

*Becoming Jane: the Romanticisation of Celebrity**

Becoming Jane: Romantikleştirilmiş Şöhret

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Öz

Jane Austen romanlarının son 30 yılda artan popülerliğinin önemli bir sebebi, yazarın güntümüzdeki kendi popülaritesidir. 1990'larda ivme kazanan romanlarının uyarlamaları sonrasında "Austen-mania," "Janemania," ve "Jane-ism" gibi terimler, popüler kültürde genel kullanıma dahil olmuşlardır. Bu fenomen, Instagram ve Pinterest gibi sosyal medya platformlarında da yer bulmuş ve Jane Austen ismi üzerinden bir çok ürünün de pazarlanmasına yardımcı olmuştur. Bu sosyal medya platformlarında sergilenen ve satışa sunulan ürünler arasında, Austen dönemine ait antika tarz kalemler ve "Darcy külotları" gibi geniş bir ürün yelpazesi mevcuttur. Edebi sayılabilecek eserler de vardır bu ürünlerin arasında (örneğin, Stephanie Borran'ın Jane Austen'i bir roman karakteri olarak kullanan ve *Jane and the Unpleasantness of Scargrave Manor* adlı romanla başlayan dedektif roman serisi, veya Karen Joy Fowler tarafından yazılmış olan *The Jane Austen Book Club* gibi). Bu ve benzeri kitaplarda, Jane Austen, aşk ve evlilik konularında gençlere (ve okuyucuya) yardım eden ve tavsiye veren bir "Güzin Abla" veya 'evde kalmış teyze' konumuna konulmaktadır. Eserlerin bazılarında kurgusal bir karakter olarak karşımıza çıkar, bazen de kurgusal karakterlerin bir ikon olarak gördükleri bir yazar olarak. Bu makale, yazarın hayatını konu alan, *Becoming Jane (Jane Olmak)* adlı filme odaklanmaktadır. Bu film, Jon Hunter Spence'in biyografisi *Becoming Jane Austen*'den (*Jane Austen Olmak*) uyarlanmıştır ve Jane Austen'in yazar olmasındaki en büyük etkenin Tom Lefroy ile yaşadığı aşk olduğunu iddia etmekle birlikte, yazarın yeteneğinin tamamıyla gerçek hayattan esinlendiğini de varsaymaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu filmin, popüler kültürün bir ürünü olarak, yazarın şöhretini pazarlama amaçlı kullanıldığı açıkça görülmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, yazarın hayatının nasıl romantikleştirildiğini ve kabiliyetinin nasıl geri plana itildiğini sergilemektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Jane Austen, ünlü kişiler, biyografik filmler

Abstract

The overwhelming popularity of Jane Austen's fiction especially in the last three decades owes much to the popularity of the author herself. Following the impact of the 1990s BBC and Hollywood adaptations of her works, "Austen-mania," "Jane-mania," and "Jane-ism" have become common phrases of popular culture. The phenomena has even spread to social media sites like Pinterest and Instagram, as well as merchandise that spans a wide area ranging from vintage-style pens to "Darcy knickers." On the more literary side of this scale are novels and films that use the "real" Jane Austen as a fictional character, such as in the detective series by Stephanie Borran which began with *Jane and the Unpleasantness of Scargrave Manor*. In these, Jane Austen appears as a "friend" or a spinster-aunt that the consumer can relate to and receive marriage advice from. This article focuses on a film that, I feel, feeds into the iconography of this commercial Austen franchise, Julian Jarrod's *Becoming Jane*. Itself based on Jon Hunter Spence's biography *Becoming Jane Austen*, the film elaborates on an alleged relationship between Jane Austen and Tom Lefroy, a man mentioned twice in her letters to her sister, and around whom much speculati-

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on exists. It suggests primarily that Jane Austen could not have become an author without having had an affair. The main aim of this article is to reveal how this biographical film can be read as an example of the romanticisation of the heroine in line with her iconic status in popular culture.

