THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO JANE AUSTEN

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RACE, PRIVILEGE, AND RELATABILITY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COLLEGE AND SECONDARY INSTRUCTORS

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GOUCHER COLLEGE

A young African-American woman asks what relevance Jane Austen's novels can possibly have for her, since Austen depicts no characters of colour. A first-generation college student from a working-class family points out that Austen concentrates on the lives of the economically privileged, making only passing references to labourers and servants. A young man who self-identifies as being on the autism spectrum responds strongly to Mr Darcy's awkwardness in public and obliviousness to social cues, traits this student is well aware of in himself.

Each of these reactions to Austen's novels occurred in one of my courses within the last several years, since I joined the faculty of Goucher College in 2012. Goucher is a small, private liberal-arts institution focused primarily on undergraduates, whose mission emphasises social justice and global education. The college's campus is located in Towson, Maryland, USA, just north of Baltimore City. In April 2015, Goucher students joined Black Lives Matter protests in Towson and Baltimore following the death in police custody of Freddie Gray.[1]

Demographically, Goucher's undergraduate population is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and home state or country.[2] Before arriving in my classroom, my students have been educated variously in public, private, and parochial schools. Some have been home-schooled for all or part of their pre-college education. Some have transferred from two- and four-year colleges; of these, some are older than the typical undergraduate age of 18–22. Entering my courses, some students have already read an Austen novel, either for class or on their own; more have seen a screen adaptation or two. (Broadly speaking, the USA's Common Core national curriculum in public schools has de-emphasised literature in favour of nonfiction texts.)

Goucher's faculty have recently reconceived both the college's general-education curriculum and many major programmes of study in order to promote student-directed learning and cultivate interdisciplinarity. Among our reinvented majors is my home programme of literary studies, formerly known as English. My literature courses typically interest students who are majoring in literary studies, creative writing, or women's, gender, and sexuality studies. I teach *Pride and Prejudice* in a survey course on the English novel and also offer an upper-level seminar, 'Jane Austen and Her Readers'.[3] Few of my undergraduates plan to study literature or other academic fields at the

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postgraduate level, though many will eventually pursue master's degrees in creative writing, library science, education, law, or other professional fields.

All these factors and contexts both contribute to the expectations my students bring to Austen's novels and also help shape their interpretations. My own perspective continues to evolve after nearly two decades of work in undergraduate teaching; research on Austen in popular culture, Austen's reception, and Austen's historical readers; and public-humanities writing and speaking on Austen and book history to a wide range of audiences.[4] In this essay, I continue the endeavour I began in my 'reader-friendly' editions of *Emma* and *Persuasion* for Penguin Classics: to welcome the widest possible audience and to support them with accurate information presented in an accessible manner, free of academic jargon. In keeping with the pedagogy of 'universal design', this approach acknowledges that all readers are worthy of respect, whether or not they proceed to become scholars.

Austen, I well know, is not for everyone, in spite of the tendency of her fans to claim her, familiarly, as 'everybody's Jane'.[5] I have written elsewhere about the pedagogical advantages of integrating adaptations and reception in undergraduate teaching of Austen (Wells, 'A Place at the (Seminar) Table'). Presently, I welcome the entire continuum of my students' reactions to Austen's novels: from confusion and hostility to unabashed fandom and professions of 'relatability'. The latter term, which once made me cringe, I have come to value as affording a new entry point for fostering students' original, critical thinking about Austen's writings.

Existing resources for teaching Austen, such as the volumes in the MLA Approaches to Teaching World Literature series, tend to stress imparting essential content in order to direct students away from mere responses towards informed academic inquiry.[6] My aim here is quite different: to provide a practical guide for navigating the real-life challenges and opportunities for connection that arise in secondary and undergraduate classrooms once students are comfortable speaking freely about their experiences of reading Austen. Throughout, I explain matters as straightforwardly as possible, for the benefit of teachers who are not Austen specialists, as well as to enable sections of this essay to be usefully shared with students at introductory and intermediate levels. (Advanced students may well be better served by other chapters in this volume, which provide more complex scholarly accounts of the same issues.)

