



“The Hartfield Edition”: Jane Austen and Shakespeare

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CRITICS HAVE CONSISTENTLY LINKED JANE AUSTEN’S name with Shakespeare’s. One of Jane Austen’s first promoters, Richard Whately, remarked that she conducts conversations with “a regard to character hardly exceeded even by Shakspeare himself” (Southam 98). Lord Macaulay wrote in 1843 that “among the writers who have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud” (603). George Lewes, who declared that Macaulay had referred to Austen as a “prose Shakespeare,” thought her, with Fielding, the greatest novelist in English, and praised her as one who, in contrast to Scott, possessed “Shakspearean” qualities of “tenderness and passion,” and “marvellous dramatic power” (Southam 125). Tennyson also spoke of Jane Austen as “next to Shakespeare” in her “realism and the life-likeness of her characters.” (24). This nineteenth-century tradition was summarized by A. C. Bradley in 1911. He wrote of Jane Austen’s “surpassing excellence within that comparatively narrow sphere whose limits she never tried to overpass . . . which . . . gives her in that sphere the position held by Shakespeare in his” (32).

Austen's most important nineteenth-century critic, Richard Simpson, a Shakespearean scholar, writing in 1870, also remarked on her dramatic quality. In addition, Simpson introduced the new idea that her relation to Shakespeare was not one of resemblance merely, but of indebtedness or influence. Giving a particular illustration of earlier critics' claims, he describes Miss Bates's talk as being made up of "the same concourse of details" as that which makes up Mistress Quickly's in *Henry IV part II* (Southam 262). Moreover, "Anne Elliot is Shakespeare's Viola translated into an English girl of the nineteenth century." "Miss Austen," he declares more explicitly, "must surely have had Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in her mind while she was writing this novel" (*Persuasion*). He argued that the novelist remembered the dialogue between Orsino and the disguised Viola when she wrote the exchanges between Captain Harville and Anne Elliot in which Anne speaks of women's constancy, and indirectly of her own.

Contemporary writers take up this link between Shakespeare and Austen. Claire Tomalin compares *Mansfield Park* with *The Merchant of Venice* to suggest how "Shakespeare's play and Austen's novel are both so alive and flexible as works of art that they can be interpreted now one way, now another" (229). Closer relationships have often been claimed. "Like *Mansfield Park*, Shakespearean drama characteristically pivots upon the performance of a play within a play," claims Nina Auerbach, who compares Fanny Price's reluctance to act with Hamlet's (55-6). More persuasively, Roger Gard compares the "lethal rationality" of the conversation in Chapter 2 of *Sense and Sensibility* between Fanny and John Dashwood with the dialogue in which Lear's daughters progressively strip their father of all his comforts (77-8). More wholesale recapitulations of Shakespeare have been suggested: Isobel Armstrong has seen many affinities between Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Henry VIII* and *Mansfield Park*. Jocelyn Harris has argued that *Emma* is a reimagining of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.¹

What are the grounds for this assumption that Jane Austen was so familiar with Shakespeare that she was continually echoing and reworking his plays? One might turn to the discussion of Shakespeare in *Mansfield Park*. Responding to Edmund Bertram's congratulations on his reading of *Henry VIII*, Henry Crawford

remarks: “I once saw Henry the 8th acted.—Or I have heard of it from somebody who did—I am not certain which. But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman’s constitution . . . one is intimate with him by instinct.” Edmund Bertram’s response is less indolent and more intelligent: “His celebrated passages are quoted by every body; they are in half the books we open,” he says, “we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions” (*MP* 338).

All but Miss Austen, that is. Unlike Fanny Burney, for example, Austen rarely uses those Shakespearean expressions that have passed into the language—the milk of human kindness, my almost blunted purpose, the finger of scorn, from top to toe. She does not use his similes and describe with his descriptions. Scott (and Dickens, too) show far more obvious signs of indebtedness to Shakespeare than Austen does. Moreover, Austen often mocks Shakespeare, as near the opening of the “History of England,” by “a partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian”: “[T]he Prince of Wales came and took away the crown, whereupon the King made a long speech, for which I must refer the Reader to Shakespeare’s Plays, & the Prince made a still longer. Things being thus settled between them the King died . . .” (139).