Keywords: Jane Austen, celebrity, Austen-mania, biopics

The last three decades have seen an overwhelming output of literary and cultural artefacts loosely related with a phenomenon that has alternately been called “Austen-mania,” “Jane-o-mania,” and “Jane-ism” (with the occasional inclusion of “Darcy-mania”). This intensely marketable phenomenon finds itself in as diverse places as image-based social media sites like Pinterest and Instagram, as well as in literary output of differing quality. On these sites, there is a whole plethora of products for sale which include “Darcy knickers” and vintage-style pens. On the other side of the consumer spectrum, there are novels that celebrate the cult of Jane Austen by making her a character (such as the detective series written by Stephanie Barron beginning with *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor*) as well as others that deal with how contemporary readers can benefit from her wisdom, such as the international best-seller *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler. The majority of books exploiting the celebrity status of the author are prequels, sequels, and retellings of her work. One intriguing common motif to be found in these largely commercial endeavours is the irresistible need to connect Jane Austen with a male protagonist of her own. A less explored avenue of this is the field of the biopic, or in this case, the homage film.

In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner (2010) argues that “we can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives” (p. 8). The 1996 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* is the main catalyst that set off Jane Austen’s celebrity status. It would be wrong, however, to discredit other films of the mid-90s such as Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and Douglas McGrath’s *Emma* (1996), which also had similar effects. Since then, hardly a year has gone by in which an adaptation of Jane Austen’s works, or inspirations from them or her life has not been made into a film. Considering that she only produced six completed novels, this is quite an accomplishment, and her celebrity status has truly been cemented. The aforementioned BBC mini-series, however, is widely acknowledged to be a major catalyst for the numerous productions that followed it. The irresistibly broody Mr. Darcy as portrayed by Colin Firth (and his wet white shirt) brought forth a new interest in the question of whether Jane Austen had had experience with a Mr. Darcy of her own. When her niece Anna Lefroy was attempting a novel of her own, Austen (1992) advised, “we think you had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations” (*Letters* p. 269). In line with this advice, which implies that Austen herself wrote largely from experience, it has been assumed that there is a hidden love story awaiting to be discovered. Rachel M. Brownstein (2011) points out that the film “[d]efinitely – as it seems now, once for all – [...] altered the image of Jane Austen from a thin-lipped old maid adored by an elitist coterie into a glamorous popular celebrity” (p.40). This comparatively new interest in Jane Austen’s love life rivals that of celebrity figures in popular culture, and has been explored commercially by both literary and visual representations of her life. The film *Becoming Jane* (2007), directed by Julian Jarrod, and loosely inspired by the biography *Becoming Jane Austen* by Jon Spence, is one of them, and one of the objectives

of the film, it seems, is to parallel Jane Austen's experience with a man called Tom Lefroy with her creation of the characters in, and the writing of, *Pride and Prejudice*. It is not very subtly suggested that Elizabeth Bennet is an extension (or alter ego) of Jane Austen, and that Lefroy was a template or inspiration for Mr. Darcy. While quite unfair to the genius and memory of Austen, it is an example of the romanticisation of her celebrity.

Jane Austen's persona and reputation had previously been carefully manufactured by her family. After her death in 1817, the first biography of her life was published in 1871 by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh as *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, which included the recollections of other nieces and nephews as well as some letters, family documents, and fragments of unpublished manuscripts. The memoir is carefully constructed so as to present a clear portrait of Jane Austen as "dear Aunt Jane," whose life was largely uneventful: "of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course" (Austen-Leigh 9). This collection provided a frame for every other biography after it, being both the first and the closest account. In the introduction to the collection, Kathryn Sutherland (2008) suggests, "there is no non-fictional evidence for a 'self' other than that constructed within the bounds of family. No diaries or personal writings have come down to suggest the existence of an inner life, a self apart" (pp. xviii-xix). One remarkable aspect of this construction of a life is that there are, in fact, numerous letters written by Jane Austen that have been preserved and handed down in her family, and although not overly excitable, they do provide an insight that often contradicts this elaboration of a portrait. Following her death, the letters remained with her sister, Cassandra, the person with whom Jane was closest, and to whom most of the letters were addressed. Cassandra "edited" her collection by burning about half of the letters, as well as eliminating pages and paragraphs from others. Consequently, there is a whole gap of about 4 years. Thus the letters that Austen-Leigh himself draws conclusions from were already carefully selected by his other aunt. According to Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh (James Edward's daughter), Cassandra "kept only those which she considered so totally devoid of general interest that it was impossible anyone should, at any time, contemplate their publication" (qtd. in Sutherland, 2007, p.81). In a collaborative effort, the family biographies present Jane Austen as having led a quiet, nice, and at times boring, life, and that she herself was a quiet, nice, and at times, boring, person.

