

A Truth Universally Acknowledged?: Rewriting Jane Austen's Marriage Plot¹

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Universally Acknowledged "Truths"

The most popular of Jane Austen's novels begins with an ironic statement about marriage: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (1).² In Austen's work, the so-called universal truth is an illusion – one maintained by a society driven by the forces of the marriage market. This opening line playfully emphasizes economic motivations rather than love or desire. Intriguingly, however, products of the "Jane Austen industry" of the 1990s and 2000s seem to ignore Austen's irony by suggesting that today's readers have never been more eager to acknowledge this "universal truth." This is evident in manifestations of what scholars have called "Austenmania,"

“the Austen phenomenon,” or the “Austen boom” in the 1990s and `2000s – a resurgence of interest in all things Austen, marked by an explosion of film adaptations, rewritings, and other commercial spinoffs.³

In many of these, the courtship/marriage plot becomes the defining characteristic of Austen’s fiction. Adaptations of her novels tend, as one scholar notes, to be “hypertrophically romantic,” often flattening “romance’s subtle gradations” or, worse, “[dissolving] any implied opposition to the mass genre whose devices Austen sought both to suppress and enlist” (Sutherland 354). Many cinematic reworkings are structured and marketed as romantic comedies. Even fictionalizations of Austen’s life, such as *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*, released in 2007 and 2008 respectively, speculate on secret love affairs that may have inspired an author who never married.

The marginalization of Austen’s irony becomes even more palpable in over 150 recently published continuations, rewritings, and other offshoots of Austen’s novels, which make courtship and marriage their focal point.⁴ Numerous sequels center on new courtship plots for minor characters or for the next generation of Darcys, Bingleys, Knightleys, etc. Modernized retellings transport the romance to the present and transform Austen’s protagonists not only into chick-lit heroines, but also into teenage girls, postgraduate students, or elderly Jewish widows in search of love. At least five spinoffs involve someone from the present traveling to Austen’s world and finding romance there.⁵

These spinoffs, written predominantly by women, bring about a critical re-evaluation of Austen’s engagement with gender issues. These include her strong and intelligent women characters (Looser 6), her focus on female experiences “from a specifically female perspective” (Gilbert

and Gubar 72), and the ways in which she has helped to shape female authorship. Moreover, spinoffs engage with varying interpretations of Austen's marriage plot – which some say adheres to patriarchal and conventional structures and others that it subtly undermines these. Discourse about women's freedom and restriction, the "reading" of men, and the role of marriage in defining a woman's identity are highlighted by what in Austen's novels is reaffirmed, negotiated, or undermined by women who revisit her "world" via these spinoffs.

Austenian Spinoffs and (Post) Feminist Gestures

Commercial concerns undoubtedly play an influential role in the repackaging of Austen; however, I believe that her "recyclability" cannot be attributed either solely to these or to the cultural sophistication associated with her name.⁶ I hope to look beyond issues of commodification and consumerism, at the significance of the "game of cultural production" (Bowles 21) that such paraliterature plays. Many spinoffs have been labelled as derivative, formulaic, or even "trashy" – but I do not set out to evaluate their admittedly questionable aesthetic merits.⁷ Rather, the key intervention of my research is its exploration of the cultural significance of these texts. I see these as meeting grounds and sites of struggle for women who may not necessarily affiliate themselves with feminist movements but who clearly have something to say about what they want as women.

Significantly, Austen is "cited with equal approval by feminists and misogynists," as one biographer-critic notes (Harman xvi). Her ambiguous treatment of the role of love and marriage in a woman's life has led her to be described as a feminist, a conservative, a proto-feminist, a partial or unrealized feminist, and a "sneaky" feminist

(Looser 4-6). What is important for my study is that Austen took on the gender debates of her era without her fiction being too confrontational or controversial. As Claudia L. Johnson importantly suggests in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Austen used a strategy of apparent silence on political matters, including other women writers' arguments about gender in the wake of the 1790s revolution, to depolemize debates of her era (xxv).⁸

I believe that Austen's enabling "silence" and arguably ambiguous feminism appeal to many contemporary women and that the spinoffs they produce or consume similarly engage with earlier first- or second-wave feminist movements in non-confrontational ways. While these spinoffs cannot be called feminist in the strongly political and academic sense of the word, there are informal feminist discourses in them. I see these texts are venues for what I call (post)feminist gestures – or informal debates about love, marriage, and identity that are often related to second-wave feminism's discussions of gender issues.

