Reinventing Jane

The Cult of Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century

B.A. Thesis

Milica Popović
Kt.: 240791-4129

Supervisor: Julian Meldon D’Arcy
May 2018
Abstract

Jane Austen is an author whose works and reputation have won the hearts of readers in all corners of the world, and secured her a permanent place in the canon of not only English but world literature, as well. Her six novels focus on the emotional portraits of ordinary people within quaint, unexceptional English villages. Their light-hearted romances and qualms, sprinkled with sarcasm in the shape of author’s narrative voice, without exception result in happy endings. However unimpressive her themes and stories may seem, throughout the years Austen has been read and loved by kings, generals and soldiers, as well as intellectuals, radicals and the common folk. More importantly, Austen is one of the few, if not the only female author of her time whose works have reached the peak of their popularity over two centuries after their initial publishing, in an era exceptionally different from her own.

This essay focuses on the rise of popularity of the works of Jane Austen in the era of post-feminist and capitalist socio-cultural influences, the reasons behind it as well as its effects on the current perception and image of the author. The question of the modern day appreciation of Austen is answered through an exploration of the history of critique of her work, as well as the analysis of the current, capitalist-influenced iteration of fourth-wave feminism, dubbed “marketplace feminism” by author Andi Zeisler. Examined as well are the methods of adapting Austen to fit to this ideology, through films, spinoffs and blogs, as well as her overall presence, promoted by her ardent fans, the Janeites. In conclusion, the resulting twenty-first century perceptions of Austen are revealed to be directly correlated to the misogynist, patriarchal-influenced “chick-lit” culture, thus corrupting the modern understanding of Jane Austen as a feminist author.
Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1

1.1. The early critique of Austen’s femininity . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 4

1.2 The modern critique of Austen . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 5

2.1 Austen’s immortality . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 8

2.2 The “Janeites” . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 9

2.3 Dualistic interpretations . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 11

3.1 “Marketplace feminism” and the “chick-lit” culture . . . . . . . . . . . . 15

3.2 Branding Austen . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

3.3 The Pride and Prejudice of the modern Janeites . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 20

3.4 “Waiting for Mr Darcy” . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 23

4.0 Conclusion . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 27

Bibliography . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 29
1.0 Introduction

The present day shifts in political and social spheres cause great changes in all areas of life, and inspire a deep reevaluation of the axioms of culture. In whittling at the building blocks of society, one constantly takes part and indeed lives in a process of probing, testing and classifying matters as appropriate or inappropriate, relevant or outdated. The past few decades have seen the rise of numerous movements aiming to inspire change in all domains of global culture. The generations leading the world into the future are motivated not only to question the ever-engulfing swarms of new media produced by the show-business industry, but also to challenge the pillars of creative and philosophical craft established decades, if not centuries ago. Works once hailed as ideals of art, literature and cinema are put under the microscope of new standards. At the same time, previously unnoticed aspects are discovered, adapted as they are to the standards that the times and the sociopolitical climate set in place. Additionally, the medium of expression has changed; today, a young reader is provided with a novel and various forms of its adaptations almost simultaneously. This further changes the lens through which one evaluates art, adding another dimension to it, resulting in a kaleidoscope of images, rather than a micrograph.

Dissecting the metamorphoses of classic works is an exciting task which yields surprising results. All aspects have to be taken into consideration. The source, the adaptation and its reception form a unique organism in a constantly shifting environment that can only be studied when caught in the present moment like in resin, before changing anew. In order to influence all subsequent changes for the better, one must first identify the positives and the negatives. The subject of this essay is Jane Austen, the early nineteenth-century British novelist whose six novels have achieved not only immortality, but unusually potent relevance in the times so different than her own. The reputation of Austen’s body of work underwent drastic changes in the last two centuries. A relatively undervalued author in her own time, Austen acquired a cult status in the early twentieth century, becoming a favorite of many esteemed literary figures as well as the middle classes. “Janeites” were an intellectual group consisting of cultured men of the upper class, who read, analyzed and passionately defended Austen, to the mirth of her opponents. With
the onset of early feminist thought, Austen’s work was criticized for its propagation of traditional patriarchal values, yet simultaneously hailed for its brisk and amusing, yet uniquely female critique of the British upper-class society of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Being one of the few women authors of the period added an unequivocal weight to her word, however. Despite its focus on a very limited section of English life and experience, her work gradually found passionate readers in all corners of the world, making her one of, if not the most popular female author in the history of British literature. Furthermore, it is important to note that a major contribution to the increase in Austen’s readership were numerous filmic adaptations of her works. Beginning with the 1938 TV film *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Michael Barry, the six novels have been adapted for small and big screens over thirty times. Additionally, they have generated numerous literary spin-offs, sequels and even motivational guidebooks.

Austen’s present-day popularity can be traced to a sudden increase that happened in a very specific cultural environment of the early 1990s. Namely, the burgeoning capitalist offspring of third-wave feminism, labeled “marketplace feminism” by author Andi Zeisler, which promoted the profitable “girl power” message not only through beauty products and pop-music, but also the choice of literature and films for women. As a result, the “chick-flick” industry was born. Simultaneously, adaptations of period romance novels underwent a renaissance; Austen’s own *Pride and Prejudice* was adapted in 1995 into the most beloved period film of the era. The rapidly developing capitalist-feminist influence affected these adaptations too, and through them generations of the new Austen audience. The resulting Millennial incarnation of “Janeites” is therefore unique; it is unequivocally shaped by both the environment that gave birth to it, and its own interpretation of the overall message of Austen’s work.

This essay explores the causal relationship between the feminist image of Jane Austen influenced by the third- and fourth-wave “marketplace feminism”, and the subsequent creation and the inherently classist ideology of her twenty-first century fans. In particular, the focus is placed on a direct reflection of negative qualities of “marketplace feminism” onto Austen’s passionate Western audience. The novel *Pride and Prejudice*, as
well as the modern-day perception of the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, and their romance, are used as examples in understanding the historical and modern shifts in perception of Austen’s overall message. The conclusion offers possible ways of breaking down the inherent elitism of the modern-day “Janeites”, and making her work accessible to all instead.
1.1 The early critique of Austen’s femininity

Modern media, as well as both casual readers and even some scholars have created a twenty-first century feminist icon in Jane Austen. Similarly glorified are some of her fellow female authors of the nineteenth century, such as the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson. However, in order to not only understand the reasons behind this assumption but also reevaluate its truthfulness, it is important to reconsider the factors that have inspired it. The most notable one has to be Austen’s struggle for success among the predominantly male critical audience which remained traditionally patriarchal until fairly recently. Both her work and her personal life had been evaluated primarily by men, whose opinions were often diametrically opposed. The critique of Austen’s work is therefore a valuable source which offers dualistic perspectives; it is interesting to see whether the elements that inspired either ire or admiration were inherently and traditionally feminine or not.

