The Making of Jane Austen

Devoney Looser

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Coda

Twenty-First-Century Jane Austen

> While I rejoice in some ways in the Austenizing of modern culture,
> I have to say I worry, sometimes.
>
> —Marjorie Garber, *Quotation Marks* (2003)

There has been a spate of recent popular essays we might simply retitle "Why Jane Austen Is Not Relevant." These pieces regularly engender snarky ripostes that could be titled, "Why Jane Austen Is Still Relevant, or If She Isn't in Your World, She Probably Should Be, and P.S. You Might Have a Higher Respect for My Nerves." It could serve as the sarcastic subtitle of this book. But really, there's no need to get defensive. What this book's chapters collectively show is that, whatever we've thrown at "Jane Austen" by way of slaying her over the course of the past two centuries, it hasn't worked. She has adapted, or, rather, many of us have adapted her, finding in her what best suits us. Her reputation has shifted with the times and with the needs and desires of her multiple audiences. If there is any takeaway message that this book seeks to leave us with, it's that it's ridiculous to wring our hands with worry that zombie movies, female-student-dominated college courses, or Etsy products are ruining Austen's status in the literary canon in the present and for posterity.

I don't mean to discount the understandable feeling that some may have now and again that Jane Austen could stand to be around just *a little bit* less. Any person in her or his right mind experiences occasional fatigue at Mrs. Elton's dialogue being quoted as a nugget of Austenian wisdom or at the umpteenth homage to *Pride and Prejudice* in the form of mommy porn. Please recognize, however, that such moments of fatigue do not signal that Jane Austen's good name is dying. To believe that whatever happens to Austen this year could snuff her out for good ignores the twists-and-turns history of her long-term canonical status and popularity. The next time someone tries to argue as much, reply that Austen's critical and popular legacies have traveled quite well together, thank you very much, for a very long time. To

declare that Jane Austen is on her last legs in the twenty-first century involves investing our own moment with far too much weight and the past with far too little.

Yet that's exactly what a 2015 article that fluttered around social media from Australia, ultimately landing in *Newsweek*, would have us believe. Camilla Nelson's "Is Popularity Killing Jane Austen?" worries that the man who wrote in *Slate* in 2013 that Austen was "overhyped" might be right.[1] She suspects that her female creative writing student who is anxious that others will judge her harshly for loving "rom-com corny" Austen could be onto something. Finally, Nelson suggests that the "gender agenda" working on Austen's image is really to blame, because to have a huge popular following (especially with women, or, God forbid, feminists!) and to be considered a great writer is "something of a paradox" in literary history (n.p.). We saw how that paradox worked out for the suffragists using Jane Austen in the early twentieth century. One can't credit Austen, of course, but women did win the vote.

Austen's literary legacy proves that you can't be both a popular and a highbrow author in the way that Ronald Reagan proves that an actor can't become president. Holding the attention of scholarly and popular audiences alike is precisely what Austen has done through two centuries of images, stages, screens, schools, and soapboxes. I suspect many of us have remained in the dark about these details because the story of Austen's afterlife has thus far been much better told as a literary-critical, rather than a popular culture, story, especially before 1995. It's probably because those of us who are scholars, who care a great deal about such things, have been the ones packaging her story for wider consumption. We've been too focused on repeating and engaging with the words and ideas of our own academic networks—our heroes and nemeses—or on quoting the ideas espoused by our mentors or our mentors' mentors. We've been too little focused on how the specifics of the Austen popular and commercial have intertwined with the Austen critical and scholarly, whether in conflict with each other, oblivious to each other, or in tandem. If attention to her and her writings dies down or dies out over the course of the next generation, it's not likely to be because of those things. It's more likely to be because, in whatever form their successor phenomena take, popular-culture makers decide not to take her there with them.

Each medium considered in this book has an Austenian afterlife that builds on past patterns and practices, extending the histories told in this book up to the present day. In illustrated Austen, for example, the current craze for adult coloring books means that visualizing her and her characters in

