

Sarah Reynolds
FMST: Fan Culture
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Jane Austen:
From High Culture to Popular Culture

Jane Austen fandom sits in an interesting junction between two types of fandoms: high culture and popular culture. Johnson writes, “Unlike *Star Trek*, Austen’s novels hold a secure place in the canon of high as well as popular culture.”¹ This paper will provide information about certain aspects of the fan community that has developed around the Jane Austen novels. It will begin with a history of the Jane Austen fandom and how it formed. It will look at the academic and intellectual beginning of Jane Austen fan audiences and then the transition to a popular “Janeite” fan audience. It will focus on the tension between the two as Jane Austen serves as both a text of high culture and popular culture. The paper will try to answer the question of how academic fans have reacted to the commercialization and popularization of Jane Austen fan objects. The paper will then move onto a case study of an off-shoot of a Jane Austen novel. “Clueless” is a 1995 comedic film based on Jane Austen’s *Emma*. We will focus on the extent to which “Clueless” is faithful to its Austen text and how audiences have reacted to it. Finally, the paper will close with personal accounts and insights into the ongoing debate about whether Austen’s novels can serve as both a focus of English literature classes and simultaneously a focus of popular culture.

We will begin this paper by looking at how Jane Austen fandom has developed over time. This is an important issue because the public perception of Jane Austen has determined how later generations viewed and interacted with the works of Jane Austen, including to what extent her works are included in an academic curriculum. In the first decades following the publication of

¹ Johnson 224.

Jane Austen's works in the early 19th century, only members of high academia and the intellectual community became followers of her texts. These academics were, in general, distinguished male publishers and professors. They fondly referred to Austen as their "dear," "divine," and "matchless" Jane². However, following the publication in 1870 of J.E. Austen's popular biography, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, Austen's books gained more widespread attention. This is when historians peg the beginning of the phenomenon of "Janeitism," which is described as "the self-consciously idolatrous enthusiasm for 'Jane' and every detail relative to her."³ This movement gained more 'Janeites' when the novels became more widely available and published at cheaper prices.

Interestingly, some of the original academic (and male) fans were not pleased when this fandom developed. Johnson writes, "many of Austen's most acute admirers have been unhappy with this extravagant popularity."⁴ In fact, Henry James noted with disdain that producers have used Jane "so infinitely for their material purpose" and she has thus developed into "a commercial phenomenon and a cultural figure."⁵ James believed that due to this commercialism, Austen is loved by the wrong people for the wrong reasons, to put it bluntly. James believed that Austen's popularity had spread too far that people no longer appreciated the literary value of her works. This latter point may be true to an extent as Austen's works have taken on varying levels of meanings based on the time in history and the fan base at that time.

During the late 19th century, Austen's novels were cherished for their female propriety and description of a world with a proper set of rules. In fact, they were the recommended reading for soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the war because of their

² *Ibid* 213-214.

³ *Ibid* 211.

⁴ *Ibid* 211-212.

⁵ *Ibid* 211.

descriptions of an ordered world.⁶ Later in history, however, including in much of the 20th century, Austen's books were re-captured by female fans as satires on the class and gender culture of her time and as examples of feminist culture in a time when females were expected to be subservient. However, over time the phenomenon of the Janeites has increased in popularity and raised concerns in academics' minds that their readings are social rather than academic and the pursuit is solely of enjoyment rather than education. Another interesting reaction of academics is their confusions about the fan practices. Johnson writes, "we are confounded by the common Janeite game of imagining how a character in one novel might behave towards a character in another, or of speculating how the novels might continue after the wedding."⁷ This reaction is largely to the fan fiction that has become popular on fan websites and publications.⁸ One can only imagine how James would have reacted to popular versions of Austen's work such as "Clueless", which I will proceed to discuss.

