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JANE AUSTEN IN POSTMODERN POPULAR CULTURE

by

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## Committee Approval

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of ELISE KIMBERLY BARKER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## Abstract

Numerous scholars have demonstrated that Jane Austen's fans have always adapted her novels and her biography to fit contemporaneous values, creating a number of contradictory and culture-specific "Austens." However, the films, the t-shirts, and the internet memes exhibit recurring themes. In the film adaptations, Austen's work is pared-down to the romantic plot and her moral positions are shifted or even reversed to account for modern values. Instead of recreating Austen's plot in which Elizabeth Bennet is confronted with her faults and grows as a result, the film adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* reverses that plotline, beginning with Bridget's hyper-critical self-consciousness and ending with self-acceptance. Similarly, the more individualized Austen ephemera are only Austen-inspired to a point. Austen t-shirts resist commitment to single meanings through irony, allowing wearers to express an ambivalent connection to and rejection of the past. The t-shirt "I shall be at Pemberley if the Queen should call" pointedly explores the tension between an honest desire for the elegance and wealth of Regency England, and a simultaneous undercutting of that desire by the very fact of its appearance on a casual t-shirt. Similarly, collections of Austen memes on *Pinterest* illustrate the extent to which literary works operate as a mediation between the past and present. Pinner use images from Austen films as a way to connect to the past and to take control over their personalized visions of her work. Although *Pinterest* appears to give users creative freedom, much of the Austen-related content is drawn from the film adaptations, which places limitations on what Austen means. This has serious consequences for English educators. Popular culture intrudes upon students' ability to have deeply immersive reading experiences, the kinds of experiences that create life-long readers.



## Introduction

“I love Jane Austen! I’ve seen all her movies!”: The Austen of Postmodernity

Jane Austen isn’t necessarily a name that conjures up assumptions of complexity for most people, and indeed on the surface, her legacy appears to be fairly straightforward: she was an unmarried woman who wrote courtship novels, in which she vividly captures the experiences of middle-class women living in the specific historical moment of Regency England. Of course, Janeites know better. Her novels are nuanced, subtle, and complex. And the deeper one wades into her biography, the critical scholarship on her works, and the fandoms associated with her, the more complicated her portrait and legacy become, because they always show signs of intrusion on the part of her readers. Not only are there competing interpretations of Austen, there are also multitudinous and diverse means of disseminating responses to Austen, in literary journals, on film and television, in blogs and online message boards, in fan fiction and literary spin-offs, through internet memes and *YouTube* video series, through literary-inspired action figures and dolls, and even through the iconic garment of modern American culture, the t-shirt. This proliferation of responses is one outcome of postmodernity, and it has a leveling effect, making each response seem of equal merit. Lionel Trilling wrote in 1957 that “it is possible to say of Jane Austen, as perhaps we can say of no other writer, that the opinions held of her work are almost as interesting, and almost as important to think about, as the work itself” (83). While I would not say that every average point of view on Austen is as interesting as her original work, I do think by looking at these points of view collectively, we gain knowledge of how a novelist shifts

from a position of a canonical literary writer to that of a fan icon, and what is at stake when such a shift happens.

One recurring observation about the culture surrounding Jane Austen is that invariably her fans re-write her in their own image, and in such a way that reflects their own cultural identity. For instance, Austen's biography is filled with gaps and silences, stubborn refusals to speak, and outright omissions, and the biographers who choose to write on her inevitably reveal more about themselves than about her. I read Claire Tomalin and John Halperin's biographies of Austen back-to-back, and although each of them added dimension and vitality to the developing portrait that I had of her in my mind, what I ultimately gained from reading these biographies was two rival meditations of very different personal encounters with Austen.

Halperin, writing in 1984, interprets Austen's literature using stereotypical assumptions of her life and the content of her novels to make conjectures about what her life was like. He takes the stance of a lofty masculine academic attempting to account for a narrow spinster author's genius, which often manifests in outright criticisms of Austen for not adhering to the role of a nurturing woman. His judgmental tone is especially apparent in his descriptions of what he sees to be her artistic failings, such as her characterization of Dick Musgrove<sup>1</sup> in *Persuasion*: "This is gratuitously harsh, shockingly cruel and malicious. ... [O]nly a woman deficient in feeling and, yes, 'taste,' could have written it. She stands revealed, personally, in the most unflattering light here" (305). On the other hand, Tomalin, writing in 1997, smashes the stereotypes associated with Austen. Her tone is much warmer than Halperin's, and she is more likely to interpret

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<sup>1</sup> "The Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reach[ed] his twentieth year" (48).

Austen's ironic and incisive point of view in a positive way. When reading Tomalin's biography, I often felt like she was trying to maintain a respectful distance of this woman whose "sharpness and refusal to suffer fools makes you fearful of intruding" (285) while at the same time trying to create a fully human portrait of a woman she regarded much as a sister or friend. These differing stances, purposes, tones, and interpretations emerge from the different academic cultures that Halperin and Tomalin are writing in, different expressions of gender with attendant differences in orientation to Austen, and finally very different personalities as writers and as human beings.

Halperin and Tomalin are certainly not the first to see Austen's life and work through their own lenses. In her book, *Searching for Jane Austen*, Emily Auerbach focuses on how difficult it is to access the real Austen because of the way that biographers and critics have positioned her according to their own values from the very beginning. Auerbach's first chapter shows how Austen's family, readers, critics and biographers have sweetened her image, tampering with the letters she left behind, fictionalizing her biography and even giving the one known portrait of her a makeover. She shows how each subsequent generation and culture of readers has done the same, creating a Victorian Austen, a WWI Austen, an American Austen, a Hollywood Austen and so forth. More generally, over the course of the past two centuries, a major shift has been made in the way that Austen is viewed by academics; as Ashley Tauchert writes, "The innocent Austen, beloved of gentlemen scholars and educated housewives, and invoked by Austen herself earlier, has more recently given way to a knowing Austen, one who smirks in anticipation of a suitably duplicitous audience" (20). Of course, the innocent Austen is still with us, as I show in "Romancing the (Un)Satisfying Endings of

Austen's Novels and Biography." This proliferation of rival Austens has created a significant set of barriers for fans who desire an authentic connection with her.

The same is true of the critical scholarship associated with Austen. As I began my research three years ago, I was both delighted and also a little alarmed by the extent to which Austen's fiction could easily represent competing points of view: conservative vs. progressive politics, feminist vs. patriarchal values, high vs. low popular culture, satirical vs. sentimental stances, eighteenth century vs. nineteenth century attitudes. As for me, I have difficulty in seeing Austen as anything but a moderate, and I feel especially justified in doing so because of her historical context and the actual content of her works. Of course, I am a moderate myself, who enjoys the artistic and social freedoms provided by progressive politics, as well as the aesthetic traditions of the past, so perhaps it is unsurprising that I find myself trying to reconcile the various competing polar extremes. My Austen resides in the middle with me.

And, indeed, one recurring theme that emerges in all interpretations and mediums is a kind of possessiveness over Austen. This is a response to the diverse and competing interpretations of her life and work, in which scholars and fans struggle over whose Austen is the most legitimate, but it also manifests in ways that are related to the *creation* of individual identity. For instance, with Jane Austen t-shirts, wearers implicitly take possession of Austen's words, claiming quotes from her novels as their own. Often t-shirt designers draw from Austen's quotes to make general statements about identity, such as the definition of the self as a reader through quotes like "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid" (*Northanger Abbey* 102). As I discuss at length in "'Jane Austen is My Homegirl': Jane Austen and

the Ironic Postmodern Identity,” the use of Austen quotes on t-shirts is an expression of elitism, because they illustrate that the t-shirt wearer is a reader, that the wearer is acquainted with canonical literature through Jane Austen, and, because Austen quotes are often ironic, that the wearer is capable of understanding irony, a privileged skill. Similarly, by wearing a shirt with a beautifully crafted and witty quote, the wearer implicitly attempts to take ownership of the eloquence that it took to compose that quote; Austen’s language often presents the perfect expression of an idea that the fan has always wanted to express but just needed Austen to articulate for her.

Similarly, when a fan wears a shirt with one of Austen’s character descriptions, such as Catherine DeBourgh’s criticism of Elizabeth as an “obstinate headstrong girl,” the fan is labeling herself using Austen’s words, and in that way is claiming ownership of Elizabeth’s character traits (*Pride and Prejudice* 336). In “‘I’m an Elizabeth Bennet in a Darcy-less world’: Fantasy, Identity, T-shirts,” I use the texts of the Austen t-shirts to show that fans are attracted to Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy because they represent a very appealing amalgam of modern and traditional characteristics, creating a post-feminist hybrid fusion. For instance, fans identify with Elizabeth’s socially liberated attitudes, her humor, and her witty use of language, all of which operate as modern characteristics (though they aren’t necessarily strictly modern), but are equally drawn to her more traditional characteristics, such as her detailed knowledge of Regency values and considerate tact as well. In this chapter, I show that fans reject the nostalgic romance associated with Austen while simultaneously identifying with it, which is a common refrain in Austen popular culture; fans want the careful behaviors, the vast wealth (of a limited few), and the lovely accoutrements of Regency England, but they don’t want to

give up the freedoms and democratic nature of their own culture. This ambivalence is effectively expressed through the irony of the t-shirt form, in which anything that is too deep or too high culture in tone is subtly undercut by the fact that it appears on a t-shirt.

Although irony can express ambivalence, it can also be used to deny single interpretations and express multiple points of view with the same product. This is discussed at length in both of my t-shirt chapters, in which I explain that we can never know the vast contexts informing a fan's decision for wearing a particular shirt. When I presented my initial research on the Austen t-shirts at a conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, my parents traveled from Topeka, Kansas to attend, and they wore "Jane Austen is my Homegirl" t-shirts to my panel; neither of them are fans of Austen, and only wore these shirts to support me, but the only way anyone would know that is by asking. This denial of explanation is even more prevalent among t-shirts that rely upon postmodern irony, which can be characterized by a paradoxical stance of infinite meanings and simultaneous resistance to any particular meaning. For instance, a t-shirt like "Mrs. Darcy" can be worn to express an identification with Elizabeth and a straight, heterosexual interest in Mr. Darcy. But it can also be worn to express various "queer" identities when gays or lesbians adopt the t-shirt. Although I am very intrigued by these queer appropriations and am delighted when they are pointed out to me, I have generally relied upon more dominant readings or other readings that I feel confident and qualified to make.

Diffuse media like internet memes and t-shirts represent huge numbers of competing interests, stances, and interpretations, but in more discrete and traditional media responses to Austen there are definite themes that appear time and again. In my two chapters concerning the biographical films and the "chick flicks" associated with

Austen, I show that professional interpretations of Austen consistently emphasize her romances and downplay her satire. These corporate-produced, collaborative efforts adapt Austen in such ways that her works will appeal broadly to a generalized, and even stereotypical feminine identity. In my chapter “Romancing the (Un)Satisfying Endings of Austen’s Novels and Biography,” I explain how the biographical films *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*, as well as a variety of other fictionalized biographical works, falsify Austen’s life in order to mimic the appealing traditional romance narrative form of her novels. These works celebrate Austen, but, incredulous to the notion that she could have written so effectively about love if she had never loved deeply herself, append romances to her life, mining her sparse biography for evidence, or even imagining that she was in love with her fictional characters because, as Halperin writes: “Where was the man for her? She found them only in her novels – in extraordinary men like Darcy, Henry Tilney, and Mr. Knightley. The men she met in real life suffered by comparison” (72). In these sources, modern values concerning love and happiness are projected uncritically, unjustly, and presumptively on to a fictionalized version of her life, in which she is cast more as a leading lady than as a human woman.

The power of the romance narrative is thus a compelling recurring theme in Jane Austen popular culture, in part because she used it so effectively herself, but also because, as I show in “‘Just as she is’: Unconditional and Static Friendships Between Women in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*,” romance narrative reflects a central and at times all-consuming reality for women. In this chapter, I show that filmmakers illustrate a half-formed desire to explore alternative plots like friendship and career, but almost compulsively end up impersonating the structure of Austen’s

romance-novels anyway. I argue that Austen's love stories are obsessively re-written in popular culture because partnership with a man is the reality of white, heterosexual, middle-class women's lives, especially younger or middle-aged women who are the target audience of the films. Unlike marriage, for which women receive institutional rewards for their time and attention, friendship is incredibly difficult for busy modern women with families to maintain, and thus is rife with what social scientists Gouldner and Strong refer to as self-deception and disguise (7-8). Thus as a theme friendship operates as much as a fantasy as romance does, if not more so. The role of deep, supportive, and lasting friendship in these films functions as a narrative matrix complementing the romance plot. Friendship represents a point of departure from Austen and a reflection of the needs of modern women.

Even in these generalized and corporate-produced works, Austen's legacy is tampered with significantly to adapt it to modern values and indeed to modern cultural identities. Austen is used expansively, and often uncritically, by her fans, in such a way that at times her novels, her biography, and her legacy become distorted. As E. M. Forster famously writes "I am a Jane Austeniete, and therefore slightly imbecile about Jane Austen. . . . She is my favorite author! I read and reread, the mouth open and the mind closed" and I think that even the most careful among us can become overly confident in the legitimacy of our own private Austen (Carson 22). Even as I review my dissertation, I see how much it is a product of my limited and partial point of view. For instance, I'm sure you can guess which of the two biographies I preferred.

The fragmentation of Austen's legacy into many personal and partial views has had the paradoxical effect of making personal responses more fleeting, simply because



there is so much intrusive noise, so many diffuse options to choose from. One response to the vast availability of interpretations is to attempt to pin Austen down, as I argue in “Pinning Down the Phantasm: Jane Austen and the Ironic Imagination on *Pinterest*.” *Pinterest* is an image-sharing and cataloguing website that especially facilitates the creation of personal fantasies for its users. Austen is drawn upon by pinners particularly to create historical fantasies, but these fantasies are constructed from readers’ knowledge of her novels and films rather than from knowledge of history, creating a number of anachronistic interpretations that are nevertheless evocative for the users. The drive to create these historical fantasies springs from the lack of tangibility of her works as well as the complexity of her legacy. Pinners collect images of historical objects, film stills, illustrations, fashion plates, and ironic contemporary memes, in an attempt to give the imaginary world tangibility, to collectively make the fantasy of the novels as experienced by the individual complete, and by doing so, give the user control over the imaginative world that is otherwise so fleeting.

One of the implicit and largely unanswered questions occasioned by my dissertation research is how the proliferation of Austen’s image in popular culture has had a way of reducing the visibility of other authors. This is related to a similar problem that academics have experienced with the literary canon as more women and non-Western writers become increasingly visible, while other fine and worthy authors get forgotten. Although this question is in some ways out of the scope of my project, I think that my dissertation does provide a clear sense of *why* and *how* certain writers achieve high visibility. If we look at Austen as an example of how a canonical writer becomes a fan icon, we see that her romances resonate with women, for whom these novels

represent an idealized and perfected reflection of their own reality; that her eloquent and witty words provide effective language for the expression of important aspects of a fan's identity; and that her canonical status and her irony are drawn upon by fans to elevate themselves and create an elite, highbrow identity. All of these explanations of Austen's popular value rest in how she is put to use in the service of her fans' identities. Similarly, fans will ignore or excise messages or themes from her works that do not comfortably fit their purposes, illustrating that one of the key ways that literary authors achieve success in popular culture is through adaptability and mutability; Austen is *made* relevant, and that is why she continues to be. Finally, increased visibility begets increased popularity, and her continual presence in the public eye has a way of insuring her persistent consequence.

I began this project feeling optimistic about the way that canonical authors achieve status in the public eye, especially because it seemed to me that modern media provides a great deal of freedom and creativity for fans to interact with authors. There is a playful exuberance in fan responses that is unmatched among critics and scholars, and I still find that to be incredibly appealing. I am inspired by the fan fiction writers on websites like *The Republic of Pemberley* who felt so moved and motivated by reading Austen's work that they just had to interact with it creatively through their own fiction. Although I don't much care for the content or style of these works, which is why I decided not to work with them, I admire the fact that they are doing it nevertheless.

The same is true of the internet memes. One example is the "Socially Awkward Darcy" meme, sustained especially by *The Other Austen* tumblr, which the creators use to point out ironic aspects of Darcy's character. Some example texts of "Socially Awkward

Darcy” are: “Rude to family, friends, and love interest, but not to servants,” “Stares at you. Keeps staring at you,” and “Not handsome enough to tempt me. Oh fuck I think she heard that.” These memes operate as a type of character analysis, in which the meme creator is making sense of Darcy’s behavior which can be awkwardly stiff. When young people create memes like this, I see it as a kind of idea-mapping process, in which responses to literature are worked out through the rapid and sound-byte-reliant processes that are second nature to internet-savvy youth. And I will admit that these memes are very amusing to me, perhaps because the crude expression and curtailed language common to the meme form heightens the sense of irony.



Figure 1: “Socially Awkward Darcy Meme” reprinted with permission by The Other Austen

But a major source of my mounting ambivalence and even criticism of these practices stems from the way in which popular culture increasingly comes to stand for the original texts. This is an aspect of postmodern culture, in which all artistic responses are

leveled and seem of equal merit. Too frequently a fan will say something like “I love Jane Austen! I’ve seen all her movies!” Although I try to be generous in my response to the more clumsy iterations of memes like “Socially Awkward Darcy,” I sometimes suspect that the meme creators only watched the popular 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>2</sup> Even Sharon Lathan, the author of the successful (if overwhelmingly hated) *Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy: Two Shall Become One*, didn’t bother to read Austen before she wrote her extension of *Pride and Prejudice*, and instead relied upon the film as the sole source of inspiration. When I see t-shirts like the one that refers to Caroline Bingley’s disingenuous exclamation of her love of books<sup>3</sup> in order to express a similar love, I have a hard time not being judgmental. If I sound snobby it is only because I love Austen so dearly, and I want other people to read her. I think that fans should give her the benefit of actually reading her novels before using her too extensively for their own purposes.

Part of why I think a return to her novels is so important is because of the way that her complex and nuanced messages have become degraded through the popular culture. In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, for instance, the romance is placed at the center while the plot of moral development, arguably the most important theme in Austen’s novel, is replaced instead with a plot of self-acceptance. I think self-acceptance is a necessary theme in modern works for women because of the ubiquitous and insidious messages of not-good-enough that we receive continually throughout our lives. For that reason, I can

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<sup>2</sup> I have learned that the blogger at *The Other Austen* wrote a senior thesis on Austen and queer theory. That may explain why I enjoy the content originating from that specific website so much while so many others seem excessively juvenile or seem to miss the point of Austen’s work. There is certainly a “queering” of Austen that goes on at *The Other Austen* that I find satisfying and interesting.

<sup>3</sup> “I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading. How soon one tires of anything than of a book. When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I do not have an excellent library” (*Pride and Prejudice* 54).

appreciate *Bridget Jones's Diary* on its own merits as a work that is separate from Austen. But in the various alterations made to accommodate modern problems, something vital is lost from Austen's original. And although the two works create an interesting dialogue when placed side-by-side, I think that the comparison with Elizabeth only shines brighter lights on Bridget's flaws, which I suspect is diametrically opposed from the filmmakers' intention.

It could be that the weakening of the thematic plot of moral development is the central manner in which Austen has become so synonymous with the romance narrative. Although I eventually come to celebrate romance narrative form in my chapter "'Just as she is': Unconditional and Static Friendships Between Women in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*," it is undeniable that the association of Jane Austen with romance has created a degradation of her legacy, in which people are unaware of her brilliant control of language, her nuanced cultural critiques, and her satire. For instance, I still can recall my red hot fury when I watched *Becoming Jane* for the first time, and realized that the film was positioning her as a literary heroine and suggesting that she was not fully "Jane" before she had her romance with Lefroy. That is a degradation of her choice to remain single and free, which was a *choice*, as she had at least two offers of marriage.

Popular culture has created myths of Austen, that she is only concerned with romance, that she is mainly relevant for women, that she is a prudish spinster. I believe that the way to counter these myths, along with the problem of fans letting popular culture take the place of the original texts, is through classroom practices. In my pedagogical chapter, "'I could not have been more wretchedly blind': Austen, Film, and

Pedagogy,” I note that popular culture creates distractions in the classroom, interfering particularly with the student’s ability to become immersed in the fictional world of the novel. I argue that traditional pedagogical strategies focused on helping students become effective readers, such as reading out-loud, are more successful than confronting the popular culture head-on. Teaching that is focused on developing students’ ability to read deeply, slowly, and with focus also helps to counter the leveling effects of postmodernity in which all literature looks the same to students and the concept of the literary canon begins to lose its meaning.

Although the primary reason behind Austen’s continued popularity lies in the genius of her works, it is undeniable that the process by which she is adapted to new cultural contexts plays a role in making her relevant to new audiences. This process of adaptation encourages vitality, creativity, and fan interaction on the one hand, and distorts and degrades her legacy on the other. When I confront this problem, I can’t help but imagine what Austen herself would think of the state of affairs. Austen kept a journal of family responses to *Mansfield Park* in which she let them exist without her own comment or intrusion, even when her mother called Fanny “insipid” and Anna Lefroy stated that “she could not bear Fanny” (Tomalin 227). But I wonder if she could have sat quietly by while her fans distort her messages as severely as her modern fans do.

I think she would have found a tactful way to deflect attention from her works, and turn the creative interests of her fans to new directions. Her nephew J. Edward Austen asked for some feedback on his domestic stories, and in her response she famously characterizes her work as a delicate “bit of ivory” made with “so fine a brush” (Halperin 318). But the more important message of this letter is that all of us have our

own point of view, our own talents, and our own stories to tell. She made this criticism of his work so subtle that many people take it rather as a criticism of her own work, but in reality, she is encouraging him to find his own voice, and indeed, as Halperin points out, his own *genre* (319). I think that Austen would say the same to her modern fans, especially to the fan fiction writers and filmmakers; she would urge them to put their vital energy into discovering and exploring what new and exciting individual perspectives they have to offer, and to let the brilliance of her works speak for itself.

## Chapter I

## Romancing the (Un)Satisfying Endings in Austen's Biography and Novels

Austen's happy endings are sometimes assumed to be "unsatisfying" because she abandons her characteristic free-indirect discourse, in which she gives readers access to the characters' thoughts and actions in a way that brings us into the moment. Instead, her endings tend to be delivered in summary form through the narrator's report of the closing events. In simplistic terms, although we know that Elizabeth marries Darcy because of the narrator, we don't *see* that marriage take place. Additionally, Austen's biography is often assumed to be unsatisfying because it lacks a definitive romance. In this chapter, I address how these endings provide a creative opening for her contemporary fans, which is specifically manifested as romance narrative. The silences in Austen's novels and biography become a space that modern readers fill with their own desires, fears, hopes, and values.

Before exploring the ways that Austen's conclusions are unsatisfying, we should examine the ways that her novels are, instead, *very satisfying indeed*. All of Austen's novels feature the progression of a romantic relationship through a series of conflicts that finally end in marriage. Austen's most famous marriage plots – *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* – are paralleled with a plot of female development, in which a heroine is humbled and comes to know her own heart, initiating her into adulthood and eventually marriage. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, the climax of Elizabeth's journey to self-knowledge occurs at the end of volume two, in her famous realization that "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (202). That new-found knowledge helps to stimulate the romance plot of the third volume. The romance operates as a major structural foundation upon which



ironic moral commentary and social critique are layered, increasing the depth and complexity of these works.

Although the depth and complexity of Austen's works are the main reasons why critics and scholars are so enamored of her works, many of her biggest and most vocal fans are moved more by her depiction of courtship and marriage. And there is no denying that Austen's romances are incredibly satisfying; Pamela Regis calls Jane Austen "the master of the romance novel" (75). Unlike her fans, Austen's critics focus on her biting moral and social criticisms, her irony, her impeccable way of turning a phrase, the skill with which she fashions her dynamic and beautifully flawed characters. Romance narratives are sometimes chastised as anti-feminist for limiting and prescribing women's roles; sometimes they are written-off as philosophically unimportant, because they don't place masculine world building concerns at the center; sometimes they are undervalued because they seem overly familiar and clichéd, too popular to be of artistic merit. To say that part of Austen's achievement lays precisely in her mastery of the romance form may be a dangerously unoriginal admission for a serious modern scholar to make, but it is not fair to her as an artist to deny that part of the exquisite art of her novels is the effortless way that she crafts the courtship of her heroines like Elizabeth and Anne Eliot, as well as the more manicured and structured way that she designs the courtship of Emma and Fanny. In her novels, the heroine's painful struggle for self-knowledge is finally put to an end – or at least a pause – with declarations of love, creating a satisfyingly enjoyable and rewarding release of tension.

But these satisfying endings only occur in terms of plot. In terms of style, the narration of Austen's novels retreats from that of free-indirect discourse, to a form in

which the narrator reports the events. Free-indirect discourse occurs when a reader cannot distinguish between the character and the narrator. Seymour Chatman argues that this style differs from discourse which is tagged (“she thought...”) because,

The tag identifies the thought as exclusively the character’s, but the absence of a tag can lead to a certain uncertainty or ambiguity. The free indirect form may be the character’s words to himself, but it may alternatively be the narrator’s language addressed to the narratee. Or it may be indeterminately *both*! (138)

Austen’s free-indirect discourse creates a style that seems to be a natural depiction of events, in which we as readers feel as though we have intimate access to the world of her novels and the minds of her characters. Even in *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel that contains the most dialogue and the least free-indirect discourse, Austen still uses the free-indirect style in strategic moments. Take, for instance, this passage in which Elizabeth is contemplating Mr. Darcy’s changing attitude toward herself during their stay at Hunsford:

More than once did Elizabeth, in her ramble within the park, unexpectedly meet Mr. Darcy. She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought, and, to prevent its ever happening again, took care to inform him at first that it was a favourite haunt of hers. How it could occur a second time, therefore, was very odd! Yet it did, and even a third. It seemed like willful ill-nature, or a voluntary penance, for on these occasions it was not merely a few formal inquiries and an awkward pause and then away, but he actually thought it necessary to turn back and walk with her. (178)

Austen signals to the reader that it is Elizabeth's point of view by the phrase "she felt," but for the next few sentences the narrator's and Elizabeth's thoughts become one. Only Elizabeth, with her limited and prejudiced understanding of Darcy's feelings, could assume that these walks are springing from "ill-nature" or "voluntary penance" on his part – indeed, both the narrator and the reader at least *suspect* his growing attachment to her. This places the narration in Elizabeth's mind and heart, while simultaneously allowing for an ironic, fully-informed reading of the moment, in which we know that Darcy has quite the opposite motives in accidentally meeting her in the park. Thematically, the free-indirect discourse contributes to the idea that Elizabeth is not nearly as astute at understanding the hearts of others as she prides herself in being.

Although in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen relies on dialogue to create a lively mood to match the personality of her heroine and uses free-indirect discourse to illustrate Elizabeth's journey to self-knowledge, in the climactic moment when Elizabeth and Darcy finally admit to one another that they are in love, Austen uses neither dialogue nor free-indirect style, and shifts instead into the narrator's report of the event:

Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well

the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him; but, though she could not look, she could listen, and he told her of feelings, which, in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable. (346)

It is hard to imagine Elizabeth, always so self-assured in her conversation, expressing herself “not very fluently” but Austen assures us that that is the case. Likewise, we can only imagine what it means when she says that Darcy “expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do.” In a novel in which the witty banter of its heroine creates engaging dramatic moments and the dialogue creates an effervescent “light, bright, and sparkling” mood, one can see how this stylistic shift has attracted attention (letter to Cassandra, 4 February 1813).

There have been a variety of explanations for this stylistic shift. Ashley Tauchert explains that the distanced unsatisfying narration at the end of Austen’s novels is a product of the impossibility of realistically representing the romantic fantasy ending. In Tauchert’s analysis, a happy marriage with Mr. Darcy (or Mr. Knightley or Henry Tilney etc.) is impossible to represent in realistic terms, because it is impossible in real life. Tauchert argues that Austen’s novels are presented in the realistic mode until the heroine has her epiphany of self-consciousness which provides the impetus for the happy ending (i.e., marriage) and shifts the narrative into fantasy or Romance mode. Tauchert states that Austen’s endings hint that *only through narrative* – fantasy narrative, which is distanced – is the hope of the unrealistically happy ending possible. I find this explanation problematic, simply because I have seen time and again fantasy represented in fiction. Of anyone in the world, I can imagine that Austen would be capable of

rendering an intimate moment between two of her most well-loved and thoroughly realized characters; Tauchert's explanation is too reliant on a supposed failure of creativity.

Another explanation has been proposed by Barbara Benedict, who sees the shift into the narrator's address as a common move of the time, in which writers intentionally expect readers to fill in the information themselves using conventional knowledge of the novel form (75). In the passage from *Pride and Prejudice* quoted above, for instance, Austen writes "he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do," suggesting that to some degree the lovers are acting in a way that fits the conventions of the time (347). Austen was clearly aware of readers' expectations and desires and would work to fulfill them to some degree, but as compelling as I find Benedict's explanation, it still seems incomplete because it doesn't incorporate an acknowledgment of Austen's careful literary crafting.

One of the most pervasive (and insidious) explanations of Austen's characteristic stylistic turn at the ends of her novels revolves around her biography and specifically behind her "spinster" status. For instance, John Halperin writes that her endings are a product of her desire to always speak from experience and truth in her fiction, meaning that she wouldn't attempt to depict a conversation that she herself had never had. He goes on to say

Probably Jane [sic.] herself did not see life as being happy, or ending happily, most of the time – and in all likelihood not ending happily for her. Could she have been jealous and resentful of the happiness she was forced to provide her own

characters – resentful that such endings were possible in her books but not in her life? (108)

Somehow Halperin misses the spirit of Austen as a creative agent, preferring instead to see her as a spinster who takes out her disappointment in life on her novels. This attitude accompanies a critical stance towards Austen that “shifts the perception of Austen’s work from great literature to archaeological artifact (at best) or encoded diary (at worst)” (Gevirtz).

One response to the argument that Austen’s life was too narrow to represent post-courtship experiences, is simply that her life was not as narrow as her early biographers and family would have her readers believe, as Claire Tomalin has illustrated in her biography of Austen. We know that she had all sorts of exciting characters in her life that she could have drawn from in her art: for instance, her aunt Philadelphia traveled to India to find a husband and her cousin Eliza’s husband was beheaded by the guillotine. That only scratches the surface of what we know about her relations. She could very well have drawn from these experienced, sophisticated, and even dangerous people for her characters, but instead of using material from her life, she created *new* and completely *discrete* characters who behave and speak just as we would expect “real” people to. Contact with these people gave her the opportunity to observe the diversity of human nature, but so far as we know she never caricatured or copied any of them. Again, using biographical information to explain Austen’s unsatisfying endings does not fully account for her remarkable abilities as an artist.

Furthermore, in Austen’s early works as a child and young woman, she uses witty and sometimes naughty puns, employs over the top characterization, treats death and

violence with a light touch, and consistently depicts women's roles outside the traditional boundaries of marriage. These works are a challenge to any conception that imagines Austen as someone limited creatively by her circumstances. The shift in her later published works to a more coded way of dealing with taboo issues is a sign of her artistic maturity and should be seen as deliberate; she was consciously moving away from the satiric and parodic impulse of the eighteenth century into a style more of her own making. Indeed, I am convinced that when Austen retreats into distance at the end of her novels, it must be an intentional stylistic choice.

To that end, Austen didn't write purely for entertainment purposes; she is known as a moralist whose works both engage *and* instruct the reader. Consider, for instance, what Emily Auerbach writes of the end of *Sense and Sensibility*: "Could it be that in a novel exploring the relationship between solitude and society, between intimacy and public life, Austen demonstrates through her respectful silence that there are some emotions and moments understood only in private?" (*Searching* 126). By backing off from her subjects in these private moments, Austen demonstrates through a narrative strategy the values of reticence and restraint that she develops and exemplifies through the character of Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*. Thus Austen's narrative strategy performs the central moral values championed by the novel.

In the case of *Pride and Prejudice* we saw that Austen narrates the romantic moment in which Elizabeth and Darcy tell each other how they feel rather than "showing" the dialogue. However, following this second proposal, Austen immediately switches back into dialogue in order to dramatize the moment in which they discuss the mutual mortification they feel concerning their past actions. In this completely rendered

conversation, each character interrogates their mistakes, and each comes to a moment when they find their past behavior too intolerable to dwell upon. At one point Darcy exclaims, “my behavior to you at the time had merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence” (347). In another moment Elizabeth interjects “Oh! do not repeat what I then said. These recollections will not do at all. I assure you that I have long been most heartily ashamed of it” (348). Here, we see Austen minimize the climactic *action* (the romantic plot leading to a marriage proposal) in order to bring the *emotional* climax (the process of coming to self-knowledge) to the center, suggesting that she values the latter more highly.

This is not to reduce the importance that Austen places upon romance and marriage, but to show that she valued these things precisely because marriage creates the foundation of a well-run society when it is informed by self-knowledge and personal growth. For Austen the journey to self-knowledge is closely intertwined with the journey towards marriage, and as Julie Shaffer has argued, marriage in Austen is the institution “which is the most central to the preservation of the world as it ought to be, when the institution involves a husband and wife who are willing to improve each other, be improved by one another, and to extend that mutual improvement to a larger community” (Regis 77). That Austen’s romance narrative is paired with a plot of education and development illustrates that good marriages improve the community and help maintain social stability.

Part of the art of her work, then, is the way in which she used the well-established and well-loved romance narrative form to embed deeper a moral dimension related to the themes of avoiding self-delusion, of taking responsibility for one’s actions, of assuming



one's proper place in the social realm, and of confronting pettiness, cruelty, and greed. With that in mind, we might also examine the narrative distance at the end of Austen's novels *ironically*. Taking the basic plot outline at face-value, her narratives appear to be idealized fantasy romances. Yet, throughout her novels, satire and irony reign, and the ends are no different. Austen's characteristic concluding distance belies the ambivalence she felt about idealized happy endings.

One ironic approach to Austen's endings can be found in Gilbert and Gubar's famous reading of Austen in *Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they argue that Austen's work is characterized by conflict between a "cover story" that reaffirms conservative patriarchal values and the embedded radical feminist critique of those traditional values (154). While I appreciate the fact that Gilbert and Gubar opened up the possibility for a more ironic and therefore a more feminist perspective on Austen's endings, I do think their position is overstated. Instead, I think a more nuanced position would be to see Austen's concluding ambivalence as emerging from a vision of life as it truly is, full of shades of gray, and therefore ambivalent in the true sense of resisting total commitment to one position or the other. In other words, the distance we see at the end of Austen's novels allows her to provide a happy ending for her audience to enjoy while simultaneously suggesting that the reader – and her characters themselves – should examine these happy endings *critically*.

One approach to understanding what Austen is doing when she backs away from her subjects at the end of her novels is to look elsewhere in the texts for clues. For instance, although we don't *see* how Elizabeth and Darcy fare, we have plenty of examples of how marriages work (or *which* marriages work) within the texts. As Deidre

Lynch points out, “Austen more than once sets up her novels as though they were sequels to earlier (untold) stories,” such as the Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor love story in *Emma* (“Sequels” 167). These untold stories provide information about what Austen thought of marriage, and allow us to extrapolate what might be in store for the heroines. In *Persuasion*, the extraordinary egalitarian marriage of the Crofts provides a model for what we might be able to expect from the marriage of Anne and Captain Wentworth. The Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Westons in *Emma* enjoy one another’s company and behave in kind, considerate ways to the other people in their communities, providing similar models for happy marriages.