After summing up some of the challenges that students often articulate, I focus on two especially hot-button topics: race and ethnicity, followed by socioeconomic status. I offer brief overviews of contexts in history, biography, intertextuality, adaptations, and readers and fan communities, each pegged to a question or questions that students frequently ask. In the section on race, I also include a roundup of Austen's descriptive language that today's readers may interpret as racialised. I cite and recommend selected academic sources as well as pertinent films, contemporary novels, and other popular-culture resources that address, appealingly and often quite imaginatively, concerns and questions frequently raised by students. Next, I discuss, more briefly, aspects of Austen's novels that students often declare to be relatable: her innovations in characterising heroines and heroes; her depictions of courtship culture; and her attentiveness to socially awkward behaviour and to psychology more generally. I conclude with a call to invent new kinds of writing assignments that allow students to engage in personal ways with Austen's novels.

The suggestions and strategies I present are applicable to a variety of courses and student populations. Teachers, your knowledge of your own students best equips you to meet them where they are, to bridge gaps in their understanding, and to think through assumptions about the importance of novels considered 'great' or 'classic'. I hope that you will each find something here that can help transform moments of confrontation or uncertainty into rich conversations about Austen's artistry, influences, and legacies. Perhaps you work among traditionally minded colleagues who scoff at efforts to reduce barriers to students' comprehension of, appreciation of, and capacity to analyse Austen. If so, I also encourage you to take heart and continue to teach in a capacious, responsive manner.

Let me begin by asking you to reflect on what you find difficult about teaching Austen to your particular students, as well as on what your students report is challenging for them about reading Austen. If you are not sure how your students would respond to this question, consider asking them directly. If you do so, be sure that they can weigh in anonymously, unless you have an exceptionally forthcoming and unintimidated group.

When I ask my students what they find challenging about reading Austen, I receive a variety of answers, all of which are worth honouring and talking through. Some students say that Austen's prose is too hard to read: they find her vocabulary archaic and her sentences and paragraphs long and complex. To this, I express sympathy. Austen's prose does demand a lot from today's readers, especially those for whom English is not their first language or who have read little written before the twentieth century. I share some of the tips that I include in my Penguin Classics editions of *Persuasion* and *Emma*. Read slowly, not too much all at once. Read out loud as much as possible or listen to an audiobook while simultaneously reading. Consider film adaptations as a way to be introduced to Austen's characters and to envision her milieu.

Other students reply that reading Austen is tough because 'nothing happens'. I reply that they are in good company: many of Austen's contemporaries had the same complaint. The popular novels of her day were stuffed with plot and peril. She deliberately chose a different course by penning her uneventful tales involving (relatively) ordinary people. It takes time to acclimate to what Austen and her characters consider to be significant, as well as to the nuances of her style. Only when we do so can we ascertain how acutely she observes and how subtly she critiques her society.

Depending on the gender balance in my classroom, I may also hear that Austen's novels are 'for chicks'. This, I explain, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Male Austen fandom was very strong through the mid-twentieth century. The wave of 1990s screen adaptations, led by the BBC mini-series of *Pride and Prejudice* starring Colin Firth, rebranded Austen in the popular imagination as appealing chiefly to audiences of women. I note, too, the persistent tendency for novels written by men to be celebrated as being of universal importance, while women's writing is thought to interest mainly women. I tell the story of Sam, a male student of mine from several years ago, who attended an all-boys Catholic high school in which virtually no writing by women was assigned in literature classes. Sam found much to appreciate in Austen's depictions of male characters and their interactions with family members, friends, and potential mates. At the conclusion of our course, he declared his resolve to urge his high-school friends, who were by then majoring in aeronautical engineering at a large state university, to read Austen.

So far, so good. But what if a student responds that Austen's novels are off-putting because all of her characters are white? First, acknowledge that, indeed, Austen focuses on characters who take for granted their own and each other's identities as white English people, so much so that race or ethnicity are not mentioned by either the characters or the narrator in any of her six major novels.

The next step in your discussion might go in one of several directions. Depending on your students' prior knowledge and the goals for your course, you could draw on the collective expertise in your classroom, or on the brief overviews I provide below. Alternatively, you could assign students to research answers to the questions with which these overviews begin; to view and report back on the popular-culture sources I suggest; or to creatively respond in writing, or in another artistic medium, to what they find thought provoking about these questions. (These avenues of exploration apply as well to my subsequent treatment of socioeconomic status.)

History: What roles did people of colour have in the England of Austen's day? What legal status did enslavement have, and what views about enslaved people were held?