The term "(post)feminist" indicates the spinoffs' affiliation with popular, informal, and non-academic strands of what is theoretically described today as "third-wave feminism." The term "(post)feminist" orients the focus towards the producers and consumers of these texts – women who grew up with the gains fought for by earlier feminists, and women who write and read these texts at a time when feminism is very much "part of popular consciousness" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 290).⁹ Such women may support female empowerment and the addressing of gender inequalities, but may challenge the application of certain second-wave feminist principles to their everyday lives or to their identities.¹⁰ In dubbing these (post)feminist texts, I acknowledge that they are informed – albeit for many in an informal, non-academic way – by

certain second-wave critics' readings of the marriage plot, by third-wave readings that harness queer theory, by reception theory, and by cultural theory.

Revising Austen's Marriage Plot: Sequels, Retellings, and Offshoots

This vision of (post)feminist rewriting guided my examination of a representative selection of spinoffs, specifically, their engagement with "stock" elements of Austen's narratives – her marriage-endings, love stories, iconic pairings, and, in some cases, her irony.¹¹ I explored how they functioned as intertextual "grafts" onto Austen's narratives, life, and world. The term "intertextuality" is used here in its restricted sense to describe "a relation between texts in which one cites, rewrites or transforms the other" (McQuillan 320) or, as Gerard Genette defines it, a relation "uniting a text B . . . to an earlier text A . . . upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (*Palimpsests* 5). The manner of grafting and the motivations behind such narrative interventions are the focus of my study.

Much of my analysis comprises a "feminist narratology" – "the study of the narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural construction of gender" (Warhol 5). Because Austen's novels are conflated in popular culture with the "marriage plot," I focused on how their narratives were transformed – changes to beginnings and endings, new settings or focalizations, and alternative paths taken in narrative middles. As I looked at *how* the marriage plot was extended, rehashed, or reworked, I asked the following questions: What in Austen and the marriage plot (or in perceptions of these) are so meaningful to women today? What do these spinoffs say specifically about the desires and anxieties of women in the present?

Harnessing tools from other models of criticism, namely cultural studies and reception theory, I supplemented my intertextual comparisons with analysis of the spinoffs' paratextual elements. "Paratextuality," Gerard Genette's term, describes the relationship in which "liminal devices and conventions both within the book and outside it . . . mediate the book to the reader (Macksey xviii). Using a cultural approach similar to that of Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson in *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*, I explored motivations revealed by such devices which, as Genette asserts, "are at the service of . . . a more pertinent reading of [a text]" (*Paratexts* 2). I first examined authorial paratexts, such as dedications, forewords, author's notes, which reflect the motivations for reconfiguring Austen and the connections these have to themes of love and marriage - what Wolfgang Iser would classify as belonging to the "artistic" pole of the work (391). I also analyzed publishers' paratexts such as book covers and blurbs, "extras" like reading guides, and marketing-oriented information on official websites. Finally, I tackled readers' responses, which comprise the "aesthetic" pole of the work, "the actions involved in responding to [it]" or its realization by the reader (Iser 391).

Thus, text, intertext, and paratext came together in my study to bring to the surface the different "truths" that women today construct out of Austen.

Repeating vs. Reworking "Universal Truths"

I will now provide a sample analysis of three spinoffs: two retellings of *Pride and Prejudice* and one offshoot that strongly references the novel. One of the key findings of my research is that that while spinoffs are unified by their connection to Austen and their acknowledgment of popular culture's linking of her works

with romance, they engage with her in wide range of ways – different types of Austen rewrites perform different kinds of cultural work. So, instead of the structural categories of sequel, retelling, and offshoot, the types of cultural interventions I identified will serve to classify the three texts tackled here. These categories are:

Spinoffs that are serious, unironic, romance-focused, and imitative; Spinoffs that attempt to veer away from or subvert romantic readings of the source novels; and Spinoffs that explore the meaning and appeal of Austen for modern women, that is, texts that relate specifically to Austen reception and the Austen phenomenon in a (post)feminist context.

The full study on which this paper is based includes a detailed look at the paratextual devices of these spinoffs; however, in the interest of brevity, I will focus solely on textual features.

