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AUSTENTATIOUS: COMEDY IMPROV AND AUSTEN ADAPTATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Key Words: Jane Austen, afterlife, postmodern, adaptation, parody, comedy

Abstract:

Recent decades have seen Jane Austen move outside the classroom to assume a pop-culture presence through a proliferation of virtual, visual, and textual adaptations, spin-offs, sequels, mash-ups, and fan-fiction, along with websites, blogs, and merchandising. Austentatious: An Improvised Jane Austen Novel, a one-hour comedy play performed in the style of Jane Austen, offers a new addition to Austen's literary legacy. Since the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe, this improvisation troupe has been staging Austen's "lost" works, by randomly drawing a title from a collection of audience suggestions, and launching directly into the action. Fast paced and hilarious, Austentatious blends narrative and gags, Regency and popular culture, "Austenspeak" and modern slang. Critics may regard it as another reductive appropriation, but, as this essay suggests, Austentatious marks a significant intervention in Austen's afterlife. Both send-up and celebration, this improvised comedy trades in familiar tropes: feisty ladies, matchmaking relatives, and romantic entanglements. These clichés are played for laughs, but Austen is not the only target. Austentatious also lampoons the textually promiscuous nature of Austen adaptation, and the "free" treatment of Austen by academics. Austentatious parodies not only the original novels but the phenomenon of (Austen) adaptation itself—whether high-brow or low—in the twenty-first century. Finally, through a new kind of long-form improvisation, Austentatious demonstrates the critical and creative potential in this most irreverent recreation of Austen.

Introduction

Austentatious: An Improvised Jane Austen Novel debuted at the Edinburgh Festival in 2012 with a six-person ensemble, but has since grown into a troupe of eight that regularly performs at London's Leicester Square Theatre and tours the UK. The one-hour comic play is premised on the scholarly discovery—explained at the start of the night by fictional Austen expert Dr. Sam Patton, PhD—that Austen penned not six but over six hundred works of fiction. Each unscripted show is built around an audience-suggested title of a "lost" Austen novel drawn at random and then enacted over a series of short scenes created on the spot. These scenes typically involve two or three players, though others can enter the action (and those on stage can exit) as they like. Usually lasting for no more than three or four minutes, a scene ends when a member of the company, theoretically off-stage but congregating visibly to the sides of the scene, walks across the front of the stage. At this point, the lights dim momentarily until a new scene commences with a different combination of actors taking the stage. The scenes assemble a narrative which both imitates and mocks the qualities of an Austen novel.

Fast paced, farcical, and hilarious, *Austentatious* blends narrative and gags, Regency and popular culture, "Austenspeak" and modern slang. Critics of "Austenmania", or the "Austen Industry", may regard it as another instance of reductive appropriation. Austen adaptations have

long stood accused of repackaging her sophisticated social satire into escapist, sentimental pap, and then marketing it to a consumer audience with an insatiable appetite for empire waists, dashing suitors, and happy endings.¹ However, as this essay suggests, *Austentatious* marks a significant intervention in Austen's literary legacy. Part send-up, part celebration, this improvised comedy trades in familiar tropes: feisty young ladies, matchmaking relatives, and prying servants, as well as inheritances, letters, and romantic entanglements. These clichés are played for laughs, but Austen is not the only target. Mixing contemporary cultural references (everything from *Game of Thrones* to Beyoncé to Yom Kippur) with a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of Regency dialogue, *Austentatious* lampoons the textually and temporally promiscuous nature of modern Austen adaptation. Moreover, by bookending the performance with the remarks of Dr. Sam Patton, *Austentatious* pokes fun at academics as equally opportunist. *Austentatious* ultimately does not spoof Austen's six novels so much as parody the phenomenon of Austen adaptation itself, and the dynamics of cultural appropriation—whether high-brow or low—in the twenty-first century. Yet, through a new variety of long-form improvisation, *Austentatious* celebrates the collaboration, creativity, and fun involved in this most irreverent recreation of Austen. Though this essay focuses on the comedy improv show *Austentatious*, the framework of interpretation used here could be applied to other contemporary adaptations.²

