

# Serial Austen

## Mashingups with Zombies

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### 1. Serial Austen?

Jane Austen sells. She sells in all possible ways, she is probably the most adapted author in British history. As a matter of fact, her novels have been adapted for the cinema and the stage (Wiltshire 2001; Byrne 2002; Parrill 2002; Voigts Virchow 2004; Sutherland 2005; Gay 2006; McLuckie 2006; Troost and Greenfield 2007; MacDonald 2008; Dow 2012; Birk and Gymnich 2015), they have been rewritten as comics and graphic novels, like for example, the Marvel version of *Pride and Prejudice* by Nancy Butler and Hugo Petrus (2013). However, Jane Austen is not only one of the most known writer of the English literary canon but she is a true cultural icon (Wells 2011; Johnson 2012; Mullen 2012). The interest in her life is so strong that many biographies have been written in order to recover new facts and details (Honan 1988; Jenkins 1996; Nokes 1997; Holbert Tucker 1998; Tomalin 1999; Le Faye 2006). The places where she has lived and the places depicted in her novels have become tourist sites for literary pilgrims; in her case literary tourism joins her life and her work (Laski 1969; Edwards 1985; Aylmer 2003; Le Faye 2003; Galperin 2003; Battaglia e Saglia 2004). Jane Austen is a cross-over phenomenon which encompasses many fields, from regency costume balls (with characters' interpretation) created in her steps, to heritage films and literary tourism. Her work has been intensively and extensively studied for centuries by scholars and is now object of study by non scholars but faithful admirers all over the world. Interdisciplinary and an incredible range of studies have been

carried on about the author and her literary works (Gammie and McCulloch 1996; Kirkham 1997; Tuite 2002; Sales 2003; Fullerton 2006; Knox Shaw 2004; Suk Yang 2013) and Austen scholars continue to find new fields of analysis (Doody 2015).

Furthermore, a variety of books have been published on her admirers across languages and cultures. The term 'janeite' has been coined in order to define Jane Austen's fans and admirers and it gives a name to the unique relationship in which writer and reader are on first name terms, they are blended. The term was actually made up by Rudyard Kipling in his short story "The Janeites" published in *Story-Teller*, *MacLean's* and *Hearst's International* magazines in May 1924 about a group of World War I soldiers who were secretly fans of Austen's novels. On January 2013 the BBC devoted a program on Janeites entitled "Janeites: the Curious American Cult of Jane Austen" presenting the movie adaptation of Shannon Hale's book *Austenland* presented at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival. The love and obsession for Austen and her narrative world has been analyzed by various scholars, like for example Lynch (2000), Giffin (2002); Raw and Dryden (2013), Yaffe (2013), Mirmohamadi (2014). Talking about Janeites clearly defines one type of Austen's admirer, the common reader we could say, opposed to the academic, the scholar.

What is the reason of Jane Austen's popular and global success? First of all, in the Anglophone world Jane Austen's books are well-known, almost anyone has read at least a book by Austen at school or at University; her texts are used in secondary education and they are widely available online (for example on the website [www.bibliomania.com](http://www.bibliomania.com)) with commentaries. Secondly, the interest on Austen's life and her work has been influenced by a massive amount of adaptations of her novels into different literary and visual genres, into sequels, prequels, comic versions, graphic novels, romance fiction and spin-offs. Jane Austen has become a brand, with a continuous development of her work's industry (Hayes 2000). Certainly BBC series have given an afterlife to Austen's narratives, they have clearly reinvigorated the interest in her works. Moreover, adaptations creators have been influenced by earlier works of adaptation and the 1995 BBC

series of *Pride and Prejudice* has certainly been a watershed in Austen's 'afterlives'. Colin Firth's representation of Darcy has remained in the minds and hearts of Austen's fans and many scenes of the series – first of all the pond scene with a sexy Darcy emerging dripping wet - have been re-utilised by later adaptations like, for example, *Lost in Austen*, a four-part 2008 British television series written by Guy Andrews where Amanda, a woman from modern London, enters the plot of the novel through a portal in her bathroom, to join the Bennet family and affect events disastrously.

