

PAROLE RUBATE

RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE
DI STUDI SULLA CITAZIONE



PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

Rivista semestrale online / Biannual online journal

<http://www.parolerubate.unipr.it>

Fascicolo n. 16 / Issue no. 16

Dicembre 2017 / December 2017

Direttore / Editor

Rinaldo Rinaldi (Università di Parma)

Comitato scientifico / Research Committee

Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini (Università di Parma)

Dominique Budor (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III)

Roberto Greci (Università di Parma)

Heinz Hofmann (Universität Tübingen)

Bert W. Meijer (Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Instituut Firenze / Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht)

María de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz (Universitat de Barcelona)

Diego Saglia (Università di Parma)

Francesco Spera (Università Statale di Milano)

Segreteria di redazione / Editorial Staff

Maria Elena Capitani (Università di Parma)

Nicola Catelli (Università di Parma)

Chiara Rolli (Università di Parma)

Esperti esterni (fascicolo n. 16) / External referees (issue no. 16)

Gioia Angeletti (Università di Parma)

Franca Dellarosa (Università di Bari Aldo Moro)

Gillian Dow (University of Southampton)

Michael C. Gamer (University of Pennsylvania)

Michele Guerra (Università di Parma)

Francesco Marroni (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)

Liana Nissim (Università Statale di Milano)

Francesca Saggini (Università della Tuscia – Viterbo)

Anna Enrichetta Soccio (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)

Enrica Villari (Università Ca’ Foscari, Venezia)

Angela Wright (University of Sheffield)

Progetto grafico / Graphic design

Jelena Radojev (Università di Parma) †

Direttore responsabile: Rinaldo Rinaldi

Autorizzazione Tribunale di Parma n. 14 del 27 maggio 2010

© Copyright 2017 – ISSN: 2039-0114

INDEX / CONTENTS

Special Jane Austen

AUSTEN RE-MAKING AND RE-MADE.
QUOTATION, INTERTEXTUALITY AND REWRITING

Editors Eleonora Capra and Diego Saglia

<i>Austen in the Second Degree: Questions and Challenges</i> DIEGO SAGLIA (Università di Parma)	3-11
<i>The Anonymous Jane Austen: Duelling Canons</i> EDWARD COPELAND (Pomona College – Claremont)	13-39
<i>“Comedy in its Worst Form”? Seduced and Seductive Heroines in “A Simple Story”, “Lover’s Vows”, and “Mansfield Park”</i> CARLOTTA FARESE (Università di Bologna)	41-56
<i>Bits of Ivory on the Silver Screen: Austen in Multimodal Quotation and Translation</i> MASSIMILIANO MORINI (Università di Urbino Carlo Bo)	57-81
<i>Remediating Jane Austen through the Gothic: “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies”</i> SERENA BAIESI (Università di Bologna)	83-99
<i>Revisiting “Pride and Prejudice”: P. D. James’s “Death Comes to Pemberley”</i> PAOLA PARTENZA (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)	101-122
<i>P. R. Moore-Dewey’s “Pregiudizio e Orgoglio”: An Italian Remake of Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”</i> ELEONORA CAPRA (Università di Parma)	123-142
<i>Recreating Jane: “Austenland” and the Regency Theme Park</i> MADDALENA PENNACCHIA (Università di Roma Tre)	143-154
<i>Writing in the Shadow of “Pride and Prejudice”: Jo Baker’s “Longbourn”</i> OLIVIA MURPHY (Murdoch University – Perth)	155-169
<i>Reading the Austen Project</i> PENNY GAY (University of Sydney)	171-193

MATERIALI/ MATERIALS

- James Frazer, il cinema e “The Most Dangerous Game”*
DOMITILLA CAMPANILE (Università di Pisa) 197-208
- Jeux et enjeux intertextuels dans “Le Soleil ni la mort
ne peuvent se regarder en face” de Wajdi Mouawad*
SIMONETTA VALENTI (Università di Parma) 209-233
- Re-membering the Bard : David Greig’s and Liz Lochhead’s
Re-visionary Reminiscences of “The Tempest”*
MARIA ELENA CAPITANI (Università di Parma) 235-250

