

***Austenland* and narrative tensions in Austen's biopics**

This essay explores how the popular film *Austenland* (2013) comically exposes some of the narrative conventions and tensions, which are apparent in two earlier Austen biopics: *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008). Through an investigation of these texts, it will be seen that the wish to celebrate Austen's historical otherness and difference, is often held in an uneasy balance with a desire to investigate the contemporary relevance of her life and work for modern readers. I will suggest that all these texts offer readings of Austen shaped by a modern aspirational narrative of romantic fulfilment. In addition their creation of an idea of 'Englishness' is informed by not only twenty-first century contexts, but also differing national expectations of Austen's world. Moreover, the essay will explore how these filmic readings are predicated on unreliable reconstructions of Austen's life, sometimes supplemented by details from Austen's novels, as well as playful enactments of historical 'facts' and self-referential quotation of other biopics and classic adaptations. These intertextual references are, as we will see, central also to the narrative of *Austenland*, and this investigation shows how the film ironically critiques earlier filmic versions of the life and works of Jane Austen, as it unremittingly draws attention to the artifice of *Austenland* itself.

I Definitions

It seems to be generally agreed that the biopics of canonical literary figures, such as Austen, frequently share many of the characteristics displayed in the classic literary adaptations of their work. In her article '*Becoming Jane* and the Adaptation Genre', Deborah Cartmell helpfully summarises the characteristics of the classic literary adaptation. From Leitch's work she notes that they include 'a period setting, "period" music, an obsession with authors, books and words, and a preponderance of intertitles, all calling attention to the film's adaptation credentials' (Cartmell, 2012, pp. 25-6). To this list, as Cartmell indicates, we might add from Geraghty's work, moments where 'the film's *mise-en-scene* visually recalls other much loved films...these meta-adaptive moments foster nostalgia' (Cartmell, 2012, p. 26). Further features suggested by Cartmell herself include 'an emphasis on the author, the inclusion of art, painting or sculpture within the frame or recreated in the *mise en scene*' (Cartmell, 2012, p. 26) as well as:

the appeal to female audiences – a feature of the genre, like historical fiction or 'chick lit', which until recently, may have been partially responsible for its banishment from serious academic critical scrutiny. Adaptation the genre, or the screen makeover of a literary text, self-consciously appeals primarily to women, signalled by female-friendly narrative additions, such as the insertion of a bathing or semi-dressed man, a trip to the shops or an additional episode in which the female upstages the male in a normally male-centred activity. Significantly, almost all of these features can be traced back to *Pride and Prejudice*. (Cartmell, 2010, p. 230)

Such features of the classic literary adaptation are thus clearly central to the genre of literary biopics, particularly where the focus is upon a canonical literary figure. As far as

biopics are concerned Cheshire notes 'defining a bio-pic is notoriously difficult: unlike most other genres there is no specific set of codes or conventions' (Cheshire, 2012, p. 5). Perhaps in general terms we might note that the subject matter depicts the life of a real person. And yet as Bingham observes, this is rather more complex in practice:

The biopic is a genuine, dynamic genre and an important one. The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of the subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or ... to be that person's audience. The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. (Bingham, 2010, p. 10)

The idea of biopics transforming the 'real' person into a character would seem to have greater resonance when we are presented with the biopic of an author, and as noted above the source for that character is often found in the author's own work. Yet there is also an observation here in Bingham's definition that the role of spectator and audience is also key. Higson takes this idea of audience further, exploring:

three separate but closely related markets or audiences for these literary biopics: the 'literary' audience; the audience for middlebrow costume drama; and the female audience for romantic drama. For some of these audiences, it is vital that these are 'quality' films about the lives of writers. For others, the protagonists of these films just happen to be authors: what is the real interest is their romantic lives. (Higson, 2013, p. 109)

A biopic of an author or writer presents particular challenges with the dominantly visual film medium attempting to represent the essentially private, intellectual and, basically not very cinematically interesting, physical activity of writing. And yet, possibly because this basic task is so uninteresting, certain film conventions have accrued around the process of writing. As Buchanan argues in relation to *Enid* (dir. James Hawes, 2009):

We recognise the anatomized elements of inspiration (poetic shafts of light, gazing into the middle distance), perspiration (clickety-clackety typewriter keys, busy fingers) and production (the words appearing on the page, the voice reading these) to which we have just been made privy and, drawing upon our foreknowledge both of Enid Blyton's literary output and, significantly, of how such film sequences *work*, we infer what this rich assembly of satisfyingly conventionalized visual elements *should* collectively now generate. (Buchanan, 2013, p. 10)

There are thus filmic conventions that have accrued to enable the cinema audience to understand the creative act of writing in literary biopics. Moreover, the narrative arc and structure of such biopics owes much to literary archetypes:

Biopics of authors are generally structured like a bildungsroman, a portrait of the artist as a young person, concentrating on the events leading up to

success and ending with the price that success brings. The emphasis is on the dawning of authorship, the 'becoming' the person we know as the author. The Romantic notion that art is inspired by love is also central to films depicting the life of an author. (Cartmell 2010, p. 28)

II *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*

The film *Becoming Jane* and the television programme *Miss Austen Regrets* have attracted much academic attention and critical investigation.

