

AUSTEN TRANSLATION:
Gender and Community in *Pride and Prejudice* Fanfiction

by
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Finally, I must quote Shannon Hale's dedication of her 2007 novel *Austenland*: "For Colin Firth: You're a really great guy, but I'm married, so I think we should just be friends." I'm not married, but the sentiment stands, I suppose.

INTRODUCTION: What's the big deal about Austen fanfiction?

“I’m going to put together an Austen section...Just look at all the other Austen stuff we have. Besides her own novels, we have novels *about* her. Then there’s *The Jane Austen Cookbook* and the bios and the collected letters. Oh, and I just read in *Publishers Weekly* that someone has written a Jane Austen self-help book.”¹

The above quote comes from Michael Thomas Ford’s 2011 novel *Jane Bites Back* about a vampire Jane Austen living in contemporary Upstate New York, and it’s a pretty accurate representation of the state of the Austen industry overall. Several pages later, Austen, who now owns a bookstore, “watch[ed] as stacks of her books and their assorted spin-offs disappeared out the door.”² The list of spin-offs explicitly mentioned is extensive – it includes *Sense and Sensuality*, an upcoming Austen-inspired massage book, Austen paper dolls, and an Austen self-help book called “*Will the Real Elizabeth Bennet Please Stand Up*”³ – but Ford fails to mention the most recent aspect of the Austen industry: fanfiction. These books either rewrite the plot of an Austen novel with an intriguing “what if,” pick up where her novels left off, or transplant her characters to a different, usually modern, setting. It’s such a common phenomenon that the major publishing house HarperCollins decided to publish a series of contemporary rewrites of Austen’s novels, called The Austen Project. Each Austen novel will be rewritten by a different popular, contemporary author, and the first book, Joanna Trollope’s *Sense and Sensibility*, was published in 2013.

When Curtis Sittenfeld was first approached about participating in the Austen Project in December of 2011, she was extremely hesitant, but she ultimately felt she had

¹Michael Thomas Ford, *Jane Bites Back: A Novel*. (New York: Ballantine, 2010), 24.

² Ford, 29.

³ Ford, 24.

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to say yes. In an interview in October 2015, she called the idea “irresistible,” and wondered “Who in their right mind would say no?”⁴ The irresistibility didn’t come from the general idea of rewriting a classic novel, but rather the specific task of rewriting an *Austen* novel. Sittenfeld noted that “[T]here is a special place in my heart for *Pride and Prejudice*,” and “If someone had asked me to do this with, you know, *Jane Eyre*, I would have said no.”⁵ Sittenfeld is not alone in feeling this appeal, or in making this distinction – just on the first page of search results for the phrase “Jane Austen fanfiction” on the internet, there are links to six Austen-specific fanfiction websites. This isn’t the case with, to use Ms. Sittenfeld’s example, *Jane Eyre*. Searching for “Charlotte Brontë fanfiction” turns up many results, but none of them are author-specific fanfiction websites. Based on this alone, it seems like there might be something unique about Austen fanfiction in particular.

Austen fanfiction does not outnumber the fanfiction for every other book, movie, or series. Far from it. As of January 16, 2016, there were 733,000 stories on fanfiction.net, one of the web’s largest fanfiction sites, that had been tagged as fanfiction for the Harry Potter series, with the *Twilight* series coming in second, at 218,000 stories. *Pride and Prejudice*, the most popular Austen novel, comes in at thirty-first in a list of fanfiction based on books, going from most popular (Harry Potter) to least (numerous books with only one entry). Still, consider the books that come before *Pride and Prejudice*. Of the thirty categories (Harry Potter, *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens, and the *Twilight* series all being examples of such categories) higher on the list, twenty-three are series. The more books there are under an individual category, the more entries

⁴ Curtis Sittenfeld. Telephone interview. 04 Oct. 2015.

⁵ Curtis Sittenfeld. Telephone interview. 04 Oct. 2015.

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you'll get for that category. Many of those series are also contemporary, and waiting for the next installment of a series can push a great many people towards fanfiction. They want to know what happens next, and the only way they can come close to that while waiting for, say, the seventh Harry Potter book, is to write it themselves. Of the remaining categories, many are connected with a successful franchise: *The Hobbit* (recently adapted into a popular movie trilogy, and tied closely to *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the most successful movie franchises of all time and a cult classic of literature), *Phantom of the Opera* (a wildly popular musical that ran on Broadway for decades), *Les Miserables* (see note for *Phantom of the Opera*), and *The Simlarion* (see note for *The Hobbit*). The last three are *The Outsiders* (a book often read in school right around the age that fanfiction becomes appealing), the Bible, and fairy tales. The Bible seems like an unusual category on a fanfiction website, but perhaps it can be explained by the idea that religious Christians feel the need to connect with the Bible on a deep level. For many, that could mean rewriting its stories from differing points of views, or simply trying to write until they understand them – in other words, fanfiction becomes an act of faith, and there's nothing in the world with a larger support base than the world's most popular religion.⁶ Fairy tales may be an unusual category, because although the tales themselves can be found in anthologies today, they could also be considered more of an oral tradition. However, that fails to consider the massive popular appeal of Disney movies. Disney's fairytale-based movies are deeply ingrained in the cultural mind, and the fan base for them is massive. A large number of fairy tale fanfictions are probably partially or

⁶ "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050." *Pew Research Centers, Religion & Public Life Project*. Pew Research Center, 02 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Feb. 2016. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

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entirely based on either the movies themselves, or fairy tales that the fanfiction author was first exposed to through Disney movies. If the fan base itself is larger, you'll get a larger number of fans who are inspired to write fanfiction. Austen is popular, but not quite to the extent of Disney.

Despite this, Austen's popularity among fanfiction authors is unusual for a classic work of literature. As noted, the books that are higher on the list and can also be considered classics have some form of a franchise attached to them – successful movies, successful musicals. And the *Sherlock Holmes* category, which comes in at number 28, can be classified it as a series, because it's a category based on a character who appears in numerous stories and books. It also currently has a successful, ongoing television series associated with it. Fanfiction for the show falls under a different category, but it's easy to imagine that a show like the BBC's *Sherlock*, which has gaps of several years between seasons and contains only three episodes per season, could drive fans to look at the source material in order to stem the desire for new material that isn't being delivered to them. Sherlock Holmes was also one of the first literary characters to inspire fanfiction, according to Anne Jamison's book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. Jamison calls Sherlock Holmes “the first formal fandom—with rules. With a *constitution*.”⁷ A community is key in creating a world of fanfiction, and Sherlock Holmes fans had the first real community of the kind. With such a long history, there are bound to be quite a few stories under the Holmes category on fanfiction.net.

Of course, Austen's novels were published long before Sir Arthur Conan Doyle even dreamed of Sherlock Holmes. But they did not enjoy the immediate, pop-culture-

⁷ Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2013), 40.

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phenomenon success that Holmes and his associate Dr. Watson did. Though she's considered a pop-culture phenomenon today, Austen was significantly less popular during her own lifetime. Her books sold moderately well, but they were nothing compared to the monster sales of the literary icons of her day such as Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. In her book *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, Claire Harman informs readers that "The actual number of Austen's books in circulation was extremely small in the years immediately following her death—just a few thousand in total,"⁸ and further notes that "[i]f Austen can ever be said to have had a period of obscurity, it was during the 1820s, when her books were out of print, out of demand, and almost out of mind."⁹ Even during the Victorian period, a time with which Austen is often erroneously associated, "[her] novels were not essential reading...and certainly were not "beloved." She had become a half-forgotten niche writer, with a readership that looks insignificant compared with that of Dickens, Collins, and Thackeray."¹⁰ Her popularity began to grow when her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, published the first Austen biography, titled *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, in 1869, more than fifty years after her death; and then again when she was prescribed to "shell-shocked" soldiers returning from World War I – Austen was believed to contain the calm essence of quintessential English life, which it was hoped would return the soldiers to a peaceful mental state, and help them become productive members of civilian life. These were passing frenzies, however, and it wasn't until the mid-1990s that Austen reached peak popularity, and it is since then that she has become something of an industry. As a

⁸ Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*. (New York: Picador, 2009), 71.

⁹ Harman, 76.

¹⁰ Harman, 94.

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character *Jane Bites Back* says, “You’ve seen the books. Austen is all the rage. You put her name on anything and it will sell.”¹¹ The Austen industry has been firmly established. Her fanfiction popularity begins to keep pace with Sherlock Holmes’s: while *Pride and Prejudice* may have fewer entries than Sherlock Holmes, at about 3,800 versus 3,900, all of Austen’s novels combined total up to about 4,500 entries. It seems she’s catching up to Conan Doyle.

Given that all the books that are high on the list have factors besides their simple existence as books that add to their fanfiction popularity, it might be more fair to compare Austen’s fanfiction numbers to something like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, or the fiction of Charles Dickens. These are all extremely popular works of classic literature which have had, at various times, popular movies or television mini-series made to adapt them for a larger audience. You might think that the number of fanfiction stories for *Jane Eyre* should be comparable to that of *Pride and Prejudice*. As of January 16th, 2016, both novels had over 1 million reviews on Goodreads. Yet while *Pride and Prejudice* has 3,800 stories in its category on fanfiction.net, *Jane Eyre* has only 389. This seems odd, since each novel is heralded as a great classic of literature, and as being among the greatest romantic stories of all time. A similar trend is apparent when looking at the numbers for *Wuthering Heights*: Emily Brontë’s novel has only 148 entries. *Romeo and Juliet*, the most romantic play by the most popular English playwright of all time, has 285 stories. *The Great Gatsby* has 317. Edgar Allan Poe’s various works have 266. If we only look at female authors, aside from the Brontë sisters, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* has 918 stories, L.M.

¹¹ Ford, 9.

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Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series (the whole series) has 758, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has 235. Even Charles Dickens – not any one novel, but all of his works together – has only 524 stories on fanfiction.net.

Clearly, the works of Austen stand out as more attractive to fanfiction authors. She doesn't have a movie franchise or popular musical associated with her – although it is true that there is a steady market for film adaptations of Austen movies. A movie-goer is much more likely to see a mainstream adaptation of an Austen novel advertised than, say, an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* or *Anne of Green Gables*. The fact that these movies pop up spontaneously, rather than being part of a self-perpetuating franchise, indicates that this trend ties into the popularity of and market for Austen fanfiction. It's just another facet of the overall Austen popularity. And Austen was also not the first real fan community, yet a huge number of fanfiction writers gravitate towards Austen. She appears to be the only one of all these many classic novels and series that crop up on fanfiction.net who has fanfiction websites *solely devoted to fanfiction based on her books*. Fanfiction itself has become a phenomenon, but Austen fanfiction remains somehow distinct.

It is not my intention to explore the “why Jane Austen?” question. Rachel Brownstein has explored that question in her aptly titled book, *Why Jane Austen?* And the question has been further delved into in the anthology *A Truth Universally Acknowledged: 33 Great Writers on Why We Read Jane Austen*. It's not “why Jane Austen?” that interests me, but rather the phenomenon of Austen fanfiction as a whole, and what it does. What about writing and reading Austen fanfiction is so appealing that it has become both an online phenomenon and a regular part of the publishing world? (Just

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try to browse a bookstore without coming across at least one published Austen-based novel.) In order to address this question, I will look at both published and online Austen fanfiction, while treating the published Austen fanfiction phenomenon mainly as a reaction to the online Austen fanfiction. The published fanfiction technically came first, but it did not become a noticeable trend until after the online fanfiction took off.

There are thousands of Austen-related stories on the web. To narrow my field of vision, I have chosen to work solely with a website called the Derbyshire Writer's Guild. Founded in 1997, the DWG was one of the first Austen-only fanfiction websites created, and it remains in operation today. Stories are posted in serialized sections on the Message Board, then immediately archived in one single location, completely distinct from the Message Board. These archival locations are divided into two categories: "Epilogue Abbey" and "Fantasia Gallery." Epilogue Abbey contains fanfiction that takes place strictly during the Regency time period. They are either continuations – "epilogues" – of an Austen novel, or explorations of "what ifs" that significantly alter the plot of the original novel. Fantasia Gallery, on the other hand, is much more loosely defined. To fit into this category, a story must simply be classified as "not Regency." Most of these stories shift an Austen novel's plot and characters to a different setting – whether place, time, culture, etc. In both of these categories, fanfiction based on *Pride and Prejudice* far outnumbers stories based on the rest of Austen's works. The Fantasia Gallery contains 966 entries for P&P (a shorthand I will use to refer to the novel throughout this work), while the other five novels together have only 343. Epilogue Abbey's disparity is even more striking, with 1321 P&P-based stories and only 257 based on the other five.

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As indicated by the numbers, there are more stories on the DWG than I could hope to get through for a project of this scope and with these time constraints. In an attempt to narrow my scope, I contacted the moderators of the DWG website and asked if they had any data on which of their archived stories got the most hits. Unfortunately, they don't keep any such records, so I went on to Plan B – asking the community for their favorite (“the best”) DWG stories. Nearly all of the recommendations that came back were for *Pride and Prejudice* fanfiction, but given the numbers, that wasn't too surprising. Even this list of recommendations, however, was too much for me to handle. To cut down my scope even more, I made another, smaller list. This was made up of any stories or authors on the original list of recommendations that were mentioned by multiple people. In addition, if I saw a story on the list that I remembered reading and enjoying in my days as a “dweggie” (what people who frequent the DWG call themselves), I put that on the new list. I considered my remembered enjoyment of the story as a second recommendation, and so felt justified in including those. After reading the stories on my final list, I have chosen to focus on stories that inspired the most interesting analysis.

