

Introduction: 'Jane Austen' and Jane Austen

TOM: . . . nearly everything Jane Austen wrote seems ridiculous from today's perspective.

AUDREY: Has it ever occurred to you that today, looked at from Jane Austen's perspective, would look even worse?

Whit Stillman, *Metropolitan*, 1990¹

Lots of fun with Jane Austen's novels is had in Helen Fielding's two volumes of Bridget Jones's *Diary*. The man of Bridget's dreams, as is now well known, is called Mark Darcy.² She and Mark are introduced at a New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet, arranged by friends of Bridget's parents. When she first meets him, Mark (a 'top human rights lawyer') is standing aloof, scrutinising the contents of their bookshelves. Bridget, prejudiced against Darcy from the first, thinks him a snob, and her new boyfriend, the rake, Daniel, confirms this opinion when he tells her that he's known Mark since Cambridge and he's a nerdish old maid. Bridget and Mark continue to bump into each other at parties and cross swords, in a series of conversations, though Bridget gradually comes to see that Mark might really care for her. When Darcy goes to great lengths to rescue the family from the financial disaster that Bridget's insufferable mother's romantic escapade has plunged them into, she is ready to fall into his arms – or rather to climb the stairs to his bedroom.

Bridget – daffy, honest, good-natured Bridget, daughter of *Cosmopolitan* culture, traumatised by supermodels – resembles *Northanger Abbey's* Catherine Morland more than she does Lizzy Bennet, but it's not hard to read the novel as a reworking of *Pride and Prejudice*. What is more interesting is that the book calls the reader's attention to the issues this involves, as in what one might call a meta-novelistic conversation where Bridget and her friends discuss television adaptations of classics. Bridget works for a publisher, and at a book launch Mark's stuck-up fiancée (as inclined to sneer at Bridget's enthusiasm for the TV show *Blind Date* as Miss Bingley was at Elizabeth's traipsing across the fields) weighs in against what she calls 'the ultimate *vandalisation* of the cultural

framework' involved in using opera arias as themes for the World Cup, and the conversion of great novels into television serials. "I must say", said Natasha with a knowing smile, "I always feel with the Classics people should be made to prove they've read the book before they're allowed to watch the television version."³ But this ploy seems to cut no ice with Mark.

Bridget Jones's Diary raises a question that is central to this book. In *Classics and Trash*, Harriet Hawkins described the 'cross-fertilisation' that so often takes place between classics and more popular films and novels with a broad appeal.⁴ But what is happening in the *Diary* is more like – to adopt a term from film criticism – a 'transcoding'.⁵ It is a kind of borrowing that plays fast and loose with the original but is, it might be argued, redeemed by its lightness of touch. Aware of the difference between our times and Austen's, it switches and changes and finds different ways to meet similar ends – which might be defined, roughly speaking, as exploring the pressures on young women to conform to the expectations of their culture. One could argue, as Natasha might do, that the novel simply makes off with the plot outline and a few references to *Pride and Prejudice*, and that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is more indebted to the 1995 BBC serialisation of the novel (of which Bridget, of course, is an avid fan) than Jane Austen's original fusion of social criticism and romance. There would be some truth in this, though at least Helen Fielding's novels would remind us that Jane Austen began and ended her writing life a satirist and that if Bridget, like her younger contemporary Cher Horowitz of *Clueless* (Paramount, 1995) finds *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* an absorbing read, that is more or less the contemporary equivalent of the Gothic bestseller of Austen's youth, *The Romance of the Forest*.

I suggest though that this novel is emblematic of a phenomenon that is typical of cultural production in this era of greatly diversified means of mechanical reproduction. Remaking, rewriting, 'adaptation', reworking, 'appropriation', conversion, mimicking (the proliferation of terms suggests how nebulous and ill-defined is the arena) of earlier works into other media is an important feature of the current landscape. If *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a different kind of product, and emerges from a different reading of Jane Austen than prequels and sequels like *Pemberley* or *Darcy's Story*⁶ – which are also interesting manifestations of contemporary culture – then it is important to consider why. Every age of course adapts, modifies and remakes, as the history of Shakespeare's reception indicates obviously enough. Every cultural creation, even a cathedral, has

an afterlife, unpredictable, uncontrolled by its original architect, when another era, another cultural configuration, turns it, adapts it, to its own uses.⁷ Texts (however we interpret that word) only partially belong to the original author: they are constantly being reworked, rearranged, recycled. Redesigning and plundering the creations of the past, indeed, rather than their preservation, is a process so continuous and so endemic, that it is arguable that it is the central motor of artistic development.