One important aspect of these investigations has been to show how these biopics have been influenced in tone and presentation by the filmic style and content of classic literary adaptations. Like the filmic adaptations of her novels, these biopics draw upon aspects of a nostalgic Austen myth, as Julian North notes:

a canonical author whose life and work signify English national heritage and all that implies of the past as an idyll of village life in a pre-industrial society, of traditional class and gender hierarchies, sexual propriety and Christian values. (North, 1999, p. 38)

A major component of this depiction involves a nostalgic longing for the order and beauty of the past. In my discussion of *Austenland* in a moment, we will see the significance of place and setting, but in *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*, we should note the significant role played by the 'historical veracity and authenticity of location and costume' – to the extent that central characters may seem lost in the 'background', which assumes a pivotal role in the drama itself' (Whelehan, 1999, p.8). With these films there is the customary setting in National Trust properties: *Becoming Jane* employed settings in Charleville Forest Castle, and Kilruddery House, both in Ireland, and *Miss Austen Regrets* uses locations at the Elizabethan Maze, Chenies Manor House, Buckinghamshire and Syon House, Syon Park, Middlesex. In these two films there are many other features of 'heritage film' or as Alan Parker coined it 'the 'Laura Ashley' school of filmmaking'¹. In each film we can recognise the characteristics of heritage cinema including the 'showcasing of landscape (often the rural south) and costume props in an occupational vacuum or state of permanent recreation', 'an appeal to relatively mature, feminine, or gay middle-class audiences, drawn to films exuding warmth and emotionality' (Voigts-Virchow, 2007, pp. 128-9). Part of this warmth and emotionality is created in these films, as it is in adaptations of Austen's literary texts, by the use of music and dance. As Sheen notes 'Adaptation from page to screen turns a novel into a soundtrack.' (Sheen, 2000, pp. 23-4). Moreover, in both of these biographical films there appears to be some direct reference or quotation of recent Austen adaptations. For example, in *Becoming Jane* there is a visual similarity between the meeting between Jane and Lady Gresham and Elizabeth Bennet and Lady Catherine de Burgh. Furthermore, the film implicitly references the famous Darcy wet-shirt moment in the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, in the scene where Jane enters the grounds of Lady Gresham's house, and also in the swimming scene following the cricket match.

Critical attention to these films has shown how the lesser-known corners of Austen's life are utilised to illuminate her literary works. In a slightly paradoxical two-way process, those same literary works and their romantic narratives, as well as those narratives of filmic romantic comedies, also inform the shape of the telling of Austen's life. *Becoming Jane* proposes that a youthful relationship with Tom Lefroy in 1796 provided Austen with the enriched emotional memory to write *Pride and Prejudice*. *Miss Austen Regrets* on the other hand depicts a period beginning with a nearly forty-year-old Austen advising her young niece Fanny on her marital prospects. This leads to Jane's own mature reappraisal of her own earlier romantic relationships, which, it is implied, inform her writing of *Persuasion*. Although her relationship with Tom Lefroy is mentioned in the television drama, the focus is here on her friendship with a Dr Haden and an older relationship with the Reverend Brook-Bridges who she was very briefly engaged to over ten years earlier. All of these relationships have been documented by earlier literary critics and writers including Austen's biographer Clare Tomalin, *Jane Austen a Life* (1997), Jon Spence *Becoming Jane Austen* (2007), and John Halperin 'Jane Austen's Lovers' (1985). While these critics do not entirely agree with each other on which romantic relationship was potentially the most significant in Austen's life and work, the film and television texts clearly endorse the idea that the author's experience of such intense romantic moments must be the transformative incidents which provide an 'explanation' for Austen's genius. This is somewhat curious and as Hopkins notes 'most dangerous(ly), *Becoming Jane* is irresistibly attracted to romance, in a way Jane Austen herself was not' (Hopkins, 2009, p. 145).

