

[E S S A Y]

JANE AUSTEN'S ABANDONED ROMANCES

LAURA CARROLL ASKS WHY THE AUSTEN INDUSTRY FAILS TO ACCEPT THAT
THE AUTHOR MAY HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL, SINGLE AND SATISFIED
WITH HER LIFE

THE current crop of Jane Austen-themed entertainments has a new and annoying character. First, it is gloomy: the perversity of making Jane Austen, of all authors, into a figure associated with sadness and unfulfilment is considerable. Second, it is obsessed with Austen's spinsterhood, with her shameful virginity: with her old-maidishness and deliberate barrenness. It appears that we are not at present allowed to be even a little bit happy that Austen managed to stay unmarried and thus wrote novels.

Earlier generations of Janeite enthusiasts accepted and liked that Jane Austen was a single woman. They called her, with varying shades of irony, 'Miss Austen' and 'dear Aunt Jane', and they read her novels in the comfortable and leisurely spirit of a good gossip session, less interested in racing forwards to the climactic weddings than in relishing the accumulation of trivial and eccentric details encountered on the way. But the latest round of popular books and movies addressing Austen's life and works are troubled by her apparent lack of personal

interest in the heterosexual marriage plot she did so much to disseminate, and represent her unmarried state as a problem in urgent need of explanation. I suppose this is a symptom of anti-feminist backlash. It might also signal a conviction that comedy has little in common with the monstrous figure of the single woman. The last truly comic heroine the Austen industry produced was Bridget Jones, and even she thought of herself as a besieged 'Singleton' among the 'Smug Marrieds': 'I feel like I have turned into Miss Havisham ... maybe they really do want to patronize us and turn us into failed human beings.'¹ The new Austen-related productions do not quite depict Austen as a grotesque bride forever arrested in the moment of her jilting, but it's a near thing.

The focusing of our narrative appetites on self-improvement and biography is important in determining the change too: we now have Austen biopics and Austen self-help texts, all bent on elucidating instructive links between Austen's fictions and how a single woman can miraculously salvage her life. The conceit of Patrice Hannon's weird part-biog, part-advice manual *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* (2007), for instance, has the Austen of 1816 filling in time while she sits around the cottage waiting to die by receiving and replying to letters from twenty-first century misses in need of relationship guidance and life counselling. Contrary to the spirit of the real Austen's fiction, Hannon's Austen dispenses advice to the effect that the happy-ever-after ending is achieved by 'the conquering of romantic illusions and expectations', 'accept[ing] the necessity of compromise'. In the chapter titled 'Beauty Tips for Heroines', a supplicant asks how she can compete in a marriage market flooded with surgically enhanced beauties. Austen writes back with consoling words about doing your best with what you have and, for the rest, 'cultivating your inner beauty using the knowledge gained from these letters'. Even the relatively pleasant *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004 novel by Karen Joy Fowler, 2007 film directed by Robin Swicord), while free of creepy ventriloquism and healthily acknowledging the boundaries between life and fiction, presents reading Austen as therapy, as good medicine for whatever ails: in its cosy view, bourgeois American life presents no dilemmas that can't be solved by asking yourself 'What would Jane do?'

Cleverly, the movie and television people mainly responsible for feeding the Austen media behemoth have realised they can't simply recycle the same six similar novels for ever—although it's not for lack of trying, as four new adaptations were recently made for British television—and they have now decided to move on to producing films, of as similar a kind as possible, about Jane Austen herself. *Becoming Jane*, seen here in cinemas in 2007, and *Miss Austen Regrets*, a

BBC film shown in Britain in 2008, obviously slot right into the quality costume drama genre originally mapped out and still dominated by classic-novel adaptations. J.G. Ballard accurately remarked to the *Observer* that ‘there are too many hats [and] everyone is overdressed’ on British television—but underneath the elegantly decorated surfaces their differences from Jane Austen’s concerns are many and their distance from her essential comic mode is vast. These are films in love with their own pale and interesting mournfulness, a species of histrionics Austen consistently showed up as ridiculous. Both films ask the same narrow set of questions about Austen: how did she write as she did about love without being a lover herself? Why didn’t she get married? What was wrong with her? Was she unlovable? Was she sad? (Did she smell?) Was she lonely? Was she ashamed of being single? The films demonstrate an inability to believe that Austen lived the way she did as a matter of free choice—if she did choose to stay unmarried, it must have been an unhappy choice made under difficult circumstances. The great and animating puzzle about Jane Austen is seen not as how she came to write so well, but, rather, what underwrites and authenticates her stories of the dignified triumph of rational affection and the value of companionate marriage if her own life did not follow the pattern of the fictions.