It is only recently, however, that the emphasis in representing Jane Austen has shifted away from notions of preservation and ‘faithfulness’, that Jane Austen has been so widely recreated, or, to use the deceptively simple word which will play an important role in the argument of this book, ‘used’. How are we to understand this use, and how can it be distinguished from the more inert, more slavish ‘usage’? The verb itself oscillates between exploitation and honourable deployment. But, as Meagan Morris puts it, ‘[w]hen any and every text can be read indifferently as another instance of “strategic rewriting” . . . something more (and something more specific) is needed to argue how and why a particular event of rewriting might matter.’⁸ So that the conversation in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* opens an important question: how do we sort out the various strands and styles of rewriting, remaking? What makes some more significant than others?

These recent adaptations, transcodings and appropriations of Jane Austen’s original novels form one subject of this book, for they are instances of a more general phenomenon, the fantasies which surround the name ‘Jane Austen’. The transformation of Jane Austen’s novels into several television productions and films which by general consent are more substantial and interesting than previous versions has already led to at least two critical collections and a great number of papers and commentaries.⁹ In her chapter, ‘Piracy is Our Only Option’, Kristin Fleiger Samuelian takes a remark of Edward Ferrars in Emma Thompson’s script for *Sense and Sensibility* and reads it against its author. Samuelian, like several contributors to the same volume, *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, regards Thompson’s screenplay as a virtual betrayal of the novel, a reversal of its system of values, and a capitulation to notions – simultaneously romantic and conservative – that the novel pits itself against. ‘Piracy’ she writes, is the appropriate term for Thompson’s postfeminist usurpation of Austen’s original text. ‘Piracy – the appropriation and adaptation for profit of Austen’s courtship novel – is for Thompson a way of deflecting what is unanswerable in the

eighteenth-century ideology the novel depicts.¹⁰ Such serious charges are made repeatedly in different forms by other writers – that in adapting Jane Austen to the needs of a modern audience, in seeking to please that audience, not only has the difficult balance of Austen’s irony been lost, but history has been traduced, and the ethical emphases of her work have been reversed. Some writers even go so far as to intimate that the film versions may, for a modern audience, liquidate or ‘erase’ the novels.¹¹

No one is likely at this point of critical time, to wish to underestimate the material conditions of a text’s production. That decisions about products costing millions of dollars are influenced by what are perceived as the desires and demands of their audiences is not in doubt, nor that writers and producers dwell within the same cultural climate, broadly speaking, as their audiences. But that these govern choices, are exclusively determinative, or even dominant may well be a more disputable matter. Even in Hollywood films are still made because a writer or producer wants to make them, believes in them, and pushes them through.¹² It is just as evident that Jane Austen, who hoped to make money by her books, was influenced to some degree by what she thought her readers would enjoy and accept.¹³ Material conditions influence the ideological messages of films also, needless to say, in a less crude and more radical sense. The technical conditions of their production mean that books and moving pictures occupy or employ quite different signifying systems.¹⁴ The very obvious points that films and television serials are predominantly visual media, that they must largely therefore signify emotion by symbol, by expression and action, that the interiority of their characters is represented through such signs rather than through language, that they encourage the gaze rather than the immersed reader’s imagination, are all factors that have cultural and ideological implications. What can be represented in the visual media emerges from these conditions and presents itself to the audience, or the viewer, as the natural and inevitable. Furthermore, it can be argued, the audience is formed in the image of that at which it gazes. Thus transcoding from one to the other system of signs may involve effects that, in some instances, are incommensurate.

‘In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful.’¹⁵ Whatever one may think of Walter Benjamin’s sweeping aphorism, it can be suggested that this focus on the films as commercial commodities largely governed by the consciousness and expectations of their intended audiences tends to remove the

scriptwriter or filmmaker as a designing subject from view. So does the Bourdieuan notion of ‘cultural capital’, the question his work leaves aside being precisely what internal possession of such capital means for the individual.¹⁶ The notion of piracy at least restores the notion of the author of the filmic text; brings him, her or them back as an agent. In this book I approach the question of influence and adaptation from this perspective – the supply side. I imagine that scriptwriters and filmmakers are agents and creative consciousnesses, and that film and television versions do emerge – all things considered – from intelligent and coherent encounters with the original works. I do not disregard the differing cultural conditions in which Austen wrote and in which, two hundred years later, readers receive her novels. As W. J. T. Mitchell has remarked, in the current stage of capitalism, ‘the common thread of both the marketable and the unmarketable artwork is the more or less explicit awareness of “marketability” and publicity as unavoidable dimensions of any public sphere that art might address’.¹⁷