Choosing the published Austen fanfictions to work with should have been more difficult, as there is no website with an attached community to help narrow down my scope. What ended up being particularly helpful to me was the simple matter of which books I could get my hands on. These were the books available at Sawyer Library, or through Inter-Library Loan, and also the books I already happened to have in my possession. By using availability as a proxy for popularity and success, I was now able to choose from a discrete collection of books. After rereading at least a section of each of

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the books in my possession, I chose to think about the ones that presented the most interesting material for analysis, both on their own and in comparison to one another.

This ended up being a list of several very different books, most of which I had read in the past, including the first-ever published Austen fanfiction from 1912, a book about Austen as a vampire, a create-your-own-Austen-adventure book, and *Pride and Prejudice* retold from Mr. Darcy's point of view, among others.

Finally, I made one last decision that was crucial to how I selected the pieces of fanfiction with which I wished to work. My initial goal was to look at fanfiction based on all six of Austen's novels, but every story that I focus on here is *Pride and Prejudice*-based. I read some non-P&P stories from the DWG, but found that, for the most part, they contained nothing that I could not find in P&P-inspired stories, which were far more plentiful. Furthermore, in terms of published fanfiction, it was easy to come across books inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, or by the life of Austen, or even stories that combined characters from different Austen novels (including P&P), but it was far more rare to come across books solely inspired by an Austen novel that was *not* P&P. In the interest of availability, and also with an eye towards time and the realistic scope of my project, I have ultimately decided to focus mainly on P&P fanfiction. I have included some published fanfiction that combines characters from multiple Austen novels, as well as some that focuses more on Austen herself and the popular culture Austen phenomenon, because I found those to be particularly interesting for my project. But with stories and books based on the five less popular Austen novels, I found that they didn't add enough of a new perspective for me to consider it worth adding them to my project.

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CHAPTER ONE – Published Austen Fanfiction

In her article “The professional woman writer” from *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Jan Fergus begins by seeking to rebut the long-held claims that Austen was uninterested in the professional aspects of writing and publishing. Fergus quotes Henry Austen’s “Biographical Notice” from 1818, in which he writes, “Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives... Few so gifted were so truly unpretending... [S]o much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen... [I]n public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. (P 329-30)”¹² According to Fergus, “That myth, and others like it, have prevented subsequent readers from understanding that for Austen, being a professional writer was, apart from her family, more important to her than anything else in her life.”¹³

The figure of professional female writer was growing in cultural importance at the time Austen was writing. Fergus references Judith Phillips Stanton, saying “The number of women writers... exploded at the end [of the century], rising by ‘around 50 percent every decade starting in the 1760s’.”¹⁴ Yet there were significant social obstacles in the paths of women writers: “Publishing her own writing could threaten a woman’s reputation as well as her social position. For any woman, the fame of authorship could become infamy, and novels were particularly reprehensible... Proper women, as Henry Austen makes clear, were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private.”¹⁵ This view

¹² Jan Fergus, “The Professional Woman Writer.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen. Second Edition*, ed. Edward Copeland Juliet McMaster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

¹³ Fergus, 2.

¹⁴ Fergus, 2.

¹⁵ Fergus, 2.

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led to many female authors trying to minimize their violation of cultural norms by including "...prefaces [that] often apologize[d] for writing..."¹⁶ Yet despite all this, the sheer number of female writers was overwhelming, and the trend has not been short-lived. Between the 18th and 19th centuries and the present day, female writers have made huge progress. There are many, many published female authors, and some are extremely successful. Just look at J.K. Rowling. The stigma from the earlier centuries has disappeared in many ways, but it's not entirely gone. In today's fanfiction, there are strong echoes of the phenomenon.

The negative view of female authors, and the constant need for them to justify and apologize for their writing, can be viewed as a precursor to both women in the professional publishing industry today, and as motivation for women to find their own safe space in such places as the world of fanfiction, away from the historically-based gender discrimination found in professional publishing. If women are constantly viewed as "second class citizens" in the professional writing world (a view that is all the more difficult to root out because of its historical basis), of *course* they want to find a space where they can be in charge.

This desire to have a safe space was part of the impetus for the development of the historical phenomenon of female literary communities. In his article "Women as readers and writers" in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, Mark Towsey explores such communities. He begins by addressing the stereotype from the 18th century of the frivolous female novel-reader, which we can see as remaining today in the way the publishing industry seeks to belittle the fanfiction it

¹⁶ Fergus, 3.

publishes. Towsey quotes a character from Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Sir Anthony Absolute, who "...famously decried the circulating library as 'an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge! It blossoms through the year! – and depend on it, Mrs Malaprop, that they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last.'"¹⁷ This is an example of what Towsey calls the "moral hysteria"¹⁸ that was a barrier to women's reading; and it also represents the commonly believed stereotype that women were reading scandalous novels. Yet much of the early part of Towsey's article is spent *disproving* the idea that women read only such works. Though the ability to really discover what women were reading is limited by the fact that many women were dependent on the men in their families for access to books, there remain some ways of tracking such records down. Towsey describes some booksellers' records as indicating that "The impoverished spinsters Mary and Frances Westley...generally preferred devotional material, including Gastrell's *Christian Institutes* (1707) and the *New Week's Preparation for a Worthy Receiving of the Lord's Supper* (1737)."¹⁹ Other sources show that women in the upper classes preferred to purchase "...plays, poetry, history, biography, voyages, and divinity," while "On the rare occasions when they can be found ordering books, female servants also eschewed novels in favor of...practical texts aimed at improving specific skills."²⁰

These records are interesting, and enlightening, but they are extremely limited.

The average household could not afford to buy books – "...the book-buying population

¹⁷ Mark Towsey. "Women as readers and writers." In *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1780*, ed. Catherine Ingrassia. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 23.

¹⁸ Towsey, 23.

¹⁹ Towsey, 24.

²⁰ Towsey, 24-25.

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was limited mainly to families with a minimum annual income of £50, or just 150,000 households altogether.”²¹ This lack of purchasing power was mitigated, however, by the fact that “...it became increasingly easy to borrow books.”²² There were several types of libraries available: the lending libraries usually found in parishes, cathedrals, and schools, or sponsored by towns as charitable institutions; the subscription libraries, which were more exclusive due to their membership fees, and which were generally made up mainly of men, but “were usually perfectly happy to welcome female members as long as they could afford the subscription fee”²³; informal book clubs that would bulk-buy books members could not afford on their own (the records from an all-female book club being of particular interest, as it again indicates that novels were not the top choice of reading material for most women); and circulating libraries. This last was especially associated with female readers, and they were particularly maligned, “with almost every contemporary author who mentioned them alleging that they supplied the most objectionable kind of novels to a mainly young, impressionable female readership.”²⁴

Such maligning of women’s choice of reading material, and the hysterical moral fear that went along with it, was not the only restriction on female access to books. Perhaps the more powerful restriction was a “deeply entrenched cultural hostility towards female learning.”²⁵ As Towsey says, “Convention dictated that women should read within their intellectual limitations, keeping their learned pretensions to the private sphere

²¹ Towsey, 25.

²² Towsey, 25.

²³ Towsey, 26.

²⁴ Towsey, 27.

²⁵ Towsey, 23.

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so as not to compete with men in public.”²⁶ This fear of truly allowing women to enter into the intellectual sphere should not be surprising to anyone who has studied modern Western culture, where many societal institutions seek to keep women as objects of desire or domestic harmony, with their purpose mainly to serve and ease the lives of men. This cultural hostility towards women fully engaging their intellectual potential was a large part of the reason that “supportive communities of female readers”²⁷ sprang up in the Georgian and Regency periods. There was a longing for, and search for, what Elizabeth Rose described as “kindred spirits” - her “preferred reading companions.”²⁸ This “collective reading” came up again and again in letters of noted Bluestockings, and is believed to be central “to the way these literary celebrities experienced the world of print.”²⁹ They further “demonstrated that shared reading and rational conversation could enhance polite sociability and virtuous domesticity,” which led to “Informal reading circles that built up around libraries and book clubs” as a way to “emulate such cultural practices.”³⁰ Shared reading provided moral as well as intellectual support to women in a society that was not always, or even often, encouraging of such activities.

Towsey links this in turn to the communities of female *writers* that sprang up around and in the communities of female readers. It’s noted that “Sustained engagement with fiction could inspire readers’ own experiments in amateur storytelling... The great success of *The Lady’s Magazine* was that it provided an outlet for such amateur writing, fostering the sense of a broader female reading community” with “a less hierarchical

²⁶ Towsey, 23.

²⁷ Toswey, 31.

²⁸ Towsey, 31.

²⁹ Towsey, 31.

³⁰ Towsey, 31.

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community of literary women.”³¹ Towsey goes on to say, “Shared reading practices had a particularly important role in shaping female authorship, providing a sense of a collaborative literary community that informed women writers’ conception of themselves and underpinned many of the major landmarks of women’s writing in this period.”³² This community engagement was clearly vital to the developing female author – these women “sought to validate the much criticized figure of the female reader” as “an external expression of mutual encouragement.”³³

With these female reading and writing communities, subject matter in women’s writing became much more geared towards female interests. The women were writing for each other, so they wrote what they and their friends would want to read. While this does include far more varied topics than male intellectuals at the time would have liked to believe, with such criteria it was only a matter of time before some female author hit upon the idea of writing new stories about Austen characters. Sybil G. Brinton’s book *Old Friends and New Fancies* is generally acknowledged to be the first instance of published Austen fanfiction. The book was first published in 1913³⁴, and the back of a more recent edition touts it as “The first Jane Austen sequel ever written.”³⁵ In the book, Brinton interweaves the lives of various characters from all six novels, focusing mainly on romances between Colonel Fitzwilliam (from P&P) and Mary Crawford (from *Mansfield Park*), Georgiana Darcy (P&P) and William Price (*Mansfield Park*), and Kitty

³¹ Quoted by Towsey, 32.

³² Towsey, 32.

³³ Towsey, 33.

³⁴ Although the Chawton House Library’s first edition copy has an inscription by the author that reads, “To P.R. Brinton I give my first effort with much love, S.B. Dec. 1912”

³⁵ Sybil G. Brinton, *Old Friends and New Fancies: An Imaginary Sequel to the Novels of Jane Austen* (London: Holden & Hardingham, 1913), back cover.

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Bennet (P&P) and James Morland (*Northanger Abbey*) (with a background romance between Tom Bertram of *Mansfield Park* and Isabella Thorpe of *Northanger Abbey* as a kind of humorous bonus). Although characters from each of Austen's works do appear, they are by no means spread evenly across all six novels. Fourteen of the characters come from P&P, seven from *Mansfield Park* (and neither Fanny Price nor Edmund Bertram are so much as mentioned by name), five from *Northanger Abbey*, seven from *Sense and Sensibility*, four from *Persuasion*, and only two from *Emma*. When those numbers are considered in tandem with the fact that one half of each of the main couples is a character from P&P, it becomes fairly clear that, although Brinton really did want to include all six of Austen's novels, P&P was not only her probable favorite, but her main focus as well.

Though Austen and her characters are clearly the focus of the novel's contents, they are not the focus of the book's marketing and presentation. The cover of a first edition copy of *Old Friends and New Fancies* contains no mention whatsoever of Jane Austen, but simply displays the title, author's name, and publisher's logo. This may be due to the practice of books being issued with dust jackets, which increased in fashion and frequency during the late 19th and early 20th century. The Victoria and Albert Museum's website says that "By the 1920s it had become common practice for publishers to issue their books with illustrated dust jackets. The function of the dust jacket had changed from providing protection [for rare materials such as leather or silk used to bind expensive books] to being an important promotional tool."³⁶ It is therefore likely that there was a dust jacket designed for the first edition, and that it has been lost over the course of the century between its publication and now. However, it is still

³⁶ "The History of the Dust Jacket." Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2016. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-of-the-dust-jacket/>

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remarkable that no mention of Austen whatsoever should appear on the cover itself.

Today, in any Austen-inspired book, her name is touted as loudly and often as possible.

Austen has become a brand. Clearly, this was not the case in 1913.

The lack of Austen-branding when Brinton's book was published is also apparent when one examines the advertisements at the back of the book, all of which are for books published by Holden & Hardingham, the publishers of *Old Friends and New Fancies*.

Take, for example, the ad for *Fairy Gold* by Kathlyn Rhodes, which describes the romantic plot in detail, ending by saying, "The story ends happily, though in an unexpected manner."³⁷ This is quickly followed by an ad for *St. Lô: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, which deals with love, betrayal, and politics in the courts of Louis XI of France and Archduke Maximilian of Flanders. Some novels are simply described as being similar to previous works by the same author: "There is sure to be a big demand for a novel of the nature of "Gloria," by an authoress of such great expertise in South African life as Charlotte Mansfield."³⁸ They're all ads for novels of a romantic nature – indeed, the word "romance" is used as a descriptor for several of the books advertised.

