

BOOK REVIEW: *Jane Austen: Glose, înțelesuri, interpretări*. Coordonator Mihaela Mudure. Cluj Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2019, 247p. ISBN: 978-606-17-1175-8.

CRISTINA BĂNICERU

West University of Timișoara

4, V. Pârvan Blvd., 300223 Timișoara, Romania

cristina.baniceru@e-uvt.ro

It is a truth universally acknowledged that writing a book about Jane Austen is quite the endeavour. She has been courted by so many critics that it is hard to surprise her avid readers, researchers and admirers now. Not surprisingly, Bloom starts his collection of critical essays dedicated to the British author by comparing Austen to another of the critics' all-time favourites, William Shakespeare: "The oddest yet by no means inapt analogy to Jane Austen's art of representation is Shakespeare's ... Like Shakespeare, she gives us figures, major and minor, utterly consistent each in her or his own mode of speech and being, and utterly different from one another. Her heroines have firm selves, each molded with an individuality that continues to suggest Austen's reserve of power, her potential for creating an endless diversity (Bloom 2009:1)". Just like Shakespeare, her works are being constantly adapted to the big screen, due to the memorable, dynamic characters, the vivid dialogues and her deep understanding of human nature. Recently, Palgrave Macmillan published an original collection of essays, inspiredly entitled, *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare. A Love Affair in Literature, Film and Performance* (Cano & García-Periago 2019) celebrating the many connections between the two writers, despite the different genres they represented. Just like Shakespeare, "our dear, everybody's dear, Jane" – as Henry James (quoted in Sahney 1990:102) would ironically refer to her – became a cultural icon with popular cult followings and fan clubs among informed readers, academics, bookish harangues and pop culture immersed youngsters alike – old and new Janeites.

With so many readings of Jane Austen from structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, film studies, even post-colonial perspectives, it is difficult to find an unoccupied academic

niche. However, what the book subject to this review manages to do is to unite all Janeites: from bookworms, movie buffs to gamers. Edited by Mihaela Mudure, *Jane Austen: Glose, înțelesuri, interpretări* (*Jane Austen: Glosses, Meanings, Interpretations*) is divided into four parts, each thematically structured, with the first part dedicated to rereadings of Austen, the second, to similarities between the British author and other important writers, not necessarily British, the third, to cinematic and virtual adaptations of her novels, and the last, Ana Olos' *tour de force* into Jane Austen's life, to her important novels and their reception. The "Preface", written by Mihaela Mudure, a scholar with a vast experience in gender studies, reveals the aim of this study: to offer a fresh and dynamic reading of Austen's works from the perspective of a variety of Romanian scholars, all devoted Janeites.

The first part opens with Dragoș Ivana's essay on the influence exercised by Augustan literature on Jane Austen. Such a reading, which may appear to place the British author in an anachronistic relationship with her contemporaries, highlights Austen's affinities with Henry Fielding's wittiness and irony, Samuel Richardson's immediacy of representation and Charlotte Lennox's parodic vein. Dragoș Ivana, quoting William Branford Shubrick Clymer, a literary journalist and Walter Scott's contemporary, sees Jane Austen as a successor of both Richardson and Fielding in her realistic depiction of manners, a position which sets her apart from the romantics who just started to occupy the literary scene. A good connoisseur of Augustan literature, the Romanian scholar interprets Austen's work as an extensive but engaged dialogue with her predecessors. Hence, the British author manages to create original characters, situations, emotions and conflicts on the ample scaffolding offered by her forerunners, at the same time, becoming one of the creators of the modern English novel.

