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The Counterfactual Austen

WILLIAM GALPERIN

HELENA KELLY'S RECENT ROMP through Austen's major fictions, *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical*, has caused quite a stir, as much for its astonishing disregard of Austen scholarship in our time (this from a professional scholar who holds a doctorate in English) as for a self-legitimizing practice where, in looking into Austen, the reader is also looking to herself with a list of demands that the novels are essentially called to meet. Describing Kelly's "literary-biographical study" as "dazzling, dizzying," and, to the reviewer's credit, "occasionally, dubious," the *New Yorker* concluded its brief notice with the prediction that, regardless of "whether or not you agree with Kelly's conclusions, you won't read Austen the same way again" ("Briefly"). Austen, the secret radical, is out of the closet, apparently to be joined henceforth to subversive elements in her novels to which formal, much less literary historical, constraints are no longer equal or particularly relevant.

KEYWORDS: *The Watsons*, consciousness, counterfactual, despondence, dissent, individualism, radical

ABSTRACT: *The Watsons*, which Jane Austen gave up writing in 1804, was far-reaching in focalizing a single consciousness. However, it differs from a work like *Persuasion* in its thoroughgoing "despondence" over the uneven stations to which "the Watsons"—a family of both sisters and brothers—are assigned as a condition of their gender. Hewing to a point of view in which despair over these conditions is growing, the narrative founders by alignment with Emma Watson, who demands better—but not before yielding both a character and an author thoroughly fed up with things as they are.

Kelly certainly knows her way around (and with) an archive and is adept at marshaling materials, both primary and secondary, in an account that, commensurate with a practice all too common, remains historicist *and* anachronistic. The wisdom of hindsight—*her* wisdom—turns out to have been there all along, waiting to be discovered. What Kelly turns up, of course, is not always revelatory. As Janine Barchas and Devoney Looser observe in their respective reviews, her “discoveries” are in many cases a repurposing of knowledge that any Austen enthusiast, certainly any scholar, would have been familiar with (Looser, “Whatever”; Barchas, “Designed”). What is different—or not—is the counterfactual aspect of Kelly’s treatment: the “radicalism” wrought from certain “hard facts” of Austen’s life and times or in the novels themselves that are then fashioned to produce a contrarian writer or an Austen, at any rate, contrary supposedly to conventional wisdoms.

Such an Austen has been with us for a while, if not in the monolithic form that Kelly provides by leapfrogging over a century of criticism, not to mention the novels themselves, then in the more nuanced and dialectical analyses of feminist critics in particular, including Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Claudia L. Johnson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and many others, who have variously marked countercurrents to the disciplinary reach of the novels’ plots or cover stories, marital and pedagogical. And this is to say nothing of the readings that these interpretations either oppose or mirror or complement, be they Marilyn Butler’s “conservative” contextualization, where Austen figures as an anti-Jacobin Tory; D. A. Miller’s inimitable decontextualization, where Austen’s, or rather her narrator’s, stylish position of exteriority echoes and rewards the exceptionalism of the critic as a gay young Janeite; or even the “criticism” (if we can call it that) that first proliferated among the novelist’s “disciples and devotees” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among her “cults and cultures,” or even in the reception history that dates all the way back to the biographical notice that Henry Austen attached to the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, where his sister’s name first surfaced as the author of her novels.¹ In every instance, or so it seems, “Jane Austen,” far from being read differently or in an unprecedented manner, is read in “the same way again”: the yield (in effect) of a presentism *and* a personalism where the distance separating reader and novelist either expands to contract or contracts to expand, depending on what’s at stake.²

To Butler, who spent a good portion of her career exploring the British “reaction” in the age of revolution, Austen is indisputably anti-revolutionary, not just by comparison to Jacobin novelists like Godwin or Mary Hays, but by

a method of analysis where the novels recede in a welter of historicization that is as much a blast from the past (or from the “war of ideas” in late-eighteenth-century Britain) as from a reader whose act of recovery is both motivated and perforce partial. The same can be said of feminist readings where a nearly universal misogyny in the novels typically passes unseen. Then, there are appreciations like Miller’s that are mostly ahistorical or transhistorical but that embed an historicism if only by collapsing a distance that is either conspicuously absent or relegated to the “history of the novel,” which, however useful in recognizing certain formal, even ideological, developments in Austen, remains a history from which her historicity is excluded—in this case by the crowning example of her achievement.