People of colour lived and worked in England's cities, especially populous London. Dark-skinned servants to wealthy families appear in family portraits and other artworks. Mixed-race or multiracial people were present as well. The 2014 film *Belle* imagines the experience of one such

person: the multiracial woman Dido Belle, a young ward of a wealthy English family in the late eighteenth century.

In 1807, the international slave trade was abolished in Britain. Not until 1833, however, were enslaved people in the British Empire freed (White 1). Indigenous inhabitants of European colonies were often referred to and treated in dehumanising, prurient ways. A prime example is the 1810–12 exhibition in London of Sara Baartman, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus'.[7]

In addition, hierarchies were present within groups of Britons that are now viewed as white. Colonial attitudes of the English elite towards the Scots and Irish peoples resulted in denigration of those ethnicities. The English themselves had as forebears both the indigenous, Anglo-Saxon peoples and the Normans who conquered the island in 1066.

Biography: Was Austen personally acquainted with any people of colour?

Her surviving letters do not refer to seeing, meeting, or knowing anyone of a different race or ethnicity, although she may have done so. As Sheila Johnson Kindred has shown, Austen's sister-in-law Fanny Palmer Austen grew up in Bermuda in households with enslaved servants, in a system less harsh than the West Indian plantations; Fanny Austen may well have discussed her experiences with Austen.

Intertextuality: In which of Austen's writings does she directly address race, ethnicity, or enslavement, and how does she do so? What descriptors does Austen employ that, to our eyes, have potentially racialised overtones?

Sanditon, the novel Austen began in her last year of life, and which she left unfinished, introduces a character whom the narrator identifies as a 'half mulatto' (*Later Manuscripts* 202). As Jocelyn Harris has pointed out, Austen seems to have coined this puzzling term (262). *Mansfield Park* contains Austen's most direct references to the enslavement of people in British colonies, through discussions of the dependence of the Bertram family on the profits of their plantation in Antigua. Noteworthy too is the 'gypsies' episode in *Emma*, which represents the supposed threat to an orderly English village, and to virginal Harriet Smith in particular, posed by the Romany people, who had been present in England for centuries.

Austen also treated the topic of enslavement figuratively and via implication. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax, who is beautiful and talented but penniless, objects to working as a governess as being a form of slavery (325). Critics have pointed out that the moneyed but vulgar Mrs Elton, who professes to be appalled by Jane's comparison, comes from the city of Bristol, formerly a major port in the international slave trade. New research, furthermore, has illuminated the significance of the phrase 'pride and prejudice' in abolitionist rhetoric during and after Austen's lifetime, in both Britain and the USA (Burns; Favret, 'Frederick Douglass' Pride and Prejudice').

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrator portrays the appearance and behaviour of Lydia, the youngest Bennet sister, in ways that parallel how people of colour have historically been denigrated. Lydia has 'high animal spirits'; she is 'wild' (49, 348).

Occasionally, too, Austen's narrator describes a character's complexion using words that, to us, seem suggestive of colourism. Such language appears in reference to both male and female characters, and its significance varies according to context. Miss Bingley of *Pride and Prejudice* sneers that Elizabeth's face has become 'brown and coarse'—we might say, tanned—from being outdoors (299). Yet Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* is no less beautiful for having what that novel's narrator describes as a 'clear brown complexion' (51). So too does Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*: 'Her skin was very brown, but from its transparency, her complexion was uncommonly brilliant' (55). Readers who recall Mr Darcy as tall, dark, and handsome are misremembering. The narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* states only that Darcy has a 'fine, tall person, handsome features, [and] noble mien' (10). Several other male characters, however, present a dark appearance, though whether in terms of skin tone, hair colour, eye colour, or a combination of these traits is not necessarily clear. Henry Crawford of *Mansfield Park* initially strikes the Bertram sisters as being 'black

and plain' (51). The narrator of *Persuasion* introduces Captain Harville as 'a tall, dark man' (105). Henry Tilney of *Northanger Abbey* earns an exceptionally detailed description—'"a brown skin, with dark eyes, and rather dark hair"' (36)—albeit via a complicated route: Isabella Thorpe is quoting Catherine Morland's words back to her, presumably accurately.

Adaptations: How have adaptors of Austen's works addressed race and ethnicity?