The particularities of Jane Austen’s life, collected mostly from family records and her written correspondence, paint a fragmented picture that her admirers have always attempted to improve. In the preface to a collection of critical essays on Austen, Ian Watt points out that most of the factual knowledge of Austen’s life stems from biographies assembled by “the discreet hands” of her relatives (Watt 6). There is little doubt that her life story contained much that needed to be hidden – the biographical facts create a rather average image. Austen had never travelled outside of England, and despite being described by her brother Henry as having possessed a “considerable share” of “personal attractions”, she never married (Austen). Her work reached publication only in the last years of her life, and she was bewildered by the fame that they gained her. Still, she was one of the rare female authors of her time to experience the benefits of the publication of her work; Austen was able to support herself financially from the royalties of Sense and Sensibility. It is therefore not difficult to see how these factors can be presently perceived as traditionally feminist in a sense – as feminist as a life of a woman author could have been in the late Enlightenment period. However, the manner in which these circumstances affected her work was interpreted in vastly different ways by her early critics. Contemporaries such as
Sir Walter Scott and poet laureate Robert Southey held Austen’s novels in high esteem, praising her detailed focus on the minutiae of personal feelings and character shifts. The authors of the subsequent Romantic and Victorian periods disagreed, attacking her thematic limitations as mundane and restrictive. She was criticized for being “without sentiment, without poetry” by Charlotte Brontë. As Watt adds, she interpreted Austen’s subject limitations “as synonymous with an unimaginative and complacent acceptance of the intolerable confinements of mundane reality.” (Watt 4) The “peculiarly English” aspects of her novels which would skyrocket Austen’s popularity in the late twentieth century, were despised by American critics such as Mark Twain and Henry James. Interestingly enough, Watt points out James’ 1905 hypothesis on the correlation between Austen’s popularity and “commercial pressures” of “publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their “dear”, our dear, everybody’s dear Jane so infinitely to their material purpose […]” (Watt 8). This observation will have proven even more poignant in modern times, in the environment focused on profit through constant reinterpretation and adaptation of Austen’s, as well as many other classic novels.

1.2 The modern critique of Austen

The twentieth century brought important changes to literary critique, and thus to the perception of Austen’s work. She was a favorite of the Bloomsbury group, E.M. Forster admiring the organic symbiosis of her characters and their environment, confined as it may be (Watt 9). Furthermore, Virginia Woolf notes the inherent limitations of Austen’s gender upon her craft (Woolf 18), defending her focus on the themes from her immediate surroundings as honest, and praising “the balance of her gifts singularly perfect” (Woolf 22). Even some feminist aspects of the novels were noted decades before an actual feminist critique was introduced. Edmund Wilson, in his essay “A Long Talk on Jane Austen,” points out with amazement the contrast between Austen’s personal life of a secluded, “well-bred spinster […] who found her subjects mainly in the problems of young provincial girls looking for husbands” with her reputation, which he compares to that of Shakespeare and the great Russian and French novelists (Wilson 35). He goes on to mention the male perspective of Austen’s heroines, which he states construe a “marvelous portraiture of a
gallery of different types of women”. Additionally, he brings up the uniqueness of the character of Emma Woodhouse, whom he describes as a woman who dominates not only other women, but also the men in her life as the single master of Hartfield (Wilson 39). Wilson further elaborates the detailed, realistic relationships that Austen depicts between pairs of sisters, connecting it rather chauvinistically to Austen’s supposed lack of experience in romantic relationships with men and her emotional confinement to family bonds.

Another factor important in the interpretation of Austen’s work, closely linked to her feminist reputation today, is her specific view and propagation of a certain type of behavior. Similar to the constraints of the class environment within her narratives, she also encloses them within a strict network of religious and moral rules. The way in which this quality has traveled through time is interesting in itself. Again, the connection to Austen’s own lifestyle and upbringing is inevitable, as C. S. Lewis observes in “A Note on Jane Austen”, where he points out the inherently English features of the morals Austen promotes. He links it primarily to her use of “nearly theological words”, as well as “the great abstract nouns of the classical English moralists” such as “good sense, courage, contentment, fortitude” as the ideals towards which her characters strive (Lewis 27). She lets her heroines achieve a change of heart through the rejecting of their old ways; her key is female transformation, not necessarily chauvinistically, but rather through striving towards her own ideals. On the other hand, the arrival of feminist theory put Austen’s moralizing under a harsh spotlight; it was considered to be propagating typical patriarchal values by the feminist critics of the 1970s. In Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, Marilyn Butler criticizes the tendency of having Jane Austen “be trusted to assist one’s choices in the modern world” (5), because of the “conservative reaction” of her novels towards the more “permissive, individualistic, and personally expressive” novels of her female predecessors such as Mary Wollstonecraft (6, 7). Others have interpreted Austen’s heroines as the subversive examples of Wollstonecraft’s tradition, dubbed “Enlightenment feminism” by Margaret Kirkham (Butler 8). In Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar consider both Butler’s and Kirkham’s notions, as well as the conservative and progressive
aspects of Austen’s work and reach a multifaceted conclusion. Namely, by analyzing the heroines and their counterparts (Elizabeth and Jane Bennett, Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax), they assess the two-fold manner in which Austen not only expresses her own “anxiety of authorship”, but the universal female dissonance between the “self as subject and object” (Gilbert 162). It is therefore interesting to examine how the modern feminist image of Austen’s work is based upon this very dissonance, established and nurtured as it still is by the neo-liberal capitalist influence on feminism.
2.1 Austen’s immortality

In order to examine the manner in which the perception of Jane Austen and her body of work has shifted through the centuries, and thus become a layered curiosity that it is today, it is pivotal to first explore the elements that have indeed kept the author and her work relevant throughout the decades of shifting sociopolitical circumstances. Additionally, this examination informs not only the historical creation of a brand out of Austen, but also tracks the creation of her fan base, which, in modern times at least, carries at least partially the responsibility of representing the author to the general public.

