The Making of Jane Austen

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JANE AUSTEN, DRAMATIZED

> I shall never again be able to read "Pride and Prejudice" with the old pleasure. And all because of the mania for acting gridirons!
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> —A. B. (Arthur Bingham) Walkley (1901)

JANE AUSTEN TODAY ENJOYS far more viewers than readers. It seems not only likely but probable that most now come by their first impressions of her and her fiction via moving images. Yet few of us are aware that stage adaptations once played a similarly foundational, reputation-altering role, a century and more ago. By the early twentieth century, Austen on the stage was a formidable presence, as well as a source of controversy. Dramatized versions of her fiction—and of her—became trendy, caught up in the era's "mania for acting gridirons," as A. B. Walkley puts it.[1] Thousands came to know Austen not on the page, through text and illustration, but on the stage, whether as audience members or as amateur actors themselves. Austen on the stage has a vigorous, complicated, and storied history, going back at least to the 1890s and lasting well into the film and television era.[2] That history, too, transformed her into a different sort of author, especially for those who first encountered her and her fiction in theatrical performances of all kinds. Dramatizing Austen moved her and her fiction in even more politically progressive directions than illustration had, emphasizing the parts of her novels that celebrated women's independence, particularly from the 1890s to the 1920s. By the 1930s, Austen on the stage also sexed her up, in ways both predictable and surprising.

The influence of dramatized Austen is easiest to grasp at the moment of its greatest popularity and commercial success: the mid-1930s. The stage was so powerful a medium that the first Austen film adaptation even tried to capitalize on its connection to the theater. This is evident in the film's casting. Metro Goldwyn Mayer's *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) chose as its stars two

actors who were proven stage talents: resolute heartthrob Laurence Olivier (Fitzwilliam Darcy) and feisty sweetheart Greer Garson (Elizabeth Bennet). That was a common enough Hollywood move at the time, as the back and forth between stage and screen was frenetic. But promotional materials for the *Pride and Prejudice* film took the stage-movie connection even further. In one set of ads, two authorizing images hover over the fictional couple's heads. The first image is a book jacket cover, discussed in chapter 3. The other is a theater marquee. An early version of MGM's publicity poster reads, "One of the most famous novels . . . One of the most famous plays . . . And now, it will be one of the most famous pictures ever filmed!" The three-minute trailer for the film tweaked it a little: "One of the most famous novels . . . One of the most famous plays ever produced . . . Now, one of the screen's happiest events!"[3]

MGM's self-fulfilling prophecy about its film's road to greatness bore fruit. For the film's 1962 rerelease, its slogan was made into a fait accompli. As a reprise of the publicity poster puts it, this was "one of the most famous novels . . . One of the most famous plays . . . One of the most famous pictures ever filmed!!!" The Austen legacy mapped out in these marketing materials is perfectly clear: first book, then stage, and now film. It's clever Hollywood advertising ("You enjoyed X and Y, so now enjoy Z!"), but it's also a fascinating claim. *Pride and Prejudice* could once have been understood not just as a famous book or as a landmark film but as *one of the most famous plays*. Who among us today imagines *Pride and Prejudice* as having been a famous play? Yet, after 1935, it was.

This matters for many reasons, some of which lead us directly to Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy in the landmark BBC TV series *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). Firth has indicated that, when considering whether to accept the role of Mr. Darcy, he was at first intimidated at the prospect of trying to supplant Laurence Olivier's portrayal of the character.[4] Olivier was one of the great actors of his day—or any day—and he influenced all of the film and TV Darcys who came after him. Firth's Darcy shows evidence of a debt to Olivier in dress, demeanor, and expression. But we rarely recognize that Olivier's portrayal of Darcy wasn't invented out of Austen's original novel alone. It also emerged from previous stage portrayals. Olivier, the film's screenwriters, the producer, and the director would have had stage-actor predecessors in mind as they put Mr. Darcy in scripts and on film. Olivier's performance owes its screen success not only to his striking looks and matchless acting but to the versions of the character as he was played in Helen Jerome's

Broadway and West End hit, *Pride and Prejudice* (1935–36). Jerome's play, officially credited as the film's progenitor, was that most famous of plays referred to on the publicity poster. Jerome's *Pride and Prejudice* laid the groundwork for the infamous wet-white-shirt Firth-Darcy sixty years on. It's not farfetched to suggest that it all started on the stage.[5]