Kelly, to return to her briefly, operates more as an historian than a literary historian, or a reader for that matter, and she has a lot of fun along the way, chiefly at the novels’ expense, where anything that bears on the literary or on Austen’s particular artistry is pushed to the side in deference to hints and clues in the novels that “bring us as close to Jane as we’re ever going to get” (30). Thus we learn—in defense of Austen’s secret radicalism—that the novels reflect attitudes regarding the tolls of childbearing (*Northanger Abbey*), patri-lineal inheritance (*Sense and Sensibility*), and enclosure (*Emma*), in addition to other charged matters such as the slave trade (*Mansfield Park*) and the inevitability and desirability of social change (*Persuasion*). Kelly is far from the first commentator to have abutted on these issues, but she is pretty unique in her willingness to dispose of the achievements where they are ostensibly curated, which is the rationale for her commentary to begin with.

We may want Austen’s fictions—in contrast to her letters, say—to bring us as close to her historicity as a social being and thinker as we are likely to get. But their achievement as versions of art, ranging from the focalization of consciousness, to the representation of dialogue and action, to a voice that moves seamlessly, often in a single stroke, from ironic distance to sympathetic proximity—in short, to realistic practice at what was an unprecedented level of sophistication—inevitably gets in the way, both for scholars and, I would further argue, the writer herself. Austen was simply too good at what she did and too consumed by what she was doing and innovating to be answerable to any claim or desideratum—certainly of the kind Kelly is putting forth—over and against techne. In thinking, then, about “what’s next for Jane Austen,” there are a number of issues that jump to mind, the first and most obvious being an investment—a continued investment—in the broader “work” that the novels perform as artistic and cultural and historical productions or even as the apotheosis of a certain kind of style. But with Austen’s radicalism

as perhaps a limit-case for the projective identification endemic to Austen “interpretations,” past and present, it may be equally helpful for future scholars to consider and to remember that at ground zero (as it were) the novels also pose a real barrier to *penetrating* Austen’s essence or self-understanding as a social thinker, much less as the agent we may want her to be.

But consider for a moment an Austen who falls short of her achievement, an Austen who tried to write what “Jane Austen” succeeded in producing but failed or gave up. Consider, that is, a counterfactual Austen (in contrast to the one I began with) whose style, far from blinding, is transparent in its fits and starts and whose take on things is determinate rather than overdetermined by greatness. This formation is not a thought experiment; she was an actual writer who, for all her affinities with the writer we know, comes closer to Kelly’s “Jane” and to at least two Austen characters in seeing “it all” (*Emma* 270), which is to say a “world” that is “dissatisf[ying]” the “more” of it one sees (*Pride and Prejudice* 121). I’m referring to *The Watsons*, which Austen began and gave up writing in 1804 and which, along with the unfinished or sharply truncated *Lady Susan*, delivers a disambiguated storyteller: an Austen who failed because her formal, and I would further venture political, assumptions about female protagonism were sharply tried by the particular individualism to which those assumptions, far from transcendent, were impossibly joined.³

In the case of *Lady Susan*, an epistolary narrative composed in the late 1790s and transcribed (and probably worked on) as late as *The Watsons*, the letter form provided Austen with a means, however basic, to explore an individualism that was rapidly gathering force, thanks to (among other things) developments in the family where children were made to feel special from day one.⁴ Eschewing the perspective of a single central character, the hallmark of Austen’s style generally but especially her mature style, *Lady Susan* shifts attention from its eponymous character, who remains a catalyst, in any case, to a range of characters, each of whom is selfish on the basis of written evidence that is either tactical or strategic but always inculpatory.

