

A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED?:  
(POST)FEMINIST REWRITINGS  
OF AUSTEN'S MARRIAGE PLOT

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## Summary

Nearly two centuries after she wrote them, Jane Austen's novels continue to be meaningful, particularly to women readers. In the last two decades, the Austen industry has produced over 150 woman-authored offshoot novels which engage with Austen's marriage plot. These largely romance-oriented Austenian intertexts bring about a critical re-evaluation of Austen's novels and, more importantly, how women today interpret them and apply these meanings to their everyday lives. My thesis examines eleven spinoffs intentionally "grafted" onto Austen's narratives, life, and world in order to examine what in (perceptions about) Austen and the marriage plot are so meaningful to certain readers today. A key argument I make is that these spinoffs serve as venues for informal feminist debates and what I refer to as (post)feminist gestures.

My introduction provides an overview of the spinoff phenomenon and introduces the approaches I use to analyze these Austenian palimpsests as sites of (post)feminist discourse. In my first three chapters, I utilize feminist narratology to analyze the spinoffs within the formal categories of sequel, retelling, and offshoot in order to draw out and identify patterns in the methods of and motivations for revisiting/reworking her fiction. In my fourth chapter, I harness cultural/reception theory to examine the spinoffs' "paratextual" and contextual aspects. Specifically, I look for what guides the (post)feminist reshaping of Austen in the ways in which authors and publishers mediate Austen to the reader and in the readers' responses to these rewritings.

Unified by their connection to Austen and their acknowledgment of popular culture's linking of her works with romance, these spinoffs nevertheless make divergent (post)feminist interventions. Austen's own depolemized yet political approach to gender debates of her time allows her rewriters to both celebrate and interrogate subjects like love, courtship and marriage, constructions of femaleness and femininity, and the desire to have both love and independence. Romance-oriented spinoffs and those that attempt to provide more than a fantasy escape call attention to the enduring appeal of the love-story aspects of Austen's fiction and to the reasons for this. While some merely identify the fixation on romance and the happy marriage ending, others question and problematize this or to seek to explain it and offer alternatives – not to Austen but to romantic readings of her. Thus, although many spinoffs lack literary merit, offer “unsanctioned” readings of Austen, and contain conflicting and sometimes problematic (post)feminist gestures, such rewritings are an important part of larger debates not just about Austen but about gender and reception that spans Austen's past and the contemporary moment.

## **Introduction: A Truth Universally Acknowledged?**

### **Rewriting Austen's "Truths" about Marriage**

Jane Austen, now canonical author of six novels that end in marriage, assessed the small scale of her writing by describing it as the “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory” on which she worked “with so fine a brush” (Austen-Leigh 130). Today, Austen’s ironically described “bits of ivory” have been expanded exponentially by scholars, enthusiasts, and those who wish to follow in her literary footsteps. Nearly two centuries after the publication of her novels, Austen’s work continues to be meaningful to modern-day readers and to women in particular. We are living in “a Jane Austen universe,” says Jennifer Frey in an article that surveys the booming industry of film adaptations of her novels, “Austeniana” gift items, and, more recently, the plethora of chick lit books (D04). *People* magazine describes as a “Jane Austen moment” (qtd. in Sikchi) this period in which twenty-first-century and (an imagined) nineteenth-century culture converge in fascinating ways. In a novel entitled *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, a modern-day woman trapped in 1813 sees Austen as the only constant in her life – “Men might come and go but Jane Austen [is] always there” (Rigler 33). Similarly, the modern protagonist of the television mini-series *Lost in Austen*, who enters the world of one of Austen’s novels, believes that the love story, manners, language, and courtesy of *Pride and Prejudice* have become part of who she is and what she wants.

This most popular of Austen’s novels begins with an ironic statement about marriage: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in

possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (1).<sup>1</sup> In Austen’s work, the so-called universal truth is an illusion maintained by a society driven by the forces of the marriage market, and her opening line subtly and playfully emphasizes economic motivations rather than love or desire. Intriguingly, however, products of the “Jane Austen industry” of the 1990s and 2000s seem to ignore Austen’s irony by suggesting that today’s readers have never been more eager to acknowledge this “universal truth.” This is evident in various manifestations of what scholars have called “Austenmania,” “the Jane Austen phenomenon,” or the “Austen boom” – the nineties and “noughties” resurgence of interest in all things Austen marked by an explosion of Austenian film adaptations, rewritings, and other commercial spinoffs.<sup>2</sup>

For example, in numerous highly romanticized film and television adaptations of Austen’s novels, a trend catalyzed by the 1995 BBC television miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, the courtship/marriage plot becomes the defining characteristic of Austen’s fiction. Kathryn Sutherland observes that adaptations of these novels tend to be “hypertrophically romantic,” often flattening “romance’s subtle gradations and [dissolving] any implied opposition to the mass genre whose devices Austen sought both to suppress and enlist” (354). Similarly, many cinematic modernizations/reworkings of these, such as *Clueless*, *Pride and Prejudice: A*

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<sup>1</sup> During Austen’s lifetime, *Pride and Prejudice* was the most popular of her novels “both with the public and with her family and friends” (Fergus, “The Professional” 22). Robert Morrison says it has “always been Jane Austen’s most popular novel” (1); other scholars, such as Louise Flavin, Robert P. Irvine, and Laurie Kaplan, concur. Results of a 2008 Jane Austen survey revealed *Pride and Prejudice* to be the favorite novel of 53% of 4,501 respondents, and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy to be the favourite heroine and hero (Kiefer). Nielsen BookScan, an electronic book sale counter, produced findings in 2002 that the novel sold as many as 110,000 copies in the US, not counting academic sales (Waldman).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Johnson in “Austen Cults and Cultures” and Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson in *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture* use the term “Austenmania,” and the latter refer to “the Austen phenomenon” (4). Deidre Lynch talks of an “Austen Boom” in her introduction to *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*.

*Latter-Day Comedy*, and *Bride and Prejudice*, are structured and marketed as romantic comedies; although they may all not end in marriage, the resolution they offer is the love story's successful culmination. Late-2000 biopics or fictionalized films of Austen's life, such as *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*, even take on a romantic angle by speculating on secret love affairs that may have inspired an author who never married. The former features an early romantic relationship, purportedly the basis of her courtship novels, while the latter portrays an older Austen reflecting upon her "lost loves" ("Masterpiece: *Miss Austen Regrets*").

The marginalization of Austen's irony becomes even more palpable in over 150 recently published continuations, rewritings, and other offshoots of Austen's works, which make courtship and marriage their focal point.<sup>3</sup> Numerous sequels, including Elizabeth Aston's six-volume *Mr. Darcy's Daughters* series and Rebecca Ann Collins's nine-volume *The Pemberley Chronicles* series, center on new courtship plots for Darcy offspring or minor characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and other Austen novels. Modernized retellings transport the romance to the present and transpose Austen's protagonists not only into typical chick lit heroines, but also into teenage girls (Rosie Rushton's *The Dashwood Sisters' Secrets of Love*), postgraduate students (Aimee Avery's *A Little Bit Psychic: Pride and Prejudice with a Modern Twist*), or elderly Jewish widows (Paula Marantz Cohen's *Jane Austen in Boca*) in search of love. Even when the story of an Austen novel is told from the point of view of a dog, such as in Kara Louise's *Master under Good Regulation*, the spotlight is on the role this canine protagonist plays in

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<sup>3</sup> This number is based on my own survey of spinoffs featured on the Amazon website as of August 2009.



“helping Darcy win back [Elizabeth’s] love.”<sup>4</sup> There are also at least five textual offshoots, all published in the 2000s, that involve the modern woman’s fantasy of traveling to Austen’s world and finding romance there.<sup>5</sup>

Whether they aim to or not, these Austenian spinoffs, written predominantly by women, bring about a critical re-evaluation of Austen’s treatment of gender issues, such as her creation of strong and intelligent women characters (Looser 6), her focus on female experiences “from a specifically female perspective” (Gilbert and Gubar 72), and the ways in which she has helped to shape female authorship today. Moreover, they engage with interpretations of Austen’s marriage plot which has been viewed by some as a sign of adherence to patriarchal and conventional structures and others as subtle and nuanced defiance of these. Similarities and differences between the present and Austen’s time with regard to women’s freedoms and restrictions, the “reading” of men, and the role of marriage in defining a woman’s identity are highlighted by what in Austen’s novels is reaffirmed, negotiated, or undermined by women who revisit her “world” via these spinoff texts.

Men, as well as women, read Austen’s novels, of course – in fact, Johnson talks of the “principally male enthusiasm” that comprised “Janeitism” or Austen idolatry of the early twentieth century (“The Divine Miss Jane” 30) – and many male critics over two centuries have provided seminal gendered readings of these. However, the modern audience of Austen’s works is a predominantly female one, and today’s Jane Austen industry has been mainly

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<sup>4</sup> The quoted phrase is taken from the back cover description of *Master under Good Regulation*.

<sup>5</sup> Besides *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, other time-travel spinoffs are Alexandra Potter’s *Me and Mr. Darcy*, Gwyn Cready’s *Seducing Mr. Darcy*, Laurie Brown’s *What Would Jane Austen Do?*, and Mandy Hubbard’s young adult novel, *Prada and Prejudice*.

oriented toward women.<sup>6</sup> Of the 42,000 visitors to the Jane Austen Centre, for instance, 90% are women (Morris). Respondents of Kiefer's 2008 Austen Survey were "overwhelmingly female," representing 96% of the total 4,501 participants. Women are targeted by web pages like "The Men of Austen," which offers profile information on these characters, including their age, income, profession, and "turn-ons" and "turn-offs"; by a quiz-type application on Facebook that asks "Which Jane Austen Heroine Are You?"; by a *Pride and Prejudice* board game, the aim of which is to race to the church and be the first to marry; and by Austen-inspired underwear that declares the wearer to be "the future Mrs. Darcy." Moreover, many of the online venues for "Janeites" or Austen aficionados who wish to express their views on Austen, such as *The Republic of Pemberley*, *AustenBlog*, *Janeites*, and *Austen.com*, as well as the virtual homes of the various official Jane Austen Societies are, notably, managed by women.<sup>7</sup>

A blatantly woman-oriented manifestation of Austenmania – the phenomenon of women rewriting Austen for women readers – and the motivations behind this are the subjects of my study. I believe that Austen's "recyclability" cannot be attributed either solely to commercial motivations or solely to the cultural sophistication associated with her name.<sup>8</sup> While commercial concerns undoubtedly play an influential role in this repackaging of Austen, I hope to look beyond assumptions about commodification and

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<sup>6</sup> In an article surveying Austenian spinoffs, Lynch is cited for the point that: "100 years ago, Austen was read mostly by men. Now it's a woman's thing because of the way the films have been marketed" (qtd. in Morris).

<sup>7</sup> The *AustenBlog* staff is composed entirely of women, and only one man's name appears in the volunteer committee that operates *The Republic of Pemberley*. The manager of the website of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) is a woman, and most of the association's officers and board members are women. Paul Terry Walhus is the founder of *Austen.com*, but mostly women's names are posted under site management.

<sup>8</sup> Still potent today, says John Carey of *The Sunday Times*, is the "belief that a liking for Austen is an infallible 'test' of your taste, intellect and general fitness for decent company."

consumerism, at the significance of the “game of cultural production” (Bowles 21) that Austenian paraliterature plays. Hence, I examine a representative selection of textual Austenian spinoffs written by women – eleven novels intentionally “grafted” onto Austen’s narratives, life, and world – as spaces of present-day women’s discourse on love, marriage, and identity. I look at how these textual offshoots specifically engage with “stock” elements of Austen’s narratives – her marriage-endings, her love stories, her iconic pairings, and (sometimes) her irony – to join these with new material that attempts to fill her gaps and silences, to flesh out the partial/limited view she provides of her world, and even to reconstruct aspects of her life.

I do not set out to evaluate the admittedly questionable aesthetic merits of these Austenian spinoffs, many of which have been labelled as derivative, formulaic, or even “trashy.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, the key intervention of my research is its interest in the cultural significance of these texts as meeting grounds and sites of struggle for women who may not necessarily affiliate themselves with feminist movements but who clearly have something to say about what they want as women. That is, it looks at the concept of feminism and its forms and discourses that emerge from these spinoff novels. The process of rewriting Austen becomes part of identity-building and women’s canon-formation, so I ask what in Austen and the marriage plot (or in perceptions of these) are so meaningful to women today. What do these spinoffs take out of Austen and why are such products important? What do they say specifically about the desires and anxieties of women in the present?

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<sup>9</sup> Lynch refers to a general impression of textual spinoffs as “uniformly derivative” (“Sequels” 161), while Judy Simons describes these as “reductive renditions” (36). James R. Kincaid gives a scathing review of the Austen industry, calling spinoffs “rat-bottom awful” and “in the best tradition of tastelessness,” saying that they lack “the artful Austenian bile,” and suggesting that they are more “pleasure indulged” than “felt need.”

### **Austenian Spinoffs as (Post)feminist “Women’s Fiction”**

Austen’s ambiguous treatment of the role of love and marriage in a woman’s life has led her to be described as a feminist, a conservative, a proto-feminist, a partial or unrealized feminist, or a “sneaky” feminist (Looser 4-6). As Claire Harman points out in *Jane’s Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, Austen is “cited with equal approval by feminists and misogynists” (xvi). Claudia L. Johnson importantly suggests in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, that Austen used a strategy of apparent silence on political matters, including other women writers’ arguments about gender in the wake of the 1790s revolution, depolemized debates of her era (xxv).<sup>10</sup> I believe that Austen’s enabling “silence” and ambiguity appeal to a contemporary audience, which I shall call “(post)feminist,” and that the spinoffs they consume similarly engage with earlier gender debates in non-confrontational or controversial ways.

This term describes women who produce and consume these 1990s and 2000s spinoffs and who are exposed via various media to the following factors or influences: consciousness about gender roles and about feminist movements that address discrimination in various ways, anti-feminist backlash (sometimes referred to as “postfeminism”), and pervasive images in film, television, and print media of women who aim to “have it all” – love, marriage, and a successful career – and who authoritative, powerful, and sometimes sexually aggressive, as well as still delighted with feminine accoutrements.<sup>11</sup> By

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson observes that “Austen was able not to depoliticize her work—for the political implications of her work is implicit in the subject matter itself—but rather to depolemize it” (*Jane Austen* xxv).

<sup>11</sup> Popular woman-centered television series in the 1990s and 2000s, for example, are *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, *Lipstick Jungle*, and *Desperate Housewives*, shows with powerful

revisiting Austen, these women writers and readers affirm, question, and negotiate social conventions regarding women's choices and the institution of marriage. Because marriage undeniably remains an act that powerfully influences women's financial well-being and social status – and the majority of the women who read these spinoffs will, in fact, marry – these mediations are of enormous sociological importance. It is this reality that provides one key connection between Austen's discourse on the choice of marriage partner and many of her imitators' often escapist, but sometimes also critical, explorations of romance and marriage for women today.

Some spinoffs celebrate the fantasy escape that, for some fans, is the appeal of Austen's world. Their writers react to what they perhaps perceive as essentialist marriage-related tenets of first- and second-wave feminism which, while aimed at ending gender inequalities and the oppression of women, have sometimes been viewed as arguing for an oppressive universal female identity. For instance, there are perceptions that feminists advocate a break with men, marriage, and traditional roles as wives and mothers, or that they believe that independence and empowerment require “a separation between the trappings of femininity (in terms of romance, family, dress, behaviour, desire) and the feminist principles of equality” (Naranch 35).<sup>12</sup> Certain Austenian spinoffs affirm the relevance for modern women of the love quest in Austen's novels and of the therapeutic escape that these texts provide. Yet there are others, too, that problematize marriage as the organizing principle of women's lives.

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and ultra-feminine protagonists whose adventures offer their audience with vicarious thrills and a strong dose of escapism.

<sup>12</sup> In her survey of feminist thought, Rosemarie Tong speaks of “radical-cultural feminists” who argue for women's “escape [from] the confines of heterosexuality” and the creation of “an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, autoeroticism, or lesbianism” (3). Those that Tong calls “radical-libertarian feminists” believe that “biological motherhood drains women physically and psychologically” (3), and some are eager for the process of pregnancy to be replaced by other means of gestation (4).

A number respond in a self-aware and knowing fashion to readings or critiques of Austen's marriage plot and of women's reception practices. Some explore alternatives to heterosexual romances, such as relationships of motherhood and sisterhood, homosexual pairings, or quests in the work arena – and somehow seek these in or work these into Austen.

Many of the more recent textual offshoots have also begun to explore the ways in which Austen is read and received by contemporary women and the role her novels fulfil in these women's lives. As they converse with Austen, certain texts dialogue with popular discussions of feminism and how these might relate to Austen's views on gender as represented by scholars or the popular media. For instance, some novels feature Austen-inspired heroines who refer to Susan Faludi and Camille Paglia, social critics whose names are associated with the term "postfeminism." Faludi, author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, a text that defends the women's liberation movement from media-driven attacks, is referenced by the protagonist of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, who pretends she has read the "five-hundred-page feminist treatise" (14) in order to impress a man with her cultural sophistication. Paglia, a self-described "dissident feminist" (*Vamps and Tramps* 431) who has also been labeled post-feminist (Gamble 37), anti-feminist (Jones 314), and "feminist impersonator" (Hammer and Kellner 219), is confusingly compared to an elitist nineteenth-century woman by the protagonist of *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*. Such references show that certain spinoff authors are conscious of feminist discourse at least in popular, if not academic, forms and that these play a role in the (post)feminist gestures that their texts make.

My use of the term “(post)feminist” must be clarified to explain my own engagement with gender, since I view these rewritings of Austen as “expressing and shaping the social context that produced them” (Tompkins 200). Movements in feminism and the field of gender have unquestionably influenced these Austenian spinoffs, whether directly or indirectly. First- and second-wave feminist groups have done much to change the lives of many women today, and the advances achieved by these are often taken as “given” by a generation of women who grew up with the gains fought for by these earlier feminists, such as the right to vote, equal rights in education and the workplace, (theoretically) egalitarian marriage partnerships, and a greater consciousness of the mechanisms of the “sex/gender system” (Rubin 52).<sup>13</sup> What is important to note is that by the 1990s – the beginning of the surge in the adaptation and rewriting of Austen – “feminism had become part of popular consciousness” (O’Shaughnessy and Stadler 290), and a new phase, confusingly called “post-feminism,” “postfeminism,” or “third wave feminism,” had also emerged.<sup>14</sup>

These terms have been used interchangeably but also as distinct and separate terms within the contemporary context in which Austenian spinoffs are produced and consumed. Whether or not they directly engage with feminist Austen scholarship on the marriage plot, these spinoff writers are influenced by a cultural context in which feminist and postfeminist/third wave feminist debates about gender roles are pervasive. As generational terms,

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<sup>13</sup> The first wave of feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century involved the questioning of women’s rights, duties, and responsibilities as well as struggles for the vote, while the second wave of the late 1960s and 1970s continued to address inequalities in education, employment, and media representation and led to further reflections in the 1980s and 1990s on gender relations and sources of oppression.

<sup>14</sup> For media examples of this phase, see Bonnie J. Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*.

“postfeminist” and “third wave feminist” describe women born in the wake of 1970s women’s liberation movements (Gillis, Howie, and Munford xxii). In other words, they have grown up with the awareness and benefits of first- and second-wave feminist struggles, may agree with certain goals of feminism, may be critical of some of its totalizing discourses, or may reject feminism altogether.

Secondly, both terms have also been used as labels for women’s writing that has emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, which Lisa Yaszek defines as “the search on the part of women creative writers for new narratives that make sense of women’s lives beyond those already identified by feminist scholars.” This meaning entails a challenging of earlier definitions of “woman” – perceived as having been influenced by the second wave – and allows for a celebration of her in plural and liberatory terms, a celebration of sexuality, and a reclaiming of previously denigrated signifiers of femininity. Cris Mazza, editor of *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, describes such writing as the products of new women authors whose styles and perspectives reveal a confidence to “honestly assess and define themselves without having to live up to standards imposed by either a persistent patriarchal world or the old feminist insistence that female characters achieve self-empowerment” (104-5). Diane Goodman’s assertions, that it “introduces multi-leveled ideas of feminism – . . . historical, political, social, economic” and that it is “funny, sad, dramatic, mean, indulgent, moving, scary,” similarly stress plurality and multiplicity in women’s writing.

Thirdly, these terms describe contemporary theoretical outlooks regarding the role and identity of women that exist along with the outlook/s of



second wave feminism. Because its prefix suggests that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer necessary, the term “post-feminism” has had a history of negative use from its beginnings in the late 1980s until the present. Faludi and other critics see it, in fact, as the popular media’s framing of an anti-feminist backlash through its portrayal of feminism as irrelevant and passé. In *Backlash*, Faludi critiques how the term was used to signify a “new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (xix), and cultural theorist Angela McRobbie argues that post-feminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (59).<sup>15</sup>

However, the term can also describe a positive genealogical (and perhaps palimpsestic) relationship to feminism, a usage which has similarly diffused into popular culture representations of women’s plurality and difference. Critic Ann Brooks defines postfeminism as “the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” (4).<sup>16</sup> Other proponents call the outlook “third wave feminism” to emphasize its valuing of “contradiction, multiplicity and difference” over the second wave’s “essentialism, universalism and naturalism” (Gillis, Howie, and Munford xxiv). Rosemarie Tong’s description in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* of the aim of third-wave feminists is particularly

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<sup>15</sup> In addition, Deborah Seigel talks of media-promoted perceptions of post-feminism which suggest “that the gains forged by previous generations of women have so completely pervaded all tiers of our social existence that those still ‘harping’ about women’s victim status are embarrassingly out of touch” (qtd. in Gillis, Howie, and Munford xxvi).

<sup>16</sup> Brooks adds that postfeminism is “about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change” (4).

relevant to my study; this goal is to “rethink the category ‘woman/women’ and to “answer the ‘woman question’ – ‘Who is she and what does she want?’ – in ways that it has never been answered before” (9). Pertinent, as well, is a key characteristic of the third wave or (post)feminism: it is seen as “less politically active” than its predecessors, tending to be “expressed more through popular culture than through petitions and marches,” which has led to its being derided by second wavers as ineffective (Dole 59). I believe that these non-polemical articulations and gestures remain political and are reflective of how many women today think of gender.

In order to encompass all three dimensions – generational, literary, and theoretical – I use the adjective “(post)feminist” to describe the discourse of Austenian spinoffs. This orients the focus towards the producers and consumers of these texts who may support the empowering of women and the addressing of gender inequalities, but who may also challenge the application of certain second-wave feminist principles to their everyday lives or to their identities.<sup>17</sup> The term “(post)feminist” is also useful for positioning my study, firstly, to focus on women as producers of textual meaning. Secondly, it acknowledges that these texts may be informed – albeit in an informal, non-academic way for many – by certain second-wave critics’ readings of the marriage plot, by third-wave readings that harness queer theory, reception theory, and by cultural theory. Thirdly, it seeks an understanding of gender identity beyond the confines of earlier feminisms by utilizing tools and

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<sup>17</sup> These writers (and their readers) are very likely aware of the central issues of feminism, such as its core thesis “that the relationship between the sexes is one of inequality or oppression” and its goal to identify and remedy the cause/s of that inequality (Macey 122), but they may not necessarily be aware of its academic forms.

terminologies from models of criticism – narratology, cultural studies, and reception study – that have been critiqued for their gender blindness.

### **Austenian Spinoffs and (Post)feminist Discourse**

The terms “Austenian spinoffs,” “rewritings of Austen,” and “Austenian paraliterature” refer here to: (1) sequels to Austen’s novels that reopen the marriage plot, (2) retellings/variants/modernizations of Austen’s novels that rehash or transform the marriage plot, and (3) offshoots grafted onto Austen’s life and “world” that engage with the marriage plot. My study does not attempt to sample the more than 1,500 unpublished and often anonymously authored works archived on the “Jane Austen Fan Fiction Archive” of *FanFiction.Net* (as well as those from other websites).<sup>18</sup> In order to concentrate on narrative strategies, I limit my materials to fictional spinoffs of novel length and thus exclude other textual products of the Austen industry such as short stories, plays, poems, nonfiction guides, advice manuals, cookbooks, quotation collections, and quiz books. Finally, my study’s exemplar texts represent more than just passing allusions to Austen or brief quotations from her works but rather intentional and direct affiliations with the author via an intertextual grafting onto her novels, life, and world.

I use Julia Kristeva’s coined term “intertextuality” here in its restricted sense to describe “a relation between texts in which one cites, rewrites or transforms the other” (McQuillan 320) or, as narratologist Gerard Genette defines it, “any relationship uniting a text B . . . to an earlier text A . . . upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (*Palimpsests* 5).

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<sup>18</sup> As of June 2010, FanFiction.Net had an archive of 1,325 fan texts for *Pride and Prejudice*, 188 for *Emma*, 95 for *Sense and Sensibility*, 64 for *Persuasion*, 25 for *Mansfield Park*, and 17 for *Northanger Abbey*. There are also dozens of Austenian fan fiction crossovers on the site.

This notion of intertextuality has brought about new ways of thinking about literature, and my study would not be possible without its larger implications about reading, such as Roland Barthes' poststructuralist use of the concept to argue for the role of the reader as "the ultimate creator of textual meaning" (275) and other "freeings" of literary texts by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish.<sup>19</sup> However, I am interested less in the intertextual nature of all writing and more in specific types of intertextual relationships. Genette's structuralist and more circumscribed application of the concept to examine imitations and transformations of texts, in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, has yielded helpful tools for close reading which I use in this study.

Genette posits two functions of intertextuality: a commercial function of responding to social demands and an aesthetic/creative function, "whereby a writer leans on one or more preceding works to construct that which will give expression to his thought or his artistic sensibility" (*Palimpsests* 395). As an "an infinitely exploitable global brand" (Harman xvii), Austen the icon becomes an ideal "intertext" for aspiring and even established ones. There exists a ready-made audience made up of readers of her novels or consumers of the film adaptations with a shared knowledge that may be tapped in innumerable ways. But rewriters of Austen also choose her because certain formal characteristics of her excellent fiction appeal to them: her wit and economy in writing, her brilliant plotting, and her reticent style. These

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<sup>19</sup> See "The Death of the Author" for Barthes' arguments about textual interpretation. See Foucault's "What is an Author?" for his identification of the "author function" (131) as being part of the structure but not necessarily interpretation of a text. See "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response" for Iser's assertions about the realization of a text through "the reader's participation and response" (196). See "Interpreting the Varorium" for Fish's conceptualization of the role of "interpretive communities" and "interpretive strategies" in constituting the properties and assigning the intentions of texts (207).

rewriters harness intertextuality to express beliefs, views, and readings of the world *through* Austen as they attempt to “lean on” these elements they admire. They build upon what she has already done, what people know (or think they know) about her, and their own perceptions of her. Commercial appeal cannot be the sole motivation for using Austen’s work as intertext, and the palimpsests’ discourse attests to this. Each spinoff reveals a different motivation for its writer’s romantic reconfiguration of Austen, from fixation on the love plot, stylistic homage, sincere attempts at imitation, to ironic commentary on and subversion of the marriage plot that has come to represent her work among mass audiences.

Other scholars have taken the study of relationships between source and spinoff text further by investigating motivations behind practices of adaptation, appropriation, rewriting, interpretations, and sequels.<sup>20</sup> For example, Julie Sanders’ *Adaptation and Appropriation* looks at the significance of the “capacity for creativity, . . . comment and critique” (160) of various rewritings, while Elizabeth Kraft and Debra Taylor Bourdeau, editors of *On Second Thought: Updating the Eighteenth Century Text*, zero in on “the desire to reinvestigate and rewrite an existing work of literature” (11). Critics have also analyzed the literary import of certain rewritings of works by canonical authors like Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens. Academic attention towards retellings like J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*, now canonized as postcolonial and postmodern novels, has led to significant discoveries about narrative strategies and techniques for rethinking

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<sup>20</sup> While Genette makes rigorous and detailed comparisons of intertexts or “hypotexts” (source texts) and “hypertexts” (spinoff texts), he is often more focused on describing the textual relationship/s between them than on closely questioning their significance.

constructions of the past.<sup>21</sup> Although I do not claim the same literary merit for the majority of Austenian spinoffs, there is much to say about their sociological import. While they may not add much to the conversation about the original novels, they contribute significantly to that about Austen and women today. Exploring their cultural significance may even lead to the discovery of texts deserving of critical acclaim, as has happened in adaptation-focused analysis of film and television incarnations of Austen's novels. The latter, at least, have been thoroughly examined from various perspectives in studies such as John Wiltshire's *Recreating Jane Austen*, *Jane Austen in Hollywood* (edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield), *Jane Austen on Screen* (edited by Gina and Andrew F. Macdonald), *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s* (edited by Eckart Voigts-Virchow), Sutherland's *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*, and *The Cinematic Jane Austen: Essays on the Filmic Sensibility of the Novels* (edited by David Monaghan, Ariane Hudelet, and Wiltshire).<sup>22</sup>

This is not the case with Austenian rewritings. Cinematic reworkings like Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* and Fielding's retelling, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, seem to have fared well in academic discussions.<sup>23</sup> Most other textual offshoots, however, are commonly grouped together in studies and discussed in general terms. Moreover, reviews of the category often center on how they

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<sup>21</sup> These are retellings of, respectively, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Dickens' *Great Expectations*. For examples of scholarship on reworkings see *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms* by Cora Kaplan and *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, edited by Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann.

<sup>22</sup> See Pamela Gibson's "Jane Austen on Screen – Overlapping Dialogues, Different Takes" for a review of anthologies from the "Austen on Screen" discipline.

<sup>23</sup> Scholarship on *Clueless* includes Suzanne Ferriss's "Emma Becomes Clueless," Esther Sonnet's "From *Emma* to *Clueless*: Taste, Pleasure, and the Scene of History," and Nora Nachumi's "'As If!' Translating Austen's Ironic Narrator to Film." For a survey of feminist criticism of Fielding's novel, see Leah Guenther's "*Bridget Jones's Diary*: Confessing Post-feminism" and Kelly A. Marsh's "Contextualizing Bridget Jones."

fall short of Austen's greatness. For example, in "What Happened Next? Or The Many Husbands of Georgiana Darcy," Kathleen Glancy measures revisitings of Austen's world in terms of fidelity and credibility. She writes a wryly humorous treatise on ridiculous "inaccuracies" of the sequels, many of which she views as containing characters and events that Jane Austen would "never have allowed" (Glancy). This assessment, however, misses the point of what makes these spinoffs' discourse so intriguing – modern women's "unsanctioned" interpretation of Austen and what these reveal about their outlook.

Simons makes a more interesting assertion in her essay "Classics and Trash: Reading Austen in the 1990s," that the "literary continuation" or "classic sequel" (34) is often unsuccessful because its reductive reworking "effect[s] a clash between the historicized perspective and the imposition of an incompatible postmodern cultural awareness" (36). Yet while very insightful about 1990s reading practices, Simons' essay does not cover important developments in the following decade. A promising study by Deidre Lynch, entitled "Sequels" (a term she extends to continuations, retellings, and modernizations), classifies these based on two motivations: a desire to continue Austen's stories and to return to "the world of Jane Austen" (163).<sup>24</sup> Lynch asserts that the sequel is both conservative in its fulfillment of the readers' demand for more of Austen and radically challenging of traditional "convictions about the boundedness of texts and mechanisms of narrative closure" in its playful recombination of Austenian elements and in its "refusal to give Austen the last word" ("Sequels" 166-7). These observations are very

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<sup>24</sup> For this essay, the scholar's name is given as Deidre Shauna Lynch.

useful, but Lynch focuses more on the implications of the general phenomenon in her unfortunately all too brief essay than on studying what specific sequels say about contemporary women's engagements with Austen.

Harman does not tackle Austenian paraliterature at length in her survey of Austenmania, but she does assert that romantic spinoffs contribute to "the contemporary debate about marriage, morals, and female empowerment" (xx). Rebecca Traister's *Salon* article, "I Dream of Darcy," offers more specific insights into gender-related motivations behind the recent boom of texts in which "the satiric acid of Austen's work seems to have been drained," she says, "and replaced with 100-proof, widely accessible romance." Traister wonders why single women fantasize "about a period during which their freedoms were so limited," pointing out that consumers of such spinoffs forget that Austen did not write in the Romantic style, treated "mushy female infatuation" in humorous ways, and died single in her early 40s after a life of "constant financial jeopardy." Traister's observations, garnered from interviews with Austen academics, JASNA members, and spinoff authors, shed light on the paradoxical appeal of Austen's world as simultaneously empowering and disempowering to women and on the motivation for returning to Austen's world as a backward sort of fantasy escape. Shannon Hale, author of a *Austenland*, a novel about an Austen-themed resort, in fact, observes that it is "completely ironic and disturbing to [her] as a feminist that [she] still daydream[s] about" Austen's era (qtd. in Traister). Academic Rachel Brownstein speculates that because Austen's books feature "bright, funny and not-always-beautiful women" (Traister) as successful protagonists,



modern readers “get a sense that [they] can be sexy and self-expressive in a way that women feel they're not allowed to be” (qtd. in Traister).

Three master's theses have explored specific Austenian spinoffs but with different purposes than mine. Brittany A. Meng's “The Enduring Austen Heroine: Self-Awareness and Moral Maturity in Jane Austen's *Emma* and in Modern Fan Fiction” is less interested in reasons for the works' enduring appeal than in assessing the spinoff heroines' consistency with the morality of those in the original novels and the fan texts' adherence to “the model of growth” (2) purportedly promoted by Austen. More pertinent to my study is Ursula Marie Gross's suggestion in “What Happens Next: Jane Austen's Fans and their Sequels,” that Janeites “identify with or seek out” certain elements in Austen (13) but transform these in their sequels into forms that are more “culturally resonant” (9) to them. Like Gross, Julia Wilhlem seeks to understand who Austen is to her rewriters. Her “Appropriations of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in Contemporary British Fiction” examines differences between Austen's novel and three chick-it reworkings of Austen's appealing love formula to evoke modern authors' “contrasting ideologies, artistic intentions, motivations,” as well as their perception of and literary approach to the original novel (19).<sup>25</sup> However, in their selectivity – Gross focuses on sequels and Wilhelm on modern retellings – these studies cannot fully account for the variety of ways in which contemporary women writers revisit Austen and do not aim to explain why they attempt to reconfigure Austen's marriage plot.

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<sup>25</sup> Wilhelm studies Fielding's bestselling *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Melissa Nathan's *Pride, Prejudice and Jasmin Field*, and Kate Fenton's gender-reversed *Lions and Liquorice*.

Tamara Wagner's essay, "Rewriting Sentimental Plots: Sequels to Novels of Sensibility by Jane Austen and *Another Lady*" also offers insightful analyses of specific Austenian spinoffs. Wagner asserts that spinoffs set in Austen's world "intriguingly reverse" the sentimentalism that Austen parodied and eschewed "by dismantling the concept of the happy marriage as an ending, while simultaneously reinstating the sentimentalism and also often cloying sentimental language" (216). However, Wagner, who includes prequels and retellings in her definition of sequels, limits her study to novels set in the early nineteenth century. Although I draw upon her useful observations for my chapter on Austenian sequels, I believe that a more representative sample of rewritings of Austen is necessary and can reveal greater insights about the cultural work these do and the narrative strategies they employ.

Like other contemporary products of the "Jane Austen industry," Austenian paraliterature mediates "between a postfeminist context acutely aware of gender roles" and "classic novels of courtship celebrating male and female harmony" (Pucci and Thompson 5). I believe that these textual mediations between past and present reflect the multiple feminisms and gender negotiations of the 1990s and 2000s. In seeking to understand why Austen is a fertile site for imitation or transformation, my research distinguishes among what I see as three types of spinoff novels: (1) those that celebrate the author as an icon or signifier of romance and the marriage plot but fail or refuse to account for her ironic handling of these themes; (2) those that attempt to employ both Austen's iconicity (how she has come to represent romance and marriage) and irony; and (3) those that question Austen's treatment of love

and marriage or the way she has been interpreted to have treated these themes by contemporary women.

Of prime importance and appeal to some rewriters are the courtship process undergone by an admirable couple who are destined for each other, the obstacles they must overcome, and the happy ending provided by their union at the end of the story. These authors seek to recreate this formula, essentially writing historical or contemporary love stories but using the Austen “brand” – made up of her recognizable name, characters and plot elements – and positioning their stories in her world while not necessarily or successfully reproducing her style. They exploit Austen enthusiasts’ shared knowledge of the original novels and popular film adaptations, specifically their familiarity with and nostalgia for a world in which gender roles were seemingly less complicated, and in which lively and witty heroines marry for love. Importantly, while these spinoffs succeed commercially, they are most likely to fail stylistically. Austen’s absolute “narrative authority” and self-contained “beauty of expression” cannot be equaled (Miller 1-2) by these lesser writers who seek to imitate it. Thus, the Austen industry is fueled in part by the fact that new – and doomed – attempts at replication must continually be made.

Other authors rewrite Austen in order to engage with her social commentary on marriage and women’s roles. They adapt Austen’s plots, irony, and comedy to negotiate these issues for a contemporary audience. Austen’s works, then, become prime vehicles for these narrative interventions/reworkings because of the tension between romance and irony in them. Moreover, since her marriage-endings come about as the result of her heroines’ active choices within the limits of patriarchy and their cultural

context, writers of this type of spinoff can take up both a critical yet hopeful perspective. Still others rewrite Austen in response to both popular readings of her and to ongoing debates in academia about her treatment of gender issues. Some write a knowing and nuanced defense of marriage as a viable choice for women, others provide alternatives to heterosexual pairings, “queering” Austen by questioning heteronormative readings of her novels, and some critique the marriage obsession of most products of the Austen industry and the limited way in which her novels have been read as romances.

Austenian spinoffs are narrative representations of women’s lives – written by Austen and then rewritten by other woman writers. As such, they are, as feminist narratologist Susan Lanser asserts, “profoundly (if never simply) referential – and influential – in their representation of gender relations” (677). In my first three chapters, I examine these texts on the level of narrative discourse or “the set of narrated events and situations as they are presented to the reader” (McQuillan 317) for inscriptions of cultural constructions of gender. More simply, I look at the “mode of presentation of the story” (McQuillan 323) or how these stories with plots, characters, and themes borrowed from Austen are presented to the reader in order to disclose the reasons behind such revisions. I compare and contrast how marriage is used as a plot device and organizer of meaning in Austen’s and the spinoffs’ narratives, paying particular attention to their beginnings and endings, since these “provide a framework for fictional patterns” and “establish the tone, atmosphere and conflict of each novel” (Kuhawara 54).

While the beginning “provides narrative with a forward-looking intention” and “gives rise to a number of possibilities” (Prince 10) via its

introduction of conflicts and of possibilities and paths that the plot can take, the ending defines any action in the plot (Welsh 1). The meaning-making processes of contemporary rewritings of Austen can most clearly be seen in these discursive elements, and in the specific possibilities that new beginnings and endings give rise to via their framing of the narrative, setting up of readers' expectations, and organization of the texts' meanings. Via analysis of these elements, I show that these texts serve as spaces of (post)feminist discourse in the 1990s and 2000s by reopening, reconfiguring and, at times, completely scrapping the marriage plot – by taking an icon of romance and reincarnating her as a vessel for contemporary desires. I make a gender-conscious examination of the stylistic choices employed by these spinoffs, for instance at the implications of two other discursive changes that negotiate the significance of marriage in these spinoffs: “transfocalization” or a change in “the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented” (Prince 31) and “proximation” or the temporal, geographical, or social updating of action in a source text (Genette, *Palimpsests* 304).

### **Revisiting Austen's Marriage Plot: Sequels, Retellings, and Offshoots**

I have chosen eleven textual spinoffs by published women writers and released between 1990 and 2010, a period which has seen a surge in Austenian spinoff production and a rise in Austen's stock.<sup>26</sup> To represent the central locations of Austenmania, I have selected novels published in the United States and the United Kingdom, the physical “homes” of the largest Jane Austen societies (although branches in Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina

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<sup>26</sup> Although Austenian spinoffs have been around since the nineteenth century, the rewriting was sparse and scattered before 1990. Based on my research, the 1990s and 2000s sequels, retellings, and offshoots far outnumber these pre-1990s revisiting of Austen's novels.

were founded later). Written by women from these countries, these texts are also marketed and distributed globally in other English-speaking nations. Because my focus is on globally disseminated and popular spinoffs, I must neglect postcolonial rewritings of Austen in other languages (which I cannot translate) and from other locales, such as Krushanaji Gokhale's *Aajapasun Pannas Varshani*, written in Marathi; Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Swami (The Husband)*, written in Bengali; Pak Wansö's *A Faltering Afternoon and Pride and Fantasy*, both written in Korean; and Vikram Seth's English-language novel, *A Suitable Boy*, which is described as having "an Austenian form and an Indian substance" (Mohapatra and Nayak 195).<sup>27</sup> The first four of these texts fall outside the publication time period specified for my research (they were published respectively in 1913, 1915, 1977, and 1980) and have not reached a global audience; the fifth, although written in 1994 and disseminated more widely, is by a male author. I also do not tackle sequels to Austen's unpublished novel *Lady Susan*, continuations of her fragments *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*, and spinoffs of her juvenilia because these are less popular and lesser known works among mass audiences. Moreover, they gave rise to only a small fraction of spinoffs most of which were produced before 1990.

In the first two chapters of my study, I tackle sequels and retellings grafted onto Austen's most revisited (Lynch, "Sequels" 162) and spinoff-inspiring novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*.<sup>28</sup> At least eighty percent of those written since 1990 are sequels to or retellings of these two novels which share certain "family resemblances." Both feature a witty, strong-minded

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<sup>27</sup> *Swami* is referenced by Nalini Natarajan in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*.

<sup>28</sup> Based on my survey of these texts (as of August 2009), more than a hundred and fifty spinoffs have been written since 1990; at least 110 of these are spinoffs of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*.

heroine, who is initially not in love with her hero and who even defies him, who remains, until directly told of it, unaware of his affections, and who does not need to rush into marriage. Elizabeth refuses an offer because she does not love the man and is surprised at Charlotte's "mercenary" marriage, while Emma's wealth and social status allow her to declare that she will never marry.<sup>29</sup> Described as "feisty" in comparison with Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot, these two heroines also remain relatively unscathed by a patriarchal society and have relative freedom to move around within it. Unlike lively counterparts such as Marianne Dashwood, Mary Crawford, and Lady Susan, they undergo no harsh societal chastening or punishment. Because Elizabeth and Emma appeal to readers as independent and unconventional women with greater freedom and fewer sources of oppression than most of Austen's other heroines, contemporary women readers of sequels may wish to see these characters face and overcome new challenges in new roles as wives, mothers, career women, etc. It helps, as well, that Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse display almost pre-feminist confidence and independence that seem more suited to the present than to Austen's time. Thus, these characters become convenient vessels for the perspective/s and fantasies of contemporary women in sequels that take up where Austen left off.

Sequels to Austen's fictions reopen the woman's narrative to begin again after her marriage. They allow for new goals, conflicts, and choices to be conceived while also allowing a fantasy return to Austen's world. In chapter 1, I examine Linda Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* and Emma

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<sup>29</sup> Their partners also rank highly among Austen aficionados as romantic heroes, and Darcy is usually the favorite hero based on formal and informal surveys (see Kiefer's survey and the "The Men of Austen" on the PBS *Masterpiece Theatre* website).

Tennant's *Emma in Love*, both of which focus on the marital lives and conflicts of popular Austen couples. I show how, on the one hand, these seem to merely extend and repeat the marriage plot, fulfilling today's readers' demands for more "Austen-branded" (her characters but no longer necessarily *in character*) romance while satisfying curiosity about what happened next to the Darcys and the Knightleys. On the other hand, I explore how these texts literally challenge the closure of the marriage endings which ostensibly resolve Austen's narratives and attempt to explore what lies beneath the happy endings that were Austen's "cover story" for more subversive feminist plots.<sup>30</sup> The after-the-wedding sequel, I believe, offers an "Austen with a difference," an intriguing combination of a conservative relationship to the original and a playful openness to quests apart from marriage or to sexual obstacles that Austen did not write about.

Other organizing principles besides marriage emerge in these texts, such as motherhood, sisterhood, or work/career, perhaps fulfilling another type of need for their readers – to open up Elizabeth's and Emma's destinies to new quests, concerns, and conflicts. Berdoll's sequel expands the marriage plot by exploring the anxieties of married life as Elizabeth continues to develop her relationship with Darcy, deals with being landed gentry and mistress of Pemberley, and feels the pressure of producing an heir to the estate. As it introduces new conflicts, it analyzes the Darcys' superior union by comparing it with those of other characters, such as Lydia and Wickham, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Jane and Mr. Bingley, and Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins.

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<sup>30</sup> In chapter 5 of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, the authors call Austen's happy endings a "cover story" (154) for more subversive feminist plots. Other critics have also argued that Austen's novels do not actually resolve the issues they raise.