Considering his aunt Jane's love life, James states: "Of Jane herself I know of no such definitive tale of love to relate" (Austen-Leigh, 2008, p.28). The family is quite adamant in their united belief that Jane Austen did not have a love affair of such great impact that would serve as inspiration for her writing, as is claimed in *Becoming Jane*, the subject of this paper. One recollection, often confused with a couple of other men that were in her circle, is of an unidentified man whom she met at the seaside in the summer of 1801, and who died soon after. As no letters of hers survive between 1801 and 1804, the only proof of his existence is again through Cassandra, who related the story (in similarly vague terms), to her nieces and nephews who in turn wrote it down as an anecdote. One of these was Lord Edward Brabourne, who edited two volumes of Austen's (newly surfaced) letters in 1884, and according to Kathryn Sutherland (2007) in *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood*, "what separates his edition from Austen-Leigh's pious and protective *Memoir* of only fourteen years previously is his strong sense of his great-aunt as a marketable property" (p. 3). Austen's commercialization in the family is evident in great-great-great grandnieces and grandnephews still publishing biographies of her. Her unprovable love life (or lack thereof) still sells.

The current persona created for the author is far from the original family intentions to preserve

her memory as a staid old maid. More than any other authors, it seems, her celebrity and biography go hand in hand with her novels, with *Pride and Prejudice* acquiring the top spot. Mass appeal biopics like *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008) – “portray [...] the novelist’s life as a version or inversion of Elizabeth’s, suggesting that failure to marry her true love thwarted and pinched Jane’s soul, but fuelled her imagination and her achievement” (Brownstein, 2011, p.4). There is a commonly accepted, implied claim that as Austen wrote from experience, her novels must be autobiographical. In recent novels that employ Jane Austen as a character, like Stephanie Barron’s detective series, it is not unusual for Jane to act and speak the same way that she makes Elizabeth Bennet act and speak. And we again return to the question of who was the inspiration behind the creation of Mr. Darcy, as if this is the question that, through answering, we will get a clearer insight into Austen’s genius. As if she could not have created these masterpieces without having had similar relationships. In *Why Jane Austen?* Rachel Brownstein (2011) suggests that in *Becoming Jane*, “Jane comes to know herself – and therefore comes to be a great writer – because of this love affair, in other words, because of a guy” and that this is “a way of denying the existence of female genius” (p. 26). While wholeheartedly agreeing with this, I would also like to add that, particularly in the Hollywood industry, this is what sells¹. George F. Custen (1992) explains in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* that even if the historical subject was not destined to have a romantically happy end (such as in the cases of Elizabeth I or Mary of Scotland), “by successfully pairing two leading actors, a studio developed an angle for promotion that added the aura of heterosexual love and marriage to a life” (p. 203). In short, romance boosts profit, and even if the audience is not going to get a happily-ever-after (or certainly because they will not be getting one), any minor affair may be sensationalized and romanticized, especially in the case of a cultural commodity like Jane Austen. For Austen, the mystery surrounding her “real” life, carefully edited by firstly her sister Cassandra, and then her extended family with their biographies, leaves more room for speculation and an open market.

The two main characters in the film are Jane Austen (Anne Hathaway) and Tom Lefroy (James McAvoy). Although the film is called *Becoming Jane*, suggesting a coming into identity, a development of genius and authorship, it is ostensibly a romantic film. Both actors in question had already acted in several romantic comedies (among others), and despite McAvoy’s having won a BAFTA award for *The Last King of Scotland*, neither of them had really established their current status in the industry. Anne Hathaway’s main claim to fame at the time was the Disney production *The Princess Diaries* (2001), followed by *The Princess Diaries 2* (2004), *Ella Enchanted* (2004), another fantasy Cinderella story, and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), a romantic comedy. An American actor under the task of providing a credible British accent, she bears a very minor resemblance to any portraits that are available of Jane Austen². The Scottish James McAvoy brings less expectations to the film as he had not previously been cast as a romantic lead. The main poster featuring the film shows

1 This is also what sells in niche publishing industries such as the romance, historical romance, and biography. Brownstein further suggests in *Why Jane Austen* that in biographies of woman authors, “we read about them to learn how they came to be unique, creative, successful – and what their love lives were like” (97).