Romance and the Marriage Plot in Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy* Trilogy

This spinoff is an alternative-perspective retelling – the marriage plot but with Mr. Darcy as the focalizer.¹² In three long volumes, Pamela Aidan fleshes out Darcy's character with information about his family life, university friends, and duties at Pemberley. Aidan constructs a "longing, almost pining Darcy" in contrast with Austen's more austere version, and the sentimental tone of the retelling matches the hero she portrays: a Darcy with strong passions hidden beneath a controlled exterior.¹³ Outwardly obsessed with correctness and propriety, Aidan's lovesick Darcy talks to himself, indulges in daydreams, and sighs over poetry or passages from Shakespeare and the Bible, prompting one reader reviewer on *Amazon* to comment that Aidan "turned Darcy into a teenaged [*sic*] girl."¹⁴

Tania Modleski's analysis of popular women's narratives provides insights into the attractions of Aidan's romance-hero Darcy. In *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, she asserts that the "mystery of masculine motives" is central to most popular romances (Modleski 31). In such narratives, the "puzzling behaviour of the hero" (Modleski 30), which includes indifference to or even mistreatment of the heroine, is explained when the happy marriage ending is reached as "the hero's resistance to the increasing power of her charms" (Modleski 34); this supposedly alleviates "women's anxieties about men" (Modleski xxvi). Aidan's retelling clearly fulfills this function as it exploits readers' familiarity with the conflicts in the source text and explicitly interprets the actions of the male protagonist/romance-hero in a positive light.

When Darcy and Elizabeth first meet, his initial coldness and reserve are attributed by Aidan to his awareness of and discomfort at being an object of "frank appraisal, as "horseflesh" put on display for buyers in search of "a suitable new Thoroughbred stallion" (*An Assembly* 4). Aidan deliberately exaggerates Darcy's vulnerability: his behavior toward Elizabeth is justified as resulting from feelings of helplessness over the public scrutiny he must endure. More significantly, because it reassures women readers of Elizabeth's immediate power over him, Darcy's remark about her being "tolerable; but not handsome enough" to tempt him (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 7) is presented in the spinoff as a deliberate attempt to hide his attraction behind insults and his "usual pose of indifference" [my emphasis] (Aidan, *An Assembly* 31).¹⁵

Another romance trope can be seen in the exchanges between hero and heroine, which are exaggeratedly

combative in this retelling, a change which intensifies the pleasure of Darcy's inevitable surrender. By the end of the first volume, Aidan spells out the fact that Darcy has been defeated; he admits his attraction but weakly retreats out of pride and insecurity. According to Modleski, much of women's satisfaction in reading romance narratives comes from "the elements of a revenge fantasy, from [the] conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally grovelling" (37). The "deep-seated desire for vengeance" (Modleski 37) forms part of the appeal of the romance of the original - first when Elizabeth rejects Darcy's proposal and later when he admits that his "unpardonable" behaviour to her "merit[s] the severest reproof" (Austen 316) - and the pleasure of this is amplified in Aidan's extended retelling. The woman's revenge-fantasy is also enacted when the retelling dwells obsessively on Darcy's sufferings over what he believes to be his unrequited love for Elizabeth.¹⁶ Elizabeth's rejection of him at Rosings is the final ingredient in Darcy's transformation. He recognizes his own pride and admits to his mistakes in meddling with Jane and Bingley. He admits, too, that Elizabeth has "demanded of him the man he had always desired to be" (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 157), and he then strives to become that man.

The idea of a woman transforming her man is emphasized via the appropriation of Darcy's voice and perception. Highlighting its message about the transforming power of romantic love, the spinoff portrays only Darcy's maturation process and attributes transformative agency to Elizabeth. Due to her, Darcy is able to rapturously utter his marriage vows with a "*proper* pride" [my emphasis] (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 437) that is based on a fuller understanding of both himself and Elizabeth. Darcy finds the one thing he lacks - "the love of an exceptional woman" (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 431), and thus, the marriage plot

is successfully re-enacted. Darcy's narrative ends because, as the final sentence puts it, he is "in want of nothing more" (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 437).

Such an ending performs and affirms the fantasy of the idealized romance hero finding fulfillment in the love of a worthy woman.¹⁷ The retelling articulates this via its embellishment of the romance novel tropes in the original novel. More importantly, by prolonging Darcy's transformative journey and emphasizing Elizabeth's influence, it enhances the importance of the heroine – and of women. It thus enhances the pleasure of its target demographic of women readers seeking a repeat of the romance – embellished and heightened – and of the traditional marriage plot.

Saying No to Marriage Endings: Emma Campbell Webster's *Lost in Austen*

At first glance, *Lost in Austen: Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure* is yet another rehash of the marriage plot. Here, the reader takes on the role of Elizabeth Bennet who must make the "correct" choices in order to recreate the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*. The spinoff reframes the marriage plot as the reader's mission: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young Austen heroine must be in want of a husband, and you are no exception" (Webster 2). Given this goal, "to marry both prudently and for love" (Webster 2), reader-protagonist embarks on a literally game-like marriage quest following a "choose-your-own-adventure" structure and involving a point system for categories like Accomplishments, Intelligence, and Fortune. The weaving together of the multiple plot paths and endings into a narrative depends entirely on the reader-protagonist's choices. Yet here is where the subversive twist

lies: the reader is offered an excess of choice while actually being limited to only one acceptable end goal.