As has been noted by other critics, *Becoming Jane* adopts a strategy, which is similar to that in *Shakespeare in Love*, in that it takes the literary work as its starting point, and retrospectively offers parallels between *Pride and Prejudice* and the 'real' life of the author: we find the end in Austen's beginnings. Consequently in *Becoming Jane*, for example, Lady Gresham becomes the model for Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Tom Lefroy's early disdain influences her creation of Darcy, Mrs Austen's anxiety that her daughters should marry well becomes the foundation for Mrs Bennet, and Jane's elopement (which did not happen) mirrors Lydia's in *Pride and Prejudice*. As with *Shakespeare in Love*, part of the pleasure that some of the film audience will experience, is in recognising the connections between the life and work which the film explores. In this drama Jane decides to elope with Lefroy and she recognises that she may need to give up both her family and her future literary aspirations as a result. She does this knowing the consequences and accepting that the married state may not be compatible with the role of a female author. Nevertheless, she soon recognises that her decision to marry Lefroy would inflict penury upon his family and so ends the relationship and she returns home. It is suggested in the film that this thwarted romance influences her novel writing and so in *Pride and Prejudice* she ensures that her heroines make sound financial, as well as romantic, attachments. While she is writing the novel, Jane remarks to Cassandra that the two sisters make 'incandescent marriages to very rich men'. The director, Julian Jarrold, has noted of the depiction of Jane Austen in the film:

And I think what was surprising and interesting was the way he [writer Kevin Hood] portrayed Jane Austen as a very fresh, feisty, lively, kind of full of energy, young 20 year old. And we are so used to the image of Jane Austen as prim and proper and obsessed with propriety and middle-aged

and sat quietly on her sofa in the living room, that it just seemed very fresh and lively and an interesting character who anybody could relate to. And there was something very interesting then about the way of looking at her before she became that iconic image... (DVD Special Feature, 2008)

This demonstrates that the film has an absolute commitment to the idea that a presentation of the author's biography, and an understanding of their perceived 'human' characteristics, provides the source and answers to a writer's future literary work and their iconic 'genius'. It is as if cultural materialism and new historicism had never happened.

While *Becoming Jane* makes some use of Austen's letters to her sister, the narrative in *Miss Austen Regrets* is derived according to its writer, Gwyneth Hughes, largely from the author's correspondence and diaries. There is a similar attempt in this drama to highlight the 'human' aspects of Miss Austen's life. Steven Pile in *The Daily Telegraph* noted:

At the start of the 21st century we are all madly interested in What Jane Austen Was Really Like, but the reports are confusing. In the cinema *Becoming Jane* showed us an intelligent woman who was nonetheless feminine and romantic, but television is not so easily fooled and has come up with something far more complex. (Saturday, May 3, 2008)

The complexity of the characterisation in *Miss Austen Regrets* is partly a consequence of Jane being more mature. Yet she is also portrayed as a flirt, with an occasional sharp mocking tongue, who is given to enthusiastic dancing and drinking too much wine. Jane's behaviour enchants her new friend and potential romantic attachment, Dr Hayden, while her former fiancé, the Reverend Brook- Bridges, chastises her. In addition, she is also seen to be constantly beset by financial concerns, partly because the arrangements of her affairs are in the hands of her financially inept brothers. Jane's writing bestows a greater economic security on herself and her immediate family, as well as a degree of fame (she visits the Prince Regent's librarian who negotiates with her for the royal dedication of her next novel). The 'regrets' of the drama's title are somewhat ambiguous and numerous. Jane regrets that she is ill and may not complete her novel. She appears to regret that she did not marry her friend Brook-Bridges. The interpretation offered here is that this decision not to marry is partly based on a belief that he was 'not the one', even though later experience teaches her that 'the only way to get a man like Mr Darcy is to make him up'. There is also the rather flippant reason offered that 'The true reason I have never found a husband: I never found one worth giving up flirting for.' Yet the drama also suggests that she has a very real anxiety that she would have not been able to continue to write because of children and family commitments. The drama repeatedly shows that the lot of most women in the early nineteenth century is to become worn out and/or die as a result of having children: her sister-in-law has died leaving her brother with eleven children; her niece is pregnant within a year of her marriage. At the christening of this child, Jane's mother comments publicly on Jane's inability to hold the baby correctly, but one is led to believe that the absence of children in Jane's life is one of her regrets. Another of Jane's regrets is shown to be that her sister Cassandra asked her not to marry as she would be left alone.

The last aspect of these two films which has come under academic scrutiny, that I wish to highlight here, is the depiction of the actual act of writing. As noted earlier, the challenge is how a biopic might make this visual and interesting. Cartmell, comparing *Becoming Jane* with *Shakespeare in Love*, highlights how the quill/ink pen has become a filmic, and indeed a universal, iconic symbol of the writer. Moreover, she notes 'The pen is...symbolic of frustrated desire as well as a rival or replacement desire' (Cartmell 2013, p. 155), and later quotes Holderness who says:

The image dovetails with our romantic idea of the writer, physically engaged in putting words on paper, transferring thoughts and emotions from the mind, via the muscles and nerves of arm and finger, through the writing implement that makes immediate contact with the paper. (Holderness, 2011, p. 24).