Austen's novels came to the stage much later than those of her most successful contemporaries and rivals, authors such as Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë. Dramatic adaptations of Scott's Waverley novels, nearly everything by Dickens, and Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) were mounted on professional stages almost immediately after their first publications. Scott expressed no interest in dramatizing his own work, but others knew an opportunity when they saw one. Dramatists attempted stage adaptations of Scott's fiction with lightning speed. Thomas Dibdin is said to have completed his dramatization of Scott's *Kenilworth* (1821) in just two days, yet another stage version was mounted before his.[6] More than 20 dramatizations of Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) were published in the nineteenth century.[7] At least 40 versions of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* were staged in the 1880s.[8] Provisional counts of the average annual dramatic productions of nineteenth-century novels make one thing clear: Scott dominated the scene. *Rob Roy* averaged 12.2 per year, making it "the most frequently dramatized novel of all time" (Bolton xx). *Guy Mannering* was just behind it with 10.8. Dickens was staged half as often. *Oliver Twist* averaged 4.3 per year, and *Nicholas Nickelby* 3.4. The rate for *Jane Eyre* was 1.5, with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* close behind it, at 1.4 productions averaged per year (xviii).[9] Jane Austen's fiction was absent. In the nineteenth-century fiction-to-stage boom, her novels appear to have been entirely passed over until 1895. That may seem to coincide with her fiction's slow growth to acclaim, but something more was going on, too.

We know this because many famous women authors, like Austen, experienced a dramatic emergence or resurgence in the early twentieth century. Previously collected provisional data from the book *Women Writers Dramatized* offers a snapshot of how Austen's dramatic legacy compared with fellow female novelists. Both Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–53) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) joined *Pride and Prejudice* in getting a slow start, with "virtually no nineteenth-century dramatizations" (Bolton 95). It wasn't until after *Wuthering Heights* appeared on film in 1939 that it experienced its first stage transformation. *Cranford*, however, followed the same path to the stage as *Pride and*

Prejudice, with dramatizations emerging at the turn of the century (206). No doubt the skyrocketing popularity of both titles in the 1890s book illustration craze spurred on new stage versions. Unlike Austen, however, Gaskell earlier enjoyed novel-to-stage success with her *Mary Barton* (1848), dramatized on the heels of its first publication. Even George Eliot, who objected to stage adaptation of her work in general, saw her novels translated to the theater, with *Adam Bede* (1859) appearing in 1862 and 1884 and *Silas Marner* (1863) in 1871, 1876, and 1881 (200–11). Then Eliot's fiction, like Austen's, experienced a dramatic resurgence in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Staging Austen wasn't just an idea long overlooked. Some believed her fiction not only shouldn't but couldn't be put on the stage. It's evident in the remarks of Catherine J. Hamilton (b. 1841), who discusses the subject in print in 1892—just three years before the first dramatization of Austen was published. Hamilton writes, unequivocally and erroneously, "Not one of [Austen's] novels could possibly be dramatised."[10] Two years later, George Saintsbury—in his preface to the Hugh Thomson–illustrated Peacock edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (1894)—echoes the sentiment in part: "I do not know whether the all-grasping hand of the playwright has ever been laid upon *Pride and Prejudice*; and I dare say that, if it were, the situations would prove not startling or garish enough for the footlights, the character-scheme too subtle and delicate for pit and gallery."[11] Still, Saintsbury doesn't deny the *possibility* of Austen's fiction on the stage or doom any attempt to total failure. "If the attempt were made," he writes, "it would certainly not be hampered by any of that looseness of construction, which, sometimes disguised by the conveniences of which the novelist can avail himself, appear at once on the stage" (xii).

Attempts were made. Dramatic adaptations of Austen began to appear in modest numbers in the 1890s and early 1900s, in both Great Britain and the United States. By 1975, there were at least fifty published plays based on Austen's fiction.[12] The first were designed for the amateur actor and became fashionable, long before they experienced professional stage acclaim. It's an order of dramatic appearance that is highly significant. One scholar dismisses these early Austen plays as "trifling attempts . . . apparently intended only for the schoolroom" (Gilson, *Bibliography* 405).[13] But whether considered trifling as works of art or not, these plays were significant because of where and by whom they were performed. Early Austen plays (often short scenes, rather than full-length adaptations) served as tools of educa-

tion, especially for young women. These schoolroom and amateur plays were bellwethers of Austen's growing cultural consequence, of how the old was being made new. They set the stage, as it were, for the full-length plays that appeared afterward. Whether designed for amateur or professional performance, these plays created new understandings of Austen and her texts that resonate to this day.

It's especially odd that scholars have disregarded Austen dramatizations, because most now believe that she herself adapted a novel for the stage: a version of Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54). That text, *Jane Austen's Sir Charles Grandison* (1980), was first edited by Austen critic B. C. Southam, who argues, contra family legend, that the play is by Austen herself, not by her niece Anna Austen Lefroy. Everyone agrees that the play is in Jane Austen's handwriting. The question is whether the composition is her own. The five-act play does not resemble the short dramatic burlesques of Austen's juvenilia. It is "over fifty pages long" (albeit on small paper) and "bears the stamp of an adult mind," rather than a child's, which is what Anna Austen would have been at the time of her supposed authorship.[14] There are other reasons to suppose the play Jane Austen's. The Austens had "a long tradition of family theatricals," including putting on Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) when Jane was nine and "a number of later productions" (Southam, introduction 13). Knowing this, we might see portions of her fiction as incorporating the conventions of stage direction, as Joseph Roach has argued.[15] But there is no evidence that she dramatized her own works of fiction.

