

Jane Austen and the Silver Fork

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Jane Austen and the Novel of Manners

In the fiction she wrote in her early teens, Jane Austen followed the popular epistolary model, a narrative told through letters (Klenck 30). But she seems quickly to have realized the limitations of the epistolary and with the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811 to have found almost fully formed the voice and technique she would use in all of her novels, especially what's become known as "free indirect discourse," using third person narration to convey characters' inner thoughts and emotions while maintaining observational distance. This technique, which allowed Austen to be both inside and outside, subjective and objective, psychological and sociological, was a transformative innovation, one employed by 19th century novelists, most memorably by Gustave Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, an innovation that has become almost the default technique of contemporary novelists. In his influential *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that unlike the 18th century novels that preceded hers, Austen's "novels have authenticity without diffuseness or trickery, wisdom of social comment without a garrulous essayist, and a sense of the social order which is not achieved at the expense of the individuality and autonomy of the characters" (297). In other words, she rarely resorts to something as intrusive as authorial comment or something as artificial as a collection of letters, thereby enhancing her novels' realism. Nonetheless, Austen was influenced by earlier novel forms, the Gothic and the epistolary. She was, according to the Australian poet R.F. Brissenden, "aware of [Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*] quite directly: she read his novels with delight and admiration and she learnt from them" (96).

Although she examines the interior lives of multiple characters, Austen generally focuses on a single character, such as Emma Woodhouse in the novel *Emma*, showing her flaws and letting us see how she ultimately overcomes her vanity and pettiness to learn an important moral lesson. As Ian Watt explains, "In her novels there is usually one character whose consciousness is tacitly accorded a privileged status, and whose mental life is rendered more completely than that of the other characters" (297). Much of the comedy in these novels comes from the ironic distance between the reader and this central heroine. That is, our focus is directed to a central character behaving in ways she thinks appropriate but which we recognize are based on foolish self-interest. Watching a character who is oblivious to her flaws and who persists in what we know are wrong-headed actions that will end badly has been an essential comic device, from Shakespeare to Larry David. However, whereas in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* we watch as Larry repeatedly violates manners and suffers painful consequences from which he learns nothing, in Austen's fiction we see protagonists mature, gaining wisdom and self-knowledge from their folly. Additionally, in Austen's work individual folly is often associated with a misunderstanding of social propriety. That is, a character may behave foolishly because she believes wrongly that she is adhering to proper social manners, what Austen in *Emma* describes as "the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are forever falling into" (98). In Austen, there's also often a class dynamic to this violation of manners, with minor, lower class characters shown to be foolish for too sedulously following what they perceive to be the appropriate manners of the classes above them, and upper-class characters shown to be foolish for misunderstanding and interfering with the lives of those below them.

Besides a central character like Emma, another character of sorts inhabits her novels, the narrative voice, what we might call the implied author, Austen herself. Wayne Booth, in his classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, explains how this narrative voice functions: "The inside views of the characters and the author's

commentary [are] used . . . to get the values straight and to help direct our reactions” (265). In other words, through what we perceive about a character’s psychology and Austen’s occasional commentary, we are steered through a novel’s moral concerns and made more aware of the dramatic irony between what a character knows and what we, as readers, know. It’s just this active role we play when reading her fiction, figuring out what Austen wants us to see in her characters, that makes her fiction so enticing—or as Katherine Mansfield says, every “true admirer of the novels cherishes the happy thought that he [sic] alone—reading between the lines—has become the secret friend of the author” (qtd. in Lynch 118).

Austen’s influence extended beyond the use of narrative point-of-view. She published, anonymously, four novels—*Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). Two more, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were published posthumously in 1817 by her brother Henry, who also wrote a note identifying Austen as author of all six books. Initially, her novels received little attention, with only twelve contemporaneous reviews (Southam, Vol. One, 1). But the reviews she did receive were favorable. Of note, the novelist Walter Scott, in reviewing *Emma*, praised Austen’s perception of human nature and admired her moral vision, declaring that she showed “a knowledge of the human heart, with the power and resolution to bring that knowledge to the service of honour and virtue” (189). In 1821, writing anonymously for the *Quarterly Review*, the Reverend Richard Whatley, who Wikipedia identifies as “an English academic, rhetorician, logician, philosopher, economist . . . theologian . . . and one of the first reviewers to recognize the talents of Jane Austen” (“Richard”), identified many of the features that have come to define her fiction: her realism, her moral instruction, her focus on character, and her use of point-of-view. Hers “is that unpretending kind of instruction,” Whatley writes, “which is furnished by real life; and certainly no author has ever conformed more closely to real life” (11). Whatley praises Austen for avoiding “narrative in the first person, when the hero is made to tell his own tale, or by a series of letter” (12). And he recognizes, without using the term, of course, which hadn’t yet entered the language, free indirect discourse, praising Austen for “saying as little as possible in her own person and giving a dramatic air to the narrative by introducing frequent conversations, which she conducts with a regard to character hardly exceeded by Shakespeare himself” (12).

Although Austen’s works were republished in the 1830s and have remained in print ever since (Thompson 275), her readership for the first part of the Victorian era was small, Scott’s and Whatley’s praise notwithstanding, comprised mostly of an elite audience of aristocrats and literati. It has been long believed that one notable member of the aristocracy, the Prince Regent, was a reader of Austen’s novels, a belief based on the words of the Prince Regent’s physician, who, while caring for Austen’s brother Henry, is supposed to have told her that “the Prince was a great admirer of her novels; that he read them often, and kept a set in every one of his residences” (Austen-Leigh 118). This notion was further supported by the fact that Austen dedicated *Emma* to the Prince Regent. In 2018, more proof was found in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle: an 1811 bill of sale—the “first document purchase of an Austen novel”—which reveals that the Prince Regent, who would become George IV, purchased a copy of the anonymously authored *Sense and Sensibility* before it had even been advertised for sale (Georgini).

