Modernist Jane: Austen's Reception by Writers of the Twenties and Thirties

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Writers in the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday of literary modernism, might reasonably be expected to have ignored Jane Austen entirely. After all, the artistic credo of the era was Ezra Pound's "Make it new!" Despite their interest in rejecting the past and creating a wholly modern literature, however, modernists mention Austen again and again in their writings.

Remarkably little attention has been paid to Austen's reception by writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Claudia L. Johnson notes the affinity of the modernists for Austen as "a lamentably understudied affiliation" (105). Both Johnson and Kathryn Sutherland discuss Austen's importance during and after World War I, although they emphasize the work of Kipling (a Victorian rather than a modernist), the relatively obscure British writer Reginald Farrer, and R. W. Chapman, editor of the first scholarly edition of Austen's novels. In her article "At Home with Jane Austen," Deidre Lynch focuses on Austen's reception during the interwar period, but she limits her scope to England, and while she does discuss both Woolf and Forster, she devotes the majority of her discussion to Austen's impact on popular culture rather than her influence on high literary modernism. Similarly, Katie Trumpener discusses a limited number of relatively lesser known women authors whose novels have been reprinted by Virago Press, but the non-canonical novels she discusses are not all from the interwar period and tend to fall in the realist rather than the modernist category.

A handful of studies examine Austen's influence on prominent *women*

writers of the modernist period, such as Edith Wharton (Emsley) and Virginia Woolf (Auerbach, Lee, and Tyler, "Nameless Atrocities"). But most references to Austen's influence on women writers of the modernist era are brief comments made in passing rather than fully developed arguments, and with a handful of exceptions,[1] Austen's influence on male modernists such as Ernest Hemingway, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and Thornton Wilder has been sadly neglected, even though several cite her repeatedly by name in their published and private writings. In short, Austen's importance to literary modernism has largely been ignored and underrated.

This essay analyzes Austen's reception by modernist writers of the twenties and thirties in some detail. I begin by examining modernists' expressed attitudes about Austen, considering their own comments about what they perceived as Austen's limitations, and then moving on to note the ways in which Austen is nevertheless used as a benchmark in reviews of virtually every woman writer of the period. The second part of the essay examines her influence on the plots, sentence structures, tone, and characters of specific modernist literary works. The final part of the essay studies modernists' impressions of Austen's perceived invincibility to criticism. The modernist writers of the twenties and thirties admired and emulated Austen, who became for them a model of literary excellence.

MODERNISTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD JANE AUSTEN

Austen's work underwent a resurgence after World War I. Her novels were recommended reading during the war for soldiers recovering from shell shock (Sutherland 53). Johnson suggests a reason for such a prescription:

> Austen's novels are about nothing if not the perils of living in a confined, narrow, profoundly bruising place where experience unfolds under the aegis of ordeal, where vulnerable, deferent young protagonists with next to no autonomy are exposed to adversities so brutal that they cannot be essayed, much less assailed directly. In Austen's world, that place is called a neighborhood; during World War I it is called a trench, but in both, a premium is placed on behaving well during "epical instants" of duress. (109)

Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, Austen's great-niece, published *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* in 1920. Three years later, Oxford University Press published the first scholarly edition of Austen's novels, edited by R. W. Chapman. *Hearst's International*, an American monthly magazine, published Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Janeites" in 1924, as did *Story-Teller* (in Britain) and *Maclean's*

(in Canada). In 1935, Helen Jerome's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* ran for 219 performances on Broadway and another 317 performances in London's West End before eventually becoming the basis of the 1940 MGM film starring Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier (Looser 107, 124). Given its prominence in popular culture, Austen's work would have been difficult for the modernist writers of the period to avoid.

Not surprisingly, given the relative sexual freedom women enjoyed in the 1920s, modernists often excoriated Austen for her sexual inexperience and criticized the narrowness of her artistic vision. In light of D. H. Lawrence's preoccupation with earthy masculine sexuality, evident in his sexually frank novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, it's perhaps predictable that Lawrence once dismissed Austen as a "narrow-gutted spinster" (qtd. in Southam 14). E. M. Forster compared the act of reading her unfinished novel *Sanditon* to "listening to a slightly tiresome spinster, who has talked too much in the past to be silent unaided" (*Abinger* 150). The more sympathetic Edith Wharton described "Austen's delicate genius" as "flourish[ing] on the very edge of a tidal wave of prudery" (*Writing* 62). American expatriate poet Ezra Pound disparaged her work as less interesting because of her limitations as a woman: "Professors to the contrary notwithstanding, no one expects Jane Austen to be as interesting as Stendhal. A book about a dull, stupid, hemmed-in sort of life, by a person who has lived it, will never be as interesting as the work of some author who has comprehended many *men's* manners and seen many grades and conditions of existence" (*Literary Essays* 385, emphasis added). Even Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, disparages Austen as "so like a tight plait" (58). Here Janeites probably share Woolf's irritation with this perception of Austen: "The people who talk of her as if she were a niminy piminy spinster always annoy me" (*Letters* 6: 87)

