

What Happens at the Party: Jane Austen Converses with Charlotte Smith

JACQUELINE LABBE

Jacqueline Labbe (email: J.M.Labbe@warwick.ac.uk) is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (MUP, 2003) and is finishing a book on Smith and Wordsworth. Her next project will explore the co-texts of Smith and Austen.

IN JANE AUSTEN'S ART OF MEMORY, Jocelyn Harris concludes that "in memory [Austen] found origins for art," following the eighteenth-century vogue for imitation in her synthesizing of what she had read: "her practice often looks to me like 'imitation' . . . which, says Howard Weinbrot, 'fosters literary borrowing and encourages modernization'" (221, 219). Harris bases her book on Austen's "tenacious" memory, a trait also discussed by most of the critics who investigate how Austen made use of what she read (Harris x), and is generous in allowing for how much she may have overlooked. For Harris, "Austen's recollections of books gave her languages to speak with" (218), a telling phrase, conjuring up a mute, or at least tongue-tied Austen for whom reading performed its highest function of instruction, enabling a layering of meaning and event, filling the blank page. What is striking, however, is the reluctance readers show to compromise on what is often presented as Austen's superiority, despite her debts. Thus she "better[s] the novel" (Siskin 137); she "almost single-handedly . . . has made most of her contemporaries seem excessive, artificial, or absurd" (Todd 18); she "created a new kind of novel which put all her predecessors and contemporaries more or less in the shade and ensured her work outlived theirs" (Waldron 3). These encomiums, and others, derive from scholars who are willing to admit that Austen read her contemporaries and that this reading is visible in her work. Others insist that Austen's unique genius is untainted by such associations; hence, "she is little given to direct imitation" (Grundy 191, in an article on "Jane Austen and Literary Traditions"); she is "extraordinarily isolated from contemporary writers" (Gillie 55). As Austen sets about perfecting the novel, she is somehow also isolated from the novelistic world, always doing better, always going further.¹

It weakens an author like Austen to suggest that she can only function off-line: that literary history is indebted to her for her understanding of "the real" yet that she herself declined somehow to notice literature. Articles pointing out the interactions between her plots and those of Burney, Richardson, Edgeworth, and many others, and the approaches like Harris's that make a virtue of her retentive memory and her open recycling, give a much more convincing picture of a writer who did not transcend her time but rather inhabited it utterly. We learn that her writing exhibits traces of *Pamela*, *Sir Charles Grandison*, *Clarissa*, and *Paradise Lost* (Harris); *Agnes De-Courci*, *Cecilia*, *The Children of the Abbey*, *The Memoirs of Miss Sydney Biddulph* (Doody); Fielding and Richardson (Siskin); Richardson, Cowper, Johnson and Burney (Grundy); Johnson, Gilpin, Richardson, Burney, Radcliffe (Pinion); Elizabeth Hamilton (Johnson). There are many more, scattered through the scholarship on Austen and her context. Richardson and Burney top the list, appearing on several different shortlists. The contemporary who doesn't pop up as much as Burney does, however, is Charlotte Smith, and for the rest of this essay I want to explore one example of what happens if we read Austen after reading Smith.

In arguing for Burney's prime influence on Austen, much has been made of the prominent appearance, at the end of *Cecilia*, of the phrase "pride and prejudice"; as Jerry Beasley notes, "it is widely agreed that *Cecilia*'s rather glib moral tag probably furnished the final title of Jane Austen's second published novel" (153). Although it is not clear why Burney is glib and Austen, presumably, is not, the attention drawn to the phrase in *Cecilia* (three times in two sentences, rendered in capitals) makes its visibility to the young Austen apparent, at least to Beasley and his source, F. W. Bradbrook. For Catherine Parke, Matthew Wickman, David Andrew Graves, Harrison Steeves, and the critics cited by Beasley (Clara Thomson, Q.D. Leavis, Elizabeth Jenkins, A. Walton Litz, R. Brimley Johnson), among others, Burney is a natural bridge to Austen. Beasley probably does the most conscientious job of "describ[ing] and assess[ing] in full detail what Miss Austen may have done with what she borrowed" (154). It is true, of course, that Austen transplanted Burney: *Northanger Abbey* is much more interested in revisiting Burney's rendition of sensibility than it is in Radcliffe's Gothic; and Mr. Darcy, as he dismisses Elizabeth's charms at a dance, acts as an updated (and down to earth) Lord Orville, whose first, and verbalized, impression of Evelina at a ball is that she is a poor country simpleton. I would suggest, however, that the actual overlaps between Burney and Austen are few, and that they are more visible because Burney herself is; while lacking Austen's glow, Burney has never fallen off the canon's radar. She is, in other words, worthy of supplying Austen with inspiration.