The most interesting fact to be gleaned from the general nature of books in this advertisement section is the audience for whom Brinton's Austen-inspired novel was intended. There was no market specifically designed for Austen devotees, so instead the book is marketed more widely to lovers of all romance novels. That Brinton's book is aimed at the same audience as all the books advertised here is made especially clear by the fact that Brinton's novel is itself advertised (although it is erroneously marketed as

³⁷ "Kathlyn Rhodes' *Fairy Gold*." *Old Friends and New Fancies*, 1913: ad supplement, 3.

³⁸ "Charlotte Mansfield's *Gloria: A South African Girl*." *Old Friends and New Fancies*, 1913: ad supplement, 5.

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Old Friends and New Faces, which the owner of this copy, possibly Brinton herself, has corrected in pen, so the advertisement now reads *Old Friends and New Fancies*). The book is styled as “A Novel of the type of Jane Austen.”³⁹

Here we find the long-awaited marketing reference to Austen (whose name does, thankfully, appear on the title page of the novel, which proclaims it to be “An imaginary sequel to the novels of Jane Austen”⁴⁰). But her name isn’t touted the way it so often is today – the line is remarkably similar to how the next advertised book is described:

“Admirers of the late Allen Raine’s works will appreciate this Novel.”⁴¹ The reference to another author isn’t exclusive to Austen, although she is the only such author referenced to have quite so close a relationship to the text being advertised with her name. She’s referenced, as she must be, but the meat of the selling-points are that “several love affairs are interwoven, and the scenes of the novel are laid in Bath, London and Derbyshire.”⁴² The book is marketed as a romance, and with other romances, not as a part of an Austen brand – because there *was* no Austen brand.

This is markedly different from the state of affairs today. The following quote spoken by Melodie Gladstone, fictional author of the fictional book *Waiting for Mr.*

Darcy, in *Jane Bites Back*:

“‘It’s a fucking nightmare...Every night it’s the same thing. ‘Don’t have sex until you’ve found the right one. Keep yourself pure. Wear this stupid locket and one day your prince will come.’ What a load of crap. But they eat it up...It’s my piece of the Austen pie...Everyone’s in on it. You’ve seen the books. Austen is all the rage. You put her name on anything and it will sell.’”⁴³

³⁹ “Sybil Brinton’s *Old Friends...*”: ad supplement, 7.

⁴⁰ Brinton, title page.

⁴¹ “Edith C. Kenyon’s *The Wooing of Mifawny*.” *Old Friends and New Fancies*, 1913: ad supplement, 7.

⁴² “Sybil Brinton’s *Old Friends...*”: ad supplement, 7.

⁴³ Ford, 8-9.

Ford's novel follows a 200-plus year old vampire Jane Austen, now the owner of a bookstore in upstate New York, as she deals with the Austen pop-culture craze. Her response to it all, and to Melodie in particular, is annoyance: "[Melodie Glatstone] was vile, an opportunist who was using *her* name to make her fortune. *Meanwhile, I haven't seen a royalty check in almost two hundred years*, [Jane] thought"⁴⁴. No one can really blame Jane for that reaction – she makes no money from the shameless commodification of her novels and biography, and who would want to sell puppet dolls and action figures of herself at their own bookstore?⁴⁵

Jane Bites Back's plot is convoluted and at times downright silly. For example, near the end of the novel Charlotte Brontë, also a vampire, is holding Jane Austen, her boyfriend Walter, her publisher Kelly, and her assistant Lucy captive in Jane's bookstore when vampire Lord Byron bursts in to save the day, only to be yelled at by Walter (who wants him to leave Jane alone), punched in the face by Kelly (because Byron has been sleeping with his boyfriend Bryce), and of course viciously attacked by Charlotte, who behaves uncannily like the character Bertha Mason from her novel *Jane Eyre*. Yet the book as a whole sheds interesting light on the links between the Austen fanfiction craze and the publishing industry. It is something of a "meta" commentary on the subject, because the book itself participates in the phenomenon it criticizes. By setting Jane Austen up as the protagonist, Ford lends his observations on the craze an air of credibility that almost any other Austen fanfiction lacks. We as readers get to identify with Austen and her (mostly human) friends, and feel superior to people like Melodie Gladstone and

⁴⁴ Ford, 9.

⁴⁵ Ford, 9.

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the slightly nutty readers who show up for her book signing in full Regency garb. Ford tries very hard to make it clear that *his* book is different: at one point Lucy, Jane Austen's assistant at the bookstore (who does not yet know Jane's status as a vampire or her true identity) says, "...if you ask me, [Austen's novels are] not about finding Mr. Darcy at all: they're about young women breaking convention and going after what they want," to which Austen silently replies, "She gets it".⁴⁶ There are bits like this throughout the novel – everyone else, Ford is telling us, is out to make a quick buck, but *he* really gets Jane Austen. He knows what it's about – because he's not just a crazy female fan.

While Austen is the main character and Lucy is prominently featured as a woman who "gets" Austen, all the other characters who are allowed to display understanding of and "true" appreciation for Austen's novels are men: Lord Byron, Walter, Kelly, even the makeup artist for a talk show Jane is a guest on. The makeup artist goes so far as to say that *Mansfield Park* is his favorite novel, a clear example of Ford trying to curry favor with those who consider themselves "true" Austen fans – the Jane narrator herself notes early on in the novel that no one in the Melodie Gladstone crowd seemed to really like *Mansfield Park*, probably because they find Fanny Price boring. Yet Ford allows a man to say, "*Mansfield Park* has more, I don't know, depth to it. Fanny's a real person, you know? She basically can't do anything right."⁴⁷ Ford puts male admirers on a completely different plane than the majority of the female fans, who fall so easily for Melodie Gladstone's moneymaking ploy. Within the novel, mocking the Austen craze serves to condemn the general female fan, while distinguishing females who "get" Austen as being superior to, and removed from, the rest of their gender.

⁴⁶ Ford, 10.

⁴⁷ Ford, 201.

This marking of “worthy” females as somehow better than the majority of their gender is an unfortunate pattern among published Austen fanfiction. In Pamela Aidan’s *An Assembly Such As This*, the first book in a trilogy that is *Pride and Prejudice* rewritten from Mr. Darcy’s point of view, we see this idea exemplified. By taking up the perspective of Mr. Darcy, Aidan returns the cultural focus to the male space, and asks us to sympathize with the problems of people who can, in many senses, be viewed as the oppressor, or at the very least, the most privileged members of the society under examination. Darcy is painted as an extremely sympathetic character from the very beginning of the trilogy’s first novel. He is kind to servants and the lower classes, caring towards his sister, and his snobbery and lack of social grace, so much emphasized in the original novel, are undermined by moments of camaraderie with members of the Hertfordshire community. This last in particular would have gained him some sympathy in the public eye, and prevented Wickham’s malicious rumors from being fully credited. For example, in chapter four, Darcy and the Bingley siblings attend a party at the home of Squire Justin, a Meryton resident created by Aidan. The exchange between Darcy and the squire includes the latter jokingly offering to buy Darcy’s hound, which he proclaims a “wonder” who “present[s] you with your trophy, [...] gathers wood for a fire, unpacks your hunt bag, and prepares the game in the Italian style for your dinner!”⁴⁸ Darcy responds in kind, with “I regret to say that the Italian style is quite beyond [the hound’s] capabilities, but as the hound insists on putting garlic in everything, your...mistake is understandable,” to which the squire responds with a “roar” of laughter, and says, “Well

⁴⁸ Pamela Aidan, *An Assembly Such As This* (New York: Touchstone, 2006), 46.

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done, Mr. Darcy! I see more goes on in that brain-box than your face betrays.”⁴⁹ Darcy proves here that he can engage socially, even with people he believes to be his inferiors. This seriously undermines Elizabeth Bennet’s role in his growth in *Pride and Prejudice*. By making Darcy’s initial character closely resemble what it is at the end of the original novel, Aidan takes away much of Elizabeth’s power, and makes her just an object of Darcy’s desire, rather than an active agent in his bettering.

Darcy also possesses a remarkable degree of self-knowledge in the first book, which covers only from the opening of the original novel to Christmas, immediately after Darcy and the Bingleys have removed from Netherfield. (This is roughly when the Gardiners make their first appearance in P&P.) In Aidan’s retelling, Darcy is able to question his motives in separating Bingley from Jane Bennet while still taking steps to bring the event about. He asks himself, “How much of his interest was directed solely toward Bingley’s good? Was it nearer to the truth that separating Charles from Miss Jane Bennet was his surest defense against the confliction [sic] raised by his own heedless attraction to her sister?”⁵⁰ This is very early on for Darcy to be aware of the complicated nature of his motives, and contradicts what he asserts to Elizabeth in the original novel, that he has no regrets about separating Bingley from Jane. It’s possible to read that later assertion as covering up his insecurity about the decision, but even if this is so, Aidan’s move takes away from Elizabeth’s power as a reforming force on him.

Aidan’s novel could be read as exploring female desire by fleshing out the male object of that desire. While this novel does create an ideal object for feminine desire, it is not by pulling that object into a female realm, but rather by rendering in more detail the

⁴⁹ Aidan, *An Assembly...*,47.

⁵⁰ Aidan, *An Assembly...*,244.

male realm and emphasizing Mr. Darcy's masculinity. He is described as a caring brother, who "...chose three lengths of silk and two of muslin" as Christmas gifts for his sister – but Aidan is careful to add that he does this "With the modiste's guidance,"⁵¹ as a reminder that Mr. Darcy is too manly to choose fabric by himself. Additionally, Aidan uses the previously mentioned trope of the heroine as special and good *because she is different from other women*. Late in the novel, Darcy has been contemplating both his attraction to Elizabeth Bennet and his desire for the companionship that commonly comes with marriage, when he thinks "But the reality of spending his life and entrusting his people to one of the frail minds and hardened natures behind the pretty faces...succeeded in convincing him of the folly of trading his happiness for his comfort."⁵² The only way to make Elizabeth worthy of Darcy's affection is to disassociate her with her gender, which increases her value, but at the expense of the value of women in general.

One could argue that Mr. Darcy's dismissive attitude towards women, and his seeing Elizabeth as the exception, is the very thing that needs to be reformed in order for him to be worthy of Elizabeth at the end of the novel. This would give back some of Elizabeth's power within their story, and it would make the derogatory comments about women as a group less offensive, because the point of them was to be eventually rebutted. It's a nice thought, but by looking at the third and final book in Aidan's *Mr. Darcy, Gentleman* series, it is shown to be false. This book, titled *These Three Remain*, encompasses perhaps the largest span of the original novel. The second book, *Duty and Desire* covers only the time that Mr. Darcy remains "off-page" (as it were) during the original novel, and is therefore filled with events and characters almost entirely of

⁵¹ Aidan, *An Assembly...*, 241.

⁵² Aidan, *An Assembly...*, 244.

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Aidan's own creation. *These Three Remain* picks up with Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam on the road to Rosings Park, where they encounter Elizabeth, and Mr. Darcy will make his disastrous first proposal. The book then continues through to the marriage of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. It covers the time during which Mr. Darcy undergoes his mental and emotional transformation, or reform, and realizes how wrong he has been. Yet the pattern of distancing Elizabeth from all other women, and privileging her as inherently better than the rest of her gender, continues. If anything, it grows more pronounced. Aidan seems to be trying to emphasize Mr. Darcy's growth by showing us his increasing appreciation of and value for Elizabeth, but she does so at the expense of every other woman Mr. Darcy may encounter (except, of course, for his sister – but Mr. Darcy thinks even she could use the influence of Elizabeth Bennet to reach her full potential). Early in the book, before his “reformation” has taken place, Darcy muses that it's only natural for his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam to be charmed by Elizabeth. “It was inevitable, he conceded. Elizabeth did not simper, nor did she exude the fashionable *ennui* that one encountered in most females of the ton.⁵³ No, her charm had a substance about it, a directness that a *man* could quickly appreciate with his mind as well as his sense”⁵⁴ (my emphasis). Colonel Fitzwilliam is charmed by Elizabeth because he is an intelligent gentleman, just as Darcy is, and Darcy assumes that it's because Elizabeth is markedly different from most other women. He's right. Before Darcy decides to propose to Elizabeth at Hunsford, he seeks to discover what the Colonel thinks is attractive about Elizabeth, and if he thinks she would fit in well with their level of society. In describing why he is “enchanted” by Miss Bennet, Colonel Fitzwilliam says,

⁵³ A term for London high society

⁵⁴ Aidan, Pamela. *These Three Remain* (New York: Touchstone, 2007), 56.

“...[L]et me assure you that Miss Bennet is something out of the ordinary. Of course, she is lovely to look upon. Her modest style, in contrast to the expensive drapery we are accustomed to, only enhances her person. Oh, she lacks a bit of Town bronze for having been immersed in the country. She cannot speak of all the little inconsequentialities attendant upon life in London, nor take part in the latest *on-dits*, but that is part of her charm. Those things compose the greater part of the conversation, so called, of most young ladies of our acquaintance. It is such a pleasure to converse with a woman of honest opinion on interesting subjects and to come away feeling still that you have been well entertained.”⁵⁵

It could be assumed, before this assessment, that it is Darcy’s arrogance that makes him mark Elizabeth Bennet as different from other females, and that what he has to learn is to look past gender and find the worth in all people, even if Elizabeth is the only woman he can love. This is clearly not the case. The amiable Colonel Fitzwilliam, whose behavior towards Elizabeth in the original novel is presented as the opposite of Darcy’s, and perhaps what Darcy’s ought to have been – pleasant, engaging, gentlemanly, courteous – still distinguishes Elizabeth as “other” than the rest of her gender, and inherently better for *not* being like them. Darcy’s judgement of her, therefore, is not out of the norm for men in his society.

