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Englishness and Narrative: New Perspectives of Literary and Historical Revisionism in Jane Austen’s Love and Friendship.

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Abstract

Historical and literary narrative discourses from the 1790’s surrounding interpretations of English identity were symptomatic of the inherited Augustan and Johnsonian social customs that posited cultural reevaluation as a nation-wide identitive endeavor. Though part of the critically neglected juvenilia, in Love and Friendship (1790) Austen’s satiric portrayal of her heroine’s upbringing reveals a shrewd perspective that mocks her culture’s anxiety to be forward thinking about its past lessons. The text judges the conservative character celebrated in the fiction and values of her childhood, positioned alongside a developing model of progressive Englishness. I recommend that the story’s first-person narrator’s nonalignment with either the conservative or progressive societal prescriptions that permeate the novel validates Jane Austen as an agentive, not reactionary, participant in the culture war she inherited. I argue that the text offers modern readers a new perspective for literary and historical revisionism of both the eighteenth-century mores that informed early nineteenth-century literary trends, and of narrative’s social function within this re-evaluative cultural model.

Keywords: Identity, Irony, Revisionism, Progressive, Conservative
As England moved into the nineteenth century, it did so with an eye turned backwards to the eighteenth. Historical and literary narrative discourses from the 1790’s surrounding interpretations of an English identity were symptomatic of the inherited Augustan and Johnsonian social customs that posited cultural reevaluation as a nation-wide identitive endeavor. The shared facility that these two systems of narrative assumed for a society coming to terms with the national significance of its global ascendency may work to shift perspectives of literary revisionism related to narrative’s ironic reversals, to a more critical treatment of the re-imagination of roles within original cultural texts. Through this lens, the bildungsroman novel of pre-Regency England can be understood as consequential of a revisionistic cultural model’s urge to reflect and ‘improve’ on past sensibilities in the hopes of inculcating a new cultural education.

Jane Austen’s profound relevance to her culture’s battle for the way one “ought,” a favorite word of her work and of the century that inaugurated her authorial career, is perhaps no better exemplified than in Love and Friendship (1790). Though part of the critically neglected juvenilia, here, Austen’s satiric portrayal of her heroine’s upbringging reveals a shrewd perspective that mocks her culture’s anxiety to be forward thinking about its past lessons. She is playful, but unapologetic in her judgment of the conservative character celebrated in the fiction and values of her childhood, positioned alongside a developing model of progressive Englishness, her portrayal of which would go on to shape the national dialogues carried out within Victorian novels and historiographical parley. More ambitiously than much of recent Austen criticism, I recommend that her well-known social commentary should be read as a revision of contemporaneous investigations into national identity, a claim that becomes substantiated when one considers the semantic interplay of past and future subtext within the term – a mission for the future grounded in a nostalgia for the past – and also lends a procreant quality to her too often typified, and platitudinously regarded, ironic sense. Love and Friendship’s first-person narrator’s independence from either the conservative or progressive societal prescriptions that permeate the novel, validates Jane Austen as an agentive, not reactionary, participant in the culture war she inherited, another position that departs from more traditional trends in scholarship surrounding her involvement in the socio-cultural developments of her day. I will argue that the text offers modern readers a new perspective for literary and historical revisionism of both the eighteenth-century mores that informed early nineteenth-century literary trends, and of narrative’s social function within this re-evaluative cultural model.

The rationale for such a model was largely precipitated by the geopolitical landscape during the decades that bookended the turn of the nineteenth-century. Historian, Warren Roberts, observes that though “there had always been a latent, sometimes overt chauvinism in England… there was a seismic shift of public feeling in the second half of the eighteenth-century” that saw the “civilized cosmopolitanism of an age of classicism and Enlightenment [give] way to the turbulent forces of nationalism” (Gray 328). In 1789, the year Austen began writing Love and Friendship, that turbulence was intensified by the newly installed revolutionary government in France, which “abolished monarchy, undertook a systematic effort to eradicate Christianity and declared war on hostile states beyond its frontiers [England included], initiating a period of warfare that was different in kind and scale to all previous wars” (329, brackets mine).
Robert’s insights speak to the international developments that prompted the “deep internal change” in English identity politics, and orient the concurrent domestic debates along conservative Augustan, and progressive or revolutionary lines (330). Richard Cronin, a literary historian, adds to the relevancy of Robert’s work to this paper by shedding light on how these debates were conducted in the literature of the period. He writes of the “weighty ethical and political themes” addressed by “Jacobin novelists of the 1790’s” and expounds on the counter-revolutionary literature, “both in discursive prose… and in novels” that countered their progressive message with warnings of “the danger of cultivating too unregulated sensibility,” a blight of character typically attributed to progressive figures or characters (Todd 290-291). Robert’s work corroborates Cronin’s assessment by asserting that “British responses to the French Revolution had been favorable initially,” and that “revolutionary ideology was taking hold in Britain,” evidenced by the Jacobin novel (Todd 330). His inclusion of a remark made by William Wilberforce, a conservative MP in 1797, illustrates that some in England regarded the determination to revise their national selfhood as concomitant to “the decline of religion and morality,” and could only be assuaged by sustained “internal reform” (Gray 330).