Catherine Morland, “in training for a heroine,” acquires a store of “those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (*NA* 15). Among them are three from “Shakspeare,” made to sound extremely silly as items in a keepsake book, including the lines from *Measure for Measure* about the beetle that we tread upon feeling a pang as great as when a giant dies, and those lines from *Twelfth Night* that Simpson suggested were her source in *Persuasion*, which declare, as Austen disingenuously claims, “that a young woman in love always looks” like Patience on a monument. When Emma declares that a “Hartfield edition” of Shakespeare would need a long note on the line from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “the course of true love never did run smooth,” she too is less than reverential towards the writer whom the eighteenth century treated with “bardolatry.” Can this skittish attitude towards Shakespeare be reconciled with any deep debt or affinity?

I propose that Shakespeare's impact on Jane Austen is not to be discovered on the surface, but is structural. A hint at what this might mean is in K. C. Philips's study of Jane Austen's language. Commenting that "Jane Austen shows great freedom, and even daring, in her conversion and use of almost any part of speech as any other part of speech," he remarks that "Shakespeare was the precursor to whom she might look in this. . . . At least two of her conversions emanate from *Hamlet*." He instances "[e]ver since her being turned into a Churchill she has out-Churchill'd them all in high and mighty claims" (E 310), which "echoes" Hamlet's famous "out-Herods Herod" (200). His point is that Austen does not imitate the semantic content but instead replicates the grammatical structure made possible by Shakespeare.

This may at least suggest the level of Jane Austen's relation to Shakespeare. More importantly, one can question the very notion of influence itself. The term influence originally meant the action of the stars on human affairs—a direct, unmediated, magical transmission. This is the way influence is often conceived—especially by the Romantics: it literally flows in upon someone from an outside source. It is certainly an ancient way of conceiving the relation of one writer to another. But there is an alternative mode of thought. In Seneca, Horace, and others we come across the idea of the later writer being like a bee, gathering honey from his original. More elaborately, we have the idea that the later writer gathers food from the source, and digests it, making it part of his own body. This tradition is put memorably by Ben Jonson in his collection of thoughts *Timber, or Discoveries*:

The third requisite in our poet or maker is imitation, *imitatio*, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. . . . Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in, crude, raw, or undigested; but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all to nourishment. Not to imitate servilely, as Horace saith, and catch at vices for virtue, but to draw forth out of the best and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish and savour; make our imitation sweet.
(119)

There is an interesting convergence between this way of seeing relatedness between authors and a much more modern way of seeing relatedness between people and the others who have been important to them—psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic thought speaks of our “identification” with others, but also of our incorporating others into our psychic life. This is because psychoanalysis is theoretically committed to the view that all psychic processes are extrapolations, or sophistications, of very early experiences of the infant. These are of necessity primarily physical. Psychoanalysis therefore proposes that the infant’s earliest experience of consuming the mother, actually taking her in—taking in her milk—becomes elaborated in our later “incorporation” of others. Others are taken into the self as “internal objects,” by which is meant a strong impression or memory that becomes a formative part of the self. An important component of the notion of incorporation is processing. The self takes in the other, but also, as when we eat, breaks it down, making it, in the process of incorporation, something else, part of the “new” self’s own substance.

This model offers a more complex analogy for thinking about the relation between authors than does the idea of influence. Influence is like milk, taken in and absorbed, unproblematically. Alternatively, one can think of the other writer as solid food, offering much more resistance to incorporation, requiring much more psychological and creative labor to incorporate. These are obviously no more than ideas, suggestions about a difficult to define process that has many levels and may differ greatly from author to author. But this is the analogy I propose to keep in mind with Jane Austen.

The very fact that Shakespeare wrote plays and Austen novels provides a barrier to the notion of direct or unmediated influence. Obviously, the act of conversion of a play into a novel must always be a complex one: the transposition of forms of dramatic action into the other techniques required by the novel seems to prevent the application of an unproblematic notion of literary imitation. A sculpture can’t imitate a painting, or an opera a play, without immense recreative labor, and in the course of this the artist must substitute his or her own purpose and design for the original, even whilst he or she may be aiming for the “same” or

an equivalent effect. This is as obviously true of the film “adaptations” of Austen’s novels (as of Shakespeare’s plays). When they are successful, they move away from the attempt to be faithful to, or capitalize on, the novels, and instead recreate something obtained from the novels by employing radically different means.