If a reader is holding out hope that Darcy, as the hero, is supposed to rise above even the perfectly pleasant Colonel Fitzwilliam’s judgement and become a superior man who recognizes the rest of Elizabeth’s gender doesn’t need to be denigrated in order to make her appear better, that hope would be in vain. After she has rejected him, he muses that “She was so different from every other female he had ever met, and he had found her irresistibly enchanting.”⁵⁶ The source of that enchantment is the fact that she’s different. Aidan doesn’t even bother to go into further detail on what those differences are, or why

⁵⁵ Aidan, *These Three Remain*, 99-100.

⁵⁶ Aidan, *These Three Remain*, 127.

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they are beneficial – simply the mention of them is enough to establish Elizabeth as worthy of Darcy’s love.

This continues to be stressed even later, when Elizabeth and Darcy run into each other in Derbyshire. Here, he takes the opportunity to show her how much he’s changed, and how he has taken her criticisms of him to heart. Yet still, as he contemplates proposing to Elizabeth a second time, he thinks about it in terms of her distinction from the rest of her gender. “Elizabeth [was]...the woman who had...refused the offer of his hand and the prestige of Pemberley. He could make the same proposal to Caroline Bingley or nearly any other woman in England and be assured of success. Yet here he was, setting out to pursue the one exception...perhaps for that very reason.”⁵⁷ First, Darcy links more or less all the women in England with Caroline Bingley, who is perhaps the most distasteful of all the female figures in *Pride and Prejudice*, because her bad behavior comes from malice and spite rather than pride, like Lady Catherine’s, or ignorance and unenlightened selfishness, like Lydia’s. This is an important indicator of his opinion of women in general. Darcy is aware of this, and he realizes that he is pursuing Elizabeth *because* she is the exception. Essentially, the message that Mr. Darcy’s perspective (or Aidan’s version of it) perpetuates, is that you have to be different from, you have to be better than, every other woman, if you hope to attract an extraordinary man like Mr. Darcy. If you’re not, you’ll end up disappointed. When this is combined with the analysis of *An Assembly Such As This*, it is clear that Aidan’s trilogy is an excellent example of how those involved or invested in the status quo have reacted to

⁵⁷ Aidan, *These Three Remain*, 308.

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Austen fanfiction: they use the genre to subtly (or not so subtly) denigrate women instead of celebrating them and their desires, as one might think fanfiction is intended to do.

Of course, a reader of P&P could note that there are moments in the original novel where Elizabeth seems to be distinguished as being “other” from the rest of the women in the world. This is undeniably true. Elizabeth is described as being *different* from other women; but she’s never described as being *above* other women. There is a huge distinction that must be made between “different” and “better.” The conversation at Netherfield about accomplished women, for example, could be seen as Elizabeth doing what Miss Bingley suggests she is doing, by being “...one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own.”⁵⁸ It’s true – Elizabeth does say that “I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe united.”⁵⁹ But this isn’t a *devaluing* of women. It’s pointing out that Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley expect far too much from a woman. Women are not perfect, elegant creatures, but (as Elizabeth later puts it) “rational creature[s]” who “[speak] the truth from [their] heart[s].”⁶⁰ Women are allowed to be human, and humans have variety.

It is clear in P&P that, at the very least, Mr. Darcy thinks Elizabeth is superior to all the other women he’s met. This is a view similar to those expressed by Aidan’s Darcy in *An Assembly Such As This* and *These Three Remain*, but there is a key difference in how Austen and Aidan present this opinion. In P&P, Darcy thinks Elizabeth is the most amazing woman ever, true, but in Aidan’s novels, Darcy thinks she’s amazing *because*

⁵⁸ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin, 2003), 40.

⁵⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 39

⁶⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 106

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she's not terrible like all other women. We all think the person we love is different from, or better than, everyone else. If we didn't think that, we probably wouldn't love them. It's not that Elizabeth is inherently better than all women, but that she's a better match *for Darcy*. It's made particularly clear that Austen believes this by her depictions of other women in P&P who are equally as good, if differently so, as Elizabeth Bennet. Jane Bennet is the first example that comes to mind. She is described by her sister as "a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in your life."⁶¹ She adds to this by wondering, "With *your* good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others!...[T]o be candid without ostentation or design—to take the good of everybody's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad—belongs to you alone."⁶² Jane is described as a completely good person here. Indeed, if "good" is defined as "virtuous, right, commendable,"⁶³ Jane is far better than Elizabeth. But a reader knows that to Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth is still better. Elizabeth challenges Darcy; Jane would bore him. This isn't because she's a worse person, but simply a worse match for Darcy. When Mr. Bingley is the man in question, Jane becomes the perfect woman.

Austen's versions of good women don't stop with the two eldest Bennet sisters. Charlotte Lucas may not be viewed favorably by Elizabeth for choosing to marry Mr. Collins, but she is undoubtedly a good woman. When Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are unexpectedly alone together in the Hunsford sitting room for the first time, Darcy

⁶¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 16.

⁶² Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 16-17.

⁶³ "Good." Def. 2a. *Merriam-Webster*. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/good>

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comments that “Mr. Collins appears to be very fortunate in his choice of wife,” to which Elizabeth replies, “Yes, indeed; his friends may well rejoice in his having met with one of the very few sensible women who would have accepted him, or have made him happy if they had. My friend has an excellent understanding.”⁶⁴ Charlotte may not have made the most romantically pleasing choice, but she made a sensible choice, and she is given credit for it. Although she’s not in love with Mr. Collins, she is right for him – she makes him happy, and his situation in life makes her happy. It’s not as evenly-matched a marriage as Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, or Jane and Mr. Bingley, but it’s a good match in many ways.

This is just a sampling of the good women in P&P – if the view was expanded to Austen’s other five novels, the number of women who are presented in a positive light grows even more. There’s no doubt that there is always a woman who is *the best match* for a particular man, but it’s not an objective distinction, as published Austen fanfiction would have us believe.

The disdain for the average woman is a slightly morphed version of the disdain for the average participant in the Austen craze that was seen in Ford’s *Jane Bites Back*. Though one trend denigrates fictional female women and the other ridicules a real group of women, they both seek to belittle spaces designed solely for women, and to make female pleasure an unimportant consideration. This denigration of women has become so intrinsically linked with fanfiction that it’s starting to influence how the publishing industry markets its own Austen spinoffs – rather than calling attention to the fanfiction aspect, they actively push it aside. In my interview with Curtis Sittenfeld, I asked what

⁶⁴ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 174.

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the main differences were between her project of rewriting *Pride and Prejudice* and the average Austen fanfiction project. Sittenfeld stated that she actually included the descriptor “fanfiction” in the original jacket flap copy for her book. Her publishers, however, removed the word. According to Sittenfeld, they were worried that using it would be “selling the book short,” and that it could “be a dealbreaker for many readers.”⁶⁵ It is important to note that the publishers came up with the idea for the Austen Project, and that they approached all the authors about participating (other authors include Alexander McCall Smith, Val McDermid, and Joanna Trollope). The publishers are clearly not averse to making money off the Austen phenomenon by putting her name on their products, but they will not actively associate said products with the world of fanfiction – despite Sittenfeld’s opinion that the only real difference between her project of rewriting *Pride and Prejudice* and the average Austen fanfiction project is that she is a professional writer who was paid for her efforts.

While there is nothing explicitly gendered in Sittenfeld’s account of her publishers’ actions, its resistance to the specific term “fanfiction” can certainly be read in a gendered way. In her article “In the Regency Alternate Universe: Jane Austen and Fanfiction Culture,” Alexandra Edwards performs a focused analysis of Austen-inspired “Regency AU” (alternate universe) fanfiction. Edwards defines the term as a “...framework for a romantic story between two characters from a very different type of story” that attempts to “...find the boundaries that the source material,” both Austen and

⁶⁵ Curtis Sittenfeld. Telephone interview. 04 Oct. 2015.

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other, “couldn’t break, and break them.”⁶⁶ Her main example is a story called “Sif & Sensibility” by fanfiction author newredshoes, which is a combination of Austen plot and societal rules with the Asgardian world (derived from Norse mythology) depicted in the recent Marvel movies *Thor* and *Thor: The Dark World*. She ultimately concludes that “...fanfiction writers critique the normative view of heterosexual relationships at the time when P&P is set; at the same time, they draw attention to those views in contemporary society.”⁶⁷

This view of fanfiction as a potentially culturally revolutionary force is echoed by Anne Jamison in her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. Jamison argues that “...fic provides a venue for all kinds of writers who are shut out from official culture.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, Jamison believes, one of the common goals of fanfiction is to create a space for writers who don’t often get the chance to be widely known in the established ways. There is an implicit gendered tinge here: as Jamison notes, “...it’s important that in fanfiction, women are running the show. Where else is that true?...[T]here’s a lot of variously talented women we haven’t been hearing from. A great many of these women are writing fic.”⁶⁹ This gendering is taken a few steps farther in Austen fanfiction, not only because the majority of the Austen fan-base is female, but also because gender is so important to what Austen writes about in her novels. In her chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, titled simply “Gender,” E.J. Clery points out Austen’s focus on “Gender as social artifice...” and states that “Chapter I of

⁶⁶ Alexandra Edwards, “In the Regency Alternate Universe: Jane Austen and Fanfiction Culture.” In *Jane Austen: Fan Phenomena*, ed. Gabrielle Malcolm. (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2015), 11.

⁶⁷ Edwards, 14.

⁶⁸ Jamison, 19.

⁶⁹ Jamison, 19.

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Northanger Abbey [is] a comic anticipation of Simone de Beauvoir's aphorism: 'One is not born a woman, one becomes one.'⁷⁰ We see Catherine Morland "...equipping herself with the superficial literary education and the techniques of personal grooming that constitute gender identity among the adolescent girls of the propertied classes," and we see Austen's prose poking fun at this socially proscribed transformation.⁷¹ Clery argues for Austen's "...pioneering role as a critical thinker on gender," but points out that "Austen is associated in the present-day imagination with normative ideas of gender difference and heterosexual romance updated for 'postfeminist' times."⁷²

If we combine these various views, we get a sort of theory of how Austen fanfiction can function: there is fanfiction that follows Jamison's ideas of these online communities as a safe space for those outside of the establishment, and Edwards' idea of it as pointing out themes in Austen that are relevant in today's society. On the other hand, there are the stories (often found in bookstores rather than online) which take the "Austen [who] has been repackaged as the mother of 'chick lit'" that Clery describes, and function within the "...normative ideas of gender difference and heterosexual romance"⁷³ she references. We have seen the truth of this second theory in *An Assembly Such As This* and *Jane Bites Back*, which wholeheartedly embrace these norms or see the divide and openly mock it *by participating in it*, respectively.

⁷⁰ E.J. Clery, "Gender." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen, Second Edition*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 159-161.

⁷¹ Clery, 159.

⁷² Clery, 161.

⁷³ Clery, 161-162.

CHAPTER TWO – Online Austen Fanfiction: Epilogue Abbey

Published fanfiction clearly goes nowhere towards proving Edwards and Jamison’s theories that Austen fanfiction can be progressive and inclusive. If they are to be proved correct, it must be through online Austen fanfiction. That world, though, is only able to exist because the internet exists. With the advent of the online world, the nature of fanfiction changed radically. Ann Jamison has addressed this extensively in her 2013 book *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*. She opens the chapter titled “The *X-Files*, *Buffy*, and the Rise of the Internet Fic Fandoms” by pointing out that, “With the rise of personal computing in the 1980s and of the internet in the 1990s, fanfiction increasingly has been electronically produced and digitally distributed...[O]ne tremendous effect of these changes has remained: speed. Communities, conflicts, and conventions form faster than ever before—probably by orders of magnitude.”⁷⁴ In addition, it’s clear that “...the internet brought anonymity. No more mailing addresses or phone numbers were needed to receive fandom news...Fanfiction became free, open, public.”⁷⁵ The internet changed what it meant to be a fanfiction writer, and what it meant to be the member of a fanfiction community. It was a large factor in changing the historical writing communities examined in the first chapter into the modern phenomenon of “fandom” *communities*, which is particularly exemplified by the Derbyshire Writer’s Guild third message board known as “A Novel Idea.” ANI, as it’s referred to, is a space inside the DWG website devoted to non-Austen-based stories by DWG authors. It is theoretically open to anyone who wishes to post there, but the only way to get to ANI is

⁷⁴ Jamison, 112.

⁷⁵ Jamison, 112.