Tennant's continuation, on the other hand, essentially repeats the marriage plot, playfully caricaturing Austen's characters to incorporate an anti-heteronormative reading of the text. The sequel adds something new by explicitly exploring Emma's alternative romantic paths and by providing an epilogue that seems open to such alternative desires. By expanding/extending Austen's marriage plot, writers like Berdoll and Tennant question and negotiate social conventions regarding the institution of marriage, women's choices, and gender identity.

Austenian retellings reopen narratives ending in marriage by returning to the beginning, revisiting and re-viewing her romantic plots and pairings, and providing alternative and, at times, anti-romantic views of their original resolutions. In my second chapter, I examine five retellings of Austen's narratives that mediate the marriage plot for contemporary women readers. Those retold from an alternative perspective, such as Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy (made up of the following volumes: *An Assembly Such as This*, *Duty and Desire*, and *These Three Remain*) and Joan Aiken's *Jane Fairfax: Jane Austen's Emma, Through Another's Eyes*, respond to romance-oriented "questions left unanswered by the gaps" in the original novels (Genette, *Palimpsests* 287). These also constitute gendered interventions via a "re-centering [of] the value structure of the narrative" (Hite 2) to enable a second look, through a late twentieth/early twenty-first-century lens, at love and marriage in the nineteenth century. In exaggerating the romantic formula elements of *Pride and Prejudice*, Aidan's male-perspective retelling underscores what in Austen speaks to the prevailing fantasies of

women with regard to men, love, and courtship, while Aiken's somber story of a minor character's marriage quest problematizes these fantasies.

Modernized retellings, such as Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Debra White Smith's *Amanda*, transpose Austen's romance narratives to the present or to new locations, allowing for validations, modifications, or rejections of the marriage plot from a contemporary perspective.<sup>31</sup> I explore how, in the process of mediating and updating Austen's narratives, Fielding's modernization emphasizes other relationships and concerns that contemporary women find relevant and thus provides at least a "partial reformulation" of the romance (Harzewski 33). I also examine the ways in which Smith's retelling of *Emma*, which abandons Austen's irony and indulges in sentiment, brings to light the way a specific community of Christian women write/read evangelical messages into the works of author who was scornful of "intrusive pietism" (Wheeler 409). Finally, I look at how Emma Campbell Webster's choose-your-own-adventure spinoff, *Lost in Austen*, reveals the playful and subversive ways in which Austen's text can be revisited to question contemporary society's readings of her novels and of her as a cultural icon. Seemingly the most marriage-obsessed of all the texts because it literally tells the reader that her goal is to find a husband, the interactive, non-linear novel actually exposes and mocks the oversimplified reading of the marriage plot in many other spinoffs' formulaic treatment of Austen's novels. Its various narrative paths and endings demonstrate, via the illusion of choice, the restrictions women in Austen's time faced in terms of life goals, leading the contemporary reader to reflect upon the choices she has in the present.

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<sup>31</sup> Based on my survey of retellings, all modernizations thus far have been set in the 1990s or 2000s.

In my third chapter, I tackle looser Austenian offshoots (intertexts which are neither sequels nor retellings), such as Syrie James's fictionalized biography, *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*, Hale's chick lit *Austenland*, Laurie Viera Rigler's *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, and Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Although these novels have no direct hypertextual connection to *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*, they draw on Austen's works in general, her life, and her world, and they similarly attempt to recapture the fantasy element of "Austen's romance" but necessarily update this by inscribing her narratives with their contemporary views. It is particularly intriguing that, although not as bound to the marriage plot of her novels as the sequels and retellings are, these incarnations of Austen still feature love, relationships, and marriage, thus demonstrating a desire for romantic configurations of Austen's world. At the same time, however, these offshoots make (post)feminist gestures by questioning such fantasies and desires through the interrogation of Austen's role and meaning/s in modern women's everyday lives.

In James's text, Austen is read as a romantic heroine, both feminist and feminine, whose choices appeal to readers who seek more than the marriage plot but who do not wish to do away with it altogether. In Hale's and Rigler's spinoffs, modern paths to "Austenland" are created, exposing its constructedness and mediation, providing portraits of Austen's fans today and their conflicting fears and desires, and permitting complex negotiations of women's identity. By drawing attention to contemporary women readers' views of Austen as both sickness and cure, these offshoots evoke Jacques Derrida's notion of the text as *pharmakon* which "acts as both remedy and

poison” (70). The concept of the *pharmakon*, reworked as a means of reading such offshoots, homes in on what is at stake in analyzing Austenian spinoffs: why/how (post)feminist gestures made in these attempt to improve or resolve gender relations while sometimes exacerbating or unwittingly validating prevailing gender inequities. Finally, in Fowler’s novel, the question of what contemporary readers bring into Austen outstrips any romanticization of her and her novels. These offshoots do not just extend or rewrite her narratives but construct her. They branch out from “Austen,” who is no longer just an author but “a sign through which desires as well as fantasies are channeled, about what we were, what we are, and what we want to be” (Pucci and Thompson 6).

### **Mediating the Marriage Plot: Paratexts and Contexts**

My first three chapters comprise a gender-focused study of narrative or a “feminist narratology” – “the study of the narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural construction of gender” (Warhol 5). Besides this textual dimension, rewritings of Austen, as cultural products or artifacts feature aspects outside of the narrative text that can point to the motivations I posited earlier. Thus, in my fourth chapter, I analyze the production and consumption dimensions of these texts in order to understand the driving forces behind their (post)feminist reshaping of Austen. Like Pucci and Thompson, editors of *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*, I view the Austen phenomenon as a “model for examining and understanding how contemporary culture inevitably enters into” Austen’s fictions, which are made over “in the likeness of late-twentieth

century-and early-twenty-first-century culture” (2). Although their study does not deal directly with any textual spinoffs, focusing rather on other popular culture manifestations of the Jane Austen phenomenon in film, television, and the tourism industry, these cultural studies critics offer “an inquiry into those cultural, social, and pedagogical conditions that have motivated and shaped” (Pucci and Thompson 2) remakes of Austen and of other earlier texts. They position film adaptations, for instance, as mediations between past and present, which enables a clearer understanding of the ways in which modern readers interpret Austen.

I do the same for Austenian spinoff novels in my final chapter, examining how Austen is reconfigured for twenty-first century women in a (post)feminist context and the motivations that drive these transformations. I attempt to look beyond the spinoffs’ narrative discourse to a type of relationship between texts called “paratextuality,” as theorized by Genette, in which “liminal devices and conventions both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*) . . . mediate the book to the reader (Macksey xviii). Elements within many of these Austenian spinoffs – such as titles, subtitles, prefaces or forewords, dedications, footnotes/endnotes, acknowledgements, and reading guides – express the nature of the former’s relationship to Austen and, therefore, their reading and “use” of her. So, too, do more public epitexts like the marketing-oriented information posted on official spinoff/spinoff-author websites. I am interested in how these paratexts not only attempt to shape how readers receive them, but also express additional ideological meanings about female authorship, the institution of marriage, and

women's identity by positioning their and their authors' relationship to Austen and Austen's marriage plot.

Paratextual elements are "at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (Genette, *Paratexts* 2). As Anne Lynne Birberick asserts, they constitute a "field of exchange . . . in which the author shapes and modifies the reader's expectations" (24) in an attempt to secure the reception of the text. A spinoff's title, for instance, the "initial point of appeal" (Paizis 51), sets up its and its author's relationship to Austen and the marriage plot, oftentimes also signifying the motivations for revisiting her texts. Nearly all of the spinoffs I study here feature her name, the titles of her novels, or her characters' names; as in the titles of the Austenian film adaptations Sutherland surveys in *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*, these act like "a branding device which vouches for authenticity even as it announces a more complicated system of ownership" (354). For example, Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy capitalizes, as does the series itself, on the popularity of Austen's hero, but also promises new material by spelling out his name to suggest a fuller revelation of his character and adding the title "gentleman" as commendation. Although it does not directly reference Austen, the title of Smith's *Emma* retelling, *Amanda*, sets up a relationship of homage and selective imitation via its use of a sound-alike heroine's name and its cover identification as part of "the Jane Austen series."<sup>32</sup> Fielding's spinoff does not mention Austen in its title, likely because of its origins as a serial column which the author only later restructured using Austen as a framing narrative device; however, later

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<sup>32</sup> The other titles in Smith's series similarly follow a pattern of imitation: *Northanger Abbey* becomes *Northpointe Chalet*, *Sense and Sensibility* becomes *Reason and Romance*, and *Mansfield Park* becomes *Central Park*.

editions emphasize the connection to the source novel via other paratextual references, and recent reprints of other spinoffs which were not originally identifiable with Austen have been re-titled to allude to her more directly.

Even more interesting is the titles' and subtitles' framing of the meanings carried by the Austen "brand" because this often parallels the motivations of the spinoffs' narratives. Labels such as *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife: Pride and Prejudice Continues* and *Emma in Love: Jane Austen's Emma Continued* not only affiliate themselves with Austen's novels but also structure these sequels as romance narratives involving the prolonging of the love quest. Other spinoff titles, such as *Jane Fairfax: The Secret Story of the Second Heroine in Jane Austen's Emma* and *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*, similarly hint at a desire for more romance via their preoccupation with filling in the gaps and silences in Austen's texts and the dearth of information about her (love) life. Alternative titles of Aiken's retelling, *Jane Fairfax: A Novel to Complement Emma by Jane Austen* and *Jane Fairfax: Jane Austen's Emma Through Another's Eyes*, also communicate a sense of supplementation. On the other hand, the playfulness of Webster's text with regard to romance is reflected in its title, *Lost in Austen*. Here, Austen becomes a romantic location wherein the reader can become immersed or disoriented; the subtitle, *Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure*, reflects the paradox of marital choice versus enforced destiny that the multiple narratives of the spinoffs pose for the reader. Similarly showing an awareness of how Austen has come to symbolize romantic escape from present-day reality are titles of texts that focus on her readers/fans today: *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* and *Austenland*. The latter was even meant originally by Hale to be entitled

*Ostensibly Jane*, a label that marks a consciousness about the artificiality of constructions of Austen and the “world” of her novels. Lastly, *The Jane Austen Book Club* aptly gives equal weight to the author and to the reading group that finds meaning in Austen’s novels, since the offshoot is neither continuation nor rewriting but rather deals with the plurality of her meanings for modern readers.

Other paratexts, like the spinoffs’ covers, also point to distinct trends in the framing of readers’ expectations as to the content of the books. Many visually emulate those of Austen’s novels prepared by twentieth- and twenty-first-century publishers or find some way to “brand” the covers with Austen, whereas the more playful and transformative spinoffs feature subversions of romantic images. Although reception can never be absolutely secured by titles, covers, and other paratextual material, these features reflect the crafting and conception of authors, editors, and publishers who target predominantly female Austen fans. Paratexts can point to both the producers’ motivations for writing a rehashed romance, a nuanced and complicated romance, or a subverted romance, and the anticipated desires of the texts’ consumers. Thus, to augment my textual analysis, I also identify paratextual discourse on love and marriage, for instance cover images that emphasize courtship rituals, the inclusion of the author’s marital status in bio sections, or reading guides that discuss the quest for a husband. I analyze these to identify the (post)feminist gestures in these texts and to validate my earlier findings about the reasons for rewriting Austen. I also draw on authorial information that is available in reading guides published within the spinoff novels or on the authors’ official websites. Answers to my research questions can be found in what these



authors say about their inspiration for writing spinoffs, about what they wish to accomplish by imitating or transforming Austen, and even about Austen's relationship to their own marital happiness.

In this final chapter, I also provide a sampling of the reception of these Austenian spinoffs in order to investigate the significance of these texts for women. A representative selection of reviews taken from online review sites such as the commercial site *Amazon* and three Austen-affiliated sites: *AustenBlog*, the "Jane Austen Sequels Page" of *The Republic of Pemberley*, and the book review section of the JASNA News on the society's official website, which are all geared towards readers who actively seek information about Austen, her novels, and spinoff novels. I draw only from reviews written by women readers in order to stay within the scope of my study and to limit the breadth of this material. Patrocinio P. Schweickart in "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" asks, "Does the text manipulate the reader, or does the reader manipulate the text to produce the meaning that suits her own interests?" (48). Readers of these Austenian offshoots, as opposed to readers of only the original novels, may have motivations for revisiting Austen that parallel those of the spinoff writers. In their hunger for certain pleasures derived from Austen's narratives, they consume spinoff novels and then respond to the desires these fulfill or fail to fulfill. It is my belief, therefore, that the reader's response to Austenian paraliterature can validate certain intentions more subtly expressed in the narrative discourse of the spinoff novels, especially in cases wherein there is a clash between the writer's goals and the reader's expectations.

### **(Post)feminist Narratives and Feminist Gestures**

The gender-focused study of these textual Austenian spinoff calls for an alliance of approaches that will illuminate the ways in which contemporary women rewrite Austen's marriage plot as well as the motivations for making new meanings out of her and her work. On the one hand, feminist criticism on Austen has provided varied and insightful interpretations of her novels. Johnson lists the numerous critics who have analyzed her works in terms of the structuring marriage plot, such as Mark Schorer, Lionel Trilling, Ian Watt, Arnold Kettle, Marilyn Butler, Tony Tanner, Patricia P. Brown, and Mary Poovey ("Austen Cults" 222). Austen's traditionalism is explored in studies like Patricia Beer's *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot* and Joseph Allan Boone's *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*, while her subversion of patriarchy through a nuanced engagement with the marriage plot is provided in studies such as Laura Mooneyham White's "Jane Austen and the Marriage Plot: Questions of Persistence," Julie A. Shaffer's "The Ideological Intervention of Ambiguities in the Marriage Plot: Who Fails Marianne in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*?" Harry E. Shaw's "Austen: Narrative, Plots, Distinctions, and Life in the Grain," Karen Newman's "Can This Marriage be Saved? Jane Austen Makes Sense of an Ending," and Sonjeong Cho's *An Ethics of Becoming: Configurations of Feminine Subjectivity in Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot*.

My research intervenes in these debates by adding to what such scholarship has not yet sufficiently considered: contemporary women writers of Austenian spinoffs, the women who read these, and the meanings they

make of her with regard to their own experiences. Although there is a plethora of academic readings of Austen's marriage plot, from those who see it as a sign of conservatism, to those that defend her iconoclastic and ironic handling of it, and those that read her novels against the grain to provide alternatives for such heteronormative interpretations, none of these so far harness findings from women who read and enjoy spinoff texts.

Secondly, Austen scholar Lynch talks of "the diverse frameworks within which audiences have claimed interpretive authority over [Austen's] meanings; about the varying motives audiences have had for valuing the novels and for identifying with or repudiating Austen's example; about the divergent uses to which such alternative Austens have been put in the literary system and the culture at large" ("Introduction" 5). Seminal reception studies such as Lynch's *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* and, more recently, Harman's *Jane's Fame*, have brought to light information about the various ways in which Austen has been interpreted. Such studies may serve as jumping off points for more comprehensive analyses of the dimension of gender with regard to the phenomenon of women creating new narratives out of Austen's novels.

Besides filling in the aforementioned gaps in scholarship, my research contributes a new framework, combining narratology with cultural/reception study, with which to view contemporary reception of Austen's marriage narratives. I use these particular approaches because they enable an illustration of how rewritings of Austen are part of a larger discourse about gender that spans Austen's past and the contemporary moment. There is great potential in examining what these spinoffs say about love, marriage, and

contemporary women in order to elicit the reasons for both the enduring appeal of Austen's narratives and the existence of a market for such retellings. Through this study I show why women use literature, and specifically Austen, to express their views about the role of marriage in their lives. I also attempt to demonstrate how works that are considered "women's fiction" in the derogatory sense of "low" literature, commercial writing, derivative writing, popular or even "fannish" fiction serve as spaces in which women can validate, negotiate, or reject ideologies regarding marriage and femininity.

Although they may not necessarily launch into arguments for political and social change and may fail to account for the dimensions of race, class, and ethnicity, I call these Austenian spinoffs "(post)feminist" because they allow for what Laurie Narancho calls "feminist gestures" (36) or a sort of "third wave reclaiming of femininity with feminist ideals" (47). Using feminist-guided "motion[s] of emphasis," "indication[s] of intention" (Narancho 36), or a sort of informal feminism, these texts critique marriage as the ultimate goal of women's lives. Some may also problematize notions of marriage as an oppressive structure, upholding it as one of many viable choices of women today – the operative word being "choice" – thus freeing women from limiting "alternatives" advocated by certain proponents of the feminist movement. Many spinoffs, via intertextuality with what they perceive to be happy endings of Austen's novels, negotiate for their female protagonists a way to have it all: freedom, independence, and romantic fulfillment. At the very least, these texts allow for a telling of not just "the other side of the story" – which, according to Molly Hite, constitutes "the enterprise of feminist criticism, perhaps even of feminist theorizing generally"

(4) – but rather of many other sides or dimensions. The last few lines of the “non-ending” of Webster’s *Lost in Austen* express this potential best. Addressing the reader, the narrator says, “Your book will not send out the message that Woman’s only choice is to marry – and that her story will end the moment she does so. You are determined to find a way for your heroine to say no to ‘The End’ and continue her adventure” (339-40).

## Chapter 1 - Austenian Sequels: Reopening the Marriage Plot

### Writing beyond Austen's Marriage Endings

The enterprise of saying no to “The End” calls to mind Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s narrative metaphor of “writing beyond the ending,” which she defines as “the invention of strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction” (x).<sup>33</sup> DuPlessis uses this rubric to assert that alternative endings can offer “a different set of choices” for women other than marriage, which “celebrates the ability to negotiate with sexuality and kinship,” or death, a “cosmic sanction” for “inabilities or improprieties in this negotiation” (4). I believe that these gender-focused concerns of “writing beyond the ending” apply, to some extent, to modern-day women’s continuation of Austen’s narratives in the ubiquitous Austenian sequel. At least seventy-eight sequels to Austen’s novels have been published since 1990; of these at least sixty-eight are sequels to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. In this chapter, I analyze two spinoffs of these popular novels, stories that begin after each protagonist’s marriage, to determine what they add to Austen’s stories and what drives each continuation.<sup>34</sup> A key point that emerges from my analysis is that in these engagements with Austen, marriage cannot be read as being either absolutely celebrated or decried outright as a resolution; rather, its significance as reality and fantasy for modern-day women is explored via Austen and character pairings that they idealize.

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson importantly points out that Austen criticism and the history of novel studies itself have made much of the marriage plot and placed such importance on the marriage ending (“Austen Cults” 214, 242).

<sup>34</sup> This is based on my survey of Austenian spinoffs (as of August 2009).

All six of Austen's novels end in marriage, relying on the marriage plot as their "central structuring device" (White 71), but although she gives readers a glimpse of married life via the depiction of other couples in her novels, she provides only brief predictions about her protagonists' future. Sequels allow a more in-depth exploration of both these protagonists' and other characters' marriages, the intimate details of which Austen did not write about. In "If Jane Austen Had a Laptop," Joan Wickersham comments on how the desire for explicit details clashes with what Austen is famous for: "discreetly averting her eyes just as her characters launch into marriage proposals, summarizing the exchange and only returning to outright dialogue once they're safely engaged and have moved on to the delicious business of comparing notes about who fell in love when." Austen's reticent style, on the one hand, makes her novels appealing to readers who are nostalgic for a time of delicacy and restraint; however, this same style also makes her stories tantalizing to today's "culture of explicit candor" (Wickersham), thus prompting the manufacture of more "tell-all" sequels to satisfy the modern reader's curiosity.

Writing beyond Austen's marriage endings allows for – although does not necessarily offer – the conception of new goals, conflicts, and choices. As continuations of the original stories, these spinoffs cater to the "longing for repetition . . . pivotal to the sequel as a genre" (Wagner 214). They however also provide something new to Austen's narratives by addressing the "what happened next?" of readerly concern" (Kraft and Bourdeau 11). The "after-the-wedding" sequel offers an "Austen with a difference," a conservative relationship to the original as well as the potential for reconfiguring Austen's characters and plots. After all, as Patsy Stoneman says in an analysis of the

“sequel syndrome,” sequels by definition provide the necessary “remaining part of a narrative” (239). But what exactly is deemed necessary and thus supplied by spinoffs which extend narratives ostensibly already resolved by marriage? More significantly, why are such supplements necessary to the women who write and read these texts?

Previous surveys of Austenian sequels suggest that these are re-enactments of the marriage plot for remaining unmarried minor characters or for new characters and are driven by what Lynch describes as the “pleasure of stories’ nostalgic repetition” (“Sequels” 162). As Wagner asserts, most of these extensions “concentrate sentimentally on the courtship or romance plots, ignoring to what extent Austen’s novels were conceived as attempts to rewrite, and not merely to parody, the novels of sentiment or sensibility of the time” (211). This is certainly true of some sequels which I have deliberately excluded from my study. Practically indistinguishable from the formulaic historical romance, their link to Austen lies in the use of descendants of her main characters and little beyond the name-dropping of well-known characters and places from Austen’s world.<sup>35</sup> In the case of these texts, the repetition of the courtship plot seems to be the primary appeal and they neither make any radical changes nor have a substantial Austen connection. Lacking the latter, they could very well be analyzed as Regency romances, which is not what my thesis aims to do.

This study is concerned with continuations that dwell specifically on the married afterlives of Austen’s characters and which thus feature not a courtship or marriage plot but the development of other facets of the

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<sup>35</sup> A few examples of these are Aston’s and Collins’ series, Skylar Hamilton Burris’s *Conviction*, Elizabeth Newark’s *The Darcys Give a Ball*, Monica Fairview’s *The Other Mr. Darcy*, and Julia Barrett’s *Emma* sequel, *The Third Sister*.



relationship between Austen's women and their chosen partners or between them and other characters. Although these texts, more often than not, involve matchmaking or the pairing up of minor characters as subplots, their focus is no longer on women who are "in want of" husbands. Without the marriage quest as an organizing principle, these sequels are able to develop new stories about familiar and beloved characters in new contexts. Other organizing principles for these new narratives also come into play, such as motherhood, sisterhood, work/career, and alternatives to heterosexual norms. I believe that (post)feminist concerns about love and marriage enter into the discourse of these sequels via their Austen connection or because of Austen's "ambivalent status as a romantic writer" (Wagner 215), that is, the fact that she is popularly known today as both an inspiring woman novelist – even a feminist icon to some – and someone who wrote appealing courtship narratives. Like today's popular fiction and other media texts the spinoffs' discourse has the capacity to simultaneously acknowledge preoccupations with romance and marriage and question their role and meaning/s at a time of ongoing debates about women's identity. The Austen connection, however, contributes an additional dimension to these debates: sequels converse with a view of the past, of Austen's "world, in which gender roles were, in theory, more straightforward, and mediate between it and what women want in the twenty-first-century.

The two sequels tackled in this chapter, Linda Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* and Emma Tennant's *Emma in Love*, are intriguing "crossover[s] between classic literature and mass culture" (Lynch 162). They revisit beloved protagonists who have new preoccupations and responsibilities as wives and as mistresses of large estates and portray the daily (and

sometimes intimate) interactions between spouses that Austen does not show. While often artistically unsatisfying in that they seem to ignore Austen's irony by displaying sentimentalism and melodrama (Wagner 223), sequels are not without relevant commentary on what women want, especially with regard to married life. Berdoll's and Tennant's each address, via what is repeated and/or changed, important questions not just about the fate of Austen's married couples but also about the meaning of the institution itself. Moreover, plotting and stylistic choices reveal both the contemporary concerns and escapist desires that drive such continuations that delve into the married lives of Austen's characters.

### **Expanding the Marriage Plot: Sex and Infidelity in *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife***

Wickersham, who surveys the recent Austenian paraliterature trend, says that Austen "makes us want more – and if she won't give it to us, then we'll just manufacture it for ourselves." Berdoll's bawdy romance sequel, *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*, does just that with its ridiculously un-Austenian focus on Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's "connubial pleasures." Published "to the acclaim of readers and the horror of Jane Austen purists," this sequel is rife with anachronisms, obscure polysyllabic words, and syntactically awkward sentences, not to mention Berdoll's seemingly endless euphemisms for the sexual act, all of which indicate a playful rather than serious approach to Austen.<sup>36</sup> Berdoll's explanation for writing this Regency romance/soft-core porn revisiting emphasizes its humorous tone: "Regrettably, in ending *P&P* on

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<sup>36</sup> The quoted phrases may be found in the "About the Author" section of *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*. Berdoll's fondness for playful sexual euphemisms can be seen in her nonfiction collection *Very Nice Ways to Say Very Bad Things: an Unusual Book of Euphemisms*.

the cusp of what undoubtedly would be a marriage of unrivaled passion, [Austen] has left many of her readers with a case of literary coitus interruptus” (*The Official Website*). Yet the fact that Berdoll attempts to bring modern-day readers repeatedly to literary “climax” by penetrating the thoughts and bedchambers of Austen’s married characters reveals what is for her a sense of incompleteness in the tantalizing original despite its happy ending.

The opening paragraphs of *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*, thus, (re)introduce a conflict between the protagonists. After her wedding night, Elizabeth reflects on anxieties about her new position, on the end to the excitement and anticipation of her wedding, and on the return of Darcy’s reticence after the couple’s first night of passion. She suffers physical discomfort as a result of her recent pursuits, “by reason of matrimony” (Berdoll 2), but she is more disturbed by her new husband’s return to his characteristic “maddening hauteur” (Berdoll 2) and stiff formality: he has reverted to calling her “Mrs. Darcy” after so passionately referring to her as “Lizzy” the night before. Berdoll’s sequel reopens the marriage plot by returning the couple to their original state in *Pride and Prejudice* of distance from each other and of ignorance about the other’s true feelings. Despite the fact that the final four chapters of the source novel emphasize the “good understanding” (Austen 275) between the two, Elizabeth once again cannot read the feelings of Mr. Darcy. Throughout the pair’s silent carriage trip to Pemberley, she wonders anxiously about the reasons for Darcy’s silence and what she thinks of as his “perversely quixotic turns” (Berdoll 2). This ominous opening is significant because it reinstates the conjugal discord found at the beginning of the source novel via the humorous depiction of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s relationship.

As in the original, the sequel's beginning positions Elizabeth as the protagonist and focalizer of the story as someone to whom modern women can relate. Berdoll explains this Austenian heroine's appeal by describing her as confident and unconventional: "In a society that demanded deference and saw marriage as primarily a financial arrangement, Elizabeth Bennet spoke her mind and followed her heart" (*The Official Website*).<sup>37</sup> Set apart by this from other women in her society, she becomes a likely heroine for readers in a (post)feminist context, and infused with contemporary women's anxieties about love and sex, fulfillment, and motherhood, she contends with what this sequel emphasizes: the challenges of married life. At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth playfully tells Jane that for her and Darcy, "It is settled . . . that [they] are to be the happiest couple in the world" (Austen 289). Berdoll's sequel, however, unsettles all this with Darcy's hint that "Indubitably, it will take a period of adjustment [for him and Elizabeth] to become accustomed to each other's all and sundry personal habits" (5). New anxieties also arise from Elizabeth's married state to widen the gap between her and her husband; unaccustomed to the luxury of her new life and to public scrutiny, she fears "the awesome duty that await[s] her" as mistress of Pemberley (Berdoll 2).

The concerns in the sequel's opening suggest that Darcy's and Elizabeth's "understanding" at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* must be renegotiated in the marital bed and in the marital relationship, and they must once again contend with obstacles and prove their compatibility. Sexual desire and anxieties, which Austen does not explicitly tackle in her novels, are elaborated on in the early chapters of Berdoll's spinoff. Here, the novel shifts

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<sup>37</sup> This quotation can be found in a response to a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) on the website.

to what verges on pornography as Berdoll depicts Elizabeth and Darcy's struggle during their two months' engagement with their "immoderately aroused libido" (6) in order to maintain a "delicate balance of love and propriety" (5). Then, when their marriage is finally consummated, readers hear of Elizabeth's feelings of sexual inadequacy and Darcy's fears that he has overwhelmed his new wife with his passion, not to mention his size.<sup>38</sup> Contrasted with Elizabeth's inexperience is Darcy's wild sexual past, which links him to new characters: Abigail Christie, a lusty servant girl with whom both he and Wickham shared relations in their youth; her son John Christie, whom Darcy believes at one point to be his bastard child; and Juliette Clisson, Darcy's former mistress. Although far removed from Austen's delicacy, the explicit sexual details in Berdoll's sequel serve both to gratify the reader and to introduce the contemporary concerns about ingredients for marital happiness which emerge from placing Darcy and Elizabeth at variance once more, but this time as a married couple.

Darcy and Elizabeth, through life together, must learn to overcome their differences and communicate effectively in order for Austen's "happy ending" to continue, and they contend with various marriage-related conflicts that lead to some rather melodramatic twists in the sequel. Wagner asserts that "In contrast to Austen herself, the writers of sequels refuse to limit their fiction merely to a courtship plot without the introduction of sex, crime, or tortuous subplots involving foundlings and cross-dressing" (224). Indeed, *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* features no less than four bastard children, six unfaithful spouses, as well as miscarriage, murder, and rape. Clearly un-Austenian in style and

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth worries that she is "too small" or "paltry," but Darcy explains that "the entire conundrum [is] the fault of *his* body; not hers," that he is "rather large" (Berdoll 52).

flavour, these subplots place well-known characters in highly unlikely and admittedly uncharacteristic situations, which makes one wonder if they remain Austen's characters when they no longer behave as expected. For example, Berdoll gives Austen's "reserved" and "fastidious" (*Pride and Prejudice* 11) Darcy of Austen a mistress and many sexual encounters, while she turns the socially adept Bingley into a naive and fumbling virgin. And yet, while some of these characterizations stretch the Austen connection nearly to the breaking point, they seem somehow to still fall within the realm of possibility at least in the imaginations of modern Austen fan.<sup>39</sup> Berdoll is certainly not alone in giving Darcy sexual experience (Amanda Grange and Maya Slater do so as well in their Darcy-perspective, diary-style retellings), which means that some modern readers probably interpret or fantasize about Darcy as a skilful lover. Such readings attempt to reconfigure Austen, to expound upon what she did not write about or what she only hinted at in her novels, with regard to what makes a marriage work.

What is also expanded is Austen's technique of presenting foils to her happy unions by showing other marital relationships highlighted in the novels' endings, often with a rundown on the fate of her major characters, just as in their beginnings. In Berdoll's sequel, the relationships of the Bennets, the Wickhams, the Bingleys, the Collinsets, and even the older (deceased) Darcys, are described in line with the novel's discourse about what constitutes a happy marriage. The portrayal of these couples in contrast with the protagonists

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<sup>39</sup> The readers' imaginations can stretch, for example, to the transformation of Lydia, who in Austen's novel gave herself to Wickham out of love, into a sex-starved and promiscuous woman in Berdoll's spinoff. Mr. Collins, who is described by Austen as a "tall" and "heavy-looking young man of five and twenty" (*Pride and Prejudice* 48), is often portrayed as older and unattractive in cinematic adaptations; Dan Zeff's *Lost in Austen* miniseries even transforms him into a sexual pervert who touches himself in public.

plainly reveals the sequel's preoccupation with inequity and infidelity. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, from the beginning to end of the source novel, serve as a humorous picture of a mismatched couple. Berdoll's sequel partly recuperates their marriage by emphasizing Mr. Bennet's fidelity to his wife (despite his lack of true affection for her) and the importance of this to Elizabeth; at one point, the latter's belief in marriage is shaken when she believes her father to have strayed and is only later restored when she learns that he has not.<sup>40</sup> A villain in this sequel is a straying husband: Wickham cheats on his wife, attempts to seduce his sister-in-law, and murders his own bastard son. Wickham's main threat lies, however, in the fact that he is Darcy's evil double – in their youth they shared a woman and similar sexual pursuits – and could even be his half-brother, the result of one of Darcy's father's dalliances.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Elizabeth's and Darcy's doubts about their fathers' affairs combine to create more anxiety about their own union. At the same time, these soap-opera-like twists contextualize the couple's marriage within concerns of family and fidelity that are relevant in the present day, such as anxieties about adultery, high divorce rates, the negative effects of these on children, and perhaps even perceptions that rates of "non-paternity events" and of children born outside of marriage are on the rise.<sup>42</sup>

In Berdoll's sequel, infidelity arises from inequity in marriage. Surrounding the Darcys are many dysfunctional couples in unequal

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth hears Mrs. Bennet telling Lydia that Mr. Bennet has also strayed in order to make her youngest daughter feel better about Wickham's affairs; Mrs. Bennet later admits that she lied.

<sup>41</sup> Darcy also learns that Georgiana is named after the Duchess of Devonshire, with whom his father had a relationship.

<sup>42</sup> See Jessica Ravitz's CNN report, "Out of Wedlock Births Hit Record High," for statistics on extramarital births in the US. See also Steve Olson's *Atlantic* article, "Who's Your Daddy?," Cecil Adams' "To Have and To Cuckold," and Michael Gilding's more scholarly study, *Rampant Misattributed Paternity: The Creation of an Urban Myth* for statistical evidence and common perceptions about cases of non-paternity.

partnerships. Lydia's and Wickham's marriage, based on mercenary intentions on his side and imprudent passion on hers, is a doomed one in Austen's novel: Wickham's "affection for [Lydia] soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer" (*Pride and Prejudice* 291). Lydia, already unrestrained in the source text, re-enters the picture in this sequel to shock and scandalize her elder sisters with her talk of the "carnal cravings of men" (Berdoll 8). She is re-imagined here as not without cravings herself: abandoned by Wickham, with whom she has several children, she produces a daughter of uncertain paternity after she marries. The Collinses briefly reappear for comedic effect and to underscore their mismatch in the original novel, and the long-enduring Charlotte is rewarded with the death of her ridiculous husband and with precisely what she seeks from her marriage: security rather than love via her son's inheritance of Longbourn.

Jane and Mr. Bingley's sexual dysfunctions in this sequel mirror what readers may perceive as their flaws in the original: Bingley's "easiness, openness, ductility of . . . temper" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 11) and his being "so easily guided" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 278) translate into an over-eagerness in the bedroom and a weakness that leads him to have an affair, while kind and amiable Jane, with her "pliancy of temper" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 11), silently endures her marital problems.<sup>43</sup> The Bingleys' marriage turns out well in the end when Bingley repents and Jane forgives him, even adopting his illicit love child, but the two clearly serve as foils for Darcy's faithfulness, Elizabeth's strength of will, and the Darcy

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<sup>43</sup> Berdoll depicts Mr. Bingley as a clumsy and overenthusiastic virgin during his wedding night: "It took several nights and just as many attempts before Jane was certain she was, indeed, a wife" (125). Jane considers it "a woman's lot" (121) to endure her husband's fumbling attentions; she says, "I could never injure Charles with criticism of his love. I am quite happy as I am" (Berdoll 123).



couple's love expressed via their sexual compatibility. This is what the spinoff presents as the necessary ingredients for a successful marriage; lacking what the Darcys have, all other marriages pale in comparison or fail outright.

*Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* soon resolves the couple's anxieties in the marital bed, but the two must still learn to adjust their thinking about one another and to openly express their concerns. Here is where perspectives about gender roles become quite marked. Elizabeth, as a wife, must learn to trust in Darcy, while Darcy, as a husband, must overcome the threats of his past relationships, avoid temptation in the shape of his former mistress, and be worthy of Elizabeth's love by honouring his vows. Telling of gender notions that remain prevalent today is the fact that in these sequels the women who are inferior to Elizabeth are portrayed as either promiscuous like Lydia, Abigail, and Juliette, or frigid like Jane Bingley, while the ideal heroine, Elizabeth, is passionate but virtuous.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, another major conflict that speaks of modern-day women's anxieties involves Elizabeth's difficulties in bearing a child. She suffers two miscarriages and bears a stillborn son before she finally gives birth to healthy twins, the requisite male heir as well as a daughter who will presumably inherit her admirable qualities. The message is that in order to "have it all," or to feel fully fulfilled as a woman, at least the equivalent thereof in her era, Elizabeth needs to become a mother. Besides this, she believes that bearing an heir is necessary for the maintenance of her new position, symbolized in this novel by the estate that must be secured for future generations. Her fear of losing this position becomes real when, believing Darcy and Georgiana to be dead in war-torn France, Lady Catherine claims

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<sup>44</sup> Even Lady Catherine is rumored to have had an affair in a twist implausible given her snobbery in the original: a buck-toothed footman rather than her impotent husband is said to have fathered the insipid and plain Anne Darcy.

Pemberley and threatens to evict Elizabeth. When Darcy returns after his children's birth, he tells Elizabeth that she should never have considered it a duty or necessity to provide an heir nor should she have worried about the security of her position. Regardless of whether they have children, he has arranged for her to be "mistress of Pemberley House as long as [she] live[s]" (Berdoll 459). Elizabeth thus gains what the readers of this sequel presumably desire: a loving and faithful husband, an equal marriage, a secure position – as well as progeny to carry on the family legacy. Elizabeth Darcy, along with the women who see themselves in her character, will not face the same fate as other married women like her mother, Lydia, Charlotte, or even Jane.

Pointing to desires related to women's identity is the fact that it is Elizabeth's lively disposition and strength of will that carry her through this novel. She soon takes her new responsibilities as mistress of a large estate in stride and becomes more mobile, travelling both with her husband and on her own to various locations. While Darcy has to rescue her twice in the early parts of the novel, when left alone Elizabeth manages the affairs of both Pemberley and Longbourn (when her father dies) and triumphs in encounters with Lady Catherine and Juliette Clisson. She banishes the former and even threatens her with a pistol, and later makes the latter realize that the Darcys' marriage is one "of more intimate regard than [she] would have liked to have understood" (Berdoll 446). It is also Elizabeth's sisterly love and encouragement that spurs Georgiana to act against Darcy's wishes and publish her writings.<sup>45</sup> Georgiana, as a secondary heroine, is granted more agency to expand the marriage plot in this sequel, but it is Elizabeth who inspires her

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<sup>45</sup> At one point Darcy declares that "A lady should not even read Shakespeare" (Berdoll 177).

both to pursue her writing and to act on her love for Colonel Fitzwilliam by actually running away to France in order to nurse him when he is wounded.<sup>46</sup> Via her own actions and her promotion of Georgiana's, Elizabeth manages to open Darcy's mind about women and by the end of the novel he has learned to process and understand new ideas when these are "filtered through Elizabeth" (Berdoll 454).

*Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* thus offers a "happy ending" for the married couple by reinforcing their compatibility in many areas and, consequently, highlighting how aptly they conform to gender roles as they are perceived today. The source novel promises a favourable future for the two: "by [Elizabeth's] ease and liveliness, [Darcy's] mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 232). Berdoll's sequel has the couple learning to express their feelings more openly and accepting "those they love for who they are" (Berdoll 463) so that ultimately Elizabeth's spirit, passion, and virtue keep Darcy true to her and open his mind to new ideas, especially about women, while his love and constancy quiet her fears of inadequacy and teach her to trust him. The spinoff's discourse communicates that passion and prudence are predictors of marital bliss; both are necessary for a marriage to work. However, a double standard exists in that a man's virility is measured by his experience – it is notable that Elizabeth is passionate but inexperienced while Darcy is something of a reformed rake. Furthermore, Darcy must guard

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<sup>46</sup> Georgiana sells her jewelry for passage into France and poses as a married woman so that she can be a war nurse, where she puts her embroidery skills to use in sewing up soldiers' wounds. She not only saves Colonel Fitzwilliam's life but also initiates their sexual relationship by seducing him while he is bedridden.

against the tendency to stray, but Elizabeth has no need to do so; instead, despite Darcy's reassurances, she ultimately establishes her position as mistress of Pemberley – along with her happiness and fulfilment – by bearing him children. The fact that this situation is viewed by Berdoll as an equal partnership points to the fact that traditional gender roles still have a firm hold on modern women's desires/fantasies.

On the one hand, Berdoll's sequel demonstrates that marriage is not the end for Austen's characters, that the adventure continues into married life and motherhood, and that there are challenges to achieving fulfilment and domestic bliss, even for such idealized couples as Darcy and Elizabeth. In the end, however, "love conquers all" and the protagonist is allowed to "have it all," suggesting that the sequel's writer and its readers believe that an equal partnership such as Darcy's and Elizabeth's is what women want. It is unclear exactly how much Berdoll or her readers know about scholarly and popular feminist discourse on marriage and the marriage plot, but this text makes evident that marriage, as projected in this and other optimistic sequels to *Pride and Prejudice*, continues to offer women fulfilment.

Nevertheless, Berdoll's spinoff remains an intriguing text because of the clash of its romantic and happy ending for its protagonists with the portrayal of so many other unequal partnerships. The novel's explicit and candid forays into sexual betrayals and infidelity reflect contemporary anxieties about marriage and family that its revisiting of Austen's Darcy and Elizabeth at once raises and attempts to quell. Through a "sexualized" Austen, today's women are able to simultaneously articulate and soothe such concerns. The spinoff assures readers that despite the prevalence of

dysfunctional relationships today, one can always find true love in this favorite Austenian couple. At the same time, the threat to this love remains. Darcy's dark double, representative perhaps of what is perceived as today's licentiousness and immorality, lives on at the end of the sequel and is bound to return and extend the marriage plot even further in Berdoll's next Austenian installment, *Darcy and Elizabeth: Nights and Days at Pemberley*.

### **Reinterpreting the Marriage Plot: Emma Tennant's *Emma in Love***

There is a similar desire to write beyond the ending of *Emma* in order to discover how the marriage works out, perhaps because, among those of Austen's six novels, its ending has been the most questioned. The last line of the original novel refers to "the perfect happiness" (Austen, *Emma* 465) of Emma Woodhouse's and Mr. Knightley's union, yet many scholars have seen the phrase as ironic. Bharat Tandon, for instance, observes that "a certain critical consensus has built up, according to which the ending of *Emma* cannot possibly be sincere, since no novelist as clever as Austen could have believed in such a confection" (172).<sup>47</sup> Scholars have also questioned Emma's capability to enjoy "a fulfilling marital relationship with Mr. Knightley" by suggesting that she is "either asexual, a 'masturbating girl,' or a closet lesbian" (DiPaolo 157).<sup>48</sup> For instance, in "'Not at all What a Man Should Be!': Remaking English Manhood in *Emma*," Johnson points out that influential

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<sup>47</sup> In *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*, Tandon cites D.W. Harding, GB Stern, Marvin Mudrick, Edmund Wilson, and Wayne Booth (in his later work) as critics who have argued that *Emma*'s happy ending is ironic (173).

<sup>48</sup> For examples of critics' work on Emma's sexuality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," Johnson's *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wolstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (1995), Korba's "'Improper and Dangerous Distinctions': Female Relationships and Erotic Domination in *Emma*," and Tiffany F. Potter's "'A Low but Very Feeling Tone': The Lesbian Continuum and Power Relations in Jane Austen's *Emma*."

critics have, for decades, labeled Austen's heroine as "manly," "unsexed," and perhaps even "lesbian" (445). Johnson herself reads Emma as an "autonomous and autoerotic" woman, "susceptible to stirrings of homoerotic pleasure," disdainful of "heterosexual love" and not constrained by the "courtship plot" (*Equivocal Beings* 195). Susan M. Korba sees Emma as submitting to the safety of a heterosexual marriage to Mr. Knightley as "the only alternative model available" because "her erotic predilection for women cannot be openly expressed" (21). Tennant's sequel, *Emma in Love*, is intriguing because it consciously engages with such criticism by implying that Emma's and Mr. Knightley's marriage has not been consummated and that Emma may be a lesbian. This interpretation of *Emma* can be seen as subversive in that it challenges heteronormative readings of the protagonist and of Austen's marriage plot. Although Wagner assesses the sequel as conservative because of the "purgation" of the potential lesbian lover and Emma's ultimate reconciliation to marriage (226), I argue that *Emma in Love*, through satire, reinforces readings such as Korba's that highlight Emma's struggles for masculine power and how society thwarts these.

Referred to by Tennant and her publishers as a belonging to a new genre called the "classic progression" (Tyler 186), *Emma in Love* is set four years later and finds Mr. Woodhouse and Isabella Knightley dead from actual rather than imagined illnesses, the loquacious Miss Bates suffering from Tourette's syndrome, the reticent Jane Fairfax jilted by Frank Churchill and working as a governess for Mrs. Smallridge and, most importantly, Emma Knightley a frustrated wife still eager to exert her power over those around her. Rather than actually progressing with the story, the spinoff seems to

return to the beginning of the source novel by rendering the protagonist as untouched by love as ever, since Emma not only lacks any true intimacy with her husband, but she also feels subordinated by him and is annoyed by his repressive presence. Emma is said to have “frequent recourse to Mrs. Weston, and on occasion to Harriet Martin, when she [feels] the need to voice her opinions on the running of a household; and by so doing her own sense of superiority [is] restored” (Tennant 9). Thus, the sequel seems at first glance essentially a repeat of the original as Emma plots (against Mr. Knightley’s wishes) to bring together Jane Fairfax and John Knightley, who are already secretly engaged, falls prey to the charm of a newcomer to Highbury, and only later when, as in the source novel, she is “frightened, vulnerable, and humbled” (Korba 20) learns to value Mr. Knightley’s love. The only thing Emma does not do in this repetitive sequel is “adopt” another Harriet Smith, mainly because the latter is as much under her influence here as in the original novel.<sup>49</sup>

Tennant’s continuation of *Emma* even imitates the style and structure of the source novel’s opening passages, beginning with a variation on its first sentence: “Emma Knightley, handsome, *married* and rich, with a comfortable home and *a doating [sic] husband*, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly four years since her marriage with very little to distress her” [my emphasis] (3).<sup>50</sup> The substitutions of “married” for “clever” and “a doating husband” for “a happy disposition” ominously suggest

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<sup>49</sup> Part of Harriet’s appeal, according to the sequel, is that despite her prettiness, “Emma would always appear in a superior light” (Tennant 71).