2 Austen’s portraits are another good example of the twisting of truth with the aim of enlarging celebrity status. There are only two authenticated pictures of the author, one a watercolour drawn from the back, and the other a black and white portrait. When writing his *Memoir*, James Austen-Leigh commissioned a watercolour based on this drawing, which is the picture that readers are familiar with as being reproduced on editions of her novels. The original picture and the commissioned watercolour have remarkable differences – features have been softened, and the clothes have become fetching – Austen has clearly been made “prettier” for a new audience.

the couple in an embrace, as is expected in a romantic film (although not necessarily a biographical film). Anne Hathaway is in the centre in a striking (not very early 19th century) red dress, gazing at the viewer, as James McAvoy gazes affectionately at her, and reinforces the film as a love story rather than the author's story. The bottom of the poster, under the title, features a smaller still of the main character on the beach walking among the waves, alone. The film uses neither of these scenes. Another widely circulated poster is a variation of this, again with Hathaway staring at the camera and McAvoy at her. The tagline for both is "Their Love Story Was Her Greatest Inspiration [...] Jane Austen's Most Extraordinary Romance Was Her Own." A less used promotion poster features the couple in a passionate, candlelit scene, about to kiss, and the dark atmosphere clearly suggests a clandestine affair. The tag line is "She lived the stories you love." The choice of actors, along with the visual promotion material, reveals the nature of the film as declaring that everything Austen wrote was based on her own love life, particularly *Pride and Prejudice*, as will be explained when discussing the film. It also suggests that Austen became a well-established author because she was spurned as a lover, in a sort of revenge act that set into motion her latent talent. The title of the biography book on which it is partly based is *Becoming Jane Austen*, while the film shortens this into *Becoming Jane*, indicating her anonymity as a woman, a "plain Jane" without a surname.

At the end of the film, we are left with the idea that Jane became an author because her relationship with Tom Lefroy did not work out. At the beginning of the film, the image of her at her desk, writing, is portrayed as hesitant and halting, whereas by the end, she writes freely and composedly. There are three main scenes in the film that show her writing, roughly in the beginning, middle, and end, and two of them are highly romanticized. The first, most in line with biographies of her, both by family members and otherwise, is at the very beginning and is part of the opening sequence, intercut with shots of her house, and her playing the piano. We hear her muttering, picking up her pen, dipping it in ink—every scene is intercut with another visual of the exterior or the interior of the house, creating an atmosphere of fragmented thoughts coupled with fitful mumbling. The paper in front of her is not even half complete, and is full of ink stains. She holds a pair of scissors in her hand, which evidently serve as primitive correction tape. Before we see her face, we see her look at her books, and then out of the window, then seated at her piano. She has given up. A shot later, she is back at her desk, writing on heavily crossed out paper—she reads it to herself, slowly gaining confidence with a faint smile on her lips. This accomplishment is quickly undermined by a shift to comedy, as is often the case in the film, and in many romantic comedies. She plays loudly on the piano in triumph, which upsets the maid, who drops a jug of water, and wakes up the entire household. When Cassandra (her sister) and her fiancé burst out into the hall from opposing rooms and encounter each other in their nightgowns, and John Fowle asks "what is it?" Cassandra merely replies "Jane." Similarly, the first word that her newly woken mother shouts is "Jane!" We do not see her writing again in this sequence. When she reads it aloud later in the day, the audience finds out that this was an essay written to congratulate Cassandra and her fiancé for their engagement. The whole sequence suggests that Jane Austen struggles in her writing, that it is surely clever but that also a lot of effort and disbelief goes into its production. The writer is portrayed as simultaneously insecure and eccentric.