To date, no period screen adaptation of one of Austen's six major novels has included people of colour in central or noticeable roles. By contrast, many stage plays, musicals, and operas based on Austen's novels have featured performers of colour.

Among period film adaptations, Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999) stands out for its explicit, sustained treatment of enslavement and abuses. Among adaptations set in the present day, Gurinder Chadha's Bollywood-inspired *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) most fully imagines Austen in an international context, with characters hailing from India, London, and the USA. The three YouTube series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *Emma Approved*, and *Welcome to Sanditon*—all set in twenty-first-century America—prominently feature characters and actors of colour.

Most professionally and fan authored fiction inspired by Austen's novels steers clear of race and ethnicity. Thought-provoking exceptions include Ibi Zoboi's 2018 *Pride*, a young-adult 'remix' of *Pride and Prejudice* set in the gentrifying Bushwick neighbourhood of Brooklyn with a socio-economically diverse cast of Haitian- and Dominican-American characters. Soniah Kamal's witty *Unmarriageable* (2019) transposes *Pride and Prejudice* to present-day Pakistan, appending metafictional musings about what it means to appreciate Austen in the postcolonial era. More loosely, Sonali Dev's *Pride and Prejudice and Other Flavors* (2019) suggests connections between Austen's world and that of a prosperous Indian-American family.

Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon*, with its 'half mulatto' character Miss Lambe, has been completed by several novelists and fans. Most recently, and most prominently, a fanciful, greatly expanded miniseries version by Andrew Davies aired in the United Kingdom in 2019 and in the USA in 2020. Publicity for Davies' *Sanditon* highlighted the role of Miss Lambe, played by Crystal Clarke. A survey of such media coverage (perhaps researched by a student) could open a useful classroom conversation about ideas concerning Austen and race, as could screening scenes featuring Miss Lambe.

Finally, as a quick and productive discussion-starter, I recommend showing students Amy Sherald's portrait of a young everyman of colour, titled 'A single man in possession of a good fortune', part of the artist's recent exhibit at the Hauser & Wirth gallery in New York.[8]

Readers and fan communities: In what ways is racial and ethnic diversity present in Austen's readership and fandom today?

How readers outside the Anglo-American context respond to Austen's novels has been explored by, among others, Azar Nafisi, in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003); Bee Rowlatt and May Witwit, in *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad* (2010); the members of the newly formed Jane Austen Society of Pakistan, who have been interviewed by the BBC and NPR; and Soniah Kamal, in her essay '*Pride and Prejudice* and Me', at the conclusion of her novel *Unmarriageable*. Elements of Austen's novels that resonate with all these readers include the strict social hierarchy and mores she depicts, as well as the struggles of women characters to attain self-actualisation within a patriarchal society.

As this book goes to press, an unprecedented amount of discussion is taking place on social media among Austen fans who identify as people of colour. Interested students could survey current and recent conversations on this topic and share their findings with the class.

Addressing Privilege

Perhaps some of your students respond that what distances them from Austen's novels is her focus on characters that are economically privileged. The money anxieties of the Bennet family in *Pride and*

Prejudice, for example, might well grate on a student who is taking on significant debt to finance undergraduate education. And the woes of Emma Woodhouse might seem like 'first-world problems' indeed.

Here, too, I encourage you to begin by acknowledging the students' responses. Austen's novels certainly centre on characters who have many privileges, including adequate (and sometimes grand) housing; access to at least some forms of education; and, in most cases, a modicum of personal wealth, though not necessarily enough to ensure independence. Moreover, the comfortable, leisured lives of Austen's main characters result from the work of many whom she leaves largely invisible, from servants to estate tenants.

It is worth pointing out, too, that in class terms, few of us can realistically 'see ourselves' in an Austen novel. If we had been alive in her time, we would most likely have been servants, labourers, or other working people, not ladies or gentlemen.

History: How do Austen's characters fit into the status hierarchy of her day? In terms of depicting privilege, how does she compare with her contemporaries and successors?

Austen chose to portray the experiences of characters that occupy the middle levels of the British status hierarchy: below royals and high aristocrats (dukes, earls, etc.) and above ordinary working people. It is essential, I find, to stress the distinction between these intermediate levels and how the terms 'middle-class' or 'middle classes' are variously understood today. Everyone in Austen's novels, like their historical counterparts, is keenly status-conscious and well aware of the intersecting importance of monetary wealth, proper manners and conduct, and family respectability. In Austen's novels, as in her world, social roles are gendered: a father, for instance, is thought to hold different obligations towards his children than a mother. A strong double standard governs sexual behaviour before marriage. Men can enjoy themselves, or err and repent, but women have to guard their reputations.

