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EDWARD COPELAND

**THE ANONYMOUS JANE AUSTEN:
DUELLING CANONS**

1. *The two canonical traditions*

All adaptations as the first condition for their success, writes Julie Sanders, depend on their readers' familiarity with the adapted source, a "canonical" recognition.¹ One can cheerfully agree to that proposition in regard to movies called *Persuasion*, or *Emma*, or *Sense and Sensibility*. No question, these movies are 'adaptations' of Jane Austen's texts, their more 'adapted' bits including, for example, a much extended part for the youngest Dashwood sister in the Emma Thompson *Sense and Sensibility*² and, in the Laurence Olivier *Pride and Prejudice*,³ Lady Catherine de Burgh revisited as a kindly mother-hen.

¹ J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 120.

² See Ang Lee, *Sense and Sensibility*, Columbia Pictures Corporation – Mirage, USA-UK, 1995.

³ See Robert Z. Leonard, *Pride and Prejudice*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA, 1940.

On the other hand, what would you call a work equally loose in its borrowings when the poached material does not make even the most cursory nod towards its source? Amy Heckerling's film *Clueless* for example,⁴ a film based on Austen's *Emma*, but casual indeed with its source, places its substantial gamble in the marketplace on a crowd of ticket-buyers with pockets full of change and heads empty of Austen.⁵ This sort of borrowing, says Julie Sanders, might loosely be called an "appropriation", a polite term for pilfering in which "the intertextual relationship may be less explicit, *more embedded*".⁶ "Adaptations", she notes in distinction, depend upon a fixed canon to direct the reader to the source. "Appropriations" depend upon, well... she doesn't say.

In place of our usual assumptions about canons as fixed, there may be another understanding of canon that can take Julie Sanders' unstable term "appropriations" under its wing. James A. Sanders, a canonical scholar, offers his experience in editing the Dead Sea Scrolls to suggest how appropriations, or "repetitions" as he calls the phenomenon, are in fact the key to his understanding of canon. "The word *canon*", he writes, "has two meanings". Canon may indeed refer "to a discrete body of literature having a stable structure", but "canon [also] refers to the function of a particular literature in the communities that find their identity and ethos in it".⁷ "At the simplest level", he argues, "the first consideration of canonical criticism is the phenomenon of repetition. [...] Minimally speaking it is the

⁴ See Amy Heckerling, *Clueless*, Paramount Pictures, USA, 1995.

⁵ David Streitfield reports that *Pride and Prejudice* is among the most opened book on Oyster but is finished less than one percent of the time. See D. Streitfield, *Books, Just Like You Wanted*, in "New York Times", 3 January 2014.

⁶ J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, cit., p. 2 (my emphasis). See also L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 2006, p. 3 and p. 9.

⁷ J. A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm*, Eugene (Oregon), Wipf and Stock, 1987, p. 14.

nature of canon to be *remembered* or contemporized through *repetition*".⁸ Moreover, the "repetition of a community value", he writes, "introduces the possibility, some would say the necessity of *resignification* of that value to some limited extent".⁹ A proto-canonical process, in other words, goes into operation through community values well before the 'fixed' canon reaches its state as a formal product.¹⁰

Such an understanding of canonical process operates paradoxically between opposite poles – in one direction between cultural instability and the canon's fixed form and, in the other direction, between canonical stability and a community's developing values.¹¹ In this way, Julie Sanders' embedded appropriations work like James Sanders' repetitions, setting up the possibility of "a posture of critique, even assault" on unacknowledged sources.¹² Such casual appropriations of Jane Austen's novels, the allusions or repetitions that readers might (or might not) recognize, shift our attention from the exclusivity of a finalized canon to the less familiar operation of a canon in process, one in which a "community [...] finds its identity in [...] an otherwise obscure and disorderly, even inexplicable, world".¹³

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Id., *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, Eugene (Oregon), Wipf and Stock, 1984, p. 22.

¹⁰ See Id., *The Canonical Process*, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, edited by W. D. Davies, L. Finkelstein and S. T. Katz, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, vol. 4, p. 231. Cf. Id., *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm*, cit., p. 30: "Adaptability and stability. That is canon. Each generation reads its authoritative tradition in the light of its own place in life, its own questions, its own necessary hermeneutics".

¹¹ See ibidem, p. 14 and p. 30.

¹² J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, cit., p. 4.

¹³ J. A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, cit., p. 22 and p. 25.

2. *The proto-canonical world*

Women's fiction in Jane Austen's day operated for the most part as a collective body, not, as today, as a bid for an individual author's celebrity. As opposed to the elevated status that Jane Austen's name now enjoys in the literary canon, readers in the nineteenth century were to take a very long time to arrive at any such consensus. From the 1811 anonymous publication of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* until Richard Bentley issued his collected edition of her works in 1832-1833, Austen's name did not appear on the title-page of a single one of her novels. The low value contemporaries placed on this "class of fictions", Walter Scott's dour expression for women's novels,¹⁴ provided a distinctly unreliable base on which to mount Jane Austen's posthumous fame.

The designations Miss Austin, Miss Austen or Mrs. Austin, if the name were known to readers at all, sufficed in the same spirit as Miss Edgeworth, Miss Ferrier or Miss Burney – as the female-authored novel lying on the library table. When the publisher John Murray wrote to Lady Abercorn a year after Austen's death (December 1817) that he was "printing two short but very clever novels", *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, "by poor Miss Austen, the author of *Pride and Prejudice*", Lady Abercorn replied at once, "Pray send us Miss Austen's novels the moment you can [...] it is a great pity we shall have no more of hers",¹⁵ pious regret for one sparrow among many in a well-stocked marketplace of

¹⁴ See note 19.