Parody of Austen

Following the classic Austenian plot structure, *Austentatious* includes an introduction of the main characters, the development of one or more conflicts, and a happy resolution of these conflicts which culminates in at least one marriage proposal. Set in 1814, the selected title is improvised by players dressed in period garb and conversing in Regency parlance. However, as one *Guardian* reviewer noted, “the Austen connection could be overstated”, and knowledge of Austen's fiction is not necessary to enjoy the show.³ Although the language, setting, and costume seem ostensibly “Austen”, the pretence of historical or literary authenticity is quickly undermined. Austenian syntax intermingles with modern-day colloquialisms and cultural references; outlandish plot twists and anything-goes humour derail any hint of realism. The absurdity of these juxtapositions makes clear that this is not a period drama but a parody. As “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance”, *Austentatious* fits Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody which, like other types of adaptation, derives pleasure from its tension between the familiar and the new.⁴ As a parody it also provides a critique of the original text by “voicing what the text silences or marginalizes”.⁵

Through a teasing, light-hearted parody, *Austentatious* highlights some of the absences in Austen's novels. For example, “Man-Feels Parts” opened—to riotous laughter—with the announcement of Lord Beaverbrook's prostate exam results.⁶ Combining a suggestive name obviously out of place in Austen's writing, and a routine medical screening that postdates the Regency period, the joke plays on the lack of sex and bodily functions in Austen. The players often riff on these lacunae through bawdy gibes and gestures. In another performance, for instance, a male character commented on the physical allure and marital eligibility of a rival who had a “cracking undercarriage”.⁷ This use of innuendo may recall Austen's own symbolic rendering of sexual power. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, the whip-smacking, aggressive horse riding of John Thorpe marks him as a mercenary predator. Here, however, the players maximise the comic effect by making the sexual reference explicit (through gesturing toward and looking at the actor's groin), the context ridiculous (discussion of this character's “undercarriage” continues at length in later

scenes), and the subtext homoerotic rather than heterosexual (this discussion takes place between men).

Austen's attention to the marriage of young ladies and the antiquated mores of Regency society also come under fire. The "Invasion of the Bonnet Snatchers", as per its title (which is a pun on the 1956 sci-fi horror film), replaces the perils of alien invasion with the stealing spree of a spurned suitor who, in cahoots with his manservant, purloins Sally Hepworth's 17 bonnets. This substitution serves to mock and trivialise Austen's provincial world and its outdated social conventions. In this world, the most exigent threats relate to the prospect of an unsuitable conjugal match, and the greatest fears revolve around the shame of walking outdoors with one's head exposed. In "Man-Feels Parts", a bachelor who is proclaimed universally unattractive is later pursued, through seductive flattery, by one of the unwed women in the village. When he wonders at her change of heart, she explains: "I knew how rich you were. That made you handsomer".⁸ The comment drew laughs because it so shamelessly announced the character as a fortune-hunter. But it also pointed more obliquely to the way in which Austen contrives to unite a penniless heroine with a worthy, wealthy, and attractive gentleman, and thus manages to resolve the thorny issues—raised early and sustained through much of the narrative—about class and gender inequalities in Regency England. The implausibility and incongruity visible in these examples indicate the way *Austentatious* makes light of the limitations of content, scope, and theme that are associated with Austen's oeuvre, and turns them to comedic effect.