However, more often than not, the untold stories of minor characters turn out to be anything but fairy tales. For instance, many of the problems in *Pride and Prejudice* arise out of the unfortunate match between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, a marriage that brings out the worst qualities in both individuals. Her silliness forces his retreat into solitude and sarcasm, and his withdrawal enables her continual absurdity. And no modern reader can forget Charlotte Lucas’s disconcerting marital compromise, in which she chooses marriage to Mr. Collins, an obsequious, delusional man, in exchange for financial security. After viewing her new home, we learn “When Mr. Collins could be forgotten, there was really a great air of comfort throughout, and by Charlotte’s evident enjoyment of it, Elizabeth supposed he must often be forgotten” (155). Similarly, *Sense and Sensibility* is peopled with unfortunate matches, too numerous to dwell upon in any detail. The Palmers, Willoughby and Miss Grey, and Eliza Williams and Colonel Brandon’s brother all marry more out of social obligation than love. Arguably, all three of the Ward sisters (Fanny’s mother and her two aunts) in *Mansfield Park* had bad

marriages, for vastly different reasons. Mrs. Price married for love and lives in poverty; Lady Bertram married for money and stagnates in a state of unambitious, tranquilized and sublime indolence; Mrs. Norris marries the local parson in a position well-below her accustomed means and develops the habits and hobbies of a miser, hoarding any actual or emotional wealth that she might accrue. Time and again, Austen presents marriage as a depressing necessity for her minor or secondary characters.

Retreating into distanced narration at the end of the novels gives the reader the opportunity to consider the evidence that Austen has provided throughout the novel in order to extrapolate what a happy ending *really* means: human beings are full of failings, all marriages are complicated, and the most we can expect of them is that they will bring joy and sorrow in equal measures. If we consult Austen's letters to her niece Fanny on the subject of marriage, we find similar ambivalence, in one letter exclaiming the good qualities of Fanny's suitor, in another, writing this: "Oh, what a loss it will be when you are married ... I shall hate you when your delicious play of mind is all settled down in conjugal and maternal affections" (20 February 1817). Both of Austen's most joyously romantic endings in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* hint that, while Elizabeth and Anne will be happy, they will not live without compromises. The final sentence of *Persuasion* reminds us that, as a man who made his fortune at sea, Captain Wentworth could be swept away from Anne at a moment's notice: "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (236). Similarly, only moments after their confession of love, Elizabeth realizes that she must temper her lighthearted teasing of her future husband: "she remembered that he had yet to

learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin” (351). Living with concession is the reality of marriage, and Austen doesn’t let us forget it even in these resplendently happy conclusions.

It is hard not to wonder if Elizabeth’s exuberant personality will take a blow in marriage to such a grave, if good, man. It is hard not to picture Anne kissing Wentworth goodbye, and waiting patiently yet anxiously for his happy homecoming when he returns to sea. Those details aren’t on the surface but lurking in the subtext. Similarly, when Darcy “expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be *supposed* to do,” Austen relinquishes creative control of that moment, and asks us to fill it in with our knowledge of romantic convention and our knowledge of Darcy (my emphasis 346). Indeed, the ironized reading of Austen’s endings hinges upon the idea that she problematized the happy ending by providing enough distance to encourage the reader to continue telling the story in his own mind, filling in the blanks and coming to his own conclusion using Austen’s own hints within the text as a guide. Austen’s ambivalent endings open up possibilities for future conflict and therefore provide imaginative opportunities for her readers.

Readers have gleefully taken up the task of continuing to tell her stories in earnest, filling volumes with fan-produced sequels, prequels, adaptations, and translations. Deidre Lynch remarks on the irony of the situation: “Austen represents in several accounts of the development of the novel the innovator who trimmed away the flab of the form. Yet through a strange twist of fate she appears to be the cause of verbiage in others.” (“Sequels” 160). Austen’s economy does not proceed from lack of depth though. Indeed, Virginia Woolf once wrote: “Her characters are so rounded and

substantial that they have the power to move out of the scenes in which she placed them into other moods and circumstances” (Auerbach “Geese”). Woolf’s astute portrayal of the dynamic, vital quality of Austen’s characters who seem to exist autonomously from the fixed worlds of the novels, encapsulates another underlying reason why Austen inspires so much fictional extension.

But as Lynch’s comment on Austen’s brevity suggests, she didn’t give her readers nearly enough of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy to satisfy us. We love Lizzy so much that we “demand for more of the same” (Lynch, “Sequels” 166). Even her family wanted more (Auerbach *Searching* 269). As Lynch points out “[c]ontinuations of Austen’s manuscript fragments begin as a family enterprise in the mid-nineteenth century, with the first contributions coming from Jane Austen’s nieces” (“Sequels” 161). Even Austen herself played with the possibility of extending Elizabeth and Darcy’s story into the real world. Consider how she discusses their fictional relationship in a letter to Cassandra dated May 24, 1813, in which she describes searching for portraits resembling the various characters in *Pride and Prejudice*:

We have been both to the exhibition and Sir J. Reynolds’s, and I am disappointed, for there was nothing like Mrs. D. [Elizabeth] at either. I can only imagine that Mr. D. prizes any picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye. I can imagine he would have that sort of feeling – that mixture of love, pride, and delicacy. (May 24, 1813)

Although certainly playful, the passage is not marked by the sarcasm, bantering wit, and even occasional cruelty that pervades her other letters. Instead, she is drawing from her uniquely intimate connection to these characters to surmise about their behavior as it

would take place outside of the world of the novel. The book may be over, and we may have finished reading it, but Elizabeth and Darcy continue to live on in our imagination. Austen's endings do not dramatize the post-courtship experience of her heroines, and thus they inspire sequels.

And indeed writers have made their careers by filling gaps and extending the story of Austen's novels. There seems to be a large niche in the book industry for sequels of *Pride and Prejudice*, preferably with titles that use the word "Darcy." Some of these extensions simply pick up from where the novels left off, like Sharon Lathan's *My Dearest Mr. Darcy: An Amazing Journey into Love Everlasting*. As part of a series of extensions, Sharon Lathan imagines Elizabeth and Darcy's growing family, with two young boys, in *The Trouble with Mr. Darcy*. Abigail Reynolds has written many alternate versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which a slight variation leads to a very different rendering of the original plot. In *Mr. Darcy's Undoing*, for instance, she imagines that Elizabeth becomes engaged to another man, thus creating a new barrier for her romance with Darcy; *Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy: The Last Man in the World* imagines what would have happened if Elizabeth had accepted Darcy's first marriage proposal, without each of them having had the growing experience that takes place in *Pride and Prejudice*. Some books change the point of view, like Regina Jeffer's novel *Darcy's Passions*, Amanda Grange's *Mr. Darcy's Diary*, and Maria Hamilton's *Mr. Darcy and the Secret of Becoming a Gentleman* each of which tell the story of *Pride and Prejudice* through the point of view of Mr. Darcy. Monica Fairview's *The Other Mr. Darcy* is told from Caroline Bingley's point of view and imagines that Darcy has an estranged brother. Sharon Lathan's *Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy: Two Shall Become One*, Linda

Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*, and Susan Adriani's *The Truth About Mr. Darcy* focus on the story of sexual intimacy between Elizabeth and Darcy after marriage.

Although Austen's novels provide the impetus for this creative outpouring of gap-filling and narrative extension, what is perhaps even more interesting is that *she herself* has also become fodder for creative speculation and expansion in fictional accounts. And although there are a wide variety of approaches to customizing Austen, one consistently reappearing theme revolves around generating a fictional love life for Austen. Like the endings of her novels, Austen's biography is "unsatisfying." Austen never married. She lived a very private life and retreated from the notoriety that she might have enjoyed following the success of her novels. Furthermore, her sister Cassandra destroyed much of their correspondence in order to protect her privacy from the prying eyes of fans and scholars. We simply don't know much about her, certainly not enough to satisfy the curiosity of her devoted fans. In her biography of Austen, Claire Tomalin closes the book by remarking on the difficulty of, well, closing the book on Austen:

She has a way of sending biographers away feeling that, as Lord David Cecil put it, she remains 'as no doubt she would have wished – not an intimate but an acquaintance.' Her sharpness and refusal to suffer fools makes you fearful of intruding, misinterpreting, crassly misreading the evidence. (284)

Claudia Johnson's description and Cassandra's portrait of Austen takes a similar tone. She describes how Cassandra's sketch "reposed beneath a heavy velvet shroud" for protection from light, causing a feeling that "even the likeness of Jane Austen shrinks from being seen: deciding to see her seems a bit like intruding on her privacy, making one uneasily aware that the more one looks at her the less visible she will be" (30).

Although Tomalin and Johnson may fear intruding upon Austen's privacy, many of Austen's fans cannot resist the urge to fill in the silences surrounding her life. Some of this Austen-inspired fiction attempts to provide plausible biographical accounts of romances that Austen might have had using hints from her letters and other sources. For instance, *Becoming Jane* develops an entire romance narrative using a few passages from two letters Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in January 1796 describing the flirtation that occurred between Austen and Tom Lefroy during his visit to the Austen family's friend Mrs. (or Madam) Anna Lefroy. Austen writes of him that

I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. I *can* expose myself, however, only *once more* because he leaves the country soon after next Friday, on which day we *are* to have a dance at Ashe after all. He is a very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man, I assure you. But as to our having ever met, except at the last three balls, I cannot say much; for he is so excessively laughed at about me at Ashe, that he is ashamed of coming to Steventon, and ran away when we called on Mrs Lefroy a few days ago.

She later continues in the same letter

We received a visit from Mr Tom Lefroy and his cousin George. The latter is very well-behaved now; and as for the other, he has but *one* fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove – it is his morning coat is a great deal too light. He is a very great admirer of Tom Jones, and therefore wears the same colored clothes, I imagine, which he did when *he* was wounded.



In the next extant letter, written less than a week later, she writes “I rather expect to receive an offer from my friend in the course of the evening. I shall refuse him, however, unless he promises to give away his white Coat.” Her final mention of an interaction with Tom Lefroy appears near the end of that same letter: “At length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will be over – My tears flow as I write, at the melancholy idea.”

One of the difficulties of understanding letters like these is that they are so pervaded with Austen’s tendency to represent domestic and personal details with a distanced and humorous tone. Her characteristic stance in all of her letters is that of ironic distance. And according to Joan Klingel Ray, Lefroy was already engaged. Lefroy eventually admitted to having a youthful attachment to Austen, but this was years following her death and rise to fame. For that reason, among others, Ray considers the relationship to be entirely one-sided on Austen’s part. I suspect that Austen did have earnest feelings for Lefroy, but that they did not go far beyond that of a friendly flirtation. More than anything, I’m convinced by Ray’s argument that

if the Jane Austen-Tom Lefroy relationship had been a passionate romance, would the ever-vigilant Cassandra, keeper of thousands of her sister’s letters, allowed the Lefroy-letters to escape the flames in which she burned the epistles that she felt embarrassing or compromising to her beloved sister?

With that in mind, the passionate embrace in the moonlight, the chance meeting culminating with a candlelit kiss on the stairways, and the dramatic moment of contemplating elopement that we see in *Becoming Jane* seem more than a little far-fetched. However, more distressing to me as a viewer is that the subtext of the film

implies that the passionate romance between Austen and Lefroy explains why Austen was so adept at writing romances – as though, without that love she could not have written as she did. Never mind that Austen started writing *Lady Susan* in 1794 and *Sense and Sensibility* under the title *Elinor and Marianne* in 1795. She had already more than proven her tremendous gift as a writer in her vivacious juvenile work. This is not to say that experience means nothing. I do think it is more than an interesting coincidence that Austen began her most beloved novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, six months after meeting Lefroy. It is entirely possible that her experience with him provided some fuel for her creative engine. But she was a powerful engine before she ever met him.

That Austen was a great creative spirit from her youth on is part of what is so frustrating about a film that suggests Austen needed to have a love affair in order to truly “become” a full human being. Before prodding her to elope with him, Tom Lefroy asks Austen “what value will there ever be in life if we are not together?” mirroring the subtler suggestion in the title that love is the only thing that makes life worth living. And *Becoming Jane* amplifies this message by emphasizing the tragic nature of Austen’s unsuccessful romance with Lefroy. At the end of the movie, Jane and Tom are portrayed as having an emotionally charged late in life meeting, in which the mood is one of regret. As Cano-Lopez and Garcia-Periago argue, the film “focuses on what the heroine has lost emotionally rather than on the excitement of a new beginning for her [i.e. through her novels].”

That sense of regret is even more overt in another biographical film, *Miss Austen Regrets*. Although the film effectively shows Austen’s enormous talent and her strong energetic personality, and beautifully and heartbreakingly renders the bond between Jane

and Cassandra, the most important relationship in Austen's life, *Miss Austen Regrets* still dwells on the missed opportunities for fulfilling relationships that Austen had throughout her life.

For instance the film fleshes out a very patchy and speculative relationship that might have existed between Austen and Reverend Brook Edward Bridges. Bridges probably proposed to Austen in 1808 according to Elizabeth Philosophos Cooper, citing work done by Deirdre Le Faye and a letter to Cassandra in which Austen writes "I wish you may be able to accept Lady Bridges's invitation although *I* could not her son Edward's" (7 October 1808). Instead of depicting the youthful proposal, the film imagines a fictional conversation that takes place many years later in the fall of 1813, a time when Austen was visiting Godmersham, the home of her brother Edward Austen Knight, where Bridges often visited. In this conversation, Rev. Bridges speaks in a way that suggests he still has feelings for her:

Bridges: I'd waited for news that you'd married.

Austen: As every woman knows there's a scarcity of men in general. And an even greater scarcity for any that are good for much.

Bridges: You can hide behind your clever words as much as you like.

Austen: Good, because my clever words will soon be the only thing that will put a roof over my head. Or my mother's or my sister's. I'm to be my own husband it seems.

Bridges: I'd have put a roof over all your heads, and cherished you, dear Jane, 'till death us do part.

[The conversation is interrupted by Fanny]

It is tempting to read into the events of 1813 to see if there is some truth to Bridges' continued affection for Austen as presented in the movie. He seems to have had a troubled family life which he often attempted to escape by going to Godmersham, especially while Austen was visiting. But the evidence here is even more flimsy than what we know of the Lefroy romance, never mind that such a forward conversation like this is anachronistic.

Another fictionalization of an apparent flirtation involves Doctor Charles Haden, whom Austen referred to as "something between a Man & an Angel" in a letter to Cassandra on December 2, 1815. The full passage reads as such

You seem to be under a mistake as to Mr H – You call him an Apothecary; he is no Apothecary, he has never been an Apothecary, there is not an Apothecary in this Neighbourhood – the only inconvenience of the situation perhaps, but so it is – we have not a medical Man within reach – he is a Haden, nothing but a Haden, a sort of wonderful nondescript Creature on two Legs, something between a Man & an Angel – but without the least spice of an Apothecary. – He is perhaps the only Person *not* an Apothecary hereabouts.

To be sure, something about this passage recalls the energetic and witty irony of the earlier flirtation she had with Lefroy. In the film, the actor Olivia Williams reads most of this passage word for word, and her breathless delivery of the lines emphasizes the flirtatious attraction that lurks beneath the surface of the letter.

The film indicates that Austen's niece Fanny's arrival interrupted Austen's flirtation with Dr. Haden, and his attention was turned to the younger woman, igniting Austen's jealousy. This shift is inspired by the text from Austen's letter to Cassandra on

November 26, 1815: “for the rest of the Even the Draw-room was thus arranged, on the Sopha-side the two Ladies Henry & myself making the best of it, on the opposite side Fanny & Mr Haden in two chairs (I *beleive* at least they had *two* chairs) talking together uninterruptedly.” Later in the film, Austen discusses the flirtation with her sister, and Cassandra declares: “You take me back to feelings I thought were long forgotten. Feelings best left buried for two old ladies like us.” In this moment, the viewer realizes that the entire flirtatious scenario with Dr. Haden, as depicted in the film, is meant to suggest that Austen has already missed her chance for love, and Dr. Haden and other men like him represent nothing but a moment of flirtation in its most fleeting and ephemeral sense.

Indeed, as the title suggests, *Miss Austen Regrets*, like *Becoming Jane*, dwells on the missed opportunities that Austen’s romances with Lefroy, Bigg-Withers, and Bridges offered and the melancholy tone of the film suggests that perhaps she made a mistake. That being said, Austen herself is never depicted in the film as admitting that she did the wrong thing. Some of the most heartbreaking moments are those in which other characters try to force her to admit she was wrong. In a conversation in which Bridges indicates that he would have encouraged Austen to write had they gotten married, he pushes her to show as much affection for him as he has for her:

Bridges: Tell me now that you regret it. Tell me now that sometimes in the night you think of me. Tell me even if it isn’t true.

Austen: What on earth would be the point?

Similarly, Mrs. Austen, Jane's mother, is portrayed as berating her for not accepting Harris Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage, thus blaming Jane for the precarious financial situation that the Austen women faced:

Mrs. Austen: It's not as if you were waiting for a better offer. The rich man with the big house. No, you had that, and threw it away. You threw your life away. And mine. And your sister's with it.

Jane Austen: What did you want me to do? Sell myself for money?

...

Mrs. Austen: You sacrificed all our security on a principle, Jane. And has it made you happy? Has it? Look at you. You're ill. Nobody tells me anything, but I have eyes in my head. Oh, my poor lonely girl.

[Jane doesn't have a chance to respond.]

In a later private conversation between the sisters, in which Cassandra is nursing a very sick Jane, Austen is finally allowed to fully speak on the topic of regret. The fictionalized Austen's words emphasize her integrity:

The only regret I have about not marrying Harris Bigg is that I'm going to die.

I'm going to leave you and Mother with nothing. ... I chose freedom. ... This life I have is what I needed. It's what God intended for me. I'm so much happier than I thought I'd be. So much happier than I deserve to be.

This speech is what I would have imagined Austen to say, if she ever said anything on the subject at all. And yet, the melancholy tone of the scene –the somber candlelight, the deathbed tears – seems to undercut Austen's words of contentment.

Of course it is not simply a detail that during this moment in which Austen speaks fully on behalf of freedom, integrity in relationships, and satisfaction of her life and choices, Austen's curious niece Fanny looks in on the bedroom and listens to the conversation. She asks Cassandra to see her aunt, stating "there's so much I need to ask her." Later, Fanny happens upon Cassandra as she burns Jane's letters, which upsets Fanny. Cassandra replies, "you still believe there's a secret love story to uncover," to which Fanny replies, "Maybe I still hope there is."

This draws attention to the fact that Fanny's fanciful and romantic point of view has been a controlling force in the film; if the somber tones of Austen's moment of accepting her life and choices take on the attitude of regret rather than of satisfaction it is because *Fanny* is not satisfied with Austen's life. Further, in Fanny's curiosity about her maiden aunt, in her insistence that Austen must have had a secret love affair, Fanny is posited as a substitute for the audience and the filmmakers themselves, who want to pry into Austen's private life and know her secrets with the same insatiable curiosity as the fictionalized niece.

The same dynamic is true of Bridges' insistence that Austen declare that she regrets not marrying him; because we are watching a film speculating about and glamorizing Austen's romantic life, we collectively are interrogating her choices as much as he is. But she responds, "What would be the point?" Indeed, throughout the film Austen and Cassandra expertly deflect Fanny and the audience's desire for disclosure. Early in the film Fanny asks her aunt Jane "were you really never in love?" to which she replies, dramatically and ironically, that

Jane: The truth is Fanny, and this must be our secret, you must never tell anyone, the truth is I am she that loved and lost. . . . I loved and lost, and pined, and yearned. And then swore myself to solitude and consolations of writing about it instead.

Fanny: Did you really?

Jane: You read far too many novels.

Similarly, when Fanny declares that she still hopes there is a secret love story in her aunt's past, instead of addressing the questions of romantic love, Cassandra's reply emphasizes the depth of their sisterly relationship. The film uses the words from an actual letter to Fanny following Austen's death on July 20, 1817: "She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow. I had not a thought concealed from her, and it's as if I lost a part of myself." Although Cassandra's words indict us for prying into this moment, the film's critique is so subtle it fails to make that point, especially considering that it so insistently speculates and fills in gaps itself. Of course, even in this film so desperate for disclosure, the sisters refuse to give up their secrets.

Although the approach to developing the unsatisfying story of Austen's life is often to imagine what kinds of experiences lurked within the silences of her biography, another approach has been to see Austen as being in love with her own fictional characters. Even serious academic biographers, like John Halperin, have done so: "Where was the man for her? She found them only in her novels – in extraordinary men like Darcy, Henry Tilney, and Mr. Knightley. The men she met in real life suffered by comparison" (Halperin 72).



An early version of the idea that Austen was in love with her fictional heroes is Rudyard's Kipling's 1926 poem "Jane's Marriage," in which Austen meets Captain Wentworth in heaven:

In a private limbo  
Where none had thought to look,  
Sat a Hampshire gentleman  
Reading of a book.  
It was called *Persuasion*  
And it told the plain  
Story of the love between  
Him and Jane.

He heard the question,  
Circle Heaven through -  
Closed the book and answered: "I did - and do!"  
Quietly but speedily  
(As Captain Wentworth moved)  
Entered into Paradise  
The man Jane loved! (Kipling 148)

James Heldman writes that when he first encountered this poem, he found himself wondering "How are we as readers to take it? Is it ironic? Is it tongue-in-cheek? Who is the speaker? ... I knew that Kipling could often be sentimental in his way, but I also knew that he could be cuttngly sarcastic and ironic as well." After pursuing the question

further with additional research into Kipling and the story that this poem follows, “The Janeites,” Heldman concludes that “Kipling, as an admirer, gives her the one thing she missed in her life – the love of her ideal man. That man, in Kipling’s view at least, is the hero of the last novel.”

I am not fully convinced that Kipling isn’t being ironic here. There is a sense in which the excessive sentiment overrides the various logistical problems presented in this poem, making me doubt its sincerity. For instance, that the poem depicts a fictional character in heaven all set to live an ethereal life of bliss with a woman notoriously averse to self-delusion seems improbable as an actual hope on Kipling’s part. That this poem was published in Kipling’s collection of short stories, *Debits and Credits*, following “The Janeites,” a war story in which Kipling takes a very unsentimental and complex view of Austen’s fiction, makes me even more suspicious. The jacket cover for the 2009 House of Stratus reprint of this collection of stories reads

*Debits and Credits* is a collection of anguished and bleak stories written by an author struggling with his own inner sufferings. Marital discord and adultery, war and death, cancer and disease are recurring themes throughout the stories, with the relentless ticking of the clock acting as a harbinger of greater sorrows.

This dark context makes a sentimental view of “Jane’s Marriage” difficult for me to accept. I tend to read the poem as expressing the desires of the men in the trenches depicted in “The Janeites.” But whether the stance is ironic or sentimental, whether Kipling is satirizing a common desire in which people want to match a spinster author up with one of her characters, or is earnestly espousing that view, may be less important for my purposes than the fact that his poem points out that, for some people, the thought of

Austen being in love with one of her characters isn't laughable at all. That speculation is part of her legacy.

And the speculation continues. In her 2006 novel, *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, Sally Smith O'Rourke imagines that Darcy wasn't merely a creation by Austen, but a man with whom Austen had a relationship. The book presents a scenario in which "a modern American man" is unwittingly transported in time and space from his home in the United States to Austen's home in Steventon, where the two fall in love and leave behind two love letters that a modern character, Eliza Knight, discovers. The novel focuses on Eliza's attempt to track down the descendants of the man in the letter, which provides the frame narrative for the story of Austen's fictional romance. *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* is particularly interesting because it combines the speculation that Austen must have loved her fictional characters with the idea that she must have had a real-life romance in order to write as persuasively about romance as she did.

This book isn't the most loved of the Austen spin-offs, but it isn't the worst by far. It was popular enough to merit a sequel: *Yours Affectionately, Jane Austen*. *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* has 3.5 out of 5 stars on *Amazon.com*. It also has over 2,000, less glowing, reviews on *Goodreads*. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by comparison, has 3,000 reviews on *Goodreads* and 4.1 out of 5 stars on *Amazon.com*. That the much more popular novel is not rated drastically higher, nor rated much more frequently than *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* indicates that people are at least interested in the concept of speculating about Austen's love life with a fictional character.

Part of this interest in fictionalized accounts of Austen's biography rests in the way that Austen's sparse biography leaves her seeming almost like a fictional character

herself. She seems to exist on the same plane as her imaginary characters and has herself become a fictional character. She has been cast as the leading lady in her own biography. Furthermore, her “loveless” life of spinsterhood is constantly reverberating against the happy relationships she depicted so believably in her novels, and the associative effect of that link is exceptionally powerful. Mira Schor, an artist who created the beautiful painting reproduced here, describes her work by stating that “[t]he writing is produced by dye-based inks that persistently seep through many layers of white gesso, so that the gap between the author's and the heroine's life is perpetually suspended in an irresolvable tension of coexistence and non-parity” (180). As much as we recognize and accept that Jane Austen never married, the idea of all her fictional romances still intrudes upon that acknowledgement, blurring it, making it seem more like a painful concession than a fact.

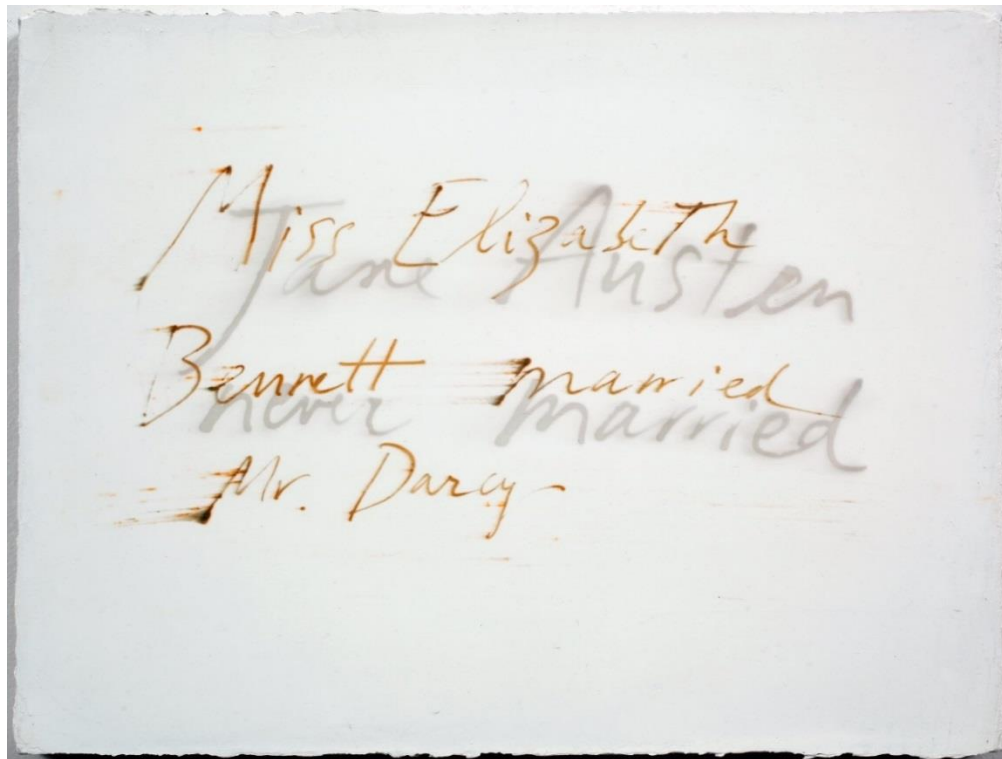


Figure 2: "Jane Austen Never Married" used with permission by Mira Schor

But for Austen's unmarried women – whether spinsters or widows – the problems created by their single status tend to be more an issue of livelihood than of loneliness. The widowed women in secure financial situations such as Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility* and Lady Russell in *Persuasion* seem to be fully content in their current positions, and in no hurry to find love again. And in the case of the women in more dire financial situations, such as Miss Bates in *Emma* and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, we are made to sympathize with them because of their decreased means rather than their lack of love. And of course Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* chooses marriage to a very silly man over being a burden upon her family; through Collins, she gains security, a house of her own, and a position of some consequence. The real tragedy of singlehood for women of this time is poverty.

This is certainly not to say that love is unimportant in Austen's oeuvre. Indeed, the opposite is quite true. Austen values love as a requirement for marriage, and two of her heroines, Fanny and Elizabeth, are shown as being justified in rejecting proposals from men they didn't love. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot is in love with Wentworth, "who had nothing to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession," and is thus persuaded to turn down marriage with him (26-27). The novel explores her experience of regret as he re-enters her life years later. Austen herself accepted a proposal of marriage from the eligible Harris Bigg in 1802, probably seeking financial comfort and support, only to retract her acceptance the following morning. In a letter to Fanny counseling her on the question of marriage, Austen writes "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection" (18 November 1814).

Austen's work occupies a transitional position in the history marriage. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, attitudes towards marriage shifted. Stephanie Coontz has shown in her extensive research on the history of marriage that prior to the seventeenth century "love was not the main thing that people took into account in deciding when and whom to marry" (977). People favored partners who contributed materially or financially to the well-being of the family, who got along well with relatives, and who provided communal bonds between families. But Coontz shows that

In the 17th century, a series of interrelated political, economic, and cultural changes began to erode the older functions of marriage and throw into question the right of parents, local elites, and government officials to limit individual autonomy in personal life, including marriage. And in the 18th century, the revolutionary new ideal of the love match triumphed in most of Western Europe and North America. (978)

Austen requires love for her heroines, but she does not require the passion and fervor from these relationships that many of her near contemporaries like the Brontës insisted on. Elizabeth and Anne are lucky to have men who are "violently in love," but Elinor and Fanny are equally lucky to have relationships built on mutual esteem and respect (*Pride and Prejudice* 346). Even the phrase "violently in love" is an Austenian nomenclature that captures the depth and candidness of Darcy's passion and an ironically hyperbolic undercutting of it at once; it is a phrase which is described by Mrs. Gardiner earlier in the novel as an expression "so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea" (138). And yet, Austen attributes it to the admirable Mr. Darcy. Austen represents a moment of transition.

Given that Austen represents a transitional and therefore fairly moderate position on marriage, it is somewhat puzzling that she has become entangled with modern discourses on sexuality. Many of the *Pride and Prejudice* spin-off novels are popular precisely because they purposefully put words to the sexual act which Austen so carefully concealed with her shift in narrative style. *The Truth About Mr. Darcy* is billed as “A sexy, compelling *Pride and Prejudice* ‘what if’” on its *Amazon.com* page. Kristine Huntley’s *Booklist* review for *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* as it appears on *Amazon.com* reads,

In Berdoll’s wild, bawdy, and utterly enjoyable novel, the Darcys begin their married life as one of the happiest, most in-love couples imaginable. Berdoll picks up the story after their wedding, but flashes back to the days after the courtship, when Elizabeth and Darcy’s passion for each other grew stronger. After a spicy wedding night, the couple finds their compatibility extends far beyond their matched wits.

Similarly, while researching I found this odd appearance of Austen in an interview with Terry Rossio, screenwriter for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, who explains “we wanted [the film] to be a very classic, Jane Austen-style bodice ripping romance” (Denby). This statement is laughable for any true fan of Jane Austen, but for the rest of the world, the association of Austen with romance has real cultural cache. It is unbelievable how often “bodice-ripping” gets mentioned in conversations about Austen.

Virginia Blum argues that Austen has become so entangled with discourses of sexuality because the repressed sexual narrative of her novels is actually much sexier to modern audiences for whom eroticism has come “out of the closet and bored us with its

endless displays of what sex really looks like” (166). She further argues that “repression is structurally central to the story of desire itself, without it there can be no origin of desire. . . . [And I] like nineteenth-century readers of Jane Austen, we know what the marriage plot stands for: the marriage bed” (174). The unsaid stories of sexuality of her novels are a tantalizing absence that excites the imagination and asks to be filled with new narratives.

Similarly, Austen herself is sexualized in the fictionalized biographical films and fantasy novels. In *Miss Austen Regrets*, Cassandra pushes Jane to reveal a secret passion for Dr. Haden, stating

Cassandra: Something happened to you in London. Something between a man and an angel.

Jane: Mr. Haden was young and unsuitable, and he thought himself very clever and very fine.

Cassandra: And you thought him...

Jane: I didn't think him anything at all. Thinking didn't come into it. My mind was not involved.

Here we see a humanized portrayal of the maiden author reveling in the pleasurable objectification of a man. Even if we assume that Austen never voiced her desires in real life, there is something honest about showing that she at least noticed the good-looking men of her acquaintance, especially Dr. Haden, who she seemed to truly be attracted to in her letters.

In *Miss Austen Regrets*, Austen's sexuality is never shown as going beyond an imaginative acknowledgement of sensuality, but other fictional accounts show her



engaging in actual physical acts, specifically tension-building kisses. In *Becoming Jane*, passionate kisses and sexual tension are paired with climactic moments in the plot— one of the most frequently pinned images from the movie on *Pinterest*, for instance, is when Jane and Tom playfully almost kiss repeatedly in the candlelight in a seductive mimicry of the formal dance they had participated in earlier. Later, when Tom implores her to elope with him, he steals a kiss, as though he could no longer restrain himself.

In *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, O'Rourke imagines that Jane is the forward one, asking for more kisses in the moonlight and emphasizing that she is using these moments as a way to gain experience: "I am merely building up a store of dreams" (187). That being said, because the book is a frame narrative in which Fitzwilliam is recounting his experience, the most intense physical descriptions are always portrayed through his perspective: "Darcy's pulse quickened as he recalled the touch of her lips on his the night before, felt the urgent trembling of her slender body pressed to his in the moonlit forest" (204). So even when Jane says that she is grateful for her experience with him, "for now I know at least a little of those tender passions and emotions which I have so often and yet so poorly attempted to describe in prose," the statement is filtered through the speaker, who always interprets Austen as a chaste maiden (209).

Although both *Becoming Jane* and *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* present Austen as a sexual being, that portrayal is only ever accomplished through kisses. These creative extensions don't dare imagine more. Though Austen's virginity is never questioned in these published narratives, many fans can't help but wondering. A naïve *IMDb* (Internet Movie Database) message board writer, afikaris09, questions "Was Jane Austin [sic] a virgin her whole life?" on the *Becoming Jane* board. The audacity of that

question gets at the heart of this paper, a kind of modern inability to understand how such a brilliant and vibrant genius could have such a private and chaste life, and the subsequent desire to pry into her life and find out why. The speculations concerning Austen's virginity are an extension of the unsatisfying nature of her biography.

Part of this obsession with Austen's physicality arises because, in addition to her already sparse biography, she left behind very little physical evidence. Claudia Johnson describes how so often physical evidence related to Austen actually indicates a lack of some sort. For instance, the pump at Steventon stands as a representative of the missing rectory where Austen lived, and as Johnson points out, when people visit this location,

the burden of wondrous vision is placed on the visitant – as when Ellen Hill is drawing the pump, and Constance, gazing on the blank space, muses, 'I can now picture myself the exact spot where the parsonage stood, and can fancy the carriage drive approaching it. .... I can even fancy the house itself.' (73)

Even her romantic and sexual biographies operate like a lack that must be filled with the imaginative narratives of her fans. Fans can't help but draw upon their own modern perspectives which often manifest in the form of outright erotic fiction.

On the other hand, many modern Janeites become enraged by depictions of Austen's knowledge of sexuality, and even the association of sexuality with Austen in the literary adaptations. Of all the Austen spin-off novels, the sexualized extensions of *Pride and Prejudice* receive, by far, the most scathing reviews on *Amazon.com*. Sharon Lathan's *Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy: Two Shall Become One* is one of the most hated among them. One reviewer, A. Beach, writes "I feel certain that Miss Austen would never approve of such lewd and disgusting displays of wanton affection, nor would the

ever-proper gentleman Mr. Darcy.” Lathan made the mistake of not having actually read Austen before writing and publishing her sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*, but the other sexualized novels receive similar treatment.