The Watsons is a different exercise, focusing on a *single* character—Emma Watson—who stands in privileged relief, thanks to a mode of storytelling that marginalizes everything and everyone in deference to her perspective. In the great Austen novel whose heroine is named Emma, this focalization is brilliantly exploited in the way Emma Woodhouse’s view of things, and the things and people she views, are juxtaposed. But in *The Watsons*—more in the manner of either *Mansfield Park* or *Persuasion*—there is precious little daylight between the way the narrator regards the world and the way the heroine looks at it. In fact, it is not too much to say that *The Watsons* looks beyond the novels

that were also on Austen's writing table during the period of its composition in fostering a disproportion between one Watson and various others—her father, her sisters, her brother and sister-in-law, and two likely suitors—who, in all but a very few instances, she is obliged to suffer, as are we.

With this far-reaching and potentially sophisticated achievement before her, the decision to abandon *The Watsons* remains puzzling, particularly in context. But mindful of what followed, the story's abandonment represents a dissent, in many ways, from Austen's achievement overall, which would incorporate in one way or another many of the story's elements: the valetudinarian father, the multiplicity of sisters frantically in search of husbands, the rakish and/or dangerous suitors, the absent or deficient mothers, the haughty aristocrats, and more generally an abiding sensitivity to the precariousness of women's lives in a culture that continues to deny them franchise. James Edward Austen-Leigh, who brought this text to light in conjunction with his biographical sketch, attributed its cessation to a number of factors, from the situation of the heroine in a position that was "too low" to Austen's personal predicament during its writing, which was too close to the heroine's (and in effect "too low") to be worked through or out of, even as the projected story line was necessarily comedic (Austen, *Later Manuscripts* lxvii–lxxi).⁵

But Austen, lest we forget, was entering maturity at this moment as well, not just as a clergyman's daughter (and soon-to-be survivor) whose window of marriageability was rapidly closing, but as an artist whose "earliest extant work in the realist mode of the mature novels," predating the transformation of *Sense and Sensibility* from a novel in letters and the final consolidations of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, was the narrative that she did not finish (Austen, *Later Manuscripts* lxxvi). The decision to abort something that was innovative as well as singular in its depressingly clear-eyed view of things could not have been easy, even allowing for the material circumstances that made the invention of a Mrs. Bennet or a Catherine Morland a more pleasant diversion than spending time with Emma Watson. Yet it was done, or necessary, I am arguing, because the narrative technique that Austen would all but codify—the representation of consciousness through free indirect discourse—was apparently a bridge too far in this instance, both as a representational imperative and because of the grim and static context where an informing consciousness is systematically ground down. Austen went, then, from *Lady Susan*, a comparatively safe haven in its sendup of individualism and selfishness, to a narrative committed to an individual but amid conditions now that made protagonism in this way, at this moment, a betrayal on all sides. Austen was already developing a range of techniques for managing

her main characters, notably Elizabeth Bennet, and for leveraging the novel's "rise" in support of individualism in ways that critics from Ian Watt to Michael McKeon to Nancy Armstrong have famously documented. My point here is that such management was something, stylistically *and* diegetically, that *The Watsons* refuses, bringing us closer, in the process, to a writer for whom fiction in the form that Austen perfected it was either a fool's errand or, perhaps worse, a capitulation.

The Watsons begins by segueing immediately to a lopsided conversation between Emma and her older sister Elizabeth that registers the shock of being Emma, both as an exile returned and as the beleaguered interlocutor of Elizabeth's reported failure to secure a husband for which another sister is apparently to blame:

"I was very much attached to a young Man of the name of Purvis, a particular friend of Robert's, who used to be with us a great deal. Every body thought it would have been a match."

