

# Being Jane

A close analysis of the modern cultural memory of the person and author Jane Austen



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## Table of Contents

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>2. AUSTEN’S LIFE: THE FACTS</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>3. JANE &amp; ROMANCE</b> .....	<b>27</b>
NANCY MOSER – JUST JANE (2007).....	31
SYRIE JAMES – THE LOST MEMOIRS OF JANE AUSTEN (2008).....	35
SALLY SMITH O’ROURKE – THE MAN WHO LOVED JANE AUSTEN (2006).....	38
JILL PITKEATHLEY – CASSANDRA & JANE (2004).....	40
VERONICA BENNETT – CASSANDRA’S SISTER (2006).....	45
<b>4. DEAR JANE</b> .....	<b>49</b>
LAURIE BROWN – WHAT WOULD JANE AUSTEN DO? (2009).....	51
PATRICE HANNON – DEAR JANE AUSTEN: A HEROINE’S GUIDE TO LIFE AND LOVE (2007).....	53
MARILYN BRANT – ACCORDING TO JANE (2009).....	56
<b>5. VAMPIRES, ZOMBIES, AND JANE</b> .....	<b>60</b>
STEPHANIE BARRON – JANE AUSTEN MYSTERY SERIES (1995 - 2010).....	62
MICHAEL THOMAS FORD – JANE BITES BACK (2009).....	67
JANET MULLANY – JANE AND THE DAMNED (2010).....	71
<b>6. JANE ON FILM</b> .....	<b>75</b>
JULIAN JARROLD - BECOMING JANE (2007).....	77
JEREMY LOVERING - MISS AUSTEN REGRETS (2007).....	81
PATRICIA ROZEMA – MANSFIELD PARK (1999).....	85
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>89</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b> .....	<b>94</b>

## Introduction

In one of the most famous passages of her classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Jane Austen describes Elizabeth Bennet's biased opinion of Fitzwilliam Darcy after he has proposed to her for the first time:

From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry. (188)

After this moment of blunt honesty, it still takes Elizabeth quite some time to realise her first opinion of Darcy is not in accordance with his true character. This theme of first impressions, which was also the original title of the novel, influenced by both “pride” and “prejudice” is partly what made Austen's story such a success. While the novel was relatively well-received after it was published for the first time in 1813, not many people would have believed that this particular anonymous “lady”<sup>1</sup> would become one of the most famous female authors the world had ever known. Many first impressions were formed of Austen and her work: some admiring, some indifferent, some appalled. Charlotte Brontë, for example, never hid her honest opinion of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: “An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” (Southam 126). Brontë had her own vision of Austen as an author, and she was definitely not the only one.

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<sup>1</sup> When her first book was published, Austen decided she wanted to remain anonymous for the time being. Therefore, instead of having her own name printed on the cover of her first book, it simply said “By a Lady.”

Even more than they did back in the nineteenth century, people in the twenty-first century associate the name “Jane Austen” with a specific image, even though it is generally not as negative as that of Charlotte Brontë. Everyone tends to have their own opinion ready, whether they have actually read her classic novels or have just heard a quick summary in one of their English Literature classes. Austen has become one of those topics everyone is supposed to have heard about at least once in their life: the most romantic female writer of all time, the sarcastic spinster who sat in the parsonage all day long, the female equal of William Shakespeare. It seems Austen’s own story on first impressions has come to haunt her, especially in the modern day and age. This time, however, it is not the portrayals of her famous characters that matter, but her own.

In 2011, Jane Austen has become almost a household brand. There are not many objects left that have not been turned into some kind of Austen souvenir: from boxer-shorts with her silhouette printed on them to cook books filled with recipes “Austen herself would have loved” to Mrs. Darcy bracelets and Jane Austen action figures. We are living in a Jane Austen moment and “the moment hasn’t ended, it hasn’t even slowed down” (James par. 1). Every few months Austen’s name can be found somewhere in the new releases lists of literature (Laura Viera Rigler’s *Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict*, Shannon Hale’s *Austenland: A Novel*), films (the upcoming release of *From Prada to Nada*, based on Austen’s novel *Emma*), and television (reruns of BBC series, ITV’s *Lost in Austen*). At this time, it seems, however, that Austen’s novels have taken a step back and it is Austen herself to whom the spotlight has turned. Numerous people, such as biographers, authors of fiction, and film directors, constantly take the task upon themselves to fill in the gaps of Austen’s own mysterious life and continue to provide the world with various representations of this popular novelist.

After her death in 1817, Jane's brother Henry wrote a "Biographical Notice of the Author", which told Austen's life story and was added to the posthumous publication of *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*. This was the first time that Austen was identified as the author of these stories, and her family wanted the reading audience to have a specific image of Jane; an image which accentuated certain character traits, but also left a great deal of Austen's personality out. While the family provided the audience with some facts about Jane's life, they also created a mystery that would surround her for the rest of her afterlife. With Henry's short biography and the letters written by Jane that have survived, her life story still has numerous gaps which people long to fill. Who exactly was this fascinating author? How did she come up with these amazing love stories? Is any of it based on real life experiences? These questions have been asked over and over again, and also have been answered multiple times by different people with completely diverse outcomes. With all the various retellings of Austen's life, the world is getting a chance to rethink their first impression of the author Jane Austen and what kind of a person she herself might once was. With the recent overload of Jane Austen portrayals, it can even be said we are not only given a new first impression, but also a second, third, and fourth.

Rewriting Austen's personal biography seems to have become a new industry in itself; an industry that is most certainly worth researching. During the last few decades the keyword "rewriting" has become a new field of interest in the world of literary fiction: going back to already existing stories and retelling them from a different perspective or trying to find the missing pieces to make the puzzle complete. All these different rewritings form a process of shaping and reshaping especially collective memory; the most prominent way in which authors such as Austen are remembered and portrayed. Liedeke Plate states in one of her works that "re-vision was motivated by a desire to counter a tradition of silence and alleged misrepresentation" (2008 394) and that is something that can be applied to Austen without a

doubt. Austen's family provided the world with a specific image of their beloved daughter, sister and aunt, but this portrayal was not completely reliable. Certain events in Austen's life and character traits were kept from the reading audience, because they would taint the image the world had of her, and a large number of Austen's own written letters, which captured parts of her true character, were burned by her sister Cassandra, who wanted to protect Jane's private life. People felt the need to break the silence surrounding Austen's life story, to bring to the attention misrepresentations brought into the world by family biographies, so they decided to start filling in the gaps themselves by mixing biography with myth and fiction in order to create their own Miss Austen image. At this point in time, it has simply become a question of product marketing and personal choice: the public is offered different portrayals of Jane Austen and they can choose whichever "memory" they like best.

There are different ways in which Austen's own story tends to be retold in both fiction and film. In every single work, the basic facts that are known of Austen's life, which can be found in any biography with her as the main subject, are used as the main framework around which the rest of the story is structured. The particular gaps in Austen's biography can be filled to the author's own decisions, which often leads to completely imaginary scenes, fictional events slightly based on unclear parts of the original biographical details, or situations resembling the plots of Austen's own novels, as Paul Franssen and A.J. Hoenselaars explain:

Apart from historical documentation, we find that the lives of subject-authors are frequently reconstructed on the basis of their own written works. This practice may range from fairly plausible inferences, if the works in question are clearly autobiographical, to the wholly unwarranted projection of the plots of putatively objective genres onto the life of the subject-author, as when a dramatist's play is

treated as a record, in a somewhat displaced form, of what actually happened to him in his own life. (24)

Probably the most well-known recent example of a biopic on Austen's life is the 2007 Hollywood film *Becoming Jane*, which stars actress Anne Hathaway as Jane, and which definitely influenced the image people have of the author Jane Austen. Interesting examples of modern fictional works which retell Austen's tale are Michael Thomas Ford's *Jane Bites Back* (2009), in which the authoress is presented as a vampire, and Marilyn Brant's *According to Jane* (2009), which shows Austen as a wise agony aunt who suddenly appears to give badly needed advice to a young woman. There are numerous different examples of both fictional works and films which present Jane Austen and her life story in various ways, but the ones that will be discussed more closely in this thesis will be mentioned in more detail later.

Authors and film makers who decide to retell Austen's own story obviously need to make themselves familiar with her biographical background. Since the 1990s, numerous articles and books have been written on Austen's life and her role in contemporary culture. New biographies which look at Austen from different points of view continue to be published, such as Deirdre Le Faye's *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (2003), *Jane Austen: A Life* (1999) by Claire Tomalin, and Jon Spence's *Becoming Jane Austen* (2007). Next to the obvious biographies, much attention has also been paid to the adaptation of Austen's novels to the screen and her current role in the film world of Hollywood. Works such as John Wiltshire's *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), *The Cinematic Jane Austen: Essays on the Filmic Sensibility of the Novels* (2009) edited by David Monaghan, Ariane Hudelet and John Wiltshire, and Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield's *Jane Austen in Hollywood* (2000) all focus on how Austen's novels have been recreated in another age and medium and what exactly caused this explosion of interest in Austen's work in the world of film and television. Most recent and noticeable is Claire Harman's *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (2009),

in which the history of Austen's fame and the changing status of her work are extensively discussed. However, even though it is clear that a lot of attention is given to Austen these days, not much has been written on the question of how Austen herself, as person and author, is portrayed in fiction and on the screen. While a couple of authors, such as Claire Harman, have devoted a chapter or article to a specific portrayal or stereotypical image of Jane Austen, so far no one has placed these different representations next to one another and looked at them in closer detail, which is what I want to do in this thesis. In what different ways is Jane Austen portrayed in twenty-first century fiction and why do these reigning images continue to rule the afterlife of this author? What do these particular representations say about Austen's position as an author in this day and age, and do these images also perhaps say something about the society we live in? By exploring the way in which these different portrayals of Jane Austen have been formed and continue to exist, I hope to be able to contribute to the debates on Jane Austen's place in contemporary literature and cultural memory as well as the issue of authors and their afterlives.

In order to address this topic, I will discuss several works of literature and films, which all centre on Jane Austen as a leading character. Next to these primary works, I will use secondary literature on Jane Austen herself, her fame and the brand-name she has become over the decades, and the topic of re-writing and re-visioning. In the first chapter, the focus will be on re-writing, cultural memory and biographical fiction in general, in order to see how this research project can be placed in the already existing field. Next, chapter 2 brings together a collection of the basic facts we have of Jane Austen's life and what different biographies over the years have focused on and how they have decided to portray her. The following chapters will then be used to introduce the different ways in which Jane Austen has been represented in works of fiction over the years. Chapter 3 will deal with the image of Austen in relation to the subject she is most famous for: love and romance. A closer look will



be taken at Nancy Moser's *Just Jane* (2007), *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (2007) by Syrie James, Sally Smith O'Rourke's *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* (2006), Jill Pitkeathley's *Cassandra and Jane* (2004), and Veronica Bennett's *Cassandra's Sister* (2007). In chapter 4 the focus will be on novels in which Austen is portrayed as a wise woman whom young girls and women turn to for advice, namely Laurie Brown's *What Would Jane Austen Do?* (2009), *Dear Jane Austen: a Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* (2007) by Patricia Hannon, and Marilyn Brant's *According to Jane* (2009). The next series of books, discussed in chapter 5, focus on a Jane Austen who seems to be connected to death and the supernatural, such as zombies and vampires. Novels which provide the reading audience with such an image are Michael Thomas Ford's *Jane Bites Back* (2009), Stephanie Barron's *Jane Austen Mystery* series (1995 - 2010), and Jane Mullany's *Jane and the Damned* (2010). Chapter 6 will then focus on depictions of Austen on the screen in *Becoming Jane* (2008), *Miss Austen Regrets* (2007), and *Mansfield Park* (1999).

## 1. A Theoretical Background

When the name of a famous author like William Shakespeare or Jane Austen is mentioned, numerous people automatically conjure up a specific image in their mind of this particular person. This portrayal can be based on existing material, such as portraits and films, which provide the audience with an indication of what this author might have looked like, but it can also be influenced by a person's own imagination. While one particular generation may think of Shakespeare as the slightly balding man depicted on the cover of their English Literature book in secondary school, countless people living in this day and age prefer thinking of Shakespeare as resembling Joseph Fiennes, who played the role of the famous author in the popular film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Likewise, while some may picture Jane Austen as the actress Anne Hathaway after the release of the film *Becoming Jane* in 2007, others might think of Austen as how she was once sketched by her sister Cassandra. All these different portrayals are an important part of how a society remembers these authors, and therefore, its past; a process which is also known as cultural memory. This important keyword, which has emerged over the last decade, is now widely used as an umbrella term which focuses on different acts of remembrance using a variety of media. Not only stories, both written and oral, but also images, museums, and monuments work together in the constantly continuing process of creating and changing cultural memory.

World-famous authors, such as Austen and Shakespeare, are an important part of the cultural memory of literature in general. They belong to a group of authors whose texts, as well as themselves, have an important place in cultural memory: two different, but certainly interdependent, aspects. There is an interesting dynamic between the author as a figure of memory on the one hand, and his or her written texts on the other. These two aspects both have their own particular place in cultural memory, but at the same time cannot help but influence each other constantly. It is also in these cases that the borders between an author and

his or her own fiction slowly fade, and it is important to rethink these limits and see how they are used and changed in modern-day literature. An important part of this evolution is memorial dynamics: the process of how a literary artefact can relate to other memorial media. A novel may be seen as a cultural memory on its own, but this memory evolves constantly and is influenced by the cultural memory of the author and adaptations in which the story is looked at from a different perspective. For example, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is based on Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and after having read Rhys' prequel a reader will most probably look at Brontë's original differently. This process also works the other way around: the cultural memory of an author can be influenced by numerous examples of memorial media and the memory that exists of his or her own written work. In her article "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans", Ann Rigney writes: "Cultural memories have their own histories and continue to evolve in the course of time" (367), which also applies to the cultural memory of an author like Jane Austen, which is still constantly changing. In this process, the borders between author and text are often crossed and especially in cultural memory it appears to be quite challenging sometimes to keep the two apart.

John Wiltshire writes: "Every cultural creation, even a cathedral, has an afterlife, unpredictable, uncontrolled by its original architect, when another era, another cultural configuration, turns it, adapts it, to its own uses" (3). Timeless texts, such as Austen's novels, therefore also have their own cultural afterlife, which is constantly growing and changing. These particular stories have spread across several generations and continents and can be described as "rooted in, and yet ahead of, the time at which they were produced" (Rigney 2010 3). The fact that the text is read by different groups, in different times, at different places results in a continually evolving cultural memory. Austen's stories are still relevant and close to reality in the modern day and age, which is one of the elements that makes sure these

stories are not forgotten. Yet, it is not only the collection of stories that speaks to the reading audience, but the historical figure of Austen herself as well. The person and name of “Jane Austen” has also acquired its own afterlife: “‘Jane Austen’ then, the cultural image, can be distinguished from Jane Austen, the texts” (Wiltshire 10). It is her personal life story, and the mysteries that come with it, not her novels that have most recently caught the eye of modern-day society. However, the only material available that tells of Austen's life leaves the audience with an incomplete puzzle. It is no surprise that in this day and age, where there is an information overload and people want an answer to every single question, there is a general longing for these gaps in Austen's biography to be filled. Not only authors, but also film directors and artists, have taken the task upon themselves to solve this particular case in which Jane Austen plays the central role. They are taking the chance to rewrite Austen's life story, in order to provide the reading audience with answers to their questions, and as a result numerous diverse portrayals of the famous British authoress are brought into the world.

When looking at the cultural memory of Jane Austen's texts and person, a significant keyword jumps out: re-writing. Austen's stories often form the basis of new novels and films, which all continue to be great successes. It seems as if the audience is not stuck in a phase where there is a specific demand for new stories that have not been written before; people at the moment seem to be satisfied by the retellings of classic tales. This phenomenon “is typical of cultural production in this era of greatly diversified means of mechanical reproduction. Remaking, rewriting, ‘adaptation,’ reworking, ‘appropriation,’ conversion, mimicking (...) of earlier works into other media is an important feature of the current landscape” (Wiltshire 2). The idea of re-writing and re-visioning has become more popular during the last few decades, in which the past is no longer “this distant ‘foreign’ country but a space open to multiple revisits from the perspective of the present” (Plate 2008 390). Especially the voice of women, which has a past of being repressed and not listened to, has received much attention in the

light of re-writing. Yet, both women *and* men felt the urge to go back to already existing stories and look at them from a different perspective: to give a voice to unheard characters, both male and female, and thereby maybe change the way a specific story is remembered (an example of this is the already mentioned *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys). All these different rewritings are an important part of the process of shaping and reshaping cultural memory, which works by reconstructing (Erll 2006 174). In the world of Jane Austen, rewrites of the original Austen novels have become an industry on its own. The love story of *Pride and Prejudice* has been rewritten numerous times, both from the perspective of Mr. Darcy (*Mr. Darcy's Diary: A Novel* by Amanda Grange) and Elizabeth Bennet (*In the Arms of Mr. Darcy* by Sharon Lathan), but characters such as Georgiana Darcy (C. Allyn Pierson's *Mr. Darcy's Little Sister*), Frederick Wentworth (*None But You* by Susan Kaye), and Mr. Knightley (Barbara Cornthwaite's *George Knightley, Esquire*) are also given the chance to tell their own stories. However, while most of Austen's characters have been given that bit of extra attention over the years, it is Jane Austen herself who seems to stand in the spotlight at this moment in time.