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through the larger DWG site, so it ends up being mostly, if not entirely, dominated by DWG authors. The fact that such a board exists is strong evidence for the idea that the DWG functions as a supportive writing community for a mainly female group. This site was founded to be a space for Jane Austen-related stories, and yet it has a message board and section of its archive devoted entirely to *non-Austen* related stories. The oldest story in the ANI archives was posted in January of 2000, nearly three years after the first DWG stories were posted in February of 1997. By then, the DWG had established a sense of community and supportive camaraderie among its authors and readers, which naturally led to the creation of ANI – they found much more support in the DWG community than elsewhere, so the readers and authors, instead of seeking other communities for non-Austen writing, simply transplanted that community into a non-Austen forum. Austen was the original attraction to the DWG for most, if not all, readers, but for at least some, eventually the community became equally important.

The publishing world is radically different today from what it was in the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet female authors are still fighting for recognition and appreciation, particularly when they write for female audiences, as most romance authors do. It's not a fight against absolute exclusion from the publishing world, but against significant disadvantages. In a 2011 article from *The Guardian*, Benedicte Page quotes a study “compiled by Vida, an American organization for women in the literary arts” that “found gender imbalances in every one of the publications cited, including the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New York Review of Books*.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶Benedicte Page, “Research Shows Male Writers Still Dominate Book World.” *The Guardian*. *Guardian News*, 4 Feb. 2011. Web. 9 Jan. 2016.

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According to this study, of authors reviewed by the New York Review of Books, “83% are men...and the same statistic is true of reviewers. [...] The New York Times Book Review fares better, with only 60% of reviewers men...Of the authors with books reviewed, 65% were by men.”⁷⁷ Though women reading is no longer a revolutionary social idea, and there isn’t the same “...deeply entrenched cultural hostility to female learning,”⁷⁸ there is still a real, visible bias and divide in the world of professional writing.

A different kind of hostility and prejudice can be found in Noah Berlatsky’s article on The Guardian website from January 2016 titled “Why Books Like *Fifty Shades of Grey* Are Worthy of Study.” Berlatsky details a recent scandal in Missouri, where “over 100 legislators have called for assistant professor of journalism Melissa Click to be fired.”⁷⁹ The official reason for these calls is a video of an exchange between Click and a student in which Click tells the student to stop photographing a specific protest, followed by “some jostling and shoving, which the legislators characterize as ‘inappropriate and criminal actions.’ They say it’s an assault on free speech.”⁸⁰ Berlatsky’s problem with this argument, however, is that legislators also attempt to use the fact that their “constituents have expressed outrage at the fact that [Click] is using taxpayer dollars to conduct research on *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Lady Gaga, and *Twilight*” as reasons she

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/04/research-male-writers-dominate-books-world>

⁷⁷ Page, “Research Shows....”

⁷⁸ Towsey, 23.

⁷⁹ Noah Berlatsky. “Why Books Like *Fifty Shades of Grey* Are Worthy of Study.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News, 8 Jan. 2016. Web. 10 Jan. 2016.

http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/08/why-books-like-fifty-shades-of-grey-are-worthy-of-study?CMP=fb_gu

⁸⁰ Berlatsky.

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should be fired— in response to which Berlatsky quips, “Free speech means only researching things that the government approves of, apparently.”⁸¹ The commotion around Click’s research into popular culture comes from a belief that these are lower art forms that don’t deserve study, which in turn comes from a very specific, gendered place. Berlatsky points out that humanities are an easy target for conservative politicians who wish to cut funds, because they can easily be called useless. Eric Selinger, a professor of English at DePaul University, “point[s] out that... Within the humanities, popular culture is seen as especially unimportant” – and then: “Within popular culture, popular romance is a particularly tempting target because it has to do with women, it has to do with sex. It’s long been seen as a fairly trivial cultural enterprise.”⁸² Even when these areas *are* studied, there is strong *backlash* against the study (and through study, validation) of such genres. Berlatsky points out that “Anything associated with women’s pleasures, aesthetic or sexual, has long generated anxiety and scandalous murmurs.”⁸³ It’s not that these books are *bad*. It’s that, as romance novelist Maya Rodale says, “Romance fiction [and other fiction geared towards women] relentlessly declares that women are worthy and their interests are valid and it is worth it for them to pursue their own happiness.”⁸⁴ Romance novels, like Austen fanfiction, are *by* and *for* women. The mainstream media and culture can’t handle so much validation of women’s intellectual life and pursuit of pleasure, so they put the genres down. This is a new tactic for an old goal: keeping the world of literature and serious thought for the male portion of the population. Just as the incredibly imbalanced gender ratios in terms of authors and reviewers in publications like

⁸¹ Berlatsky.

⁸² Berlatsky.

⁸³ Berlatsky.

⁸⁴ Berlatsky.

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the New York Times Book Review and the London Review of Books is a way to bring male authors to the forefront at the expense of female authors, the belittling of such mainly female genres as romance and fanfiction serves as a way to devalue female contributions to modern literature. Meanwhile, the fears built into society regarding female pleasure and pursuit of intellectual pastimes or careers help keep those contributions from being too plentiful in the first place. It's a contemporary version of the same old historical phenomenon, and even though its nuances are different (i.e. belittling versus total exclusion), the two phenomena ultimately function in the same way. Given this hostility, it's no wonder that women seek more insulated, supportive, female-based communities for their writing.

This community is found, at least by Austen enthusiasts, on online Austen fanfiction websites. The stories examined below are exclusively *Pride and Prejudice*-based stories posted on the DWG. Stories on this site are divided into two categories: Epilogue Abbey (Regency) and Fantasia Gallery (non-Regency). Both categories have far more P&P-based stories than stories inspired by all the other five novels combined. And yet, despite this overlap in the popularity of P&P, the Fantasia Gallery and Epilogue Abbey have vastly different projects. The Fantasia Gallery stories shift Austen's original story to a new setting, while for the most part focusing on the same themes and ideas found in P&P. The project of Fantasia Gallery stories will be explored in-depth in Chapter Three. For now, our focus lies on Epilogue Abbey stories, which are rewrites or extensions of existing Austen novels, usually with the same characters (and occasionally a few new characters added to the mix).

A large part of what seems to inspire Epilogue Abbey fanfiction is a desire to play in the world Austen has created, because these readers have “a sense of nostalgia for a time they have only experienced through fiction.”⁸⁵ Readers and authors get to engage in a fantasy of living in Austen’s world – not the real Regency era, but an idealized version in which everything always ends happily, and no one has to worry about bad hygiene, or any kind of bodily functions. This is why much Epilogue Abbey fanfiction takes the form of fantasy or wish fulfillment. Take, for example, Noell S.’s story *All That This Entails*, posted between August 2006 and August 2008. Through a complicated family backstory, halfway through the original plot of P&P, it transpires that Mr. Bennet has inherited a dukedom, and the substantial fortune that goes with it. It’s as if the author thought, “What’s the one thing about Elizabeth Bennet’s situation that I don’t like?” and then sought to rectify the perceived error.

Longbourn is worth roughly £2,000 per year; Mr. Bingley is rumored to have £5,000 per year; and Mr. Darcy’s income is around £10,000 per year. By comparison, the Bennet family’s new income is a total of £300,000 per year – that’s *thirty times* as much money as Mr. Darcy, the most fabulously wealthy character in P&P, gets per year. Each of the girls now has a dowry of £60,000. Essentially, Noell S. is making Darcy and Bingley look almost *poor* in comparison to the Bennets; and by making the Bennets both rich *and* members of the nobility, this story serves as the author and readers’ fantasy of what it might be like to be an Elizabeth Bennet who really has everything. This is a sort of “Mary Sue”-like fantasy – “Mary Sue” being a derogatory term used to criticize a fanfiction author’s original character inserted into a fanfiction who is clearly meant to be

⁸⁵Brandy Foster. “Pimp My Austen: The Commodification and Customization of Jane Austen.” *Persuasions* 29.1 (2008). www.jasna.org. Web. 23 Feb. 2015. 2.

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an idealized version of the author. To many people, it represents everything that's wrong with fanfiction: poor writing, self-indulgent storylines, and ridiculous fantasies. In P&P fanfiction, we don't have versions of the author inserted into the story. Instead, Elizabeth Bennet becomes idealized, and the author and reader are very clearly supposed to identify with her, or even become a version of her. Elizabeth Bennet is one of the characters in English literature young girls and women most often relate to, or *wish* they could relate to. By playing on and amplifying this trend, Elizabeth becomes a form of the Mary Sue, and the readers' and author's desires for romantic wish fulfillment are played out in their most straightforward terms.

A slightly different form of wish fulfillment is exhibited in Alicia M.'s story *An Unlikely Friendship*, which was posted between April 2002 and February 2003. In this story, Mr. Wickham is turned into an incredibly nice guy, who remained close friends with Mr. Darcy as they grew up. The two are thus delighted when they run into each other in Meryton. This allows many difficulties to be smoothed away much faster than they are in the original novel. Mr. Darcy's real character is unfolded to Elizabeth by Wickham, so her prejudices are softened earlier on, and Wickham is able to use his own, more impartial observations to convince Darcy not to interfere with the relationship between Jane and Mr. Bingley. This in itself is a kind of wish fulfillment: the characters have a much easier road to happiness than they do in P&P. The most interesting form of wish fulfillment comes, however, in the form of Mr. Wickham himself, in his reimaged state. He is a sort of love-interest version of the Mary Sue, with his original character functioning as a structure the same way that Elizabeth's does: Wickham becomes exactly the sort of man the author imagines she herself would like to be with. By making him a

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completely different person, the author can play out her romantic fantasies with the love story between Elizabeth Bennet (the woman these readers and authors perhaps want to be) and Mr. Darcy (who is too defined in the original novel to become a loosely imagined fantasy), but also with the romance that takes place between the reformed Wickham and Charlotte Lucas. Here is an interesting comment on the different types of fantasy: many women want to idealize Elizabeth Bennet because she's the kind of woman they want to be, or at least be perceived as: witty, clever, charming, beautiful, and (perhaps most importantly) able to bewitch a man without even realizing it. Charlotte Lucas, on the other hand, is the character many more women may be forced to see themselves as: low self-esteem, practicality, common sense, and not particularly attractive. This is not to say that readers of Austen fanfiction are on the whole a physically unattractive group. It would be impossible to know that. Rather, in today's society, most women have deeply ingrained in them a belief that they are not beautiful *enough*, or not the right *kind* of beautiful. Teenaged girls in particular are socialized to have very low self-esteem, and this ends up manifesting itself in body image problems as well as lack of confidence in one's personality. Charlotte Lucas is the "everywoman" in this sense, much more than Elizabeth Bennet. By giving Charlotte a fulfilling romance with an idealized man, Alicia M. is indulging in the fantasy that the plainer, less interesting women *can* get the guy.

At first glance, this object of wish fulfillment could seem to mirror Austen's goals. Certainly the romantic gratification inherent in the ending of P&P makes readers happy, and it fulfills their desire to see the characters' lives come out right. But Austen provides this catharsis with a push to examine and question it. At the end of P&P, while we feel that Darcy and Elizabeth deserve each other on a personal level, we are also

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extremely aware of the social reality in which they're entangled. Their marriage is not viewed favorably by everyone. The most notable example of this is Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though she is often dismissed as being bitter that Darcy didn't marry her daughter, her belief that Darcy is degrading himself socially by marrying Elizabeth does represent the opinions of a large portion of the established upper classes. This was a moment in history, however, when the future of these powerful figures was coming into question. Austen began the first version of P&P in the 1790s, when the Western world was enthralled by the horrifying spectacle of the French Revolution. The stability of their social world, and how long it could continue, was on everyone's minds. With Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage, Austen is showing us one way to make sure some version of the established society continues to exist. Elizabeth and Darcy aren't quite social equals, but they are *mental* equals. To propagate this society, Austen suggests that a new idea of social worth – one tied to mental and emotional capabilities *as well as* birth and wealth – must become commonly accepted. So yes, Austen is fulfilling readers' romantic desires, but she does this while grappling with major flaws in her social system, and suggesting how to fix them. Epilogue Abbey fanfiction provides none of this impetus to think deeply about what the happy ending means, and with the loss of that complexity, the majority of the stories become a straightforward, transparent form of wish fulfillment.

Essentially, an exploration of Epilogue Abbey stories shows us that they do in fact bear out many of fanfiction's detractors' worst fears: they are stories where readers and writers attempt to live out their simplest romantic fantasies. In addition to this uninspiring content, most of these stories aren't particularly well written, which makes many question how they gained their extraordinary level of popularity. And yet these stories, and the

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online world in which they exist, are an important phenomenon. Not so much because of anything they contain, but because of what they represent. The DWG is a world in which female pleasure, desires, wishes, and fantasies are completely privileged. In a society where women are told they must be distinct from the rest of their gender in order to be worthwhile, a space in which they can engage in their desires, and have their worth as women reinforced, is an incredibly valuable thing to have; and the desire to play in such a space goes a long way towards explaining the popularity of Epilogue Abbey stories.

CHAPTER THREE – Online Austen Fanfiction: Fantasia Gallery

Existing alongside Epilogue Abbey, but so different it feels worlds away, is the Fantasia Gallery. Five specific Fantasia Gallery stories will be examined here: *Life on Planet Earth* by Annie, *Up From the Ashes* by Sofie, *Pember Lake*, also by Sofie, *Disenchanted* by Kara, and *Longbourn Academy* by Mosylu. *Disenchanted* is actually listed as an Epilogue Abbey fanfiction, but that is a misclassification. Kara's story takes place in an alternate-reality Regency period in which wizardry and other forms of magic are a part of everyday life. Though it engages with Regency societal norms and cultures, the story contains many of the elements of a fantasy novel. Any story in which Elizabeth Bennet rides through the skies on a winged horse cannot be considered as set in the Regency period, no matter how many Empire-waist gowns appear in the story. *Disenchanted* must then be considered as Fantasia Gallery fanfiction, even if it is not housed within the Fantasia Gallery. The projects of Fantasia Gallery and Epilogue Abbey fiction are extremely different on more than just a basic plot level, and to discuss a story that belongs in the Fantasia Gallery as if it belonged in the Epilogue Abbey would be to misinterpret it hugely.