Interestingly, both Woolf and Wharton offer defenses of Austen on this count. Woolf points out that Austen's limitations were not of her own choosing: "If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone" (*Room* 68). By contrast, Wharton argued for the excellence of Austen's art in spite of its narrow scope:

> If it be argued that the greatest novelists, both French and English, have drawn some of their richest effects from the study of narrow lives and parochial problems, the answer is that Balzac's provincial France, Jane Austen's provincial England, if limited in their external contacts compared to a Main Street linked to the universe

> by telephone, motor, and wireless, nevertheless made up for what they lacked in surface by the depth of the soil in which they grew. ("Great American Novel" 154)

Presumably as women writers themselves, they could sympathize with Austen's socially imposed limitations.

In spite of Austen's sexual inexperience and narrow social focus, however, reviewers mentioned her when reviewing the books of virtually every modernist woman writer of any note. In a review of Woolf's 1919 novel *Night and Day*, Katherine Mansfield writes, "It is impossible to refrain from comparing *Night and Day* with the novels of Miss Austen. There are moments, indeed, when one is almost tempted to cry it Miss Austen up-to-date" (*Critical* 57).[2] In a 1928 letter to his mother, Harry Crosby pronounces American writer Kay Boyle "the best girl writer since Jane Austen" shortly after he accepted Boyle's first book, a collection of short stories, for publication by his Black Sun Press (qtd. in G. Wolff 251). In a review of Gertrude Stein's 1933 memoir, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Edmund Wilson improbably compares Stein's household with Alice B. Toklas to "one of the households of Jane Austen" (470). Similarly, the editors of the 1936 collection *The Bedside Book of Famous American Stories* observe, "Dorothy Parker is the Jane Austen of her day" (Burrell and Cerf 1268).[3] In a review of *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, published in 1937, Kay Boyle writes, "But had Katherine Mansfield succeeded in doing what she obviously *knew* could and had been done she might have been as enduring as Jane Austen" (54). In a 1938 review of Edith Wharton's posthumously published novel *The Buccaneers*, Q. D. Leavis acknowledges that Wharton has been described as "the nearest thing to an American Jane Austen" (83).

Virginia Woolf, Kay Boyle, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Mansfield, and Edith Wharton have little in common other than their sex and the era in which they were writing, so it's difficult to see how they could *all* have inherited the mantle of Jane Austen. These comparisons may indicate the modernists' impoverished notion of the female canon: the reviewers could think of few women writers of the past to whom they could compare these modernist women writers, especially once the Victorians against whom the modernists rebelled were eliminated. But these name-checks of Jane Austen nevertheless reify her literary stature even among a cultural milieu that was noisily interested in breaking with literary tradition.

What modernists most celebrated in Austen's novels is what many Janeites today still admire: her characters. "People will read Miss Austen," Pound tells us, "because of her knowledge of the human heart" (*Literary Essays*

279). D. H. Lawrence observes in passing, "We can accept . . . Jane Austen's characters . . . as human beings in the same category as ourselves" (*Selected* 120). Wharton calls *Emma* "perhaps the most perfect example in English fiction of a novel in which character shapes events quietly but irresistibly, as a stream nibbles away its banks" (*Writing* 129).

Even modernists who disapproved of Austen were compelled to acknowledge her social influence. F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests that Austen's best-loved heroine became an unfortunate model for modern women's behavior when he refers, in a letter to Hemingway, to "Jane Austin's Elizibeth (to whom we owe the manners of so many of our wives)" (Bruccoli 67). He might have been responding here to the popular dramatizations of Austen's novels that emphasized the strength and independence of her heroines, dramatizations published from the turn of the century to the 1920s (Looser 83–97).[4] Although exactly what he meant is unclear, the tone certainly sounds somewhat resentful. Fitzgerald was a financially irresponsible alcoholic who more than once passed off his wife Zelda's writing as his own. It's difficult to imagine the spirited Elizabeth Bennet putting up with any of that.