While Postmodernism, most specifically Roland Barthes, announced the death of the author and the demise of character, the last few decades have shown a resurrection of historical authors as characters. When looking at this particular increase of attention for representing writers, a particular genre comes to mind: biographical fiction. This kind of novels, which focuses on the life story of a specific person, is part of a field that is definitely growing and becoming more popular at this moment in time, especially in English literature (Kersten 55). Biographical fiction is often linked to historical fiction, and maybe even seen as a subgenre of this group. In historical fiction, the history of a specific time and place is brought to life for the reader, such as for instance the Middle Ages or the Elizabethan Age. The same is done in biographical fiction, but these novels focus on one particular person, who

actually lived during this specific historical period. While both genres require solid research, biographical fiction uses as a foundation a real person, while historical fiction generally only uses completely fictional characters. Biographical fiction then is a mix of both facts and fiction, which makes it a challenging genre to write in, and an interesting genre to research. It also differs from a biography, because not only facts are given, and usually only a specific period in this person's life is brought to the attention instead of his or her whole life story. Another fascinating aspect, which is definitely important to mention in the particular case of Jane Austen, is the fact that this is biographical fiction based on the life of an author, who him/herself also wrote fictional stories. It often happens that the author's own plots are used to fill up the empty spaces in the biography, which is an intriguing combination of the author's own real life and his or her imaginary tales. The right balance between fact and fiction needs to be found, which can be quite challenging, as John Mullan explains in a review of two examples of biographical fiction based on the life of author Henry James:

These two clever and engaging novels unsettle each other's assumptions, prompting the thought that biographical fiction might, unavoidably, condemn itself to a kind of triviality. The more it stacks up its evidence, its sources, its academic credentials, the more it condemns itself to a secondary status – something perhaps more entertaining than the truth, but something less than the truth, too. (par. 7)

The field of biographical fiction based on Jane Austen's life has been growing since the late 1990s, and has since then turned into a fascinating branch of the Austen industry. Instead of re-writing, once again, the love story between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, authors decided to start focusing on the remarkable woman behind this romantic tale. The various retellings of Austen's own life story have certain aspects in common, such as the basic background story, which always includes the same fundamental facts of the author's life, and particular rules of biography they all tend to follow, as Joseph Epstein writes: "Every

biography is under the obligation to tell a story about its subject: to find a pattern, bring coherence, create drama, and, above all, offer an explanation of the true meaning of the life under investigation” (par. 10). Yet, next to these basic essential elements, numerous authors long to turn Austen’s story around and add interesting individual changes: “In many cases, the presentation of the author as character is accompanied by an element of self-reflection: pondering the life and works of often illustrious predecessors, the modern author tends to reflect on the genesis of literary works in general and his or her own in particular” (Franssen and Hoenselaars 18). Each author adds his or her own individual touch to their specific representation of the author and person Jane Austen, which results in numerous diverse portrayals. However, while these depictions show the different faces of Austen, they also provide a glance at the face of our modern-day society. These portrayals change the way in which Austen herself is thought of and remembered, but this female icon is also something onto which we project our own needs and occupations, which is something that will come back in more detail later on in various chapters of this research project.

It is not a real surprise that most of these retellings focus on one specific element of Austen’s life, namely the role of love and romance, which is the topic she continues to be linked to most often and which still raises the most frequently asked and discussed questions. Did she have her own Mr. Darcy? What role did Tom Lefroy really play in her life? Should one not know love in order to be able to write about it in such a specific way? What Austen may have missed in real life when it comes to love, is definitely made up to her in all the novels based on her life story, in which she is given numerous lovers and romantic adventures. However, it is not only love that plays a central role in these biographical novels. In her afterlife, Austen embarks on several different adventures, such as solving murder mysteries and becoming part of a vampire clan. As a result, while one of the most central, but questionable, topics in her own novels, love, seems to be unconditionally linked to Austen’s

own life, people also portray her in completely diverse, and sometimes even unexpected, ways, which not only tells us more about the constantly changing cultural memory of the author Jane Austen herself, but about our own modern society as well.



## 2. Austen's Life: The Facts

In 1995, the American magazine *Entertainment Weekly* published an article on the “Top 10 Entertainment Personalities of the Year”, in which Jane Austen took one of the top spots and was accompanied by a picture of her modern self (below, Westenberg). With a laptop next



to her, a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in one hand, and a mobile phone, with which she is most likely talking to her publisher, in her other, Austen is suddenly turned into a stereotypical twenty-first-century author. While it can be said with certainty that Austen did not spend her time chatting on the phone next to a swimming pool, it is still a mystery what this world-famous author really looked like and what kind of a person she was. Though the world has about 160 letters written by Austen herself during her lifetime, two authentic, but slightly unclear, portraits and several biographies written by family members closely after her death, there are still numerous questions left unanswered. These particular gaps, such as the questions of how many lovers she might have had or how she came up with the ideas for her stories, are extensively discussed and elaborated upon in numerous fictional works, which

will be focused upon later in this thesis. In this particular chapter, however, the actual facts the world has of Austen's person and life take on a central role, because it is these specific details which form the foundation for all other tales on Jane Austen's life.

It was not until after Austen's death in 1817 that the first biography of her life was published. This mainly had to do with the fact that during her lifetime, Austen was not that well-known as an author. When her first work was published in 1811, it did not even mention her real name: the cover simply said "By a Lady." It was her brother Henry who decided to write a "Biographical Notice of the Author" after his sister's death, which was added to the posthumous publication of *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* in December 1817. This was the first time that Austen was identified as the author of these stories, but after this it still took quite some time before a real, more extensive biography was published:

In 1817, the idea of such a biography, like the idea of Jane leaving any artistic legacy, was unimaginable. Compared with the global fame of Scott and Byron, Austen's little group of admirers and sales of a few thousand copies were negligible, and although plenty of her readers had declared themselves delighted, no one yet seemed moved to consider her novels as more than light entertainment for the current, and as unlikely as any to survive. (Harman 85)

In the first few decades after Austen's death, only family members wrote about her life, because her fame was gradually spreading and there slowly came a specific demand for information on the authoress behind novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. These particular biographies written by descendants of the Austen family, however, brought to life a kind of biased family memory. Certain aspects of Austen's life were deliberately left out, in order to portray not only Jane, but the entire family in a more positive light. Examples of these events are Jane's brother George, who was mentally retarded or deaf and did not live with his parents and siblings, and the arrest of Austen's aunt, Jane

Leigh-Perrot, for shoplifting, which was considered a disgrace to the family. If these particular facts had come out, they would have tainted the memory of Jane, according to members of the Austen family, who preferred portraying their sister and aunt as a quiet, domestic spinster; the image with which Austen is still most often associated these days.

After Henry's short biographical notice in 1817, James Edward Austen Leigh published a memoir of his aunt, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, in 1869. This biography was a family project, which would most probably have included more information if Cassandra, Jane's sister, had not destroyed many of her sibling's letters. The work did not go into any private details, and the so-called 'scandalous' aspects were also left out in this life history. The biography was well-received and became the primary biographical work on Austen for quite some time. At the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, Austen's fame rose and more biographies were published, such as those by J.H. Hubback, Mary Augusta, and Elizabeth Jenkins, which each contained new information and insights. In 1932, a collection of Austen's surviving letters was published, edited by R.W. Chapman, which was followed by a second (1952) and third (1995) edition. In this last edition, edited by Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye, new material was added and the letters were put in chronological order. Especially when the events the family had tried to keep hidden from the world, such as Austen's own experiences with romance, came to the surface, authors saw it as an interesting and challenging task to tell the story of Austen's life again and again: each time with different points of view and different interpretations of particular events. This only made the urge to tell Austen's story stronger and more present, up until this very day: "The telling of what was previously considered best left unsaid not only opens new narrative spaces, but redefines these spaces as effectively public" (Plate 2000 71).

Due to the several family biographies and Austen's own letter correspondence with her sister Cassandra and other family members, the basic facts of her life are known to the

reading audience. Jane Austen was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire, England, and had seven siblings, six brothers and one sister: James, George, Edward, Henry, Francis, Charles, and Cassandra, who was also her best friend and confidante: “But dearest of all to the heart of Jane was her sister Cassandra, about three years her senior. Their sisterly affection for each other could scarcely be exceeded” (J.E. Austen Leigh 15). Her father, George Austen, was a reverend who had a respectable income, but with all these children to feed, the family was definitely not rich. Mrs. Austen, née Cassandra Leigh, had a particular way of raising her children, namely by sending them away to another family at a young age: “After weaning, though, the children were placed in the hands of a local family (...) until they reached what Mrs Austen considered to be the age of reason: that is until they could walk and talk and demonstrate a measure of sturdy independence” (Shields 12).

Even though the Austens could not provide their children with everything because of their money issues, they “believed they could make up for the lack of money by giving their children a good education and depending on rich and influential relatives to help” (Spence 67). Both Jane and her sister Cassandra were sent to school, first in Southampton and later they attended a boarding school in Reading, and at home they were taught other accomplishments, such as drawing and playing the piano. As a young girl of ten or eleven, Jane “was shy, awkward, reserved, and uncomfortable with strangers. She lacked confidence and, in her own phrase, ‘ready civility’” (Spence 38). She preferred reading, like most others in her family, who were “great novel-readers and not ashamed of being so” (Austen, Le Faye Letter 14), and it did not take long before she took up writing as well. She wrote down her first stories in three notebooks, which are now known as her *Juvenilia*. These tales, which were written between 1787 and 1793, include humorous parodies and satirical pieces: “Jane wrote her early pieces for the amusement of her family and friends, and she put in shared jokes, teasing jibes, and allusions to real events in their lives” (Spence 40). These amusement

stories were, of course, only the start of Jane's aspirations to become a published author one day.

As Jane grew up, she continued to live at her parents' home in Steventon, while enjoying being a young woman. Some of her early letters tell of her pleasure at dances and parties and her visits to other cities, such as London and Bath. At home, she helped her mother and the servants in the household and attended church regularly. Of course, she also continued writing: between 1793 and 1795 she devoted her attention to an epistolary short novel called *Lady Susan*. After finishing this, she started on her first full-length novel with the title *Elinor and Marianne*: the story of two sisters and the difficulty of finding middle ground between passion and reason. Even though elements of Austen's own relationship with her sister Cassandra can be found in the story, Jon Spence comes with another logical explanation of the theme of this particular novel: "Tempting as it is to take Elinor and Marianne as deriving from Cassandra and Jane themselves, it is probably closer to the truth to see them as conflicting sides of Jane Austen's own nature" (91). It is not entirely clear when Jane put away *Elinor and Marianne*, which would later become her novel *Sense and Sensibility*, but it is a fact that something distracted her from her writing; a young man with the name of Tom Lefroy.

From December 1795 to January 1796, when Jane was twenty years old, Tom Lefroy, a nephew of some of the Austen's family friends, visited Hampshire before going to London to train as a barrister. Jane described him as "a very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man" (Spence 95) and it is often thought, looking at her letters which describe this particular young man, she developed a particular fondness for him. They met at a number of balls, and the attraction seems to have been mutual. He even visited her at home once, while wearing a white coat, which caused several jokes that can be found in Austen's letters. It is not clear how serious the feelings Tom and Jane had for one another were, but it can be said

that Jane felt differently towards Tom than she did to other young men she met: “She wrote picturing herself as the heroine of a sentimental novel: ‘At length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will be over. My tears flow as I wrote, at the melancholy idea.’ Jane makes fun of herself as a romantic heroine, but in doing so she stakes her claim to the role” (Spence 97). However, Austen’s own love story soon came to an end, when Tom left at the end of January. Neither of them had any money, so marriage simply was not an option, and the two never saw each other again. Both Jane’s joy and sadness overflowed into her writing and she started *First Impressions*, which would turn out to be the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*. While this particular affiliation between Austen and Lefroy is mainly based on speculation, it becomes clear from Jane’s letters that Tom Lefroy played a perhaps small but significant role in her life and may have influenced her thoughts and feelings towards the subject of love.

After hearing the enthusiastic responses from friends and family to his daughter’s newest story, George Austen decided to offer *First Impressions* to a publisher in London named Thomas Cadell. However, Cadell declined and sent the letter back without even giving the manuscript a try. It is not clear whether Jane knew about this, but even if she did, it did not stop her from writing. Around the same time, she started a new work inspired by Gothic novels which she called *Susan*, which would later become known to the public as *Northanger Abbey*. However, everything changed when her parents suddenly decided to retire to Bath, a city which Jane was not fond of, in 1801. The following years only brought more bad news: in 1802 Jane received her only proposal of marriage, by a friend of the family named Harris Bigg-Wither, which she rejected; in 1803 Jane finally sold her novel *Northanger Abbey*, but at the last minute the publisher decided not to publish it after all, and in 1805 her father suddenly died, which left the family with a considerably reduced income. Jane and Cassandra stayed with their mother and became largely dependent on financial support from their brothers. In

1806, they moved to Southampton and in 1809 to Chawton, where their brother Edward provided them with a small house. From this particular period, 1801 to approximately 1809, not many documents have survived. James Edward Austen-Leigh suggested that Austen probably had two composition phases: one in the 1790s, when she finished three full-length novels, and the other after 1809: “The family’s move to Bath in 1801 silenced her and (...) her muse returned only when she settled back in Hampshire” (Harman 42).

In Chawton, life was much quieter than it had been in Bath and Southampton, and Jane finally found the inspiration and the peace and quiet to start writing again. She was able to be as productive as she used to be and after she had revised *Sense and Sensibility*, her brother Henry helped her to find a publisher who was willing to buy her work. Thomas Egerton was interested and a deal was made to have the novel published in 1811. This chance of finally having her dream come true was the cause of new inspiration and Austen started a new novel named *Mansfield Park*. *Sense and Sensibility* received some favourable reviews and even made a small profit. Egerton continued to publish Jane’s work with *Pride and Prejudice* appearing in 1812, which was an instant success, and *Mansfield Park* in 1813, which was sold out in six months. She soon started writing *Emma*, which was published in 1815 with a special dedication to the Prince Regent. In 1816, Jane finished a sixth novel titled *Persuasion*, but during this time she became unwell and could no longer find the strength to write as much and as often as she used to. Her health deteriorated even more in 1817, but she managed to start her last novel, *Sandition*, which she would never finish. In May she moved to Winchester for medical treatment, and died there on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, aged 41.



After her death, Austen slowly became more and more famous, as mentioned before, and became one of the world's most favourite and well-known female authors of all time. Next to the limited biographical facts available about her life, only two authentic portraits of her have survived, both made by her sister Cassandra. Since one of them seems like an unfinished sketch, made around 1810 (above on the left) and the other is a back view (above on the right), not much can be said with certainty about Austen's looks. In the biographies, her family describes her as "attractive" (J.E. Austen Leigh 82), and "developing from a precociously bright little girl into a highly intelligent, articulate young woman, pretty as well as witty, devoted to her family" (W. and R.A. Austen-Leigh 50). However, Jane's niece Anna wrote in one of her letters: "One hardly understands how with all these advantages she could yet fail of being a decidedly handsome woman" (Shields 6-7). Whether Austen was a true beauty or not, it was her personality, and of course her remarkable writing skills, that stood out and made her loved by so many people, up until this very day.



One of Austen's famous personality traits is her sense of irony, which is clearly present in her writing and was not understood by everyone who read her work or met her: "I cannot believe that Jane, who wrote so many sharp things, never said one; and her criticism, whether expressed or not, must always have been felt. There never lived a human being with a keener sense of the ridiculous or a greater power of expressing it in satirical language" (Cornish 26). This irony is clearly present in her novels, which are also sources of information on Austen's character: "The text of Austen's novels is the most persuasive biographical detail we can ever have of her. Her work is the product of her unremitting attention, and we can see the character of that attention – that mind – more clearly in the novels than in anything else we know about her" (Klinkenborg par. 6). It is difficult, especially for authors retelling Jane's own life story, to separate these two from one another: her real life, reality, on the one hand, and her fiction on the other. Austen herself also played with this: using real situations in her novels but turning them around: "Austen is never autobiographical in the crude sense of recording what happened to her or the people she knew. But a real situation was sometimes her starting point and developed in her imagination as something quite separate from the 'real'" (Spence 64).

Only these few, mainly basic, facts are known about Austen and it is no wonder that admirers of her work continue to feel the need to fill the silences and gaps in her life story and thereby deal with and bring into the world misrepresentations of her figure:

Jane Austen is now considered to be one of the most difficult and challenging of biographical subjects, second only to Shakespeare in terms of how little of the life is knowable and of what interest it is. The complexity of the novels, the originality, intelligence and vitality of the mind behind them make many of Austen's admirers long for more evidence of her inner life, and in its absence, find fertile grounds for speculation. (Harman 137)

Different portrayals have been sketched of the author and person Jane Austen over the last few years, presenting the world with various diverse representations of this particular woman. From a romantic teenage girl searching for the perfect man to a strong and stubborn female detective solving murder mysteries, Austen has played all kinds of roles over the last two decades. This not only tells the reading audience more about this famous author herself, but also shows how a specific society projects its own character traits and occupations on the portrayals of this female icon, which will become apparent in the following chapters.