Though few of Austen's major characters occupy truly precarious economic positions, many experience threats to the stability of their lives. Austen returns again and again to the challenges faced by young people of comparatively modest means in a marriage market that places great value on inherited wealth. Her female characters have virtually no options for earning money of their own. Austen shows sympathy, too, towards those of her male characters who must make their way in the world in one of the few professions considered appropriate to them, principally the clergy and the military. Moreover, she explores the pressures of the traditional gentlemanly role, through characters such as Mr Darcy. The courtship plot that anchors all of her novels enables her to emphasise the serious consequences for both women and men of choosing a marriage partner. With divorce virtually unobtainable, ill-suited spouses were essentially trapped with each other until death.

Many of Austen's predecessors and contemporaries in the English novel took an interest in the predicament of a young, well-brought-up woman with little money as she entered the marriage market. Frances Burney's bestseller *Evelina* (1788) is one such tale. Other authors of realistic novels depicted characters of roughly the same social ranks as those in Austen. Not until the 'condition of England' novels of the 1840s and 1850s, including those of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, would the lives of the poor receive sensitive—albeit sentimental—literary treatment.

Biography: What was Austen's own social and financial position? What were her personal attitudes towards marriage and professional authorship?

Austen's family occupied much the same 'middling' ranks of society that we find in her novels. Her father was a clergyman, educated though not personally wealthy, while her mother's extended family included landowners. The professions pursued by Austen's brothers mirror those of the male characters in her novels: the clergy, the navy, banking. One of Austen's brothers was adopted by rich distant relations and became the heir to their estates, an experience somewhat comparable to that of Frank Churchill in *Emma*. After Austen's father's death in 1805, which occurred when she was twenty-nine, she—along with her widowed mother and elder sister—essentially depended on the

support of her married brothers. A glimpse of Austen's restricted personal finances can be found in the list she kept of her expenses in the year 1807: she spent a total of £44.10*s*.6*d* on essentials including clothing, laundry, postage, and servants' wages, plus charity and tithes to the church, and a few indulgences such as renting a pianoforte (*Autograph Memorandum*).

Austen received at least one marriage proposal, from the brother of close friends, and may have received more. She opted not to marry and instead spent her prime writing years, her thirties, living with her mother, sister, and a woman friend; her wealthy brother supplied the house. She was proud of what she earned from the novels she published in her last decade of life and kept careful track of her investments, as can be seen from her handwritten 'Profits of my novels' (*Autograph Note*). However, the amount that she earned from her publications was not enough to support herself, much less her entire household. In her novels and letters, she repeatedly commented on the indignities of poverty for unmarried women: for instance, she remarked to her niece Fanny Knight in 1817 that '[s]ingle Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor' (*Letters* 347).

Intertextuality: In which of Austen's novels does she focus most on the experience of socially or financially marginalised characters? Where and how does she criticise privilege?

Austen consistently commends characters that are truly cheerful in spite of narrow circumstances. Most memorably, she exalts Miss Bates of *Emma*, a fortyish spinster who lives in rented rooms with her widowed mother, as possessed of 'universal good-will and contented temper': 'The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body and a mine of felicity to herself' (36).

Mansfield Park offers Austen's most unsparing depiction of the difficulties of impoverishment. Fanny Price's father, Lieutenant Price, who is disabled from active duty and dependent on alcohol, makes life a misery for his wellborn but now downtrodden wife and their numerous children. Sensitive Fanny suffers both at home and, differently, while under the patronage—and patronisation—of her mother's wealthier sisters, who bring her up from the age of nine.

By contrast, *Persuasion*, the final novel Austen completed before her death, celebrates the capacity of the human spirit to flourish even in circumstances of penury and disability. The injured Captain Harville and his wife, who must make do on very little, are nevertheless generous and open hearted, while the titled landowner Sir Walter Elliot is vain and selfish in the extreme. Austen singles out for praise, too, the intelligence of a workingwoman, Nurse Rooke, who makes up for her lack of formal education with shrewd observations of human nature. Among Nurse Rooke's patients is the chronically ill Mrs Smith, who earns the narrator's admiration by remaining optimistic and eager to connect with people, despite being confined to living in two small rooms.