Although *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* is not as explicitly sexual as Lathan’s novel, the mere suggestion of sexual freedom that lurks beneath the subtext is too much for some readers. In the *Amazon.com* review of *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, titled “Wrong-Headed View of the Future,” Katherine Patterson writes

I loved this book, except for a rather heavy-handed attempt to link birth control and sexual freedom to the wonderful world of the twenty-first century. Hasn't the author ever looked at a modern classroom or a day-care center or the whole foster-care system? Haven't the readers noticed how many college girls go to bars, leave with someone they hardly know, and end up dead? Instead of sexual freedom bringing in the modern Utopia, it has delivered one or two generations with untold numbers of lost souls. Any day you want, I'll be happy to take Jane's morals and values--the family, fidelity, chastity, children who know their fathers, young women who accept the protection of their families.

The preoccupation with Austen’s sexual innocence is as wrapped up in personal politics as the sexualization of her novels is, to the point that her virginity is used as an emblematic trophy politicizing a way of life.

But sometimes the insistence on Austen’s innocence is more subtle, more a taken for granted assumption. For instance, I was struck by this statement by the screenwriter for *Miss Austen Regrets*, Gwyneth Hughes, who observes

Although it seems as if the world's foremost writer of love stories was writing out of apparently no experience, when you look closely, you realize that she did have experience – not a bodice-ripping, sexual experience, as I'm sure she died a virgin, but a clear emotional experience of at least three men. (Sewards)

Hughes feels the need to qualify her statement about Austen's experiences with men, to specify that it was only emotional, and not physical, because the norms and values associated with Austen will not admit for any other possibility without the kind of ridicule that the sexualized spin-offs receive. Part of this is related to her own moral vision. But more to the point is how she is positioned as an iconic figure whose virginity is a central aspect of her fame. There are centuries of precedent in which her maidenhood and assumed virginity are hugely important factors in understanding her works.

Especially prior to the feminist re-appropriation of her work, critics and fans were quick to append the word "maiden" to descriptions of Austen as a writer. Tellingly, Sir Walter Scott wrote in his journal on March 14, 1826, "That *young lady* had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and character of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with" (135, my emphasis). As Tomalin argues, Scott did "what everyone has done ever since, assimilate her to the twenty-year-old heroines of the books" (254). Austen, who died at 42, over 10 years before that passage was written, is caught in an everlasting youth, and her enormous talent is viewed as a kind of aberration made all the more impressive by her innocence. Thus the compulsion to make statements asserting Austen's virginity is tied up in long-standing cultural attitudes to Austen.

Emily Auerbach and Claudia Johnson have shown that Austen's assumed innocence was created as a rhetorical strategy on the part of Austen's family and

biographers. This was accomplished through the editing of Austen's letters, first by Cassandra and later by other family members and biographers. For instance, Lord Brabourne made an effort to edit out any mention of bodily functions that would suggest Austen had knowledge of sexual acts. According to Claudia Johnson, he deleted

the carnal matter-of-factness that runs through many of Austen's letters.

References to 'breeding' neighbors or suggestions that one prodigious couple, after the birth of their eighteenth child, might consider 'the simple regimen of separate rooms' (L, 330, 20 February 1817) get the knife for sexual knowingness.

(23)

As Johnson so rightly points out, "What is important to recognize here is that posterity's insistence on Austen's ignorance of the body has its origins in *our* discomfort with her body, not in *her* discomfort with it" (23). Over and over again, readers project modern, personal hang-ups into the silences in Austen's biography.

The casual knowingness involved with the assumption of Austen's virginity sometimes feels as invasive as the sexualized fictions, in part because it projects personal assumptions about what constitutes happiness onto the absences in Austen's biography. The message board poster who asks "Was Jane Austin a virgin her whole life?" in the title goes on to write in the actual message content that Austen's "life truly was a tragedy. She never married and died young. She had so much love built up inside her but she was never able to give it to someone [sic]" (afikaris09). The perception that a loveless, sexless life is a tragedy and the subsequent sexualization of Austen are based on *fans'* assumptions of happiness rather than her own, indicating that there has been a major shift in cultural assumptions regarding what constitutes "happiness." For that reason, we have

a situation in which Austen biographical films must walk a fine line on which they present her as chaste in order to adhere to long-standing traditions of her innocence, while at the same time demonstrating that she had a passionate love life in order to account for her superb mastery of the romance form.

If we turn to her letters and her works themselves instead of to our own assumptions about happiness we see that Austen's opinion of domesticity was not very glowing. For instance, upon discovering that Anna Lefroy was pregnant again, Austen wrote to her niece Fanny Knight: "Anna has not a chance of escape; ... Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty. – I am very sorry for her. – Mrs Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children" (23 March 1817). Additionally, Cassandra was rumored to have told Frank's daughter Catherine that "some of her [Jane's] letters, triumphing over the married women of her acquaintance, and rejoicing in her own freedom, were most amusing" (Tomalin 281). And as Claudia Johnson points out, that by placing "art and passion in opposition," *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets* "cannot imagine what is so obvious to the Janeites discussed throughout this book: that *writing* was Jane Austen's passion, not a regrettable substitute for it" (183). After all, Austen called *Pride and Prejudice* "my own darling child" (29 January 1813).

Perhaps Austen's biography isn't unsatisfying after all, but, like her novels, is very satisfying indeed. When we assume otherwise, when we seek to fill the silences of her life with our own agendas, when we treat her as an empty vessel into which we can pour our own concerns, we are treating her memory with a kind of presumption that we know she would have been grieved to witness. All we need do is to turn to the (un)satisfying endings in her own novels and observe the respectful distance she offers

her heroines in matters that are closest to the heart, to know that she would have had us do the same for her.

## Chapter II

### “Just as she is”: Unconditional and Static Friendships Between Women

The relationship that Austen had with her sister Cassandra was perhaps the most important and deep relationship of her life, and relationships between women are important centerpieces of her novels, often driving the plots forward and universally supporting the central themes. Elinor and Marianne represent the divergent stances of sense and sensibility. Elizabeth’s quickness to make judgments and form prejudices forms one extreme on a spectrum, while Jane’s excessive kindness and goodwill represents another extreme. Emma’s interaction with the lower-class Harriet illustrates her privileged and presumptuous blindness. Lady Russell convinces Anne to drop her engagement with Wentworth, illustrating both the positive and negative effects of persuasion. Mary Crawford’s appealing wit and unflattering amorality act as a contrast to Fanny’s quiet passivity and unwavering moral rightness, making the case that sometimes the most popular personality is not always the most correct. With that in mind, it is unfortunate that instead of having a reputation for creating deep relationships between women, Austen has come to be almost synonymous with the marriage plot.

That being said, friendships between women do figure prominently in the Austen-inspired films *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*. In these films, friendship acts as a fantasy that strongly resonates with the concerns and desires of the target audience – contemporary middle-class heterosexual young white women – for whom deep friendships are often prohibitively hard to maintain. Friendships presented in these movies represent a fantasy of devotion which complements the core narrative fantasy of romance. The connection that these films have to Austen, who provides the



narrative foundation for these adaptations and spin-offs, allows the filmmakers to present and celebrate the power of friendship as a possible alternative narrative structure, while simultaneously persisting in the use of the easy, conventional, moneymaking format of romance narrative.

While “Sex and the City” (1998) is perhaps the most visible American embodiment of the fantasy of female friendship, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), Helen Fielding’s fictional account of the Londonite “singleton” scene anticipated that fantasy in her construction of what Bridget terms “the urban family.” *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is a modern story hung together on the bare bones of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, especially gaining inspiration from the specific trajectory of the romance plot between Elizabeth and Darcy. When Bridget meets Mark Darcy for the first time, they are equally repelled by one another; she overhears him calling her a “verbally incontinent spinster who smokes like a chimney, drinks like a fish, and dresses like her mother” and later she refers to him as a “prematurely middle-aged prick.”<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, Bridget becomes interested in her boss Daniel Cleaver, who represents the Wickham character. When Mark and Daniel have an awkward reunion in Bridget’s presence, Daniel explains that the two used to be best friends until Mark slept with Daniel’s fiancée years ago. Daniel eventually leaves Bridget for an American woman. As time passes, Mark becomes more and more interested in Bridget, and eventually tells her that he likes her “just as she is.” Like Elizabeth and Darcy, we see early on that Bridget’s playfulness and occasional foolishness would be a nice balance for Mark’s overbearing gravity and intelligence. By the end, like Elizabeth and Darcy, Bridget and Mark have a complete reversal of their

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<sup>4</sup> Unless I’ve cited page numbers, all quotes of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* are transcribed from the film version.

feelings for one another, and we learn that, like Wickham, Daniel had lied about the story of betrayal.

According to Imelda Staunton, Bridget Jones is “a kind of ‘everywoman’ of the 1990s” (12). And as rumors of a third Bridget Jones film circulate in 2013, over a decade after the release of the first film, we see the continuing potency of her appeal for women of a certain demographic (“Bridget Jones Opens”). A major part of that appeal involves the iconic urban family composed of Bridget and her singleton friends, who, in the novel, act as a support system for Bridget as she makes the best out of her various romantic entanglements.

The film heightens the fantasy of the friendships established in the novel by bringing all of her various friends together multiple times in what seems to be a habitual way, highlighting the friendships as a collective experience, rather than as a series of one-on-one relationships. These friends are highly flawed in charmingly quirky ways, to the point that the one sane and calm voice in the novel – Sharon – is removed from the circle of friends in the film adaptation. Instead, we have Jude, Bridget’s best friend and “head of investment at Brightlings Bank who spends most of her time trapped in the lady’s toilet, crying over fuck-wit boyfriend” and Shazzer, a journalist who “likes to say ‘fuck’ a lot.” The film also adds Tom, Bridget’s gay friend who usually operates as separate from the group of women in the novel, but who is brought into the circle of friends in the film. Tom thus performs both the tropes of “gay best friend” and token male. He is an “eighties pop icon who only wrote one hit record, then retired because he found that one record was quite enough to get him laid for the whole of the Nineties.”

The quirkiness of these characters serves an important function. It heightens the sense of fun that pervades Bridget's life as a singleton woman, but more importantly, the friends act as foils for Bridget, who might seem even more painfully neurotic, crass, and crude than she already does had these friends not been included. They make her seem like an "everywoman" by comparison. Bridget's profanity, drinking, smoking, and sexual freedom operate as flaws because she is continually trying to stop doing these things. And they are moderate flaws that connect her to the women in the audience. The friends' more extreme versions of these behaviors show us that it could be much worse.

Additionally, the friendships in the film heighten Bridget's centrality in the fictional universe. In the book Bridget often offers support to her friends, commiserating with Jude concerning the cruel exploits of "Vile Richard" and rallying assistance when Tom "disappears" after a nose job (17). The film removes most of these moments. In the film Bridget seems to be the only one with any troubles. We know from an early phone call that Jude is having problems with her boyfriend, but that knowledge operates merely as subtext from that moment on. Tom is happily enjoying the problem-free lifestyle of a promiscuous gay man (obviously a problematic stereotype) and Shazzar seems perfectly content to hang out in bars, talk about other peoples' problems, and say fuck a lot. One of the ways to read Bridget's constant problems is that her penchant for getting into trouble is *her* quirky characteristic that makes her valuable to this circle of friends, who love to solve her problems and dictate (often disastrous) solutions. But more importantly by focusing on Bridget the film heightens the fantasy of friendship, in which the friends are completely and utterly dedicated to the heroine and the problems in her life, as though they have nothing better to do than think about what is going on with Bridget.

For instance, in the book, the first meeting between the friends is to discuss Jude's "self-indulgent commitment phobic" boyfriend "Vile Richard" (17) but in the film, the first meeting is an "emergency summit with urban family for coherent discussion of [Bridget's] career crisis." She was caught by her boss, Daniel Cleaver, having inappropriate conversation with Jude on the phone at work. She makes the situation worse by pretending that she had been talking to F. R. Leavis, not realizing that he is dead, escalating a little mistake into a major professional embarrassment. Her friends' responses match their personalities. Shazzar exclaims, "Fuck 'em. Fuck the lot of 'em. They can stick fucking Leavis up their fucking asses." When Bridget asks Jude, "what would you do if one of your assistants made a harmless little mistake like that?" Jude responds, "I'd fire you, Bridge." And Tom humorously asserts, "Well I think a well-timed blow job's probably the best answer." Although their suggestions are unhelpful, sarcastic, and offered up more for laughs than as actual useful ideas to get past this mistake, the greater point is that they all showed up for the "emergency summit," seemingly at her beck and call, simply for the purpose to support her in what is a pretty minor crisis. What they say is less important than that they showed up.

Similarly their second meeting is to prepare Bridget for an important work-related book-launch cocktail party, in which Bridget's "whole future happiness depends on how [she] behave[s] at this one social occasion." Collectively, the group works to prepare Bridget for the event, illustrating the fantasy of devotion yet again. Jude begins, by suggesting, "First. Look gorgeous. Two. Totally ignore Daniel and suck up to famous authors." As she delivers these lines, she gestures with her index and middle fingers balancing a smoking cigarette, and Bridget mimics the gesture, drawing attention to the

fact that everyone at the table is smoking. Indeed, the humor of this scene revolves around the bar-like-setting. Tom swirls his martini as he delivers the third suggestion to “circulate, oozing intelligence.” Shazzar clinks a margarita glass and a wine glass together to illustrate how to “introduce people with thoughtful details,” which also draws attention to the fact that their little table for four is littered with empty and half-finished glasses. When she demonstrates the skill of introduction, stating, “Shelia enjoys horse-riding and comes from New Zealand. Daniel enjoys publishing and comes...” she is interrupted by Bridget who finishes the idea by crudely suggesting “All over your face?”

It is important that all of the “emergency summits” take place in bars and involve lots of smoking, drinking, flirting, profanity, and sex talk – emblems of the raunchy liberated post-feminist femininity described by Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. Levy focuses how post-feminism often frames empowerment around a simplistic ideal of the freedom to push limits, even if those acts of rebellion begin to look like familiar old misogynistic practices. For these kinds of feminists, the empowerment comes in the form of Shazzar’s demonstrative “fuck ‘em!” and Tom’s readiness to resort to the use of sexual power through a “well-timed blow job” as much as it does from Jude’s more traditional demonstration of institutional power of “I’d fire you.” For instance, Levy interviews Candida Royalle, a feminist pornographer who discusses her break from traditional second wave feminists:

We had sex with whoever we wanted. We did drugs whenever we wanted. No one could tell us what to do. ... It was my way of going to the other extreme ... rebelling against the too-radical uptightness that was turning a movement I loved

into these old biddies telling me we shouldn't have relationships with men. (68-69)

This form of femininity and feminism revolves around personal freedom and rejection of any perceived institutional or cultural constraints. The bars, the smoking, the drinking, and the profanity create a picture of liberation from patriarchal scripts for womanhood. The celebration of friendship seems to be part of that freedom, in which intimacy and support through friends frees women from the ubiquitous marriage plot.

To that end, Bridget's urban family of singeltons is favorably compared to her other set of friends, the "smug marrieds." Bridget only sees her smug marrieds once, at a stuffy dinner party. Upon entering the room, and being introduced to the other attendees, Bridget thinks (in voice-over) "[t]he only thing worse than a smug married couple; lots of smug married couples." During this event, Bridget, the only single woman in attendance, is put on trial when one of the guests asks her "why is it there are so many single women in their thirties these days, Bridget?" Bridget evades the question through humor, saying "Oh, I don't know. Suppose it doesn't help that underneath our clothes our entire bodies are covered in scales." The room then falls into an uncomfortable silence.

Although the smug married's dinner party makes Bridget feel hopeless about being single, she still clearly prefers the informal social events with her single friends. Later Bridget hosts her own disastrous dinner party for her singleton friends that exhibits a set of values in juxtaposition to those offered up in the smug marrieds party. Despite an inedible meal, the night nevertheless ends with a toast from Tom: "Well done Bridge, four hours of careful cooking and a feast of blue soup, omelet, and marmalade. I think that deserves a toast, don't you? To Bridget, who cannot cook, but who we love [in an

undertone] just as she is. [All in unison] To Bridget, just as she is.” The fundamental and unconditional acceptance that Bridget receives from her friends is the ultimate fantasy of friendship.

Through the tonal differences between the two opposing dinner parties, the filmmakers make a sub-textual and implicit argument that the singleton life is the core fantasy of the film, not the more traditional romance narrative. The smug marrieds may be coupled, but they are simultaneously tamed, reigned in, and domesticated, while the lonely singletons enjoy a sense of freedom and get support through friendship.

However, as much as the film makes us crave an urban family of our own, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* “still ultimately emphasize[s] what a woman really wants is to find the right guy with whom to spend the rest of her life” (Mabry 204). The moment of unconditional acceptance among her friends in which they declare their love for her “just as she is” is actually a repetition of an earlier scene in which Mark tells Bridget “I like you very much. Just as you are.” At Bridget’s disastrous dinner party, Tom is playing a joke on Bridget and Mark, by referring to a private moment between them and showing Mark that Bridget thought enough of that statement to tell her friends. That playfulness does not erase the unconditional acceptance represented by the toast. They all might be laughing, but the friends are clearly in earnest. However, it complicates the scene by introducing the romantic plot into a moment that might otherwise be about friendship.

Indeed, the rollicking exuberance of the post-feminist girls’ nights out that occur throughout the film is almost always ironically undercut by the actual the content of the scenes, in which the characters are lamenting their own singleton existence. Throughout the film, most of the “emergency summits” between the friends involve discussions of

romantic relationships. Even when they get together to prepare Bridget for the work-related cocktail party, the ultimate goal is for Bridget to hook up with her boss, Daniel Cleaver, the Wickham character. And at the end of the film, Bridget's friends come to her apartment hoping to convince her to go to Paris with them for the weekend to try to get over Mark Darcy's impending marriage. Just as she is about to get into the taxi, Mark appears. She is forced to make a symbolic choice: friendship or love. Of course, this choice has only one possible outcome. She chooses to stay with Mark and the happy couple kisses as her friends elatedly cheer her on from the taxi.

This emphasis on both/and friendship/marriage represents Bridget's post-feminist outlook. One of the freedoms protected by post-feminists is the freedom to be unapologetically concerned with romance and marriage or any other traditionally feminine or anti-feminist institutions. As Angela McRobbie points out in her essay on Bridget Jones and post-feminism, "Bridget fantasises about very traditional forms of happiness and fulfillment" despite finding a great deal of comfort and pleasure in the non-traditional source of support in the form of friendship (21).

A similar dynamic exists in the film version of *The Jane Austen Book Club*. This film presents an ideal of friendship initially more artificial than *Bridget Jones's Diary* because the group comes together through a book club scenario and the acts of friendships are most often shown within the context of the club. However, foundational members of the club – best friends, Jocelyn and Sylvia, Sylvia's college-aged daughter Allegra, and the somewhat mysterious older free-spirit Bernadette – have a deep and significant history. Early in the film Sylvia, Jocelyn, and Allegra are hanging out in Sylvia's bedroom as Sylvia lounges in bed with red eyes and tissues. She has just



discovered that her husband wants a divorce and is dating another woman. In this intimate scene, the trio begins to discuss what it is like for women in the forties to begin dating again:

Sylvia: It's just so unfair. He can start his life over again. And at this age. You know, men can do that. Women... it's over.

Allegra: You are beautiful mom.

Joceyln: And accomplished and interesting. You are not without your options, Sylvia.

...

Allegra: You might even meet somebody.

Sylvia: I don't want to meet someone. I just want to pull the covers over my head and read novels.

Here Allegra and Jocelyn attempt to soothe and comfort Sylvia's broken heart, to rally her up, to help her plan for a new sort of life. Like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Jane Austen Book Club* thus establishes that a central purpose of friendship is support and guidance in romantic problems.

This purpose is solidified by the outcome of the first meeting of the book club. The subject is *Emma*, and as they sip white wine on the porch at sunset, Bernadette remarks that, like Emma, Jocelyn is a matchmaker. Sylvia observes "You put me together with Daniel," reminding her of her soon to be ex-husband. She starts crying and runs back into the house. The four foundational characters follow her into the house one by one, presumably to comfort her.

This establishes one of the repeated codes for support in the film, in which a character leaves the room in tears and is followed by at least one of the other members of the club. Unlike *Bridget Jones's Diary*, we sometimes don't get to hear what is said during these moments of comfort. Indeed, the audience is left on the porch with two of the other book club members: Grigg the one man invited to the club and Prudie who remains the most isolated character throughout the film. When Sylvia begins to cry during the first meeting, Grigg gently touches her arm and back to comfort her, but she hardly notices, and runs inside; he's not close enough to comfort her. We hear the porch door slam shut over and over as the foundational friends leave one by one. Symbolically left out on the porch while the other women commiserate confidentially inside, the audience and these *mere* book club members have not earned the right to be privy to what occurs inside the circle of close friends.

The isolation of the two estranged characters is further emphasized by the following scene in which the four foundational friends discuss the first meeting after Grigg and Prudie have left. The incongruity of a young single man in this group of deeply involved female friends becomes the first immediate source of discussion.

Jocelyn: I hope we didn't scare Grigg away.

Allegra: Yeah, he sure got out of here fast.

Bernadette: We'll toughen him up.

Here, Bernadette's joke that Grigg needs toughening up to survive interaction with these intelligent yet highly emotional women suggests that the supportive work of friendship is indeed *hard work*, and a skill that must be learned and honed through exposure and

practice. They remain confident about his ability to learn to be part of the group. The response to Prudie, however, is less generous:

Jocelyn: Jane and I, we know our themes. [said with an exaggerated English accent to sarcastically mock Prudie's use of Austen's first name]

Allegra: And why does she have to speak in French?

Jocelyn: And if so, couldn't she do it in France [emphasizing the American pronunciation of the word], where it is less noticeable?

Bernadette: I feel for Prudie. She is married to a complete Neanderthal.

Prudie thus seems like an even more awkward fit for this group than Grigg, but as Bernadette suggests through her last line, she is valued as a project for romantic improvement, much as Emma values Harriet in Austen's *Emma* and Jude, Shazzar, and Tom value Bridget. She is seen as figure who needs romantic help, and who is thus in need of a supportive group of friends.

Indeed, this first meeting of the book club solidifies that the primary purpose of friendship as experienced by the group of women presented in the film is that combination of Austen and friendship is a form of therapy. And the common theme for therapeutic discussion is romantic problems, especially Sylvia's impending divorce.

Early in the film, the characters discuss the purpose of the book club:

Jocelyn: We were only doing the book club to get her [Sylvia's] mind off Daniel.

Prudie: I thought the reason for the book club was for my not going to Paris?

Bernadette: Exactly.

Bernadette has quite intentionally structured the book club (and the choice of Austen's novels) as a way for each of the characters to deal with her/his own set of problems.

Discussing the changes between her novel and the film version, Karen Joy Fowler observes that

Robin [Swicord, the director of the film version] unified the movie around the romances, particularly Jocelyn and Grigg's. She made the emotional content more overt... The book club meetings are fraught—the characters far more likely to read Austen through the lens of their current struggles, far more likely to leave the room in tears. (171)

Like Bridget's singleton friends, the friendships of the book club provide support for these various romantic predicaments.

The multiple plot strands come to a head at a library fundraiser event. All the characters attend the event in order to support Sylvia, because her husband may be bringing his new girlfriend. But as the book club members arrive, we quickly see that Sylvia appears to be the most optimistic member of the bunch. Allegra has just experienced a dramatic break-up with her girlfriend who used intimate stories from Allegra's childhood as fodder for her creative writing. Grigg and Jocelyn are in the midst of a tense, private battle concerning the state of their burgeoning relationship. And Prudie is distraught and barely holding it together after her mother's death, which is manifested in increasing hostility and cruelty to her husband.

Prudie: Dean thinks "Austen" is the capital of Texas. [pause] You'll notice that Jane, she never shows what happens after the wedding. Maybe Elizabeth and Darcy start hating each other. Maybe Lizzie went off to Pemberley, and she turned into this crazy person, like her mom, because our mothers are like time bombs. They just, they tick away inside of us.

Sylvia: Let's not give Mrs. Bennet more importance than she deserves.

Grigg: You know, I mean, what about the father?

Prudie: What father? You know, my mom showed me a picture of a guy in uniform. Well, maybe she made him up. Or maybe she bought it at a garage sale. And I kept it in my room, this... I kept it in my room.

Dean: Let's not do this now, okay?

Allegra: Dean, I got it.

The tension escalates, Prudie increasingly loses control, and the scene ends when Prudie runs to the bathroom, followed by Allegra. The scene ends without an indication of what is said behind the closed doors. Here, we see Prudie has become initiated into the circle of friends through her participation in the code of supportive friendship. It is important that Allegra plays the role of support because she had been the most unreceptive to Prudie throughout the early scenes. Prudie's meltdown, a sign of the definitive breakdown of her finely constructed emotional veneer, and the subsequent need of support, initiates Prudie fully into the group.

In the car ride home with Bernadette, Prudie confesses a hazardous personal truth: "I'm in love with one of my students. I mean, nothing's happened. Much. But it could, if I let it. I fantasize about him constantly." Perhaps out of fear that she has exposed too much of herself, Prudie retreats again into reticence following this scene. Nevertheless, Prudie's movement from isolation from the group into acceptance is a major, if subtle, shift within the film. It illustrates that the move from being a mere book club member (or, more generally, a work colleague or acquaintance) into a fully initiated friend requires emotional vulnerability and a complementary humility to receive help when it is offered.

The final scene of the film takes place at the next year's library fundraiser event. Unlike the previous year, when all of the romantic relationships were in flux, this year, every one of the book club members is partnered up, with patched-up marriages (Prudie/Dean and Sylvia/Daniel), a book club born relationship (Grigg/Jocelyn), and two new relationships (Allegra/Samantha and Bernadette/Señor Obando). They sit around the table, everyone smiling and content; no support is needed beyond a cheer of congratulations for one another. Although the friendships within *The Jane Austen Book Club* present the fantasy of unconditional support and occupy a major focus of the film, like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the story of that friendship is ultimately replaced by romantic pairing, suggesting that friendship is simply what helps a person make it through the uncomfortable singleton stage of life. In these two films we see enacted Rochelle Mabry's assertion that the Bridget Jones franchise "shows that the urban family – and indeed the woman's life outside the romantic relationship – can be such an attractive alternative that it can, at least momentarily, place question marks around the happy romantic conclusion" (202). But as we have seen, the alternative of singleton friendship is rejected – almost from the outset – in preference for the less out of the ordinary alternative of romance narrative.

I would argue that the fact that each of these films pays homage to Austen, known for her narrative romance, is as important in determining the form of the films as the fact that they are chick flicks. When stripped of her irony and satire, Austen's novels begin to look more and more like the formulaic romances so beloved by modern readers, simply because the basic narrative structure of her novels is romance. So *Bridget Jones's Diary*, a modern story hanging together on the bare bones of *Pride and Prejudice*, will by

necessity mirror the basic romantic structure, and therefore implicitly privilege the romantic over the platonic. When we wonder why Bridget's story led her to the arms of Mark Darcy instead of to a moment of self-acceptance amidst her loving friends, well, the answer is in the question; Mark Darcy is Mr. Darcy, and Bridget Jones ends where Austen ended.

Further, the notable casting of Colin Firth – Mr. Darcy from the 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* – as Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones's Diary* works by self-consciously implying a relationship to Austen. More importantly, the casting choice implies a relationship to the earlier film, celebrated more for its passionate portrayal of Darcy's love for Elizabeth than for its commentary on Regency social existence as writers Lisa Hopkins and Ellen Belton have shown. Similarly, with a title like *The Jane Austen Book Club*, we know that part of what is being sold is Austen, and is, indeed, the romantic structure of her narratives. Unlike *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Jane Austen Book Club* does not use one of Jane Austen's novels as a source for the narrative arc, but instead uses Austen more as a reference point. So even when the film is not forced by the adaptation format to provide the same outcome of the novels, it nevertheless compulsively follows the narrative pattern suggested by Austen's novels. It is almost as if the name "Austen" requires that all characters are neatly partnered up at the end of the narrative.

Although I suspect that the "Austen-inspired" money-machine capitalizes primarily on Austen's reputation for romance there are many factors involved and I found it difficult to test the idea without making problematic assumptions. All of Austen's works are romance narratives, so there isn't a point of comparison. Instead, I turned to

Elizabeth Gaskell. Although Austen writes in the Regency and Gaskell in the Victorian era, Gaskell's work is a useful case for comparison because she wrote both a popular romance novel, *North and South* (sometimes referred to as the industrial *Pride and Prejudice*), as well as a novel on female friendship, *Cranford*, both of which have been adapted into film. She is also an ideal point of comparison, because she is often handled as an heir or peer of Austen, especially in popular culture. For instance, on *Pinterest*, the social networking website designed to help users amass and organize pictures, memes, and links to internet webpages, Austen and Gaskell pins often appear side by side on the same user boards, such as Vasilena Ivanova's "Men in cravats" board, Rita Wood's "Favorite Period Dramas" board, and Sara Walthour's "The Period I Should Have Been Born Into."

Both of Gaskell's novels have been adapted by the BBC. *North and South*, starring Daniela Denby-Ashe and Richard Armitage, came out in 2004, and *Cranford*, starring Judie Dench and Imelda Staunton, came out in 2007. *North and South* is far more popular than *Cranford* on *Pinterest*. (For the record, Jane Austen pins are far more numerous than anything relating to Gaskell.) One of the most prolific Elizabeth Gaskell pinners is Kate Canon, whose board "Mrs. Gaskell" had 269 pins as of May 15, 2013. Of these pins, 176 are related to *North and South*, 44 refer to *Wives and Daughters*, 42 mention *Cranford*, and 7 contain historical or biographical information. *Cranford*, though filled with humor, lovely scenery, famous actors in gorgeous period clothing, and cows dressed up in long underwear, is no match for the steamy romance portrayed in *North and South*, which can be easily encapsulated in movie stills of the sexy stage kiss or pictures of the broodingly handsome Richard Armitage looking longingly at gorgeous Daniela



Denby-Ashe. While there are a number of pins showing images of the cotton mill or views of the manufacturing town, Milton, most of the pins feature movie stills of the two main actors. Even the *Cranford* pins emphasize the romances (not part of the original novel) with 11 pins relating to the romance between Sophie and Doctor Harrison or Mary Smith and Jack Marshland and only 8 showing the four women in attitudes suggesting their bond, which is the central theme of the novel. Clearly, these fans want *Cranford* to act as a historical romance in the same vein as Austen's work and Gaskell's own more popular *North and South*.

This brief foray into the complex world of *Pinterest* and Gaskell-fandom illustrates that even when offered alternative options, fans cling to the familiar and desirable mode of romance narrative. Austen provides an pretext to chick-flick filmmakers to feed these desires, to avoid seeking out alternative narratives, for not embracing the narrative possibilities that open up when friendship (or motherhood, or career, or something even more radical) becomes the source for the narrative structure. And while these filmmakers clearly acknowledge the various complicated facets of women's lives in these films for women, the truth is that the romance narrative is still an incredibly powerful and popular form within contemporary mainstream film in general, and in chick-flicks in particular. So instead of forging new territory with new narrative structures, it is no wonder that filmmakers choose to borrow from that which has been tested – and loved – over and over again for 200 years.

And the familiar refrain is not all bad. There is power in repetition. Victor Nell argues persuasively in his book *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* that well-known narratives are among the most pleasurable. He describes the experiences

of families recalling well-worn oral tales in which “not only the teller is zestful [but] spouse and children, who have heard the anecdote dozens of times, hang on every word” and the Xhosa tribal practices of “fattening” stories with prior knowledge and through call and response (58-59). We need not look further than our own university departments to see academics continually re-reading the fiction and poetry that most deeply move us; literary scholarship itself is a way of engaging in such repetition. While I am tempted to protest the endless, self-conscious, and overly simplified repetitions of Jane Austen’s themes in popular culture, I – who will re-read *Pride and Prejudice* on the flimsiest pretext – recognize the powerful and even obsessive urges that undergird the act of narrative repetition. I don’t want to completely abandon those criticisms, because I believe they are valid and deserve closer scrutiny, but it is worth pausing to explore the alternative idea that there is something worth repeating in Jane Austen’s narrative structure.

Pamela Regis calls *Pride and Prejudice* “the best romance novel ever written” (75) and many chick lit and romance writers credit Austen as mentor or ancestor (Wells 48). But obviously Austen did not create the romance narrative; she simply perfected it and put it to sublimely artistic use. Nevertheless, Austen’s work should be placed in a tradition in which heterosexual union is a pervasively used organizational narrative principle, especially in the novel form. Joseph Allen Boone’s work in *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* illustrates the way in which heterosexual love became a central narrative structure in the Western novel form. He shows that this persistent form emerged from the literary traditions popularized by Samuel Richardson but were introduced earlier from the ideals of courtly love in the Renaissance. He argues

that even many of the most beloved “masculine” American novels organized around a quest, like *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Sea Wolf*, are valued and canonized precisely because they deviate from the expected courtship, seduction, marriage, or divorce plots so inextricably linked to the novel form (227). He argues that these works are canonized because they present a struggle to free the self from oppressive cultural norms represented by marriage, domesticity, and other institutions. Thus, even artistic attempts to escape the organizing principle of marriage are still bound up in its ideological rules.

The privileging of the romance narrative happens in part because it is a familiar and therefore incredibly satisfying narrative structure. In human experience, few things have such an identifiable beginning, middle, and end, from the “meet-cute” to the first kiss to the wedding day, making the romance a fairly effortless narrative form. Perhaps more importantly, it is an organizing principle in peoples’ actual lived experience. Tony Tanner argues in his book *Adultery in the Novel* that

For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-contracting contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure. ...The bourgeois novelist has no choice but to engage the subject of marriage, at no matter what extreme of celebration or contestation. He [sic] may concentrate on what makes for marriages and leads up to it, or on what threatens marriage and portends disintegration, but his subject will still be marriage. (15)

The over-representation of marriage as an organizing principle in novels thus emerges from the fact that it is a central organizing principle in Western middle-class white heterosexual culture.

And like Tanner suggests, romance as an organizing principle is not as constraining as it appears to be. In her book on the history of the romance novel, Regis argues that we should see that the pleasure of romance novels is not contained in the ending, but instead in the process of overcoming the barriers impeding the happy ending: “A blinkered look at the form’s ending might suggest a single issue for the romance novel, but the barrier’s flexibility and ubiquity force a wider view. The barrier can raise virtually any issue the writer chooses” (14). The same is true for chick-flicks, in which the pleasure of watching the repetitive romance plot revolves around discovering how the filmmaker will make the inevitable love-match happen.

Part of why the romance narrative pervades in the *chick*-flick form is because of a long artistic tradition linking women’s worth with marriage. The trajectory of romance has always been carefully aligned with the growth of women’s middle-class identity, in part because of old traditions in which women were exchanged from fathers to husbands when they came of age. This is mirrored in fictional narratives, and particularly in coming of age stories for women. Boone argues that

Because in female variations of the [bildungsroman] the climactic event of marriage confers on the heroine her entire personal identity (as wife) as well as her social ‘vocation’ (as mother), the growth of the female protagonist has come to be seen as synonymous with the action of courtship: until very recently the only female bildungsroman has been a love-plot. (74)

Like Boone’s example of American novelists’ rejection of domesticity, even books like *Wuthering Heights*, which is an anti-romance narrative, are still caught up in the ideology of courtship as a kind of response to or perversion of the more traditional fictions of

female growth. Brontë presents a scathing critique of the identity of possession that accompanies romance narratives when Cathy melodramatically confesses “I am Heathcliff – he’s always, always on my mind – not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself – but, as my own being” (73). This overwrought over-identification that Catherine and Heathcliff have with one another is a destructive force in that novel.