It appears that the fashion for finding or assuming a biographical core to all storytelling has made it hard for us to accept that novels, especially novels by a lady, can contain and express truths not necessarily drawn from direct experience. The way Austen’s novels orchestrate an apparently spontaneous alignment of mutual passion and esteem between heroine and hero with enough money for them to live happily in material comfort for ever after does not reflect a social reality any more than it mirrors her own life. But it is not a daydream or fantasy; nor is it simply the writer finally capitulating to the demands of the narrative formula she is working with. It is a philosophical ambition. It is the inevitable corollary of her conviction, and related technical demonstration through the medium of free indirect speech, that women are independent and fully human beings, with complete inner lives, who can and therefore must think for themselves. Pressed to marry a rich man she neither likes nor respects, *Mansfield Park*’s timid and dutiful Fanny Price voices an idea new in literature: ‘I think it ought not be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself ... How was I to have an attachment at his service, as soon as it was asked for?’ Marriage for love is an ethical goal in Jane Austen’s writing and to register its full idealism and ambitiousness does not have to mean that she sought it for herself. It is enough to read her novels.

Virginia Woolf says we know Austen as we know Shakespeare: we know nothing about her, and everything, and we know her through her work, her mind:

When people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word she wrote, and so does Shakespeare.²

As James Ley recently observed, what the truism that we don't know enough about Shakespeare the person really means is that we are unsatisfied with those facts we do have: we lack 'any direct testimony from the man himself ... his opinions are lost to us'.³ This is not quite the case with Austen: from the 160 of her letters that survive, we have detailed knowledge of her opinions about food, parties, fashion, the weather, games, neighbours, health, places, travel, and a sprinkling of the books and plays of the day. If we feel we lack direct testimony from her it is testimony about affairs of love, the journallings of a mythical Emo-Austen, minutely recording heavy sighs and pressed hands and exchanges of lugubrious looks, the heavy pangs of doomed love on tear-blotted pages. No such *cri de coeur* exists so it has had to be invented.

To give it its due, *Becoming Jane* (horribly blurbed by the Qantas in-flight magazine as 'a true story of true love') is trying to be the story of an artist, a Künstlerroman; it wants to reveal or suggest something about the source of Austen's inspiration. But it's looking in such very wrong places. The press pack for *Becoming Jane* said:

Becoming Jane focuses on a life-changing romance during one summer in the life of the young Jane Austen.

Austen was 20 years old when she met the brilliant and roguish Tom Lefroy, who she found instantly attractive.

Her romantic adventures with the dashing Mr Lefroy, at a turning point in her literary career, [are] said to have inspired her to write novels and helped create her male romantic heroes such as Mr Darcy.

Some imagination is required to construct a serious romance between Austen and Lefroy, the visiting Irish nephew of a family friend, from the historical record. They met at some dances over the winter of 1795–96 and apparently enjoyed one another's company. Certainly, she liked him. Of their flirtation Jane wrote to her sister Cassandra: 'Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together.' A few days later she uses the same

joking language to tell Cassandra about a ball she is looking forward to: 'I rather expect to receive an offer from my friend in the course of the evening. I shall refuse him however, unless he promises to give away his white coat.' This is the hyperbolic, ironic voice the youthful Austen uses in her satirical sketches:

They said he was Sensible, well-informed, and Agreeable; we did not pretend to judge of such trifles, but as we were convinced he had no soul, that he had never read the Sorrows of Werter, and that his Hair bore not the least resemblance to auburn, we were certain that Janetta could feel no affection for him, or at least that she ought to feel none.⁴

We can't think she would write so flippantly if she genuinely hoped to receive a proposal, and in the event she didn't. Whatever happened between them, Lefroy returned to Ireland and Austen was cracking jokes about him shortly afterwards.

In *Becoming Jane* all the dancing and flirting between Jane and Tom leads directly to a romantic disaster of *Titanically* clichéd proportions. The pair get recklessly into a carriage to go off and marry, even though Tom's rich old uncle will disinherit him when the truth is known. Never mind; they have each other. But on the road Jane realises that without the uncle's money, Tom's numerous brothers and sisters back in the old country will be penniless too. To keep Tom's Irish siblings from starving to death, therefore, plucky Jane renounces him and returns home to the parsonage before nightfall on the day of her elopement, conveniently preserving both her chastity and the appearance of it. She returns to the writing she'd been ineptly pursuing before she met Tom; but with the memory of his criticism and encouragements to draw upon as well as the mysterious power of love, her style is miraculously improved, and now she has something to write about as well. So out she pops *Pride and Prejudice*, featuring Tom as Mr Darcy.