Which factors have made Jane Austen immortal? The passionate readership that she has amassed since the publication of her first novel has had various reasons to attribute immortality to the author; the proof of her continuous appeal to millions of people with different tastes, born and shaped by different eras, is perhaps the greatest proof of her immortality in itself. “Everybody’s dear Jane” has been adapted to historical events and societal shifts which have shaped mankind, sometimes resulting in surprising consequences. Jane’s Fame author Claire Harman, points out that Austen was a great favorite of the British soldiers at the front in World War I. She explains that the fact that “the trenches were full of Janeites” was inspired by the “solace” and “means to escape” into another, more peaceful and idyllic era provided by her works, along with other literary staples of the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Harman 181). She mentions, too, the “therapeutic potential of Austen’s novels” in their being “prescribed as an aid to convalescence” to wounded and shell-shocked soldiers. Furthermore, Harman points out the widespread potential of her work in a discussion on Rudyard Kipling’s short story “The Janeites”, a work not only representative of Austen’s “curative powers” upon the saddened author himself, but also varying classes of the British society: the Masons, the soldiers and the common folk, too (185). The same qualities which have been disputed over and rejected by the Romantic and Victorian critics, namely Austen’s self-proclaimed “little bit of ivory” portraits of the lives and affairs of “four or five families in a country village” (Jane Austen’s Letters), “had come to represent qualities that not only defined a sorely threatened English culture, but held out the means to repair it” (Harman 180). This was proven to be
true again during World War II; in his memoirs, Winston Churchill reminisces over the enjoyment of listening to his wife read *Pride and Prejudice* to him whilst he lay ill in bed in 1943, admiring the “calm lives they had, those people!” (Churchill, as qtd in Harman 218) Numerous productions of the novels have been staged across Britain throughout the war, and the American-produced 1940 screen adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson, in particular “gently reflected the relation of the Allies in the war, and the heritage that both countries were jointly defending” (Harman 216). Undoubtedly, the quaint affairs of love and marriage of “Old England”, set during the peaceful time nestled in between the perilous conflicts of the Great Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars, have always provided readers with a sense of serenity and hope. Coupled with Austen’s unique sense of humor and cutting wit, it can be said that they brought joy at times when it was sorely needed; this quality has no doubt inspired the author’s canonization in universities and schools in the first half of the twentieth century.

### 2.2 The “Janeites”

Austen’s immortality has not only been measured in the sentimental, and even healing values that she has thus represented in the lives and homes of her fellow British people. In less than a century following her death, she had completely enchanted a perhaps entirely unexpected group of people. Already in the 1880s and 1890s, esteemed critical essays and academic lectures described both Austen’s work and her very name as “a passion and a creed, if not quite a religion” (Howells, qtd. in Harman 162). This passion had not been a mere short-term fad; namely, over thirty years later in 1923, Virginia Woolf humorously mentions the existence of “twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon [Austen’s] genius as if it were an insult offered to the chastity of their Aunts.” These gentlemen, who would have at that point existed for almost three decades under the general public’s mocking nickname of “Janeites”, consisted of university professors and famous critics to whose “masculine sensibility” Woolf suspected Austen owed a certain percentage of her “present celebrity” (Woolf 15).
In the current post-feminist age, it is with no small degree of irony that one considers the possibility of Woolf having been right almost a century ago; that the current status of the beloved author, whose characters are deeply associated with feminine progress and liberation, is directly correlated to the opinions and favoritism of a group of conservative, middle-aged, upper-class, white men of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. The original “Jane Austen Book Club” could not have been more different from the middle class, female-dominated current one; yet this sharp oxymoron is exactly the core which makes the subject of Austen’s fan base itself worth studying. Some of her most passionate fans were world-renowned authors such as E. M. Forster and the aforementioned Rudyard Kipling, alongside highly esteemed critics such as R. W. Chapman and Edinburgh University professor, George Saintsbury. As Harman reminds us, Saintsbury himself coined the term “Janite” [sic] in his preface to the 1894 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, in order to describe the author’s tightly knit, intellectual fan base as “the sect – fairly large and yet unusually choice” (Saintsbury, qtd in Harman 161). What inspired this sudden interest in Austen were the numerous biographies suddenly emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century, heralded primarily by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh’s 1869 publication, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. “A society of Austen-appreciators, self-selected for their superior discrimination” of those who did not sufficiently appreciate what Austen-Leigh dubs “Miss Austen’s merits”, guaranteed what Harman poignantly calls “snob value” to the author’s name (158).

Whereas Austen’s work was so out of favor with the Romantics, early Victorians and American transcendentalists for its complacency with the strict moral codes of English society, these factors seem to have had a completely opposite effect on the original Janeites. This is particularly true of the early Austen lovers. As noted by critic R. H. Hutton, their critique not only rejoiced in the restrained depth of character, and range of emotion presented through the author’s “fine feminine sieve”, but also expressed a wistful longing and nostalgia for “a social world […] relieved of the bitterest elements and infinitely more entertaining […] which rivets the attention without wearying it, and makes life appear far less dreary and burdensome” (Hutton, qtd. in Harman 169). That the early Janeites’ love of
“Divine Jane” overcame the cerebral is proven by their attachment to particular novels, and even characters. Harman notes that Professor Saintsbury made a “spectacle of a respected critic and academic” of himself upon indulging “in sentimental reverie about Austen’s characters, and confided that Elizabeth Bennet was top of his list of fictional heroines that ‘no man of taste and spirit’ could help falling in love with and wanting to marry” (161). Particularly interesting here are the ties between this idealization of times past in a rapidly progressing society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, ties that can be said to have been transposed to the modern age, as well. While the established immortal elements of Austen’s novels have surely factored the most in attracting readers, there is something yet to be said for the differing and often quintessentially opposite interpretations that have been promoted and thus catered to her fans of all classes.