Austen's Influence on Modernist Fiction

It is instructive here to examine specific examples of the modernists' indebtedness to Austen in plot developments, sentence structure and tone, and character. With respect to plot developments, a mother and her daughter share a romantic partner in very few literary works. In Austen's *Lady Susan*, the title character unsuccessfully tries to bully her daughter, Frederica, into marrying Sir James Martin for financial reasons; eventually, when Frederica finds love and happiness elsewhere, Lady Susan is herself betrothed to Martin. *Lady Susan* might have inspired Wharton's 1925 novel *The Mother's Recompense*, for the novel's protagonist, Kate Clephane, discovers that the daughter she abandoned in her haste to escape a bad marriage is now engaged to Kate's own former lover. In contrast to Austen, however, Wharton finds melodrama in the situation rather than comedy.[5]

Austen's influence is also evident in other Wharton novels, as has been widely acknowledged (Benstock 389; Emsley; Horner and Beer 2–3, 5). Avril Horner and Janet Beer contend that Austen inspired Wharton's social satire in her 1927 novel *Twilight Sleep* (46), and they also detect Austen's influence on Wharton's 1928 novel *The Children*, in which "Wharton uses a plot structure and themes reminiscent of Jane Austen's work—dinners, picnics, the symbolic significance of gifts of jewellery, a ball, the importance of primogeniture" (78).

Wharton wrote in the tradition of the comedy of manners, inherited from Austen through George Eliot (Leavis; Horner and Beer 46; Macheski), and her narrative approach in *The Age of Innocence* closely resembles Austen's in *Emma* (C. G. Wolff 314). Wharton's last, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*, is particularly indebted to Austen:

> In focusing on a group of young women of marriageable age whose mothers' greatest desire is to see their girls suitably matched, the novel evokes the sardonic humour and astute social observations throughout Austen's work—perhaps Nan's first and fateful reaction to the wilderness and ruins of Tintagel is an ironic reference to Elizabeth Bennett's dating of her serious interest in Mr. Darcy to the first sight of the very orderly Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*. (Horner and Beer 139; see also C. G. Wolff 399)

Critics have also suggested that in its metaphors of imprisonment and entrapment within marriage, *The Buccaneers* resembles *Northanger Abbey* (Horner and Beer 151).

The twentieth-century novelist also expressed strong interest in Austen in her private life, as her biographers reveal. Edith Wharton's circle of friends enjoyed reading literary works aloud to each other in the evenings at her home on the French Riviera: "'Ah, Jane, you sorceress,' she exclaimed, after listening to [Robert] Norton read aloud from *Sense and Sensibility* over a series of January evenings in 1934" (Lewis 522). As a result of rereading Austen (C. G. Wolff 440 n68), Wharton wrote a friend in 1930 that she was flirting with the idea of writing an article on Austen and the Victorian British novelist Anthony Trollope: "They deserve to be coupled" (*Letters* 527).

Although critics were less likely to see Austen's influence on D. H. Lawrence, Nicholas Marsh makes a persuasive case for Lawrence's indebtedness to Austen's most beloved novel:

> *Women in Love* is, in form, a double courtship novel. Astonishingly, it begs a close comparison with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in which two pairs of lovers court and marry. The parallels between the two plots are amusing to rehearse: both Ursula's and Elizabeth Bennet's marriages are a romantic "rags-to-riches" story; both Birkin and Darcy have to endure being humbled and rejected, and both of them have to overcome aspects of their own personalities before they deserve to be successful in love. (211)

Marsh concedes that "These parallels are startling, however, only because of the overwhelming contrast between the two novels" (210)—but the fact that

there are any parallels to identify between two such dissimilar writers suggests there was some influence.

Similarly, Ernest Hemingway might seem like the American modernist least likely to admire Jane Austen, but his writing suggests otherwise. He probably read at least one of her novels when he was in high school in Oak Park, Illinois. The school library owned ten copies of *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as comparable numbers of such nineteenth-century novels as *Jane Eyre, A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Vanity Fair*: "Because of the multiple copies, it is likely that these books were assigned collateral reading. . . . Hemingway may have been required to read any or all of them" (Reynolds 42). Moreover, Hemingway owned a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1940, as revealed by his inventory of his library in Key West (94). His library at the Finca Vigia, his home near Havana, included *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, plus a second copy of *Pride and Prejudice* (Brasch and Sigman 57–58). Intriguingly, Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo ordered Hemingway, then about twenty-four, to read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* aloud to learn to how to write better dialogue (Wagner-Martin 171). It's perhaps not coincidental that Hemingway later became well known for writing realistic dialogue.