There may be something of Tom Lefroy in the genesis of Darcy. Like any writer, Jane Austen did not receive 'the fruitful idea which will give rise to a fiction', as Somerset Maugham put it, 'like a falling star, out of the blue':

For the most part, it comes to him from an experience, generally emotional, of his own, or, if it is told him by another, emotionally appealing; and then his imagination in travail, character and incidents little by little grow out of it, until at length the finished work comes into being.⁵

But there are no grounds at all for attributing the fullness of Austen's literary gifts and achievements to the effects of having had a 'life-changing romance'. To imply

this is to indulge two widespread misapprehensions about Austen the novelist and the nature of her art. The more forgivable, because somehow natural, mistake is to assume that those novels, so accurate and perceptive about social systems, so psychologically powerful, and so full of personal brilliance and magnetism, contain clues about the inner life of the person who wrote them. The other misapprehension is not so blameless. It involves suppressing and ignoring all the plentiful evidence about the hard-earned professionalism, the intent, of Austen's writing career, in favour of seeing it as a spontaneously erupting outlet for unsatisfied sexual passion.

This is a pernicious view of how a person learns to be an artist, let alone a controlled and deliberate artist. Jane Austen was an accomplished writer well before she was out of her teens; she had read extensively and had a sophisticated understanding of the conventions of the courtship novel genre; and she was determined to be a professional writer, for financial as well as artistic reasons. To pretend all this doesn't matter, or that it matters less than Austen's private erotic life, is a devaluation of what this woman writer's career means. The 'life-changing romance' hypothesis implies that before it happened she was not a writer, but after it, she was: without it she might never have picked up a pen.

If true romance as novelistic inspiration were what was wanted, the filmmakers would have done better to choose another author. *Shakespeare in Love* showed that the Künstlerroman built around an abandoned romance doesn't have to represent the lives of artists as tragic and sacrificial. On being asked by a campus news service for comment on *Becoming Jane*, Victorian literature scholar Rohan Maitzen mused:

I found myself thinking that really, if movie makers (and movie audiences) want a biopic about a woman writer's interesting, sexy life, they should really be working on *Becoming George*. Isn't the transformation of country girl (and preachy evangelical) Marianne Evans into leading intellectual, free-thinker, strong-minded woman, and renowned novelist George Eliot really as good as (really, better than) anything someone could make up about a 19th-century woman's life, and true, to boot?⁶

Or, if a film-maker genuinely wanted to dramatise the development of Jane Austen's use of the courtship novel as a vehicle for her discoveries about female agency, a ready-made and largely unexploited subject awaits in the form of Austen's 17,000-word unfinished novel known as 'The Watsons'. Austen sold her first manuscript, the novel that would eventually become *Northanger Abbey*, in 1803 and began 'The Watsons' the following year. It was laid aside in 1805, and

Austen never returned to it either to revise it or to throw it away. She appears to have written nothing further until 1809, when the Austen women moved to their first settled and secure home since the death of Austen's father in 1805. Its story is both like and unlike the Austen novels we are familiar with. It concerns a young woman, Emma Watson, innocent, unaffected, good, kind and attractive, who has been brought up by rich relations and at the opening of the story has just been sent back to live with her own family because her aunt has remarried and Emma has lost her expectations of an inheritance from the aunt. Mrs Watson is long dead, Mr Watson is a very sickly invalid, and the family is severely impoverished. Besides Emma there are three sisters, all older than her and all unmarried with no suitors. The peculiar tension of the story arises from the contrast between the idealistic Emma's dawning awareness of the desperate situation and her sisters' correspondingly drastic efforts to adapt to or escape from it. A revealing early conversation between Emma and Elizabeth, the eldest and most sympathetically drawn sister, on the topic of the absent Penelope's husband-hunting strategies establishes the scene:

'I am sorry for her anxieties,' said Emma, —but I do not like her plans or her opinions. I shall be afraid of her. —She must have too masculine and bold a temper. —To be so bent on Marriage—to pursue a Man merely for the sake of situation—is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great Evil, but to a woman of Education and feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest. —I would rather be a Teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a Man I did not like.' —'I would rather do any thing than be a Teacher at a school' —said her sister. 'I have been at school, Emma, and know what a Life they lead; you never *have*. —I should not like marrying a disagreeable Man any more than yourself, —but I do not think there *are* many very disagreeable Men; I think I could like any good humoured man with a comfortable Income. —I suppose my Aunt brought you up to be rather refined.'⁷

