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DIEGO SAGLIA

**AUSTEN IN THE SECOND DEGREE:  
QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES**

The three categories in the subtitle of this special issue hold an undeniably central place in present-day Austen studies. Quotation, intertextuality and rewriting – deeply rooted in Austen’s fiction – also characterize the relentless proliferation of offshoots and by-products which her writings and *persona* continue to generate. ‘Purloined words’ are indeed intrinsic to the texture of Austen’s novels and a familiar field of analysis for critics who have traditionally busied themselves with chasing allusions and references, throwing into relief the various kinds of intertextual relations within her output. In addition, quotation, intertextuality and rewriting have become unprecedentedly visible as part of the panoply of strategies available to contemporary rewritings and reinventions of Austen. In other words, a solid, if problematic, line connects Austen’s practices of re-making other authors with those of contemporary authors and other cultural producers, such as script-writers and directors, re-making Austen.

Though nothing new in itself, the current phenomenon of reinventing the novelist and her works stands out for its ceaseless pace, cultural pervasiveness and sheer volume. Such features can make contemporary Austenmania more than occasionally irksome, as well as inspiring dismissals of its products as opportunistic and superficial; and yet, many of its manifestations present fascinatingly self-conscious and self-critical facets which cast them as intriguing objects for cultural consumption and analysis. Take, for instance, the TV series *Lost in Austen* (2008) or the novel-film *Austenland*.<sup>1</sup> These reinterpretations blur the boundary between fiction and reality in order to bring the more alert readers and viewers to ponder the constructedness of the work they are experiencing, of Austen's narrative universe and, more broadly, of the ever expanding dimension of 'all things Austen'. Contemporary *Austenland* is located at the meeting point of originality and derivation, authenticity and fabrication. On the one hand, it implies a desire to identify and own the real Austen; on the other, an unstoppable production and consumption of more or less convincing and satisfying Austens 'in the second degree'.<sup>2</sup> And, while this issue generally addresses Austen's ambivalent positioning in contemporary culture, the question of authenticity is specifically explored in Maddalena Pennacchia's contribution on *Austenland*, where she considers the real and symbolic *locus* of the theme park in order to show how the novel and film promote a critical reflection on the fabricated nature of contemporary Austen universes and their power of seduction over readers and fans.

Current reprises of Austen seem to have reached a peak of postmodern self-consciousness and transnational success thanks to the

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Zeff, *Lost in Austen*, Mammoth Screen, UK, 2008; S. Hale, *Austenland*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2007 and J. Hess, *Austenland*, Fickle Fish Films – Moxie Pictures, UK - USA, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Genette, *Palimpsests. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.

mash-up phenomenon. The film adaptation of Seth Grahame-Smith's novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was released in 2016, spreading further the popularity of one of the most viscerally adored but also denigrated Austen offshoots of recent years.<sup>3</sup> Associated with fiction thanks to Grahame-Smith's novel and Ben H. Winter's *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*,<sup>4</sup> the Austen mash-up has now taken global screens by storm. Though it remains to be seen if the film directed by Burr Steers will eventually become an influential reinvention of Austen, the amount of attention it has received confirms that, now more than ever, Austenland is teeming with constantly mutating forms of second degree derivations. Indeed, we could almost say that we are in the presence of an unstoppably mutant Austen. And yet, this novel-film pairing also demonstrates how, as Serena Baiesi contends in her essay, even the most seemingly unpromising derivations never completely sever the link to Austen's text. As Baiesi suggests, Grahame-Smith's work is indebted to *Pride and Prejudice* not merely because it replicates its narrative arc and reproduces entire portions of it, but also, and much more interestingly, because it reworks and updates problems and addresses questions of economy, race, class and gender that are both central to Austen's canon and relevant to the anxieties and concerns of a twenty-first century reader.

As to quotation, intertextuality and rewriting within Austen's work, we need look no further than *Pride and Prejudice* itself, the title of which re-echoes the final chapter of Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782). Entitled *A Termination*, this chapter repeatedly conjoins the two terms to provide a concluding moral to Burney's cautionary tale. As one of the characters

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<sup>3</sup> See J. Austen and S. Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Philadelphia, Quirk Books 2009 and B. Steers, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Cross Creek Pictures – Sierra Pictures, USA – UK, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Austen and B. H. Winter, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, Philadelphia, Quirk Books, 2009.