Hemingway obviously learned from his exposure to Austen's work, for her influence is evident in his sentence structure and tone in a short story that overtly owes little to *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen has long received high praise for her balanced sentence structures and comic irony. For example, consider Mary Crawford's comment in *Mansfield Park* about her friend Mrs. Fraser: "'She could not do otherwise than accept him, for he was rich, and she had nothing'" (416). Mrs. Jennings is equally blunt in her appraisal of the prospect of a marriage between Colonel Brandon and Marianne Dashwood: "It would be an excellent match, for *he* was rich and *she* was handsome" (*SS* 43). A sentence in Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" sounds suspiciously similar to one of Austen's sentences in its beautifully balanced structure, its comic irony, and its clear-eyed and cynical view of marriage: "They had a sound basis of union. Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him" (18; Tyler 103).

If this similarity seems coincidental, in another of his books Hemingway espoused a moral philosophy very similar in both content and tone to what Marianne Dashwood expresses in *Sense and Sensibility*. Chastised by her sister Elinor for visiting Allenham, the home of Willoughby's aunt, without being introduced to Willoughby's aunt, Marianne tells her sister, "'[I]f there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at

the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure'" (80). Compare that to Hemingway's similarly defensive declaration in *Death in the Afternoon*: "So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after" (4). What Marianne and Hemingway share in these scenes is a conscious sense of the questionable morality of what they have unquestionably enjoyed doing, so their irritable denials ring a bit hollow.

Virginia Woolf, too, is indebted to Austen, although in her case perhaps more for her characters than for her sentence structure and tone. Woolf's letters and journals reveal her profound (if sometimes ambivalent) admiration for the Regency novelist. She recounts visiting Austen's tomb at Winchester (*Letters* 3: 510), choosing *Persuasion* as her favorite Austen novel (*Letters* 6: 22), contemplating "writing an article on the coarseness of J. A." (*Letters* 6: 87), and buying books that once belonged to Jane (*Letters* 6: 390). Woolf's use of the name Willoughby for an important character in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, suggests that character's predatory qualities when it comes to his interactions with women; the allusions to *Persuasion* in Woolf's novel point to certain similarities between Austen's protagonist, Anne Elliot, and Woolf's (Tyler, "Nameless Atrocities").

In what is perhaps the most compelling parallel between Woolf's fiction and Austen's, Woolf implicitly condemns John Willoughby's narcissism by comparing him to a furious child. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby identifies "'three unanswerable reasons for disliking Colonel Brandon,'" the first of which is "'he has threatened me with rain when I wanted it to be fine'" (61–62). Similarly, in Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay promise their son James a trip to the lighthouse if the weather cooperates:

> "But," said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, "it won't be fine."
>
> Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. (10)

Mr. Ramsay bluntly and repeatedly insists that because of the weather, a planned trip to the lighthouse will be impossible: "There wasn't the slightest possible chance that they could go to the Lighthouse tomorrow, Mr. Ramsay snapped out irascibly" (50). His son James responds with murderous rage because his father's self-assured weather prediction has threatened James's eagerly anticipated outing. Willoughby's similarity to James here suggests Willoughby's essential childishness.

MODERNISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AUSTEN'S INVINCIBILITY TO CRITICISM

Perhaps the most interesting response of modernist writers to Austen is their admiration of her airy superiority to criticism. In his 1938 preface to *Our Town*, playwright Thornton Wilder seems mystified by the genius evident in Austen's novels:

> Their events are excruciatingly unimportant; and yet, with *Robinson Crusoe*, they will probably outlast all Fielding, Scott, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Dickens. The art is so consummate that the secret is hidden; peer at them as hard as one may; shake them; take them apart; one cannot see how it is done. (*Collected Plays* 658)

He later wrote privately, "When you live in isolation, as I do, you read more attentively. I pick up paperback novels in bus-stations. *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*—doesn't hold up. *Return of the Native*—doesn't hold up. Jane Austen—incomparable" (*Selected Letters* 613). Pound seems equally in awe, writing to a poet friend about editing his work, "I am inclined to say in desperation, read it yourself and kick out every sentence that isn't as Jane Austen would have written it in prose. Which is, I admit, impossible" (*Letters* 308).