Such recognition likely helped her work gain readership among the upper classes. As historian Sarah Glosson, author of *Performing Jane: A Cultural History of Jane Austen Fandom*, explains, “The prince, while reviled by many, would have been a tastemaker in his social circle, so the fact that he likely had one of the very first copies of *Sense and Sensibility*—perhaps in his hands before anyone else—is remarkable” (qtd. in Georgini). And there is scattered evidence of the popularity of Austen’s novels among members of the upper class. Anna Isabella Millbanke, who would marry Lordy Byron, wrote that *Pride and Prejudice* was “at present the fashionable novel” (qtd. in Bautz 58); Lady Anne Romily wrote to the novelist Maria Edgeworth that *Mansfield Park* “has been pretty generally admired” (qtd. in Bautz 58); Lady Robert Kerr revealed that *Mansfield Park* “is admired in Edinburgh by all the *wise ones*” (qtd. in Bautz 58); and the Countess of Bessborough wrote to Lord Granville, “Have you read *Sense and Sensibility*? It’s a clever Novel. They were all full of it at Althorp” (qtd. in Hogan 40).

The latter comment presents me with an irresistible opportunity to digress. The Countess of Bessborough, Henrietta (“Harriet”) Ponsonby, was married to Frederick Ponsonby, Viscount Duncannon, the 3rd Earl of Bessborough. The man she is writing to about *Sense and Sensibility*, Granville Leveson-Gower, 1st Earl Granville, who would serve as ambassador to Russia and France, had been her lover for many years and had fathered two illegitimate children with her, pregnancies she’d somehow managed to keep hidden from her husband (“Granville,” “Henrietta”). From the start of her marriage, her husband had abused her psychologically and physically, which was well known in her social circles, so well-known that once when she was ill gossip spread that her husband had attempted to poison her. Seeking comfort outside of her marriage, Harriet also had an affair with the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, until they were found in bed by her husband.

She had many other lovers, including the future Prime Minister William Lamb, who would marry her daughter Caroline (“Henrietta”) who in turn, for six months in 1812, had a scandalous and well-publicized affair with the poet Lord Byron, whom she famously described as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” At a ball honoring the Duke of Wellington (with whom she had had an affair soon after his triumph at the Battle of Waterloo), Lady Caroline responded to an insult from Byron by breaking a wine glass and attempting to slash her wrists. She would eventually write a tell-all novel, *Glenavron*, which will be the focus of a future podcast (“Lady”).

Caroline’s mother Harriet ended her long affair with Earl Granville so he could advance his career by marrying Harriet’s niece. Meanwhile, Harriet’s former lover Sheridan had for years been harassing her in letters, even confronting her in public (“Henrietta”). On his deathbed, with Harriet by his side, according to John Cam Hobhouse, 1st Baron Broughton, Sheridan “grasped her hand hard and told her he intended to haunt her after his death. Harriet, petrified, asked why, having persecuted her all his life, he was determined to continue his persecution after death. ‘Because I am resolved you shall remember me’” was his reply (qtd. in “Henrietta”). This narrative about Harriet Ponsonby, et al, should remind us of the sordid sensibilities that never found their way into the pages of Austen’s tidy fictions.

Another digression. One of Harriet Ponsonby’s descendants suffered through an equally tumultuous and scandalous marriage. Harriet was born Lady Henrietta Frances Spencer, in the family line of Diana Spencer—Lady Di. The Althorp where everyone is reading *Sense and Sensibility* was, in fact, the childhood home of Diana, a 100,000 square foot palace with 90 rooms and 31 bedrooms, set on 13,000 acres. Its library, accumulated by George John, 2nd Earl of Spencer in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, consisted of more than 100,000 volumes, making it one of the largest private libraries in Europe (“Althorp”). Its current resident, Charles Spencer, the 9th Earl and brother of Diana, has continued the family’s interest in writing, as a journalist and historian and, most recently, as the author of four best-selling historical novels.

Now back to Jane.

Besides the aristocracy, Austen’s novels were being read and appreciated by an exclusive set of the literati. “Throughout this period,” writes Austen scholar B.C. Southam, “Jane Austen remained a critic’s novelist—highly spoken of and little read” (Vol. 2, 2). Nor was there much written about her, Southam noting that by 1870 only fifty essays had been published that even referred to Austen, with just six focused exclusively on her work (Vol. One, 1). But recognition of Austen grew steadily after the 1870 publication of her nephew’s *Memoir of Jane Austen*. Even when her readership remained small, however, she had an outsized influence on the development of the English novel as novelists and critics became increasingly familiar with her work. Charlotte Bronte, for instance, in a letter to a book reviewer, said she would shy away from melodrama and “endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen’s ‘mild eyes’ to finish more, and be more subdued” (qtd. in Barker 646). Anthony Trollope declared that “Miss Austen was surely a great novelist. . . . What she did, she did perfectly. Her work, as far as it goes, is flawless. . . . In the comedy of folly, I know of

no novelist who has beaten her” (qtd. in Super 277). The novelist Harriet Martineau in her 1877 autobiography described Austen as “the Queen of novelists, the immortal creator of Anne Elliott, Mr. Knightley, and a score or two more of unrivalled intimate friends of the whole public” (77). The critic George Henry Lewes, perhaps reflecting the views of his editor and soon-to-be wife George Eliot (Kaminsky 997), wrote: “To read one of her books is like an actual experience of life: you know the people as if you had lived with them, and you feel something of personal affection for them” (134). In 1839, writing in his journal, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow noted that he “was amusing [himself] with Miss Austen’s novels. She has great power in delineating commonplace people; and her writings are a capital picture of real life, with all the little wheels and machinery laid bare like a patent clock” (qtd. in Hogan 53).