Because of its focus on marriage, the spinoff condenses or excises many scenes from the original to spend more time on courtship-related sequences from the original as well as to make room for romantic “diversions” into other Austen novels, wherein the reader plays the role of other women characters.¹⁸ These narrative digressions expose other retellings’ formulaic treatment of Austen’s novels by making Elizabeth interchangeable with other heroines. The spinoff thus calls attention to the fact that for many readers today that Austen’s writings have been conflated with romance. Similarly, the insertion of Austen’s rumored flirtation in one diversion parodies other spinoffs’ insistence on providing Austen with her own love story. What the spinoff playfully contends, then, is that a “Jane Austen Adventure” has, for many modern readers, come to mean a romance or marriage text.

The spinoff’s ironic tone clearly emerges through its intrusive narrator who provides the reader with choices but who also comments on these decisions as well as on details over which the reader has no control.¹⁹ Via sarcastic commentary, the narrator critiques marriage, for example, telling the reader: “You’ve got a long way to go before you’ll be fit to attract a husband of any real worth” (Webster 15), or “Your judgment remains contemptible. . . and your chances of marrying prudently therefore marginal at best” (Webster 90). In the text, the “right” choices increase the reader’s chances of marrying well, while the “wrong” ones add to her “list of Failings” and compromise her “chances of attracting a rich husband” (Webster 44).

While ostensibly guiding the reader towards a successful marriage, the spinoff actually portrays this as a

tedious and unexciting choice. "Lower your expectations a little or you'll never get a husband" (Webster 121), the narrator tells the reader, while praising her for such talents as the "Ability to Feign Interest in the Utterly Boring," which she will need when she is married (Webster 147). In fact, the reader-protagonist comes closer to fulfilling her mission if she does *not* accumulate too many Intelligence points from her decisions or from acing trivia quizzes on the Regency period.²⁰ For the spinoff, marriage is clearly not an "intelligent" choice, and it suggests that readers who know about Regency life (enough to answer the trivia questions) should not forget how little eighteenth and nineteenth-century marriages sometimes had to do with romantic love.

Moreover, by presenting the illusion of choice, narrator and narrative frustrate readerly pleasure in the romance's "desired and expected ending" (Modleski lxxiv). For instance, at one point, the reader-protagonist is absurdly punished with disfigurement and death simply because she takes a left rather than a right turn. Similarly restrictive of the reader's "choice" is the binary of successful and unsuccessful conclusions: the reader must make a prudent love-based marriage or else face poverty, degradation, imprisonment, or death. These examples demonstrate that Elizabeth/the reader does not truly have any say in what befalls her but is rather subject to the whims of the omnipotent author – first, Austen, and now Webster. Although the book may suggest that the reader decides the outcome, its various conclusions actually point to a lack of options.

Fifteen out of the twenty possible endings are considered "failures" because the reader does not achieve her mission. The standard *Pride and Prejudice* ending is reached only if the reader matches the choices made in the original novel. So, on the one hand, Webster's text gives

readers what they want: a chance to revisit Austen's world and reaffirm the rightness of Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's union. On the other hand, it playfully undercuts this "happy" ending by following it up with a "non-ending" that critiques the closure of the marriage plot. If the reader-protagonist's Intelligence score is high enough, Elizabeth does *not* marry Mr. Darcy; instead, she refuses the fate of romance novel heroines. The narrator then spells out an alternative destiny: to write about a woman seeking the right match but without "send[ing] out the message that Woman's only choice is to marry - and that her story will end the moment she does so" (Webster 339). The narrator proclaims: "You are determined to find a way for your heroine to say no to 'The End' and continue her adventure (Webster 340).

Webster's satirical transformation of Austen's writing thus highlights the illusion of choice offered by romanticized film adaptations or other retellings. The novel's ironic reduction of Austen's writings to basic romantic plot points invites readers to question the way that spinoffs and adaptations often ignore Austen's more careful treatment of marriage. As Webster points out in a *Guardian* article, "readers tend, understandably, to see [Austen's marriage endings] as celebratory" even though "Austen always gives her protagonists at least one opportunity to say no to marriage before they finally agree - highlighting the seriousness of the decision" ("Happy Ever After"). Finally, Webster's retelling reveals new meanings of marriage for modern-day women: the fear that it spells "the end of lifelong quest for adventure" ("Happy Ever After"). Perhaps it also highlights the (post)feminist preference for closures that are less final because, as Webster asserts, women today "like to delay 'The End' of [their] adventures as long as possible" ("Happy Ever After").