drawings is newly hot again. (I say "again" because the *Greer Garson Coloring Book* includes four oversized pages devoted to *Pride and Prejudice* [1940]. In that girls' coloring book, the emphasis in image and caption is entirely on the dresses.[2]) In the spate of new adult coloring books, it's not just the Austen films or manga versions that are inspiring the images. The 1890s Austen illustration craze images are also duplicated, sometimes literally. Their popularity may rest on the fact that they are out of copyright, but it means they are attracting new looks. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice: A Coloring Classic* (2016) puts peacock feathers on its title page, in imitation of the 1894 Peacock edition.[3] *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice Colouring & Activity Book: Featuring Illustrations from 1895* (2015) reprints the Brock brothers' Austen images of that year.[4] *Persuasion: The Coloring Book* (2016) and *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice: The Adult Coloring Book* (2015) both reprint Hugh Thomson's illustrations of the 1890s.[5] *Color and Colorability: An Adult Coloring Book Celebrating the Work of Jane Austen* (2016) takes its images from a smattering of both the Brocks and Thomson.[6] Other coloring books consist of an abundance of Austen quotations, accompanied by floral motifs, echoing what seems to be the current trends in tattoo design. It's intriguing to consider what kinds of effects these images will have on Austen's visual lexicon going forward. It's particularly interesting to consider what it means and will mean to resurrect the Brocks, Thomson, and peacocks from the 1890s into this 2010s format.

The fad for illustrated Austen on the coloring book page is more than matched by the renewal of interest in dramatized Austen. Both amateur and professional stage versions of Austen are experiencing a big comeback. Jane Austen on the stage became hot in the 2010s, with new dramatic adaptations of almost all of her titles, in one form or another. Austen plays were professionally mounted and well received. A *Pride and Prejudice* by writer-producer Simon Reade debuted at the Theatre Royal Bath in 2009 and had a successful run at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in London in 2013, followed by a US production at the Minneapolis Guthrie Theatre. It was headed back to Regent's Park in 2016, touring into 2017. Reade offers a greater focus on the Bennet parents, ending with Mr. Bennet's whisking Mrs. Bennet off to dance, after she voices the novel's famous first line for the play's last.[7] (It's almost as if the ending of that unrealized 1974 screenplay finally had its day.) *Austen's Pride: A New Musical of Pride and Prejudice* by Lindsay Warren Baker and Amanda Jacobs did well in 2015, racking up accolades, awards, and scheduling future productions. In 2014–15, a *Sense and Sensibility* by

playwright-actor Kate Hamill (starring as Marianne Dashwood) had a successful New York run, attracting positive notice and heading for further stages at this writing.

These are just two of the most visible of the new professionally staged Austens. If you include theater of all kinds, the global prevalence of performed Austen is enormous, with hundreds of separate community and school productions per year. We're seeing a rebirth of the tradition that Rosina Filippi set in motion in the 1890s. The theatrical licensing company Samuel French reports handling an astonishing 332 Austen-inspired school and community theater productions from 2012 to 2017, most as full-length plays. The vast majority were for *Pride and Prejudice*. Samuel French also still licenses Helen Jerome's 1935 play, which makes up some unknown number of those performances. According to Samuel French's data, then, it received fees for 2,000 licensed separate performances of dramatized Austen over the course of a nearly five-year period.[8] One playwright, Jon Jory, has completed an edition of dramatized Austen, "the complete works of Jane Austen for the stage" for 2017 publication.[9] When you consider the numbers of actors and audience members who were part of Austen on stages of all kinds in the past several years, the dramatic reach is extensive. What new Austen-inspired messages or patterns might be emerging in these dramatizations, actors, and performances is yet to be determined.

Austen also continues to be a powerhouse figure in schools and curricula. The Open Syllabus Project, using data from a million syllabi worldwide, offers a sense of Austen's popularity in college classrooms from 2005 on: *Pride and Prejudice* is the thirty-eighth-most popular text assigned in English courses.[10] That number might seem low, when you consider that Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* ranks thirty-sixth and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is second. But when you add to that the fact that Jane Austen now has a new college named after her, her educational clout seems formidable. (In America, we'd understand a college of this kind to be an upper-grades high school.) A group of students will now be identifying themselves on applications and resumes of all kinds as graduates of Jane Austen College.

Jane Austen College chose its name with care. Claire Heald, executive principal of the school, reports that it's part of a family of schools in Norwich: Sir Isaac Newton Sixth Form, Jane Austen College, and Charles Darwin Primary. Their names indicate each school's different disciplinary specialism. As Principal Heald reports, "Jane Austen . . . was chosen to be an inspirational role model for our students. In addition, the school's pastoral houses follow

a literary theme: Thackeray, Brontë, Chaucer, Eliot, and Shakespeare. The intention is to inspire, motivate, and instill a love of literature and great writers in our students. It was also important to me that our namesake was a woman, in the interests of equality and diversity. Our core values are independence, scholarship, aspiration, and resilience, and I think Jane Austen embodies those values."[11] Independence, scholarship, and aspiration seem a far cry from the late nineteenth-century study guides' and textbooks' quiet and placid clergyman's daughter version of Austen. It does, however, seem quite close to the suffragists' vision of her. That may suggest that Austen's reputation in schools and among educators is the arena in which she has most changed since the early twentieth century.