declares: “The whole unfortunate business [...] has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE”.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing this conceptual pairing, in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen switches its position from Burney’s finale to the starting point of her own narrative, making it the cornerstone of her finely nuanced study of the complexities of human relationships. Moreover, instead of narrating an “unfortunate business”, Austen develops her work through comic and comedic registers that have ensured its status as one of the most beloved classics of English-language as well as world literature. To be sure, critics tend to disagree over whether Austen successfully managed to rewrite and “subvert” Burney.<sup>6</sup> However, even such interpretative disputes serve to confirm the significance of Austen’s borrowings and reinventions together with the mirror games they play with specific works and narrative modes such as the contrast novel, the moral-domestic tale, the regional or the national tale, to name but a few. Quotation, intertextuality and rewriting are another crucial facet of Austen as a “determined author”.<sup>7</sup>

If intertextual moments in *Pride and Prejudice* are fairly well known, the opening essays in this issue address less familiar forms of citation in Austen’s fiction. Edward Copeland offers an exploration of Austen’s practice of appropriation and strategic deployment of contemporary popular fiction, before assessing similar appropriations of Austen by ‘silver fork’ novelists of the 1820s and 1830s. Carlotta Farese, in turn, expands the connection between *Mansfield Park* and Elizabeth

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<sup>5</sup> F. Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, Edited by P. Sabor and M. A. Doody, With an Introduction by M. A. Doody, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 930.

<sup>6</sup> M. Waldron, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> A. Mandal, *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel: The Determined Author*, Basingstoke – New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* as well as including the latter's novel *A Simple Story*, in order to reconstruct a triangular relationship that illuminates Austen's engagement with her sources as a way of questioning and revising the aesthetic features and ideological import of different genres.

Perhaps inevitably, a significant number of essays focuses on *Pride and Prejudice*. As Austen's most celebrated and best-known novel, it is still the main point of access to her production for many readers and the most frequently reworked and adapted text in her canon. If its constantly multiplying reprises defy any attempt at critical mapping,<sup>8</sup> a significant portion of this issue addresses a selection of the most compelling among the latest productions in this fertile region of Austenland. Massimiliano Morini analyzes Ang Lee's 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* and Joe Wright's 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, parsing their opening scenes in order to focus on the mechanisms of selection and exclusion of narrative-dialogic elements in the transition from novel to film, as well as the textual organization of these sequences and their (re)creation of meaning in collaboration, as well as in competition, with the source text. As indicated above, Serena Baiesi examines Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride Prejudice and Zombies* and its reworking of some of the distinctive themes and ideological concerns in Austen's fiction. Looking at another prominent rewriting of recent years, Paola Partenza offers a detailed analysis of P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), a combination of the novel of manners and sentiment, the psychological tale and detective fiction that, focusing on a murder in the woods near Darcy's and Elizabeth's home, reinterprets the significance of the enigmas and mysteries in Austen's narrative universe. Eleonora Capra, instead, considers the textual peculiarities of an Italian rewriting of

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<sup>8</sup> See J. Todd, *Preface*, in *The Cambridge Companion to "Pride and Prejudice"*, edited by J. Todd, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. XV.

*Pride and Prejudice*, P. R. Moore-Dewey's *Pregiudizio e orgoglio* (2012), which include its adoption of Darcy's viewpoint and an intricate intertextual web combining Austen with a variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English-language novelists. Finally, Olivia Murphy examines Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2014) as exemplifying a postmodern reinvention of a familiar work from a perspective that was either sidelined or absent in the original, in this case that of the Bennets' servants and Elizabeth's maid in particular. For Murphy, Baker's engagement with *Pride and Prejudice* constitutes a powerful way of rethinking and problematizing Austen's much-loved (and, for this critic, also much abused) "darling child".<sup>9</sup>

Put succinctly, a major portion of this issue explores contemporary manifestations of Austen's "textual lives",<sup>10</sup> a phrase that is particularly relevant because it stresses the textual component underlying the countless artefacts and products that make up contemporary Austenland. On the one hand, it is undeniable that "Austen's success as an infinitely exploitable global brand, or conceptual product, is everything to do with recognition and little to do with reading".<sup>11</sup> And yet, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that Austen's writing lies at the basis of this process of infinite exploitation and we must always return to it when examining its products, offshoots and effects.

A particularly multifaceted phenomenon when envisaged from the standpoint of remediation, Austen 'in the second degree' may be seen to comprise the two principal meanings assigned to this term – the

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<sup>9</sup> J. Austen, *Letters*, Collected and Edited by D. Le Faye, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 201 (letter to Cassandra Austen, 29 January 1813).