Within this praise we see another significant impact that Austen’s fiction had upon the Victorian novel. Although without much in the way of realistic description of the country houses and rural villages and churches and farms her characters inhabited, the kind of details such a feature of Victorian novels, in examining the social mores and individual foibles of a small community of unimportant middle and upper-middle class families living in the south of England during the Regency period, she helped establish a model of social realism that looked at the everyday lives of ordinary people (mostly the gentry), a model that included realistic speech and manners and characters.

Austen was aware of the circumscribed nature of her novels which she self-deprecatingly (and probably ironically) called “pictures of domestic life in country villages” and “the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush” (qtd. in Thompson 277). But many critics admired this central feature of her work. Scott, for instance, wrote, “keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitement which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners and sentiments, greatly above our own. In this class she stands almost alone.” The poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, even compared her skill as a miniaturist to Shakespeare’s: “in the narrow sphere of life which she delineated, she pictured her characters as truthfully as Shakespeare.” But he made sure to point out that this miniaturist perfection did not make her the equal of Shakespeare: “Austen,” he wrote, “is to Shakespeare as asteroid to sun. Miss Austen’s novels are perfect works on small scale—beautiful bits of stippling” (qtd. in Southam, 137N.11).

While many Victorian essayists, novelists, and poets recognized Austen’s skill, some found her narrow focus a weakness and limitation. Thus, Charlotte Brontë admitted that Austen “does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well,” but felt that “there is a . . . miniature delicacy in the paintings: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her. . . . Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (not senseless) woman” (qtd. in Barker 749). And an anonymous critic in 1853 (possibly George Eliot) complained that Austen’s works “show us too much of the littlenesses and trivialities of life, and limit themselves so scrupulously to the sayings and doings of dull, ignorant, and disagreeable people, that their very truthfulness makes us yawn” (“Progress” 358). At the extreme end of this criticism stands Mark Twain who repeatedly voiced his dislike for Austen’s work. Writing to his friend the Hartford pastor Joseph Twichell, Twain claimed, “Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone” (qtd. in Auerbach 296). In *Following the Equator*, he compliments a ship’s library for having no books by Austen. “Just this one omission alone,” he writes, “would make a fairly good library out of a library that hadn’t a book in it” (615).

Without going as far as Twain, one might fault Austen for relying almost exclusively on the marriage plot, except that this narrative, besides being central to Shakespeare’s comedies, was common in 18th century novels—and became a standard feature in the Victorian novel. The popularity of the marriage plot in the 19th century suggests the many unresolved questions about class roles and women’s rights that marriage raised and Victorian culture struggled to answer. Only one of the novels I’ve discussed in this podcast, Anne

Bronte's *Agnes Grey*, has an unambiguously happy ending with hero and heroine joyfully tying the knot. The others don't present marriage as unambiguously happy, largely because these writers, living in a time when there was much discussion of wives' legal rights and other progressive feminist concerns, recognized the many ways that Victorian marriage could entrap women and men.

Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has hero and heroine marry happily but only after the novel's heroine has escaped an abusive marriage and, given the draconian divorce laws and the legal provision that decreed wives and children the property of their husbands, only after her husband has died a miserable death. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* both depict women who marry decent and loving men, but they do not love these husbands in part because they were forced into marriage by economic necessity. Too late, they recognize that they should have loved their husbands after all. No doubt Austen's skillful use of the marriage plot influenced Victorian novelists. However, her moral instruction, showing a heroine overcoming her vanity and ignorance to achieve a happy marriage, was essentially conservative, reinforcing the status quo, arguably an understandable conclusion given the lack of options open to women in early 19th Century Britain. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, offer this paraphrase of the typical Austenian conclusion: "the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and advisor, whose house can provide her with shelter and sustenance and at least derived status, reflected glory" (154). Besides reinforcing status quo gender relations, marriage in Austen's fiction serves to resolve tension between social classes. For Pomona College Emeritus Professor of English Edward Copeland, "in all of Jane Austen's novels marriages resolve power relations between ranks and classes" (61). If Wood's and Broughton's and Bronte's protagonists had existed in a Jane Austen novel, they would have overcome their blindness to their husbands' flaws and recognized these men's worthiness and thus married happily or else would have found true love before being pushed into a loveless marriage. In addition to their sparkling wit and fine-edged prose, their well-drawn characters and well-crafted plots, Austen's novels' enduring popularity depends upon their inevitable and perfectly satisfying happy endings. One can't transpose the endings we've seen in *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Ellen Wood* to the world of Austen. It's impossible to imagine circumstances conspiring to force Elizabeth Bennett to marry Mr. Collins, to learn that Mr. Darcy has died from fever in India, and to subsequently die herself from consumption. Or for Emma to marry Reverend Elton, then to leave her children and run away to Europe with Mr. Knightley.

