
УДК 821.111.09

Джейн Меммиссон (Jane Mattisson)

**LITERATURE INTO LIFE, LIFE INTO LITERATURE:
A NEW LOOK AT JANE AUSTEN AND HER WORLD**

Резюме

В работе «Литература в жизни, жизнь в литературе: новый взгляд на Джейн Остен и ее мир» рассматривается с точки зрения *нового историзма* роман Лори Вьера Риглер «Признания любительницы Джейн Остен» (2010), демонстрируется, что роман отображает новое видение творчества Джейн Остен и отношение его к социальному контексту.

Резюме

У роботі «Література в житті, життя в літературі: новий погляд на Джейн Остін та її світ» розглядається з точки зору *нового історизму* роман Лорі В'єра Ріглер «Зізнання любительки Джейн Остін» (2010), демонструється, що роман відображає нове бачення творчості Джейн Остін і відношення її до соціального контексту.

Key words: New Historicism, context, cult, Regency.

How may one shed new light on an author as famous and extensively critiqued as Jane Austen? This article addresses this question as it reviews the development of the Austen cult and cultures and discusses a refreshingly new view of Jane Austen presented in the recently published *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* by Laurie Viera Rigler (2010). Hereafter referred to as *Confessions*). Adopting a New Historicist approach, I demonstrate that Vigler's novel provides new insights into the relationship between Austen's novels and their context. Courtney Stone, Rigler's protagonist, is a typical modern Los Angeles girl who finds herself suddenly and inexplicably transported to Jane Austen's world. She adopts the identity of Jane Mansfield¹, whom she closely resembles physically, mentally and emotionally. As *Confessions* progresses, Courtney finds her understanding of Austen's novels challenged; she is forced to re-evaluate the latter as she becomes increasingly immersed in early nineteenth-century England,

¹ Jane Mansfield appears to be a combination of several Austen characters.

reads first editions of Austen's novels, and discusses these with her newly-found friends and acquaintances.

The relationship between fiction and context is fragile. When Courtney meets Austen in London (she bumps into her on the street), the result is catastrophic for both parties. *Confessions* challenges readers' assumptions about Jane Austen, her world and fiction. Interesting and – on occasions – intimate details about women's lives in the early part of the nineteenth century are revealed with a delightful sense of humour. The ending of the novel, i.e. the marriage of Jane Mansfield and Charles Edgeworth, has been criticised for its implausibility². This view fails to acknowledge one of the chief contributions of *Confessions*, namely the recognition that true appreciation of Austen's novels comes only with a proper understanding of the spirit and customs of Regency England. *Confessions* invites the reader to face his/her obsessions (a frequently mentioned characteristic of Rigler's protagonist) and pre-conceived notions by seeing Austen's novels in a new light. Rigler is following in Austen's footsteps: as Mary Waldron has observed, Austen's refined dialogue and free indirect style create an extraordinarily complex fictional world which leaves the reader the possibility of choice in his/her response to the actions and thoughts of the main characters (1999, 14). 'Her fiction ... is about fiction itself, its parameters and possibilities' (Waldron, 14). As Rachel Brownstein argues, Austen 'wrote to criticize and perfect the [novel] form' ('*Northanger Abbey*', in Copeland and McMaster, 35).

Confessions is a refreshing change from the re-creation or even mockery of Jane Austen and her novels seen in such works as Helen Fielding's two volumes of Bridget Jones's *Diary* – sometimes read as a re-working of *Pride and Prejudice*³ – and David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975)⁴. *Confessions* is an example of the cross-fertilisation that

² See, for example, <http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com/search?q=rigler>. Accessed on 4 April 2010.

³ See, for example, John Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–2.

⁴ Morris Zapp, one of the main characters, is an Austen specialist and his nine-year old twins are even called Elizabeth and Darcy, after the well-known *Pride and Prejudice* characters.

takes place between classics and popular novels with a broad appeal as discussed by such writers as Harriet Hawkins (*Classics and Trash* 1990).

The Austen cult and cultures

One of the earliest observers of the Austen cult was Henry James, who described Jane Austen as a commercial phenomenon and a cultural figure, formidable as well as non-threatening. James's sceptical attitude was prompted by the wider publication of Austen's novels, ranging from Routledge's cheap volumes of 1883 to the lavishly illustrated Macmillan's 1890 issues and the quasi-scholarly ten-volume set published by Dent in 1892 (these were reissued five times in as many years)⁵.

As Edward Copeland argues, Austen has become

a cultural fetish ; loving – or hating – her has typically implied meanings well beyond any encoded in her works. Because she has proved essential to the self-definition of so many contending interests – people who see themselves as delicate escapists or as hard-nosed realists, as staunch defenders of morality or as . . . elitists or democrats, as iconoclasts or conventionalists, as connoisseurs or as common readers – it is conspicuously difficult to disentangle the 'real' Austen from the acknowledged or unacknowledged agendas of those discussing her (Copeland and McMaster, 212).