### 3. Jane & Romance

Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Janeites" (1924) is headed by a poem, of which these are the first two paragraphs:

Jane went to Paradise:  
 That was only fair.  
 Good Sir Walter met her first,  
 And let her up the stair.  
 Henry and Tobias,  
 And Miguel of Spain,  
 Stood with Shakespeare at the top  
 To welcome Jane –

Then the Three Archangels  
 Offered out of hand  
 Anything in Heaven's gift  
 That she might command  
 Azrael's eyes upon her,  
 Raphael's wings above,  
 Michael's sword against her heart,  
 Jane said: "Love."

The poem appears to be Kipling's own tribute to Jane Austen, in which he gives her something many people think she never experienced, but only wrote about: love. This is also the topic that returns in all of her novels, and the subject she is most well-known for. Next to being considered one of "the masters of the romance novel genre" (Regis 75), it is also Austen's name that is often mentioned as a cure for lovesick and hopelessly romantic young

women after another heartbreak, together with chocolate and a box of tissues. Guides such as Lauren Henderson's *Jane Austen's Guide to Dating* (2005) portray Jane Austen as a dating expert, with whose advice and tips any girl can find her own Mr. Darcy. It seems to be a given that Austen must have been an expert on love if she was able to write about it in such a realistic and convincing way. Therefore, it is no surprise that when a new representation of Austen is brought into the world, a little bit of romance is often added to the plot: "Eagerness to inject passionate romance into Jane Austen's life is nothing new" (Klingel Ray par. 1). This seems to be done with the thought in mind that someone must have experienced something in order to be able to write about it persuasively. However, does one also expect a crime novelist to have committed and/or solved murder cases? When one looks at Austen's biographical facts, it can almost certainly be said she remained a spinster all her life. However, the specific role the subject of romance and love played in her life remains discussable: did Austen never experience passion herself and did she compensate for this in her fiction, or did she have one or more affairs of the heart, but never reached the happy ending she did give the heroines in her novels? When it comes to love, what is the specific link that can be made between Austen's true life and her fiction, and why do authors pay such a large amount of attention to this specific issue in their representations?

When talking about Jane Austen and how she herself experienced love in her life, the same four events continue to come back. First of all, and most often used, the visit of Tom Lefroy to Hampshire in 1795, where he met Austen at a ball. Before she had the chance to get to know him, however, Lefroy had already gone to London, but it becomes clear from her letters that there was a flirtation between them during his stay. It is not clear whether Jane really had feelings of love towards this young man, but numerous authors tend to turn Tom Lefroy into the love of her life, as will become apparent later in this chapter. The second event in Austen's life which is often mentioned in relation to love is the first, and only, marriage

proposal she received during her lifetime, for as far as the world knows. In December 1802, Jane and Cassandra visited their friends Alethea, Catherine, and Elizabeth Bigg-Wither at Manydown. The girls' younger brother Harris, who was 21 years old at this time, had always had a certain fondness for Jane, and even though he was 5,5 years younger than her, proposed to her. Initially, Jane accepted, but after realising she could not marry someone she did not truly love, she rejected the proposal the next morning and left Manydown as soon as possible. Caroline Austen wrote about her aunt:

Mr Wither was very plain in person – awkward, & even uncouth in manner (...) one need not look about for secret reasons to account for a young lady's not loving him (...) I conjecture that the advantages he could offer, & her gratitude for his love, & her long friendship with his family, induced my Aunt to decide that she would marry him when he should ask her – but that having accepted him she found she was miserable & that the place & fortune which would certainly be his, could not alter the man (...) I have always respected her for the courage in cancelling that yes. (Le Faye 137-38)

The other two events have not been documented, so it is not entirely clear whether they really happened or not. The first of these incidents is a possible proposal to Jane from Edward Bridges, the brother-in-law of her own brother Edward. He tried to court her, but Jane was not interested in him in that way. In one of her letters to Cassandra, who was invited for a visit by Lady Bridges, Jane wrote: "I wish you may be able to accept Lady Bridges's invitation, though I could not her son Edward's" (Austen, Le Faye Letter 62). This ambiguous and puzzling phrase is often seen as a hint of a possible proposal, but there is no concrete evidence that this event really took place. Lastly, there is a story that supposedly has been handed down in the Austen family of Jane having fallen in love with a young man during one of her West Country holidays around 1800, in Devonshire or Lyme. The young man promised to meet her again, but Jane never heard from him, until she received the news of his untimely

death. This particular event is first mentioned by James Edward Austen-Leigh in his memoir on his aunt's life:

While staying at some seaside place, they became acquainted with a gentleman, whose charms of person, mind, and manners was such that Cassandra thought him worthy to possess and likely to win her sister's love. When they parted, he expressed his intention of seeing them again; and Cassandra felt no doubt as to his motives. But they never again met. Within a short time they heard of his sudden death. I believe that, if Jane ever loved, it was this unnamed gentleman; but the acquaintance had been short, and I am unable to say whether her feelings were of such a nature as to affect her happiness. (27)

This incident might have inspired Austen to write *Persuasion*, but besides this quotation there is no evidence of the meeting having actually taken place. It is these four events that tend to form the basis of any romantic encounters in novels telling the story of Austen's own life.

Next to these particular four events, there are also novels that simply mix Austen's own life with her written work. In these cases, Austen's own male characters, such as Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*'s Mr. Knightley, take on the role of or form the obvious foundation for Austen's own secret lover. This comes with the belief that Austen must have based most of her male characters on men she met herself during her lifetime instead of simply having used her own imagination. In this chapter, five novels will be discussed in which this "Romantic Jane" plays the leading role, namely: Nancy Moser's *Just Jane* (2007), *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (2007) by Syrie James, Sally Smith O'Rourke's *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* (2006), *Cassandra and Jane* (2004) by Jill Pitkeathley, and Veronica Bennett's *Cassandra's Sister* (2007).

### **Nancy Moser – *Just Jane* (2007)**

Nancy Moser's *Just Jane: A Novel of Jane Austen's Life* looks like a journal written by Jane Austen herself, starting when she was 20 years old up until her late 30s, when she has published her first works. The story includes the same events that have been recorded in numerous biographies, such as her pleasure in, but also sometimes difficulty with, her writing, the move to Bath, and the death of her father. Moser uses much real material in her novel, such as excerpts from Austen's letters, and it can therefore be seen as a collection of facts, which is filled up with some fictional elements to make her story more coherent and fascinating. There is, however, an important focus on Austen's own encounters with love during her lifetime, in which Moser definitely uses her imagination to describe how Austen experienced it all. However, while Moser describes several romantic encounters between Jane and various men, the main message at the end of the novel and behind this specific representation is the fact that Austen may not have found true love in her life, but because she did not, the world now has her amazing novels instead.

The novel starts with the most famous sentence from Austen's classic love story, *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a true thing everyone knows that... I scratch out the words, dip my pen into the well of ink, and try again" (11). It is significant that Moser uses this scene, in which Jane tries to come up with a first sentence for her story, as the start of her novel. The aspect of love already clearly comes forward, since the reader knows it is this very moment that Austen starts writing one of the most famous love stories of all time. It soon becomes clear where Austen found the inspiration for her story, since she describes having found love herself: "I myself can say with some measure of pride that at age twenty, I have prospects. Or at least one prospect. And after all, a woman only needs but one if he be the right one. His name is Tom Lefroy. He is a charming Irishman, the nephew of a neighbor I saw at a ball last Christmas. His eyes are as blue as the Hampshire sky..." (12).

Moser describes Austen as a happy young woman in love, who cannot stop thinking about that one special man. Jane even believes Tom will propose to her, and is already busy making plans in her mind of what her life will be like as his wife. It comes as a real shock when she hears Tom has left Hampshire without even paying her a visit. Nevertheless, she still believes he will come back for her, until she hears from Anne Lefroy, her good friend, that Tom has been to Hampshire for a short visit, but did not take the time to see her. Jane starts to realise he does not have the same feelings for her as she has for him, but refuses to let this break her: “I cannot wallow. I cannot allow myself the total despair of my character Marianne, grieving for Willoughby. To lose one’s senses in such a way, to display them for all to see?” (72). Instead, Jane finds her release in her writing and is inspired to start rewriting *Sense and Sensibility* and begins a new Gothic story called *Susan*, which will later become *Northanger Abbey*.

The first part of Moser’s novel deals with a young Jane, whose broken heart helps her to grow up, and shows how she expresses herself in her writing. As the story goes on, Jane meets other men that somehow influence her life, but none of them seem to come close to Tom Lefroy, whom she keeps thinking about. Her mother and aunt try to set her up with different men, such as a Mr. Gould, but Jane is not interested:

In spite of my aunt’s and mother’s matchmaking schemes, in spite of the fact that Mr. Gould *was* a nice enough fellow, I do not wish to procure a mate through coercion or manipulations. Although I know such means are often used (and often necessary) in the pairings of young people, I still embrace the hope that I can find a husband through my own means, my own charm, and my own destiny. It is the stuff of novels. How appropriate. (94)

It is this belief that Jane holds onto, also when the family moves to Bath, where she and Cassandra are almost forced to mingle and meet men in order to hopefully find some financial



security. The sisters find solace in each other, since Cassandra has loved once in her life, namely her fiancé Tom Fowle who died unexpectedly at a young age, and does not want to marry any other man, and Jane continues to hope for a marriage of love, instead of simply accepting the first man who asks her.

It is a visit to the seaside that brings Jane close to finding the true love that she is searching for, but once again her own love story does not have a happy ending. While she is in Sidmouth she meets a man, William Jones, who seems to be genuinely interested in her. He promises her they will meet again, but the only news Jane receives is the message that he has unexpectedly died, shortly after the last time she saw him. Jane is, once again, heartbroken: “But why, Cass? Why would God take him? We had just found each other. Why, when I finally found a man I might truly love?” (170). Not long after this event, Jane receives a proposal from a close friend of the family, Harris Bigg-Wither. At first, she accepts, thinking it is the most logical step to take in her life. However, Cassandra reminds her of her beliefs: “‘You do not love him.’ It is a statement, nay a question. ‘He is a nice man.’ ‘You do not love him.’ ‘Love need not be a prerequisite. Love may grow and – ‘ ‘You are a romantic, Jane’” (190). It is these words that remind Jane of her longing to find love, and not just a marriage, and the next morning she rejects Harris’ proposal.

After these events, it seems Jane starts to focus more on her writing and her family, instead of this search for love. One of her aunts even calls her “a dull stone” (203), because she does not flirt with men any longer, but Jane does not seem to care. As long as she can be with Cassandra and focus on her stories, she is content. Without even trying she receives another proposal, from Edward Bridges, but she does not take this too seriously and they both end up simply seeing it as a joke. As soon as the family moves to Chawton, Jane finds new inspiration to write and it does not take long before her first work is published. It is during this time that she describes herself as finally being “truly content” (311). At one point,

Cassandra even discusses with Jane how she might not have found true love, but found something else instead: “I believe with my entire heart that if you had married Tom or Harris or William or Edward, or any of the other men who could have become your beaux with little effort, you would not have written your books. As you said, life would have been thrust upon you. A good life, but a different life. The world would not have your books if you had married, Jane” (351). This is something Moser stresses at the end of her novel: Austen might not have found true love, but because she did not, the world now has her amazing novels instead.

In *Just Jane*, Moser depicts Austen in different stages of her life. In the first part of the novel, Jane is clearly a young woman, experiencing love-like feelings for the first time, having her heart broken, and learning how to deal with it. As the story continues, Jane grows up and the experiences in her life form her character. Moser uses the four romantic events in Austen’s life as the basis for her story, as something that actually made Austen a stronger and more independent woman, and provides the reader with her own interpretation of these events, as she explains in an author’s note: “The engagement to Harris Bigg-Wither (and the breaking of the engagement) is very real. I believe this event signaled Jane’s decision to let the mating game go on without her. Unable to find her own Mr. Darcy, she created him!” (361). Moser suggests that Austen herself may have decided to accept her fate as a spinster and instead of continuing her search for her own Mr. Darcy, she decided to focus on her writing career. This representation can be linked to our modern-day society in which one of the main issues in women's lives continues to be the choice between love and a career, which is in this novel used to explain the decisions Austen, as a female icon, made in her life. Numerous people might see it as a problem and an unresolved issue that the biographical facts only show that Austen never married, but Moser suggests that because of her unresolved

search for true love, the world now has Austen's written work to enjoy instead of simply an entry in a marriage registry.

**Syrie James – *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (2008)**

A fascinating and entertaining example of bio-fiction on the figure of Jane Austen is Syrie James' *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen: A Novel* (2008). The novel starts with a short introduction by an academic who has stumbled upon the secret memoirs of Jane Austen that were hidden somewhere in Chawton Manor House, and the pages that follow are a large part of the text of this memoir. James herself researched Austen's life and the Regency era extensively before she started writing this particular story, and on one of the first pages of her novel, she mentions one of the most burning questions among Austen readers, which also seems to form the starting point for her book:

How could this *spinster*, this woman who, to all appearances, never even *courted* – who never felt that wondrous connection of mind and spirit between a man and woman, which, inspired by friendship and affection, blooms into something deeper – how could *she* have had the temerity to write about the revered institutions of love and courtship, having never experienced them herself? (7-8)

James is one of the novelists who took the task upon herself to provide the world with an answer to this burning question, which is why she decided to write these memoirs of Austen that include an account of a romance between Austen and a man called Ashford, someone she never met in real life. James based this on the mystery man Austen supposedly met when she was visiting the seaside around 1800, who was, according to James Edward Austen Leigh, an important person in Jane's life, as mentioned before. James decided to use this specific detail of Austen's biography as the foundation for her own version of Austen's personal love story.

James' story is a mix of historical facts and fictional elements, in which especially Austen's own novels play an important role. James seems to believe that Austen might have based most of her writing on real-life experiences, because elements from all six of her novels come back in this account of her life. For example, Mrs. Austen, Jane's mother, strongly resembles Mrs. Bennet: continually wishing her daughters to marry and harassing them about it (33). At one point, a conversation between Jane and her father about future husbands reminds one of a conversation Sir Thomas Bertram has with Fanny in *Mansfield Park*; Jane and a group of people go on a picnic at Netley Abbey, which is reminiscent of the picnic at Box Hill in *Emma*, and like Louisa Musgrove in *Persuasion*, Jane falls down a set of stone stairs in Lyme. There are also mentions of haunted stories, which refer back to *Northanger Abbey*, a couple which plans to run away to get married like Lydia Bennet and Mr. Wickham do, and Jane visits the estate of the man she is in love with, Ashford, which is called Pembroke Hall, which seems to be based on Fitzwilliam Darcy's Pemberley. Next to these numerous fictional events, James does use some events that really happened to Austen, such as the marriage proposal by Harris Bigg-Wither, and she quotes some of the letters written by both Jane and her sister Cassandra.

What is, however, most striking about James' novel is how she manages to turn Austen's life into a stereotypical, entertaining, modern romantic "chick lit" novel, which is all based on the idea of Austen finding true love with her own Mr. Darcy. On a visit to Lyme, Jane is saved by a mystery man after falling down a set of stairs at the seaside. This man turns out to be called Mr. Frederick Ashford and, from the start, there is obviously a connection between him and Jane. They start talking and it does not take long before they even begin finishing each other's sentences by quoting Wordsworth (49). Jane starts to fall in love with Ashford, but as in any romantic tale, there are obstacles that prevent the couple from being together. When Ashford has to leave Lyme suddenly, he and Jane lose touch and Jane is

heartbroken. Cassandra tells her to forget about Ashford, but she wants to believe in the possibility of true love: “‘Not every one has a chance at true love, Jane.’ ‘But every body has the right to *seek* it, to *believe* that she can and should marry for love, at least once in her life, does she not? Must I sacrifice all my hopes?’” (78) When Jane is at a dinner party a couple of month later, she suddenly bumps into Mr. Ashford, who happens to be one of the guests as well. Romantic encounters follow: a picnic where they spend hours telling each other stories, their own bench in Kensington gardens, and so on. However, once more the blooming romance is obstructed when Jane hears Ashford is actually engaged to someone else. She is, yet again, alone and heartbroken, and tries to distract herself by going on a trip with her friend, Alethea Bigg-Wither. During this trip she visits Ashford’s estate, Pembroke Hall, where she unexpectedly bumps into him for a second time. It takes a while before everything has been cleared up, but eventually Ashford chooses Jane and proposes to her. Everything seems to be ready for a perfect ending, but James has to stay true to at least one detail of Austen’s life story, which is that she never married. Instead of following the family myth of the man at the seaside who unexpectedly died, James keeps Ashford alive and as an alternative makes Jane decide it is better for him to marry a rich woman instead of her, because he deserves a better future. Jane ends up alone, with only the memory of the perfect man, who inspired her to write her novels and, most specifically, who figured as the foundation for her famous character Mr. Darcy.

It is mainly Austen’s feelings towards Ashford that make or break her aspirations to become an author. When Jane is in love with him, she finds the unending inspiration to write and write, but when Ashford leaves, she can no longer find the right words any more. At the end of the novel, when Jane decides she and Ashford cannot marry one another, she also states she will never write again. It is, in true romantic spirit, Ashford who convinces her to continue writing about love with a happy ending, to contrast their own experience, and

together they come up with the title for Jane's first novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. James gives Austen the love she supposedly never had: “My goal was to create a love interest who was truly Jane’s equal in intellect and temperament, and worthy of Jane Austen’s admiration and passion; a man who could influence her life and her return to writing, but at the same time, would not take away from her own fiercely independent spirit or seem to be the only reason for her many accomplishments” (318). James decided to incorporate the wish of every romantic woman, which is still used as the basis for countless films and novels in this day and age, in her representation of Austen: meeting the perfect man and feeling like the heroine of a true love story. So, in contrast to Moser, who decided to portray Austen as a woman happy to have found love in her life in the form of a career, in this case her writing, James based her representation of the famous author on the image of the modern-day pop fiction heroine starring in a romance novel, which is in this case based on Austen's own written works.