¹⁵ S. Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House 1768-1843*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, vol. 2, pp. 64-65 (1st edition London, John Murray, 1891).

women novelists.¹⁶ The multiple names – Miss Austin, Mrs. Austin or Miss Austen – functioned in contemporary society as simply one more participant in a “plurality of voices, of other words, other utterances and other texts”.¹⁷ Female authors assumed that the repetitions and variations they took unacknowledged from the plurality of voices simply belonged to the job description of novelist.¹⁸

Although Walter Scott gives *Emma* extravagant praise in the “Quarterly Review”, he still offers nothing better in defence of that lesser “class of fictions” to which Austen’s works belong than to suggest them as a refuge in “hours of languor and anxiety, of deserted age and solitary celibacy, of pain even and poverty” that “are beguiled by the perusal of these light volumes”. Addressing the novel before him, he closes his glowing remarks on *Emma* by recommending it merely as one from which “the youthful wanderer may return from his promenade to the ordinary business of life, without any chance of having his head turned by the recollection of the scene through which he has been wandering” – that is, as nothing more than a pleasant watering-place diversion.¹⁹ Richard Whately’s even more extravagant praise of Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and

¹⁶ G. Allen, *Intertextuality*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 71: “In the modern market system, the name of the author allows the work to be an item of exchange value [...] the capitalist market system [...] encourages us to view works as disposable, or at least finite, commodities”.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

¹⁸ Anthony Mandal places Austen firmly in a broad spectrum of Jane Austen’s associations with other novels. See A. Mandal, *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel: the Determined Author*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 and also E. Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Women’s Fiction in England 1790-1820*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 117-158 (for Austen’s general participation in the women’s tradition, in particular “The Lady’s Magazine”).

¹⁹ [W. Scott], [review of *Emma*], in “Quarterly Review”, XIV, October 1815 [issued March 1816], pp. 188-201, cited from *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, Edited by B. C. Southam, vol. I: 1811-1870, London, Routledge & Kegan, 1979, p. 59 and p. 68.

Persuasion in the “Quarterly Review”, ultimately comparing the author’s characters to Shakespeare’s, concludes likewise, that

“Miss Austin’s works may safely be recommended, not only as among the most unexceptionable of their class, but as combining, in an eminent degree, instruction with amusement [...] for mere innocent amusement is in itself a good [...] especially as it may occupy the place of some other that may *not* be innocent.”²⁰

A canonical process more powerful, however, than either Scott or Whately understands, guides “this class of fictions”. Mr. Morland, the fictional spokesperson for Letitia Elizabeth Landon in her novel *Romance and Reality* (1831), recalls his lifetime of reading novels as a voyage of discovery through the community of women’s fiction: “One does not easily forget the impressions of our youth”, he says, “and mine passed in the reign of female authorship”. He traces his earliest enthusiasm for the popular novels of the Minerva Press, then with added years, through the novels of Mary Robinson, Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith, and finally, his maturation into adulthood in the company of “Miss Edgeworth, Miss Burney and Miss Austen”.²¹ Jane Austen herself affirms the community of women’s fiction in *Northanger Abbey*:

“Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? [...] Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body”.²²

In the same novel her hero, Henry Tilney, boasts of his experience in reading within the women’s tradition: “I myself have read hundreds and

²⁰ [R. Whately], [review of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*], in “Quarterly Review”, XXIV, January 1821, pp. 352-376, cited from *ibidem*, p. 105.

²¹ L. Landon, *Romance and Reality*, London, Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831, vol. II, pp. 192-194.

²² J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, edited by B. M. Benedict and D. Le Faye, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 30 (I, 5).

hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas”, citing the two most favoured names for their heroines as proof of it.²³

3. *Austen's and women's fiction*

Austen indulged in her own appropriations from the woman's canon through a story entitled *Guilt Pursued by Conscience; or, The Perfidious Friend*, a tale she found in “The Lady's Magazine” of 1802. Stories in “The Lady's Magazine” were provided by the readers themselves as free and grateful offerings to the muse – a thrifty policy of the magazine that resulted in monthly conversations of free-flowing tales in which the shared concerns of the authors and the readers, the same beings in very fact, could be examined in unending repetitions, not unlike internet blogging today. The tale that claimed Austen's particular attention will catch the eye of any present-day reader of *Emma*:

“Mr. Knightley, a country-gentleman of not very large fortune, but such as was amply sufficient for his mode of living—as he rarely visited the capital, had an aversion to the expensive pleasures of dissipated life—had married, from the purest of affection, and an esteem which grew with his knowledge of its object, a young lady of foreign birth, who had been left a deserted orphan at a boarding-school near the residence of a relation of his whom he sometimes visited. As by this union he made no addition to his property, nor formed any advantageous connexion, he was by some blamed, and others ridiculed. He however found himself amply compensated [...] by the amiable qualities and virtues of his wife; who, like himself, despised ambition, and sought only the genuine enjoyments of domestic happiness.”²⁴

²³ Ibidem, p. 108 (I, 14). See J. Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 107-210.

²⁴ *Guilt Pursued by Conscience; or, The Perfidious Friend: a Tale*, in “The Lady's Magazine”, November 1802, p. 563.