<sup>50</sup> Austen’s *Emma* begins with “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, *clever*, and rich, with a comfortable home and *happy disposition*, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress her” [my emphasis] (37).

that after a few years of marriage Emma has lost formerly inherent qualities while retaining and gaining only external advantages; the latter substitution also implies that it is her husband who has cost Emma her happiness. In the paragraphs that follow, Tennant utilizes Austen's structure of presenting a seemingly blessed heroine and then following this up with her faults or the "disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments" (*Emma* 37).<sup>51</sup> Tennant adapts this passage to establish that Emma still has "too much her own way" and is disposed to "think a little too well of herself" (5; Austen, *Emma* 37), which this time has made her resistant to change and has allowed her to remain "a loved daughter" to Mr. Knightley "rather than a wife" (5). Thus, the sequel suggests that marriage has not altered Emma Knightley, or at least not for the better; she appears an even more self-confident version of the Emma Woodhouse introduced by Austen at the beginning of her novel, "marooned on an island of self-regard, where any idea of a different outlook was instantly turned away" (Tennant 5).

But in the guise of returning to the beginning and repeating the story, Tennant's sequel interrogates the marriage plot; it transforms into a fictional narrative the critical interpretation of *Emma*'s marriage ending as denial of her sexuality and surrender to heterosexual order. This engagement with Austen criticism is clear not just in the sequel's discourse but in Tennant's direct allusions to it. In interviews she refers to the source novel as having "strong lesbian overtones and undertones" and argues that "Serious academics have found many clues" to the protagonist's lesbianism (qtd. in Tyler 186). In

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<sup>51</sup> Austen's Emma Woodhouse is revealed to be "directed chiefly by her own [judgment]" (*Emma* 37); Austen adds: "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself. . ." (*Emma* 37).



*Emma in Love*, Emma has no passion for Mr. Knightley; the “temperature of the marriage” is low, for they are merely “friends” or “brother and sister” (Tennant 64), and they sleep in separate bedrooms and remain in “the same state as in Hartfield” since Mr. Knightley is “no more – and no less – than a father to her, in reality” (Tennant 81).<sup>52</sup> One reason for Emma’s unhappiness is clearly due to the loss of power brought about not by Mr. Knightley per se, since he takes great pains not to offend his wife with a rebuff, but by her marriage. As a wife, she sees herself “not as mistress of a fine house, but as a mere appendage of Mr. Knightley, with neither money nor possessions of her own” (Tennant 69), and she mourns her own loss to wifedom much as she did that of Miss Taylor at the beginning of *Emma*. The sequel also emphasizes Emma’s resistance to change by spelling out her desire to maintain the status quo of her days as a single woman. For one, she avoids travel despite her friends’ urgings, perhaps because she wishes to remain securely at the center of Highbury society. For another, she refuses to modernize or improve her new residence, Donwell Abbey, which to her is “perfect as it stands” (Tennant 7) perhaps as a repudiation as well of her duties as its mistress.

The sequel is also explicit about another reason for Emma’s lack of passion for Mr. Knightley: her attraction to other women. Her husband, in fact, wonders out loud to Mrs. Weston if Emma is “in love” (Tennant 45) with him – an allusion to his words in Austen’s novel about desiring to see her in that state and to the benefits of her love not being returned by a “proper

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<sup>52</sup> See the reviews of Nigel Reynolds and Cher Holt-Fortin for brief commentary on the Knightleys’ unconsummated marriage. Tennant narrates that Emma cannot even think of having children; she surmises that this is because of her responsibility toward Isabella’s orphans – “deeper reasons she refused at each opportunity to explore” (148).

object” (*Emma* 69).<sup>53</sup> From the beginning of the sequel, it is clear that Emma still seeks this object, proper or otherwise. Emma is initially drawn to newcomer Captain Brocklehurst, brother-in-law to Frank Churchill and essentially his replica in looks, charm, and deceptiveness.<sup>54</sup> But rather than feeling passion for him, she is merely pleased by his flattery and the fact that he is “more sensible” than her own husband to the efforts she makes “to assist those with fewer advantages than herself” (Tennant 88).<sup>55</sup> As with Frank Churchill, there is more thrill in exercising her power by pairing him up with someone else than in enjoying his advances. It also turns out that he is as unavailable as Churchill, for Emma later comes upon him in the Westons’ conservatory, wearing a “wide-brimmed straw hat” and “a white, floating gown and with cheeks and lips rouged to a bright hue” (Tennant 182). Brocklehurst, whose name calls to mind the hypocritical disciplinarian of young girls in *Jane Eyre*, secretly indulges in cross-dressing and is brought to Highbury, as Emma surmises, in order for Churchill to “indulge in a friendship which must not be spoken of” (Tennant 222). Emma wonders: “But was Frank not, perhaps, another such as his brother-in-law? . . . Did Frank too, with all his posies and his fine words, love the Captain more than he loved Jane?” (Tennant 222).<sup>56</sup> The episode relates to the sequel’s interest in and incorporation of unconventional sexualities expressed in modern-day rather

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<sup>53</sup> In Austen’s novel, Mr. Knightley says to Mrs. Weston: “It I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good. But there is nobody hereabouts to attach her; and she goes so seldom from home” (*Emma* 69).

<sup>54</sup> Tennant writes: “Frank Churchill, once considered the handsomest man in the small society formed by Randalls, Hartfield and the others of that important circle, was now surpassed – and by his comrade” (59).

<sup>55</sup> Brocklehurst calls Emma “the most beautiful [woman] in Surrey”, describes her eyes as “heavenly,” compliments her for her “distinguished line of neck and head,” (Tennant 86), her freshness and loveliness (Tennant 89), and even calls her a goddess (Tennant 88).

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the Frank Churchill equivalent in the highly popular film modernization of *Emma*, Heckerling’s *Clueless*, released in the same year as Tennant’s sequel, is unavailable because he is gay.

than Austenian terms.<sup>57</sup> It also serves to set up Tennant's engagement with Emma's own lesbian tendencies and their connection to her struggle for power.

First, several passages in the sequel imbue Emma's friendship with Harriet Smith with sexual attraction: Emma "had *fallen* once before for the soft blue eyes of Miss Harriet Smith. . ." [my emphasis] (Tennant 70), and she had once "found happiness" in those eyes (Tennant 173). Tennant justifies this interpretation by saying that, in Austen's novel, "Emma absolutely adores Harriet Smith, her protégé and spends a lot of time with her" and by calling attention to a passage wherein Austen describes "how Harriet's soft blue eyes are just the type of eyes that Emma loves" (qtd. in Reynolds). When an acquaintance of Mrs. Smallridge joins Highbury society, Emma's affections transfer to the mysterious newcomer whose eyes she also admires as "shining, dark orbs" which are "at least as intense and certainly as lovely as those of Jane Fairfax" and into which she cannot "desist from gazing" (Tennant 70). As a wealthy widow, the Baroness Elise/Delphine has both status and freedom, and as a French noble with a history of forbidden love, she represents romance and excitement to Emma.<sup>58</sup> Tennant's protagonist begins to realize her own forbidden desires when she first suspects a relationship between the

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<sup>57</sup> Episodes of cross-dressing were "quite common in society memoirs and fiction of [Austen's] time" (Rogers 512n), but while in *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia and Mrs. Foster dress up a member of the militia in female attire for fun, Captain Brocklehurst cross-dresses in secret and flees when he is discovered, suggesting transgender feelings as motivation for his donning of female attire.

<sup>58</sup> Mrs. Elton recounts the Baroness's concocted dramatic background: she is a widow said to have fallen in love with a man (Leonce) intended for another woman (Mathilde), a plot taken from *Delphine*, an infamous epistolary novel by Germaine de Stael who was exiled from France for writing about "revolutionary principles" and advocating "women's independence" (Dow). The name D'Almane is taken from children's tales by Madame de Genlis; in *Emma*, the protagonist refers to these while talking of Mrs. Weston's raising of her as a way of practicing, "like La Baronne d'Almane on La Comtesse d'Ostalis, in Madame de Genlis' Adelaide and Theodore" (Austen 444), for the education of her own daughter.

Baroness and Jane, calling this a “danger come into poor Jane’s life” (147) in the form of subjection to “the miseries of *female friendship*, ostracism and despair” [my emphasis] (136). Emma observes that Jane’s hand lies “a second longer than was customary, even between friends, in the Baroness’s grasp” (Tennant 132-3), and she instinctively knows that, while the Baroness is “capable, no doubt, of inspiring admiration, even love, in the breasts of men. . . . the hand she [would hold] the longest would belong to Jane Fairfax, or another of her sex” (Tennant 133). Later, she realizes that she is herself “passionately enamoured” of the Baroness and, in the solitude of her bedroom, revels in the thrill and fear “of her own newly-discovered and unowned passion” (Tennant 173). In a climactic scene, the Baroness enters Emma’s chamber, the two kiss, and the Baroness leaves Emma in turmoil.

The references to Emma’s sexuality in Tennant’s sequel seem, on the one hand, to be sensationalized and melodramatic.<sup>59</sup> After all, homosexuality was thought of differently in the early nineteenth century from the way it is today. One of Austen’s contemporaries, Anne Lister, kept diaries about her life as a lesbian seductress, but her confidence and frankness of expression about her exploits suggest that “casual homosexuality” may have been quite common “for putatively *heterosexual* women in earlier centuries” (Castle 390). Natalie Tyler asserts that “there was no real notion in Austen’s time of gay or lesbian personality ‘types’” (187), Edward Kozaczka says that “homosexual” and “heterosexual” “did not exist as identity categories” (although he adds that “sexual practices were understood and judged as

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, Tennant recounts Emma’s dream about the Baroness in dramatic language: “The voice of Elise now sounded in the whistling of the wind: low, a foreign voice that brought storms to her neck and down her spine; and, wherever her hands might roam to hold it at bay, her very soul” (157).

normative and non-normative, natural and unnatural, procreative and indulgent”), and Sharon Marcus notes that “the lesbian was not a distinct social type during the years 1830 to 1880, although male sodomy was a public and private obsession” (6).<sup>60</sup> Moreover, relationships such as that between Emma and Harriet, which Tennant uses as a template for the sequel’s exploration of unconventional sexualities, could have been seen in Austen’s day as romantic friendship, or just friendship. For instance, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reminds readers of 1800s literature of the “twentieth-century opposition between heterosexual normalcy and lesbian deviance and the nineteenth century’s failure to sequester friendship from erotic intimacy” (qtd. in Marcus 31). Martha Vicinus also writes, in *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, of the idealization of “same-sex friendships” in the nineteenth century (xviii).

However, despite its arguably sensationalized treatment of homosexuality, *Emma in Love* is not unsuccessful in subverting the “ultimate *telos*” of heterosexual romance in the marriage plot (Cho 47). The sequel converses with twentieth-century anti-heteronormative readings by critics (and presumably some readers) of Austen’s *Emma* by suggesting that a struggle for power underlies Emma’s sexuality and her relationships with men and women. In the source novel, Emma feels comradeship rather than sexual attraction to Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley and “infatuation” for Harriet Smith and Miss Taylor because she “exerts power and influence” over them (Korba 3-4). Her admiration for Jane Fairfax is clear, but because the latter cannot be

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<sup>60</sup> Tyler notes further that “The closeness of many female friendships portrayed in literature is so intense because among other reasons, there was little or no awareness of sexual passion or tension that might have caused a heroine in a novel, or an author, to recoil into a guarded self-consciousness” (187).

subordinated, Emma seeks to punish her despite the fact that she is perhaps, as Korba claims, her “real object of desire” (4). In Tennant’s sequel, Emma openly acknowledges what she feels: “This *frisson* – and here perhaps lay the greatest surprise of all – was not as disagreeable to [her] as she might have supposed” (Tennant 70). Moreover, she recognizes that her attraction is partly based on the fact that she “would never succeed in ordering [the Baroness] . . . to do her bidding” (Tennant 70). It is this realization about her true desires that renews Emma and ironically opens her up to Mr. Knightley’s love in the final chapters of the sequel.

Heterosexual order is soon restored: it is revealed that the Baroness, actually the ringleader of a web of thieves in Bristol, has seduced Emma in order to steal a pearl necklace. The false Baroness escapes and, shamed and embarrassed by her betrayal, Emma turns to Mr. Knightley, resigning her position as “that most superior of beings . . . esteemed and admired by all Highbury society” (Tennant 209) to humble herself before him. Emma calls her husband fondly by his first name, the marriage is consummated, and nothing can disturb “the perfect happiness of Mr. and Mrs. Knightley’s union” (Tennant 215), for Emma is, finally, in love. Or is she? Beneath the melodramatic twists of the sequel’s ending lies its interrogation of marriage and of Emma’s fate in the original novel: only when she is shamed, her judgments proven wrong, and she is deprived of any other choice does she return to the safety of her marriage.

The sequel’s ending, like its beginning, reconstructs the words in the original but gives these a parodic twist given the interpretation of what has come in between. In *Emma*, the protagonist at the end has nothing to wish for,

“but to grow more worthy of [Mr. Knightley], whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future” (Austen, *Emma* 456). At the end of Tennant’s sequel, a humbled Emma realizes anew that “no man,” or woman, presumably, “however dashing, could measure up to Mr. Knightley” (211). Because of much evidence to the contrary in Tennant’s narrative, this becomes a humorous line, as does the description of Emma’s happiness: “an exquisite flutter of joy, and a joy of a degree, moreover, as she believed must still be greater when the flutter should have passed away” (Tennant 217). There is no question that the “perfect happiness” of the marriage ending is undercut by Austen’s irony in *Emma*; the narrator, after all, comments that “Perfect happiness, even in memory is not common” (239). However, Tennant’s sequel destabilizes the happy ending even further, if not too subtly, via its particular reading of *Emma*’s sexual conflicts.

In *Emma in Love*, Emma’s marriage to Mr. Knightley is used to explicate the source novel’s discourse about power and sexuality: the sequel views heterosexual marriage as Emma’s only recourse in a society that would frown upon her true inclinations. In her caricatured reinterpretation of the union of the Knightleys and of the fate of other original characters, Tennant humorously expresses how unsatisfying such a surrender of identity and power can be. For instance, Frank Churchill who is gay according to the sequel’s interpretation is punished by “a wife who demands all the more from him in return for a fortune” (Tennant 210) and must turn to Captain Brocklehurst’s “friendship” for fulfilment. Jane Fairfax is again rescued by marriage “from the miseries of her existence” and, in Emma’s mind, from being “lost” to a

lesbian relationship (Tennant 136). However, the reasons for her engagement to John Knightley promise yet another passionless marriage: “we had both lost our loves – John his Isabella, . . . – and I Frank Churchill to whom I had been betrothed. In speaking of our sadness, we found comfort; and we shall find love” (Tennant 223). Only Mrs. Elton seems content, for in her marriage, she is the dominant partner, which perhaps calls attention to the sequel’s message about women want. As in Austen’s novel wherein Mr. Elton speaks very little after his marriage, he barely makes an appearance in Tennant’s sequel. Here, even more so, Mrs. Elton is Emma’s rival in terms of social status in Highbury and in the exertion of influence over other people’s lives, and of control of Jane Fairfax’s destiny. The remaining minor characters are similarly caricatured, some simply for a comedic effect and others for further satirical discourse on sexuality.<sup>61</sup> One example is “Highbury’s best-loved spinster, dear Miss Bates” (Tennant 221), who already suffers from verbal incontinence in Austen’s *Emma*, and who appears to have Tourette’s syndrome in Tennant’s sequel. This allows her to “spell out the truth” (Tennant 227) in the form of various expletives, such as the last syllable of “Norfolk” to signify the spinoff’s preoccupation with sex, “bollocks” to criticize Emma’s hypocritical visits to her home (53) and “bugger Brocklehurst” (227) to express disapproval of Frank Churchill’s activities.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> An example is the description of Mr. Woodhouse’s and Isabella’s deaths at the beginning of the novel, which establishes its playfully irreverent tone: “the gratitude felt at the order in which parent and sibling had succumbed to mortality soon supplanted the real grief Emma felt at that time; for Mr. Woodhouse could not criticise Isabella’s doctor for his negligence, having departed this world himself; and Isabella, already ill on the first occasion of her father’s sitting unwontedly in a draught had neither desire nor capacity to give vent to her mistrust of Mr. Perry” (Tennant 4).

<sup>62</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the expression figuratively means “nonsense” or “rubbish” and expresses “annoyance” and the “disbelief or dismissal (of a statement, idea, etc.)” (“bollocks, *int.*”). “Bugger” is an informal term for “one who commits buggery; a sodomite (“bugger, *n.*”)



Sensing disapproval of such activities from the sequel as a whole, critics have assessed it as a “homophobic revision” that opportunistically uses homosexuality for “shock value” and then repudiates it (Quinn 60) and a failure for being “conservative” while setting out to be a “subversive [adaptation] of Austen’s fiction” (Wagner 226). Yet I believe that the sequel satirizes the “happy” ending in which Emma remains with Mr. Knightley by not actually disclaiming her attraction to women. The sequel’s ambiguous final chapter features Highbury gossip about one more tryst between Emma and her seductress during a boating party to celebrate the engagement of John Knightley and Jane Fairfax. At this affair, a mysterious young woman, said to resemble the baroness, is cordially welcomed by Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley. Emma, presumably with her husband’s approval, rows off alone with this woman to the nearby island and stays there until nightfall. Nothing is revealed about what happens between the two, and the novel’s last line returns to reticence by taking the perspective of Jane Fairfax, who “had, as ever, no comment to make at all” (Tennant 229).

The sequel thus calls attention to what it engages with: what Austen did not write, or at least what is not explicitly in the texts, the parts of her stories that remain hidden in order for the “happy ending” to prevail. Emma’s reflection in the penultimate chapter also suggests the repression this spinoff text reads into Austen’s text: “Happiness – indeed perfect happiness – must come from understanding where she had thought she too perfectly understood, that there were complications, matters kept hidden that were not intended to be revealed” (Tennant 218).

### **Going beyond the Universally Acknowledged Truth?**

If there is one thing that Berdoll's and Tennant's continuations of Austen's narratives demonstrate, it is the heterogeneity of the sequel genre. Even as it playfully combines elements of Regency romance and soft core porn, *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* extends the marriage plot in order to contextualize the union of an Austenian couple within contemporary concerns about love, sex, marriage and family, and invites readers to speculate about what Austen did not write about. The novel paints a picture of what its author and readers desire from their partners and from married life, their anxieties about these, and the perspectives about gender that frame both. It also demonstrates the enduring belief in love and marriage as offering fulfilment to women despite anxieties about infidelity and that this belief is validated by and accessed via Austen's world. *Emma in Love* reinterprets the marriage plot as a critical reading in fictional form: it is a repetition of the text with a difference that allows it to spell out such criticism in its narrative, playfully "outing" Austen's characters in order to question the closure of the marriage ending.

Although different in terms of their approaches to the source texts, these spinoffs are unified by their "revisionist intention" (Stoneman 240) or their aim to supply something new to Austen's narratives. Both assert that marriage is not the end for Austen's characters and present conflicts that involve the female protagonists' desires within and outside their roles as wives. Both of these protagonists, Elizabeth Darcy and Emma Knightley, explore their sexuality and its role in their lives, although the former embraces hers and the latter represses it. Both sequels are also open-ended texts, and as

such suggest that their women's narratives extend beyond the order that is restored by the resolution of marital conflicts. Berdoll's novel hints at new threats to the couple's domestic bliss, while Tennant's novel offers an epilogue to Emma's lesbian affair that leaves the protagonist's sexuality unresolved.

Although both sequels maintain the marital status quo, I believe that, to a limited extent, these texts write beyond the marriage ending. For one, they do something that Austen does not, which is to tackle explicitly the conflicts and concerns of Austen's married heroines, subject matter that is apparently relevant to today's audiences. The "good understanding" and "perfect happiness" at the end of Austen's novels must be renegotiated after the wedding – that is, it must be negotiated for modern-day women who read Austen and these spinoffs. For another, these sequels challenge the boundaries of Austen's texts not just by continuing them but by writing about what is hinted at, what is not said, or what has been interpreted in different ways by scholars and readers in the past two centuries. Although they certainly exploit Austen's popularity and commercial appeal, fan enthusiasm, and nostalgia, they may also utilize the style of Austen's domestic fiction to comment seriously (or not so seriously) on issues like love and marriage that are relevant to women today.

While these sequels focus on romance and maintain the marital status quo, they remain worthwhile subjects of study. They may not exactly subvert or undermine Austen's existing plots but they engage in subtle yet important "acts of creative revision: embellishing, rearranging, modifying, supplementing, expanding" (Felski 108). By reopening the marriage plot,

Berdoll's and Tennant's sequels take the first steps in going beyond "universally acknowledged truths" about love and marriage. By expanding it, they call attention to the romantic fulfilment that her novels provide for women but also explore alternative sources of fulfilment. By continuing Austen's novels and by focusing on the married afterlives of her characters, sequel writers may both critique marriage and acknowledge that, rather than being either on the one hand woman's sole objective in life or on the other an oppressive patriarchal institution, it offers women today something that they want.

## Chapter 2 - Austenian Retellings: Rewriting the Marriage Plot

### Revisiting/Reconfiguring Austen's Marriage Narratives

Sequels write beyond the ending of Austen's novels by continuing their protagonists' stories; retellings return to the beginning, fill in perceived gaps, and provide alternate perspectives and discourses. Their writers engage in what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision" or "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). The Austenian retelling is even more heterogeneous as a category than the sequel since it may be set within Austen's world or outside it. It is also a more recently utilized spinoff form than the sequel: at least fifty-eight retellings of Austen's novels have been published since 1990, while only five were produced before this period.<sup>63</sup>

In this chapter, I take a look at five spinoffs of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* which re-enter the marriage plot and romantic readings of this from various critical directions and in ways that are imitative, celebratory, innovative, and sometimes subversive. To elicit the women's needs and desires that drive the production and consumption of these texts, I explore how these retellings reconcile (post)feminist negotiations of women's identity – specifically with regard to having both independence and love – with novels organized according to the marriage plot and which ostensibly celebrate gender proprieties. Again, a crucial point that emerges from this analysis is that the meaning of marriage for the texts' modern-day readers is negotiated and configured as important but not necessarily central to women's lives both

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<sup>63</sup> This information is based on my survey of Austenian spinoffs. Moreover, all *Pride and Prejudice* retellings are 1990s or 2000s productions.

in retellings of Austen that retain it as a plot resolution and in those that discard it for other alternatives.

When Virginia Woolf wrote that Austen “stimulates us to supply what is not there” (114), she was unaware that, decades later, readers of Austen would, in fact, add so abundantly to the Austen archive by retelling her romantic plots. Elaborating on Woolf’s points about the interaction of Austen’s texts with the reader, Iser says: “What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue – this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said” (“Interaction” 392). The Austenian spinoff writer of the 1990s and 2000s has certainly been drawn in and stimulated to supply what is not said; *she* has placed Austen’s texts in contemporary settings and situations, provided alternative perspectives from which to view her stories, and explored “what-if?” tangents in these romantic narratives. Looking at such retellings, I ask: what discourse about love and marriage do these romance-oriented rewrites contribute to Austen’s novels, and why do the women who produce and consume these retellings find it necessary to revisit Austen through these texts?

Whether their authors intend it or not, Austenian retellings participate to some extent in the telling of the “other side of the story,” a notion which feminist narratologist Molly Hite uses to describe women’s experimental fictions. Hite asserts that such texts “share the decentering and disseminating strategies of postmodernist narratives, but they also seem to arrive at these strategies by an entirely different route, which involves emphasizing conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way *re*-centering the

value structure of the narrative” (2). For instance, the proximation or temporal updating of the source novels’ action in modernizations like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Amanda* allows the meanings of singlehood and marriage in Austen to be extended or adapted for emphasis on specific interpretations that are relevant to readers in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>64</sup> In Fielding’s novel, the marriage plot is not entirely rejected but rather modified to fit within the cultural context of its central character, a nineties urbanite and daughter of Cosmopolitan and consumer culture; in Smith’s retelling, it is validated and upheld but also remolded for its contemporary Christian protagonist. Transfocalized spinoffs like Aidan’s *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy and Aiken’s *Jane Fairfax* also re-center the narrative, even while retaining marriage as a resolution, by giving a voice to reticent characters and angling romantic themes in ways that address the desires and anxieties of modern-day women readers.<sup>65</sup> These women’s longing to see every stage of Mr. Darcy’s transformation into a worthy husband is gratified in a much extended retelling from his point of view, while their curiosity about the secret romance of a “secondary” Austenian heroine is satisfied by the recounting of Jane Fairfax’s story.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in Campbell’s *Lost in Austen*, the closure of the marriage ending is challenged via a non-linear and interactive format, its intrusive narrator, and the playful thwarting of the reader’s desires.

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<sup>64</sup> Thus far, the published modernizations I have encountered have been set in the last two decades rather than in other time periods. *FanFiction.Net*, however, features post-civil war American, “Western,” and futuristic science fiction retellings of *Pride and Prejudice* (see the bibliographic entry for “Pride and Prejudice FanFiction Archive”), as well as crossovers with texts set in different eras and imaginary worlds (e.g. *Wuthering Heights*, *Master and Commander*, *Star Wars*, *The Dragonriders of Pern*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and *Discworld*).

<sup>65</sup> A number of retellings have also been written from the point of view of characters portrayed negatively in Austen’s novels, such as Lydia Bennet and Mrs. Elton, in order to redeem them.

<sup>66</sup> Four of the eight *Emma* retellings in my survey of Austenian spinoffs are told from the point of view of a character dubbed by Aiken as “the second heroine” of the novel.

A measure of these retellings' (post)feminist gestures of dissemination and decentering is achieved via the transposition of Austen's novels to genres which have been labelled as women's fiction, popular/"low" literature, or derivative and appropriative writing. Aiken's alternative-perspective retelling is straightforwardly referred to as a tongue-in-cheek Austen sequel, akin to Berdoll's and Tennant's spinoffs, but the other four spinoffs have more intriguing generic affiliations.<sup>67</sup>

Firstly, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is seen as one of the earliest examples of chick lit, a genre of novels marketed as humorous, entertaining, and highly readable women's texts that feature single women in their twenties or thirties who deal with problems of work, dating, and daily life (Mazza, "Who's Laughing Now?" 24-6).<sup>68</sup> Responses to the genre have been polarized: it has been derided by critics as "trivial fiction" and staunchly defended by fans who "claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women" (Ferriss and Young 2). Chick lit novels seek to "unite readers across genre lines, by both grounding themselves in nineteenth-century, heroine-centered literature and by dialoguing with various twenty-first century consumer culture mediums" (Smith 2). Chick lit transpositions of Austen's fiction may be viewed as apt in light of the fact that Austen wrote at a time when the literary status of "novels that portrayed female emotion and the struggle of independent heroines against social convention" (Benedict 63) was insecure. As Barbara M. Benedict points out, Austen was interested in the "commercial circulation of literature, and wrote novels informed by both high and popular

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<sup>67</sup> See the "Jane Austen Sequels" section of the author's official website, *Welcome to the Wonderful World of Joan Aiken*.

<sup>68</sup> Mazza asserts that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is seen to have "jump-started" the chick lit trend ("Who's Laughing Now?" 24).



literature (64).<sup>69</sup> Her consciousness of and playfulness about literary hierarchies mean that the very source material for spinoffs like *Bridget Jones's Diary* itself anticipates the blurring of boundaries between high literature and popular culture.

Another modernized retelling, *Amanda*, is written in the genre of Christian romance, inspirational romance, or “Godly” romance. As such, it necessarily angles Austen’s novels to include such elements as “a solid faith message” and “spiritual growth” or the characters’ “deepening relationships with God and greater understanding of their spiritual needs” as they work through their romantic conflicts (Martin 5). Next, Aidan’s retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* originated as fan fiction, a genre which “fill[s] the gaps left by legitimate culture” (Fiske 33) and “blurs the boundary between text and reader” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 155).<sup>70</sup> Seen as what Michel De Certeau describes as textual “poaching,” fan fiction “takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader” (174), re-centering the narrative in the reader’s favor. Lastly, the seemingly marriage-obsessed *Lost in Austen* makes strategic use of a non-linear, interactive, multiple-ending format to destabilize the structure and the very notion of a marriage plot.<sup>71</sup> Thus, rather than assessing these returns to Austen as formulaic and derivative and assigning them to a single homogenous category, it is more useful to explore what Austenian retellings do ideologically, what motivates their production and

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<sup>69</sup> Austen also did not belong to her age’s literary elite that was beginning to cordon off texts into canonical and non-canonical categories (Benedict 63).

<sup>70</sup> Aidan originally published the first volume of the trilogy as online fan fiction inspired by Colin Firth’s portrayal of Mr. Darcy in the 1995 BBC television miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>71</sup> The subtitle of Webster’s novel, “Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure,” calls to mind the popular “Choose Your Own Adventure” books of the 1980s and 1990s based perhaps on earlier forms of the multiple-ending novels such as Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*, in which readers can opt to read the chapters in sequence or “hopscotch” randomly through various chapters, or read only the odd or even pages.

consumption, and what they contribute to the feminist enterprise. It is also important to remember with regard to assessing how critically these spinoffs reconfigure the marriage plot, that even slight “changes in emphasis and value can articulate the ‘other side’ of a culturally mandated story” (Hite 4).

### **The Singleton’s Quest in Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary***

In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, a loose modernized retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, adapted from a serial column (begun in 1995) in the *Independent*, the focus is on the single thirtysomething woman’s preoccupations and anxieties. Set in mid-1990s England, the novel is written in diary form, each entry usually beginning with tallies of the protagonist’s weight, calories consumed, and indulgences in bad habits, like smoking, drinking and obsessing about men. The retelling features “Singleton” and comic heroine Bridget Jones, the charming Daniel Cleaver as her Wickham-like Mr. Wrong, and the stiff yet honorable Mark Darcy as her Mr. Right. Paralleling plot points in *Pride and Prejudice*, Bridget has an annoying mother eager to marry her off, dislikes her destined partner at first because she overhears him insulting her at a party, is duped by the caddish Daniel, and is threatened by a family scandal which Mark averts out of love for her. Beyond these similarities, however, Fielding’s spinoff does not strictly adhere to Austen’s characterizations, atmosphere, and style. It can be fully appreciated without any knowledge of the source text, perhaps because Fielding did not originally intend the Austen connection and only later used it as a framing device for the original serial.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Darcy appears only at the beginning of the 1996 columns, and Bridget’s mother does not yet take on the role of Lydia Bennet as she does in the novel. However, while the columns

This combination of Austenian engagement and disengagement allows for a productive palimpsestic relationship wherein Fielding “validates [Austen’s] perceptions in a new century” (Salber) as she makes playfully knowing references to the source text. For example, in reference to the parallels in name and character of her love interest and Elizabeth Bennet’s, Bridget writes: “It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party. It’s like being called Heathcliff and insisting on spending the entire evening in the garden, shouting ‘Cathy!’ and banging your head against a tree” (Fielding 13). Unlike many other modernized retellings in which the protagonist implausibly fails to recognize the unfolding Austenian courtship plot, this retelling calls attention to the intertextual relationship by making Bridget openly acknowledge the connection.

This self-reflexivity ironically permits more divergences from Austen and a less jarring engagement between hypotext and hypertext than that in other modernizations which often fail to reconcile Austen’s style with their own. For instance, Austen’s delicacy and the late-twentieth-century’s outspokenness about sex are arbitrated by Bridget’s reflections on the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. For Bridget, Darcy and Elizabeth are her “chosen representatives in the field of shagging, or, rather, courtship” (Fielding 245) because she has no vicarious desire to see herself as Elizabeth Bennet. Although she is addicted to their courtship, she is not interested in seeing its goals reached in such an “unnatural” and “wrong” scene as “Darcy

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did not use *Pride and Prejudice* as a narrative frame, references to Austen, *Persuasion*, and the 1995 BBC miniseries (and its stars Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle) are prevalent in these. In 1999, Fielding adapted columns from 1996 and 1997 (including 1998 entries in the *Daily Telegraph*) into a sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999), a loose modern retelling of *Persuasion*.

and Elizabeth in bed, smoking a cigarette afterwards” (Fielding 246). What emerges from these seemingly trivial observations is the notion that modern versions of Austen’s characters act as intermediaries between past and present: Bridget Jones can smoke, pig out, get drunk, and have sex but can also still be, in spirit, Elizabeth Bennet.

Bridget, like Elizabeth, has wit, charm, and beauty, but she also remains relatable to women readers today as a contemporary “everywoman” with faults and flaws. Moreover, like the women who read about her, Bridget suffers from the conflicting pressures of (her understanding of) feminism and a longing for love, her career ambitions and a ticking biological clock, her principled resolutions and the indulgence of her desires. Even critical responses to her character are in conflict: the comic treatment of her many foibles has been critiqued for presenting “an image of contemporary women that contradicts all that feminists have worked to achieve” (Marsh 53) and positively recognized as “a satire of feminism” (Marsh 54). The text’s complex relationship with feminism is introduced in an early scene wherein Bridget falls into a humorous trap because of her desire to impress Mark as strong-minded and well-read. When he asks if she has read any good books, Bridget triumphantly drops the name of a popular nineties feminist text, which she has not actually read: “*Backlash*, actually, by Susan Faludi” (Fielding 14). Mark, who *has* read it, shares his criticism of its excess of “special pleading” (Fielding 14), driving a sheepish Bridget to change the subject, but also revealing to readers the protagonist’s patchy knowledge of feminism and her ambivalent identification with it.

It is likely that many readers share similar uncertainties given the wide range of gender debates that permeate into popular culture about how romance and marriage define women's lives – feminist views of marriage as oppressive toward women, the defense of marriage by marriage rights advocates, the anti-feminist backlash about which Faludi wrote, the pathologization of single women in an “intensified culture of ‘family values’” (Negra), prevalent media images about ideal femininity, and “the pressures on young women to conform to the expectations of their culture” (Wiltshire 2). Fielding projects these uncertainties onto Bridget's vacillations between celebrating her feminist identity and constantly worrying about being an “unmarried freak” (132), between rejoicing in her freedom as a Singleton and secretly fantasizing about being a “trendy Smug Married” (131).

In a humorous recurring pattern, Bridget ends her diary entries with feminist discourse only to follow this up with man-related anxieties. She writes with strong resolve, for instance, in one entry: “feeling v. Empowered [*sic*]. Tremendous. Think might read a bit of Susan Faludi's *Backlash*”; her next, however, begins with “Oh God, am so unhappy about Daniel. I love him” (Fielding 77).<sup>73</sup> In another scene that comically reveals her conflicting priorities, self-proclaimed feminist Bridget attempts to control a friend's male-bashing because “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism” (Fielding 20). Bridget smartly identifies these contradictions but is seemingly helpless (and perhaps unwilling) to escape them; she writes “I am a

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<sup>73</sup> In another entry, Bridget writes: “One must not live one's life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance”; a few hours later, she writes: “What's wrong with me? I'm completely alone. Hate Daniel Cleaver. Am going to have nothing more to do with him. Am going to get weighed” (Fielding 31). Yet another entry ends with a resolution to be self-reliant: “The only thing a woman needs in this day and age is herself. Hurrah!”; however, it is followed by Bridget expressing her fears of dying alone: “Why hasn't Mark Darcy rung me? Why? Why? Am going to be eaten by Alsatian despite all efforts to the contrary. Why me, Lord?” (Fielding 286-7).

child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices” (Fielding 59). She is also clearly a child of 1980s and 1990s gender debates which contribute to the cross-pressures that can sometimes confuse her. At the same time, they make her a fitting medium for questioning such gender issues and for potentially expressing alternative (post)feminist negotiations to have both love and independence.

The narrative of *Bridget Jones's Diary* reflects this engagement. Like most chick lit novels, Fielding's retelling ends with a happy romantic union, and yet Bridget remains single at the end of this novel *and* its sequel. The first and final entries of Bridget's diary reveal her preoccupations with finding love, but they emphasize other concerns as well about her health and well-being, work, friendship and family. Only five of the thirty-three resolutions with which she begins the diary are about men, and four of these notably fall under Bridget's "I Will Not" category of practices to avoid; her penultimate "I Will" resolution is to "Form functional relationship with responsible adult" (Fielding 3).<sup>74</sup> The romantic ending that brings to Bridget a final tally of "*Nice boyfriends 1*" (Fielding 310) is not without qualifications. Even as she celebrates Mark's declaration of his feelings for her, she acknowledges that "all this stuff about how he love[s] [her]" is "the sort of stuff, to be honest, Daniel was always coming out with" (Fielding 306). Finally having the "functional relationship" she desires, Bridget surprisingly does not rave,

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<sup>74</sup> Bridget vows that she will not "Fall for any of the following: alcoholics, workaholics, commitment phobics, people with girlfriends or wives, misogynists, megalomaniacs, chauvinists, emotional fuckwits or freeloaders, perverts"; she also promises not to "Sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend" but ironically adds "as best way to obtain boyfriend" (Fielding 2).

acknowledging instead that Mark has been her boyfriend for six days only and looking back on the year as a whole, not just in terms of love, but also life practices and friendships. Despite the romantic harmony reached at the end, this chick lit retelling is not organized around marriage and is at the very least a “partial reformulation” of the romance (Harzewski 33).<sup>75</sup>

As such, this modernization does not repeat Austen’s marriage plot. Instead, while it features a courtship, romance, and relationships, it questions the significance of these for a contemporary audience living within what McRobbie calls “the postfeminist condition” (11). In this “new gender regime” (McRobbie 12), Bridget, as the “product of modernity,” benefits from institutions which grant her relative independence, mobility, and more choices, but which at the same time generate new anxieties about isolation and singlehood (McRobbie 20). Thus, for Bridget, the binary of singlehood and marriage must be renegotiated. On the one hand, Bridget both envies and abhors Smug Marrieds who torture Singletons with the dreaded “How’s your love-life?” and “Why aren’t you married yet?” (Fielding 40). Questioning what motivates such tactlessness, she says:

maybe Smug Marrieds only mix with other Smug Marrieds and don’t know how to relate to individuals any more. Maybe they really do want to patronize us and make us feel like failed human beings. Or maybe they are in such a sexual rut and they’re . . . hoping for

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<sup>75</sup> *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* ends openly enough to permit Fielding’s 2005 revival of the *Independent* columns; Bridget continues relationships with both Daniel and Mark up until the final entry where, still unmarried, she gives birth to Daniel’s baby. Bridget says: “And truth is, although scary, I like this worrying re being eaten by own child so much better than years of worrying that would die alone, as tragic barren spinster, and be found weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian” (Fielding, “*Independent* Columns”), while Fielding’s afterword to this last Bridget instalment in 2006 reads: “Bridget is giving her every attention to the care of her newborn son – and is too busy to keep up her Diary for the time being” (“*Independent* Columns”).

vicarious thrills by getting us to tell them the roller-coaster details of our sex lives” (Fielding 40).

While secretly longing for love and marriage, Bridget defensively asserts that “There’s more than one way to live,” and revels in a fellow Singleton’s valorization of her generation of “single girls . . . with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don’t need to wash anyone else’s socks” (Fielding 42). However, when her married friend, Magda, expresses her own frustrations and her envy of Bridget’s friendships (i.e. her surrogate family of other Singletons) and freedom, Bridget sees the other side of the story and writes:

Talk about the grass is always bloody greener. The number of times I’ve slumped, depressed, thinking how useless I am and that I spend every Saturday night getting blind drunk and moaning to Jude and Shazzer or Tom about not having a boyfriend; I struggle to make ends meet and am ridiculed as an unmarried freak, whereas Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day. And yet here she is so beaten, miserable and unconfident and telling me I’m lucky. . . .” (Fielding 132)

This realization clears up much about the divide of single and married women, but it does not stop Bridget from desiring a meaningful relationship that will both fulfil her and raise her status among Singletons and Smug Marrieds alike.

By presenting such dilemmas, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* satirizes courtship and relationships and society’s foibles just as *Pride and Prejudice* does, even though, at times, the retelling’s kinship with Austen seems distant, especially, for instance if readers focus on another key subject of Fielding’s: the



impossibility of “having it all,” of satisfying all of one’s media-created desires in the era of capitalism and consumer culture. Fielding’s response to a Book Club question calls attention to the cultural differences between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries; she says that Austen “was also writing about dating, but in her day the rules were very clear, whereas now it’s a quagmire of bluff and counterbluff,” and that while Austen said “the only thing that renders a single woman pitiable is poverty . . . . Now it’s no longer necessary to be married in order to be well off” (“Book Clubs”). However, while Fielding’s spinoff illustrates how much gender roles have shifted since Austen’s day, it also establishes connections between pre-feminist Elizabeth who married for love rather than financial security and (post)feminist Bridget who seeks both love and other sources of fulfilment that define her feminist and *feminine* identity.

Fielding’s spinoff loosely uses Austen’s novel as a template for (post)feminist and postmodern commentary, enabling it to “create [Austen’s] world afresh” (102) as one character, Natasha (Caroline Bingley’s equivalent in the spinoff), puts it. Natasha describes such a goal as evidence of “arrogant individualism” (Fielding 102) in a conversation about hierarchies of culture that self-reflexively highlights the fact that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is a popular adaptation of a literary classic. Similarly, Bridget’s boss, Perpetua, expresses her disgust “that a whole generation of people only get to know the great works of literature – Austen, Eliot, Dickens, Shakespeare, and so on – through television” (Fielding 99) and scoffs at Bridget for thinking that a primetime television dating show is “on a par with Othello’s ‘hurl my soul from heaven’ soliloquy” (Fielding 101). She and Natasha, who resents “the ultimate

*vandalization* of the cultural framework” and Bridget’s “cutesy, morally relativistic” frame of thinking, agree that “with the Classics people should be made to prove they’ve read the book before they’re allowed to watch the television version” (Fielding 102). However, Fielding’s portrayal of these characters as pompous and elitist undermines their commentary, as does the response of Mark, who laughs at Natasha’s pretensions and calls Bridget a “top-postmodernist” (101). Fielding reminds readers, through Mark’s gentle rebuttal of Natasha’s points, that creating the world afresh for a new generation with new conflicts and concerns is exactly what film adaptations and spinoff texts like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* do. The reminder is an insight into the fact that certain readers can appreciate both source text and spinoff for the pleasures these bring as well as the problems these articulate in their narratives about the Singleton’s quest.

### **Spiritual Growth through Love in Debra White Smith’s *Amanda***

Another ingredient, spirituality – as defined by contemporary Evangelicalism – is added to the woman’s quest in *Amanda*, a modernized romantic retelling of *Emma* that seems at first incongruent with what is known about Austen. Austen was an Anglican, attended public worship and read religious texts, but on matters of religion, she “avoided extremes” (Wheeler 409). While she writes in the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, there is little overt concern with spirituality in her work; instead, as Michael Wheeler observes, “The sacred and the secular blend together organically” (410) in her novels and religious elements do not obtrude.<sup>76</sup> Looking closely at *Emma*, for

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Whately called her a “Christian writer” but observed that her religion is “not at all obtrusive” in her novels (qtd. in Kelly, “Religion” 155).

example, Ronald Blythe observes that “All the social and ethical aspects of Christianity are present, the spiritual non-existent” (“Notes” 471). Moreover, in another spinoff, Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club*, one character laughingly notes that although Austen writes about clergymen, her interest in them seems more financial than spiritual and that there is “not a single sermon” in all her six novels (Fowler 106). It is interesting, therefore, to examine how the dimension of spirituality is read into Austen’s *Emma* and transformed into evangelical teachings about faith and marriage in Smith’s romantic retelling.

Smith is the founder of Real Life Ministries and has written various books that conflate love and faith, including non-fiction guides like *What Jane Austen Taught Me about Love and Romance* and *The Divine Romance: Experiencing Intimacy with God*, and “The Austen Series,” Austen-based contemporary romance fiction published by a Christian Press, Harvest House Publishing. Not surprisingly, “issues of faith” are woven into the romance narrative of *Amanda*, the fifth book in the series, which follows the basic plot pattern of Austen’s *Emma*.<sup>77</sup> Amanda Priebe (Emma Woodhouse) is the matchmaking CEO of a family-owned travel agency who attempts to improve the romantic prospects of her dowdy and clumsy secretary Haley Schmitz (Harriet Smith) by turning the latter’s attention from down-to-earth dairy farmer Roger Miller (Robert Martin) to music minister Mason Eldridge (Mr. Elton). Her long-time friend Nate Knighton (Mr. Knightley) is secretly smitten with Amanda but opposes her matchmaking scheme because of his belief in Roger’s “high morals” (Smith 27) and because he sees in him an

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<sup>77</sup> The quoted material is taken from the back cover blurb of *Amanda*.

opportunity for Haley to “marry a hard-working Christian man” (Smith 27). Amanda is drawn to the charming and flirtatious Franklyn West (Frank Churchill), but when her plans go awry – Mason proposes to her, she learns that Franklyn is secretly engaged, and she fears that Nate seems to be falling for Haley – Amanda admits that she has been “trying to play God” (Smith 298) and realizes that Nate is the man she wants to marry.

