

## Jane Austen Fan Fiction and the Situated Fantext

### The Example of Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*

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Building on recent findings in the field of fan fiction studies, I claim that Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* is indirectly influenced by three cultural phenomena which centre around Jane Austen and her work. Aidan's fan fiction text stays close to the spirit of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* because she "reimagines" the novel according to the interpretive conventions of the Republic of Pemberley, a fan community. These conventions demand respect for Austen and her novels because they are shaped by the broader, cultural conventions of Janeitism and Austen criticism. Similarly, Aidan's text is more individualistic and "Harlequinesque" than Austen's novel, because the Republic allows writers to reproduce the cultural reading which underlies BBC / A&E's adaptation of Austen's novel.

#### 1. Introduction

Jane Austen has a fan base, and a creative one at that. For decades, her devotees have written stories on the basis of her fictional worlds—recounting what happened after Emma's wedding, for example, or what might have taken place after Mr. Bennet's death. Such narratives are instances of "fan fiction": fiction written by and for fans, which is founded on the characters, settings, concepts, or plots of antecedent texts. These may be literary classics, like Austen's novels, but more often they are non-canonical novels, Japanese anime and manga, video games, television shows, and films. Fans have published their stories in fanzines, letterzines, and other amateur forms of press since the 1930s, but with the rise of the Internet, the tradition exists on a considerably larger scale: the World Wide Web now houses millions of "fics," posted by hundreds of thousands of writers (Coppa 2006a: 42-3; Sendlor 2011). Since Austen fan fiction has always been a niche phenomenon, it has received less academic attention than fan fiction based on media texts (such as the *Star Trek* franchise) or popular novels (such as the *Harry Potter* sequence) (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 17-24). As a consequence, Austen fan fiction sometimes jars with the "central readings and theoretical approaches" of fan fiction studies (17-8).

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Many theorists have argued, for instance, that fans write in response to “the seemingly all-encompassing force of commercial media” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 18; Parrish 2007: 57; e.g. Kustritz 2003: 373-4). This line of thinking has its roots in Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* (1992), an ethnographic study of media fans which builds on Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Jenkins typifies fans as “textual poachers,” who “appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests” (23, 24). “Slash” fans, for example, can be said to commandeer the intellectual property of others because they reinterpret the sexual orientation of their favourite characters (Parrish 2007: 69; Jones 2006: 264) and write fan fiction from this “corrective” reading (Parrish 2007: 65). Juli J. Parrish has pointed out, however, that Jenkins’s metaphor does not apply to every form of fan fiction (69-70). This certainly holds true for Austen fan fiction. Janeites, as Austen fans are commonly known, know very well that their idol’s work is out of copyright and, therefore, “fair game” (Austen.com 2009b; Bowles 2003: 19).

The poaching paradigm has been challenged in other ways, too. In “Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online” (2007), Bronwen Thomas calls into question the poaching metaphor’s connotation of unbridled freedom. She points out that the creative licence of fan writers is typically restricted by interpretive conventions, which are created in a top-down and bottom-up fashion. While fan fiction sites “police the content submitted by users” according to specific contributor guidelines, users continually generate conventions of their own, by reviewing other texts and inserting details into their own fictions (Thomas 2007). Thomas supports this analysis with a study of the “Republic of Pemberley,” a website which, between 1997 and 2008, hosted an archive of Austen fan fiction. Writers were asked to set their fics in “the same historical era” as Austen’s novels, to present her characters “in a manner faithful to their original conception,” and to take their cue from “Jane Austen’s own sense of taste and humanity” (Pemberley.com 2003; cf. Pugh 2005: 37-9). At the same time, the site’s community developed conventions about the married life of the Darcys, and borrowed materials from the screen adaptations of Austen’s novels (Thomas 2007).

While the Republic’s “critical apparatus” resembles that of most other fan fiction sites, its contributor guidelines are remarkably protective of Austen’s “legacy”. Considering this “respect for the source texts and their author,” and the “almost Leavisite tone” of the guidelines in question, Thomas concludes that the notion of literary canon, “not just as some kind of badge of quality, but also as guarantor of moral improvement and education,” still holds sway in the Austen fandom (Thomas 2007). This has some very interesting implications, which Thomas does not explore in depth. It implies that fan writers are not just influenced by fancultural constraints, such as the expectations of their readership or the “technological interfaces” they use (Stein and Busse

2009: 192; Stein 2006: 248-9), but also by broader, cultural conventions. The influence of these conventions should be discussed in greater detail and so this essay examines how they impact upon Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*, a rewrite of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose form is shaped by the complex system of practices, evaluations, and interpretations which surround Jane Austen and her work.

This system is very extensive and diverse. Austen's novels have held a secure place in high culture since the early twentieth century, inspiring a wealth of reviews, books, essays, and other forms of academic discourse (Kaplan 2005). Unlike many canonical texts, moreover, Austen's work has a rich history in popular culture, where it has inspired numerous adaptations, completions, and sequels, as well as Jane Austen Societies, fan sites, and merchandise (Macdonald and Macdonald 2003: 1; Breuer 2000; Thompson 2008). Her work has generated several clusters of interpretations, values, physical and discursive practices, products and social structures, associated with particular groups of people and labelled as "high" or "popular". Aidan's text bears traces of three such clusters, having been informed, firstly, by the practices of Janeitism, secondly, by the value system of Austen criticism, and finally, by the interpretation of BBC/A&E's 1995 production of *Pride and Prejudice*. This influence is not as straightforward as it may seem, however, since cultural conventions, whether highbrow or popular, are swept up in the process of fan writing, and its incessant interplay of "canon," "fantext," and creativity.