Parody of Austen "Heritage" Screen Adaptations

Austentatious parodies not only Jane Austen's fiction, however, but also modern adaptation of it, and specifically "heritage" screen versions. Heritage Austen includes such middlebrow favourites as Andrew Davies's BBC serialisation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and Douglas McGrath's *Emma* starring Gwyneth Paltrow (1996). In contrast to the "sumptuous affairs", "glamorous costumes", and "antique furniture" of heritage productions, *Austentatious* offers only token attempts at historical accuracy.⁹ In fact, *Austentatious* makes a spectacle of its inauthenticity. A few floor-length frocks, tailcoats, and top boots pass for Georgian attire; a handful of chairs on stage and a rotation of basic props like shawls, hats, and books suffice to set the scene. Moreover, a faux Regency phraseology impertinently blends millennial slang and gestures (such as high fives) with nineteenth-century drawing room formalities. Through its minimal stage design and obvious anachronisms, *Austentatious* announces itself as a travesty, rather than the *real* Austen. By self-consciously exchanging the visual, discursive, and textual elements of Austen's world for the prevailing twenty-first-century stereotypes of this world, it produces a comic effect. *Austentatious* also reminds us that authenticity in an adaptation depends on "finding a convincing representation of what we think of as Austenian".¹⁰ Implicitly, it suggests that heritage Austen programmes, despite their thoughtful and expensive choices about location, costume, and casting, do not present us with the *real* Austen, either. As several critics have suggested, faithful replication of the surface detail of an original text does not necessarily mean fidelity to its spirit.¹¹ Heritage adaptations of Austen's novels have garnered criticism for illuminating only "the accoutrements" of the texts, "rather than any engagement with the contemporary ideologies and debates which are so profoundly embedded in the original[s]".¹² *Austentatious*'s obvious inauthenticity becomes one of its best jokes, but also a way of exposing the constructed nature of even the most faithful adaptations.

Austentatious encourages us to laugh at the romantic nostalgia so prominent in heritage screen versions of Austen. These programmes “capitalize on people’s desire for a stable, recognizable world – such as we associate with Austen”.¹³ In conjuring a simpler, classier England, however, these productions promote a vague cultural past that is as much a fiction as any Austen, or indeed any *Austentatious*, novel. The tendency to emphasise the love stories—even if it means erasing subtleties of character, ambivalent endings, and complex social satire—is often regarded as the epitome of this impulse toward unrealistic escapism. The marriage plot was not always considered the most significant formal or thematic aspect of Austen’s fiction.¹⁴ This interpretation emerged in the academy in the 1960s but has been consolidated by recent screen, stage, and page adaptations.

At the same time, though, *Austentatious* retains, and revels in, the structure of the courtship plot and its happy ending in marriage. This predictable resolution closes every performance, like clockwork, even though it is frequently engineered only after the most preposterous plot twists. The *Guardian* described a 2013 show: “you get wrapped up – if not in the story, then in seeing how well the performers can tell it. [...] It’s very funny to watch them pursue the tortuous logic of whatever’s blurted out of their mouths, daring their subconscious to resolve the narrative”.¹⁵ In “Innocence and Indolence”, for instance, the inhabitants of a Hampshire village are saved from a life-threatening tedium by the introduction of Zumba classes with Fabrice. The Baxter sisters, who are “blessed with intelligence” but “stuck in a village with little diversion”, are energised by a military deserter named Malcolm who returns and introduces the Latin dance craze to the neighbourhood.¹⁶ Though taken to court for his crime of desertion, testimony from local resident Jeremy Renner saves Malcolm from death, celebrating his heroic restoration of the village to normal levels of activity. Malcolm and Jeremy are then rewarded with a double marriage on “Fabrice-mas”. The seamless realism of an Austen plot gives way to a storyline verging on farce. Still, the viewer is entertained as much by the outlandish humour as by the virtuosity of the players in bringing the story back, ultimately, to the Austenian structure. *Austentatious* burlesques the modern tendency to force the love story, at the expense of characterisation, plausibility, and even basic logic. Nonetheless, in the final scene of “Innocence and Indolence”, the couples kiss and the older Miss Baxter, centre-stage, lifts one foot off the ground, bending it slightly. *Austentatious* thus also celebrates this winning formula, delivering its fairy tale ending with camp flair.