Few contemporaries would have remembered *Guilt Pursued by Conscience* – or would have cared if they did – but any reader of Austen’s *Emma* remotely familiar with popular fiction would have taken the point of its concern. Is it possible, “The Lady’s Magazine” tale asks, for a Mr. Knightley to wed a penniless orphan from a boarding school? The Mr. Knightley in the magazine does so with grateful alacrity. Jane Austen’s Mr. Knightley never considers it for a moment. Only Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith, great novel readers themselves, could dream of such a thing. Austen appropriates “The Lady’s Magazine” tale in the broadest sense of parody, the “ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” or “repetition with critical distance”.²⁵ Austen made deliberate incursions into the despised field of popular literature through “situated conversation”, a crafty practice implicitly announcing her own work as “counter-novelistic”, but at the same time assuring herself of a profitable stake in the popular market.²⁶

That is true enough, but Austen’s irony, her characteristic distancing of her works from the tradition, was achieved over time and, in her early writing, not always with complete success. In *Sense and Sensibility* for example, Colonel Brandon’s melodramatic in-set account of the two Elizas – that is his confession to Elinor Dashwood of his own failed love for the first Eliza and his report of Willoughby’s seduction of the second Eliza, her daughter – reminds us of the dangers of entrapment in the rhetorical slough of women’s fiction. Colonel Brandon concludes his tale of Willoughby and

²⁵ L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1988, p. 26.

²⁶ K. Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 217. See also J. Simons, *Jane Austen and Popular Culture*, in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, editors C. Johnson and C. Tuite, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 469.

the second Eliza by bringing the boilerplate resources of contemporary women's fiction into play. He reports to Elinor with horror that

“he [Willoughby] had left the girl whose youth and innocence he had seduced, in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address! He had left her promising to return; he neither returned, nor wrote, nor relieved her.”²⁷

In like manner, Anna Maria Bennet writing from the bottom of the literary status pile, the Minerva Press, supplies the readers of her popular novel *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (1797) with just such a cry of outrage: “from such a state of happy security, to be at her age at once sunk from affluence to poverty, without one natural friend, was enough to shake the strongest mind”.²⁸ Charlotte Smith, a middle-level author, serves up the expected dish in her *Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake* (1789): “young, beautiful, indigent, and friendless, the world was to her only as a vast wilderness, where perils of many kinds awaited her”.²⁹ Mrs. Ann Radcliffe, the gold standard of gothic fiction, provides yet another version from the heroine of *The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance* (1797):

“‘Alas!’ said she, ‘I have no longer a home, a circle to smile welcomes upon me! I have no longer even one friend to support, to rescue me! I—a miserable wanderer on a distant shore!’”³⁰

²⁷ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, edited by E. Copeland, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 237-238 (II, 9).

²⁸ A. M. Bennett, *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, London, William Lane at the Minerva Press, 1797, vol. II, p. 127.

²⁹ C. Smith, *Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake*, London, T. Cadell, 1790², vol. V, p. 38.

³⁰ A. Radcliffe, *The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance*, Edited by F. Garber, With an Introduction and Notes by E. J. Clery, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 220.

Colonel Brandon, to his credit, updates the hoary trope, a practice in “the nature of canon”,³¹ by altering Mrs. Radcliffe’s heroine from a “wanderer on a distant shore!” to Austen’s more modern heroine “left [...] ignorant of his address!”.

Austen’s more characteristic posture, the mockery of such jargon, paradoxically appears in the very same novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, relying on an appropriation, one also borrowed from “The Lady’s Magazine”, *The Shipwreck*. This tale from the magazine’s supplement for 1794 supplies two significant names for characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby and Brandon. At the opening of “The Lady’s Magazine” tale, the reader finds Miss Brandon, who has long held a distinct preference for Mr. Willoughby (and he for her), waiting inconsolable, but obedient, aboard a ship preparing to set sail for Bristol where she must marry her father’s choice for her husband, an elderly colleague in trade. A sudden storm in the harbour sweeps Miss Brandon into the sea. By the greatest good fortune, Mr. Willoughby, who attends the ship’s departure, spies Miss Brandon’s danger and unhesitatingly plunges into the waves to bring her safely to shore. When Mr. Brandon, the father, learns of his daughter’s narrow escape, he instantly demands to meet her rescuer:

“Her preserver appeared and announced himself as Willoughby; that Willoughby who [...] would not hesitate to encounter a thousand times the same danger he had now braved to shield her from harm.”³²

A grateful Mr. Brandon, reversing his past refusal to countenance the couple’s union, agrees to an immediate celebration of their nuptials. Austen’s quiet repetition of the billowing waves of *The Shipwreck* as a

³¹ J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, Eugene (Oregon), Wipf and Stock, 1972, p. XV: “It is in the nature of canon to be contemporized”.