The term “recreation” in fact is a helpful one. This is partly because of its punning quality. It includes the idea of “recreation” as play, as well as the idea of remaking. The idea of play suggests that the later artist has attained a state of freedom from the earlier, no longer constrained by, or working in deference to, his or her authority. Sometimes this state of freedom manifests itself in the desire to “make over” or destroy the original. But any account of the relationship between two artists that emphasizes the aggressive motif that is certainly implicit in the notion of incorporation is bound to be partial and incomplete.² Poets and novelists have no biological ties to their predecessors: they *choose* their artistic parents. We must therefore have a theory of creative love before we have a coherent theory of creative rivalry.

I should pause for a moment and give an idea of what I mean by recreation. One of the very earliest reviewers of *Pride and Prejudice* remarked that Elizabeth Bennet is “the Beatrice of the piece” and thus saw immediately that the dialogues between Elizabeth and Darcy resemble the contests of wit between the heroine of *Much Ado About Nothing* and Benedict. As an example: in company with Darcy and Bingley, Mrs Bennet is boasting that Jane was so pretty at fifteen that “a gentleman” wrote some verses on her.” ““And so ended his affection,”” said Elizabeth impatiently. ““There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”” Darcy replies quickly, ““I have been used to consider poetry as the *food* of love.”” Elizabeth returns: ““Of a fine stout healthy love it may be, but I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away”” (44).

If the contest between these two figures does remind us of Beatrice and Benedick, the material of their exchange alludes to another Shakespeare comedy, *Twelfth Night*, or rather to its famous opening lines. The dialogue is used to suggest that the participants have more in common with each other than they

know. When Elizabeth says “I wonder who first discovered . . . ?” she is putting lightly a historical or cultural question and it is this hint that Darcy is able to respond to with his play on Shakespeare’s line. He in fact *feeds* her this line so that she can go on to cap her earlier comment. But it’s also notable that Elizabeth’s remark expresses a refreshing scepticism about the relation of true feeling to literary expression. So whilst the exchange is “feeding off” Shakespeare, it is simultaneously questioning whether repeating the language of another can ever express true feeling. We tend to find some such mark of independence, of recreation as play, whenever we detect Austen “using” or alluding to Shakespeare.

One might well conclude that the impact on her work of Austen’s reading of Shakespeare is impossible to prove. Nevertheless, as the discussion in *Mansfield Park* suggests, Shakespeare probably was important to Jane Austen. In the second part of this paper I shall briefly outline two main areas in which one might plausibly discern his presence. To begin with Macaulay’s suggestive equation: as Fanny Burney is to Ben Jonson, Jane Austen is to Shakespeare. In Burney’s novels, he wrote, we find “striking groups of eccentric characters, each governed by his own peculiar whim, each talking his own peculiar jargon, and each bringing out by opposition the oddities of all the rest.” In Shakespeare’s characters, by contrast, he thought, “no single feature is extravagantly overcharged” (605, 604). He implies that the effect of individuality in Austen is achieved by some form of parallelism or affinity rather than “opposition,” but Macaulay does not explore this consequence of his terms. I suggest that it is the multiplication of lines of connection between figures which gives the sense of an integrated “world” in Shakespeare’s plays and Austen’s novels, whilst simultaneously generating the sense of depth and moral drama. This successfully gives the effect of verisimilitude, whilst at the same time brings the pleasures of a tightly organized psychological or moral argument.

Shakespearean criticism has often recognized that characteristic feature of his work that Hazlitt in 1817 called “the use he makes of the principle of analogy”³ and A. P. Rossiter in 1961

called “beautifully complicated parallelisms” (52). More recently G. K. Hunter has described the characteristic “creation of meaning by antithetical structuring” (392) in the romantic comedies, and Graham Bradshaw has similarly spoken of “dramatic ‘rhyming’” (63-8). As Bradshaw points out, “it is by now a critical commonplace to observe that *Hamlet* presents the differing responses of three sons and a daughter to the loss of their fathers, so that our reactions to Fortinbras, Laertes, or Ophelia figure in our thinking about Hamlet.” Bradshaw goes on to demonstrate that it is often the case that the resemblance, the “rhyming,” is “‘off’ in some dramatically pointed or provoking way; there is enough of a resemblance to set us thinking about differences, which may be far more important” (64).