The fourth sister, Margaret, is a manipulative, spiteful girl, adept at and delighting in creating psychological discomfort in others. Her entrance confirms that the dominant mode of 'The Watsons' is a singular and unflinching realism (this is also evident in the story's unusual attention to details about cooking, housework, clothing and transport), which will not be softened by comedy. Mrs Bennet's oft-repeated fear, in *Pride and Prejudice*, that Mr Bennet will die and the women will all be turned out of their home, is basically shrugged off in that novel as an aspect of her perceived taste for self-dramatisation rather than a real

possibility—which, of course, is exactly what it is. The Watson sisters are clearly facing the same possibility as the Bennet girls, but unlike in *Pride and Prejudice* we cannot enjoy their predicament secure in the belief that everything will magically come right in the end. When the text abruptly ceases, Emma Watson is literally trapped in her father's sitting room, unable to think calmly of the future or to tolerate the atmosphere of strife permeating the household.

Into this dire narrative situation Austen attempted to place an escape route in the shape of Lord Osborne, a recognisable Darcy avatar who is in the process of being transformed from a rich, selfish and proud individual into an appropriately gentlemanly suitor for Emma, under the influence of her lovely face and principled sense of her own worth. But Emma is displaying signs of loving instead the modest clergyman Mr Blake. It seems inevitable that in the course of the story Osborne would make Emma an offer that her heart would urge her to refuse. But in the realist mode of 'The Watsons,' such a refusal would be unthinkable: if Emma could comfortably choose the luxury of her own private fulfilment over ensuring the physical survival of her sisters then she is not the decent, clear-sighted and honourable person we believed her to be. The choice apparently facing her is no choice at all; if the lord asks her she must in conscience accept him. The situation does have dramatic potential but it offers no scope for exploring the ethical aspects of a woman's reconciliation between the social good of marriage and the personal necessity of freedom to choose. There could be no question of Emma Watson's father telling her, as Mr Bennet tells Elizabeth, 'Let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life.' Austen did what a real writer must do in these circumstances: she abandoned her untenable romance, broke the novel off.

I think the moment she put it away is the moment she became a great novelist. She confirmed that her real literary vocation was neither the documentary recording of the difficult lives of lower-middle-class women, nor the invention of simple wish-fulfilment solutions to their problems: it was the establishment of a novelistic language that would make it possible to represent marriage between men and women as genuinely reciprocal. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot observes that books have told men's stories—'the pen has been in their hands'. When Jane Austen discovered this, she blazed a trail for books that tell women's stories as well.

The narrative voice we hear and treasure in Austen's completed novels belongs to a successfully single, self-possessed mature woman artist, a confirmed spinster but not a beaten-down or ridiculous old maid: just the kind of person who, as D.A. Miller has recently argued, does not and cannot exist in the social world her

books depict; but the delivery of that voice into literature enlarged its expressive horizons and, it is not an exaggeration to say, contributed to the expansion of the range of experiences and ways of being the nineteenth-century novel made available to female readers. It troubles me that the person who invented that voice should be represented as having done it on the rebound. This is an insult to Austen's deliberate decision to remain independent and pursue her art, one that is also present in the 2008 BBC film *Miss Austen Regrets*, albeit with a somewhat clearer grasp than *Becoming Jane* of the actual relations between an author's life and her fiction, as well as a more nuanced picture of Austen's difficult position within her family.

Miss Austen Regrets is an example of what philosopher Stanley Cavell calls a 'melodrama of the unknown woman'. Films in this genre deal with the question of how a woman achieves full personhood—also explored in romantic comedies, including those written by Austen—but the melodramas operate within a narrative 'structure of unhappiness'.⁸ The heroine of an unknown-woman melodrama forgoes the form of education acquired through what *Mansfield Park* calls 'unchecked, equal, fearless intercourse'—open conversation and exchange with an equal partner (Beatrice and Benedict, Elizabeth and Darcy). Her transfiguration or metamorphosis is achieved alone, at the cost of isolation from everyone around her. *Miss Austen Regrets* opens with the depiction of a documented crossroads in Jane Austen's spinster career, presented as a scene of devastation and brokenness and a radical rejection of the idealist endings of the novels. It is 1802 and Harris Bigg, proprietor of Manydown Park, is making Jane a proposal of marriage that, if she consents, will forever guarantee the future of her impoverished mother and sister, as well as of her penniless self. She has no affection for him, but accepts out of prudence. The following morning she has taken back her promise and as the carriage drives her away Jane's stricken face stares out through a rain-streaked window and she thinks: Dear God, let me never regret this day. What Carol Shields in her biography of Austen describes as 'bodily fastidiousness',⁹ that is, sexual choosiness, may have contributed to the historical Austen's rejection of Harris Bigg, who was a good deal younger than her and apparently something of a galoot, but she cannot have regretted escaping the dangerous and exhausting life of pregnancy and childbearing that marriage inevitably brought upon women. (Bigg eventually married Anne Frith and fathered ten children.)