It is clear from the parallels in names – given in a “cast” list explicitly describing Smith’s characters as counterparts of Austen’s – that *Amanda* is more overtly grafted onto its source novel than *Bridget Jones’s Diary*.<sup>78</sup> The transposed retelling, however, lacks the self-reflexive aspects of the Fielding’s novel and excises much of the irony and humor of Austen’s plot. While Austen is “conspicuously self-conscious and iconoclastic in [her] deployment of narrative techniques” (Mezei 1), Smith indulges in unabashed sentiment via the main characters’ many musings about their romantic feelings.<sup>79</sup> Smith retains the matchmaking elements, romantic pairings, and marriage ending of *Emma* but transforms the characters into stereotypes of their Austenian counterparts; as one reviewer says, she “appropriates those elements of Austen which suit her needs and ignores or mutates what does not fit her message” (Radcliffe 3). One example of selective transformation is Smith’s casting of Mr. Elton as a music minister (who leads the choir rather than an actual service) instead of a pastor: she says, “While his claims indicate his only ambition in life is to be a man of the cloth, his expensive tastes say he’s after a

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<sup>78</sup> Another paratext is the “Cast” list provided by Smith in the first few pages of *Amanda*, wherein the similarity between the names of Smith’s and Austen’s characters is unmistakable, e.g. Miss Bates becomes Betty Cates and Mr. Weston becomes Wayne West.

<sup>79</sup> One reader-reviewer on *Amazon.com* even describes Nate’s character as “a love-sick puppy.”

wife with money.”<sup>80</sup> Just as in her earlier retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, wherein Mr. Collins’ counterpart is vice-president of an oil company rather than a pastor, Smith refrains from portraying unpleasant Austenian characters as religious leaders (Wells, “True Love Waits”).

Other characters show the barest resemblance to Austen’s: Harold Priebe (Mr. Woodhouse) loses his influence on the plot and humorous appeal as a hypochondriac when he is portrayed as a jolly old man, not an invalid, who actually encourages Amanda to marry Nate, while Betty Cates (Miss Bates) becomes a simple-minded gossip. Even more problematic because of its racial stereotyping is the characterization of Janet French (Jane Fairfax), described as “an elegant young lady of Asian descent” but portrayed as an appearance-conscious flirt. The nuances of Jane Fairfax’s character – she is a beautiful, talented, accomplished woman of good birth who is forced to earn her own bread – are reduced into Asian exoticism as Janet’s allure is attributed to such features as her “smoldering Asian eyes” (Smith 135). The Asian woman is seen not just as exotic but seductively passive, for instance, when Amanda’s jealousy of Nate manifests in her expectation of seeing him “with some wilting Asian on his arm” (Smith 206). Such stereotypes illustrate the spinoff’s selectivity but also its biases; Janet is simply an attractive “Other” woman, Amanda’s (mis)judgement of her is not corrected in Smith’s novel, and Janet plays no role in the protagonist’s transformation.

For the most part, however, the spinoff’s mutations are in accord with the goal of Christian romance, which is to incorporate spiritual or faith

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<sup>80</sup> This description of Mason Eldridge can be found in the “Cast” section in the first few pages *Amanda. First Impressions*, a retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, is the first novel in Smith’s “The Austen Series.”

concerns and a Christian outlook in the love story.<sup>81</sup> Various passages emphasize Christian culture and atmosphere, such as a scene featuring Sunday worship at Mason's ministry, references to Angie Townsend West's (Mrs. Weston's) "Bible teaching" (Smith 250), and even passing remarks about the beat of "contemporary Christian music" (Smith 67) matching the rhythm of Nate's pulse. More importantly, the central characters repeatedly address prayers about their romantic concerns to God or Jesus. Amanda at the beginning of the spinoff declares her romantic machinations to be "nothing but the hand of God" (Smith 17), and she later chastises herself for this, asking forgiveness from God for her pride in thinking she can control people's romantic destiny (Smith 298). When Haley decides to return to Roger, she believes that it is the right choice because Amanda's "ideas of what's best are totally different from [hers] . . . and God's" (Smith 306). Nate's love life is guided by his faith: early in the novel he decides to "stop the whole dating game and just wait on God to bring him his future wife" (Smith 19).

Marriage is also the endpoint in this retelling that is preoccupied with love and courtship; the narrative closes with Franklyn and Janet engaged, and the two central couples, Amanda and Nate, and Haley and Roger, married as well. These are the same pairings as in Austen, but when one considers the spinoff's author and readers, the unions take on a sense of advocacy. Smith, after all, is a Marriage Enrichment Coordinator who views her "blazing love affair marriage" as resulting from the "innovative concepts taught by her ministry" (*Debra White Smith*). The text's target Christian readership is a community which sees marriage as one of the basic ideological institutions for

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<sup>81</sup> According to Gail Gaymer Martin, "The purpose of Christian romance is not to evangelize; it is first to entertain and second to present life and romance through a Christian worldview" (95).

the propagation of faith. Thus, as Juliette Wells puts it in “True Love Waits: Austen and the Christian Romance in the Contemporary U.S.,” their reading of Austen is “guided by faith rather than by an academic understanding of literature.”

Smith’s retelling essentially transforms Austen’s text into an evangelizing guidebook. For instance, Nate’s reprimanding of Amanda for “playing God” (Smith 154) stresses the sin of her feminine preoccupation with matchmaking. Then, when Nate witnesses Haley’s secret tryst with Roger, Haley wonders if their discovery is “some kind of divine justice,” and her guilt makes her recall the Biblical maxim, “Your sins will find you out” (Smith 229). As Claire Radcliffe points out in “Updating Austen: Jane Austen’s Stories in a Modern World,” the spinoff pushes “the belief that [Austen’s] works can be used as a manual for the romantic conduct of the young evangelical female” (2-3). In Smith’s retelling, romance becomes a “faith journey” (Martin 96) during which Nate struggles briefly with his doubt of God – at one point he wonders if “God [has] forgotten he need[s] a wife” (19) – and Amanda recognizes her sins of pride and self-centeredness.<sup>82</sup> Contemporary evangelical lessons are installed in the story: that one’s romantic fate should be left to God and that faith and spiritual growth play a role in a couple’s compatibility.

But why use Austen in particular for overtly evangelical messages about marriage? The two seem a strange fit when one considers that Austen eschewed “the kind of fervent religiosity that characterised much of the religious fiction of her day, particularly Evangelical fiction” (Wheeler 412).

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<sup>82</sup> Martin’s definition of the Christian romance includes the “coming together” of a couple “through a deeper purpose and God’s guidance, to embrace in love and commitment” (4).

Moreover, her novels advocate prudent and love-based marriages rather than marriage in general, as seen in the contrast in *Emma* between the Knightleys' union and the more questionable ones of Mr. and Mrs. Elton or Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. Yet Smith's text reveals perceived affinities between Christian romance and Austen's fiction. After all, the first three of the four points on which Christian romance fiction differs from its secular counterparts, according to Martin's *Writing the Christian Romance*, also apply to Austen's novels: a lack of "violence, profanity," and "physical sensuality and explicit sexual content" (5). As is true of much mainstream nineteenth-century fiction (due in part to the restraints imposed by publishers and circulating libraries), there are no graphic portrayals of violence in Austen's novels. The closest readers get to swearing are exclamations such as Marianne Dashwood's "Good God!" or "Gracious God!" and Catherine Morland's "Good Heavens!" (Sutherland and LeFaye 101, 151).

Recalling Woolf's and Iser's observations about how Austen's texts stimulate the reader's creative participation are Martin's suggestions that writing about sex be "evocative rather than explicit" (8) and that "providing only a suggestion of detail allows readers to use their imaginations as much or as little as they want to fill in the blanks" (8) – although this subtlety does not extend, in Smith's retelling at least, to the spelled-out evangelical messages. Affinities between Austen and Christian romance can be seen in Smith's assertion that Austen's novels are "'racy' and modern" without being "immoral" or overly explicit because the latter "always disapproves of sin" ("An Interview"). Likewise, Smith observes that contemporary issues tackled from an evangelical perspective are topics that Austen also deals with, such as



premarital sex (e.g. Lydia Bennet) and unwed mothers (e.g. Eliza Williams) (“An Interview”). It helps, as well, that themes which are the preoccupation of Christian romance, such as “weakness, shame, pride, sin, guilt, and self-centeredness” (Martin 95), are also found in Austen’s multi-faceted works. Smith aims to emulate Austen by bringing up these subjects “without ever creating a story that is too racy for teenagers or conservative Christians to read” (“An Interview”). This same impulse can be seen in Mormon writer Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series which is distinguished by its “erotics of abstinence” (Grossman) despite the author’s claim that her novels are not intended as religious propaganda (e.g. the portrayal of sexual abstinence as a virtue). Smith’s writing, like Meyer’s, is “shaped by the values she learnt from her family and the church” (Mills).

With regard to Martin’s fourth point, the presence of “spiritual elements and a take-away faith message,” the connection between Austen and the evangelical romance becomes more tenuous, since “morality” (which is clearly present in Austen’s work) and “spirituality” are not the same. Nevertheless, a relationship is created between the two in Smith’s spinoff through the use of Austen’s marriage plot. David Michael Thomas asserts in *Christian Marriage: The New Challenge*, “The coupling of marriage as a social institution with love between the wife and husband has been an important aspect in developing a theology and spirituality of marriage” (viii). Perhaps what factors into the selection of Austen’s novels as hypotexts for Christian romance is the fact that at a time when marriage was largely motivated by economic concerns, Austen wrote about unions based on mutual love. While Austen’s works are hardly examples of evangelical Christianity

and have little to say about faith in Smith's sense of the word, they are easily reconfigured to incorporate a take-away faith message with regard to marriage. Austen's *Emma* and Smith's *Amanda* may share the same plot, but the latter illustrates how small details can alter a narrative to communicate entirely different values and to give it a vastly different aesthetic. This importantly suggests the flexibility of the "marriage plot," especially when considering how different Austen's *Emma* is from Smith's transformation of it into a Christian romance retelling that guides women to believe or reaffirms their conviction in "the ultimate power of faith and love."<sup>83</sup>

### **"Romancing" Mr. Darcy in Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman Trilogy***

Besides transposing Austen's novels to the present, spinoff writers have also sought to complement these by providing alternative-perspective retellings, the most prevalent of which involves the recounting of the marriage plot from the point of view of the Austenian "hero."<sup>84</sup> With the exception of Mr. Darcy, who proposes by Chapter 34 in a novel with 61 chapters, the feelings of Austen's men are made explicitly known to the female protagonists only toward the end of her novels. Viewing this as a lack, spinoff writers aim to fill the gap for readers who are interested in seeing the love story from the male perspective. Interestingly, despite Mr. Darcy's earlier disclosure of love, there are at least seven retellings from his point of view, as compared to only three from that of Captain Wentworth, one each from Mr. Knightley and

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<sup>83</sup> The quoted phrase is from the back cover blurb of *Amanda*.

<sup>84</sup> I have encountered at least twelve retellings of this type in my survey of Austenian spinoffs. A popular format is the "diary" retelling which allows readers to view the gradual development of the "hero's" affections for the protagonist; it also permits Austen's more reticent males to unrestrainedly articulate all their feelings of love.

Edmund Bertram, and none at all from Henry Tilney, Edward Ferrars, and Colonel Brandon. He is, after all, based on the findings of a 2008 Jane Austen Survey, the favourite hero of respondents (51%), followed by runners up, Captain Wentworth (17%) and Mr. Knightley (14%), and trailed by Henry Tilney (10%), Colonel Brandon (5%), Ferrars (1%) and Edmund Bertram (1%) (Kiefer).

Moreover, Darcy's appeal has obvious links to *Pride and Prejudice's* affinities with the romance novel. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis devotes a chapter entitled "The Best Romance Novel Ever Written" (74) to this text and uses it to illustrate the elements of the romance genre. *Pride and Prejudice* has, of course, been read for many other literary aspects, but there is no denying that contemporary romance writers have used it and its protagonists as template for their own love stories, heroes, and heroines. Following a popular romance trope, Darcy is initially indifferent to Elizabeth and even behaves badly toward her, and the turnaround of his feelings becomes all the more pleasurable to women readers because of his early aloofness toward the heroine with whom they identify. As an appealing romance novel hero, Darcy becomes a likely protagonist of alternative-perspective retellings which aim to amplify the existent romance plot elements of *Pride and Prejudice* via content and style. In such retellings, Austen's novel and Austen's Darcy are "romanced" or embellished to satisfy and, so to speak, court the pleasure of readers who watch his courtship of Elizabeth.

Even Elizabeth is curious about Mr. Darcy having fallen in love with her; in the penultimate chapter of Austen's novel, she asks him, "How could you begin? . . . "I can comprehend your going on charmingly, when you had

once made a beginning; but what could set you off in the first place?" (*Pride and Prejudice* 326). Retellings from Darcy's perspective aim to produce even more readerly pleasure by compensating for what they perceive to be silences in *Pride and Prejudice* with regard to the development of his feelings for Elizabeth. Aidan enlarges on Elizabeth's queries in a three-volume retelling that tracks the story of "Fitzwilliam George Alexander Darcy." She asks: "How did Fitzwilliam Darcy change so dramatically between the opening pages of the book and his reacquaintance with Elizabeth at Pemberley, a change not only in his inner man, but one that carries him to great personal acts of charity involving a man he has every reason to hate?"<sup>85</sup> Although Austen allowed Darcy to explain himself to Elizabeth at the end of the novel, Aidan and, presumably, her readers want a more explicit account of his behaviour.

Besides allowing him to literally speak volumes about his feelings for Elizabeth, the *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy fleshes out Darcy's romance-novel-hero role, sharing in "E-True Hollywood story" style, information about his full name, family life, college friends, and duties at Pemberley. The entire second volume focuses on the relatively "unseen" Darcy playing the role of landlord, loving and protective brother, concerned cousin, and good friend. Aidan also constructs a "longing, almost pining Darcy" in contrast with Jane Austen's more austere version, and the sentimental tone of the retelling matches the hero she portrays: a Darcy with roiling passions and emotions hidden beneath a controlled and aloof exterior.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> This question is from the Q&A with Pamela Aidan section of the reading guide of *These Three Remain*.

<sup>86</sup> This is how the reading guide of *Duty and Desire* describes the character in the "Q&A with Pamela Aidan" section.

Outwardly obsessed with correctness and propriety, Aidan's lovesick Darcy talks to himself, indulges in daydreams, and sighs over poetry or passages from Shakespeare and the Bible, prompting one reader reviewer on *Amazon* to comment that Aidan "turned Darcy into a teenaged [*sic*] girl."<sup>87</sup> From the moment he meets Elizabeth he becomes fascinated with her, much more consumedly in this retelling than in the original, reflecting on every detail of her actions, looks, and words, dissecting them and over-reading them.<sup>88</sup>

The appeal to contemporary women of Aidan's Darcy, along with that of other sentimental diary-keeping Darcys, seems perplexing at first because, in terms of how he expresses himself, he seems nothing like the original. However, Tania Modleski's analysis of popular women's narratives provides insights into the attractions that such a Darcy has for women – a Darcy whose romance hero qualities in *Pride and Prejudice* are exaggerated by Aidan to exploit the appealing turnaround of a man who is outwardly disdainful of the heroine but inwardly sensitive and not quite in control of his feelings. In *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, Modleski talks about the "mystery of masculine motives" being central to most popular romances (31). In such narratives, the "puzzling behaviour of the hero" (30), which includes indifference to or even mistreatment of the heroine, is explained as "the hero's resistance to the increasing power of her charms" (34) when the happy ending is reached, thus alleviating "women's anxieties about men" (xxvi). Aidan's retelling functions similarly but with a twist. Taking into account readers' familiarity with romance elements of the source text, it

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<sup>87</sup> See the bibliographic entry for "Customer Reviews: *An Assembly Such as This*."

<sup>88</sup> Darcy notices an incredible amount of detail: Elizabeth's smiles, the biting of her lip, a dimple in her cheek, the flashing of her eyes, her perfume, the swishing of her gown, an arched eyebrow, the "uncommon intelligence displayed in her beautiful, dark eyes" (Aidan, *Assembly* 48).

homes in on the pleasures of these and gratifies them by explicitly interpreting the actions of its male protagonist in a positive light.

At the assembly where Darcy first meets Elizabeth, the spinoff presents a husband-hunting society from the male's perspective, thus attributing the reason for Darcy's initial coldness and reserve to his discomfort at being an object of "frank appraisal" (Aidan, *An Assembly* 4). While *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that Darcy is motivated at the Meryton Ball by a combination of shyness, a sense of being hunted, and a fear of appearing to disadvantage – Aidan deliberately exaggerates his helplessness. Her Darcy sees himself as "horseflesh" put on display for buyers in search of "a suitable new Thoroughbred stallion" (Aidan, *An Assembly* 4). When he meets Elizabeth, his actions are justified as partly resulting from his irritation with the public scrutiny he must endure. More significantly, because it reassures women readers of Elizabeth's immediate power over him, Darcy's remark about her being "tolerable; but not handsome enough" to tempt him (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 7) and his denigrating descriptions of her to Caroline Bingley are presented as deliberate attempts to hide his attraction behind insults and his "usual pose of indifference" (Aidan 31).<sup>89</sup>

Stressing another romance trope used in the original, exchanges between hero and heroine in the retelling are blatantly portrayed as combative in order to heighten the pleasure of Darcy's inevitable surrender to Elizabeth. Aidan's numerous and not too subtle battle metaphors – two chapters, for example, are entitled "En Garde!" and "Duelling in Earnest" – serve to amplify the thrill of this antagonism. In numerous verbal duels, Darcy reads

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<sup>89</sup> Darcy, "with as much insouciance as he could summon, . . . made it clear as he criticized her face, her form and her manners that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was not his idea of perfection in a woman" (Aidan, *Assembly* 41).

Elizabeth's words as part of a mind-game she is playing with him: he detects a "martial light in [the] eye" (86) of his "delightful antagonist" (91) and wonders at one point what "weapons [she] will bring to the fray" at their next "battle of wits" (87).<sup>90</sup> By the end of the first volume, Aidan spells out the fact that Elizabeth is (unbeknownst to her) victorious and that Darcy has partially succumbed by admitting his attraction to Elizabeth but weakly retreating to London and Pemberley out of pride and fear of his overwhelming love.

According to Modleski, much of women's satisfaction in reading romance narratives comes from "the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally grovelling" (37). The "deep-seated desire for vengeance" (Modleski 37) forms part of the appeal of the romance of *Pride and Prejudice* – first when Elizabeth rejects Darcy's proposal and later when he admits that his "unpardonable" behaviour to her "merit[s] the severest reproof" (Austen 316) – just as it does, albeit in an overstated way, in Aidan's much-extended retelling. Aidan's language makes obvious another appealing romance element that her retelling exploits: the portrayal of the heroine viewed by the hero as a "pert, adorable creature" (Modleski 39). For example, when Darcy decides at the end of the second volume that Elizabeth is the one for him, he refers to her affectionately as "one impudent, exciting, lovely little piece of baggage" (Aidan 171). While in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth criticizes Darcy in convincing terms that cause him to reflect on his

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<sup>90</sup> More war/chess metaphors include Darcy's seeing Elizabeth as "checked...but not mated" (Aidan, *Assembly* 105) by one of his verbal attacks, his description of her "barrage of penetrating wit" (107), and his talk of the "prospect of victory," "battles won but wars lost," and being "down, but not defeated" (105).

actions, in Aidan's trilogy, Elizabeth's signs of rebellion are overtly transformed into "a way of pleasing men" (Modleski 39).

In *Duty and Desire*, which tackles the "silent time" of Austen's novel, Aidan emphasizes another romance novel element, what Regis calls the "point of ritual death," or the point at which the "happy ending is most in jeopardy" (35). Darcy attempts to "banish [Elizabeth] from his mind and displace her in his heart" (Aidan 110) by seeking a more "correct" object, and he comes into contact with the romance narrative's "other woman – the real scheming adventuress" (Modleski 43). A visit to gothic Norwyck Castle offers him an alternative prospective mate in the mysterious Lady Sylvania, a half Irish "fairy changeling" (Aidan, *Duty* 124) to whose "passionately offered temptations" (Aidan, *Duty* 294) Darcy nearly yields. He is disillusioned, however, when, in a ludicrous twist, she uses supernatural powers (the novel is vague about this) to seduce and blackmail him to serve her political cause. Darcy's dramatic change can be partially attributed to this traumatizing experience with the "other woman," the heroine's foil. The encounter also serves to emphasize that Darcy's love for Elizabeth, who does not appear in this novel, prevails; she remains in his thoughts, and he soon begins to compare her in a favorable light to the society women he encounters.<sup>91</sup>

The rest of Darcy's transformation takes place in *These Three Remain*, when he again encounters Elizabeth at Rosings, and wherein the reader's pleasure of watching Darcy watch Elizabeth is renewed. Citing art critic John Berger to describe the latter phenomenon in romance narratives, Modleski

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<sup>91</sup> In *Duty and Desire*, Darcy begins to see Elizabeth's worth: "Although she was present only in his mind, [her] shadow had eclipsed the Brilliants that Society had offered him" (Aidan 216); "She did not precisely belong within any group of women of his acquaintance. She was. . . Elizabeth!" (Aidan 51-52); and "it was quite evident that in [her] there dwelt no pretense, no artifice or deceit. She was herself, as she met the world, as she met him" (Aidan 109).



says that “Women watch themselves being looked at” (qtd. in 44). Berger adds, “The surveyor of the woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (qtd. in Modleski 47). Intriguingly, however, the reader of Aidan’s retelling seems to be positioned as both male and female. While Austen describes Elizabeth’s eyes and figure from Darcy’s perspective in a few brief passages, after the first volume of *Pride and Prejudice*, Aidan massively adds to these observations in her retelling.<sup>92</sup> The latter’s incredibly detailed descriptions of Elizabeth’s face and figure from Darcy’s male perspective call to mind Laura Mulvey’s notion of “spectatorship” which positions “woman as image” and “man as bearer of the look” (33). Aidan also, however, projects female fantasies onto Darcy’s observations, for instance in his meticulous description of Elizabeth’s clothing: “Delicate, creamy muslin, flocked with flowers embroidered in blue and edged with lace” (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 54). Besides being emotional and nurturing, traits traditionally thought of as feminine, Aidan’s Darcy shows an interest in and knowledge of what “Men commonly take so little notice of” (Austen 14), as Mrs. Allen in *Northanger Abbey* puts it.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Austen’s Darcy is comparatively terse; in *Pride and Prejudice*, he observes “more than one failure of perfect symmetry” in Elizabeth’s form but is “forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing” (16), and he comments a few times on Elizabeth’s “fine eyes” (19), their expression, color, shape, and fine eye-lashes (39) and the “brilliance” given to them and to her complexion by exercise (24, 26). Aidan’s more effusive Darcy lovingly describes her “lively eyes” (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 47), her “brow arched over teasing eyes” (*An Assembly Such as This* 67), and “the marvelous way the sunlight was playing among Elizabeth’s luxurious curls” (*An Assembly Such as This* 76). Descriptions such as these abound in all three volumes, and even in the last few pages of *These Three Remain*, Darcy still talks of the glow of Elizabeth’s eyes (419), her “loveliness” and her “calm beauty” (Aidan 435).

<sup>93</sup> *Northanger Abbey*’s Henry Tilney also displays broad knowledge of women’s fashions. Catherine Morland thinks him “strange” (Austen 14) when he talks about muslins with Mrs. Allen, but this is his way of mocking the latter’s foibles.

In any case the transfocalization allows female readers to revel in the praise of a woman they both gaze at and identify with, for instance when Darcy calls Elizabeth “Diana and Minerva, courage and wisdom together” and “an enchanting muse” who causes “his heart to beat so erratically and the blood to skip and surge through his veins” (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 61-62). Their desire to be viewed as unique is played out when Darcy realizes that Elizabeth is “different from every other female he had ever met” and “irresistibly enchanting” (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 127) for being “the first and perhaps the only woman who could draw him both body and soul, who could merrily stand against him on a point of contention and yet excite both his admiration and desire” (Aidan 147). The woman’s revenge-fantasy is also enacted when the retelling dwells obsessively on Darcy’s sufferings over what he believes to be his unrequited love for Elizabeth: “He, whom the brightest of diamonds, gracing the most exclusive of drawing rooms had failed to entrap, to have been brought so completely to heel by a country-bred girl of no family, only to be spurned, suffer abuse of his character, and have his just scruples thrown in his teeth!” (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 129). Elizabeth’s rejection of his suit in Rosings is the final ingredient in Darcy’s transformation. Because of it Darcy recognizes his own pride and admits to his mistake in reading Jane Bennet’s feelings and in guiding Charles Bingley. He cannot hate Elizabeth because she has “demanded of him the man he had always desired to be” (Aidan 157), and he then strives to become that man.

The woman transforms the man in this retelling just as she does in the original but in a way that is made much more explicit by Aidan by appropriating Darcy’s voice and narration. Highlighting its message about the

transforming power of love, the spinoff portrays *only* Darcy's maturation process and attributes transformative agency to Elizabeth. In her, Darcy finds the one thing he lacks – “the love of an exceptional woman” (Aidan 431). Thus, in the retelling's ending, which extends to the actual wedding ceremony, Darcy rapturously utters his vows with “proper pride” (Aidan 437) that is based on a fuller understanding of both himself and the object of his affections. Marriage puts an end to Darcy's narrative and quest with the final sentence, “He was in want of nothing more” (Aidan 437).

Such a declaration performs and affirms the fantasy of an idealized Darcy finding fulfilment in the love of a worthy woman. Aidan's Darcy values Elizabeth as an “amazing, precious woman” (*These Three Remain* 435), thus reading/writing him as women want to read their men: caring, appreciative (to the point of noticing minutiae of their clothing), adoring, and cognizant of a woman's “infinite preciousness” (Modleski 37). The retelling articulates these fantasies by celebrating Darcy as the ideal man and via its embellishment of the romance novel tropes in the original novel. More importantly, by prolonging Darcy's transformative journey and emphasizing Elizabeth's influence, it enhances the importance of the heroine – and of women – thus enhancing the pleasure in the text of its target demographic of women readers.

### **Settling for Marriage in Joan Aiken's *Jane Fairfax***

Providing this particular type of pleasure is not the goal of Aiken, who is one of the fore-runners in the arena of Austenian spinoffs. In *Jane Fairfax: Jane Austen's Emma, Through Another's Eyes*, she grants a minor character

heroine status, as suggested by her novel's alternative subtitle, *The Secret Story of the Second Heroine in Jane Austen's Emma*. Aiken's transfocalized retelling provides Jane's back story, from her childhood encounters with Emma, her experience of Highbury events from the original novel, to her engagement to Frank Churchill. Tamara Wagner assesses *Jane Fairfax* as a failure that is "cursory" and "embarrassing in its inaccuracies" (234) because it ridicules Austen's heroine to make way for the new protagonist (231), dismantles the "detective" plot, and misreads the original's events (233-4). While acknowledging Wagner's valid criticisms, I argue for the text's significance because the shift in perspective from the privileged heroine of *Emma* to a marginal and silent character in Aiken's retelling represents a gendered intervention that re-centers the narrative. By giving voice to a reticent character and by angling the romance to show a "secondary" heroine's trials and conflicts, the spinoff significantly shows how the marriage plot does *not* work quite as ideally for Jane Fairfax and women like her.

The story's beginning, which features first the wedding and then the early death of the protagonist's parents, sets the somber tone of *Jane Fairfax* and establishes its discourse on the restrictions faced by women from other classes of society than Emma's. Jane, left in the care of her poor grandmother and unmarried aunt, is dowry-less and dependent. She is frequently made aware of her poverty by encounters with the privileged and spoiled Emma Woodhouse, whose charity, cast-offs, and condescension she must quietly accept. During the brief interlude when the two are playmates (after Mrs. Woodhouse's death and before Miss Taylor's arrival), Emma forces Jane to play a "wedding game" of pairing up their Highbury neighbors; Jane later

retrospectively analyzes her dislike of this game as resulting from a fear that she would never marry (Aiken 251). This analeptic beginning accentuates the contrast between the marital prospects of Austen's protagonist and Aiken's. As seen through Jane's eyes, Emma grows up to be a snobbish young woman, inferior to Jane in beauty and talent (because she abandons any task at which she cannot excel), but endowed with the confidence and charm that come with her wealth and status. Because of her position and connections, Emma is often in the society of Mr. Knightley, whom Jane has worshipped since childhood for his kind and unpatronizing attentions to her, but to whose love she cannot aspire.

Outside Highbury, the protagonist's encounters with new characters bring out the spinoff's discourse about her limited options. Jane already knows the destiny of women with little money, such as her dependent grandmother and aunt, or even the governess Miss Taylor, whose situation improves only through her marriage to Mr. Weston. The fate of Rachel Campbell, Jane's close friend and an heiress to whom she serves as a companion, further shows Jane that marriage can be driven by economic concerns rather than love. Timid and less attractive than Jane, Rachel nevertheless easily acquires a husband, Matt Dixon, who loves Jane but who is forced to marry for money.<sup>94</sup> Jane's dislike of Miss Winstable, Rachel's stuffy and prudish governess, is tempered by empathy with her situation: "The Campbells regarded Miss Winstable as being of small account, hardly rated on a level with the family or their friends (Aiken 72). Jane also befriends a maid named Susan, who

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<sup>94</sup> This confirmation by Aiken of what is merely an idle and mistaken speculation of Emma's in Austen's novel is one of the points that Wagner attacks. The treatment in this retelling of Jane's doomed affair with Matt Dixon calls to mind speculations about Austen's one-time love interest, Tom Lefroy, who supposedly could not afford to marry her.

illustrates the dramatically worse plight of a working-class woman; Susan is wrongfully accused of theft, escapes from the authorities who have come to jail her, and ends up crushed under the wheels of a carriage. Thus, while Emma revels in her wedding game and matchmaking, Jane mulls over her limited choices, saying:

Why . . . because we have the ill-luck to be born girls, why are these the only two choices open to us? Boys can elect for the army, the navy, the church, the law, or medicine, or politics; they can write histories, or become painters or musicians; but girls, it seems, can only be mothers of families, or teach; those are the only futures allowed to them. Or they remain spinsters, like Aunt Hetty. (Aiken 72)

To marry, to work as a governess, or to remain single and poor are the only alternatives for Jane, and she recognizes the practicality that drives other women in her situation to the first choice. In contrast with this restricted set of options is Emma's economic power and that of the wealthy and tyrannical Mrs. Churchill (Frank's aunt). Via a closer look at the latter, whom Jane encounters in Weymouth, the retelling draws parallels between the two rich women who both seek to control the marital destinies of people around them. In doing so, it also shows the disparity between such privileged characters and a "second-class" heroine, Jane Fairfax.

Thus, rather than offering a romantic revisiting of Austen's *Emma*, Aiken's retelling tells a grimmer story. While the tone of *Emma* is playful and ironic, that of *Jane Fairfax* has a bitter and morose quality that makes the novel depressing at times, particularly given its protagonist's many disappointments. Love, romance, and marriage still play key roles in this

novel, but these are treated with a heavy seriousness, and even the introduction of incarnations of comic characters from other Austen novels fails to lighten the mood of the novel. For example, Mrs. Fitzroy, Rachel's snobbish aunt, resembles Lady Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice* in her disdain for Jane's moneyless background, while Mrs. Churchill is reminiscent of Mrs. Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility* with her power to bestow and withhold fortunes. But in Aiken's text, these characters are only lightly mocked, and any form of ridicule is undermined by the fact that Jane is unable to retaliate against them. Aiken also does not maximize the comic appeal of the pompous Tom Gillender – whose proposal Jane rejects because it is motivated by a mistaken belief that she is an heiress – even though he seems a likely candidate for the mockery that Austen's Mr. Collins and Robert Ferrars receive.

Most importantly, the novel's marriage ending is not a happy one. Jane accepts Frank Churchill's proposal out of desperation; he is the only ray of light in a gray and miserable future of servitude. Although it is hinted that she later grows to love him, this is only the result of her comparative unhappiness as a single woman in Highbury. Twice in the narrative, Jane loses a man she loves to another woman: first Matt Dixon, and second Mr. Knightley. The existence of these former loves, the circumstances of Jane's acceptance of Frank, and the relative lack of passion in their relationship demonstrate that marriage offers an ambivalent rather than a happy ending to the narrative. Even when Frank apologizes to Jane for his behaviour, clears up their misunderstandings, and declares his undying love, Jane's lukewarm reaction indicates that their happiness will be far from perfect. Looking at Frank, she muses:

He was not Matt Dixon. He was not Mr. Knightley. (With an internal smile at herself she acknowledged that she must now renounce that childish daydream once and for all.) But he was a dear, kind fellow, he was himself, and he loved her. And she loved him too; yes, she did, in spite of it all. Together they would do *well enough* [my emphasis]. (Aiken 246)

Jane's telling discourse about Frank's deficiencies (describing who he is not before listing his positive qualities), the renouncing of dreams, and the almost begrudging admission of requiting his love all point to the fact that she is settling for marriage to him. Her consolation, and it appears she will need one, is that at least Frank "will be kind, and unfailingly cheerful, and cherish [her] and show [her] things to laugh about" (250). Such an ending, in contrast with that of *Emma*, sends a different message about marriage to women readers by painting an undeniably unromantic picture of a heroine's reconciliation to doing "well enough" – rather than finding "perfect happiness" – with her husband.

Aiken's retelling thus seeks to complement both *Emma* the novel and Emma the character, providing new insights into the courtship plot while questioning its applicability to a less-privileged heroine. Notably, its final scene features a conversation between rivals Jane and Emma, rather than between the newly engaged couple. A partial resolution is reached when Emma apologizes to Jane and expresses the envy she has always felt for the latter's freedom, for it is Emma who is the mystery to Jane in this retelling. Ironically, the two realize how they might have "changed each other's lives" (Aiken 252), how they might have reconciled their class differences and



learned from each other's situations, only when their respective marriages are likely to separate them geographically. The ending of Aiken's text thus takes on a bittersweet note in articulating not only the compromise regarding marriage but also to the closure of the gap between these women: "Now we shall never have the chance, it is too late," Jane sadly concludes, and Emma replies, "But at least we have stopped being enemies" (Aiken 252).

**Saying No to Marriage Endings: Emma Campbell Webster's *Lost in Austen***

I turn finally to an intriguing retelling that creates its own category by applying a structure and style not seen in any other Austenian spinoff. In *Lost in Austen*, the reader, at once identified as female, takes on the role of Elizabeth Bennet and must make the "correct" choices at various narrative "forks" in order to re-enact the story of *Pride and Prejudice*. The spinoff immediately references the marriage plot of the original by reframing it as the reader's mission. Beginning with a twist upon its familiar first sentence – "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young Austen heroine must be in want of a husband, and you are no exception" – the spinoff sets out the reader-protagonist's goal as being "to marry both prudently and for love" (Webster 2). The marriage plot literally becomes a game as the narrator instructs the readers "How to Play" (i.e. read the text), explains the book's RPG-like point system for five categories (Accomplishments, Intelligence, Confidence, Connections and Fortune), and talks about the "success" or "failure" of the reader's mission (Webster 3). *Lost in Austen* contains multiple plot paths and endings, and the weaving together of this into a narrative depends on the

reader-protagonist's choices (she can opt to read one story based on one linear set of choices or move back and forth to explore all possible stories). The spinoff thus begins with a clever paradox: the reader is offered an excess of choice while actually being limited to only one acceptable end goal.

With marriage as its reader's target ending, the text focuses mainly on courtship-related sequences from *Pride and Prejudice*, condensing or excising many scenes in order to concentrate on these and to make room for romantic "diversions" into other works of Austen. These include an encounter with Mr. Crawford from *Mansfield Park*, a visit to the home of Henry and Eleanor Tilney of *Northanger Abbey*, a choice that must be made between *Sense and Sensibility*'s Willoughby and Colonel Brandon, an ending taken from Austen's juvenilia (*Love and Freindship*), interactions with all the marriageable men in *Emma* (including an affair with Robert Martin, which leads to an outcome reminiscent of Mrs. Price's marriage in *Mansfield Park*), and the renewal of a relationship with Captain Wentworth from *Persuasion*. The ironic use of these narrative digressions exposes other retellings' formulaic treatment of Austen's novels. By making Elizabeth Bennet interchangeable with Austen's other heroines and by taking only the courtship/marriage-related elements of the source novels, Webster's spinoff calls attention to the fact that for many readers today the meanings of Austen's writings have been fused with romance. Similarly, the mixing in of details about Austen's rumored romance with Tom Lefroy in another diversion parodies other spinoffs' insistence on providing Austen with her own love story. Webster's spinoff thus playfully contends that a "Jane Austen Adventure" has, for many modern readers, come to mean a romance or marriage text.

The ironic tone of Webster's spinoff is made even more evident by its intrusive and biased narrator who provides the reader with choices but who also comments on these decisions as well as on details over which the reader has no control. For instance, about Mrs. Bennet, the narrator says, "Your mother is so anxious to marry you all off that she may very well kill you in the process," and then orders the reader-protagonist to deduct 10 Fortune points not for making any particular choice but simply "for having such a negligent mother" (Webster 10). Via sarcastic commentary, the narrator also expounds on what is implied in Austen's novel, for example, telling the reader to "Consign [Charlotte Lucas] to [a] list of Inferior connections" because of the character's disappointing and depressing "representation of marriage" (Webster 79).<sup>95</sup> Comments on the reader's mission are tinged with irony, as when the narrator says, "You've got a long way to go before you'll be fit to attract a husband of any real worth" (Webster 15) and "Your judgment remains contemptible. . . and your chances of marrying prudently therefore marginal at best" (Webster 90). In the text, the "right" choices increase the reader's chances of marrying well, while the "wrong" ones add to her "list of Failings" and compromise her "chances of attracting a rich husband" (Webster 44).

These ironical comments playfully critique marriage, which the spinoff reads as a tedious and unexciting choice for women. "Lower your expectations a little or you'll never get a husband" (Webster 121), the narrator tells the reader-protagonist and praises her for such talents as the "Ability to Feign

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<sup>95</sup> This follows dialogue lifted by Webster from *Pride and Prejudice*, wherein Charlotte says to Elizabeth, "I am not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (Austen 95).

Interest in the Utterly Boring” which she will need when she is married (Webster 147). In fact, the reader-protagonist comes closer to fulfilling her mission if she does *not* accumulate too many Intelligence points from her decisions or from acing trivia quizzes on the Regency period. Adapting a passage from *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator comments on one marriage ending that is rendered a failure by a high Intelligence score: “to come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can. You are a LOSER” (Webster 213).<sup>96</sup> For the spinoff, marriage is clearly not an “intelligent” choice, and it suggests that readers who know even a little about Regency life (enough to answer the trivia questions posed in the novel) should not forget how little eighteenth and nineteenth-century marriages sometimes had to do with love and romance.

The narrator’s commentary, along with the structure and style of the spinoff, maximizes the contact between the modern-day reader, the texts *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lost in Austen*, and the authors Austen and Webster. Narrator and narrative frustrate readerly pleasure in the romance’s “desired and expected ending” (Modleski lxxiv) by presenting an illusion of choice. For instance, in one early narrative fork, the reader-protagonist is absurdly punished with death and disfigurement simply because she turns left rather than right on the way to Netherfield. Similarly restrictive of the reader’s “choice” is the binary of successful and unsuccessful conclusions: the reader-protagonist must make a prudent love-based marriage or else face poverty,

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<sup>96</sup> The passage is from Chapter 14 of *Northanger Abbey*, but Webster adds “You are a LOSER” and replaces “have” with “has” in the penultimate sentence.

degradation, imprisonment, an unhappy marriage, or death. These examples demonstrate that Elizabeth Bennet/the reader does not truly have any say in what befalls her but is rather subject to the whims of the omnipotent author – first, Jane Austen, and now Emma Campbell Webster. Though the book may suggest that the reader decides the outcome, when one looks more closely at the conclusions it provides, its discourse about Elizabeth’s and the reader’s lack of choice emerges.

Fifteen out of the twenty possible endings for *Lost in Austen* are considered “failures” because the reader’s mission is not achieved, and eleven out of the twenty involve marriage, happy or otherwise. The “ideal” ending, i.e. the standard *Pride and Prejudice* ending, is reached only if the reader-protagonist matches the choices made by Elizabeth in the original novel. So, on the one hand, Webster’s text gives readers what they want: a revisiting of Austen’s world and a reaffirmation of Elizabeth’s and Mr. Darcy’s rightness for each other. On the other hand, it playfully undercuts this “happy” ending by following it up with a “non-ending” that critiques the closure of the marriage plot. Elizabeth, already engaged to Darcy, makes one more decision, or rather a choice that is determined for her by the reader-protagonist’s Intelligence score. If this is high enough, Elizabeth does *not* marry Mr. Darcy; instead, her superior mind makes her reconsider her future, and she refuses the fate of romance novel heroines who face “The End” of their adventures and identities once they marry. The narrator then spells out Elizabeth’s/the reader-protagonist’s alternative destiny:

You plan to write about the adventures of a young woman in pursuit of the right match. Unlike the volumes that lay before you that fateful

night, however, *your* book will not send out the message that Woman's only choice is to marry – and that her story will end the moment she does so. You are determined to find a way for your heroine to say no to 'The End' and continue her adventure. (Webster 339-40)

In a metafictional twist, the narrator continues: "You dip your pen in your ink, put pen to paper, and begin to write as follows:" (Webster 340); below these final words are instructions to "Continue on page 1" (Webster 330). Via this "non-ending," Webster critiques romance narratives for sending readers "a dark subliminal message – that marriage equals 'The End'" ("Happy Ever After") and destabilizes the structure of the marriage plot by placing the pen in the reader's hand so that she can write her own narrative. The return to the beginning serves a double purpose: the reader either remains trapped in *Lost in Austen's* narrative and the marriage *telos* or, as I interpret it, she may proceed to the first page of her own story.

Webster's satirical transformation of Austen's writing also calls attention to the fictionality of the choices that romanticized film adaptations or other retellings offer, texts that she is likely to have encountered while doing research for *Lost in Austen*. The novel's ironic reduction of Austen's writings to basic romantic plot points invites readers to question the way that Austenian spinoffs and film adaptations sometimes ignore Austen's more careful treatment of marriage. As Webster points out in a *Guardian* article, "readers tend, understandably, to see [Austen's marriage endings] as celebratory" even though "Austen always gives her protagonists at least one opportunity to say no to marriage before they finally agree – highlighting the seriousness of the decision" ("Happy Ever After"). Finally, Webster's retelling calls attention to

new meanings of the marriage quest for modern-day women: the fear that marriage spells “the end of lifelong quest for adventure” (“Happy Ever After”). It highlights the (post)feminist preference for closures that are less final “with both the characters and their audiences being given much more room to breathe” because women today “like to delay “The End” of [their] adventures as long as possible” (“Happy Ever After”).

### **Acknowledging Alternative “Truths”**

Like Austenian sequels that write beyond the ending, these retellings reconstruct the marriage plot and engage with Austen in a variety of ways. Through their preoccupation, ironic or otherwise, with the romance elements of Austen’s novels, they suggest that marriage is still a concern of women today. At the same time, the ways in which they alter her stories or look at these from different lenses also indicate that women’s relationship/s with marriage narratives and the institution itself is complex. For some, it is no longer an end nor necessarily central to defining their identity as women. As Fielding’s and Webster’s non-marriage endings show, despite its undeniably strong presence in women’s consciousness, marriage exists alongside other available options. Other writers/readers, who seek more than the romance of Austen’s novels, welcome a de-romanticized view of marriage like that in Aiken’s retelling, wherein they can relate to the reality/necessity of settling for “not-quite-Mr.-Right” in real life. For some, of course, the marriage ending still appeals, as demonstrated by Aidan’s and Smith’s sentimental spinoffs, yet these texts make intriguing (post)feminist gestures in terms of what aspects of Austen’s novels they choose to focus on and expand. Aidan’s arguably

feminized version of Mr. Darcy, for instance, zeroes in on a fantasy reading/interpretation of the ideal man and mate; his perspective provides the woman reader with the pleasure of seeing herself adored “as a treasure worth winning at any price” (Aidan, *An Assembly*).<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, Smith’s selective borrowing from Austen’s iconic novels targets a community of women readers who choose love and marriage as fulfilling ways of celebrating their spirituality.