This focus on the physical, and indeed pseudo sexual act of artistic creation can be seen in the opening scene of *Becoming Jane*. Here we see Jane Austen in the early morning dressed in nightdress and shawl writing at a small desk in the parlour of a country cottage. The opening shots of the film lovingly linger over a pastoral scene with a small village nestling amongst rolling hills, and cattle and horses grazing in the field. The soundtrack is dominated by rural sounds – bird chirping, horses snorting which is then over taken by the loud ticking of a clock in Jane's room which shows it is 6.15am. An interesting characteristic of this opening scene is fast cutting between long-shots and apparently idiosyncratic close-ups. Before her on the desk is a page, blank but for a few sentences and she distractedly taps her pen on the desk. After one stalled attempt to write a sentence which is crossed out (and then cut out of the page) she starts lethargically to play a piano. The camera pans outside the house and looks back through the window at a rather melancholic Jane tinkling on the keys of the piano, and then pans up the wall of the house to look-in at Jane's sister Cassandra, and her parents sleeping peacefully. The next shot is of a large sow suckling her piglets and the Austen's servant arriving for the beginning of her working day. As the serving girl enters the house, Jane is struck by an idea which she frantically scribbles down, and then under her breath reads aloud the paragraph she has now written. Her exuberance at this success leads her to return to her piano and play a jubilant loud piece which causes the servant to drop a milk jug on the stairs, the piglets to scatter alarmed, two doves to flutter from the dove cote, her sister to rush from her room and meet her future fiancé on the landing before each retreat embarrassed by the lack of propriety, and Mrs Austen to shout 'Jane' just as the film's title appears on screen. Her mother continues 'that girl needs a husband ...no-one's good enough ...I blame you for that'.

This opening line quite clearly is intended to introduce the beginning of a series of references to marriage in the film that parallel those in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* ('It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife', Chapter One). In this case it is Jane, the single woman without a fortune, who must be in want of a husband. In Mrs Austen's declaration we see how Jane's writing implies a singleness separate from the film's opening images of partners and natural procreation which include Cassandra and fiancé, Mr and Mrs Austen (who engage in some early morning amorous activity after her initial comments), and even the two doves frightened from their cote, along with the sow and her many piglets. This is certainly the explicit meaning of the opening of this film. And yet, there is perhaps an

implicit suggestion that the act of writing is also a pseudo – sexual act of creation. The succession of close-ups of, initially apparently, random objects together create a Freudian narrative of writing as sexual climax. The sequence of shots from a full-frame shot of the bottom of a dripping drain-pipe, the focus on the prow of a boat on the river, following by a close-up of Jane's black pen being tapped repeatedly on the table before being dipped in the ink-well, followed by a shot of a doll sitting in a window seat, and then Jane's ecstatic piano playing leading to the breaking of the waters as the servant's jug is broken on the stairs does I think support such a reading. In a sense this film's response to Gilbert and Gubar's question 'Is the pen a metaphorical penis?' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 3) would be a resounding yes. And yet the audience learn as the film progresses, that Jane's creation in this scene is an early draft of *First Impressions* which fourteen years later became *Pride and Prejudice*. The film's main project is to show how the events the film depicts are the catalyst for the creation *Pride and Prejudice*. The film proposes that her relationship with Tom Lefroy introduces her to the 'real' world of love and relationships which results in the emergence of Austen as a great writer borne out of sacrifice.

This theme of sacrifice is also a major theme in *Miss Austen Regrets*. Like her character Emma, Jane first tries unsuccessfully to manipulate the love life of her niece Fanny. Yet her significant reflection on Fanny's desire to be in love and to marry and her own regret at not marrying Brook-Bridges results in a succession of scenes where she is seen to write passages from *Persuasion*. Having returned from her brother's house in Kent she settles into the cottage in Hampshire where in a voice-over interspersed with domestic images of gutting fish and preparing fowl she says:

More than seven years were gone since this little recent sorrowful history had reached its close. She hoped to be wise and reasonable in time but alas, alas, she must confess to herself that she was not wise yet. She had used him ill – deserted and disappointed him, and worse she had shown a feebleness of character which his own decided confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others she had been forced into prudence. She learned romance as she grew older. Natural sequence to an unnatural beginning.

By the end of this passage, Cassandra is wiping her tears away with her apron but Jane notes 'I never weep over anything which might make me some money'.

After the disappointment of losing the attention of Dr Hayes in London, with her sister-in-law's words ringing in her ears 'It is a gift which god has given you. It is enough I think', Jane again returns to Hampshire and there is an extended scene in which another passage from *Persuasion* is 'written'. The passage is again interspersed with scenes of life at the cottage:

(Awakes in a start from sleep) For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched (outside in nightgown under a tree). She had some feelings which she was ashamed to investigate. They were too much like joy, senseless joy (close up of pen on paper). Anne hoped she had outlived

the age of blushing (*medium shot of Jane in parlour*) but the age of emotion she certainly had not. (*Cassandra lets in brother and family through the gate*) All of the overpowering blinding bewildering effects of strong surprise were over with her. (*back of head –camera sits just behind shoulder*) Still however she had enough to feel it was agitation, pain, pleasure (*voice over Fanny and children chasing a chicken in the yard*) a thing between delight and misery (*chicken cornered, knife sharpened*) The room seemed full of persons and voices (*plucking chicken*) a thousand feelings rushed on Anne of which this was the most consoling (*Door creaks, Cassandra enters with tray, sets table – Jane freezes with pen above paper*) But it would soon be over (*chicken gets head cut up – Cassandra re-enters, Jane stands up – cries out in pain*).

