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# 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



PENNY GAY

## READING THE AUSTEN PROJECT

*The Austen Project: Jane Austen Re-imagined* to give it its ambitious full name, proposes to pair six bestselling modern authors with Jane Austen's six complete works: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. Publishers HarperCollins claim: "Taking these well-loved stories as their base, each author will write their own unique take on Jane Austen's novels".<sup>1</sup> So far, Joanna Trollope's *Sense & Sensibility* (2013), Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* (2014), and Alexander McCall Smith's *Emma* (2014) have been published. Seeming to excite (pro or contra) only the fans, whether of Austen or of her famous re-writers, the project's reception has been muted. Short reviews in newspapers take the novels at the face value of the publishers' claims and tend to suggest with faint praise that the books are 'fun' for the Austen fan; longer discussions on Jane Austen websites and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Austen Project series*, web address [www.goodreads.com/series/113943-the-austen-project](http://www.goodreads.com/series/113943-the-austen-project) (HarperCollins' separate website publicising the series seems to have been withdrawn). Curtis Sittenfield's *Eligible: A Modern Retelling of "Pride and Prejudice"* was published in 2016, too late for consideration in this discussion.

blogs spend most of their space complaining about omissions and wrong choices by the modern authors.

Scholars of adaptation, however, might well consider these re-writings by different authors (one English, two Scottish) a gift to test their theories on. This essay is an attempt to offer some possible staging posts in that project. It is not an attempt to make critical and aesthetic judgements (though these will no doubt be implicit), but rather to look at the technical problems that arise in making an adaptation *in the same genre* as the original (i.e., not a film, not a stage-play, not an opera, etc, but another *novel*).

It is worth noting that the authors so far published are generally considered to be highly accomplished, best-selling, much loved, but not quite top-rank ‘serious’ novelists; middle-brow entertainers, in fact. This distinction is based on a factitious snobbery, one even noted early in Austen’s own career: “there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them”.<sup>2</sup> As any Austen enthusiast will tell you, she is a supreme and subtle stylist, and those who would imitate her must at least meet the criteria of her own mission statement:

“‘And what are you reading, Miss — ?’ ‘Oh! It is only a novel!’ replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.— ‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, edited by B. M. Benedict and D. Le Faye, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 31 (I, 5).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

Here, incidentally, Austen is warmly praising two female novelists who are her contemporaries, Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth – not classics from the past century of novel publishing by such masculine masters as Henry Fielding or Laurence Sterne. There is no sense of inferiority in Austen’s implicit inclusion of herself and her ilk among the respected and popular writers of fiction.

If Austen’s criteria, with their insistence on fine psychological insight and excellent writing (with a persistent dash of wit), are not met by a re-telling – an adaptation in the same genre – what we have is merely fanfic (and there are myriad examples of that genre).<sup>4</sup> Fanfic usually takes the characters further, into an expansion of their world, and importantly changes or develops the plot according to ‘fan’ desires – most commonly, sexual fantasies that the original would never have countenanced. Stylistically, the norm seems to be to pastiche the original, i.e. to attempt an imitation of the original writer’s prose style; the commonest failings are simple historical solecisms (failures in fact-based research), and errors in tone or voice – what one might call a vulgarising of the original’s “best-chosen language”. Modern re-tellings in which the historical period is changed are, by contrast, a very rare endeavour, and their challenges obviously set the bar much higher than does the historical pastiche, though the two areas of potential disaster remain broadly the same.

In regard to the Austen Project, there is no publicly-available information about the publisher’s guidelines, about the delimiting of what can and can’t be done with the original novel in these modern re-imaginings. We have only a few comments from the individual authors, and a number of questions that arise from our experience of reading the original

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<sup>4</sup> A check of listings on Jane Austen fan websites (which will also take the reader to some examples of non-print-media fanfic) reveals a vast sub-industry of sequels and (fewer) re-tellings, mostly of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Jane Austen texts. For example, whose voice does the reader hear in the narrative's rendition of events? What is the difference, affectively, between the style and tone of the original novel and that of a contemporary writer who is *not* writing a pastiche but re-telling the story in modern terms? Equivalences in plot and characters are easy enough to do, and the re-imaginings so far published provide the modern reader with some delighted and/or surprised recognitions of apt new facts about the characters' lives and situations. But Austen's famous irony, her rendering of the heroine's thoughts from inside but also beside the character's viewpoint, her oblique critiques of her society and its manners – can they be re-imagined and re-rendered successfully? In the following two sections, I discuss these issues in regard to Joanna Trollope's *Sense & Sensibility* and Alexander McCall Smith's *Emma*.