2.3 Dualistic interpretations

The early twentieth century brought changes to the exclusive status of the Janeites’ club. Austen’s work was introduced to school and university curriculums and thus became available to lower classes, which proved themselves capable of enjoying and discussing them, as Rudyard Kipling satirically touches upon in “The Janeites”. However, the image of the author and her novels still largely depended on the intellectual elite. The aforementioned elements of attraction to her work, were interpreted in varying, opposed and sometimes even harmful ways. For instance, Austen’s ever-present fixation upon the mechanisms of a small set of people, her doll-house like depiction of English society contained within the walls of nation-wide moral peculiarities, had the intellectuals draw rather xenophobic and overtly nationalistic conclusions. These conclusions would then color the message that they would claim Austen to represent. Austen’s own seclusion within the Steventon-Bath-London triangle, as well as the limited spaces her character were allowed, had certainly factored in these conclusions. However, it is more likely than not that the hostile climate of the Great War had firmly established them, and promoted them as a general conclusion, supported by many highly esteemed Janeites. Additionally, Austen had remained exclusively British for a long time, as both translations and interest in her novels were limited overseas. As Harman states, “part of the appeal of Janeism was its
ingrained Englishness, which for cultural and linguistic reasons slowed the dissemination of her works in the non-anglophone world” (174). She further proves that this had been a point of pride to “xenophobic Janeites” which took

comfort in the thought that Austen’s humor was so delicate and gossamer and all that, so finely ironized, that no translation could reproduce it; even the best translation ensured that the essential “Jane” remained where she had always remained in life, in England. (175)

Curiously enough, the effects of this rather exclusivist view perniciously permeate the perceptions of Austen’s modern readership. In the present sociopolitical climate, the “ingrained Englishness” of the author, and indeed any work created in a climate of institutionalized classism and racism of the early nineteenth century Britain, whilst taken with the obvious grain of salt, is still celebrated as cerebral and intellectually superior. Is this a relic of times past, or a peculiar gene which the modern Janeites have inherited from their predecessors? The question poses itself as even more interesting when considered in respect to the current, fourth-wave feminist appropriation of Austen.

The feminist qualities of Austen’s work have been recognized and examined by academics as well as ardent fans for decades. However, it should be noted that at the time when Western feminism was only beginning to surface, not only were these qualities relatively unappreciated because of the governing social circumstances, but Austen’s literature overall has been interpreted by the most ardent circles of Janeites as rather anti-feminist. As established, Janeites consisted primarily of highly-esteemed intellectual men, university professors and literary critics with a soft spot for “dear Jane”, whose opinions were held in high regard. The fact that Austen had been a woman herself did not at all contribute in proving the fact that women were as equally capable writers as men. Rather, as Harman notes, these esteemed men saw her as one of their own because they “took comfort in perceiving a controlling intelligence […]: discriminating, generous, critical and humorous – a ‘powerful mind’” behind the typically feminine, domestic and romantic topics at the center of Austen’s novels. Her unique, beloved critical voice became a tool of
appropriation; as Harman continues, “cultural conservatives took this as evidence, not that women might have greater potential than was usually assumed, but that Austen was some sort of exception, like a honorary man” (170). Furthermore, her modest personal circumstances were used to support arguments against the newly-formed New Woman movement; she became “a model of a high-achieving woman in an unreformed society, who seemed to have been perfectly happy with her lot”, never complaining about “the conditions of her own existence, or the rights of women generally.” Austen’s greatness and skill, which she harnessed with ease in spite of her circumstances, were used to underline the “frivolity” of requests for emancipation and rights of ordinary women (Harman 170). Clinging onto the structural framework of “threatened” Englishness, class society and terse Victorian morality, which were teetering on the edge of a new century, the Janeites even prescribed Austen’s novels as models of good behavior to modern women. In his idolization of Elizabeth Bennet, George Saintsbury went as far as to say she had “nothing of the ‘New Woman’ about her”, being as she was “not in the least ‘impudent and mannish grown’” (Saintsbury, qtd. in Harman 170). Upon consideration of this issue, the perhaps overtly strict tone of the early feminist critics’ assessment of Austen’s novels becomes more understandable, as the power of creating dominant mainstream perceptions lay for decades in the hands of men such as Saintsbury. Ironically enough, the modern reader is more likely to have encountered Elizabeth Bennet, bold, cunning and proud, as a patron saint of feminism.

However, the real root of the feminist interpretation of Austen’s work was a slowly emerging ideological perception on a completely different end of the scale than the one of the intellectual male Janeites. Despite their best efforts at propagating Austen in a misogynist light, the “New Women” of the steadily rising wave of female emancipationists, who would later become the suffragette movement, had begun claiming Jane Austen as their own. It is interesting to consider how this relationship will have influenced her modern readership and related media in general. Contrary to the male Janeites, the earliest suffragettes recognized the liberating aspects of Austen’s literature and the author’s biography itself. Namely, the same elements which had been appropriated by intellectual
men – the holy, almost virginal image of Jane Austen, the woman, and the depiction of her secluded, domestic life as sufficiently satisfactory – were turned on their head by the early feminists. She was praised for her “good work” as a person of the female sex; as per Harman, Millicent Fawcett “promoted Austen to independent young women of the working and lower middle class” (171) as an inspiration and an example of an achieved, fulfilled womanhood. Her personal life was analyzed in a different light. The financially independent bachelorette status was transposed onto the young, poor, revolutionary female population, whom the general public was quick to ridicule as “odd” and “mannish” for their unmarried status, and their prioritizing of their cause above all. Curiously enough, the qualities of Saintsbury’s beloved Elizabeth Bennet were perceived as those easily gracing a socially excluded suffragette, what with her “attempt to take initiative or […] assert herself emotionally”, characteristics condemned in women of the early twentieth century by the prescriptive *Yellow Book* (Harman 171). Virginia Woolf, too, adopted Austen as her own, and can be said to have officially announced the end of the age of Janeites’ critical ownership of her, in the preface to the 1922 edition of *Love and Friendship*. She ridicules the “reputation [sic.] that has been accumulating on top of us like […] quilts and blankets”, dismissing the Janeites as “the voices of the elderly and distinguished, of the clergy and the squirearchy” and celebrating the fresh page turned upon Austen criticism, and the long-awaited possibility to reinvent her image for the new century (Woolf).
3.1 “Marketplace feminism” and the “chick-lit” culture

Understanding the present state of readership and the overall fan base of an author as firmly canonically established as Jane Austen requires a consideration of both the manner in which the canon has been influenced by the social challenges of modern times, and the ever-changing expansion and reception of the content of various media. While her work was noted for containing a great capacity to be profitable, even by Henry James in 1905, the multiple ways in which Austen is now mass-marketed is a complex, if artificially created organism of its own. The roots of the worldwide spread of the current Austen fever can be traced to the 1990s, and the propagation of the prevalent medium of the modern-day intake of most literary classics – the period feature film. On its own, the period adaptation represents an easy, entertaining way to experience a work of art of the literary medium. However, it is the strategically aimed marketing towards a specific, middle class and predominantly white female target group which creates an intricate connection between Austen, “chick-lit” and the fourth-wave “marketplace feminism”.