An interesting motif is also brought into the fore in this opening sequence, which is developed later on to form one of the main themes of the film: the relationship between literary production and physical passion. In particular, passion curtailed by the norms of early 19th century society is also presented for the consideration of the 21st century viewer. When the engaged couple meet in the hall,

they are embarrassed by the sight of each other in nightgowns, which in keeping with the times, of course cover every part of their bodies. When Cassandra suddenly realizes how inappropriate their situation is, and turns around and runs to her room, John gazes after her with mischief in his eyes and a knowing, sly smile. Cassandra in turn laughs roguishly in her room. A little more surprising is the scene between Austen's parents, a parson and his wife, who decide to have sex on a Sunday morning. The shot after they are shown going under the covers shows Mr. Austen delivering his sermon in church about the duties of a daughter, among which is the virtue of being quiet in the mornings. The only other significant character, Eliza de Feuillide, is reading in her room with her dog on her lap, who merely looks out into the hall and smiles when she hears the engaged couple speaking. Eliza's search for a loving match is the background parallel story that we follow in the film (she will eventually marry one of Jane's brothers, Henry). In this opening sequence, the only passion on Jane's part is towards her writing and perhaps her piano. However, we will see how she channels her passion to her writing after meeting Tom Lefroy, which according to the film, is how she learns to be a writer. Her mother, after shouting "Jane!" in frustration, says, "That girl needs a husband," suggesting that neither writing nor music can compensate for romance, and perhaps even that if Jane could find a physical outlet for her passions, then she would not waste her time on other activities.

The second scene which shows her writing, occurs roughly in the middle of the film, at a time when Jane, Eliza, and Henry are staying in London at Tom Lefroy's uncle's lodgings. Incidentally, there is no evidence to indicate that such an encounter ever took place. By now the romance between Jane and Tom has been fully established, and the only hindrance in their relationship is the approval of Lefroy's uncle, who is a high court judge, and pays for Tom's education, besides giving him an allowance. He will eventually decline giving his consent for their marriage because Jane is "penniless," but the scene in question begins under more favourable conditions. After enjoying a day out in London, during which Jane and Tom go to have tea with Ann Radcliffe, which will be discussed further later on, they return to Mr Justice Lefroy's lodgings after everyone has gone to bed (this obviously was highly improbable in the early 19th century, for a man and a woman, not even engaged, to be out together thus). A kiss goodnight is interrupted firstly by the judge calling out in his sleep, and then by Eliza and Henry, who are also returning from somewhere. Jane and Tom part without touching each other. Eliza, a widower, and Henry, who is, by the way, 10 years younger than her, show less discretion, and after several "come hither" looks, Henry follows Eliza to her room. Jane, lying in her bed and clutching the covers to her chin, is evidently at a loss, her desire unfulfilled. After a little tossing and turning, she gets up and begins to brainstorm on a fictional story, transferring her passion from her body to her mind. She begins muttering with the words "five little girls of little fortune," a reference that would not be lost on any Austen fan. Next she sits down and writes "First Impressions," the first title of the novel that eventually became *Pride and Prejudice*. This time, the words follow freely, she does not stop to think and is not hesitant in any way. There are no crossings out, no scissors, no editing, it is indeed a spontaneous overflow. Close-ups reveal the names Mr Darcy, Mr Wickham, Elizabeth Bennet, and Pemberley. Little by little she starts sitting up and pausing, crossing out and refining sentences, yet in an entirely different manner to that of the scene at the opening of the film. Whenever she stops, her thought process is evident, and she sits back down with a smile on her face, impatient to get her thoughts on paper. The last words she is seen writing are "Darcy's marriage," practically proposing that she wrote the entire novel in one night. Jane's solitary image in bed, turning from one side to another, mouth open, tousled hair and wearing an open nightgown, shown directly after Eliza and Henry entering Eliza's room and putting out the dog suggest a definite sexual frustration. What

comes out of it is *Pride and Prejudice*.