Every Austen novel includes characters that are menaced by disgrace and ignominy. In *Sense and Sensibility*, two generations of women named Eliza, mother and daughter, are seduced and abandoned in turn. *Pride and Prejudice*'s Lydia Bennet risks her reputation and safety by gleefully eloping (so she thinks) with Wickham. Without the protection of privileged patrons, the illegitimate Harriet Smith and the talented Jane Fairfax in *Emma* would both be vulnerable to predators. *Northanger Abbey*'s Isabella Thorpe places herself in danger through her attraction to the unscrupulous Captain Tilney.

In no sense does Austen advocate class revolution. Nevertheless, she firmly counters the notion that rank ought to be respected no matter what. She applies some of her strongest satire to condescending, power-hungry titled people, from overbearing Lady Catherine de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice* to Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion*. Contrary to popular belief, Austen does not depict the social hierarchy as rigid or unchanging. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Darcy accepts as a friend the well mannered, warm-hearted Mr Bingley in spite of the recent origins of the latter's wealth. With the Martin family in *Emma*, Austen shows how trustworthy tenants can steadily rise in prosperity and respectability. Most importantly, the naval men of *Persuasion*, from the now-wealthy Captain Wentworth to the financially struggling Captain Harville, demonstrate a new kind of honour, in contrast to the self-absorbed Elliots (excepting Anne).

Adaptations: Which novels and films based on Austen offer the most thought-provoking depictions of social class and financial privilege?

By far the most imaginative reworking of Austen from a class perspective is Jo Baker's 2013 novel *Longbourn*, a film version of which is currently in production. Baker imagines the life of Sarah, a servant in the Bennet household, who pursues her own happiness in spite of bigger obstacles than those confronting the young ladies whose petticoats she launders. An unvarnished, even déclassé view of the Bennets themselves is present in Joe Wright's 2005 feature film of *Pride & Prejudice*, in which livestock move freely in and out of the family's cluttered, crumbling house. Autumn de Wilde's 2020 feature film *Emma.* is notable for Mia Goth's sensitive portrayal of Harriet Smith as capable of being not only silly but also, ultimately, self-possessed.

Most screen adaptations of Austen show servants at work much more frequently than the novels themselves do. In Roger Michell's 1995 telefilm *Persuasion*, the camera accords great dignity to working people. De Wilde goes even further in *Emma.* by giving the servants at Hartfield both names and opportunities for (nonverbal) critique. In another vein, Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* feature film, which I recommended earlier with respect to race, is again of interest because Rozema endows Fanny Price with the ambition to become an author. Emma Thompson's screenplay for Ang Lee's 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* spells out for a turn-of-the-millennium audience why the Dashwood sisters cannot just go earn a living.

As I previously mentioned, Ibi Zoboi's young-adult novel *Pride* 'remixes' *Pride and Prejudice* along socioeconomic as well as racial lines. The five Benitez sisters and their parents live in a tiny apartment; their father works nights at a hospital cafeteria.

Readers and fan communities: Countless novels feature present-day Austen fans of moderate means engaging with ersatz or real Austen characters, or with the author herself, via time travel, role-playing, or magic. Of these, the most insightful on the subject of class differences is Shannon Hale's 2007 novel *Austenland*, which was made into a 2010 film directed by Jerusha Hess. In both versions, an American fan travels to England to participate in a kind of live-action enactment of a pseudo Austen novel. Among the country-house cast are Darcy and Wickham types, played by actors whose roles conceal the men's very different true identities.

I highly recommend, too, the television miniseries *Lost in Austen* (2008), which proceeds from a frankly ridiculous premise. Amanda, a modern-day London office worker who adores *Pride and Prejudice*, finds her way into the world of that novel via her bathroom wall, thereby switching places with Elizabeth Bennet. While the defiantly non-posh Amanda fakes Regency behaviour in an apparently doomed effort to pass, Elizabeth makes herself comfortably at home in the life of a self-supporting single woman in our century.