The second essay, written by Constantina Raveca Buleu, is dedicated to an ample analysis of *Lady Susan*, an epistolary novel, quite neglected by criticism in favour of Austen's more mature works. The novel in question, which was recently adapted to the big screen by Whit Stillman, under the title *Love & Friendship* (2016), demonstrates Jane Austen's affiliation to the art of letter writing, which Samuel Richardson perfected in his novels. Buleu's analysis focuses on Lady Susan Vernon, a widow no longer in her prime, finding herself in a less than fortunate financial situation, who, with the help of her oratorical skills, manages to find rich husbands for both herself and her daughter, at the same time keeping her lover. The critic manages to dissect Lady Susan's epistolary strategies, revealing the latter as a female trickster whose wit, playfulness and "manipulative irreverence" (p. 28) undermine a rather rigid and overly polite society.

Amelia Precut, the third contributor, discusses the metafictional dimension of *Northanger Abbey*, which becomes a dialogic battleground between the sentimental tradition and an *avant la lettre* realism. If Austenian critical tradition focuses mostly on this novel as a parody of the Gothic genre, Precut sees it as a successful attempt to domesticate the sensationalism inherent in the pre-modern novel. Catherine Morland is another ‘female Quixote’ who, blinded by the romances she reads, falls victim to embarrassing mistakes. Thus, the third person narrator, as the critic observes, seems to imply that one does not need exceptional heroes or situations to successfully portray human nature. According to Amelia Precut, Austen is inferring that the new novel needs “to reflect ordinary and daily concerns and situations” (p. 39, my translation).

Cristina Diamant, the next author to approach Jane Austen’s works, compares two different Austenian female characters that appear to stand for two emergent tendencies in the epoch: on the one hand, Fanny Price, who seems closer to the Victorian ideal and, on the other hand, Emma Woodhouse, the effervescent romantic heroine. But Cristina Diamant goes past these crude dichotomies and sees the complexity of the two heroines. Although Fanny Price might be considered “a toxic model of feminine passivity” (p. 41, my translation) by second-wave feminists and Emma Woodhouse “the feminine variant of male privilege and ethics” (p. 41, my translation), both represent various facets of acceptable femininity in the culture in which Jane Austen wrote. Even though, at a superficial glance, Emma stands for spontaneity and Fanny for austerity, such a reading, according to the critic, is simplistic, since Austen carefully created different circumstances for her heroines to reflect their subtle complexity.

The book’s second part, dedicated to various (inter)cultural and (inter)textual connections between Jane Austen and other important writers, starts with the (un)holy marriage between Shakespeare and Austen. Monica Matei-Chesnoiu’s two-fold study focuses both on Austen’s intertextual references to Shakespeare and to the similarities between the two iconic writers. According to the author, Austen’s references to Shakespeare, though not many, are deeply ironic, mainly mocking her contemporaries’ compulsion to quote from Shakespeare as a sign of ‘erudition’. At the same time, the Shakespearean snippets, especially those found in *Northanger Abbey*, are meant to ironize Catherine who is far from the romantic heroine she fancies herself to be. When it comes to the two famous British authors, although, as the author of the essay admits, the differences are many – from thematic to generic ones – a striking similarity is the writers’ exploration of self-knowledge as a central theme in their works.

Octavian More's essay establishes connections between Jane Austen and another important 19th century female writer, George Eliot. Although the latter never mentioned her precursor in her critical appraisal of women writers, the critic cannot but notice many similarities between the two. In her critical essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", Eliot criticizes the sentimental novel for its artificiality, silly dialogues and unrealistic plot, but praises Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau, completely ignoring Jane Austen. Octavian More makes a well-structured and insightful analysis of the many thematic and narrative threads that unify the two writers, from the female characters created, the explorations of the female psyche, the provincial setting and social investigation to the lack of an overtly didactic tone and of an intrusive auctorial voice.