A sigh accompanied these words, which Emma respected in silence—; but her sister, after a short pause, went on—

"You will naturally ask why it did not take place, and why he is married to another woman, while I am still single.—But you must ask him—not me—you must ask Penelope.—Yes Emma, Penelope was at the bottom of it all.—She thinks everything fair for a husband; I trusted her, she set him against me, with a view of gaining him herself, and it ended in his discontinuing his visits and soon after marrying somebody else.—Penelope makes light of her conduct, but *I* think such treachery very bad. It has been the ruin of my happiness. I shall never love any man as I loved Purvis." (Austen, *Later Manuscripts* 81)

We do not yet know the circumstances surrounding Emma's return to her family on the occasion of her aunt's remarriage, which turns out to be treachery as well. But we get a hint through statements such as "I can think of nothing worse . . . than [to] marry a man I did not like" and "to pursue a man merely for the sake of situation—is a sort of thing that shocks me" (83) that the one-sidedness of this initial conversation owes as much to Elizabeth's desperation as to the stunning reversal that Emma is processing from a position suddenly under siege. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet's advocacy of a companionate marriage in her debate with Lady Catherine—one leveraged by a "situation" named Pemberley—Emma's interjections are continuous with her general "silence" in toggling between an entitlement of old and the shock of the new, which gets

played out in aphorism. Opining that “[w]e must not all expect to be individually lucky,” or that “[t]he luck of one member of a family is luck to all” (87) in reference to their brother’s good fortune (and subliminally her own), Emma is being neither stoical nor especially altruistic. She is erecting a defense against the very solidarity she proposes, leaving it to Elizabeth, in fact, to put these words to action in sending Emma to the Edwards’s assembly in her place, where “luck” may well be in the offing.

Suspended, then, between an endorsement of Emma as the only important, and not coincidentally marriageable, Watson daughter and a latent understanding that kindheartedness marks a surrender, in Elizabeth’s case, to something like minority, *The Watsons* is already conflicted (120). For in representing “the Watsons” and their world as Emma construes them, namely as something she could never have imagined for herself, the narrative is party, reflexively or not, to a continuity linking the protagonist’s sense of outrage and the selfishness that, on Emma’s testimony, governs those who are not kindhearted along with those who are. Even as there is someone else present (call her Jane Austen) to confirm or reconfirm Emma’s sense of things and the affront that these things generally represent, it is left mostly to the story itself, and to the disproportion it promotes in pitting a singular protagonist against a blameworthy or secondary environment, to founder on its own formal bias. This becomes especially clear in *The Watsons*’ final stage when, closeted in her father’s chamber, Emma rages against her environment and the “inferior minds” that compose it in ways that, if not strictly radical, are a commentary nonetheless on “things as they are,” both in the world and in the narrative at hand, where marriage, or rather the marriage plot, is neither an answer nor a solution.

But before this moment *The Watsons* is buoyed by condescension: specifically, Emma’s ability to condescend without condescending (as it were). An initially chilly reaction to the wealthy Miss Edwards as someone who has “caught something” of her mother’s reserve and detachment soon gives way to an appreciation of the latter as showing “good sense, a modest unpretending mind, and great wish of obliging” (88, 89). More memorably, there is the episode at the assembly involving ten-year-old Charles Blake, the youngest member of a party that comprises Lord Osborne, his sister, his tutor (Mr. Howard), and Charles’s mother (Mrs. Blake, a widow). An individual, or one certainly in the making, the “little boy” has his heart set on dancing with Lord Osborne’s sister (apparently by prearrangement), which leads immediately to disappointment, replete “with crimsoned cheeks, quivering lips, and eyes bent on the floor,” when the latter reneges and, just as suddenly, to kindheartedness on a heroic scale:

Emma did not think or reflect;—she felt and acted—.