Their work is also valuable to this thesis because it situates Austen in a pre-Regency dialogue about preserving or rewriting what it meant to be English, significantly, as a voice with allegiances to both sides. While Roberts argues “her upbringing, accomplishments… tastes and family connections placed her within the world of a refined stratum in English society,” Cronin contends her “full… engagement with more recent (progressive) literary trends” orients her own work as “novels that function also as moral fables… establishing social manners that… cultivate an ideal of Englishness that will supplant the outmoded class-bound rigidities” of the eighteenth-century (Grey 331, 290-293, parenthetical mine). Their oppositional readings of her personal sentiments suggest that Austen’s fiction clashes with her biography, producing a revisionistic dualism that exists via her stylistic creativity. Therefore, one can see how Austen’s reexamination of the values composite in her upbringing helps to more rigorously contextualize her authorial reputation as a serial editor and recycler of plot. In addition, then, to offering alternatives to a cultural debate that was as personal as it was public, this longer piece of the juvenilia is a fertile text for tracing back developments in Austen’s formal revisions throughout her writing life. To my knowledge, the field has yet to produce an examination of how her penchant for revisiting her own fiction parallels her reevaluation of cultural models in Love and Friendships, and that are always present, if only lurking, in her six mature novels.

Austen pollinates her story with familiar scenarios and axioms of literary elites like Johnson, Cowper, and Burney who campaigned against one another through their writing for competing visions of English character. Her inclusion adds additional supports to reading this work as a direct response to the at once political and narrative questions these writers sought to answer. The letters that survived her sister, Cassandra Austen’s, purge reveal that Jane admired all three of these authors, and each can be understood as representative of three facets to the typical eighteenth-century literary education she received. While it is worth noting that the growing genre of the novel was not, in 1789, universally regarded as a venerable form of instruction, it is also noteworthy that by Jane Austen’s death in 1817, the novel, and the
introspective character-driven plot trajectory that she developed, had assumed a level of import in England’s domestic character that rivaled, and soon surpassed, moralism and poetry. Again, Cronin’s insights prove helpful in pinpointing the eighteenth century influence Austen’s epistolary novel bears, as her work credits Frances Burney as the writer from whom “Austen inherited the main lineaments of the plot that was to serve throughout her career, the misadventures of a young woman” (Grey 289). Readers of Northanger Abbey, a version of a text begun before Love and Friendship was completed, will recall its narrator’s fierce defense of novel writing as part of an ironic turn on Gothic fiction made popular by Burney.

Moreover, despite her admiration and, more pertinently, her allusion to eighteenth-century literary icons, Austen revisits the legacy of these figures without aligning herself to their ideological programs - her text pays them homage while maintaining the tonal distance of a cultural arbiter to two contending ideologies. Jane Nardin’s critical work helps to better understand how Love and Friendship’s satiric reevaluation of these authors’ conservative and progressive traditions makes space for the flexibility to mock and to honor her literary lineage, by offering an analysis of how irony functions in her mature works. Nardin has argued that readers should resist the temptation that Charlotte Bronte could not and to read Austen’s full-length novels not as “uneasy fence-straddling,” but to see her “ironic sense of the irreversible incongruity between… the way things are and the way they ought to be,” as “always employed in the service of morality as she saw it” (Nardin 2). If this same critical perspective is turned toward Love and Friendship, the child-like mirth most have attributed to the novel quickly recedes in place of the more mature overtones that falsifying a propagandized civic and lettered education resound in. What is more astonishing, given the text was written by the equivalent of a young adolescent, is that Austen achieves this complex narrative feat by varying the evaluative tonal cues of the novel’s first-person narrators, deliberately leaving it up to her readers to independently cultivate their own interpretive pathways to discern her veiled ideological framework. For critic Mary Poovey, reading Austen in this context “enables us to recognize what the challenge to traditional values looked like from the inside [or] how an artistic style could constitute part of a defense against this challenge” (Poovey 172). She continues, writing “Austen’s aesthetic choices – her style and her subject matter - can be seen as solutions to some of the problems” (172) her culture sought to solve, thus differentiating her cultural prescriptions from earlier Augustan writers.