But I should add one caveat to this criticism. Some scholars suggest, contrary to how her endings are embraced by most readers, that Austen knew her romantic endings were false and contrived, and she signaled this attitude in her texts. These scholars have "noticed the duplicity in the 'happy endings of Austen's novels,'" Gilbert and Gubar tell us, "in which she brings us to the brink of bliss in such haste, or with such unlikely coincidences, or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut" (169). On this reading, Austen, aware of the falsity—but necessity—of such endings, presents them from an ironic distance. "The mocking self-consciousness of these essentially comic conclusions," explains Lloyd W. Brown, "evokes a contrast between a literary convention and the good novelist's preoccupation with reality. . . . The happy ending succeeds in both mocking a convention and providing the reader with what he wants" (224). But to Gilbert and Gubar the problem persists no matter Austen's ironic stance: "the implication remains," they write, "that a girl without aid of a benevolent narrator would never find a way out of either her mortifications or her parents' house" (169). These criticisms notwithstanding, Austen's novels played an important role in the development of the 19th century novel, her use of free indirect discourse being adopted by countless writers and her focus on the manners and morals of ordinary upper-middle class families, even without detailed descriptions of these families' physical environments, shaping the domestic realism that defined the Victorian novel. Raymond Williams identifies the key element that defines Austen's fiction, an effect many subsequent writers have sought to achieve and many readers have found irresistible: a "remarkable unity of tone—that cool and controlled observation which is the basis of her narrative method; that lightly distanced management of event and description and character which need not become either

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open manipulation or direct participation” (116). But perhaps the best assessment of her fiction comes from Austen herself when defending, in *Northanger Abbey*, the novel as a “work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (36).

The Silver Fork Novel

Unlike Jane Austen’s fiction, the silver fork novel, popular from the mid-1820s to the mid-1840s, was often richly detailed. To see this difference, consider, first, this scene from *Pride and Prejudice* in which Elizabeth Bennet enters Mr. Darcy’s Pemberly mansion:

They followed [the housekeeper] into the dining-parlour. It was a large, well proportioned room, handsomely fitted up. Elizabeth, after slightly surveying it, went to a window to enjoy its prospect. The hill, crowned with wood, which they had descended, receiving increased abruptness from the distance, was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight. As they passed into other rooms these objects were taking different positions; but from every window there were beauties to be seen. The rooms were lofty and handsome, and their furniture suitable to the fortune of its proprietor; but Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste, that it was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine. (302)

Austen gives us almost no description of Pemberley’s impressive interior. Scholars have offered several sites as the model for Pemberley, but no definitive location has been determined. For the sake of my analysis, I’ll assume it’s based on Lyme Park in Cheshire, constructed in the 17th century, three stories tall and comprising approximately 75,000 square feet (the other contenders, Chatsworth House and Wentworth Woodhouse, both in Yorkshire, are comparably large and grand). The Pemberley dining parlour Austen describes merely as “a large well proportioned room, handsomely fitted up” is, at Lyme Park, a high-ceilinged room fashioned in the Elizabethan style with floor-to-ceiling wainscotting, topped by elaborately carved crown molding and an equally elaborately decorated stucco ceiling. To exit the dining room, one walks through a doorway topped by a wooden pediment featuring more fine carvings. As Elizabeth walks from one room to another, she notices nothing about the interior, not the paintings or tapestries or marble carvings or statuary or chandeliers that undoubtedly decorated whatever mansion was the original of Pemberley.

Compare Austen’s description with the following, from the first pages of Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s 1831 novel *Romance and Reality*:

Such a room as must be at least a century's remove from London, large, white, and wainscoted; six narrow windows, red curtains most ample in their dimensions, an Indian screen; . . . and some dozen of large chairs covered with elaborate tracery, each chair cover the business of a life spent in satin-stitch. On the walls were divers whole length portraits, most pastoral-looking grandmammas . . . a broad green sash, a small straw hat . . . a nosegay somewhat larger than life, a lamb tied with pink riband, concocted a shepherdess just stepped out of [a poem] into a picture. Grandpapas by their side, one hand, or rather three fingers, in the bosom of each flowered waistcoat, the small three-cornered hat under each arm; two sedate looking personages in gowns and wigs, and one—the fine gentleman of the family—in a cream-coloured coat, extending a rose for the benefit of the company in general. Over the chimney-piece was a glass, in a most intricate frame of cut crystal within the gilt one, which gave you the advantage of seeing your face in square, round, oblong, triangular, or all shapes but its natural one. (1-2)

There's more detail in the first two pages of Landon's novel than in all of Austen's. The differences between Austen's and Landon's descriptions in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Romance and Reality* reveal the different aims of their fiction, a comedy of manners versus a silver fork novel. Austen is not concerned with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Rather, she is concerned with individuals' characters. Elizabeth Bennet observes not the expensive setting but the beautiful countryside she can see through the house's many windows. (Lyme Park, by the way, is surrounded by 15 acres of formal gardens and faces a small lake, part of the estate's 1400 acres.) Prior to Elizabeth's entering the Pemberley mansion, Austen has us view the estate's grounds through Elizabeth's eyes. In describing both the interior and the grounds, Austen is signaling to us Mr. Darcy's character (and Elizabeth's growing appreciation of his character) through his apparent good and understated taste, his having furniture that is suitable to his fortune with nothing gaudy or uselessly fine. As she approaches the house, Elizabeth notes that the stream in front of it had no "artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth . . . had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste" (169). The grounds of Pemberley are a reflection of Mr. Darcy: he is true and natural, tasteful and unassuming. The language Austen uses to describe the house and grounds also conveys Elizabeth's physical attraction to Mr. Darcy. Like the rooms of his house, he is well-proportioned and beautiful. We can sense Elizabeth's attraction to Darcy through Austen's repeated references to size and beauty. The house is large and handsome, the dining parlour large and handsomely fitted, the other rooms lofty and handsome. Mr. Darcy is man of the house; and the house is Mr. Darcy.