## 2. Writing Fan Fiction: Constraint and Negotiation

### 2.1 Canon and Creativity

In "Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology" (1991), Constance Penley offers an alternative view of the relationship between fan writers and their source texts. While Henry Jenkins's fans "take something from a private cultural preserve," Penley's "reimagine the preserve itself" (Parrish 2007: 67-8). In fandom, a fan writer's preserve, or source text, is known as her "canon" (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 9). This concept is related to canon in its common usage. Just as the Western canon comprises the pillars of Western culture, or rather, what a community believes those pillars to be, a fan writer's canon comprises every event a group of fans accepts as "real" or authorised. This is where the similarity ends, however. Fans do not limit their canon to "great" works of art; indeed, they tend to draw on works which are excluded from the Western canon<sup>2</sup> (Thomas 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> This implies that, while there is only one "canon" in Western culture, there are many "canons" in fandom. This is reflected in the term's usage, both in academic and fannish circles. While "Western canon" is invariably used with a definite article, its fannish equivalent is used in a plural form (e.g. "closed canons"—Pugh 2005: 27; Parrish 2007: 28; Fanlore.com 2011b), with an indefinite article (e.g. "a closed canon"—Pugh 2005: 26; Parrish 2007: 70, 151; Fanlore.com), with a definite article (e.g. "In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the canon includes . . ."—Parrish

Penley's characterisation highlights two aspects of canon. On the one hand, it presents the fan writer's source text as a framework within which fans are creative. In effect, source texts tend to provide the "universe, setting, and characters" of a fan fiction text, while fans weave in events of their own creation (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 9). Fan writers share their enthusiasm for the source text with a "fandom," a group of fans assembled around a specific object of interest (Parrish 2007: 26). These fans may disagree on what is canonical and what is not. In many of today's literary fandoms, such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, a fan writer's canon can include any configuration of novels, screen adaptations, "and even interviews and comments made by the authors" (Thomas 2007; Busse and Hellekson 2006: 9-10). The preferences of fan writers can be very apparent in the fan fiction they produce and, indeed, in the fandom itself. In the Austen fandom, for example, there is a rift between fans who base their stories primarily on the adaptations and fans who "focus principally on the books" because the latter "claim some intellectual superiority over the first group" (Thompson 2008).

On the other hand, Penley's characterisation indicates that fan writers rewrite the source text. Henry Jenkins has stressed that fan writers use canon as a jumping point for their own creative efforts (Jenkins 2008b; cf. Thomas 2006: 227, Parrish 2007: 32). Fan texts, he believes, are ultimately grounded in "negative capability," by which he means gaps and details in the source text which invite readers to use their own imagination<sup>3</sup> (Jenkins 2008a; cf. Pugh 2005: 41). Jenkins distinguishes five such elements, including holes (events which are not narrated, but which must have happened), silences (elements which appear to be excluded for ideological reasons), and potentials (elements which suggest how the narrative could have continued or, I would add, how it could have taken an alternative course) (Jenkins 2008b). Fans appear to have a predilection for negative capability which relates to characters and their relationships (Jenkins, 2008b; cf. Coppa 2006b: 229). To some extent, fan writers withdraw these from canon as they would artefacts from an archive (cf. Derecho 2006: 65). They treat characters as "complex creations complete with physical descriptions, histories," and "personalities" (Kaplan 2006: 135; Pugh 2005: 70-1, 65-6). At the same time, however, they accept that there is room for debate. A source character's personality is largely a matter of interpretation, as is his exact eye colour, his background, or his relationship with other people. Faced

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2007: 28; Pugh 2005: 27), and, perhaps most strikingly, without an article (e.g. "without contradicting canon" (Pugh 2005: 26), "any departure from canon," "adherence to canon" (Parrish 2007: 33), and a detail "easily inferred in canon" (Fanlore.com 2011b)). In addition, the term is used as an adjective, interchangeably with "canonical" (e.g. a character "is canon"—Parrish 2007: 32; Fanlore.com 2011b).

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins has drawn "negative capability" from the work of John Keats, but he uses it in a completely different sense. While Keats understands "negative capability" as the ability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (qtd. in Jenkins 2008a), Jenkins relates it to an "encyclopedic impulse" on the reader's part, i.e. a desire to "know all of the details of a favorite story" (Jenkins 2008a).

with these obscurities, fan writers tend to reproduce the reading they prefer, while they weave in “all kinds of argumentation” to defend their interpretation (Jenkins 2008b; Kaplan 2006: 151).

Fans, then, may respond to a text’s negative capability by filling its gaps. According to Sheenagh Pugh, this response is the hallmark of fans who want “more of” canon (42). These fans are reluctant to leave the universe of their choice and create additional material to prolong the experience (42-3). They may fill Jenkins’s “holes,” for example, with stories called “missing scenes”—stories which recount “incidents, conversations, interactions that take place within the timescale of canon and are compatible with canon, that might have happened and in some cases must have happened, but which are not seen on the page or the screen” (57). Fans can also want “more from” canon, however (Pugh 2005: 42). In that case, they feel that their canon is not “perfect or fully realised,” and see “possibilities in it which were never explored as they might have been” (43). This response may result in stories which depart from canon. These may be corrective to a greater or a lesser degree. Some fans set out to correct annoying parts of canon, such as Jenkins’s “silences,” or write with another agenda in mind. Others simply find it enjoyable to realise the “potentials” of characters, relationships, and events (Jenkins 2008a).

A fan’s departures may likewise be more or less extreme. This is indicated by the double meaning of “alternate universe,” a term used in fandom to describe stories which feature source characters but take place in a different universe than the canonical one. This universe may be entirely different (for example, when characters are dropped into a different time period) or practically identical to canon (Fanlore.com 2011a). Pugh has argued that a missing scene becomes an alternate universe story the moment it seems illogical that later canonical action follows from it (63). By this view, a story in which Elizabeth believes a warning about Wickham earlier in the story, and changes her behaviour toward Darcy, is an alternate universe story, while a story in which she dismisses such a warning is a missing scene (63-4). Whether fans reproduce most of their source text, however, or rewrite it almost entirely, they always adhere to and diverge from canon. After all, fan stories must refer to a source text to qualify as fan fiction, but they must also diverge from it to be worth telling (Parrish 2007: 34, 138). Fan fiction, then, is always shaped by the interplay of canon and individual creativity.