Of these stories, four take place in the modern day: *Life on Planet Earth* is set in a pizza parlor (called Planet Earth Pizza) in a small Midwest city, where most of the characters are employees; *Up From the Ashes* is set on a small Canadian island, and makes the Elizabeth Bennet figure a single mom struggling to rebuild a defunct and derelict greenhouse business right next door to the Mr. Darcy figure's elite stables; *Pember Lake* is set in a small Canadian town, with Elizabeth Bennet as a new arrival in town and an aspiring artist, who finds work at the local elementary school, where the

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majority of the other characters work; and *Longbourn Academy* takes place during the characters' first year at a college for the fine and performing arts. As previously stated, *Disenchanted* takes place in a Regency period that has been infused with magic.

One trend that is illuminated by these pieces is the use of Austen fanfiction as a framework for playing with other ideas. This is particularly obvious in *Disenchanted* and *Life on Planet Earth*. Both Kara and Annie explain in their author's notes that their stories are Austen fanfiction less because that's what inspired them, and more because that's what they were comfortable with. Kara goes so far as to say that *Disenchanted* was not, in fact, wholly inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*:

“This piece of fanfiction, while inspired by the final installment of the Harry Potter books, has many influences. I love a good fantasy story – my first love being, of course, J.R.R. Tolkien, along with many others, including (but not limited to) Diana Wynn Jones, Patricia Wrede & Caroline Stevermer, C.S. Lewis, Neil Gaiman... This is not an HP/P&P mix fanfic. I hope to make this as much my own as a fanfic can be – my own ideas of wizardry, magic, spells, mystical creatures, the good and the bad all thrown in with my (our) favorite characters.”⁸⁶

By stating that the story was initially inspired by *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* rather than P&P, and despite the fact that she references Austen's characters as her “favorites,” Kara's note begs the question – why write fanfiction at all? Why not write an original story? In her note at the end of *Life on Planet Earth*, Annie actually answers this question for us:

“The idea for LoPE lurked at the back of my mind for about three years before I actually started writing the story. I always used to joke with my co-workers at Pizza Hut that someday, I was going to write a book about

⁸⁶ Kara. *Disenchanted*. Derbyshire Writer's Guild, 01 Aug. 2007 - 09 Oct. 2007. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.

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what it was like working there...and they loved the idea. They encouraged me to start writing, so I did...

“The only problem was, while I had all of these memories and scenes in my head that I wanted to write about, I had no cohesive storyline for them. I got discouraged and thought about scrapping the whole thing... Then, in the summer of 2001, I thought about writing it as a P&P fan fiction story, so I decided to call the story *Life on Planet Earth* and started posting.”⁸⁷

The problem for Kara and Annie was not a lack of new ideas worth exploring, but rather the lack of a framework through which to explore those ideas. For both authors, the bones of P&P offered that. Each author seized on it in a very different way – Annie chose to focus on updating the central relationships in Austen’s novel, with a fairly loose interpretation of modernizing the plot, while Kara chose to stay within the Regency era and to stick fairly close to the original plot, at least in the beginning. As the story continues, *Disenchanted* diverges from P&P in increasingly more dramatic ways, by adding a past friendship between Mr. Bennet and the elder, now deceased, Mr. Darcy, and through the addition of a mysterious, malicious wizard who poses a serious threat to national security. As Kara got comfortable with the new ideas she was exploring, she allowed herself to wander away from the framework she’d imposed on herself and began to focus more seriously on the ideas that initially inspired the story. Fanfiction is published in a serialized style, which allows us to clearly see the evolution of Kara’s confidence with her original ideas, and her lessening dependence on the Austen framework as that confidence grows. There is still focus on the love story between Elizabeth and Darcy, but the story really becomes about a magical world, with a heavily

⁸⁷ Annie. *Life on Planet Earth*. Derbyshire Writer’s Guild, 05 Jul. 2001 – 29 Jan. 2004. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.

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magic-influenced social order, that is fighting against a force threatening to destroy it from the inside out.

The changes in setting for a Fantasia Gallery piece aren't always quite as overtly dramatic as throwing magic into a non-magical world. In many, the story of P&P is simply transplanted to a different time period, usually some version of present-day society. It's easy to assume that, without changing something dramatic about the fabric of the society in which the story takes place, the story will remain more or less completely intact. The bells and whistles of society have changed significantly over the last two hundred years, but the way people interact with each other has remained more or less the same. When thought about that way, a modern transplant would seem to become simply a basic retelling of P&P – plus cellphones, perhaps. In fact, transplanting the stories to a new time period can have a much stronger impact. While Kara's *Disenchanted* takes a fairly long time to diverge from the original structure of P&P, Annie's *Life on Planet Earth* diverges from the very beginning. To call it a diversion is almost to do it a disservice, in fact – LoPE is a true transplant. Within the first few chapters, it becomes apparent that the Mr. Darcy figure, here renamed Darcy Williamson, is the only outsider who comes to town here. Mr. Bingley, now Chazz Bingley, already lives in the town where the story takes place, and is of the same economic and social class as the Bennet sisters. The Bingley sisters are no longer Chazz's sisters, but catty co-workers. This move implies that Annie was more at home with her original ideas from the start, which theory is echoed in her author's note, when she says that she wrote several scenes of the story *before* deciding to make it P&P fanfiction. The framework was still useful as an outlining structure, but Annie began with less dependency on it than Kara did.

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The changes in both of these stories are extensive – in one, Annie places *Pride and Prejudice* in a context intimately familiar to her, and in the other, Kara places *Pride and Prejudice* in a magical world of her own invention. By taking *Pride and Prejudice* as a starting place, they are each able to explore their own idea. What remains unclear is why people choose Austen to be that framework.

Annie’s note at the end of *Life on Planet Earth* may help illuminate this. After explaining how she came to write the story, she goes on to say,

“There are some people I absolutely *must* thank, starting with Ann [the founder of the DWG] for being such a great archivist, and everyone who helps keep the DWG running. I would not be writing today if this place didn’t exist...I want to give special thanks to all the chatterites for their support and patience with me while I was writing, with special thanks going to Spring, Jennifer (few), Maria V., and Tineke for being LoPE’s most persistent fans. I know the occasional threats of violence involving dull knives, blunt objects, being tied to a chair in front of my keyboard, and beheading by portable guillotine were meant in jest...I think...Finally, I want to thank everyone who has written to me to say that they’ve enjoyed the story...[Y]our comments and opinions mean so much to me.”⁸⁸

Annie is not just thanking a faceless group of readers. She is thanking a community. *Life on Planet Earth* was Annie’s seventeenth story to be posted on the DWG. Some of those previous sixteen stories were what the “dweggie” community refers to as a “Deathmatch!” In this fairly common act of community engagement, an author would write out a fictional wrestling match, either between two characters from Austen’s novels, or between two DWG authors and/or readers. One of Annie’s Deathmatches is between Annie herself and another DWG author named Laura, with a description that reads, “Annie and Laura fight over Annie’s creation, Sir James Hampton, and Lise [another DWG author] plays referee.” By her engagement in this rather silly

⁸⁸ Annie. *Life on Planet Earth*.

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phenomenon, in addition to the number of stories she posted and the very personalized thanks to her readers in the note at the end of *Life on Planet Earth*, Annie shows that she is not only on the DWG to write, and not necessarily even there only to write Austen fanfiction. Certainly Austen was the reason she came, but not the only reason she stayed. For Annie, and I suspect for Kara and many other DWG authors, part of the reason for playing with new ideas within the framework of Austen was the built-in, supportive community of predominantly female readers. The idea of experimenting within that kind of safety net must be tempting indeed, particularly for authors who may find the mainstream writing communities less supportive of their efforts.

This idea picks up on the idea of the DWG as a safe space for authors to find community and encouragement, which they don't necessarily find in the mainstream writing and publishing world, which was examined in Chapter Two. While it's true that Epilogue Abbey stories provide this sort of space, Fantasia Gallery stories take it a step farther, because they make use of the safety to try out new ideas. It's an incredibly positive, supportive community – a fact that is further exemplified in Sofie's story *Pember Lake*, a P&P fanfiction posted in the Fantasia Gallery. In this story, set in Canada, Elizabeth Bennet becomes Bella Gardiner, an aspiring artist in her early twenties who just lost her parents in a tragic accident and has left her hometown spur-of-the-moment, because she can't deal with her horrible relatives or the small-town gossip about whether or not her parents' death was really an accident. She ends up moving in with her old friend June (the Jane Bennet figure, no longer Elizabeth's sister) in a small town and working part-time at the elementary school where June and most of the other characters are teachers or administrators. This elementary school runs through grade seven, and

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early on in Bella's time at the school several grade seven girls approach her because they want to start a writing club – but not one where they “do dumb things like write poems where the first letter of each line was from our names, or a spring theme or if I was queen of the world, as if we were still in grade three.”⁸⁹ When Bella wants to know what they actually *do* want to write, the girls explain to her that they want to write fanfic. “[It's] when you write stories that are like a famous book or movie or something, but you put your own spin on it. Did you ever read *Pride and Prejudice*, or see the videos?...[We] want to write [our] own stories of *Pride and Prejudice*[...]And we want to post them at this site.”⁹⁰ The site they're talking about, as it transpires, is the DWG, and the names of the girls who want to form this club include Alyson, Cindy, Rita, Alicia, Sarah, and Lise. They're later joined by a boy named Adam and a shy girl who everyone thinks is a snob, named Sofie. All of the names listed are the names of authors from the DGW forum who were actively posting and engaging in the community at the time this story was posted. Throughout Sofie's story, the kids reference actual stories posted on the DWG as their own stories or ideas. They also plot to bring together Bella and D. Fitzwilliam, their beloved teacher, as if writing their own fanfiction within the world of Sofie's story. While it is very clearly a *Pride and Prejudice* fanfiction, *Pember Lake* also serves as a sort of homage to the DWG community. The bond between the writers, and the fact that they feel themselves a supportive community within a larger world that may not always be supportive of them – as creative writers, as fanfiction writers, and/or as kids – is made very clear by Sofie, who goes so far as to have a “ten years later” epilogue where she

⁸⁹ Sofie. *Pember Lake*. Derbyshire Writer's Guild, 19 Feb. 2003 – 5 Aug. 2003. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

⁹⁰ Sofie, *Pember Lake*.

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describes what all of the community-member-inspired children are doing now that they're adults within the world of the story. It's unclear to an outsider if the characters' paths mirror the lives of their inspirations, or if they're a more wish-fulfillment version of what they'd like their lives to be, but it was probably clear to Sofie's readers when the story was posted. While this self-referentiality could be seen as excluding those not in the community, it can also be seen as inspiring readers to appreciate what a warm, supportive community the DWG is, and making them feel that they would certainly be welcome there.

If *Life on Planet Earth*, *Pember Lake*, and *Disenchanted* illuminate the trend of using Austen novels as a framework to play with new ideas within a safe space, then *Up From the Ashes* and *Longbourn Academy* place Austen in other contexts to re-examine the ideas that Austen presented within her novels. By doing this they seek, as Edwards said, to make clear how those ideas and themes continue to affect us in the modern day. When we read about issues of gender in Regency England, it can be easy to dismiss it all as problems of a bygone era. By taking the same story and characters, moving them to *today*, and seeing how remarkably well the plot and character frameworks function in a modern context, fanfiction authors attempt to make it impossible for us as readers to deny the issues at stake in Austen's novels.

There are issues, however, with how Austen fanfiction authors implement this idea. Simply talking about gender issues in a modern context is not the same as pointing out what's wrong with gender relations and norms today, and many *P&P* fanfictions that discuss gender fall into the trap of treating the subject with a slant that, while falling in line with what Austen may have written, is a conservative, regressive view of gender for

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our times. A fanfiction that attempts to deal with Austen's ideas on gender in contemporary contexts should look to retain the spirit, rather than the letter, of Austen's goals.

In *Longbourn Academy* by Mosylu, there is a wide range of female characters with varying (although mainly artsy, by virtue of the story's setting in a fine and performing arts school) interests. They are each dedicated to their craft, and they're allowed to flourish as individuals and artists. For the most part, that is. This is a positive updating of Austen's portrayal of women as individual people with thoughts and emotions (in tune with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and in joint rebuttal with her to Rousseau's ideas of women as helpmates to men rather than thinking, feeling individuals). Mosylu updates Austen's ideas in an important way by inserting these female individuals not simply into society, but into the art world, which is still difficult for women to break into. But on the other hand, there is Liddie Wickman. Liddie is the updated version of Lydia Bennet, and she reinforces a modern stereotype that is incredibly harmful. Mosylu depicts Liddie as a very sexually active young woman, as early as the introduction to her. On their first night in the dorms, Liz Fiennes (the Elizabeth Bennet figure), M.J. Lansdowne (the Jane Bennet figure), and Char Lukasic (the Charlotte Lucas figure) return from the freshman barbecue to find "...giggling and squirming taking place on the couch...It looked as if Liddie Wickman, one of the occupants of the third room in the suite, had come back from the picnic early, and brought somebody with her."⁹¹ When discussing the event later, Liz says, "If it hadn't been the first night...I would have gone for the bucket of water," and when Char is

⁹¹ Mosylu. *Longbourn Academy*. Derbyshire Writer's Guild, 06 Jun. 2000 – 13 Aug. 2000. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.