1. *Jane Austen and the (fictional) facts of life: "Longbourn"*

As all historians know, the history one chooses to tell depends on one's selection of the known facts. In that respect, novels that eschew fantasy (as Austen's do – quite consciously, in the case of *Northanger Abbey*) are little different from history, whether it is set in the past or the present. Such novelists create fictional characters by giving them an environment and a situation, and then developing them via the plot's interaction with other characters, who have their own environments and situations. Generally the characters are given the power of speech and movement to facilitate the plot. Degrees of difficulty in the sub-genre of re-tellings include: how far (or close) the new narrative is to the original as regards characters and the historical context; how idiosyncratic or individualized the writer wants to make the character while still retaining her or his role in the plot. It is, indeed, something of a minefield.

By way of introducing the issue of facts in fiction in the modern re-imaginings, I propose first to look briefly at Jo Baker's well-received re-telling of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Longbourn* (2013), a novel which is told from the perspective of the almost unmentioned servants – the taken-for-granted – of Austen's novel. In writing this novel, Baker has a serious critical objective; almost, one might say, deconstructive: to dig deep into the fault-lines that Austen chooses to pass over. Austen knows they are there, which is one of the reasons why close reading of her texts is always rewarding: think of what Lydia's offstage antics in Brighton and London casually reveal of sexual debauchery, gambling, the power of money, and the decadence of the military defenders of the nation during the Napoleonic wars. Or, in *Emma*, Jane Fairfax's bitterness about the psychological equivalence of governessing and slavery ("There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something. Offices for the sale — not quite of human flesh — but of human intellect");<sup>5</sup> and the text's constant anxiety about anything French. Emma's world is a very fragile one, threatened by the effects of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, with the ongoing Napoleonic wars making invasion a real possibility; and it is interesting to contemplate, as I do below, how McCall Smith represents this fragility in his 2014 re-telling.

Baker's novel is robustly factual – as though she were rubbing the modern reader's nose in realities that nostalgic Janeites choose to ignore. In a postscript she points out that she starts with "ghostly presences"<sup>6</sup> – her job is to reanimate them as people, characters whose experience of the world is very different from that of the gentry with whom they are nevertheless so intimate:

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<sup>5</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, edited by R. Cronin and D. McMillan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 375 (II, 17).

<sup>6</sup> J. Baker, *Longbourn*, London, Doubleday, 2013, p. 445.

“They deliver notes and drive carriages; they run errands when nobody else will step out of doors — they are the ‘proxy’ by which the shoe roses for Netherfield Ball are fetched in the pouring rain. [...] When a meal is served in *Pride and Prejudice*, it has been prepared in *Longbourn*.”<sup>7</sup>

But importantly, their stories only partly coincide; Baker provides a rich back-, forward-, and under-story; she thus avoids the fetishizing of Austen’s original narrative, and performs a smarter version of the romantic ‘continuation’ genre by insisting on the reality of historical *continuum*: “*Longbourn* reaches back into these characters’ pasts, and out beyond *Pride and Prejudice*’s happy ending”.<sup>8</sup>

Let us look briefly at Baker’s invention (in the sense of bringing to light) of new facts. The novel’s first chapters are full of them. It is mildly disconcerting but also refreshing to read the bravura evocation of washing day that takes up the novel’s first chapter. For the first time in Austenland, an aspect of the ‘facts of life’ which after all underlie the romance genre (i.e. physical heterosexual relations) is brought to our notice: bodily fluids, particularly menstruation. As a woman reader, I often wonder how the unmentioned recurrence of the monthly period must have affected both female writers and their female characters. Is the ubiquitous ‘headache’ or ‘feeling unwell’ a well-recognised euphemism for the unmentionable fact of female monthly bleeding?

Austen was no prude; she could refer to the facts of sexual life in barely-veiled euphemisms: “I w<sup>d</sup> recommend to her [M<sup>rs</sup> Deedes] & M<sup>r</sup> D. the simple regimen of separate rooms”<sup>9</sup> after the birth of their eighteenth child. In *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia, in casually announcing her elopement

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> J. Austen, *Letters*, Collected and Edited by D. Le Faye, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011<sup>4</sup>, p. 330 (letter to Fanny Knight, 20-21 February 1817).

with Wickham, writes to her younger sister: “I wish you would tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown”.<sup>10</sup> The *double-entendre* is no accident: the metaphor recurs in *Mansfield Park* as Fanny tries to stop the still-virginal Maria from going through the locked gate with Henry Crawford: “You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram,” she cried; “you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes — you will tear your gown — you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha”.<sup>11</sup> Various women’s reputations in the novels are ruined by their giving in to sexual passion outside of the bonds of marriage – but Austen is more interested in the social effects than the physical effects of sexual desire. She comes closest to the latter, perhaps, in the description of Marianne’s illness after Willoughby has inexplicably put an end to their romance: a ‘fact’ that Joanna Trollope represents convincingly with Marianne’s tendency to suffer violent asthma attacks.