Points of Connection

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, attending to Austen's representations of gender uncovers points of possible connection for today's readers. In particular, the question of Austen's feminism always rewards investigation. While no radical like Mary Wollstonecraft, Austen nevertheless promoted women's self-determination in a way that can be seen as progressive. Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr Collins on the grounds that neither would make the other happy. Charlotte Lucas accepts Mr Collins because his offer matches her own pragmatic goals of leaving her family home and gaining the independence of a married woman. In *Persuasion*, Mrs Croft robustly demonstrates women's physical courage and stamina, while gentle Anne Elliot voices her objections to men's assumed authority: 'the pen', she memorably declares, 'has been in their hands' (255).

Austen decisively influenced the genre of the novel, moreover, by establishing new kinds of both heroines and heroes. This contribution is clearest in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose characters debate the

qualities of the so-called accomplished woman. Such a person is faultlessly behaved, artistically well trained, perfectly beautiful, and successfully endures trials to her virtue. By contrast, an Austen heroine is someone who thinks for herself and develops self-knowledge. Thus, *Pride and Prejudice* centres not on the trusting and lovely Jane Bennet—who would have made an ideal eighteenth-century heroine—but on the sparkling, overconfident Elizabeth. An Austen heroine, far from changing herself to become more attractive to a man, concentrates on her moral self: her personal growth, as we would say today.

An Austen hero is not static either. He examines himself, identifies his faults, and works to remedy them. Especially in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, Austen airs the conventional view that a flawed man can be improved or redeemed by the love of a 'good' woman, but she does not endorse this notion. Her heroes and heroines enter marriage having already made themselves worthy of each other.

Austen follows the norms of her era in investing men with the power to propose marriage, while granting women the power only to accept or refuse such an offer. Though many students guess that marriages in Austen's era were arranged, in fact her emphasis on the importance of love accords with prevailing views of her time. Her celebration of truly companionate marriage, however, sets her apart.

I often hear from my students that the world Austen depicts reminds them of their own experiences in high school, full of flirting, crushes, and romantic rivalries (minus, of course, social media). Discussions about parallels and differences between Regency and present-day dating cultures can lead to valuable insights. Adaptations of Austen's novels to college and university settings, such as Green and Su's *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, likewise open up questions of perceptions of conduct, especially women's, then and now. My students have found especially thought provoking the transformation of Lydia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* from a heedless hedonist to a victim of an abusive relationship.

Other aspects of Austen's novels that resonate with today's students include her treatment of social awkwardness, which they perceive as analogous to the experiences of neuroatypical young people navigating a baffling world. As an example of how works of literature might be interpreted outside of traditional academic frameworks, I often share Phyllis Ferguson Bottomer's analyses of Austen's novels in light of current understandings of the autistic spectrum. Those students who are familiar with Matthew Macfadyen's performance in Joe Wright's 2005 *Pride & Prejudice* film can comment, too, on his portrayal of Darcy as being less proud than deficient in social skills.

More generally, psychological explorations of Austen's characters greatly interest many of my students, who are all too aware of the prevalence in their generation of anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental illness. Marianne Dashwood's excessive sensibility, for example, can be approached both via medical theories of Austen's day and also as a cautionary tale of refusal to engage in acts of self-care. By contrast, Elinor Dashwood assiduously manages her own symptoms of distress, in large part by doing what we would now call setting boundaries with her mother and sister. Anne Elliot, too, well aware of her tendency towards emotional overwhelm, capably looks after herself and her needs, often by seeking solitude and reflection. Furthermore, Anne sensitively counsels Captain Benwick regarding his painful grief. Robustly healthy herself, Emma Woodhouse patiently and sympathetically copes with her father's moods and hypochondria. Altogether, Austen's depictions of emotional resilience, which Kay Young has recently illuminated, hold strong appeal for young people who seek to cultivate wellness in a world full of stressors.

Finally, Austen's astute analysis of gendered power dynamics holds new relevance in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Valuably, Austen depicts not only verbal and physical assaults on women but also acts of effective resistance. Elizabeth Bennet laughs off minor insults, including of course Mr Darcy's judgement that she is 'tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me' (*PP* 12). Moreover, Elizabeth asserts herself in response to the arrogance of first Mr Collins and then Mr Darcy, as each man in turn not so much proposes marriage as demonstrates his certainty that he

cannot be refused. As Celia A. Easton has explored, students' unfortunate familiarity with sexual assault and alcohol abuse leads them to appreciate the real dangers of the tête-à-tête carriage ride in *Emma*, during which Emma firmly resists the advances of the wine-drunk Mr Elton. Meek Fanny Price stalwartly refuses to bow to Sir Thomas Bertram's overbearing authority, Edmund Bertram's efforts at persuasion, and Henry Crawford's blandishments. Austen endows all her heroines with the certainty that they deserve happiness and respect. What's more, she celebrates her characters' commitment to their personal integrity, rather than their maintenance of their sexual virtue per se.