It is interesting that both of these passages are a conglomeration of snippets from different parts of the novel, and an adaptation of Austen's text. Such pastiche we will see is also part of *Austenland's* oeuvre. The dominate note of both pieces of *Persuasion* we seeing being composed is elegiac – the creative act has been born from difficult personal experience. The ideas arrive unbidden and are wrenched from and into the ordinary fabric of Jane's life. The silent act of writing is supplemented by voiceover, music and the cornering, killing and preparation of the fowl for the table. As in *Becoming Jane*, the close-up on the pen is again significant. Here it is poised, waiting above the paper for Jane to resume her writing once the room is again her own. Yet whereas the act of writing in *Becoming Jane* was almost an act of procreation, here in *Miss Austen Regrets* it seems an act of purgation and it is seen as an anticipation of her own death. Despite the fact that these passages are not unadulterated Austen, the audience is manoeuvred into a position where they are presented with an image of an author who has confronted her demons and created a great work of literature.

Thus as in *Becoming Jane*, the iconic figure of Austen is challenged in *Miss Austen Regrets*, and it is again built on the assumption that as Stephen Pile noted above 'we are all madly interested in What Jane Austen Was Really Like'. Arguably this drama, unlike *Becoming Jane*, came closer to examining some of the social and historical contexts of Austen's life and work. Yet it shares with *Becoming Jane* its strategy of creating an image of Austen which is shaped through a filter of twenty-first century concerns. And here again there are similarities with the filmic adaptations of Austen's own works. The recreation of Austen herself as a 'feistier' version of one of her own heroines appeals, as Giddings and Selby noted of the Classic Serial on television, to 'socially, sexually, and political enfranchised women' (Giddings, 2001, p.119) in the contemporary audience. On the one hand the heritage film displays a cultural obsession with the past but paradoxically these productions cater to the audience's perceived need for Austen to 'be like us' – a woman with a career, searching for financial security, a good social life, a significant relationship and children. We want Austen to have anticipated these shared modern preoccupations in her work, but this is only achievable by radically realigning biographical and historical facts.

III *Austenland*

But to turn now to *Austenland*. The film *Austenland* released in 2013 is based on the first *Austenland* novel by Shannon Hale. In terms of its style and content the film and novel rely on its audience recognising, or at least implicitly understanding, the features of the classic literary adaptation, the biopic, and also the narrative structure of romantic comedy. The title of the film emphasises the significance of place to the concept of the film. *Austenland* the location in the film has a material particularity, but is founded on a rather more nebulous interpretation of the author's life and works. The term 'Austenland' was used in 2002, by Battaglia and Saglia, as a concept to describe all things Austenian 'a vast, virtual territory in a state of continuous expansion and configuration' created by 'readers and critics in their explorations of Jane Austen and her works' (Battaglia, 2004, p. 1). Yet 'Austenland' also suggests other nomenclature, such as 'Shakespeare's County', or 'Bronte Country', employed by local tourist boards. Nicola Watson describes such literary tourism as 'a fusion of the biographical with the fictional' (107) and notes of the emergence of 'Bronte Country' at the end of the nineteenth century :

it thus emerges as an amalgam of biographical and ambiguously real and fictive locations. It is populated indiscriminately by the sisters themselves, by their fictional characters, and by houses and places which are at once fictive (since they have usually been transposed and have always been re-named) and yet which are sufficiently real to be documented, mapped, marked and viewed. (Watson, 2006, p. 126)

In some respects, the two biopics discussed earlier are also acts of literary tourism combining the real and the fictive as well as documenting and mapping people and places to be marked and viewed. In *Austenland* the economic imperative of this literary tourism is also clearly and comically exposed. At the beginning of the film, the proprietor, Mrs Wattlesbrook, in a marketing video for travel agents, describes *Austenland* 'as the world's only Jane Austen immersive experience', where Austen's name is a synonym for both literary works and author. The 'land' or location for this experience is revealed to be Pembroke Park, a stately home in the southern counties of England, which the film recreates at the National Trust property, West Wycombe Park. The first shot of the house echoes the framing of such locations in *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets*. Its apparent authenticity is constructed for on-screen customers by its association with these biopic films and other classic literary adaptations. The country house asserts its pastoral credentials in the first long-shot where it is shown perched on a hill, framed by trees, fronted by a lake, and bathed in sunshine. In addition, the film audience hear a classical music score inviting further comparisons with previous filmic constructions. The film thus deliberately crafts its location from the tropes of classic literary adaptations and biopics, and yet at the same time these conventions are commandeered to become part of a parody or pastiche of those very films.