The physical constrains the daily lives of nineteenth-century servants as strongly as their class situation does, and Baker brings these facts to the reader’s attention in vivid prose that is very different from Austen’s narrative style. Baker calls into play facts that have been made available to modern readers by the work of modern historians (named in her *Acknowledgements*). She has her male protagonist go as a soldier to the Napoleonic wars, surviving a vividly evoked set of realistic horrors to return against all odds and marry his lover Sarah (one of the Longbourn servants). The same character, James, turns out to be the bastard son of Mrs Hill the housekeeper and the unhappily married Mr Bennet. James’s illegitimacy – and therefore invisibility – cleverly complicates the

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<sup>10</sup> Id., *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by P. Rogers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 321 (III, 5).

<sup>11</sup> Id., *Mansfield Park*, edited by J. Wiltshire, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 116 (I, 10).

Austenian fact, vital to the plot, that the pompous Mr Collins is the *legal* heir to Longbourn, due to an entail (which always requires a long explanatory note in editions of *Pride and Prejudice*). An illegitimate son – the historically common alternative inheritor (a plot-point used, for example, by Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones*), does not suit the genre of fiction that Austen choose to write.

The pattern of representing every fictional fact in a given novel is the necessary basis of the Jane Austen Project, in which the characters and, largely, the plot of a specific Austen novel remain, but the whole is set in the present day (a different project from Baker's exploration of the history of the original novel's period). Inevitably, other facts must be introduced to explain the characters' situations, behaviours and motivations. How much leeway does the writer have within these given bounds, and others less easy to define? The characters may not change their psychology and personality – that would be a betrayal of the readers' emotional connection to these well-loved characters. Situations and environments have to be found that mimic the original in their effects on the characters. Somehow, an air of verisimilitude has to be created, so that the reader finds the story convincing and engaging, even while some part of our consciousness is all the time judging the re-telling against the original.

## *2. The art of exposition: some contrasts between the authors*

On examining the two re-tellings under discussion in this essay, *Emma* and *Sense & Sensibility*, it becomes immediately obvious that each author (McCall Smith and Trollope) is confidently calling upon tropes that characterise their own fictional world. Trollope, famous for her hugely successful stories of the agonies, anxieties, and pleasures of life and relationships among members of the English middle class, deftly places her

Austen-created characters as though they were just on the sidelines of her own imaginative world, waiting to be called into play. Like a lot of recent novelists concerned with the prosperous British middle classes, she shows them as defined not only by education and profession, but more quirkily by *things* (hence the somewhat patronising description of such works as *Aga Sagas*). Characters, that is, are as much defined by their taste as by their actions. This tendency to evoke images that might appear in a catalogue from a high-class interior decorating establishment or department store is a characteristic of Trollope's fictional technique. Austen, by contrast, rarely tells the reader what her characters are wearing or how their houses are decorated – and when she does, she makes a point of showing her lovable characters' preference for the old-fashioned; it is her satirised vulgar characters who are up-to-date with the latest fashions in desirable objects.<sup>12</sup>

These distinctions are particularly relevant in *Sense & Sensibility*<sup>13</sup> because the initial impulse for the story is that the main characters in both versions, the Dashwood women, are forced to move from a large, gracious and comfortable estate to a country cottage. Austen begins her novel with a chapter describing the familial and financial relationships of a matrix of characters around the Dashwood women, moving then into a brief description of the essential characteristics of Elinor, Marianne, and Mrs Dashwood on the 'sense' to 'sensitivity' scale (Margaret, the youngest, is

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<sup>12</sup> What Austen can suggest with a character's obsession with fashionable things is deconstructed with brilliance in David Miller's analysis of Elinor and Marianne's encounter with Robert Ferrars in the jewellery shop (*Sense and Sensibility*, II, 11): Robert's ignoring the sisters while he concentrates on his purchase of a toothpick-case becomes a sign of his "unheterosexuality", his refusal of the romance plot (even though Austen – the author-as-god – uses Robert's dandyism ultimately to allow her plot to triumph). See D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 9-20.