***Austentatious* and Austen 2.0**

In this blend of self-referential irony and romantic nostalgia, *Austentatious* exhibits the “double-voiced” discourse at the heart of postmodern adaptation.¹⁷ It engages with the legacy of the past, but comments on and plays with it in ways that tell us more about our own time than Austen’s. The same might apply to many of the textual, visual, and virtual rewrites, prequels, sequels, spin-offs, mash-ups, and fan-fictions that have now joined the “heritage” versions of Austen. This explosion of Austen-inspired material includes, to give a few examples, the metafictional ITV series *Lost in Austen* (2008), Seth Grahame-Smith’s bestselling fantasy mash-up, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009; film version, 2016), and the raft of Austen-related fiction on Wattpad, a free online literary platform launched in 2006 which allows its 45 million members to publish, read, and comment on each other’s serial instalments in real time. *Austentatious* should be considered in the context of this proliferation of material, which has been dubbed collectively as “Austenpop”, or “Appropriated Austen 2.0”.¹⁸ Unlike many of the heritage adaptations which

“transpos[ed]” Austen’s novels onto television or cinema screens, much of this new Austen-inspired work might more aptly fall under Julie Sanders’s category of appropriation, because it manifests “a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain”.¹⁹ Appropriation of Austen surfaces, too, in an ever-expanding range of kitsch retail and electronic products, from tablecloths, tea towels, and T-shirts, to video games, iPhone apps, and online role-playing sites.

Austentatious participates in and pokes fun at the most prevalent traits of “Appropriated Austen 2.0”. Most obviously, it demonstrates “hybridity”, that is, the splicing of Austen’s decorous realism with incongruous genres such as erotica or horror.²⁰ The word *Austentatious* itself represents a neologism that indicates its showy, flamboyant take on the world of Austen. Like Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Arielle Eckstut’s *Pride and Promiscuity* (2003), or Amanda Grange’s *Mr Darcy, Vampyre* (2009), the title of *Austentatious* announces its interest in genre fusion. The *Austentatious* audience likewise delights in this hybridity, putting forward pun-filled titles such as “Snakes on a Horse Drawn Carriage” and “Fear and Loathing in West Hampshire”, or genre mash-ups like “Darcy Double O” and “Breaking Cad: Meth Comes to Pemberley”.²¹ The same ironic spirit reigns over the “elegant accoutrements” available for purchase on the *Austentatious* website.²² These include tea-towels, aprons, and tote bags featuring a cartoon drawing of a Regency male and female, with speech bubbles that proclaim two of their favourite titles: “Strictly Come Darcy” and “Man-Filled Park”. These items look more like comic artist Kate Beaton’s spoofs, such as “Austen Mania”, than the twee merchandise for sale in Jane Austen gift shops.

Austentatious also makes clear that impertinent treatments of Austen are not only funny, but fun. A late scene in “Invasion of the Bonnet Snatchers” saw villagers surround the devious bonnet-stealer, pointing at him and chanting “Shame! Shame!” The reference drew chuckles as the audience savoured the comparison of the well-known humiliation scene in Season Five of HBO fantasy series *Game of Thrones* with the light-hearted condemnation taking place on the mock-Austen stage. In drawing on material for inspiration, *Austentatious* does not differentiate between screen and print media, high and popular culture, the nineteenth century and the twenty-first. In one performance, a mention of the “1785 Eco-Summit” explained the regulations governing millinery; in another, skateboarding was indicated as one Regency squire’s preferred pastime.²³ Sometimes, a player registers a particularly blatant anachronism with an ironic question, a smirk, or a giggle, but this kind of self-reflexivity seems only to heighten the enjoyment for both the company and audience. The effect resembles what, according to Kylie Mirmohamadi, transpires on the online fan-fiction portal Wattpad, with its joyful “textual promiscuity” and “intertextual, genre-, canon- and time-bending”.²⁴ The humour of *Austentatious* hinges on the playfully transgressive premise that canonical texts and authors, much as we love them, need not be regarded as fixed or sacred. According to Claudia Johnson, an analogous violation of the “sacred boundary” of Austen’s texts has been practiced with “ludic enthusiasm” for years by “amateur reading clubs” such as the Jane Austen Society (JAS) and Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA).²⁵ With “enjoyment rather than hermeneutic mastery” as their shared aim, these groups host fancy dress parties and games, and, to the horror of many academics, speculate about the afterlives of Austen’s characters.²⁶