In order to fully explore this connection, the term “marketplace feminism” must firstly be explained. Coined by feminist author and activist Andi Zeisler, it represents the brand of fourth-wave feminism which sources its revolutionary qualities in marketable, mass-produced empowerment aimed at middle class women through products and pop-culture (Zeisler). This particular iteration of the movement has been in the making for a long time, peaking in the mid-2010s. Its roots, however, date back to the mid-1990s, coinciding with the creation of the popular “chick-lit” genre. The switch from the radical second wave to the capitalist-influenced third- and fourth wave feminisms happened over the last fifty years, and was directly correlated to the larger sociopolitical and economical shifts of the West, which worked to establish the notion of the neoliberal individual consumer. According to Marmina Gonick’s article “Between ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’: Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject”, women had initially been recognized as a consumer group during the post-WW2 economic boom of the 1950s, when “novel forms of cultural goods” were established and advertised in order to fulfill the “new demands” of female consumers (Gonick 5). With the subsequent rise of neoliberal thought in the 1990s,
the market adapted to the individual, promoting products and services as beneficial towards one’s own personal goals and benefits.

Thus, the advertisement industry appropriated feminism, using the ideas of empowerment, equality and Girl Power as buzzwords for marketing campaigns aimed towards the sexually and economically liberated women of the third wave. Johnston and Taylor in their dissection of the marketing of female body imagery dub this trend “feminist consumerism”; they define it as “focusing on commodity purchase and acquisition as a primary means to assert an identity, achieve a common good, express ethical (feminist) principles, and seek personal pleasure and social approval” (Johnston and Taylor 943). The revolution became a matter of personal choice rather than a social issue, expressed through particular fashions and tastes; third wave empowerment focused on “feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are” (Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein 195). Reflecting the political shift of responsibility from the state onto the individual, the idea of sisterhood had been replaced by individual-scale efforts, and the propagation of work on both the inner and outer self, through popular literature and self-help books among others. As Gonick notes, feminist consumerism became “ubiquitous, entering mainstream cultural arenas through an incredible range of products and services”, reflecting pop culture as well, and influencing the creation and image of “feminism, with all its implied threat, cuddly, sexy, safe, and most importantly, sellable.” (Gonick 6, 9)

Whilst undoubtedly rather simplistic in nature, this iteration of feminism has fundamentally affected generations of young women who grew up with it, influencing their perceptions of both themselves and the movement in itself; it was thus normalized and continued to be propagated for years to come. The trend is very much alive today, and, admittedly, the viral reach of such personal-political messages in the age of social media is not to be underestimated; feminist consumerism is not without its positives. However, and especially considering the rapidly lowering age of both pop- and social media consumers, it is crucially important to raise awareness of its negatives. As a movement aiming to erase inequality of gender, race and class, feminism is inherently Marxist in nature (Smith); thus
its attractive, capitalist iteration which caters primarily to white women of the first world’s middle class, often at the cost of discriminating against poor women of color in impoverished third world countries, rings hollow. Additionally, the beauty and pop-culture industries frequently promote their products under the brand of empowerment, in particular relying on the idea of subverting societal standards of beauty and gender in their advertising. However, feminist scholars warn that these images of subversion serve to merely reinstate the norms they claim to fight, working in favor of maintaining, not disrupting, e.g. the idea of beauty as essentially and inherently female (Sastre 940).

Although it may appropriate different aspects of the feminist message without necessarily prioritizing the issue of beauty, “chick-lit” culture participates in the reinstating of the patriarchal norms that it seems to reject through its women-friendly, women-centered narratives. This is a topic which has been frequently discussed ever since the genre’s creation in the mid-1990s. Moreover, Jane Austen’s own work is irrevocably tied to the genre, considering that its pioneer novel is considered to be The Bridget Jones Diary, a novel for which author Helen Fielding claimed Pride and Prejudice was the main source of inspiration. Thus, it is no wonder that Austen is frequently mentioned within the discourse on the feminist and, likewise, misogynist aspects of “chick-lit”, as over time, her plots were used as a formula for many novels and films, also known as “chick-flicks”. In her PhD dissertation, titled “Of Bridgets, Rebeccas, And Carries: Chick Culture Defines Woman”, Vivian Ruiz exposes the toxic patriarchal connection between “chick-lit” and the firmly established, mythical elements of the classic romance plot, itself derived from nineteenth-century literature, and the ways in which they both capitalize on misogyny and heteronormative gender behavior, deeply influencing the audience’s psyche. She claims that Chic-Lit novels and Chick-Flicks are particularly notorious for relying on love and romance as plot framing devices. As such, these genres participate in spreading and perpetuating the notion of heterosexual romantic love as the absolute key to happiness. In doing this, they not only exclude non-heterosexual women from the grand narrative they constitute but they also rely on antiquated patriarchal, oppressive ideas of love and happiness by ascribing limiting gender
roles to men and women and setting rigid, normalizing parameters for the relationships between them. (Ruiz 50)

Furthermore, “chick-lit” content is colored with the brand of female liberation perfectly aligned with the tenets of “marketplace feminism”; in cases of novels such as Candace Bushnell’s Sex and the City and Confessions of a Shopaholic, the female protagonists are a hedonistic bunch enjoying their status of middle-class neoliberal individuals by indulging in excessive shopping and seeming sexual freedom, and thus an overall perceived sense of empowerment – yet all within the carefully constructed patriarchal bell jar. Therefore, “marketplace feminism” and “chick-lit” culture are irrevocably tied and blended together in a unique manner within the microcosm of Jane Austen fans.