What drives women’s production and consumption of these retellings? As the five spinoffs tackled in this chapter demonstrate, women want to tell/hear the other side of the story, to address perceived silences in Austen’s novels, to celebrate these source novels and at the same time interrogate and reconstruct them. Perhaps it is Austen’s texts themselves that motivate such transformations. The seemingly universal appeal of her themes encourages alternatives to the “universally acknowledged truths” she pokes fun at. Moreover, her iconic plot and characters have the flexibility to be re-molded, caricatured, and inscribed with new and sometimes contradictory meanings. Thus, there can be romance-novel retellings like *Amanda* and the *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* series that celebrate Austen as a signifier of love and an advocate of marriage, or spinoffs like *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Jane Fairfax*, and *Lost in Austen* that engage with the ironic Austen. As they transform her novels, they appeal to Austen enthusiasts today, to single women in their thirties, to women seeking spirituality through love, to Darcy-addicts and Emma-haters, and to women who see marriage as an end to their adventures.

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<sup>97</sup> This quote is taken from the Q & A section of the reading guide of *An Assembly Such as This*.



The discursive changes, whether considerable or slight, made by these and other Austenian retellings offer at least the potential for ideological restructuring. This potential may, on the one hand, not always be realized. While reflecting what feminists would see as progressive strides for women, some retellings may wrongly suggest that women have gained an equal status with men, when in fact they inadvertently reveal the (sometimes self-imposed) limitations and barriers that contemporary women still face. For instance, in the various new roles in which Austen's characters are interpretatively recast, Elizabeth may have a career, but Darcy is still positioned in traditionally male professions or with greater power, influence, and income than Elizabeth enjoys.<sup>98</sup> This contemporary accounting for the inequalities in their status is telling of class and gender stereotypes still prevalent in contemporary society. On the other hand, these retellings can contribute in small part to the the feminist enterprise via their dissemination of interpretations of Austen's classics through the democratic popular literature route. They function as an extension of the book club, allowing women to share their own private Austens in a public arena, and forging connections between women of different ages and from different locations (although in terms of the latter, the range remains limited by class).

These texts may serve as spaces for (post)feminist gestures and articulations of informal feminist discourse with regard to negotiating both traditional and second-wave notions of women's identity. Many of the genres in which Austen has been retold, such as chick lit, Christian romance, and fan

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<sup>98</sup> Darcy and Elizabeth are, respectively, a judge and attorney in Sara W. Angeli's *The Trials of the Honourable F. Darcy*, television producer and struggling writer in Fenton's *Lions and Liquorice*, businessman and aspiring interior designer in Louise's *Drive and Determination*, director and actress in Nathan's *Pride, Prejudice, and Jasmin Field*, and scion of a political family and spunky marine biologist in Abigail Reynold's *Pemberley by the Sea*.

fiction, have dominantly female readerships. The label “chick lit” derives from its readers and subject matter, and Christian fiction is “dominated by female authors, just as its readers are dominantly female” (Gandolfo 68). As for fan fiction, its “female authorship,” as Louisa Ellen Stein asserts, “has been the subject of much comment by scholars of fandom and by fan authors themselves” (259). Not only do these genres and texts focus on women’s preoccupations as subject matter, but they also, as Modleski says of chick lit, point “towards the gaps between what women want and what society gives them” (xxvii). Transpositions, transfocalizations, and other discursive transformations of Austen’s narratives thus have at least the potential for revisionary outlooks, and some already offer significant (post)feminist reconfigurations of love, marriage, and gender roles at a time when these concepts continue to be negotiated.

### **Chapter 3 – Austenian Offshoots: Reconfiguring (Post)feminist Austens**

#### **Contemporary Austenian “Grafts”**

The next four spinoffs have no direct hypertextual connection to specific Austen novels but have much to say about modern women’s relationship/s with these and with the author. In this chapter I examine four novels which graft themselves onto details from Austen’s life, her body of work, the world she wrote about, and histories of her reception in order to interpret the “Austen” hypotext – author, icon, and phenomenon – for modern women. I analyze one offshoot in which Austen figures as romantic protagonist and three others in which contemporary women’s interactions with her and her works offer ways of finding love and fulfillment. Viewing these textual offshoots as artefacts of contemporary culture, I examine what different kinds of cultural work they do, as well as what in/about Austen is being reworked to “[speak] so effectively and eloquently . . . to present-day needs and fantasies” (Pucci and Thompson 2) or to a readership of women in the 2000s.

The re-making of Austen “in the new fashions, styles, and desires of the present” (Pucci and Thompson 2) inevitably entails the incorporation of contemporary perspectives about gender. As with sequels and retellings, Austenian offshoots acknowledge the importance of love and marriage for women today. As I hope to show, however, more than merely conflating Austen with romance, these texts ask important cultural questions through Austen about modern women’s desires for both love and independence. Branching out from “Austen,” these offshoots reflect negotiations of these

women's conflicting desires for present-day privileges and Austen's "romantic" past. They present and question constructions of Austen as a (post)feminist heroine and of her novels as guides to love and identity. Significantly, their depiction of Austen's "world" as both cause and cure of women's romance-related problems also brings to the surface the complex "*pharmakon* effect" of the (post)feminist gestures they make, that is, the simultaneous problematization and (attempt at) resolution of issues of women's identity and choices.

Why do Austenian spinoff writers choose to interpret Austen by rewriting the love/marriage plots in her works? Austen is viewed today as a romantic icon because she wrote stories of courtship and marriage; however, the happy unions of her protagonists contrast with her own singlehood.<sup>99</sup> This disparity between life and fiction represents a gap that spinoff writers are eager to fill. The offshoots' focus on Austen as hypotext in fact calls attention to the stark contrast between her subject matter and the dearth of material about her romantic relationships.<sup>100</sup> Biographical information on the author is "famously scarce," and many accounts have had to rely on "skimpy or censored sources and on what can be gleaned" from Austen's writings (Fergus, "Biography" 4). The most authoritative source, James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen: and Other Family Recollections*, is marked by the reticence and discretion of mid-Victorian biographies, and is thus set apart from what Austen scholar Sutherland calls "the prying

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<sup>99</sup> Eric C. Walker in *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen after War* sees a relationship between Austen's life and her popularity today; he refers to "the hypercanonical fiction of a woman writer, Jane Austen, who ducks marriage in her own life and appears to write about nothing else" (3).

<sup>100</sup> Evidence about Austen's romantic attachments is limited, even in accounts written by her family. Many of her letters, which may have contained information about this, were destroyed "in the cause of diplomacy" (Le Faye and Austen-Leigh 270) by her sister Cassandra.

accountability of our modern need-to-know stance” (“Introduction” xxxv).<sup>101</sup> Given the seeming disparity between Austen’s personal experiences of love – as mediated by biographical histories – and her novels that end in marriage, it is no wonder that curiosity has arisen about the author’s love life and beliefs about romance and marriage.

This interest has been translated into both fact-based and fictional biographies that attempt to look beyond earlier depictions of Austen as “a quiet, domesticated, middle-aged maiden aunt” (Le Faye 53) and rather as someone more akin to her present-day readers. While some biographers claim not to interpret documentary evidence, many provide “versions” of Austen or focus on specific aspects of her life or the period in which she wrote (Le Faye 57). As critics have observed, when it comes to Austen, fiction and reality seem to merge, and she becomes “a fictional character” with an “often fantasized” existence (Hudelet 149); in other words, as Wiltshire asserts, she is “less of an author, more of a romantic ideal” (“Afterword” 164). Valerie Grosvenor Myer’s *Jane Austen – Obstinate Heart*, for instance, dwells on Austen’s determined refusal to marry without love, and Jon Spence’s *Becoming Jane Austen: a Life*, the basis for the romantic biopic *Becoming Jane*, focuses on the “deep emotional impact” of her encounters with Tom Lefroy and their resonance in her writing.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Claire Tomalin’s *Jane Austen: A Life*, as its publisher claims, offers readers “the real Jane Austen,” framed as a woman who gave up marriage in order to follow her vocation as a writer, while David Nokes’s book of the same title prefers to show a “less

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<sup>101</sup> It remains, however, as David Gilson claims, the “prime source of all subsequent biographical writings” (qtd. in Sutherland, “Introduction” xv).

<sup>102</sup> The quoted phrase comes from the publisher’s description on *Amazon*.

saintly and serene” (5) Austen, constructing her “as she most frequently presented herself, as rebellious, satirical, and wild” (7).

Fictional biographies and other offshoots in which Austen makes an appearance seem to set themselves up against earlier and more “objective” biographies and share affinities with those written in the last two decades, and which are aimed at an audience of women curious about what could have inspired the romance in Austen’s novels. Like biographers, the authors of these spinoffs do historical research but necessarily select details that will contribute to their particular construction of Austen. For example, resembling actual biographies, James’s *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* comes with a map of Austen’s England, her family tree, a list of all her works, and a chronology of her life, all of which serve to “authenticate” the spinoff’s fictional account of Austen’s secret love affair. Significantly, James maintains the illusion of reality by claiming that the fictional elements of her novel are interspersed with fact – dates, places, publications, friends and family, even Austen’s “habits” and “her personal life.”<sup>103</sup> By asserting that such subjective observations as the latter two are “accurately presented,” James encourages readers to forget that many so-called accurate details about Austen’s personality are drawn from biographies in which her identity has also been reconstructed in eras following hers.<sup>104</sup> The type of research done for the three other spinoffs similarly reflects each author’s particular take on Austen. On her official website, Hale cites the published novels, various 1990s film adaptations of these, and print and Internet sources on the period, as constituting her research, sources which offer precisely the type of information

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<sup>103</sup> The quoted phrases are from the “Q & A with Syrie James, Author of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*” section of the book’s reading guide.

<sup>104</sup> The quoted phrase is from the Author Q & A section of the book’s reading guide.

her modern-day protagonist and readers access. Rigler's resources for her time-travel text are, like her protagonist, Austen addicts, or fellow JASNA members, to be precise, who "vetted the historical details" of her novel and shared databases of regency period information.<sup>105</sup> Fowler, whose offshoot is focused on Austen reception, lists comments of "critics, writers, and literary figures" (260) on Austen and her novels from 1812 to 2003.

However, in these offshoots, research and historical accuracy are necessary only up to a certain point. What matters is not the "real" Austen but rather the Austen these authors imagine to exist – or imagine into existence. As in the later biographies (and as, arguably, in all biographies), there is "some degree of invention" (Nokes 6) in the interpretation of Austen's thoughts and actions. For instance, despite the lack of documentary evidence about any love affair in Austen's life, James proceeds to imagine a tangible inspiration for Austen's writing and justifies her spinoff by saying she disagrees with how the author is portrayed "basically as a spinster with a great imagination."<sup>106</sup> James likely refers to biographies that are largely based on Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* and on accounts given by Austen's relatives who depicted her as a domestic and affable spinster aunt, or those which contain views of Austen, shared by Charlotte Brontë, Edward Fitzgerald, Mark Twain and H.W. Garrod, as "sexless spinster of the 'parlour' or the 'parish'" (Trott 96).

Hale similarly veers away from a historically/academically sanctioned Austen by taking pains to specify for prospective readers that she is neither

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<sup>105</sup> The quotation is from the "Acknowledgements" section of *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*.

<sup>106</sup> The quotation is from the Author Q & A of the reading guide of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*.

Austen scholar nor purist (*The Official Site*). Her website sets up readers' expectations by supplementing her spinoff with remarks about her enjoyment of Patricia Rozema's controversial cinematic reworking of *Mansfield Park* to declare her openness to deviations from what is perceived to be the "real" Austen.<sup>107</sup> Rigler, meanwhile, even allows her contemporary protagonist to dominate in a conversation with her favourite author because her offshoot focuses on modern readers' construction of Austen as someone who "never gave her consent to a future world that butchers her great literature" (241). Finally, Fowler emphasizes not Austen herself, but each of the book club members' "private Austens" and the ways in which they read their identities and lives into their interpretations of Austen's novels.

As Sutherland observes, literary biography is "not so much an attempt to explain as an attempt to satisfy" (xvii). This explains the hunger of today's readers for "intimacy and identification" (Sutherland xvii) with Austen rather than for facts or explanations. *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* interweaves an imagined romantic relationship with Austen's history in order to satisfy its author's, and presumably her readers', curiosity about Austen's hidden love life. *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, *Austenland*, and *The Jane Austen Book Club*, with their mixture of Regency and popular culture references, explore Austen's meanings for women readers and fans today. They reinvent Austen as comrade and confidant, talk about the impact of her novels on their lives, and playfully explore the long-debated "right" and "wrong" ways of reading her. Through these texts' engagement with readers' responses to Austen, further insights about the proliferation and significance of the sequels

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<sup>107</sup> Hale makes these assertions in the "Dear Janeites" link in the *Austenland* page of her official website.



and retellings discussed in the previous two chapters emerge: the empowering messages women read into Austen's heroines and Austen herself, the fantasy escape they perceive to be provided by her world as well as the problems that arise from these fantasies, and the gaps and silences in her novels that they identify and seek to fill.

### **A (Post)feminist Austen in Syrie James's *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen***

The phenomenon of historical reimagining is not restricted to Austen: the lives of various authors, historical figures, and celebrities have become fodder for popular biographies and biopics which have flourished in the last two decades. However, Wiltshire points out in *Recreating Jane Austen* that “of all writers in the canon, . . . Austen is the one around whom [biography's] fantasy of access, this dream of possession, weaves its most powerful spell” (17), perhaps because of both what she gives and what she holds back. Access and possession are promised by *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*, which aims to offer “a new, particularly intimate window into the workings of Jane Austen's mind and heart” (James 5). Presenting the novel as a collection of newly discovered manuscripts, James uses a technique characteristic of nineteenth-century novels, the creation of a fictional editor. Hers holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from Oxford University and is president of the Jane Austen Literary Foundation. Moreover, this editor's name, Mary I. Jesse, is an anagram of Syrie James, significantly pointing to the writer's fantasy of discovering/interpreting a “new” Austen. Writing as Austen, James tells the story of “the one, true, great love” (8) in her life and her reasons for remaining single. Her offshoot speculates on “a relationship so passionate and so

intense” as to inspire the author “to write about emotions that she had, allegedly, never felt.”<sup>108</sup> This biographical spinoff thus highlights two key questions that are preoccupations of many other contemporary spinoffs and cultural texts (like the film *Becoming Jane* and the television miniseries *Miss Austen Regrets*): “How could Austen have written so appealingly about love without having experienced it?” and “Why did she choose not to marry?”

The spinoff elaborates on these concerns by immediately letting Austen explain, in a style that is anachronistic despite James’s attempts to capture Austen’s voice, why she writes the memoir:

People may read what I have written, and wonder: how could this *spinster*, this woman who, to all appearances, never even *courted* – who never felt that wondrous connection of mind and spirit between a man and woman, which, inspired by friendship and affection, blooms into something deeper – how could *she* have had the temerity to write about the revered institutions of love and courtship, having never experienced them herself? (7-8)

By referring to “speculation” about what motivated Austen’s romantic writings (James 7), the spinoff touches on what drives its creation and consumption. Readers of this text and others like it need to believe in a hero like those Austen created who could have inspired her to write what they perceive as ideal romances. Despite the fact that love can be experienced without either marriage or even acting on the sentiments, James and her readers require Austen to have “one true, great love” (8) in order for them to reconcile her life with her texts. The offshoot partially acknowledges potential

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<sup>108</sup> This quote is taken from the Author Q & A section of the book’s reading guide.

criticism of this “real-romance-as-catalyst” theory by letting Austen ask: “Is it not conceivable that an active mind and an observant eye and ear, combined with a vivid imagination, might produce a literary work of some merit and amusement, which may, in turn, evoke sentiments and feelings which resemble life itself?” (James 8). However, it also undermines such a question by its very creation of a “life-changing love affair” for Austen and the interweaving of this with her composition of *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>109</sup> As James says, her aim is to “showcase [Austen’s] inspiration and struggle, both because of and in spite of her romantic relationship,” and for her, Austen’s romantic fiction is largely autobiographical, even though scholars may argue otherwise.<sup>110</sup>

“Biography is suspicious of gaps and silences,” says Sutherland (xxx), which explains why fictional ones like James’s tend to imagine the existence of suppressed information. Jan Fergus notes that “Particularly from 1809 . . . the life that can be narrated is [Austen’s] professional life” (“Biography” 8). Although Austen writes these memoirs in her closing years, it is this period, from January 1809 to April 1811, in which James sets the events of her romantic spinoff, a time when Austen was, like a chick lit heroine, in her thirties and older than any of her own heroines. James fills this “two-year gap” with a romantic hero, Mr. Ashford, who “inspire[s] the true depth of [love] and . . . reawaken [s][Austen’s] voice, which had long lain dormant” (8); she aims to create “a man who could influence [Austen’s] life and her

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<sup>109</sup> The quoted phrase is taken from the book’s blurb.

<sup>110</sup> This quote is taken from the Author Q & A section of the book’s reading guide. The fictional editor emphasizes the autobiographical element in her Afterword: “The fact that Jane Austen was reminiscing about her own unknown love affair while writing *Persuasion* helps to explain certain facets of that novel, for it is considered by most critics to be her most passionately rendered story” (James 300).

return to writing, but at the same time, . . . not take away from her own fiercely independent spirit or seem to be the only reason for her many accomplishments” (James).<sup>111</sup> Ashford inspires Austen’s writing of *Sense and Sensibility*, offers suggestions about the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, and even secures a publisher for the former.<sup>112</sup> The suggestion is that, without him, these novels would not have been written, or at least would have been very different. One wonders, of course, why Austen could not have drawn from her imagination or observations about the preoccupations of her society and, for that matter, why it has to be a man that inspires her rather than the women she was particularly close to, Cassandra, her cousin Eliza de Feuillide, or even an also unknown intimate female friend. Then again, given the success of Austen’s novels, it is a dependable marketing ploy to give readers who seek the “Austenian romance” the same sort of heterosexual love story for Austen herself.

However, James’s story is more than a romance novel which happens to feature Austen. For one, while there is courtship, there is no happy marriage ending because of the need to adhere to historical facts. Instead, the spinoff gives a bittersweet account of Austen’s secret romance and explains why it has remained untold; underscoring the spinoff’s focus on what is hidden from history and women’s narratives, James’s Austen asserts that “A love story, to be told, must end happily” (297). Another way in which the offshoot deviates from the romance formula of many other spinoffs is that James does not attempt to gratify her readers by creating a brooding and arrogant Mr. Darcy. Instead, the socially adept Mr. Ashford easily becomes

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<sup>111</sup> These quotes are taken from the Author Q & A section of the book’s reading guide.

<sup>112</sup> According to Fergus, there are doubts about where Austen got the money to pay a required sum in case of the novel’s lack of success” (“Biography” 9).

Austen's friend and confidant, notably expressing many similar sentiments, quoting her favorite poetry, and even finishing her sentences.<sup>113</sup> In creating a hero who is meant to be "truly Jane's equal in intellect and temperament, and worthy of [her] admiration and passion," James seems to transform Austen into both hero and heroine of the narrative, thus implying that the only one worthy of Austen is Austen herself.<sup>114</sup>

The parallels drawn between Austen and Ashford are interesting analytical points, particularly with regard to love and marriage. Both have the chance to better their stations in life by marrying for money; Austen has an offer from Harris Bigg-Wither, and Ashford, whose father squanders the family fortune, like Willoughby, can recoup these losses by honoring his betrothal to Isabella Churchill. However, Austen and Ashford approach these choices differently. Austen, like her favorite character Harriet in *Sir Charles Grandison*, refuses to "marry a wealthy man, despite her lack of fortune" (James 51). Ashton similarly chooses love, but his fate is actually decided for him by Austen who urges him to marry Isabella in order to save his legacy. To persuade him, Austen speaks of his estate and privileged position as reader imagine she might of her own writing vocation: "If you gave it up, in time you would grow to regret it, and to resent me" (James 293). James's Austen thus advocates Ashton's mercenary marriage while refusing to accept the exchange of "a life of ease and comfort . . . for one of misery and loneliness" (81). In showing correspondences between the lovers' characters, and then granting

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<sup>113</sup> Both enjoy Wordsworth, Cowper, Scott, Samuel, and novel-reading. When Ashford declares Lyme to be "a very outpost of heaven," James's Austen writes, "I stared at him in wonder at hearing my own sentiment on his lips" (49). When Jane asks Ashford why he has never married, his answer could very well be one supplied by contemporary readers for Austen herself: "Perhaps . . . I prefer to be particular in my choice" (James 51).

<sup>114</sup> This quote is taken from the Author Q & A section of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*.

Austen the agency to resolve their romance in this way, *The Lost Memoirs* emphasizes the idea that despite being a woman of little fortune in the early nineteenth century, she might have had, to some extent, more freedom than some men to decide her romantic destiny.

In the final chapters of the novel, Austen's fate is furthermore distinguished from that of other women. A gypsy woman tells her that she is "not like others" and that she will be immortalized by the gift that she must share with the world (James 271). Finally, in the last few passages of the memoir, Austen remarks on her fulfillment and happiness at seeing "her dearest children," i.e. her novels, "go forth into the world" (James 297). The ending of heartbreak alongside professional (although not financial) success frames the narrative, for James's Austen tells readers, "I have lost my own true love, yet found it in my work" (297).<sup>115</sup> The offshoot thus shapes Austen as both feminist in her choice to remain single and pursue writing and feminine in her acknowledgment of the role love has had on her life's work. This is a bid perhaps to appeal to (post)feminist readers who admire Austen's devotion to her writing career and also appreciate, even demand, that element of love to define her – and their – identity.

The text's mediation of Austen, history, and biography for modern women readers can also be seen in the "sexual tension" which pervades the lovers' interactions. Ashton criticizes *Sense and Sensibility* for having "no verbal manifestations between the couples, no physical demonstrations of any kind, and *no kiss*," calling this a "rather drastic omission in a book about love

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<sup>115</sup> Fergus observes that Austen's earnings were less than those of her contemporaries like Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney, but that her "continuing to write until four months before her death, and in . . . her intentions for future publication, [is] possibly the most poignant evidence of her professionalism" (11).

and courtship” (James 274). Although James’s Austen says that “some things...are best left to the imagination” (274), the offshoot does not fail to explicitly describe passionate kisses and other manifestations of physical attraction. James justifies her inclusion of such elements by expressing her lack of satisfaction with Austen’s brief romantic endings written in the third-person and with academic explanations for this reticence:

Scholars have suggested that Jane was scrupulous about writing only what she knew, and perhaps she didn’t include love scenes in her novels because she didn’t feel qualified to invent them. I disagree. I believe Jane avoided writing those scenes because in that era, an expression of passionate feeling on the page might imply that she’d had that personal experience herself, an implication which would not be appropriate for a single woman.<sup>116</sup>

Again, the spinoff writer does not specify the critics that she makes out to be her opposition, and although there seems to be a popular consensus that Austen wrote about what she knew, it is difficult to find scholarly assertions that Austen knew nothing of love or passion – besides which she *did* write about such things.<sup>117</sup>

Austen has been seen as “notoriously reluctant to describe love scenes of any kind” (Nachumi 133), and the absence of such has been read in different ways by critics. Some argue that this demonstrates Austen’s inability to write such scenes which would destroy the “illusion of reality” (Booth 264)

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<sup>116</sup> This quote is taken from the Author Q & A section of the book’s reading guide.

<sup>117</sup> Even early critics were in contention about what Austen drew on. One early reviewer in the *British Critic* (March 1818) considers Austen to depend “exclusively on experience” and to be “extremely deficient in imagination,” while a reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review and Literary Miscellany* (May 1818), talks of her work’s “exhaustless invention” (qtd. in Waldron 89).

and others, like Wayne C. Booth, that this is justified since “norms of gender and sexuality are already encoded onto the plot” (Johnson, “Austen Cults” 222). What is important is that by opposing what she characterizes as the dominant criticism, James gains mileage for her offshoot, which she represents as providing an alternative Austen or as rescuing her from scholars and academics. Her statement also partially explains the proliferation of adaptations, sequels, retellings, and other spinoffs which incorporate scenes of passion in the life and works of an author who did not write explicitly about physical displays of affection.<sup>118</sup>

In James’s biographical offshoot, Austen, via the discovery of lost manuscripts, of history that was “made to disappear” (297), is remade as a (post)feminist romantic heroine. Significantly, her “lost memoirs” are found because of the modern repair of an old manor, Chawton House; James’s fictional editor dramatically asserts that, “if not for an extensive roof renovation . . . the manuscripts might have remained undiscovered for many more centuries to come” (5). The old house becomes a repository of knowledge of the past, and the change/s in ownership of the property and the texts it contains brings to light both new documents and histories. The novel thus suggests that the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century comprise an age of reinvention and remaking, wherein texts change hands and are “renovated.” While such re-imaginings may do violence to the author’s style, the point is that offshoots such as these offer something that is both Austen and yet not Austen. James’s text renovates Austen as

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<sup>118</sup> Examples include Roger Michell’s *Persuasion*, which includes a kiss that “so shocked Janeites and historical purists” (Collins 79), Berdoll’s two bawdy sequels, and Arielle Eckstut’s *Pride and Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen*, which playfully introduces lesbianism, sadomasochism, and incest into Austen’s novels.



distinctively feminine and feminist, as a passionate and driven woman whose personal experience with love inspired her writing, and as a relatable heroine for women readers today.

### ***Austen as Pharmakon in Austenland and Confessions of a Jane Austen***

#### ***Addict***

Talking of readers' responses in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, Lynch cites Lionel Trilling's assertion that Austen is the object of "illicit love" whose readers often carry their responses to the novels "outside the proper confines of literature" (qtd. in "Introduction" 6). Recent Austenian chick lit spinoffs, such as Hale's *Austenland* and Rigler's *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, reflect anxieties of modern women about reading or loving Austen in the "wrong" way by having their protagonists question their Austen fandom. For instance, *Austenland's* protagonist, thirty-three-year old New Yorker and graphic designer Jane Hayes, flushes when someone discovers her hidden *Pride and Prejudice* DVDs and is embarrassed to be heard quoting a line from the novel because she might be thought of as "a woman who memorized Austen books and played dress-up" (Hale 30). In *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, Courtney Stone, a "working class girl from Los Angeles" (Rigler 3) configures her fandom as a closeted activity. She reads Austen "in secret on sick days" and vacillates between worrying that the "eccentricities" of fellow Austen fans might surpass hers (Rigler 65) and that interacting with them might "hold up a mirror to [her] addiction" (Rigler 65).

Both novels acknowledge, as Sheila Kaye-Smith and G.B. Stern do in their 1944 collection, *Talking of Jane Austen*, that Austen is both “potentially escapist” and “therapeutic” (qtd. in Trumpener 151). In doing so, they help women to legitimize their reading practices while also allowing them to interrogate the cultural conditions which create their need for Austen-healing and the effect such therapy has on their lives. The notion of the *pharmakon*, a Greek term that translates into “medicine and/or poison” (Derrida 75), is thus useful for discussing Hale’s and Rigler’s spinoffs, especially with regard to their reflection of how women readers reap therapeutic benefits from Austen’s “high” culture route to romance while simultaneously struggling with her as an addiction or obsession that interferes with their satisfaction with their own world.<sup>119</sup>

The opening sentence of *Austenland*, a twist on those of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, introduces the protagonist as a chick lit heroine: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a thirtysomething woman in possession of a satisfying career and fabulous hairdo must be in want of very little, and Jane Hayes, pretty enough and clever enough, was certainly thought to have little to distress her” (Hale 1). In typical chick lit fashion, Jane soon bemoans her inability to find Mr. Right, which can be partially attributed to her Austen obsession. After the prologue, each chapter begins with a description of Jane’s ill-fated relationships, and it soon becomes clear that no man can meet the standards set by Austen’s Mr. Darcy, or rather the version of him played by Colin Firth.<sup>120</sup> Touching on the influence of this adaptation for women like

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<sup>119</sup> Derrida uses the term in his investigation of Plato’s texts and the function of writing.

<sup>120</sup> Jane breaks up with various men who fail to meet her Austen-based standards: she finds one man’s “slippery pawing” of her ridiculous when compared to the moment when Elizabeth runs into Mr. Darcy at Pemberley (Hale 79), a date’s attempt to unhook her bra disgusts her

her, Jane says that while she has read and reread Austen's novels, "it wasn't until the BBC put a face on the story that those gentlemen in tight breeches had stepped out of her reader's imagination and into her nonfiction hopes" (Hale 2). She thus pinpoints the locus of her (and other readers') desires with regard to Austen: the dream of being Elizabeth Bennet and of meeting and falling in love with the seemingly unattainable Mr. Darcy.

At the same time, Jane is conflicted with regard to this desire, both craving and shrinking from what can be considered a dream come true for any Austen fan, an immersive visit to Austen's world. When she is bequeathed a trip to Pembroke Park, an expensive English resort that caters to "Austen-obsessed women," Jane hopes that this "last trip to fantasy land" (Hale 24) will help her to finally kick her Austen addiction.<sup>121</sup> Pembroke purports to offer an Austen experience, described as "a tea visit, a dance or two, a turn in the park, an unexpected meeting with a certain gentleman, all culminating with a ball and perhaps something more. . . . No scripts. No written endings" (Hale 13). What it actually provides, however, is a carefully orchestrated "holiday romance" and an *expected* encounter which some might read almost as a form of female sex tourism.<sup>122</sup> After all, besides Jane, Pembroke's clients are wealthy and bored socialites or housewives who seek a brief romantic (albeit chaste) interlude in the Regency world, with actors who are paid to flirt and banter with them. With its aim to gratify its female clients' desires, the resort represents what Jane says of the BBC adaptation: "stripped of Austen's funny, insightful, biting narrator, [it becomes] a pure romance" (Hale 2). Rather than

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for being "so not Mr. Darcy" (Hale 134), and another boyfriend's snorting laughter turns her off because this is something that "Mr. Darcy would never [do]" (Hale 171).

<sup>121</sup> The description, "Austen-obsessed women," is used in the book's blurb.

<sup>122</sup> One *Amazon* customer reviewer, "R. Hudson," calls the resort "a high-class-almost-brothel," and another anonymous reviewer says it seems "one step above a brothel."

being markedly Austenian, Pembroke is a Regency-romance-theme-park experience.

The true journey into “Austenland,” therefore, is a modern woman’s resolution of her feelings about her way of reading Austen and its meaning in her life. Throughout this journey, the protagonist precariously “straddle[es] the real world and Austenland” (Hale 54), even though the latter is actually shaped by contemporary fantasies. At Pembroke, Jane surrenders her technological gadgets, dresses in empire-waisted gowns, and enters into Regency/Austenian role-play with other female clients and paid actors. She even falls in love with the Mr. Darcy-like character of Mr. Nobley, played by actor Henry Jenkins.<sup>123</sup> And yet modern values and the rules imposed at the park are often at odds for her because she cannot fully embrace her character as “Miss Erstwhile” (a name which aptly refers to a time in the past) and has difficulty giving in to what she calls “the Experience.” The *New Yorker* in Jane rebels against the park’s life of leisure. Unlike the other clients, she balks at using a fake British accent and instead fumbles between modern and “Austen-y” language; she is almost kicked out of the resort for keeping her cell phone; and, in a twist perhaps inspired by D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, she has a brief fling with NBA-watching Martin Jasper, an actor playing a gardener at the park, because he represents the real world by being “so-not-Mr. Darcy” (Hale 70). Significantly, despite “all the hours she

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<sup>123</sup> The name “Mr. Nobley” is clearly a play on that of another Austen hero, Mr. Knightley. Possibly, “Henry Jenkins,” the name of the actor playing him, could be an allusion the author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, texts which uphold media fandom.

had spent daydreaming of living in Austen's world," Jane wryly admits that she misses "the mundane realities of normal life" (Hale 75).<sup>124</sup>

Through the protagonist's tongue-in-cheek commentary about the goings on at Pemberley and about her own Austen obsession, *Austenland* intriguingly points to the conflicting desires of women readers today for both what is in Austen's novels and what is not, and to the ways in which "Austen" operates as both creator and balm of modern romantic frustrations. There is conflict, for instance, between the subtlety of Austen's chaste romances – Jane wants the "zing" as she calls it, that arises when Darcy and Elizabeth merely look at each other across a piano – and explicit displays of affection of "the pent-up passion that explodes behind Regency doors" (Hale 153); between being the object of a man's fantasy and fantasizing about him; and between wanting an escape into Austen's world where Mr. Darcy resides – a world perceived as embodying romance – and wanting something real.

Such contradictions complicate what seems at first like a typical chick-lit search for Mr. Right/Mr. Darcy. The contemporary protagonist participates in the charade and continually questions her own enjoyment and the constructedness of her experience, but she also enjoys it. At one point, she even wonders if Austen might have shared her own sensibility: "amused, horrified, but in very real danger of being swept away" (Hale 123). This is reflective of many women's engagements with Austen characterized by a mixture of secret thrill and embarrassment and of desire for both the romance of the past and the freedom and advantages of the present. For instance, Jane's

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<sup>124</sup> Jane daydreams about the details of her mundane, everyday life: "washing her clothes in the sink when all her building's laundry machines were occupied; the hot, human smell of a full subway; eating a banana from a street vendor; buying a disposable umbrella in a downpour" (Hale 75).

enjoyment of one particular moment – when her boot heel slips and Henry catches her – is tinged with guilt, for she asks herself: “Is this why women wear heels? We hobble ourselves so we can still be rescued by men?” (Hale 182). Jane’s guilty pleasure in this situation reflects a sort of *pharmakon* effect – this time of her informal notions of feminism. Implicit in Jane’s questions about their use is the conflict between earlier forms of feminism and the third wave’s reclaiming of “elements of traditional femininity” (Beail and Goren 6) like high heels, images and icons of which have come to represent the modern woman on so many chick lit novel covers.

Conflicts such as this color Jane’s decisions in the novel. After leaving Pembroke Park, she admits: “I used to want Mr. Darcy, laugh at me if you want, or the idea of him. Someone who made me feel all the time like I felt when I watched those movies” (Hale 189). However, she is a self-aware Austen fan, informed by both the novels and media intertexts, and a modern woman with her own ideas about how her narrative should progress. In light of this, one of the book’s reading guide questions raises a valid point, that perhaps “today’s single, thirtysomething woman is more a Darcy than a so-called spinster.” Jane turns her female gaze on the men of Pembroke Park, whom she describes as a delicious array, “one man of each type for the buffet” (Hale 39) served up to the women clients, and she naughtily speculates on what the proper Mr. Nobley might be like in bed (Hale 122). At one point, she recognizes this reversal, admitting that she is “more Darcy than Erstwhile” as she sits “admiring [Henry’s] fine eyes, feeling dangerously close to falling in love against her will” (Hale 190). In the offshoot’s final chapter, two men

literally fight over her and, although she enjoys being pursued, she decides to say no to both, and leaves them behind to go on with her life.

The search for Mr. Darcy reveals only the protagonist herself. By the end of the novel, Jane comes to terms with desires she defines via Austen. Pembroke Park, which promises to make Austen real, allows Jane instead to “live through her romantic purgatory” (Hale 180). She recognizes the falseness of her interactions with Mr. Nobley, and discovers that, in a Foucauldian twist, even her illicit tryst with Martin is part of Pembroke Park’s staged reality; the latter is actually an actor playing an actor playing a gardener, a “contingency plan” to delude clients who are unable “to realize and forget themselves enough to fall in love with the key actors” (Hale 176) into believing they are free to make their own romantic choices. Jane chooses to reject Pembroke’s “false lines,” “feigned exclamations of love,” “artifice,” “pretense,” and “lies” (Hale 144). She ends her tour of Austenland by turning down Mr. Nobley’s obligatory proposal, telling him that what she really wants is “something real” (Hale 165), and leaves feeling “cleansed of entrapping fantasies” (Hale 176). She realizes that she does not want the trappings of Austen’s world. In the middle of hearing a perfect but staged profession of love, she finds herself “craving anything real” and that “mixed up in the ugly parts of reality were also those true moments of grace” (Hale 163).

On the one hand, therefore, the spinoff demonstrates how Austenian fantasy becomes an addictive drug, the “opiate of women” whose dreams of finding Mr. Darcy, the perfect man, are doomed to frustration. Only when Jane chooses to let go of her fantasy of “Austenland” is she finally able to open herself up to “real possibilities” (Hale 180). *Austenland’s* actual

resolution, however, is still a romantic, wish-fulfilling, optimistic chick-lit ending. Back in the real world, Jane bids both Martin and Henry “tallyho,” a hunting call that suggests the “beginning of something” (Hale 186), and which she feels represents the perfect finale to her story. Yet in a scene reminiscent of many romantic comedy closures, Henry hops aboard Jane’s plane back to America and tells her he wants “a shot at forever” and that he wants to make her “feel like the most beautiful woman in the world every day of [her] life” (Hale 190). This down-to-earth, albeit romantic, declaration spoken by Henry Jenkins instead of Mr. Nobley prompts Jane to ask herself if choosing love with a real man (*not* Mr. Darcy) might be “a better ending than *tallyho*” (Hale 190).

It is not quite Austen’s ending because Jane chooses reality over fantasy – chicken-pox-scarred Henry minus the costume and Regency accent – but there is certainly an element of the latter in *Austenland*’s ending. After all, Henry tells Jane that she is *his* fantasy (Hale 191), Jane finds a man “as crazy intense” (Hale 190) as she is, and the dream she has rejected becomes reality. So, on the other hand, the novel ends up validating the fantasies of modern women who, like Jane, suffer from “an excess of hope” (Hale 63) and who escape into Austen’s world where true love prevails. Jane’s faith in the optimistic message of this world, as she and other women read it, is restored. By refusing to relinquish her identity, she is essentially rewarded with a version of Mr. Darcy who meets her modern needs better than Austen’s would. Although Jane buries “Miss Erstwhile” in order to become the real Jane, the hope with which she accepts Henry’s love lets her remain in the *Austenland* of her own creation. Cleansed, whole, real, and in love yet again,



Jane takes out her hidden *Pride and Prejudice* DVDs and displays these among the rest, “spine out and proud” (Hale 194), implying that there really is no desire to leave Austenland – only to remake it for oneself.

This “little dose of Jane,” as Hale puts it (*The Official Site*), offered by spinoffs such as *Austenland*, calls attention to the simultaneously empowering and disempowering nature of engagements with her. Similarly, in Rigler’s *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, wherein the modern protagonist travels through time and space to 1813 Regency England, there is tension between the gains of the last two centuries and the prevailing problems that women face. Courtney Stone wakes up, after a drinking binge and yet another reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, to find herself in the body of a nineteenth-century woman, the humorously named Jane Mansfield.<sup>125</sup> Courtney is a JASNA member, has read and reread all of Austen’s novels, owns the two-DVD set of the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and has a Jane Austen action figure “still in the box no less” (Rigler 65). She requires an “Austen-mojo” (Rigler 29), she claims, in order to cope with the mundanity of her own relationship: her fiancé, like the boyfriend of the protagonist of the time-travel television miniseries *Lost in Austen*, makes her a drunken and unromantic proposal but generally neglects her. When he goes so far as to cheat on her, Courtney self-medicates with “fat, carbohydrates, and Jane Austen, her “number one drug of choice” (Rigler 33). For Courtney, and presumably other “Austen addicts” today, Austen is, on the one hand, a magical charm, a constant companion, even a partner in marriage who is present “In sickness and in health, for richer,

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<sup>125</sup> The name of Courtney’s nineteenth-century alter ego is an incongruous combination of past and present and highbrow and lowbrow culture; it calls to mind the “Mansfield” of Austen’s novel and her most “proper” heroine, Fanny Price, along with the 1950s sex symbol, blonde bombshell Jayne Mansfield. Courtney later learns that the time/body transfer could have been instigated by her counterpart’s wish (made to a fortune teller) to be someone else.

for poorer, till death do us part” (Rigler 33). On the other hand, loving Austen too much becomes a shameful activity, which makes Courtney both defensive about her own addiction and critical of that of others. For instance, she cringes at the practices of fellow JASNA members, saying, “they actually dance at Regency balls, many dressed in costume, no less. . . . And what if – God forbid – I gave in to temptation and went to one of those balls myself?” (Rigler 65).

During Courtney’s sojourn in Austen’s world, her experiences and romantic encounters bring out as well as help to resolve these conflicting desires that many modern women readers may share. Despite finding that she is living the fantasy of being in a Jane Austen novel, the twenty-first-century protagonist initially suffers intense culture shock. Rigler takes full advantage of the offshoot’s displacement plot device, just as Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (which established the time-travel genre) does, to satirize romanticized ideas about the nineteenth century and readers’ idealization of Austen’s “world” in her novels. The novel is rife with comments from Courtney’s modern perspective – from her surprise at the contrast between what she imagined about Austen’s past and its actual gritty and unromantic aspects (for instance, the hygiene and health practices that Austen did not write about), to her comparison of women’s identities then and in her time.

Like *Austenland*, Rigler’s spinoff represents a form of Austen tourism, literally a “time-travel to the past” and “refuge from modernity” (Lynch, “Cult” 116). However, while it centers on Courtney’s romantic encounters and ends with marriage (she meets and falls in love with a Mr. Darcy “type”

named Mr. Edgeworth), the “visit” offers not just romantic escape but also an immersive experience that allows for the problematization of fantasies about Austen’s world and what it represents. For one, there is a telling attention to Regency details that Austen chose to omit from her works. With its explicit descriptions of setting and costume, *Confessions* provides the type of trivia (e.g. about clothing, hairstyles, furniture, and food of the era) that Austen fans enjoy and can relate to after seeing these as *mise-en-scène* elements in film adaptations.<sup>126</sup> It also, however, includes the unpleasant realities of Regency life – body odor, menstruation, chamber pots, bad teeth, and farting, to name a few – which so shock Courtney and which contemporary readers often fail to consider since these fade into the background of themes of romance. The offshoot holds a microscope to these features that present-day readers, filmmakers, and audiences choose to see and not to see in Austen’s novels.

For another, Courtney’s reading practices, representative of those of women readers today (and perhaps those of Rigler herself), are examined in a knowing and critical way.<sup>127</sup> Despite her oft-emphasized Austen addiction, Courtney misspells the surname of main characters in Austen’s *Persuasion* (writing “Eliot” instead of “Elliot”) and seems to know very little about the Regency world. Although she acknowledges that she is in a “hermetically sealed world, isolated from modern references” (Rigler 11), Courtney carelessly allows her contemporary consciousness to intrude into her

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<sup>126</sup> As Wells observes, Austen provides such details about clothing or jewelry “only to satirize” characters “who concern themselves more with adornment than with behavior” (“Mothers of Chick Lit?” 63), e.g. Lydia Bennet and Mrs. Elton. Similarly, Antje Blank notes that Austen depicts “dress as the concern of, at best, the immature . . . or, at worst, the vacuous and vulgar” (250).

<sup>127</sup> It is noteworthy that Rigler is herself a lifetime member of JASNA who dedicates her novel to “Austen addicts past, present, and future; and most of all, to Jane Austen, whose bit of ivory is an endless source of wisdom and joy for this humble admirer.” On her MySpace page, she expresses her Austen fandom in the voice of Courtney Stone.

conversations with other people. For example, she is too forward when talking with men, leading Mr. Edgeworth on one moment, and then rebuffing his advances as being too fast for someone she has not even “slept” with; she introduces a servant as if he is a gentleman to a woman from her class and meets with this same man in a public place; and she often lapses into using modern expressions that befuddle Jane’s family and friends, such as “Listen, you guys,” “okay,” “hanging in there,” “you’ve got to be kidding,” and Cher Horowitz’s famous “whatever” from *Clueless*. All of these “blunders” demonstrate how the context of Austen’s writing can be disregarded by readers today and how much these readers bring themselves and their culture into their reading of her. The protagonist (and, as Rigler implies, the modern reader of Austen) cannot help but view the past with a mindset that regards her culture as superior, and as time (and space) traveller to bring to it her “Americanness” and (post)feminist “technology,” so to speak, in order to make up for its deficiencies.

However, Courtney’s attempts to affect this past with her discourse seem ineffectual because she soon “goes native.” With modernist hubris, she rails against the era as a “fascist regime” (Rigler 51) for treating working class women so poorly, but she adjusts quite easily to being a pampered member of the gentry when her desires “trump [her] empathy for the proletariat” (84). She alternates between wanting to apologize for her “disgusting bourgeoisness” (Rigler 163) and revelling in the novelty of being served hand and foot. At one point, Courtney pities a young servant who she believes “should be hanging out with her friends at the mall and looking through college catalogues, not schlepping a pail in a drab brown sack of a dress” (47), but she

later tells herself to relax and enjoy herself because “At least in this world someone else does the shopping and cleaning up” (Rigler 48). The offshoot thus highlights tensions between past and present that modern women readers negotiate when they read Austen.