This idea that women explore their identities through romance narratives is certainly a huge factor contributing to *Pride and Prejudice*’s appeal and artistry. Nina Auerbach has remarked on the way in which *Pride and Prejudice* is a story about women waiting for men to endow their lives with substance. For instance, she observes that Austen hardly describes Longbourn at all, and we only finally see it through a man’s eyes. She argues that this operates as a subtle symbol of the entail, in which Longbourn is only a place for the sisters to exist temporarily. Pemberley on the other hand “is Elizabeth’s initiation into physicality, providing her with all the architectural solidity and domestic substance Longbourn lacks. It has real grounds, woods, paths, streams, rooms, furniture; real food is eaten there” (44). It is the presence of a man who owns the land and home which cannot be taken away from him that provides Elizabeth with security and gives her life a sense of tangibility.

But this all-encompassing view of romance as the sole means of establishing identity in *Pride and Prejudice* does seem extreme when we remember Elizabeth’s relationship with her “most beloved sister” Jane and the deep, if strained, relationship that she has with Charlotte Lucas (186). The role of friendship seems even more heightened in the various contemporary adaptations, especially *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

Although romance is central, friendship nevertheless plays an important role. It is unfair and incomplete to ignore these relationships as beside the point, when they are clearly part of the heart and soul of these works.

As I struggled to make sense of how friendship between women fit into the schema in which heterosexual union inescapably drives the plots of narratives that even seek to avoid it, I found Sharon Marcus's fascinating book *Between Women* in which she looks at the complex ways in which women formed relationships – friendships, partnerships, and even marriages – in Victorian England. Marcus argues that in fictional narratives, friendship between women is seen as aiding the central heterosexual relationship and thus is complementary to that relationship. She describes female friendship as a “narrative matrix,” “a relationship that generates plot but is not its primary agent, subject, or object” (79). The narrative matrix of female friendship “is rarely a locus of compelling narrative suspense, for it is seldom subject to courtship's vagaries, conflicts, obstructions, and resolutions” but it is also not “passive, since it has the generative power and dynamism to launch, direct, and resolve a plot” (79). As Marcus puts it succinctly: “By helping each other marry, friends expressed their love for one another in a world that valued female friendship but deemed marriage the most important tie a woman could forge with another adult” (71).

Friendship as a narrative matrix is often used to overcome the barriers to romance described by Pamela Regis above. While Marcus focuses on Victorian novels, this idea applies just as well to fiction in the eighteenth century, such as the relationship between Anna Howe and Clarissa in Richardson's *Clarissa*, and films made today, as it does for nineteenth century fiction. Emma's relationship with Harriet in *Emma* is a good example

of a narrative matrix in Austen's fiction because Harriet's crush on Mr. Knightley ignites Emma's jealousy through the introduction of a love triangle and motivates Emma to acknowledge her deeper feelings for him, thus overcoming the barrier of Emma's blindness. Emma's friendship with Harriet also aids a secondary plot centered on humbling Emma and helping her to realize how mistaken she had been on many social issues. As in the romance narrative, in the secondary plot of feminine development the friendship is less important than Emma's journey to self-knowledge. Nevertheless, Austen's use of Harriet as a narrative matrix shows how artfully and complexly such devices can be used.

The interaction between barriers and narrative matrixes illustrate the deep-seated differences between Austen's novels and the contemporary Austen-inspired films. The barriers impeding a happy ending in *Pride and Prejudice*, as in *Emma*, are thematically rich, socially suggestive, and formally interesting, creating a thoroughly artistic exemplar of the form. *Bridget Jones's Diary* mimics and adapts many of these barriers. The fear of losing one's reputation by familial association is maintained. The importance of social hierarchical standing as a characteristic of marriagability is narrowed down to a question of whether or not it is important to have a prestigious career as a woman, and indeed subtly asks through characters like Jude and the successful "other woman" who steals Daniel away from Bridget whether a career actually helps or impedes romance. The economic fears of single women in Regency England as a motivator for marriage are aligned with the paradoxes of liberation and loneliness that complicate female singlehood in an era that claims to be post-feminist. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, closely and self-consciously aligned with *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of plot, explores the new and

challenging barriers emerging from contemporary issues, using Austen's novel as a starting point. The barriers in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, ranging from sociological issues like divorce, homosexuality, age-differences between partners, to moral problems like infidelity and artistic ownership, show an even more definitive break from Austen's themes. The form, and the "Austen-inspired" foundation, may constrain the ending of the films, but as Regis suggests, the filmmakers still maintain a good deal of freedom to create innovative themes within those constraints through barriers.

Another break from Austen is in the tone of the friendships that act as narrative matrixes. Austen's use of other women to resolve barriers is usually set up as antagonistic. Mary Crawford's unladylike dismissal that there was anything seriously wrong with Maria's affair with Henry Crawford leads Edmund to realize that Fanny is his true love and not Mary Crawford after all. Lady Catherine's attempt to secure a "no" from Elizabeth regarding any future marriage proposals from Darcy ends in giving Darcy hope. Even Harriet, the most complex narrative matrix in Austen's work, operates by antagonism. In the romance plot, Harriet is set up as a threat and rival, which spurs the romance between Knightley and Emma. And in the journey to self-knowledge, Harriet's function as a narrative matrix is about helping Emma learn that people should assume the correct place in the social order.

But in the Austen-inspired films, the relationship between the romance plot and friendship matrix are not mutually exclusive, but are indeed complementary. This relates to the central function of friendship as a support for romantic entanglements. For instance, during a physical fight between Mark Darcy and Daniel Cleaver, the friends act almost like a Greek chorus, spelling out the various conflicts, and heightening the drama:



Tom: Which side are we on?

Jude and Shazzar: Mark's!

Shazzar: Obviously! He never dumped Bridget for some naked American.

Jude: And he said he liked her just the way she is.

Bridget: Yeah, but he also shagged Daniel's fiancée and left him broken hearted.

Tom: Good point. It's a very hard one to call.

As explained earlier, a central function of a scene like this is to show Bridget's friends' constant support as they try to help her verbalize the various confusing circumstances underlying the scene. The friends perform their narrative function of helping Bridget achieve her own happily ever after.

Furthermore, in *Bridget Jones's Diary* friendship – rather than the use of women as a third in a love triangle – actually acts more in accord with Marcus's suggestion that friendship as a narrative matrix breaks down barriers impeding the marriage plot. This function is most clear in the moment when Tom proposes the toast using Mark's words: "To Bridget, just as she is." Here Tom is fulfilling his role of narrative matrix, cleverly pulling the two characters closer together by forcing them both to acknowledge their mutual attraction.

Because there are so many more characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club* there are significantly more barriers and means of overcoming them. This film takes a mediated position between *Bridget Jones's Diary*'s view of friendship as a complement to marriage and Austen's more antagonistic view of women as narrative matrixes. As in *Emma*, outright attempts at matchmaking backfire. Jocelyn attempts to set Sylvia up with Grigg, when clearly Sylvia is still in love with her husband and the real romantic tension

exists between Jocelyn and Grigg. This mistake creates a number of barriers, but as in *Emma*, it simultaneously provides the means of overcoming the barriers. When Jocelyn sees Grigg attempting to flirt with Sylvia by going out to a fancy lunch together, she is finally forced to confront and unravel the complicated emotions she feels for him. Daniel, Sylvia's husband coincidentally sees Sylvia out on the date with Grigg, and that makes him reconsider their separation. The love triangle set-up that occurs in *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* are a central narrative matrix in *The Jane Austen Book Club* too.

But a more explicit form of intrusion by friends is ultimately what helps these couples overcome the central barriers in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. After discussing Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne in *Persuasion*, Bernadette, ever the intrusive Mrs. Bennet, convinces Daniel to write Sylvia a letter asking for forgiveness: "Never underestimate the power of a well-written letter." It works. Similarly, Grigg's sister tells Jocelyn outright that Grigg loves her and the future of their relationship is now in Jocelyn's hands. Jocelyn, however, moves more slowly than Sylvia. Instead, she reads the Ursula Le Guin novels that Grigg has been asking her to read. She stays up all night finishing them, and only then, grateful for his suggestion and ready to acknowledge her love of him, does she drive to his house and admit her love.

Grigg and Jocelyn's final reconciliation over literature finds its parallel in the resolution of Prudie and Dean's love story. Prudie, still isolated from the group because of her own reticence, turns to the silent but ever present seventh member of the group, Jane Austen, for support. She begs Dean to read *Persuasion* with her as a way to mend their broken relationship. In an attempt to convince him to read it, she describes the book in terms of their own relationship: "It's about these two people who used to love each

other. And they don't anymore. And it's how they persuade themselves to give it another try." Without giving him a chance to disagree, she begins to read out loud. For that first page, she is in tears and he almost is too, but soon they are laughing together, and by the end she is sleeping in his arms as he finishes the novel on his own. Here, we realize that Austen, and even Literature itself, is performing the narrative matrix normally fulfilled by friends: offering support and helping to resolve central romantic conflicts in the film. Prudie's isolation does not leave her completely without aid, as long as she has Austen.

Therefore, although the outcome of the bare bones plots of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club* match Austen's, these films present uniquely contemporary barriers, and friendship acts as a central means of overcoming these barriers. In these two films friendship is privileged. That friendship is developed as a complementary rather than antagonistic narrative matrix is an important departure from the standard pattern in Austen's novels, and thus suggests that friendship is valued by contemporary women as a fantasy of devotion and support.

While the idea of a narrative matrix helps us understand the fiction better, it also simply reflects reality for many women, especially the white, Western, middle-class women for whom the Austen adaptations are made. In her 2005 study of friendship among college women, Shannon Gilman found that friendship is almost always overpowered by heterosexual unions for college students when opportunities for relationships arise. She implies that women's life trajectories resemble pre-ordained scripts and plots according to a heterosexist "master plot," and her language describing the role of friendship sounds similar to that of Marcus's narrative matrix: "Specifically,

women's friends assume value to the extent that they encourage choices and behaviors in line with heterosexist scripts" (612).

Although Gilman's study focuses narrowly on college students, it simply confirms prior research, such as Gouldner and Strong's earlier 1987 study of middle class women, which similarly shows that one of the effects of modern middle class mobility is the fragile place that friendship holds for women. Indeed, as Gilman suggests "the already tenuous significance of friendship to women might *peak* during college, after which it steadily and necessarily declines as women assume more comfortable positions in the patriarchy" (612). Romance is the privileged plot form because it closely mirrors the actual lived experience – past, present, or future – of the people who consume these narratives.

It is no wonder, then, that modern day bildungsromans about women are still organized around the principle of heterosexual romance, because the reality of white middle-class women's identity is centered in romantic relationships. But even now that we are freed from the biological reproductive imperative, powerful traditional scripts and genuine rationales keep us fettered to that structure. For instance, Gouldner and Strong's study suggests that given the mobility of middle class lifestyles, in which people are uprooted in the search for suitable jobs, it makes sense for both women and men to gain identity and support through marriage with the person who is making the moves with them, rather than with the friends they must leave behind.

Thus, as Tony Tanner suggests, the master plot of heterosexual romance simply reflects reality. Although the recent recession may have caused a drop-off in marriage rates (Mather and Lavery), most Americans (78%) will be married or partnered at some

point in their lives (“New Marriage”). When audiences fantasize about romance, it is more about idealized forms of romance. Friendship, however, is much more evasive, and thus much more likely to be subject to fantasies. Indeed, the very powerful cultural compulsion towards heterosexual bonding in modern women’s lives may make the fantasy of friendship all the more powerful because it is not prioritized. There are lots of Prudies out there, who have to rely on Jane Austen – or the fictional Bridget Jones or the ladies in the book club, the fantasy friends of their imagination – to fill the supportive space in their lives that friends should fill.

And there is some danger in portraying friendship in this highly idealized way. In fact, Gouldner and Strong argue that they had to proceed with caution in their 1987 study of friendships among middle class women because friendship “is a highly romantic concept” since it isn’t institutionally restricted the way that marriage and parent/child relationships are (7). This romanticization of friendship leads to what Gouldner and Strong refer to as self-deception and disguise:

The self-deception consists of not knowing or not admitting to one’s self the reality about the quality (that is, their depth or superficiality) of one’s friendships.

The disguise consists of hiding from outsiders and embellishing what is known to be the truth about the number and quality of one’s friendships. (7-8)

Furthermore, with changes in the institution of marriage, in which people are spending a larger time of their adult life single, women are making a more self-conscious effort to develop and maintain friendships as a means to provide “intimacy and support” (Gouldner and Strong 150). Self-deception and disguise combined with the strong desires for friendship and a reality that women’s friendships are often placed at the end of a long

list of priorities for women means that friendship is an area rife with the potential for fantasy and even delusion.

Given this precarious status of women's friendship, it is no wonder that we see them represented as powerful and transcendent fantasies in chick narratives. Ann Patchett's reflection on "Sex and the City" as the television show came to its end in 2003 illuminates the core of the fantasy in terms of the way it resonates emotionally. She writes,

here are four adult women who have continued the intensity of their friendships as if they were still college girls. No one moves away. No one is derailed by babies or relationships or work. They are at their table in the coffee shop every week, talking about the most intimate details of their lives. ... I think the deeper fantasy is having such close women friends and having the time to actually spend with them. ... As women are bombarded with books about how to balance career and marriage and children, friendship is something that is squeezed in, not because it isn't a priority but because all those other priorities keep pushing it aside.

The fantasy of having it all has traditionally centered on work and family, but as women have struggled to meet the demands of the second shift, friendship is often the first thing cut to make more time. Deep friendships as portrayed in the two films are prohibitively hard to maintain for many middle-class women.

Thus the powerful implied preference for the exuberance of the singleton dinner party over the stuffy smug-marrieds party in *Bridget Jones's Diary* is an emblem of a nostalgic view of pre-coupled friendship. Indeed, it is important to note that *Bridget Jones* and *The Jane Austen Book Club* are only able to feature the transcendent

acceptance and support through friendships because they begin their narratives with characters who are either single, divorced, or with marriages on the rocks.

And while the ending of *Bridget Jones* emphasizes the beginning of a relationship between Bridget and Mark Darcy, given Jude, Shazzar, and Tom's heartfelt cheer from the car we assume that her friendships will remain static and continually supportive. This is similar to the relationship between the sisters, Elizabeth and Jane, in *Pride and Prejudice* who, we are assured, will live close enough to maintain contact: Mr. Bingley "bought an estate in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire, and Jane and Elizabeth, in addition to every source of happiness, were within thirty miles of each other" (364). Using Marcus's concept of a narrative matrix, we see that the static nature of friendship in these narratives is what makes them so alluring:

The narrative distinctiveness of friendship lies in its ability to make stability a springboard for the adventures that traditionally constitute our notion of the narratable. Though friendship provokes none of the suspense or distress we typically associate with plot, it sustains the reader's interest and attention: with respect to female friendship, Victorian novels succeed in making the reader desire that *nothing will happen*. (79)

Unlike average contemporary middle-class white heterosexual women, who will struggle to maintain friendships after marriage, children, and career, we are assured in *Bridget Jones* and *The Jane Austen Book Club* that these friendships will only continue to grow as their lives carry on. The fantasy of friendship between women is that it will persist.

Indeed, *The Jane Austen Book Club* ends with the group determining to continue the book club with another set of novels, and this time husbands are included. The

inclusion of the husbands into the fantasy circle of friends symbolically represents an opening up of their lives for both marriage and friendship, in which these separate types of relationships are integrated into one. Thus the deeper fantasy presented in these films is a dogged post-feminist vision of women's lives centered on an inclusive attitude and a fantasy of "having it all." To that end, Genz describes Bridget as a "New Woman" who

faces the dilemma of 'having it all' as she endeavors to reconcile her experiences of being female, feminine, and feminist without falling apart or having to abandon one integral part of her existence. She is simultaneously frustrated and elated by her contradictoriness and hybridity, wrestling with self-doubt and despair as well as celebrating hope and confidence. (98-99)

When Bridget and her friends toast her at the joyously disastrous dinner party, saying "to Bridget, just as she is," part of what they are celebrating is Bridget's authentic and flawed identity, her hybridity, and her contrariness, all aspects of the "New Woman" that resonate with the audience. This moment realizes her need for traditional love in the form of Mark Darcy while simultaneously allowing her to experience the freedom that she receives through the singleton lifestyle with her friends. And therefore they are celebrating the way in which the various pieces of her life come together in their most complete form in that very moment of the toast, the poignant moment just at the onset of a romantic relationship when friends are still operating at their fullest (narrative and actual) capacity as agents in the creation of the romantic relationship. In this moment, Bridget is whole, because her hybridity is allowed to fully function without making a choice. The fact that the love story and the friendship matrix are both embraced in their



ideal forms – a dynamic love story that involves change and a static (thus secure and supportive) story of friendship – represents a post-feminist ideal of both/and inclusivity.

Austen's classic romance narratives present a limiting factor for any novelist or filmmaker who wants to pay tribute to her work. But narrative barriers provide room to explore specifically modern concerns. Further, with a resolution of the romance plot that focuses on post-feminist self-acceptance, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club* actually present fundamental departures from Jane Austen's originals. In the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in particular, we see the filmmakers tackling a very different secondary plot than Austen. In Austen's novels, the romance plot is usually complemented by a painful journey to self-knowledge, in which the heroine must confront and try to correct her mistakes. Elizabeth begins her story in confidence and ends her story humbled and matured. But Bridget begins her story agonizing over her faults and ends her story with newfound self-acceptance.

There are many factors contributing to this shift. One major difference is that Austen's work is designed to *instruct* and to entertain, while chick-flicks are intended to *uplift* and entertain instead. The need for self-acceptance strikes me as a fundamentally contemporary issue, especially given the way in which consumer culture is designed to make us feel bad about ourselves so that we will buy more stuff. In this sense, while the romance narratives in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club* are part of a long-lived tradition, the secondary plots and the supportive fantasy form that friendship takes in these films make them distinctly contemporary. Austen's works, on the other hand, are classic because their central message of self-improvement and growth are, if

not universal, then close to it. Although Bridget may have been the Everywoman of the 1990s, Elizabeth is an Everywoman for the ages.

## Chapter III

“Jane Austen is My Homegirl”: American Janeites and Postmodern Irony<sup>5</sup>

A few years ago, my mom gave me a t-shirt with the phrase “I ♥ Mr. Darcy” boldly printed across the chest. Since then I have found myself coming back to the question of what wearing the shirt says about my identity, as well as what the very existence of the shirt says about Jane Austen, her works, and her legacy. Unlike other forms of expressing opinions about Austen, t-shirts are forced into brevity. Due to that brevity, they often exhibit a self-referential quality; in order to make meaning, they draw attention to social conventions and stereotypes. This distillation process means that the conventions drawn upon are very clearly delineated. In the case of Austen, t-shirt messages strip the complexity of her oeuvre down to only that which is essential to contemporary fans, especially American Janeites. When looked at *en masse*, the t-shirts provide a valuable resource for unearthing popular opinions, while broadening understanding about what fans gain from associating themselves with her. They give us additional insight into the ways in which popular American cultures have incorporated Austen into a contemporary social consciousness that seems so remote from the world she depicts in her novels. Austen’s continuing popularity is as much due to how she is reinvented by each successive generation, and how she continues to be creatively appropriated by differing communities, as it is about the genius of her craft. This chapter

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter appeared previously as “‘Jane Austen is my Homegirl’: American Janeites and the Ironic Postmodern Identity.” *Global Jane Austen: Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community*. Ed. Laurence Raw and Robert Dryden. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.189. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. This material may not be copied or reproduced without permission from Palgrave Macmillan

explores how Austen has been reinvented by a new generation of American fans, and what these fans gain by reinventing her.

To begin with, I needed to narrow the vast number of Austen t-shirts online into a manageable set to study, so I decided that I would focus on the t-shirt company *CaféPress.com*, because this is one of the major sources of Austen-related merchandise online. To create a data set to work with, I did a search for “Jane Austen” on *CaféPress.com* and limited the results to t-shirts. This yielded 883 t-shirts,<sup>6</sup> or 10 pages of 96 results per page. My data set includes the first 6 pages, or 577 t-shirts total. I limited the results because after page 6, there is a significant amount of repetition.

In order to make sense of the data, I used the processes of coding associated with grounded theory, articulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, which draws upon both deductive and inductive thinking. Although this qualitative method is not without its detractors, grounded theory is a suitable method of analysis for examining the *CaféPress.com* t-shirts because, ideally, it allows the materials to speak for themselves. The researcher’s duty is to discover underlying themes and categories within the data set, from which she can begin to formulate a possible explanation or theory. As Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor argue: “[t]heory, experience, and imagination come together in the abducting process [in which one creates a new principle from established facts] of

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<sup>6</sup> As a reference point, as of March 21, 2012, *CaféPress.com* yields 2,800 results for Shakespeare, 1,128 for Mark Twain, 678 for Byron, 648 for Lewis Carroll, 598 for Dante, 313 for Keats, 261 for Walt Whitman, 175 for Emily Dickinson, 168 for Vonnegut, 158 for Brontë, 146 for Alexander Pope, 123 for William Blake, 92 for Hemingway, 85 for Francis Bacon, 84 for George Eliot, 84 for Percy Shelley, 79 for Nathaniel Hawthorne, 78 for Alcott, 74 for Flannery (adding O’Connor only yields 3 results), 64 for Samuel Johnson, 61 for Mary Shelley, 54 for T. S. Eliot, 39 for Tolstoy, 39 for Henry James, 32 for Virginia Woolf, 31 for Tolkien (Lord of the Rings yields much more), 29 for J. K. Rowling (Harry Potter yield more), 25 for Sylvia Plath, 24 for Tennessee Williams, 20 for Maya Angelou, 16 for John Donne, 13 for Melville, 11 for Ezra Pound, 10 for Edith Wharton, 6 for Sir Walter Scott, 3 for Margaret Atwood, and 3 for Alice Walker.

developing a *surprising* finding – a finding that one cannot infer from looking at instances, as in induction, or from the logic of deduction” (243).

Using this theory as a guide, I began looking for themes and categories within the 577 t-shirts, and I determined that they can be divided into three large categories: Austen quotes (e.g., “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife”), fan identification (e.g. “I ♥ Jane Austen”), and ironic or romantic identification with characters (e.g. “I’m an Elizabeth Bennet in a Darcy-less world”). In this chapter, I focus on the first two categories because they both operate as Janeite “identity announcements,” a term used by Donna Darden and Steven Worden in their analysis of t-shirts on college campuses to describe the self-conscious public messages about the self that t-shirts convey to the world (67). Although I do briefly discuss ironic identification with characters in this chapter, I will examine that category more fully in the following chapter.

After establishing these categories, I began looking for repeated textual motifs and themes as a way to determine what accounts for the most prevalent way of characterizing Austen. One ubiquitous theme uniting all the textual categories is how the t-shirts not only refer to Austen, but also tell us something about the identity of the wearer. Within the category of Jane Austen quotes, out of 73 possible citations (found on a total of 142 t-shirts),<sup>7</sup> there are 29 that contain direct references to the self, using the words “I” or “me.” For instance, there are four t-shirts that reference the quote “My good opinion once lost is lost forever” (*Pride and Prejudice* 57). Obviously the wearer intends

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<sup>7</sup> There is a considerable amount of repetition on the website, so in order to distinguish between the design or text that is repeated and the various individual t-shirts that contain these motifs, I will indicate how many t-shirts use that design in parentheses, unless I have mentioned the number elsewhere in the text.

to reference Austen, but probably also wants to associate themselves with the words as well. Additionally, there are 14 quotes (30 t-shirts) that imply and “I” or a “me” that refers to the wearer, such as the quote “obstinate, headstrong girl,” which is found on seven separate t-shirts (*Pride and Prejudice* 336).

Given that 43 of 73 quotes (well over half) found within the Austen t-shirts on *CaféPress.com* contain either direct or indirect reference to the wearer, it is clear that identity is a primary focus within this set, and indeed all types of t-shirts. The single most repeated motif is simply that which boldly and prominently displays the words “Jane Austen” in isolation (17 t-shirts). While this category contains a variety of designs, each performs the same function: to alert the world to the fact that the wearer is a Jane Austen fan, a modern “Janeite,” the term originally coined by George Saintsbury in 1894 to describe the cult-like fandom inspired by Austen in the Victorian era (Lynch, “Sharing” 13). Austen *CaféPress.com* t-shirts collectively present what it means to be a Janeite today.

Although anyone in the world can purchase products from the website, *CaféPress.com* is an American company, founded in San Mateo, California, with current headquarters located in Louisville, Kentucky (“State”). For this reason, this analysis of the Janeites is necessarily a localized one. So a slight revision of my thesis is order: through an examination of how t-shirt vendors on *CaféPress.com* have adapted the t-shirt to display their identities as Janeites, we can clearly see the situatedness of American Janeitesm. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing here that the values expressed on the t-shirts specifically reflect the ideologies of the creators and purchasers, but shouldn’t be

assumed to be universal attitudes; not all American Janeites share the particular world-view presented here.

A good starting point for analysis is to examine one of the most popular and repeated textual motifs on *CaféPress.com*, a quotation from the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (6). There are 14 t-shirts that reference the entire quote, 2 t-shirts that simply refer to the quote with the words “It is a truth universally acknowledged,” and 2 t-shirts that reference the quote intertextually: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen kicks ass”; “She had me at truth universally acknowledged.”

As Claire Harmon has demonstrated, “A truth universally acknowledged” is incredibly well-known, often adapted and referenced in diverse contexts (xvii). Marjorie Garber refers to it as “cultural bromide” to illustrate how it has almost become a useless cliché (204-06). On the other hand, this line, one of Austen’s most famous, most ironic, and most laden with meaning, is an appropriate symbol of her work; it illustrates her humor, her ability to play with point of view, her ironic tone, her narrative voice, and the way that her work resists single interpretations. This line accomplishes so much at once because the “universally” immediately forces the reader to question the statement, to wonder who is speaking, and how this speaker can be so sure of themselves. The overstatement created by the “universally” makes clear that the statement is actually *not* universally acknowledged, and that it is therefore ironic, that it means the opposite of what it claims to mean, as well as a variety of other possible interpretations.

The line also operates as a unifying symbol for Janeites on *CaféPress.com*. George Cheney, in his research on the rhetoric of group identification, argues that a unifying symbol helps to create group cohesion through implication and suggestion. That “A truth universally acknowledged” appears on *CaféPress.com* in an *abridged* form indicates that part of belonging to the Janeites is the possession of privileged knowledge. Well-informed fans can fill in the missing part of the quote, and by doing so “demonstrate their legitimacy, their right to belong” to the Janeites (Hart and Doughton 158). In this enthymematic way, the line, especially in its abridged and therefore more symbolic form, unifies Janeites through shared knowledge of her prose. In contrast, a non-Janeite is left hanging, which illustrates that the line can operate as a form of exclusion. It is an example of Hart and Daughton’s concept of “code words” that are “inherently discriminatory: They set their users apart from larger society” (157). These words allow their users to send “messages to select persons without risk of interruption or interference from the unselected” (Hart and Daughton 158). “A truth universally acknowledged” t-shirts are good examples of what Darden and Worden term the elitist t-shirt, containing “insignia of membership into groups that not everyone could expect to join, where the wearer has chosen the category or group and been chosen by the group, and perhaps has even gone through something to earn the right to wear them” (74). It is fitting that Austen, heralded prose-stylist that she is, would come to be symbolized by her own powerful words.

While “A truth universally acknowledged” is the most recognizable quote and expression of elitism within the *CaféPress.com* t-shirts, other quotation t-shirts exploit the space between Janeites and non-Janeites to a greater degree. For instance, Elizabeth’s



assertion that “Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing” might certainly appear humorous to a non-Janeite, but it becomes more interest and layered when we understand that the statement reflects Elizabeth’s growing distrust of men who only appear to be intelligent and polite, and who use these qualities to selfish ends (152). The same dynamic is true of Mr. Bennet’s assertion that “A girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then,” found on one t-shirt. The quote is funny and reflects Mr. Bennet’s amiable personality within a house of boy-crazy daughters, but for a fan of *Pride and Prejudice*, we also know that it reflects his willful ignorance of his children’s suffering and the various trials that his financial negligence is causing in their lives. Austen was great at writing one-liners that are more complicated than they seem, and that allows Janeites to “hide in public” by using her quotes on t-shirts to discover allies in their midst (Hart and Daughton 158).

Many of the t-shirts reference details from the novels that a person needs to know in order to “get” their significance. For instance, someone would need to know that in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen represents Darcy’s growing attraction to Elizabeth through his appreciation of her “fine eyes,” as well as that his estate is located in Derbyshire, to understand the t-shirt phrase “I have fine eyes do you have an estate in Derbyshire?” (27). Similarly, four t-shirts present fictional businesses inspired by Austen: “Mrs. Bennet’s Matchmaking Service”<sup>8</sup>; “Tilney’s Muslin Warehouse”<sup>9</sup>; “Visit Northanger Abbey the

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<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Bennet tries to find husbands for her five daughters, each of whom is used to an inactive middle-class lifestyle and lacks an appropriate dowry. This dynamic creates the driving force behind the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>9</sup> In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney ingratiates himself with Catherine Moreland and her vain chaperone Mrs. Allen by discussing fashion and fabric, muslin in particular. He is Austen’s most ironic hero, and Catherine is never sure if he means what he is saying.

Most Horrid Edifice in All of England”<sup>10</sup>; and “Woodhouse’s Finest Gruel.”<sup>11</sup> Each of these examples is loaded with irony, which can only be understood by those with a more detailed knowledge of Austen’s novels. The Janeites reading this chapter, for instance, won’t need to dip down into my footnotes to understand the humor of these ironic “business” t-shirts.

Another oft-repeated textual motif among the *CaféPress.com* t-shirts is the “WWJD?” or “What Would Jane Do?” motif, which appears on seven t-shirts. The “WWJD” acronym was originally associated with the words “What would Jesus do?” from the book *In His Steps* published in 1896 by Charles Sheldon. The phrase was repopularized in the 1990s in the United States, when evangelical children and teens wore bracelets inscribed with the acronym to act as reminders of their faith (Sheppard). The history of this phrase means that the wearer of this t-shirt either ironically or earnestly associates Austen with Jesus as a model for virtue. A person only acquainted with Austen might think this a reference to her prudish reputation, which is a position posited by the film adaptation of *The Jane Austen Book Club*<sup>12</sup>, for instance. Another possible interpretation emerges from the way that her representation of the landed gentry has associated her with a more mannered and cultured way of life than modern Americans are

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<sup>10</sup> Tilney joking depicts his father’s home, Northanger Abbey, as a terrifying gothic setting to the gullible Catherine, which causes all sorts of problems when she arrives there and begins to picture herself as the heroine in a gothic novel.

<sup>11</sup> In *Emma*, Emma’s father, Mr. Woodhouse, is a hypochondriac who believes everybody should forego flavorful food for the healthier option of gruel. He is the wealthiest person in Highbury, and this creates uncomfortable moments for his visitors, who want to sample the delicacies of his table offered by his elegant daughter, but who also want to show appropriate deference to his opinion.

<sup>12</sup> *The Jane Austen Book Club* contains a scene in which Prudie, a high school teacher, contemplates sleeping with her student, but she changes her mind when she imagines a stop light flashing the words “What Would Jane Do?”

accustomed to; what Jane would do is culturally specific. I discuss this interpretation of the “WWJD” t-shirt in more detail in the following chapter.

However, just as the “What Would Jesus Do?” phrase suggests that the answer is something only a true Christian would know, the t-shirt implies that knowing what Jane Austen would do in any given situation is something that only a true Janeite may understand. And, given the irony of her work and the infinite complexity of her fictional worlds, a true Janeite will recognize that Austen can never represent or provide a pat, simplistic answer to the intricacies of moral choices in real, lived existence; the implied statement of morality is more complicated than it appears. Again, here is another example of the way in which the t-shirts signal membership in an elite “club” of intelligent, knowledgeable Janeites.

The special intelligence of Janeites is an implicit theme in all the t-shirts, as observed in one of the most repeated Austen quotes on *CaféPress.com*, Henry Tilney’s observation that “The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid,” which appears on seven t-shirts (*Northanger Abbey* 102). This statement implies that the person wearing the t-shirt is presumably *not* intolerably stupid because he or she does take pleasure in a novel. Indeed, the point of the t-shirt is the expression of the wearer’s special identity as a reader and intellectual. The value of reading, and the way that reading makes the wearer of the t-shirt special, appears in twelve reading motifs on a total of 26 t-shirts. In this category, we see an array of motifs, ranging from imperative statements, “Read Jane Austen” (on three t-shirts) to evaluations, “Reading is Sexy” (three t-shirts) and intertextual questions, “I put down *Pride and Prejudice* for this?” (one t-shirt).

Another example of this technique is found in the following quote: “I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading. How soon one tires of anything than of a book. When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I do not have an excellent library” (*Pride and Prejudice* 54). This is originally uttered by Caroline Bingley, the notoriously mean-spirited snob in *Pride and Prejudice*, and is used to illustrate her superficiality. However, we cannot assume that every person who selects and wears this t-shirt will be able to make fully informed and knowledgeable readings of the phrase. Some might interpret this quote as a superficial means to underline their own highbrow interest. They participate in a process described by Marjorie Garber: “the book [that Caroline reads] is a tool of seduction, not because she is reading, but because she is pretending to read it. The book has become an accessory, like a hat or pair of gloves” (209). In the Caroline Bingley quote t-shirt, the act or appearance of reading is more valuable than the content of what is read. Here the use of Austen’s quote operates almost solely as a trademark or an accessory: Austen is a prime example of a canonical author who can be used by certain readers to cultivate an intellectual, knowledgeable – and therefore elite – appearance.

A small but related subcategory of t-shirts associate Austen with fanciness and indulgence: “Jane Austen, Glass of Wine, and Chocolate. Life is good”; “No top hat? Not interested”; and “I shall be at Pemberley if the Queen should call” are a few examples. Such phrases expand the notion of what elitism means in Janeite culture; she has come to represent the extravagance of high culture, especially in contemporary America, where the nuances of class hierarchy are less taken for granted as compared to Great Britain.

The association of Austen with high culture can be attributed in a large degree to the heritage films based upon her books, in which set designs, costumes, and reconstructed rituals of Regency England “regularly upstage ... the actors” (Thompson 24). Thompson further argues that “costume dramas ... can be figured as moments in which class as a brutal exclusionary force is being revisioned as elegance, style, as classiness” (22). Such classiness presents an ironic twist of fate, given the tenuous place that Austen occupied in the middle class, a similar position occupied by many of her heroines.

Related to the elite, intellectual quality of the Janeite identity is also a curmudgeonly, playfully misanthropic attitude. The example mentioned above, “Stupid men the only ones worth knowing,” is an example of this theme, and it is further expressed in at least fourteen of the textual motifs (27 t-shirts), mostly in direct quotes from Austen’s fiction and letters. The most repeated of these is from Austen’s letters, in which she writes, “I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it save me the trouble of liking them a great deal” (December 24, 1798). Other observations of similar tone include Elizabeth Bennet’s comment that “There are few people whom I really love and still fewer whom I think well” (*Pride and Prejudice* 133), Darcy’s assertion that “My good opinion once lost is lost forever” (57), and Austen’s own declaration that “Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked” (March 23, 1817).

Each example presents an ironic representation of the individual self. In the quote from Austen’s letter (“I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them”), the real object of humor is Austen herself, or in the case of the t-shirt wearer. The quote expresses a desire for detachment, which derives from what one

of the editors of the published version of this paper characterized as “shyness, a reluctance to engage with people” on Austen’s part. It ironically explores the conflict between full social engagement and the safety of disconnection; the desire for detachment belies the desire for connection.