But, as Beasley notes, Austen's "Juvenilia give only a few distinct signs of the

influence of Fanny Burney, although," he hastens to add, "Miss Austen was surely reading the older novelist's work while doing her own earliest writing" (153 n. 2). The "older novelist" whom we know Austen read while young is Smith: "Charlotte Smith is the only contemporary novelist whose works are referred to in the juvenilia" (Southam 10). Austen's youthful references to Delamere, the faux-hero of Smith's first novel *Emmeline* (1788), and to *Ethelinde* (1789), Smith's second novel, are matched by a series of allusions, borrowings, and wholesale importations that suggest the centrality of Smith to Austen's development, and to the modernization of the novel. Once we read Smith, which is becoming increasingly easy to do (all of her novels are now in print), we can see how deeply she is embedded in Austen. Even "pride and prejudice," that famous phrase, appears again in Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1793), muddying easy conclusions about Austen's source.²

As I note elsewhere, Smith has been compared by critics to Austen since as early as 1939, in Mary Lascelles's *Jane Austen and her Art*, where Smith's Emmeline is offered as the foil of perfection to Austen's Catherine Morland.³ F. B. Pinion links scenes in *Emmeline* and *Pride and Prejudice* as well as in *Ethelinde* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Claudia Johnson does the same for *The Young Philosopher* (1798) and *Pride and Prejudice*. Susan Allen Ford discusses *Lady Susan* in light of *Desmond* (1792), while Joe Bray presents similar forms of free indirect discourse in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*. Stephen Derry notes "the probable influence on *Persuasion* of . . . *The Banished Man* [1794]" in Austen's portrayal of the Elliotts as derived from Smith's *Ellesmeres*. Anne Ehrenpreis treats at greater length Austen's representation of scenes from *Ethelinde* in *Catharine* and *Northanger Abbey*. Loraine Fletcher notes how Austen picks up on Smith's "emblematic castles" in *Mansfield Park*. Eleanor Ty notes the similar plot resolution of the libertine free thinker in *Emmeline* and *Mansfield Park*. Most of these are noted in passing, one or two sentences in a chapter dwelling on Burney, or Richardson, or Johnson, or someone else; or else appear as "notes" style articles, plotting plot similarities.

"Her pencil sickening Fancy
throws away."

The exception is William Magee's "The Happy Marriage: The Influence of Charlotte Smith on Jane Austen"; Magee notes that Smith influenced Austen "the most frequently and profoundly of any of her predecessors . . . , [e]ven [in her] most mature novels," mentioning virtually all Austen's work and most of Smith's. He concentrates on language, on similar verbal constructions, and concludes that despite Smith's "unnatural" plots and "heavy Johnsonian style" she remained for Austen "a vital source of situations, characters, and themes to borrow, work up, and perfect, but essentially retain, to the end of her career" (120, 122, 131). Even though Magee regards Austen as the master over her source, it is remarkable how little impact Magee's insights have made. Most of the critics who note a Smith parallel do so without seeming to notice how many others have made similar points with different evidence. But as this survey points out, *all* of Austen's work has relied to some extent on *most* of Smith's. This reliance indicates more than simply a retentive memory: Charlotte Smith's novels not only provided a language for but in many ways *spoke* Jane Austen's. Smith's novels of the 1790s explore thematics of modern gender economies, shifting class boundaries, female choice and independence, property and inheritance limitations, trauma and loss occasioned by bad parenting, public violence, gossip and the politics of reputation, and many other issues familiar to us from Austen's novels. The experimentation undertaken by both novelists effectively facilitates the development of the genre into its modern form.