The third essay in this part puts forward a very original and unexpected parallel between Jane Austen and Henry David Thoreau, the practitioner of Transcendentalism. Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru's ample discussion starts with a depiction of Jane Austen's last residence in Chawton village where she wrote four novels. What impresses the critic is the self-imposed austerity in which Austen lived and wrote. She created for herself, according to Cuțitaru, a deeply spiritualised locus which calls to mind Thoreau's Walden. After an extensive presentation of Transcendentalism – starting with the initiator of the philosophical movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then moving to Thoreau's transcendentalist experiment by the Walden Pond –, the author moves to Austen's female characters whom he considers imbued with their creator's *avant la lettre* Transcendentalism. In *Sense and Sensibility*, towards the end, Marianne recognizes the importance of reason, and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* escapes social constraints, simultaneously transcending her ego and adhering to a non-ego.

The next two essays focus on another comparison, this time between Jane Austen and Germaine de Staël. Elena Butoescu's essay traces the literary trajectories of the two female writers, who were both born in the late 18th century and died in July 1817 but who never met, as Austen famously refused to meet Madame de Staël. Even though they shared the same literary context, admired the same author, Fanny Burney, and published at the same publishing house, the two authors – one flamboyant, the other restrained (Butoescu 2019:111) – were differently perceived by their contemporaries. The critic observes that, if initially, Germaine de Staël was met with enthusiasm by readers, enjoying great popularity, while Jane Austen's novels had moderate success, later, the latter transcends her period, gaining unprecedented popularity. Elena Butoescu offers an explanation to why Madame de Staël remains a period writer, mostly relevant to the epoch she wrote in, as opposed to

Austen. The English writer is mainly interested in the private lives of her characters, the grand scale of politics never attracts her. Germaine de Staël is deeply caught in the web of her time, her novels being mostly political. Maria Măţel-Boatcă continues the parallel between the two authoresses as both contributed to the innovative ideas that shaped the 19th century (p. 124). The critic chooses two novels, both centred on marriage, love and family relationship: *Delphine* by Madame de Staël and *Emma* by Jane Austen. The analysis is carefully constructed to reveal an intricate and conflictual system of power relations, especially those between women and men.

The sixth essay, written by Andreea Bugiac, details a very problematic cultural encounter, that between Austen's novels and the French readership, which ended up with Jane Austen remaining practically unknown in France until the end of the 20th century. The reason for such a poor reception, despite the fact that all Austen's novels were translated within a relatively short time after their publication, is the translation itself. Andreea Bugiac discusses the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, which she sees as an example of cultural, even ideological adaptation. As the writer aptly notices, large portions of the text were left out or condensed to create a variant acceptable to the Republican and later to the Napoleonic French society. Not surprisingly, the 'adapted' parts were those centred on the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, the former being completely disempowered to accommodate the demands of a conservative, patriarchal society. As the author concludes, the abridged variant lacks also the metatextual, ironic dimension that makes Austen such a popular choice for readers.

Ramona Mihăilă's essay, which ends the second part of the book under discussion, focuses on a reinterpretation or rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* in a postmodernist key. As expected, Jane Austen's novels did not escape the now fashionable, modern adaptations of the classics, another proof of her good understanding of human nature and human relationships that stands the test of time. If *Bridget Jones's Diary* (by Helen Fielding) or *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (by Seth Grahame-Smith) are rewritings of a single novel, *The Jane Austen Marriage Manual* (by Kim Izzo), though still mainly inspired by Elizabeth Bennet's adventures, draws from most of Austen's novels. In her discussion of Izzo's novel, Ramona Mihăilă resorts to Sanders' theories about adaptation and Kristeva's approach to intertextuality. Such a rewriting of Austen's fiction, as the critic herself confesses, facilitates fresh reinterpretations of her canonical texts.

The volume's third part, dedicated to the cinematographic and video game adaptations of Jane Austen's novels, opens with Iuliana Borbely's text on *Pride and*

Prejudice, the novel with the largest number of adaptations, nine in total. The critic argues that the adaptations after Austen's works have become more and more visually based, with the image conveying more meaning than the dialogues. Also, the directors go for more sumptuous locations and costumes in their desire to accurately represent the epoch. However, probably the most striking change to Austen's novels is the increased emphasis given to romance, with some scenes becoming outright daring (p. 154). To prove her theory, Iuliana Borbely analyses four adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, all bringing to the fore different interpretations of Austen's famous novel.