Landon is not interested in using description to convey a person's character or a character's feelings for another. She's interested in the description itself, in the decorative details of the wealthy. The silver fork novel—also known as the fashionable novel—is not didactic in the manner of Austen, not concerned with lessons of morality or comedies of manners or delineations of character. It's interested in fashion, in showing how the wealthy live and behave. It was read by the middle and upper classes, or, as an anonymous reviewer for *The Athenaeum* wrote, it was read for "the pleasure that little people take in hearing about great people, and great people in hearing about themselves" (Review of *The Exclusives*, 792). Typically, the plots of these novels, according to Ellen Miller Casey, Professor Eremita at the University of Scranton, focus on either a female or a male protagonist. In the female-centered novel, "Beautiful and wealthy young women, searching for appropriate husbands, are pressured by family and friends into appropriate matches." In the male-centered novel, "Intellectual and self-educated young men, searching for an appropriate way to distinguish themselves, settle on politics." The male narratives sometimes feature that Regency-era figure, the Dandy, a theatrical, vain, and immoral nobleman preoccupied with self-display. Regardless of their gender focus, "All of these tales are set against vivid descriptions of balls, dinner parties, teas, clothes, food and shopping" (Casey, "Aristocracy" 15). In their depictions of upper class settings, the silver fork is more detailed, while Austen's fiction is more critical, but they have something in common: a failure to convey the larger political economy upon which this wealth depends. Austen's novels, according to the novelist and critic and Cambridge University professor Raymond Williams, are set in "an acquisitive, high bourgeois society at the point of its most interlocking with an agrarian capitalism," yet "money from the trading houses, from the colonial plantations, has no visual equivalent; it has to be converted to . . . signs of order [such as land and house] to be recognized at all" (115).

Overall, though, there are great differences between Austen and the silver fork novelists, differences that seem not to have been recognized by these novelists who saw their work as in line with hers. Writes Edward Copeland, "by the 1830s it was assumed that Jane Austen's novels and silver fork novels belonged in the same basket, so much so that the editor of the 1833 Bentley edition of *Sense and Sensibility* announced, 'Miss Austen is the founder of a school of novelists,' i.e., the silver fork school (44). Copeland goes on to explain that "Austen's works frequently operate as a storeroom of characters, plots, and dialogue to be hauled out by silver fork novelists for use as needed" (47). The novelist Catherine Gore, explaining the aim of her novel *Pin Money* could be speaking for many silver fork novelists when she writes that the novel is

“an attempt to transfer the familiar narrative of Miss Austin [sic] to a higher sphere of society” (11). This assertion was met with some criticism. “We do not deny the smartness, and occasionally, the shrewdness, of Mrs. Gore’s views of manners and life,” protested one writer, “but still we are far from tracing even a remote resemblance between the labours of the two ladies. Miss Austin’s [sic] novels are histories of the human heart, and in the more occasional parts, wonderfully exact analyses of character and disposition: whereas, in Mrs. Gore’s books, we can see little more than a series of brilliant sketches, bordering occasionally on the caricature” (Review of *Pin Money*, 441-42)

Gore’s sense that silver fork novels like hers picked up where Austen left off does not accord with the aims of Austen’s fiction. While her novels often feature members of the upper classes in rich settings, Austen does not luxuriate in these settings, often barely describing them. Likewise, Austen’s heroines seek a love match, but the process of achieving this match requires them to undergo a moral education that’s missing from most silver fork novels. Ultimately, Austen examines the psychology of her characters in response to the social norms within their socioeconomic class, questions that remain largely unexamined by silver fork novelists, no matter their “transfer[ing] the familiar narrative of Miss Austen to a higher sphere.” More than examining characters’ psychology, Austen’s novels center on, in Williams’s words, “a testing and discovery of the standards which govern human behavior in certain real situations” and a “preoccupation with estates, incomes, and social position, which are seen as indispensable elements of all . . . relationships” (113). Of course, silver fork novelists are preoccupied with “estates, incomes, and social position” but not with how, as Williams puts it, “An openly acquisitive society, which is concerned also with the transmission of wealth, is trying to judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement” (115), the moral and behavioral confusion that is at the heart of Austen’s fiction.

One thing Austen’s novels and the silver forks have in common is that they are set in the Regency era, that nine-year stretch from 1811 to 1820 when George III was incapacitated by mental illness and his son George, the Prince Regent, sat on the throne or that period from 1795, the latter part of George III’s reign, to 1830 and the death of George IV or to 1837 and the ascension of Queen Victoria. Whichever calendar one uses, the Regency era is remembered now almost entirely because of Austen’s novels. Her vision of this period has become ours. Her books have also spawned a whole genre of romance novels, the Regency romance, thanks also to the prolific Austen-inspired Georgette Heyer, who set 26 of her 56 novels in this period, beginning in 1935 with the novel *Regency Buck*. This genre has become wildly popular. If one wants to read a contemporary Regency romance, one can choose from several categories: the Regency Time Travel Romance, the Historical Regency Romance, the Traditional Regency Romance, the Steamy Historical Regency Romance, the Regency Spy Romance, the Dark Regency Romance. If one wants to write a Regency Romance, one can follow the advice of several guidebooks. One such lists multiple Regency romance tropes, among them Amnesia, Arranged Marriage, Childhood Friend Romance, Con artist/ruffian, Kidnapping, Loveable Rogue, Marriage of Convenience, India / far flung lands; about the latter the guidebook’s author, romance novelist Jewel Allen writes, “A romance in a lush, exotic setting? Yes, please” (11). Allen also offers this advice about including a Duke or Titled Hero: “A titled hero is always appealing. After the prince, dukes hold the most powerful title. As the billionaire of the Regency era, the duke easily gets what he wants, except for the heroine’s love. She’ll make him work for it, and he’ll fall line, hook, and sinker. Earls, Marquesses and Viscounts aren’t too far behind in their appeal” (15). With novels like *Saving Her Duke*, *Blind to the Duke’s Attractions*, *Never a Duke*, *A Week to Lose the Duke*, *100 Nights with the Duke*, and *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, Allen seems to be offering sage advice. The novelist Leigh D’Ansey, author of *The Duke’s Blackmailed Bride*, offers further advice: “Your heroes and heroines must have the strength to defy [upper class social customs], never for their own self-interest of course but in defense of others—siblings, parents, friends or even servants who are unable to stand up for themselves. . . . Your characters should understand what is at risk when they don’t comply. Loss of fortune, status, and reputation; lands and title stripped . . . even, and most importantly, loss of love for the person who has become central to their happiness. . . . The higher the stakes, the more your readers will be captivated” (3).