Richard Cronin reports that when *Pride and Prejudice* was published, "the future Lady Byron confidently reported after reading it that it had been written by 'a sister of Charlotte Smith's.'" Cronin asserts that for Austen, "it was Frances Burney who took the palm," providing for Austen "the main lineaments of the plot that was to serve her throughout her career, the misadventures of a young woman" as she "makes her choice of marriage partner" (289-90). Given that the standard marriage plot is utilized by any number of authors of the period besides Burney, it is perhaps less compelling as evidence for Burney's supremacy. For the purposes of my argument, Austen's mistaken identity as a sister of Smith's rings true.

One of the clearest overlaps in terms of plot occurs between *Celestina* and *Sense and Sensibility*, as Magee in particular, and Fletcher have remarked. One hint is the authors' joint use of the name "Willoughby." Although Fletcher discounts this borrowing, Smith's Willoughby acts as a bridge between Sir Clement Willoughby, the rake in *Evelina*, and John Willoughby, whose mysterious transformation from lover in sensibility mode to selfish gold-digger with a libertine past has disturbed many readers (Labbe 113-14). Smith's George Willoughby begins and ends *Celestina* as a man of feeling, but he spends much of the middle portion of the novel engaged to an heiress at the behest of his aunt, so that his estates may be disencumbered. *Celestina* voices the anxiety that Austen's characters come to feel: "Willoughby—but no! it is impossible: he cannot be unworthy—he cannot have cruelly deceived me—it is impossible" (156). She is reassured that "it is indeed . . . impossible for Mr. Willoughby to be guilty of any unworthy action," and so it proves, eventually; but Austen, by employing both her models, creates a Willoughby who is simultaneously a man of feeling and a desiring rake. Her contemporary readers, well versed in their Burney and their Smith, may thus have had a forewarning of Willoughby's unstable status subsequently lost to later readers for whom Smith was not so much a closed as an unknown book.

Such a reader emerges in 1919: then, George Moore focuses on *Sense and Sensibility* as providing a “supreme scene” of human suffering:

Miss Austen gives us all the agony of passion the human heart can feel; she was the first. . . . A young girl of twenty, jilted, comes up to London with her mother and sister, and she sees her lover at an assembly; he comes forward and addresses a few words more to her sister than to herself within hearing of a dozen people, and it is here that we find the burning human heart in English prose narrative for the first, and, alas, for the last time. (Littlewood 1:447)

It is striking how resonant the scene is for Moore and other readers; Tony Tanner’s description of Marianne’s subsequent primal scream is only a later example. Marianne’s “wildest anxiety” and Willoughby’s struggle between social politesse and “embarrassment” (201) focalize the destruction of unmediated emotion in the text. The public forum militates against anything other than formal interaction, as Willoughby understands and Marianne doesn’t. The scene shows the moment in which Marianne is punished for her indulgence in sensibility, visible in spite of Elinor’s best efforts “to screen her from the observation of others” (202). In other words, Austen shows us what should not be seen, female emotional frankness leading to a stripped-bare display of “agitation.”

The centrality of the scene to the text and to an understanding of Austen’s willingness to be raw is clear. But Moore is mistaken in his celebration of Austen’s originality, as readers of *Celestina* know. Magee and Fletcher, as noted above, plot the parallels between the texts, and each notes that *Celestina*, like Marianne, suffers physical and emotional humiliation when rejected by Willoughby at a party. Smith’s scene is fuller than Austen’s, and where Austen’s Willoughby’s emotion is visible only superficially, Smith’s Willoughby is given the initial point of view as well as the mistaken notion that *Celestina* has an “attachment to [a] new favourite.” But Smith transfers point of view when *Celestina* and Willoughby physically touch; jostled against him, *Celestina* turns and utters an “involuntary and faint shriek”:

The *agitation* of poor *Celestina* could not be concealed, nor could she for a moment or two escape from the enquiring eyes of those who remarked it. . . . *Celestina*’s eyes followed [Willoughby] with a look of inexpressible amazement and concern. She seemed to be in a fearful dream; and when she no longer saw him, her eyes were fixed on the door through which he had gone out. She . . . sat, with a palpitating heart and oppressed breath. . . . (375-76, emphasis added)

Like Marianne after her, *Celestina*’s public display of emotion, her “violent . . . perturbation” (377), affects her physically, and her agitation is contrasted to the “reasonable and gentle arguments” of her friend Lady Horatia (379). Austen condenses the scene, while at the same time allowing for conversation between Marianne and Willoughby; *Celestina* later apostrophizes her Willoughby but in markedly similar terms: “Ah! Willoughby . . . is it thus we meet again after such a parting?” (378).

Smith’s scene assigns almost equal pain to Willoughby and *Celestina*, but in the end it is *Celestina*’s suffering that is the focus; Austen limits her Willoughby’s reaction to “embarrassment,” although it is repeated twice and is itself a complex emotional reaction, as I will suggest. Narration, here, pauses to allow characters to *feel*. Austen’s telescoped moment pares down the more elaborate structure of its model to emphasize its cruelty, but both the scenes force readers into a participation in agitation. Smith and Austen linger on *Celestina*’s and Marianne’s pain and thus require the reader to acknowledge the truth-factor of their portrayals. Both do so voyeuristically: despite efforts to screen, to hide from view, on the part of characters, readers are given special visual access, so that the texts’ plot similarities facilitate a mutual exploration of the relationship between secrecy and surveillance.⁴ This theme is as significant in the 1790s as in the 18-teens; political tensions and anxieties allow a new trade in spying and a new emphasis on security.

Celestina’s 1791 publication and *Sense and Sensibility*’s 1790s genesis and 1811 publication give the novels an edge inflected by social concerns with *seeing*. In the party scenes, and in the pages leading up to them and subsequently, Smith and Austen make repeated use of verbs like “gaze,” “perceive,” “see,” and “observe”; characters “betray” themselves, are looked at, “avoid the sight” of others. What’s more, they write secret letters, which are then allowed to be read by others; and they attempt to hide themselves away only for their private spaces to be entered by uninvited guests. The two novels project a keen awareness that people *will* look at other people; both infuse this culture of gazing with narratives of physical trauma.

In *Celestina*, a feverish and miserable Willoughby attends a card party with his sister, and when she sits down to play Willoughby

sauntered into one of the apartments where the younger part of the company were seated at a commerce table; where the first person that met his eyes was *Celestina* . . . while on one side sat a young man . . . and on the other another gentleman. . . . Fixed to the place, [Willoughby] stood unheeded. . . . [H]is legs trembled so that it was with difficulty that he

supported himself, and his heart beat as if it would break. . . . [H]e staggered, and might have fallen, had not the shame of betraying so much weakness lent him resolution to reach a chair. . . . (374)

Consumed with jealousy, he returns to his sister so that they may leave as soon as she “sett[es] her winnings” (375), and from here the scene’s perspective shifts to Celestina and her own recognition scene: “the well known face of Willoughby . . . instantly struck her” (375). Her shriek, anticipating Marianne’s later scream of agony, corporealizes this strike: beaten by Willoughby’s gaze, she collapses in full view of the company. His secret initial observation, in that she does not know he has seen her, transmutes into a co-observation that is mutually obscuring: Willoughby thinks she has a new lover; Celestina thinks he no longer cares for her. Celestina’s agitation, an emotional perturbation and disturbance that manifests itself physically as well, arises from “the displeasure with which he surveyed her” and “impress[es]” her “with terror” (375). It also seems to dehumanize her, as Willoughby, on leaving with his sister, sees her only as an “object” from which he “turn[s] hastily,” leaving Celestina frozen in an observational stance: her “eyes followed him with a look of inexpressible amazement. . . . [W]hen she no longer saw him, her eyes were fixed on the door through which he had gone out” (376). Transfixed, Celestina is all eyes; Willoughby’s behavior is construed by her friends as “insulting,” and she retreats to her bedroom where, after nightmarish sleep, she wakes to find her friend Lady Horatia “sitting by her bedside, holding one of her hands, and gazing on her with great concern” (379).