During the twentieth century, the Austen cult was predominantly a male one shared among publishers, professors, and literati such as Montague Summers, A. C. Bradley, Lord David Cecil and E. M. Forster. For ardent followers of Jane Austen prior to World War One, Austen's novels evoked a world before history blew up. They were even regarded as a therapy for people whom history had made sick physically and mentally⁶.

Today, the Austen cult is kept alive by societies such as the Jane Austen Society and the Jane Austen Society of North America, whose conferences

⁵ See B. C. Southam's introduction to *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2: 1870–1940 (1987), especially 58–70; David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (1982), 211–34; Geoffrey Keynes, *Jane Austen: A Bibliography* (1929), and Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (1991).

⁶ See Christopher Kent, 'Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen' in *Jane Austen's Beginnings* ed. J. David Grey, 1989.

and *Collected Reports* provide a forum for the publication of scholarly articles. The same organisations also organise events for amateur enthusiasts, including costume balls, games, readings and dramatic interpretations. Jane Austen has become the realm of the amateur as well as the critic.⁷

Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict

Confessions is Rigler's first novel⁸. It is the work of a professional with a profound knowledge of Austen and her world. Rigler is a freelance book editor who teaches writing workshops. In an interview for Penguin books, Rigler describes the extensive research conducted in preparation for writing *Confessions*:

I read everything I could find on the period, and I travelled. I went to London, to Bath, to little country villages frozen in time. I went to the Assembly Rooms where Anne Eliot longed to catch Captain Wentworth's eyes. I went to conjure the past through the lens of my twenty-first century protagonist's mind.

(<http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com/search?q=rigler>).

The result is a masterful exposition of early nineteenth- and early twenty-first century England and their gradual merging; in *Confessions*, context informs literature and literature informs context.

At the beginning of the novel, Courtney Stone inhabits a dream world in which she has assumed the identity of Jane Mansfield. She is surrounded by characters dressed in early nineteenth-century costume, the furniture in her bedroom is from the same period, and she is visited by a doctor who threatens to (and ultimately carries out) the nineteenth-century practice of bloodletting. Jane Mansfield has apparently fallen off her horse and is suffering from severe concussion and mental confusion. The bloodletting

⁷ For a comprehensive review of Austen criticism from the early nineteenth century to the present day see Bruce Stovel, 'Further Reading', chapter 13 of Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster's *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*.

⁸ A sequel has been published: *Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict* (Boston : Dutton Adult, 2009).

scene is described in detail and with a sense of humour that belongs to the world Courtney Stone has recently left:

No way is this creature going to stick anything into my arm. I've always been squeamish, but this is too much. Last time I had my blood drawn was at the gynecologist's, and I had to lie down in an empty examination room for twenty minutes because I almost fainted (*Confessions*, 8).

Courtney Stone observes that 'antiseptis was still decades away from becoming standard practice' (*Confessions* 8) in the early nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the novel, Courtney rebels against assuming the character of Jane Mansfield. As the story progresses, she becomes increasingly intrigued by others' unquestioning acceptance of her as Jane. She is also struck by the resemblance of Mrs Mansfield to her own mother, making her unsure on occasions of which world she inhabits.

As Courtney Stone acclimatizes herself to her new surroundings she must learn to accept practices for which her reading of Austen novels has only partially prepared her. A case in point is the first time she must enquire about toilet facilities, only to discover that she must use a chamber pot hidden under her bed. She asks her maid, 'You expect me to pee in that?' The sentence which follows is laced with dry humour: 'The thought is revolting, but if I don't relieve myself soon, the alternative will be much worse' (*Confessions*, 18).

The first occasion Courtney must brush her teeth is another illustration of the circumstances of Austen's characters which are not described in the novels: she is surprised to be offered a toothbrush with a metal handle as well as a tongue scraper. She is not prepared for the salty, chalky paste which serves as tooth powder. Equally amusing is the episode in church where she describes how her thoughts are interrupted 'by the sound of – can it be? Someone is actually farting in church. And not some sheepish, just-slipped-out by mistake of a fart, but several trumpeting bursts' (*Confessions*, 83).

As Courtney tries to acclimatise to her new situation she constantly seeks refuge in Austen's novels, which lull her into 'calm, and peace and harmony' (*Confessions*, 35) and, in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* and

Sense and Sensibility, actually keep her sane (*Confessions*, 87). At the same time, Courtney discovers that there are definite advantages to living in the early nineteenth century: she has company (in America she is lonely), and she is relieved of domestic chores: ‘At least in this world someone else does the shopping and cleaning up’ (*Confessions*, 48). Also, without internet and television, Courtney reflects that women are not expected to keep up-do-date with the news as in the twenty-first century. This has a positive impact on her otherwise low self-esteem.

In formal social gatherings, Courtney finds it particularly difficult to play the part of Jane Mansfield because she does not recognise those with whom she is supposedly acquainted. Socialising becomes a game which Courtney fears at first but gradually learns to enjoy. Conversations are, she reflects, as difficult as doing ‘the *New York Times* crossword puzzle with half the words in Swahili’ (*Confessions*, 77).