³² *The Shipwreck*, in “The Lady’s Magazine”, Supplement for 1794, p. 680.

mere “driving rain”³³ in *Sense and Sensibility* reveals an author at the top of her ironic game. When Willoughby arrives at the Dashwood cottage the morning after Marianne’s accident, the youngest Dashwood sister, Margaret, greets his appearance with a quotation taken directly from “The Lady’s Magazine” story: “Marianne’s preserver” she exclaims – Austen noting that her expression had “more elegance than precision”.³⁴ “The Lady’s Magazine” *Shipwreck* remains in Austen’s memory, resurfacing four years later in *Emma* when the novel’s heroine mistakenly interprets Jane Fairfax’s sailing accident as sure evidence of Jane’s guilty love for her best friend’s husband, Mr. Dixon, her timely preserver from the Weymouth waves.³⁵

4. *Appropriating Austen’s novels: the 1820s and 1830s*

In this context, it should not be surprising that novelists of the period that followed Austen felt free to import dialogue, characters and plots from Austen’s works with no obligation to their source, just as she had done with “The Lady’s Magazine” tales. Novelists of fashionable aristocratic life, the next generation of novelists to follow Austen, were outrageous poachers of Austen’s works. Richard Bentley, the publisher of the first collected edition of her novels (1832-1833), acknowledged Austen’s influence on this profitable contemporary genre in the preface to his edition of *Sense and Sensibility*: “Miss Austen is the founder of a school of novelists”, he writes, “and her followers are not confined to her own sex, but comprise in their

³³ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, cit., p. 49 (I, 9).

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 55 (I, 10).

³⁵ See Id., *Emma*, edited by R. Cronin and D. McMillan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 171 (II, 1).

number some male writers of considerable merit”.³⁶ The followers Bentley refers to, the “silver fork school”,³⁷ took its name from the radical critic William Hazlitt as his term of contempt for their slavish attention, as he considered it, to the tastes and manners of a corrupt aristocracy. The school enjoyed a huge success in the 1820s and 1830s, making the fortune of their primary publisher, Henry Colburn, and, by no coincidence, his sometime partner Bentley himself. Edward Bulwer, a leading member of the school, confessed to being surprised and appalled by the popularity of these works:

“Read by all classes, in every town, in every village, these works [...] could not but engender a mingled indignation and disgust at the parade of frivolity, the ridiculous disdain of truth, nature, and mankind, the self-consequence and absurdity, which, falsely or truly, these novels exhibited as a picture of aristocratic society.”³⁸

Bentley no doubt hoped that his claim of Austen’s relation to these glamorous and popular fictions would promote his new collected edition of her novels. Ironically however, it was Jane Austen’s self-identification with the language and mores of the genteel middle classes that made her novels so tempting to authors writing about the aristocracy in the 1820s and 1830s. Austen’s novels had aimed at a lower social group, a narrow “coalition of Anglican gentry and middle-class people of merit”, with the intention “to educate [her readers] stylistically and therefore politically”.³⁹ Silver fork

³⁶ H. Austen, *Memoir of Miss Austen*, in J. E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by K. Sutherland, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 154 (“An editorial paragraph issued from Bentley’s office and not strictly part of Henry Austen’s ‘Memoir’”).

³⁷ W. Hazlitt, *The Dandy School* (1827), in Id., *The Complete Works*, Edited by P. P. Howe, London and Toronto, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1934, vol. 20, p. 146.

³⁸ E. Bulwer, *England and the English*, Paris, Baudry’s European Library, 1834, p. 252.

³⁹ G. Kelly, *Jane Austen and the Politics of Style*, in *Re-drawing Austen: Picturesque Travels in Austenland*, edited by B. Battaglia and D. Saglia, Napoli, Liguori, 2004, p. 68.

novelists shared the same intention, to educate their readers, but for them the aim was political as they turned their attention towards a much wider span of society, one covering the genteel middle classes, the gentry and the aristocracy itself.

The importance of Austen's novels for authors in these years, 1825 to 1840, politically the Age of Reform, lay in her gift to them of a "new consciousness fully consonant with cultural evolution", that is, the "fundamental assumption" that "our knowledge of the world [...] our world of everyday life" belongs to the great world of politics and public life.⁴⁰ For novelists who placed liberal political reform at the top of their agenda, Austen's Sir Walter Elliot could easily be reworked as a proto-canonical 'repetition' for an enfeebled aristocracy; Mr. Rushworth for a dim-witted upper gentry; Mrs. Elton, for an aggressive merchant class. Each of Austen's characters "is in fact a *text* with a style and language of its own",⁴¹ texts ideally suitable for such appropriation. Constantine Henry Phipps, Lord Normanby, an aristocrat writing in the cause of Reform, borrows (with no acknowledgement) the plot of *Persuasion* for his novel *Matilda: A Tale of the Day* (1825), and has a significant twist on his repetition, having the Anne Elliot character, after breaking off the engagement to her Captain Wentworth, haplessly succumb to her guardian's will and the well-meant advice of her late mother's best friend, and marry the wrong man, a wife-beater and, it turns out, a narrow-minded Tory as well. When her true love, a liberal Whig, returns to mend their relationship, Normanby turns the heroine's tragic marriage into a sympathetic, but deeply troubled case for revised divorce laws.

⁴⁰ M. Hayes, *Why Jane Austen Made It a Movie*, in *Jane Austen. Oggi e ieri*, a cura di B. Battaglia, Ravenna, Longo, 2002, pp. 26-27 and p. 31.

⁴¹ B. Battaglia, *Jane Austen's 'Chameleonic' Art and a Poetics of Postmodernism*, in *Jane Austen. Oggi e ieri*, cit., p. 41.