## 2.2 Creativity in a Community Context

Fan fiction texts are not usually produced in a vacuum. As Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse note, many fans, “especially those who choose to share their work with other fans, are aware of and engage with already existing fan communities and traditions during their creative process”

(196). Fan communities are, quite literally, groups of fans who interact socially, for example on blogs, forums, mailing lists, and bulletin boards (Parrish 2007: 26). These communities may assemble around a very narrow field of interest. Increasingly, for example, they are devoted to particular ‘ships, i.e. romantic pairings of source characters (Parrish 2007: 86; Busse and Hellekson 2006: 15). Fan communities are also interpretive communities, in Stanley Fish’s sense of the word (Stein and Busse 2009: 197; Costello and Moore 2007: 126). Their members tend to share particular “interpretations and interpretive strategies” when it comes to the source text (Stein and Busse 2009: 197). If a community centres around a particular ‘ship, for example, its members will “agree on the centrality of particular events, characteristics, and interpretations that support their favored romantic pairing” (Stein and Busse 2009: 197). The members of a *Star Trek* community may agree, for instance, to interpret the interactions of Kirk and Spock in a romantic light. In that case, they agree to reread the source text in a similar way.

Because fan writers are aware of these interpretive conventions, and know that their readership is aware of them too, a community’s preferred reading of the source text acts as an additional constraint (Stein 2006: 248). This restriction is created very gradually. I have noted that fan fiction texts contain a wealth of fan-made materials, which supplement or contradict canon. These additions may become “generally accepted and used by other writers” in the community (Pugh 2005: 41; Thomas 2007), to the extent that certain details, tropes, and plot elements become cliché (Marley 2003). This fannish canon is known as the community’s “fanon” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 9). This fanon is never carved in stone, however. Fans can always voice their opinion in reviews, conversations, and, indeed, in fics of their own (Parrish 2007: 105). As a result, community conventions are always a “work in progress” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 6, 7; Pugh 2005: 222).

Because the term “fanon” can have negative connotations in fandom (Driscoll 2006: 90), a related concept serves better. By reading, writing, and reviewing fics, fans constantly add to the “fantext” of their fandom, i.e. “the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre)” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 7). Because each community produces texts from particular readings, this fantext contains “multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes,” which are “contradictory yet complementary to one another and the source text” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 7; Kaplan 2006: 137). The interpretive conventions of fan communities, then, can be typified as “fantextual” conventions. The influence of this fantext can be enormous, as a fan’s “understanding of the source is always already filtered through the interpretations and characterizations” that it contains (Busse and Hellekson 2007: 7). Since the advent of the Internet, however, it has become increasingly difficult to trace the finer points of this impact in fan fiction texts. Before the 1990s, “fandom was a face-to-face

proposition”: fans socialised and distributed their fan fiction in fan clubs and on conventions (13). They were introduced to the fandom, moreover, through a process of enculturation (13; Karpovich 2006: 178). This made it relatively easy for communities to uphold a number of rules, also with respect to fan fiction. Fan writers could be instructed, for example, not to write “real person slash”—slash fiction about real people rather than characters (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 13).

This is difficult to achieve in an online environment. Fan writers no longer depend on fan communities to get their work published, while “lurkers” can get hold of fan fiction “without interacting with other fans” (13). As a result, writers can have a readership even if their texts go against the guidelines of particular communities. Indeed, it has become easier to find like-minded fans as technologies became more advanced. ListServes, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and blogs have allowed fans to discuss topics more efficiently, and to assemble around specific fields of interest (13-5). As a consequence, today’s fandoms are splintered “into nearly innumerable factions,” devoted to different “stories, styles, or pairings” (15). This increased fragmentation has made it easier for fans to avoid fics which are not to their taste (15). At the same time, “online fanfic libraries” have collected stories from all over fandom, and made it possible for readers to search them on such details as the presence or absence of particular characters or even of “happy endings” (Pugh 2005: 229). As a result, prospective fan writers are no longer “enculturated” by a particular community (Karpovich 2006: 186; Parrish 2007: 24-5), but infer standards and expectations from a wide range of stories, be it in the style or pairing they are interested in. The process whereby fans negotiate fantextual conventions, then, has become increasingly difficult to follow.

### 3. Contextualising the Fantext

While several theorists have discussed the fantext and its role in the process of fan writing, few have considered the cultural context in which that fantext is embedded. I believe, however, that the boundaries between fantext and context become blurred in the process of fan writing—especially in the Austen fandom. I will demonstrate this with Pamela Aidan’s *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*. This fan fiction text needs to be understood against the background I have just outlined. An Internet fic, *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* was posted in instalments between 1997 and 2005. This is no coincidence. Though Aidan had been a fan of *Pride and Prejudice* since secondary school, she only became fascinated by Mr. Darcy after she watched BBC/A&E’s 1995 adaptation of the novel, which starred Colin Firth as Darcy (Aidan 2006b: 252). Because Aidan “could not get enough of the film,” she went in search of “more” on the Internet (Irene 2007). She discovered a number of sites devoted to Jane Austen and the BBC/A&E adaptation, becoming most “appreciative of

The Republic of Pemberley (pemberley.com) and The Derbyshire Writer’s Guild (austen.com)” (sic) (Aidan 2006d: 286).

