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Austen Now: An Introduction

Eric Parisot and Gillian Dooley

In July 2017, fans and scholars alike took the opportunity to commemorate the bicentenary of Jane Austen's death, celebrate her works and all that they have spawned, and reflect on what Austen means to them in this modern age. Scholars mostly converged around two international conferences: an international conference at Chawton House Library, located in the village where Austen spent the last eight years of her life; and another international conference, "Immortal Austen," at Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia), co-convened by the editors of this special section. One conference held in what is now the epicentre of serious Austen scholarship, the other not too far from what Jerry Seinfeld once called "the anus of the world" (Teh). If any observation from the bicentenary helps to reinforce the immense geographical breadth of Austen's global fame, this is it.

Even within these professional scholarly spaces, it had become clear that Austen studies had long breached the limits of pure literary studies. Sure, many conference papers focused on the traditional, literary Austen, examining her novels, characters, themes, and reception. But other less familiar Austens were also invoked: Austen the moral philosopher, Austen the musician, Austen the appropriated emblem of right-wing politics, Austen the theologian, ecological Austen, and dark Austen—just to name a few examples. As editors, we attempted to catch the disciplinary breadth of Austen studies, 200 years after her death, in a 2018 special issue of *Persuasions On-Line*—the Jane Austen Society of North America's online journal—called "Undisciplined Austen" (Dooley and Parisot).

Most pertinently, Austen studies is these days arguably a subfield of cultural studies as much as it is of literary studies. Jane Austen is a popular multimedia icon of the twenty-first century as much as she is a Romantic-period novelist. Her works are adapted, retold,

expanded, invoked, and dissected across all major forms of media and culture. Her stories are now a staple of film and TV; in a demonstration of Austen's contemporary currency and pulling power, Autumn De Wilde's cinematic adaptation, *Emma*. (2020), is one of the top ten highest-grossing cinematic releases of the year in Britain. Heritage sites in Bath and other locations related to Austen's life or Austen films are now sites of immersive tourism. Contemporary merchandise is also facilitating a new wave of Austen material culture: Austen can be found in boardgames and colouring books, and on stamps, ten pound notes, stationery and clothing. Meanwhile, publications like Jennie Batchelor and Alison Larkin's *Jane Austen Embroidery: Regency Patterns Reimagined for Modern Stitchers* (2020) combine old material cultures with new, showcasing Regency embroidery patterns derived from the *Lady's Magazine* (1770-1832) and repurposing them for modern sewing projects. In the digital world, websites and YouTube channels cultivate online fan culture, not to mention some of the most popular Austen adaptations, such as Hank Green and Bernie Su's vlog-styled *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-13). Even within the sphere of fan fiction—where literary and cultural studies meet—we see a mind-boggling proliferation of the uses of Austen. Austen novels are being adapted into all kinds of literary modes, to suit all kinds of readers and agendas. Sarah Price's Amish retellings of Austen's novels (2014-16) offer their Christian readers examples of practical romance where, like Austen's novels (she claims), "Love does not have much to do with the agreement to marry" (Price); they have regularly featured in Amazon's monthly list of Top 100 Bestselling Books. On the other hand, paranormal mash-ups and erotic retellings give fresh blood to Austen's romantic intrigues by highlighting the sexual tensions left decorously understated in the original novels. Indeed, one of the biggest literary phenomena of this century, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-08), began life as *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction. The connection between Austen and pornography doesn't end there: one can watch topless women reading Jane Austen on

Pornhub. Even sex pheromones are now named after Austen's most notorious young bachelor, Mr Darcy. As Holly Leutkenhaus and Zoe Weinstein remark in *Austentatious: The Evolving World of Jane Austen Fans* (2019), one wonders whether there is any "piece of modern entertainment or media that hasn't somehow been Austenized" (9). These days, Austen is both a literary and pop cultural juggernaut.

These days. The timing of Austen's popularity is a concern of this special section. Many scholars and students have been taught to view Austen's pop cultural status as a strictly modern phenomenon, one that rapidly emerged on the back of Andrew Davies' wildly successful BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995)—and, of course, Colin Firth's wet shirt. But there are two significant problems with this commonplace view. To begin with, as Devoney Looser's recent book, *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017), convincingly demonstrates, Austen has rarely been out of the popular limelight. Indeed, a more recent discovery by both Looser and Jennie Batchelor of the first piece of Austen fan fiction—a mock letter published in the *Lady's Magazine* in 1823 describing Austen's visitation as a ghost (Lewis)—appears to confirm Looser's summary: that "Austen's critical and popular legacies have traveled quite well together, thank you very much, for a very long time" (Looser 217).

These days. It's a phrase that also connotes a sense of novelty, that Austen's current popularity is something fresh and new. It is certainly an unprecedented period of Austen's reception, characterized by proliferation through popular media and mass commercialisation along the most expansive communication systems this world has ever seen. But is this new Age of Austen still new? Its supposed originating cultural moment is now a quarter of a century ago. For how long can we view this period of Austen's reception in the singular, as one that captures the spirit of a single age? For how long can we continue without adjusting our perspective, without acknowledging Austen's ongoing evolution as a cultural icon during

this period? This reassessment is, we feel, an important critical manoeuvre, as this “new” Age of Austen shows no signs of abating. This special section, and its title—“Austen Now”—is our attempt to draw attention to this critical juncture in Austen’s popular reception, and to signal the need to break from viewing the BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and the 1990s more broadly, as inaugurating moments. (Besides, young students now typically cite Joe Wright’s 2005 film *Pride and Prejudice* as their first experience of Austen pop culture.) Only in liberating ourselves from this context can we bear witness to the emergence of twenty-first century constructions of Austen.