But if one is to focus on remaking or adaptation, and put the adaptation or remade product into some kind of relation with the ‘original’ (however different this original is) it is impossible not to impute or imply an intelligence or imagination which has made choices, either to preserve, rework, or refuse the predecessor text. A criticism that focuses on the cultural context of texts, though often making a grudging acknowledgment, à la Barthes, that a certain ‘mixing’ of the given signs takes place,¹⁸ – that the activity of deployment or shift makes the object under consideration a novel and distinct thing – finds it difficult to theorise the author, or ‘auteur’. I propose then that scriptwriter and filmmakers be understood as readers, and that one advantage of all such revisions is that they make public and manifest what their reading of the precursor text is, that they bring out into the discussably open the choices, acceptances, assumptions and distortions that are commonly undisclosed within the private reader’s own imaginative reading process.

In the conversation I have quoted from Helen Fielding’s novel, *Natasha* goes on to complain of the arrogance with which a new generation imagines that it can somehow create the world afresh. Mark Darcy replies ‘gently’, ‘But that’s exactly what they *do*, do.’¹⁹ One might add that indeed each generation produces its own works of art, but not entirely out of their own materials. Rewritings of Austen are primary examples of this process. This book builds therefore on the perception of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott that works of art are not entirely

made, but neither are they exactly found either.²⁰ Rather than thinking of these works as piracies or abductions of the original text, I argue that they are best read as recreations, and therefore need to reintroduce the concept of creativity – redolent of the sixties though it be – into critical discourse. Winnicott is one of the few writers to offer sustained attention to the origins of creativity. Never a systematic thinker (as his French commentators routinely point out)²¹ and rather suspicious of systematising modes of thought, Winnicott nevertheless offers a series of ideas and concepts with which to approach a notion that was no doubt discarded because, together with a clutch of similarly dynamic notions, it was used ‘to designate a locus of opacity’.²² Winnicott, a paediatrician as well as psychoanalyst, introduces an understanding of the notion of creativity at its earliest moments, in the infant’s originary gestures towards the world. In his thinking, creativity, which is understood as a quotidian quality as well as an extraordinary one, is often shadowed by its alternative, compliance. Moreover, since the notion of creativity is central to his thought, he relates it to questions of art and literary production.

Winnicott’s theory differs strikingly from Freud’s attempt to make sense of the aesthetic. ‘Sublimation’ offers to instantiate a realm outside the domain of sexuality and yet always seemingly leads back into sexual determinants.²³ Winnicott’s theory of creativity, on the other hand, expands into the social and interpersonal rather than the erotic. In papers which I shall draw on later in the argument of this book, Winnicott shows that everyday creativity makes use of the other person, that progress in psychological life is a form of consumption of the other which simultaneously respects the other’s independence. Sometimes, through a series of intuitions or jumps Winnicott extends his thoughts about the infant’s creativity into the realms of art and culture.²⁴ But following work by the psychoanalytic social theorist Jessica Benjamin I argue that in a variety of ways, and in different contexts, Winnicott’s thoughts can be helpful in formulating a theory of artistic creation, influence and recreation, which has (though neither Winnicott nor Benjamin explicitly makes this point) an ethical aspect. What Winnicott shows about the infant and about the psychoanalytic patient, throws, I suggest, some light into the hidden and problematic processes in which a text that is public property becomes taken up and effectively remade. If the mind is, as contemporary psychoanalytic theory proposes, actually built out of ‘configurations of self in relation to others’,²⁵ then it is possible that the relations between texts may be illuminated by this parallel.

This book does not, however, offer a full account of the film and television adaptations of Jane Austen's novels. In fact, aspects of the films are only drawn upon when they contribute to a larger project, which is to understand the internal logics of the process which I am calling 'recreation'. The topic of the book then, is not so much the imitations or recreations of Jane Austen, as the process of imitation or recreation itself, and its central task is to transfer concepts formulated in the psychoanalytic encounter into literary or cultural criticism, to transform descriptions of human psyches in their interaction into useful ways of thinking about the relationships between texts, even when these texts belong to different genres or media. I consider the various versions of the novels not as piracies, but – all things considered – as coherent readings of the original books, which by their public, objective existence, can throw unique light on the nature of reading. An analogy to the contemporary remaking of Jane Austen, I suggest, is to be found in her own hardly reverent relation to Shakespeare and in the first of two chapters bearing on this I contrast the theory of creativity with the more commonly accepted notions of influence.