Like the Janeites, *Austentatious* displays a non-academic approach to Austen. It enacts an irreverent mode of reading Austen that is often associated with the habits of amateurs and the

emotionally invested practices of fans. Douglas Lanier explains that “[r]efusing the academic imperative to read closely is often the point, a source of anarchic pleasure”.²⁷ In *Austentatious*, Austen’s fiction is not so much being read as recognised, and only in the loosest sense. The players rarely allude to a specific Austen plot or character, and an interview with the *Austentatious* troupe disclosed that “One of our cast members – we won’t say which one – had still not read any [Austen] for the first six months”.²⁸ *Austentatious* does not aim to replicate or to update the experience of reading Austen. Instead, it starts with the basic ingredients—her themes, period, style, and structure—and then intermixes so many foreign elements that by the end it no longer resembles Austen but something else entirely. And, yet, it is not *entirely* new. Eradicating Austen completely would be neither amusing nor particularly challenging. The brilliance of *Austentatious* lies in pushing the parody to its limits but ultimately, through great talent and team effort, preserving a shred of Austen at its core. Treating Austen (but also itself) with knowing irreverence, *Austentatious* reappropriates the terrain of canonical literature for the purposes of popular entertainment.

***Austentatious* and the “Academic” Appropriation of Austen**

At the same time, *Austentatious* also sends up what we might call the “academic” appropriation of Austen. The “Introductory Address” which precedes every *Austentatious* performance involves one cast member appearing on stage in a black cap and gown as Dr. Sam Patton, Ph.D. In “Innocence and Indolence”, the hastily donned graduation attire only partially conceals the white frilly frock beneath, and therefore ironically suggests but also undermines Dr. Patton’s scholarly status. Dr. Patton, played by comic actress Cariad Lloyd in this performance, introduces herself:

I am Dr. Sam Patton. I know you’ll know my name, you’ve read my book, you regularly follow me on Tumblr, those of you who have crossed me on Tinder...rrr [laughter]. It was a very bad Facebook photo. But actually when you zoom in, I wasn’t as drunk as I seemed. So, I am Dr. Sam Patton, one of the, Europe’s most foremost, prestigious and *available* Jane Austen scholars. [laughter]²⁹

In a manner at once arrogant and informal, Dr. Patton presumes audience knowledge both of her status as a published expert and her presence on social media. That she discusses her personal photos in a public talk suggests not only a cringe-worthy lack of professionalism but also a worrying level of narcissism. The joke, of course, is not just that a supposedly renowned scholar is defending inappropriate pictures or utilising social media, but that she mentions Tinder, the dating app notorious for facilitating no-strings sex. Lloyd plays cleverly on the word “available”, which refers to her professional as well as her sexual availability.

In addition to blurring the lines between her personal and professional lives, Dr. Patton lumps together her interventions in the scholarly field and in popular culture.

I have written many books including *Jane! Come on!* [laughter] I’m sure you know it, I’m sure you know it. I am also working steadfastly with the bloody television people to get more Jane on the television. [...] You may have watched some of my programmes. *Who do you think you are, Jane?* where celebrities [...] trace their ancestry back to being Jane Austen. [...] Also, I invented *Ready, Steady, Jane!* where academics bring five bits of Jane Austen paraphernalia and try and rebuild her genetically. [laughter] I was also involved in *Location*,

Location, Jane [laughter] where we [...] looked for places Jane Austen might have liked to live [...] Jane Austen did not in fact write six novels – no, come on! what? – she did in fact write 792 novels. [...] We are doing our utmost to restore these novels to who – to you! come on! – the public.³⁰

The titles of Dr. Patton's books (*Jane! Come on!* and its "sequel", *Jane! Really?*) and television programmes carry a similar kind of colloquial sensationalism. These titles recall real-world attempts to adapt literary study for a popular audience, such as BBC Two's *The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen* (2011). Described by critics as utilising a "hybrid approach", this programme exemplifies current "trends within academia to adopt less-formal types of public engagement" and also the efforts of history programmes to import the approaches of "chat shows and light entertainment" in order to widen their accessibility.³¹ *Austentatious* may be gesturing, however tangentially, toward the disastrous effects of a REF culture that pressures researchers not only to publish but to demonstrate Impact.