The 'immersive experience' promised to *Austenland*'s customers is the promise of romance. In another parallel with the Austen biopics, the 'experience' is loosely based on moments or tropes from the novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice*. The premise of

the film is that the heroine, Jane Hayes, an American, will either find romance at Austenland or be cured of her obsession with Jane Austen's world, and in particular, Darcy and *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Hayes' long-standing obsessiveness is illustrated through a short series of flashbacks of former romantic encounters blighted by her obsession with Darcy. The interior of her apartment is shown to be cluttered with Austen memorabilia, and is a shrine to a kitsch version of Austen with its collection of teapots, china cups and saucers, doll's houses, dolls in eighteenth century dress, a full-size cardboard cut-out of Colin Firth as Darcy which dominates her living area, and a bedroom of floral chintz, with 'Darcy was here' written over the bed. With the last of her savings Jane Hayes embarks for Austenland. Following a series of establishing shots of rather clichéd London tourist sites including the House of Parliament, marching guardsman and red telephone boxes, the film shows her arriving at a London airport. In an overhead shot we see her sweeping through the terminal in a long red polyester dress, of a vaguely Regency/Victorian style, a red-hooded cloak, and wearing an ill-fitting flimsy bonnet. At the collection point for Austenland, she meets one of her fellow guests, who while not dressed in period costume, announces herself, reading from notes provided by Austenland, to be Miss Charming. This character played by Jennifer Coolidge becomes Jane's confidante, although it is soon clear that she seeks a different experience from that of Jane at Austenland. They are collected by a chauffeur driving a classic Rolls Royce, which Miss Charming refers to as a 'car from the 1800s' and later asks if this is 'the Chitty, Chitty Bang Bang car?'. This opening section of the film thus illustrates its American visitors' yearning for historical authenticity in England and at Austenland, while at the same time not being entirely sure what such authenticity would look like. They are seeking the 'LC – life changing experience...get to play the heroine of your very own Austen story' as promised by Jane's travel agent, but their search for transformation is predicated on a misconceived, and inaccurate fantasy model of Austen and her works. The trope of an enacted, but dislocated fantasy is established clearly by Jane's 'Little Red Riding Hood' costume etched against the modernist styling of the airport arrival terminal.

Austenland, the location, oscillates rapidly between the utilisation of genuine historical buildings and grounds, as discussed above, and the obvious inaccuracies of the performance of the 'immersive experience' staged within it. Jane Hayes is given the pseudonym Miss Erstwhile, marking her affinity with a by-gone age. Of the three visitors to Austenland, she is the one most versed in the novels, whereas Miss Amelia Hartwright gushingly enters into the costume drama, while Miss Charming fails to register that *Pride and Prejudice* is the title of an Austen novel, and appears more focused on possible romantic liaisons during her vacation. These three women interestingly seem to mirror Higson's 'three separate but closely related markets or audiences for these literary biopics' (Higson, 2013, p. 109) mentioned above – those seeking the literary, the costume drama, and the romantic drama. Ironically, it is Jane, the most informed of the visitors, who, during her welcome meeting at Austenland with the proprietess, is downgraded to the copper package because she has inadvertently paid for a lower level experience. It is clear that there is a modern economic bottom line in this enterprise. It

is rather tempting to suggest that this also comically exposes the financial constraints of all modern stagings of Austen. In the film, Jane's copper package means that initially she is denied the 'fine' clothes and accommodation of her two fellow female participants, and is allocated the role of poor relation to the family at the House, and it is from this lowly position that she negotiates the recreated life of an Austen heroine seeking romance.

The 'interactive experience' of *Austenland* is founded on a performance where everyone, but the paying guests, are paid actors. The staging of this performance embraces a number of features that would be familiar to its cinema audiences, and to its participants. The interiors of the House are recognisable as those of the Regency houses of classic adaptations, while at the same time they are excessively and parodically filled with *object d'arte* and cluttered with flower displays, paintings, statuettes. The costumes of the women are authentically shaped but they utilise a too modern colour palette and are excessively accessorised. They are the epitome of what Voight-Virchow called 'costume props in an occupational vacuum or state of permanent recreation' (128). The male actors are slightly more authentically costumed, and in one of a number of intertextual references in the film, the dark suit worn by Mr Noble, (JJ Feild), the Darcyesque leading-man in the *Austenland* performance, was worn by Colin Firth as Darcy in the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*. Similarly Rupert Vansittart, who plays Mr Wattlesbrook in *Austenland*, also played the similar drunken figure of Mr Hurst in the same television production. One might suggest that these intertextual references, which are likely to go unnoticed by all but the most assiduous of viewers, together with JJ Feild's previous casting as Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* (2007), are, curiously, an attempt to establish the authentic credentials of the film project itself, even as it parodies the spectacular failure of the *Austenland* experience.