I had thought of calling this book 'Jane Austen, Our Contemporary', to signal that Shakespeare is its secondary plot, its shadow subject. This would itself be a pinch from the title of Jan Kott's influential 1966 book, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*.²⁶ But it would be stealing with a difference: Kott's book insisted on the contemporary 'relevance' of Shakespeare's plays, reading the *Henriad*, for example, in the light of the brutal politics of Eastern Europe. My intention is otherwise. In developing a theory of adaptation through discussion of the recent remakings of Jane Austen's novels I seek to confront those readers in the academy and elsewhere who still consider Jane Austen as a novelist who belongs to or creates a 'world' that is far-off, impeccably gracious and morally superannuated, who panders (in the author's own unfortunate phrase) to a taste like Susan Price's for 'the genteel and well-appointed'.²⁷

Yet 'Jane Austen' is obviously not everyone's contemporary. The distributors of the 1998 Touchstone Pictures comedy, *Jane Austen's Mafia!*, decided to change the title in pre-screening publicity when surveys revealed that only ten per cent of their teenage target audience knew who Jane Austen was (perhaps the same audience that is reported to have queued for *Sense and Sensibility* thinking it was a sequel to *Dumb and Dumber*). But the producers clearly knew what 'Jane Austen' signified, and counted on a certain response to their title. They were playing on 'Jane Austen' as a cultural commodity, bound to produce an

expectation even in those who have never read the novels. For what does 'Jane Austen' mean? Propriety, decorum, romance, English ladies – just the opposite of what 'Mafia' suggests – brutality, violence, crime, machismo. The oxymoronic trick had been played before when James Ivory and Ismail Merchant released a film I shall discuss later in this book, *Jane Austen in Manhattan*, in 1980. Racy, smart, modern Manhattan; staid, genteel, old-fashioned Jane. The mere title 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1989 MLA presentation and 1991 essay, flaunting the same incongruity, was attacked by conservative commentators, disturbed at the linkage of the familiar cipher for placid elegance and furtive, unsanctioned sexuality.²⁸

This 'Jane Austen' is almost a brand name. You come upon 'Jane Austen' nightdresses in the same section of the heritage shop 'Past Times' as her *Letters to Cassandra*. The name signals a variety of cosiness, seductively close to that notion of domestic 'comfort' which, as an architectural commentator has noted, Jane Austen's novels play their role in naturalising.²⁹ 'Jane Austen' stands equally for a certain priggish concern with manners, a prudish unadventurousness, an anachronistic fascination with the ways of ladies and gentlemen. This 'Jane Austen' is irredeemably conservative and middle-class. In another recent British novel, for instance, a young teacher parries a girl's invitation to have sex with her on their first date. Fed up with him, she lets fly: 'I think he could see what I was feeling because he said he was sorry . . . and we should say goodnight – I ask you what a load of Jane Austen bollocks, that was nearly it, there and then, I was that close, it was on the tip of my tongue to say all right then fuck off for ever darling I cannot be doing with one second more of this Jane Austen bollocks . . .'³⁰ This angry reaction is B's in *B. Monkey* published in 1992 by Andrew Davies, frustratedly working at that time, one must presume, on the script for the famously successful BBC *Pride and Prejudice*, which went to air in 1995. 'Jane Austen' means then, no sex and antiquated manners.

For others, 'Jane Austen' signifies English imperialism, the dissemination of her work via the BBC and Miramax films, colonisation in a new form. This Jane Austen is perceived as an enemy of the indigenous, the literary queen (as Shakespeare is the king) of a dominant culture, her texts one arm of an oppressive educative project that inculcates the values of the 'mother country', her careful investigation of behavioural constraints and the inner life, confined to a small section of nineteenth-century society, absurdly anachronistic, inappropriate and fundamentally detrimental to nations, peoples and classes seeking their own

identities. The films, with their seductive depictions of English landscape and gorgeous interiors, their focus on exquisite manners and exclusively heterosexual romance, only reinforce the image such readers carry of a Jane Austen stultifyingly genteel, complicit with patriarchy, a velvet enforcer of convention and conformity. Within Jane Austen criticism the operation of this image is seen in the reaction it provokes – the eagerness to show that Austen is sassy, spunky, postcolonial, radical, transgressive, sexually complex and ambiguous.³¹