This intertextuality among adaptations has got to the point that sequel narratives have referred to the actor interpreting the character, like Mia March's *Finding Colin Firth* (2013). Actually, Firth's Darcy is partly responsible for the erotic fascination with Austen characters. Many have been the publications on the erotic genre and what has been defined as "Jane Austen Erotica", like for example, Arielle Eckstut and Dennis Ashton, *Pride and Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes by Jane Austen* (2001) or Enid Wilson's 'sexy romances' visible in her webpage "steamydarcy.com", to William Codpiece Thwackery's rewriting *Fifty Shades of Mr Darcy: A Parody* (2012). A quite playfully study on Austen's novels and the role of readers is Sarah Raff's *Jane Austen Erotic Advice* (2014) which has nothing to do with the mass of publication on Austen erotica but which envisages a strong and emotional relationship between the writer and her readers, an empathic bond that would explain the massive interest in her work nowadays. If the title choice is more a marketing solution than a polemic against sexed up classics we do not know but it clearly reveals the point to which Austen's rewritings have got. Austen has become a crime fiction writer in the hands of Stephanie Barron and her "Jane Austen Mysteries" (bibliography available at <http://stephaniebarron.com/books.php>). She has been transformed into a teen writer with young adult novel adaptations like Elizabeth Eulberg's *Prom and Prejudice* or Jenni James's series *The Jane Austen's Diaries* (Coldwell 2014). It is not a chance that scholars see Austen behind sentimental novels like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and *Bridget Jones and the Edge of Reason* (1999) which have been

adapted into movies and whose sequel is the brand new *Bridget Jones's Baby* directed by Sharon Maguire with one again Colin Firth as a new Darcy (2016). Chicken literature like Alexandra Potter's *Me and Mr Darcy* (2007) or Shannon Hale's *Austenland* (2007) or the spin off *Longbourn* (2014), a novel that imagines *Pride and Prejudice* from the point of view of the Bennett's housemaid, are other 'reflections' of Austen's works. Another realm which has been widely invaded by Austen's stories is the horror genre with books by Amanda Grange's sequel *Mr Darcy, Vampire*, (2009), followed by *Vampire Darcy's Desire: A Pride and Prejudice Adaptation* (2009) by Regina Jeffers. The vampire motif spread to a different Austen novel, resulting in Jane Austen and Wayne Josephson's *Emma and the Vampires* (2010) and even Austen herself turning into a vampire in *Jane Bites Back* (2010) by Michael Thomas Ford. So, it is clear that we witness an endless manipulation of Austen's stories and characters (Francus 2010).

Acknowledging this, should we take this proliferation of Austen and her world as a way to read her endlessly and in proliferating ways? As Linda Hutcheon has outlined, talking about proximity or fidelity to the original text, "adaptation is repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 2006: 7). As a reader and a fan of Austen in the last two decades I have witnessed a proliferation of her narrative world but I have been particularly struck by the horror path her characters have taken. Some months ago while I was looking at new books in the sci-fi section in the bookshop where I usually go I was perplexed about the amount of novels clearly referring to my favourite author and showing covers with vampires and zombies. While I was thinking to myself that this could not work (at least for scholars or intellectuals), the bookshop seller said I could not miss that, it was a very enjoyable and funny book. At that point my soul of Cultural Studies scholar could not resist, and grabbed Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) showing an Elizabeth Bennett zombified on the cover. Surely this has not been one of the best readings in my life but it is anyway one example of a phenomenon that poses some questions about reading, readers, classics and our globalised and wired world.

That is how I entered the world of “mash-up” novels, a real cultural phenomenon of the last decade. “Mash-up” novels combines the original novel with a parallel version in another genre; they are works of fiction which combine a pre-existing literature text, often a classic, with another genre, principally the horror genre or science fiction into a single narrative. The term originated in the music industry defining songs blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another. It appears to have been coined for this novel, Seth Grahame-Smith's novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) seen as the starting point of the genre. It is clearly a marketing choice, in fact these novels have been commissioned by a publisher, who recognized a new market segment. The idea of a marriage between the Regency novel of manners with zombie splatter fiction came from Jason Rekulak, the publisher at Quirk Books, an independent Philadelphia-based publishing house, which led to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* becoming the first of a new imprint, Quirk Classics, mockingly mirroring Penguin classics. Quite interestingly, Quirk Books utilized internet as their main marketing tool for the selling of the novel. “Mash-up” have been seen as a way to exploit classic literature for commercial purposes, a way to capitalise on the publishing success of canonical text, which certainly is the case. The publisher increase the initial print from 12,000 to 60,000 copies thanks to the position of the “mash-up” as a best-seller both in the Amazon list than in prestigious lists like for example, the *New York Times best sellers*.

“Mash up” novels have been massively bought while being dismissed as popular and marketing products by the academia. Surprisingly (also for the publisher) the zombie version of Austenland was seen as an interesting evolution by Austen fans worldwide who bought and read it more than horror genre readers. The following years saw a prequel, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls* (2010) about the Bennet sisters and the sequel, *Dreadfully Ever After* (2011) on the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, both by Steve Hockensmith. The hideous progeny of *Pride and Prejudice* led to more supernatural creatures being

introduced into the market in the same year, like Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters's *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and Jane Austen and Vera Nazarian's *Mansfield Park and Mummies* (2009). A more recent phenomenon within the genre is the combination of more than two original works, or genres, as in the case of *Robinson Crusoe (The Eerie Adventures of the Lycanthrope)*, which combines the original novel with elements borrowed from the works of H.P. Lovecraft as well as the popular genre of werewolf fiction, and is accordingly attributed to three authors – Daniel Defoe, H.P. Lovecraft, and Peter Clines, or Cass Grix's *Frankenstein Darcy: a Pride and Prejudice Paranormal* (2016).