3.2 Branding Austen

Ever since the publication of Austen-Leigh’s A Memoir of Jane Austen, there has been great interest in the commercialization of her work. Whether through illustrated editions, magazines dedicated to the author, or even pilgrimages to her resting place in Winchester Cathedral, early Janeites found ways to enjoy Austen even after having read the novels time and time again. This sentiment is mirrored in a modern audience, yet the number of adaptations, products, and spin-offs Austen has generated is higher than her contemporaries could have ever imagined. As already stated, the sudden worldwide spread of Austen’s popularity can be almost exclusively blamed on the filmic adaptations of her novels in the 1990s, heavily affected by the birth of “marketplace feminism” and “chick-lit” culture.

The adaptation which not only changed the way the modern world saw the prim and proper British romance novel author of two centuries past, but revolutionized period adaptations overall is the BBC’s 1995 mini-series Pride and Prejudice, produced by Sue Birtwistle and directed by Andrew Davies. Harman notes that the five-part film, along with the following adaptations of Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion that same year, then two versions of Emma in 1996, and a Mansfield Park in 1998, captivated the audiences by playing into the burgeoning Hollywood desire for “chick-flick” narratives focusing on an unattractive young woman obtaining the love – and riches – of a handsome man, as well as
by casting leading Hollywood heart-throbs to play Austen’s legendary characters (Harman 258). Yet, this is not the only way in which the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* in particular catered for, and indeed, generated its widespread yet oddly specific audience. Namely, on top of the fact that the film’s interpretation of the novel in many ways coincided with the narrative elements of “chick-lit”, the director himself pushed this agenda further by instilling more elements catering specifically to what is known as the female gaze. A mirror-like counterpart to the infamous, ever-present male gaze, itself a term coined by the feminist critic Laura Mulvey in the 1970s, the female gaze reverses the traditionally male/female, active/passive roles in cinema. The power of looking is taken from its patriarchal, active and traditionally male position, and given to the traditionally passive female sex. Thus, the phenomenon of “the determining [...] gaze [which] projects its phantasy on to the [...] figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 837) is placed upon the male body, as represented on screen by actors, which in case of Austen adaptations were usually attractive white men, some of whom, like Colin Firth, were even regarded as sex symbols in the 1990s (Harman 255). This role disruption can be interpreted as a bold directorial move, yet upon consideration of the tenets of “chick-lit” culture, it is obvious that it is in fact a move dovetailing with monetized motivations rooted in “marketplace feminism”.

The manner in which this shift affects the audience is peculiar in itself. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey claims that “the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (Mulvey 838); consequently, as she further claims, this is a phenomenon which places a sense of voyeuristic power in the psyche of not only the male characters on-screen, but first and foremost the male audience viewing the film. Thus, the complete reversal of the situation places a sense of voyeuristic power into the hands of the female audience observing an objectified male, presented in a way which fulfills the particular fantasies of the female gaze. Whether Firth’s Mr Darcy is gazing wistfully upon his beloved Elizabeth Bennet, or walking out of a lake in a wet shirt clinging to his chest (Davies), he is purposefully playing into the peculiar fantasy, which,
ironically enough, is not construed by the female mind, but rather implanted there by a male director for the purpose of achieving maximum profit. As Harman states, “the wet-shirt scene” is “a sequence which is now considered one of the most unforgettable moments in British TV history” (256); it has almost become emblematic of the 1995 adaptation. Moreover, any perceived sense of empowerment derived from witnessing these wish-fulfillment fantasies is rendered laughably fictional not only through the public judgment passed onto “the matrons of England”, as Harman mockingly calls the film’s satisfied female audience, but even more so through the reality of the devastatingly patriarchal society in which the male gaze is an omnipresent part of their everyday lives. The rare moments in which the cinematic female gaze is satisfied through the enjoyment of a romantic, handsome male lead entirely passive to a lens of the camera, shine, small and jewel-like, against the dark multitude of films, shows, advertisements and other media firmly entrenched in the domain of the male gaze; it is this fake shine which would have women believe, if only for a fleeting second, in an illusion of emancipation. However, the cinematic charm is broken soon after they leave the safe, dark confines of the theater. The sense of empowerment, and emotional and even physical pleasure derived from any such scenes, and indeed the film as a whole, speak in favor of the film itself being a product of “marketplace feminism”, rather than it being a real feminist work.

3.3 The Pride and Prejudice of the modern Janeites

The way in which Austen’s work has been marketed and adapted over the course of the past twenty-five years, as well as the sociopolitical circumstances of the modern age, have worked to shape a group of Janeites seemingly vastly different than their predecessors of a century ago. Considering the aforementioned, it is no surprise that the great majority of the Austen fan base consists of women – particularly middle-class, white women most likely to be the target group of “marketplace feminism” which has been involved in the shaping of the modern Austen content since the 1990s. In 2018, the age of the social media, it would be an understatement to say that a fan base does not largely affect the way in which a certain work of art, or indeed, an author is perceived by others. Thus, on top of two centuries of impressive reputation, passionate love and dedication by some of finest critics
of literature, as well as the entire British nation and then millions of readers across the world, Austen’s image is still created and re-created in the minds of the modern populace. It is therefore interesting to consider who reads Austen at this moment, and what sort of image they promote. In doing so, it is perhaps best to focus on a singular aspect of an interpretation of an Austen work. Due to its sheer popularity, the status it holds with readers and within the canon of English literature, as well as its overwhelming cultural and media presence, the novel to be observed is *Pride and Prejudice*, and, in particular, its elements which lend themselves easily to both feminist analysis, and adaptation in the modern age. Taking into consideration the connection between “marketplace feminism” and Jane Austen’s work, it is key to establish how *Pride and Prejudice* serves to uphold this trend through its adaptations and interpretations, thus affecting both the already targeted Austen audience as well as the general public. There are two elements that serve as examples here more than any others: the Janeites’ idolization of the character of Elizabeth Bennet, and the idolization of her romance with Fitzwilliam Darcy. The modern interpretation of both of these aspects promotes classist, misogynist and antiquated moralist undertones, definitively out of place in the current Western sociopolitical reality, thus, curiously, transposing the attitudes of the original Janeites to the present, and, furthermore, supporting the “marketplace feminist” agenda.