For the taint of the staid, the oppressively genteel can be used also to rule out any consideration of Jane Austen's critics and commentators from serious engagement in the current critical agora. Jane 'Austen criticism is notable mostly, not just for its timidity and banality', Sedgwick declares, 'but for its unrelenting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson.'³² Criticism has made Austen's work into 'a dryly static tableau of discrete moralized portraits, poised antitheses, and exemplary, deplorable, or regrettably necessary punishments' (pp. 127–28). 'This tableau is what we now know as "Jane Austen", fossilized residue of the now subtracted autoerotic spectacle' (p. 128). Such a 'spectacle' is what Sedgwick discerns in *Sense and Sensibility*, reading a scene in which Marianne weeps in her bedroom as her 'unstanchable emission, convulsive and intransitive', the signal of 'an excess of sexuality altogether, an excess dangerous to others but chiefly to herself' (p. 114, p. 120). Elinor's supposedly envious censorship is presented in the light of later medical tracts against 'self-abuse' and Austen's critics as scurrying, all too readily, to follow her, to underscore the coercive or prescriptive elements in the novels' plots.

Part of Sedgwick's argument makes Morris Zapp of David Lodge's 1975 novel *Changing Places* uncannily proleptic. Zapp, the American exchange Professor who is an Austen specialist (he has left behind nine-year-old twins called Darcy and Elizabeth) lectures his reluctant English class on the topic of 'Eros and Agape in the later novels'. Getting up steam, he snatches up the text of *Persuasion* and reads from the scene where Wentworth lifts the child from Anne's shoulders. "'Her sensations on the discovery made her perfectly speechless. She could not even thank him. She could only hang over little Charles with the most disordered feelings.'" "How about that?" He concluded reverently. "If that isn't an *orgasm*, what is it?" He looked up into three flabbergasted faces.³³ Perhaps this can stand as a moral lesson in its turn on those dangers of ahistorical reading that hedge about such an enterprise as this one. Nevertheless, it is true, as Sedgwick suggests, that a previous generation of critics scarcely read the

novels except in the transferential light of their own pedagogic practices. As Howard Mills remarks, few teachers will escape cringing when one of Zapp's students describes his essay on Austen: 'I've done it on her moral awareness.'³⁴ But I don't know how to address Sedgwick's depiction of Marianne and Elinor except to say that I think it shows a lack of moral awareness. Marianne's condition is not pathological: it is so distressing and such a challenge to her sister precisely because it is not aberrant or perverse.

'Jane Austen' then, the cultural image, can be distinguished from Jane Austen, the texts. So can the more kindly inflection of this tendency, 'Jane Austen' as the object of idealising and romantic fantasy. Whatever the associations of 'Jane Austen' the term always, I think, signals distance from the contemporary. Both those who say they love Jane Austen and those who dislike 'her' intensely often predicate their assessments on this supposed remoteness from the harassments and incitements of modern urban life. The cognate term or phrase 'Jane Austen's world' suggests this even more strongly.³⁵ 'The private life in the foreground, history a distant rumble of gunfire, somewhere off-stage', as Zapp's English equivalent declares, 'In Jane Austen not even a rumble.'³⁶ Like 'hermetically sealed from the vast anguish of her time',³⁷ Reginald Farrer's description in 1917 of the milieu of the novels, these accounts no longer command any form of assent from Jane Austen's critics, but the notion that 'Jane Austen's world' is both synonymous with an actual historical period and also blissfully, or blindly, outside of history still persists,³⁸ kept overdeterminedly alive perhaps by the novels' own internal coherence, as well as the positiveness of the author's organising 'voice'.

What then makes it possible to claim with some plausibility – some chance of being heard – that despite the popular myth, the critical fossil, there is another Jane Austen who is our contemporary? In one sense this question is answered by the proliferating transformations that are the stuff this book works in. As I hope to show, sometimes the films do genuinely achieve, within different terms, an equivalence to Jane Austen. Its task would not, however, be complete without an account of at least one Austen novel that attempted to substantiate through its own critical reading the implicit claim I have been making here, to speak of Jane Austen rather than 'Jane Austen'. The chapter on *Pride and Prejudice* also allows me to make explicit a theme which is present in a variety of forms throughout the book. It is a version (so I fondly imagine) of Jane Austen's own dislike of sensibility, of the late eighteenth-century cult of