The maker of the t-shirt amplifies the misanthropic quality of the quote by omitting the last three words. Instead of being save the trouble of liking agreeable people “a great deal,” the t-shirt wearer is saved the trouble of liking agreeable people *at all*. This abridgement repurposes Austen’s nuanced and humorous self-critique, creating a misanthropic statement. The increased negativity in the abridgement changes the nature of the irony too. In Austen’s original text, the irony *explores* the competing desires for connection and privacy, and they are not seen as mutually exclusive. The abridgement simplifies the irony. The hyperbolic pessimism allows us to see the sarcastic intent, and yet the literal non-ironic meaning suggests that the wearer would rather not have the trouble of liking people. Thus, the t-shirt version is more concerned with the question of “is the wearer really a misanthrope or is she just joking?”

This ironic portrayal allows the wearer to have it both ways – to express misanthropy while simultaneously denying it through hyperbole. Irony is often an expression of elitism; in order to see irony, a person has to be aware of all the social and linguistic codes at work. In this case, we would have to actually know the person wearing this t-shirt, along with all the social knowledge that the wearer draws upon, to be sure if s/he is intentionally wearing it ironically. In this sense, irony privileges people who have the right information. As Claire Colebrook asserts, “[i]rony is essentially, avowedly and positively elitist: it works against common sense, the unrefined intellect and the social

use of language” (19). The misanthropic statement on the t-shirt creates an elite association for the wearer because irony itself is an expression of intellectual superiority. This theme is similar to the themes of the privileged Janeite knowledge and the love of reading, in that it creates for the wearer a unique and elite social identity.

The examples looked at thus far fall under the heading of alerting the world to the wearer’s membership in the elite group of Janeites. Using the examples from the t-shirts as a guide, characteristics associated with Janeites revolve around the superior intelligence of the “members,” which is expressed through special knowledge of Austen’s texts, the act of reading, a complex moral vision, and playful misanthropy. Irony is a common stance among each of these categories. But many other t-shirts that operate as Janeite identity announcement don’t easily fit into these neat categories, and seem to require increasingly specific subcategories of their own.

Many motifs that are difficult to classify have a fill-in-the-blank quality about them, in which modern American catchphrases, aphorisms, mottos, and memes have been adapted to Austenian purposes. For instance, the motif “Eat Sleep Jane” appears on five t-shirts, while “Peace Love Jane” appears on three others. The “Eat Sleep \_\_\_\_” phrase is commonly used to represent total dedication to an activity. Another example of the fill-in-the-blank style of t-shirts is the “Team \_\_\_\_” meme, which according to Ben Zimmer became popular in the United States in 2005 after news broke of the dramatic love triangle among Brad Pitt, Jennifer Aniston, and Angelina Jolie. Zimmer argues that it really took off in 2007 with the rising popularity of the love triangle in the *Twilight* series of novels. This meme is replicated on the Austen t-shirts, with seven t-shirts containing

some variation of the “Team \_\_\_\_” motif: Team Jane, Team Austen (two t-shirts), Team Tilney (two t-shirts), Team Darcy, and Team Brandon.

Phrases of this variety act as identity announcements of the same form I’ve been discussing all along. But these fill-in-the-blank t-shirts reject the association with elitism, and rather encourage the wearers to value their identities as Americans who are capable of participating in popular trends. This broadens our sense of what a Janeite might represent. Given American stereotypes about Austen, which characterize her as feminine, high-class, and even prudish, I was surprised to see the self-consciously modern designs of a large portion of the t-shirts. For instance, the “iPride and Prejudice” t-shirt design (found on four t-shirts) uses visual features that reference the dancing shadow people used in iPod ads in the United States.

Another repeated textual motif is the Homegirl or Homeboy motif. “Jane Austen is My Homegirl” is found on three t-shirts, and “Darcy and Bingley are my Homeboys” is found on one t-shirt. “Homeboy” is an American slang term particularly associated with hip-hop subcultures to refer to a friend who is from the same neighborhood or gang. One possible interpretation is to see the t-shirt as an opportunity for an individual to show her love of Austen using the language of her own dialect. Another possibility arises from incongruity: Americans associate Austen specifically with whiteness and Englishness, so the text, “Jane Austen is My Homegirl,” links the mannered life in the Regency English countryside with the vibrant urban communities in the United States. The image above the text increases this sense of incongruity; in the 1870 Victorian engraving, Austen wears a lacy high-necked gown and a frilly old-fashioned bonnet. For some wearers, the



incongruity might be a sufficient end on its own, but for others, the t-shirt could suggest deeper political tensions between white European and African-American worlds.

A similar dynamic is seen in the “Jane Austen: Reading is Sexy” motif, which is found on three t-shirts. One can view it as ironic because it goes against the narrow stereotypical notions that dominate American conceptions of reading, which are equated with nerdiness. In this interpretation, the Austen fan announces her fan status while simultaneously undercutting the stereotypical American associations of Austen as a prim, prudish, feminine, out-of-touch spinster, therefore distancing herself from traditional, outdated notions of Janeitism and illustrating her own modern attitudes.

Again, we are back to irony, but here it is operating in a slightly different way: Colebrook explains that “[i]rony is possible when language is used in ways that run against our norms; it thereby brings our norms into focus” (41) The seeming self-awareness of this shirt is an attribute of postmodern irony, which Lisa Colletta describes as follows:

Awareness of constructions has replaced awareness of meaning, and postmodern irony replaces unity with multiplicity, meaning with appearance of meaning, depth with surface. A postmodern audience is made conscious of the constructed nature of meaning and of its own participation in the appearance of things, which results in the self-referential irony that characterizes most of our cultural output today. (856)

When we analyze the significance of what the t-shirt means, we draw on our stereotypical beliefs that nerds read, nerds are not sexy, and Jane Austen *definitely* is not sexy. Part of

the pleasure imparted by “getting” the irony of this statement is that we become more deeply connected with cultures that produce it.

When we attribute significance to the statement “Jane Austen: Reading is Sexy,” we discover several possibilities, including a criticism of the anti-intellectualism that seems so prevalent in this country today. In this reading, the tired stereotypical binaries are intentionally turned on their heads. Alternately, some wearers will see the t-shirt as a legitimate articulation of their experience of reading Austen. As we have seen with the Darcymania springing from the 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, there are always sexy undertones veiled beneath the surface of Austen’s texts (Blum). Indeed, some wearers will consider the shirt as a direct allusion to the sexualized reaction to that film, and will buy the shirt to celebrate (or perhaps to make fun of) that phenomenon.

All of these interpretations are contingent upon context; this is what Colletta means when she says that postmodern irony is all surface, all appearance of meaning. Indeed she argues that “[t]he irony of postmodernity denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance and even embraces incoherence and lack of meaning” (856). She goes on to say that “ambivalence might ultimately be [ironic satire’s] most powerful attribute” (872). And yet, all of these interpretations are contingent on the reader, making a number of possibilities, none “more right” than the other. If we were to ask the shirt wearers which interpretation might be more justified, they would cryptically answer: “yes.”<sup>13</sup> The lack of meaning created by postmodern irony paradoxically creates a situation in which infinite meanings become possible.

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Dr. Nancy Legge, Idaho State University’s Department of Communication, Media, and Persuasion, for the language here.

The meaningfulness of postmodern irony helps us to understand what to make of people who might buy and wear one of these t-shirts without any knowledge of Austen; I can imagine that certain wearers gleefully embrace the audacity of deliberately choosing something unfamiliar to them. To that end, the irony of postmodernity, with its paradoxical stance of meaning and resistance to meaning, evokes a rebellious attitude, which dares parents and adults and non-Janeites to try to figure out what it all means. Like the misanthropic t-shirts, a large class of t-shirts adopt a deliberately oppositional and ironic stance which characterize the wearer (often through Austen's words) in ways that are contrary to preferred mainstream characteristics. For instance, Lady Catherine DeBourgh's memorable criticism of Elizabeth Bennet as being an "obstinate, headstrong girl" appears on seven t-shirts on *CaféPress.com* (*Pride and Prejudice* 336). This t-shirt elevates the wearer by asserting her individuality and by drawing attention to the ways in which she rejects the idea that girls should be docile and obedient. What is meant as an insult in the book is repackaged as a badge of honor and resistance. Another example is the description of Mrs. Bates from *Emma* as "A very old lady, almost past everything," which appears on two t-shirts (22). Again, this is an abridgement of Austen's original, which reads "Mrs. Bates, the widow of a former vicar of Highbury, was a very old lady, almost past every thing but tea and quadrille" (22). Austen's original is much softer. The hyperbole in the t-shirt quote is an ironic reclamation of the stereotypes of old-age.

This type of ironic rejection of the mainstream is built into *CaféPress.com*'s business model. *CaféPress.com* operates as an alternative to traditional consumer culture, in which private sellers are enabled by the host website to create stores outside the bounds of the traditional brick-and-mortar store. It is an alternative to traditional

shopping, and the heralded benefits of this experience revolve around the ways the process of shopping empowers the consumer: the products available are increasingly specialized and customized, the store is always open as it is online, and finally, the website provides a place for consumer reviews of the individual sellers.

At the bottom of the *CaféPress.com* “Homepage,” we see a company description in which the power of customization is stressed over-and-over:

*CafePress* is where the world shops for *custom* T shirts and other unique gifts that express people's *unique personalities*. You'll find millions of *one-of-a-kind* designs on every topic you can imagine (and some you can't) - from political expressions, funny t shirts & stickers, to all sorts of merchandise with cool *personalized* designs. (emphasis added)

By presenting itself as an alternative shopping option that stresses the individuality of the consumer, the online store is by design against the mainstream.

However, the counterculture offered up through the website is ironically quite mainstream, not just because online shopping is becoming an accepted social practice, but also because of the limits of consumer culture. The same mission statement also emphasizes its deference to American mainstream popular culture: “Plus find themed gear from major brands such as the *Twilight Saga*, *American Idol*, *Star Trek*, & more. ... Our breadth of merchandise you can customize includes high-quality products such as t-shirts, hoodies, posters, bumper stickers, mugs and much more.” By referencing some of the most mainstream American entertainment programs and by highlighting the decidedly American products – especially t-shirts – as their wares, the very text of the company description shows the limits of customization; they are still just selling t-shirts and

television shows after all. Online stores repackage the status quo with a countercultural undertones; even just a *suggestion* of rebellion is enough to sell products.

Many of the Austen t-shirts seem to be doing the same thing, including the example of “obstinate headstrong girl” cited above. Another final example is Darcy’s first impression of Elizabeth as being “tolerable,”<sup>14</sup> a quote which appears on one t-shirt (13). The spirit of this t-shirt seems of a conspiratorial nature, in which the wearer, other Janeites, and Jane Austen herself all imagine a world in which, contrary to popular belief, it is not such a bad thing to be a merely “tolerable” woman. Such a woman can indeed become the mistress of Pemberley. However, this statement manages to be both rebellious in attitude while also expressing something that isn’t as “alternative” as it seems – most Americans take for granted that a person has value beyond her appearance, her rank, her familial relations (although whether or not we actually follow that edict is another matter). Through Austen’s *playful* and ironic misanthropy, American Janeites are given fodder to make “safe rebellions” against mainstream attitudes (Ascheid).

Again, this interpretation can be complicated by the question of intention and the problem that postmodern irony presents to someone trying to find a fixed meaning in the t-shirt. But that complication itself acts as an additional shield, preventing the wearer from ever going too far outside of the mainstream. Irony protects a wearer from ever needing to fully commit. And no one is allowed to take it too seriously, because it is a t-shirt after all.

Janeitism, especially of the variety I discussed in the first half of this paper, also operates as a safe rebellion. By embracing qualities not always favored in mainstream

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<sup>14</sup> The full quote is “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men” (13).

American culture – especially the elite quality of intellectualism – Janeites rebel against that anti-intellectualism. But at the same time, Austen’s popularity in film has made her a recognizable figure even for non-readers. Austen is an appropriate figure to draw on for safe rebellions of this variety. She can represent the literary canon, the popular book market, established norms, the British Empire, and therefore Western culture on the one hand, and alternately, she still occupies the margins, especially in the way that she has been positioned as an icon of the constrained woman author in a male-dominated world, thanks to observations from writers like Virginia Woolf (Lee). She embodies the tensions between the mainstream and the alternative visions of the world because she can easily represent both.

These two opposing stances are often encapsulated on the same t-shirt. “Jane Austen: Reading is Sexy,” clearly draws upon Austen’s high-cultural status to imply the unique intelligence of the wearer and her association with the elite group of Janeites. However, it simultaneously undercuts the iconic quality of Austen’s image in a deliberate way that matches the rebellious countercultural spirit of the t-shirt industry. When a fan purchases a “Jane Austen: Reading is Sexy” or “Tolerable,” or even “Jane Austen is My Homegirl” t-shirt from *CaféPress.com*, they are not simply buying a t-shirt, but are also embracing a number of assumptions that simultaneously embrace and challenge the status quo. This celebration of *moderate* individuality and *safe* rebellion is an essential quality of Austenian cultural identity as constructed in the contemporary United States. That Austen is put to use for these ends illustrates her continuing relevance as a way of embodying the tensions between mainstream and alternative culture.

## Chapter IV

## “I’m an Elizabeth Bennet in a Darcy-less World”: Postmodern Nostalgia

T-shirts with texts such as “I have fine eyes, do you have an estate in Derbyshire?” and “I’d rather be at Pemberley” illustrate a nostalgic desire for a way of life that never really was, and, perhaps more importantly, for a kind of fantasy love match that is the stuff of fairy tales. This orientation to Regency England, the historical context of Jane Austen’s works, echoes Frederic Jameson’s argument concerning the 1930s and 1950s nostalgia films, which he argues indicated an overarching large-scale cultural desire to get back to an idealized and fictionalized version of a mythic past. While Jameson diagnoses the culture that produced these myths as contracting “historical amnesia” (1,974) and even cultural “schizophrenia” (1,962), I argue that the ways in which Austen fans illustrate their connection to Austen and the nostalgic fantasy past is ironic. T-shirts such as “No top hat? Not interested,” show a humorous sense of self-awareness that undercuts the earnest desire for an ahistorical fantasy way of life and love, while still allowing the fan to express her desire for that lifestyle. The coexistence of nostalgia and irony is closely linked to how fans perceive themselves *as fans* of Jane Austen: ironic distance allows the fan to reject the nostalgic romance associated with Austen while simultaneously identifying with it.

This work emerged out of the project that produced the previous chapter. Although I performed the qualitative analysis on these materials in the spring of 2013, I used the same set of materials that I assembled for the previous chapter when I wrote it in the spring of 2012. As before, I coded the t-shirts based upon similarities in theme and tone, and the various orientations to Jane Austen or her literature. The latter category was

complex, and involved first sorting out Austen quotes from modern day statements about Austen and quotes from the film adaptations. I also categorized the t-shirt texts based upon which characters the quotes were associated with, and if they were quotes, which characters they are attributed to. After that I looked for patterns and major themes, many of which I discussed in the previous chapter.

For instance, a major category of t-shirts on *CafePress* includes those t-shirts that refer to the heroes or heroines of Jane Austen's novels. There are 38 t-shirt designs that refer to the heroines, although out of that 38, only 18 of the textual motifs are unique. This means that while there is only one "In a Jane Austen Novel, I'd be the heroine," there are twelve shirts that use the text "Mrs. Darcy," and the design of these twelve shirts can be quite different. That said there is a great deal of overlap and repetition in the designs. Elizabeth is the favored Austen heroine on *CafePress*. Among the heroine t-shirts there are 31 that refer to Elizabeth and a total of 11 unique textual motifs. This category includes "What would Elizabeth Bennet do?" and "Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley," but does not include the t-shirts with quotes from Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, of which there are 11 textual motifs and 15 unique designs.

It is no wonder that Elizabeth is overrepresented on the t-shirts. In one of her letters to Cassandra, even Austen "confesses" her love of Elizabeth: "I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least I don't know" (January 29, 1813). In his book on literary heroines, William Dean Howells argues that Elizabeth's superiority "springs from her temperament and character, cool, humorous, intelligent and just: a combination of attributes that renders Elizabeth Bennet one of the most admirable and attractive girls



in the world of fiction” (48). There *is* something particularly appealing about Elizabeth that sets her apart from other fictional figures, so much so that at times I have found it hard to go beyond simply listing Elizabeth’s character traits as evidence of why someone would love her and want to be like her. Isn’t it obvious!? This is as true now in the United States as it was at the time when Austen wrote.

Basic literary values tell us that round and dynamic characters are the most psychologically honest and therefore interesting to read and Elizabeth is the definition of such a character. Elizabeth makes mistakes and grows as a result of these mistakes. While the ostensible lessons that she learns grow out of her unique circumstances— to avoid pride and prejudice – perhaps the most basic lesson in *Pride and Prejudice* is that of knowing one’s own heart. In fact, the major climax of the second volume is the moment in which Elizabeth says “till this moment, I never knew myself” (202). Although none of the t-shirts specifically exemplify this concept, I think there is an interesting symmetry in the fact that t-shirts are part of a material culture specifically associated with the exploration and creation of identity and the fact that the central journey in *Pride and Prejudice* is the coming to self-awareness. It is fitting that Austen’s novel of self-discovery and growth, indeed often labeled a bildungsroman, is used by so many to make statements about their identity and sense of self.

Using the t-shirts as a gauge, one of Elizabeth’s central character traits that t-shirt wearers identify with is her unconventional behavior. As I indicated in the previous chapter, one of the most popular t-shirt designs reads “Obstinate Headstrong Girl,” a line uttered by the snobbish Lady Catherine DeBourgh when Elizabeth will not promise to not marry Darcy (337). This is the most repeated textual motif that references Elizabeth other

than “Mrs. Darcy,” which I will discuss at length below. The popularity of this motif indicates that fans value the ways Elizabeth flouts social convention. Elizabeth runs through the muddy English countryside without a care for the state of her petticoats, she fearlessly refuses to act as an inferior in the presence of her social “betters” like Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine DeBourgh, and perhaps most importantly, she refuses to let her circumstances dictate her worth. As Emily Auerbach observes, “Elizabeth, we suspect, *enjoys* standing up to Lady Catherine, arguing with Mr. Darcy, [and] opposing her mother” (*Searching* 171). Elizabeth is a heroine who is uniquely unfettered physically, socially, and mentally, something that appeals to postfeminist women today. In her self-claimed freedom, she is, at least superficially, like privileged American women who take freedom for granted and who are presumably the intended consumers of products like the “Obstinate Headstrong Girl” t-shirt. As I have argued, for contemporary American consumers, there is something particularly gratifying about purchasing products that seem to quash the status quo and thereby create a (safely) rebellious appearance for the consumer.

Elizabeth is also uniquely lively, humorous, and active for a woman character penned in the eighteenth century. A total of six t-shirt motifs contain references to three of Elizabeth’s quotes which stress her sense of humor and love of absurdity: “Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me” (56), “[I] dearly love a laugh” (56), and “I am excessively diverted” (344). This is an example of one of Elizabeth’s traits that seems so obvious that people would identify with that it feels strange to belabor the point. After all, who *doesn’t* “dearly love a laugh”? Just look at what most Americans use the internet to do (besides porn) – we use social media to share amusing memes like

LOLcats, Grumpy Cat, Bluntcards, and *YouTube* videos of cute babies and daredevils performing idiotic stunts (the overrepresentation of cats might be my fault here). But unlike these quickly shared and easily forgotten internet ephemera, which pass in and out of our lives with little effort or loss, a t-shirt requires searching, selecting, purchasing, and wearing a material item. The t-shirt's physical presence moves it beyond the status of a mere meme. It is important to see a t-shirt as a deliberate and material choice on the part of the creators and wearers, and in the case of these three t-shirts, the wearers choose to highlight the lighthearted nature of their own identity.

The presence of this category of t-shirts isn't so clear-cut and obvious when we consider that many of the literary t-shirts on *CafePress* actually emphasize more serious, abstract, or even philosophical orientations to the literature that they reference. To test this idea out, I looked up a couple of authors on *CafePress* who are more serious in tone than Austen. On April 12, 2013, I did a search for "Emily Dickinson," and limited the search to t-shirts, and then did a cursory qualitative analysis on only the first page of a possible seven pages of t-shirts. On this page, I found 28 t-shirts. 20 of the t-shirts contain Dickinson quotes, four feature her portrait without words, two simply refer to her name, one is an "English Teacher" t-shirt and states her name among other literary giants, and only one refers to her in the lighthearted way we see repeated among the Jane Austen t-shirts: "In my previous life I was Emily Dickinson." All of the chosen quotes emphasize Dickinson's abstract and philosophical ideals, as we can see by the following quotes from poems #466, #690, and #314 each of which appear on three separate t-shirts: "I dwell in possibility," "Forever is composed of nows," and "Hope is the thing with feathers"

(Vendler 222, 314). Although Austen has plenty of material that could be used to make abstract statements, there are very few t-shirts that use her quotes in that way.

The philosophical seriousness we see of the Dickinson t-shirts might emerge primarily from the source materials; there is no doubt that Dickinson tends to tackle subject matter traditionally classified as serious. For that reason, I did a similar quantitative analysis on the first page of t-shirts that appear when I used the keyword “Brontë” in order to see how the gloomy brooding sisters compared. Among the 28 shirts on that first page, thirteen are basic identity announcement shirts that contain text like “Team Brontë” or pictures of the three sisters. The other two major categories each contain seven t-shirts. The first category is that of quotes, and as one might expect, the quotes reflect the serious nature of the source materials; for instance, three of the t-shirts use a variation of the following quote from Jane Eyre: “I am no bird and no net ensnares me. I am a free human being with an independent will” (258). However, “Brontë” also yields seven t-shirts that are humorous or ironic like the Jane Austen t-shirts. In this category we see t-shirts like “Mrs. Rochester,” “Lowood Institute,” “Jane Eyre is my homegirl,” and “You are the Heathcliff to my Catherine and that’s not healthy.”

Because the more serious Brontës also yielded a number of humorous t-shirts, we know that, although the source materials make a difference in the kinds of t-shirts that are available on *CafePress*, the personality of the fans who buy the t-shirts makes a bigger difference. With a few caveats accounting for academics and certain sets of fans at *The Republic of Pemberley* (see Bowles 17), Austen’s fandom is fairly free of the philosophical seriousness that the fans of other authors utilize in their t-shirts. Some of this may be caused by Austen’s overexposure in popular culture over the past few

decades (Rosenbaum “Is Jane Austen Overhyped?”; Johnson 182). It may be this overexposure contributes to the fact that even the things that Austen fans take seriously are nevertheless often handled with the distance of a knowing irony, an aspect of her fandom I will describe in more detail below. The fans’ choice to use Austen to highlight their own lightheartedness emerges from the qualities of Austen’s own work, specifically from characters like Elizabeth, as well as from the culture that surrounds her work.

Elizabeth’s lighthearted quotes might be used in these t-shirts to suggest a rejection of overly serious academic orientations to literature, stemming from the prevalent anti-intellectualism in the United States these days. But these quotes also may be chosen simply because Elizabeth said them, and they are quotes that capture an appealing aspect of her personality so vividly. In the circular logic of character identification, fans identify with Elizabeth because they see her exemplifying their own sense of humor, but in a way that is perfected and idealized; instead of saying “Grumpy Cat makes me laugh” she says “Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me,” getting closer to what they really mean than what they could ever say themselves. In any case, a large part of Elizabeth’s character that modern fans are drawn to is her charming sense of humor, her fanciful love of diversion, and perhaps most importantly her own self-awareness and consequential ability to articulate that aspect of her character so well.

Similarly, Elizabeth holds her own – and even triumphs – in conversations with well-educated men and high ranking women; her banter is “light, bright, and sparkling” just like Austen’s prose (February 4, 1813). Many of the t-shirts contain quotes of the witty, epigrammatic things that Elizabeth says in *Pride and Prejudice*: “What are men to

rocks and mountains!” (152), “Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing” (152), “I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*” (21), and “Few people whom I really love and still fewer whom I think well” (133). Similar to the humorous quotes above, these quotes provide eloquent and humorous language for the fan to present as her own. This is especially true of the first two quotes referring to men, which, when taken out of Austen’s context, seem to fit into a pop-psychological *Men Are From Mars* variety of gender essentialism that so often counts as humor. Of course, the lack of context is actually an important part of understanding how these quotes operate as I have shown. That gap in information is filled in by savvy Austen fans, illustrating their right to belong to the Janeites.

But you will notice that four of the five quotes above use either the words “I” or “me.” In all, seven t-shirt text motifs (nine different t-shirt designs) that use Elizabeth’s words use language that directly references the self. This language suggests that the “I” of the quote is the wearer, not Elizabeth. Similarly, three text motifs (eleven t-shirt designs) operate as a label for the wearer without the use of “I” or “me,” such as the “Obstinate Headstrong Girl” t-shirt. This is the nature of character identification; people see something of themselves in a character, or see something that they aspire to be in that character. It is not shocking that people want to associate themselves with Elizabeth’s socially liberated attitudes, her humor, and her witty use of language, and claim those qualities for themselves. If girls and women aren’t already like Elizabeth, there is a lot about her that they might want to emulate.

However, in a deeper sense, the wearers claim ownership not only of the things that Elizabeth represents, but of Elizabeth herself, claiming Elizabeth’s liberated

attitudes, self-awareness, her humorous personality, and her witty words for themselves. The direct and indirect “I” and “me” in these t-shirts is not Elizabeth, but the wearer, or perhaps Elizabeth as filtered through the bodily presence of the wearer. The physicality of an actual human body wearing an unembodied quote of a fictional character somehow trumps the character’s ownership of those words. Like Cyrano’s words parroted from Christian’s mouth, Elizabeth, and even Austen herself, become eclipsed by the “speaking” body.

At the very least, fans and t-shirt wearers look up to Elizabeth as a model. Indeed, one of the t-shirts reads “What would Elizabeth Bennet do?” faithfully giving credit where credit is due. Here, Elizabeth is working as a model specifically for behavioral choices. Perhaps fans wear this t-shirt as a reminder to cultivate an Elizabeth-like personality, to be witty, or to be true to themselves in the modern sense. But a better reading sees this t-shirt in a way similar to the “What Would Jane Do?” t-shirt, in which Elizabeth is seen as a model for *moral* behavior. Given that the t-shirt text parodies the popular “What Would Jesus Do?” movement, such a reading seems particularly apt.

Although readers and fans focus on how modern Elizabeth is, she also represents a number of ideals of her time, and these ideals emerge specifically from Austen’s moral and religious values. These values are closely aligned with manners, which at their best can operate as a blueprint for moral behavior. While Elizabeth knows when it is worth flouting convention, she also knows and stays within certain boundaries; when flouting convention will hurt her family’s reputation, when tactless conversation will hurt another worthy person’s feelings, when the consequences of her words or actions overpower the fun or moral ground of an unconventional position, Elizabeth knows to hold her tongue.

Mrs. Bennet and Lydia act as foils to Elizabeth, showing us what unregulated rule-breakers do. Their unthinking behavior allows us to see, by contrast, that Elizabeth's limit-testing moments are deliberate moral choices.

In Elizabeth, we see the positive possibilities offered by a more mannered culture; she shows us a uniquely negotiated performance of Regency politeness – she is not someone restrained by manners, like many other characters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but instead is able to use those conventions which create a happier life and discard those which are silly or even immoral. But unlike us, or even some of her contemporaries, she is integrated into the culture well enough that she can make a well-informed decision about which limits she can safely test and still maintain her respectability. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, “Austen admits the limits and discomforts of the paternal roof, but learns to live beneath it” (121). This negotiation of morals and manners illustrates a middle ground between the highly structured hierarchy of civility we associate with the eighteenth century aristocracy, and the somewhat careless manners of equality we associate with the modern United States; Elizabeth's status as a country gentleman's daughter, of the middling classes or landed gentry, enables this mediated position.

For many fans, this careful negotiation of social boundaries is fascinating as a historical lesson. For others, the elegance that arises from tact and the performance of social niceness is a welcome relief from the more careless manners of our own American culture. The question “What would Elizabeth Bennet do?” is an apt one, because the answer involves testing, pushing, and stretching social boundaries, making fun out of ridiculous situations, being a slightly irreverent “modern” girl, but also following a moral



code of manners and convention when the context dictates it. Elizabeth Bennet is a both/and character. She is *both* modern *and* old-fashioned in all the *right* ways, making a powerful point of identification for modern fans who want the elegance of a time past, but don't want to give up the privileges of contemporary liberation. Elizabeth is who modern girls and women hope they would be if they were transplanted in Regency England. Indeed, one of the t-shirts goes beyond implied identification with Elizabeth, and states outright that the wearer *is* Elizabeth: "I'm an Elizabeth in a Darcy-less World."

One of the most interesting readings of the "I'm an Elizabeth in a Darcy-less World" shirt is that it implies that there are many Elizabeths (the wearer is *an* Elizabeth not *the* Elizabeth) and not *any* Darcys! Elizabeth's specialness in this formulation is the way in which she is absorbed and shared by the readers and wearers in an appeal to similarities between them and her (real or hoped for). Through shared character identification, this utterly unique character becomes an Everywoman

As I have shown, Elizabeth represents the full package of identity-related material: she is ideal to identify with on her own terms because she is so perfectly lively and modern in her sensibilities while also being tactful in an elegant and old-fashioned sense. But it might almost be more important that Elizabeth has a romantic relationship with fantasy man Mr. Darcy that many women would desire and even envy. The text "Darcy-less world" indicates that what is at play is indeed fantasy – a fantasy in which idealized Everywoman, Elizabeth, marries figurative knight in shining armor, Darcy.

One of the most popular t-shirts referring to Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy, or *Pride and Prejudice* itself is one that simply states "Mrs. Darcy," with a total of twelve shirts containing that text, fifteen if we include "Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley."

This t-shirt is deceptively simple. At first glance, it obviously means to suggest that the woman wearing the shirt is claiming the status of Mr. Darcy's wife. This seems like an uncomplicated and therefore correct explanation. Lots of women and some men have expressed a similar desire: in 2003, "Mr. Darcy was voted by women to be the most 'desirable' fictional figure in a BBC poll" (Tauchert 23-24).

But further thought invests the "Mrs. Darcy" t-shirt with an odd power struggle over meaning and ownership. There is a sense in which the wearer is illustrating her own affinity to Elizabeth, similar to t-shirts that reference Elizabeth's character traits like "Obstinate Headstrong Girl" and "I'm an Elizabeth in a Darcy-less World." But a truer reading of the shirt would be to see the text as a denial of Elizabeth, in which the wearer is claiming Elizabeth's position as Darcy's wife. Just as they take ownership of Elizabeth's identity by wearing t-shirts with her words printed on them, fans also take ownership of Elizabeth's romantic identity. In this reading, the book as Austen wrote it no longer exists, and the t-shirt wearer has taken over, not only the interpretive power of the novel, but also the outcome of the plot itself, interrupting it, and placing herself in it. In this sense, the t-shirt provides an interesting metaphor for the way in which these t-shirts represent the fans taking ownership and power over the texts in very material ways.

Indeed, ownership is at the heart of what this t-shirt means. For instance, the t-shirt seems to embrace old fashioned values about marriage through the reference to the self through the husband's last name only. However, while the wearer is suggesting that Darcy owns her through the appeal to traditional marital economies, a truer reading of the t-shirt would be to see the way in which the *wearer* has taken ownership of *Darcy*. So not only has the wearer figuratively erased Elizabeth's presence and taken over Elizabeth's

role, she has also taken ownership of Darcy, turned him into an abstraction, and therefore, taken control of what he means. And the text of some of the other shirts take control more overtly; for instance, one of the shirts even reads “Darcy is Mine” and another, “Dibs on Darcy,” lays claim in perhaps a more tongue-in-cheek way. These two shirts take the power struggle further, showing it as a struggle for Darcy between *fans*.

Therefore, the abstracted Darcy and the things that he stands for are the sources of the (contested?) meaning behind the t-shirt for the wearer. But what does he represent and why would a t-shirt wearer want to associate herself with him? To me, the simplest, most obvious and even clichéd explanation of Darcy’s particular appeal is that his love for Elizabeth is centered in respect and esteem, a particularly modern view of romance. One of the most satisfying aspects of Mr. Darcy’s love for Elizabeth is that it emerged over time and therefore that the love is born out of his knowledge of her character rather than from more superficial reasons.

However, while romance issuing from respect is an important part of Darcy’s appeal, I haven’t seen any t-shirts that mention that aspect of his character explicitly. The truth is that when some fans refer to Darcy they are actually referring to Colin Firth’s (1995), or even Matthew MacFaden’s (2005) performance of Darcy. Again, these performances are characterized by their romantic quality, but they are also *passionate*, and both emotionally and sexually heightened, if only in a repressed way. When asked to discuss how he went about portraying Darcy, Firth said “I thought to myself: ‘This is where he wants to go across the room and punch someone. This is where he wants to kiss her. This is where he wants sex with her right now.’ I’d imagine a man doing it all, and then not doing any of it” (Blum 163). Virginia Blum points out that this sense of

repression imposed upon Darcy by social forces and represented through the “knowing” modern film lens creates a heightened sexuality in the 1995 adaptation that may indeed be the source of the film’s great success. Similarly, Lisa Hopkins argues that because Colin Firth puts Mr. Darcy’s passion and desire for Elizabeth at the center of his performance, the film privileges a feminine romantic and sexual fantasy of “ male characters who crave the love of heroines with an intensity which, we may fear, real men rarely experience” (120).

Instead of a focus on Darcy’s respect for Elizabeth, I did find plenty of evidence of the appeal of Darcy’s passion for Elizabeth within the t-shirt themes. The longest quotes on any of the t-shirts that appear with a search for “Jane Austen” on *CafePress* both portray moments in which Elizabeth is unaware that Darcy is watching and falling in love with her. For instance, the following t-shirt text narrating Darcy’s thoughts appears on two separate design motifs:

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his

asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. Of this she was perfectly unaware; -- to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable no where, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with. (24)

Another similar long quote, from the time Elizabeth spent at Netherfield while Jane recovered from her cold, appears on one t-shirt

Elizabeth, having rather expected to affront him, was amazed at his gallantry; but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger. (51)

Long quotes like this disrupt the easy interpretation of identity-announcement t-shirts like “Mrs. Darcy” that make a hasty claim to similarity to characters and ownership of their character traits. For both of these t-shirts, the visual impact is made by using a “handwritten” cursive font presented in a large block of text, which emphasizes the aesthetic quality of reading and writing through the beautiful look of the written page. In fact, the choice of using a long passage, in which details are hard to make out, indicates that the wearer is celebrating the act of reading in a general sense. A longer passage *looks* more readerly than a simple one liner. Therefore, in some sense, the chosen text is beside the point and the wearer is simply proudly stating her or his identity as a reader.

On the other hand, these specific quotes were *chosen*, and because they have a number of thematic similarities, it seems they were chosen consciously and deliberately. Interestingly, both of these long quotes emphasize the way in which Darcy is falling in

love with Elizabeth by observing her from afar. For many Janeites, the most romantic scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* are the heated verbal sparring matches between Darcy and Elizabeth, but here the romance is narrated from a distance. Although Darcy is thinking about *Elizabeth*, it is *his* thoughts, filtered through the narrator's that we are privy to. In this way, the t-shirts choose to highlight the aspects of Darcy's behavior that Blum and Hopkins say contribute to Darcy's appeal in the films – there is something that modern readers like about watching a man fall in love with a woman. Part of why this is so appealing is that, as we have seen above, fans identify with the woman that he is falling in love with so strongly that they have felt themselves “become” her. There is a sense in which the t-shirts suggest that watching Darcy fall in love with Elizabeth is like watching him fall in love with all of “us.”