As already established, *Pride and Prejudice* served as a model for Helen Fielding’s *The Diary of Bridget Jones*, and belongs to, if not headlines, a canon of novels upon whose narrative structure the “chick-lit” genre has been built. As per Ruiz, one of the greatest attractions to the genre itself is a desire for escapism. However, as she continues, this would be impossible without a heroine to project onto, a character that enacts and lives the reader’s own desires; “By projecting herself onto the heroine, the reader […] escapes the real world if only for a while, and is able to live through her a desired romantic fantasy” (Ruiz 47). Thus, the modern reader of Jane Austen, whose critical opinions and tastes have been unequivocally nurtured by the ever-present influence of “marketplace feminism”, cannot help but identify not only with Elizabeth Bennet as the novel’s protagonist and romantic lead, but also as a woman who, through her virtual presence, is inherently
ascribed the desirable qualities of the modern age which may not have been allowed space in 1813. In turn, Elizabeth’s own characteristics are interpreted in the light of the current sociopolitical climate; in a recent article, popular online magazine Bustle claims women should aspire to be like Elizabeth, as her actions “hit an important chord: her happiness comes first, no matter that anyone else tries to tell her otherwise” (“8 Truly Feminist Lessons from Jane Austen that Every 21st Century Woman Can Use”). As discussed in chapter 3.1, the message of prioritizing one’s own happiness as a woman is the staple of “marketplace feminism”, and particularly typical of beauty industry advertisements. But is this neoliberal philosophy really what guides one of Austen’s most empowering female leads?

The primary reason for Elizabeth’s popularity both with the modern female reader and the likes of Professor Saintsbury over a century ago, is undoubtedly found in her intelligence, which not only distinguishes her from other, female and male, characters of the novel and thus ascertains her status of a progressive character, but also helps her overcome the constraints of her gender and class (Chang). This feature, when observed under the light of the “chick-lit” genre, which inherently colors the popular interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice* and analyses of its characters, yields interesting conclusions which are at odds with Elizabeth’s supposed status of a feminist heroine. And while her intelligence undoubtedly contributes to this status, and, as per Hui-Chun Chang’s article, “The Impact of the Feminist Heroine: Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*”, lets her achieve the character transformation that allows her to relinquish her titular prejudice, and, even more importantly, influence Mr Darcy to change his own personality (1), it also contributes to the opposite. Namely, as Chang’s main argument illustrates, Elizabeth’s wit can only flourish when contrasted to that of the women in her surroundings – even her beloved sister Jane’s (1). However, and particularly in light of the “marketplace feminist” influence on modern ingestion of culture, this contrast creates a sense of misogynistic otherness, typical of the rift between the “good and bad” archetypal female characters of “chick-lit” novels (Ruiz 48), and indeed, of the competitive animosity among women that translates to the real world. That Elizabeth, although “not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured
as Lydia,” is favored by her father for having “more of quickness than her sisters” (Austen 9, 10) reflects the modern, patriarchal favoritism of a certain type of womanhood above all others, as well as a typically chauvinist dichotomy between “brains and looks”, ever-present in “chick-lit” and “chick-flicks”, aimed at the corruption of the idea of sisterhood which seeks to unite, rather than divide.

It is also interesting to note the classist aspect of misguided appropriation of Elizabeth’s intelligence. Upon a survey of various blogs, and informal character analyses, essays and even Austen fan-fiction found online, it is clear that a pattern emerges. Namely, the most ardent lovers of “Dearest Lizzy” are women claiming to be book lovers, self-proclaimed “nerds”, who indulge not only in the classics, but also the vast array of Jane Austen spin-off media. These Janeites are primarily white, American, and belong to the middle class, religious, often educated at the university level, and often majoring in English literature; overall, a type of woman ready and able to afford a $23 cushion stating “The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid” (“15 Jane Austen Accessories You Need To Own Right Now”). And while the spread of this influence might seem to be contained to an online community, it also spreads into the real world through conventions, exclusive Regency balls, pilgrimages and, even, adaptations. The 2007 Robin Swicord “chick-flick”, Jane Austen Book Club, illustrates perfectly, albeit on a small scale, the middle-class, white exclusivity created around the image of Jane Austen (Swicord); it is ironic that the film itself is commentary on the current state of the fan base, being as it is a product of the industry which has bastardized Austen under the influence of “marketplace feminism”.

3.4 “Waiting for Mr Darcy”