To satisfy her craving, Aidan started reading fan fiction, which she found in the sites’ archives (Irene 2007). Because few fics actually told the story “in real time from Darcy’s point of view,” however, Aidan decided to write such a story herself (Irene 2007). She started posting it on the two sites I mentioned, on Austenesque, and on Firthness.com (Aidan 2009; Aidan 2006b: 247). Once completed, her text comprised three parts: *At An Assembly Such As This*, *Duty and Desire*, and *These Three Remain*<sup>4</sup>. Aidan received feedback throughout her creative process (Irene 2007). These reviews showed her that she “could depart from Austen, sometimes in some very shocking ways, and still not only keep [her] readership but get them to agree to the twists [she] was giving the story” (Aidan 2009). In the following, I will consider these departures in light of three cultural phenomena: the practices of Janeitism, the value system of Austen criticism, and the preferred reading which underlies the BBC/A&E adaptation. I will argue that although Aidan seems to negotiate little more than the contributor guidelines of the Republic of Pemberley, she also reproduces three conventions which underlie the Republic’s policy. I will argue that her staying close to the *spirit* of Austen’s text is attuned to the interests of Janeitism, on the one hand, and the highbrow notion that Jane Austen is a canonical author, on the other. Similarly, her portrayal of Darcy is grounded in the idea that *Pride and Prejudice* is individualistic and romantic—a reading made particularly popular by BBC/A&E’s 1995 production of the novel.

### 3.1 Fidelity to Canon

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* has as much negative capability as any other source text. Her novel can be reread, for example, from the idea that Darcy and George Wickham have feelings for each other. Similarly, it is possible to offer a sobering perspective on Austen’s world, if one adopts the viewpoint of the men, “servants, traders and workers who are present but silent in her books” (Pugh 2005: 195). Although Aidan adopts Mr. Darcy’s viewpoint, however, *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* does not offer such a perspective on *Pride and Prejudice*. As I will demonstrate, Aidan stays relatively close to Austen’s text, departing from the letter of the novel, but staying true to the spirit of it. Notably, Aidan uses Austen’s novel, rather than its adaptation, as her primary point of reference. This preference is particularly clear when the series departs from Austen, staging scenes differently (cf. Aidan 2006a: 6-7; Austen

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<sup>4</sup> Aidan eventually decided to publish the series, keeping most of the original text intact (Aidan 2009). *An Assembly Such As This* appeared in 2003, *Duty and Desire* in 2004, and *These Three Remain* in 2005. All three books were removed from their original locations, but they can still be retrieved with the Wayback Machine (from Austen.com). The title of *At An Assembly Such As This* was ultimately changed to *An Assembly Such As This*. Similarly, the trilogy’s title was changed from *The Chronicles of Pemberley* to *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*.



2003: 13-4; I.2<sup>5</sup>), for example, or leaving them out entirely (Aidan 2006a: 65-8; Austen 2003: 25). Aidan does not lift events (Aidan 2006a: 1; I.2) or dialogue (Aidan 2006a: 3; I.2) from the series as she does from Austen, although, as I shall discuss in greater detail below, some of her additions are clearly influenced by it.

In essence, Aidan supports everything Austen mentions about Darcy. This amounts to snippets of information, such as the ones provided by Austen's narrator (e.g. Austen 2003: 18, 12), and a brief account of Darcy's past, which he gives to Elizabeth in the novel's final chapters (Austen 2003: 346-351, 359-361). These details are "embodied" in *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*: they underlie Aidan's version of the source text's events, and the events of her own invention. In the following excerpt, for example, Darcy follows "good principles" in "pride and conceit" (Austen 2003: 349) during and after his first meeting with Charles Bingley:

It was just this exuberance of character that had made Charles the object of several cruel jokes among the more sophisticated young gentlemen in Town and had been the means of bringing him to Darcy's notice. Unwillingly privy to the planning of one such humiliation conducted during a game of cards at his club, he had heard enough to disgust him and form the resolve to seek out the unfortunate youth and warn him away from those he had thought his friends. To Darcy's surprise, what had started as Christian duty became a satisfying friendship. Charles had come far since his first visit to Town, but there were still moments, like the present, when Darcy despaired of ever cultivating in him a proper reserve. (Aidan 2006a: 2-3)

Here, Darcy knows that it is right to warn Bingley, but he does not see how overbearing it is to instruct his friend in "proper reserve". Aidan confirms this paradox in Darcy's character throughout her trilogy, by writing out his thoughts and feelings (for example, about the Darcy name—Aidan 2007a: 26) and by adding a number of missing scenes (such as his adventures at Norwycke Castle—Aidan 2007a: 49).

This does not mean that Aidan is not creative. Her additions are always coloured by her preferred reading of Darcy's behaviour, person, and transformation. While Austen's Darcy separates Bingley and Jane because he does not see any symptoms of love on her side (Austen 2003: 192), for example, Aidan's Darcy cannot believe that Jane Bennet is sincere in her regard for Bingley because of his own experiences with Wickham (Aidan 2006a: 17-8) and scheming society women (56). Similarly, Aidan's Darcy is a man of the world, who is confronted with such matters as the Luddite movement (Aidan 2006c: 19) and the "Irish

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<sup>5</sup> I have numbered the scenes according to the scene selection on the DVD (Langton 2001). The Roman numerals refer to episodes.

Question” (Aidan 2007a: 180-1)—historical facts which Austen systematically excludes from her work (Irene 2007). Finally, Aidan weaves in her own reading of Darcy’s transformation. *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* is meant to solve a specific question: “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?” (Aidan 2007b: 446). In answer to this question, Aidan describes how Darcy rediscovers his faith.