This *Austenland* experience focuses on a number of dramatic scenarios, staged by the actors in *Austenland*, to provide opportunities for the guests to become romantically entangled. Therefore, in activities derived from Austen's novels, biopics and other classic literary adaptations, the actors create scenes involving elaborate dinners and picnics, card games, musical soirees, amateur theatricals, and outdoor sporting activities. The latter provides the moment familiar from classic literary adaptations, and seen in the cricket scene in *Becoming Jane*, where the 'female upstages the male in a normally male-centred activity'. In this film Jane Erstwhile is the best shot in the grouse-shooting competition, and this moment is given some cinematic authentication, by employing the biopic convention of the classical musical score, which is here a Mozart Horn Concerto. Nevertheless, at the same time this scene becomes part of a running visual joke in the film around stuffed animals and birds. The grouse Jane 'kills' are already dead, and have been stuffed and then launched into the air for her to shoot. This she does in the style of a rifle-toting American settler. Taxidermy is everywhere in the film from the birds who embellish the women's hair, to the peacocks and farm animals dotted around the estate. This motif could I think be a parodic reference to the

very real animals which inhabit Longbourne in Joe Wright's 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*. Moreover, this taxidermy is a marker of the artifice which is at the heart of the Austenland experience, and perhaps more significantly becomes a metaphor for the ways biopics seek to objectify and preserve the lives and works of their subjects.

The activities at Austenland, as seen in this grouse-shooting episode, also bring English and American behaviours and interests into stark contrast. This can be seen in the attempts by Miss Charming to imitate Englishness in her speech by mangling vowels and resorting to 'tally ho' and inaccurate 'top of t'morning' utterances before commenting that 'I really enjoy conversating'. Lady Amelia Hartwright is linguistically convincing in the role of an eccentric, comic English aristocratic and yet is revealed at the end to be a bored wealthy American married to an old and ailing husband. Jane Erstwhile, however retains her American accent throughout, despite the coaching offered by Miss Charming. Given this film is often parodic in its intentions, this discussion around appropriateness of vocabulary and accent, could be seen to reference the exploits of other American actresses taking roles in Austen dramas. For example, in the pursuit of 'authenticity', Anne Hathaway, when playing Austen in *Becoming Jane* was willing to immerse herself in 'a village in England for a month', in order to change her accent, which, as Hopkins notes, 'was an clear urge to fidelity' (Hopkins 140). Yet it also emphasises how in contemporary adaptations of Austen's life and works, the transatlantic perspective on English heritage is also a significant shaping factor.

The film therefore gives a number of examples of the difficulty of creating a version of Austen's life and work in the modern world. As well as those mentioned above, the film often uses music to demonstrate the tensions and ambiguities of such an endeavour. Classical music is used to endorse the legitimacy of the film and the constructed Austenland as noted earlier, but contemporary popular music is used to endorse difference and historical distance. All the women when called upon to demonstrate the musical and singing skills of the typical Austen heroine are found sadly wanting. Jane Erstwhile invited to entertain the gathering, provocatively plays a one-fingered piano version of an American hip-hop song by Nelly that begins in her version with 'it is getting so hot in here/ I think I will take my clothes off'. Comedy is provided by the contrast with the modern and contemporary, but the song also parodies how desire is often signalled, admittedly more subtly, via such piano performances in biopics and classic literary performances.

But what of the romance in this film? In the biopics of Austen we have seen that, in comparison to her novels, romantic love is not able to be portrayed as happy-ever-after, based on 'the simple fact that all her heroines find their man, but Jane Austen did not' (North 2012, 111). And yet, as we have seen, despite this, romantic love is positioned as transformative in these biopics. *Austenland* is at heart a romantic comedy (a romcom) and possibly a chick flick, so it comes as no surprise that the idea of romance is again central. Austenland, the place, with its commercial transactions, layers of reality, and performance, complicates the recognition of true love, as it does in Austen's novels. Yet this game-playing provides in the film ample opportunities for the

customary misunderstandings of romantic comedy to develop. Jane Hayes/Erstwhile clearly understands that Mr Nobley is the Mr Darcy figure in the performance being enacted at the House, but she initially is attracted by someone who seems more 'real', the servant Martin who seems to critique the Austenesque world. The viewer, however, is soon shown Martin behind the scenes at Austenland, relaxing by a swimming pool discussing Jane, with the other male actors. This scene appears to parody one of the classic novels 'female-friendly narrative additions, such as the insertion of a bathing or semi-dressed man', in a behind the scenes moment that shows Captain East in a customary state of undress. Jane, however, fails to recognise that Martin is also giving a performance, albeit one of a disgruntled actor at Austenland, and he is her designated copper package romantic partner. Martin is arguably the Mr Wickham character in the film. Mr Nobley, on the other hand, tries unsuccessfully to reveal his real affections for her under the guise of the theatrical entertainment. There is also some evidence in *Austenland*, that as in the biopics romantic love can transform one's artistic life. In the novel, *Austenland*, the character of Jane Hayes is a graphic designer who while staying in England recovers her lost talent for painting. In the film, there is a remnant of this particular transformative power of love, with Jane's continued sketching and Nobley's comments 'you are an artist' [59.09].