It is clear enough that the employment of allusions and cross references between characters, rather than sharp contrasts, becomes a crucial part of the three novels written at Chawton. Consider how Fanny Price as virtual orphan and ward is rhymed by Mary and Henry Crawford as orphans and wards, how the influence of one adopted uncle is paralleled with the influence of another, how the notion of fraternal love is worked through the Crawfords, through Fanny and William and through Fanny and Edmund. Or reflect how Emma’s dependence on the whims of her hypochondriac father is echoed or duplicated by Frank Churchill’s dependence on the whims of his hypochondriac adoptive mother, and how Frank’s inventive mischief—serving an erotic purpose—throws light on Emma’s mischief, where the underlying impulses are less obvious. If *Hamlet* presents a range of different reactions to loss, consider the varieties of mourning that are represented and “rhymed” throughout *Persuasion*.

The other point of comparison relates to the representation of inner life. Jane Austen’s later novels employ “free indirect discourse” as a mode of representing the private thoughts and feelings of her characters. Consciousness is narrated as a sequence of unspoken sentences, often overlaid or colored with irony. The form of free indirect discourse allows the narrator to move in and out of a character’s thoughts, here giving them directly, there summarizing and commenting, all in a seamless continuum. Emma often talks to herself, but it is a deeper level of inner life that free

indirect discourse is able to represent. The heroines of the two other Chawton novels, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, are more withdrawn, more introspective, and Austen more consistently uses free indirect discourse with them to suggest aspects of the self that are less easy to access, that are less directly available, than the “secrets” about which Emma laughs to herself. She uses it to imply motives or feelings that emerge into light only when they have been elicited or disentangled from other motives and thoughts that harbor them.

In her presentation of such inner life, Jane Austen, I believe, must have absorbed the soliloquies of Shakespeare’s characters. These are of different kinds, and perform many different functions, some of them merely giving the audience information, but there would be general agreement that the most remarkable of them (the most “Shakespearean”) have two main characteristics. They express feelings or intentions that sharply contrast with the demeanor of the character in society (Hamlet’s ironic wit at court, followed by “O that this too, too solid flesh would melt”) and they vividly express psychological conflict. It is these two aspects of the soliloquy that Jane Austen adopts and adapts in her representation of the inner life of Fanny and Anne.

In this paper I shall comment only on Fanny Price. There are many resemblances between Fanny’s situation and that of Helena in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*, not the least of them being that both heroines are secretly, passionately and tenaciously in love with young men named Bertram.⁴ Helena’s feelings about her Bertram are revealed in two soliloquies after the family has left the stage. Her imagination is full of him, yet she knows she cannot marry Bertram, the difference in their social positions is too great. She feels that he is so far above her in status that she might as well love “a bright particular star/And think to wed it.” She struggles to overcome her feelings, though not very determinedly, and seems to resign herself to an unfulfilled, hapless love.

Just as Helena’s thoughts are divulged in a soliloquy after a departure, Fanny Price’s feelings about Edmund are divulged in a passage of free indirect discourse after he leaves her with the words that she is “one of his two dearest.” “[T]hough it told her no more than what she had long perceived, it was a stab;—for it

told of his own convictions and views. . . . It was a stab, in spite of every long-standing expectation; and she was obliged to repeat again and again that she was one of his two dearest, before the words gave her any sensation" (*MP* 264). Fanny Price too, feels that Edmund is too far above her for her ever to marry him. Like Helena, she feels her desires are transgressive. "To think of him as Miss Crawford might be justified in thinking, would in her be insanity. To her, he could be nothing under any circumstances—nothing dearer than a friend. Why did such an idea occur to her even enough to be reprobated and forbidden? It ought not to have touched on the confines of her imagination" (264-65).

More importantly, Jane Austen's representation of Fanny's inner thoughts derives not from Helena's soliloquies but from the way Shakespeare represents private psychological life in most of his later plays. Jane Austen has taken from the dramatist what Hazlitt, the critical contemporary of Jane Austen, referred to as "Shakespeare's peculiar manner of conveying the painful struggle of different thoughts and feelings, labouring for utterance and almost strangled in the birth" (Bate 175-6). This Shakespearean sense of emotional complexity, and particularly of the emergence of one feeling out of another, as if one feeling were hiding behind or within another, is not something that requires intense study of the plays—it will strike anyone who reads or sees an effective performance of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. This is what we find when Fanny's love for Edmund emerges out of her attempts to repress it, or when Anne's desire for Wentworth bursts through her struggles for rational self-control. "Now, how were his sentiments to be read? Was this like wishing to avoid her? And the next moment she was hating herself for the folly which asked the question" (*P* 60).