Another aspect of these long quotes is that they both emphasize the way in which Darcy is falling in love with Elizabeth despite his better judgment. The sense of lost control in the face of romantic passion is a strong theme in the t-shirts. The fact that the third most popular t-shirt associated with *Pride and Prejudice* (the second is some variation of the opening line of the book, found on fourteen shirts) is taken from Darcy's first proposal supports the idea that the passion of Firth's and MacFadden's Mr. Darcys is a major source of appeal for Darcy's character. There are ten t-shirts that refer to some variation of Darcy's declaration of love – “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” or “I love you most ardently” (the 2005 film adaptation's edit) – in which he is so overcome by his love for Elizabeth that he allows his emotions to flow out unchecked by considerations of tact or her feelings.

For modern viewers fully Romanticized in our sensibilities, the idea of someone so overcome with love that they just can't help themselves is particularly appealing, because it suggests the psychological purging and therefore emotional honesty valued by our therapy-reliant culture. Interestingly, this t-shirt ties for third place with "Obstinate Headstrong Girl." I say interesting because both suggest a Romanticized vision of the unfettered self, unconcerned with social conventions and roles. Here we see how t-shirt wearers latch upon the parts of Austen that emphasizes the values most closely aligned with their own modern ideology.

Darcy's love for Elizabeth, born out of respect for her character in the book and expressed through passionate restraint in the films, creates the foundation of Darcy's intense appeal and explains why so many fans want to be "Mrs. Darcy." But another aspect of what fans like about Darcy is also wrapped up in the specifically historical vision of him. Indeed, the "I'm an Elizabeth Bennet in a Darcy-less World" t-shirt suggests that part of Darcy's appeal is that he represents an ideal that is no longer available, or which perhaps was never available to begin with.

Andrew Higson has written extensively about the heritage film genre which gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, especially because of the Merchant-Ivory adaptations of E. M. Forster's novels, like *A Room with a View* and *Howard's End*, and also the numerous adaptations of Jane Austen's the novels. Higson argues that this boom of the heritage genre was born out of nostalgia for the lifestyle of the English aristocracy, which, in these films represents an idealized and conservative vision of the national past. The principle emotional experience associated with nostalgia is that of irretrievable loss. In *English Heritage, English Cinema* Higson writes that

The strength of the pastiche in effect imprisons the qualities of the past, holding them in place as something to be gazed at from a reverential distance, refusing the possibility of a dialogue or confrontation with the present. The films thus render history as spectacle, which can then seem quite separate from the viewer in the present, something over and done with, complete, achieved. (65)

Thus Darcy is over and done with, the modern world is a Darcy-less world, and the Regency England associated with Austen is looked at longingly as irretrievable. When a fan alludes to the Darcy-less world, part of what is experienced as a loss is the *conditions* that create men like Darcy.

Part of the historical conditions experienced as lost and thus deeply desirable is the unimaginable wealth and attendant elegant lifestyle represented by Darcy. The desire for this wealth is certainly acknowledged or implied on *CafePress*, in t-shirts such as “No top hat? Not interested!” “I shall be at Pemberley if the Queen Should Call,” and “Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley.” Here we see that Darcy’s wealth is associated with an utterly English and specifically historical conception of wealth that is tied up with status and property. Here the t-shirts might be taking more cues from the heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s than from Austen herself. Higson shows that this slate of films was interested in depicting life specifically for the wealthy. The wealth of the characters in the films allows the filmmakers to create a *spectacle* of elegance, in which the lace and jewel encrusted gowns, the crowded dinner tables with luxurious accoutrements, and the magnificent properties take center stage. Darcy, in his specific magnificence at Pemberley provides an ideal opportunity for filmmakers to depict all the gorgeous trappings of conspicuous consumption.



Among these trappings of consumption is that of the top hat. To me, the most interesting t-shirt in the wealth and elegance category is “No top hat? Not interested!” because it contains no specific references to Austen, and it could just as easily have been tagged to *Downton Abbey*, the Monopoly Man, Uncle Sam, *Alice in Wonderland* (Mad Hatter), or *Young Frankenstein* (“Puttin’ On the Ritz”). In other words, when the person created the search criteria to attach to this t-shirt, he or she explicitly decided that a fan of Jane Austen would be likely to buy a t-shirt expressing desire for top-hats. Although all of the other top hat associations will continue to impact the interpretation of the t-shirt regardless of how it is tagged, the fact that it is tagged to Austen rather than Gene Wilder gives us a hint into the meaning intended by the seller.

Interestingly, I can’t recall Austen ever specifically mentioning a top hat, or a topper, or a stove pipe hat, or a beaver hat in her writing. Instead, the fan expresses through this t-shirt a desire for the civilized elegance of an older world, in which men and women dressed for dinner and attended balls. In this reading, nostalgia for the Regency England of Austen’s novels is represented through the image of the top hat, a symbol that operates more as a historical object than as a legitimate fashion choice for modern Americans. The top hat is a symbol for a way of life that is associated with Austen.

Although the top hat is a symbol for a specific historical style of the nineteenth century, that historical style is itself a sign of elegance and sophistication, partly because of its association with wealth and by extension the power of the aristocracy. During the period of the top hat’s growth in popularity, it was associated with power. Indeed, according an account in the *London Times*, the first time John Hetherington wore a top hat in public in 1797, he caused a riot, and was arrested for wearing “a tall structure

having a shining luster calculated to frighten timid people” (Action 277). Even in this absurd legend, part of what the style was intended to do is elevate the wearer above those around him through intimidation. And today, there is no doubt that the top hat operates as a status symbol. Therefore, a large part of what the “Top Hat” t-shirt wearer is “interested” in is the *status* that accompanies wealth.

Although Darcy is part of the landed gentry and related to the aristocracy only through Lady Catherine, his status is nevertheless impressive, especially because he owns Pemberley. One of the repeated themes among the t-shirts is the desire for Darcy’s majestic *estate*. Like the top hat, a large privately owned estate is associated with a nostalgic view of the past, as well as with wealth and, perhaps most importantly, status. The following t-shirts all focus on the fantasy of being able to call Darcy’s estate home: “Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley,” “I’d rather be at Pemberley” and the aforementioned “I shall be at Pemberley if the Queen Should Call.” Even the t-shirt stating “Property of Mr. Darcy,” in which the wearer labels herself as one of Mr. Darcy’s many assets, emphasizes that his connection to landed property and affluence is part of the desirability of marrying him. I’d say that the fans are taking Austen’s cue here – Elizabeth herself expresses truth in jest by explaining to Jane that the first moment when she began to reconsider her rejection of Darcy’s proposal was when she observed the grounds at Pemberley for the first time (353) and “at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!” (235). “Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley” suggests that what “an Elizabeth” would gain through marriage with Mr. Darcy is not simply a fantasy romance, but the fantasy of gaining ownership and (shared) control over a powerful and beautiful estate. Maybe the person who purchases this t-shirt would want

to emphasize her identity as someone whose domestic or managerial skills deserve the challenge of a great property like Pemberley.

Or perhaps, “Mrs. Darcy: Mistress of Pemberley” would be purchased by someone who simply wants to live a fairytale in which she receives the figurative “castle” in the form of Pemberley, without going much further into what that might mean. Here, Pemberley is a fantasy in the sense that it is an impossibility, and thus vaguely defined.

Indeed, there is the haunting reality that the phrase “Darcy-less world” may suggest that such a world never existed to begin with and that the possibility of such “comfort and elegance” was simply dreamt up and so vividly presented by Austen that we believe it to be true (*Pride and Prejudice* 363). The fantasy of sophistication, luxury, wealth, and status is closely associated with the t-shirt on *CafePress* that reads “I want the fairytale.” Like the “Top Hat” t-shirt, the Austen tag is imposed after the fact and not derived from anything specific in the actual text of the t-shirt, meaning that the creator had to make an explicit decision to connect Austen with the general idea of the desire for a fairytale existence. It isn’t surprising. *Pride and Prejudice* does have a fairytale quality to it. Although Elizabeth isn’t a Cinderella, she is in a precarious position in which the death of her father could thrust her into a financial situation well-below the standards to which she has become accustomed. And Mr. Darcy, with unimaginable wealth and status, and a castle-like estate at Pemberley, saves her from an inevitable slip into obscurity through his love of her by deliberately flouting social expectations.

In Ashley Tauchert’s book on the similarities between Austen’s novels and traditional Romances, she often uses the phrase “saved” to describe the marriages that Austen presents in her novel. This language hearkens, not only to the specific courtly

Medieval and Renaissance Romances she describes, but also to the more general fantasy of fairytales:

One of the things that makes Austen so astonishingly successful as a writer is also the thing that associates her work with the basest of feminine fantasies: she narrates the daydream of the heroine's persistent desire to be *somehow* saved by an ideal gentleman: a common desire to be rescued from "all this," and to live "happily ever after." The "somehow" seems to involve a feminine power to transform an animalistic masculine desire into civility, or gentlemanly action.

(xiii)

Tauchert's analysis seems particularly apt to make sense of many of the t-shirt themes we've seen up to now: the fantasy of rescue by Mr. Darcy – a Prince Charming for grownups – is a central theme expressed on the t-shirts.

And as Tauchert points out in the final sentence in the quote above, there is a sense in which the fantasy themes of feminine elegance, manners, and top hats operate as symbols for the ways in which civilization imposes repression on passion. Perhaps the tamed and civilized Darcy, tightly buttoned up in a coat with tails and wearing a top hat that figuratively puts a stopper on the heats of his passion *is* an appealing image for modern fans, for whom the popular (and horribly sexist, even misandrist) conception of the modern man stemming from sources like sit-coms is that of a ill-mannered, fat, oafish slob, who has no trouble voicing his baser desires. Here the manners of Regency England, remembered nostalgically through Mr. Darcy, operate as a way to keep men reigned in and respectful of the women they encounter. Obviously nostalgia of this variety is quick to forget the Henry Crawfords and John Willoughbys who use their

privileges to seduce and abandon young women, but nostalgia is not a logical emotion. Perhaps these rakes simply serve as foils to Darcy, heightening the fantasy that he represents.

Nevertheless, the t-shirt wearers have shown that they *do* crave the animalistic desire of Darcy, as my analysis of the long quotes and quotes from Darcy's proposal show above. Darcy's unspoken desire for Elizabeth as well as his eventual outburst of said desire in the form of an extemporaneous marriage proposal *both* find their ways on to t-shirts. Virginia Blum's notion of the appealing nature of repression is helpful here. She writes that 'repression is structurally central to the story of desire itself, without it there can be no origin of desire. ... Repression is desire's public face, the very contour of the story of sexual desire. Without repression, there is no story to tell' (174). Without repression, there is no being overcome by emotion; without the unsaid story of Darcy's developing desire that we see represented on the long quotes, there can be no spontaneous outburst in the form of his marriage proposal.

And like Elizabeth, Darcy is a both/and character; he is both passionate in a way that modern women want their men to be and civilized in a tactfully elegant and old-fashioned way. And as we have seen through the analysis of the t-shirts above, that tension is a major source of his appeal. The both/and aspect of his character also contributes to the sense that Darcy represents an unrealistic fantasy, a perfect melding of old and new that removes him from the realm of achievable possibilities.

But many of the t-shirts show that many people take issue with the idea that Darcy is just a fantasy that cannot exist in real life. Companions to the t-shirts that state the wearer is looking for Mr. Darcy are those that claim that the wearer *is* Mr. Darcy:

“Mr. Darcy,” “Austen hero,” “Hello my name is: Mr. Darcy” (written as a nametag), “Mr. Darcy’s Stunt Double,” “You have found Mr. Darcy,” and “Property of Mrs. Darcy.” These shirts collectively seem to say “No need to believe in fairytales. I’m just as good!” Indeed, it is harder for me to believe that men wear these shirts specifically to identify with Darcy in the same way that women wear the Elizabeth Bennet t-shirts. Perhaps I am jaded, but they appear as an attempt by the wearers to cash in on all the feminine interest generated by Austen and the film adaptations by claiming a kinship with one of Austen’s most beloved men.

In that sense, these t-shirts are like seductive “come-ons” in which the character identification is less for the wearer’s gratification as it is for the women (or men) he encounters. As my friend Sara Parks points out, the use of second person in “You have found Mr. Darcy” belies that the claim to identification is about the *viewer’s* desires (personal communication, April 5, 2013). This t-shirt mirrors the Elizabeth shirts in the way that the wearer is not simply claiming identification, but is indeed claiming he *is* Darcy. But instead of using that as a means to associate himself with character traits that he wants to emulate or as a means to claim fantasy ownership of a fictional marriage, he is claiming to be one with the character because that character is desired by another living human being. The t-shirt is an answer to the call presented on t-shirts like the “Searching for Mr. Darcy” t-shirt. While utilizing and participating with fiction and fantasies presented in “Searching for Mr. Darcy” and similar t-shirts, “You have found Mr. Darcy” claims a much more direct association with “reality” than any we have looked at so far because it literally addresses the viewer through the word “you.”

The seductive intention is nowhere more clear than in the “Mr. Darcy’s Stunt Double” t-shirt, which simply reeks of male bravado. It is suggesting that the wearer is better than perfect Mr. Darcy because he does all the difficult physical things that Darcy is incapable of doing himself. This shirt epitomizes masculine one-upmanship. This wearer doesn’t want to become Darcy. Indeed, he denies the appeal of Mr. Darcy as a sophisticated, mannered, wealthy individual, and claims instead that physical prowess is that which is truly desirable. He is the fleshy, powerful, living doppelganger to Mr. Darcy’s elegant, feminized, and insubstantial fictional existence. By knocking down the fantasy Mr. Darcy and placing himself in that position, the wearer cannot be more transparent that his intention is that of seduction.

Maybe if I hadn’t seen “Mr. Darcy’s Stunt Double” and “You have found Mr. Darcy,” I would have had a different reaction to the “Mr. Darcy” category of t-shirts. There probably are wearers who genuinely do identify with Mr. Darcy and wish to highlight that fact without also creating a creepy pick-up artist vibe. Nevertheless there is a difference between a “Mr. Darcy” and a “Mrs. Darcy” t-shirt. This difference is centered in the way that titles are used. Although the “Mr.” in *Pride and Prejudice* operates as a way to let us know that Darcy is not of the aristocracy but of the landed gentry, today the “Mr.” is a much more general honorific. It is a way to pay respects, but it is not as suggestive of individual identity traits as other titles. “Mr. Darcy” is the most common way that Austen and her characters refer to him.

Conversely, “Mrs. Darcy” is only used by Austen once to refer to Elizabeth. This occurs in the final chapter to signal that Darcy and Elizabeth had been married, and after that initial use, Austen immediately goes back to using Elizabeth’s first name. On the

other hand, the American version of Douglas McGrath's *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) makes quite a big deal about Elizabeth's married name in the conclusion. Elizabeth tells Darcy "you may only call me 'Mrs. Darcy' when you are completely, and perfectly, and incandescently happy." Here, the "Mrs." is a signal for being happily wed. "Mrs." explicitly specifies the marital status of the woman who is referred to, which is the most important aspect of the "Mrs. Darcy" t-shirt as we saw above. "Mrs. Darcy" suggests that the wearer has "won" her man, and that a fantasy marriage to him is an important part of her identity.

But Mr. Darcy is "Mr. Darcy" whether or not he is married. Alternately, Elizabeth is "Elizabeth" whether or not she is married. But there are no shirts that simply say "Elizabeth," partially because Elizabeth could refer to any Elizabeth whereas there is only one Mr. Darcy that really matters; he is *the* Mr. Darcy. The "Mr. Darcy" shirt claims Darcy's specific identity in a direct and literal way that is not matched in the Elizabeth-centered t-shirts. He's not "a Darcy" he is "Mr. Darcy." It lacks the humor and the ironic twist that make us aware of the distinct personality of the wearer in the other t-shirts. The wearer's contemporary personality revealed through humor and irony may be what keeps shirts like "Hello My Name is: Mr. Darcy" from heading into creepy territory. That lack of personality on the "Mr. Darcy" t-shirt is part of what makes me suspicious that identification isn't the primary motivation to wear such a t-shirt.

That said part of the distrust that I have concerning these "Mr. Darcy" t-shirts arises from our sexist and homophobic culture that is suspicious of men who take too much interest in anything associated with "feminine" pleasures. The extent to which Austen has been claimed by the ladies is a taken for granted part of Austen scholarship as



well as the popular media. One of my favorite examples of this feminization of Austen is that *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Persuasion* (1995) were both for sale at *Costco* as part of a collection of films with a special pink cover and the text “Ladies’ Choice Collection” in 2010. The misspelling of Austen’s name – which suggests the creator of this cover was not an Austen fan and that the cover was hastily put together – only confirms that Austen’s association with women is a wide-reaching cultural assumption; this cover was not put-together after a lot of thought and effort. And I cannot recall a single published argument *against* the idea that Austen is culturally associated with women.

On the other hand, when I say that Austen is culturally associated with women I am not also saying that Austen’s fandom is comprised exclusively of women. In fact, some men have made great efforts to masculinize Austen. In his book, *Miniatures and Morals*, Peter Leithart spends a chapter arguing that “Real Men Read Austen.” Ron Rosenbaum wrote an article sub-titled “It Takes a Real Man to Love Jane Austen.” William Deresiewicz’s *A Jane Austen Education*, spends a lot of time proving his masculinity and explaining how “Jane Austen schools him out of his bad [masculine] behavior” (Rosenbaum “Is Jane Austen Overhyped?”). The problematic language of “real men” aside (who are the supposed non-real-men?), here we see male critics who admire Austen and are struggling to redefine her in such a way that will shield them from accusations of effeminacy or homosexuality. Even male authors like E. M. Forster and Henry James, who are often classed with Austen, tried to distance themselves from her and by doing so ended up appearing as though they “protested too much”; as Clara Tuite

argues “[w]e might read both Forster’s and James’s depreciation of Austen in terms of the relationship between the homosexual son and his mother” (128).

This culture limits men’s proud ownership of such feminine pleasures unless they first illustrate plenty of masculine qualifications. The problem with that is it is possible to go too far; they may protect themselves from “the horror” of being labeled gay, and by doing so end up in creepy sleazy pick-up artist territory. If I am suspicious of men who wear these shirts it arises at least in part from the sexist cultural assumptions that under-privileges femininity, and Austen by extension, and therefore creates a difficult double-bind for her male fans. And if this seems sexist, that is because it is sexist; we live in a culture that still assumes a great deal of gender essentialism.

For all these reasons, I expect that many men might be reluctant to wear a shirt like the “Mr. Darcy” t-shirt because it creates such a mess of problems and questions. But obviously there are lots of Mr. Darcy’s character traits that men would identify with or want to emulate. He is fundamentally kind-hearted, an attentive friend, a competent master of his property, and a compassionate manager of his servants; he learns from his mistakes and is rewarded with a marriage to “the most admirable and attractive girls in the world of fiction” (Howells 48). Indeed, one of the t-shirts, “Property of Mrs. Darcy,” suggests that one of the benefits of being Mr. Darcy is being married to Elizabeth. This t-shirt strikes me as much more similar in tone to the Elizabeth-centered t-shirts I discussed above, and it is interesting that, again, it is centered on the fantasy romance that is the narrative core of *Pride and Prejudice*.

A final category of t-shirts confirms the centrality of the romance narrative again. Additionally, these three t-shirts illustrate the extent to which character identification is

related to *role-playing*: “I Married My Mr. Darcy,” “I have fine eyes, do you have an estate in Derbyshire?” and “I’ll be your Elizabeth if you’ll be my Mr. Darcy.” These t-shirts present a negotiation of reality and fantasy through role-playing that resembles the “You have found Mr. Darcy” shirt. Instead of denying the reality of modern Mr. Darcys, these t-shirts allow the wearers to imagine that he does exist in the form of a present or future husband. These t-shirts supply complex readings, but what I find most interesting is that they directly acknowledge the extent to which all of these *Pride and Prejudice* t-shirts engage in a lighthearted game of role-playing. For, in the end, the “Mrs. Darcy” shirt in its essence is simply about playing Elizabeth’s role; that doesn’t negate the complex tensions concerning ownership that the t-shirt conjures up that we examined above, but at the same time, we would be remiss if we completely disregarded what probably is the innocent motivation on the part of the wearer to inhabit the life of an admirable character.

Indeed, one response to what I’ve written thus far might be: “Aren’t you taking all this too seriously?” I would agree that, yes, the above discussion is missing an integral piece of interpretive knowledge. That is a sense of irony. Clearly the fan doesn’t want to literally erase Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice* when she wears the “Mrs. Darcy” t-shirt; probably a large impetus of her choice to buy that t-shirt rests in her appreciation of Elizabeth. But she must also be aware on some level that both she and Elizabeth can’t be Mrs. Darcy at the same time. This can be explained as a kind of role-playing, as I stated above. But for most of the wearers, I imagine that they would deny any special meaningfulness if I pressed the issue too hard. I can hear them saying something along the lines of “It is just for fun! You are taking this too seriously!”

This “just for fun!” sticking point is where irony is helpful, particularly post-modern irony, which, as we have seen in the prior chapter, is about negation, over-awareness of the various interpretive strands available, slippery definitions, a denial of meaningfulness, and the subsequent paradoxical effect of infinite meaningfulness. The denial of meaningfulness in particular is often expressed through the words “just for fun!” which is in essence a distanced position that refuses commitment. Postmodern irony allows t-shirt wearers to make statements about themselves and their desires, while at the same time creating the space to deny these statements. The “Mrs. Darcy” t-shirt allows a wearer to illustrate her desire to be married to fantasy man, Mr. Darcy, while simultaneously acknowledging it as an impossibility, and therefore “just” a trifle that shouldn’t be taken too seriously. This is fantasy after all, and to delve too deeply might reveal ugly realities – of the dating scene, of the institution of marriage, of the historical conditions for women in Austen’s time – that one would just as soon forget.

The interpretation of many of the t-shirts is aided by an acknowledgement of their fundamental irony. I suspect that the person wearing the “No top hat? Not interested!” t-shirt would be as likely to date a nice fellow in a t-shirt that says “Property of Mrs. Darcy” as a guy walking around in a literal top hat, because the t-shirt is expressing what she values *ideologically* rather than what she values materially. That is not to say that she would turn down a guy in a top hat; she still values fanciness and old-world charm, or else she wouldn’t have bought the t-shirt. But she is also making fun of those desires at the same time; the irony of a woman expressing her desire for a man in a fancy top hat through words that appear on a *t-shirt* illustrates that there is an awareness, almost an interrogation, of that which is desired by the wearer. A modern girl is aware that top hats

are relics. In a sense, the impossibility of attaining the fairy-tale fantasy is also part of what is being interrogated, in which the humor of t-shirts like “Mrs. Darcy” and “I want the fairy-tale” is centered in the fact of their hopeless impossibility.

The fantasy depicted on these t-shirts is further disrupted and dismantled by the way in which irony shakes up the assumed heteronormative gender politics espoused by these t-shirts. There is no one stopping a man from wearing a “Mrs. Darcy” shirt and a woman from wearing a “Mr. Darcy” shirt. I would love to meet that couple. I would also love to meet the lesbian woman who ironically wears *either* the “Mr. Darcy” or “Mrs. Darcy” shirt, and I could see many gay men having fun with the gender assumptions presented on these t-shirts too. The assumption of role-playing suggested by these t-shirts creates all sorts of interesting ways of performing gender when irony and queer politics join forces.

Finally the “Mr. Darcy” t-shirts make more sense when seen through an ironic lens too. When I searched “Mr. Darcy t-shirt” on *Google* and limited the search to images, one of the pictures that came up is of a man modeling a shirt that states “I am Mr. Darcy.” He is standing in a natural location, in front of what looks like flower-laden willow branches, and is holding out a bouquet of wild flowers as if offering it to the camera. His expression is serious, almost a frown, like that of his grave and brooding namesake. I can nevertheless detect a bit of a smirk or hidden smile, as if he were laboring to play the role appropriately. He seems utterly aware of the dangerous position he has created for himself by allowing himself to be photographed wearing a t-shirt that claims kinship with such a distinguished character. However, his subdued faux-hawk and scruffy goatee with evidence of a five o’clock shadow makes him look a bit like he just

rolled out of bed. His hair, beard, and the very fact that he is wearing a t-shirt (rather than a top hat) are evidence that he actually is in no way Mr. Darcy.



*Figure 3: “I Am Mr. Darcy” used with permission by Brookish*

When I followed this image to its source, I found that it was connected with an *Etsy* seller named Brookish. The description of the t-shirt appears as such: “Label your own Mr. Darcy with this fun t-shirt.” Here, the t-shirt seller is assuming a lot and again many of the assumptions derive from heteronormative gender essentialist values. All the same, it seems to catch on to a subtext that nevertheless exists within the “Mr. Darcy” t-shirts. It suggests that the buyer is a woman hoping to get her boyfriend or husband to wear it. This of course means that there could be men out there wearing this shirt without really knowing what it is that he is saying about himself by wearing it. This is an interesting reversal of the knowingly forceful voice we hear on the “You have found Mr. Darcy” t-shirt, and the attempt at seduction now begins to appear as its opposite: a man humoring a woman with whom he has been in a relationship for a while. Here, the woman extends her fantasy for Mr. Darcy by making it real and labeling her real-life boyfriend with the Mr. Darcy nametag.

Not all men who wear this shirt will wear it because their girlfriends forced them to. But some will. And it will always be hard to tell because the t-shirt mode – for all t-shirts – is, at its core founded upon postmodern irony, in which the statement is both true and untrue at once and in which the statement means nothing without a complex system of meanings that is ultimately unavailable to anyone but the person wearing the t-shirt. Although the t-shirts enable a kind of role-playing, in which anyone can pretend to be Elizabeth or Mr. Darcy just by labeling themselves as such, that role-playing is always undercut by the fact that they never seem to fully commit to the meaning, simply because the statement is written on a *t-shirt*, which by its general yet infinitely customizable nature is ironic. Again, here the speaking body is privileged over the characters that the wearer claims identification with; the wearer role-plays Elizabeth or Darcy, but the ironic modern self is fully intact, and is only claiming those words, traits, or associations as one of many parts of the self.

This ironic mode seems to stand in contradiction to the nostalgic mode that I discussed above. But as David Lowenthal argues, nostalgia is a mode that is often as distrusted as irony in the ways that it is commercialized and removed from the reality it claims to represent (21-22). Although nostalgia is a common emotion, most people know enough about history to realize that nostalgia can be naïve and even embarrassing if taken too far. The same aware and knowing quality accompanies the romantic fantasy t-shirts, in which the wearer acknowledges the silliness and impossibility of that fantasy. Therefore, like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, with their old-fashioned romance informed by modernized values, these t-shirts allow the wearer to *both* freely admit their “shameful”

nostalgic and romantic fantasies and simultaneously make fun of those fantasies in a thoroughly modernized and knowingly ironic way.



## Chapter V

Pinning Down the Phantasm: Jane Austen and the Ironic Imagination on *Pinterest*

In the three weeks between finishing my written exams and taking my oral exam, I tried all sorts of things to fill that time previously spent feverishly and endlessly reading. I discovered the social networking website called *Pinterest*, and became so involved in collecting “pins” with images taken from useful websites on topics ranging from cooking and health to historical photography and literary-analysis-lite that I worried that I replaced compulsive reading with an internet addiction. As I was ending my career as a student with uncertain career options ahead of me I was very vulnerable to the alluring form of fantasy on *Pinterest* that masquerades as self-improvement. I found myself abusing the escapist function of the website.

But the more I felt pulled into the fantasies of the self that I created online, the more I sympathized with *Pinterest*’s other users and felt a kinship with these people that I have rarely experienced. This kinship arose from sharing so many interests with the users, and above all an interest in Jane Austen. Perhaps in an attempt to defend my obsession, I started to ask: is this my chance to finally be a participant-observer in the way that my academic hero Henry Jenkins is? As I shifted my use of *Pinterest* from a user to a researcher and became more self-aware about my use of the website, I realized that on *Pinterest* fantasy and reality are not mutually exclusive. Similarly, Austen, the realist novelist, is treated on *Pinterest* in much the same way as big name fantasy novels like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are, and is even categorized alongside these other works. Austen – a word which here encompasses her novels, Regency England, modern responses to her works in film and novelistic spin-offs, as well as Austen as a

living human being, Austen as a great novelist, and all the various fictions inspired by her life – *is* fantasy. *Pinterest* activates and facilitates the various imaginative fantasies inspired by Austen, and simultaneously fulfills the urge to pin fantasies down into something quantifiable by turning the fantasies into collections of images.

My initial observation as a pinner was that *Pinterest* might be a good vehicle to address some of the issues that I had trouble discussing when looking at the films and the t-shirts, simply because *Pinterest* revolves around individuals rather than corporations and film companies. *Pinterest* is populated mostly by individuals, with only a few companies or public institutions using it in an official capacity. That is not to say that many savvy pinners haven't used it to market themselves; indeed, some of the most prolific pinners are individuals who are trying to gain visibility for their name or brand as designers or educators or authors. Nevertheless, most people present themselves as individuals operating in a relatively private way. Similarly, instead of arbitrary or avataric screen names, like the screen name I use for *YouTube* and my calorie counting website, "curryandsage," pinners usually use their own names or "real" sounding fake names. For instance, I follow people like Rita Wood, Katie D'Aquilante, Callie Schroeder, and Vasilena Ivanova, along with about a hundred people I know in real life. This may be a subtle difference, but it indicates that pinners are using the service in a way that doesn't deny their actual (if complex and contradictory) selves; this isn't a virtual space in the same way that a video game is. Additionally, because these are actual individuals, it is easier to detect different personalities of pinners based upon their pinning choices, and therefore to speculate about their motivations. As I pointed out in the *Cafepress.com* chapter, it is difficult to know with any certainty what the purchaser or viewer of

corporate-produced materials is thinking. *Pinterest* provides an opportunity to look closely at individuals and make more informed observations about their stances towards the materials.

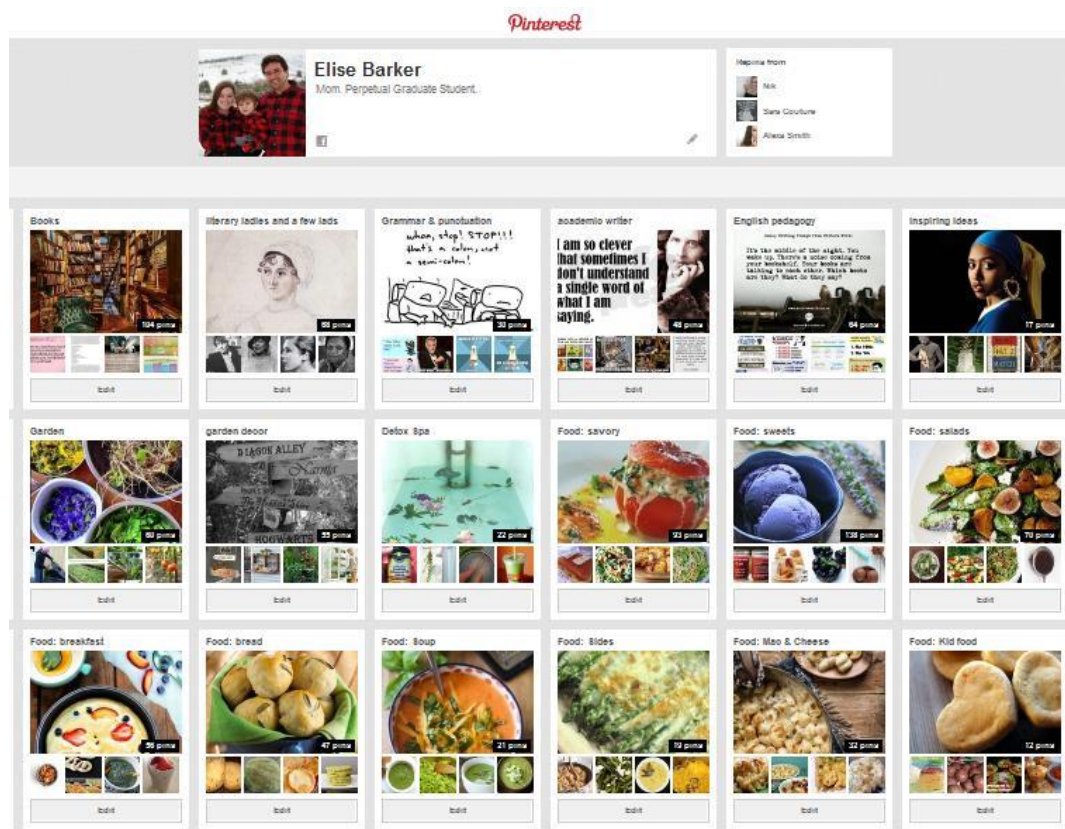


Figure 4: Elise Barker's Pinterest Boards, printed with permission from Pinterest.com

Similarly, *Pinterest* operates both privately and publically. On my home page, I can see all the recent pins of people I follow and make the choice of whether or not I would like to re-pin those pins too. So when I see that someone I follow pinned a funny “Socially Awkward Darcy” meme and it makes me laugh, or I think it might be useful to my research, I pin it into my “Austen” board. I also have boards for entertainment related pins, self-improvement, academic issues, various styles of clothes, types of foods, and a number of what *Pinterest* users call “mood” boards, which can be organized around a simple theme like “the ocean,” or can be more complex and specific like my board

“pastos oldentimers” board, in which I’ve collected high-fashion photography that presents historically inaccurate but gorgeous fantasies of the past. My attitude to each board is laden with both public and private meanings.

These various boards are available to the public, but they are more for my personal use than for public perusal, which makes *Pinterest* distinct from other social networking sites like *Twitter* and *Facebook*. The most visible and public moment for my pin is right after I pin it, when it appears on my followers’ homepages. As the day goes on, the further from view the original pin becomes. After that, users must actively search through my boards or use the search function on the website to see what I’ve been up to.

For this reason, pinners walk a very interesting line between a self-conscious creation of a public persona available for anyone to see, and an activity ultimately about individualistic exploration and self-improvement. As a researcher, I like that these boards are public because I can use and explore them without feeling invasive, but I also like that personal dimension to them, in which I can view the users having conversations with themselves about various topics. For instance, I began my pastos oldentimers board when I saw a hyperbolic and gorgeous image of a woman with an enormous ruffle and I felt a compulsive need to carve a space for it in my boards; I didn’t fully recognize that it was subconsciously related to my research on postmodern nostalgia until I had seven or eight other pins in the board. These private conversations aren’t necessarily as deep as something explored in a journal, but in some ways they are less self-conscious, more about unlocking the subconscious and exploring personality or character. For instance, Callie Schroeder’s “Hipster Austen” board captures her distinct personality. Even though

I've never met her, I can imagine her winking, smirking, and laughing to herself as she pins yet another socially awkward Darcy meme using her iPhone or tablet.

However, in terms of establishing a methodology for research, *Pinterest* is a nightmare. I looked into various ways of creating a data-set. There are three ways to limit a search on *Pinterest*. One option is to search through all the pins for a chosen text. Another is to search through boards (user-created individualized categories of pins). The third option is to search for *Pinterest* users. When I searched "Jane Austen" in pins, the results were vast. *Pinterest* does not provide any counts and I spent four or five minutes simply trying to scroll to the end of the results. I never reached the end. A *Google* search for "Pinterest: Jane Austen" yielded 2,360,000 results as of July 24, 2013.<sup>15</sup> According to some of the (very vague and not helpful at all) research I did, the results are ranked through a combination of most recently pinned items and popular items. The ranking has a lot to do with the specific quirks of the day. One day I searched for Jane Austen and a large number of the results were "Jane Austen Tarot Cards." These pins seemingly appeal to such a specific demographic that, while interesting, were not something I wanted to dwell on in my research. And predictably, these cards quickly stopped appearing at the top of the search results as days passed. Searching through Jane Austen *boards* on *Pinterest* was a little more helpful because the results are grouped by what individual pinners have decided to single out. But even the number of Jane Austen boards is vast

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<sup>15</sup> For a random point of comparison, on the same day "Pinterest: Shakespeare" yielded 10,800,000 results, "Pinterest: Bronte" (no first name to catch all three writers) yielded 626,000 results, "Pinterest: Charles Dickens" yielded 629,000 results, and "Pinterest: Herman Melville" yielded 88,100 results. In terms of high profile popular contemporary literature "Pinterest: Lord of the Rings" yielded 7,830,000 results (Tolkien only 875,000 results), "Pinterest: Harry Potter" yielded 27,500,000, "Pinterest: Hunger Games" yielded 28,200,000 results, and "Pinterest: Twilight" yielded 23,000,000 results. While Austen can't compete with big box-office film adaptations, she still has a strong presence on *Pinterest* in comparison with other famous authors.

and again the results provided through the search function are based on daily quirks.