Jane Austen and the Silver Fork

Like Regency romances, silver fork novels were wildly popular, and they depended upon (and were criticized for) their formulaic plots. Whereas Jane Austen's novels are cleverly and precisely plotted, the plots of silver fork novels are often picaresque—that is, episodic, charting characters' movements through their social circles with little concern for narrative development—and little concern for teaching a moral lesson. The term “silver fork” itself, adopted from a review by the essayist William Hazlitt, was a way to disparage these novels, making them synonymous with what was perceived as their central flaw: a preoccupation with the superficial details of the lives of aristocrats. “Provided a few select persons eat fish with silver forks,” Hazlitt wrote, these writers “consider it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves” (345).

The silver fork novel was criticized for many other reasons, as Casey documents, focusing on reviews in the weekly journal *The Athenaeum*. Besides their hackneyed plots and fascination with the details of the good life, these novels were deplored for their style and grammar, their “vulgar words imported from the club-house or the kennel,” and [their] ‘flagrant outrages upon the laws of universal grammar’” (qtd. in Casey, “Silver-Forks” 254). According to the *Athenaeum*, literature should be moralistic (but not preachy) since, writes one critic, “events, as they occur in real life, have always a moral if we have but the wisdom to detect it” (Review of *The Three* 461). Extremely popular, Casey describing them as “perhaps the first bestsellers” (“Aristocracy” 13), silver fork novels raised fears that an ever-enlarging reading public which crossed class boundaries would be exposed to and influenced by frivolous and amoral or dubiously moral fiction, leading one critic to decry “the blighting influence of [their] artificial manners, cynical egotism, and corrupted morals” (Review of *The Three* 461).

The problem such critics were addressing was the rise of consumer culture—that is, the publication of novels meant to respond to the marketplace, to broad public taste, rather than to the refined tastes of the cultural elite. Thus, one critic rued that authors had “fallen upon evil days and . . . like tradesmen . . . must subordinate [their] own tastes to those of their customers. . . . [They must submit] to the necessity of pandering to the prevalent corruption of the intellect” (803). Another criticism was simply that there were too many of these titles, too many novels being published overall. In fact, the number of novels published annually in Britain in the years 1820 to 1836 was, from a modern perspective, quite small, ranging from a low of 69 to a high of 112 titles (Garside 25). The number of copies per edition was also small, a first edition of a new novel having a press run of between 500 and 2000 (Garside 29). Complaints about the excessive number of silver fork novels being published are indicative of the literary establishment's frustration about losing their gatekeeper function. But they also show a culture in transition, an elite literary world being overwhelmed by a burgeoning mass market.

Another objection was that the silver fork novel seems not to have been spontaneously created by the genius of individual authors but to have been contrived by a publisher. Emeritus English professor John Sutherland explains: “The mastermind behind silver forkery was the publisher Henry Colburn. In 1825-26, at a time when the book trade was prostrated by a recession Colburn embarked on a saturation campaign of publishing short-life best sellers, exploiting post-Regency fascination with the high life” (584). Roughly three-quarters of the 500 silver fork novels published were connected in one way or another to Colburn (Sutherland 584). Relying on gimmicks and deception, Colburn prefigures the kind of wily and manipulative marketers who dominate our commercial environment (and who have been part of the publishing industry since its beginnings in the 17th century. Colburn, writes Sutherland, “promoted his wares by . . . often unscrupulous advertising” (136), placing in literary journals paid paragraphs that read like reviews, or what Casey calls “the Victorian equivalent of ‘infomercials’” (“Aristocracy” 21), thereby earning the nickname the “Prince of Puffery” (Sutherland 136). While it was commonplace for novels to be published anonymously (as Jane Austen's initially were), with only a third of novels published between 1820 and 1836 having identified authors (Garside 31), Colburn used the anonymity of authorship to suggest that each author was an aristocrat who was basing his/her narrative on first-hand experience. “It was assumed,” Casey explains, “that the novels were romans-a-clef, a belief reinforced by the publication of ‘keys’ to the

more popular of them” (“Aristocracy” 16). These keys, roughly 40 pages in length, consisted of passages from a novel followed by short discussions, along with a table of characters with corresponding real-life inspirations, often with coy references such as the following, taken from *The Key to Vivien Gray: Being a Complete Exposition of the Royal, Noble, and Fashionable Characters Who Figure in the Most Extraordinary Work*:

We have already made a slight allusion to the witty, accomplished, but unprincipled Baron Von Konigstein. The whole sketch of this titled black-leg is a veritable picture of a gambler of high rank at this moment flourishing in the *Hells* [i.e., illegal gambling clubs], and we are sorry to say, in the upper circles of London. In this particular, our Key must be deficient; we cannot, even by inuendo, venture to hint at him, though, when we give his [villainous] history . . . we hope he will at least be pretty generally suspected” (Barrington 8).

The identify of this black-leg is further hinted at in a note appended to the character list, where the Baron’s real name has been left blank: “Our fashionable readers will have no difficulty in supplying this blank, though we may not print even the initials. Should they require any clue, we beg to call their recollection to a late disgraceful gambling transaction recently exposed in the newspapers” (Barrington 22).