In *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman*, Darcy’s response to Wickham’s deceit is partly presented through conversations with religious characters, such as Mrs. Annesley (Aidan 2006c: 44-5) and Georgiana (Aidan 2007a: 220-5). These dialogues show that Darcy is unable to consider Wickham’s deception in terms of Providence (Aidan 2006c: 44-5). As a result, he cannot “pity” the “natural frailty” of his enemy, let alone help him to overcome it (Aidan 2006c: 3-4). In a number of missing scenes, set before his visit to Rosings, Darcy is tempted to deny the workings of Providence (Aidan 2006c: 208-9) and confronted with his (unchristian) desire for revenge (Aidan 2006c: 272, 280; Aidan 2007a: 4, 9). This confrontation is key to his development. Faced with “the dark depths in his heart,” Darcy has to admit that he is not as gentlemanly as he once wanted become and, later on, that there might be some truth in Elizabeth’s “epithets” (156). Encouraged by Georgiana, he learns to see Elizabeth’s refusal as providential, and tries to change, with the help of “a newborn compassion joined with determined practice” (267). Although his further development is shaped by Elizabeth’s reproofs (252), just as his actions are inspired by her distress and his feeling responsible for it (369, 374-5), the “good principles” Darcy rediscovers in Aidan’s trilogy are actually Christian principles: he learns to do the right thing by his enemy (360), as well as his friends, his peers, his family, and, indeed, Elizabeth.

These examples show that Pamela Aidan negotiates the constraints of her canon without violating the guidelines of the Republic of Pemberley. Although she departs from the letter of *Pride and Prejudice*, her text ultimately supports the novel, with “Jane Austen’s characters behaving as she wrote them in scenes we might wish she had an opportunity to write herself” (Pemberley.com 2003). Aidan’s tendency to fill gaps, rather than make them, is not exceptional in the Austen fandom. Jane Austen’s writing has long been acclaimed for its economy. Indeed, modernist authors like Virginia Woolf used her work in a “campaign against the over-decorated gushiness of Victorian fiction” (Lynch 1996: 174), holding up her novels as “the compact ideal that women’s novels of the future” should try to attain (173). Many fans respond to this economy in a “more of” fashion. Some work out the “love scenes” Austen left out (Pugh 2005: 60) or rendered “in reported speech or paraphrase” (60). Others simply “spell out emotions where Austen herself did not choose

to” (60) or write out missing scenes “among the male characters and minor characters” (61). Still others are inspired by Austen’s “non-endings” and write sequels (O’Connell 2000; Pugh 2005: 47).

Considering that the Republic is an *online* community, it is remarkable that so many fan writers chose to stay true to the spirit of Austen’s work (cf. Pugh 2005: 37-8). It is impossible for one online community to control everything that is written in a fandom; and this is also true of the responses to Austen. Two of the four sites which accepted Pamela Aidan’s story had, and still maintain, a different editorial policy than the Republic of Pemberley. The largest of these, the Derbyshire Writers’ Guild, shares many contributor guidelines with the Republic, but it is more tolerant of alternate universe stories set in Austen’s universe. In addition, the site archives “modern stories, time-shifted stories, stories with fanciful elements,” and “more irreverent stories” (Austen.com 2009a; O’Connell 2000). Firthness, a smaller site, is even less prescriptive and accepts “adult fanfic”<sup>6</sup> (Pugh 2005: 246). These communities give fans the chance to get “more from” Austen, within certain limits. Like Bronwen Thomas, I believe that the Republic’s popularity, in spite of these alternative possibilities, is due to Austen’s status as a canonical author. I wish to contend, however, that the Republic’s heritage is far more complex than Thomas has suggested. To fully understand the fantextual conventions of the Republic, one needs to understand the particulars and the history of its cultural context. This context was shaped by Janeites, on the one hand, and Austen critics, on the other.

### 3.1.1 Janeitism

“Janeitism” can be defined as the “self-consciously idolatrous enthusiasm for ‘Jane’ and every detail relative to her” (Johnson 1997: 211). It first appeared in “the last two decades of the nineteenth century” (211). This was mainly due to J. E. Austen-Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), in which her nephew gives a “familial, insider’s view of the novelist” (Lynch 2005: 112; Johnson 1997: 211). However, Austen’s popularity also benefited from Richard Bentley’s “deluxe *Steventon Edition of Jane Austen’s Work*” (1882) (Johnson 1997: 211) and from the appearance of cheaper editions of her work (1883 and later) (211). By the early twentieth century, Janeitism was widespread among the day’s “publishers, professors, and literati” (213). Apart from Caroline Spurgeon, a lone female Janeite, Austen’s champions included Montague Summers, A. C. Bradley, Lord David Cecil, Walter Raleigh, R. W. Chapman, and E. M. Forster (Johnson 1997: 213-4). Assembled in reading communities like the Royal Society of Literature (Lynch 2005: 115; Johnson 1997: 214), these enthusiasts transgressed “the dogmas

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<sup>6</sup> To some extent, this is the case *because* of the site’s demographic. Both the Republic of Pemberley and the Derbyshire Writers’ Guild ban adult fiction from their archives because some of their members are still minors (Pemberley.com 2007; Austen.com 2009b).

later instituted by professional academics presiding over the emergent field of novel studies,” for example by talking “about characters as if they were real people” or by speculating “upon their lives before, after, or outside the text itself” (Johnson 1997: 214).