LIBRI DI LIBRI / BOOKS OF BOOKS

- [recensione – review] *‘Open access’ e scienze umane. Note su diffusione
e percezione delle riviste in area umanistica*, a cura di Luca Scalco,
Milano, Ledizioni, 2016
ALBERTO SALARELLI 253-257



OLIVIA MURPHY

WRITING IN THE SHADOW OF “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE”: JO BAKER’S “LONGBOURN”

The afterlives, adaptations and adulterations of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, first published in 1813, are legion. They vary enormously in degree of popularity, quality, plausibility and – one might argue – sanity. Before beginning this paper (in January 2015) I made a cursory investigation of the most recent *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations listed on Amazon’s website. The new year had already ushered in *Steady to His Purpose: A Pride and Prejudice Variation* by the suspiciously Austenian-sounding Cassandra B. Leigh,¹ *Untamed and Unabashed: Lydia Bennet’s Story* by Liza O’Connor² and *Pemberley Lake: A Pride and Prejudice Novella* by Dona Lewis, with the daunting series title of *The Pemberley*

¹ See C. B. Leigh, *Steady to His Purpose: A Pride and Prejudice Variation*, Amazon Media, 2015, web address <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Steady-His-Purpose-Variation-Prejudice-ebook/dp/B00S33RJQO>.

² See L. O’Connor, *Untamed and Unabashed: Lydia Bennet’s Story*, New Authors Online, 2015, web address <https://www.amazon.com/Untamed-Unabashed-Lydia-Bennets-Story-ebook/dp/B00S481WGQ>.

Assignations, Book I.³ I made it as far back in the catalogue as November 2014, at which point I was brought up short by *Mr Darcy's Dog Ruminates: "Pride and Prejudice" through the Eyes of Julius Caesar, Darcy's Dog* by Y. M. Whitehead.⁴

Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013) sits very awkwardly amidst this dubious company of unauthorizable sequels, variations, and pornographic vignettes. The novel is better understood as participating in a postmodern tradition of critically inflected re-writing of canonical texts, whose best known examples are Jean Rhys's imagined 'backstory' for *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Rochester, *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Maxwell Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), in which characters from Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* and *Robinson Crusoe* share an island and a narrative. And yet: in *Foe* and *The Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader is asked to re-encounter characters already well-known (at least by reputation), to imagine other interpretations of their histories as originally presented by their creators. *Longbourn* requires of its readers something very different, in asking them to engage imaginatively with the lives of characters that the source text, *Pride and Prejudice*, almost entirely overlooks. The central characters of *Longbourn* are little more than names in *Pride and Prejudice*, and unmemorable names at that: Sarah, Mrs Hill. More often than not, they are known not by any name at all, but by function only. They are the housekeeper, the footman, the butler, and the maid.

³ See D. Lewis, *Pemberley Lake: A Pride and Prejudice Novella (The Pemberley Assignations, Book I)*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, web address <https://www.amazon.com/Pemberley-Lake-Prejudice-Novella-Assignations/dp/1505893682>.

⁴ See Y. M. Whitehead, *Mr Darcy's Dog Ruminates: 'Pride and Prejudice' through the Eyes of Julius Caesar, Darcy's Dog*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014, web address <https://www.amazon.com/Mr-Darcys-dog-ruminates-Prejudice/dp/1503065456>. A dog, even one named Julius Caesar, is of course anatomically incapable of rumination.

This last, the housemaid Sarah, is the heroine of *Longbourn*. As the novel shadows the plot of its source text so too does Sarah, in some respects, shadow her mistress Elizabeth Bennet. I mean this literally, in that Sarah accompanies Elizabeth to London and Kent, and eventually to Darcy's estate Pemberley. There are also many more subtle ways, however, in which Baker's heroine functions as a foil, a shadow, to Austen's:

"Skirts rustling, Elizabeth moved towards the dressing table, to see herself in the mirror there. Sarah followed her, smoothed the dress's yoke onto china collarbones, using only her left hand, so as not to risk staining the muslin. On the right, a blister had burst and was weeping.

