The Making of Jane Austen

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JANE AUSTEN, ILLUSTRATED

> [Jane Austen's] tide has risen high on the opposite shore, risen rather higher, I think, than the high-water mark . . . The critical spirit . . . is not responsible . . . Responsible, rather, is the body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their "dear," our dear, everybody's dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable form.
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> —Henry James, "The Lesson of Balzac" (1905)

> Miss Austen has suffered more than most authors at the hands of her illustrators.
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> —H. C. Beeching, *Pages from a Private Diary* (1898)

WE'VE ALL SEEN IT at least once. A purist complains that Jane Austen's fiction is being cheapened or even destroyed by film and television adaptations, vlogs, and memes, or by zombies, paper dolls, and porn. (Just Google "ruined *Pride and Prejudice*.") A century and more ago, similarly disposed readers lamented that Austen was being done in by book illustration. Before there were large numbers of three-dimensional actors populating our Jane Austen imaginations, there were hundreds of two-dimensional illustrations that functioned in strikingly similar ways. Novelist Henry James is the most famous among the early pop-culture Austen haters, although he was not the first to express this opinion. In his 1905 lament (excerpted in the epigraph above), James condemns the cultural saturation and commercialization of all things Austen. His sarcasm might read now as amusing witticism or trenchant insight, especially if you ignore his self-serving exoneration of critics, relieving them of all blame for the "twaddle." But what's most important to notice in his rant is the degree to which he homes in on illustrations of all kinds. James particularly singles out Austen's "illustrators," and their "pretty reproduction" in "saleable form," poking fun at their supposedly

"tasteful" images, as well as the flawed perceptions of the consumers willing to appreciate them. Don't believe the unsophisticated hype, James seems to say.

Did Jane Austen really suffer more than most authors at the hands of her nineteenth-century illustrators? It's difficult to prove either way, but it seems unlikely. What is demonstrably clear is that Austen's illustrators had a profound impact on her afterlife. They shaped her public image, imprinting messages and impressions that readers took away after first and repeated viewings. Those who came, saw, and were most troubled by these illustrations seem to have worried that the images would keep readers from other, "better," although less memorable messages and impressions of Austen. In that sense, at least, Henry James was absolutely right to be worried.

Many Austen illustrators came to have a far more profound—or at least a more wide-ranging—impact on audiences than did most critics, even if the best-known Austen critics did enjoy greater name recognition. Illustrations, more easily than critics, could encourage first-time readers and rereaders alike to imagine (or reimagine) Austen's novels as more dramatic than comic. They could encourage readers to see her fiction as more intimate than social or as more whimsical than serious—as works of political commentary or as the furthest thing from it. Artists had the power to lead readers to anticipate that Austen's novels were stories centered on families and conflict, or horses and tea sets, or forested estates and the natural world. Whether in single images at the front of books or in copious illustrations throughout a novel, illustrators were there, at every step of the way, confronting a reader with ways to visually grasp the text. By comparison, those few pages of a critic's brief introduction to the novel could be quite easily skipped over.

Reasonable people may disagree over whether the situation I've just described is cause for celebration or worry, now or in the past. But from our vantage point, it's hard to know whether to cheer on Henry James or to boo him off the stage, especially when you realize how many illustrated Austen editions of the 1890s were marketed as young people's Christmas gifts. Should we really blame *those* artists for going in for the stereotypically unthreatening Aunt Jane approach? That kind of edition was never going to depict *Pride and Prejudice*'s Lydia Bennet eloping with Wickham or *Emma*'s Mr. Elton drunkenly proposing marriage in a carriage. Yet, believe it or not, Austen's earliest English illustrator did select some of her most sensational scenes of domestic terror for his Austen designs. Despite what some would have us conclude, there was no univocal, collusive "message"

being promoted by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Austen illustrators. Each artist made his (and, in a very few cases, her) own imprint on the material, each with its own potential to shape readers' first impressions—and sometimes longer-lasting ones, too.