This section comprises three essays that emerged from the “Immortal Austen” conference and affiliated events. Collectively, they offer a snapshot of the kind of issues associated with popular constructions of Austen that have emerged in the last decade. Or, as is the case with Olivia Murphy’s article, “Queering Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century,” the issues that emerge with constructions that persist longer than we ought to expect. Murphy’s essay is an indictment, highlighting the problems that emerge when twenty-first-century Austen pop culture, created in an era of marriage equality, remains yoked to the ideals of the 1990s (or indeed courtship novels of the eighteenth century). Beginning briefly with Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1996) and Sharon McGuire’s film adaptation of *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001), Murphy reveals how queer proclivities are used as shorthand in these films to signal shame, secrecy, and latent threats to the heterosexual heroine’s romantic ideal. Moreover, the article reveals how little has changed in twenty-first-century retellings of Austen in popular literature and film. For Murphy, the challenge is clear: to get with the times, and to find a place for queer lives and families within an eighteenth-century ideal of marriage. Anne Rouhette’s article, “‘Un Auteur,’ or, ‘Une Héroïne’? Jane Austen in France in the Early 21st Century,” points to the cross-cultural problems associated with Austen’s global reach. Rouhette’s essay is a case study of two colliding cultural processes. On one

hand, Rouhette highlights the dehistoricization of Austen and her works as a by-product of translation into a foreign language and a different culture. But, on the other hand, what happens when that said culture is not insulated from Austen's fame, when constructions of Austen already exist within this foreign culture? The problematic result in Rouhette's example is the substitution of Austen the author with a preexisting fictionalized Austen, one that hinders rather than supports an understanding of her literary genius. The circulation of multiple Austens in pop cultures across the world ought to be celebrated, but it is evidently not without attendant problems. Finally, Eric Parisot looks at the post-*Twilight* convergence of Austen and vampires—in particular, rewritings of *Pride and Prejudice* as a vampiric romance, and Mr Darcy as the perfect blend of earthly gentlemanly virtues and unearthly sexual virility. On closer inspection, however, this is an impossible fantasy, where the sadist impulses of the literary vampire—of the old world and the new age—clash with traditional romantic values of heteronormative monogamy and domestic bliss. Austen has proven pliable to various trends at different times, but Parisot's article serves to highlight something else: how resilient the core values of Austen's novels can be when placed under pressure by competing contemporary tastes. Together, these essays offer only a sample of the work to be done in reassessing Austen's pop cultural image(s), the various ways in which Austen can be appropriated as a vehicle to explore the nuances of contemporary cultural trends and events, and the critical concerns that emerge as a result.

In a 2019 special issue of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, editors Janine Barchas and Devoney Looser ask: "What's Next for Jane Austen?" They could not have possibly predicted the events of 2020 thus far. The COVID-19 pandemic and the aggressive renewal of the "Black Lives Matters" movement are just two events of a tumultuous year that have left an indelible mark on many lives and cultures. Some commentators have suggested Austen as the perfect author to get us through self-isolation; aside from the obvious comfort

derived from favourite authors in difficult times, some columnists have suggested that life during the pandemic has taken on hues of living and courting in Austen's Regency era. "Long, solitary walks. Family dinners. Days spent wondering when life might change. Evenings spent in quiet entertainment: reading, scrolling, reminiscing. These are the routines of present-day isolation"—and of everyday life for Jane Austen's heroines (Bruner). So too is social distancing and the prohibition of physical touch, another article claims (Goldstein). Austen as the pin-up girl for pandemic romance—who knew? Meanwhile, Austen novels have again come under misguided scrutiny as vehicles of white supremacy, just as they did in 2017. (For a defence of Austen, see Murphy.) As statues of slave owners and colonists are being torn down across the world, and racially-insensitive films and TV programs are removed from various streaming platforms, one correspondent writing to Melbourne's *The Age* sardonically suggests that Austen "was a racist," and "it is time to burn her books" because she did not explicitly condemn slavery when alluding to Sir Thomas Bertram's investments in the sugar trade in *Mansfield Park* (Edgeworth). As this correspondent evidently knows, this kind of erroneous logic can lead to misdirected violence—and he is aiming at our soft spot for dear Jane to prove his point. As we write this introduction, we learn that a group of men recently surrounded a statue of George Eliot in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, fearing that her statue would suffer collateral damage from nearby protests. Is it conceivable that the Austen statue erected at Basingstoke, Hampshire, might come under attack? Today, yes—but certainly not at the beginning of the year. Our point here is that when it comes an icon like Austen, whose cultural presence now pervades the most intimate spaces of our modern lives, her evolution in popular culture is just as unpredictable as life itself. For every construction of Austen now, there is a new construction already in the making. It is the equally exciting and daunting challenge of scholars working at the intersection of Austen and popular culture to keep pace.

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