Austen and the Marriage Plot as *Pharmakon* in Shannon Hale's *Austenland*

Last of all is a spinoff called *Austenland*, which explores what Lionel Trilling describes as the “illicit love” that women readers have for Austen (qtd. in Lynch, “Introduction” 6) and, correspondingly, I argue, for romance narratives and the marriage plot. This spinoff highlights women’s view of Austen as both sickness and cure, something like Jacques Derrida’s notion of the *pharmakon*, which “acts as both remedy and poison” (70). *Austenland* reflects this anxiety about loving or reading Austen in the “wrong” way – acknowledging that women reap therapeutic benefits from Austen’s high culture route to romance while simultaneously struggling with her as an addiction or obsession that interferes with women’s satisfaction with their own world.²¹

The spinoff self-reflexively transforms Austen into chick lit by beginning with: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a thirtysomething woman in possession of a satisfying career and fabulous hairdo must be in want of very little...” (Hale 1). The protagonist, Jane Hayes is unable to find Mr. Right – mainly because of her Austen obsession – no man can meet the standards set by Mr. Darcy.²² Jane pinpoints the locus of her (and other readers’) desires: the fantasy of living happily ever after with an ideal that does not exist in today’s world. Yet despite wanting this, Jane is appalled by the idea of actually living in Austen’s world. When she is bequeathed a trip to Pembroke Park, an expensive English resort that offers an Austen experience to “Austen-obsessed women,” she goes in the hope that this will help her to finally kick her Austen addiction.²³

From the beginning, contradictions complicate what seems at first like a typical chick-lit quest. Jane ends up

“straddl[ing] the real world and Austenland” (Hale 54), the latter actually shaped by contemporary fantasies. She dresses for the part, role-plays along with the rest, and falls in love with the resort’s Darcy-clone Mr. Nobley, who is actually an actor, Henry Jenkins.²⁴ However, her contemporary values often clash with Pembroke’s rules, making it difficult for her to become fully immersed in the experience. Despite “all the hours she had spent daydreaming of living in Austen’s world,” Jane wryly admits that she misses “the mundane realities of normal life” (Hale 75).²⁵

Thus, *Austenland* intriguingly points to the conflicting desires of women readers today for both what is in Austen’s novels and what is not, and to the ways in which “Austen” operates as both creator and balm of modern romantic frustrations. There is conflict, for instance, between the subtlety of Austen’s chaste romances – Jane wants the “zing” as she calls it, that arises when Darcy and Elizabeth merely look at each other across a piano – and sexual expression of what she calls “the pent-up passion that explodes behind Regency doors” (Hale 153); between being the object of a man’s fantasy and fantasizing about him; and between wanting an escape into Austen’s world – a world perceived as embodying romance – and wanting something real.

Jane’s enjoyment of the journey to Austenland alongside her continual questioning of this enjoyment and of the constructedness of it all relates to contemporary women’s dilemmas about identity and empowerment. For instance, when Jane’s boot heel slips and Mr. Nobley catches her, her delight in the romantic moment is tinged with guilt. She reproaches herself, asking: “Is this why women wear heels? We hobble ourselves so we can still be rescued by men?” (Hale 182). Jane’s guilty pleasure in this situation

reflects a sort of *pharmakon* effect – this time of her informal notions of feminism. Implicit in Jane’s questions is the conflict between earlier forms of feminism and the third wave’s reclaiming of “elements of traditional femininity” (Beail and Goren 6) like high heels, images and icons of which have come to represent the modern woman on so many chick-lit covers.

The true journey into “Austenland,” therefore, is a modern woman’s resolution of her feelings about her way of reading Austen, her use of Austen in her life. Because Pembroke Park, which promises to make Austen real, but instead allows Jane instead to “live through her romantic purgatory” (Hale 180), Jane chooses to reject Pembroke’s falseness. She terminates her tour of Austenland by turning down Mr. Nobley’s obligatory proposal, telling him that what she really wants is “something real” (Hale 165), and she leaves feeling “cleansed of entrapping fantasies” (Hale 176). Austen’s world, then, as the spinoff asserts, can become addictive, an “opiate of women” whose dreams of finding Mr. Darcy are doomed to frustration. Only when Jane chooses to let go of her fantasy is she finally able to open herself up to “real possibilities” (Hale 180).