### **Sally Smith O’Rourke – *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* (2006)**

In her 2006 novel *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*, Sally Smith O’Rourke turns one of the most frequently asked questions in regard to Austen’s real life romances into a story: what if Mr. Darcy was actually a real person who was Austen’s true love? Various people believe that a character like Darcy, who is the ideal man for women all over the world, must have been based on a man Austen knew during her lifetime. O’Rourke deals with these beliefs and speculations in an interesting way in her novel, which has two main storylines. The novel starts with Austen’s own point of view: “She was thirty-four years old – an unremarkable spinster who lived an unremarkable life in a house provided by her devoted brother and shared with her elder sister and their aged mother. And, until fewer than twenty-four hours ago, she had never known a lover’s caress” (2). Not much specific information is given by O’Rourke, before she switches to the modern-day storyline. Eliza Knight, an artist from New

York, one day buys an old vanity table at an antique warehouse, having no idea to whom the table used to belong. As soon as she gets home, she finds two letters tucked behind the mirror: one sealed, the other one dated May 1810 and addressed to “Dearest Jane” from “F. Darcy.” Eliza immediately thinks of Jane Austen and her most famous character, Fitzwilliam Darcy, but cannot believe the letters are real: “The relationship suggested by the enigmatic address on the letter was flatly impossible. Darcy was, after all, a fictitious character, wasn’t he?” (19) After scientific testing by a Jane Austen scholar, the sealed letter appears to have been written by Jane herself and Eliza’s world is turned upside down. However, instead of handing over the letters to scholars, Eliza is drawn to Virginia, where a man named Fitzwilliam Darcy lives, at his estate Pemberly Farms, who will do everything to have these letters in his possession before they go to auction.

The letters still leave Eliza with unanswered questions: “If Darcy had been a real person, she wondered, were they in love, how did they meet, why didn’t they marry?” (27). She has a feeling Fitzwilliam Darcy knows more about this, and eventually he decides to tell her his story. While riding his horse one morning in England, he fell off and when he woke up, he found himself in nineteenth-century England. He was brought to a house nearby, where two girls named Cassandra and Jane took care of him. He was specifically taken in by Jane: “Her best feature, he thought, was her large brown eyes, which sparkled in the light and seemed to contain infinite depths of intelligence and understanding” (127). It took some time for him to recover, and also to realise where he had ended up and with whom. While he tried to find out how to get back to his own time, he fell in love with Jane, who also developed feelings for this stranger. Darcy confided in Jane and told her how he needed to go back to his own time, where she happens to be incredibly famous. After several kisses in the moonlight and attempts to go back, Darcy realised he had to do exactly the same thing he did to end up in the past, to travel back to the future. Jane helped him, realising there was no place for him

in her world and no place for her in his world, and said to him: “‘I shall dream of a man who loved me once,’ she vowed in return, ‘if only for a moment. And in my dreams, dear Darcy, you shall be ever strong and kind and most exceedingly noble’” (221). It is his visit that inspired Jane to re-write her tale *First Impressions*, in which Darcy plays the role of the romantic hero; the only memory of their short love story.

Since his travels through time, Darcy has been looking for anything that once belonged to Jane, like the letters Eliza found in the vanity table, which was once Austen’s property. Eliza finally understands one of the letters was actually written by the same Fitzwilliam Darcy she has met, and the letter written by Jane is addressed to him. Instead of selling the letters, she decides Darcy can have them, and with him she finds her own romantic Austenesque love story. By adding the concept of time-travel to her novel, O’Rourke manages to give an entertaining possible explanation of what Austen’s famous love story *Pride and Prejudice* is based on, while also providing the reader with an interesting portrait of Austen herself. While Jane does not play the leading role in this novel, like she does in Moser’s and James’ works, O’Rourke portrays her as the intelligent and ironic woman that shines through in the six novels she wrote. However, once again, Austen is given her own love story to explain how she wrote one of her masterpieces, and in this specific example she is even literally given her own Mr. Darcy, which most likely fulfils the wish of numerous Austen fans.

**Jill Pitkeathley – *Cassandra & Jane* (2004)**

In a letter written soon after Austen’s death in 1817, Jane’s sister Cassandra tries to explain how she is feeling: “I have lost a treasure, such a Sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed, -- she was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow, I had not a thought concealed from her, & it is as if I had lost a part of myself” (Le



Faye 267). From remaining personal letters such as this one it becomes clear what a special and close relationship Jane and Cassandra Austen had with one another. They were sisters, but also each other's best friend and confidante. In her novel *Cassandra and Jane*, Jill Pitkeathley tries to capture this special sisterly bond by filling in the missing gaps in Austen's life story by looking at it all from Cassandra's perspective, instead of Jane's. While this piece of biographical fiction is also a blend of facts and fiction, the book is certainly different from the novels already mentioned, because it looks at Austen from the viewpoint of the person who was closest to her and knew her best, namely Cassandra. It is also this special sister-to-sister relationship between Cassandra and Jane that plays a central role in this specific representation and that proves most important in Austen's life, according to Pitkeathley, more important than any man could have ever been.

The novel starts and ends with the same event: the burning of most of Austen's letters. Pitkeathley describes Cassandra as a 70-year-old woman, still living at Chawton cottage, who has kept all the letters her sister once wrote her safely hidden in Jane's own rosewood trunk. She fears that when she is not around anymore, family members will make sure every detail of every letter will be published, all for a profit. She remembers Jane's own words, which Pitkeathley mentions in her introduction: "No private correspondence could bear the eye of others" (xi), and as her responsibility to her sister, Cassandra only saves some letters and burns the rest. This event is the start of a trip down memory lane for Cassandra, as she takes the reader back to Jane's birth, childhood and older years. While Cassandra appears to be the docile, silent older sister who watched out for and took care of her younger siblings, Jane is portrayed as a witty free-thinking young woman, critical of the limitations of the society she lived in, searching for her own place in the world. Two roles which remind one of Austen's famous sister couple in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood.

In her late teens, Jane is becoming more and more interested in the opposite sex, as described by Cassandra:

“Am I not becoming the most prodigious flirt?” she asked me one evening on the way home from Manydown House. “Did you see how so many competed for a place in the line with me? I had not one but two invitations to walk in the conservatory.” I did not respond because I had noticed and had not been very pleased to overhear one of the older ladies who was chaperoning describe her as “*madly husband hunting*”. (39)

It is an image of a young girl, adoring the attention she is given, full of hope of what the future might bring her, not caring what others might think about her behaviour. It is especially a young man named Tom Lefroy who makes Jane act and feel a specific way. However, this short journey into the world of romance does not last long, and Jane scolds herself for being so foolish: “I hope you have told no one of my hopes which have turned out to be ill founded. Ill founded is too mild a term. My hopes were stupid. Oh how I should have realized that his family would not allow it. He needs to make a better match than I. Money is at the root of it” (42). While Cassandra could see it was hurting her sister, Jane was not the girl to pine openly and looks at it all from an author’s perspective: “A consolation I find is that I can now feel for the heroines of my stories when they fall in love. I am sure you know though that I wish with all my heart that I could make a happy ending for myself” (43). It is this particular incident with Tom Lefroy that changes Jane when it comes to the opposite sex and marriage. When the news of the death of Tom Fowle, Cassandra’s fiancé, reaches England, Jane realises her sister will most probably never marry. Cassandra explains this event seems to have influenced her sister, since this meant there was not as much pressure on Jane to marry as well. From this moment on, Jane does not seem to worry too much about the whole marriage issue any longer. This does not mean, however, that men no longer play a role in her life.

Jane has to endure being set up with possible future husbands, such as the Reverend Samuel Blackall, in whom she is not the slightest bit interested, a marriage proposal by Harris Bigg-Wither, and she also sees an ulterior motive to her family's move to Bath: “Are we to be paraded as prospective wives for the citizens and visitors of that sad town? Are we to be observed and judged in the Pump Room, for our looks, our carriage, our accomplishments?” (88). While on a trip at the seaside in Lyme, Jane almost falls down a set of wet steps and stumbles into Reverend George Atkins, a man with whom she turns out to have a lot in common. The two continue to write each other with fake names, Joseph Hill and Mary Unwin, based on Wordsworth’s work, and on Jane’s side there is even hope of an engagement. Yet, at a certain moment Jane no longer receives any letters from Mr. Atkins, and she is afraid she might have said something he did not approve of: ““So Cass, I must now accept that I have once again, as I did with Tom Lefroy, mistaken interest and attraction for love.’ Her voice grew hard. ‘I should have realized before this that I am destined always to be a lady disappointed in love and find solace in having had the experience’” (113). When she returns to Lyme after a certain amount of time, though, she finds out George Atkins had a seizure and died a few days later. He even told his family he found a girl he wanted to marry, but the news of his death had never reached Jane.

Overall, Pitkeathley stresses that Jane knew two loves in her life, even though she never married, namely her writing and her sister, which form the basis of this specific representation of Austen. Her writing shows who the author ‘Jane Austen’ really was, and it was only Cassandra who knew Jane, inside and out. This comes forward at the end of the novel, after Jane’s death, when Henry suggests writing a short biographical notice, which would be added to the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. Cassandra, as the narrator of the story, says:

It was not Jane, of course, but Henry understood that this was how she was to be remembered. Hers was such a complex nature that it was not possible to explain to those who did not love her that she could be cruel and kind, disparaging and compassionate, bitter and hopeful, almost in the same breath. We must paint a simple picture – a life by “*no means of event*” as Henry put it – and the real Jane would remain known only to me. I was content with that. (237)

While men came and went, her stories and Cassandra were always there when Jane needed them, which was the foundation for a special relationship. Pitkeathley makes an interesting point by stressing that Austen did find love in her life, but not in the form most readers of her novels wanted her to. The sisterly bond with Cassandra was so strong, that no man could have come between them, and this was something Pitkeathley wanted to use in her representation and explore in this novel, as she explained in an interview: “Each was the most important relationship in each other’s life. They always shared a room and clearly missed each other greatly when they were separated (...) They occupied a special place for the rest of their relations who often saw them as a couple rather than as two separate people in spite of their very different personalities” (par. 1). The relationship between Cassandra and Jane which Pitkeathley describes in her novel is actually reminiscent of the feminist idea of universal sisterhood, which was popularised by second-wave American feminism, as an alternative to women’s fixation on men, which has been linked to Austen before. According to Pitkeathley’s *Cassandra and Jane*, Austen saved the romantic tales for her novels, while already having found a maybe even stronger and ever-lasting bond right next to her wherever she went.

**Veronica Bennett – *Cassandra's Sister* (2006)**

In *Cassandra's Sister*, which is seen as a young adult novel, Veronica Bennett tells the story of the nineteen-year-old Jane Austen, named Jenny by her family and friends, and her search for love. When taking a look at the short description of the novel on the cover of the book, it already becomes clear what the main theme of this work is, namely love:

As Jane Austen writes the novels that will become such classics as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, she despairs of ever finding a Mr Darcy of her own among the closed circle of her rural acquaintances. But, in the winter of 1796, the handsome Tom Lefroy enters Jane's quiet life. At a time when money conquers love, can the happy ending Jane wrote for her characters be hers in real life?

The young Jenny really admires her worldly cousin Eliza, who has just lost her French husband in the war. Eliza has everything: the right attitude, beautiful clothes, and men admiring her everywhere she goes. It is Eliza who gives Jenny ideas on how wonderful it would be to be admired by men everywhere she goes, how she should behave around men, but also the one who inspires Jenny to take up writing more seriously.

When Jenny and her family and friends are at a ball, she meets a young man named William Heathcote, whom she is immediately enchanted by: "Mr Heathcote was the most beautiful man Jenny had ever seen" (64), but while he promises her the last dance, it is her friend Elizabeth Bigg-Wither who eventually captures his eye and his heart. It is Jenny's first disappointment in love, and from this moment on she starts to wonder whether true love is really something she will ever find in life. However, her feelings change as soon as she meets a young man named Tom Lefroy at another ball: "When Tom Lefroy led her out onto the floor her heart felt as if something heavy were pressing it. She could not feel her legs at all. She executed the steps without knowing it, aware only of how naturally her hand fitted into her partner's" (119). In a letter to Cassandra, Jenny declares her love for Tom and how she

hopes for a possible proposal, but once again, she is disappointed. It seems, however, that this particular displeasure scars Jenny for the rest of her life, because she cannot forget Tom Lefroy and her memories of him continue to haunt her and come back throughout the entire novel: “Jane, after two years without a word, had accepted that Tom Lefroy was lost to her. Was she indeed left behind, doomed to spinsterhood by association? Would she forever be one of the Misses Austen, invited out of politeness?” (177).

When she was sixteen years old, Jenny had used a blank page in her father’s church register to write down her own imaginary marriage entries. This hope for romance seems to have slowly died when Jenny, who by now prefers to be called Jane, reaches the age of twenty-two. She makes jokes about love and marriage, knowing it is something not meant for her: “Most heavy upon Jane’s heart, though, lay the conviction that when Tom Lefroy had returned to Ireland he had taken her future with him (...) If another man should ever love her enough to propose, and if she should ever love him enough – as much as Elizabeth loved Darcy – it would be a miracle” (196). From this point on, she turns her attention to her writing and her family, instead of a possible marriage. However, even though Jane seems to have given up the hope of ever finding true love, when a friend of the family, Harris Bigg-Wither, proposes to her, she declines, not wanting to marry without love. The novel ends with Jane and Cassandra driving away from Manydown in a carriage, both knowing they will probably not find love again in their lives, but they will have each other to rely on and take care of. Like some of the other authors mentioned in this chapter, Bennett focuses on Austen’s unfortunate chances at love, but also stresses the important role her writing played, which can be seen as a kind of love as well. Once again, the issue of having to choose between either love or a career plays a central role in the way Austen is represented.

The five different novels discussed in this chapter all deal with a specific theme which is, these days, almost automatically mentioned when talking about Jane Austen and the way

she is often portrayed: love and romance. Something that seems to play an important role here is the specific message that finding love and romance in a relationship between a man and a woman, which ultimately ends in marriage, equals complete happiness. Young women are supposedly looking for their own Mr. Darcy to make their lives complete, and there seems to be a basic assumption that this is something Austen must have experienced or missed in her life. Whether it was Tom Lefroy or a completely fictional male character that resembled Mr. Darcy's personality traits, Austen is believed to have loved someone who must have given her the inspiration to write some of the world's best-known love stories. Deirdre Lynch gives a possible explanation for this longing to change Jane Austen into a romantic heroine herself: "We have to imagine Austen as Elizabeth Bennet and grant her a Darcy of her own – even if in the end we take him away again. We can't bear to think that her wisdom was not based on experience" (par. 11).

While this particular public wish to give Austen her own love story still seems to be widely present, as comes forward in the novels by Syrie James and Sally Smith O'Rourke, the idea of a woman needing to be married in order to find happiness no longer fits our modern society, which comes back in the various ways Austen is represented. One can also find satisfaction and contentment in his/her career, which is what happens to Austen in Moser's novel *Just Jane* and Bennett's *Cassandra's Sister*, being with friends and family, or maybe even the idea of a universal sisterhood, which plays a role in Jill Pitkeathley's work. The connection between the stereotypical man-loves-woman fairytale and Jane Austen is easily made, probably because her novels, with their marriage plots, are most often placed on the romance shelf. However, Austen did not only focus on love, but wrote about numerous other topics, such as women's limited freedom and the importance of manners in her day and age, as well. While, predictably, love still seems to be the one topic that is linked to her own name and character the most, it is interesting to see that in some examples of modern-day bio-

fiction based on Austen's life, 'love and happiness' can also be interpreted in a different way, which results in diverse fascinating modern representations of the author and person Jane Austen.



#### 4. Dear Jane...

In the modern day and age it seems every magazine with a female audience has at least a few pages dedicated to giving advice. Whether it is issues related to love, family, school, or work, an advice columnist is ready to answer these specific questions from people who need help. Through the decades, Jane Austen somehow established herself as one of these “agony aunts” as well, fitting the stereotypical picture of this term: a slightly older woman providing others with her wisdom and giving comforting advice. Based on her novels in which love plays a central role, Austen is most often specifically seen as a master of romance, who can solve any love-related issue. An online website for single women, for example, sees Jane as “the original positive thinking dating coach” and asks a number of its readers: “Ever wonder what the love guru and author Jane Austen would do in modern day dating dilemmas the single ladies today have to face?” (Brown par 1.). Deirdre Lynch mentions that students at universities even tend to turn academic lectures on Austen’s work into self-help classes on the topic of love: “A few of the students who enroll in my Austen courses admit that they are there to trawl the books for dating tips” (par. 10). There is even an official website, [askjaneausten.com](http://askjaneausten.com), which provides visitors with “wit and wisdom from Regency England’s go-to advice columnist”: one can ask Austen a question, which is then answered in the form of one of her famous quotes.