In addition to being open to classroom discussions of the relatability and relevance of Austen's novels, I encourage you who are instructors at the secondary and undergraduate level to design at least one course assignment in a non-traditional mode, in order to allow your students to investigate connections and contexts that are of particular concern to them. In my experience, young writers exceed expectations at every level, from research to writing style, when they are free to pursue their own curiosity, draw on their unique expertise, and address their chosen audience.

My favourite example from my own courses is the project completed by the student whom I mentioned at the beginning of my introduction: the African-American woman who felt that her own experience was not at all reflected in Austen's novels. She decided to write a personal essay recounting her reactions and responses to our readings, which eventually led her to appreciate certain aspects of Austen's artistry. This student wanted to share her insights with others who, like her, live in the city of Baltimore and use its public libraries. So she designed and formatted her essay in the form of a booklet, made copies of it using curriculum-support funds, and placed one of the booklets in each of the library branches in and around the neighbourhood where she grew up.[9] She hoped that a curious young reader might pick up her essay and be inspired to give Austen a try.

Notes

1 My thanks to Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria Frawley for their invitation to contribute to this volume, and for their enthusiasm about this topic. I gratefully acknowledge the opportunity, made possible by Professor Anna Paluchowska-Messing, to present work in progress to English literature students at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, in April 2019. I appreciate the inspiration of my own students, especially those in my LIT 335 course, Jane Austen and Her Readers. I drafted and revised this essay in a rapidly changing world, which will have changed still further by the time you read it. I completed final revisions in August 2020, several months into the COVID-19 pandemic and the next wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, with the critical US Presidential election a few months in the future.

2 Goucher's 1400 or so undergraduates include approximately 40% students of colour, a proportion that has been steadily rising in recent years ('Fall 2018 Fact Sheet'). Collegewide, the gender balance is officially 69% women, 31% men, although an increasing proportion of students identify as nonbinary ('Fall 2018 Fact Sheet'). The overwhelming majority of students in my literature classes identify as women, nonbinary, and/ or trans. Approximately 25% of incoming students are first-generation, i.e., the first members of their immediate family to attend a four-year undergraduate institution ('Class of 2022 Infographic').

3 In Fall 2020 I launched a new course in Goucher's general-education curriculum: a first-year seminar titled '*Pride and Prejudice*, Here and Now'.

4 See in particular Wells, 'Austen in Public'.

5 Patricia A. Matthew has incisively analysed how Austen's novels, thanks to fervent fans, tend to eclipse other worthy works, including the anonymously published 1808 novel *The Woman of Colour: A Tale*. Teaching Austen in conjunction with *The Woman of Colour* is an approach taken by instructors at America's historically black colleges and universities (Favret, 'Jane Austen at 200').

6 In addition to the chapters in this volume, recommended resources for imaginative Austen pedagogy include Olivera Jokic's illuminating article 'Teaching to the Resistance: What to Do When Students Dislike Austen', which includes quotations from her undergraduates at John Jay College of the City University of New York; Michael Verderame's reflections on teaching *Persuasion* to incarcerated students; and Bridget Draxler and Danielle Spratt's treatments of public-humanities and community-based-learning approaches. More valuable work is on the way, including the forthcoming summer 2021 special issue of *Persuasions*

On-Line, the open-access journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America, titled 'Beyond the Bit of Ivory: Jane Austen and Diversity'.

7 For a thorough consideration of the degree of likelihood that Austen herself saw Sarah Baartman, see Harris, chapter 7.

8 A digital image of Sherald's portrait is included in Schjeldahl.

9 The curriculum-support funds that made it possible for my student to produce multiple copies of her booklet came through the generosity of Betty Applestein Sweren, Goucher class of 1952, to Goucher's pioneering Book Studies programme. Together with her husband Edgar Sweren, Mrs Sweren has recently endowed the college's Marcie Sweren Wogan Institute for the Study of the Book.

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