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confused, Liz clarifies: “It’s what you do with dogs.”⁹² This is a modern version of denigrating women who are entirely focused on men, which, it’s true, Austen does with Lydia Bennet in P&P. Yet Austen’s main concern with her criticism on Lydia and Kitty, her partner in crime, is their shallowness, which is *exemplified* by their sole focus on men. The pair is described as “...ignorant, idle, and vain. While there was an officer in Meryton, they would flirt with him; and while Meryton was within a walk of Longbourn, they would be going there for ever.”⁹³ The condemnation is of their man-chasing habits, but it’s meant as a facet of their shallowness. If this idea is applied to Mosylu’s *Longbourn Academy* and Liddie Bennet, it reveals something very concerning for modern society: the assumption that sexual activity means shallowness of character. Liddie has absolutely no redeeming qualities: she’s shallow, she’s selfish, and at the end of the story she’s kicked out of the titular Longbourn Academy for being a bad student. The lumping together of all these negative characteristics makes Liddie’s, or any character’s, sexual activity seem inherently bad.

This is particularly clear when Liddie is contrasted with Liz and M.J., both of whom decline to be sexually active for the entirety of the story. This is displayed quite clearly in one conversation between Liz and her mother, the mother asks, “Is there a chance you might be—”⁹⁴ Liz’s mother is implying that Liz could be pregnant here, and Liz is completely indignant at this, replying that it’s not a possibility “when you’ve never once had sex,” and that “there’s not even a chance, unless immaculate conception is an

⁹² Mosylu. *Longbourn Academy*.

⁹³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 207.

⁹⁴ Mosylu, *Longbourn Academy*.

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option.”⁹⁵ Liz’s vehement reaction against being suspected of sex causes her mother to exhibit relief: “Ava put a hand to her heart. ‘Just what every mother wants to hear.’”⁹⁶ This immediate relief can be read as being directed towards her daughter not being pregnant, but it is also implicitly relief that her daughter has avoided sex altogether. There are no degrees of safe sex discussed – it’s either sex or abstinence, and one is clearly the better choice. This is further emphasized when it’s made clear that Liz and her friends don’t socialize with Liddie *at all*, even though they share a suite with her. They decide they don’t want to be her friend, and a large part of that seems to be based on her level of sexual activity, since that’s the most concrete detail we learn about her personality and habits. By adding sexual promiscuity to the list of qualities that make a person shallow, Mosylu certainly updates Austen’s portrayal of man-chasing as shallow, but she does it in a way that is potentially very harmful to modern society’s women.

Sofie’s *Up From the Ashes* is another example of a fanfiction treatment of gender that tries and fails to live up to the precedent set by Austen. Sofie’s story focuses on Elana Barnes (the Elizabeth Bennet figure), a divorced single mom who works tirelessly to try to provide a good life for her kid, and her several quirky female friends: Joy (the Jane Bennet figure), an aspiring weaver who works as a cashier to support herself, Chandra (the Charlotte Lucas figure), an extremely opinionated waitress, and Justie (the Georgiana Darcy figure), an enthusiastic riding instructor. But there is also Lina, the Caroline Bingley figure. Like her model in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lina wants very badly to be an item with Darien Stewart, the Mr. Darcy figure in this story. To accomplish this, she says extremely derogatory things about other women in front of Darien, especially

⁹⁵ Mosylu, *Longbourn Academy*.

⁹⁶ Mosylu, *Longbourn Academy*.

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women Darien might be interested in romantically. In one scene, after a brief run-in with Elana where she threatens to shut down the latter's small roadside stand selling homemade pies (which is being used as a temporary source of income until Elana can rebuild the greenhouse business she inherited), Lina says the following to Darien and his sister:

“Remember what I told you she said about the jam? That she makes it with stuff that causes cancer in rats? Well, today she was down there in her tacky little stand selling pies, like a little kid. Pathetic. And she came on to me all smart-ass saying that they were full of ingredients that would make me fat and that she would have made some diet pies for me if she knew I wanted some...I let Elaine have it. I told her you'd call the board of health and have them send inspectors out, and I said you'd report her for not having a business license. Really, what does she think she is, having that stupid little roadside stand there so close to our place?”⁹⁷

(“Our place” refers to the upscale stable business run by Darien Stewart, who employs Lina as a publicist. The stables happen to be right next to the greenhouse property Elana is trying to turn into a functioning business.) Lina is exaggerating her exchange with Elana, and deliberately using the wrong name, in order to make Elana seem unworthy of Darien's attention. At this point in the story, she doesn't really believe there's anything to worry about, so she's insulting Elana almost out of habit – any woman who comes near Darien must be painted as vastly inferior to herself. But when Darien begins to show interest in Elana, Lina moves to personal attacks. When she sees Elana talking to Darien at an event for the stables, Lina invents a reason to call Elana away, and then goes on a tirade against her to Darien, saying, “I don't really care about her, pretentious upstart...And get that dress she's wearing – it's got to be at least five years old. She looks

⁹⁷ Sofie. *Up From the Ashes*. Derbyshire Writer's Guild, 27 Jan. 2004 – 24 Jul. 2005. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.

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so worn out in it... Well, it's better than her usual jeans and t-shirt, I guess, but that's not saying much. The thing I can't understand is why everyone thinks she's so pretty."⁹⁸

Without losing the emphasis on Elana's lower socioeconomic status, Lina has transitioned into insulting her personality – “pretentious” – and, more obviously, her appearance, in what is a very personal attack. This pitting of women against each other in competition for a man is common in media depictions of all types, and it was accepted without thought in the early 19th century. But today, such a portrayal has become stereotypical. The problem isn't that women like this don't exist, but rather that they're a type we see portrayed so often in popular culture, it seems as if you can't walk outside without stumbling across at least three of them. This type of woman has become a cliché, and she loses even more of her storytelling power because there's so much less at stake for women like Lina than there was for Caroline Bingley. Achieving the security of a permanent romantic partner was a serious issue for a woman of upper or middle class in Regency England. It was her way to make sure she would have a comfortable social and economic station, and the only socially acceptable option for what to do with her life. These stakes are lower today, and in most modern portrayals of this kind of woman, the author doesn't attempt to add in underlying problems or background circumstances that would re-raise the stakes for a contemporary context. She becomes yet another flat, uninteresting, unsympathetic female character.

This sort of “updating” is seen again in relation to ideals of female beauty in *Pember Lake*. It might seem like a simple task to update beauty standards for a modern retelling of an Austen novel, but the act is, like so much else relating to Austen fanfiction,

⁹⁸ Sofie. *Up From the Ashes*.

fraught. Although Austen rarely, if ever, gives a detailed physical description of a character, generic descriptors work their way in out of necessity, and their associations are quite telling. Harriet Smith is referred to as “plump” in her initial description, and this is meant positively. In fact, nowhere in Austen is any sort of thinness associated with anything other than ill-health – a robust, full, figure is what’s considered attractive. This is the opposite of what one finds today, where models are often so skinny you could almost believe their angular edges would cut you if you brushed up against them. So when a fanfiction author translates an Austen story into a modern, or at least updated, setting, those new standards get imposed on the characters. One of the most noticeable instances of this is with versions of Charlotte Lucas’s character. In *P&P*, she is acknowledged to be quite plain, which translates in many modern adaptations to her being, at the very least, not thin. In *Pember Lake*, there is a scene where most of the main characters are watching a baseball game together and one character says that “The game’s not over till the fat lady sings,” in reply to which Carla (the Charlotte Lucas character) jokes, “Well I’m not singing!”⁹⁹ When her friends protest that she isn’t fat, she replies that she’s “not skinny either.”¹⁰⁰ This is only one of the instances where weighing too much is the new way to indicate that the Charlotte Lucas character isn’t considered as attractive as those around her. In Annie’s *Life on Planet Earth*, Charlie Lucas makes frequent references to her weight as a negative quality, and even Elisabeth Bennet compares her own weight unfavorably with that of her sister Jenna’s (the Jane Bennet figure) – Jenna’s being trimmer meant to be a translation of how Jane was considered the “handsomer” of the two sisters in the original novel.

⁹⁹ Sofie. *Pember Lake*.

¹⁰⁰ Sofie. *Pember Lake*.

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This translation of the plain-pretty spectrum into the fat-skinny spectrum could say several things about the goals of fanfiction authors. It's possible that they're trying to subvert negative body stereotypes by drawing attention to the fact that one can have a fulfilling, happy life even if you are overweight (or perceive yourself to be). This is an admirable goal, and though it does not translate directly back into one of Austen's recognizable goals, it is in line with the spirit of her work as a development of her proto-feminist leanings. However, it is more likely that these authors are accepting the inherent value judgement that comes with the identifiers of "fat," "overweight," "chubby," etc. Though Charlotte Lucas gets to live a fulfilling life, she isn't usually the main character of the story. Sometimes she gets her own "what if" or "alternate perspective" stories in the Epilogue Abbey, but modernized versions tend to be more faithful to the original plot, and to keep the characters' roles within the story close to what they are in the source material. There are exceptions – Charlie Lucas has a major role in Annie's *Life on Planet Earth* – but it's not the norm. As a side character, Charlotte Lucas and the modern versions of her are allowed to be chubby because they're not the main characters. It's allowed to be an important, defining characteristic of her within the story, because no one ends up falling in love with her (or at least, she doesn't have to be part of the love story in which readers are really invested). She is not quite good enough to be the main female character – not quite interesting enough in some cases, not quite pretty enough in others, but in nearly all modern-update cases, not quite skinny enough.

In their attempts to update certain ideas about gender norms and relations in their fanfiction, Sofie and Mosylu overlook other underlying depictions that need updating. They see what was new and potentially radical about Austen's novels in the 19th century

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– namely, the treatment of women as rational human beings – and they put that idea in a modern context. Yet they miss the underlying assumptions about gender inherent in Austen’s novels that were completely unquestioned in her day, but that today we should be able to criticize. They stay true to the letter of Austen’s work, but not necessarily the spirit. In attempting to make a radical move by focusing on this issue, these particular fanfiction authors actually end up taking a conservative stance by reinforcing gender norms of the 19th century that have simply been transferred to the 21st.

So far, we have only examined the ideas of Austen as a structuring plot and supportive community, and updating her ideas for a modern context, in separate stories, but Annie’s *Life on Planet Earth* is an excellent example of a combination of the two. In this story, ideas of gender relations and the social structures restricting a character’s options are updated mostly successfully. Take, for example, the idea in the original novel that the Bennet’s are below Mr. Darcy in terms of social status. This is updated in part by increasing the difference in income drastically – Darcy Williamson is a senior vice president at a huge New York corporation, while Elisabeth Bennet is the assistant manager of a pizza store – but also by making Elisabeth a young, unmarried woman, not in a long-term relationship, who realizes near the beginning of the story that she’s pregnant with her ex-boyfriend George Wickham’s baby. Contemporary popular culture is invested in romances that cross class boundaries, and frowns on social snobbery, which makes creating a really believable class difference extremely difficult. Simply having the Darcy figure be fabulously wealthy is not enough to convince readers that he’s really socially above Elisabeth. But to be an unmarried woman who is unexpectedly pregnant has an undeniable social stigma. She has to deal with the many stigmas attached to a

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woman who is pregnant out of wedlock: the shame of not being part of the still-idealized “Nuclear Family” unit, the associations of unwanted pregnancy with irresponsibility and poor planning, and the class implications – an upper-class woman could have afforded an abortion and avoided the pregnancy ever becoming noticeable. Her pregnancy also significantly lowers Elisabeth’s desirability as a romantic partner. Not only is she not “pure” and virginal, but just in terms of practicality, a person would think twice before entering into a serious romantic relationship with a pregnant woman, because of the expected child, and the implications of being in that child’s life. It’s hugely off-putting for many people, particularly at the beginning of a relationship, when it’s not yet clear that things will work out long-term. By putting Elisabeth Bennet in this position in *Life on Planet Earth*, Annie is raising the stakes of what it means to be a “vulnerable woman” in today’s society, so that the urgency associated with it is more similar to what an unmarried woman of little fortune felt in Austen’s original novels. It’s not the same situation, but rather a modern version of the same *kind* of situation: a smart, independent young woman with minimal prospects who has to be realistic about her situation.

Annie adds another interesting dimension to ideas of what it means to be socially acceptable or superior: one of her original characters, Jack Middleton, has an extremely mentally ill mother. This makes Jack view himself as inferior to the woman he loves, saying that “[S]he deserves better than me. She deserves a real shot at happiness, and how can she possibly be happy when she has to deal with a family like mine?”¹⁰¹ After a disastrous dinner where he tries to introduce his girlfriend to his mother and sisters (who are in denial that there’s anything seriously wrong with their mother, and blame Jack

¹⁰¹ Annie, *Life on Planet Earth*.