If Austen's educational credibility remains high, so does her political clout. She continues to be a lightning rod for debate, quoted and repurposed by people who may otherwise have few opinions in common. To name only the most notable of the recent past: When Austen's face was chosen for the British ten-pound note in 2013, it prompted Austen-related rape and death threats on Twitter, aimed at a feminist activist.[12] The US Supreme Court had what is believed to be its first-ever mention of Jane Austen in its proceedings, when *Pride and Prejudice* was cited in an opinion by the late justice Antonin Scalia, a Ronald Reagan appointee.[13] (Scalia's interest in Austen seems to have been linguistic.) In the summer of 2016, Hillary Clinton's daughter, Chelsea, delivered a speech at the Democratic National Convention in which she revealed that she had fond memories of watching *Pride and Prejudice* with her mother on movie nights.[14] Although the default political option now seems to be to imagine Austen as a liberal or a feminist, Tories and conservatives continue to question those who would claim the author for progressive causes, seeing Austen instead as one of their own.

As a result, I don't worry overmuch about Jane Austen's good reputation going forward. As to its going forward at all, all signs point to yes. I worry more about our ability to study it with the historical nuance and cultural scope it deserves. I worry about our ability to see her beyond the established critical voices and author-celebrities that we've so long cited and repeated. It's incredibly important that we not keep intoning the limiting stories about Austen, her fiction, and her cultural legacy ("She was hesitant to publish!" "Darcy became sexy in 1995!"). It's important that we stop quoting only the most expected, recycled supporting evidence ("Little bit [two-inches wide] of ivory," "Big bow-wow strain," etc.). Doing so means handing down flawed, partial stories to the next generation. Loving Jane Austen didn't once

belong to the privileged few, only to be ruined by having been wrested away by partisan interests or the hoi polloi. The recognition of her greatness didn't begin or "surge" in 1870. There was an awful lot going on for Jane Austen and popular culture prior to the 1990s Austen boom, some of which even made that boom possible. It's only by considering more and better information, whether printed, visual, rare, or archival, that we recognize that Austen's mass popularity, political divisiveness, and high literary reputation aren't on some new collision course. If it is a collision course, it's a very old collision course.

As we've seen, Austen was so oft-staged and illustrated that Henry James worried that commercializing Austen had run amok by 1905. Suffragists marched through the streets of London with an Austen banner in 1908, witnessed by large crowds, in the same period that elite men in nearby private clubs were claiming an Austen who had no connection to politics. Today's Jane Austen societies have not stained her good character by introducing cosplay. People have been dressing up as Austen, on the stage and at society parties, for more than a century. None of these things destroyed her upmarket status. Every previous blow that Jane Austen's reputation has supposedly endured at the hands of popular audiences who would sully her has failed to rub her out. Reports of Jane Austen's posthumous death have been recurrently exaggerated.

But let's suppose I'm wrong, and history proves we're living in the very moment when Jane Austen jumps the shark. I'd have to count myself as part of the problem. As an Austen scholar who team-teaches a Jane Austen course at Arizona State University (with my Austen-scholar husband, a man I met over a conversation on Austen), and as a skater who's played roller derby under the name of Stone Cold Jane Austen, I'm one of those who contributes in my own little way to making her ridiculous.[15] This combination of experiences is preposterous, and I freely acknowledge it. It's absurd that one literary figure could enable and structure so many parts of an adult life, from work, to love, to hobby. It's also very unusual to end a book of argument and information with revelations about oneself. But doing so seems only honest and fair to readers who have come this far with me; I've spent much of this book marshalling literary, historical, and biographical evidence to make sense of Austen's legacy and little-known legacy makers—how their lives and choices may have shaped their productions and our visions of her. Jane Austen, in myriad ways, has made me, too. My sense of that no doubt shapes the questions I've brought to this study and the conclusions I've drawn and

speculations I've made. As Austen's narrator in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) might say, let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. As common sense might say, physician, heal thyself.

But this isn't only personal. It's collective and historical. If past is prologue, no matter what questionable, odd, or innovative things any of us do in her name, Jane Austen's fiction will continue to be noticed, read, and valued beyond, or even because of, outliers and oddballs. What the history of Austen's legacy shows us is that, as long as her fiction morphs in meaningful ways from one fresh popular medium to the next—those very transformations that have been so repeatedly fretted over or decried by the guardians of high culture—she'll probably stick around. As long as cultural innovators and risk takers want to play with her novels and characters, that should breathe new life into her legacy. But rather than end this book with any truth universally acknowledged, I'll riff with this: I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend haughty, highbrow exclusivity or celebrate uncritical adulation.

This page intentionally left blank