Gabriela-Iuliana Copilcă-Ciobanu and Ioana Mohor-Ivan trace the history of the reception of Jane Austen's novels and their itinerary from canonical texts to pop culture items. Not only does their essay offer an exhaustive presentation of Austenian critical heritage, starting with Walter Scott, John Bailey, E.M. Forster, F.R. Leavis and ending with online communities, such as *PEMBERLEY.com*, but it also brings into discussion Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*. For the two authors, Fowler's novel, another rewriting of Austen's novels, also rich in intertextual references just like Izzo's *The Jane Austen Marriage Manual*, is meant to illustrate "Jane Austen's presence in the pop culture at the beginning of the new millennium" (p. 181, my translation). This creative dialogue with the Austenian text is extended when in 2007 the novel was adapted to the big screen by Robin Swicord. All these different examples of both academic and 'profane' receptions of the British writer are, according to the two critics, proof of the existence of a global Austen, to which even the Romanian public adheres.

If Jane Austen's work could easily reach the big screen, it can easily penetrate the virtual world of gamers. Diana Melnic's text discusses a video game based on Austen's novels *Ever, Jane* an MMO ("massively-multiplayer online"), an online video game that allows the participation of many players, and "a role-playing video game" (RPG). Before showing how a video game can accommodate Jane Austen, Melnic introduces the layperson to the necessary terminology by explaining key terms such as *cybertext*, *interactivity* and *immersion*. *Ever, Jane* allows players to experience Austen's world and, more importantly, "to interact closely with a narrative inspired by Jane Austen" (p. 209, my translation).

It may be rather difficult to imagine how Austen's novels can be a source of inspiration for Tamil cinema – the main competitor of Hindu Bollywood – considering her restrained style which, at a first glance, might seem incompatible with an Indian film. But Mihaela Mudure makes a very convincing case for the 'translatability' of the Austenian world into another, completely different culture. The film the scholar chooses to discuss – *I*

have seen, I have seen directed by Rajiv Menon – is an adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* in which “a traditional, religious Indian society meets a neo-liberal one” (p. 211, my translation). What the Austenian world and Rajiv Menon’s adaptation have in common is undoubtedly, according to Mihaela Mudure, the obsession of finding a family-approved husband. Although, the plot of the film is set in India in 1999, everything still evolves around the marriage plot. The essay clearly shows how iconic texts can transcend cultures – how a text, profoundly influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment in which reason reigns supreme, can turn into a sentimental story, “spiced up with music, dance and postcolonial implications” (p. 220, my translation).

The study to end the book and also to offer a most comprehensive conclusion is Ana Olos’ witty portrayal of Jane Austen, her life, works and reception. Ana Olos’ essay depicts a female writer who, unlike the ‘vindictive’ Mary Wollstonecraft, chooses to express her opinions with subtlety, delicacy, restraint and moderation. Just like a fairy tale heroine – Ana Olos’ motto to her essay refers to fairy tales – she bloomed and transformed herself, due to her versatile novels, into the iconic figure we know today. As the critic amusingly concludes, “her white, ordinary, lace-trimmed bonnet was more fecund than Gogol’s cloak” (p. 239, my translation).

Jane Austen: Glose, înțelesuri, interpretări (Jane Austen: Glosses, Meanings, Interpretations), which brings a definite contribution to the vast field of Jane Austen studies, easily manages to stay both informative and entertaining all throughout. As a writer whose works transcend time, borders, languages and cultures, Jane Austen has been well-received and well-served by Romanian scholars. A striking feature of this book is that it manages to bring together scholars of various ages and experiences, from various backgrounds and disciplinary fields to address a variety of Romanian Janeites and not only.

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