Janeitism fell into disrepute, however, as novel studies became institutionalised. To be a Janeite slowly became synonymous with being a fan—a term which has, from the first, carried similar connotations of enthusiasm, but in a negative sense (Jenkins 1992: 12). Interestingly, modern-day Janeites take an approach to Jane Austen and her works which is very similar to that of their predecessors, even though they are now predominantly female (Johnson 1997: 222-3; Lynch 2005: 115). According to Deidre Lynch, Austen still “fosters in her readers, as most other literary giants do not, the devotion and fantasies of personal access” we now associate with “the *fan*” (Lynch 2005: 111). Claudia L. Johnson has noted, moreover, that Janeites still want to know as much as possible about “Janean” artefacts, ranging from “balls” and “picnics” to “Addison’s disease” and “petty-theft” (Johnson 1997: 223). Finally, it is still a “common Janeite game” to imagine “how a character in one novel might behave towards a character in another,” or to speculate “how the novels might continue *after* the wedding” (223). The Republic of Pemberley seems to cater to these interests. While its contributor guidelines ensure that fans respect Jane Austen and her work, its boards provide general information about her life and times, and its archive of fan fiction satisfies cravings for “more of” (Pemberley.com 2009). The reverent tone of the Republic’s guidelines (Thomas 2007), then, appears to be part of a broader discourse, inspired by the site’s cultural context.

### 3.1.2 *Austen criticism*

Claudia L. Johnson has noted that “Austen’s novels hold a secure place in the canon of high as well as popular culture” (Johnson 1997: 224). They have, in other words, “a popular audience and an academic one” (Lynch 2005: 113)<sup>7</sup>. This divide in Austen’s readership dates back to the mid-twentieth century (Kramp 2007: 151), when “the New Criticism” established a “reformed” field of “English studies in the American university” (Brown 1996: 12). Mainly due to Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), this reformation had a particularly great impact on novel studies<sup>8</sup>. Most importantly, it became accepted that to study *the* novel was to study a number of formal features which supposedly characterised the

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is possible that these two groups overlap, considering that book-based fan sites tend to be even “more literate” (Pugh 2005: 121) than those of media fandoms, the writers of which have always had a high standard of education (Coppa 2006: 45; Pugh 2005: 130, 131). However, “academic” fans tend to behave differently according to the situation they are in (Parrish 2007: 51-2).

<sup>8</sup> Written mainly to solicit the attention of New Critics (Brown 1996: 34), Watt’s *Rise* emphasises the novel’s “formal realism” and lays its origins in the mid-eighteenth century (Hunter 1990: 7; Brown 1996: 32). Although his thesis has been questioned ever since (Hunter 1990: 7), it held considerable sway at contemporary American universities (Brown 1996: 32).

genre (Hunter 1990: 29-30). Both Watt and the New Critics treated Austen as a “pivotal figure” in the history of this form (Brown 1996: 34), because her work appeared to merge “Fieldingesque and Richardsonian novelistic modes” (15). Because novels, however, still “lacked the cultural prestige of poetry and drama,” Austen scholars felt the need to distinguish themselves from non-academic, Janeite readers (Johnson 1997: 221; Hunter 1990: 29). After all, “so long as novels were believed to be about characters, novel studies could seem to be species of gossip of precisely the sort in which Janeites delight” (Johnson 1997: 221). To “consolidate” their authority, this “new professorate” began to develop a different way of reading Austen, creating some of the dogmas still in use today (213).

Modernist authors, such as Virginia Woolf, had already praised Austen’s economy and restraint and portrayed her as “a prim and passionless authoress” (Lynch 1996: 175), whose “stiff upper lip” would become the trademark of every “modern Englishwoman” (176). This version of the author was subsequently professed by Q. D. and F. R. Leavis, who adjusted it to include Austen’s satirical eye, with which she was said to embark on a “historical mission, which was to target those novels (sentimental fiction in the juvenilia; Gothic romance in *Northanger Abbey*) which give *the* novel a bad name” (184). Janeites were eventually attacked from this perspective. In 1940, D. W. Harding claimed that “Austen’s ‘books are . . . read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked’ ” (qtd. in Johnson 1997: 213; George 2007: 35). Since then, many “professional scholars, whose claim to prestige is validated by their vocation’s protocols of dispassion and objectivity,” have similarly been bothered by “amateur cultures of Austenian appreciation—because they are associated with, variously, unbecoming levity, sentimentality, a determination to integrate fiction into life or a conservative nostalgia” (Lynch 2005: 118). Interestingly, there is a similar “divide” between theorists and fans of popular culture, such as film scholars and cinephiles (Hills 2002: 3-6). Considering this tension, Matt Hills has pointed out that although academics approach their object of study in an “objective” way, they have an admiration and respect for it which is not dissimilar to that of fans (4-5). The Republic of Pemberley’s respect for Austen’s work, then, may also be due to the fact that her novels have received academic attention.

### 3.2 Individualism and “Harlequinisation”

I have argued that the Republic of Pemberley, in general, and Pamela Aidan, in particular, seek to preserve Austen’s fictional world as much as possible, because Jane Austen is generally considered to be an admirable, canonical author. It is interesting to note, then, that the Republic actually originated as “a support group for people addicted to” the BBC/A&E production of *Pride and Prejudice* (Pemberley.com 2007). This adaptation

outstrips many others in terms of “distribution and mass appeal” (Kaplan 2005). An immediate hit, it “attracted at least 10 million viewers when it was first serialized on British television in 1995 (and before it was broadcast in more than 40 other countries)” (Kaplan 2005). This had a considerable impact on the book market, with Penguin selling “430,000 copies of *Pride and Prejudice* in the year after the serial was first broadcast” (Kaplan 2005). A product of this Austenmania, the Republic has always honoured its “gushing roots, and the Austen-for-the-masses feel that a demonstrative love of the adaptations brings to the site” (Pemberley.com 2007). I believe that *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* is shaped by this loophole in the Republic’s editorial policy. Pugh has argued that “[f]or many who have read the book, Davies’ adaptation has added something to their understanding of the characters” (22, 70). This is certainly the case for Aidan, who began to see Darcy in a different light after she watched the adaptation. While she had found Darcy’s character “sketchy” and “unlikable” in Austen’s novel, Colin Firth’s performance “brought to the fore intriguing suggestions of who Darcy might really be” (Aidan 2006b: 252).