Novelists of fashionable life found Austen's novels richly stocked with solutions to their most pressing needs: first, a genteel language that could buffer the awkwardness of introducing the middle classes into higher company and, second, plots that with only slight alterations could alert contemporary readers to a change in political and social mores. The briefest survey of the silver fork school makes for encounters with Jane Austen that always can surprise. Marianne Spencer Hudson's novel *Almack's* (1825) produces a Lady Norbury who complains fretfully: "I am not fond of young men [...] they make such a noise in the house with their boots, and they clap the doors so after them".⁴² Very much the same thing Mr. Woodhouse says of Frank Churchill in *Emma*:

"He has been opening the doors very often this evening, and keeping them open very inconsiderately. He does not think of the draught. I do not mean to set you against him, but indeed he is not quite the thing!"⁴³

In the same novel Mr. John Knightley objects to going out to Mr. Weston's house for dinner:

"The folly of not allowing people to be comfortable at home [...] when they can! [...] in defiance of the voice of nature, which tells man [...] to stay at home himself, and keep all under shelter that he can [...] Going in dismal weather, to return probably in worse; — four horses and four servants taken out for nothing but to convey five idle, shivering creatures into colder rooms and worse company than they might have had at home".⁴⁴

Sir William Lacy in Thomas Henry Lister's *Herbert Lacy* (1828) endorses the sentiment:

⁴² M. Hudson, *Almack's. A Novel*, London, Saunders and Otley, 1827, vol. I, p. 193.

⁴³ J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 268 (II, 11).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 121-122 (I, 13).

“Conceive, if you can, a spectacle more delightful, than that of a whole family going, in the worst of weather, six miles out and back again, actuated and supported only by a noble determination to do as other people do.”⁴⁵

Landon begins her novel *Lady Anne Granard, or, Keeping Up Appearances* (1842) with a foolish married couple about to launch into familiar Austen territory:

“For five years every thing went on exceedingly well, excepting that every year a daughter made its appearance, a fact which astonished no one so much as it did Lady Anne herself [...] Moreover it was a son they wanted, as a male heir was necessary before any settlement could be made of the property.”⁴⁶

Any boarding-school girl would recall *Pride and Prejudice*:

“When first Mr. Bennet had married, economy was held to be perfectly useless; for, of course, they were to have a son. This son was to join in cutting off the entail [...]. Five daughters successively entered the world, but yet the son was to come; and Mrs. Bennet [...] had been certain that he would.”⁴⁷

It was Austen’s ear for contemporary speech, however, that made the most profound mark on her followers. Edward Bulwer Lytton reminds contemporary authors of the new Austen way in *Pelham: or The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828), his first novel of fashionable life:

“[...] there is only one rule necessary for a clever writer who wishes to delineate the *beau monde*. It is this: let him consider that ‘dukes, and lords, and noble princes,’ eat, drink, talk, move, exactly the same as any other class of civilized people—nay, the very subjects in conversation are, for the most part, the same in all sets.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ T. H. Lister, *Herbert Lacy*, Philadelphia – New York – Boston, Carey Lea & Carey, 1828, vol. I, p. 285.

⁴⁶ L. E. Landon, *Lady Anne Granard, or, Keeping Up Appearances*, London, Henry Colburn, 1842, vol. I, p. 11,

⁴⁷ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by P. Rogers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 340 (III, 8).

⁴⁸ E. Bulwer Lytton, *Pelham: or The Adventures of a Gentleman*, London, Henry Colburn, vol. III, pp. 49-50.

Marianne Hudson, possibly the most free-handed of her contemporaries with variations on Austen's dialogue, mines *Emma* for a wealth of opportunities to demonstrate her proficiency in Austen-speak. When Austen's middleclass Mr. John Knightley addresses Jane Fairfax, he

“ [...] smiled, and replied,
 ‘ [...] The post-office has a great charm at one period of our lives. When you have lived to my age, you will begin to think letters are never worth going through the rain for.’”⁴⁹

In Hudson's *Almack's* a kindly duke finds similar words for the heroine of that novel:

“‘I fancy, when your ladyship is a little older,’ said the Duke smiling, ‘you will find your nerves not quite so easily excited: none but very young ladies ever receive such exquisitely interesting letters’.”⁵⁰

Miss Bates's old mother, referring to Jane Fairfax's 'crossed' letters (lines written over one another at right angles to save space and postage), tempts another Hudson aristocrat into Austen's idiom: “Well, Hetty,” says old Mrs. Bates, “now I think you will be put to it to make out all that chequer-work”.⁵¹ A great lord in *Almack's* protests likewise:

“I have often wondered what the deuce women can find to write about: such crossed sheets! One ought to be paid for deciphering their chequer-work.”⁵²

Catherine Grace Francis Gore, the leading female author of the silver fork school, compared by contemporaries to Austen, is the most complex

⁴⁹ J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 316 (II, 16).

⁵⁰ M. Hudson, *Almack's*, cit., vol. II, p. 137.

⁵¹ See J. Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 168 (II, 1).

⁵² M. Hudson, *Almack's*, cit., vol. II, p. 137.

and probing of Austen's debtors. Gore reworks two of Austen's novels, *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, at least three times each. *Emma* presents Gore with opportunities to explore Austen's trope of the independent woman. In her first appropriation of *Emma*, the anti-heroine of *Mothers and Daughters* (1831) enters the novel as a character "neither handsome, clever, nor amiable",⁵³ an elegant tribute to Gore's source. This unpromising character thrashes her two elegant, but much-abused daughters through the London marriage market in a vain attempt to land them aristocratic marriages. In Gore's second appropriation of this novel, *Pin Money* (1831), a bright, spirited, but naïve heroine shows herself inadequate to navigate aristocratic London without a guide more responsible than the boarding school chum she chooses. Finally, in *Mrs. Armytage: or, Female Domination* (1836), Gore traces the frightening career of a young woman born to Emma's happy state of independence, in whom, as with Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Taylor, her father and tutor can see no flaw. She grows into a domestic terror and a political monster.