The final writing scene is brief yet poignant, and appears in the penultimate sequence of the film. As the closing sequence is a flash-forward, this is the end of the “becoming” part, and soon after Jane and Tom have parted ways forever, and he is engaged to someone else. Before the sequence begins, Jane and Mr Wilsey are taking a walk, talking about how important affection is in a marriage, and how sad it is that while Mr Wilsey feels it, Jane does not (overly mature on their part). Jane informs him that she will from now on devote herself to writing her books, which will always have happy endings, unlike real life. Mr Wilsey responds with, “The good do not always come to good ends. It is a truth universally acknowledged...” after which the scene visually dissolves to Jane writing, and she picks up the verbal cue, and continues narrating in voiceover, “that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” This is the cleanest sheet of paper we have yet seen in the film. In wonderfully neat handwriting, “Chapter I” is written at the top in orderly fashion, followed by one of the most famous opening lines in English literature. This is intercut with a scene of Eliza and Henry’s wedding as the voiceover continues. While everyone is celebrating, Jane is shown this time from the outside of the house, framed by a window. She sits directly opposite to the window, yet this time does not look out. Head resting on her left hand, she continues writing with her right. Her gaze does not shift from her writing even once. She has “become Jane,” and from now on she is Jane Austen, the author, who wants to remain anonymous yet, as the final sequence shows, somehow everyone knows who she is. As the window pans outward and up, the window frame dissolves into a stage, then a ceiling, and the camera this time pans downwards to reveal a flash-forward – the final sequence of the film in which Jane and Tom meet for a final, futile time.

There is nothing sexual in either this or the previous sequence. The representation of her writing is remarkably unremarkable besides the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* seems to be presented as completely unrelated to the novel she was writing while in London with Tom. They were, in reality, the same albeit with heavy editing. The film in fact goes to great, and largely fabricated lengths to suggest that Jane and Tom’s relationship served as a prototype for *Pride and Prejudice*. This is an idea picked up from Jon Spence’s biography *Becoming Jane Austen*, which argues that everything Jane wrote in her life had a connection with Tom Lefroy, thereby greatly trivializing her genius. Spence points out that Tom Lefroy’s favourite novel was *Tom Jones*, and Jane in fact does mention his interest in the novel and their discussion of it in one of her letters to Cassandra. Whether it was his favourite novel, and remained so is up for debate. In the first letter to survive dated January 9, 1796, Jane remarks that Tom “is a very great admirer of Tom Jones, therefore wears the same coloured clothes” (qtd. in Hughes-Hallett, 1990, p. 19), and nowhere is this mentioned again. Yet in this biography even of *Mansfield Park* it is claimed that

It was more than fifteen years since [Jane Austen] had met and fallen in love with [Tom Lefroy], and ten years since she had written anything new, but she again gave her sign that she had not forgotten him: Tom Bertram’s friends the Andersons take their name from a family in *Tom Jones*. (Spence 178-9)

In each novel Jon Spence finds a family name that was also utilized in *Tom Jones* (which is hardly surprising), and uses it as evidence to argue that Jane never forgot him and was always sending him secret messages thus.

This idea is contested in several biographies, the foremost of which are those of her family. There is an agreement in the family memoirs that while Jane and Tom did enjoy a brief and fun flirtati-

on, this did not develop in any way into a relationship as suggested in either Jon Spence's biography or the fictionalized film (for which Spence served as "historical consultant"). By any account, and mainly according to Cassandra Austen, the man whom she was most likely to have married is the mystery man that she met in Devon sometime during the summer of 1801, as mentioned before. Interestingly, the majority of the letters that Cassandra destroyed belong to the period between 1801 and 1804, thus there is no evidence either way. On the one hand, it could be argued that she destroyed them because this indeed was the love of her life, and she did not want that to be a part of Jane Austen's legacy. On the other hand, biographical critics such as Jon Spence argue that there is nothing known about this period simply because nothing of much interest happened. Cassandra did not throw away any of the letters that mention Tom Lefroy and they are only three in all – two from January 1796, when they met and danced together, and one from 1798, when she is embarrassed to ask his aunt who comes to visit the Austens about him, by which time he has become a lawyer. Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh (James Edward's daughter, and Austen's great-niece) wrote in *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* that "the great mass of Jane's letters were destroyed by Cassandra, [...] she kept *only* those which she considered so totally devoid of general interest that it was impossible anyone should, at any time, contemplate their publication" (qtd. in Sutherland, 2007, p. 81). If we take this to be true, and it does seem logical based on the secretiveness of Cassandra in every other aspect of her life, the only reason for her to keep the ones mentioning Lefroy would be that nothing intrinsic occurred between the two. The letters do suggest that Jane and Lefroy enjoyed flirting with each other, but it is hard to grasp Austen's true intention when she writes such things as "At length the day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, and when you receive this it will be over. My tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea" (Hughes-Hallett, 1990, p. 20). In *Jane and Her Gentlemen*, Audrey Hawkrigde (2000) suggests, "Jane's descriptions are often constructed so that Cassandra may laugh at her, since she realized that the best jokes are always told against herself" (p. 100). Nearly everything in these early letters serve this purpose, and no one around her escapes her satirical wit. Yet while it is not constructive, it is also not really essential. Undoubtedly there were several gentlemen who interested Jane Austen, since Lefroy is by far from being the only one mentioned. The assumption that she could not have written her novels without having experienced similar events is problematic, as it is evident that she did not. Nevertheless a year hardly goes by without a new biography or biographical film insisting that she did.