It is during Courtney’s/Mansfield’s conversations that the reader is given valuable insights into the concerns and activities of Regency men and women. The reader contemplates the influence of values and traditions on characters’ lives and thoughts and compares these with his/her experiences in the twenty-first century. When Courtney suspects Charles Edgeworth – to whom she is attracted and who has expressed an interest in marrying her – of turning his attentions elsewhere, she is reminded of how she had earlier discovered her twenty-first century fiancée in the company of another woman. Courtney is finding it increasingly difficult to keep her two lives separate.

By chapter 23, she has adapted so well to her new life that she is fast becoming Jane Mansfield: ‘All I can think about are those mind-flashes; no, memories, which is what I have to call them. With every passing day, the lines are becoming less distinct between Jane and me’ (*Confessions*, 137). It is Charles Edgeworth’s sister, Mary, who tells Courtney, ‘There is no old life or new life. There is only life’ (*Confessions*, 185). Courtney is ready to accept this truth and become Jane Mansfield. She finds peace in her new identity. One indication of this is that she no longer feels any need for the make-up of the twenty-first-century world: ‘I give myself the respectable version of Regency-era makeup, which consists of biting my

lips and pinching my cheeks' (*Confessions*, 185). The unpainted face she sees in the mirror is Jane Mansfield's, she likes it, and she has become used to regarding it as her 'own' (*Confessions*, 208).

When Courtney comes face-to-face with Jane Austen in chapter thirty-one, life and literature merge. Courtney expresses her concern that the reputation of the great writer may suffer as her novels are filmed and televised. The twenty-first century reader can sympathise with Courtney's views; Jane Austen, on the other hand, is of course totally confused by Courtney's strange references to film:

I start holding forth on the pros and cons of adapting great literature to the big screen, and not just to the author of that great literature, but to the author who never gave her consent to a future world that butchers her great literature, and to the author who cannot possibly think any more of that conversation than that she had the misfortune to be cornered by a madwoman who claims to know the future (*Confessions*, 241).

Courtney Stone is not mad, of course: she is pointing to a genuine but as yet unrecognised problem. The chapter finishes with a challenge: 'Is the future so depressingly set in stone? Don't we have free will as well as destiny?' (*Confessions*, 242). Rigler is making a plea to twenty-first readers and producers to preserve the qualities of Austen's novels intact and to avoid the temptation to transform them into objects for the cinema and television.

Courtney Stone's reading of Austen's novels and Rigler's portraits of Regency England inform one another as past and present mingle. The reader becomes absorbed in two stories, that of Courtney Stone and her fictional alter ego Jane Mansfield; by the end of the novel, it is impossible to distinguish the two. Both are fiction and yet both are 'real'. *Confessions* is a remarkable novel: it is entertaining and informative, humorous and scholarly as well as witty and challenging. It is a 'must' for all Austen addicts who wish to know more about their favourite author, her times and her writing, and who are prepared to be taken on a journey which, at the very least, will add a new dimension to their understanding of Austen, and at best, radically change their vision of the relationship between literature and context.

References

1. Brownstein, Rachel M. 'Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice' in Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster / Brownstein, Rachel M. ; The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen. – Cambridge : CUP, 1999.
2. Copeland, Edward and Juliet McMaster. The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen / Copeland, Edward and Juliet McMaster. – Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997.
3. Fergus, Jan. Jane Austen: A Literary Life / Fergus, Jan. – Houndmills and London : Macmillan, 1991.
4. Fleming, Helen. Bridget Jones's Diary / Fleming, Helen. – London : Picador, 1997.
5. Fielding, Helen. Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason / Fielding, Helen. – London : Picador, 1999.
6. Gilson, David. A Bibliography of Jane Austen / Gilson, David. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1982.
7. Grey, J. David. Ed. Jane Austen's Beginnings / Grey, J. David. Ed. – London : UMI Research Press, 1989.
8. Hawkins, Harriet. Classics and Trash / Hawkins, Harriet // Hemel Hempstead : Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
[Электронный ресурс]. – Режим доступа: <http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com/search?q=rigler>. Conversation with Laurie Viera Rigler. Accessed on 4 April 2010.
9. Kent, Christopher. 'Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen' / Kent, Christopher // Jane Austen's Beginnings ed. J. David Grey.
10. Keynes, Geoffrey. Jane Austen: A Bibliography / Keynes, Geoffrey. – London : The Nonesuch Press, 1929.
11. Lodge, David. Changing Places, a Tale of Two Campuses / Lodge, David. – London : Penguin, 1975.
12. Rigler, Laurie Viera. Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict / Rigler, Laurie Viera. – London, Berlin, New York : Bloomsbury, 2010. First published in 2009.
13. Rigler, Laurie Viera. Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict / Rigler, Laurie Viera. – Boston : Dutton Adult, 2009.
14. Southam, B. C. Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, vol. 2, 1870–1940 / Southam, B. C. – London and New York : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.
15. Stovel, Bruce. 'Further Reading' in Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster / Stovel, Bruce. – The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen.

16. Waldron, Mary. *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* / Waldron, Mary. – Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999.

17. Witshire, John. *Recreating Jane Austen* / Witshire, John. – Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001.