Women writers were particularly likely to see Austen as mocking her detractors. For example, Woolf notes that in response to the masculine sentence characteristic of the writings of her nineteenth-century male contemporaries, "Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it" (*Room* 77). Similarly, Mansfield wrote in a book review,

> Can we picture Jane Austen caring—except in a delightfully wicked way which we are sure the author of this book would not allow—that people said she was no lady, was not fond of children, hated animals, did not care a pin for the poor, could not have written about foreign parts if she tried, had no idea how a fox was killed, but rather thought it ran up a tree and hissed at the hound at the last—was, in short, cold, coarse, practically illiterate and without morality. Mightn't her reply have been, "Ah, but what about my novels?" (*Novels* 302)

Neither Woolf nor Mansfield shared Austen's perceived self-assurance. Both were plagued with self-doubt. Mansfield once wrote of Austen in a 1921 letter, "She makes modern episodic people like me, as far as I go, look very incompetent ninnies" (*Letters* 339).

Modernist scholar Liesl Olson has suggested of Virginia Woolf that

"[h]er interpretation of Austen reveals as much about Woolf's ethos and era as it does about Austen's" (70). That is true of the modernist writers as a whole: their interpretation of Austen reveals as much about the modernist ethos and the modernist era as it does about Austen's. As Johnson observes, "She is the contemporary of a generation whose ideals have blown up, a generation that respects the humor of little things, home things, not because they are darling, diminutive, or manageable, but more tragically because big bombastic things have been shown to be shams" (113).

Sexually freer than their ancestors, the writers of the 1920s and 1930s disparaged Austen's presumed celibacy; since the ease of transatlantic travel made it possible for many of them to travel extensively and even live as expatriates for a time, they often found the narrow scope of her novels exasperating. But they nevertheless regarded her as an icon of literary excellence, principally for her genius at characterization, and used her as a standard to whom virtually any modernist woman writer could reasonably be compared. In turn, those modernist women writers particularly admired what they saw (not altogether accurately) as Austen's unquestioned self-assurance. British and American writers of the 1920s and 1930s rebelled against the prudishness, conventionality, and nationalism of late Victorianism, and in their search for an alternate foremother, they could not have done better than to choose Jane Austen.

NOTES

1. See Shelly Dorsey and Clara Tuite on Austen's influence on E. M. Forster. Forster wrote in a 1949 essay, later republished in his book *Two Cheers for Democracy*, "One's favourite book is as elusive as one's favourite pudding, but there certainly are three writers whom I would like to have in every room, so that I can stretch out my hand for them at any moment. They are Shakespeare, Gibbon, and Jane Austen" (304).

2. While Mansfield's review comparing Woolf's novel to Austen's work might seem complimentary, her later comments on *Night and Day* in a letter to J. M. Murry suggest that she is appalled by Woolf's ability to ignore the changes wrought by the Great War—"the novel can't just leave the war out"—and that she believes that "Jane Austen could not write *Northanger Abbey* now—or if she did, I'd have none of her" (*Critical* 59). Ironically, Mansfield's own work has also been linked to Austen's (Boddy 170).

3. That comparison works both ways. A 2016 review of the film *Love and Friendship* describes director Whit Stillman as having "turned Jane Austen's early novella *Lady Susan* into a rapier-sharp comedy and unleashed its inner Dorothy Parker" (Muir).

4. Devoney Looser notes that "the amateur theater had a previously unrecognized impact on Austen's legacy, particularly in amplifying the themes of women's independence and in celebrating admirable domestic protest" (99). Those themes of independence and domestic protest might have been what motivated Fitzgerald's resentment.

Although dramatizations of *Pride and Prejudice* were especially popular, T. S. Eliot's first cousin, Eleanor Holmes Hinkley, wrote a 1919 play, *Dear Jane*, a dramatization of Austen's early life, and a scene from *Emma*, "An Afternoon with Mr. Woodhouse," in a performance of which, notably, modernist poet T. S. Eliot played Mr. Woodhouse (Looser 116).

5. Sarah Emsley suggests that *Lady Susan* influenced Wharton's 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*: "Undine and Lady Susan are both characters stripped down to the bone of essential self-interest."

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