Dr. Patton's scholarly career seems to follow the "hybrid approach" of her programmes. Her snappy-sounding monographs appeal to the lay reader and her Austen-inspired reality shows take literary history to the masses. The silly puns and flimsy book titles suggest, however, that both may become meaningless as a result. With the assertion that *Austentatious* provides an important social good in restoring Austen's lost novels to the "public", Lloyd mimics the "recovery" rhetoric often deemed necessary to justify research in the arts and humanities. Yet Lloyd ironically implies that *Austentatious*, like the scholar-entertainer Dr. Patton, has perhaps no rationale or aim other than entertaining its audience, and sustaining its own (profitable) existence. This preamble to *Austentatious* works in tandem with the performance proper to have a levelling effect. Appropriations of Austen, whether from elite academic culture or the entertainment industry, display a laughable hybridity, a lucrative widening of audience, and the makings of a postmodern identity crisis.

***Austentatious* and Postmodern Adaptation**

However, *Austentatious* does not just critique the cultural, commercial, and scholarly appropriation of Austen. It certainly laughs at the absurdities of "hybridity" and invokes the denunciations of "Austenpop" as populist drivel that exploits Austen's name and dumbs down her work. It also shows how Austen's modern afterlife may encompass some of the most troubling aspects of post-Industrial capitalist society: its collective attention deficit disorder, its consumerism, and its intellectual, artistic, and moral vacuity. Still, *Austentatious* also models the cooperative capacity of adaptation in the twenty-first century. It stages the dynamics of the contemporary "participatory culture" in which texts are not so much decoded as enacted, and "avid readers are keen to perform what they are sharing in what has been called 'affinity spaces'".³² Improvisation as a dramatic form embodies these interactive processes, creating meaning through "the collision [...] of different sets of meaning", and generating "active" spectators that not only read but write the performance too.³³ In *Austentatious*, the audience not only determines the title of the play, but through its responses, directs the company toward (or away from) certain jokes, actions, plot turns, or even characters. In one performance, when the evening's title was read out, an audible response from a woman in the audience signalled the whereabouts of the writer, who was revealed as Kirsty Heard in Seat G10. An actor in the first scene then referred to a fellow performer as Kirsty, making

the author-viewer into a character in that night's play. As a performance or "affinity space", *Austentatious* demonstrates the same playfulness with intertextuality and genre, postmodern irony, and collaborative meta-textuality that thrive in the online fan fiction environment.³⁴ With *Austentatious*, everyone is, literally, in on the joke.

Austentatious also illustrates the creative and critical potential of irreverent readings of Austen. Like much fan fiction which incorporates sex, violence, and carnival into master-texts in order to make them more relevant to a contemporary reader, *Austentatious*'s additions to and distortions of Austen make it accessible and entertaining.³⁵ Both reflect the ethos of what Henry Jenkins has called a "convergence culture" which joins old and new media, defies authority, and poses challenges to traditional artistic hierarchies.³⁶ *Austentatious* celebrates the ways that not only academics but also everyday readers and fans are increasingly exerting their rights to artistic construction and interpretative freedom.³⁷ Typically, academics have felt their authority threatened by fans and amateurs, who have a reputation for passive, wayward, and emotional reading; fans and amateurs, on the other hand, have felt hostility to what they perceive as an inaccessible and irrelevant scholarly handling of a beloved author.³⁸ *Austentatious*, which parodies both groups and ultimately points out their commonalities, implies that they might benefit from collaborating rather than competing. This approach would require an acknowledgement that today's free-wheeling, digital, "prosumer" culture has made us all into media consumers and critics.³⁹ With funding for the arts and humanities under threat, and enrolment in related university programmes on the decline, this collaborative spirit seems not only positive, but positively fundamental.