“I shall be very happy to dance with you, Sir, if you like it,” said she, holding out her hand with the most unaffected good humour.—

The boy in one moment restored to all his first delight looked joyfully at his mother and stepping forwards with an honest and simple “Thank you Ma’am” was instantly ready to attend his new acquaintance.—The thankfulness of Mrs. Blake was more diffuse;—with a look, most expressive of unexpected pleasure and lively gratitude, she turned to her neighbour with repeated and fervent acknowledgements of so great and condescending a kindness to her boy. . . . It was a Partnership that could not be noticed without surprise. (98)

Now in contrast to another impulsive action by another Emma, this one at Box Hill, Emma Watson’s behavior not only registers her sympathy or moral sentiment, it also marks her as an individual, whose singularity—from which she condescends beautifully—seems altogether justified. Or, as Elizabeth observes after being debriefed of all that had transpired, including Emma’s refusal to dance with the eligible and flirtatious Tom Musgrave: “You are like nobody else in the world” (112). This assertion, suffice it to say, has already hit a wall or enough of one that Emma’s autonomy may be reckoned a performance at this stage, an exercise in self-deception, that in advance of the author (or so it seems) she performs as best she can.

At the dance she rejects Tom Musgrave in favor of dancing with Mr. Howard, generating still more “notice,” this time from Lord Osborne, who is “continually at Howard’s elbow during the two dances” she shares with the latter (103). Afterward she not only turns down Musgrave’s offers of a ride home in his curricle but has this to say to Osborne in response to an invitation to go horseback riding, which he takes to be a pastime that, like some other women, she can afford:

“Your Lordship thinks we always have our own way.—*That* is a point on which ladies and gentlemen have long disagreed—But without pretending to decide it, I must say that there are some circumstances which even *women* cannot controul.—Female economy will do a great deal my Lord, but it cannot turn a small income into a large one.”— (115–16)

This may be the one statement in *The Watsons* that Austen enthusiasts, regardless of whether they read the story regularly, are familiar with; its effect on Osborne, which is to make him think and to do something apparently

unprecedented—"to wish to please a woman"—is evidence once more of someone's nobody-else-ness (116).

But embedded in Emma's statement as well, in what the narrator calls its "mild seriousness," is a certain detachment—an exteriority to one's less singular situation—that is also, and not coincidentally, both the high-water mark of her exceptionalism and virtually the last time Emma is like nobody else in the world (116). On the heels of this encounter and its subsequent retelling, she must endure a visit from her brother Robert and sister-in-law. Here she is forced to confront her betrayal by an aunt, who raised her in "a superior stile" and who has now relinquished all responsibility, along with an impending future involving her father's death and the dependency she will be relegated to, all of which her brother is only too willing to elaborate (123). His elaboration reduces Emma to tears and, "rather softened" by that spectacle, Robert tries not very successfully to "chang[e] the subject":

"I am just come from my Father's room, he seems very indifferent. It will be a sad break-up when he dies. Pity, you can none of you get married!—You must come to Croydon as well as the rest, and see what you can do there.—I believe if Margaret had had a thousand or fifteen hundred pounds, there was a young man who would have thought of her." (124)

The relief in "her sister-in-law's finery" that Emma takes in reaction to this intervention is amusing (124). But it comes or is registered by what amounts to a backward glance, where the specter of finery and ease, not to mention a single man in want of Emma, is receding ever more rapidly.

When Tom Musgrave shows up unexpectedly several hours later, then, sending Margaret, who is also visiting, into a tizzy, the effect is a little different than it was early on with Elizabeth. Musgrave's interest is with Emma, not Margaret, whose "sharp and anxious expression . . . made her beauty in general little felt" (119). Still, his inclusion of Emma with Margaret and their other sisters as women whom he could never possibly "dread a meeting with" proves as much a matter of diplomacy now as a diagnosis (128). Emma may well be a person of interest whom men, near and far, are thinking about. However, the mode of storytelling has clearly shifted from a representation of the world as Emma sees it (the formal prop of nobody-else-ness) to a representation of Emma in the world, where, as Robert reminds her, she is no longer different. There is, of course, one last instance where we reenter Emma's consciousness, this on the occasion of her entering her father's chamber, where she lashes out against an environment characterized by "unequal society," "family discord,"