'You look very lovely, Miss Elizabeth.'

'All your hard work, Sarah, dear.'"⁵

It is Sarah's hard work, and the equally hard work of the other three Longbourn servants, that provides the central motif of the novel. Sarah's life is one of unpleasant and unremitting labour, from hauling well-water and lighting fires hours before dawn, to emptying chamber pots and scrubbing filthy underclothing, to rendering pig fat for soap and curling ladies' hair with fire-heated tongs. This work is invisible in *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel that, as is customary with Austen's writing, offers very little in the way of description and rarely refers to any but the most trivial domestic activity.

This is arguably a function of Austen's stylistic choices: many contemporary novelists employ far greater levels of detailed specificity without achieving Austen's reputation for realism. Perhaps less understandably, such labour is equally invisible in most mainstream reception and adaptation of Austen's work, that nevertheless begins from the assumption that Austen's novels require us to imagine her characters

⁵ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, London, Doubleday, 2013, p. 59.

“as actual beings”, and their histories as, somehow, historic.⁶ This is no recent phenomenon: Austen herself recorded that one early reader of *Emma* (1815) was “convinced that I had meant M^{rs} & Miss Bates for some acquaintance of theirs — People whom I never heard of before”.⁷ Imagining the characters and actions of *Pride and Prejudice* as somehow ‘real’ leads implicitly in *Longbourn* to inferences of *how* those real lives might be lived. The comment in *Pride and Prejudice* that the “shoe-roses” for the Bennets to wear to the ball at Netherfield “were got by proxy”⁸ becomes, in *Longbourn*, a miserable and rather dangerous mission for Sarah, “a slow, reluctant trudge”⁹ to Meryton that leaves her soaked to the skin and covered in mud. By contrast, the notes to the heavily annotated Cambridge University Press edition of the novels give a definition for “shoe-roses” but offer no suggestion as to what “got by proxy” might mean in this context.¹⁰ *Longbourn*’s attention to this imagined – and nevertheless perfectly historic – detail of Regency existence is superficially its greatest strength. It is what sets it apart, not only from Austen’s original but also from other literary and filmic adaptations of the novel. Joe Wright’s 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, with its peripatetic sow and swampy courtyard, showed Longbourn as a working farm in a clear attempt to create an atmosphere distinct from the elegant Augustan prettiness of the 1995 BBC television series.¹¹ Wright’s film, the miniseries *Lost in Austen* (2008) and the ‘reality’ television series *Regency House Party* (2004)

⁶ J. Wiltshire, *The Hidden Jane Austen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. IX.

⁷ J. Austen, “*Opinions of Emma*”, in Id., *Later Manuscripts*, edited by J. Todd and L. Bree, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 237.

⁸ Id., *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by P. Rogers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 98 (I, 17).

⁹ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 132.

¹⁰ See J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 490.

¹¹ See J. Wright, *Pride and Prejudice*, StudioCanal – Working Title Films – Focus Features, UK, 2005 and S. Langton, *Pride and Prejudice*, BBC, UK, 2005.

approach, perhaps, closer than most other Austeniana to discussions of the messy practicalities of life in the early nineteenth century, but they fall far short of *Longbourn*'s often literally visceral realism.¹²

The reader's introduction to Sarah is on washing day, where she must scrub the famous mud off Elizabeth Bennet's petticoats. There are also the bloody napkins of five young women to boil in the copper, along with the more heavily soiled (because harder used and less often changed) clothes of the servants themselves. Just as in *Pride and Prejudice* the reader is first introduced to the Bennet family via dialogue, so too in *Longbourn* we hear the Bennets before we catch sight of them. The first chapter of Austen's novel, however, is almost exclusively dialogue, with no location or physical description offered to the reader. In contrast, *Longbourn* gives us a particular location in space and time from which to eavesdrop on the Bennets: as Sarah is carefully negotiating the back stairs with a full chamber pot.¹³ Where Austen eschews description, elaboration, or particularity, Baker offers specific, concrete detail.