We can see how this narrative structure informs a revisionistic reading of Austen’s satirized tale of moral education in the first exchange of letters between Isabel, the story’s once-heard-from initiator, and Laura, the misfortunate heroine that Austen’s bildungsroman novel focuses on. The story opens with Isabel writing to her old friend on her fifty-fifth birthday, entreating her to “give [her] daughter a regular detail of your misfortunes in life,” as they occurred about the same time her daughter, Marianne, must now be, hoping it will serve as a “useful lesson” (Austen 77). Her request in place of an offering on her friend’s birthday is the first instance of Austen’s ironic sense the novel relates, and accrues significance if one reads Isabel and Marianne as stand-ins for the conservative and progressive models that dichotomized the national debate in the 1790’s and beyond. Isabel’s wish to use Laura’s narrative as a warning to her child signals that she represents the old, cautious, and conservative order, willing to
For Isabel, narrative is endowed with preventative, if byzantine, prowess, and like the cultural conformists she represents, she aims to use those forces to instill the propitious notions of cultivated and conservative Englishness in her daughter. Austen scholar Claudia Johnson’s, comment that “Austen shows… conservative mythology… expose[ing] not only the hollowness but also the unwholesomeness of its moral pretensions” reinforces my position that Austen achieves similar derision of conservative values in this text by introducing and then quickly dismantling that framework by revealing the inherent contradictions that compromise it (Johnson 96). In this way, Laura swiftly exposes the pretense behind her friend’s envisioned lesson in the only direct quotation Isabel is afforded in her autobiography, where she beckons, “Beware, my Laura, beware.” Her words read as dubious mysticisms, as readers are left to judge Isabel’s parental concerns against the conservative, perhaps, reactionary, anxiety of England’s older generations. Furthermore, Isabel’s request signals that Austen was aware of the gender-laden bifurcations that informed these ideas because the aging Isabel can be read as the sex-switched “obstinate father,” the likes of which can no longer endanger Laura at her advanced age (Austen 77). Here, Johnson’s work, again, proves useful. Her insight, “anti-Jacobin [and] conservative novelists” idealized authority in the “standard figures embodying them: fathers, husbands, clergyman,” orients Isabel’s antiquated ideology as, prominently, a male one (Johnson 8). Conservative minded male guardianship of women is thus subverted by Austen’s reversal of the character’s sex that personifies it.

However, as Elinor and General Tilney of Northanger Abbey may remind readers, this logic concedes that Isabel’s presumably eligible daughter is still vulnerable to her parent and the cultural interpretations that parent’s ideology represents. In Laura’s response to Isabel’s appeal, Austen further complicates the power dynamics of their relationship by accepting her friend’s request, not as a favor to her, but in the hopes that it “will gratify the curiosity of your daughter” (Austen 77). By switching the agentive force of the request from Isabel to the younger Marianne, Laura’s playful recognition, or perhaps invention, of Marianne’s wishes signals that the authority Isabel hopes will preventative has already failed – as a mother, she cannot give her daughter a lesson unless that daughter as asked for one. Nevertheless, this passage does not indicate Austen’s endorsement of Laura or her implied progressiveness, as she goes on to admit that she can only hope to soften the “afflictions” that must inevitably “befall her in her own [life]” (77).