Numerous books have been published over the years in which Austen’s letters and novels are used as the sources for quality advice. Works such as *Jane Austen’s Little Advice Book* (1996), edited by Cathryn Michon and Pamela Norris, *The Jane Austen Companion to Love* (2009), published by Sourcebooks and with no specific author, and Juliette Shapiro’s *Ask Jane Austen* (2008), which is described as “an oracle of universally acknowledged truths” on its cover, give the reader advice in Austen’s own words, namely quotes taken from both her novels and the letters she wrote to family and friends. In Lauren Henderson’s *Jane*

*Austen's Guide to Dating* (2005) and in *Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners: Compliments, Charades & Horrible Blunders* (2006) by Josephine Ross, the authors use Austen's name and novels as the foundation for giving modern-day advice on how to behave and how to date. In real life, Austen was in fact literally an "agony aunt" to her niece Fanny Knight, Jane's brother Edward's daughter. In letters written by both Fanny and Jane, it becomes clear that Fanny often turned to her aunt for advice, especially in relation to romantic issues. Austen's own thoughts about love, which can be found in her novels as well, obviously come forward in these letters, such as for example in this one, written by Austen in 1817: "Do not be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last; you will in the course of the next two or three years, meet with somebody more generally unexceptional than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as ever He [God] did, and who will so completely attach you, that you will feel you never really loved before" (Austen, Le Faye Letter 153).

It is this particular image of "Aunt Jane" as the expert on love and manners that inspired several authors to represent Austen as an adviser in their works of fiction. This is yet another stereotypical image, namely that of the older Austen, confirmed spinster, who gives younger women advice on love and other topics, which reminds one of the traditional idea that love is for the young and wisdom for the middle-aged. It is a fact that Austen never married, and numerous people believe she never even experienced love in her life, but she did manage to create a male character that continues to be described by countless women as the perfect man. A love story like that of Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is what a large amount of the modern-day women still long for and question: how to find a love and man like that? It is this specific group of women that would most likely pay to receive some advice from Jane Austen herself, and that is where the image of "Agony Aunt Jane" comes in. In the works discussed in this chapter, Austen is therefore not portrayed as the main female character that is on a quest to find love herself, but as the trustworthy

sidekick, who appears when advice, on especially romantic issues, is needed. The works that will be discussed in more detail in relation to this are Laurie Brown's *What Would Jane Austen Do?* (2009), *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* (2007) by Patrice Hannon, and Marilyn Brant's *According to Jane* (2009).

### **Laurie Brown – *What Would Jane Austen Do?* (2009)**

The title of Laurie Brown's novel, *What Would Jane Austen Do?*, already suggests the specific role Jane Austen plays in this work of fiction, namely that of adviser. When the main character finds herself in a tricky situation and she does not know what to do, she simply asks herself: what would Jane Austen do?, and in accordance with Austen's own time and beliefs, an answer is always found. The leading lady in this particular novel is Eleanor Pottinger, a Regency fashion expert and costume designer from Los Angeles, who travels to Hampshire, England, for a Jane Austen conference. As soon as she arrives at Twixton Manor Inn, an eighteenth-century grand manor house converted into a hotel, she is told her reservation was lost and the only room left is one that is almost never used, because it is supposed to be haunted. Eleanor jokes about this and happily takes the room, but it does not take long before she meets two ghosts in her room, namely the two sisters Deirdre and Mina Cracklebury. They need Eleanor's help with preventing their older brother Teddy from dying in a duel with a certain Lord Shermont. Eleanor wants to sleep and in order to make the sisters stop talking, she agrees to help them as long as she gets to meet her favourite author, Jane Austen, in return. Eleanor goes to sleep, but when she wakes up she finds herself in 1814; transported there by Deirdre and Mina to help them, just like she promised. Eleanor embarks on her own Regency adventure, in which she encounters numerous problems having to do with love and manners. However, with the author's voice of Jane Austen in her head, she manages to find her way and even gets to meet her own personal adviser in real life.

Throughout the novel it is obvious that Brown researched the Regency period and Austen's novels and biography in close detail. She even occasionally refers back to certain characters and scenes from Austen's own stories, especially on the pages where Eleanor needs some guidance and the question 'What would Jane Austen do?' is once again asked: "Eleanor felt she should say something, but she had no idea how to diffuse the situation she'd inadvertently caused. Quick, quick, what would Jane Austen do?" (30-31). Whether it is a situation in which she could possibly insult someone, which reminds Eleanor of the Box Hill picnic in *Emma* and the various comments made by Mr Knightley and Emma afterwards, or which man she should give a flower to in order to wish him good luck in a horse race, without making others think she has special feelings for this specific male, Austen and her works always seem to provide Eleanor with a fitting solution: "What would Jane Austen do if she were waiting for a suitor to call? She would want to appear nonchalant, not indifferent, but not overly eager" (265). It is specific situations in which Eleanor turns to her favourite author for advice, and in the end, even when more important and possibly life-changing decisions have to be made, Austen shows her the right direction: "She knew Jane would take the honorable path even if it hurt, and in her heart Eleanor knew what was right" (254).

Besides the role of giving Eleanor advice through her own words, Austen also plays a minor role in the novel. Deirdre and Mina Cracklebury, completely fictional characters, are in this novel the neighbours and family friends of Jane and her relatives, so when a ball is organised by the Cracklebury family, Jane and her sister Cassandra are also invited. This gives Mina and Deirdre the chance to stick to their part of the deal, namely making sure Eleanor gets to meet her favourite author. While Eleanor wants to ask Austen all sorts of questions about her work, this is however not possible, since in 1814 Austen's works had only been published without her real name on the cover: "Miss Jane has not openly acknowledged that she is... You absolutely cannot mention anything about her...ah...habit. That would be

the epitome of rudeness” (164). Eleanor is nervous about meeting Jane in real life, which is described by Brown in true modern-day fashion: “Omigod. Jane Austen!” (164). The description of Austen’s looks appears to be based on the portrait her sister Cassandra made of her, and the important sparkle in her eye, which is almost always mentioned when describing Jane: “She was tiny in stature, not even five feet tall. Slim. High arched brows, straight classic Grecian nose, small mouth with thin lips. Ordinary. Someone you might pass by without a second thought. Except for the lively sparkle in her eyes” (167). While the description of Austen’s physical appearance is quite conventional and sticks to the same details that are often given when discussing Austen’s looks, her advisory and helping side comes to the surface when Eleanor is talking to her: “If you will excuse a bit of advice from a stranger, life is short, and the opportunity of love rarely comes around a second time” (257). This piece of important love advice is also the end of Eleanor and Jane’s conversation, and it leaves the reader with a specific representation of Austen as the helpful, wise, romantic woman she is often thought to have once been.

**Patrice Hannon – *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine’s Guide to Life and Love* (2007)**

Next to her work *101 Things You Didn’t Know About Jane Austen* (2007), which is a book filled with biographical facts and insights into Jane Austen’s life and times, Patrice Hannon has also written an interesting and amusing fictional work named *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine’s Guide to Life and Love* (2007). It can be seen as resembling a self-help book in which “Aunt Jane” plays a kind of advice columnist, who answers letters from modern-day women, who have a problem they want an expert’s advice on. The different letters are written by, as Austen calls them herself, “heroines-in-training”, who still need to learn what exactly it takes to become a real heroine, such as the leading ladies in Austen’s own novels. The reader

can easily imagine Austen sitting behind her desk, writing by candlelight, in order to give advice to these 21<sup>st</sup> century women on not only love, but all kinds of topics.

Hannon manages to imitate Austen's voice well in a mixture of fiction and quotes from Austen's own letters and novels. A storyline is present in the work: Austen is described sitting in her cottage in Chawton on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1816, when her cousin Fanny brings her a new pile of letters. These letters, written by different women and about different subjects, and Austen's answers take up most of the pages in Hannon's work, but in between answering letters, Austen describes being visited by her sister Cassandra, her nieces Fanny and Anna, her brothers Henry and James, and others. It is obvious from the descriptions that Austen is ill, near the end of her life, and spends her time quietly sitting upstairs, answering these letters whenever she has the time: "How tired I feel after my visit downstairs. I should not lie awake for long if I closed my eyes now, but I must press on for the sake of my heroines-in-training. I am afraid no one could call me the picture of health today" (126-27). At the end, Hannon portrays the image of a woman waking up, after having a dream about Jane Austen giving advice on modern-day issues. As she is leaving, she remembers she left her notebook, filled with advice for women like herself, in one of the upstairs rooms. She enters the room and sees a quill pen, with its tip still wet, on the desk, which features as an interesting reference to Austen. This short plot gives a more story-like feeling to the work, in which the main focus still lies on the letters written by both the advice-seeking women and Austen herself.

Hannon divided the novel into various chapters, in which different letters on a specific topic are discussed. Examples of the titles of these chapters are: "A Heroine's Character", "Beauty Tips for Heroines", "A Heroine and her Family", and "Should a Heroine Care About Money?". In these chapters, all kinds of topics are discussed: from dating your sister's ex-boyfriend and unhealthy obsessions with clothes to internet dating and friendship troubles. The first letter in the novel already shows a typical crisis for modern-day women: "Dear Jane

Austen, help! I have reached the age where I won't tell my age and I will die if I don't land a husband soon. Why am I still single?" (2). Austen gives advice by writing that this particular heroine should not believe in what she sees in films and on television, just like Catherine Morland believes the Gothic stories she loves to read in *Northanger Abbey*, and in this letter Austen even mentions characters from the popular TV series *Sex and the City*:

If, as is most likely, you are unacquainted with members of your sex who dress like Carrie Bradshaw or establish intimacies with the frequency and insensibility of Samantha Jones, by all means be entertained by the behaviour of these fictional characters too, as Catherine is by the heroines of her beloved novels, but do not for a moment believe that such behaviour resembles that of flesh and blood women. (3)

Austen turns to 21<sup>st</sup>-century examples, and even dedicates one chapter to the topic of sex, fittingly titled "A Heroine's Guide to S-x (a short chapter)", but sticks to her own beliefs and ideals throughout the entire work, which she explains by the help of her own heroines and their adventures. Elizabeth Bennet, Marianne Dashwood, Julia Bertram, Anne Elliot and the actions and emotions of other famous Austen characters are referred to more than once to explain a certain character trait or event. At the end of each topic, Austen leaves the reader with a message, an "Austen says", which are wise lessons a heroine-in-training needs to learn, such as: "a heroine has pride despite her imperfections", "a heroine loves romantic stories but does not mistake them for real life", and "a heroine's beauty is more a matter of her character and manner than her physical features".

Hannon portrays Austen as an older, wise woman, who still has her wit and irony, and who gives sensible advice in the same style as her novels. However, Austen also tells her would-be-heroines that they should not believe in the love stories they read or the romantic comedies they watch, because these do not portray reality. She even explains that the young women in her novels are not perfect either, just like in real life: "Your mistake is one that

millions of women fall into. In your distress you imagine my heroines to be without flaw but a moment's cooler reflection will show you your error. Pictures of perfection, like the heroines of romance novels, make me sick and wicked, and you will not find them in my books" (7). In this way, Hannon manages to portray Austen as wise, old "Aunt Jane", who gives modern-day young women, with her own novels in mind, not only advice on love, but also on manners and different topics.

### **Marilyn Brant – *According to Jane* (2009)**

Almost every woman who has read *Pride and Prejudice* would like some love advice straight from Jane Austen, the expert, herself. In Marilyn Brant's *According to Jane*, young Ellie Barnett, whose name quickly reminds one of Elizabeth Bennet, finds herself with her own personal advice specialist in the form of Jane Austen. During one day in English class, Ellie has to read *Pride and Prejudice* for a school assignment and it does not take long before she hears a "tsk" in her head. This particular voice belongs to no other than Jane Austen, who has taken up residence in Ellie's mind and has no plans of leaving her any time soon. Jane helps Ellie through her teenage years and beyond, slowly becoming not only the person she goes to for advice, but also a best friend and confidante.

The main focus in the novel lies on the topic of love: the boyfriends that come and go in Ellie's life and how she deals with being in love and being heartbroken. The leading male character in Ellie's own love story is Sam Blaine, who has been busy teasing and challenging her since kindergarten. Even though he makes her life horrible, Ellie cannot seem to get him out of her mind and unconsciously develops feelings for him. Jane, who often gives Ellie advice based on her own novel *Pride and Prejudice*, sees Sam as a Mr. Wickham type, a young man that cannot be trusted: "*You would do well to heed my advice, friend*, said the voice, and I could've sworn I heard an ironic little laugh right along with an unmistakably



British accent. *I am well acquainted with men of his ilk, and they are disinclined to be honourable. You had best keep your distance*" (7). Ellie grows up from a 15-year-old girl to a 34-year-old woman and during all these years Jane stays with Ellie and gives her, sometimes useful and sometimes ignored, advice on family, work, and most importantly, love in the modern age. While different boyfriends come and go, Ellie continues to bump into Sam and Jane continues to warn her, without success. It takes some time for both Ellie and Jane to realise that certain life lessons need to be learned, by both of them, in order to move on.

While Jane is only a voice in this particular novel, instead of a real person, Brant manages to portray the famous author in her own, but still slightly stereotypical, way. The voice in Ellie's head not only has the British accent and knows all the Austen characters, but also has the same sense of irony and wit one can find in Austen's own work and letters. Jane starts to play a special role in Ellie's life: "I should've known Jane would figure it out. She'd been my constant companion, my most secret friend for years. She knew me as no one else could" (16), which is reminiscent of Jane's role as an aunt to her niece Fanny, whom she often gave advice to in her letters. Throughout the novel, Jane gives advice she might have given in her own time, life lessons she herself learned, but which still hold true for the modern day and age: "*Regardless of what happens in your playing at love, you will end up where you need to be. Life brings its gifts to you either way*" (209). However, while Jane's advice definitely helps Ellie to grow up and become her own person, Ellie has to learn to listen to herself and follow her own advice, instead of only depending on Jane. When, at the end of the story, Sam declares his love for Ellie, it is her own voice she listens to, and it is Jane who learns a valuable lesson: "*Let go, Ellie. Just let go of all expectation. A voice in my head, other than Jane's, says this, and I realize, with no little shock, that it's my own voice*" (226).

An interesting detail of Brant's work is the reason behind Jane's decision to come and guide Ellie in her struggles with love and life. Once again, the strong belief that Austen must

have loved in her life comes forward, when Jane tells Ellie about a certain clergyman by the sea she once loved, but whom she did not end up with. It turns out that Ellie is one of his distant relatives, which is why Jane chose her:

*Ellie, I waited almost two centuries to find just the right one of his ancestors with whom to share what I know of human nature, what I recognize to be true about love and passion. I waited to try to connect with his one descendant that I felt shared an outlook on life most like mine, in hopes of making her life better. Perhaps it is a small gift. Perhaps it has been hopelessly ineffective, but it is the only one I have left to give to the memory of the man I loved. And to you. (246)*

Ellie is given the same gift numerous readers of Austen's work consider her novels to contain: not only advice on men and love, but on life and everything it encompasses in general. Brant herself explains she could have imagined no better guide than Austen during her own teen years: "Her genius in depicting human character quite literally changed my perceptions of the people around me. I wished I could've had her as my guide through the hazards of teen life and beyond. Her influence on my adolescent worldview was profound and, in my opinion, priceless" (261). The role of adviser and guide in life seems to fit Austen perfectly, especially in this novel, in which she herself is seen as an expert who still has some lessons to learn herself as well, because some choices are simply for individuals to make themselves.

These three novels are a few examples of fictional works in which Austen plays the role of the agony aunt, who helps would-be heroines in their search for answers in both love and life in general. It is no surprise that in this day and age where self-help books and TV shows on all kinds of topics continue to be extremely popular a famous author like Jane Austen is turned into a modern-day self-help guru herself. Not only in books, but in numerous magazines, articles, and on websites Austen is often portrayed as some kind of love expert,

based on the popularity of her own novels. The wise lessons that are given are often quotations from her own novels or letters, or based on the plots of her stories or experiences in real life. Yet, it is important to realise Austen most probably never saw herself as a true expert on particular topics such as love and romance. It is, once again, a modern socially constructed image of Austen which can be linked to the success of her work; her novels deal with life in general and have been read by millions of different people from various places all over the world, which means enough readers believe in what she wrote. It is only to be expected that in the modern day and age people take every chance they get to become a part of this enormous Austen industry, which is also done with this specific portrayal of Jane Austen as a personal adviser on all kinds of issues. Especially young women long to be just like one of Austen's heroines, want to hold onto the idea of "true love" that is sold to them by the entertainment industry, and will pick up any book that brings them closer to this ideal. While the specific authors mentioned in this chapter most likely did not decide to write a novel starring Jane Austen simply for the profits, they do provide their reading audience with a representation of Austen that fits the stereotype that has been brought into the world based on the demands of the public.