The adaptation’s influence is most obvious, perhaps, in Aidan’s descriptions of Darcy. When Colin Firth accepted the part of Austen’s romantic lead, he knew he would “have to get together a very lively, dynamic, varied performance and then not act it,” because “nobody ever knows quite what Darcy’s thinking” (Firth, qtd. in Birtwistle and Conklin 1995: 99-100). To hint at this inner turmoil, Firth developed a distinct “physical vocabulary” (Cherly Nixon, qtd. in Belton 2003: 187). Aidan has incorporated elements of this vocabulary in her text. Both in the series and the trilogy, for example, Darcy twists his ring when he is uncomfortable (IV.24, Aidan 2006a: 34, 96; 2007a: 32) and turns away to look out the window when he wants to keep his reactions and thoughts to himself (VI.33; Aidan 2007a: 34, 58, 391). This suggests that Aidan’s reading of *Pride and Prejudice* is influenced by the BBC/A&E adaptation. In fact, one could argue that it functions as an additional source of information—as a secondary canon.

Aidan’s portrayal of Darcy is also shaped, however, by the preferred reading which underlies the adaptation. Even though the BBC/A&E series is hailed for its faithfulness to the novel (Belton 2003: 186; George 2007: 35), several theorists have shown that it actually “creates the illusion of fidelity to the original by presenting an interpretation of Austen’s narrative that is also attuned to the sensibilities of a 1995 audience” (Belton 2003: 186; cf. Margolis 2003: 34-5). Ellen Belton has argued, quite convincingly, that this interpretation is grounded in the “late twentieth-century assumption that the needs and desires of the individual take precedence over other values” (194). The 1995 audience, in other words, wanted “Elizabeth to have it all” (187)—and that includes a lover who sees her “as an independent subject” (191). Because of the “cultural acceptance of the idea of the New Age Man,” Austen’s

Darcy needed to be softened and romanticised (187, 193). The adaptation achieves this by highlighting the way he takes into account Elizabeth's "feelings and wishes," after he has disregarded them so blatantly before his first proposal (191). As I shall demonstrate, this lays the 1995 production open to a charge of "Harlequinization" (Margolis 23, 37): it creates a chemistry between Darcy and Elizabeth which resembles the sexual tension of a *Harlequin* romance novel<sup>9</sup>.

Aidan's picture of Darcy is very similar, as it is both individualistic and "Harlequinesque". The first is exemplified by the trilogy's ending. While Austen ends her novel with "a careful discrimination among relationships and a weighing of personal inclinations against moral and social obligations" (Belton 2003: 186), the final lines of *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* read:

Sweeping up her other hand, Darcy brought both to his heart. She was his; he was hers. He was in want of nothing more. 'Elizabeth,' he whispered. She looked up into his eyes. 'Dearest loveliest Elizabeth.'  
(Aidan 2007a: 437)

This conclusion clearly focuses on Darcy's needs, and Darcy's needs alone. Like the series, which ends with a kiss, Aidan's ending suggests that individual happiness is more important than other considerations (Belton 2003: 186).

Aidan's Darcy is also more Harlequinesque than Austen's, because she reproduces some of the series' changes. To make visible Darcy's evolution, the BBC/A&E adaptation builds on the "looks, glances, and facial expressions" with which Austen tried to say what could not be spoken (Belton 2003: 187). Although Elizabeth is still the main focaliser of the story, Darcy is occasionally "given the floor". This alternating focalisation makes it "a story about Elizabeth and Darcy, rather than a story about Elizabeth" (Andrew Davies, qtd. in Birtwistle and Conklin 1995: 4). Most importantly, the progress of their relationship "is charted through a movement from sidelong glances to direct contemplation to mutual admiration" (Belton 2003: 190). This gives the couple's interactions "a powerful erotic charge" (Lisa Hopkins, qtd. in Belton 2003: 188), which is emphasised by a number of "anachronistic alterations pertaining to sexuality" (Margolis 2003: 34). While Austen's Darcy meets Elizabeth at Pemberley, for example, looking like "he was . . . that moment alighted from his horse or his carriage" (Austen 2003: 242), Firth's Darcy has just taken a swim in the Pemberley lake (IV.23).

Aidan does not include such "anachronistic alterations" in her story. True to form, she uses Austen's novel as her primary source text, refusing to draw on the series or on her own imagination if the latter

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<sup>9</sup> Outside of the United States, these novels are commonly known as *Mills and Boon* novels. The typical *Harlequin* or *Mills and Boon* novel tells the love story of a beautiful young woman and a handsome man, who get married after many difficulties. The genre is also notorious, however, for its erotic content (Morrissey 2008: 11, 24, 29).

provides an alternative. Instead, she incorporates Darcy's side of the "regard" in her story (having him observe Elizabeth's behaviour to assess her state of mind) and emphasises it by means of close character focalisation. This appears, for example, when you compare the accounts Austen and Aidan give of Darcy and Elizabeth's meeting at Pemberley:

They were within twenty yards of each other, and so abrupt was his appearance, that it was impossible to avoid his sight. Their eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of each were overspread with the deepest blush. He absolutely started, and for a moment seemed immovable from surprise; but shortly recovering himself, advanced towards the party, and spoke to Elizabeth, if not in terms of perfect composure, at least of perfect civility. (Austen 240-1)

As [Darcy] took a step backward, one of the ladies turned, her eyes coming to rest full upon him. The light in them struck him like a bolt. *Elizabeth! My God, Elizabeth?* Every nerve in his body came alive, yet he seemed unable to command them to any purposeful action. Elizabeth—here! The truth of it raced through him, yet his mind reeled into denial. How could it be? But it must be; for there she stood not twenty yards away, her lovely eyes wide in surprise and then turned from him as a blush suffused her cheeks. An answering heat flushed his face as he searched for a sign, and indication of how he should approach her. None came, and she remained a picture of beautiful confusion. That he must relieve her anxiety was his only thought; he must be the one to make a beginning. Willing his limbs forward, he went to her. (Aidan 2007a: 273)

Like most fan writers, Aidan uses a "relatively transparent style of prose conducive to an immersive reading experience" (Coppa 2006b: 240). What makes Aidan's style transparent and visual is the amount of detail she uses. In line with Darcy and Elizabeth's meeting in the series (IV.23), Aidan pays particular attention to the look Elizabeth and Darcy share; however, she also gives a detailed description of Darcy's physical behaviour ("took a step backward") and sensations ("like a bolt," "every nerve in his body came alive," "heat"), his observations ("her lovely eyes wide in surprise"), and his thoughts ("*Elizabeth! My God, Elizabeth?*").