## 2. Mashing Up *Pride and Prejudice*

Marketed in the press and on the front cover as “The Classic Regency Romance now With Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem” and signed by two authors – Jane Austen and Grahame-Smith – the novel follows the original plot of *Pride and Prejudice* and adds to it zombies and ninjas. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Grahame-Smith declared that he used a 80% of Austen's text and transformed only the rest. Disrupting the linearity of the original the writer added new elements in order to present the story from a different perspective. However, here the notion of rewriting is taken a step further, starting from the premise of co-authoring the book with the dead author. Following Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), we can debate if this is an adaptation of the Austen's text or an appropriation. Probably Austen's rewriting with zombie can be seen as an enhanced version of the original text with modern material. Both the positive and negative evaluation of the phenomenon starts from the fact that “mash-up” authors take available and well-known texts, integrate them with popular elements and make the story accessible to a modern audience. So, if on the one hand, they trivialize classics and canonical literature, on the other, the contemporary writer expose readers to touchstone classics they might not have had an interest in before the novel was combined with the horror genre. One of the main

idea is that “mash up” unveil an interest and a veneration for classic texts which are given a new life, we could say they are ‘translated’ for the younger audience. It’s hard to say if this is an homage, or an exploitation, or more pragmatically a mere marketing strategy. As intellectuals we do not take too much seriously these literary forms, however we must recognize that in this age of hypertexts and multimedia narrative structures they should be regarded as a new literary phenomenon. We can say that the “mash-up” novel allows contemporary writers to explore classic novels by adding popular elements to the pre-existing stories, making these stories more appealing for the contemporary reader (Beard 2009). Clearly the dead author cannot react to adaptations, re-mediations and mashing-ups of her work, they are made taking into account the readers’ expectations. They are texts principally thought for the American reader and market (Murray 2012).

Can “mash-up” novels be seen as the last product of Austen’s works adaptability and versatility for a modern audience? Can we say that the extreme popularization of the author and her novels gradually brought us to the mashing up of her texts? Moreover, it seem a never ending replication since many “mash-up” novels have been adapted into movies, like in our case the movie of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* released in February 2016 (directed by Burr Steers), or previously Seth Grahame Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2010) first a “mash-up” novel, and then a “mash-up” film as well. So, the success of “mash-up” novels now has transcended to the film industry. The adaptation of “mash-up” novels into movies or graphic novels (*Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* has been adapted as a graphic novel by Tony Lee and Cliff Richards in 2010) clearly show the popularity of mash-ups and give us, both as readers and scholars, some food for thought. Even the BBC dedicated a program on this topic in 2012 entitled “Are literary mash-ups the best next thing?”.

My aim is to demonstrate that “mash-up” novels based on Austen’s texts can be considered as serial narratives. If as Henry Jenkins (2006) asserts, seriality implies the unfolding of a story over time through a process of “chunking” (that is creating meaningful

parts of the same story) and of “dispersal” (that is breaking the story into more parts and in more genres and media), mash-ups seems to do this. Austen’s story remains as a “story hook” which pushes the reader to come back to different products for a continuation of the same story. So, if on the one hand “seriality occurs within the same text” (Jenkins 2006: 18), the storytelling of Austen’s stories across genres and media are part of a seriality process, So we can say that Austen’s world is rebuilt through different literary and cultural products. As Camilla Nelson (2013) asserts, more than to the original the text is influenced by other adaptations, and we witness “an intertextual field of difference” (Nelson 2013: 342). Intertextuality and intermediality are the key issues of these forms of writing which are based on the idea of assembling previous literary and cultural material and mashing them with new ideas. If on the one hand, adaptation demands the text to be read relationally to previous texts, on the other hand, “mash-up” novels like *Pride Prejudice and Zombies* demonstrates that seriality can be seen in the repetition with variations of the same model, that is to say, these literary forms exemplify how an hypotext (the classic) is repeated with differences in the hypertext (the “mash-up”).<sup>1</sup> According to Jenkins, Victorian seriality has been transformed into a wider literary/cultural universe transposed in various media (cinema, comics, visual arts, the web) and we can retrace an “horizontal seriality” repeated in different media, a “vertical seriality” visible in sub-plots of the hypotext, and a “transversal seriality” retraceable in the character’s characterization.