<sup>13</sup> Trollope's title uses the ampersand rather than Austen's *and*, thus cleverly suggesting the modernity of the world her characters inhabit, with its communications defined by mechanized shorthand.

only thirteen and not functioning as an adult on this scale as far as Austen is concerned). Austen's second chapter consists entirely of a dialogue between their half-brother John Dashwood and his wife, the rapacious Fanny, in the course of which his intention to give his sisters £1000 each is whittled down to "helping them to move their things, and sending them presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season".<sup>14</sup> This is a blackly comic satire on human avarice and self-interest, and it is the first indication in Austen's published works of her ability to render character simply through what individuals *say*, a combination of their idiolects and their monomanias. This will become, in her most technically complex novel, *Emma*, published five years later, the brilliant indirect style of narration utilizing Emma's point of view, which presents probably the biggest challenge (at least so far) in the Austen Project. Trollope has an easier task, one that she comfortably slips into by telling the story from the very first pages largely via dialogues between her characters; the accomplished and experienced novelist finds it no problem to create their idiolects. But as well as the financial and social facts which, like Austen, she needs to get established, Trollope rather cheekily riffs on a tiny motif supplied by Austen that indicates the last straw of Fanny Dashwood's covetousness:

"When your father and mother moved to Norland, though the furniture of Stanhill was sold, all the china, plate, and linen was saved, and is now left to your mother. Her house will therefore be almost completely fitted up as soon as she takes it.'

'That is a material consideration undoubtedly. A valuable legacy indeed! And yet some of the plate would have been a very pleasant addition to our own stock here.'

'Yes; and the set of breakfast china is twice as handsome as what belongs to this house. A great deal too handsome, in my opinion, for any place *they* can ever afford to live in. But, however, so it is.'"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, edited by E. Copeland, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 13 (I, 2).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15 (I, 2).

In Trollope's hands Austen's masterly invocation of the unavoidable physicality of table china – so useful in its multiplicity, so solid yet so fragile, and so unavoidably on display at every meal – becomes an opportunity for anchoring her modern Dashwoods into their material world just as precisely: the china symbolises the irreducible facts of their lives. Trollope shows she is more self-aware than her critics would allow when she cleverly flaunts this particular appearance of her characteristic 'domestic furnishings' trope in the novel's opening chapter:

“While they waited, they switched their collective gaze to the scrubbed top of the kitchen table, to the sponge-ware jug of artless garden flowers, randomly arranged, to their chipped and pretty tea mugs.

[...] Elinor glanced now across the kitchen to the huge old Welsh dresser, which bore all their everyday mugs and plates [...]

[...] John glanced at them both and then looked past them at the Welsh dresser where all the plates were displayed, the pretty, scallop-edged plates that Henry and Belle had collected from Provençal holidays over the years, and lovingly brought back, two or three at a time.

John moved towards the door. With his hand on the handle, he turned and briefly indicated the dresser. ‘Fanny adores those plates, you know.’”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, using her method of defining characters through the objective correlatives of their household furnishings (and there is, in passing, a savage critique of Fanny's decorating tastes),<sup>17</sup> Trollope's narrative arrives at exactly the same point as Austen's does: the situation of the Dashwood women, about to be moved from their comfortable physical existence by a malicious force – but also about to encounter the novel's unworldly and ungrasping male lead, Edward Ferrars, whom Elinor loves for his quiet good taste and gentle intellect. With his introduction to the reader, the exposition of the narrative is complete.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Trollope, *Sense & Sensibility*, London, The Borough Press, 2013, p. 4, p. 13 and p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 15.

McCall Smith's *Emma*, by strong contrast, establishes his principal character Emma's situation not via dialogue regarding their immediate real-world situation (as Austen and Trollope both do), but in an unexpected focus, for sixty or so pages, on her father. Mr Woodhouse's background and profession, his life-story, his interest in science and health, offer a different category of significant facts from Trollope's, but serve a similar expository or placing function. Instead of "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich",<sup>18</sup> we are given:

"Emma Woodhouse's father was brought into this world, blinking and confused, on one of those final nail-biting days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a time of sustained anxiety for anybody who read a newspaper or listened to the news on the radio, and that included his mother, Mrs Florence Woodhouse, who was anxious at the best of times and even more so at the worst.