Pride and Prejudice is the novel that many of these creations take as their guide in having the most elements of autobiography in it, and *Becoming Jane* is no different. Both Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy are portrayed as likely characters on which Jane Austen projected her own self-image, and the film takes this to some confusingly intertextual lengths. From the outset, the film argues that fact gave birth to fiction – Mr and Mrs Austen are models of Mr and Mrs Bennet (this is quite unfair to the Austens, and very far from what previous biographers have suggested), Cassandra is more Jane Bennet than herself, and complete characters have been invented to parallel conflicts in the novel (Lady Gresham as Lady Catherine de Bourgh), and Mr Wisley (who begins as evocative of Mr Collins, and soon morphs into a figure similar to Colonel Fitzwilliam Darcy). And of course Jane is Elizabeth and Lefroy is Darcy. Rachel M. Brownstein (2011) suggests further that "[t]he assumption that keeps on going is that like every other girl she meant to marry [...] – in other words, that she wrote what and how she did because first the desire and then the failure to marry obsessed her" (p. 89), an idea that is supported in the film. In the second writing scene, we see Jane making use of her happiness and hope of a future with Lefroy, coupled with sexual frustration, to write her novel. It is also implied that she

has not written fiction before this time, and that it is her relationship with Lefroy that has unleashed her talent. After a brief union, the narrative draws to a conclusion with a separation initiated by Jane. It is often believed that Lefroy in some way wronged Austen by leading her on and then dumping her, although it was evident from the outset that he could not marry her when she had no money. In the film, however, Jane altruistically lets him go when she realizes that he has a large family of brothers and sisters in Ireland who depend on him.

The portrait presented in the film of woman authors is far from just. In the aforementioned scene with Mr Wilsey, the proposed idea is that Austen even relied on other people's words in her writing, as the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* is practically attributed to Wilsey. Another aspect of female authorship that is undermined is the author's relationships – both familial and otherwise. The sequence in which Austen has tea with Ann Radcliffe is quite interesting in this respect. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that such a meeting ever took place, or that Austen was in as awe of Radcliffe as is represented in the film. Apart from similarities such as both being women authors, having written six novels, and both living lives outside of large social circles, the most salient connection between them is Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, which is primarily known as a satire of Gothic fiction of the time, Radcliffe being one of its foremost authors. It is possible to make other connections. As is argued clearly by Gilbert and Gubar in their analysis of *Northanger Abbey*, which employs a "critique of patriarchy" (152), in this novel, Austen "gently admonish[es] literary women like Maria Edgeworth for being embarrassed about their status as novelists" (146). At the end of Chapter 5 in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen dwells on the social perception of novel reading:

Such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss -- ?' 'Oh! It is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. 'It is only "Cecilia," or "Camilla," or "Belinda"; or, in short, only some 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. (36-37)

Since the film seeks to highlight an embarrassment on Radcliffe's part, as will be discussed below, it is possible to interpret this scene as instrumental in Austen's defence in *Northanger Abbey*. Yet the film chooses mostly to dwell on the fact that they were both women who made the people around them nervous because they chose to write in an inappropriate age. The sequence follows another which highlights Austen as a nuisance to Lefroy's uncle because she corrects his definition of irony upon which he is suitably shocked. Tom Lefroy defiantly declares that they will be visiting Ann Radcliffe, "another" woman writer of good family. Although Radcliffe was a well-established author and fairly famous at the time, it is noteworthy that no one at the dinner table besides Tom Lefroy has heard of her. It should also be noted at this point that Lefroy's interest in introducing the two women with each other can be read as an attempt on his part to construct Austen's identity as a woman writer.