Interestingly, the novel features Courtney’s rants about “feminism and class struggle and the unfairness of it all” (Rigler 97) alongside her easy distraction from these thoughts by men, social engagements, and balls. While she talks of marriage as “the only possible career option” (Rigler 137) of women in Austen’s time and decries the subordination, constant pregnancy, and child-rearing that accompanies this, she is clearly eager for a romantic proposal and daydreams about a wedding where she can be “queen of the ball in a white satin dress” (Rigler 71). Throughout the text, sexually “liberated” Courtney scoffs at what she calls the prudishness and hypocrisy of Regency society, stares freely at Mr. Edgeworth’s “assets” in his tight breeches (Rigler 52), talks about having “all-out sex” (Rigler 222) with a servant, and nearly gives in to sleeping with a mere acquaintance. On the one hand, she denigrates the conversation of the women around her regarding feminine pursuits such as “the lace they’re using to trim their gowns, and choice bits of gossip” (Rigler 138); on the other, she revels in the appearance of her empire-waisted dresses and reminisces on the aspects of cosmopolitan culture that she misses, such as shopping and makeup.<sup>128</sup> Contradictions abound in her discourse on gender as well: given the cultural setting (or at least her perception of it), her points about women’s rights and gender inequalities

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<sup>128</sup> For instance, Courtney feels naked without her “arsenal of paints and powders,” and finds it a nightmare to be “the only woman without so much as a drop of lip gloss at a party full of painted-to-the-hilt beauties” (Rigler 51). At one point, she attempts to distract a friend from her obsession over a former lover by suggesting, first, shopping, and then a makeover.

invoke first- and second-wave feminist arguments, yet she also celebrates her sexuality and signifiers of femininity – “tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation” – in ways that might classify her as ascribing to tenets of third-wave “girlie” feminism (Dole 59).<sup>129</sup> The novel clearly engages, therefore, with negotiations of feminism and femininity which bring with it conflicts and contradictions.

When Jane’s cousin, Susan Randolph, attacks the marriage plot of *Pride and Prejudice* for condoning “a woman’s right to aspire to a situation above what she was bred to do,” Courtney refers to the criticism as “post-feminist Camille Paglia crap” (Rigler 60) and defends Austen’s satirical representation of marriage while asserting her belief that Austen “prizes love, and marriage for love, above all else” (Rigler 59). She continues her rant against Susan with present-day references and language: “you twentysomethings seem to forget that if it weren’t for women aspiring to situations far above what they were bred to do, we’d still be pumping out a kid a year and squeezing ourselves into corsets” (Rigler 60). In dialogue here is what Courtney sees as feminist principles and her contemporary prejudices about what the past was like. Even Courtney’s reference to Paglia and post-feminism seem muddled. Viewing Susan’s “misreading” of Austen’s marriage plot as a false “burst of sisterhood” (Rigler 59), Courtney aligns her both with an iconoclast known for attacking mainstream feminism and with the media backlash against this. Paglia, however, is also notorious for declaring herself to be “radically pro-pornography, pro-prostitution, pro-

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<sup>129</sup> According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000), “Girlies are adult women, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties, whose feminist principles are based on a reclaiming of girl culture (or feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave)” (400).

abortion” (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 242) and for other controversial arguments, a far cry from Susan’s disapproval of “silly novels” (Rigler 60), marrying above one’s rank, and what she sees in Austen as the “narrow and confining portrait” of women (Rigler 59). Moreover, “post-feminist” – which suggests a concern with describing the limitations of 1960s and 70s feminist thought – seems a strange adjective to describe someone from the 1800s. Besides all this, Courtney’s theoretically confused defense assumes that women were “bred” to bear children and look beautiful.

The text thus provides a mix of pop culture understanding of feminism, gaps in information about its academic aspects, and the application of such knowledge to Courtney’s life and to Austen, reflective of the type of notions of informal feminism held by modern women readers. What makes this offshoot particularly relevant is that Austen becomes the medium for such informal (post)feminist “interventions.” This is particularly clear in one important segment of the novel, wherein Courtney meets and converses with her favourite author, whom she describes as “a legend, an icon, an object of speculation by people who have made her life their life’s work, or her work their life’s focus” (Rigler 235).<sup>130</sup> Courtney fills this conversation with modern and media references, telling Austen that she is “a huge fan” (Rigler 237), a term the author is of course unfamiliar with. Courtney then assures Austen of her future fame, of scholars’, biographers’, and an adoring public’s insatiability for her work, saying that “Millions of women will dream of living the lives of your heroines and meeting heroes as handsome as Edward Ferrars”

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<sup>130</sup> The fact that Courtney’s first impressions are about Austen’s appearance reveals the strong influence of Austenian film and television adaptations on the protagonist’s relationship with the novels. Courtney observes how pretty Austen is, despite her unflattering cap, and contrasts her impressions with Austen’s most well-known “pop-eyed portrait” (Rigler 236).

(Rigler 237). When Austen corrects her about Ferrars' appearance and questions whether Courtney has actually read the novels, the protagonist explains what "movies" are and that film producers "decided [Austen's] heroes should be handsome," and that "there should be a love scene at the end, . . . with kissing and an actual proposal, even though [she] left that sort of thing to the imagination" (Rigler 238). Like *Austenland's* Jane Hayes, Courtney's understanding of Austen has been informed by contemporary film adaptations which do not leave her feeling "deprived" of "kissing and romance and handsome heroes" (Rigler 239).

Resonating in the dialogue between author Austen and reader Courtney is Barthes's poststructuralist use of the concept of intertextuality to argue for the role of the reader as "the ultimate creator of textual meaning" (275), although in this case both the offshoot's protagonist and its actual readers play a role in commenting on and transforming Austen. The offshoot self-reflexively interrogates the protagonist's experience as "an escapist fantasy to a Jane Austen-like world" (Rigler 6) and her story as "a romance novel with pretensions to Jane Austen" (Rigler 76). It paints a knowing portrait of Austen's readers today, specifically those who grapple between adoration and shame over loving her too much, in order to explain the therapeutic uses to which her novels are put.

Finally, as in science fiction, the motif of time travel into the world of Austen serves an ideological function as well by "literally provid[ing] the necessary distancing effect" that the fantasy offshoot requires "to be able to metaphorically address" gender issues and themes that concern women today (Redmond 114). If, in the modern world, Courtney is barraged by various



forms of feminist discourse in popular culture and academia and feels guilt at taking pleasure in romance and aspects of traditional femininity, then her journey to the past suggests that her identity crisis can culminate in her finding herself at home within the “fractured-Austen-novel of a world” (Rigler 65). With regard to the notion of identity, the novel’s ending is deliberately ambiguous. Courtney, heeding the advice of a fortune teller, accepts her new identity and admits her love for Mr. Edgeworth. The book then jumps back and forth from sensory impressions of both Courtney and her counterpart Jane, from past and present – signifying that the boundaries between the two women’s identities and of time have blurred. Courtney simply says, “in that moment I am home” (Rigler 284), and her first-person narrative abruptly ends. The novel’s final pages consist of a diary entry written by a happily married woman (whether it is Courtney or Jane, readers do not know) who signs her name “Mrs. Charles Edgeworth.” Thus, the offshoot’s modern-day discourse is no longer about Austen but about modern women, demonstrating that losing oneself in Austen is equivalent to losing Austen in oneself.

### **Contemporary Austens in Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book***

#### ***Club***

Contemporary identities are similarly read into Austen’s novels in Fowler’s reception-oriented offshoot which follows the monthly meetings of five women and one man who make up “the Central Valley/River City all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time-book club” (5). Their story is told via shifting focalization: at times, all six book club members narrate it together (using the first person, plural pronoun “we”), at others, one or two members are

described by the rest and excluded from the perspective until the focus moves to another character, and at still others a single character's perspective/narrative voice takes over. The narrator is similar to what DuPlessis calls the "collective protagonist" (xi) of a narrative that, that in spite of its romantic orientation, does not easily fit the pattern of the marriage plot since it is about both individual and group, private and public Austens, and the novels and their readers (albeit with an emphasis on the latter).

Austen serves as an organizing point for the offshoot's structure (one novel per character per month per chapter), but actual discussions of her books are overtaken by narratives about the lives of the characters and the uses to which they put Austen. The text does not make Austen as ubiquitous as in the two previous offshoots; instead, she more subtly appears in both separate and communal constructions of her by the book club members whose take on her novels aids in characterizing them. Jocelyn, unmarried and in her early fifties, has more passion for the matriarchal Rhodesian Ridgebacks she breeds than for men; for her, Austen is someone who "wrote wonderful novels about love and courtship, but never married" (Fowler 1). Her childhood friend, Sylvia, is devoted to her family and thus sees Austen "as a daughter, a sister, an aunt . . . who wrote her books in a busy sitting room, read them aloud to her family yet remained an acute and nonpartisan observer of people." Sylvia's recent divorce from her husband of thirty-two years also colors her interpretation of Austen's novels and, ironically, of the author as someone "who could love and be loved" without its "cloud[ing] her vision" or "blunt[ing] her judgment" (Fowler 2). Sylvia's thirty-year-old lesbian daughter Allegra is betrayed by her lover, Corinne, a writer who submits as creative fiction the secrets Allegra

confides. Scornful of the promulgation of heterosexual norms in Austen's novels, Allegra "would have shelved Austen in the horror section," because she views her as someone who "wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of women" (Fowler 4). Twenty-eight-year old high school French teacher Prudie hides her insecurities about her marriage and identity behind foreign phrases and index-card observations about "Jane." The "true Janeite" (Fowler 82) of the group, Prudie sees Austen as someone "whose books changed every time you read them, so that one year they were all romances and the next you suddenly noticed Austen's cool ironic prose" (Fowler 4). Sixty-seven-year old, free-spirited Bernadette has been married six times and loves *Pride and Prejudice* best of all the novels; light-hearted and eternally optimistic, she sees the "comic genius" (Fowler 1) in Austen. Lastly, Grigg, a science fiction fan, reader of Dickens, and the only man in the club, reads Austen for the first time; his private Austen is a mystery to the group of women, some of whom believe that "men don't do book clubs" (Fowler 3).

Although all the characters deal with romantic conflicts as they read and discuss Austen's novels, "Austen" functions to define their identities in a variety of ways and not just as adviser on matters of the heart. In fact, the characters' stories, told in digressions, soon surpass the book club discussions in terms of length, and the novel's reader may easily forget s/he is reading an Austenian spinoff. There are no easy parallels to be drawn between Austen's and Fowler's characters. Even in the more obvious connections, such as of Jocelyn and Emma's desire to control those around her, there is something tongue-in-cheek about the comparisons made: "We thought of how the dog

world must be a great relief to a woman like Jocelyn . . . . In the kennel, you just picked the sire and dam who seemed most likely to advance the breed through their progeny” (Fowler 29).

As the novel moves forward, it becomes impossible to simply match an Austen character to those of Fowler, and none of the chapters serve as retellings of the novels. Allegra’s chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, reveals her to be more than just one character: “a creature of extremes” (44) like Marianne Dashwood, but also Mr. Palmer, Charlotte Lucas, and just herself, Allegra; her narrative features a lover’s betrayal, but it also dwells on the non-romantic ways in which she addresses her need to experience life with intensity and passion. Prudie, charged with leading the discussion of *Mansfield Park*, has a few of Fanny Price’s characteristics (e.g. “a mind which had seldom known a pause in its alarms or embarrassments” (Austen 25; qtd. in Fowler 81) but is defined more by her problematic relationship with a mother she resents for manipulating/manufacturing her memories as a child – which has led to her preference of fantasy to reality and her difficulties in “making herself up” as an adult.

While in the previous spinoffs contemporary culture enters “Austenland,” the reverse is true here as the reader detects subtle connections between the everyday lives of the book club members and the Austen novels they read. Jocelyn’s description of a dog show, for instance, highlights one of *Emma*’s class issues: it “emphasizes bloodline, appearance, and comportment, but money and breeding are never far from anyone’s mind” (Fowler 39). Extracts from manuals by an eighteenth-century dancing master remind readers of the dynamics of courtship: the pairing up of couples, the importance

of appearance and grace, the following of “rules” of timing and order, and spontaneity of movement. E-mail from Grigg's sisters substitute “for the letters often used as plot points by Austen” (Sama). A magazine quiz to identify “which of the *Sex and the City* girls you are most like” (Fowler 100) brings up the notion of female archetypes in Austen in a contemporary cultural text consumed by women. Scenes at a science fiction convention and quotations from authors such as Arthur C. Clarke and Philip K. Dick on fantasy, art, and writing serve as both foils and mirrors to Austen fandom. Yet another subtle connection can be seen in a promotional poster for a mystery novel written by a minor character, a man who says he does not read Austen nor other “woman’s stuff” because he likes a good plot (Fowler 182) but who then uses Bernadette’s anecdotes about her multiple marriages as the outline for his latest novel.<sup>131</sup> It becomes clear, as the narrative progresses, how much Austen is part of these characters’ lives and environment.

Besides love and relationships, reading, writing, and other issues relevant to the characters’ lived experiences are interwoven into the discussion of Austen. For instance, they discuss not just passion (or lack thereof) in *Emma* but also class – the “sense of level” that remains in contemporary society. Jocelyn likens the two worlds by saying, for instance, “It may not be based on class exactly anymore, but we still have a sense of what we’re entitled to” (Fowler 34). Then there is the interesting fact that the offshoot’s women are all older than Austen’s heroines (the youngest is close to thirty and the oldest nearing seventy). At one point, the members question the treatment of older women like Mrs. Dashwood at the same time as they wonder what

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<sup>131</sup> This criticism resonates with nineteenth-century commentary that “Austen could do characters, but not ‘plot,’” which modern critics have argued against (Trott 96). Prudie responds to this by saying, “Austen can plot like a son of a bitch” (Fowler 182).

newly divorced Sylvia's "prospects [could] be at fifty-whatever" (Fowler 47) compared to that of her husband who is already dating someone new.<sup>132</sup> Alternatives to heterosexual romance are also explored through Allegra's relationships, Jocelyn and Sylvia's long-term friendship, the group's support of each other through divorce, parental death, and through Prudie's conflicted relationship with her mother. The differences between men's and women's reading practices are introduced via the inclusion of Grigg in the Austen reading group. Bernadette aptly observes that "The dynamic changes with men" (Fowler 3), but she is humorously proven wrong about men talking "more than their share" and women being "too tentative to interrupt" (Fowler 3). Grigg overcomes the women's prejudices (interesting in light of the fact that some of the earliest Janeites were men) by demonstrating that for him reading can be both "a solitary pleasure" (Fowler 3) and a social activity.<sup>133</sup>

In fact, Grigg's remark about the "pomo" elements of his favourite Austen novel, *Northanger Abbey* – he loves how "it's all about reading novels" (Fowler 138) – self-reflexively calls attention to the same characteristics in Fowler's novel. The book is, of course, about reading novels; the book club members share their interpretations of Austen and also discuss the relevance of her works' past reception and compare Austen to other writers from the past and present. When Grigg pairs Austen's name with those of science fiction writers, historical fiction writer Patrick O'Brian, and Charles Dickens, he gets varied reactions from the others, who are outraged by

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<sup>132</sup> Sylvia asserts that while "the problems of older women don't interest most writers," Austen seems to care (Fowler 46). Prudie later says that "An older man can still fall in love. An older woman better not" (Fowler 47).

<sup>133</sup> Johnson notes that "the Janeitism of the early twentieth century was . . . principally a male enthusiasm shared among an elite corps of publishers, professors, and literati" ("The Divine Miss Jane" 30).

the first comparison, patronizing about the second, and tolerant of the third. Bernadette observes that Austen's writing is "genuinely funny, not like Shakespeare's jokes, which amused you only because they were Shakespeare's and you owed him that" (Fowler 1-2). One chapter ends with historical details about the rejection and under-pricing of Austen's earlier works, as well as scathing criticisms of her works by Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Another critiques but also explains the reason for the production of the 1999 reworking of *Mansfield Park* which Prudie dislikes because of its reinvention of the novel and its provocative "amalgamation of Fanny with Austen herself" (83).<sup>134</sup> Finally, Allegra talks of Austen "having a go at readers" (139), adding that "It's Austen writing the really dangerous books. . . books that people really do believe, even hundreds of years later. How virtue will be recognized and rewarded. How love will prevail. How life is a romance" (141). With a postmodern knowingness, the offshoot tackles the various meanings of Austen for themselves and for other readers without denying the novels' interpretation as romances.

While the film adaptation of Fowler's novel diverges from the novel and markets itself as a romance, adding such lines as Austen is "the perfect antidote to life," the novel itself does not. A line from the epilogue may seem to conflate the reading of Austen with romance – "We'd let Austen into our lives, and now we were all either married or dating" (Fowler 249) – but the statement is playfully ironic, for the true resolution reached affects the group as a whole. After all, the book club members contrast Austen's happy endings with the less happy ones of other characters like Charlotte Lucas, Maria

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<sup>134</sup> Prudie prefers novels to film adaptations because of "the solidity of the written word. You might change and your reading might change as a result but the book remained whatever it had always been" (Fowler 82).

Bertram, and Colonel Brandon's Eliza, and are conscious that the novels end both with marriage "and the thing Austen isn't saying about it" (Fowler 75). Woven into the narrative are many modern invocations of the author which are *not* based on romance, such as criticism of Patricia Rozema's film adaptation of *Mansfield Park* and a dream sequence involving an Austen-led tour of an estate, an excerpt from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (which only Grigg has read), the book club members' first impressions (a reference to the original title of *Pride and Prejudice*) of each other, and reflections on genealogy in the chapter about *Persuasion*.

At the end of the novel, Bernadette is married again, Jocelyn and Grigg are dating, Sylvia's husband moves back home, and Allegra is back with Corinne but none of these endings constitute a clear "happily ever after." For example, Bernadette amuses her friends and the offshoots' readers with her conviction when she says of yet another new husband, "I really think this is the one" (Fowler 248), Jocelyn is still a bossy matchmaker, reticent Sylvia "says she's happy, but she's still Sylvia. Who can really tell?" (Fowler 249), and Allegra inexplicably forgives Corinne, prompting the others to remark that "it's hard to have a good feeling about the relationship" (Fowler 250). Finally, Prudie's insecurities about her marriage and identity – tied up with the death of her mother – are not actually resolved, perhaps because the true resolution of the offshoot is for the "multiple individual," the group as a whole, who find an ending that is "an alternative to individual quests and couple formation" (DuPlessis xi).

More than any of the other spinoffs, this text turns attention from Austen and toward her contemporary readers' relationship with this author.



Not everyone will agree with some of the characters' interpretations of Austen's novels (just as the characters often disagree among themselves), but the offshoot's point is that the process and experience of reading Austen's novels and discussing them are relevant to readers' everyday lives, as are the varied meanings/uses of Austen. Finally, despite the therapeutic benefits the characters derive from talking about Austen, the group does not simply construct her as a romantic icon or as an antidote to modern romantic frustrations. More significant than romantic inspiration is the power to "link the mundane and the transcendent" (Lynch, "Cult" 116), which they whimsically attribute to Austen. She gets the last word in the novel via a reconstructed contemporary cultural object, a Magic 8-ball that Allegra takes apart and inserts with Austen's image and words, an "Ask Austen" ball that represents the merging of past and present involved in the reading of the novels. However, it is still the book club members – her readers – who have the power to choose which quotation is the right ending for their narrative. What they settle on is that "The mere habit of learning to love is the thing" (Fowler 250).

### **Branching out from Universally Acknowledged Truths**

Katherine Mansfield says that "Every true admirer of [Austen's] novels cherishes the happy thought that he [or she] alone – reading between the lines – has become the secret friend of their author" (305). The four offshoots featured in this chapter underscore this fantasy of intimate access to an imagined Austen. They take this intimacy further, branching out from Austen and extending her meanings in ways that both celebrate and interrogate the

ways she is read and, likewise, how love and marriage are viewed by women today. Like the sequels and retellings of the previous chapters, these offshoots inadvertently highlight what Johnson describes as academic dogmas with regard to how Austen's novels should and should not be read ("Austen Cults" 214). They do so by violating these dogmas, for instance by talking about her characters "as if they were real people" or speculating on their lives "before, after, or outside the text itself"; by giving great weight to details about Austen's life, deemed to be "irrelevant at best and heretical . . . at worst"; by writing about her with without the required "analytic skills and specialist knowledges available through courses of study at colleges and universities"; and by focusing on the marriage or courtship plot as "the major event in her fiction" (Johnson, "Austen Cults" 214). Aimed at readers who experience Austen in various media, these texts' forms and their marketplace appeal are influenced by the romance-oriented film and television adaptations of Austen's novels and other products of the contemporary Austen industry, an important multi-media dimension which I explore more fully in my next chapter.<sup>135</sup>

In these four offshoots Austen is re-molded into a (post)feminist heroine, into a signifier of love and independence, and into someone whose fiction both "effortlessly renews itself" (Amis) and creates connections among each new generation of readers. What is important is that these texts emphasize the Austens that are meaningful to readers' lives: an inspiring professional woman writer as well as a woman who wrote appealing love

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<sup>135</sup> For instance, as in certain sequels and retellings, many offshoots knowingly portray Darcy archetypes in ways that are clearly informed by the now iconic and highly appealing "take" on the character by director Andrew Davies and actor Colin Firth in the 1995 BBC mini-series adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

stories, a social critic as well as a guide for navigating social relationships, and a source of both romantic satisfaction and frustration. Offshoots importantly acknowledge these alternative “entrees” to Austen and the complex interrelationship of the novels and multi-media spinoffs – or basically, the extent to which “Austen” has been opened up.

Furthermore, these texts make what I see as a (post)feminist gesture of grafting Austen with contemporary romance, thereby joining “high” literature with the discourse of popular women’s narratives. By reconfiguring Austen in romance and chick lit genres, they validate the pleasure in what some second-wave feminists might consider “terribly unfeminist desires and actions,” such as “engaging in heterosexual romance, enjoying work and play,” and “taking pleasure in traditionally feminine appearances” (Naranch 36). These reconfigurations are not unproblematic, but they at least express such desires and the contradictions therein. Finally, texts like *The Jane Austen Book Club* participate in what is important to feminist reading models: the “[establishment] of reading communities that ensure the construction and maintenance of readerly connections among women” (Davis and Womack 75) – *and* men. As the Jane Austen industry expands into more constructions of Austen, new frontiers open up for the interpretation of Austen and of modern women’s interactions with her work.

## **Chapter 4 – (Post)feminist Paratexts and Contexts of Austenian Spinoffs**

### **Mediating Austen's Marriage Plot**

In this final chapter I move from the narrative elements in these texts to “paratexts” – aspects at the periphery and outside of the spinoffs’ narratives – as well as to contexts of the spinoff’s production and reception, which provide valuable insights into the (post)feminist gestures Austenian spinoffs make. Various approaches to Austen and her novels have emerged in the previous chapters’ narrative-focused discussion – from selective imitation and celebration, to ironic commentary, to the reworking or even subversion of romantic plots. Such motivations and desires to revisit her novels, to add to the Austen archive, and to recreate her in these spinoffs can be elicited from the authors’, publishers’, and readers’ own words. Paratextual and contextual aspects of these texts “mediate” Austen and bring out what is sometimes less overtly stated with regard to what women are fixated on when they her novels. From these elements, ideological positions emerge with regard to (post)feminist definitions of “woman,” of “feminine” cultural practices and preoccupations, of the significance of love and marriage in women’s lives, and of alternative sources of fulfillment to romance.

I first examine authorial paratexts that reflect the motivations for reconfiguring Austen and the connections these have to themes of love and marriage – what Iser would classify as belonging to the “artistic” pole of the work (“Interaction” 391). I also analyze publishers’ paratexts such as images and words on these books’ covers, reading group guides, “extras” that accompany these texts, and public epitexts (or paratexts outside the book) like

the marketing-oriented information posted on official websites that often repeat or complement the spinoffs' peritextual material. Finally, I tackle an informative epitext: readers' responses to these textual Austenian spinoffs, which comprise the "aesthetic" pole of the work, "the actions involved in responding to [it]" or its realization by the reader (Iser, "Interaction" 391). When these aspects are examined alongside the narratives of sequels, retellings, and offshoots, it becomes clear that Austen's meaning is considered to be both "fixed" – in terms of the stability she imbues these spinoffs with – and flexible in terms of their readings of her. Each draws boundaries between what is inside and outside of Austen in different ways which parallel their specific (post)feminist intervention with her work.

### **The Spinoff Writer and Austen**

Endeavors to rewrite Austen are often bolstered by the mention of their authors' "credentials," such as academic work on Austen, JASNA membership, and even distant kinship as in the case of Tennant.<sup>136</sup> Dedications, acknowledgments, and author bios, designed to declare "Austen expertise," not only express the "proclamation (sincere or not) of a relationship (of one kind or another)" (Genette, *Paratexts* 135) between Austen and the spinoff writer, but they also reflect how Austen serves a role of "moral, intellectual, or aesthetic backing" and as "a kind of ideal inspirer" (Genette, *Paratexts* 136). Many bios understandably describe these authors as

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<sup>136</sup> According to the "About the Author" sections in their novels and official websites, Webster specialized in Austen in Oxford University, James is "a Jane Austen scholar and a long-time admirer of Miss Austen's work," and Rigler "holds a lifetime membership in the Jane Austen Society of North America." Smith wrote her first Master's thesis on Austen, and Aiken is "a prolific author of . . . Austen sequels and continuations" ("Debra White Smith Interview"). Finally, the St. Martin's Griffin edition of *Pemberley* states that Tennant's half brother is "a descendant of Jane Austen's brother Edward Knight."

Austen enthusiasts: both Aidan and James, for instance, call themselves Austen *fans*. Similarly, although Fielding's brief bio is "Austen-free," an online reading guide labels her a fan of Austen, stating that she "cheerfully admits she 'pillaged her plot' from *Pride and Prejudice*" ("Book Clubs/Reading Guides). The deliberate use of the term "fan" in these paratexts indicates not only the author's identity as an Austen enthusiast and her desire to celebrate Austen, but also marks the text out to appeal to other fan readers.

There are other nuances that help to place spinoff writers in distinct categories. The Austen "affiliation" is often qualified to express the spinoff author's attitude toward the act of revisiting Austen and to guide consumers' expectations accordingly. For example, Berdoll has an "interest in all things Austen" but warns her readers that she is "not, nor [does she] pretend to be, a Jane Austen expert," perhaps to ward off criticism about her novel's lack of fidelity to the original (*The Official Website*). Hale provides a similar caveat when she writes a letter to Janeites to disclaim being an Austen scholar, literary critic, or historian of the Regency period. By saying that she is "merely a lay-fan, a girl who loves to read Austen novels and watch the movie adaptations," Hale aligns herself with contemporary readers who access Austen via the film versions of her novels and whose understanding of her is thus influenced by these media forms (*The Official Site*).<sup>137</sup> Fowler's Acknowledgements section calls attention to reception by giving thanks to Austen for "those renewable, rereadable, endlessly fascinating books and everything that's been written about them" (288). Fowler also uses a spin on

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<sup>137</sup> This information can be found via a "Dear Janeites" link on the "*Austenland*" page of Hale's official website.

her novel's assertion that everyone has a "private Austen" (1) and identifies *her* Austen as someone "who showed her work to her friends and family and took such obvious pleasure in their responses" (288). This paratextual continuum of (proclaimed) intimacy with the author is matched by the wide range of the spinoffs' "takes" on Austen.

Intriguing because the connection is not a given is the paratextual linking of Austen with the spinoff authors' marital status. In such references, Austen becomes an "intertext" upon which the meaning not just of the spinoff but also, to some extent, of the spinoff's writer depends. For instance, Rigler's dedication projects her desires for Austen: "If there is any justice in the world, Miss Austen, then there is a parallel reality in which that lovely young man from the seaside didn't die young, you lived to write at least six more novels, and the two of you grew happily old together. . . ." In her Acknowledgments Rigler even refers to her husband as her very own Mr. Darcy. Similarly, the "About the Author" section of *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* reports that, "Although [Berdoll] admits that she eloped in a manner similar to Lydia Bennet's, to her great fortune it was with Darcy, not Wickham." Aidan responds to a reading guide question that has little to do with the content of her retelling: "We hear that you owe your marital happiness to Jane Austen. How did you meet your husband?"<sup>138</sup> She reveals that the act of writing her spinoff and posting of sections of this on the Internet inadvertently led to a correspondence with her future husband, who wrote her fan letters as Mr. Darcy; Aidan also claims that when women ask her "where to find a Darcy," she tells them "he's already taken!"<sup>139</sup> James, in turn, compares her own husband to Mr. Ashford, the

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<sup>138</sup> This is from the reading guide of *An Assembly Such as This*.

<sup>139</sup> The quoted phrases are taken from the reading guide of *An Assembly Such as This*.

fictional love interest she creates for Austen. Lastly, Smith's bio markets her as a marriage expert; it not only refers to her "blazing love affair marriage," but also mentions titles of her non-fiction guides like *Romancing Your Husband*, *Romancing Your Wife*, and *What Jane Austen Taught Me about Love and Romance*, a text which conflates Smith's knowledge of Austen with her marriage expertise.<sup>140</sup>

The paratextual inclusion of such information emphasizes the significance for Rigler, Berdoll, Aidan, James, and Smith of the marriage plot in Austen's texts. For them, the relationship with Austen transcends the textual or narrative dimension and enters the personal realm: their husbands are equated to Austenian heroes and their happy marriages to those of Austen's most popular couples. Not surprisingly, this linkage coincides with the central role that marriage plays in their spinoffs – Aidan's and Smith's reenact the marriage plot, Berdoll's focuses on married life, and James's explains why Austen did *not* marry. On the other hand, Austenian rewritings with more original or subversive takes on the marriage plot tend not to include information about the marital status of their authors precisely because these attempt to do revisit more than just the romantic elements in Austen's novels. Nothing in Aiken's, Tennant's, Fowler's, or Webster's peritextual bios, dedications, and acknowledgements indicate whether or not they are married, and Fielding's even contains a pointed remark which parallels her novel's critique of the "old-fashioned" belief that it is abnormal to be single: "Surely

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<sup>140</sup> A "Marriage Conferences" link on Smith's official website notes that she and her husband have been married nearly 25 years. It further specifies that, "As a result of the innovative concepts their ministry teaches, they have a blazing love affair marriage that many people dream of but might never have. They are a down-to-earth couple who are crazy about each other, love the Lord, and want to help other couples grow into a dynamic and exhilarating union" (*Debra White Smith*).



you know better than to ask whether she's married" ("Book Clubs/Reading Guides").<sup>141</sup> Fielding furthermore states that, since the publication of her novel, she gets "no more patronizing comments" from married friends, whose attitudes toward singlehood have changed ("Book Clubs/Reading Guides"). A pattern emerges from these latter texts: Aiken's and Tennant's spinoffs maintain the marital status quo, but their endings do not celebrate marriage, Fowler and Fielding question new "rules" of love and courtship in contemporary society, and Webster playfully calls attention to less positive meanings of the marriage ending for women today.

Thus, both in the narratives and now in paratextual information that mediates these to the reader, categories which are based on the spinoff writers' motivations for revisiting Austen emerge. In one group are the novels of Aidan, James, Smith, and Berdoll, the paratexts of which suggest a desire for a selective (and embellished) repetition and celebration of Austen's romance. A second category, which includes those by Tennant, Aiken, Fielding, and Webster, as indicated by their paratexts, veers away from the serious imitation or rehashing of Austen's romantic plots, although not all texts are entirely successful in their goal of subverting romantic readings of the source novels. In the third grouping are Hale's, Rigler's, and Fowler's spinoffs, which explore how women today read and make use of Austen and whose paratextual elements relate specifically to Austen reception and the Austen phenomenon in a (post)feminist context. These categories are useful for reviewing my chapter's more form-based divisions of sequel, retelling, and

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<sup>141</sup> The quoted sentence also appears in the "About the Author" section of Fielding's book.

offshoot and for reorganizing these texts based on the (post)feminist impulses that drive them.

First of all, celebratory spinoffs engage in “traipsing after Jane,” as Aidan describes her fan fiction, but their imitation/appropriation of Austen is selective. It is with “immense respect for Austen” and with “great fear and trembling” at her own “audacity” that Aidan enhances Mr. Darcy’s romance-novel-hero qualities by focusing on his pursuit of a “worthy” woman whom he “wins . . . at the price of changing and growing.”<sup>142</sup> James has no qualms about stating her motivation to provide a love story for Austen based on her own speculations. She asks, “what about a love story of Jane Austen? Why hasn’t anyone done that?” – although, in fact, filmmakers have. Her spinoff, she says, provides a “pleasurable way of connecting” to a past that people fear is lost; at the same time, she focuses on the present as evidenced by her assertion that Austen’s “characters all wrestle with social and emotional problems we can recognize, and still confront on a daily basis.”<sup>143</sup> For James, the pleasure comes from the universality of one of Austen’s themes: “ultimately, what attracts us to Austen now is probably what’s been attracting people to her for two centuries: anyone, at any time, can relate to falling in love.” Smith, who approaches her modernization of Austen’s classics “as a celebration of Austen” (“Debra White Smith Interview”) is also drawn to romance, saying that “the subtle spark between [Austen’s] heroes and heroines is magnetic” (“An Interview with Debra White Smith”).

*Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* seems at first misplaced in this category because it does not share the serious tone of the three aforementioned spinoffs.

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<sup>142</sup> This is from the reading guide of *An Assembly Such as This*.

<sup>143</sup> The quoted passages are taken from the reading guide of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*.

Berdoll, after all, says that she wrote her sexually explicit sequel “with nothing if not a sense of fun,” playfully classifying readers of Austen’s sequels as either “those who yearn to know what Darcy might have whispered into Lizzy’s ear in their nuptial chamber” or “those who fall into a swoon at the notion of such heresy” (*The Official Website*). In addition, her rationale for writing about Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s sexual relationship, which references Charlotte Brontë’s indictment of Austen (italicized below), is stated in a tongue-in-cheek manner:

As befitting a maiden’s sensibilities, [Austen’s] novels all end with the wedding ceremony. *What throbs fast and full, what the blood rushes through*, is denied her unforgettable characters, and therefore, us. Dash it all! We endeavour to right this wrong by compleating [*sic*] at least one of her stories, beginning whence hers leaves off.<sup>144</sup>

Berdoll’s attempt to satisfy the “longing to know what happened to Darcy & Elizabeth” is more a playful desecration of than homage to Austen because it takes great (even outrageous) liberties with Austen’s characters and style and seems to borrow no more than the Austen “brand name” and the names of her iconic romantic couple. However, as Wagner observes, “sentimental [Austenian] sequels often rehearse entire passages without being either self-conscious or self-ironical” (222), and paratexts of Berdoll’s spinoff indicate that its messages about true love rewarded by a happy marriage are certainly not ironic. For example, she praises Elizabeth Bennet for “follow[ing] her heart,” explains that so many women have fallen in love with Darcy because he is “enormously arrogant with a magnificent heart – one that he gives but

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<sup>144</sup> This can be found in the “Preface” section of *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*.

once, and when he does, it's unconditionally," and shares her hope of portraying Darcy and Elizabeth as a married couple "Desperately in love" (*The Official Website*).<sup>145</sup> Thus, as in Aidan's, Smith's, and James's spinoffs, the motivation for revisiting Austen is to revel in and embellish the romantic aspects of Austen's novels even to the point of being unfaithful to the text being celebrated.

The authorial paratexts of spinoffs belonging to the second category, such as *Emma in Love* and *Jane Fairfax*, which were published at the beginning of the Austen boom, lack the effusiveness with regard to Austen fandom as well as the numerous references to romance of those of the four previous spinoffs. Instead, Tennant's and Aiken's commentary complicates romantic interpretations of Austen's marriage plot. In a prefatory note to an earlier Austenian sequel, Tennant observes that Austen "continued to think of her characters after the book closed" (*Pemberley* vii), saying that they "lived on in [Austen's] mind long after they had married and were, *supposedly*, living happily ever after" [my emphasis] (*Pemberley* viii). The word "supposedly" says a lot about Tennant's framing of her sequel to focus on the unhappy marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley. As discussed in Chapter 1, *Emma in Love* reads the marriage ending of the source novel as an obligatory surrender of Emma's true sexuality to heterosexual norms, and Tennant is very open about her lesbian interpretation of the character.<sup>146</sup> Wagner assesses *Emma in Love* as conservative and sentimental because of its ending, which reconciles

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<sup>145</sup> These statements come from Berdoll's responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on her official website.

<sup>146</sup> Tennant says in an interview: "In the original, Emma absolutely adores Harriet Smith, her protégé and spends a lot of time with her. There's a passage where [Austen] describes how Harriet's soft blue eyes are just the type of eyes that Emma loves. I am not the first to draw out her lesbianism. Serious academics have found many clues to it in *Emma*" (qtd. in Reynolds).

Emma to her marriage through the purgation of a lesbian villainess (226). However, Tennant's comments firmly establish Emma's sexuality in the spinoff regardless of whether or not she chooses to maintain the marital status quo. Furthermore, the paratexts above indicate a desire to present an alternative to romantic heteronormative readings as a projection of the author's own reading of the source text and to engage with similar critical takes on *Emma's* marriage ending. At the same time, they suggest fantasies about both contemporary culture's candor and Austen's "straightness."

Aiken's Austen-related official website simply states that Austen "was possibly Aiken's favorite author for the extraordinary skill and wit with which she condensed so much experience into such an apparently small compass" (*Welcome to the Wonderful World*). Aiken admits in an interview that there are other writers whose work she admires but "not to the point of writing sequels" (qtd. in Grant). However, her tone of admiration – she does not rave like many other spinoff writers do – parallels her more careful homage and gentle questioning of Austen's themes. Paratexts of *Jane Fairfax* and Aiken's other sequels indicate that, while set in Austen's world and attempting stylistic fidelity to her novels, the revisiting of Austen is more ironic than seriously imitative. According to her site, Aiken's Austen sequels are both "a great tribute to her literary heroine" but also "evidently written with tongue firmly in cheek" (*Welcome to the Wonderful World*). Thus, while she admires Austen, Aiken does not repeat the marriage plot but rather offers what she deems to be a complementary story: the grimmer and less romantic tale of a less privileged heroine. As in Tennant's sequel, the contemporary perspective

intrudes to ostensibly add an interpretive dimension (class) to a novel which already has much to say about this issue.

Two other spinoffs that question the gendered implications of the marriage plot, this time by engaging with contemporary readers' obsession with it, are *Lost in Austen* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Paratextual trivia (e.g. endnotes with information about Austen's life, works, and world) in the former caters to Austen fans, but Webster's commentary also establishes that she is critical of the marriage endings that these readers may enjoy. Noting that readers understandably see those in Austen's novels as celebratory, Webster is troubled by the implication of "a dark subliminal message – that marriage equals 'The End'" to a woman's adventure ("Happy Ever After"). The plot device, Webster asserts, "intersects with the view of marriage" of women like her whose increased economic and personal freedom lead them to "keep [their] options open" and "delay 'The End' of [their] adventures as long as possible" ("Happy Ever After"). She even offers the data from the Office for National Statistics to demonstrate this: "by 2031 the proportion of women aged 45-54 who have never married is predicted to rise from 9% to 35%" (Webster, "Happy Ever After"). Webster's subversion of the romantic marriage ending is furthermore highlighted in her reference to the oversimplified way in which Austen's are read: she defies anyone "to take a close look at Austen's actual endings (as opposed to the rose-tinted conclusions to the screen adaptations) and still classify them as 'fairy-tale' or 'happy'" ("Article postscript"). Webster asserts that Austen "conformed to convention by ending her romantic comedies with happy marriages, but . . .

subtly and skillfully subverted it too” (“Article postscript”), thus highlighting the self-aware irony and subversion of her own Austenian spinoff.

What Webster says about modern romances – that couples “are far less likely to get married at the end” and that “There is less finality to [their] conclusions, with both the characters and their audiences being given much more room to breathe” (“Happy Ever After”) – applies as well to *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Its modern take on marriage can be seen in Fielding’s defense of the “Singleton,” a term popularized by her novel. In paratextual commentary, she decries the term “spinster” with its negative connotations of “spinning wheels failure” and the old fashioned idea “that if you’re not married by thirty, you’ll die alone and be found three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian” (“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”). Like Austen’s novel, Fielding’s is a social satire. She uses irony “to make people laugh” and to raise “some issues that strike a nerve,” since she believes that “Novels are there to reflect the truth in what they see, as well as to entertain” (“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”).

Because Austen is seen today as a feminist icon, Fielding also addresses criticism that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* “reinforce[s] conventional gender roles while pretending to challenge them” (Guenther 84) – by pointing out the aforementioned irony of her work and stressing how men and women’s “roles have shifted enormously” and that “rules” of courtship and marriage are not as clear cut today as they seem to be in Austen’s novels (“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”). Fielding’s responses reveal her to be aware of the spinoff writer’s responsibility to Austen and feminism, but she also defends (post)feminist Bridget’s foibles and makes her own (post)feminist gestures by

saying that “We've got to be able to have comic heroines without being so terribly anxious about what it says. We're not equal if we're not allowed to laugh at ourselves” (“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”).<sup>147</sup> Thus, she writes in the comedic spirit of (post)feminist chick lit, which moves away from the “high seriousness and simmering anger characteristic of earlier feminist fiction” (Benstock 255), but which is still capable of expressing feminist convictions.

In the third category, Hale's, Rigler's, and Fowler's spinoffs offer a surplus of paratextual materials that extend from the texts to official websites, blogs, and other online presences. A closer look at these reveals an intense interest in both celebrating and questioning the romantic Austen for modern women. First of all, for Hale, Austen is an “everywoman” whom readers can relate to and be intimate with. For her, Austen does not need to look like “movie-version heroines” because she's “tangible,” “the ideal of our best friend,” “a woman, just like us. . . . sorta pretty and sorta plain (*The Official Site*). This intimacy with Austen is further elaborated on in Hale's surmise that “both Austen purists and Austen skeptics might not feel at home” in a story written for her “internal reader” (*The Official Site*). Hale's contextualization of her writing of *Austenland* reveals that it knowingly caters to readers interested romantic aspects. She believes that categorizing Austen's novels “simply as ‘romances’ is dismissive and untrue” but adds that this is “nevertheless, . . . precisely this aspect of her stories” that her novel seeks to explore, “particularly in how they are portrayed in movies” (*The Official*

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<sup>147</sup> Leah Guenther notes that “detractors lambasted the novel for its adherence to traditional romantic plot devices, criticisms that were helped along by the fact that Fielding modelled the plot of the first novel on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and its sequel on *Persuasion* - albeit in both cases with a sense of the latent complexity and ambivalence of Austen's women characters' experiences and desires” (84).



*Site*).<sup>148</sup> Lastly, Hale qualifies her offshoot's happy ending by showing its evolution from two earlier endings in which her protagonist chooses a different man in the first and chooses none in order to "be happy alone" in the second (*The Official Site*). The discarding of these alternate endings for the one in which Hale's protagonist chooses Henry Jenkins frames the latter as the "more real. . . , more possible" ending because it was "fought for . . . by eliminating every possibility during the writing process" (*The Official Site*). Thus, while *Austenland* has a happy and romantic ending, Hale's commentary attempts to distance it from other chick lit novels and contemporary romances by emphasizing the thought and examination that went into producing such an ending.

*Austenland* is a quintessential contemporary artifact in that its web page is very much like the modern DVD – packed with special features such as the origins of the novel, the story of its publication, five versions of Hale's bio, *Austenland* limericks, a fantasy cast, discourse on Austen's looks, and the alternate endings. Hale furthermore links her novel to popular and media culture via references to film adaptations and the repeated mention of Colin Firth, who played Mr. Darcy in the 1995 BBC miniseries. Not only does she flippantly dedicate her novel to him, Hale also presents a letter addressed to the actor, includes his name in an *Austenland* limerick, and shares in her story of the novel's beginnings her joy at its "setting off to greet the world and cheer other Austen fans and silly women like [her] who adored Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy just a little too much" (*The Official Site*). Hale thus draws attention to

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<sup>148</sup> The quoted phrases are taken from the "Dear Janeites" link on the "*Austenland*" page of Hale's official site. In the same link, Hale shares her own varying readings of Austen: "At different times in my life, I read her books in different ways – romances, comedies, feminist commentaries, tragicomedies, satires. In college, I wrote an essay on why *Pride and Prejudice* is NOT a romance, but at other times in my life, I've disagreed with myself."

the proliferation of Austenian adaptations often attributed to the “wet-t-shirt Darcy” of the miniseries (Troost and Greenfield 1) – a point earlier humorously highlighted by Fielding’s Darcy-obsessed Bridget Jones – to media culture’s transformation of these into “hypertrophically romantic” stories (Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives* 354), and to the illicit love involved in the consumption of such mediated Austens.

These references underscore the significance for women today of romance-focused film adaptations of Austen’s novels. The influence of the BBC adaptation can be felt in the texts and paratexts of many of the spinoffs whose writers deliberately proclaim a relationship between it and their own novels. For Aidan, it was Firth’s performance that “really opened up [her] eyes” about the character of Mr. Darcy because his acting “brought to the fore intriguing suggestions of who Darcy might really be.”<sup>149</sup> Berdoll says that her interest in Austen was piqued by the miniseries, and her “definitive Darcy and Elizabeth” are Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle (*The Official Website*). James cites her love of the novels and the 1995 adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* as inspiration for her fictional biography.<sup>150</sup> Fielding’s spinoff and its sequel contain numerous references to the BBC miniseries, Mr. Darcy, and Firth: Bridget views the lake scene fifteen times as “research” for an interview with the actor in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, compares Mark Darcy to Austen’s character, and cannot separate the actor Firth from the role he plays. Adding another complex self-referential layer, in the film versions of Fielding’s novels, Firth plays the role of Mark Darcy.