In Gore's appropriations of *Mansfield Park*, any heroine with a limp in her step, a smallpox-ruined complexion or a hopeless love for her cousin is entitled to refuge in the Park's East room, where Fanny's "writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach [...] Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend".⁵⁴ The reader thus finds Cousin Mary (smallpox) in Gore's *Mothers and Daughters*

"[...] surrounded by her books, her work, her music, her easel, her flowers, her birds! [...] sufficing to her own amusement—yet ever ready to lay aside her favourite pursuits and preoccupations in order to contribute to the happiness of others."⁵⁵

⁵³ C. Gore, *Mothers and Daughters: A Novel*, London, Richard Bentley, 1831, vol. I, p. 4.

⁵⁴ J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, edited by J. Wiltshire, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 178 (I, 16).

⁵⁵ C. Gore, *Mothers and Daughters: A Novel*, cit., vol. III, p. 32.

In her *Stokeshill Place, or The Man of Business* (1837), the Bertram sisters stroll over to become the Drewe sisters:

“ [...] tall, handsome, high-bred girls [...] with no worse disqualification than [their] selfishness [...] All without was bright and polished, — and all within hollow and unprofitable”;⁵⁶

the very judgment visited on Austen’s spoiled Bertram girls:

“ [...] it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility.”⁵⁷

These spoiled girls are given a Fanny Price figure to patronize as well:

“Rivalship with such a person was out of the question; and instead of treating her want of connection with the scorn it would have provoked from some country baronet’s daughter, they were fascinated by her unassuming gentleness, and amused by her *naïveté*”;⁵⁸

the discriminating variation of a higher social class on the relationship between the Bertram sisters and their humble cousin:

“Though unworthy, from inferiority of age and strength, to be their constant associate, their pleasures and schemes were sometimes of a nature to make a third very useful, especially when that third was of an obliging, yielding temper.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Id., *Stokeshill Place, or The Man of Business*, London, Henry Colburn, 1837, vol. I, p. 101.

⁵⁷ J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., pp. 21-22 (I, 2).

⁵⁸ C. Gore, *Stokeshill Place, or The Man of Business*, cit., vol. I, p. 101.

⁵⁹ J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., p. 19 (I, 2).

The heroine of Gore's *Stokeshill Place* Margaret Barnsley (scarlet fever, hopeless love) revisits her old schoolroom, like Fanny Price, to get the better of some very unsettling reflections:

"There stood the piano, awaiting her with its figures and concertos, — the drawing-box with its chalks, — the eternal tapestry-frame with its worsteads and floss-silk; — while Blair, Chapone, Graham, Trimmer, Hannah More, Fordyce, Gisborne, and a few other female classics, displayed their well-worn tomes on the shelves of her limited bookcase."⁶⁰

In Gore's final and most extended appropriation of *Mansfield Park*, *The Cabinet Minister* (1839), the orphaned heroine, Bessy Grenfell, lives in the home of her wealthy aunt where she nurses, like Fanny Price, dual anxieties over her brother's career ambitions and a secret and unrequited love for her cousin, the son of this aunt, with regular bouts of verbal abuse from her aunt in the combined idioms of Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas Bertram. It is to her East room that she retreats for solace:

"She arose and bestirred herself; her favourite books and occupations were again around her. She would not suffer herself to dwell upon evils, perhaps never to be realized."⁶¹

5. *Austen in the crossfire: duelling canons*

How the contemporary critical establishment, the professionals of the literary periodicals, could have remained so utterly silent about this plentiful, even flamboyant recycling of Jane Austen's novels is a mystery, one that deliberately conceals the conflict of critical attention that divides popular literature from approved literature throughout the century; the difference between an understanding of canon as an achieved status of

⁶⁰ C. Gore, *Stokeshill Place, or The Man of Business*, cit., vol. II, p. 2.

⁶¹ Id., *The Cabinet Minister*, London, Richard Bentley, 1839, vol. II, p. 271.

value as against canon understood as a process in the development of a readership's common values.

The usual account of Jane Austen's long-delayed rise to fame, for example, rests on contemporary uncertainty about her deserved presence in a formal, fixed canon. The market at the beginning of the nineteenth century flourished on celebrity, the glittering reputations of authors like Scott, Lord Byron and Robert Burns, a privileged mark of value that continued through the century, and one that ran completely counter to the collective system that supported even the best known of women writers like 'Miss Burney', 'Miss Ferrier', 'Miss Edgeworth' and 'Miss Austin'. The female-weighted collection of novels edited by Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *The British Novelists* (1810-1820), where eight are written by women and fourteen by men, easily lost its bid to establish a novelistic canon to Walter Scott's collection, *Ballantyne's Novelist's Library* (1821-1824), in which "twelve are men, [only] two are women".⁶²

Professional critics of the nineteenth century complain over and over that Miss Austen is not well known, that hers is a talent too good, too refined for the masses, that she is a hidden treasure of English letters.⁶³ The great triumvirate of Austen's supporters in the century, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Archbishop Whately and George Henry Lewes, resort to elevating their author to honorary male status, a "prose Shakespeare",⁶⁴ a well-considered design to inoculate her against "this class of fictions", the

⁶² C. Johnson, "Let Me Make the Novels of a Country": Barbauld's "The British Novelists" (1810/1820), in "NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction", 34, Spring 2001, p. 170. Claudia Johnson offers an account of these two competing efforts to create a selective canon of the British novel.