That sort of effort would begin nearly a century later. The most significant dramatic innovator of Austen, Rosina Filippi (1866–1930), is the subject of chapter 4. Filippi was a pioneering actor, director, writer, and teacher who repurposed Austen for the stage for "every cultivated amateur," through seven short scenes in dialogue—what she called "duologues."[16] Duologue was a fashionable term that had been around since the 1860s, although it seems to have experienced renewed vogue in the 1890s. Filippi's contributions to the genre, published in 1895, were meant to be staged simply and without scenery—no stage, proscenium, footlights, or curtain. A spare approach meant that almost anywhere could be turned into an Austen performance space. Filippi argued that her scenes were complete in themselves, but they were also excerpts that served to amplify selected characters and moments of the plot. These short plays presented Austen as the author of material that emphasized—and celebrated—female domestic protest. Filippi, and those

who came after her, shaped the ways in which Austen's fiction was learned by young people, and young women especially, for decades. Untold thousands of students and young women would have voiced, or heard voiced, three-dimensional Elizabeth Bennets recast on stage as agreeable, quasi-feminist role models.

As Austen adaptations arrived in the professional theater, new patterns of representation and meaning arrived, too. In chapter 5, I follow one iconic character as he appeared on stage: *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Darcy. Several decades of the dramatization of Austen's most famous hero provide a window onto how stage adaptations changed the extent and kind of emphasis on Darcy versus Elizabeth over time. I focus on the actor-Darcys of the 1890s to the 1930s, including one who approached him as a Dickens hero, another who took the stage at a surprisingly advanced age, and the little-known amateur female Darcys. Decades of playwrights, directors, and actor-Darcys paved the way for Laurence Olivier's star turn for MGM's film.

Austen's legacy in the theater wasn't all about Elizabeth and Darcy, as I show in chapter 6. Another important milestone in the history of staging Austen is the first full-length biographical play based on her life, which opened at New York's famed Civic Repertory Theater in 1932. With fewer than a dozen performances, the play wasn't a success in theatrical terms, but it fascinates in every other way. Written by Eleanor Holmes Hinkley, first cousin of modernist poet T. S. Eliot, the play *Dear Jane* (1919) has never been published and is rarely given more than a mention in Austen studies. Copies of it survive, however, inviting an extended analysis. *Dear Jane* depicts its subject as both a dedicated writer and an unrepentant flirt. Austen was dramatized as a flapper, a figure night-and-day different from the Christian spinster and old-maiden aunt put forward by early biographies. Hinkley's Jane entertains a series of suitors, before choosing to throw them all over to commit to a life of writing with her sister.

The play itself is interesting, but its little-known performance history is stunning. The first known actors to play Cassandra and Jane Austen in *Dear Jane* in 1932 were themselves an off-stage romantic couple. Cassandra was played by acclaimed director and actor Eva Le Gallienne. Leading lady Josephine Hutchinson, recently divorced from her first husband, played Jane Austen. Le Gallienne and Hutchinson's romantic relationship adds a crucial chapter to the history of Austen and queer studies. Examining *Dear Jane*'s unpublished script in conversation with its history of performance changes how we understand the female-intimacy and marriage-rejecting

elements of Hinkley's play. That the first two women known to portray Jane and Cassandra on stage were publicly outed as lovers contributed to critics' mixed response to *Dear Jane*. It also paved the way for Helen Jerome's hyperheterosexualized stage version of *Pride and Prejudice* (1935).

After MGM optioned Jerome's play for film, it needed to come up with its Hollywood screenplay. MGM turned from one screenwriter to another, producing one rejected script after another. These unrealized 1930s scripts are the subject of chapter 7, offering us a wider window onto how Austen was being reimagined as a potentially hot Hollywood property. Each screenwriter or set of writers tried to update Austen's plot and characters, to broaden their appeal to moviegoing audiences. Whether proposing the use of Western-movie style scenes with guns and dogs, or suggesting broad comedy with Elizabeth falling into a mud puddle, or adding smallpox, masquerade balls, and dog-monkey fights, screenwriters grasped at straws. They tried to make Austen's original story more humorous, thrilling, and contemporary. Their ideas never saw the light of day. But their failed efforts reveal where Austen was then envisioned by pop-culture makers as falling dramatically short.

MGM's film was not the end of Jerome's dramatization of Austen on the professional stage. Two decades after it was translated to the screen, Jerome's play inspired a Broadway musical flop, *First Impressions* (1959), by Abe Burrows of *Guys and Dolls* fame. Jerome's play and the MGM screenplay also inspired a never-made Universal television film project in 1974. Each playscript had its innovations and its own visions and versions of Austen, but both were also derivative of dramatizations. We've so overvalued telling the history of Austen adaptation on screen that we've missed the signal ways in which professional and amateur stages paved the way for them. As Austen on stage once again proliferates in the early twenty-first century, we ought to recognize that it's a dramatic resurgence, not an emergence.

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