“hard-hearted prosperity” (from the very quarter she was earlier content to call the “luck of all”), and finally “low-minded conceit, and wrong-headed folly” (135). This is followed by reflections on her precipitous decline from a place of distinction, one of “comfort and elegance” and the expectation “of an easy independence,” to a situation where, as Emma puts it to herself,

she was become of importance to no one, a burden on those, whose affection she could not expect, an addition in an house, already overstocked, surrounded by inferior minds with little chance of domestic comfort, and as little hope of future support.—It was well for her that she was naturally cheerful;—for the change had been such as might have plunged weak spirits in despondence. (135)

It is at this point (or twenty or so lines later) that composition stopped, less at Austen’s direction, or so it seems, than at Emma’s, whose despondence (originally “wretchedness” [*Later Manuscripts* 379]) has prevailed over any cheerfulness regardless of origin. While individualism and self-interest are universal in *The Watsons*, beginning with Elizabeth, who claims that she is not selfish or “not so selfish,” it is Emma, and Emma solely, who, by refusal to join the “rest” in repairing to Croydon at the story’s cessation, maintains the impossible and insupportable distinction of being “like nobody else” and at the same time “of importance to nobody” (85).

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with Emma—that is, inherently wrong—nor is Austen taking an especially critical view of the entitlement from which her contempt and unhappiness appear to emanate. It is rather that, to quote Mr. Parker at the beginning of *Sanditon*, “[t]here is something wrong *here*”: that, as a woman and an individual—in short, an Austen heroine—there is no way that Emma Watson can avoid the despondence precipitated by the uneven stations to which “the Watsons” are eventually assigned as a condition of their gender (Austen, *Later Manuscripts* 138, emphasis added). We see this very clearly in the “luck” that her brother Robert enjoys and even in the comparatively limited prospects of another brother, Sam, who is at least “a very clever surgeon” if not likely, it appears, to win the hand of Mary Edwards (90). But for Emma and her sisters—but especially Emma, who is enough of an individual to demand a husband whom she just might love—the mere fact of growing beyond childhood marks a reversal, a betrayal exactly proportionate to her sense of entitlement, that is no fun to witness, particularly at the level of intimacy that access to her thinking and to her world provides.

It would be a while, then, before Austen would reenter such a consciousness, which she eventually does in Fanny Price, whose trajectory is nearly the opposite of Emma's. Yet even here, in a narrative of upward mobility, the reversal of fortune that Fanny experiences briefly when sent home to Portsmouth not only issues in a response similar to Emma's but serves warning as well, in a way that Emma's anger really can't, that the individual had better get what she wants lest all hell break loose:

she must and did feel that her mother was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children, whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end, and who had no talent, no conversation, no affection towards herself; no curiosity to know her better, no desire of her friendship, and no inclination for her company that could lessen her sense of such feelings. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 306–07).

Unlike Emma's betrayal, which embeds a feminist argument—as individualism and gender turn out to be a bad match—Fanny's sense of outrage owes entirely to the fact that she is already or potentially one of the victors, not just in her establishment at Mansfield, which has been temporarily interrupted, but in the future, both at Mansfield and abroad, that she and others like her, including her brother William, will help shape as servants of the empire. By the time of *Mansfield Park*, the game has changed. Victory, or what might count as victory, for an Austen heroine is no longer a question of franchise and autonomy, however much a fantasy these remain, but a matter now of assuming one's rightful and privileged role in a middle-class hegemony, which is to say the new Britain. For both Fanny and *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot, this role is quite simply that of housewife or domestic icon, presupposing a level of subordination along with a sense that women, far from agents with constructive control over their lives and environments, are required simply to “belon[g]” (Austen, *Persuasion* 199). Thus, while the later novels are quite unique and different from the first three in resuming the “consciousness” project inaugurated in *The Watsons*, the particular proximity of narrator and character essential to this kind of representation seems inflected more by a sense of loss or resignation or perplexity in the Regency novels than by the radical shock that *The Watsons* opens onto—to which the consolations of plot and form, including marriage, will always be unequal.