⁶³ See B. C. Southam, *Introduction*, in *Jane Austen, The Critical Heritage*, cit., vol. II: 1870-1940, 1987, p. 21, p. 46, p. 50 and p. 52.

⁶⁴ [G. H. Lewes], [review to *The Fair Carew*], in "The Leader", 22 November 1851, p. 115, cited from *Jane Austen, The Critical Heritage*, cit., vol. I: 1811-1870, p. 130.

dismissive phrase Scott uses for women's fiction. Women authors simply falls below their horizon of serious critical consideration. Austen is thus lofted into the company of established male merit in the manner of Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser in Johan Zoffany's painting *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-1772) in which the male academicians are shown busily at work on the task of 'life-drawing' while the Academy's only two female members are consigned to portraits hung on the wall.

Even Walter Scott, who valued Austen's works to the end of his life, never gets past the undigested fact that her great talents must exist beside those of ladies who write "this class of fictions". In his journal, he records with genuine, if patronizing admiration: "That young lady had a talent", one he admits is denied to him. Two weeks later, he returns to the sub-text of ladies who write fiction: "The women do this better—Edgeworth, Ferrier, Austen have all their portraits of real society, far superior to any thing Man, vain Man, has produced of the like nature". And, in a late conversation cited by John Lockhart, he throws up his hands in wonder: "There's a finishing-off in some of her scenes that is really quite above every body else".⁶⁵

The problem for Austen's nineteenth-century admirers lies in her undeniable claim to be placed in the formal canon of English literature and yet her persistent association with the stain of women's popular fiction. Ironically, the three greatest female luminaries of mid-century English letters, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, found the critics' repeated comparisons of Austen to Shakespeare a deeply

⁶⁵ W. Scott, *The Journal* 18256-26, the text revised from a photostat in the National Library of Scotland, edited by J. G. Tait, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1939, vol. I, p. 135 and p. 144 (14 and 28 March 1826) and J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, Edinburgh – London, Robert Cadell – John Murray and Whittaker, 1837, vol. VII, p. 338, cited from *ibidem*, p. 106

troubling issue. Its implied exclusivity threatened their own claims as women to seats on Mount Olympus.

Charlotte Brontë wrote to Lewes to protest what she considered his excessive praise of Austen. Lewes responded hotly that she “*must*” read Austen and, as Brontë quotes his own words back to him, “learn to acknowledge her as *one of the greatest artists, of the greatest painters of human character*, and one of the writers with the nicest sense of means to an end that ever lived”. Brontë reluctantly promised to follow his advice to read Austen, but closed her return letter to him with a flourish of unmistakable contempt for the task, “I do not know when that will be, as I have no access to a circulating library”, that low place.⁶⁶

Elizabeth Barrett Browning also protested Austen’s elevation to canonical status, deeming the critics’ admiration of Austen’s characters a misplaced evaluation, the effect of mere “craft”, not “poetry”. For her taste, she wrote Mary Russell Mitford, Jane Austen’s novels were *unworthy* to be compared to Mary Howitt’s “delightful” translation of Frederika Bremer’s *The Neighbours. A Story of Every-Day Life* (1842): “I do consider the book of a higher & sweeter tone”, she writes Miss Mitford, “than Miss Austen had voice & soul for”.⁶⁷ Regarding Austen’s canonical status, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is distinctly unimpressed: Miss Austen is “delightful exquisite *in her degree!*”, but she does not belong in the same company

⁶⁶ T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, *The Brontës: Their Friendships, Lives, and Correspondence*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1932, vol. II, p. 180 (C. Brontë, letter of January 18, 1848), cited from *ibidem*, p. 127.

⁶⁷ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836-1854*, edited and introduced by M. B. Raymond and M. R. Sullivan, Waco (Texas), Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1983, vol. II, p. 99. See K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and her readers, 1786-1945*, London, Anthem Press, 2012, p. 155.

with those “who aspire, like *ourselves*”, she confides, to the higher claims of Literature.⁶⁸

George Eliot is more circumspect in her opinions of Austen expressed in her later years, she was living after all with Lewes, Austen’s most outspoken nineteenth-century promoter. But in an early unsigned essay, *The Progress of Fiction as an Art* (1853), an essay her biographer considers to be from her pen, she has this to say of Austen:

“Without brilliancy of any kind — without imagination, depth of thought, or wide experience, Miss Austin, by simply describing what she knew and had seen, and making accurate portraits of very tiresome and uninteresting people, is recognised as a true artist, and will continue to be admired, when many authors more ambitious⁶⁹ [...] will be neglected and forgotten.”⁷⁰

As for Austen’s canonical status, all this talk of Shakespeare is a mistake:

“Miss Austin’s accurate scenes from dull life, and Miss Burney’s long histories of amiable and persecuted heroines, though belonging to the modern and reformed school of novels, must still be classed in the lower division.”⁷¹

George Eliot shares Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s contempt for the women’s tradition to which Austen belongs:

“They show us too much of the littlenesses and trivialities of life [...] They fall short of fulfilling the objects, and satisfying the necessities of Fiction in its highest aspect [...] .”⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibidem, vol. II, p. 109. See K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and her readers, 1786-1945*, London, Anthem Press, 2012, pp. 154-158.

⁶⁹ She remarks with perhaps a hint of personal anxiety.