This party scene and its aftermath transform the acts of looking, gazing and seeing into threatening and anxious acts of surveillance, infused as they are with suspicion, dread, and mistrust. As characters observe each other, seeing becomes an invasion that violates a variety of forms of bodily integrity. Willoughby and Celestina can barely stand after seeing each other; touch provokes shrieks; a look is reconstituted as an insult; a sleeping body is held and gazed upon without the sleeper’s knowledge. When Celestina sits down to write to Willoughby, she couches her distress in terms that conflate looking and feeling: “You look very ill, Willoughby. You look unhappy: and on me you looked unkindly” (383). Willoughby’s look both indicates pain and inflicts it: Celestina notes that she “do[es] not ask to see” him, but later, another accidental meeting at the opera again leads to more mutually-threatening seeing: Celestina becomes faint and nearly falls from her seat, while Willoughby’s eyes “fall” on her and then “tur[n] towards her, but immediately [are] withdrawn as if they had met a basilisk” (390). In a 1790s context, it is a political move to present acts of seeing as acts of violence, and it transforms a romance of sensibility into an investigation of identities. “Enquiring eyes” follow characters throughout the novel; they are unable to escape, or camouflage their reactions to seeing and being seen.

Courtesy of Chawton House Library.

Austen drafts and revises “Elinor and Marianne” between 1795 and 1797, well into the decade’s turn towards repression, suspicion, and watchfulness. By the time she finishes *Sense and Sensibility*, Charlotte Smith is dead, and “surveillance” as a term has entered the English language (the OED dates it to 1799). As noted above, the party scene has struck many readers as vital to the emotional trajectory of the text. Austen models her scene very closely on Smith’s, while also reassigning some of the action: where Willoughby’s sister sits down to cards, here Lady Middleton “sat down to Casino”; and where Willoughby begins the surveillance when his eyes are “met” by Celestina in company with a young man, here “Elinor perceived Willoughby . . . in earnest conversation with a very fashionable looking young woman” (200). Visual verbs abound: she “soon caught his eye”; Willoughby “could not but see” Marianne; Marianne in her turn “perceive[s]” Willoughby and is then mystified when “he does not look at [her]”; Willoughby “regard[s] them both” and then “avoid[s]” Marianne’s “eye . . . determined not to observe her attitude”; Elinor “watche[s] his countenance” (200-01). Austen’s Willoughby is more successful than the Dashwoods at *not* looking, but Austen nonetheless concentrates her action on seeing and looking, so that Willoughby is drawn back to his young lady “on catching [her] eye” even as Marianne insists to Elinor that “I must see him again” (201-02). Again, curious eyes watch, and Elinor tries to block their gaze. Once again, the card-playing woman is persuaded to leave her game, and once again agitation, torment, and agony result from the acts of seeing and looking. Marianne, like Celestina, retreats to her bedroom, and like Celestina cannot escape being looked at even there: “Elinor, roused from sleep by [Marianne’s] agitation and sobs, first perceived her” (205).

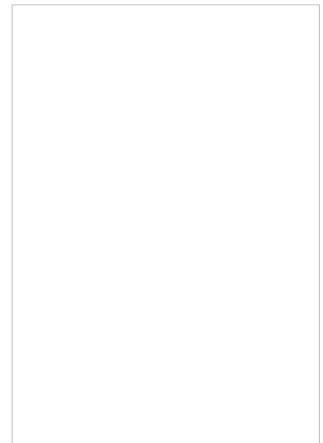
Interestingly, given the emphasis on seeing and watching, Austen allows Marianne to fix on another sense in her letter to Willoughby. Celestina’s letter, we remember, focused on Willoughby’s visuality, but Marianne is more interested in the aural:

"I am perfectly ready to *hear* your justification. . . . You have perhaps been misinformed, or purposely deceived, in something concerning me, which may have lowered me in your opinion. *Tell* me what it is. . . ." (213-14, emphasis added)