Unfortunately for the Jane of the movie, regret is the film's leitmotif and it contrives six or seven occasions on which she remembers or someone in her circle reminds her of everything she threw away each time she refused a proposal.

Advising her young niece, Fanny Knight, about whether to marry the dishy Mr Plumtre, Jane tells her to wait until she's quite certain: 'the right man will come along'. Fanny looks sullenly at her and says, 'He never did for you.' Jane's brother Edward reproaches her for 'scribbling' and for failing to marry and lighten his financial burdens. The entrance of a handsome and clever London physician who after all is more interested in Fanny than in Miss Austen gives Jane occasion to say, 'I should never have wanted to become a doctor's wife', a line surely aimed at flattering the film audience's snobberies and prejudices.

As they sit side by side on a low stone wall, the middle-aged Brook Bridges, a neighbour who proposed to Jane in their distant youth, begs her to tell him she sometimes regrets turning him down; she can't or won't oblige him but they both look devastated, Brook presumably because he's never gotten over her and Jane because she is momentarily regretting the comfortable domestic life she would have led. (Brook Bridges is a composite figure invented for the film; there is no evidence of Austen having received such a proposal from any of the men on which he's loosely based.) In the film's most dramatic scene, a wild-eyed Mrs Austen steps forward from the depths of the kitchen's black shadows to assert that yes, she really had wanted Jane to 'sell herself for money' to Harris Bigg all those years ago. 'You sacrificed all our security on a principle, Jane—and has it made you happy? Has it? My poor lonely girl.' We see Jane sink to her knees in the forest and bawl out her grief and misery.

The film's melodrama-patterned conception of Austen extends to its representation of her most significant personal relationship as structured by sacrifice and renunciation. Through all the decisions and crises of Jane's life, Cassandra moves silently in the background, keeping Jane gently but firmly tethered to the family. When Jane is dying, it is Cassandra who nurses her and who keeps Fanny out of the sickroom. Their final conversation hints at the love and sympathy the sisters have shared all their lives but it is love that is resigned and muted by sadness: in narrative terms it is too little and comes forward much too late. 'This life I have', says Jane, 'is what I needed—it is what God intended for me.'

Miss Austen Regrets suggests that even though Austen lived among her family and friends her essential self always remained untouched and isolated. We understand that she paid a heavy price but the movie neglects to balance the scales by giving us a clear idea of what she got in exchange. The closest it comes is an awkward and slightly absurd scene enacting the 1815 visit Jane Austen made to Carlton House, where the Prince Regent's librarian informed her she had the privilege of being allowed to dedicate her next publication to his Royal Highness.

The author of *Emma* obviously had richer sources of satisfaction than the dubious distinction of royal approval but you would not know this from the film.

‘The chief miracle’ about Jane Austen’s work, according to Virginia Woolf, is its freedom from the ill effects of the narrow circumstances in which she lived and worked. ‘Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without protest, without preaching.’¹⁰ This is a recognisable description of the psychological qualities that have long made her fiction indispensable to us, but its ‘miraculous’ quality also hints at the incredulous, suspicious mode in which we now probe her biography for the traces of hidden sorrows and abandoned romances that we are so unjustifiably confident must lie buried there.

NOTES

1. Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Picador, London, 1996, p. 40.
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2004 (1929), p. 79.
3. James Ley, ‘Germaine Greer on “a wife-shaped void”’, *Australian Book Review*, October 2007, accessed online at <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/%7Eabr/Current/oct07leyreview.htm>>.
4. ‘Love and Freindship’ (1790), in *Love & Freindship and Other Writings*, ed. Janet Todd, Phoenix, London, 1998, p. 82.
5. W. Somerset Maugham, ‘Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights*’, in his *Ten Novels and Their Authors*, Vintage, London, 2000, p. 256.
6. Rohan Maitzen, ‘Becoming George’, *Novel Readings*, <<http://maitzenreads.blogspot.com/2007/08/becoming-george.html>>, 18 August 2007.
7. Jane Austen, ‘The Watsons’, in *Northanger Abbey and Other Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, pp. 255–6.
8. Stanley Cavell, ‘Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager*’, *Critical Inquiry* 16.2, 1990, p. 217.
9. Carol Shields, *Jane Austen*, Viking Penguin, Melbourne, 2001, p. 176.
10. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 78.