Conclusion

Austentatious seems to embody all the most promising characteristics of "Appropriated Austen 2.0". Accessible, intelligent, and imaginative, it appeals to lay people, fans, students, and scholars. It showcases not only the comic timing and quick wit of its cast, but like all improvisation, a cooperative creative process. Moreover, *Austentatious* is not trapped by forms but "celebrates the freedom to improvise and create *via* the forms".⁴⁰ According to Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, "improvisation is about order, and about adaptation, and about truthfully responding to changing circumstances [...] It is about creation".⁴¹ *Austentatious*, as a new British take on fluid long-form improvisation, may then be not only a parody of Austen and Austen adaptation, but a model of postmodern adaptation more generally. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, "we use the word *adaptation* to refer to both a product and a process of creation and reception".⁴² *Austentatious* denotes one such "product" but also makes visible the "process" by which canonical material is reworked. This reworking happens, as we have seen, through the blurring of boundaries between creators and consumers, through the updating of "old" or the addition of "new" content, through the shifting or splicing of genres, through the "repetition" but not "replication" of familiar forms and themes, through the use of ironic distance and self-reflexiveness, through paratextual framing. It involves "the doubled pleasure" of recognising the scaffolding of the old text underneath the (irreverent) contours of the new.⁴³ Like much postmodern adaptation that is performative, amateur, or internet based, it may seem throwaway, but this does not mean it is "trash".⁴⁴

Austentatious suggests the meaningful, "mutually informing play" by which adaptations have always, throughout history, drawn on but also sustained their source texts.⁴⁵ According to Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, the "literary megastardom" of writers like Austen and

Shakespeare *needs* adaptation and travesty, because “the original works cannot achieve extremely wide appeal simply by maintaining their original forms. They must multiply into a variety that supplements the original but that does not replace it”.⁴⁶ *Austentatious*, however, offers us more than a reassuring affirmation that canonical material and cultural appropriations can coexist. It also heeds Simone Murray’s call for adaptation studies to move away from a myopic focus on comparative aesthetic analysis, and toward a deconstruction of the artistic, commercial, and institutional power structures that shape modern adaptation.⁴⁷ *Austentatious* seems to nudge us toward this kind of approach. As a parody of Austen’s fiction and of contemporary reworkings of it, as well as a simulation of the process of postmodern adaptation, *Austentatious* reminds us of the ways in which product and process, performer and spectator, new and old, high and low, academic and amateur can be brought together to entertain audiences and challenge conventional understandings of adaptation.

Notes

¹ *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Mansfield Park* (2007), for example, provoked such accusations.

² Material that may benefit from a similar critical approach includes: unorthodox stage adaptations such as the Bedlam Theater Company’s “Sense and Sensibility” (2014), Reduxion Theater’s interactive “Jane Austen’s Christmas Cracker” (2015), and stand-up comic Sara Pascoe’s “Pride and Prejudice” (2017), literary spoofs like LipService Theatre’s “Mr Darcy Loses the Plot” (2017), comic strips by Kate Beaton such as “Jane Austen’s Comics”, “It’s a Large Book”, and “Emily Has Some Advice” (*Hark! A Vagrant* 2011), and literary computer games like “The Lady’s Choice” (2016).

³ Brian Logan, “Austentatious – Edinburgh festival 2013 review,” *The Guardian*, 14 Aug. 2013

<<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/aug/14/austentatious-edinburgh-festival-review>>.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xii. See also Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 114, 170, and Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 17.

⁵ Sanders, 23.

⁶ “Man-Feels Parts,” Leicester Square Theatre, London, 9 Mar. 2014.