⁷⁰ [G. Eliot], *The Progress of Fiction as an Art*, in “Westminster Review”, LX, October 1853, p. 358, cited from *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. I: 1811-1870, cit., p. 145.

⁷¹ [G. Eliot], *The Progress of Fiction as an Art*, cit., p. 145.

⁷² Ibidem, pp. 145-146.

Even Lewes succumbs finally, and with obvious regret, to the high-minded notions of his helpmeet, George Eliot, and confesses in his last essay on Austen, published in 1859, that Austen “never stirs the deeper emotions [...] never fills the soul with a noble aspiration”. The problem, he implies, falls to the contamination of the woman’s novel. “Her fame, as we think”, he writes, “must endure. But, after all, miniatures are not frescoes, and her works are miniatures”.⁷³

The anxiety that women’s popular culture compromised Austen’s status remained a lasting influence. Catherine Gore’s *The Hamiltons: or, Official Life in 1830* (1834), thought to be her best novel, gathered dust in university libraries for over hundred years with no notice of its massive appropriations from *Sense and Sensibility*: a recycling of Austen’s plot, the same two sisters, the same two suitors, the predatory Lucy Steele, with bits of little-altered Austen dialogue salted-in along the way.⁷⁴ But for those with eyes to see, ample evidence demonstrates that her texts were deeply involved in the popular marketplace.

James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir of Jane Austen* found the late-Regency association of silver fork fiction with his aunt’s novels unsafe territory, responding to the threat by turning her into a figure of Victorian propriety. As for F. R. Leavis and the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century, they took umbrage at any association at all of popular literature with Jane Austen. Matthew Whiting Rosa’s study *The Silver Fork School* (1936), a representative example, roundly rejects Gore’s explicit confession

⁷³ [G. H. Lewes], *The Novels of Jane Austen*, in “Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine”, LXXXVI, July 1859, cited in B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. I: 1811-1870, cit., p. 166.

⁷⁴ See E. Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 37-64.

in the preface to her novel *Pin Money* that her work is influenced by “the familiar narrative of Miss Austin”:⁷⁵

“One feels a difference in their works not to be atoned for by any amount of similarity in aim or subject, the delicate clarity of an Austen novel is as remote as can be from the prolix cumbrousness of a Gore novel.”⁷⁶

One of the advantages, however, of Jane Austen’s delayed path to formal canonical status is the respite that twenty years of title-page anonymity provided her between 1811 and 1832, before she became “Jane Austen” in Bentley’s collected edition, before her descendants branded her as a Victorian lady, or her Janeite champions created her as the ‘Dear, dear Jane’ of ‘Austen-land’, or James Edward Austen-Leigh made her the mark of “cultivated minds”,⁷⁷ or Leavis announced her to be the “inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel”,⁷⁸ or, for that matter, before the 1970s variably introduced Jane Austen as the conservative propagandist, the subversive feminist, the political radical, or more recently, the modern person’s guide to sexual ecstasy.⁷⁹ None of these Jane Austens existed when her novels were appropriated by the silver fork authors during the 1820s and 1830s.

With our knowledge of their rampant predations, we may now dismiss the hundred year-old canard that Austen’s novels lacked an early popular audience. The multitudinous adaptations, appropriations and repetitions of the years immediately after her death had the effect both of

⁷⁵ C. Gore, *Pin Money: A Novel*, London, Henry Colburn, 1831, vol. I, n. p.

⁷⁶ M. W. Rosa, *The Silver Fork Novel: Novels of Fashion Preceding “Vanity Fair”*, New York, Kennicat Press, 1964, p. 128.

⁷⁷ K. Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood*, cit., p. 12.

⁷⁸ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1950, p. 7.

⁷⁹ See K. Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood*, cit., p. 12.

extending and confirming public access to Austen in areas hitherto unsuspected. As for the operations of Julie Sanders' unacknowledged appropriations in later fiction, it would be hard to account for *Vanity Fair*, *A Portrait of a Lady*, *Howard's End* or, for that matter, the loopy teenagers in Heckerling's *Clueless* without Austen's proto-canonical presence. As Cornel West recently observed of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, it is "impossible" to think that "characters like Didi and Gogo are not fundamentally connected to the preoccupation in the quotidian that you get in the light, playful, subtle, sophisticated, complex stories of Jane Austen";⁸⁰ an insight that frankly embraces the presence of such a canonical process in the on-going world of the novel.

Finally, however, it must be admitted we are left with puzzling questions about the reading practices of Austen's day. Could there have been a highly selective, elite readership for example, one that would be able to nod appreciatively when an obvious adaptation or an unacknowledged appropriation of Austen swam to the surface? Was there a second tier of readers, a less knowing market where embedded appropriations were normal and expected, silently incorporated into a proto-canon of developing tastes and values? Or, should we imagine a much cannier general readership than we have previously thought, one in which all novel readers were in on the game, readers who knew their way around the novel better than professional critics blinded by their obsession with the establishment of a formal canon? It could be that Jane Austen was slowly becoming a classic without their help through inclusions and exclusions made by time passing and by reader choice. In other words, it could be that a *functioning* canon at work on Scott's "this class of novels"

⁸⁰ C. West, *Power and Freedom in Jane Austen's Novels*, in "Persuasions. The Jane Austen Journal On-Line", 34, 2012, pp. 114-115.

was silently making a seat for Jane Austen on Mount Olympus notwithstanding the gallant, but unnecessary imprimatur provided by the professionals.

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