In scenes which convey so much through a thematics of surveillance, Marianne's turn towards the *heard* is another indication of her estrangement from correct modes of interpretation. It doesn't matter what Willoughby may or may not have heard—although, in this case, Marianne's speculations encapsulate what *Smith's* Willoughby has been told about Celestina—since the recognition event is entirely dependent on the *seen*. Hence, Marianne uses the word "regard" to mean esteem and affection: "your regard for us all was insincere" (214), "Who regards me?" (217). But the text itself, the narrated text, uses it in its visual sense—he "regarded them both"—so that when Elinor *thinks* the word, it is colored by both meanings: "Absence might have weakened his regard, and convenience might have determined him to overcome it, but that such a regard had formerly existed she could not bring herself to doubt" (203). In this way Elinor surveys her understanding of events, constructs Willoughby's affection visually, and realizes—makes real—the secrecy that has allowed Willoughby to *disregard* Marianne at the party. His subsequent letter, read and thus part of the visual economy, is deemed an "insult," just as Willoughby's glares at Celestina are.

Smith's Willoughby, as noted, undergoes a more extended bout of suffering than does Austen's, befitting his status as hero: he is made to suffer so that he may be rewarded in the end. Austen's composite figure, with his man-of-feeling exterior married to a libertine sensibility, is denied this honorable torment, but, as mentioned above, when confronted with Marianne he shows "embarrassment," which is "witnessed" by Elinor. Embarrassment, perplexity, hesitation, or constraint manifest themselves physically; while clearly not as traumatic as agony, for a man-about-town like Willoughby such conduct functions as its own form of violence. Unlike agitation, however, it carries a material meaning as well: Willoughby is not only distracted in his manner, he is also financially embarrassed, and so the language Austen chooses encodes Willoughby's priorities and motives and requires him to display his rationale for his behaviour, even if, in this case, the observant Elinor can't quite see it.

Celestina and *Sense and Sensibility* make surveillance into a narrative device that forces characters into painful, tormenting, and traumatic situations. It becomes impossible, as much as Marianne might wish it, to "avoid[] the sight of every body" (206). And whereas ordinary surveillance is undertaken in the service of uncovering secrets, in these two texts looking, gazing, seeing, etc. serve only to mystify situations. Characters watch each other constantly and yet fail to understand motivations or clarify their own and others' bewilderment. In a culture saturated with fears of security breaches, lapses in border control, and a compromised social order, it is not surprising if people spend time watching each other. What is perhaps discomfiting is how these two novels show the damage, emotional but, more surprisingly perhaps, also physical, that such a reliance on surveillance can cause *despite* the period's dependence. Secrets can't be ferreted out through diligent and rigorous observation; surveillance instead undoes security.



"The Female Exile"

When Austen replays aspects of *Celestina*, she does more than simply reiterate event: she cooperates with Smith in moving the novel into a modern mode. It's not just that both authors are interested in unpacking the ramifications of full-scale surveillance; it's that Austen does so through a creative interaction with Smith, that *Sense and Sensibility* maintains its conversation, one-sided though it may be, with its co-text. By taking their readers to the crush of a party, writing a crowd scene, and then homing in on moments of seeing that enable only suffering, Smith and Austen insinuate modern ideas of violated bodily integrity, a dynamics of *interaction* rather than influence. And by keeping *Celestina* in sight as she writes *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen directs our gaze across and between these key texts of a modern surveillance society.

NOTES

1. For a survey of the critical attitudes to Austen and her borrowings, or not, see my "Narrating Seduction: Charlotte Smith and Jane Austen" (115-16 and 239-40, nn 7, 13-15).
2. As Steeves says, it crops up as well in Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1785) and Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* (1796) (342n).
3. See "Narrating Seduction" (115-117). There, I also note the critics for whom Smith does not figure at all, to which may be added Margaret Ann Doody in "Jane Austen's Reading."
4. Henry Tilney's remark to Catherine Morland about neighbors watching each other provides another example of domestic surveillance.

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