I am aware my analysis crosses seriality with transmediality and crossmediality. We could say that Austen’s “mash-ups” are part of a process of transmedial storytelling – in the definition given by Max Giovagnoli (2011) – because they amplify the author’s imaginary world and they re-tell the core story in different media. Furthermore, they can be considered as products of “modification” according to Marie Laure Ryan’s definition of transfictionality (Ryan 2013). Following her study

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<sup>1</sup> For this terminology see Genette 1982.



on the three different operations of expansion, modification and transposition, Austen's "mash-ups" are clearly consequence of the "snowball effect", that is:

A certain story enjoys so much popularity or becomes so prominent culturally that it spontaneously generates a variety of either same medium or cross media prequels, sequels, fan fiction and adaptations. In this case, there is a central text that functions as a common field of reference to all other texts. (Ryan 2013: 363)

Austen's protoworld of *Pride and Prejudice* is clearly redesigned and reinvented in contemporary "mash-up" novels.

### **3. What zombies got to do with Elizabeth Bennett?**

The "mash-up" clearly is structured around six elements from Austen's text: the plot, the characters' characterization, the dialogues, well known scenes and some of the main themes in the novel like the differences between social classes, money, gender relationships, social values and rules in Regency England. As a matter of fact, despite transgressing Jane Austen's construction of the world of Regency manners, Grahame-Smith still manages to retain many of its core values, from a sense of decorum through the depiction of a strong main female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet. It is not a chance that the novel begins alluding to Austen's well known beginning of the story:

'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the living dead.' (Austen and Grahame-Smith 2009: 7)

This rewriting of the classic opening line from *Pride and Prejudice* signals a departure from the normal narrative, and prepares the

reader's expectations since as a result of these two simple sentences, the perception of the ideal Austen reader is immediately deconstructed and the access to a wider readership is evident. While transforming Austen's text, the author disrupts the linearity of the original text while reinterpreting some parts. All through the text the reader recognizes the extracts from Austen and the author's reinterpretation of the plot. As for the characters' characterization, the first recognizable thing is Grahame Smith's changes about Austen's female characters, they are warriors, ninjas who fight for the Crown against Zombies who are invading the idyllic English rural world. The Bennett sisters are fearless warriors, trained as zombie warriors in the Shao Lin Temple in China and masters of the use of katana. Georgiana, Darcy's sister is a warrior too, and so is Lady Catherine de Bourgh famous for her fighting skills. As we can guess from the horror theme, violence is pervasive and some scenes are very disturbing, like for example, Elizabeth devouring the still beating heart of a ninja. Because of this depiction of a fighting femininity, a feminist message has been underlined in the novel (Ruthven 2012; Roberts 2015). However, following the marriage plot, these women are expected to cease fighting zombies once they marry. The sentimental novel comes once again on the surface (Potter 2012). However, Charlotte Collins' marriage plot is reshaped and following Austen's portrayal of human beings and social manners, Grahame Smith represents the characters' dispositions, manners, talents or their power to please. He changes Austen's depiction of male characters like, for example, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Collins, who are well known for their defects and non sympathetic behaviors, and render them more positive; Darcy is a renowned zombie killer while Mr. Bingley has never learnt to fight.

Like in Austen's novel, characters are built through their words, that is to say, through what they say and think. Dialogues have the same use as in Austen's text, they explain the character's attitude while developing the plot. The Austenian language (Page 1972; Stokes 1991) is also mashed up with contemporary American English and the use of the horror genre lexicon, so that the author's passages are intersected with the contemporary words of Grahame Smith. Descriptions of

zombies as 'herds', 'outcasts', 'living dead' recall all the cinematographic tradition starting from Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1968). Moreover, the dialogue between verbal and visual texts is symbolized also in the last edition of the novel where the cover is taken from the movie adaptation and which presents a paratextual apparatus with images from the movie. Therefore, the intermediality already present in the text through the illustrations by Roberto Parada is enhanced with the photos of the cinematographic adaptation.

Adaptations of the "mash-up" novel have gone so far to create videogames and adaptations for ipads and tablet devices. It is not a chance that Austen's stories have also proliferated on the web, through fan fiction published by readers and internet chats on the author and her world. In *Convergence Culture* (2006) Jenkins has defined "transmedia storytelling" as emergent forms of storytelling which tap into the flow of content across different media and through the networking of fan response, and clearly not only the proliferation of Austen's stories is a clear example of this process, but also the seriality created by the re-production of the "mash-up" novel into different media is an evident one. Not simply Austen has been serialised through different genres and media but the same adaptations have been serialised through different forms of storytelling. The seriality of Austen and her narrative world has taken a further direction, becoming part of a deeper and wider popularization of the author and of her work centuries after her life and publications.

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