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<sup>149</sup> This is from the reading guide of *An Assembly Such as This*.

<sup>150</sup> This is from the reading guide of James’s spinoff.

Not surprisingly, the “entrée to Austen” of Rigler’s media-obsessed protagonist is “via Colin Firth prancing around in tight pants for the BBC” (65). This protagonist, Courtney Stone, is placed firmly within contemporary culture via her online presence in the *Jane Austen Addict* website and profiles on social networking sites. Intriguingly, she and her creator seem to share the same attitudes toward Austen; in fact, the link to the former’s MySpace page leads instead to that of Rigler who, under the heading “General Interests,” effusively declares her love for Austen in the same voice and wordy style as her protagonist – and even utilizes some of the memorable phrases from the novel.<sup>151</sup> Rigler thus calls attention to fannish reception practices by using Courtney to project her and, presumably, other modern readers’ enthusiastic feelings about Austen and what “purports to be Austen” (film and television adaptations).<sup>152</sup> The paratexts of her spinoff, which is dedicated to “Austen addicts, past, present, and future,” are similarly turned toward contemporary reception. Rigler’s official website caters to this audience via its “diversions for Jane Austen fans who dearly love a laugh” and venues for reader contributions such as a list of “Signs of Addiction” to Austen and various Austen-related quizzes, games, trivia, and videos. Many of her novel’s reading guide questions highlight the importance of modern women’s reading practices with regard to Austen, for instance by asking how Courtney uses the novels “as a means of making sense of her world,” questioning whether

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<sup>151</sup> Rigler writes here very much like Stone: “Jane Austen, Jane Austen, Jane Austen. My number-one drug of choice. I could spend all day rereading [Austen’s novels]. Yeah, even Mansfield Park. Then there are the movies. Mr. Darcy fencing. Mr. Darcy in a clinging wet shirt. Even Mr. Darcy bathing. Various other bare-assed naked characters that Jane Austen would have never put into her novels but which Hollywood and the BBC feel her great works lack. Are there enough hours in the day to read Austen, watch Austen . . . , then engage in some serious imbibing with my girlfriends? Unfortunately, the slight inconvenience of having to work for a living leaves me less [*sic*] hours for Austen than I would like.”

<sup>152</sup> The quoted phrases are taken from Courtney Stone’s/Laurie Viera Rigler’s MySpace Profile: <http://www.myspace.com/courtneystoneaustenaddict>.

attitudes toward marriage have fundamentally changed since Austen's day, urging readers to list the appeals and challenges of being in Austen's world, and making a link between the spinoff and other books and media entertainment that readers turn to for "inner strength, guidance, or comfort" (*Jane Austen Addict*). Judging from one question – "To what extent do we define ourselves by what we read? To what extent do we form our opinions of others based on what they read?" (*Jane Austen Addict*) – it is clear that the spinoff is preoccupied not just with Austen's meaning as romantic escape and antidote to modern romantic frustrations but also with how Austen defines her modern readers' identities.

Focused on the significance of Austen reception, *The Jane Austen Book Club* includes a reading guide that is paginated to be part of the narrative instead of supplementary to it. Besides summaries of the Austen novels and a survey of responses to these by her family and literary critics, this guide includes "Questions for Discussion" posed for the spinoff's reader by Fowler's fictional book club members. Although these questions reference Austen, they involve the reader in a self-reflexive disclosure of the ways in which Fowler's characters read their own lives and contemporary culture into Austen's texts. For example, Jocelyn asks if, like Austen's "troubling couples," the matches made in Fowler's novel (such as that of Grigg and herself) also "create disquiet" (284). The questions posed by Allegra link the appeal of balls in Austen's time to the "too prominent" role of high school proms in people's "personal histories" (Fowler 285), suggesting that courtship rituals have not significantly changed since Austen's day. Grigg's questions call attention to publishing history in the shaping of responses to Austen's novels by asking

whether she would be considered a romance writer if she were publishing today (Fowler 285). Sylvia represents yet another type of Austen reader by joining her personal life with her reading of *Persuasion* in the following question: “Is love better the second time around? Is a good book better the second time around? Is the book you love the most also the one you reread the most? Is the person you love most the person you want to spend the most time with?” (Fowler 286). Bernadette also turns attention to readers and reading practices by asking about the significance of author information and of happy endings in the reading of novels (Fowler 286) – both of which play large roles in the appeal of Austen.

“It’s hard to read Austen and know what her opinions really were about anything,” asserts Prudie, following this up by asking if the same can be said of Karen Joy Fowler (Fowler 286). While Austen uses the technique of free indirect speech to blur the thoughts of her characters with those of her narrators, Fowler speaks through the shifting perspective of one, some, or all six of her characters, making it difficult for readers to pin down one specific Austen, apt for a novel that focuses on a reading community’s varied opinions. While on other Austen websites, readers may take a quiz to determine which Austen heroine they are, Fowler’s online quiz asks “‘Who’s Your Jane Austen?’”, which parallels the spinoff’s discourse on the numerous “Austens” that are relevant to various modern reader’s lives. Although only six results (the book club members) are possible, the truth is that, like the online respondents to this questionnaire, there is a potential for countless “private Austens” in this (post)feminist context.

### The Spinoff Publishers and Austen

The publishing history and marketing materials of these spinoff novels offer additional insights into today's Austenian paraliterature phenomenon. Besides promoting and marketing the spinoffs, publishers "confer authority and add value to authors' works" as well as edit and design these books "to meet author/market/branding needs" (Clark 3). Thus, aspects such as the books' covers, reading guides, and official websites are "capable of furnishing [readers] with paratextual scraps" (Genette, *Paratexts* 346) which complement the messages of the texts and help to shape their reception. As can be seen from many of these novels, publishers have taken advantage of the rise of book club culture in the United States, where most of these spinoffs are published.<sup>153</sup> Often these include discussion guides, interviews with the author, and other "bonus" materials – all of which can further point to the ways in which Austen reception is shaped. Before taking a look at these, however, I briefly survey the publishing houses that release and market these spinoffs. Although readers may not give great consideration to this aspect, it is important to consider this because of the interesting parallels with author intent and target reader it reveals.

The spinoffs of Aiken, Tennant, Fielding, and Fowler, whose earlier works had already met with success, were published by some of the largest English language publishers in the US and UK: St. Martin's Press, Fourth Estate Ltd. (a division of HarperCollins), and Penguin Books. Although they revisit Austen, these authors – particularly the latter two whose novels were international bestsellers – offer original work that critiques rather than

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<sup>153</sup> According to Harvey Daniels' survey of what he calls "the Literature Circles Boom," "By 1990, there were about 50,000 book clubs in the United States; by the turn of the millennium that number had just about doubled" (3).

celebrates romantic readings of Austen. As established writers, the four were likely freer than new, undiscovered ones to veer away from marketable feel-good romances, while still producing appealing – and saleable – fiction. Commercially viable spinoffs belonging to the chick lit and historical romance genre, such as *Austenland* and *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*, come from smaller but well-known mainstream publishers, such as Bloomsbury USA, which is known for its young adult novels (particularly the *Harry Potter* series) and women’s fiction, and Avon Books, a division of HarperCollins “recognized for having pioneered the historical romance category” (*Romance Blog by Avon*). It is no surprise, given the romance-reader market their publishers cater to, that while Hale and James spinoffs may problematize the significance of Austen’s marriage endings for readers today (as discussed in Chapter 3), the romantic orientation of both their texts is unmistakable. Finally, released by Imprints of Penguin which aim to provide alternatives to mainstream fiction are the stylistically playful spinoffs, *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* and *Lost in Austen*. The former comes from Plume, which has the goal of providing “an opportunity to voices previously neglected by mainstream publishing,” while the latter is from Riverhead Press, which claims to be “dedicated to publishing extraordinary, ground-breaking, unique fiction and non-fiction writers.”<sup>154</sup>

The most romance-focused spinoffs tend to be published by smaller and newer presses geared toward specific interests. One is the independent publisher, Sourcebooks, Inc., which in the mid-1990s and early 2000s began releasing many love-oriented Austenian spinoff titles, including Berdoll’s *Mr.*

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<sup>154</sup> See the bibliographic entries for “Plume” and “Riverhead Books.”

*Darcy Takes a Wife*, under its Casablanca and Landmark Imprints. The publishing firm admits to catering to a niche or alternative market by saying that most of their books “don’t make the Times’ bestsellers list” but that their titles “will have an impact and they will find their way into people’s homes.”<sup>155</sup> In other words, they publish books which make no claims to “literary merit” but which have a dependable readership. So reliable is this niche market that Sourcebooks has recently reprinted a number of previously published (and self-published) spinoffs from the 1990s, such as those by Aiken and Reynolds, many with new titles that “make it more obvious they are Austen paraliterature” (Mags, “Weekend Bookblogging”).

Another special-interest spinoff, Smith’s *Amanda*, comes from Harvest House Publishers which, as a Christian publishing firm, has the mission of releasing books that “affirm biblical values, help people grow spiritually strong, and proclaim Jesus Christ as the answer to every human need.”<sup>156</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, Smith’s romance spinoff adheres to this by avoiding explicit sexual references (already absent in Austen) and adding the spiritual message that God is in charge of people’s marital destiny. Lastly, although later released by a large publishing house, Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, Aidan’s *Fitzwilliam* trilogy was first published as online fan fiction, and then via Wytherngate Press, which specializes in Austenian spinoffs such as the *Frederick Wentworth, Captain* series by Susan Kaye and the *Mercy’s Embrace* series (spinoffs of *Persuasion*) by Laura Hile. The press utilizes “Print on Demand” (POD) technology to disintermediate the publishing process,

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<sup>155</sup> See the bibliographic entry for “the Sourcebooks Story.”

<sup>156</sup> See the bibliographic entry for *Harvest House Publishers*.



lowering costs and giving authors more control over the design and dissemination of their work, but also lessening the quality control involved.

Just as the wide range of publishing houses indicates the heterogeneity of these texts, the cover images and other marketing materials of these spinoff novels point to distinct trends in the approaches to rewriting Austen and framing readers' expectations. At first glance it seems as if these covers visually emulate those of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century editions of Austen's novels. Many feature paintings of women in Regency attire or of courtship scenes from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century (sometimes also from the later Victorian period) and consequently imply that their narratives are not only set in a past era but will be like Austen's in style and content. However, while a relationship to Austen is emphasized by such images, only a few covers of this study's exemplar texts, such as Aidan's trilogy, attempt to suggest equivalence to Austen.

The first volume (Fig. 1), *An Assembly Such as This*, depicts a ballroom scene and a gentleman (presumably Darcy) looking at an array of ladies fanning themselves, Volume 2 (Fig. 2), *Duty and Desire*, features a man conversing with a woman in a carriage – even though there is no actual encounter between Darcy and Elizabeth in this volume, and Volume 3 (Fig. 3), *These Three Remain* portrays a man and a woman walking under an umbrella as women in the background smile at the pair.<sup>157</sup> Victorian rather than Regency paintings are used for all these covers, denoting the propriety and restraint of the former and highlighting Austen's affinity with the refined

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<sup>157</sup> The cover art for *An Assembly Such as This*, *Duty and Desire*, and *These Three Remain* are as follows: "Fan Flirtation" (1908) by Henry Glindoni (the fan in the male figure's hand has been edited) "Rendez-vous" (1863) by E. Guerard, and "A Wet Sunday Morning" (1896) by Edmund Blair Leighton.

nineteenth rather than the coarser eighteenth century. Notably, other texts have made use of the painting in Aidan’s first volume, such as *The Darcys Give a Ball* (Fig. 4), a match-making sequel, and *Regency Buck* (Fig. 5) a historical romance by Austen-influenced Regency novelist Georgette Heyer. It is not surprising that these texts share the same romance novel formula and marriage plot.

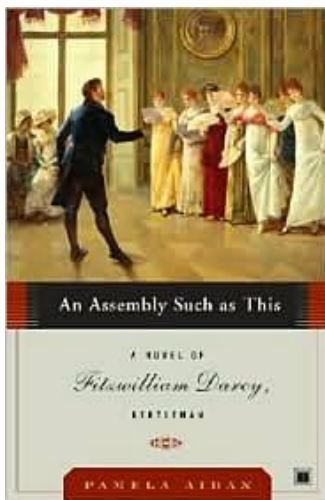


Fig. 1. Volume

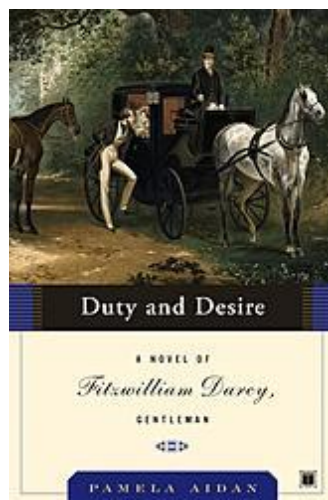


Fig. 2. Volume 2

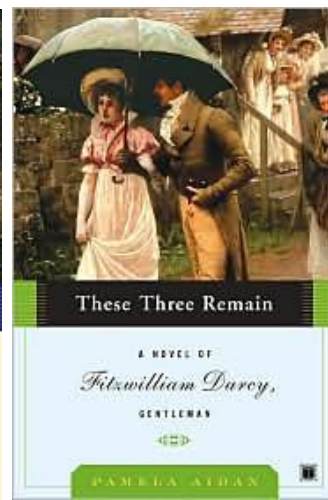
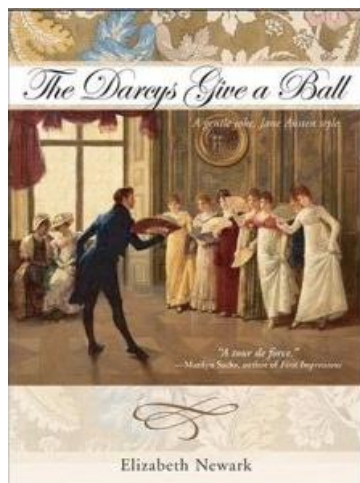
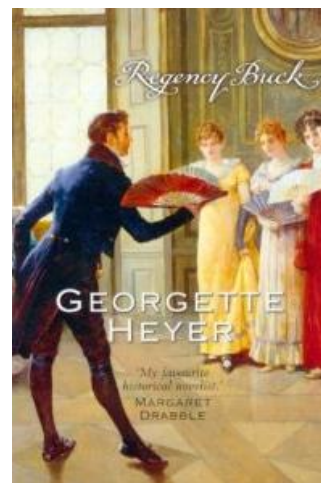


Fig. 3. Volume 3

Fig. 4. *The Darcys Give a Ball*Fig. 5. *Regency Buck*

Based on other publisher paratexts, Aidan’s trilogy clearly appropriates those elements of her work whose romantic potential can be maximized. The books’ blurbs refer to gaps in Austen’s texts which the trilogy fills by constructing Mr. Darcy as “the mysterious and handsome hero” and focusing

on the fact that he is not only “an enigma even to Jane Austen’s most devoted fans” but also hailed as “one of the most beloved romantic heroes in all of literature.”<sup>158</sup> The stress is on Darcy’s “private struggle to overcome his attraction to Elizabeth while fulfilling his roles as landlord, master, brother, and friend” and his “journey of self-discovery” throughout which “he endeavors to grow into the kind of gentleman he desires to become.” Such an emphasis points to the desire – of writer, publisher, and reader – for the sentimental and romantic supplementation of Austen.<sup>159</sup> In fact, reading guide discussion points mention that, while in the source text readers are “never privy to his personal thoughts or feelings,” in the trilogy, Mr. Darcy and the primary male characters “are all more sentimental and romantic than readers may be used to when it comes to reading about men and love,” and even contrast Austen’s Darcy, who is “a bit austere,” with Aidan’s “longing, almost pining” version.<sup>160</sup> Asked how she would compare her hero to those of “today’s romance novels,” Aidan says, “I don’t read much Romance nor do I write by formula”; however, by posing such a question and selecting courtship-focused cover images, the publishers (who created the Reading Guide) seem to classify Aidan’s spinoff within that formulaic genre.<sup>161</sup>

The “branding” link to a romantic Austen can also be seen in *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (Fig. 6), which features on its inner cover a portion of a nineteenth-century painting, “Woman Writing a Letter” by Pierre Duval-Lecamus, the same art used in another Austenian sequel, Jane Dawkins’

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<sup>158</sup> These passages are taken from the blurbs of *An Assembly Such as This* and *These Three Remain*.

<sup>159</sup> These passages are taken from the blurbs of *Duty and Desire* and *These Three Remain*.

<sup>160</sup> The quoted passages are taken from the Reading Group Guides of *Duty and Desire* and *These Three Remain*.

<sup>161</sup> The question and response are from the Author Q&A section of *These Three Remain*.

*Letters from Pemberley* (Fig. 7). The image functions in both to offer more than a revisiting of Austen’s world; it grants access to hitherto undisclosed secrets that the spinoffs undertake to reveal. The blurb of James’s novel even states that it is written in “a style that echoes Austen’s own” and “offers a delightfully possible scenario for the inspiration behind [Austen’s] romantic tales,” thus promising intimacy with the author and speaking to readers’ fantasies of access. Romance, nostalgia, and disclosure are also dwelt upon by the novel’s front cover image, which features an old, weathered manuscript layered over a floral cloth and bound by a pink ribbon, which promise a “feminine” focus on love and romance.

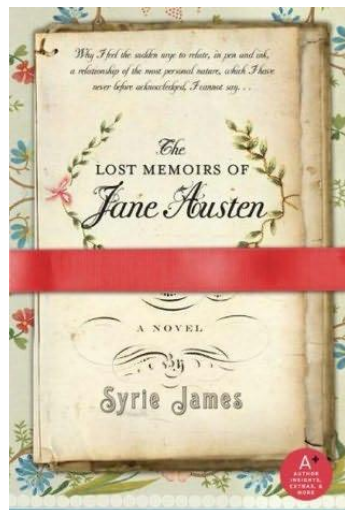


Fig. 6. *The Lost Memoirs*

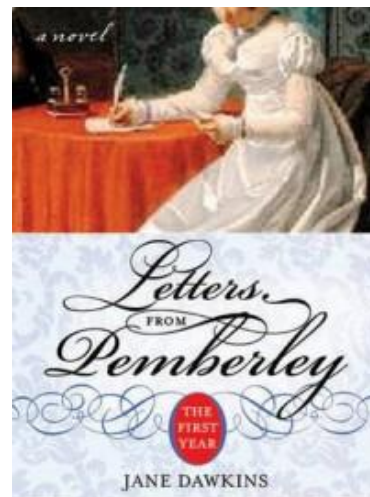


Fig. 7. *Letters from Pemberley*

The homage to Austen and the themes hinted at by its covers are highlighted by quotes on “Love & Marriage” and by reading guide questions regarding Mr. Ashford as romantic inspiration, the differences among the marriage proposals that James’s Austen receives, and insights about her decision to remain single. These questions urge readers to bring their contemporary perspective into the reading of the offshoot by asking them to compare today’s attitudes to popular media with those of Austen’s society toward the novel. In

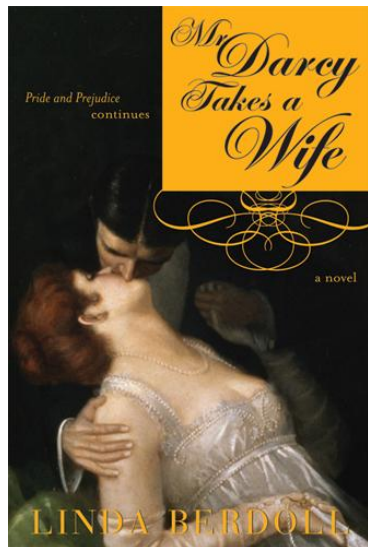
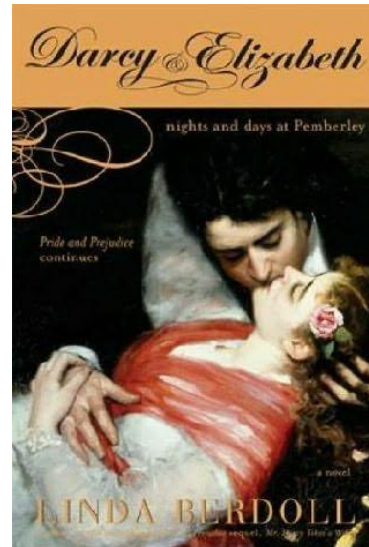
doing so, they promote the consumption of media texts (and of the spinoff) by equating these with what Austen herself produced. Referring to how James creates and sustains “sexual tension” between hero and heroine, another guide question also points to the nature of the novel as a contemporary cultural artifact, a construction of Austen in terms of today’s perceptions.

The cover of Berdoll’s *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* (Fig. 8) even more directly indicates its focus by turning Darcy and Elizabeth into figures from a typical romance novel. The image is of Darcy bending over to kiss a reclining Elizabeth, whose cleavage and neck are vulnerably exposed. A mirror image of this appears on the cover of *Darcy and Elizabeth: Nights and Days at Pemberley* (Fig. 9), suggesting even more sexual escapades and attracting the same kind of readers who enjoy Berdoll’s bawdy portrayal of the Austenian couple. Based on a review by Kristine Huntley who describes the spinoff as “rollicking” and “wild” and refers to its portrayal of a “spicy wedding night” (qtd. in *The Official Website*) as well as on product descriptions of the novel as a “sexy, epic, hilarious, poignant and romantic sequel” that features a couple who “can’t keep their hands off each other,” it seems that this text, and others like it, are designed to be in tension with contemporary readers’ notion of what Austen’s period was like – chaste, restrained, and proper. This is interesting because the Regency period was actually known for its “open highjinks” and “freer ways” (Bancroft 2), compared to those in the Victorian period to which Austen is more commonly associated.<sup>162</sup> By its very self-proclaimed bawdiness and the claim that it “goes far beyond Jane Austen,” Berdoll’s text is a contemporary fiction of what Austen and the past were about.<sup>163</sup>

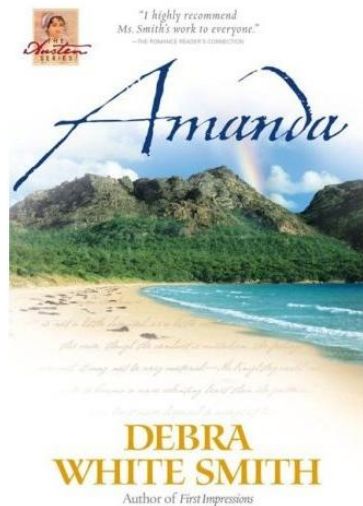
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<sup>162</sup> The product description comes from the *Amazon* web page for *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*.

<sup>163</sup> The quotation is taken from the book’s blurb.

Fig. 8. *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*Fig. 9. *Darcy & Elizabeth*

A text that aims to celebrate Austen’s romance is not necessarily represented by covers with characters in Period attire. For instance, Smith’s *Amanda* (Fig. 10) does not, at first glance, look like an Austenian spinoff, but upon closer inspection is clearly marketed to emphasize the Austen connection. *Amanda* is literally stamped on the upper left-hand corner with Austen’s image and the label “The Jane Austen Series” and, like the other books in the series, plays up its palimpsestic relationship by juxtaposing an idealized contemporary setting with watermarks of passages from its source text. The front cover does not immediately identify the novel as a Christian romance, unless of course one is familiar with the author and the series. However, *Amanda*’s blurb explicitly states the novel’s concern with “issues of faith” that are woven into a retelling reportedly enjoyable to “any Jane Austen fan.” Such publisher paratexts attempt to forge connections between the spinoff’s overt spiritual messages and Austen’s marriage plots – despite the known facts about Austen’s dismissal of evangelical arguments, mocking treatment of clergymen, and lack of reference to the spiritual aspects of Christianity in the source novel (Blythe 471).

Fig. 10. *Amanda*Fig. 11. *Emma in Love*

On the other hand, Tennant's retelling of *Emma* subverts what is viewed today as a repressed Regency society via its cover image (Fig. 11), which features a portrait of two sisters, one glancing lovingly at the other.<sup>164</sup> This same portrait can be seen in the 2003 Penguin classics edition of *Pride and Prejudice* to depict the loving sisters, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. Attached to what publishers brazenly call “a lesbian *Emma*” (qtd. in Reynolds), however, the image calls to mind not a sisterly relationship but a romantic intimacy between the two women, and the loving glance hints at the spinoff's “heart-fluttering innuendo” (qtd. in Reynolds). Even the typography – the cursive and curlicued capital “e” in “Emma” – might be read as adding flourish to a “straight” tale. Thus, although set in a culture that is seen as quite open about sexuality, Smith's spinoff and its paratexts highlight chaste and wholesome qualities, while Tennant's historical novel makes much of its contemporary openness to a “female friendship” that in the nineteenth century might not necessarily have been “secretly lesbian” but rather “openly homoerotic” (Marcus 3).

<sup>164</sup> The painting is called “A Double Portrait of the Fullerton Sisters” by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830).

The covers of *Jane Fairfax* and *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* are interesting because of what they conceal. The preoccupation of Aiken's and Rigler's covers with secrecy and identity point towards the authors' motivations and contemporary readers' desire for a fuller disclosure of Austen's world and a woman's identity – or at least their construction of it. On the cover of Aiken's spinoff (Fig. 12), the book's eponymous heroine is turned away from the reader – suggestive of her reticence and the spinoff's revelation of her "secret story." Jane's figure is mobile rather than static, unlike that of many heroines as portrayed in late twentieth-century editions of Austen's novels. Jane walks away, hiding her face and expression, seemingly escaping from being read.

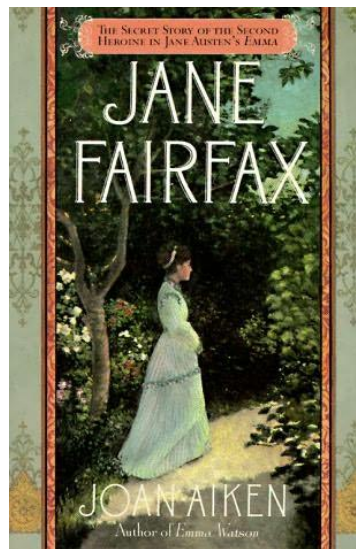


Fig. 12. *Jane Fairfax*

Rigler's cover (Fig. 13a) obscures the eyes of its central image, a woman dressed in Regency attire, and attention is therefore drawn more to the historical costume associated with Austen's heroines and to a book the protagonist holds in her left hand. The latter highlights the act of reading and suggests, together with the protagonist's costume, her juxtaposition with the



Austen heroines she reads about.<sup>165</sup> The pale pink dots on the upper left-hand corner of the cover evoke the chick lit genre, which is associated with the color and its functions of “feminization” and marketing “through a recognizable visual appeal” (Harzewski 33). The hardcover edition of the spinoff (Fig. 13b) has even more of a “chick lit” feel. Its contemporary heroine is dressed in a pink tank top, jeans, and high heels, but she sees an image of a Regency woman as her reflection in the mirror; behind her are a smaller mirror and a smaller portrait of the same/another Regency woman, perhaps Jane Austen herself. This identity-obsessed cover constructs an idealized one (at least from the point of view of other Austen addicts) for the modern woman: she wears pants, is mobile and free, feminine and sexual, and is also at the same time demurely “Austenian.” The bright pink typeface and floral/leafy border frame this woman as the heroine of her own constructed Austenian fantasy.

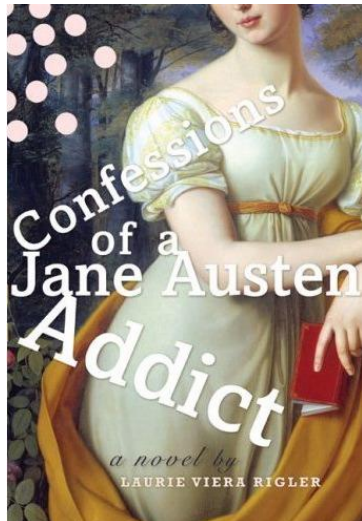


Fig. 13a. *Confessions* (paperback)

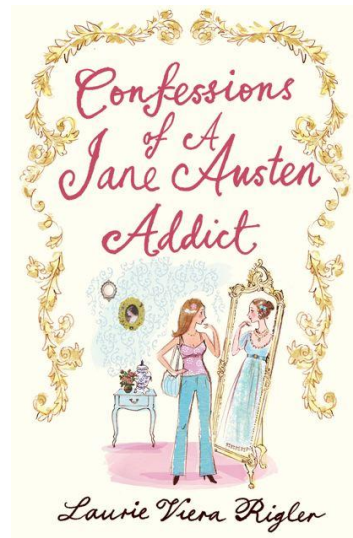


Fig. 13b. *Confessions* (hardcover)

<sup>165</sup> The image is reminiscent of the most well-known portrait of Austen, drawn by her sister Cassandra, or rather the Victorian adaptation of this that appeared as the frontispiece to *A Memoir of Jane Austen* by James Edward Austen-Leigh.

The publisher paratexts of Hale's *Austenland* also emphasize the meeting of an imagined past and the present. The cover of its hardcover edition (Fig. 14a) depicts the back view of a woman clad in blue jeans and carrying a suitcase as she stands on the path to a grand mansion reminiscent of those featured in Austenian film adaptations that fantasize/romanticize the era. It is a literal portrayal of what many women readers today do: turn their backs on the real world and choose to face a fantasy of Austen's world that is, ironically, removed from Austen because it is based on an interpretation of her. Similarly aiming to appeal to modern women, the cover of the spinoff's paperback edition (Fig. 14b) features the protagonist as a chick lit heroine in a miniskirt and high-heeled boots. She stands back to back with a Mr. Darcy figure, but despite their antagonistic position, the two are smiling, and their eyes are turned flirtatiously toward each other. While the two characters are painted in vivid colors, the background is pale and washed out, suggesting that the focus is less on Austen's world as a setting and more on the romantic characters and plot associated with that world.

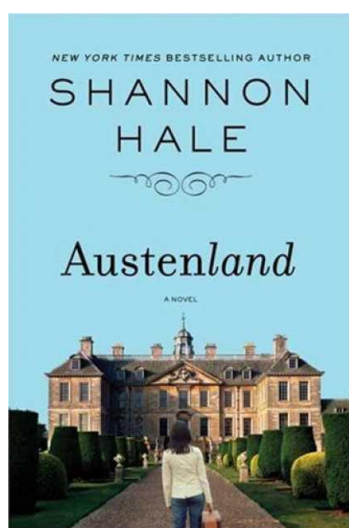


Fig. 14a. *Austenland* (hardcover)



Fig. 14b. *Austenland* (paperback)

However, taken along with other publisher paratexts, it is clear that both these covers do not frame the spinoff as romance per se but rather converse about contemporary women's reading of Austen's romance. For example, questions about relationships and love are ironically phrased, such as the one that tells readers to compare the marriage-related opening lines of *Austenland* and *Pride and Prejudice* and asks, "Which of these universal 'truths' is actually true, if either?" Other discussion questions turn the focus yet again on the contemporary reception, for example, by asking if the Austen heroine is "given short shrift by many Austen fans today," referring perhaps to the oversimplification of these characters and the outright dislike of Fanny Price, and whether it is possible to "guess at Austen's attitude toward romance by reading her work." Yet another question, "Could [Austen] ever imagine a fan like Jane Hayes?" reflects/projects readers' fantasy of intimacy with the author or that she might have been interested in the (post)feminist concerns of women today.<sup>166</sup>

Austen all but disappears from the covers of *The Jane Austen Book Club*. The central image on one cover (Fig. 15a) is a set of empty chairs in a semi-circle that aptly frames the book's title and the subtitle "a novel" in a similar cover (Fig. 15b). The six chairs, each of a different design, can stand easily for Fowler's reading group or, obviously, for readers in general. Their emptiness evokes the notion of gaps and silences so often associated with Austen's writing; at the same time, the chairs invite readers to fill these gaps, to take a seat and participate in a communally shared reading experience.

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<sup>166</sup> These questions are taken from the reading guide of *Austenland*.

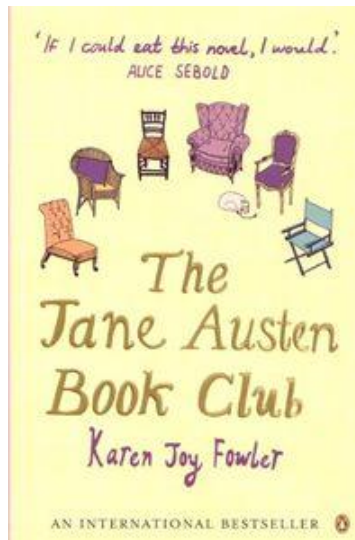


Fig. 15a. Cover A

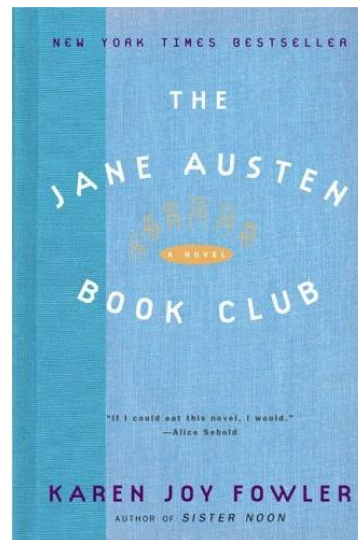


Fig. 15b. Cover B

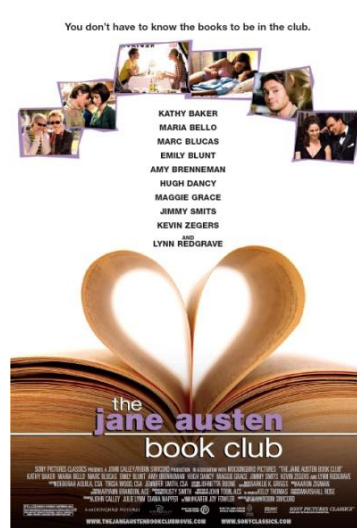


Fig. 15c. Movie tie-in cover

In contrast, the Hollywood movie poster/tie-in cover (Fig. 15c) of the spinoff, like the film adaptation, explicitly fills in Austen's meanings. Here, two pages of an open book fold toward each other to create a heart as the central image; above are small frames depicting intimate scenes that focus on relationships between the characters, and all but one contains images of romantic pairs. The cover also features the tagline of the film: "You don't have to know the books to be in the club," thus targeting readers who may not even have read Austen's novels but who probably know of her through romanticized film adaptations from which they receive notions about what

Austen's period was like. While practically divorcing the spinoff from Austen's novels, this tagline suggests that Austen is synonymous with romance, that if one knows love, then one knows Austen and vice versa. Thus, in the latter cover and in the film adaptation, the "fantasy" of Austen's time and the romantic interpretation of her novels are underscored.

Romance-linked Austenian imagery is caricatured in the US cover of *Lost in Austen* (Fig. 16a) which satirizes the marriage quest via its cartoon-like depiction of courtship scenes from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the image of a chain of men and women paired up in a dance which borders the bottom of the spinoff's front cover. The book also contains illustrations in the same "gothic-manga" style (Cloutier) of various courtship scenes from Austen's novels and the recurring sketch of the chain of dance partners and of a bride with a bouquet (which usually accompanies the spinoff's marriage endings). The front cover has a gap in the center – a space perhaps for the reader's identity – through which can be seen part of the inner cover, the face of Elizabeth Bennet, whose role the reader will play. Turning to this inner cover, the reader can see the complete image of a primly seated Elizabeth with a wry smile and a bridal bouquet in her hands (a recurring illustration in the book), representing the marital mission of the game-like spinoff. Above this, a testimonial from Jasper Fforde, author of the Thursday Next series, states that the spinoff is "amusing, enlightening, and un-Austen-titious," thus aligning Webster's work with his own literary pastiches rather than with the typical sentimental Austen sequel.



Fig. 16a. US edition (paperback)

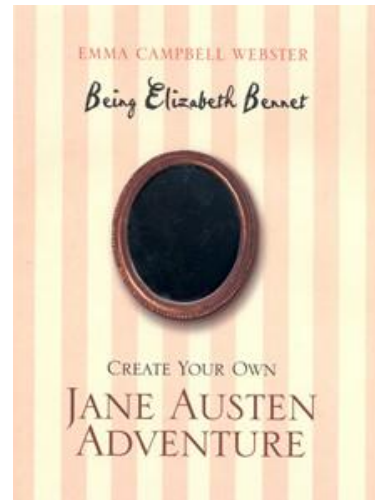


Fig. 16b. UK edition (hardcover)



Fig. 16c. UK edition (paperback)

Playing up the notion of the Austen fan's identification with *Pride and Prejudice's* heroine, the cover of the UK hardcover edition (Fig. 16b) of Webster's spinoff depicts a mirror set against a backdrop of pink striped wallpaper. The illustration of the mirror even has an actual reflective surface that allows the reader to literally see herself as Elizabeth Bennet/the novel's heroine. Finally, the cover (Fig. 16c) of the UK Atlantic Books paperback edition, with its turquoise-and-hot-pink color scheme seems more modern than historical despite the central image of a woman in Regency attire. Her carefree, reclining pose on a pink-striped divan calls to mind appearance-

obsessed women on the covers of chick lit novels. Staring at herself in a handheld mirror, she could very well be a modern woman playing dress-up for a Regency ball. The alternative US and UK titles also point out differences between America's and England's Austen: *Lost in Austen* suggests disorientation and fumbling about in a foreign land, while *Being Elizabeth Bennet* highlights identification with a character that forms a part of English national heritage (Irvine 154).

Finally, the focus of publisher's paratexts of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is almost entirely on the contemporary woman, and the Austen connection becomes more of an afterthought, just as it can seem merely incidental in the novel. Although the cover of the first Penguin edition (Fig. 17a) may call to mind the Regency era because of the woman's hairstyle, the second (Fig. 17b), which features only a woman's eye-shadow enhanced eyes and painted lips juxtaposed with the blank page of a diary, is clearly meant to represent a modern woman. The movie tie-in cover (Fig. 17c), which features Renee Zellweger as Bridget Jones, moves even further away from the source text by including such modern tag lines as "Uncensored. Uninhibited. Unmarried," thus informing the reader that despite its intertextual references to *Pride and Prejudice*, the book is also "unAustenian." The link to Austen through the focus on Bridget as a modern everywoman is reflected in the novel's online Reading Guide wherein Fielding talks about the protagonist's battle between the ideas of being the glamorous and independent "Cosmo Girl" and the "old fashioned idea of failure" as an unmarried thirty-something. According to this guide, while women during Austen's day had little choice but to marry for financial security, Bridget has to decide between "tragic, barren spinsterhood,

or relegation to the dull, diaper-and-coordinated-pasta-container-filled realm of the Smug Marrieds.”

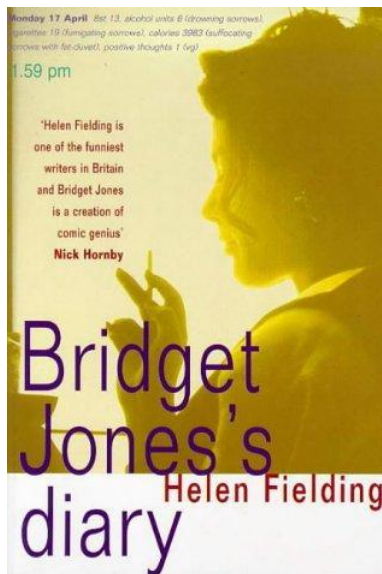


Fig. 17a. 1996 Penguin edition

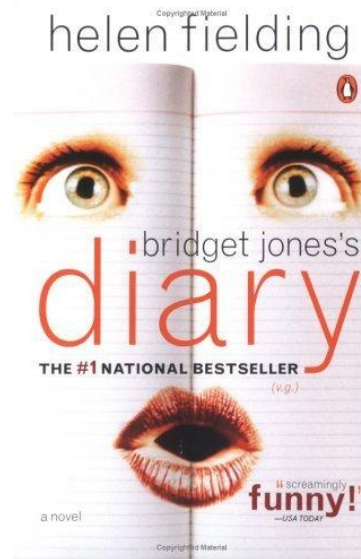


Fig. 17b. 1999 Penguin edition

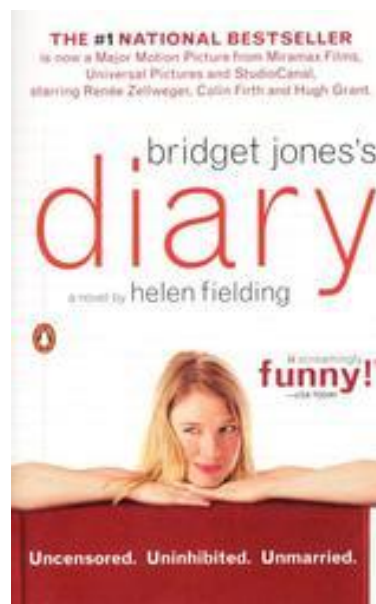


Fig. 17c. Movie tie-in cover

A “Bridget-O-Meter quiz” similarly highlights present-day women’s concerns with regard to love and courtship; it asks, for example, if readers have ever “realized cellulite is creation of fiendish, misogynist extraterrestrial force in grips of which female earthlings are helpless,” “calculated likelihood of dying alone, in bad underwear” or “checked phone messages more than six times an hour in any four-day period following initial sexual encounter”



(“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”). Discussion points furthermore emphasize contemporary concerns such as the “Having It All Syndrome,” the “eternal quest for self-improvement,” and the media’s influence on women’s self-images as well as women’s collaboration in this process (“Book Clubs/Reading Guides”). Thus, it becomes clear that the book’s publishers are not targeting Janeites and Austen fans or enthusiasts but rather a wider audience of modern women in a Cosmopolitan/consumerist society who relate better to the romantic experiences of a flawed and sometimes ridiculous Bridget than to Austen’s heroine.

### **The Spinoff Reader and Austen**

The analysis of author and publisher paratexts arguably offers a form of reception study because these reveal what James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein term the “production use[s]” (205) of Austen in these spinoffs. Nevertheless, it is important to examine the actual “reader’s activity” which accounts for these texts’ “subsequent interpretations or continuing reception” (Machor and Goldstein 5). As it is impossible to provide a complete view of the reception practices of readers of these Austenian spinoffs, I examine only a limited selection from sources accessible to the public. First of all, I focus on responses to the following spinoffs chosen to represent the categories discussed earlier: *The Fitzwilliam Darcy*, *Gentleman* trilogy for the first, *Emma in Love* and *Lost in Austen* for the second, and *Austenland* for the third.

Secondly, I use as sources of responses/reviews sites that are geared towards readers who consume and actively seek Austen and spinoff novels. These are: the commercial site *Amazon*, which features in its product pages

links to spinoffs that customers purchase along with Austen's novels or with other spinoffs; the Austen-affiliated site, *AustenBlog*, which is a "compendium of news about Jane Austen in popular culture" and which includes Austenian paraliterature and "other manifestations of the delightful way in which Jane Austen and her work have informed today's popular culture"; and *The Republic of Pemberley*, one of the largest and most comprehensive Austen discussion sites and which includes a "Jane Austen Sequels Page" with reviews of what it calls "Austenuations." Thirdly, since I am interested in women's responses, the breadth of this material is limited by drawing only from reviews written by women readers. That is why, for *Amazon*, I selected the feedback of reviewers with "Real Name" badges, which indicates that the person uses a signature based on the cardholder name on his or her credit card. Lastly, I am interested only in passages from these largely summary-oriented reviews that directly reference the intertextual relationship with Austen.

Although I have conducted no demographic study, a few assumptions may be made about these readers of Austen spinoffs based on the sources I utilize here. I take it as a given that these reader reviewers consume both Austen's novels and spinoffs, and very likely Austenian film adaptations as well. Since they access the websites mentioned above, they are presumably educated, computer literate, and middle-class women from English-speaking first-world nations, most likely the US, UK, or Canada. These assumptions may be cross-referenced with Kiefer's observations in "Anatomy of a Janeite: Results from *The Jane Austen Survey 2008*" whose respondents cite seven out of the eleven exemplar texts of my study as favorite Austen-related works. Kiefer's survey respondents were "overwhelmingly female" (97%), with a

median age of 40, mainly from English-speaking nations (90%), working women (75%), holders of college degrees (81% of those over the age of 20), avid book readers, tech savvy individuals (57%), and approving of film and television adaptations (86%), particularly the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (62%). Through an examination of “the critical reactions” of the spinoffs’ various readers and what these add to “the author’s expressed decisions and purposes” (McGann 24), I elicit the meanings these readers make of Austenian spinoffs and, accordingly, of Austen and her novels.

Reviews of Aidan’s trilogy indicate that, for her readers, fidelity to Austen involves recreating the latter’s basic marriage plot and sticking with the familiar characters. Users “Shinjinee” and “JaneGS” of *The Republic of Pemberley* respectively praise Aidan’s romantic novels for being “authentic to the text (unlike Emma Tennant) and the sensibilities of the age (unlike many other writers)” and “true to the original in tone and action.”<sup>167</sup> This view of fidelity is reflected in the responses of Pemberley reviewers “Kathi,” “Sarah Catherine,” and “RuthO,” who criticize *Duty and Desire*, which veers away from Austen’s story and is composed almost entirely of Aidan’s additions, for being unAustenian.<sup>168</sup> It is not Aidan’s plot and characters that readers are after, as all three suggest that the latter’s second volume lacks “guidance” from Austen and can be skipped without missing what readers seek – encounters between Austen’s Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.