If you prefer your Austen-legacy stories to be neatly packaged accounts of inspirational development, or, à la Henry James, accounts of going to hell in a handbasket, then you'll be disappointed in the following chapters. The material I've uncovered and describe here doesn't provide us with a tidy tale about the making of Jane Austen through book illustration. It does move us, over the course of a century, from adult-themed serious gothic sensationalism, to a glut of charmingly humorous children's pabulum, and from there to books on (and of) the big screen. The history of Austen and book illustration is a challenge to pin down. There are surprising twists and turns, but there are also insipid repetitions and unaccountable anomalies. There are nearly forgotten representations and illustrators, as well as Austen artists whose images and reputations achieved enviable longevity. No responsible book chapter on Austen and illustration could carry forward through a single argumentative thread or set out to be encyclopedic without ignoring a great deal of visual evidence.[1]

There is at least one argumentative constant: the assumption that illustrations seen by Austen's first generations of readers shaped then-developing understandings of the author and her fiction. As a result, we should consider how—and speculate why—illustrators visualized (or visually interpreted) Austen's novels the ways they did. We don't know, and in many cases can't know, whether these illustrations had their genesis in assignments from publishers, in artists' perceptions of what to emphasize in Austen's fiction, in market-derived considerations and trends, or in artists' or publishers' own life experiences. The artists and publishers who made choices about what, where, and how much to depict in Austen may not have even read her novels! (In some cases, evidence would suggest they didn't or didn't very carefully.)

What we do know is that Austen-inspired book illustrations emerged at first in modest numbers. The early illustrations would have had an outsized impact, as they had little to no competition. As more illustrations followed, the size of their impact would presumably have been proportional to their sales and distribution. Then Austen images exploded in the midst of a larger craze for classic novel illustration in the 1890s.[2] This made any goal to make a visual impression more difficult to achieve for different reasons, as Austen

images were so prevalent that illustrators began to compete with each other to gain oversaturated audiences and eyes. The following chapters describe some of Austen's momentous, trendsetting, and reputation–shifting images and their artists. I focus on those who were active prior to 1940, the moment that saw the emergence of her first film and television adaptations. It was then that screen images began visually to overwrite book illustrations, although the first Austen film drew directly on book illustration in its marketing. These images were anything but trivial in the process of building Jane Austen's place in culture and society.

The example of one early critic-fan illuminates how deeply such images could shape readers. Sheila Kaye-Smith acknowledges in *Talking of Jane Austen* (1943) that "for many years *Pride and Prejudice* was the only book of hers that I had seen."[3] Kaye-Smith uses the word "seen" and not "read" intentionally, she says, because she first took *Pride and Prejudice* off of the shelf, as a girl, to study its pictures (1). She continues, "I would turn the pages and look at the illustrations, which gave me a general impression of quaintness—a characteristic I still dislike but no longer expect to find in the pages of Jane Austen" (2). This idea of "quaintness," she admits, persisted "till after I should have known better," as Kaye-Smith describes going to a dance in a costume inspired by what was presumably an artist's rendering of Elizabeth Bennet (2). "Evidently," she concludes, "my mind still carried a simpering picture based on a merely ocular acquaintance with *Pride and Prejudice*," although she then owned and reread other editions of the novels beyond the illustrated one she'd studied as a girl (2). The quaint costume of an Austen illustrator stuck with Kaye-Smith more profoundly than Austen's own descriptions of the heroine.

Only a handful of such detailed accounts survive of the impact of Austen illustration on individual readers. But even without first-person testimony, we can and should speculate. Illustrations invited readers to envision or reenvision Austen's themes, words, and meanings. Studying the history of Austen and book illustration allows us to approach her words and others' images in tandem, to look at how each works with and comments on the other, especially as they're adjacent on the page.[4] In Austen's case, these adjacencies are far more fertile, substantial, and politically meaningful than we've given them credit for.