Not much is known of Ann Radcliffe's life, by all accounts she was a very private person, and like Jane Austen, did not mingle in literary circles. Accordingly, Tom Lefroy mentions in the film that she is a recluse, and in the next sequence, they enter a shabby yet genteel London building. Radcliffe hardly ever looks at Austen while speaking, and appears distracted and unstable, alternately looking

at the ceiling (when they speak of the imagination), the floor, right across at the fireplace, or to the side. The literary chat does not last long and is quite contradictory to the point that the film is trying to make about Austen writing largely from experience. Radcliffe, on the other hand, is the opposite. Austen points out the discrepancy between Radcliffe's quiet life and the adventurous novels she writes, appearing disappointed in the uneventfulness of the older author's life. Radcliffe does not offer much advice on writing except to point out that Austen will get to know more about love and will write of it with more ease in the future, and, if not, that she can employ her imagination. Radcliffe, appearing more and more inattentive and vague, mentions that she gained her independence "at a cost to [herself] and [her] husband." The conversation quickly shifts as Radcliffe narrates what a big scandal she is for her husband because she earns her own living, and has a mind of her own. When she reveals that it is not easy to be a wife and author at the same time, Austen is visibly dismayed, and her despondence here acts as a foreshadowing to imminent disappointment in her love life. As Austen never became a wife, the implication is that she became a better author because of it. The fact that the sequence focuses on the discomfort that women authors cause to the men in their lives reveals the underlying concern with authors' love lives in place of their literary merits.

Austen never achieved the economic independence of Ann Radcliffe, and largely depended on her brothers' charity throughout her life. However, the flash-forward at the end of the film presents a secure, confident, and independent author, reading from her book as Lefroy and his daughter listen. Both Lefroy and Austen's faces suggest remorse at the past, yet Lefroy's also exhibits a sort of pride and wonder at what Austen has "become." Jane is seated while Tom towers over her as the camera slowly pans outwards. She is forced to look up at him, and does so, first at the end of the first sentence, and at the end. She reads from Chapter 50 of *Pride and Prejudice*:

[Darcy's] understanding and temper, though unlike [Elizabeth's] own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance.

But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was. (Austen, 1992, p. 300)

Her looking up at him at these instances reveal the depth of his impact on her life. Apparently, we are to understand, he would have fulfilled "all her wishes," and they would have both benefited from their union, just like Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Although neither the chapter nor the book ends here, she closes it and clasps her hands on top of it. The two share a long look and Lefroy gives a faint smile with the hint of tears in his eyes, after which Austen shifts her eyes from him to the book on her lap. The final shot of the film is of the book with her hands on top of it, she has "become" Jane Austen by transferring her love and passion to her writing, and it is Lefroy who has made it possible, he figuratively towers over her identity as he does over her seated person in this scene.

The film *Becoming Jane* is an example of how Jane Austen's celebrity has led to her being commercially exploited, and exhibits an involvement with the celebrity status above that of biographical criticism. In the world of mainstream biographical film, historical accuracy is not essential and is only loosely adhered to, however in this film it seems even less relevant. Similar to the products exhibited

on social media sites, the intention is far from validity or authenticity, but more in line with the constructed image of Jane Austen's celebrity persona. As mentioned before, her persona has changed from the "Aunt Jane" proposed by her family to more of an experienced woman in love. This has resulted in the celebrity persona overshadowing that of the author. The "Austen vogue," as Rachel Brownstein (2011) calls it in the late 20th century "combined obsession with the woman writer with an effective dismissal, or at least a high-handed under-reading and condescending rewriting, of what she wrote" (p. 4). This obsession has been transplanted into 21st- century celebrity culture, accompanied by an infatuation with the personal that obscures the factua

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