And what of the earlier novels, the works that Austen was writing and revising at the very moment that *The Watsons* came and went? Here the

achievement is all about the management alluded to earlier: a medley, in effect, of an individualism that can be bought off or moderated (generally through marriage) and, paradoxical as it sounds, of a feminism, or radicalism if you prefer, that stays as close to Austen as we are likely to get in demonstrating that not all individuals can afford the price of individuality. Thus, in *Northanger Abbey*, we not only encounter a heroine, Catherine Morland, who essentially lacks interiority and whose consciousness is barely formed; we also encounter someone who effectively outsources her anxiety, or such anxieties as she retains about the greater world, to gothic novels. Similarly, *Sense and Sensibility*, which begins on a note of related anxiety as the Dashwood women confront their imminent dispossession, responds to these “female difficulties” not by focusing on a single individual’s sense of betrayal, but by dividing the individual in two or between two sisters, one of whom “acts out” her discontent so that the other, who comes closest to being the repository of consciousness in the novel, can maintain a distance that is unbridgeable and an interiority sufficiently impenetrable that her default position is one of restraint or inscrutability rather than rage. Finally, in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose central character, Elizabeth Bennet, represents perhaps the strongest argument for individualism in the Austen canon to the degree that her worth as a person is based entirely on who, rather than what, she is, the reaction to status inconsistency and female vulnerability is not just restricted to her prejudice, which is eventually tamed (especially after visiting Pemberley), but additionally neutralized by a general atmosphere of absurdity, helped primarily by the Bennet family and by Reverend Collins, that keeps prejudice and the resentment with which it is coextensive under wraps. Furthermore—despite Mrs. Bennet’s perpetual worry—the Bennet girls are in denial regarding their future and the condition of women generally, so that the seemingly desperate fantasy of a single man in possession of a fortune wanting any of them becomes a fairy tale in which the novel colludes, keeping the “radical” argument both alive and at bay.⁶ In all three early novels, what ultimately counts as individualistic resistance or resentment or refusal on a heroine’s part, be it gothic fantasy, bad manners, or prejudice directed at a man of power and entitlement (there is also Lydia, of course), is eventually disciplined—ostensibly in deference to some ideal of sociability or civility or maturation but also, I would argue, by way of preserving or protecting an awareness of the woman’s plight that unchecked individualism, the kind leading to injured merit, erodes through bad affect.

That leaves us with one other Austen novel, whose title alone renders it the most relevant to this discussion, and with another counterfactual insofar as Emma Woodhouse is what Emma Watson might have been or become

had Aunt Turner not “turned” her out. This optative should, at a minimum, cast a different light on the former’s matchmaking initiatives, particularly as they represent a leveling of distinction between men and women. And it should cast a different light on her interiority generally, where her imaginings are defeated not because Emma Woodhouse is necessarily blind to reality as often argued but because the world in which a Mr. Elton or a Mr. Weston can take care of himself but where a Miss Bates or a Jane Fairfax cannot, the very reality Emma Watson has just discovered, is one that Emma Woodhouse refuses to accept—because she can. This kind of refusal is certainly one way to think about Austen going forward, with attention especially to her historicity. However, with *The Watsons* as perhaps the defining errancy or dissent in Austen’s oeuvre, it is a gesture that points to the refusal to refuse as well: to an achievement undertaken by a writer who is now the *factual* Austen or, at the very least, someone like her.⁷