Perhaps the comparison can be made sharper. Is it too much to imagine that the exclamations and repetitions that convey emotional strain and conflict within the thoughts of Austen's heroines derive from her assimilation of Shakespeare's plays? "Could she believe Miss Crawford to deserve him, it would be—Oh! how different would it be—how far more tolerable!" Fanny thinks to herself (264). These are dramatic moments, but the way they puncture and punctuate the run of thoughts makes them quite

different from the overblown gestures and language that are so consistently the substance of dramatic speech in Burney or Elizabeth Inchbald.

I would argue then that Jane Austen did learn a great deal from Shakespeare, but that she did not imitate him. One might say rather that she had forgotten Shakespeare than that she remembered him. She learned how to organize a dramatic presentation so that it would simultaneously express a moral or psychological problem, and she learned how to present the complex inner life of characters, through a mode that none of her predecessors in the novel, not Burney, not Richardson, could readily have taught her. If, however, we call the novels “re-readings” of Shakespeare’s plays, I believe we are indulging our own fancies and merely molding the novelist into a replica of the critic.

To conclude, then. When Emma imagines “the Hartfield Edition” of Shakespeare she is full of “enchancing hubris” (Harris 169), imaginatively rivaling her great predecessor. Later in the novel she quotes Shakespeare again, but in a very different style. “The world is not their friend, nor the world’s law”: the line from *Romeo and Juliet* she calls up to express her feeling about the concessions that might be granted to a person in Jane Fairfax’s situation reflects too her own now chastened mood. Jane Austen may be alluding to a letter in Johnson’s *Rambler* (107) as much as she is to Shakespeare.⁵ If so, not just one male cultural icon is being called up but two. “My dear Dr Johnson,” Samuel Johnson, the most famous editor of Shakespeare, is as important a presence in Jane Austen’s novels as was Shakespeare himself—and a very different one. But that’s another story.

NOTES

1. *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, CUP, 1989; Jocelyn Harris, “Jane Austen and the Burden of the (Male) Past: The Case Reexamined” in Devoney Looser, ed. *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995, pp. 87-100. Harris claims that “*Emma* draws all its main elements from *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (93). Claire Tomalin, on the other hand, finds that the parallels between *Mansfield Park* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are “obvious” (329).

2. Harold Bloom’s famous polemic *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) proposes a relation between poet and successor poet that is almost entirely one of conflict and antagonism: Oedipus and Laius fighting each other at the crossroads.

3. "The striking and powerful contrasts in which Shakespeare abounds could not escape observation; but the use he makes of the principle of analogy to reconcile the greatest diversities of character and to maintain a continuity of feeling throughout, have not been sufficiently attended to" (William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 Vols. IV, 183, quoted by Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 151).
4. These parallels have never (to my knowledge) been noticed, perhaps because *All's Well* is one of the least read, and least frequently produced, of Shakespeare's plays.
5. Emma actually says "the world is not their's nor the world's law," which is how Shakespeare's line is cited in *The Rambler*. See Mary Lascelles's note in Chapman's edition, p. 493. This letter is not actually by Johnson, but Jane Austen wouldn't know that.

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In *Emma* and *Persuasion* Jane Austen reaches back to Shakespeare and to Chaucer. She calls on Richardson now only to solve particular problems, for where almost every page of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park* bear traces of him, he does not much matter in the last two novels. She who had already drawn on Locke, Milton, Richardson, and others, now places herself even more firmly in the main line of English literature, proving the truth of Dryden's contention that poets too have a heritage, "our Lineal Descents and Clans, as well as other Families" [Poems, IV. 144...]. Emma says smugly that "a Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage" (75). The following discussion might serve as that long note. Despite their differing historical contexts and genres, Austen and Shakespeare both portray the interchangeability of lovers and the fickle nature of romantic attachment in these works. Both artists combine tragic and comedic elements in their oeuvre to make an argument about the possibility of the harmonious resolution of romantic attachments within societal constraints. Through this lens it becomes apparent that Austen, like Shakespeare, is modelling a way in which to see the world. The first version of this chapter was written in honour of Timothy Fuller's fifty years of teaching at The Co... Wiltshire, John. "The Hartfield Edition: Jane Austen and Shakespeare". *Persuasions* 21 (1999): 212-14. Google Scholar.