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<sup>167</sup> See the entry for “*An Assembly Such as This* by Pamela Aidan” for these quotes from a March 2004 review of *An Assembly Such as This* by user Shinjinee and a January 2007 review by user JaneGS.

<sup>168</sup> See the entry for “*An Assembly Such as This* by Pamela Aidan.” Kathi (February 2005) writes that *Duty and Desire* “has has very little to do with anything in P&P . . . and it was fairly boring” and says she will read the third novel because she assumes it will “return to Austen.” Sarah Catherine (February 2005) similarly observes that Aidan, “when focusing on a period during which Darcy is out of contact with Elizabeth and for which there’s no guidance from P&P, got a bit carried away and let the novel write her.” Lastly, RuthO (April 2007) says, “You can skip the second book in the Trilogy [*sic*] without missing any of JA’s plot.”

Many *Amazon* customers also assess *Duty and Desire* as the weakest in the trilogy because of its departure from Austen. Elizabeth K. Barr calls it a “filler novel – not worth your time” but says she is excited to read the third novel since it is “parallel to the heart of *Pride and Prejudice*.”<sup>169</sup> Helen Hancox sees the addition in the second novel of a whodunit aspect as a downside, saying her real reason for reading the trilogy was “to follow the love story with Darcy and Elizabeth and the way that his sentiments change.”<sup>170</sup> Of the first and third volumes, however, reviews are positive and see Aidan as following “faithfully” in Austen’s footsteps. C. Wang “Ravenna” says that Aidan fills in Austen’s gaps from Darcy’s perspective to provide “a perfect interpretation of Darcy’s thoughts in all of the events that happen in P&P” and that “Aidan has copied perfectly the style of Austen.”<sup>171</sup> Lisa Zechman also celebrates how Aidan depicts Darcy’s “joy and life as he made himself into a better man, a gentleman that Elizabeth would approve of.”<sup>172</sup>

Pointing again to the desire for fidelity that comes along with a desire for more about the romance of Austen’s iconic couple is the *AustenBlog* review of the trilogy. Staff reviewer M. J. Ryan awards higher grades to the volumes which deal with familiar events in *Pride and Prejudice* and a low one for the volume that departs from the source – her criterion being the amount of interaction between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy that Aidan provides for readers.

*An Assembly Such as This* receives a B, *Duty and Desire* dips to a grade of C-

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<sup>169</sup> See the entry for “*An Assembly Such as This* by Pamela Aidan” for this December 2005 review.

<sup>170</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Duty and Desire*” for this January 2006 review entitled “A good sequel but with significant downsides.”

<sup>171</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *An Assembly Such as This*” for this August 2008 review entitled “Finally a great Darcy perspective of P & P.”

<sup>172</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *These Three Remain*” for this April 2008 review entitled “My heart! OH my Heart.”

because in it Darcy acts impulsively and “out of character,” does not directly interact with Elizabeth, and is (mis)cast “into a Gothic romance,” while *These Three Remain* redeems the series with an A- for “plunging right back into the *Pride and Prejudice* world we all love” and rewarding the reader with “wonderful interaction between Darcy and Elizabeth” (Ryan). These grades speak clearly of a selective sort of return to Austen, wherein some elements – like the prolonged focus on the couple’s interactions – are welcomed, and some – like the addition of new characters and new plot elements – are not as well received. Ryan thus suggests that in answering the question that “must be on the mind of every reader: when did Darcy fall in love with Elizabeth?” a spinoff writer may fill in the gaps and embellish to her heart’s content but must still stick to the popular aspects of Austen’s novel.

*The Republic of Pemberley* features three reviews of Tennant’s *Emma in Love* in which the sequel is also read from a framework of fidelity – that is, it is criticized because its elements do not match what the readers believe they know of Austen. User “Kim Mon,” a forty-plus stay-at-home mom, says, “I choose to think that Emma would be perfectly happy with Mr. Knightly [*sic*]. I cannot believe that he would not be a passionate lover from the very beginning.”<sup>173</sup> User “Michele,” a librarian for more than seventeen years, says that the spinoff’s characters are “not true to form” and expresses shock at the homosexual kiss between Emma and another woman by exclaiming, “In Jane Austen, I don’t think so!” Although none of the seven reviewers of the book on *Amazon* have Real Name badges, I draw on two by users “Victoria ‘starbrow’” and “Jennifer Smith” of Florida because these indicate the same

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<sup>173</sup> See the entry for “*Emma in Love* by Emma Tennant.”

“fidelity” approach to the spinoff. Calling the sequel “no kin [*sic*] whatsoever with the Jane Austen I know,” the former says that “a true Austen fan will detest every page of it,” that the author “[takes] liberties with events that certainly would never have happened in a lifetime of Austen stories,” and that it comes close to “desecrating a classic author’s grave.” The latter describes the disappointment of her expectations of getting “more of my beloved friend Emma” and warns readers not to read the text if they “want to think of *Highbury* the same way.”<sup>174</sup> These readers’ responses interestingly reveal a fantasy of an Austen they “know,” with clear boundaries between what her world can contain and what it cannot. However, these reviews are more likely informed or influenced by romantic readings/adaptations of the novels rather than by research on the period or the “queer theory” that influenced Tennant’s writing of the spinoff. The responses reflect a clash between Tennant’s motivations for queering Austen and what spinoff readers expect from an Austenian sequel – “faithfulness” to the heterosexual marriage plot of original.

The reviews of *Lost in Austen* are understandably mixed since it simultaneously instructs the reader to re-enact the marriage plot of *Pride and Prejudice* and pokes fun at them for doing so. Allison Thompson of *AustenBlog* is amused by the “adventures ... [of] meeting and accepting (or rejecting. . .) romantic overtures” from various Austen characters and appreciates the irony of Webster’s “perceptive and witty” commentary. Her review highlights the “what if” appeal of the novel, the game that reader gets to play with Austen’s characters, and the fun of making different choices or going back to “make another decision to move in a different direction”

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<sup>174</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Emma in Love: Jane Austen’s Emma Continued.*”

(Thomson). More importantly, Thompson recognizes the significance of the “intriguing final decision” with regard to marriage that readers are allowed to make in the spinoff; unlike other readers, she picks up on Webster’s point that intelligence determines the choice to marry Mr. Darcy (and irrevocably end the story) or to say “no” to marriage endings. *Amazon* customer reviewer Jessica Weissman notes that the spinoff involves “real cleverness...beyond pastiche” and that Webster is “literate, only a bit snarky, and doesn’t just want to exploit Austenmania.”<sup>175</sup> Weissman’s recognition of Webster’s jabs at sentimental Austenian paraliterature is underscored in her advice to readers to go ahead and buy it precisely if they “cringe at the very idea” of such a spinoff.

There are some readers, however, who miss the novel’s point. *Amazon* customer reviewer Annie Brodeur finds the spinoff narrator’s tongue-in-cheek comments “mean,” “useless,” “cheerfully judgmental,” “annoying, repetitive and hiding what seems like contempt and dislike toward Elizabeth.”<sup>176</sup> Brodeur criticizes the book for inconsistencies like taking away points “for behaviour over which you have no control, i.e.: things that are taken straight from P&P,” the listing of traits and connections under “accomplishment one seconds [*sic*], in failings the next,” and the fact that “the author dictates the whole thing really” – all of which are actually deliberate ploys of Webster to playfully point out the determinism of the marriage plot. Webster, in fact, designs the spinoff such that a reader’s high Intelligence score (gained from answering trivia questions about the period) leads to the final *non-marriage*

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<sup>175</sup> See the entry for “*An Assembly Such as This* by Pamela Aidan.” This is from a September 27 review entitled “Lots of Fun, Avoids the Pitfalls.”

<sup>176</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Lost in Austen: Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure* by Emma Campbell Webster” for this January 2008 review entitled “Don’t Bother Really.”

ending and, funnily enough, Brodeur remarks, “At one point I was at -110 for intelligence and I don’t even get how I got there.” What Brodeur and presumably readers of the more romance-focused spinoffs seek is clearly not Webster’s parodic interpretation of the marriage ending and of the Austen reader.

Finally, “fantasy” and “relatability” seem to be catchwords of the numerous *Amazon* customer reviews of Hale’s *Austenland*. Ruth Anderson, who connects with the protagonist’s “Darcy-mania,” calls the book “the ultimate Austen-lover’s fantasy world”; Marcia Mickelson says the main character is “like so many of us”; Jennie M. Tracy relates to Hale’s fandom, saying the book is “a good read for those . . . a wee bit obsessed” with the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice*; and Rebecca Huston talks of a subculture of Mr. Darcy/Colin Firth fans who desire, like Hale’s protagonist to escape the “dull reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>177</sup> Many reviewers highlight the romantic aspects of the escape into Austen’s world, such as Alyson King, who talks of the book as “a quick fix” and “a fun romantic get away [*sic*]”; Christina Boyd, who wishes there were a real *Austenland* and who says her “Janeite sensibilities never were in danger of offense, even by Hale’s blatantly, contrived happy ending”; and Angela Thompson, who enjoys the “romantic comedy finish line ending” along with the protagonist’s vacillations between “giving in to the

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<sup>177</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Austenland*.” Anderson writes a June 2007 review entitled “Fun, clever send-up of Austen mania...” and Mickelson writes a July 2007 review called “A fun Read.” Tracy, in an August 2007 review called “A great distraction,” akin to many spinoff writers, says, “I’m just glad I’m married to my Mr. Darcy (with a bit of Mr. Knightley thrown in).” In a June 2007 review entitled “Welcome to your fantasy,” Huston says, “We are all hopelessly in love with Mr Darcy. Or rather, the most perfect manifestation of him in the form of Colin Firth.”



fantasy” and “long[ing] to dive in with reckless abandon.”<sup>178</sup> Similar sentiments are displayed by reviews on *The Republic of Pemberley*: identification with Hale’s protagonist and the desire to visit Austenland and an appreciation of the romantic ending.<sup>179</sup>

Interestingly, one *Amazon* reviewer who associates Austen not just with romance but strictly with *marriage* finds the fantasy lacking. Alina Mower says that she expected the “true love” of Hale’s protagonist “to bear the title of Husband, or fiancée at the least”; because there is “zero reference of the future” for *Austenland*’s Jane Hayes and Henry Jenkins, she believes that the former “never did find her Mr. Darcy.”<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, besides the fantasy of romantic escape, many readers relate more to what the novel says about modern women. For example, *Republic of Pemberley* citizen Megan Snider sees it as a glimpse into their “confusion and befuddlement with the traditions of the past,” and Rebecca J. Carlson says the book allows women to laugh at themselves – “at people who wish they lived in a country estate in Regency England, at the sad absurdity of the modern dating scene, and at [Hale’s] leading lady’s wit, insight, and hijinks [*sic*].”<sup>181</sup> Based on these

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<sup>178</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Austenland*” for these quotes taken from the following reviews: “Wonderful quick read” (June 2007), “Kicking myself for not having read this sooner!” (May 2008), and “Angieville: AUSTENLAND” (November 2008).

<sup>179</sup> See the entry for “*Austenland* by Shannon Hale.” User “Faith” wishes that “a place like Austenland actually existed” because it would be “fun to get to dress up, stay in a large house, and converse in Regency style.” “Amanda Lee” says that while *Austenland* is definitely not a book for an Austen enthusiast she sees herself in the book’s protagonist. Linda Waldemar finds the “reality of living one’s fantasy to be very plausible” and *Austenland*’s ending “very real.”

<sup>180</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Austenland: A Novel*” for Mower’s July 2008 review, “bitter.”

<sup>181</sup> See the entry for “Customer Reviews: *Austenland: A Novel*.” Snider says in her February 2010 review, “Fun slip of a novel for Austen fans,” that “Austen purists might scoff at the light examination of themes and contrivances in her books – and wonder if Hale is spending too much time looking at Regency England with modern eyes, something which really can’t be done.” She adds that *Austenland* might be the book for those who have “fantasized about [their] own Darcy” and about Austen’s world. Carlson points out in her November 2007 review, “A Different Side of Hale,” that women’s fantasies such as those in Hale’s spinoff

latter responses, the spinoff appeals not just to the desire for escape into a fantasy world, but also speaks to readers who are conscious of this desire and who are willing to question why such a desire exists.

*AustenBlog* reviewer Mags, for instance, questions the appeal of the *Austenland* resort which she finds degrading to women and to Janeites like herself, saying “When we go to ‘Jane places,’ it’s to learn more about her, and when we imagine ourselves a character in a Jane Austen novel, it is because we want to better understand the motivations and actions and emotional journey of that character.” Drawing out even more observations on Austen reception from Hale’s spinoff, Mags cites a *Times* online article, “Dark Lord of Love,” to explain *Austenland*’s subject matter: modern women’s Darcy obsession. According to the article, Elizabeth falls in love with Mr. Darcy because he has a “side that no one else can see – a sensitivity and vulnerability” which is “part of the thrill of romance”; this kind of attraction is “characteristic of falling in love with a narcissist,” and such a relationship between modern women and narcissistic Darcys is doomed to “end in tears” (“Dark Lord”).<sup>182</sup>

Mags also cites material from the blog of L. Timmel DuChamp, editor of Aqueduct Press (a feminist SF press), who critiques Hale’s spinoff for seeming to forget that many women in Austen’s novels are “forced to make compromise marriages, or live in straightened [*sic*] circumstances.” Observing how Austen served up critiques of her society “in the guise of love

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“have the power [to] shape us, perhaps even more power than ‘real’ external events have. . . .”

<sup>182</sup> The article sees a resemblance between “Darcy as described by Jane Austen: handsome and conscious of his appearance; proud, giving the appearance of being above everyone else; emotionally self-contained” with “the characteristics of the narcissistic personality, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association: ‘grandiose sense of self-importance,’ ‘requires excessive admiration,’ ‘shows arrogant, haughty behaviour’” (“Dark Lord”).

stories,” Duchamp believes that Austen “would be appalled by the idea that people crave the romance of her times – a brief experience that only few could experience – in lieu of the many opportunities of our own.” Duchamp raises a key point by saying that certain women, including Hale and her readers, are “so fixated on the romance in Austen’s books that they’re blind to the whole world she wrote about.” This suggests that for modern women who consume romance-oriented film adaptations and textual spinoffs, Austen’s literary skill and the other issues about which she wrote become secondary to the pleasure derived from her romantic pairings.

### **Repeating vs. Reworking “Universal Truths”**

I hope I have shown via this chapter’s discussion, however, that nearly all of the authors who revisit Austen recognize this fascination with romance, and some attempt to account for it or even critique it. Each text is significant for the informal feminist debates raised by the way both its texts and paratexts engage with Austen. The words of the spinoff writers, publishers, and readers call attention to “truths” read into Austen about love, marriage, and gender and may simultaneously celebrate and interrogate these. The sentimental novels of Aidan, Berdoll, James, and Smith, not unproblematically, feed fantasies of modern women with regard to this, but they at least identify, and therefore prompt questions about, what women want and how Austen provides this. The spinoffs of Fielding, Hale, Rigler, and Fowler, without decrying romance, seek to understand its enduring appeal as well as that of romantic readings of Austen. The works of Tennant, Aiken, Webster and Fowler account for other

sources of fulfilment that modern women find in and create out of Austen's novels.

At the very least, even the most romance-oriented spinoffs raise important questions about the prevailing appeal of Austen's romances and what this implies with regard to the concerns and anxieties of women in today's (post)feminist context. The ones that attempt more than just a repeat of romance do not merely offer fantasies of escape but rather straddle both (perceptions of) Austen's past and the present in order to examine what empowers and disempowers women today. Some stand behind Austen as a pre-feminist to argue against traditional gender roles. Others attempt to define women's identities through Austen whose writing they interpret to recuperate ideals of romantic love and marriage along with other contemporary goals. Still others deliberately invoke Austen in the "wrong" way, to celebrate "feminine" cultural preoccupations with courtship plots, gossip, clothing and appearance, and "women's popular fiction" like romance and chick lit novels. Finally, one important insight revealed by the assorted paratexts of these Austenian spinoffs is that women continue Austen to ask important questions about what defines their identity.

## Conclusion: (Post)feminist Incarnations of Austen

### Contemporary Culture's "Austen Woman"

As the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close, Austen continues to seed more contemporary incarnations produced for and consumed by women. In early 2010, *Sex and the Austen Girl*, a comedy web-series inspired by Rigler's *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* and its parallel novel, *Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict*, was released by Babelgum, a free Internet and Mobile TV company. The series features Rigler's protagonists, modern woman Courtney Stone (Arabella Field) and her 1813 counterpart, Jane Mansfield (Fay Masterson), engaging in brief dialogue about life and love in their respective eras and giving wry reality-TV-style confessional interviews on these subjects.<sup>183</sup> As in many recent offshoots, the protagonists of *Sex and the Austen Girl*, united by a love of Austen, compare early 1800s and early 2000s "girl culture," such as preoccupations with fashion, beauty, and rules of courtship, and hash out the anxieties of women from both eras with regard to love, men, and women's identity. Although the series is not exactly *Sex and the City* – only four of the seventeen episodes released contain discussions of sex – it certainly has the playful (post)feminist spirit of 1990s and 2000s media texts like it.

It seems fitting to wrap up my project with this spinoff of a spinoff because it represents the kind of (post)feminist gestures made by Austenian paraliterature. That is, through Austen, it both celebrates and interrogates subjects like dating and marriage, women's choices, the fixation on romance

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<sup>183</sup> As in the textual spinoffs, Courtney and Jane exchange bodies and existences, the former after she drinks a lot of vodka and falls asleep reading an Austen novel, and the other after a riding accident.

and appearance, and the desire to have both love and independence. While this and many other playful textual Austenian spinoffs may not appear politically active, they participate in ongoing feminist struggles by at least articulating woman-centered concerns and offering a variety of standpoints on these. Even some of the most romance-oriented spinoffs have shown – specifically through their revisiting of Austen’s world – that they are capable of questioning traditional gender roles and advocating female empowerment. Some directly engage with feminist discourse, while others implicitly test the contradictions of feminism and femininity and the dual *pharmakon* effect of these, that is, the joys and privileges both grant as well as the limits they maintain or even set.

I believe these texts extend the question of the third wave, of (post)feminism, or of today’s informal feminism, by asking, “Can women have it all?” They offer no clear answers yet, only attempts to respond intertextually through Austen whose writing provides intellectual stimulation, whose romance provides fantasy escape, and whose ironic style and witty heroines allow women to laugh at both society’s and their own foibles. Many of these spinoffs are important precisely because of their light-hearted spirit and tone and their authors’ same willingness to laugh at themselves and at their culture. Such an approach draws in women readers to use humor as a sort of feminist strategy, like Austen does, to point to their desires and anxieties, as well as to prevailing social inadequacies.<sup>184</sup> Enlisting the romance and wit of Austen’s novels, Austenian spinoffs attempt to define the identity of the modern “Austen woman.”

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<sup>184</sup> Audrey Bilger, in *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*, asserts that these authors suggest that “female laughter and revolutionary politics might go hand in hand” (50).

Male reviewer Marc Hustvedt says that the only thing shared by the women of *Sex and the Austen Girl* seems to be “an unhealthy obsession with Jane Austen novels.” What he fails to see, however, is that although the series may show that much has changed in the past two hundred years in terms of hygiene practices, technology, perceptions of beauty, and gender roles, it also emphasizes the perceived similarities between the two eras. Courtney and Jane find kinship in terms of (dis)trusting men, the fantasy of having romance and security through a Darcy-like mate, and the recognition of the social (and self-imposed) pressure to marry by a certain deadline and to make the right choice. Even in the first episode, which contrasts Courtney’s talk of finding a husband on Match.com with Jane’s suggestion of marrying a cousin to secure a man from a good family, the two find a connection in having to wait for the man to “call” after an initial meeting. Jane’s description of such a rule prompts Courtney to say, with a straight face, “This is quite reminiscent of 2010,” playfully setting the spinoff’s tone and making full use of the comedic potential provided by its out-of-time premise.

As Rigler puts it, at the core of *Sex and the Austen Girl* is the question: “Are we better off now, or were we better off then?” (“Sex & the Austen Girl”). The pithy, open-ended episodes home in on what is selectively taken from and reworked in Austen as well as on the desires and unresolved anxieties of today’s “Austen woman” with regard to men, love, marriage, and identity. The series thus encapsulates what is essential to my thesis: the cultural significance of these texts as venues for (post)feminist discourse, for women’s identity-building, and for women’s canon-formation. In the web series, modern woman Courtney is appalled by the limitations on women’s

choices in the nineteenth century. She upholds twenty-first-century “freedoms” for women such as being the pursuer in a relationship, having multiple sexual partners, and the option of divorce. At the same time, she is living out her fantasy; she enjoys the fashions, the pampering, and the assurance of attractiveness in a world where magazine models do not set impossible standards of beauty. Jane, the woman from Austen’s world, also represents the modern woman. She notes the limitations of her era but is not always happy with the “innovations” of the twenty-first century: its artificiality, the obsession with appearance, the casual sex, and the easy relinquishing of commitments. Both women wish to marry for love and both importantly agree with Austen in expressing the anxiety that “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (*Pride and Prejudice* 16).

Courtney and Jane, along with the new Elizabeths and Emmas of sequels and retellings and the modern protagonists of offshoots, use Austen to articulate their belief in true love despite their romantic frustrations, their identity as strong women who desire both freedom and romance, and their ideals which may be viewed as (post)feminist. This demonstrates what Gary Kelly rightly observes about “Austen’s feminism” and its relevance to the present, that “feminisms are constructed by individual and collective exercise of social, discursive, and artistic options within a structured yet open and changing field of social and cultural practice, a field that is also and always a field of conflict” (“Jane Austen” 32). Austenian spinoffs significantly suggest that widely different women can be united by Austen and the questions she makes them ask about themselves.



**(Post)feminist Palimpsests and Women's Canon**

The acts of retelling and reworking are by no means limited to Austen's fiction – but why have these novels and their author been so frequently and almost obsessively revisited in these past two decades and in these particular romance-oriented ways? While her narrative skill, irony, wit, and nuanced critique of social foibles are undeniable and have led scholars and academics to place her in the literary canon, it is not these aspects to which contemporary spinoff writers are primarily drawn. Instead, it is the combination of something both fixed and ambivalent about her novels that has wedded her to diverse interpretations. Lynch importantly points out how different groups of readers throughout the years have aimed to “rescue” Austen's meanings from others in moves “guided by an unattractive logic of exclusivity that runs like this: since she is my Jane Austen, she cannot be yours too” (“Cult” 118). Although for academics, the iconic Austen is the ironic one, spinoff writers and the women who consume their texts engage with an Austen who has come to symbolize – or even be equivalent to – both romance and cultural prestige, and publishers employ her name as a brand that practically guarantees commercial success.

This discrepancy forms part of Austen's unique reception history, marked by disputes among different groups of admirers. “We might all want Jane Austen real in some way, but differ as to which way,” says Lynch (“Cult” 117). The fact is, Austen's novels *can be* read as romances and are appealing and, therefore, marketable as romances; one of the key things that makes her unique is that, while she has been acknowledged as a great writer by the literary world, it is “possible to read [her] in ways that transgress the

boundaries of properly literary reading” (Lynch, “Introduction” 8). Today, unlike almost any other author, she stands high on the lists of both canonical and popular fiction. Thus, spinoff authors depend on the stability and cultural capital granted by Austen’s name but, at the same time, exploit the flexibility her works provide via the perceived gaps, blanks or silences in her writing which have led to such contentious debates about her meanings. Austenian paraliterature importantly calls attention to such debates, demonstrating that it is by no means a homogeneous category and that there is a variety of alternative Austens for women.

Like “postfeminism” and “third-wave feminism,” which have been called “shifting signifiers that are inconsistently defined” (Lotz 75), “Austen” becomes a flexible cultural concept, and the spinoffs’ drawing out of alternative interpretations correspondingly generates different perspectives about what women want. The novels thus serve as both palimpsests of Austen and of gender debates, and may exhibit discourse that runs the gamut of proto- or pre-feminism, feminism of the sixties and seventies, postfeminism of the eighties and nineties, and now third wave/ “girly”/(post)feminism of the nineties and noughties. As they rehash or rework the marriage plot, spinoff writers acknowledge what remain “truths” for women – if no longer marriage as an end goal, the enduring desire for love and an equal partnership, the persistent anxieties about men and how fantasies arise to assuage these fears, and the quest for identity on which romantic fulfillment still has bearing. They question, complicate, or subvert such “truths” by channeling Austen’s ironic approach to the subjects of courtship and marriage. They also apply these “truths” to the everyday lives of women readers and Austen enthusiasts

today. Publishers of these spinoffs play up the connection to Austen, highlighting contemporary constructions of her that speak to modern women: Austen as friend and confidant, as addiction and therapy, and as someone just like them. By perpetuating such constructions, they continue to make Austen more accessible to women today, on the one hand, perhaps sometimes “dumbing down” the author and oversimplifying – even “misreading” – her messages but, on the other, allowing for expansions of her meanings. Finally, the spinoffs’ readers seek an Austen who is meaningful to their lives – one who represents along with love and romance, fantasy and reality, strength and independence, bonds between women, and an insight into contemporary culture which no other writer seems to provide in quite the same way.

Why is all this significant? A number of the spinoff writers cite statistics about real women today which point to the cultural anxieties that drive the production and consumption of romance-related Austenian spinoffs. Webster, for instance, projects data about women who remain single in their forties and fifties to demonstrate an increasing tendency in women to delay marriage so as not to be tied down or in order to seek other sources of fulfilment (“Happy Ever After”). Webster uses Austen to question the structure of the traditional marriage plot, seeing it as a frightening one for women today, and thus prolongs the woman’s quest in her retelling. However, her novel also invokes Austen to suggest that the lengthened adventure will eventually end in marriage, thereby not entirely rejecting the latter but rather presenting it as one among many other options for women. In the same vein, Fielding’s singleton characters celebrate new “truths” for the modern woman via statistics that validate their status and make them feel less alone: “One in

four households are single, most of the royal family are single, [and] the nation's young men have been proved by surveys to be completely unmarriageable. . ." (42). This data, like Austen's epigrammatic observations at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, expresses women's anxieties and desires – in the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the worry about not finding a suitable mate and a wish to change society's attitude toward single women.

Meanwhile, Smith's marriage advocacy, achieved through an affiliation with a writer whose novels end in marriage, is motivated by anxiety about high divorce rates, even in Christian unions.<sup>185</sup> Her nonfiction books and, arguably, her Austen series aim to allow readers to "testify that Christian marriages are the most thrilling on the planet" (*Romancing Your Husband* 10); thus, for her, intertextuality with Austen serves to recuperate romantic marriage. Rigler's Courtney Stone is also anxious about marriages breaking up. In an episode of *Sex and the Austen Girl*, she explains that modern women give such importance to the fanfare of the wedding because of the "scary notion of divorce," whereas in Austen's time, as readers see it, marriage was the important thing and lasted forever. These women writers turn to Austen's detailed examination of courtship, to the obstacles faced by her couples before true understandings are reached, and to her happy marriage endings, in order to express their own modern anxieties and desires with regard to singlehood, marriage, and divorce.

Austenian paraliterature clearly plays a part in larger debates about modern women. As Ariane Hudelet says, despite the remoteness of Austen's world from ours, products of the Austen phenomenon create a "composite

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<sup>185</sup> Smith writes that in the US 41% of first-time marriages end in according to the National Center for Health Statistics, a percentage that is not much different for Christian marriages (*Romancing Your Husband* 11).

narrative” which “is felt to provide answers, explanations, and moral lessons (about the self, the meaning of life, love and companionship) (149) to readers today. That is, they offer a sort of enduring kinship among women. Austen’s novels belong to the literary canon or what Franco Moretti classifies as the “academic canon” (209); the production and consumption of Austenian spinoffs constitute the building of what he calls the “social canon” (209) – more specifically, a “women’s canon” made not by scholars or academics but by mass audiences, by a larger number of women who are drawn together by the “idea of Austen.” “Readers, not professors, make canons,” says Moretti, who points out that Austen, like other canonical writers, was “*socially* supercanonical right away, but *academically* canonical only a hundred years later” (209).<sup>186</sup>

The sheer numbers of texts that revisit her novels reflect Austen’s place in this “women’s canon” today – they reveal that her texts have been kept alive among generations of readers and not just critics. While many of her contemporaries have gone to Moretti’s “slaughterhouse of literature,” Austen survives and has been chosen – based perhaps on preconceived notions of what she does as a writer – to represent the identity of women as a group. Other women artists who could alternatively have been tapped for this canon-building process do not enjoy the same position. Why, for instance, among nineteenth-century women writers, is it Austen, and not Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Elizabeth Gaskell, or George Eliot whose works and life are so frequently revisited? Why are the Brontë sisters’ novels, particularly Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, distant runners up in terms of cultural presence? Why is

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<sup>186</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, writer of “Sensibility by the Numbers: Austen’s Work as Regency Popular Fiction” also identifies Austen’s novels as initially popular rather than highbrow (64).

Mary Shelley not as much of a cultural artifact as her fictional creation, Frankenstein's monster, while Austen's fame seems to equal that of her heroines? Why have poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton – venerated by feminist academics as empowering and, in theory, relatable to women – not managed to acquire that same mass appeal as Austen in reality? Why is famous Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, whose work focused on female experience, arguably not as much a part of popular consciousness as Austen?

I could go on, but what is important about the selection of Austen in this canon-making process is that something qualitatively different in her writing speaks to women readers today. Readers cannot help but be influenced by Austen's fame which is itself a product of remaking and reworking, from her biography, to her portraits, to her critical and popular reception. But the fandom manifested by the spinoffs still stems from her original novels. Something in these helps women assess what they want, just as movements in feminism and gender theory attempt to do. While I have not made a comparative study of Austen and her rivals as Moretti does with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and other detective fiction writers, I can speculate at least on some of Austen's differences from other women writers. The fact that there is more joy than pain and anger in Austen's writing, that her heroines are not punished by patriarchy, that she is ironic but also funny, that she writes about situations translatable to today's context, makes her more companionable and comforting than Plath or Sexton, more relatable than Gilman, Gaskell, Eliot, Shelley, and the Brontes, and more cheering than the "pain and passion" (Kettenmann) of Kahlo.

Among these other women artists, Austen stands out as a cultural icon, an identity-marker for the beliefs and concerns that unite women who make pilgrimages to her “sacred” time and space. The Austen of academics and historians is clearly not the same as the Austen of contemporary women. Thus, an important thing that these spinoffs do is to generate dialogue between these alternative Austens. The selection of Austen as part of this canon does not mean, of course, that the battle for interpretation is over. Various groups of readers continue to struggle to define her and themselves within the range of interpretations allowed by her novels and according to their own motivations and agendas. By refusing to accept the end of Austen’s novels, the women who write and read these texts continue to dialogue with her and with feminism in ways that are different from Austen criticism but which may similarly yield valuable insights on gender and culture.

Yet another interesting aspect of this canon-making process is its identification of what groups of women are the most powerful in defining who and what Austen is and what Austen means to them. Although some are globally disseminated, most Austenian spinoffs are produced in the US and UK by predominantly white women and therefore tend to represent British and American Austens, and they generally cater to a middle-class, educated audience who have access to the original novels and the contemporary offshoots, and who have the leisure and economic capital to join online and physical communities of Austen enthusiasts. These texts’ liberatory potential is limited by the fact that they represent a specific demographic of women unlike more widely read works by Agatha Christie, Barbara Cartland, Enid Blyton, Danielle Steele, and even J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer. Also, at

least for now, the alternative Austens of women from the Third World and from other countries and contexts are relatively less well known. Perhaps in the future, the ways in which intertextuality operates in products of the global Austen phenomenon – such as in rewritings of Austen with a postcolonial bent, “Bollywoodizations” of her novels such as *Bride and Prejudice*, wherein Darcy is a white British businessman and the Bennets are provincial Hindus, or other representations of Austen in Asia – may be explored for, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan puts it, the complex and interesting ways in which intertextuality operates to “read Austen in ‘other’ ways” (15). A study of such texts may demonstrate the ways in which Austen crosses racial and geographic boundaries and help to challenge the genre’s emphasis on white, middle-class women. Another limitation to consider has to do with the (post)feminist messages of these romantic texts which may wrongly imply that gender inequalities have been fully resolved and which may reinforce norms that are still oppressive to some women. It remains to be seen whether the spinoff phenomenon will branch out into new categories that address the experiences of more groups of women, or whether it will fizzle out as a trend because of such limitations.

I hope my study demonstrates, however, that these texts are significant now, that they resonate with a large number of women from this (post)feminist cultural context, and that contemporary engagements with Austen seem to be gaining relevance with a wider audience. Modernized retellings and chick lit offshoots are on the rise, and some have already attempted to cross the boundary of age to address the desires of older and younger women. Fowler’s spinoff, for example, takes an interest in a markedly older demographic – the



youngest member of the book club is twenty-eight and the oldest is sixty-seven, and demonstrates the sexual desirability of a fifty-something woman who ends up with a younger man. In *The Independence of Miss Mary Bennet*, an adventure spinoff by Colleen McCullough, Mary is a thirty-eight-year old spinster who is a “social imbecile” but manages to attract a younger man, a lawyer, and a high-flying wealthy Scotsman-journalist-businessman, whereas the Darcys, who have been married for twenty years, are not getting along. Cohen’s witty and self-aware *Jane Austen in Boca* both updates *Pride and Prejudice* and “up-ages” its characters by setting the story in a retirement village, which serves as “an enclosed homogenous community in which very intricate and elaborate relationships are generated” (172). Its intertextual and metafictional references to Austen prove how transposable her subject matter is, even to the experiences of senior citizen widows and widowers.<sup>187</sup> Meanwhile, teens and tweens are targeted by such young adult spinoffs as Hubbard’s *Prada and Prejudice*, essentially an adolescent chick lit version of the time-travel Austenian romance, and Rushton’s *The Dashwood Sisters’ Secrets of Love*, wherein three sisters deal with their parents divorce, their father’s remarriage and death, and the implications of these on their lifestyle and teenage love lives. Admittedly, Austen’s characters are reduced to stereotypes in such novels, but they still interestingly prompt questions about the messages about love and romance sent to young girls by these purported homages to Austen.

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<sup>187</sup> The novel begins with its own epigram that invokes the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*: “Take it from me. A nice widower with a comfortable living can be nudged into settling down by a not-so-young woman who plays her cards right.” Metafictional elements include a plan by the protagonist’s niece to make a film about the retirement village which she describes like Austen’s “three or four families in a country village” (Austen-Leigh 76). Another character plans to teach a course on “Jane Austen and Her Adaptors,” and the Boca Festa residents debate about which *Pride and Prejudice* character exhibits which trait.

### New Austenian Hybrids and “Universal Truths”

Many more fascinating fields of Austenian paraliterature and other media spinoffs, particularly on the Internet and social networking sites, remain to be harvested for insights into contemporary culture’s reading of Austen. The past few years have seen a revival of earlier nineties spinoffs, often re-titled in order to “make it more obvious that they are Austen paraliterature” (Mags, “Weekend Bookblogging”), and published along with many new offshoots by Sourcebook’s Casablanca and Landmark imprints.<sup>188</sup> Other independent and smaller publishing firms like Coscom Entertainment and Norilana Books, as well as self-publishing venues like Wytherngate Press and Amazon’s CreateSpace, which offer on-demand printing and online distribution, have contributed to the rise of both romantic and “alternative” Austenian spinoffs. The number of these texts rose drastically in 2009 and 2010 alone, and many new titles are slated for the coming year. Other scholars may wish to tap into some of these newer texts as well as into samples from the abundant supply of online Austenian fan fiction archived in websites such as *The Jane Austen Fan Fiction Index*, “Bits of Ivory” (at *The Republic of Pemberley*), *A Happy Assembly* (formerly *A Happier Alternative*), and *The Derbyshire Writers’ Guild*. Using both a gender and cultural approach to examine these texts may shed even more light on the reasons for revisiting Austen and her novels.

Yet another intriguing direction recently taken by Austenian paraliterature is the “literary mash-up” which has paired Austen and her novels with zombies, vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural creatures. The

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<sup>188</sup> Abigail Reynold’s *Pemberley by the Sea* and *Impulse and Initiative* have been re-released respectively as *The Man Who Loved Pride and Prejudice* and *To Conquer Mr. Darcy*.

trend was set off in 2009 by Seth Grahame-Smith's highly popular *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which incorporates "ultraviolent zombie mayhem" into the words of the original novel.<sup>189</sup> This was quickly followed by similar "crossover" fiction by Quirk Books, like Ben H. Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and other mash-ups of horror and literature as in Winters' steampunk *Android Karenina*, or horror and history, as in A.E. Moorat's *Queen Victoria: Demon Hunter*.<sup>190</sup> While Grahame-Smith adds very little to the original (his retelling is 85% Jane Austen and 15% zombies, says *New Yorker* reviewer Macy Halford), later writers have incorporated substantial, albeit over-the-top, subplots that serve as more than just long-running jokes. For instance, Steve Hockensmith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, has more freedom as a prequel to attempt its mix of "taut horror-movie action with neo-Austenian meditation on identity, society, and romance," to keep the tone but alter the language of its hypotext, and to flesh out its male characters.<sup>191</sup> Other publishers have jumped on the bandwagon with their own paranormal titles, like Adam Rann's *Emma and the Werewolves* (Coscom Entertainment), which essentially does the same thing as Grahame-Smith's retelling; Wayne Josephson's *Emma and the Vampires* (Sourcebooks), which reduces and simplifies the original; and Vera Nazarian's *Mansfield Park and Mummies* (Norilana Books), which stands out because it interweaves its supernatural elements and research on Egyptology more

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<sup>189</sup> Austenian mash-ups like Grahame-Smith's, Winters', Rann's, Josephson's, and Nazarian's are listed in my bibliography according to Austen's name followed by that of the later co-author.

<sup>190</sup> For *Android Karenina*, see the entry for "Tolstoy, Leo, and Ben H. Winters" in my bibliography.

<sup>191</sup> The quoted phrase is taken from publisher information on *Amazon*.

historically into the source text and because it was written with the aim of defending heroine Fanny Price's underrated strengths.<sup>192</sup>

*Why is Austen now being transformed in this particular way? What are the affinities between her world and the supernatural, and what is it about the author that appeals to some of today's fantasy writers? Notably, most of the "monster-lit" (Harlow) spinoffs which "do violence" to Austen's novels are written by male authors. It is interesting from a gender and cultural perspective to ask what hostility these men might have towards Austen or what hostility among male readers is identified by their mash-ups. Based on Amazon customer information, these texts seem to be geared towards men, or at least towards a different audience from that of romantic spinoffs: consumers of mash-ups tend to purchase other classic/horror mash-ups, parodies, or supernatural-focused texts rather than woman-authored, romance-geared spinoffs. Various publisher descriptions and reviews indicate, moreover, that these texts are meant to introduce reluctant (often, male) readers to Austen. The blurb of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* claims that it "transforms a masterpiece of world literature into something you'd actually want to read," and Amy Leal observes in "See Jane Bite" that the retelling targets not Janeites but "male readers disgruntled by all the Austen chick flicks and adaptations with titles like *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*." Guest poster "Trai" on *AustenBlog* similarly reports that "the (mostly men) non-Jane fans . . . who have read it . . . seem to be in agreement that the zombies help them get through and actually enjoy the book." These comments suggest the opposite*

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<sup>192</sup> Nazarian, a fantasy and science fiction writer, deliberately sets out *not* to write a patchwork sort of mash-up, which she describes as a "one-joke wonder"; she says in an interview that "A solitary running gag certainly does not justify a whole book (the mistake that some of the other mash-ups make)" (Sanborn).

of romantic spinoffs' fannish approach: a sense of discontentment with the female-oriented Austen phenomenon and the view that Austen's novels require male-introduced violence and action in order to be palatable.

This contrast between male- and female-authored spinoffs can be seen in other supernatural texts that have also spun off of the mash-up trend. Some writers of romantic Austenian paraliterature, like Grange and Regina Jeffers, seem to be capitalizing on this and the vampire trend popularized by Anne Rice and, more recently, by Meyer's *Twilight* series and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Grange's *Pride and Prejudice* sequel, *Mr. Darcy, Vampyre*, is not a parody like the mash-ups but rather a romance novel in Gothic style (inspired by Ann Radcliffe's novels), centering on Darcy's secret vampire curse and complete with mysterious castles and a swooning Elizabeth. The tone of Jeffers's *Vampire Darcy's Desire* is, similarly, serious rather than parodic. In this supernatural retelling, Darcy must contend with not just pride and prejudice but, like Meyer's Edward Cullen, his urge to possess his beloved both as a man and vampire. Despite their ludicrous premises, these texts may prove to be worthwhile subjects of study from a gendered perspective to examine what the transformation of the fantasy hero Mr. Darcy into a vampire – without the comedic intent of the mash-ups – says about the qualities women read into this idealized hero and, therefore, what women who consume these vampire spinoffs want in a man.

Most intriguing of all is the phenomenon of “re-animating” Austen herself, taking the notion of her immortality a ridiculous step further by turning her into one of the undead, as in Janet Mullany's *Jane and the Damned* and Michael Thomas Ford's *Jane Bites Back*. Mullany's offshoot is set in

Austen's time and features her battling as a vampire to defend England from the French. Despite how this sounds, the book is not meant as a parody. Instead, the supernatural premise provides not only a lot of additional action but also a dilemma for Austen who must choose between two forms of immortality (since being a vampire apparently diminishes her writing ability). Ford, on the other hand, uses supernatural elements to satirize the author's textual immortality. Austen is a 233-year-old vampire in the twenty-first century and the owner of an independent bookstore in New York. Her shop sells, among other things, Austenian spinoffs avidly bought by die-hard fans – while Austen's latest manuscript is repeatedly rejected by publishers. Austen is amused by foolish and hysterical Darcy fans who come to book-signings in costume, and her first victim is a romantic spinoff writer, an opportunistic woman who says “Austen is all the rage. You put her name on anything and it will sell.”<sup>193</sup> In both spinoffs, vampirism becomes a metaphor for Austen's enduring popularity, but especially in Ford's self-reflexive offshoot it is also used to comment on the vampirism – or “the wider parasitic trend” (Leal) – of the spinoff phenomenon. Ford knowingly and playfully critiques authors who feed off Austen's fame, which he does himself, and thus draws attention to the partisanship that characterizes Austen reception. While it pokes fun at the Austenian and vampiric trends, Ford's novel may just view the spinoff phenomenon in the way Sutherland does the “afterlives” of Austen's texts as a “as a two-way transfusion of energy” (*Jane Austen's* 357) rather than a parasitic relationship. After all, Ford's and, arguably, many other spinoffs do not only draw on Austen; they also bestow something upon her texts – insights

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<sup>193</sup> This quotation is taken from the first chapter of the novel, which is excerpted on Ford's official website.

into her meanings, observations about women and contemporary culture, and a revival of interest in ever more incarnations of the author.

It is also noteworthy to add, as a gesture toward future research, that various media, not just film and television, now serve as venues for these sometimes surprising incarnations. Marvel Comics has released graphic novel versions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Grahame-Smith's zombie spinoff has also been rehashed in this form by Del Rey and is slated to be made into a film in 2011, along with an alien-classic mash-up called *Pride and Predator*. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is also available as an iPhone game, and another video game called "Brain Age" quotes passages from Austen's and other classic novels. Online constructions of Austen are even more ubiquitous. There are numerous fan fiction sites, blogs, fan tributes, music videos, quizzes, and social networking groups devoted to Austen. One YouTube video, a fake trailer for a clever film mash-up of Austen and Chuck Palahniuk called "Jane Austen's Fight Club," has recently gone viral. Its humorous juxtaposition of Austen's nineteenth-century heroines with the down-and-dirty values of a 1990s novel/film capitalizes on the mash-up trend, but resonates with audiences also because it manages to pinpoint both societies' repressions. This and *Sex and the Austen Girl* are perhaps early manifestations of the new directions in which Austen is branching out and the new hybrids that are being made out of her, contemporary culture, and various media.

Given all these manifestations of Austenmania, I end with the inevitable question: Why Austen? As Austenian paraliterature demonstrates, "Austen" – the author, the woman, the icon – becomes a site or location for the

meeting of past and present ideas of love and of women's identity and for contemporary women's conflicting desires for the privileges of the present and the romance of the past. These spinoffs' appropriation of her courtship plots and romantic pairings, which have become inextricable from the larger Austen phenomenon, points to the fact that these contain something meaningful to her readers today. They "convey what are considered universal truths" (Hudelet 149), truths about what women want, who they are, and the relevance of love and companionship in their lives. So who are these women and what do they want? The answers are as assorted as the "truths" that Austen has been married to by varied spinoffs. The seemingly small scale of Austen's writing has expanded and continues to expand to encompass countless private and public alternative Austens, various takes on the marriage plot and its implications about women's identity, and a diverse range of interpretations that can enrich both the reading of her novels and of contemporary (post)feminist culture.



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