### 5. Vampires, Zombies, and Jane

While up until this very day countless women still swoon over Fitzwilliam Darcy (most specifically the way Colin Firth and Matthew McFadyen portrayed him in the 1995 and 2005 film versions of *Pride and Prejudice*), for a younger female generation new Darcys have taken the stage. A significant one being Edward Cullen, the handsome and mysterious vampire, who stars in Stephenie Meyer's best-selling book series *The Twilight Saga*. Over the past few years, the paranormal and everything it encompasses, such as zombies, vampires, werewolves, and ghosts, have started to take over the globe, including the literary world. Author Jayne Ann Krentz explains this recent revival of the paranormal in literature as typical for the modern day and age: "The era of terrorism is scary. Psychologically it's hard to wrap your mind around it. Fiction almost has to take an extra leap to deal with it" (Vaughn par. 16). What started with an innocent touch of magic in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* has evolved into werewolves and thirsty vampires in Meyer's *Twilight* and even zombies entering Regency England.

Obviously, it was only a matter of time before these elements would invade the romantic green-hilled landscape of Jane Austen. As Linda Troost explains in an interview, mash-ups are a keyword in the age we live in and new ways of re-using Austen's name and fiction are always searched for, which is how a work such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) by Seth Grahame-Smith came to be written:

He made a list of books out of copyright, mainly great classics that you read in high school or college and then a list of things that could be added to various books: pirates, Ninjas, space aliens, sea monsters, and such, and began drawing lines back and forth between them. And then when he hit "Pride and Prejudice" and zombies, he thought now we have it. This would be completely different. (Carone and Cavanaugh par. 6)

This definitely was the start of a new popular subgenre in the world of Austen's fiction. In Grahame-Smith's novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* a mysterious plague has fallen upon Meryton, a small English town, which causes the dead to return to life. Against this backdrop, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy meet one another and their love story unfolds. However, at the same time, Elizabeth is occupied with something else: fighting thousands of zombies on the battlefield. While numerous Austen fans were shocked and insulted by the publication of the novel, it became an instant success, just like its sequel, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009). Somehow the eighteenth-century novels of Austen, these days often described as "dull" by younger generations, have become more attractive to the modern public by inserting Gothic details, such as zombies and sea monsters. For example, in 2010 the series *Bespelling Jane* was published in which some of Austen's own novels are turned into paranormal stories with titles such as *Northanger Castle*, *Blood and Prejudice* and *Little to Hex Her*, based on Austen's *Emma*.

However, it is not only Austen's novels which are given a dark or paranormal twist, but her own life story as well. In the mid-1990s, Stephanie Barron published the first part of her *Jane Austen Mystery* series, in which Jane Austen is portrayed from a more feminist perspective, it seems, namely as a female detective who solves murder cases in Regency England. This specific series is one of the earliest examples that injects a bit of power and feminism into the representation of Austen: showing her as a strong, self-controlled woman instead of a lovesick girl. The idea of combining Austen with both the Gothic and the supernatural seems to have conquered the world at this moment in time specifically: a large Hollywood film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is expected to hit theatres in the following years and numerous novels continue to appear in which Austen herself, instead of her storylines or characters, follows the trend by being linked to the bloody and mystical. It seems the way the world looks at Austen has undergone some changes in the last few years

and has developed into a new interpretation. Instead of only focusing on the romantic and wise side of Austen's character, it appears the evils of self-repression have shown themselves and a different side of the author Jane Austen is in the process of being explored. In this chapter, the focus will be on the portrayal of this specific modernized Jane Austen and a number of fictional works will be discussed. First, as mentioned before, Stephanie Barron's *Jane Austen Mystery* series (1995 - 2010), in which Austen takes on the role of a detective who solves murders. Next to this, Michael Thomas Ford's *Jane Bites Back* (2009) and Janet Mullany's *Jane and the Damned* (2010) will be looked at in closer detail, both novels in which Austen is turned into a vampire. It is evident the paranormal and the Gothic have taken over the literary world of today, but what exactly does this do to the portrayal of Jane Austen?

### **Stephanie Barron – *Jane Austen Mystery* Series (1995 - 2010)**

In 1995 Stephanie Barron, the pseudonym of US author Francine Mathews, introduced Austen fans to a new portrayal of their favourite author: Jane Austen as the solver of murder mysteries. In the first part of the *Jane Austen Mystery* series, Barron explains to her readers that some of Austen's missing journals have been found, which she has been asked to edit. The journals were written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most specifically the years which are also known as the missing years of Jane Austen. From this particular period of time, of which it is known Austen did not work on her fiction, none of Austen's correspondence has survived, leaving the world in the dark as to what exactly was going on with her during this period of her life. Numerous authors have fantasized about these missing years, starting when Austen was roughly 25 years old up until her mid-thirties, translating their thoughts into novels in which Austen finally finds her own Mr. Darcy or Captain Wentworth; relationships which the world never knew about and which explain Austen's talent for writing realistic love stories. However, Barron fills in these missing years in a

completely different way: what if Austen was not writing fiction because she was occupied with something else, namely solving murder mysteries in the neighbourhood?

The link between Jane Austen and detective stories is not one that has not been made before. In her article “Mystery without Murder: The Detective Plots of Jane Austen”, Ellen R. Belton discusses the presence of mystery-solving details in Austen’s novels. She states that there is a specific course most of Austen’s plots follow, which includes a mystery that is eventually solved:

The heroine (or heroines, where the main character’s love adventure is complemented by a sister’s) meets (or has met before the story begins) the man she will eventually marry, but before marriage is possible, she must penetrate a set of mysteries or secrets associated with the problem of understanding and evaluating him. The central problem is either to explain the hero’s behavior and to uncover his concealed feelings or to solve the mystery of another, less worthy, male character, a Mr. Wickham, a Frank Churchill, a Henry Crawford. (45-46)

Belton researches the plots of *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and other novels to show how Austen uses different devices and constructions to add this element of mystery to her stories and challenges the reader by doing this. Whether Austen actually meant for her readers to play a kind of detective while reading her novels cannot be said with certainty, but from Belton’s research it becomes clear that the connection between Austen and detective stories is not a strange and unlikely one. Anita Vickers also stresses how the image of Jane Austen as a detective, which is given in Barron’s novels, fits Austen’s personality: “In this series, Jane Austen author becomes Jane Austen consummate detective, a rather reasonable premise especially if we consider Austen’s reputation as a clever commentator on manners and as an accurate portrayal of personality and character” (213). This particular image of a seemingly-innocent older lady finding her place in the male world of crime and murder reminds one of

both American and British traditional female detectives such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher from the television series *Murder, She Wrote*. While Austen's personality first and foremost tends to be associated with romance, it is interesting to see she can also be seen as more serious and man enough to cope with issues such as murder. Solving mysteries and looking for clues seems to fit both Austen and Barron herself, who also serves as a detective here in a way. Each part of the series can be seen as somehow "solving" a certain biographical mystery in Austen's life, and it is Barron's task to incorporate the details of Austen's life in her stories to provide the reader with a plausible and convincing image of one of England's most famous authors.

In the *Jane Austen Mystery* series, Barron portrays Austen as a grown-up, smart, amateur female detective, who at a certain point stumbles upon a murder case she longs to solve. The first part of the series, *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor*, was published in 1995, and after being well-received other parts soon followed. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2010, the latest and tenth part of the series appeared, namely *Jane and the Madness of Lord Byron*. The series focuses on Austen's life from roughly 1802, when she was 26 years old, up until 1811, when her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* was published. The various mysteries are introduced to the reader as entries in journals written by Austen herself, which were supposedly discovered in an old house belonging to one of Jane's relatives: "For what we found that day was no less than an entire series of manuscripts we believed had been written by Jane Austen" (Barron 1995 viii). Like other novels mentioned before, Barron suggests that the story the reader is about to read is based on authentic Austen manuscripts, and she even takes it a step further by claiming, on her personal website, Jane's original voice just came to her one day: "I was, I am convinced, channeling Jane. I sat down to write what she told me" (par. 6). Whether this should be believed or not, Barron uses the gaps in Austen's biographies in an interesting way to construct mystery stories around real events that



did happen in her life, which is an important and fascinating aspect of the series: “Although the mysteries themselves are fictional (...) the biography of the novelist and the depiction of the time in which she lived and worked are in many ways truer than the apocrypha proliferated by overprotective family members and fanatical devotees and by popular misconceptions of history” (Vickers 219). By mixing real-life events with fiction in the form of murder cases, Barron manages to provide the reader with an appealing and different portrayal of Jane Austen.

While the series consists of ten separate parts so far, in this chapter the focus will be on mysteries number one and two, namely *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor* and *Jane and the Man of the Cloth*. Both parts begin in a standardized Austen way with sentences that, once again, remind one of the famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that the expectation of pleasure is generally preferred to its eventual attainment – the attainment being marred, at its close, by the resumption of quotidian routine made onerous by the very diversions so lately enjoyed” (1996 1). However, this specific start of *Jane and the Man of the Cloth* is obviously more complex and different than other modern-day versions of this specific line, which often describe something having to do with romance and finding a suitable man, and thus might signal the start of a different Austen portrayal. Both mysteries follow the same structure: Jane is staying at a place away from home for several weeks, in these cases Scargrave manor and Lyme, where someone is suddenly murdered and Jane sees it as her calling to solve the mystery. Following the lines of a classical “whodunit”, the reader is provided with different clues and led to suspect various characters before the real murderer is revealed in the last pages of the book. While the set-up and structure of the novels might not be that original, the portrayal of Jane Austen as the solver of these particular crimes is, since it is a way in which she has not been portrayed before.

The main focus, when it comes to her character, lies on Austen's intelligence and wit, which fit the personality of a detective, according to Barron herself:

When Austen wrote to an intimate – most frequently her sister, Cassandra – she was Jane Unbound: caustic, funny, judgmental, dismissive. She possessed and dominated everyone she knew by subjecting them to her wit – and she delighted in the past time [sic]. This was a Jane remarkably equipped to investigate murder, a Jane who understood the power of motivation and the essence of the human heart. She delighted in the absurd, punctured the ridiculous, and demurred for no man. (2010 par. 11)

Austen is not portrayed as an obedient and shy young woman, which would be fitting to the image of her in some of the family biographies, but true to the feminist image of the female detective as a smart and outspoken woman with her own voice. This is also confirmed by characters in the novel, such as in this scene from *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor*: “‘Come, come, Jane!’ Sir William chided. ‘You are not a blushing girl, given to airs and sighs; you have your wits about you, as I’ve always approved, and are readier than any I know to form a judgment when the facts stare you in the face’” (68). Barron also adds a bit of a feminist touch to Austen, which is not strange seeing she is portrayed as a detective, which was seen as a strictly man's business. Some of the male characters in the novels, for example Jane's father, compliment her on this and are surprised that a woman can have these specific insights and be brave enough to find herself in dangerous situations in order to solve a case: “I knew you for a lady of fine understanding and natural courage; but I dared not hope you possessed such faculties of determination and initiative. Forgive me if I must observe that they seem rather the part of one of your brothers, than a member of the weaker sex” (1996 262). These specific qualities seem to distinguish Jane from most of the other female characters, who keep themselves busy with fashion and staying at home; definitely not murders. This is something Jane, in the novel, also realises: “That most ladies of gentle

rearing and habits should rather die than venture alone through the darkness, I acknowledged; and set aside as irrelevant. I was not, after all, *most ladies*” (1996 188). From her novels and letters, it can be said with certainty that Austen sometimes felt restricted by the limitations put on women in her day and age and went against this in her own way, which is a quality that is also stressed in this series of novels.

However, even though Barron adds a focus on Jane’s wittiness and a feminist touch to her stories, she cannot help but fall back on the stereotypical element of Austen’s character: love. An important part of the mysteries is the mini-romances that can be found in each of the novels, with Jane as the leading lady. Barron mentions names such as Harris Bigg-Wither and Tom Lefroy, but also comes up with new love interests and kissing scenes in every novel of the series: “The most enjoyable aspect of the mysteries is Jane’s mini-romances and what can only be described as flirtations with various male characters. If you are frustrated by the whole Tom Lefroy/Harris Bigg-Wither/Mysterious Suitor by the Sea thing, here’s your cure!” (Sullivan par. 3). It is, of course, not a complete surprise that this element of love is, once again, added to a portrayal of Austen. While Barron lets her Jane joke about marriage: “I have recovered fully from my own misadventures (...) and I have determined to avoid all proposals of marriage in future, in the fear that my refusal should precipitate another spate of killing at some country house or other” (1995 316), it is a significant and fascinating detail that love has to play an important role in this representation of Jane, even though she is busy following trails of blood and tracing murder suspects.

### **Michael Thomas Ford – *Jane Bites Back* (2009)**

Jane Austen as the detective solving murder mysteries is a modern portrayal of the famous British authoress, but in the twenty-first century so far even more challenging and fascinating depictions have been brought into the world. While Seth Grahame-Smith turned one of

Austen's most famous characters, Elizabeth Bennet, into a zombie-slayer, Michael Thomas Ford takes the supernatural to the next level by turning Austen herself into a blood-thirsty vampire in his novel *Jane Bites Back*. Other classic British authors are not safe either from Ford's pen, as Austen is bitten and turned into a vampire by no less than Lord Byron himself and her enemy is a vampire-version of Charlotte Brontë, which is definitely an interesting choice considering Brontë's famous opinion on Austen's work. Ford stumbled upon the idea for his novel by accident: "In the spring of 2008 I was talking to my agent about the sad state of publishing. 'The only things selling are vampires and Jane Austen,' my agent said. 'I should do a novel about Austen as a vampire,' I joked" (2010 par. 6). What started as a simple joke turned out to be a smart move, because the idea was immediately picked up and Ford got himself a three-book-deal with a publisher. After uncountable re-writings of Austen's novels and her own personal quest for love, the world seemed to be ready for something "new", while not wanting to let go of the classic just yet. The answer? Combining the classic with one of the best-selling subjects of the moment: vampires.

While Ford's venture introduced a specific new audience to Austen and dedicated Janeites to the world of the paranormal, not all Austen fans were open to this new and rather controversial portrayal of their favourite author. Ford's novel has been seen as disrespectful, which he does not find strange, as he explains on his personal website:

There's something about Austen that makes her readers want to protect her. I think it's her innocence. This is, after all, the woman who came in second (behind Queen Elizabeth I) on the *Guardian's* list of Top 10 Literary Virgins. She represents a time when chastity was a virtue, not a defect, and for many people she is a welcome respite from the less demure entertainments of our time. (par. 6)

The innocence of her novels and time are a way of escaping reality for many Austen fans, which is then of course completely turned around when Austen is placed in the twenty-first

century, which is where the story is set, as a blood-sucking vampire, who even has sex.

However, Ford does not see his portrayal as rude, but quite the opposite: “I looked at it as giving her the chance to take revenge on those who have appropriated her literary genius for their own profit. I thought her fans (among whom I of course count myself) would cheer this opportunity for her to reclaim her rightful place in the literary world” (2009 par. 4). Ford combines the traditional representation of the innocent spinster Jane, always on the look-out for true love, with his own additions that focus more on her passion, irony, and stubbornness, something which the fans should recognise in his novel: “They might find that this Jane is not so different from the one they already know and love. Only now her bite is just as sharp as her bark” (2009 par. 9)

What is striking about Ford’s representation of Austen, as mentioned before, is the fact that he portrays a new Jane, but still uses the stereotypical image of the spinster Jane; he just gives her an extra dimension. Austen, who uses the name Elizabeth Jane Fairfax in the novel, is the manager of her own bookshop and lives in her own home in a small American town in the twenty-first century. From the outside, she appears to be a quiet, middle-aged woman who loves reading a book with a glass of wine, but at the same time she is a vampire who roams the streets late at night in search of blood. Jane tries to hide this part of herself from the world, just like the fact that she is an author trying to get her most recent novel, *Constance*, published. Since the nineteenth century, she has received more than 100 rejection letters from publishers and Jane begins to get the feeling she might have lost her touch after her first six novels. The most frustrating part is that everywhere around her she sees people using her novels and her name to get on the best-sellers list, without giving her the credit she deserves: “Jane herself was enjoying none of the benefits associated with being one of the most popular authors of all time. No royalty check came her way. No one asked her permission to make the book group reading guides or gardening books or knitting patterns that sold by the cartload”

(24). One of the people who make use of the Austen brand, Melodie Gladstone, gives a lecture at Jane's bookstore to promote her newest book, which focuses on true love and waiting for Mr. Darcy before giving yourself away. Gladstone manages to convince the audience with her talk, but her true character comes out later: “Do you really think there are any Mr. Darcys left in the world? No, there aren't. I don't think there ever were. But these girls want to think there are, so I give them what they want.’ ‘And in return they make you quite wealthy,’ Jane commented. ‘It's just my piece of the Austen pie,’ Melodie said” (9). It is not a surprise that Austen cannot withstand the temptation to take a quick bite out of Melodie Gladstone herself later that night.

The story of how Austen became a vampire is an interesting one, as Ford comes up with a possible whirlwind romance between Austen and the British poet Lord Byron, who was known for his numerous love affairs. Byron turned her into a vampire and has been trying to get back with her ever since, now turning up in the town she lives in under the name Brian George. Of course, a true Austen story cannot go without a bit of love trouble, which is added to the novel by Ford in the form of Byron. Jane has developed feelings for one of her male friends, who does not know she is a vampire, and the situation only gets more complicated when she, without thinking, spends the night with Byron and he makes it his goal to win her back, no matter what, threatening to expose her to her friends and the whole town. While all of the vampire action is mainly going on at night, during the daytime Ford describes Austen finally finding a publisher who wants to publish her book and the fascinating and amusing journey of Jane Austen as a twenty-first-century author, visiting talk shows and romance books conventions to promote her latest novel.