⁷ “Invasion of the Bonnet Snatchers,” Leicester Square Theatre, London, 30 Oct. 2016.

⁸ “Man-Feels Parts.”

⁹ Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 344.

¹⁰ Harriet Margolis, “Janeite culture: what does the name ‘Jane Austen’ authorize?” *Jane Austen on Screen*, ed. Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 22-43 (31).

¹¹ See Judy Simons, “Classics and Trash: reading Austen in the 1990s,” *Women’s Writing*, 5.1 (1998): 27-42 (36), and Sutherland, 342.

¹² Simons, 37.

¹³ Margolis, 23.

¹⁴ Claudia Johnson, “Austen cults and cultures,” *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 211-26 (221).

¹⁵ Logan, n. pag.

¹⁶ “Innocence and Indolence,” Leicester Square Theatre, London, DVD (date/ production company?).

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *Parody*, 4.

¹⁸ Juliette Wells, “From Schlockspeare to Austenpop,” *Shakespeare*, 6.4 (2010): 446-62 (446); Eckhart Voigts-Virchow, “Pride and Promiscuity and Zombies, or: Miss Austen Mashed Up in the Affinity Spaces of Participatory Culture,” *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, ed. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012) 34-56 (34).

¹⁹ Sanders, 25, 35.

²⁰ Emma French, quoted in Lisa Hopkins, *Relocating Shakespeare and Austen on Screen* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

²¹ The first two titles are mentioned by Logan, n. pag., the second in “Just a Quickie with...Cariad Lloyd, of Improvised Comedy Troupe Austentatious,” *The Press*, 6 May 2015

http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/leisure/theatre/12933832.Just_A_Quickie_with_Cariad_Lloyd_of_improvised_comedy_troupe_Austentatious/.

²² "Shop", *Austentatious*, 1 Nov. 2016 <<http://www.austentatiousimpro.com/shop/>>.

²³ "Invasion"; "Untitled," Canterbury Arts Festival, 23 Oct. 2015.

²⁴ Kylie Mirmohamadi, *The Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen: Janeites at the Keyboard* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12, 30.

²⁵ Johnson, 223.

²⁶ Johnson, 223.

²⁷ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 52.

²⁸ Duncan Hall, "Exploring Jane Austen's unpublished works with improv group Austentatious at The Old Market", *The Argus*, 29 Jan. 2016

<http://www.theargus.co.uk/leisure/stage/14239590.Exploring_Jane_Austen_s_unpublished_works_with_improv_group_Austentatious_at_The_Old_Market/>.

²⁹ "Innocence and Indolence."

³⁰ "Innocence and Indolence."

³¹ Sarah Artt, "The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen," *Global Jane Austen: Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community*, ed. Robert G. Dryden and Laurence Raw (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 65-67 (65, 67); Kenneth A. Longden, "The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen," *Global Jane Austen: Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community*, ed. Robert G. Dryden and Laurence Raw (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 67-70 (69). Longden's same title as previous?

³² Voigts-Virchow, 36.

³³ Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 165, 167.

³⁴ Mirmohamadi, 21.

³⁵ Lanier, 82.

³⁶ Henry Jenkins, cited in Sanders, 31. 'quoted' rather than 'cited' used in note 19

³⁷ Voigts-Virchow, 40.

³⁸ Juliette Wells, "New Approaches to Austen and the Popular Reader," *Uses of Austen: Jane's Afterlives*, ed. Gillian Dow and Clare Hanson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 77-91 (78, 83).

³⁹ Wells, "New Approaches", 88; Voigts-Virchow, 40.

⁴⁰ Jeanne Leep, *Theatrical Improvisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 83, my italics.

⁴¹ Frost and Yarrow, 3.

⁴² Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, xiv.

⁴³ Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 116.

⁴⁴ I invoke the sense of this word as used by Judy Simons.

⁴⁵ Sanders, 34.

⁴⁶ Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, "'Strange mutations': Shakespeare, Austen and cultural success," *Shakespeare*, 6.4 (2010): 431-45 (443).

⁴⁷ Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 4.