Throughout *Longbourn*, the familiar events of *Pride and Prejudice* are shown in their impact on Sarah and her fellow servants. Baker writes of Bingley's advent:

"A young, unmarried gentleman, newly arrived to the neighbourhood. It meant a flurry of excited giggly activity above stairs, it meant outings, entertainments, and a barrowload of extra work for everyone below."¹⁴

Such work is for the most part endured rather than enjoyed by the much put-upon Longbourn servants, who entertain no Burkean notions of feudal loyalty or respect for their betters. At one point Sarah seeks the

¹² See D. Zeff, *Lost in Austen*, Mammoth Screen, UK, 2008 and T. Carter, *Regency House Party*, Channel 4, UK, 2004.

¹³ See J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 25.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 51.

pastoral support of the clerical Mr Collins, who dismisses her concerns and commends her to her duty, before she leaves his room with yet another full chamber pot:

“This, she reflected, as she crossed the raining yard, and strode out to the necessary house, and slopped the pot’s contents down the hole, *this* was her duty, and she could find no satisfaction in it, and found it strange that anybody might think a person could. She rinsed the pot out at the pump and left it to freshen in the rain. If this was her duty, then she wanted someone else’s.”¹⁵

References to such earthy bodily realities as these are occasionally made by earlier eighteenth-century satirists (Lemuel Gulliver’s attempt to extinguish the Lilliputian fire springs to mind), but they fall outside the purview of the polite novel from the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. Leopold Bloom’s visit to the privy in the second book of *Ulysses* is a frank riposte to the conventional squeamishness of nineteenth-century realist literature. *Longbourn* reminds its readers frequently of the bodies Austen barely mentions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy notes to himself that Elizabeth’s figure is “light and pleasing”,¹⁶ but in *Longbourn* we see Elizabeth dressing, “raising her arms, exposing the dark musky fluff underneath”.¹⁷

Baker’s more pressing concern in *Longbourn*, however, goes beyond these skirmishes against conventional realism and its genteel silences. The novel seeks to redress the elision of history – or, more accurately, the elision of the history of England’s majority population – from the popular conception of the late Georgian period as it has been transmitted through adaptations of Austen’s work. The economic violence of the period, made known most vividly to us through the poetry of William Blake, John Clare,

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 128.

¹⁶ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 26 (I, 6).

¹⁷ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 59.

William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and their ilk, has long been traced through Austen's novels.¹⁸ The wider Austen industry, however, seems to enjoy her novels as Winston Churchill once did, as a respite from reality:

"What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars. Only manners controlling natural passion as far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances."¹⁹

The "crashing struggle" of the Peninsula War, at least as experienced by one individual, finds a central place in *Longbourn*. James Smith – who has deserted the army (a capital offense) and found work as footman to the Bennets – at first believes he is safely hidden in the countryside, only to find the war and its preparations encroaching into Hertfordshire: "There were troops everywhere these days. It made you twitchy; you could not turn round without seeing a red coat and a Brown Bess".²⁰ James is filled with fear and bitterness by the family's closeness to the militia officers billeted in Meryton, a group that, as the novel shows, are quick to enforce brutal discipline on their underlings, but who have themselves little chance of seeing dangerous action:

"If only Wickham was in the regulars, James thought [...] he could allow himself the pleasure of imagining the pretty young fellow sent off to fight in Spain. He could imagine him caught by *guerillas* and strung up from a tree, his cock cut off and stuffed in his own mouth, left bleeding and to the mercy of the wolves. That'd take the shine off him a bit."²¹

¹⁸ See M. Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975 and C. L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹⁹ W. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 5: *Closing the Ring*, London, Houghton Mifflin, 1952, p. 377. Churchill is here remembering having *Pride and Prejudice* read to him while he was ill, in December 1943.