In this respect, Aidan departs from Austen. Jane Austen adds information about "contextual cues, setting, and paralinguistic cues of character behavior" (Thomas 2006: 231) to her text, but she uses such references sparingly. Aidan, in contrast, adds enough information to make explicit her interpretation of the scene. In this excerpt, her attention to "nonverbal" detail suggests that Darcy is infatuated with Elizabeth. Aidan does this throughout the trilogy. While her Darcy constantly registers the sounds, smells, textures, and sights of his environment, he displays a heightened awareness of Elizabeth. This is



the case when he sees her (e.g. Aidan 2006a: 155-6; 2007a: 47, 389), (nearly) touches her (Aidan 2006a: 63; Aidan 2007a: 300), smells her (Aidan 2006a: 114; Aidan 2007a: 27, 299), or even thinks of her (Aidan 2006c: 108; Aidan 2007a: 51, 64, 281). I believe this adds a layer of unresolved sexual tension to Aidan's trilogy, which resembles that of the series.

Aidan's use of close character focalisation adds a layer of unresolved sexual tension, much as "anachronistic alterations" do in the series. However, close character focalisation also allows Aidan to bring together a wide range of different readings. Deborah Kaplan has remarked that "close character focalization" is quite common in "relationship-based" fics, especially if the pairing is not supported by canon, because it is particularly suited to defend an interpretation (2006: 139). *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* is such a "fictional essay," too, but one that resonates with a wide range of readings.

#### 4. Conclusion

Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* is shaped by the interplay of canon, fantext, and creativity. This interplay, however, also takes place in a rich cultural context. My case study suggests that Austen fans negotiate the cultural readings which circulate in this context on two interrelated levels: on the micro-level of the fan fiction text and on the macro-level of the fantext. I have traced the impact of three such readings from the micro-level of Aidan's trilogy to the macro-level of the Republic of Pemberley's fantextual conventions. First, I have pointed out that Aidan stays relatively close to Austen's novel. Like other fan writers, Aidan "reimagines" her source text: she uses the negative capability of *Pride and Prejudice*, in this case Darcy's perspective, as a jumping point for her own creative efforts. On the one hand, she "reimagines" her canon because she is creative within the framework of *Pride and Prejudice*. She accepts everything Austen mentions about Darcy's behaviour, character, and transformation, and supports it with missing scenes, back-stories, thoughts and feelings of her own invention.

On the other hand, however, she also rewrites Austen's text. Faced with the latter's economy, Aidan reproduces, and defends, the readings she prefers. She weaves in her own interpretation of Darcy's motivations, his viewpoint, and his transformation. There can be no doubt that these readings depart from the letter of Austen's novel. Because they stay true to the "spirit" of her work, however, Aidan's response is of the "more of" type, rather than the "more from". I have related this to the fantextual conventions of the Republic of Pemberley. These conventions are interpretive conventions. Members of the Republic agree to "reread" Austen's novels in a respectful way. This policy appears to be grounded in two broader cultural discourses. The discourse of Janeitism combines a devotion to Jane Austen and her

work, an interest in her life and times, and a fascination with the “potentials” of her work. The discourse of Austen criticism, though developed in response to that of Janeitism, is likewise underlain by an admiration and respect for Austen’s work. The Republic of Pemberley caters to Janeite interests, but its protectiveness appears to be fuelled by an awareness of Austen’s canonicity. Just as Aidan weaves her own reading into Austen’s text, then, the Republic appears to weave elements of Janeitism and Austen criticism into its contributor guidelines.

Secondly, I have noted that Aidan’s reading of *Pride and Prejudice* resembles that of the BBC/A&E adaptation, one that “embodies” a distinct interpretation of the novel, particularly of the character of Mr. Darcy. On the one hand, it captures Austen’s character in a specific physical vocabulary. On the other, it tailors Darcy to the needs of its late-twentieth-century audience. He is softened, romanticised, and shown to respect Elizabeth as an independent subject. At the same time, the series uses looks and glances to suggest that Darcy is infatuated with Elizabeth, and that she comes to admire him, too. This creates an erotic charge, which is emphasised with a number of departures from the novel. Aidan does not incorporate these departures in her trilogy but, with the help of close character focalisation, she does weave in the adaptation’s reading of Darcy and its unresolved sexual tension. I have related this to a loophole in the Republic’s editorial policy. Because the community still honours its “gushing” roots, it does not ban Harlequinesque elements from its archives. Both Aidan’s text and the Republic’s guidelines, then, contain elements of yet another reading. Ultimately, *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* suggests that cultural readings are swept up in the dynamics of canon, fantext, and individual creativity. As such, they contribute to the incessant movement which characterises the fandom’s fantext. Unique interpretations such as Aidan’s can become widely accepted in the fan community. This can change the community’s fantextual conventions and the cultural readings embedded in them. Approaching the source text from these new interpretive conventions, other fans can then begin to see new creative possibilities in their canon. As long as these fans defend their views, as hundreds have done before them, Austen’s characters will lead a life of their own in cyberspace.

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