Further, the word choice of “curiosity” to describe the motivation for Laura’s re-appropriation of power to Marianne is meaningful for two reasons. Not only does it suggest an appropriate pedagogic measure of the young girl’s character, but it also works to distance Laura from the binary it creates between mother and daughter, conservative and progressive. Laura’s unwillingness to align with any single ideology links her to Austen’s mature narrators, as she becomes an outside observer in both the fictional and national drama, and is thus endowed with the third-party powers of observation and judgment. She is free to relate both the virtuous and ignoble aspects of each without fear of inclusion in either. Laura’s distance may also be an
example of a young Austen testing her narrative voice on avatars (as in *Emma* and *Persuasion*), as their shared detachment from both the reactionary and reformist platforms that envelope the fiction becomes like, what Virginia Woolf called, the visage of a child shown the world by fairies, who “knew not only what the world looked like, but had already chosen her kingdom… She is impersonal; she is inscrutable” (Woolf 136).

In this way, we can see how Laura’s peripheral status along the borders of Isabel and Marianne’s ‘domestic dispute’ mirrors Austen’s own distinctiveness amidst the politically and culturally bifurcated landscape of 1790’s England. It also highlights how in *Love and Friendship*, Austen avoids giving her readers explicit direction in how they should come to judge its characters because, consequently, any necessarily independent interpretation of their ideology must be grounded in their own personal morality, not the author’s. Thus, Austen’s generative, not reductive, irony stands out as a high accomplishment of the writer, and in this case, one achieved by a fifteen-year-old.

The introductory exchange between Isabel and Laura contains another allusion to the conflict between liberal reformations and conservative propriety, specifically in warning of the ensnaring dangers that emerging Romanticism presented to young girls like Marianne. Recalling Isabel’s consolation that her friend is free from the ensnarement of male heroes and anti-heroes, Isabel’s expanded quote reads that she us safe from “the determined perseverance of disagreeable lovers and the cruel persecution of obstinate fathers” (Austen 77, italics mine). The sentence in which this excerpt is pulled begins with a subordinate clause, in the Johnsonian style, again linking Isabel to that conservative tradition that is here described as prohibitive to the point of death. In the same way as her mother is typified, it follows that this also positions Marianne, like the famous Dashwood sister of the same name, as tacitly representative of an ideology much like the Romantics: inquisitive, eager to seek “fortitude” from storytelling that is more true to the nature of lived experience, like Laura’s tale, and susceptible to entrapment by unwanted suitors (77). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, long-time proponents of the juvenilia’s worth in extrapolating Austen’s personal beliefs about her literary culture, have noted that the plot of *Love and Friendship* is evidence that she ultimately “rejects stories in which women simply defend their virtue against male sexual advances” (Gilbert and Gubar 119). Their reading is validated, as Laura relates to Isabel’s daughter her burlesque life, idealized in the uncontrolled and spontaneous Romantic visions of passion. But this life is exposed as far from idyllic. In Gilbert and Gubar’s words, the “seduced-and-abandoned plot is embedded in the form of an interpolated tale told to [Marianne] as a monitory image of [Laura’s] own more problematic story” (119). Through this ancillary association with these fictions, then, Austen leaves readers to consider feminine susceptibility to seduction and ensnarement in progressive and Romantic models that privileged intuitional passions above institutional marriage, but still eroded female identity to the single function of gratifying or escaping male lust.

Her revision of early Romantic traditions of sentimentality is most likely the most nuanced and visceral attack in all of Austen’s fiction on the cultural practices of her day. Almost as soon as the eighteen-year-old Laura bemoans, “how am I to avoid those evils I shall never be exposed to?” (Austen 79), Austen loosens the delicate discretion that she would become famous for, and proceeds to mime a story of how curious girls like Marianne (Dashwood) are vulnerable
to the dangerous delusions of a fictitious ideal that offer girls suspicious models of practicality. In this way, Austen “impl[ies] that sentimental fiction legitimizes the role of seduce-rapist” (Gilbert and Gubar 119). Like the overextension of plausibility on which irony depends, Laura’s wish is extravagantly fulfilled, as her desire to control and develop her life’s trajectory instead becomes a curse of dependency, amounting to a seizure of the identitive hope her lamentation makes clear she (and her culture) covets. For Gilbert and Gubar, Laura must “reflect on the dangers of the romantic celebration of personal liberty and self-expression for women who will be severely punished if they insist on getting out” of that illusion (120).