What all of this suggests, therefore, is that the question of “what’s next for Jane Austen” as an object of study, but also one of imitation, adulation, adaptation, even critique, is inseparable finally from perhaps the central counterfactual concerning her: What *was* next for Jane Austen had she lived? One answer is, of course, *Sanditon*, a work that many would prefer didn’t exist. Still, the predictive disposition of this unfinished work—especially in its palpable engagement with what’s “wrong here”—gains additional traction in conjunction with the earlier fragment, where it can be seen as further bracketing an achievement that is alternately the sine qua non of literary greatness and a siren song for readers seeking self-legitimation of one kind or another.⁸ D. A. Miller has something very specific in mind in exploring this calling, what he calls “Austen Style,” along with the “stylothete”—the narrator-cum-author—who performs it from a position of sublime detachment, which is nicely communicable. But it is the non-specificity of Austen’s style, as an armature of either realism or the rise of the novel or just something that kept her busy for at least a decade, that may be the more critical issue, particularly as a detour from the fragments that flank it, where the focus is reciprocally on a very specific, unpleasant “here.” There is “something” assuredly right with the world of the completed novels as the thing mediated, ambiguated, and overdetermined ideologically, as something that, as Reginald Farrer observed of *Emma*, “give[s] you . . . pleasure, not repeated . . . but squared and squared again with each perusal” (23–24). By contrast, the Austen of the fragments—the counterfactual Austen—delivers an unmediated vision or one, at any rate, where the emphasis shifts from representation, in which fiction rises to an unprecedented level of sophistication and pleasure, to a *represented* where style

falters, where detachment collapses, where something immediate and dystopic takes over. We have no idea—or just an inkling really—of what Austen would have accomplished had she continued writing. But there is reason to surmise that, in the wake of arguably the most monumental detour ever, she was headed to a place, a “radicalism” for want of a better term, that she had apparently never quite left or renounced. There is more of *that* radicalism to be understood going forward, in this case as a “matter of fact” (to borrow Barchas’s term), but with the recognition always that Austen’s errancy cuts both ways.

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NOTES

1. For the appropriation/appreciation of Austen that began with her brother’s biographical notice, see Lynch (ed.), *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*; Johnson, *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures*; and, most recently, Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen*.

2. A notable exception is Barchas’s *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen*, which expands the historical distance separating the novels from posterity, where a particular kind of historical literacy is now lacking and where certain facts, familiar to both Austen and her contemporaries, have been forgotten.

3. References to *The Watsons*, *Lady Susan*, and *Sanditon* are to the texts in *Later Manuscripts*.

4. See my essay “*Lady Susan*, Individualism and the (Dys)functional Family.”

5. See also Duckworth, who believes that Austen gave up writing *The Watsons* for “other than artistic reasons” (224). My point here, in contrast, is that “artistic reasons” and the particular freight they bear are central to *The Watsons*’ abandonment.

6. Kelly describes *Pride and Prejudice* as a “revolutionary fairy tale, a fantasy of how, with reform, with radical rethinking, a society can be safely remodeled” (153). In fact, this is exactly opposite to how the fairy tale operates in this novel, which, as I show in *The Historical Austen*, is an instrument of hegemony or the dominant order presided over by Darcy (124–37).

7. The “counterfactual Austen” as evidenced by *The Watsons* is both a supplement to and the underside in many respects of the “historical Austen” (as I have described her), in seeing no real possibilities for either women who are individuals or for the novel as an instrument for that subject position. But “she” is in many ways the “secret radical” with whom Austen is always wrangling.

8. Clara Tuite makes a related claim for *Sanditon* as the apotheosis of a queer or anti-normative current in Austen, apparent in the juvenilia but largely submerged in canonical works, which are dogged (to the point of being self-reflexive) in their subscription to various norms, notably the courtship plot. Tuite's is an inordinately dim view of the canonical achievement, where Austen, granted, is up to other things but not without a binocular sense either of what's wrong or, as I argue both in *The Historical Austen* and more recently in *The History of Missed Opportunities*, of what was also possible. I agree with Tuite that "*Sanditon* offers a crucial new departure in Austen's *oeuvre*" involving among other matters a "renunciation of the . . . vindictory construct of female subjectivity" or what I've been calling individualism (189). Where she oversteps, due in no small measure to her hyper-theorized and hyper-historicized approach, is in dismissing out of hand the oppositional, renunciatory work already before us in *The Watsons* (which she sidesteps entirely) and, at the very least, dormant in the completed novels, where it is repressed or reciprocally bracketed but, as *Sanditon* shows, hardly forgotten. We both agree, in any case, that Austen was headed in a new direction, which is to say an old direction.

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