[...] From an early age he showed himself to be a fretful child, unwilling to take the risk that other boys delighted in and always interested in the results when his mother took his temperature with the clinical thermometer given to her by the district nurse."<sup>19</sup>

This introduction is cheekily self-conscious: it announces, 'This is not Jane Austen's novel – did you think it was, for half a sentence? It is *mine*' – and McCall Smith then goes on to demonstrate for many chapters his concern for the background facts that will explain Emma's situation and subsequent behaviour. The "world"<sup>20</sup> of Emma is "this world" — the world of the Cold War at its most tense, which is itself the extreme end of the spectrum of the 1950s-60s belief in the possibilities of technology: in Mr Woodhouse's case, vitamin therapy, fad diets, small-scale inventions to improve the already comfortable life of the middle classes. McCall Smith places the new Emma with pinpoint precision, not in the present of the

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<sup>18</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 3 (I, 1).

<sup>19</sup> A. McCall Smith, *Emma*, London, The Borough Press, 2014, pp. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 3 (I, 1).

early twenty-first century, but in the bonds of her immediate lineage and class.

The invocation of the magazines “The Lady” and “Country Life”, as facilitators of the continuation of the class markers that distinguish Emma and her micro-society, is particularly apt (the glossy journals still exist today, doing their vital work for a small segment of UK society that persistently survives – Miss Taylor is recruited from the advertisements for nannies that are still to be found in “The Lady”). The arrival of Miss Taylor, and the early years of her home-schooling Mr Woodhouse’s two daughters, is also narrated in extensive detail. The Scottish governess is undoubtedly an avatar of McCall Smith’s Edinburgh philosopher-detective, Isabel Dalhousie;<sup>21</sup> like her, she is given to brisk and witty rationality but has an evidently warm heart. A brief observation from a minor local character confirms the reader’s suspicions:

“The conviction that she was right — the firm disapproval of those she deemed to be slovenly in their intellectual or physical habits — was something that Mrs Firhill believed to be associated with her having come from Edinburgh.

‘They’re all like that,’ a friend said to her. ‘I’ve been up there — I know. They think the rest of us very sloppy. They are very judgemental people.’

‘I hope that doesn’t rub off on the girls,’ said Mrs Firhill. But I suppose it will. There’s Emma already saying *cadit quaestio* — and she’s only six.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus McCall Smith makes his point about education (*not* random circumstance) being in part responsible for Emma’s small-town adventures (Austen does this briefly, via a reminiscent conversation between Miss Taylor and Mr Knightley in chapter 5 of her novel). He also takes care to invent an intrinsic character trait in Emma: she likes to arrange things so that they look beautiful – but is always *re*-arranging them. This is the

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<sup>21</sup> Isabel Dalhousie is the principal character of McCall Smith’s popular *Sunday Philosophy Club* series set in Edinburgh.

<sup>22</sup> A. McCall Smith, *Emma*, cit., p. 23.

background to her twenty-first century need for a college education, European travel and a proposed career as an interior decorator, all of which takes place before Miss Taylor's marriage and the start of the Austenian plot. Isabella, too, has her backstory spelt out: no university for her, but an immediate job "with a firm of fine-art auctioneers that specialised in providing employment for the daughters of county families".<sup>23</sup> It is in London, with all of the social life that Isabella craves. Mr Woodhouse's old-fashioned plan to "marry her off"<sup>24</sup> via a photograph in "Country Life" backfires with delicious irony when Isabella takes up with the society photographer, John Knightley.

McCall Smith's investment in explaining Mr Woodhouse's character automatically makes him brighter than Austen's original; he is an eccentric and a gentle conservative rather than a one-note hypochondriac. McCall Smith does a similar thing with the introduction of Mr Weston in chapter 7 (covered by Austen in a couple of paragraphs in her second chapter): James Weston's backstory, including the emotional trauma of giving up his son Frank, is told with empathetic intelligence. This develops, through chapters 8 and 9, into the story of the rapid courtship of Mr Weston and Miss Taylor, and their moving into Randalls together before their marriage. At this point in McCall Smith's novel we have reached the beginning of Austen's novel: the exposition – and explanation – of the heroine's situation is complete. Austen's situational beginning to her novel, with Emma and her father stuck, it seems, in a pre-Sartrean *huis clos*, lamenting the loss of "Poor Miss Taylor!",<sup>25</sup> is not rendered by McCall Smith until chapter 10 of his novel, almost one-third of the way through the book.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 6 (I, 1).