Not only the characters but also the authors of these novels piqued readers’ interest. *Vivian Gray* was a best-seller, which led to much speculation about the identify of its author. What Duke or Lord could have written it? When identified, its author—Benjamin Disraeli, the future prime minister—was criticized for deceiving the public since he was not, as the publisher had led readers to believe, an aristocrat but instead a twenty-one-year-old solicitor’s clerk with a Jewish mercantile background. As well, Colburn, the novel’s publisher, was severely criticized in literary journals such as *Blackwood’s Magazine*: for “knowing all the while that the writer is an obscure person, for whom nobody cares a straw. . . [Colburn] is thus enabled to scrape together from defrauded purchasers who, on the faith of puff and paragraph, believed the paltry catch-penny to be from the pen of a man of genius and achievement” (“Nortes” 98). As a result of the scandal of his authorship, Disraeli suffered severe depression, tried for a couple of decades to suppress his novel, and, in 1853, issued a revised edition which included a preface in which he excused himself by suggesting that “Such productions should be exempt from criticism, and should be looked upon as a kind of literary [fluke]” (qtd. in Rosa 101).

Published in 1826, *Vivian Gray* was one of the first—and one of the most successful—of the silver fork novels. The previous year had seen a major stock market crash and run on the banks, The Panic of 1825. David Cannadine describes the results: “The . . . crash was unprecedented in its depth and in the damage it caused. Eighty country banks failed in the early months of 1826, the Bank of England itself was only saved by an influx of gold bullion from the continent, and 500 of the 624 companies formed during the bubble of 1824-25 had collapsed by 1827” (134). The publishing industry suffered as well; for example, Sir Walter Scott’s first publisher, Constable and Co., declared bankruptcy in 1826, and Scott himself would struggle for the rest of his life to pay off the massive debts he accrued as co-owner of the publishing house Ballantyne and Co. (Horsman 2). Alexander J. Dick, Professor at the University of British Columbia, explains that although after the crash the number of publishers remained the same, the established publishing houses suffered serious financial setbacks, while

hitherto less-reputable publishers . . . took advantage of the slump and completely changed the literary market. The high end of the market for vellum-bound poetry and triple-decker novels fell off, and the lower end market for cheaper productions, pamphlets, miscellanies, sermons, and children’s books took off. . . . The equation, assumed by [the more established houses] between literary reputation and expensive, limited editions was superseded in the market by the idea that financial reward came from mass sales.

The atmosphere surrounding the book trade can be seen in the title of bibliographer Thomas Didbin's 1832 jeremiad *Remarks on the Present Languid and Depressed state of Literature and the Book Trade*. It was in this context, this time of economic crisis, when reputable publishers were struggling to survive, that publishers like Colburn found a market for cheaper books that would appeal to a mass audience. The silver fork novels were particularly appealing at this time because they offered readers a means of escape by taking them back to the earlier and more prosperous Regency era and having them vicariously luxuriate in "coronets, fine gentlemen, and still finer ladies, court plumes, diamond necklaces, the Prince Regent, masquerades, [and] money-lenders," as the *Athenaeum* put it (qtd. in Casey, "Silver-Forks" 254). The prolific Edward Bulwer Lytton, author of several silver fork novels, asserted that middle-class readers' interest in the lives of the upper class was aspirational: "In proportion as the aristocracy has become social, and fashion allowed the members of the more mediocre classes a hope to outstep the boundaries of fortune, and be quasi-aristocrats themselves, people eagerly sought for representations of the manners which they aspired to imitate, and the circles to which it was not impossible to belong" (108). These novels thus served as a guide for the ascendent middle-class, for, writes Alison Adburgham, social historian and long-time fashion editor at the *Guardian* newspaper, "manufacturers who made fortunes moving to the capital from the industrial north and by City bankers and merchants already on the fringes of the elite. For aspiring social entrepreneurs the detailed realism of these books made them compulsive reading with their intimate portrayal of the world they hoped to enter" (qtd. in Rowbotham 14).

But these novels were not mere catalogues for the rising bourgeoisie; nor were they wholly praising of the rich. In fact, overtly and covertly, they often mocked as frivolous and vain the lives of the aristocracy, as in this passage from *Romance and Reality*, which begins with a typically detailed description of an ornate boudoir but then shifts to an obviously satirical discussion of the need to choose wallpaper colors that will enhance a woman's beauty:

The boudoir was a very pretty boudoir; the curtains at the window were rich rose colour, the paper a pale pink, and the fire-place . . . one sparkling blaze. On the mantel-piece two alabaster figures supported each a little lamp, whose flame was tinted by the stained flowers; some china ornaments, purple and gold, and a vase filled with double violets, were reflected in the mirror. . . . By the by, what a barbarous, what an uncharitable act it is, of some people to furnish their rooms as they do, against all laws of humanity as well as taste! We have actually seen rooms fitted up with sea-green, and an indigo-coloured paper: what complexion could stand it? The most proper of becoming blushes would be utterly wasted, and perhaps at the most critical moment. Mrs. Fergusson never would let her daughters visit at Lady Carysfort's, on account of the unabated crimson of her walls and furniture: as she justly observed, the dancers looked like ghosts. For ourselves, when we furnish our rooms, we have decided on a delicate pink paper; it lights up well, and is such a relief to the foreground of whites, reds, and blue. (52-3)

The satirical aim of these novels, as demonstrated here, is clearly noted in the key to *Vivian Gray*, a key which allegedly was written by the author of the novel Disraeli: "if any kind of life . . . can justify the invasion of ridicule, it is the life of the haute noblesse where vice has not the excuse of necessity, nor folly the plea of ignorance. Upon this, perhaps, the author of *Vivian Grey* may rest his vindication, and assert that he is not meanly administering to a malicious taste in the public" (Barrington 2).