Yet *Austenland*’s actual resolution still adheres to the marriage plot. Back in the real world, Henry pursues Jane and tells her he wants “a shot at forever” (Hale 190). Jane, believing that she is choosing reality over fantasy – chicken-pox-scarred, shy Henry versus the dashing Mr. Nobley – accepts this ending. Jane’s faith in the optimistic message of Austen’s world, as she and other women read it, is restored. By refusing to relinquish her identity, she is essentially rewarded with a version of Mr. Darcy who meets her modern needs better than Austen’s ever could. Cleansed, whole, real, and in love yet again, Jane takes out the *Pride and Prejudice* DVDs she had previously been ashamed to

display and sets them on her shelf, “spine out and proud” (Hale 194). With this ending, the novel somehow validates the fantasies of modern women who, like Jane, suffer from “an excess of hope” (Hale 63) by implying that there is really no desire to leave Austenland with all its romantic trappings – only perhaps to remake it.

(Post)Feminist and Other Incarnations of Austen

Austen assessed the small scale of her writing by describing it as the “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory” on which she worked “with so fine a brush” (Austen-Leigh 130). Today, these “bits of ivory” have been expanded exponentially by scholars, enthusiasts, and those who wish to follow in her literary footsteps – the latter doing so, I argue, in a variety of culturally significant ways.

Some, like Pamela Aidan’s detailed telling of Darcy’s side of the story, extract only the romance of Austen’s novels in order to extend and embellish it. And yet this unironic text, like others I have studied – such as Linda Berdoll’s sexy *Pride and Prejudice* sequel *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*, Debra White Smith’s modernized and Christianized *Emma*, and Syrie James’s account of Austen’s secret love affair – are, for their readers, fulfilling ways of revisiting Austen. Romance-oriented spinoffs such as these seem to express, in their celebration of the love story, a longing for traditional gender roles and for a validation of marriage and family. At the very least, they articulate the fact that these readers – many of whom will marry – view Austen’s fiction, or what they understand of it, as a guide for their own relationships. Perhaps women today want more of this imagined and idealized world of Austen but with *their* problems and concerns written into it.

Spinoffs like Emma Campbell Webster's *Lost in Austen* make stronger (post)feminist gestures by both recognizing *and* questioning the fixation on romance and the happy marriage ending. Like Webster's spinoff, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* harnesses Austen not only because of her popularity but also precisely because she has become a signifier of marriage – and can therefore be referenced when questioning its role today. Such spinoffs offer partial reformulations both of marriage and of popular readings of Austen's marriage plot. Other texts, such as Emma Tennant's sequel to *Emma* and Joan Aiken's *Jane Fairfax: Jane Austen's Emma, through Another's Eyes* certainly do not romanticize marriage; the heroine of the former is trapped in her heterosexual union, and the heroine of the latter marries for financial security rather than love.

Then, there are the texts that self-reflexively explore the romance-obsession of Austen adaptations and paraliterature. Shannon Hale's spinoff is a re-enactment of the ultimate Austen fan's fantasy as is Laurie Viera Rigler's time-travel story *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*. Yet both novels represent the journey to Austenland as less than idyllic. Their protagonists learn to recognize the difference between fantasy and reality while reflecting on why they seem to need Austen. The texts importantly acknowledge the complex relationship that women today have with the author and her works – the fact that she is both creator and balm of modern romantic frustration. Lastly, Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* asserts that love and marriage are important take-off points for other interpretations of Austen – because so much of what she writes about, along with the afterlives of her works, resonates with her readers' everyday lives.

All of these texts gratify something in their readers – curiosity, nostalgia, the longing to escape to a fantasy world, but also the desire to add something to the conversation

about Austen, to produce something that is both Austen and not Austen. Something in the source texts allows rewriters to both celebrate *and* interrogate subjects like love, courtship and marriage and constructions of femaleness and femininity. Somehow, Austen allows them to ask what Rosemarie Tong calls the “woman question” of third wave feminism: who is she and what does she want?

These spinoffs are valuable as palimpsests of both Austen and of gender debates; their discourse runs the gamut of proto- or pre-feminism, feminism of the sixties and seventies, postfeminism of the eighties and nineties, and now third wave/“girly”/(post)feminism of the 90s and 2000s. As they rehash or rework the marriage plot, spinoff writers acknowledge what remain “truths” for women – the enduring desire for love and an equal partnership (if no longer marriage as an end goal), the persistent anxieties about men and how fantasies arise to assuage these fears, and the quest for identity on which romantic fulfillment still has bearing. They question, complicate, or subvert such “truths” by channeling Austen’s ironic approach to the subjects of courtship and marriage. They also apply these “truths” to the everyday lives of women readers and Austen enthusiasts today.