As an introduction to "Clueless," it is important to understand, in general, what Jane Austen's novels concern and are known for. Jane Austen's novels are set in the 18th century and show how women deal with the constraining pressures of their time, most explicitly the pressure to marry well. They also show how these women pursue their own individual desires and independence, such as marrying for love. For this reason, Jane Austen's novels have attracted a largely female, and often empowered, audience. While modern adaptations often seem to modify this motif as they are no longer set in the 18th century, the general theme is maintained. The specific pressure on the women may be slightly different, now it is the pressure to date a popular boy such as in "Clueless" when Cher is pressured to date Elton, but the general theme is

⁶ *Ibid* 217.

⁷ *Ibid* 223.

⁸ For example of this, the following website has a link to fan fiction websites and novels based on Jane Austen novels: <http://www.austen-beginners.com/fanfiction.shtml>

much the same, concerning the societal expectations of who one dates being pre-determined for women and how these women deal with these expectations.

The movie “Clueless,” a modern adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, is an interesting case study for Jane Austen fandom. “Clueless” is an example of a Jane Austen work becoming part of the popular culture as this comedic film definitely has. The language and some of the plot has been updated; “Significantly, both Eltons object to the protégé’s class. Mr. Elton exclaims, ‘I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!’”⁹ Similarly, in the movie version, Elton asks “Don’t you know who my father is?” This illustrates that while some motifs are lost in the modernization of *Emma*, many still remain. The importance of class in dating and Emma’s rebellion against it is one of the biggest themes in the original Austen novel as well as in “Clueless.” However, the modernized motifs do not always maintain the Austen ones. While some commentators believe that Cher’s energy in “Clueless” is a modern interpretation of Emma’s feminism, others believe that much of this feminist message is lost. In addition, racial issues, a more modern problem, are introduced in the re-make but not in the original. However, the racial issues are often phrased in class terms; Cher and Dionne are presented as not having racial issues largely because their common socioeconomic status is what pre-dominates. The level to which this actually matters depends partly on how important these messages are to the fans of Jane Austen. The fact that many of the readers are middle-aged women as well as female students leads me to believe that these messages are important. This also leads me to wonder how Jane Austen fans in general feel about movies such as “Clueless.” One fan said, “I think that to the extent that people find out that it’s based on *Emma* is good because people realize that Jane Austen’s works are timeless. As long as they don’t distort Austen’s intentions, I don’t object.” One interesting point about having “Clueless” as part of the Jane Austen fandom is that it is certainly possible for someone to enjoy watching “Clueless” and

⁹ Turim 38.

have no idea that it is based on a Jane Austen novel. However, for those who are already fans of Jane Austen fiction, the similarities with *Emma* are quite noticeable in certain scenes as well in some over-arching themes of the movie.

In conclusion, I would like to add some personal insight into the Jane Austen phenomenon. While Henry James and others have expressed concern over the Austen novels spreading from a high culture fandom to a popular fandom, in my personal experience this has not been a problem. While I am the first to admit that my mother and I have our fair share of Jane Austen commercial products (tote bags with “I’d rather be reading Jane Austen” imprinted on them, playing cards, and the like), I believe the commercialism of Austen’s works has helped spread not only these material products but also the literary value of her works. Personally, I was introduced first to “Pride and Prejudice” by watching the A & E movie version. I then read many of the novels as part of a British Literature class and saw “Clueless,” aware of its connection to one of my favorite novels. While I believe that to some level I enjoy “Clueless” because of the comedy and the clothes, I also think that my academic study and close reading of the novels contributes to my understanding and appreciation of Jane Austen’s novels and of the subsequent spin-offs in books, movies, and commercial products. However, this leads to my closing point, which is that while the Janeites have spread far and wide, for the most part, the Janeites I know are female and highly educated. James would perhaps appreciate this knowledge – that Austen is regarded highly and not as just a commercial product, but whether there is still stigma associated with “high fandom” in the Austen fandom is an interesting point to ponder. In fact, this may not be a problem at all, but a blessing. One of Austen’s favorite writers believed that “the purpose of literature was to help us better enjoy or endure life, then we must be glad, pace James, that ‘Jane’ is ‘theirs’, ‘yours’, and ‘ours’ after all¹⁰.

¹⁰ Johnson 224.

Works Cited:

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