There's an obvious tension in these novels as they appeal to the ego and commodity fetishism of the upper class and the dreams of the middle class—or as Casey writes, "to confirm the status of the exclusives and to instruct the middle class in how to achieve that status" ("Aristocracy" 22)—while simultaneously mocking the shallowness of upper-class lives and middle-class dreams. For the novelist Bulwer Lytton, the root of this contradiction—"revel[ing] in the spectacle of aristocratic luxury, while condemning the system that perpetuated it" (Dzelzsinis 107)—was that so few of the middle class could achieve the status of the exclusives, could ascend into the upper class; therefore, these novels offered readers compensation in the

form of “a satire on the follies and vices of the great” (108). Even more, Bulwer argued that these novels had had a political force that was especially resonant in the turbulent 1830s. Industrialization, urbanization, a rapidly growing population, and an unrepresentative political system led to significant social unrest, which was further incited by the example of the 1830 July Revolution in France, which overthrew Charles X and created a constitutional monarchy. Alan Horsman, formerly an English professor at the University of Otago, New Zealand, summarizes this situation: “Novelists and publishers . . . shared with the general public in the apprehensions of the 1830s arising from civil disorder in the countryside in the south (in support of a living wage), from strikes in the industrial north, and from popular agitation for the reform of parliament” (2). “This period,” explains historian Eric Hobsbawm, “is probably the only one in modern history when political events in Britain ran parallel with those on the continent, to the point where something not unlike a revolutionary situation might have developed in 1831-2 but for the restraint of both Whig and Tory parties” (110-11). As Hobsbawm alludes to, this tense and potentially revolutionary situation was resolved, in 1831, with passage of the First Reform Act.

Bulwer argues that the passage of the First Reform Act was helped by novelists like himself who had been changing public opinion, had been, in his words, “converting the multitude” toward a more progressive politics (189). Bulwer explains these changes in public consciousness:

Just at the time when with George the Fourth expired [in 1830] an *old* era expired, the excitement of a popular election at home concurred with the three days of July in France, to give a decisive tone to the *new*. The question of Reform came on. . . From that moment the intellectual spirit became *wholly* absorbed in, politics; and whatever lighter [novels] have obtained a warm and general hearing, have either developed the errors of the social system, or the vices of the legislative. (110)

Bulwer claims, in other words, that the silver fork novel anticipated and promoted the progressive changes that culminated in the First Reform Act and that subsequent to its passage these novels became much more conscious of the impact of government policies and of economic disparities, identifying problems both social and political. In his study of these novels, Edward Copeland reaffirms this view, asserting that “silver fork novelists act[ed] as fifth columnists for this liberalizing political programme. It was their mission, as it were, to infiltrate both the middle classes and the aristocracy, and once having established their credentials and novelistic characters among the aristocratic fashionables . . . to persuade each group to accept a useful new social mythology, one in which the middle classes are joined with the aristocracy to constitute a new governing class” (50).

Bulwer’s defense of these novels’ urgency and relevance did little to change their reputation. During the two decades of its popularity, the silver fork novel was continually criticized by the literary establishment for its amorality and frivolity and lack of artistry, its one-dimensional characters and derivative plots. And it was the target of repeated satires, including ones by Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray. Further serving this appetite for critique, *Punch* magazine offered its readers this silver fork recipe:

Take a consummate puppy . . . baste with self-conceit—stuff with slang—season with maudlin sentiment—hash up with a popular publisher—simmer down with preparatory advertisements. Add six reams of gilt-edged paper . . . garnish with marble covers, and morocco backs and corners. Stir up with magazine puffs—skim off sufficient for preface. Shred scraps of French and small-talk, very fine. Add ‘superfine coats’—‘satin stocks’—‘bouquets’—‘opera-boxes’—‘a duel’—an elopement—St. George’s Church—silver bride favours—eight footmen—four postilions—the like number of horses . . . some filtered tears—half-mourning for a dead uncle (the better if he has a twitch in his nose), and serve with anything that will bear ‘frittering.’ (“Literary”)

Jane Austen and the Silver Fork

After its spate of popularity, the silver fork novel, tarnished by repeated critical and satirical attacks, seemed to disappear, remembered only for its influence on William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a novel one critic calls "both a repudiation of the silver fork genre and its apex" (Casey, "Aristocracy" 20). According to Matthew Rosa, "*Vanity Fair* enlarges and restudies the entire world of the fashionable novelists. . . . [Thackeray's] success has thrown his predecessors into a shade from which they have never emerged" (12). Thackeray did his part to throw shade on the silver fork, writing parodies and, in *Vanity Fair*, referring to his conniving social-climbing protagonist Becky Sharp, "that estimable woman as regards *fashion*," having the doors to the upper classes opened to her, doors, Thackeray writes, "guarded by grooms of the chamber with flaming *silver-forks* with which they prong all those who have not the right of the *entrée*" (564, emphasis added). "Mustiness pervades" the silver fork novel, Rosa concludes, while *Vanity Fair* shine[s] . . . undimmed and fresh" (216).

Writing in 1936, Rosa pointed out that, a century after their heyday, silver fork novels were to be found "only in copyright repositories like the British Museum [and had] vanished almost utterly from the shelves of the dealers" (216). The same is true today, except that rather than copyright repositories, these novels, converted to pdf's, have been relegated to sites like Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive. Almost none are available in book form. And this unfashionable fashionable novel is known only to a coterie of academic specialists. Although an English professor who taught college literature surveys for decades, I admit that I had never heard of the silver fork novel until I began conducting research for this podcast, which I hope in its small way can help draw attention to these books and their manifold influence on the Victorian novel and their importance as documents of late-Regency, pre-Victorian England.

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