However, the film more particularly seems to utilise the archetypal structure of romantic comedy more familiar in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. The film's tripartite structure enables the festive holiday world of Austenland to provide a release from the normal world to facilitate clarification and transformation as noted by C L Barber 'through release to clarification' (Barber, 1959, p. 4). For the heroine of the film this clarification comes in stages. The beginning of this process is signalled by the conventional romantic 'make-over' as she discards the costume of the copper package and takes 'charge of her own story'. Following a musical and dance sequence to Kim Carnes 1981 version of 'She's got Bette Davis's eyes' (referencing Elizabeth Bennet's eyes and the framing of Kiera Knightley's eyes in 2005 film –see Cartmell, 2013), Jane asserts, in a near quotation of *Miss Austen Regrets* that she is single because 'good men are fictional'. The final stages of this clarification comes at the obligatory final Ball where she declares she 'wants something real' not what she takes to be the sham proposal of Nobley. This is followed by the fracas at the airport where the two men literally fight for her affection. Then the final stage in the clarification is Nobley's arrival in America at her apartment recently decluttered and cleared of its Austen paraphernalia. Nobley, in this different land, is revealed to be a history Professor and novice actor at Austenland, who nevertheless affirms the benefits of the Austenland experience: 'I used to think my Aunt's profession was somewhat grotesque. But the truth is I enjoyed stepping into history. The idea of a simpler world where love is straightforward and lasting. I believe we have that in common. And all of this is secondary to the fact that I am completely mad about you' (1.26.13) 'I saw you in the theatrical and you weren't Miss Erstwhile. Neither of us is capable of pretending' (1.27.06). The film has revealed that Austenland, the place, is a poorly constructed artefact, yet paradoxically out of it appears to come

transformation, understanding, and real love. Austen is vindicated in her relevance to the contemporary world and Jane gets her modern Darcy.

This affirmation is confirmed in the final sequence of the film, where Henry Nobley and Jane Hayes return to the newly refurbished Austenland. They are seen strolling through the grounds where the 'interactive experience' has been turned into an Austen fun-fair owned now by Miss Charming. Amidst funfair rides, candy-floss, tea drinking, and displays from Captain East aimed at the predominately female visitor group, Jane and Nobley pose for a photograph with their faces framed behind a life-size cut-out of Elizabeth and Darcy. Instead of the high 'art' and painting of conventional classic adaptations the audience is left with the image of a fun-fair holiday snap.

IV

Austenland, the film, is thus I would argue a romantic comedy which utilises and interrogates the conventions of biopics and classic literary adaptations. Its *modus operandi* is parody and through this means reveals the tensions and undercurrents of the conventions employed in the creation of biopics and classic literary adaptations. Macdonald noted in his collection of parodies that 'most parodies are written out of admiration rather than contempt' (Macdonald, 1960, p. xiii). Hutcheon noted also

that the modern use of parody ... does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction. Parody implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive'. (Hutcheon, 1978, p. 202)

The film *Austenland* in its parody seems to endorse this view, in that it offers a playful, and kindly, parodic version of biopics and classical literary adaptations, while ultimately affirming the ideas of transformative romantic love which are central to other films telling Austen's story or stories. Further one might argue, that *Austenland*, the location in the film, stands as an ironic representation of those films, as it offers a performed and constructed version of the life and works of Austen. It explores the attraction of biopics to both US and UK audiences who seek via this experience the nostalgic reconstruction of the lost social and cultural world of canonical writers. Yet it reveals that such reconstructions are forged from different national and subject positions with different expectations of the finished project. More importantly, this ironic representation reaffirms the significance of place as a site of memorial and remembering. *Austenland* parodically, and Austen biopics more earnestly, bring a romanticised, and somewhat anachronistic, version of the literary writer into the present. From this temporal and spatial foundation, they endeavour to deliver a transformative experience for their audiences. In that sense, perhaps, *Austenland* and Austen biopics are both acts of cultural or literary tourism. They provide opportunities to map and document, but also

encourage the contemporary audience to identify and empathise with Austen as they cinematically travel across time and place.

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ⁱ This now apocryphal phrase originated as a caption to a cartoon in Alan Parker's *Making Movies* (1998). The comment was directed particularly towards films made by the Merchant-Ivory team, especially *Howard's End* (1992).