Beyond the obvious desire to ‘place’ the modern Emma very precisely, in terms of her upbringing and social position, it is tempting to speculate further why McCall Smith insists on providing full biographies of the male figures of Austen’s story (both George and John Knightley also get many pages of backstory). McCall Smith is no slouch when it comes to creating strong female protagonists – witness Isabel Dalhousie or the wonderful Precious Ramotswe.<sup>26</sup> Why then this deliberate narrative delay? The novel is still called *Emma*, yet, as I commented earlier, McCall Smith strikes a deliberately perverse note in beginning it with the words “Emma Woodhouse’s *father*”. Perhaps this is the author’s way of excusing himself for the project that he has got himself involved in: his Mr Woodhouse is the father of a headstrong young woman called Emma; McCall Smith is the creator, or father, of this modern *Emma*. He presents his novel’s father figure as eccentric, lovable, a traditionalist, having encyclopedic interests in science and medicine and a good grasp of the demands of money and society, though a little old-fashioned by modern standards. This is a far cry from Austen’s Mr Woodhouse, but close enough to what one might guess of McCall Smith’s view of himself as author in this odd project. Both self-deprecating and self-justifying, this perspective also operates as a defence against the “monstrous regiment of women”, as his compatriot John Knox<sup>27</sup> once labelled the queens of sixteenth-century Europe.<sup>28</sup> Here he may be defending himself against, for example, the largely female membership of Jane Austen Societies around the world, who might well be affronted that a

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<sup>26</sup> Precious Ramotswe is the principal character of McCall Smith’s *No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series.

<sup>27</sup> See A. McCall Smith, *Emma*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> See J. Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*, Geneva, n. p., 1558: a book attacking female monarchs, arguing that rule by females is contrary to the Bible.

male writer had been allowed to take on the mantle of the divine Ms Austen.

### 3. *The novelist's voice*

McCall Smith's strategy, as we have seen, is to insist on the reader's joining him in his version of the world, seeing things from his point of view as the omniscient narrator, and listening with the mind's ear to his voice. McCall Smith is particularly prone to the habit of editorialising, as a quick check of any novel in any of his multiple series will confirm; readers either love or hate his work for this authorial persona conspicuously offering witty and wise comments: "the author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self".<sup>29</sup> The reader, nevertheless, can choose to resist this dominant voice, and thereby refuse to be the reader that the author wants. McCall Smith's *Emma* is a particular test of this author's power because of the greater authority (Austen's) that haunts it, and perhaps much of the critical distaste for this re-telling can finally be put down to the issue of his intrusive voice.

Joanna Trollope, on the other hand, has gone on the offensive in order to be self-defensive: in 2013 she made a YouTube video in which she says *Sense & Sensibility*

"[...] is most definitely a Joanna Trollope novel: it's got my voice, even though it's her characters [...] they have to have a few jobs, they wear different clothes, they are very cognizant of modern technology, they do all the things that modern young (and older) people would do, but they are Jane's people."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> *Joanna Trollope Talks Sense And Sensibility* (11 September 2013), web address [www.youtube.com/watch?v=62cbBIEQoQL](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62cbBIEQoQL).

She also speaks of her novel as “a tribute, not an emulation”.<sup>31</sup> She thus forestalls criticism by indicating that she knows her fanbase, and that it is comfortably different from that of the academic and Janeite readers of Austen. More interesting, however, is Trollope’s insistence that “it’s got my voice”. None of the reviewers that I have located comment directly on this, but arguably it is at the root of the success or failure of the whole Austen Project: what we are reading is not fanfic, not pastiche, but a recognisable voice, not Jane Austen’s, re-telling an old and familiar – and much-loved – story.

Clearly, neither of our authors proposes to emulate Jane Austen’s unique voice; we need then to enquire whether their authorial voices are ultimately able to do the work that Austen’s does. Here Trollope has had the easier task, as most readers agree that for all its many virtues and profound explorations of both society and the human heart, *Sense and Sensibility* is somewhat uneven in style, in particular, perhaps too easily reliant on glib irony such as is evident in the novel’s last sentence:

“Between Barton and Delaford, there was that constant communication which strong family affection would naturally dictate; — and among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands.”<sup>32</sup>

The move that the reader has to negotiate from satisfaction at the plot’s romantic conclusion to a sarcastic aside from the authorial voice leaves an unpleasant taste: this author is too keen to show that she is cleverer than any of us who enjoy indulging in the surrogate delights of fiction, and who have accompanied her on this long journey. Trollope

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, cit., p. 431 (III, 14).

simply ignores this model, and her novel's conclusion is the more pleasing for it: it is a classic conclusion to a novel of hers, a dialogue between "contentedly" embracing lovers: "All", says Edward, "All. I'll settle for that".<sup>33</sup> Compare, however, the extraordinary final paragraph of Austen's *Emma*:

"The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own. — 'Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business! — Selina would stare when she heard of it.' — But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union."<sup>34</sup>

The improvement is as much a matter of tonal (i.e. musical) progression as anything more complex. The more temperate irony of the authorial voice ("very much like other weddings") passes briefly through amusing satire as Mrs Elton's irrepressibly opinionated voice intrudes one last time into the novel's acknowledged imperfect world. This slight discord morphs into a major key resolution with an authorial "But", allowing the reader to relax into an assurance of "the perfect happiness of the union". Even, indeed, to want to applaud, as though at the chorus's conclusion of a classic musical comedy.

McCall Smith does not match Austen's complex writing here. But he does something else, something in fact closer in tonality to Trollope's ending to *Sense & Sensibility*, but with a characteristic twist:

"Emma was happy. She realised that happiness is something that springs from the generous treatment of others, and that until one makes that connection, happiness may prove elusive. In Italy with George, that thought came even more forcefully to her when, in a small art gallery in an obscure provincial town well off the beaten track, she

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<sup>33</sup> J. Trollope, *Sense & Sensibility*, cit., p. 401.

<sup>34</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 528 (III, 19).

saw a seventeenth-century picture of a young man giving his hand to a young woman. And the young woman takes it and holds it, cherishing it, as one might cherish something that is fragile and vulnerable, and very precious. The eyes of the young woman are not on the young man, nor upon the hand that she holds, but fixed on the one who views the painting, and they convey, as do so many of the figures in art that would say anything to us, this message: *You do it too.*"<sup>35</sup>

He begins with the inevitable satisfying conclusion, echoing Austen's "perfect happiness of the union", but instead of narratorial irony that shares awareness of the intrusions of an imperfect world, as a last move McCall Smith reminds us that art has a moral and educational function – by implication, his twenty-first century art as well as Jane Austen's 200-year-old art. It is a bold gesture to reinforce and justify the voice he has deliberately employed throughout this rewriting. As we have already seen, the evidence of narrative choices and style suggests he takes this commission seriously: if it is to be a re-telling, it is his opportunity to speak to a new audience. Nevertheless, the question remains (*quaestio non cadit*, one might say, in his manner): to put it crudely, is it possible to convey the same lessons if your teacher has a different voice?

As readers of Austen's novel know – and delight in the reading experience offered – almost all of *Emma* is narrated from Emma's point of view. Nevertheless the reader (at least after that first breathless reading) always knows more than Emma, and sees through her delusions even as she confidently articulates them. The reader shares a position of superiority with the implied author, reading her every observation from, as it were, a point of view just behind the character, slightly aslant – seeing just a little more than Emma herself can:

"[...] the narration's way of *saying* is constantly both mimicking, and distancing itself from, the character's way of *seeing*. [...] Narration comes as near to a character's psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it, and the character

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<sup>35</sup> A. McCall Smith, *Emma*, cit., p. 361.

does as much of the work of narration as she may without acquiring its authority. [...] free indirect style gives a virtuoso performance, against all odds, of the narration's persistence in detachment from character, no matter how intimate the one becomes with the other."<sup>36</sup>

To summarise, Austen's voice in *Emma* provides the reader with the experience of a virtuosic performance of the possibilities of free indirect style, and in doing so, gives the sophisticated reader greater pleasure, probably, than the more conventional satisfaction of the double motive of the plot, which is to get Emma to her own, unexpected wedding (plot as romantic comedy), and to get her to know herself truly, without the self-delusion and self-defensiveness of her cleverness. Can McCall Smith attain this psychic closeness? Does he even wish to? I think not. Much of his novel is *not* written from Emma's point of view; it involves conversations between other characters and information about them supplied by our chatty omniscient narrator. When we do encounter a passage in which Emma's point of view is represented by the free indirect style, and we see her misreading a situation and building her meddling plans on the misreading, it is not subtle. Not even a first-time reader could miss the fact that here Emma is fooling herself about her superior insight into character and situation, and her ability to run other people's lives for them:

"He [Philip Elton] must have seen her, though: no man could sit near Harriet at a dinner table and fail to notice that he was in the presence of exceptional physical beauty. And if he had noticed her in that way — which he must have done — then she would not have much work to do. All that would be required of her was the facilitating of a meeting; nature — passion — call it what you will — could be expected to do the rest."<sup>37</sup>

Misreading all the evidence, she continues to delude herself that she is aiding the courtship of Harriet Smith and Philip Elton:

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<sup>36</sup> D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*, cit., p. 27 and p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> A. McCall Smith, *Emma*, cit., p. 176.