At one point in the story, Byron says to Jane: “They all think of you as a quiet afternoon, but inside you rage with passion, don't you?” (18), which captures Ford's portrayal of Austen perfectly. While he sticks to the stereotypical image of Austen as the

quiet, middle-aged “Plain Jane”, he also shows the reader her other side: the ironic and witty Austen, who was filled with passion: “The Jane Austen character has that wit, that rapier wit that the actual Jane Austen had” (Carone and Cavanaugh par. 41). He does not see Jane Austen as a kind of holy figure he cannot touch and does not take the Austen industry, of which this book is a fitting example, too seriously, which results in an amusing and interesting representation of Austen, which she herself might even have laughed at.

### **Janet Mullany – *Jane and the Damned* (2010)**

One of the authors who also jumped on the paranormal Austen bandwagon is Janet Mullany, who was asked by her publisher to write a series in which Jane Austen features as a vampire, after the success of Grahame Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. However, Mullany states that the connection between Austen and vampires is not a new one; she believes Austen already used vampire-like figures in her own novels, as she explains on her personal website: “If you’ve ever wondered why Jane Austen knew so much about sexual attraction, and why she could invent characters like the Crawfords or Willoughby or Wickham, people who exploit and feed off others, it’s obvious that Jane knew a great deal about vampires as well as the ways of the human heart” (par. 3). She considers vampires as a subtext that can be found in Austen’s novels by focusing on specific characters and subtle clues. Certain similarities can be found between some of Austen’s own characters, who are amoral and attractive, and the image of the vampire that is dominating fiction nowadays. Yet, Mullany takes a different path by not focusing on Austen’s self-made vampire-like characters, but turning Jane into one herself.

Mullany’s alternative history novel is set in 1797, when Jane is 21 years old, and has just experienced a few setbacks: she is still dealing with the disappointment of her experience with Tom Lefroy, the family has just heard the news of the death of Cassandra’s fiancé, and

her first novel *First Impressions* has been declined by a publisher. Jane feels the pressure from society to get married and settle, something which she is worried about:

She had been trapped in a girlhood that once seemed infinite, Miss Jane, the youngest and brightest daughter of the Austen family, the one who wrote and read and played the pianoforte with dash and flair, and was always ready with a witty comment. But now, with her twenty-second birthday occurring the next month, childhood was falling away. How many years would it be before the matrons at assemblies and balls murmured about poor Miss Jane, who almost certainly would not marry now, for she was sadly faded and had too sharp a tongue for her own good? (4)

To distract herself from all of this, Jane goes to a provincial assembly, where she starts flirting with a young man, who turns out to be one of the Damned: the striking, fashionable, coldblooded vampires of Georgian England. The young man, named William, sees something in Jane: “She was pretty, intelligent, and – although certainly able to enjoy life – unhappy” (21); and he decides she would be a perfect victim, which leads to him biting her and Jane is turned into a vampire. Lost and hungry, Jane decides to consult her father, who wants to take her to the waters in Bath, the only known cure. However, as Mullany spices up her story by having Bath being invaded by Napoleon’s troops, Jane meets and befriends other members of the Damned and she struggles with making an important decision: her human life as a writer or immortality as a vampire?

The transformation from human Jane into vampire Jane can be seen as a fascinating portrayal of Austen’s real character and the way she is remembered. Mullany starts off with a young Jane, who has a passion for writing, and is not sure about what life will bring her. She knows she does not want to end up as a grey-haired spinster, all alone, and it is this fear that ultimately leads her to flirt with a member of the Damned. As a vampire, Jane continues to have her innocence and wit, but other personality traits come forward, such as her irony, her



obstinacy, and her strength. Even when she is captured by the French and her hair is cut to make her ready for the guillotine, she does not let her weaknesses take over: “She felt a tug, followed by a sudden lightness at her neck as shears clacked. And again. Hanks of hair slithered against her shoulders. ‘Why, you make me fashionable,’ Jane said. ‘I am much obliged’” (267). When one ignores the fact that she is a thirsty, strong vampire who attacks French soldiers to drink their blood, Jane is portrayed by Mullany as the independent woman she struggled to be in her own time. While there is also place for some romantic details and gory action in the novel, *Jane and the Damned* manages to capture an interesting side of Austen’s character, which cannot be found in every novel that tells Austen’s life-story.

A significant detail of the vampire version of Austen is that she is not capable of writing. Even though she somewhere deep down feels the need to express herself on paper, she misses the inspiration to come up with the right words. This, of course, already shows what Austen’s destiny is, because what would she be without her writing? The central issue, again and again brought forward by the other vampires, is immortality, the most important element they can offer her when Jane has to decide whether she wants to stay a vampire or not:

Let us paint a happier picture for Miss Jane Austen. You write a few books that entertain your family and you win a little fame, perhaps even some money, while you live. And after, what then? Your books languish forgotten on dusty bookshelves and you are but a name on a binding that disappears with decay and time. You think your books offer you a chance at immortality? Oh, Jane, do not delude yourself. (290)

In the end, Jane decides to leave the Damned and take the cure in Bath to become human again. Strikingly, it is this decision that will eventually make her immortal after all. Once again, the idea of immortality in return for giving something up, such as the topic of love

discussed in the first chapter of this research project, takes on a central role in Austen's life story.

When one takes a closer look at these specific retellings of Austen's life story, it becomes clear the recent revival of the paranormal and Gothic in the world of literature has also left its traces in Austenworld. While it all started with Austen's novels being transformed into ghost tales with zombies and sea monsters, Austen herself has also undergone several makeovers the last few years, including a magnifying glass in her hand to solve murder cases and blood dripping from her pointy fangs. A possible explanation for these specific representations, besides the obvious fact that a combination of Jane Austen and a modern popular topic such as the paranormal is destined to become a best-selling hit, can be the longing to give Austen her own voice that finally gets to speak out against the stereotypes. Stories about the Gothic can, for example, be seen as being about the return of the repressed, which can be applied to Austen as well. During her time she was a repressed voice and as both a female detective and a vampire, she is portrayed as a more independent, feminist character. This is, obviously, in clear contrast to the clichéd image of the spinster looking for true love, which is taken to another level in these specific novels. These representations seem to be based on the still ongoing struggle of the modern woman to be equal to men on all levels; a struggle which a female icon like Austen also had to deal with. All three novels mentioned in this chapter show this more feminist and dark representation of Austen, which fits the twenty-first century and is an image that will most probably develop more over the years to come.

## 6. Jane on Film

The moment when Colin Firth, as Mr. Darcy, climbs out of a lake, dripping wet, with his thin white shirt stuck to his torso in the 1995 BBC series *Pride and Prejudice* is a scene many women will never forget. Even though it is said this particular scene was the start of Colin Firth's successful film career, the entire series, together with the release of Ang Lee's film version of *Sense and Sensibility*, was the start of an important part of the modern-day Jane Austen brand: films and TV series based on her famous novels. It was not until halfway the 1990s that directors started to see the appeal of putting these particular tales on the screen: they are stories of quality, the name "Jane Austen" is recognised by people all over the world, the texts are in the public domain which means they can be used without paying an author for it, and no expensive special effects are needed to make it all look realistic (Parrill 3). Over the years, about 40 feature films and television series have been made based on Austen's tales (Paris par. 3), such as the 1995 classic re-telling of *Emma* titled *Clueless*, and the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice* starring Keira Knightley, and more are on their way. Turning Austen's novels into successful on-screen adaptations only made the British authoress more popular as it added an extra dimension to the stories, as Michael Gamer, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explains: "Something happens when you put Austen on the screen or when you repackage Austen for a film audience. It transforms the novels" (Frey par. 17), and it is this particular transformation that has made the demand for anything Austen-related even greater.

While Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood have been portrayed in different ways by various actresses over the years, the leading female role at the moment seems to be saved for Austen herself. While an adaptation of one of her novels comes along every year or so, Austen's own life story managed to catch the eye of numerous directors as well. Like many novelists who took the opportunity to fill in the gaps in Jane

Austen's biography in varying ways, television and film makers have also taken this task upon themselves. Transferring Austen's life story to the screen differs greatly from writing it down, and has both negative and positive qualities to it. Certain aspects, such as the right scene setting or the wrong actor for a specific part, can completely make or break a film, which leaves the director with a certain responsibility to make the right decisions. However, this is also already an important issue: what are "right" decisions in these cases? The movie world differs from the publishing world in that there is usually a lot more money involved. If much money is invested in a film, it is often expected that this money will be earned back with the release and hopeful success of the film. By keeping this in mind, sometimes the essence and quality of the film is forgotten, it seems. For example, should the actress portraying Jane Austen be someone who fits the role perfectly or someone who has already established her name in the film world and will make sure the motion picture gets the attention it needs? Should one stick to the biographical facts that are known or is some freedom allowed and can parts of the script be fictional in order to make the film more entertaining to watch? These are issues that play a significant role when putting someone's life-story on the screen, especially that of authors, who in general "make poor subjects for biopics as they lead, on the whole, pretty dull lives" (Harman 262).

One element which almost all Austen-related films and television series have in common is the eighteenth-century English landscape filled with rolling green hills and country manors. This particular scene setting is enjoyed by a large audience, and it is these specific Austen trademarks that also account for the success of these on-screen adaptations, as writer Zoe Williams explains: "Austen's popular because everyone likes a good costume drama and with Austen you know what you're getting. You're guaranteed a manor house, daughters, dresses and weddings" (Winterman par. 17). Besides these elements, there is also one more important detail that ensures a certain number of, specifically female, viewers,

which is the erotic tension and the good-looking male actors usually present in an Austen film: “The wild success of recent Austen films relies in great part on their visual realization of the erotic potential of the novels, on the dramatization of scandalous elements locked into some of Austen’s backstories and on the vision, generously lingered over by the camera, of a lot of handsome men in the flattering dress of the early 1800s” (Harman 251). It is no wonder that these particular elements, which automatically seem to secure a certain amount of success, come back in films telling Austen’s life story. However, the question remains how much of this is reality-based and how much is simply there to be able to tell a better story.

In this chapter, three different cinematic versions will be discussed in which Jane Austen, or a character that strongly resembles Austen, plays the leading role. Firstly, the 2007 Hollywood romantic drama *Becoming Jane*, which stars Anne Hathaway as Austen, and which mainly focuses on the whirlwind romance between Austen and Tom Lefroy. Secondly, the television-film *Miss Austen Regrets* (2007), which was not a big hit, but managed to represent Jane Austen in an interesting way, and lastly Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* (1999), in which the main character Fanny Price resembles Jane Austen in close detail, which forms a fascinating, different, portrayal of Austen herself. These three particular examples were picked, because each of them stands for a specific combination that has been proven to play a significant role when it comes to representations of this famous author: Austen in relation to money and success in the modern day and age, Austen the way she comes across in her letters and novels, and Austen as a mixture of fiction and reality.

### **Julian Jarrold - *Becoming Jane* (2007)**

“She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both” (295);

these words from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* form an important moment of realisation for Elizabeth Bennet in relation to her feelings for Mr. Darcy, and it is these same words that also play a significant role in the 2007 film *Becoming Jane*, which provides the audience with a romantic love story Austen herself could have written, but which she actually stars in. The film turns the few paragraphs on the short period of contact between Jane Austen and Tom Lefroy that can be found in almost every biography into a 2-hour romantic fairy tale of true love found and lost. While not much is known of Austen and Lefroy's "relationship", if that is even what one can call it, *Becoming Jane* turns this episode in Austen's life into the sensational love story she herself never knew, leaving behind the biographies and going into the world of fiction, specifically *Pride and Prejudice*, which this film greatly resembles at points.

After the release of the 2005 film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Joe Wright and starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen, the audience was eager for more Jane Austen, so that is what they got with *Becoming Jane*. The film, which used Jon Spence's biography *Becoming Jane Austen* (2007) as an important source of information, focuses on a specific period in Austen's life, namely when she was twenty years old and met Tom Lefroy, to whom she is often romantically linked. Tom Lefroy, portrayed by actor James McAvoy, is an Irish law student with a bad reputation as he busies himself mainly with partying, women, and drinking. When he is sent to the countryside, he quickly becomes bored and when he meets Jane for the first time, the two cannot stand each other. However, this bad first impression quickly turns into a spark and the two fall for each other, which of course reminds one immediately of another famous couple:

Like the bristling dynamics between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, they engage in a battle of wits and witticism – Lefroy relishing her blushes with each sexual innuendo he drops. Jarrold makes much of the contrast between

Jane's contained passion and Lefroy's loose cannon antics and it makes for a saucy and sprightly romance yarn in the first half. (Papamichael par. 2)

Tom and Jane play a perfect Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy with the initial feelings of deep dislike turning into infatuated yearning. However, the script writers of the film had to at least stay true to one important fact of Austen's life: she never married. After deciding to elope together, Jane realises neither of them has any money and their future does not look promising. With pain in her heart she says goodbye to Tom Lefroy, and this is the end of their short but passionate love affair. The ending of the film shows Jane reading from one of her novels to an audience, which includes Lefroy, who has by now married a rich Irish woman, and his daughter, whom he has named after his first love, Jane. It was, of course, according to the script, this romantic time in Austen's life that inspired her to write *Pride and Prejudice* with Tom Lefroy as the basis for her famous Mr. Darcy.

The passionate love troubles with Tom Lefroy are injected into Austen's life story without any proof, and this playing with fact and fiction continues throughout the film on different viewpoints as well. For example, Jane's brother George, who was sent away from home because he was either mentally retarded or deaf, has a close relationship with Jane in the film, and Tom Lefroy, who is in the records described as shy and serious, is here portrayed as the "bad boy" and womanizer of the late eighteenth century. Jane is also given other love interests, such as a Mr. Warren, who tries his best to prohibit Tom Lefroy from coming close to Jane, and a Mr. Wisley, who admires her and wants to propose to her with the help of his aunt Lady Gresham, who strongly resembles Austen's character Lady Catherine de Bourgh from *Pride and Prejudice*. It is the typical story of wanting what one cannot have: several men are interested in the young Jane and want to marry her, but the only one she wants is the one who has no money and cannot possibly marry her. After the heartbreak, Austen focuses on her writing and at the end of the film the familiar spinster image once again

pops up: the heart wrenching story of the famous romance novelist who once found love, but lost it, and turned this tale into one of the most romantic love stories of all time. However, at the end of the film, Tom Lefroy is shown as having named his daughter after Jane, which is historically correct, and playing with his wedding ring while looking at her reading one of her stories out loud, suggesting he never really forgot about what he and Austen once felt for one another.

Anne Hathaway, who swapped her American accent for a British one for this role, manages to capture Austen's wit and famous sparkle in her eye, but seems to be more of a classic beauty than Jane was, according to family members and the portrait sketched by Cassandra Austen. Director Julian Jarrold wanted to capture Austen's person as a young woman instead of using the typical spinster image:

One of the key ideas in the film was to get away from the old, stuffy costume drama kind of feel of what Jane Austen is and to look at somebody before she becomes a genius, when she is in her early twenties and on the verge of writing her great thing; she had a real exuberance for life, intelligent and independent and a sort of outsider in rural Hampshire, more intelligent than the people around her and kicking against all those pressures. (Felce par. 27)

Austen is portrayed as a young woman struggling to find happiness in a society she feels she does not completely fit in. She wants to love, instead of simply marry for future financial security, and to write, but no one around her seems to understand or support her. While Austen tried to be, according to sources, a strong and autonomous woman, this side of her is not shown in the film, in which she often comes across as a young girl who has fallen head over heels in love with a boy: "By watching this movie, you'd think that Jane could barely string together an interesting sentence until she fell for a cocky young lawyer from Limerick who, in turn, is to thank for inspiring *Pride and Prejudice*" (Feinberg par. 3). The love story



takes over in the film, which causes Jane to be portrayed more like one of her heroines, most specifically Elizabeth Bennet. Whether this is a realistic representation is discussable, but it is definitely a popular one that suits this particular film and its plot.

It is striking that the makers of this Hollywood film, which heavily influenced the cultural memory of Jane Austen in the modern day and age, decided to focus most on entertaining the audience with a passionate love story which consists more of fiction than of fact. Most of the plot is purely an imaginary tale and more based on Austen's novels than her own life story, which was in this case probably viewed as not being interesting and entertaining enough to function as the story behind one of the world's most famous romantic authors.

### **Jeremy Lovering - *Miss Austen Regrets* (2007)**

It is 1802 and Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra are sitting in a carriage, driving away from the property of Manydown, where only hours ago Jane accepted, but then declined, a proposal of marriage from a family friend, Harris Bigg-Wither. With this specific event the BBC-produced drama film *Miss Austen Regrets* begins, and it is this event that continues to play an important role. The film, which was first aired on television in both the UK and America in 2008, was made in the same time period as *Becoming Jane*, but shows a completely different side of Austen's story. While *Becoming Jane* is centred on Jane in her early twenties, just starting on her first novel, *Miss Austen Regrets* is mainly set in 1814, showing the viewer a Jane in her late thirties, who has already published three of her famous novels, and is in the last years of her life. Instead of focusing on pretty pictures of stately manors and falling in love, this film pays close attention to Austen herself and what she might have been like as a person. An image not based on what the majority of the romance-loving

audience wants to see, but simply basing a character on early sources, such as family records and, most importantly, her own written words.