Just how many original illustrations have appeared in Austen's novels over the past two centuries? Prior to 1975, the number can be estimated at approximately fifteen hundred.[5] This rough count doesn't include images on book

jackets and book covers or seek out Austen-inspired illustrations in works beyond the six novels. By way of comparison, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels had amassed fifteen hundred total illustrations by the end of the nineteenth century.[6] It's true that Scott published many, many more novels than Austen did—the Waverley novels series alone numbers twenty-six titles—and that he enjoyed immediate fame whereas she had late-dawning celebrity. But even after Austen's standing as a novelist outstripped his, she didn't catch up to Scott in number of illustrations. It's likely because classic book illustration was itself diminishing in importance with the onslaught of adaptations for TV, radio, and film.

The differences in illustrating Scott and Austen had their origins in the early nineteenth century. In the 1810s, Austen's novels were published unillustrated, something perfectly typical for the era's fiction. In that period, illustrations signaled a substantial financial investment. First, the publisher would pay an artist a modest amount for the designs, as they were called. Then, an engraver would receive a somewhat larger amount to transfer the artist's image to a plate, often on steel or wood. The choice to include an illustration in a novel could pay off in greater sales, making the title more desirable for purchase, but it could also cut into profits. Publishers weighed one risk against the other.

Adding to the risk was the fact that novels, especially those not written by a handful of then-celebrated authors, were considered ephemeral.[7] The genre's relatively lower status also played a role in its comparative lack of illustration. The works of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Ann Radcliffe, or Frances Burney are the ones a reader could expect to find published in new illustrated editions in Austen's day. But Burney's *Evelina* (1778) didn't receive a frontispiece until its fourth edition, and Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) until its fifth.[8] Even Scott didn't see his first illustrated fiction title until 1819, five years after publication of bestselling *Waverley* (1814). Austen's fiction sold perfectly well but not stratospherically well. She could not have expected illustration.[9]

Copyright laws mattered, too. For *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, the copyright would have lasted twenty-eight years, according to an 1814 act. Those novels, published in 1811, 1813, and 1814, saw their copyright expire in 1839, 1841, and 1842. Her last three novels, *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published in 1815 and 1818, set to go out of copyright in 1843 and 1846.[10] But then this latter set of expirations was prevented by another act in 1842. That act extended the copyright of

Emma until 1857 and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* to 1860. Austen's nineteenth-century reputation was shaped by these acts and dates. As one perceptive critic in 1898 put it, in the mouth of a fictional interlocutor, "[Austen's] greatest vogue came when her copyright was expiring. Any publisher who likes can make money out of it."[11]

The moving target of copyright expiration had its greatest impact on Austen in limiting the potential for a collected edition. This curtailed the numbers of illustrations. Before 1833, no single British publisher had the right to make a complete set of Austen titles. After 1833 and until 1860, only one did. Mid-nineteenth-century editions of Austen's novels as single titles, however, turn out to have been far more common than we've previously realized, and some of them were illustrated.[12] Because the Austen copyright situation applied only in Great Britain, it was in new editions abroad that Austen's novels first began to be illustrated, four years after her death. Publishers who printed unauthorized editions abroad did exactly what they liked, allowing for several artists to create frontispieces for French and German editions.

The first illustration to an Austen novel was in a French translation of *Persuasion*, titled *La Famille Elliot* (1821), with its engraved frontispiece by Delvaux, after Charles-Abraham Chasselat (1782–1843), the historical painter and illustrator of Voltaire, Racine, and Molière. Chasselat would go on to create designs for several Austen novels.[13] His illustration of Marianne fainted away in the arms of Willoughby is strikingly similar to his depiction of Josephine's reaction after learning of her divorce from Napoleon, a visual convergence about which much more could be said. But of far greater importance to Austen's legacy were the circumstances that led to her first English illustrator, Ferdinand Pickering, described in the following chapter.