Similarly, a *Google* search for “Pinterest: Boards: Jane Austen” yielded 232,000 results, a terrifying number to a qualitative researcher. Figuring out how to get a representative and diverse sample has proven to be a real challenge.

These methodological issues have been frustrating, but I decided that I nevertheless have a lot to say about the various habits I’ve observed about the individual pinners I’ve come into contact with and for that reason it is worth forging ahead.

Although I have not gone about this as systematically as I did with my *Cafepress.com* analyses, I trust that my findings are as valid as the earlier paper simply because I have been immersed so deeply in the *Pinterest* community from January through July of 2013; during that time I have amassed 6,220 pins, 101 boards, and follow almost 600 people, many of whom I follow specifically for Austen related material. Comparatively, according to Giselle Abramovich, the average user has 2,757 pins, 35 boards, and is following 355 other pinners. I think it safe to say that I qualify as a participant observer. In the subsequent analysis I will focus on the specific pinners and boards that I have been following; it is difficult to say why I ended up following these pinners rather than others, but I intentionally sought diversity when I chose who to follow and trust that they fairly represent the distinct types of pinning personalities on *Pinterest*.

To begin with, I want to point out the ways that the average “pin-and-forget-it” pinner of Jane Austen differs from the more fanatical pinners that I have chosen to work with. A large number of the Austen-related pins simply provide a picture of a cover of the Penguin edition of one of her works and a summary of a novel or perhaps her portrait with a brief biography, and these pins are categorized on boards that amass pictures of

numerous canonical works or authors, such as “Books I Love” or “Literary Giants,” both of which are commonly used titles of boards of this variety. These kinds of boards operate as a form of collecting. Some collectors strive to own beautiful or rare editions of special books; some collectors try to own every edition of a particular book; some collectors retain every physical book they’ve ever read, and many they haven’t, in boxes in the garage; and some people, perhaps people who use a library card to gain access to books, keep lists of the books they’ve read on paper, or nowadays, on a website like *Pinterest* or *Goodreads*.

Unlike a website like *Goodreads*, however, *Pinterest* users do not pin books indiscriminately. Like all collections, there is a curatorial function to the pinning experience in which certain books are chosen over others. Boards like “Literary Giants” feature famous authors that impart a high-brow persona to the pinner. The less impressive authors that the pinner has read are not mentioned at all. A board like “Books I Love” operates as a list of accomplishments and in this way performs a quantifying function, in which personal growth, experience, and ability are measured through a laundry list of books. In the case of a board like “Literary Giants” or other similar boards in which the user has created a place to collect pictures and short biographies of all of his or her favorite canonical authors, the function is similarly a way to measure personal accomplishment through identification of and with famous authors. This form of elevating the self is similar to the types of elitist identification I’ve discussed before in my chapter on ironic postmodern t-shirts.

However, as someone who has experienced the feeling of pinning to a general literary board, I know that there can be more to it than simple self-aggrandizement. These

boards can fulfill very specific functions for pinners, who have made deliberate and perhaps incredibly personal choices in the creation of these boards. For instance, my board, “literary ladies and a few lads,” focuses on women writers. I ended up making women my focus because even though *Pinterest* is a website with a heavy focus on feminine interests and heavy percentage of women users (according to Craig Smith, 80% of pinners are women) I noticed that many general literary boards still skew heavily male, perhaps because there are more canonical writers who are male. I thought that maybe in such a woman-centered online space, women authors would particularly flourish, but that wasn’t the case, so my knee-jerk contrarian and not necessarily very deep reaction was to skew the opposite direction.

The most popular Austen pins are images from the various film adaptations of Austen’s novels. For instance, the most recent pins on Rita Wood’s “Favorite Period Dramas” board are movie stills and behind the scenes photography from the BBC adaptation of *North and South* and the 2005 Keira Knightly adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Wood’s board name specifically acknowledges that her board is about the films, but much more often users will create “Jane Austen” boards in which images from the films stand as representative of Austen in a less self-conscious way. For instance, when I searched Jane Austen and limited the search to pins, out of the first 31 pins, 12 contained images from one of the films, 6 featured quotes, 7 were Jane-Austen inspired products, like t-shirts, bookmarks, and china with her silhouette printed on them, 4 were illustrations of characters or comics, and 2 were pictures of books. It is understandable that the incredibly image-based nature of these films would eclipse the notoriously



image-free words of their progenitor on a social network that is essentially a medium for image-sharing.

Period films and *Pinterest* share more than a common imagistic core. One function of collecting on *Pinterest* is escapism, and that same escapist urge is also one of the most pervasive explanations for the popularity of period dramas and heritage films. Writers like Andrew Higson have argued extensively that the English heritage film boom in the 1990s was precipitated by a nostalgic conservative desire to escape from complicated issues of modern life into a “simpler” time when issues of class, gender, and race were less available for negotiation. At first look, this politicized reading of escape does not adequately account for the flights of fancy we see in boards like Sarah Lowe’s “Romance” board, within which she has pinned images from English heritage films, images of antique looking exteriors and interiors, photos of women in elegant hats, pictures of lacy white vintage lingerie, quotes and poems on the subject of love, still lives of romanticized historical objects like parasols, as well as paparazzi shots of celebrity couples. Here we see history, literature, and popular culture each used as a small part of creating a mood of romance and femininity. In this image-based mood board Lowe subtly and maybe even subconsciously uses fictions of the past to comment on the present, to suggest that old femininity, and by extension, old gender politics, are a preferable and key means of achieving romance.

Thus mood boards like Sarah Lowe’s “Romance” adapt the past to fulfill modern fantasies that emerge from highly stylized imagery. The past is imagined on *Pinterest* through high fashion photography, carefully curated vintage daguerreotypes and illustrations, reproductions of portraits of famous historical figures, and lushly staged

photographs of historical objects. The use of images to stand for the past creates a paradox in which the image appears substantive and real, even as it is based in fictions of the past. In this sense, the image-based past of *Pinterest* generates nostalgia similar to that produced by heritage films like the Austen film adaptations. Of these films, Higson argues that,

the past is reproduced as flat, depthless, pastiche, where the reference point is not the past itself, but other images, other texts. The evocation of the past-ness is accomplished by a look, a style, the loving recreation of period details. The image of the past becomes so naturalized that it stands removed from history. The past as referent is effaced, and all that remains is a self-referential intertextuality.

(*English Heritage* 64)

This kind of imagined past, in which images of the past reference other fictionalized images, is even more apparent on *Pinterest*, where still images are the central means of communicating. My personal reaction to this ahistorical fetishization of the past is ambivalent. On the one hand, I am shocked by how it dehumanizes the people of the past through oversimplification. I feel the need to leave a personal comment on every ahistorical pin correcting their generalizations. On the other hand, I recognize that pinners are often up to something personally fulfilling that I might not fully understand. I wonder what an uninformed viewer would think of my “pastos oldentimers” board, for instance.

When I came upon Sara Walthour’s board “The Period I Should Have Been Born Into,” my first reaction was to explain it as escapist fantasy in the same vein as Sarah Lowe’s “Romance.” In many ways, Walthour’s board looks like Lowe’s mood board; it contains images from Austen adaptations, illustrations of Regency dresses, and famous

paintings from the 19th century. But it also contains a surprising number of humorous “meme-style” pins.

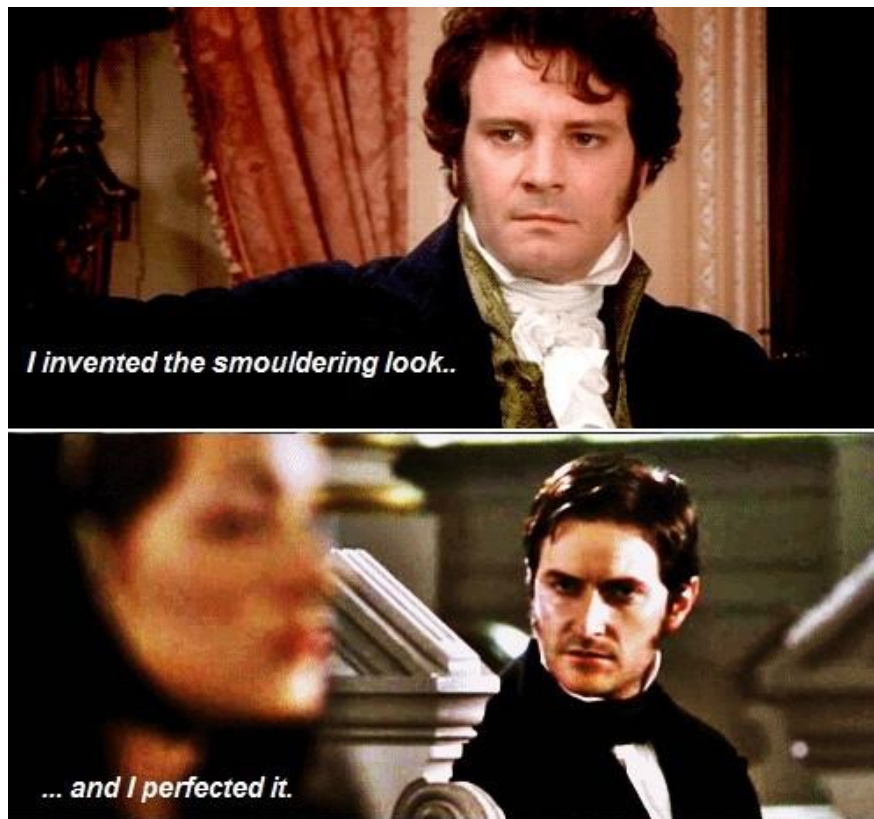


Figure 5: “Darcy / Thornton Mash-up: The Smouldering Look edition!” by The Vassie Tumblr

For instance, one of her pins is the popular Darcy/Thornton comparison, which originally appeared on *The Vassie Tumblr*, in which Colin Firth “invented the smolder” and Richard Armitage “perfected it.” This meme perfectly encapsulates the way in which contemporary fans recognize that the history (and literature) presented in film adaptations is a *production* that involves acting, staging, and performance. Indeed, like the nostalgic character identification t-shirts I discussed in the second t-shirt chapter, the meme form, which usually gets its biting humor from an awareness of constructions, is a perfect venue for expressing the tension between the desire for an authentic connection with history and the simultaneous awareness of the absurdity of such a hope. It is interesting

that “The Period I Should Have Been Born Into” is casually assumed to be based upon artifice. My impression is that most pinners are completely aware that they are falsifying the past and don’t have any problem with doing so because it fulfills the need for escapist fantasy.

And indeed many pinners like Walthour pin ahistorical pins precisely because they are ahistorical, and are therefore part of an interesting *current* conversation. One of Higson’s early mistakes on the subject of heritage dramas was that he did not fully account for ways in which these films use the past to *critically* engage with both the past and present; in a later work he admits “a more generous reading of these films might suggest that, in the displaced form of the costume drama, the heritage film creates an important space for playing out contemporary anxieties and fantasies of national identity, sexuality, class, and power” (“Re-presenting” 118). Similarly, many of the quasi-historical types of pins are depicted through a specifically modernized gaze, from a particularly modern stance, and with the type of linguistic and cultural references that possess cultural cache beyond the Austen-olden-timey world.

One of the more delightful Austen boards that I follow is Callie Schroeder’s “Hipster Austen” board. I like Schroeder’s board because she seems to have no illusions about the ways and means in which modern Austen fans engage with Austen through a specifically modern lens. Her pins, often taken from *The Other Austen*, heighten the awareness of the modern voice intruding upon Austen’s world, and criticize both that modern intrusion, as well as Austen’s own work. The “Hipster Marianne,” “I feel more deeply than you ever will,” meme is a good example. This pin references and recreates a popular meme that reinterprets famous moments in literature and film through the super-

cool and ironic voice of a modern hipster. It presents a critique of holier-than-thou hipster thinking and simultaneously makes us aware that such self-congratulatory teenage behavior has been around for a long time, albeit in less bespectacled and perhaps more subtle forms.



Figure 6: "Hipster Marianne" used with permission by The Other Austen

The critique of youth culture presented through this pin and others is certainly interesting, but more interesting to me is what referential pins represent as a whole. Like the fill in the blank "Eat, Sleep, Austen" t-shirts that I discussed in my t-shirts and postmodern irony chapter, the hipster pins refer to practices that extend way beyond Austen fandom. These "hipster Austen" pins knit Austen into the social fabric in a way that corresponds with current ways of speaking. This use of shared language like "hipster" and the inside jokes emerging from the knowledge of special language (that everybody who's anybody knows about) show that, although pinning is a private practice, it still brings pinners into a communal fold. Austen herself functions as a progenitor of

shared meanings that brings isolated individuals into a community: we have our code words and short cuts already in place to talk about Austen, as we saw in ironic postmodern t-shirts; we have a store of readily available images to represent her work because of the films. Existing code words and images combined with new cultural practices like the hipster meme, and create a self-fulfilling cycle of popularity which guarantees Austen's continuing relevance.

I mentioned that *Pinterest* is a much more private and individualistic experience than other social networking websites, but *Pinterest* also functions as a communal experience. Part of this seeming paradox has to do with a difference in purpose between something like *Facebook*, which is about connecting with friends and family, and *Pinterest*, which is about connecting to larger more generalized cultural interests and communities through images. So boards like Lowe's "Romance" and my "pastos oldentimers" feel like private escapes, but they are fundamentally built upon shared cultural assumptions. Lowe's board uses social constructs about history, gender performance, and love, to create the mood of romance. Even though my "pastos oldentimers" board seems primarily about a personal exploration of an artistic practice that simultaneously attracts and repels me, it also engages with known ideas about history, fashion, art, and nostalgia. In my self-conscious attempt to confront these issues, I am not acting in isolation, but am directly interacting with the culture. This isn't a chatty, conversational, person-to-person communication, but a communal experience in the sense that it is an engagement (or struggle) with cultural norms.

"Hipster Austen" memes present a similar tension between the public and the private experience of *Pinterest*. Although they are widely shared and operate through

shared cultural meanings, and are thus about building and maintaining community ideology, they are often consumed in a solitary way, with the mind disconnected from the immediate world and instead plugged into a virtual one through personal computers, internet capable phones, and tablets. One critique of modern technology is that devices meant to connect us make us feel less connected; the joke of the family all sitting on the same couch each immersed in the private world of their phones is almost clichéd now. But, on the contrary, these acts are about personal encounters with the culture; if they aren't about communication, perhaps they are more about communion.

Indeed, when we say that looking at *Pinterest* (or sharing memes or playing video games or watching *YouTube*) is merely escapist, part of what we mean is that the person is actually being *enveloped by culture*. Yi-Fu Tuan argues that

What one escapes to is culture – not culture that has become daily life, not culture as a dense and inchoate environment and way of coping, but culture that exhibits lucidity, a quality that often comes out of a process of simplification. Lucidity, I maintain, is always desirable. About simplification, however, one can feel ambivalent. If, for example, a people's experience of a place or event is one of simplification, they may soon feel bored and dismiss it – in retrospect, if not at that time – as a thinly constructed fantasy of no lasting significance. Escape into it from time to time, though understandable, is suspect. If, however, their experience has more the feel of clarity than of simplification, they may well regard it as an encounter with the real. Escape into a good book is escape into the real, as the late French president Francois Mitterrand insisted. Participation in a ritual is a participation in something serious and real; it is escape from the banality and

opaqueness of life into an event that clarifies life and yet preserves a sense of mystery. (23)

We can argue about whether or not sharing memes on *Pinterest* is a worthwhile way of connecting with the culture or a mere simplification as Tuan calls it, but to say that it is purely solipsistic is to deny the reality of how these memes work as cultural encounters. This dynamic tension between the public and private is summed up by Douglas Rushkoff's early work on the projected effects on the internet, in which he speculated that "I do believe we are in the midst of a transition – intimated by the Internet – towards a more collective thinking, where the individual becomes a component of a larger group mind" (Evans 232).

And the effect of the collective consciousness is the appearance of prolific diversity. When I started using *Pinterest*, I was shocked to see how frequently Austen boards and pins occurred in the company of materials that pinners described as "geeky" or "nerdy," like *Doctor Who*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars* memes. In boards such as Sarah Blodgett's "Geek-tastic," Stephanie Krings "Nerdy Chick Happy Place," and Erin Boswell's "Imanerd," we see Austen not only appreciated by the same pinner who loves *Doctor Who*, but actually pinned within the geek board alongside the more traditional geek materials. And there are frequent intertextual mash-ups between Austen and *Doctor Who*, like this meme which suggests that Elizabeth has encountered a Weeping Angel instead of a sculpture.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> One of the Doctor's nemeses is the Weeping Angels, aliens that look like statues. These creatures cannot move while a person is looking at them, and they cannot look at each other or they will be forever frozen, which is why they are typically presented with hands covering their eyes. A common refrain in Weeping Angels episodes is "Don't Blink" so that the creatures are kept frozen.





Figure 7: "Don't Blink Elizabeth" by charlotteiq at Miss Not Quite Ginger

But even though *Pinterest* seems to encourage diversity, the true effect of collective consciousness is an increasing uniformity in choice. As I continued to encounter so many people who shared my love of Austen AND my love of *Doctor Who* AND my love of *The Lord of the Rings*, I started wondering if I hadn't just happened to self-select people who are like me and by doing so entered into a very niche corner of *Pinterest*. While I haven't ruled that possibility out, I noticed that there are other areas of interest to me that do not have a very strong presence on *Pinterest*. One of my favorite TV shows of all time is *Carnivale*, a cancelled HBO drama from the early 2000s. If people were creating and sharing pins related to that show, I would be one of the biggest participants. But they're not. Similarly, I love George Eliot, and while there are a few pins related to her fiction and film adaptations, she can't even begin to compete with Austen's numbers. Popularity begets popularity, the range of acceptable choices grows

narrower, and identity-generating materials become more insular. Austen's presence on *Pinterest* illustrates that, yes, people identify with her and that she speaks the language of our culture or has been adapted in order to continue to do so, but part of her continuing popularity rests precisely on a continuing visibility of her work that limits the consumption of alternative materials.

That being said, it is amazing what individuals can do simply by culling pins from a limited pool of options. This is where the curatorial function of collecting that I described above comes back into play. Although Katie D'Aquilante and I share a lot of interests, all you have to do is look at our vastly different collection of boards to realize we interact with the same materials in very different ways. Her boards are almost all related to geek culture and Jane Austen, while those are just a very small subset of categories that I pin. This, again, goes back to the tension between public and private experiences on *Pinterest*. I may intersect with D'Aquilante in the area of entertainment choices, but I have a very different group of people I follow to get delicious recipes and cute clothes ideas, and another group with whom I share feminist and womanist pins, and another I follow to get academic pins. In this way, *Pinterest* provides a useful and active metaphor to illustrate Burke's notion of consubstantiality, in which identity is always comprised of multiple competing and even contradictory group identifications. Yi-Fu Tuan argues humans tend to struggle with the competing desires to stand out as unique and to simultaneously fit into the crowd (83); consubstantial identity, which connects individuals with groups, but allows for increasing individual specificity by association with other identity groups, helps to fulfill both of these contradictory desires.

But explaining the connection between Austen and *Doctor Who* and *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* through the narrowing of possible areas of interest and subsequent consubstantiation is too easy. Or rather, it is incomplete. It doesn't adequately address why Austen and *Doctor Who* and *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* became such heavily pinned themes to begin with, or why they started being classified together in the same boards. A simple way to explain it is to point to the availability of image-based media; Austen's novels have each been adapted numerous times, *The Lord of the Rings* has recently been adapted to a high profile trilogy, the Harry Potter books and films have been an international sensation since the late 1990s, and *Doctor Who* is a British television show available through BBCA and *Netflix* instant streaming. All four thus provide easily accessible troves of images to draw from for pins.thh

There are other connections, and one notable similarity is the way in which Austen, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Doctor Who* each are often used to represent British culture, especially for Americans. One of Katie D'Aquilante's *Pinterest* boards is not so subtly titled "British=Better," and there are many other, presumably American pinners who have similar boards. Some of this popularity of and interest in British culture simply has to do with the BBC's accessibility through the BBCA channel and *Netflix* streaming, which provides British shows like *Doctor Who*, *Robin Hood*, *Supernatural*, and *Sherlock* to the average American viewer.

But I suspect that a more important part of the presence of boards celebrating British culture actually have to do with elevating the self from the rest of the American crowd through the less pervasive media produced by Britain. The idea of elevating the self through an identification with British nationality has been discussed by Higson, who

argues that the appeal of costume dramas of the 1990s was about clinging to a sense of traditional Britishness before that notion became complicated by struggles in class, race, and gender. In this interpretation, viewers feel elevated by extension through narratives that focus on the specific concerns of the English aristocracy. Given that theory, it is remarkable to me that in 2013, we see *Austen*, associated with older more insular values, pinned alongside *Doctor Who*, which has been a fairly inclusive show and contains vast and even intergalactic definitions of what it is to be British. Both views hold that there is something in the culture worth protecting and celebrating. That these very different perspectives on Britishness appear on the same boards suggests that what appeals to modern pinners is an all-encompassing view of British culture, one that equally craves the specificity of the past and an increasingly inclusive future.

Another facet of the interest in British culture is that a suggestion of Britishness can lend a quality of aesthetic appreciation to an activity that would otherwise be labeled ogling. A common variation on the “British=Better” board are those that suggest that, specifically, British *men* are better *looking*, like Samantha Moyers’ “British Men are just better” and Latanya Ivey’s “British Men are the death of me.” These boards predictably contain images of Colin Firth in his Mr. Darcy costume, Benedict Cumberbatch with his ginger hair dyed an attractive looking dark brown to play Sherlock, David Tennant playing with a kitten in his Doctor Who suit, and Richard Armitage in his all-black-leather Guy of Gisborne get-up for *Robin Hood*. Invariably, boards along these lines mention something about the sexy British accent, which, as *Arrested Development*

famously illustrated, can trick American viewers into thinking that the speaker is smarter and more polished than he or she really is.<sup>17</sup>

This, of course, leads to an inevitable observation – that these boards present *fantasies* of Britishness – fantasies in which the British past is stable and lovely to look at, in which the British present and future is just and inclusive, in which British men are hot and smart. In this view, *Pinterest* users are as much creating fantasies of Britishness as they are creating fantastic moods of “Romance.” Britishness itself is thus posited as fantasy in the American imagination in these *Pinterest* boards.

With that in mind, it is fascinating to me that Austen is in the company of so many fantasy and science fiction programs. Throughout my dissertation I’ve considered the fantasy that Austen represents to be based upon nostalgia and romance. What if Austen, with her specific lens into the British national past, operates as fantasy in the same way that *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* do? What if we take seriously the idea that to read Austen is to enter another world, with its own set of assumptions about what is possible? Claudia Johnson explains in *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures* that for modern readers Austen “is not quite other than ourselves, nor quite like ourselves either” (89) and therefore

that Janeism in its past as well as its current forms allows us to foreclose the gap between Austen’s time and our own, between the dead and the living, the fictional and the real, and to occupy Austen’s novels as they are – not were – lived, in an eternal present, where they commune with her familiarly. Janeites commune with

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Bluth falls in love with a mentally impaired British woman whose beauty and British accent blind him to her childlike intelligence.

their divine Jane and her characters in a sort of suprahistorical time warp where past and present gets blurred. (11)

A number of popular modern novels inspired by Austen have explored the idea of a mediated space between past and future, fiction and reality: for instance, in the film *Lost in Austen*, a modern Londonite finds herself within the novel of *Pride and Prejudice* and struggling to maintain the plot as she knows it; the novel *Austenland* presents a character who enters into a Jane Austen theme park, where she must act the part of a middle class Regency lady; the novel *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* presents a male character who receives a bump on the head and is transported to Steventon where he is nursed back to health by Austen herself.

These works present Regency England as a fantasy of the *imagination*, not as a specifically historical period of time. Familiarity with Austen gives modern heroes and heroines the knowledge of how to act in a world that truly operates with a different set of rules. Sometimes the “historically appropriate behavior” presented in these novels and films is anachronistic because these heroines behave like the haughty Emma or the free-spirited Elizabeth without understanding the subtle knowledge of class hierarchies involved in determining those characters’ behaviors. Like a science fiction novel, we come to understand the assumptions guiding this alternate imaginary world of Jane Austen’s creation by reading how the characters behave within it. All of the historical institutional realities present in Austen’s fiction – Britishness, or more specifically, *Englishness*, the Regency past, the all-but-gone class of the landed gentry, historically specific gender-appropriate behavior – are thus powerfully reinscribed as fantasy through the fictional form.

It is in this “suprahistorical time warp” that Janeites participate in events like the Netherfield Regency Ball in Bath, The Jane Austen Evening in Pasadena, California, and the English Country Dance in Rochester, New York, where fans dress up in historically-accurate Empire waist gowns and perform complicated line dances specific to the Regency era. The producers of these events may pride themselves on historical accuracy, but the opportunity to have a *Jane Austen experience*, to experience the fictional world of her heroines, seems to be the primary motivator – especially considering I discovered each one of these by simply searching for “Jane Austen Ball” in *Google*.

It is also in this context that various Jane Austen guidebooks are consumed. *Jane Austen’s Guide to Life*, *Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating*, and *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine’s Guide to Life and Love* provide Austen-inspired advice for life choices and adapt Regency values for contemporary behaviors. These books use scenes from Austen’s books and letters as a way to instruct the reader how to behave given various contemporary scenarios. In Lauren Henderson’s *Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating*, Austen’s novels are systematically mined for moral lessons; she uses Elizabeth’s experiences with Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* as a platform to advise her readers to not “fall for flashy, charming people” and to not “be too ready to think you’re anything special to a player” (109). This book treats Austen’s novels as how-to books and views Austen as a kind of Dear Abby, back from the dead and responding to our modern problems in a coded way through her fiction. I can understand why this is a very tempting gesture to make – there is so much to be learned from her books. Of course, dating advice is a very narrow way to learn from Austen’s complex novels.

Similarly, Josephine Ross' *Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners* walks an interesting line between past and present; it often feels more like a history book or a biography of Austen than an actually useful guide to modern life. For instance, in Ross' entry titled "Do not dress immodestly" she writes, "True 'elegance' is not achieved through transparent fabrics or naked limbs and bosoms, as the Authoress has frequently (and not always charitably) pointed out. A Miss Langley was described by her in 1801 as 'Like any other short girl with a ... fashionable dress & exposed bosom'" (75). Ross goes on to state that "It was an unfortunate coincidence that the Austens' acquaintance Mrs Powlett who had appeared at a party 'both expensively and nakedly dressed' should have a kinswoman who subsequently faced further exposure, in the Press, as an Adulteress" (77). Although modesty is a virtue worth protecting, Ross' quickness to associate fashion choices with moral worth seems unhelpful in an era when even conservative clothes choices can be a little revealing. When we look at this as a guide for acting appropriately in a Regency-specific, or better yet, an *Austen-specific* context, such entries make a lot more sense.

Similarly, many books, such as *Jane Austen's Sewing Box: Craft Projects and Stories from Jane Austen's Novels*, *In the Garden with Jane Austen*, and *Tea with Jane Austen*, help the reader to experience the material culture of Austen's world by providing Regency era instructions for crafts, recipes, and gardening. Even these historically accurate guidebooks provide the historical information in way that is filtered through Austen's texts, as every entry relates the content back to scenes and quotes from Austen's novels. In *Jane Austen's Sewing Box*, Jennifer Forest provides instructions for Regency



crafts which she annotates and explains using quotes; in her chapter on bonnets, for instance, she refers to moments in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* when Lydia and Lucy Steel improve old or unfashionable bonnets using new trimmings. The history presented in these guidebooks is always made relevant by its association with Austen.

Furthermore, on *Pinterest* historical-themed pins are only chosen insofar as they conjure an imaginary world that meets a number of individualized criteria. Austen becomes divorced from historical reality, and historical details are read as fictions, fantasies, or “moods,” as in Sarah Lowe’s “Romance” board. This fictionalizing of the past isn’t (always) done out of naivety or ignorance, but is instead marked by self-awareness. Michale Saler argues that modern readers are adept at using the *ironic imagination*, “a form of double consciousness” that enables “individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths” (25) and “to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance” (24). He also refers to this process as “a disenchanted enchantment” (23), a stance that allows for the inhabitation in a fantasy world while always maintaining an awareness that it *is* fantasy.

When pinners create Austen boards on *Pinterest*, then, they are self-consciously extending the time of their immersion into the fantastic world of her novels. They accomplish this, as Saler argues, through “the willing activation of pretense” (39). *Pinterest* helps to move the inhabitation of the fictional world from what is primarily a solitary and ephemeral experience of the imagination that happens while reading, into a slightly more tangible experience of image collection. With its image-based platform,

*Pinterest* provides a focus on the lush period details missing from Austen's famously image-less prose and provides beautiful faces to speak the effervescent but unembodied dialogue of her characters. The Austen film stills and memes provide a sense of embodiment to the ethereal fictions they represent. Through the increased tangibility provided by images, *Pinterest* helps readers sustain their inhabitation of the fantasy realm.

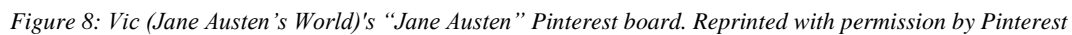
It can be argued that the Austen film adaptations also provide a sense of tangibility to the fantasy world of the novel. But filmmakers inevitably control the interpretations that they present, meaning that film is less conducive to imaginative world inhabitation than *Pinterest*'s more user-based model. I can get swept away by a filmmaker's vision for a couple of hours, but I inevitably feel like s/he didn't get certain details right, and I start imagining what I would do differently. Perhaps I like the 1995 casting of Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy, but prefer the 2005 Donald Sutherland as Mr. Bennet; on *Pinterest*, I can collect the "correct" images from the 1995 and 2005 adaptations in order to reflect a hybrid vision. Notably, while it is possible to use *Pinterest* to collect and share film clips, most users choose to collect film stills instead. Film can engage the imagination, but an image can evoke it, prod it, and motivate it; the image gives the imagination focus and direction for meditation on the novels.

But even images are poor substitutes for the world of the imagination. I think this is why there is such an extreme impulse on *Pinterest* to hoard images, with boards numbering in the hundreds and even thousands of pins. There is a sense that, through the collection of images, the imaginary world will become fully alive and tangible; the right combination of images of Regency historical objects, evocative film stills, nineteenth-

century illustrations from the novels, and contemporary memes, will collectively make the fantasy of the novels as experienced by the individual complete, and by doing so, will give the pinner control over the imaginative world otherwise so fleeting. This is similar to Saler's discussion of literary fans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, who began accumulating literary ephemera like maps, appendices, and dictionaries associated with writers such as Sir Walter Scott (62) and J. R. R. Tolkien (27) as a way to extend their residence in "imaginary worlds, [and heighten] their emotional investment in them by participating in collective exercises of world building" (36). Of course, images leave much to be desired, creating frustration and an unsatisfied urge to collect more and more.

More often than not, pinners build fictional worlds of their imagination primarily using film stills, but there are some very interesting exceptions in which the obsessive act of amassing pins is an attempt to create an authentic connection to the historical context of Austen's time and even Austen herself. This is especially true of Jane Austen boards related to Regency fashion, like Tara Finlay's "Jane Austen Regency," with 258 pins with pictures of Regency fashion plates, Regency portraits, Regency gowns on displays on mannequins, and modern recreations of Regency era clothing worn by models or in films. Similarly, Susie Hibdon's "Jane Austen & Regency Love," with 368 pins, mostly features fashion plates and period clothing.

A more extreme example is a pinner named Vic (Jane Austen's World) who has 130 boards; Vic is also the blogger at *Jane Austen's World*, a popular blog on historical Regency details. Most of Vic's boards are related to fashion, architecture, and furniture in the Regency and Georgian times. One of Vic (Jane Austen's World)'s boards is simply



All these things I have mentioned so far were proffered and displayed not only on account of their capacity in some ways to authenticate Jane Austen, to show that she did indeed exist and had not altogether vanished, but also, and even more important, to impersonate and to embody her and in the process to make it

possible for us to connect with her, even as they also scrupulously and candidly declare their insufficiency. (Johnson 160)

Johnson's book *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* dwells on the way that Jane Austen is a ghostly figure for modern readers; her fans can feel her as an unembodied but nevertheless powerful presence in our lives. Historical collections, visits to Austen's house in Chawton, and, more relevantly, pins with images of these objects provide a sense of substance to a woman who we know almost solely through the insubstantial and fictional yet provocatively authentic worlds she created in her novels.

To me, the "world building" activity that takes place on *Pinterest* is a pleasurable way to extend my experience of Austen's novels, to help me feel more connected with her, and also to put me in touch with my imaginative subconscious. For instance, as I mentioned above, I initially loved the casting of Donald Sutherland as Mr. Bennet in the 2005 adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice*. I thought, and still think, he has the right face. It is simultaneously warm yet satirical, something that other adaptations haven't been able to capture in a way that spoke to me. Even though I was ultimately disappointed in his choice to give a mumbling delivery of all of Mr. Bennet's one-liners, when I scroll through the Austen pins and come across his face among the film stills, I smile and feel certain the casting directors were on to something when they chose him. Even though *my* Mr. Bennet doesn't mumble, he does have an interesting, almost grandfatherly face similar to Sutherland's. But why doesn't my Mr. Bennet mumble? For that matter, why must he be grandfatherly? He is in the role of the *father* after all! Why does Sutherland's face strike me as more grandfather-ish, than Benjamin Whitrow's, the man who played Mr. Bennet in the 1995 adaptation? Running into an image of Sutherland by chance on

*Pinterest* can set off a complex series of questions for me, sometimes moving from questions concerning casting into other complex areas of character development. I started wondering why I like the costume director's decision to put Sutherland in slightly sloppy clothes better than the more polished look of the earlier film, for instance.

I have answers to all of these questions, some stemming from the source materials and some from my knowledge of the historical context. For instance, I am sure that Mr. Bennet took too much pride in his wit to mumble through his clever and ironic statements. Thinking about and looking at Sutherland and Whitmore as Mr. Bennet helped me to see him, as Austen meant him to be, more fully than I had before. I understood her subtle ability to convey many details through very little information. I think the still images particularly enabled this for me, because I wasn't distracted by the performance and was instead able to reflect on it.

But also I discovered that many answers to my questions emerged from more unexpectedly personal sources. I still don't know exactly why I feel like Sutherland's grandfather-ish face is right, but I'm beginning to think that it came from my own assumptions. At one point I thought he was significantly older than Mrs. Bennet when they married, as Austen explains that he was initially attracted to her youth in particular, but Austen is never actually very clear on how much of an age gap exists between the two characters. It isn't unreasonable, given the historical context, to assume that she is significantly younger than him, but Austen never addresses it. Perhaps I imagine him as prematurely aged from the trying experience of being married to a busy-body. But ultimately, the nuts and bolts of Mr. Bennet's appearance are up to the reader.