As the film begins with a memory of a declined marriage proposal, love is an element that does come forward. However, it is not portrayed as a perfect picture and looked at differently from Austen's own perspective than in *Becoming Jane*. This particular event in her life seems to have put Jane off the idea of marriage and it prevents her from ever settling down with anyone else. Numerous men played a role in her life: the famous Tom Lefroy, described by Jane as "loved and lost"; Reverend Bridges, with whom she had a connection but did not see a future, because neither of them had any money; Reverend Papillon, with whom she shamelessly flirts after every church service; and Dr. Haden, who is much younger but seems like an "angel" to her. Austen jokes about it to her family, telling her niece Fanny the reason she never chose a husband was because she "never found one worth giving up flirting for." However, at the same time, the scandal of having turned down a rich man like Harris Bigg-Wither haunts her, even though it was her own choice. A choice which was useful as a basis for this particular biopic, as producer Anne Pivcevic explains:

She refused him because she did not truly love him – that's a theme that resonates throughout her novels. She remained unmarried as a choice, not out of bitter disappointment. The word 'spinster' denotes a victim – it's never used in a positive sense. But in Jane's letters, we found an incredibly affirmative voice, someone who knew her own mind. (Rampton par. 10).

People often base their image of Austen on her novels and automatically assume she must have been a romantic herself, but "she wasn't some sloppy romantic – she was practical" (Rampton par. 16), as actress Olivia Williams, who plays Austen in the film, points out.

Marriage works with different ingredients, love being one of them, but only love does not guarantee a future. It is this particular image of Jane, a woman who herself decided to write

instead of marrying without love, that is shown to the public in this film, finally stepping away from the key words “spinster” and “true love”, which seem to still haunt Austen up until this very day.

In the film, much attention is paid to the relationship between Austen and her niece Fanny. The letters which were written by the two in real life also formed the basis for a large part of the script. Austen, who is played by British actress Olivia Williams, is adored by Fanny, who is the oldest daughter of Jane’s brother Edward. Fanny has read her aunt’s novels and goes to her for advice on especially love. She believes Jane’s central message is “only marry for love”, so when she is courted by a Mr. Plumptre, she wants her aunt’s advice and permission to accept him if he proposes to her. While Fanny longs to hear of her aunt’s own love adventures, Jane tries to make clear to her niece that there is more to marriage than simply love. She even tells Fanny her books are just fiction and “the only way to get a man like Mr. Darcy is to make him up.” While Austen is often portrayed as a shy and friendly woman, this film also shows a different side of her, namely that she could sometimes be mean and bitter as well, as Olivia Williams explains: “One’s impressions from screen adaptations of Austen is that it’s all lovely girls running down hills in flowery dresses. But Austen could be a real bitch as well. She could nail the weaknesses in someone’s appearance or accent. She could deconstruct people accurately and uncharitably, and would rail against their faults and foibles” (Rampton par. 19). It is striking, and a welcome change, to have Austen not only portrayed as the always good-tempered and nice woman, but like any other person: human. It is not the image of the romantic Jane Austen who will do anything for true love that is present in this film, but a more realistic woman, who knows there is much more to life and love: “Austen was witty and brilliant, as you’d expect, but also moody and a bit mean, sometimes bordering on bitter. Suddenly it was clear: of course, that’s exactly what Jane Austen was like” (Wollaston par. 3).

Even though the film mainly sticks to biographical facts and Austen's own written letters, there are definitely some similarities with her last complete novel *Persuasion*. The way Austen is portrayed in the film reminds one of Anne Elliot, who, at the age of 27, is Austen's oldest heroine. While the leading ladies in her other novels are in their late teens and early twenties, Anne seems to speak for Austen in her later years with her wisdom and maturity. When she was younger, Anne experienced love, but now that society has almost written her off, she accepts her position as a spinster. She is forced to leave her beloved family home and move with her family to Bath; a city she is not very fond of, like Austen herself. While the plot of *Persuasion* does not resemble any particular period in Austen's life, the idea of looking back on one's life and youth and wondering whether there ought to be any regrets about choices made in the past is definitely present in both the novel and in *Miss Austen Regrets* as well. While Austen's wit and irony cannot be found in Anne Elliot, this heroine's wilted and sad demeanour can possibly reflect how Austen looked at herself when she was older, which is an aspect that is present in this film. So, while the director wanted to stay true to fact, namely Austen's biographical story and not fiction, traces of her novels are also definitely present.

At the end of the film, Fanny finally marries, but Jane is absent from the celebrations, since she died some time before that. During the party Fanny goes looking for her aunt Cassandra, who has left the party early. She finds her aunt, sitting alone in a room near a fireplace, burning Jane's letters. Fanny wants to stop her aunt, still hoping to uncover a secret love story in Jane's letters. It is not only Fanny who has this particular wish to find proof that her aunt did indeed have some kind of secret romantic relationship no one knew about, it is almost the entire world that now seems to have this longing. With a small smile on her face, Cassandra continues to burn her sister's letters, and this scene is significant for the message of the film in its entirety. The world will never know what truly went on in Austen's life,

because important pieces of the puzzle are missing. However, *Miss Austen Regrets* manages to present the world with a representation of Austen's character that is original: a portrait that might be too dark and gloomy for some at times, but perhaps more rational in comparison to the imaginary tales of love and vampires that continue to surround Austen's figure at this moment in time.

### **Patricia Rozema – *Mansfield Park* (1999)**

After the release and success of several Austen-based films in the 1990s, such as the BBC series *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996) starring Gwyneth Paltrow, it was obvious the public was embracing, and ready for more, Austen on screen. In 1999, a new version of *Mansfield Park*, directed by Patricia Rozema, was released, but in contrast to the before-mentioned romantic adaptations of Austen's novels, this one was much more serious and controversial. Numerous negative reviews disapproved of Rozema's projection of this particular classic Austen novel on the screen and the major changes she made to Fanny Price, the heroine of the story. One of the most significant alterations made to this female character is the fact that Rozema decided to mix Austen's own life story with *Mansfield Park*, and thereby create a combination of Austen herself on the one hand and Fanny Price on the other; an interesting combination, since it is often remarked that *Mansfield Park* is probably Austen's novel that has the most autobiographical details in it. When one looks at this particular portrayal of Jane Austen, it is clear that this is not an image based only on biographical details or on complete fiction, but Rozema's own personal contemporary mixture of both, which leaves the audience with a fascinating interpretation of not only *Mansfield Park*, but of Austen's own character as well.

During the first few minutes of the film, the titles on the screen already show that the script of the film was not only based on *Mansfield Park*, but on Austen's own letters and early

stories as well. The first words spoken come from a tale Fanny is telling her younger sister Susy, which is based on one of Austen's own earliest stories, "Love and Freindship." This specific beginning already shows the important role Austen's own personal writing and life will play in the rest of the film. Quotes from other Austen stories, such as "Frederic and Elfrida" and her satiric "History of England", and personal letters continue to come back in the script, just like events in Austen's life, such as the first accepted and then declined marriage proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither. In the novel *Mansfield Park* Fanny declines Henry Crawford's marriage proposal from the start, while in the film she actually accepts, but then changes her mind the next morning.

Some of Austen's character traits can be found in the personality of Fanny as well, since instead of the docile, silent, innocent girl portrayed in the original novel, Fanny is presented as a witty, ambitious, forthright young woman, who not only resembles *Pride and Prejudice's* Elizabeth Bennet, but Austen herself as well: "In the movie, Fanny reads stories and letters directly to the camera as she corresponds with her younger sister back in Portsmouth. Drawing on Austen's writings, it is an ingenious conceit, a way of spicing up Fanny's character with Austen's spunky persona" (Johnson 107). Rozema's Fanny is portrayed as a modern-day young woman, who has her own voice and can be considered having slightly feminist qualities. She has an open personality, which cannot be found in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, and dares to give her own opinion when discussing slavery. In the end, it is Fanny who has taken over as the narrator of the story and who has turned the Bertrams into her own characters.

Like many others, Rozema considered the original Fanny Price a slightly dull heroine and therefore decided to make her leading lady a mix of both author (Austen) and character (Fanny). However, an evident element of Rozema's own imagination is added to her character, namely a contemporary feminist side, which numerous people love to see in

Austen, but which does not fit in with the Regency period she lived in. Austen differed from most women of her time by never marrying and becoming an independent female author, which results in people wanting to portray her as more than just a romance novelist. This is definitely a different and challenging portrait of the author and person Jane Austen, which is, once again, an interesting mixture of both fact and fiction. Elements of Austen's personality come back in this representation, but it is nevertheless based on what a specific part of the audience wants to see. The world wants to see her as a contemporary feminist, freed from the restrictive conventions of her day and with her own rights and her own voice, which is definitely an interesting representation of Austen, but also one that is, once again, influenced by the goals and occupations that occupy people's minds in this particular time period.

In one of her articles, Astrid Erll writes that in the modern day and age "film seems to have become the leading medium of popular cultural memory" (395), which is why films and TV series in which Austen herself is portrayed, and which influence the cultural memory the public has of Austen, play an essential role in this research project. In this chapter, three different films have been discussed in which Austen is portrayed in three diverse ways. In *Becoming Jane*, Austen is presented as a young woman in her early twenties, who finds true love, but loses it and uses this life-changing experience as inspiration for her novels. The script upholds the stereotypical image of Austen as the author of romance novels, who must have loved and lost in order to write such successful novels. Like *Becoming Jane*, Patricia Rozema's version of *Mansfield Park*, in which the main character Fanny strongly resembles Austen herself, portrays a specific image of Austen the public wants to see: a contemporary feminist who fought against the restrictions of her own time. The third film discussed, *Miss Austen Regrets*, seems to come closest to a down-to-earth and sensible portrayal of Jane Austen. While it also focuses on the importance of love and Austen's struggles against her

time's conventions, it shows both the positive and negative qualities of Austen near the end of her life and overall provides the audience with a, maybe not so popular, but certainly convincing portrait of what this captivating, but complex, woman might once have been like.



## Conclusion

When one does a search for the author ‘Jane Austen’ on the Internet these days, millions of search results and completely different websites pop up: from how to make your own Jane Austen Regency dress to Austen-inspired recipes to quizzes in which the results reveal what Austen heroine you are most like. While characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy continue to live on through the retellings of their love story and the various actors and actresses who take on these specific roles, the mastermind behind the stories, Jane Austen, has managed to build up an impressive afterlife as well: not just with her novels, but as her own person. While at first her written work did the talking for her, there came a moment in time when people started to wonder who exactly the lady was who came up with these tales and, most specifically, what her own story looked like. The game of searching for old family documents, hidden journals and remnants of burned letters occupied the world; “an exercise akin to ransacking an author’s bureau drawers and drawing conclusions from piles of neatly folded handkerchiefs or worn gloves” (Shields 10). When it turned out that Austen’s life story would quite possibly never be completely known to the public, numerous authors and film makers saw it as a challenge to fill these gaps with their own imagination and conclusions. This resulted in a wave of fictional works not based on Austen’s classics, but on her own life and personality instead. All these different novels and films heavily influenced the cultural memory the world has of the author and person Jane Austen, and the result was numerous different representations, which have played a central role in the re-creation of Jane Austen’s cultural memory, which was the main focus of this particular research project.

After her death in 1817, Austen’s family tried to bring a specific image of their beloved sister, daughter and aunt into the world: Jane, the not very outspoken, religious, sweet-tempered woman, who was devoted to her writing and her family. However, specific events in her life and particular character traits were left out of the story, in the hope that the

world would embrace this polished image of Austen. From this moment on, numerous people started to provide the world with various representations of Austen's life and character, which all together form a fascinating mixture of different portrayals of the same person. Especially in the modern day and age, Austen-inspired works seem to be everywhere, each of them portraying a different Jane Austen, adding to the cultural memory. For my thesis, I chose some specific works from the last two decades, which I then divided into groups according to which Jane is portrayed in each of them. The result was four different groups: Austen as the romantic heroine, Austen as the wise agony aunt, Austen related to the paranormal and Gothic, and Austen on film. The research of these different portrayals led to interesting findings.

The role which Austen most often plays is that of romantic heroine, in relation to one of the central topics in her novels, probably the one she is most well-known for: love. The novels discussed were Nancy Moser's *Just Jane* (2007), *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (2008) by Syrie James, Sally Smith O'Rourke's *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen* (2006), *Cassandra and Jane* (2004) by Jill Pitkeathley, and Veronica Bennett's *Cassandra's Sister* (2007), all of which provide Jane with a certain romantic adventure in her life. The widespread belief that Austen must have known love herself if she was able to write about it so convincingly inspired some of these authors to give Jane her own Mr. Darcy; sometimes completely fictional, sometimes based on biographical details, such as the presence of Tom Lefroy in Austen's life. However, a few of these authors decided to look at both Austen's life story and the concept of love from a slightly different perspective, providing the famous authoress with a touch of love in her life, but not in the shape of a suit-wearing gentleman. True to modern-day ideas, Austen could also have found happiness in her career or in the relationship with her family and friends, mainly her sister Cassandra, which can be linked to the feminist ideas of a universal sisterhood. While these particular novels deal with the queen

of love and romance books, the subject is touched upon in a modern and different light, which provides the world with an interesting portrayal of Austen herself.

Next to this particular image, there is the representation of Austen as the slightly older, wise, agony aunt who provides others with useful advice on all kinds of topics. The novels which focus on this particular image and which were discussed are Laurie Brown's *What Would Jane Austen Do?* (2009), *Dear Jane Austen: a Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* (2007) by Patrice Hannon, and Marilyn Brant's *According to Jane* (2009). In these fictional works, Austen is considered a source of advice, based on her novels which encompass numerous lessons on not only love, but life in general. These novels closely resemble the popular modern self-help books in which an expert, in this case Austen herself, helps the reader to achieve his or her goals. This image seems to be based on the stereotypical representation of Jane Austen, the sensible and trustworthy spinster, who is always there in the back of your mind to give advice on how to be a true Austen heroine.

An especially modern version of Jane Austen is an image related to the revival of the paranormal and the Gothic, which has lately conquered the world of literature and film. In these specific novels Austen is given a slightly dark dimension, such as her being a female detective solving murder cases (Stephanie Barron's *Jane Austen Mystery Series*) or a bloodsucking vampire (Michael Thomas Ford's *Jane Bites Back* and Janet Mullany's *Jane and the Damned*). While these authors link these specific topics to certain character traits of Austen, such as her attention to behaviour and manners like a true detective, or the similarity between some of her own characters, like a Henry Crawford or a Mr. Wickham, and vampires, it seems that this image mainly has to do with a high entertainment level and a guaranteed place on the best-sellers list. Yet, at the same time, the portrayal of Austen as a strong willed, female detective gives her a touch of feminist strength. As a woman living in the English eighteenth century, she had a repressed voice, which is now given the chance to

get back at the world and have its revenge, whether it is in the shape of a bloodsucking vampire or a female detective who proves to others that she is more than just a romantic spinster.

Next to the novels already mentioned, films based on Austen's life story also play a significant role in the process of remembering and representing an author like Jane Austen. The 2005 Hollywood romantic drama *Becoming Jane* portrays Austen as a young woman who falls head over heels in love with Tom Lefroy, but is left broken hearted, destined to write novels on the topic of love for the rest of her life. This tale of love combined with some successful and good-looking actors is a guaranteed best-seller. Another film, Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, provides the viewers with an image of Austen that consists of a mix between biographical details and the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price. This particular character can be seen as a strong, outspoken, feminist-like young woman, which is a way in which many people like to see Austen. The work that probably comes closest to portraying Austen the way she comes across in original biographical material is the BBC film *Miss Austen Regrets*, which shows a cynical, witty and slightly dark Jane: an image which might not be in accordance with everyone's thoughts on Austen, but certainly one that is not only based on love and imagination.

Overall, several different portraits of Jane Austen have been sketched and redrawn over the last two decades, which have, each and every single one of them, contributed to the constantly changing and continuing process of Austen's after-life and cultural memory. While the Jane Austen of the rolling English hills, the beautiful dresses, and the romantic gestures of charming Regency men continues to be the idea various people prefer to have of Austen, there is room for all kinds of different representations, which are already out there, and the future will most probably only bring more. It is important to point out, however, that none of these portrayals manage to capture what kind of a person the author Jane Austen genuinely was.

The world relies on specific sources, such as Austen's letters and family biographies, that most probably show an edited image; what Jane, Cassandra and their family allowed the world to see. This leaves enough room for speculation, which results in different interesting portrayals of a historical character that evolve with time, which show how the world, in this historical moment, chooses to remember Jane Austen. Obviously some portrayals may be closer to the truth than others, but we shall never know. The real issue is what these fictions tell us about ourselves and how we project our own needs onto this female icon. All these different representations of the person Jane Austen are fitting to our own goals and preoccupations and provide us with not only an image of Austen, but of ourselves and our time as well. For example, a woman's search for love and the perfect man, the dilemma of choosing between a career and a personal life, is an issue for numerous modern-day women and something that comes back more than once in these novels retelling Jane Austen's life story. In present-day culture, the main focus is on these specific aspects of Austen's life and character, instead of for example on her piety, which is why in the future Jane Austen might be remembered and represented in a completely different way. Maybe, in a few years time, Austen will figure as a fashion stylist or a master chef in a series of books or films, who knows? Something that can be said with certainty, though, is that, after having celebrated her 235<sup>th</sup> birthday last year, Jane Austen is here to stay, for the long run.

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