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when anything goes wrong), Jack clarifies, “I don’t want her to have to go through anything like that ever again, and if she stays with me, she’ll have to. There’s no getting away from my family [...] I love her, but I don’t ever want to see her as unhappy as she was when my mother shoved her out the door. That’s going to keep happening if I don’t let her go.”¹⁰² This is definitely an update of feeling socially inferior to one’s love interest: whereas in Austen’s novels it might have been the inability to be together because of a great divide in terms of money or the social status of a family, here a man is sacrificing his love because he views his family as detrimental to her for emotional reasons, rather than social or economic ones. This essentially keeps the idea of how important family connections are, while updating it for a more contemporary world.

Annie also addresses the issue of what it means to be “plain,” which can be so problematically linked to weight issues in many Austen updates. Charlie Lucas, as mentioned, is a much larger presence in *Life on Planet Earth* than the Charlotte Lucas figure often is in P&P fanfictions, and her weight issues are still part of what makes her believe she’s plain, but it’s more of a side issue. The real reason Charlie believes she’s unattractive, or even grotesque, is because she had a form of non-life-threatening skin cancer which manifested as rash-like red bumps over more than forty percent of her body. She frequently refers to them as something that would be off-putting for potential love interests, even though she has undergone treatment and is nearly free of the red bumps by the time Annie begins the story. This is a new way to update the idea of a woman being “plain” – a disease, rather than something inherent about a woman’s body. It brings to the forefront the fact that a woman being plain or not isn’t in her hands – it’s

¹⁰² Annie, *Life on Planet Earth*.

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as random as it is subjective. Charlie's skin problems become a powerful way to point this out, and to critique both Regency and current ideals of feminine beauty as arbitrary.

Life on Planet Earth is, in many ways, the epitome of what a Fantasia Gallery story can be. It uses Austen's original plot as a framework for playing with new ideas; Annie seeks the community of the DWG as a safe space in which to try out those ideas; and it subtly critiques aspects of gender norms and relations, both modern and Regency, by updating many of Austen's ideas so that they fit into a modern context seamlessly. Not every story is as successful, and of course Annie's story isn't perfect, but it does give us some insight into what a story that achieved the ultimate goals of Fantasia Gallery fanfiction would look like.

CONCLUSION

On December 8, 2015, Amy Watkin posted an article titled “Jane Austen Is Probably Mad At Us” on the website *McSweeney’s*. The delightfully titled article (part of Watkin’s equally delightfully titled series of articles “Women Who Should Be Pretty Pissed Off”) deals with the misrepresentation of Austen in popular culture. Watkin describes why Austen is perhaps “so relevant these days that she’s actually become irrelevant,” going on to ask, “Do we relate to Austen’s books and characters for the wrong reasons? And would she be pissed off by the way we diminish her novels to overly simplistic love stories?”¹⁰³ The student of popular literature in me balks at the idea that there is a “wrong” reason to read a book, but Watkin’s point remains: are we reading Austen in a way that misses the larger point of what she was trying to do?

This is not to say that there’s anything wrong with a good romance novel. As Watkin says, “I love romance novels. You should love them, too. It’s a legitimate genre that takes particular skill to write [...] For their complications and nuance, many of today’s romance novels (all of the good ones, anyway) owe a debt to Jane Austen.”¹⁰⁴ But “Austen primarily wrote about women and their predicaments when it came to money, relationships, and self-worth. The love part is in some ways a bonus, maybe even a distraction.”¹⁰⁵ She played by the rules in terms of plot, but there’s much more to it than that, which we miss if we don’t look deeper. Austen wrote “with such clever and sometimes subtle irony and wit that a cursory reading looks like a bunch of characters

¹⁰³ Amy Watkin. “Women Who Should Be Pretty Pissed Off: Jane Austen is Probably Mad At Us.” *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. *McSweeney’s Publishing*, 8 Dec. 2015. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. <http://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/jane-austen-is-probably-mad-at-us>.

¹⁰⁴ Watkin.

¹⁰⁵ Watkin.

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making an awkward amount of silent eye contact, leading us to miss the point” that “Austen *pushed all kinds of boundaries*. She hid her rebellions in plain sight and must be rolling her eyes at us now for not highlighting them more often”¹⁰⁶ (my emphasis). In a time when it was up for debate whether or not women possessed a rational mind, Austen bypassed the *if* question about women’s capability for rational thought and went right to the *how*, thereby subtly settling the debate without even seeming to enter into it.

Watkin’s irritation lies in the fact that so many people “...think that Jane Austen wrote about love with all the drama of a woman perched on a settee in a stiff corset, waiting for something to do, pouncing on the first male she’s not closely related to and begging him to marry her.”¹⁰⁷ And you don’t have to take Watkin’s word for it. Look, for example, at a post by user “La Gamine Moderne” on the popular blog site Tumblr, which reads as follows:

“Has it occurred to anyone else that Austen novels are just nineteenth century Twilight?

- predictable, unfulfilling plot that makes you groan or roll your eyes
- love it or hate it
- appeals to hopeless romantics
- stock characters
- massive popular appeal
- slightly mindless
- I mean, doesn’t exactly leave you questioning the fibre of your being, does it?”¹⁰⁸

This is the perfect example of the way many view Austen’s writing – romance books with no depth. It would be easy for a scholar of Austen to go through this post and refute

¹⁰⁶ Watkin.

¹⁰⁷ Watkin.

¹⁰⁸ La Gamine Moderne. “Has it occurred to anyone else that Austen novels are just nineteenth century Twilight?” lagaminemoderne.tumblr.com. Tumblr, 11 Nov. 2014. Accessed 5 Jan. 2016.

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it point by point. But this isn't about whether or not La Gamine Moderne is right. The point is that she holds this belief at all, and she is not alone. There are those who stand firm with La Gamine Moderne in believing that Austen wrote basic, predictable romance novels. Many examples of this can be found amongst Goodreads reviews: Books Ring Mah Bell puts it rather succinctly in her review, simply saying P&P is "P to-the-double-O P,"¹⁰⁹ while Olivia says "Pride and prejudice was how to word it boring and stereotypical...Characters were underdeveloped and boring...I hate the characters. I hate the plot. I hate everything about it."¹¹⁰ Snowy calls it "possibly one of the most ridiculously stupid plots ever," and adds, "If you are a feminist you will hate this book. But, if you want to be dragged on a dry dumb romance that you can fully understand, and predict after reading one page go for it."¹¹¹

The disdain for the romantic nature of Austen's plots is probably based in large part on the fact that these plots can be found in most romance novels or romantic comedies, and have come to be rather predictable. But the hostility is misplaced: it's not that Austen has copied or reused these tired old plots. Rather, these romantic comedies and romance novels are based on Austen's novels. The reason we're so tired of the "boy and girl hate each other then fall in love" trope, or the "girl realizes she's been in love with her best friend all along" trope, and others, is because Austen did them so well that generations of authors have copied her on them. Austen's not an imitator in this area – she's the original.

¹⁰⁹ Books Ring Mah Bell. Review of *Pride and Prejudice*. Goodreads, 23 Sep. 2010. Accessed 09 Jan. 2016.

¹¹⁰ Olivia. Review of *Pride and Prejudice*. Goodreads, 25 Sept. 2015. Accessed 09 Jan. 2016.

¹¹¹ Snowy. Review of *Pride and Prejudice*. Goodreads, 03 Oct. 2015. Accessed 09 Jan. 2016.

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There are also people on the other end of the spectrum, who see Austen novels as romance-fests but completely love them that way. Goodreads user Anne, for example, who opens her image-filled review by saying, “**Mr. Darcy... *swoons***,” followed by a long discussion of why “Colin Firth is the only Mr. Darcy,” and ends with, “So. *Yes*, I’m unashamed to admit that I *am* that cliché of a woman who loves *Pride and Prejudice*. Unashamed! I just...**{insert fangirl screaming and crying}** **Throws panties at Mr. Darcy**”¹¹²

This pop-culture reaction to Austen is more linked to Austen fanfiction than it first seems. Austen fanfiction can be viewed by many in the same way that Austen’s novels are today – silly pieces of chick-lit with no depth that uphold gender norms. In fact, perceptions of fanfiction in general, and knowledge of the plethora of Austen fanfiction, may contribute to that image. It’s an image with which Austen may have been familiar. The views now held about fanfiction, are extremely similar to the views held by her contemporaries on the subject of novels. In a famous passage from *Northanger Abbey*, Austen mounts a spirited defense of the novel, which reads in part as follows:

“Let us leave it to the reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans...Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers...[T]here seems a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.”¹¹³

¹¹² Anne. Review of *Pride and Prejudice*. Goodreads, 16 Jul. 2015. Accessed 09 Jan. 2016.

¹¹³ Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. 1817. Introd. Margaret Drabble. New York: Signet Classics, 1996. Print. 43.

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Austen's defense of the novel could easily be applied to fanfiction today, changing only the occurrences of the words "novel" and "novelist" to "fanfiction" and "fanfiction authors" – although perhaps it would also be necessary to change the reference to "the groaning presses" to "the overheated computer." In many ways, it is a fitting legacy for Austen: not only to remain a part of a much-disparaged genre (the romance genre), but also to have one of her major popular culture offshoots become its modern-day equivalent.

In fact, in many ways, *Northanger Abbey* itself has some family resemblances to fanfiction. Austen uses the novel to rewrite the traditional conventions of Gothic horror fiction, a popular (and much-maligned) genre of her day. Additionally, she directly references the novels *Cecelia*, *Camilla*, and *Belinda* (the first two by Fanny Burney, and the latter by Maria Edgeworth) as "...only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language."¹¹⁴ Clearly, Austen admires these novelists and what they attempt to do with their fiction, and her own novel is easily seen to be an attempt to follow in their footsteps, and use the conventions of the novel of manners to write a new version of it. This is not fanfiction, but unapologetically taking elements from another author's work and using them for your own, independent work is most definitely a step in that direction. In this sense, it seems like Austen would be *proud* of the fanfiction legacy her work has left behind, because it truly carries on the tradition of undermining

¹¹⁴ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 43.

respected forms of literature, and boldly declaring the legitimacy of a genre that is considered with “contemptuous censure”¹¹⁵ by so much of the reading public.

There are key differences between current opinions on fanfiction and the opinions held about novels in the 19th century. One of the biggest of these differences is that while the male readership derided novels in the 1800s, they still *read* them. Even the buffoonish, horse-obsessed, stereotypically masculine John Thorpe, in *Northanger Abbey*, sometimes reads novels¹¹⁶, though he precedes his admission of this fact by exclaiming, “Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels.”¹¹⁷ Fanfiction, on the other hand, really does have an almost entirely female readership. This more or less complete separation of Austen fanfiction from the male sphere makes it that much easier for the general public to deride it – it becomes another version of a pop-culture phenomenon that’s unworthy because it’s only associated with women. This is a major difference between Austen’s struggle to get novels acknowledged and the plight of fanfiction authors today: Austen simply wanted acknowledgement of a readership that already existed, while fanfiction actually has to struggle to expand its readership to the groups that deride it. Still, the general attitude of derision from higher culture remains a fascinating parallel.

Most of the novels that Austen’s contemporaries were complaining about have faded into a well-deserved oblivion by now, as most of today’s fanfiction undoubtedly will sink to be a mere footnote of literary history in the future. There is no screening

¹¹⁵ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 42.

¹¹⁶ An example that comes from Austen, true, but as she was one of the most adroit observers of the social realities of her world, it’s highly unlikely she would have included this moment of parody if she hadn’t seen the phenomenon occur in real life.

¹¹⁷ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 57.

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process that a story must go through to be posted on the DWG, so there is a remarkable amount of self-indulgent, wish-fulfillment-based, poorly-written fanfiction there, as there is on every fanfiction website. The lack of gatekeepers makes this inevitable. Yet despite this multitude of bad fanfiction, there *is* some good fanfiction; and, more importantly, the writers on the DWG, and other Austen-focused fanfiction communities, are doing for each other what the historical community of female writers and readers did for Austen: they are providing an alternate route to creative expression, and support against a mainstream culture that seeks to deny their ability to create (in Austen's case) or marginalize their ability to create things worth serious readerly consideration (in the case of modern female authors). Even more specifically related to Austen, the online community of the DWG functions much as Austen's own family did for her. The Austens were a literary bunch: as children, Jane and her siblings would put on small plays in a barn by their house, for which eldest brother James would often write a prologue; that same James published a small literary magazine for a while, Mr. Austen was extremely well-read, and even Mrs. Austen dabbled in poetry.¹¹⁸ With such a family, it's only natural that young Jane would have shared her work and received a supportive but critical response.

Criticism is perhaps what is most lacking from the online Austen fanfiction community: too much support, not enough critical responses. It's too much to say that, with the right criticism, fanfiction authors could become authors of a similar standing to Austen. But perhaps a few of them could become authors of books and stories that would appeal to a wider audience. After all, they're imitating Austen in more than just her plot

¹¹⁸ Claire Tomalin. *Jane Austen: A Life*. (New York: Vintage, 1999.)

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and characters: in many ways, they're imitating her writing process, and the communities of people she wrote with and for.

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