Through this experience of collecting images, confronting them, and sometimes struggling with them, the idea that Mr. Bennet, as I see him, is as much a character of my own making as he is of Austen's became powerfully real to me. Indeed, more generally, as I look through the images of period-appropriate clothing, furniture, home interiors, and tools, as well as film stills and modern responses in the form of memes, I find myself thinking about Austen in ways that are specifically about exploring the division between history/modernity and fiction/real-life, and I discover that they aren't always as clearly defined as I would like to think.

These activities can be incredibly productive in awakening or enlivening my imagination, something that becomes harder and harder to do as I age. But by doing so, I think that we open ourselves up to the same dangers that fantasy fiction, gothic literature, video games, and other "dangerous" media present. As Saler so eloquently puts it: "the price of living with enchantment [is] always the possibility of being captivated by it" (32).

One of the ways that *Pinterest*, and film adaptations, and t-shirts for that matter, can captivate a person is through the false sense that an image is more real and more present than something that occurs in our imaginations. For instance, some readers will rightly challenge my use of the word "tangibility" above to describe the assertion of control over fictional worlds that pinners experience through the use of digital images. Images, especially viewed through the screen of a computer or a tablet, are not tactile. Pictures of actors and actresses dressed up like Darcy and Elizabeth are not anymore embodied than the versions of these characters we imagine as we read. Nor do they have a natural presence in the same way that a painting or even a photo reproduction in a

magazine does. These images might even distract from the fascinating and miraculous way that the brain creates images in response to fiction because the images from the films interfere with the imaginative processes. This false sense of tangibility can be seductive, especially when an image from a film adaptation begins to become the primary means of interacting with a text.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, *Pinterest* has a way of captivating its users, keeping attention focused on worlds that they have already inhabited, preventing us from trying out new ones. I often turn to my Austen board for entertainment, rather than opening my new copy of *The Mill on the Floss*, or even re-opening my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. This is an aspect of fandom that some fans enjoy and even celebrate; they are more than willing to be completely pulled into a few limited worlds and gain an increasingly intimate knowledge of them. *Pinterest* captivates us by the world building possibilities offered by it, but the collective consciousness focuses on Austen and other literary stars and by doing so limits the selection of possible worlds to choose from. *Pinterest*'s users' reliance on images from film adaptations has the same effect of creating an ever-narrowing interpretation of the materials. A distressing outcome of this kind of narrowing of interpretive possibilities is that interacting with authors on *Pinterest* tricks us into feeling like we *are* reading or at least doing something akin to it.

This idea that *Pinterest* makes me feel I'm doing something akin to reading stems from the way that *Pinterest* is associated with self-improvement, a way of thinking and being that itself a type of fantasy world building. When I pin to my Austen board, part of

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks especially to Dr. Roger Schmidt's challenging questions on the nature of imagery and imagination here. His account of being annoyed by the banality of the nightingale in *Bright Star*, and the idea that that image could never compare with the beauty of "Ode to a Nightingale" by Keats, was particularly inspirational.



my motivation comes from feeling like I'm learning more about her and even interacting with her, like I'm becoming a better reader and a more devoted fan. Furthermore, when I open up my *Pinterest* homepage, I see Jane Austen, Doctor Who, and Harry Potter pins, but I also see a lot of ideas for recipes, home décor, fashion, spirituality, and health. I don't usually open up *Pinterest* to specifically look at Austen memes. In fact, I usually log on ostensibly to look for new recipes and I get pulled into the world building activities associated with Austen without intending to.

The association between fantasy and reality on *Pinterest* is complicated in that many of the fantasies are presented as possibilities. This is nowhere clearer than in the health boards, which present images of thin well-toned women alongside a suggested workout or diet plan that purports to provide results suggested by the image, like "Do this routine before every shower: 50 jumping jacks, 5 pushups, 20 crunches, 20 mountain climbers, and 30 second plank." Some of the workouts are very good, but more often they are like this example, too easy to actually produce the lean, muscled bodies of fitness models. We are used to critiquing dieting advertisements and pointing out the ways in which they are based upon problematic lies, but pins like this are more difficult to explain away because they appear in a context where we have both world building mood boards and authentic, user-generated suggestions for improving one's life. The fact that these tips and tricks are shared among individuals, many of whom are my actual flesh and blood friends, makes it seem less dangerous than an advertisement with an obvious intent to sell me something.

In practice, the distinction between fantasy and reality becomes increasingly complicated. I have made a conscious effort to remove aspirational photos of 5'8" 18

year old models from my health board to save my self-esteem from a crash, but I actually do want to see and pin many of the workouts and ideas in order to improve my running. I regularly use the recipes that I find on *Pinterest* and have altered how I style my outfits because of the fashion ideas I see on *Pinterest*. In that sense, it has a real impact on my life. But more often than that, *Pinterest* becomes a way of world building my own life; my food boards are full of pictures of beautiful recipes I will never make (lavender icing, panna cotta, sourdough), clothes I will never feel comfortable wearing (the yellow bikini sits in my swimwear board, taunting me), and memes about judging people for their grammar (I'm the furthest thing from a prescriptivist that an English teacher can be – I must have pinned those out of peer pressure). Even on my Jane Austen board, I only pinned things that fit into the disinterested and objective version of my academic self that I have been exploring on a few of my academic *Pinterest* boards.

This falsification of the self is related to the escapist function of *Pinterest*; as Tuan argues, there is a fundamental discontent at the very core of what it means to be human:

Human beings have been and continue to be profoundly restless. For one reason or another, they are not content with being where they are. They move, or if they stay in place, they seek to rearrange that place. Migration and the *in situ* transformation of the environment are two major themes – *the* two major themes – in human geography. They both reveal a discontent with the status quo, a desire to escape. (8)

This discontent with our condition drives us to escape into fantasy world building, and as Tuan argues, what we are escaping from is the mundane, the “banality and opaqueness of

life” (23). I sometimes get tired of being the literature teacher who occasionally cries in front of students about literature, of not knowing how to make sourdough bread, and of not feeling comfortable in a yellow bikini, so perhaps I can experience being a hard teacher, a bread baker, and a bikini wearer through this world I’ve created online.

And Tuan points out that fantasy escape is not always destructive: discontent can motivate us to improve our life through a combination of inspiration, aspiration, and hard work. I learned how to bake (non-sourdough) bread because of the beautiful photos of bread I found on *Pinterest*. I took a stab at a few CrossFit workouts because my friend Dana kept pinning them. I bought a swimming suit without a skirt on it (not a bikini, but a step closer). And sometimes the intrusion of fantasy into real life can create delightful and authentic experiences. For instance, there are 54 boards dedicated to Jane Austen parties, involving period appropriate recipes and décor. I can imagine that these parties were filled with authentic moments of connection between the participants. Perhaps they even felt a stronger connection to Austen afterwards.

I know that after examining the hundreds of historical artifacts related to Austen pinned by Vic (Jane Austen’s World), I do feel like I understand Austen’s material existence a little better than I did before. Even something so simple as seeing the difference in the texture and patterns on fabrics intended for different occasions made me imagine the books a little differently, and it certainly helped me to fill in the gaps of my personal portrait of Austen.

Similarly, looking at pictures of men’s fashion in particular on Vic (Jane Austen’s World)’s board “Regency Dandy” made me re-see the men in Austen’s life. I rarely paid any attention to men’s dress prior to seeing Vic’s pins. One of her images on that board is

a pastel portrait by Hugh Douglas Hamilton of Arthur Hill created between 1785 and 1790. He's wearing a wig. Of course he was wearing a wig! But before that I never fully acknowledged that it is likely Austen's father and brothers might have occasionally worn wigs when she was a child, before the Beau Brummel style really gained popularity. After that I noticed that in Edward Austen Knight's formal portrait for his world tour he is wearing a wig. Something about that tiny detail shifted how I imagined certain aspects of her family life, particularly her family's theatrical productions. This added familiarity with her world increased the feeling that I am powerfully connected to her. And that my feeling of connection is a fantasy that exists only in my mind doesn't erase the power of my experience of that connection. The experience *is* real.

While there is a danger of being captivated by the fantasies offered on *Pinterest*, I am convinced that most users approach it through Saler's ironic imagination, in which we can explore fantasies without being swept away by them. Many of the most popular memes on *Pinterest* explicitly confront these fantasies. For instance, one meme presents a commonly pinned tip, such as how to properly apply eye-shadow or how to lose weight or how to use Elf on a Shelf at Christmastime, and pairs it with an image of Kimberley Wilkins. Wilkins, otherwise known as Sweet Brown, became a national celebrity after her appearance on the news following an Oklahoma City apartment fire when she explained that she left her shoes behind because "Ain't nobody got time for that." Ignoring for a moment the racist implications of this meme (worth a whole paper in itself), here we see users of *Pinterest* conceding that, yes, even some of the lifestyle tips we encounter on the website are as much a fantasy as the mood boards. I haven't seen that realization stop anyone from participating in the fantasies.

*Pinterest* offers a space between fantasy and reality which activates the ironic imagination. Austen too ignites our ironic imagination in a way that operates somewhere between fantasy and reality. Both she and her fiction are slippery and difficult to pin down; interpretations of her work continue to grow and can represent opposite sets of values; her characters have powerful personalities who nevertheless simultaneously have very little physical presence; knowledge of her life is famously bare, leading to brash speculation and fantasy; and even the portraits we have of her are suspect and thus deny our gaze. This is why Johnson argues that there is a “genuinely phantasmal quality that has always been a feature of Janeism” (6). The fantasy explored on *Pinterest* is about pinning Austen down to a manageable and user-specific image or set of images.

*Pinterest*, where people go to turn fantasy into reality and reality into fantasy, enables us to chase the phantasm that is Jane Austen, comprised of slippery cultural and historical meanings as well as deeply personal experiences, to simultaneously enlarge and reify our fantasies of her, to pin that phantasm down, and make her over into our own image once again, as we always have.

## Chapter VI

“I could not have been more wretchedly blind”: Rejecting Film in the Classroom

When I first started my project on Jane Austen popular culture, I was convinced that using the Austen film adaptations in the classroom would be a good thing, and the source of this belief has to do with the ways in which these films are already part of the classroom experience, whether we welcome them into our classrooms or not. In my dissertation proposal I wrote “[s]tereotypes about Austen based on popular culture often interfere with student comprehension of her novels, and I will therefore be focusing on the ways that teachers can address the popular mythologies surrounding Austen in the classroom” (15). I still agree with this statement. I even feel more strongly that one of my goals when teaching Austen is helping students to divorce their understanding of her novels from stereotypes and popular mythologies associated with her. But my approach of how to accomplish that has shifted dramatically. Early on, I thought the best approach would be to confront this myth head-on by showing the films, encouraging students to discuss Austen-inspired memes, and perhaps even create their own Austen-inspired fan-fiction. This stance was informed by the pedagogical literature I had read. But over the past two years, I have read more deeply into the theoretical and pedagogical issues, and, perhaps more importantly, I have had a chance to teach *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, and my stance has shifted back to a more traditional conception of how to teach these novels. Like Elizabeth Bennet, I was blind. And like Elizabeth, vanity and ego were the sources of my blindness. This blindness was a result of my excitement about the interesting things *I* was learning. My desire to share these new ideas with students was about what was interesting to *me*, and it reflected a lack of understanding about what

students need from an introductory course on literature. Above all, students need help becoming immersed into fictional worlds, and that is accomplished by modeling expert reading habits to them.

But as I mentioned, every indicator in the pedagogical literature suggests that introducing film and even other types of modern technological discourse into the classroom is a good thing. The reason for this revolves around the particular ways of knowing that “kids these days” possess. Lewis and Fabos have shown that for young students today, technology and media don’t feel like technology and media, they feel “normal and invisible” (470). John Hartley confirms this, stating “[t]eens evidently don’t see the computer as technology” (127). Hartley goes on to say that

Popular culture has prospered by capturing the attention, mood, time, activities, and culture of young people (and others) in their leisure moments, when they’re just beyond the institutional grasp of family, school, or work. So while schools and universities keep their distance, *purposeless entertainment* has nurtured demand for creative self-expression and communication among the young. (130)

My natural impulse when confronted with assertions like this was to try to find ways to harness the power of these technologies for captivating the attention of my students, who sometimes seem so vacant and distracted in the classroom

Many teachers have published accounts of their successes using Austen film adaptations in the classroom. M. Casey Diana, for instance, conducted a survey of her students in her “Introduction to Fiction” course. To assemble her data she created two groups, one who only read the novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, and another who watched the 1995 Ang Lee/Emma Thompson film adaptation *and* read the novel. She had the

students fill out a questionnaire, do comprehensive quizzes, and write an essay after various stages in the reading process. The students who viewed the film had a decided edge over those who only read the book:

The questionnaires revealed that students who viewed the film followed the plot far more closely, had a deeper involvement with and readily differentiated between characters, and remembered a greater amount of detail than did the readers. On the other hand, the book readers (with one or two exceptions) were frustrated. Many missed major plot developments, displayed confusion over characters, recalled minimal (if any detail), and either dreaded viewing the film or desired to see it merely for clarification. .... The film version of *Sense and Sensibility*, and probably other film versions of Austen's classics, instills a desire for – and provides a gateway to – a positive, in-depth reading experience for college students. In fact, 90 percent of the film viewers expressed a desire to read the book. (141)

When I read these glowing accolades on the success of Diana's use of the film adaptation, I was sold. It certainly confirmed my own experience with the film of *Sense and Sensibility*, which came out when I was fifteen and precipitated my first attempt to read that novel.

One of the problems with film adaptations in the classroom is that students become focused on creating a ledger with one side describing the novel and the other describing the film. In these kinds of activities it is too easy to uncritically label deviations from one side to the other as bad, regardless of the effect of the change. This view of filmed literature doesn't fully account for the way in which these films are



*adaptations*. Inescapably a number of factors change along with the change of medium, not the least of which is a cultural shift. Not only is Diarmuid Lawrence's 1996 British adaptation of *Emma* vastly different from Austen's original text, it is also vastly different from Douglas McGrath's 1996 Hollywood adaptation of *Emma*, and those two films were released in the same year! Two very different cultures produced these adaptations. For that reason the films should be seen as interpretations. A good teacher will help her students see the two opposing sides of the ledger as an issue of interpretation and adaptation rather than of fidelity. Films aren't books and we shouldn't expect them to behave like them.

Louise Flavin's book *Jane Austen in the Classroom: Viewing the Novel/Reading the Film* is an excellent resource for teachers who want to move beyond using the films as an abridged version of the Cliff Notes. In her book, Flavin centers the pedagogy on a comparison of the various film versions and the source novels, not only for issues of fidelity, but also for differences in cultural mood and medium of expression. She argues that this process not only

sharpens students' ability to 'read the film,' it also helps them to 'view the novels' critically. As students visualize characters and settings and hear dialogue spoken, their readings of the novels become more critically astute. As additions and deletions, as well as more subtle changes, are noted, students can analyze why the changes were made and evaluate the effectiveness of the alterations on the film.

(7)

Flavin convinced me that the films can help students see the narrative strategies that Austen uses in her novels because they provide a contrast that illuminates Austen's

unique style. Interrogating the filmmakers' choices gives us insight into Austen's magnificent accomplishment in prose and helps us see the unique challenges of both mediums in a way that we wouldn't be able to do without the point of comparison.

Shortly after I read Flavin's book on film adaptation in the Austen classroom, I came across Anne-Marie Paquet's interesting analysis of Joe Wright's 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* starring Keira Knightley, "Staging Intimacy and Interiority." This article examines how Wright translates the inner life of Austen's characters into visual imagery. I was particularly curious about Paquet's analysis of chapter 36, the chapter which contains the moment of Elizabeth's painful self-discovery. This self-discovery is one of the most central plot developments in the novel, and it is presented by Austen as a striking and powerful monologue: "How humiliating is this discovery! – Yet, how just a humiliation! – Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love has been my folly. ... Till this moment, I never knew myself" (202). A film adaptation will have trouble capturing this moment without voice-over, a technique that most serious filmmakers try to avoid these days.

Paquet examines how Wright manages to convey a sense of Elizabeth's process of self-discovery as she reads, re-reads, contemplates, and digests the contents of Darcy's explanatory letter:

The montage foregrounds the manner in which Elizabeth supposedly fixedly gazes at the mirror while looking directly at the camera and the spectator. . . . The play of soft lighting and darkness, especially as reflected on Elizabeth's thoughtful face, at once marks the passage of time and functions as a companion piece to the process of complete reassessment of the whole situation. . . . Paradoxically, this

condensation technique also operates as expansion since the heroine's symbolic passage through the looking glass calls for the metaphorical recreation of another storyline and fosters a new interpretation of facts and potentialities.

After reading this analysis, I thought that I could use the film in my teaching to provide an interesting starting point to discuss the ways in which Austen chooses to represent Elizabeth's reflective change of heart. I thought that students would be more impressed with Austen's use of a combination of dialogue and free-indirect discourse after they saw how that moment was rendered in film using the shorthand of the mirror.

I taught *Pride and Prejudice* in an ENGL 115 focused on literary irony in the fall of 2012. I had an excellent group of students; they were talkative without being chatty, they were willing to take interpretive chances, and I was lucky enough that often my job in the class came down to choosing who got to speak next. Of course, I did occasionally find it necessary to guide them back to preferred or dominant readings of the texts, but not to the extent that I have had to in the past. The film clip I showed includes the scene described above<sup>19</sup> as well as the scenes directly following it, which contains a (decidedly non-Austenian) image of Brontëan Romance as Elizabeth stands on a cliff and the wind whips her dress about<sup>20</sup>.

I was sorely disappointed by the outcome of this discussion. First of all, although many of the students had already seen the film, those who hadn't seen it before assumed that the somber characterization of Elizabeth in this clip is consistent throughout the film. Although that confusion did create a few interesting observations concerning the

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<sup>19</sup> "Pride & Prejudice (7/10) Movie CLIP - A Letter to Elizabeth (2005)": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U56CTIGkx8>

<sup>20</sup> "Lizzy On Top of the World": [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ePn0\\_ZJtn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ePn0_ZJtn4)

differences in tone conveyed through the image of the mirror in candlelight versus Elizabeth's reflective monologue, the students became stuck on the idea that Elizabeth was too serious in the movie, which was distracting from the larger message of subjectivity. In order to give the class a fuller sense of Elizabeth's character in the film, I ended up showing them another clip, Darcy's first proposal<sup>21</sup>. After this interruption, it was difficult to get them back to my original intention of focusing on the portrayal of subjectivity. In fact, they ended up wanting to spend the bulk of the time reflecting on the fidelity of the film to the source material. When I did finally wrangle them back to a discussion of Elizabeth's moment of shameful self-recognition, I felt as though I had silenced them by my agenda; while they seemed impressed by both Austen's original materials and Wright's handling of them, they were not capable of going beyond that initial impact. Ultimately, the film clip interfered with our ability to fully unpack this important part of *Pride and Prejudice*.

My experience was like that of Robert Eggleston, who tried to use the film adaptations of *Emma* in his first-year literature course – a failure. His students engaged with the novel and film, but only superficially:

[their] commentary, although honest and amusing, did not indicate that the *Emma* variants were bringing the students that much closer to the original, nor did my own concerted effort clearly lead the students into more thoughtful discussion of the novel through consideration of its adaptations.

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<sup>21</sup> "Pride & Prejudice (6/10) Movie CLIP - Elizabeth's Pride (2005)"

The urge to focus on superficial differences in plot and characterization is too powerful for introductory students, and for that reason the deeper questions that those differences point to get unexplored.

One explanation of this outcome is rooted in the ways in which students interact with media. In *Convergence Culture*, in his chapter on *Harry Potter* fan fiction, Henry Jenkins shows how much fans learn about writing when they engage in fan fiction and identity play on Hogwarts-themed websites. The problem is that there is no real way to harness that enthusiasm to serve pedagogical goals: “These kids are passionate about writing because they are passionate about what they are writing about. To some degree, pulling such activities into the schools is apt to deaden them because school culture generates a different mindset than our recreational life” (194). As Hartley shows, the creative learning that young people get out of interacting with online media and games is a product of the fact that this is “*purposeless entertainment*” (130).

And even more importantly, media is a *distraction from the learning process*. In 1938, Louise Rosenblatt’s work made us aware of how complicated the act of reading really is, because, as she contends, it involves taking into consideration the reader’s prior experiences and knowledges, as well as memories elicited by the text (57). Robert Scholes states in *Textual Power* that “[t]he supposed skill of reading is actually based upon a knowledge of the codes that were operative in the composition of any given text and the historical situation in which it was composed” (21). He argues that teachers often expect students to skip past the reading stage and move straight into interpretation and criticism, when in reality, they need help tackling the historical, cultural, and literary

codes contained within the text. Too often expert readers take for granted the numerous basic knowledges that it takes to unpack literary texts.

I like Cristina Vischer Bruns approach to teaching literature because it is informed by the process and stages of reading outlined above. In fact, she reduces the stages of reading to “immersive” and “analytic” (65). Bruns is particularly interested in how readers become immersed in imaginary literary worlds, and her focus in the classroom is helping students to have the same profound “lost in a book” feeling that expert readers take for granted. She adapts Gayatri Spivak’s approach to reading, in which students enter into the text’s “protocol” and suspend their own impulse to criticize in order to take in the world of the novel fully (124). She explains that

[r]eading in this way requires a temporary suspension of one’s own values and expectations in order to take on, as best one can, the perspective of the text itself, to attend to the values of its world and to place oneself within it in order to see what one can see from that other position. Then, with the benefit of that alternative view, one returns to one’s own perspective, perhaps to critique the text’s world or one’s own, having temporarily seen through other eyes. (124-25).

Given this schema, the problem that occurred when I showed the clips from *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) is that the film inevitably privileges a modern point of view and therefore immediately places students into the analytical stage. When we watch the film, we skip the immersive reading stage in which we enter into Austen’s protocol and are carried away by her vision. Instead we become immersed in a different, yet adjacent, world informed by modern values and a modern analysis of the source material. While

more advanced students can make this jump competently, it was too much to expect from a 100-level classroom, regardless of how bright the students were.

There are a number of teaching strategies that encourage immersive reading, but here I will focus on two that I think were especially effective in my teaching: reading literature out-loud in class and reducing the length of texts on the course schedule. Both of these are strategies that emerged from my actual experience as a student as a teacher. For instance, in the first Jane Austen class I took from Dr. Roger Schmidt, I was impressed when he took lots of class time just to read long passages from Austen's novels out-loud. I hadn't had that experience since I was in grade school! He reads slowly, emphatically, and dramatically, giving weight to Austen's words and using his tone of voice to make her ironies very apparent even to irony-deficient students. When I was a student – high school through graduate school – far too often when I prepared for class, I would zoom through the text, catching the most relevant content and saving enjoyment of the prose-style for some imaginary far-off time in the future. I'm someone who wants to read in this deliberate way, but too frequently I have had to accept a more cursory reading experience. Taking class time to listen to Austen's words read out-loud allowed me to focus on the literature in a way that my over-crowded life rarely gave me an opportunity to do.

We think of reading out-loud as an elementary literary practice, in which students read out-loud to gain experience reading *words*: it is about comprehension. Some college students still need help at this level. One of my friends in Dr. Schmidt's Austen class had a very hard time understanding Austen's language, and she said hearing the passages read

out-loud helped to her make sense of the actual content of Austen's admittedly difficult prose style.

For more advanced college students, the reading out-loud experience is about attending to the *language*: it is about understanding the art of the words. To that end, Dr. Schmidt's readings of Austen helped me see how unique and powerful her style is. His readings helped me to understand how complicated some of Austen's sentences are, how artistically she uses punctuation to guide us through intricate grammar, how effectively she uses shorter simple sentences as a contrast to the more complex sentences. Additionally, the way that Dr. Schmidt read with emotion helped me to see how much art went into Austen's crafting of her heroine's emotions, how frequently character and personality is revealed by linguistic and stylistic choices.

Furthermore, reading out-loud allowed Austen's voice to take center stage, instead of the historical, social, and critical stances that so often dominate classroom discussion. Not that there is anything wrong with these perspectives, but they have the tendency to obscure the actual literature, and for students who are still learning to read using the author's protocol, such perspectives can be a distraction. As a doctoral student who had gotten used to always reading from a critical perspective, it was a nice reminder of the beauties of language that drew me to the study of English in the first place. It made me realize that one of the gifts that teachers in high school and the first couple years in college gave me was not knowledge of theory and criticism, but the reading skills to have increasingly effective immersive experiences with texts and the tools to appreciate those experiences.



Throughout that semester and in subsequent classes I took from Dr. Schmidt, I started imagining how I might incorporate reading out-loud in my own teaching. As someone who has struggled with stage fright and performance anxiety so bad that I ended up dropping my piano performance scholarship in college (meaning that I had to take a worse job – an accompanist), I don't read out-loud in the classroom as much as I would like because it feels too much like a performance. I usually enlist a student to read for me. Reading is good practice for students, but an even better approach is for a teacher to read the passages herself, modeling a deliberate and energetic performance of the materials, showing students how to enliven the words on the page.

Because of this reluctance to read on my part, for my teaching internship one of my goals was to improve my reading performances. It was challenging. I am not a dramatist. Like I said, I have stage fright. I practiced all the poems and the important passages from short stories at home, trying out different interpretations, using hand gestures, and striving to bring emotional weight to the readings. I usually didn't have the guts to go through with a really impassioned performance in front of my students, but for me even doing that footwork at home was improving my ability to read effectively in front of a class.

When it came to the section I taught on *Pride and Prejudice*, I had gotten the hang of it. I tried to read at least one long (up to a full page) of text out-loud per class. Those were the scariest, and yet the most rewarding moments of that class for me. When I first started doing the long readings, I noticed that students would get antsy, wiggling around in their chairs, checking their watches, wondering "is she really going to use up our class time *just reading*?" As the semester went on, their bodies would actually

become relaxed during readings, and the room would be quieter, more focused. If I accomplished nothing else for that day, at least my students listened and attended to Austen's language, and somewhere deep in their brains, maybe only in their subconscious, her brilliant language is there imprinted. But I'm sure it accomplished at least one other thing; I showed them that expert reading isn't speed-reading, but is instead attentive, deliberate, slow, and dramatic. Expert readers allow themselves to become immersed in the beauty of the language.

Another important strategy for helping students to become immersed in the literature they read has to do with course design. Although Kimberley Hill Campbell's book *Less is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts, Grades 6-12* focuses on junior high and high school students, her work convinced me that shorter and less demanding readings help students become fully immersed in the fiction that they do read. When students are expected to read a 5 or 10 page assignment, they don't feel (as) rushed as when they are given a 40 or 50 page reading assignment, giving them the opportunity to read slower and more carefully, more like an expert reader; this is especially aided by daily quizzes that provide some external motivation to read.

Indeed, as a student, my best learning occurred in semesters when I reduced my course load. As an undergraduate, my final fall semester was 9 credits, as opposed to 15 (or as many as 21 when I was music minor), and I was consistently shocked that I actually had time to be fully prepared for class every single day. As a PhD student, when I opted out of the TA program the quality of my writing sky-rocketed. I was uniquely privileged to be able to do that, but it made me realize that reading more and doing more is not necessarily the way to improve my reading and writing. Part of why I made so

much headway after cutting back was simply that I had time to pay closer attention to a smaller number of responsibilities. Although I can't remove the number of responsibilities my students face, I can design my course in such a way that the number of readings isn't adding to their already cluttered lives. This isn't "dumbing-down" the course for students who can't hack it, but instead is about creating an environment in which focus and deliberation are valued more highly than fast-paced accumulation.

In my teaching internship, I deliberately kept the reading list short and manageable, with one exception. I thought that *Pride and Prejudice* is such a "light, bright, and sparkling" novel that surely my students could handle the no more than 150 pages per week limit for fiction that was recommended to me by the department. On the first day of discussing *Pride and Prejudice*, students admitted they struggled painfully with both the length of the reading and the difficulty of Austen's prose. I told them that they would get used to it if they kept with it, but as that class period went on I ended up talking most of the time while the students sat with their mouth agape. This was the first time in the semester my students seemed in over their heads and afraid or incapable of speaking about the material. It is as if the gargantuan task of making it through the materials meant they needed to turn off the critical part of their brains. I wondered if they had only done what Campbell describes as "fake reading": holding the book and moving their eyes across the page without taking in any of the content (4-5). That afternoon I rearranged the schedule, reduced the readings to 90 pages a week, 30 pages a day, and removed a play from our list of texts. By the next class period, my chatty group of students was back.

Shorter readings help ensure that students are more frequently prepared for class and ready to participate, and because of that, it makes the conversations in class much more rewarding. When we were working our way through *Pride and Prejudice*, my students started talking about it and asking questions the moment they walked through the door; there was no waiting for class to begin. They went from being overwhelmed and intimidated by the materials to being excited and interested in them over the course of a weekend.

Similarly, shorter readings have the added benefit of making the use of classroom time much more efficient. When I have a more manageable reading list I don't feel as rushed to get through the materials or as disappointed when we inevitably can't do all the readings justice. Furthermore, modeling good reading behavior using a few short stellar examples that everyone in the class has actually read is much more effective than overloading students with so much to read that they don't fully absorb any of it.

Both the reading out-loud strategy and the short texts strategy require that the teacher makes a leap of faith, or several actually. The leaps of faith are that students gain something by having seen good reading practices modeled for them, that they will continue to read once the class is over, and that they put those reading practices into use. One of the reasons that in the past I over-crowded my syllabi is because I felt my classes had to be the end-all of literature for my students; how in the world can they possibly say they have an English education if they haven't read all of x, y, and z!? But the reality is that my class will only ever be a small part of these students' education and the best use of my time is to show them *how* to be a reader. For college students, who already tend to

be effective readers of *words*, my goal is, again, to make them effective readers of *language*.

Teaching Austen in this immersive way is perhaps the best approach to confront the popular myths of Austen that I mention in the introduction to this paper. Often Austen is characterized as a prim smirking spinster obsessed with propriety and courtship, or as a lonely author fixated on romance who uses writing as a way to have a love life, and her works are seen as nothing more than very well-written love stories. By focusing on what Austen *actually* says in her novels, students will see how wrong modern formulations of Austen are. I found that even from the first day of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which we spent the first fifteen minutes discussing Austen's ironic opening line – "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife" – my students' eyes were opened about how much more complex Austen and her novels are than they had been led to believe. The first interpretations of the sentence offered by my students were informed by clichéd and somewhat sexist ideas about dating, which are of course exactly what a superficial reading of the sentence allows. But I'll never forget when one student was stuttering his way through a complex thought that he just couldn't articulate, and he stopped and said "well, it all depends on point of view, doesn't it." This was an awesome breakthrough for the goals of the class in which irony was the central theme. As we went on to outline the different meanings that this sentence might have for various characters in the book – that Mrs. Bennet may utter this statement earnestly while Mr. Bennet might mean it ironically, for instance – my students clearly began to see how Austen was using courtship as a way to talk about the complexities of human character, social institutions, and even morality.

Not all of my students were comfortable with the change in perspective. One of my students who loved *Pride and Prejudice* principally for the love story before the class expressed multiple times in the quizzes that she thought we were over-reading what she believed to be “just a happy love story.” I’m not sure I converted her, but at least she is aware of other possibilities, and has been exposed to lots of evidence to the contrary.

To that end, when we make time and room in the schedule for immersive and deep reading, it is possible to dig into the multitudinous potential interpretations offered by the text. *Pride and Prejudice*, and every novel by Jane Austen, is a rich source of possibilities for discussion without adding the films and other popular texts to the mix. For example, in *Approaches to Teaching Pride and Prejudice*, writers illustrate the diverse possible orientations to the text, ranging from biographical and socio-historical readings, to formal and thematic interpretations, to Feminist and Marxist critiques. And *Persuasions*, the journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America, regularly publishes unique approaches to teaching Austen, such as Phyllis Roth and Annette Leclair’s fantastic idea to have students curate display boxes featuring Jane Austen for their library. I was similarly inspired by Natasha Duquette’s thrilling description of her experience hosting extracurricular Austen-themed tea parties. I would love to do my own version of all of these ideas. But there is simply no way to fully tackle *Pride and Prejudice* over the course of a few weeks, especially for first or second year students, even if we skip the curating and tea parties.

That said, although I didn’t get to teach, say, Robert Dryden’s interesting pedagogical approach focused on the British Regency navy, I was aware of that history and was prepared to talk about it because I had recently read his interesting essay.

Sometimes our reading of critical and pedagogical scholarship actually finds its way into the classroom. My favorite pedagogical work was Edward Copeland's essay "The Economic Realities of Jane Austen's Day," which provides context and modern equivalents for the different incomes in *Pride and Prejudice* and other novels. Most memorably, for me, he describes what conditions the character from *Persuasion*, Mrs. Smith, would have lived in by modern standards (in 1993): "fourth-floor studio flat, walk-up of course, with no hot water and a shared bath down the hall"; with the addition of 5 to 10 guineas a year "students may add hot running water and a one-burner hot plate to the fourth-floor walk-up" (36). It was lucky I read this essay because students were justifiably curious about the relative wealth of the various characters. As a result of my ability to talk about these incomes competently our discussion was particularly rich, because it helped Elizabeth's precarious social situation come to life for my students.

Likewise, I had seen all the film adaptations and read deeply in the literature on Austen films before I taught *Pride and Prejudice*, and felt confident answering my students' questions about the various film versions of that novel. This is how I think teachers, or at least how *I* should approach the films and film criticism. Inevitably students will watch the movies and be informed by them. And we should encourage our students to see the adaptations, because like Diana discovered in her research on the use of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), the films help students pick up on plot and character details with more accuracy than reading blindly. Because students are watching these films regardless of our attitude to them, we should watch them too. Questions about the movies inevitably arise in discussions or in the time before or after class. When one of my students mentioned that Jane Austen almost eloped with Tom Lefroy, I knew that she

had been watching *Becoming Jane* and was able to talk to her about what I loved and hated about that film, rather than rolling my eyes (or worse).

It is perhaps too much to ask to be consistently up to date on all the critical work and every adaptation of every piece of literature we teach; in the future, I will be teaching plenty of materials that I never wrote a dissertation about. But I think being at least aware of the scholarship is a good way to be confident and helpful for my students, especially at my level, in which I have a number of years of experience but am still learning about my field.

Finally, while film adaptation and popular culture are not appropriate for undergraduate students in ENGL 1110 or ENGL 1115, I do dream of one day teaching an intensive advanced undergraduate or graduate course on *Emma* and watching the films as part of that class. In this class, we would spend at least a month reading and discussing that single novel. The rest of the semester would focus on excerpts from Austen's letters, her juvenilia, her nephew's memoir, early reviews, and current critical scholarship. When we watch the three major film adaptations, we would examine the historical and cultural contexts in which the films were produced and released, as well as the reception of those films. One of the stated goals of the course would be to see how adaptation both illuminates and obscures the source materials. Another goal would be to see how we can better understand current culture by looking at interpretive responses to history and literature in film. In other words, I hope to one day share with students some of the insights I've made as part of my work on this dissertation. These are challenging goals, and perhaps they too are overly focused on my own agenda, ego, and interests. Nevertheless, I do believe a class like this would be beneficial to advanced students,



because film adaptation is an increasingly important and relevant part of literary scholarship.

That being said, even in graduate courses we should always be aware of the ways in which modern politics intrude upon Austen's legacy. When I first began this project, I was very optimistic about the creativity underlying various popular adaptations of Austen. But the longer I work with these materials, the more pessimistic I have become. As I've shown throughout my dissertation, it is presumptuous to re-write Austen's works and her biography to fit modern agendas. It is disrespectful to use her words to stand for our own on t-shirts without crediting her, even if she is unnamed in order to signal ownership into a limited club of Janeites. But at the same time, the urge to pin Austen down is born of a place of admiration and a feeling of potent, if fleeting, connection to this woman who produced such powerful works. I feel like I am in a unique position as a teacher to be able to lead a class of students through these complexities someday because I can understand the alluring appeal as well as the audacious danger these actions pose.

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