²⁰ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 223.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

The militia's ostensible purpose was to safeguard England in the event of a Napoleonic invasion. Once this threat had largely passed, they were deployed against those deemed by the establishment to be dangerous agitators. James, unwisely, mocks Wickham: "I dare say you will get your hands bloody soon enough. Situation's promising in the north. Slaughtering mill-hands: proper job for a man, that".²² Along with this reference to the violent suppression of the early stirrings of the labour movement in the newly industrialized north, *Longbourn* reminds us of the more unobtrusive, but nonetheless equally significant economic changes of the Romantic period. "This used to be common land", says Sarah of a sheep paddock, "there were houses here".²³ Sarah, it is revealed, is the daughter of a weaver, a cottage industry newly superseded by the mechanization of textile manufacture. Sarah has memories "of a man who sat indoors over a shuddering loom, a book balanced on the frame".²⁴

Domestic economic realities share space in *Longbourn* with those of global trade, and particularly the so-called Triangular Trade between Britain, Africa and the Caribbean in manufactured goods, slaves and sugar. The news that Bingley's fortune is from sugar sends the little maid Polly into confectionary daydreams: "I bet they have peppermint plasterwork, and barley-sugar columns, and all their floors are made of polished toffee".²⁵ The reality is hinted at by the arrival of the Bingley's "distressingly handsome"²⁶ footman:

"So he was what they called a black man, then, even though he was brown? An African? But Africans are cross-hatched, inky, half-naked and in chains. That plaque

²² *Ibidem*, p. 181.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

she had seen at the parsonage, hanging in the hallway: *Am I not a man and a brother?*"²⁷

The plaque – possibly one of those manufactured by Wedgwood – gestures to slavery as an abstract political and religious issue. The handsome footman, who becomes Sarah's first suitor, does not fit later stereotypes of the freed slave, but rather is as individuated as any other character in the novel. Like *Longbourn's* other characters, however, he reflects the novel's historical context, demonstrating how inescapably enmeshed in history is the life of every individual. This is ultimately revealed, not through his skin, but through his name:

"Ptolemy Bingley. At your service.'
His first name was strange enough, but: 'How can you be a Bingley?'
'If you are off his estate, that's your name, that's how it works.'"²⁸

Ptolemy, it is implied, is the illegitimate son of the late Mr Bingley senior and one of that man's sugar-producing slaves, and thus – at least genetically – a brother to the Mr Bingley of *Pride and Prejudice*. His unusual degree of courtesy and self confidence mark him out, to repurpose a term from *Emma*, as a "half-gentleman",²⁹ and his presence in the novel gestures to the complexities of racial and class identity that conventional historical accounts overlook.

In its explicit acknowledgment of the realities of late Georgian life, of land enclosure, industrialization, illiteracy, war, rural poverty and grinding drudgery, *Longbourn* embeds its characters in the economic and historic fabric of its time. Many readers have identified this strategy in

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 54.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 97.

²⁹ J. Austen, *Emma*, edited by R. Cronin and D. McMillan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 213 (II, 6).

Austen's novels too, of course, and not always with delight. W. H. Auden wrote in *Letter to Lord Byron* (1937):

“You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle-class
Describe the amorous effects of ‘brass,
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.”³⁰

Most adaptations and commentary on Austen's novels, however, seem by preference to ignore those realities of which the author was so clearly aware. To redress this, and in so doing to reclaim the histories and the subjectivities of the millions of women and men whose experience has been largely forgotten or ignored, is *Longbourn's* ostensible aim. In twenty-first century parlance, *Longbourn* is *Pride and Prejudice* for the ninety-nine percent. Baker has written that the servants in *Pride and Prejudice* “are—at least in my head—people too”;³¹ she has mentioned that her grandmother, like millions of other English women from the Middle Ages until the mid-twentieth century, was “in service”.³² *Longbourn* can thus be seen to participate in a vogue for fictionalized lives of servants: a review of the novel for “The New Yorker” argues that “we are now in the grip of another servant renaissance”,³³ citing the success of films such as *The Help* (2011), *The Butler* (2013) and the television series *Downton*

³⁰ W. H. Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron*, in Id., *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings: 1927-1939*, edited by E. Mendelson, London, Faber and Faber, 1977, p. 171.