<sup>10</sup> K. Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> C. Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, Edinburgh – London – New York – Melbourne, Canongate, 2009, p. 3.

transposition and re-making of a text from one medium to another, and the translation of a text from a less to a more technologically advanced medium according to a mechanism of supersession and improvement.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, because of its complexity and scope, the phenomenon of Austen ‘in the second degree’ also requires us to ask why Austen of all writers; why now, at the turn of the twenty-first century; and why in so many different forms and repeatedly remediated formats. Indeed, it is evident that the current burgeoning of quotation, intertextuality and rewriting of Austen is as much to do with her output as with ourselves, so that another central question might be: what is there in our culture, intended as a simultaneously local and global construct, that urges us to produce and consume Austen ‘in the second degree’? A provocatively straightforward answer is that “the main reason for Austen’s mass popularity is the one from which critics tend to avert their eyes: the love stories”.<sup>13</sup> This is also the reason why so many Austen by-products tend to be disappointingly repetitive. Yet, in order to account for more challenging and groundbreaking reinventions and remediations, we may perhaps take a different approach: a possible answer may lie in the fact that, in novel after novel, Jane Austen “elaborated, explored, and riffed on the play of opposites, generating variations”.<sup>14</sup> If Austen’s narratives are grounded in a clash of contrasting views, concepts and identities, this may be precisely where their capacity to “generate variation” resides. In this fashion, we return once again to the crucial point that, even when it seems most unlikely, Austenland is still centred in and draws upon Austen’s texts.

In the final analysis, we may have to resign ourselves to the

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<sup>12</sup> See J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (Mass.) – London, MIT Press, 1999, pp. 44-50.

<sup>13</sup> C. Harman, *Jane’s Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, cit., p. 246.

<sup>14</sup> R. M. Brownstein, *Why Jane Austen?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 9.

impossibility of finding any satisfactory and definitive answers to these questions. Just as we will presumably continue to read and re-read Austen, so the question ‘why Austen?’ is destined to re-emerge endlessly, together with its corollary: why has Austen ended up joining Shakespeare as tutelary godhead of English-language literature worldwide? The best proof of what still vaguely feels like canonical sacrilege is that both authors are currently caught up in processes of rewriting as updating occasioned by their respective anniversaries. Austen’s novels are being recast as part of *The Austen Project: Jane Austen Re-imagined*, in which six modern authors rewrite her six complete works by transposing period details and language to a contemporary context. In her essay for this issue, Penny Gay examines this series (currently including Joanna Trollope’s *Sense and Sensibility*, 2013; Val McDermid’s *Northanger Abbey*, 2014; and Alexander McCall Smith’s *Emma*, 2015) in order to identify its position and impact in the current panorama of Austen derivations and, more specifically, to evaluate the technical challenges posed by creating an adaptation in the same genre as its source. Significantly, something similar is happening to Shakespeare thanks to the *Hogarth Shakespeare* project that, as its official website announces, “sees Shakespeare’s works retold by acclaimed and bestselling novelists of today”,<sup>15</sup> starting from Jeanette Winterson’s rewriting of *The Winter’s Tale* as *The Gap of Time* (2015).<sup>16</sup>

This mutable and expanding panorama confirms that Austen has achieved the status of free-floating global cultural currency; and, for better or worse, scholars and critics have come to confront this process and to accept that no one has a monopoly over the author, her output, their aura

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<sup>15</sup> *Hogarth Shakespeare*, web address [www.crownpublishing.com/hogarth-shakespeare](http://www.crownpublishing.com/hogarth-shakespeare).

<sup>16</sup> See J. Winterson, *The Gap of Time*, London – New York, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2015.

and resonance:

“If Dr. Johnson [...] was correct in opining that the purpose of literature was to help us better to enjoy or endure life, then we must be glad [...] that ‘Jane’ is ‘theirs’, ‘yours’, and ‘ours, after all.’”<sup>17</sup>

The essays that follow consider this intricate phenomenon by looking at forms of intertextuality, quotation, rewriting and remediation within Austen’s works, as well as in subsequent reformulations and reinventions, the latter roughly comprised between the epoch-making BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and the present. The international cast of authors ensures a broader focus than one exclusively centred in the Anglo-American academic tradition or merely concerned with English-language literary and filmic works, thus probing further into the current status of Austen as “part of today’s multinational, multilingual, multicultural single currency”.<sup>18</sup> Fully aware of the daunting scale of Austenland, these essays are representative of the degree of attention currently given by critics to Austen’s pervasiveness on the page, on various types of screen, and on the shelves of souvenir and gadget shops. Ultimately, this issue of “Parole Rubate / Purloined Letters” contends that it is this attention that enables us to discover new cultural artefacts such as novels, films and digital objects, which may prove just as challenging, enriching and entertaining as Austen’s works. As we continue to confront the multiple mutations of Austen’s cults and cultures and metamorphoses of Austenland, these artefacts are the best evidence of an ongoing, genuinely productive and transformative legacy.

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<sup>17</sup> C. L. Johnson, *Austen Cults and Cultures*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Edited by E. Copeland and J. McMaster, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 224.

<sup>18</sup> C. Harman, *Jane’s Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, cit., p. 2.



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