As I did in the conclusion of my dissertation, I would like to gesture toward other potentially rich areas of study related to this phenomenon. There are many new self-reflexive offshoots which explicitly deal with what happens when Austen’s novels are made to perform cultural work they were never originally intended to do. For instance, early 2010 saw the launch of a spinoff of a spinoff, a comedy web series *Sex and the Austen Girl* based on two novels by Laurie Viera Rigler. In April 2012, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a video log or “vlog” series began to appear on various online platforms, accompanied by complementary “side-channels”

such as Lookbook, Tumblr, and Twitter accounts. Other afterlives of Austen are also fascinating – for instance the predominantly male-oriented monster mash-ups like Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* that do violence to her novels. There may also be as yet undiscovered alternative Austens in postcolonial contexts – a Philippine Austen, perhaps, since she certainly has a fan base here. There are also many other incarnations of the author – new hybrids that are being made out of Austen, contemporary culture, and various media. All of these can add to the conversation about Austen and her readers.

I end with the inevitable question: Why Austen? As Austenian paraliterature demonstrates, “Austen” – the author, the woman, the icon – becomes a location for the meeting of past and present ideas about women’s identity and for contemporary women’s conflicting desires for the privileges of the present and the (perceived) romance of the past. These spinoffs’ appropriation of her courtship plots and romantic pairings, which have become inextricable from the larger Austen phenomenon, points to the fact that these contain something meaningful to her readers today. They “convey what are considered universal truths” (Hudelet 149), truths about what women want, who they are, and the relevance of love and companionship in their lives. So who are these women and what do they want? The answers are as assorted as the “truths” that Austen has been married to by varied spinoffs. Her “bits of ivory” continue to expand to accommodate countless private and public alternative Austens, various takes on the marriage plot and its implications about women’s identity, and a diverse range of interpretations that can enrich both the reading of her novels and of contemporary (post)feminist culture.

Notes

¹ This paper was delivered on September 14, 2012 as a tenure lecture and as part of a Homecoming Lecture series. It provides an overview of my doctoral thesis similarly titled "A Truth Universally Acknowledged?: (Post)Feminist Rewritings of Austen's Marriage Plot."

² During Austen's lifetime, *Pride and Prejudice* was the most popular of her novels "both with the public and with her family and friends" (Fergus, "The Professional" 22). Robert Morrison says it has "always been Jane Austen's most popular novel" (1); other scholars, such as Louise Flavin, Robert P. Irvine, and Laurie Kaplan, concur. Results of a 2008 Jane Austen survey revealed *Pride and Prejudice* to be the favorite novel of 53% of 4,501 respondents, and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy to be the favorite heroine and hero (Kiefer). Nielsen BookScan, an electronic book sale counter, produced findings in 2002 that the novel sold as many as 110,000 copies in the US, not counting academic sales (Waldman).²

³ Claudia Johnson in "Austen Cults and Cultures" and Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson in *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture* use the term "Austenmania," and the latter refer to "the Austen phenomenon" (4). Deidre Lynch talks of an "Austen Boom" in her introduction to *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*.

⁴ This number is based on my own survey in August 2009 of spinoffs featured on the Amazon website.

⁵ These are Laurie Viera Rigler's *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*, Alexandra Potter's *Me and Mr. Darcy*, Gwyn Cready's *Seducing Mr. Darcy*, Laurie Brown's *What Would*

Jane Austen Do?, and Mandy Hubbard's young adult novel, *Prada and Prejudice*.

⁶ Still potent today, says John Carey of *The Sunday Times*, is the "belief that a liking for Austen is an infallible 'test' of your taste, intellect and general fitness for decent company."

⁷ Lynch refers to a general impression of textual spinoffs as "uniformly derivative" ("Sequels" 161), while Judy Simons describes these as "reductive renditions" (36). James R. Kincaid gives a scathing review of the Austen industry, calling spinoffs "rat-bottom awful" and "in the best tradition of tastelessness," saying that they lack "the artful Austenian bile," and suggesting that they are more "pleasure indulged" than "felt need."

⁸ Johnson observes that "Austen was able not to depoliticize her work—for the political implications of her work is implicit in the subject matter itself—but rather to depolemicize it" (*Jane Austen* xxv).

⁹ The first wave of feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century involved the questioning of women's rights, duties, and responsibilities as well as struggles for the vote, while the second wave of the late 1960s and 1970s continued to address inequalities in education, employment, and media representation and led to further reflections in the 1980s and 1990s on gender relations and sources of oppression.

¹⁰ These writers (and their readers) are very likely aware of the central issues of feminism, such as its core thesis "that the relationship between the sexes is one of inequality or oppression" and its goal to identify and remedy the cause/s

of that inequality (Macey 122), but they may not necessarily be aware of its academic forms.