³¹ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 366.

³² I interviewed Jo Baker on 21 February 2014, at the Perth International Writers Festival.

³³ R. Margalit, *Life Downstairs*, in “The New Yorker”, 31 December 2013, web address <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/life-downstairs>.

Abbey (2010-2016).³⁴ The way in which such fictions are understood as an interconnected genre is perhaps best summed up in the film *Sabrina* (1995), where a chauffeur, approached affectionately by a housekeeper, accuses her of “watching *Remains of the Day* again”.³⁵ While *Longbourn* does belong to this genre, its engagement with *Pride and Prejudice* forces its poetics into a somewhat different course.

There are moments in *Longbourn* that bring home the great difficulty, if not hubris, of its literary task. This is expressed in the novel as the problem of how to make substance out of a shadow; or in other words, how to make the unremembered, unthought-of Sarah and her colleagues as real as the characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose cultural weight is greater than that of most historical human beings. In the free indirect speech that Austen invented and which Baker makes use of, this is made out to be a psychic risk for Sarah herself:

“The room was dull now, and meaningless, with the young ladies gone from it. They were both lovely, almost luminous. And Sarah was, she knew, as she slipped along the servants’ corridor, and then up the stairs to the attic to hang her new dress on the rail, just one of the many shadows that ebbed and tugged at the edges of the light.”³⁶

Sarah’s lack of social, physical and economic importance – the understanding that to others she is either invisible or transparent – impinges on her sense of self and reality. In the 1840s the equally fictional *Jane Eyre* stakes her claim to humanity: “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure,

³⁴ See T. Taylor, *The Help*, Reliance Big Entertainment – 1492 Pictures – DreamWorks, USA, 2011; L. Daniels, *The Butler*, Laura Ziskin Productions – The Weinstein Company, 2013; J. Fellowes, *Downton Abbey*, Carnival Films – Masterpiece, UK, 2010-2016.

³⁵ S. Pollack, *Sabrina*, Paramount, USA, 1995. Pollack’s film is itself an adaptation of Billy Wilder’s 1954 film of the same name. Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Remains of the Day* (London, Faber and Faber, 1989) was adapted into a highly acclaimed film by James Ivory, Merchant Ivory Productions – Columbia, UK-USA, 1993.

³⁶ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 62.

plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart!”³⁷ For much of *Longbourn*, however, Sarah’s sense of her own insubstantiality threatens to engulf her. Her first encounter with Mr Darcy (and also the reader’s) comes more than half way through the text, with his visit to Elizabeth at Hunsford parsonage, accompanied by his cousin, and is telling:

“ [...] the two gentlemen filled the doorway, and stepped through it, and moved past her, and did not so much as glance her way – for them the door had simply opened itself. [...] She watched their glossy boots scatter her tea leaves across the wooden floor. The two gentlemen were so smooth, and so big, and of such substance: it was as though they belonged to a different order of creation entirely, and moved in a separate element, and were as different as angels.”³⁸

Sarah’s impression is, in some senses, literally true. Mr Darcy, with his fortune and his massive estate, is of more substance than a housemaid with only a few slowly accumulated shillings and some hand-me-down frocks to her name. Well fed and well looked after from birth, Darcy is also more physically substantial than any other character in the book, while Sarah has been undernourished and overworked for much of her life. The maid is effectively invisible to Darcy:

“Sarah could not have even slowed his progress, no more than one of the evening shadows could trip him up. She stood there on the threshold, feeling quite transparent: the brassy polish of the doorknob seemed to shine through her hand; the evening blue leached right through her. [...] she stood aside just in time, or he would have walked straight through her.”³⁹

To make Sarah fictively substantial, to make a heroine of her, Baker turns to the novelistic conventions within which Austen worked. Sarah is

³⁷ C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, edited with an introduction by Q. D. Leavis, London, Penguin Classics, 1987, p. 281.