In the course of the next thirteen letters, Laura relates her misfortunes, beginning with her elopement with a stranger who has had only to knock on her door to make Laura fall in love with him. Edward, Laura’s husband, has two symbolic traits: a predilection for theft and a principled rejection of his father’s conservative designs for his future. These mark him as both a Romantic and progressive character, the kind of male threat Isabel wishes to safeguard her daughter from. Edward’s qualities prove to be debilitating, for both himself and his wife, who has developed a restrictive perception of her existence in binaric relation to him. Apart from Laura, Edward has also stolen his father’s purse to marry her, and has plans to plunder his aunt’s fortune after her death. The couple lodges with Edward’s friends, who have an almost identical history of theft, and Laura will eventually witness all the male figures in her life disappear or die, as if they were themselves stolen from her. She will ultimately be forced to entertain relations who have stolen her money, and, literally, the food out of their own mother’s mouths. In the mature works, only Persuasion’s Anne Elliot, who also struggles with profound loss as a result of choice, eclipses Laura’s sequestered sense of self.

When pitted against the norms of early Romanticism, the theme of thievery takes on another sinister meaning. Susan Morgan explains Romantic literature in terms of the progressive message that this paper has worked to communicate, terming Romantic art, and poetry especially, as “a kind of frontier literature, aesthetically and socially and politically aggressive, challenging and transforming the old, daring to invent or explore the new,” significantly, “the English form of the French Revolution” (Grey 365). Her explanation works together with a scene in Mansfield Park, where Fanny Price turns to idiosyncratic recitals of Cowper when forced to maintain polite conversation, while submerging the truer feelings of love the poems were intended to conjure, to frame the semantic affect allusions to Romanticism produced in Austen’s day. Her presentation of the dangers it posed to the young, feminine, and impressionable can be found in a conversation of Laura and her partner in misery, Sophia, who has also fallen victim to situating herself with the fictitious, not against it.

While walking past a “grove of full grown elms” to the west and a “bed of full grown nettles,” to the east, with a “murmuring brook” running behind them, Laura attempts to cheer her friend up by echoing the beauty of their scene, which is almost identical to the one in Mansfield Park, where Cowper is mentioned by name (Austen 97). In this pastoral setting, Laura “desired [Sophia] to admire the noble grandeur of the elms which sheltered [them] from the eastern zephyr” (98). However, her appeal fails, as Sophia sinks deeper in despair as the immediate helplessness of their situation juxtaposes with the illusoriness Romantic one that Laura thinks

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ought to be real since it physical and literally surrounds them. Her next attempt to win her partner with the passionate allusions of poetry also fails. Entreaties of a “beautiful… azure sky” that Laura thinks “charmingly… varied those delicate streaks of white” (98) produces another despondent cry from Sophia, who can only associate an abstract reality with her idealized husband, who is feared dead. In this way, Austen “subverts the conventions of popular fiction to describe the lonely vulnerability of girls whose lives, if more mundane, are just as thwarted as those they read about so obsessively” (Gilbert and Guabr121). Laura, and Marianne, her ‘reader,’ exemplify this relationship.

Readers can interpret this scene best if by understanding it as an example of Austen’s critique of narrative genre by deliberately testing its limits. Austen has already ensconced Laura and Isabel in a narrative fiction, but she allows a poetic aesthetic to leak into her prose, and in projecting a idyllic scene of poetry as an intended true-to-life environment for Laura and her friend, the two wounded lovers sink deeper in the hopelessness of living in fiction(s). Ironically, in similar mood to Isabel’s attempt to employ her friends narrative as ameliorative, Austen’s parody warns readers like Marianne that a progressive and, nonetheless, cultish adherence to swooning, fainting, and passivity, is no less as damaging because it is in binary opposition to that retentive, conservative order of their fathers.

In these ways, Love and Friendship provides an index by which critics might measure how the nineteenth-century came to regard the reformist alterations of those who had cultivated a conservative model of Englishness just a century before. It is an underexplored example of Austen’s undeniable mediation of the very authors whom she had not yet finished reading as a fifteen-year-old trying her hand at her first extended fiction. I hope my recommendations to this discourse spurn deeper investigations that uncover how succeeding trends of Victorian and Modernist fiction developed in the wake of Austen’s influential revisionism, as that too remains a task ahead of Austen critics. In the meantime, let them continue to reflect on her many other not so minor works.
References