“She could understand Philip’s inviting Harriet to the pub, but why would he invite her as well? Her puzzlement, though, was brief. She only had to think about it for a few moments before an obvious answer suggested itself: Philip, for all his good looks and eloquence, may have felt anxious about asking somebody out on what was obviously a date; men like that often suffered from a lack of confidence. Asking both of them was a way of paving the way for the next invitation, which she imagined would be extended only to Harriet.

‘That’s really good news, Harriet,’ said Emma. ‘I could tell he liked you, you know. It was perfectly obvious — right from the beginning.’ She grinned at her friend. ‘Men are so transparent. You can read them like a book.’

‘He’s very kind,’ said Harriet.

Emma would not have chosen that description for Philip, but she was content to let it pass.”<sup>38</sup>

McCall Smith here cleverly uses a quasi-Austen voice: it is clear even to the first-time reader that Emma is fantasizing and rationalizing her fantasy, with signals such as “She only had to think about it for a few moments before an obvious answer suggested itself”, and standard worldly-wise clichés such as “men like that often suffered from a lack of confidence” (patently untrue for the character of Philip Elton in either McCall Smith or Austen).

Most of the time, however, Emma’s point of view and her delusions are given no more space than the many other strands of narrative: the conversations between male characters, married couples, and servants that are never available to Austen’s Emma. McCall Smith is an unrepentantly omniscient narrator, going where he wills in his fictional world. But on the sixth-last page of the novel he pulls off audacious trick that arguably matches the revelation of Frank and Jane’s secret engagement in Austen – a fact that, as in Austen, is there for all to see if they are second-time readers of a detective bent: Harriet has never been in love with Mr Elton (hence the dismissive “He is very kind” in the scene just quoted), nor with Mr

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 222.

Knightley, and has ignored Emma's snobbish advice to look higher than Robert Martin, whom she has been seeing secretly all along. As for Emma's fear that Mr Knightley is courting Harriet, in fact Harriet has been following her mentor's example and doing some match-making of her own, encouraging Mr Knightley to declare his feelings for Emma and even bringing together the previous lovers Mr Woodhouse and Mrs Goddard (in this version an unreconstructed hippie). Thus, using his own preferred authorial persona, the pseudo-Victorian omniscient narrator with his wise comments on the world, McCall Smith has at the very end flaunted the fact that he knows more than we do – he just didn't choose to tell, thereby putting the reader in the position of Emma rather than (as in Austen) alongside the ironically knowing narrator.

Game-playing in a way that Austen might have enjoyed, McCall Smith refuses, finally, to solve the mystery of Jane Fairfax's piano. Having gleefully demonstrated his power as omniscient narrator of a world he has created, he now rubs the reader's nose in it by withholding clarification; supplying instead further evidence of the arbitrariness of assigning motive for any behaviour (what do we really know of other people's lives?):

“Nobody ever worked out who gave her the Yamaha piano, but there were theories. One of these, put forward by Mr Woodhouse, was that the piano was bought by Miss Bates, who was only pretending to be poor in order to defeat her creditors at Lloyd's. [...] ‘That woman never fooled me,’ said Mrs God, who claimed to be a good judge of character.”<sup>39</sup>

This is the novel's second-last paragraph, and if we are looking for the irony interwoven into Austen's ending (quoted above), here it is to be found. “Mrs God” stands in not only for Mrs Elton, but also for Emma,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 361.

who much earlier in the novel as she began her matchmaking, thought “it was rather as God might feel”.<sup>40</sup>

Just as Trollope insisted that her *Sense & Sensibility* was a “Joanna Trollope novel”, unrepentantly written in her “voice”, Alexander McCall Smith demonstrates, by his massive pre-plot excursus and his constant narratorial musings, that his *Emma* was doing *his* artistic work, not Austen’s. The individual voice of each contemporary writer comes through loud and clear, and as readers we may love or hate or be indifferent to them, but they are evidence of the writers’ integrity. We should not expect them to imitate Jane Austen’s voice, and our unique relationship with her via that voice. To call upon a musical analogy to try and define what sort of adaptation these re-tellings are, we might say that Trollope’s *Sense & Sensibility* is the equivalent of an arrangement of a well-loved Mozart concerto for different instruments; McCall Smith’s *Emma* offers variations on some themes from that extraordinary concerto.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 140.



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