¹¹ The texts were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) written by women, (2) published in the 1990s or 2000s, (3) published in the central locations/sources of Austenmania, the US and the UK (also the physical “homes” of the earliest and largest Jane Austen societies), (4) marketed and distributed globally in other English-speaking nations, (5) spinoffs of the two most revisited novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, or of Austen’s life/world. I also read many of the available spinoffs in order to select texts which would represent both the prevailing trends and diversity of the genre.

¹² There are at least twelve retellings of this type, sometimes written in the first-person perspective in diary format, which allows readers to view the gradual development of the “hero’s” affections for the protagonist. The diary format also permits Austen’s more reticent males to unrestrainedly articulate their feelings.

¹³ This is how the reading guide of *Duty and Desire* describes the character in the “Q&A with Pamela Aidan” section.

¹⁴ See the bibliographic entry for “Customer Reviews: *An Assembly Such as This*.”

¹⁵ Darcy, “with as much insouciance as he could summon, . . . made it clear as he criticized her face, her form and her manners that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was not his idea of perfection in a woman” (Aidan, *An Assembly* 41).

¹⁶ This can be seen in the following passage: “He, whom the brightest of diamonds, gracing the most exclusive of

drawing rooms had failed to entrap, to have been brought so completely to heel by a country-bred girl of no family, only to be spurned, suffer abuse of his character, and have his just scruples thrown in his teeth!" (Aidan, *These Three Remain* 129).

¹⁷ Aidan's Darcy values Elizabeth as an "amazing, precious woman" (*These Three Remain* 435), thus reading/writing him as women want to read their men: caring, appreciative, adoring, and cognizant of a woman's "infinite preciousness" (Modleski 37).

¹⁸ These include an encounter with Mr. Crawford from *Mansfield Park*, a visit to the home of Henry and Eleanor Tilney of *Northanger Abbey*, a choice that must be made between *Sense and Sensibility's* Willoughby and Colonel Brandon, an ending taken from Austen's juvenilia (*Love and Freindship*), interactions with all the marriageable men in *Emma* (including an affair with Robert Martin, which leads to an outcome reminiscent of Mrs. Price's marriage in *Mansfield Park*), and the renewal of a relationship with Captain Wentworth from *Persuasion*.

¹⁹ For instance, about Mrs. Bennet, the narrator says, "Your mother is so anxious to marry you all off that she may very well kill you in the process," and then orders the reader-protagonist to deduct 10 Fortune points not for making any particular choice but simply "for having such a negligent mother" (Webster 10).

²⁰ Adapting a passage from *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator comments on one marriage ending that is rendered a failure by a high Intelligence score: "to come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always

wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can. You are a LOSER" (Webster 213).

²¹ Derrida uses the term in his investigation of Plato's texts and the function of writing. The concept of the *pharmakon*, reworked as a means of reading such offshoots, homes in on what is at stake in analyzing Austenian spinoffs: why/how (post)feminist gestures made in these attempt to improve or resolve gender relations while sometimes exacerbating or unwittingly validating prevailing gender inequities.

²² Jane breaks up with various men who fail to meet her Austen-based standards: she finds one man's "slippery pawing" of her ridiculous when compared to the moment when Elizabeth runs into Mr. Darcy at Pemberley (Hale 79), a date's attempt to unhook her bra disgusts her for being "so not Mr. Darcy" (Hale 134), and another boyfriend's snorting laughter turns her off because this is something that "Mr. Darcy would never [do]" (Hale 171). She seeks Mr. Darcy, or rather the version of him played by Colin Firth. Touching on the influence of this adaptation for women like her, Jane says that while she has read and reread Austen's novels, "it wasn't until the BBC put a face on the story that those gentlemen in tight breeches had stepped out of her reader's imagination and into her nonfiction hopes" (Hale 2).

²³ The description, "Austen-obsessed women," is used in the book's blurb. The Pembroke "Experience" is described as "a tea visit, a dance or two, a turn in the park, an unexpected meeting with a certain gentleman, all culminating with a ball and perhaps something more. . . . No scripts. No written endings" (Hale 13).

²⁴ The name “Mr. Nobley” is clearly a play on that of another Austen hero, Mr. Knightley. Possibly, “Henry Jenkins,” the name of the actor playing him, could be an allusion the author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, texts which uphold media fandom.

²⁵ Jane daydreams about the details of her mundane, everyday life: “washing her clothes in the sink when all her building’s laundry machines were occupied; the hot, human smell of a full subway; eating a banana from a street vendor; buying a disposable umbrella in a downpour” (Hale 75).

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