³⁸ J. Baker, *Longbourn*, cit., p. 215.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 218-219.

made substantial – to herself, at least, if not to the reader – by the attention that men pay to her. At first she attracts the notice of Ptolemy Bingley: “it was wonderful to be noticed; it was giddy [...] She felt as though she was more *there*, simply because he noticed that she was”.⁴⁰ Sarah’s narrative shadows Elizabeth Bennet’s insofar as Ptolemy eventually proves a distraction from the central mechanism of the plot, the romance between Sarah and the Longbourn footman, James. Accompanying Elizabeth into Kent, and away from Hertfordshire for the first time, Sarah thinks:

“I would write you a letter, James. If I had paper. If I had ink [...] about Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, who is such a polished meaty thing that he makes me slip, for a moment, out of this world entirely, and I become a ghost-girl who can make things move but cannot herself be seen. I would write about how you make me be entirely in myself and more real than I had ever thought was possible.”⁴¹

Sarah’s relationship with James is not only crucial to the plot, it also demonstrates the few enviable elements of Sarah’s life. Unlike the Bennet sisters, along with the other Longbourn servants Sarah has a degree of personal, and physical freedom. She has greater sexual liberty (and, indeed, pleasure) than is available to her mistresses. Without attracting notice or censure, she deliberately begins a sexual relationship with James: “daylight, and his presence, made her flush. The things that she had done with him, in the dark”.⁴² In contrast, it is Jane Bennet’s “queasy look” after news comes of her youngest sister’s elopement that suggests “she had some uneasy half-suspicion of what men and women might do together, if they were but given the opportunity: there was disgust there, as well as distress”.⁴³ Sarah’s destiny is, perhaps unavoidably, as sexualized as any woman’s in *Pride and Prejudice* as, indeed, the history of women has

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 116.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 218.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 177.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 301.

usually been understood in terms of their relationships to men. She is nevertheless made to be as capable of pursuing the destiny of her choice as any twenty-first century woman. To Mr Darcy, Sarah's pursuit of independence may only render her "an unconsidered household item that had abruptly ceased to function",⁴⁴ but to the reader her choices add up to a feminist claim for women's autonomy, regardless of class.

What might we add, finally, about Baker's claims? Towards the close of *Longbourn*, its juxtaposed imagery of shadow and substance gives way to a new motif, one Baker presumably draws from the name of the Bennets' home. The word *born* means a limit or boundary, and hence a goal or destination: like Elizabeth Bennet's, Sarah's destination is long in the seeking. This meaning evolved, however, from an older one meaning river or stream. It is this idea that comes to preoccupy the narrative in its final stages. Doling out the servants' wages "with all the usual ceremony",⁴⁵ Mr Bennet muses:

"What is life but constant change? Did not Heraclitus say—' He paused, and thought better of it. 'Well. Well. You are a good girl, Sarah.' [...] She bobbed a curtsey, and took her money up to her room. [...] If she could find it, and it was writ in English, she would borrow Heraclitus from the library, at the next opportunity."⁴⁶

On their eventual return to Longbourn, many years after Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, Sarah explains Heraclitus to James. "He said [...] you can't step into the same river twice".⁴⁷ *Longbourn* may begin as an exercise in tracing the shadows of *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel that Austen herself, in a letter to her sister, ironically complains is "rather too light &

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 355.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 327.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 365.

bright & sparkling” and “wants shade”.⁴⁸ *Longbourn*’s efforts to bring the contents of those shadows to light are admirable. By the novel’s conclusion, however, it has emerged from the shadow of *Pride and Prejudice*. No one can step into the same river twice, just as no one could recreate *Pride and Prejudice*. By stepping into Austen’s plot, however, Baker succeeds in creating a new fiction, and a new way of thinking about a much beloved, and much abused story. If *Longbourn* imitates anything in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is in challenging Austen’s readers to re-examine those truths which are universally acknowledged.

⁴⁸ J. Austen, *Letters*, Collected and Edited by D. Le Faye, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011⁴, p. 212 (letter to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813).

Copyright © 2017

*Parole rubate. Rivista internazionale di studi sulla citazione /
Purloined Letters. An International Journal of Quotation Studies*