Elizabeth Bennet thus becomes a rather skewed point of identification for the modern Janeite; however, it is the perception of her relationship with Mr Darcy which reveals most the depth of influence of the inherently patriarchal post-feminist attitudes on Austen’s literature. Similarly to Elizabeth, Mr Darcy is adored to the point of sanctification among today’s Janeites. A simple example of this can be found in online shops: hundreds of items,
accessories, and even kitchen towels are embellished with “Waiting for Mr Darcy”, “What would life be without Mr Darcy?”, “In a world of Wickhams, keep looking for a Darcy” (Etsy). The tone here is one of longing; the young, female Janeite, having already identified with the modern iteration of Elizabeth Bennet, is on a prowl for her counterpart. It is only logical that the result is similarly skewed by the capitalist lens, however, perhaps even more dangerous for its influence on young women’s real lives through the artificially implanted ideas of romance. One such Janeite writes on her blog, “It’s not crazy that I am in love with a fictional character from hundreds of years ago. I’m simply setting a high standard” (LaCourse). While informal writing can be given the benefit of the doubt, it is pivotal to understand the forces at work behind statements such as these. Namely, as Chang claims, “Mr Darcy perceives reading to be the necessary accomplishment for women and deems Elizabeth’s intellect her most admirable quality” (2); taking into consideration the conclusions of 3.3, it is here clear that Mr Darcy’s favoritism of Elizabeth, described as such, dovetails with the patriarchal favoring of one specific type of womanhood. Darcy’s preferences for intellect, as well as his education, are a direct result of his belonging to nobility and upper class; thus, as Chang herself concludes, Elizabeth’s intelligence works in her favor to attract a powerful, financially superior man – she is not only capable of being his intellectual equal, but also of changing her personality and influencing his, thus deepening the attraction (Chang 2). However, whether or not this is a feminist action is difficult to claim with certainty; Austen allows Jane, Elizabeth’s kind-hearted elder sister, a happy marriage to a “truly amiable” Mr Bingley, whose lightness of attitude makes him a much more favorable bachelor than Darcy, yet neither Jane nor Bingley undergo transformations as great as the central couple (Austen 79). Additionally, Austen offers a modicum of happiness, albeit a very different iteration of it, to the character of Lydia Bennet, in every way an archetype of a fallen woman. While it is apparent that the marriage between her and the deceitful Mr Wickham is a sure contrast to the happy endings of both Jane and Elizabeth, Lydia, despite breaking the moral codes of her time, is unwittingly allowed an ironic moment of subjective joy, which, perhaps, could be considered a feminist statement on its own.
However, the present day interpretation of these relationships is coded in a way which aligns with the tenets of “chick-lit”; not only has the romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy inspired the one between Bridget Jones and Mark Darcy, it has also become a victim to the post-feminist attitudes which have created the genre in the first place. The protagonist – an initially uninterested, witty, sarcastic, pretty, yet not too pretty girl with whom the reader enjoys identifying – manages to get the man – a wealthy, educated, handsome, yet secretly kind-hearted man – through her own charms alone, within a rather competitive setting which works against her favor. The main point of attraction to Mr Darcy, which the reader senses through her experience of Elizabeth, is his willingness to change for her. Whether it is indeed invoked by her intellect or no, it is this element of male change which is, as per Ruiz, the cornerstone of success of “chick-lit” narratives, and, indeed, the patriarchal, capitalist idea of romance (47, 48). In the example of *Pride and Prejudice*, this is evident in the Janeites’ wish to identify with Elizabeth rather than Jane; it is Elizabeth who manages to change Darcy, a man of vastly superior social standing, and have him bend to her will, even though both women marry kind, wealthy men for love and achieve happiness, objectively speaking. Furthermore, as Chang reminds us, it is Elizabeth’s seeming refusal to conform to the patriarchal standards of her time which attracts Darcy to her rather than the likes of Caroline Bingley (3); however, Chang’s statement that, unlike Caroline, Elizabeth “gives no thought of gaining financial security through marriage” is indeed misguided, considering the fact that Elizabeth’s change of heart regarding Darcy can be pinpointed to the moment she sees the magnificence of Pemberley for the first time (Austen 222). Furthermore, and especially in the light of the narrative constraints of “chick-lit”, this singling out of Elizabeth as a superior among women, even next to her sister Jane, indeed makes her “a honorary man”, not unlike the one her authoress was considered to be by the early Janeites. After all, despite her unique characterization, it is important to remember that Elizabeth herself undergoes change which allows her to abandon some of her more childish beliefs, such as e.g. her judgment of her friend Charlotte Lucas for marrying her cousin, Mr Collins, and her deep misunderstanding of her own mother’s struggle to marry off all of her daughters; coincidentally, these beliefs are what Janeites often praise in regards to Elizabeth’s character. Finally, the transformed
Elizabeth follows the pattern of the women of her time, marrying for love, but also wealth, and leaving her family home; yet, she is still regarded highly for her headstrongness and seeming rebelliousness. There is little doubt that these conclusions are direct results of the “marketplace feminist” climate; as Ruiz reminds us, “the discrepancy between proclaimed independence and enacted submission to normalizing patriarchal traditions and ideology is the essence of post-feminism” (64).

The toxic perception of the Elizabeth/Darcy romance is perhaps best illustrated in the number of spin-off media it has generated in the last twenty years, following the post-feminist “chick-lit” boom of the 1990s. Along with Pride and Prejudice sequels such as Seth Grahame-Smith’s 2009 Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, the easily-accessible bookshelves of Amazon are overflowing with titles such as “Mr Darcy’s Guide to Courtship: The Secrets of Seduction from Jane Austen’s Most Eligible Bachelor” and “Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating.” Indeed, it is interesting to consider why exactly a Janeite would lean on an author of two hundred years past to solve the issues of her love life; as per Harman, “In a permissive age […] the idea of the heroines attracting so much male attention by making so few sexual concessions becomes, for the modern woman, an unattainable fantasy of female empowerment” (248). It is this fantasy that becomes an easily marketable product in the era of the patriarchal, manufactured romance, governed, as Ruiz reminds us, by a strict gendering of women as “controllers and manipulators of men”, who either entrap men “using their so-called feminine wiles and sexual allure”, or, if single, are encouraged to wait for “her ‘prince’ to show up, and to fall in love with him” (49). Thus, the targeted group of Austen fans not only falls victim to the regressive ideology behind supposedly feminist ideals, but also produces content in favor of it, thus not only furthering its goals but also misrepresenting Jane Austen’s entire body of work in the fast moving cultural flow of today.
4. Conclusion

In the rapidly shifting sociocultural environment of today, it is important to consider the shifts in the approach and criticism of media created in different environments, especially if the media in question is highly esteemed or canonized. Jane Austen’s literature, well-loved by people of all classes across the world, has continued to be read and analyzed for over two centuries since its initial publication. The changes in critical perspective toward her famous novels have always reflected not only Austen’s own writerly intentions, but also the particular historical and social circumstances of her readers; she has been a favorite of King George IV as well as British soldiers fighting at the front of World War I, of England’s chauvinistic late-nineteenth century intellectual elite, as well as the radical Bloomsbury group, and even the Suffragettes. It is this loaded history of love for Austen which makes her unique among other female authors of her time, especially considering that her modern, global popularity started its gradual and continual spread as late as in the 1990s. However, the circumstances that have generated this expansion and the particular modification of Austen for the present day represent an intricate web of capitalist, patriarchal and post-feminist motivations. The manner in which a popular work such as *Pride and Prejudice* is, and continues to be represented, is inherently tied to the notions of “marketplace feminism” and “chick-lit” culture; indeed, Austen has served both as an inspiration and a manifestation of these trends. Throughout many adaptations, spin-off media, and even dating guides, Austen has been turned from a modest, almost unknown Steventon authoress to an international, multi-million dollar industry. Thus, it is important to re-evaluate the message that her work propagates, as perceived within the modern-day microcosm of sociopolitical movements advocating feminism, socialism, and an equality of races, genders and class. A particularly important aspect of that are Janeites, the passionate Austen fans behind blogs, Austen memorabilia, Regency fairs and fan-fiction. Through the design and particular targeting process of the “marketplace feminist” climate, modern-day Janeites consist largely of middle-class, Western white women of good social standing; women who are simultaneously targeted by “chick-lit” and “chick-flick” culture which works under the guise of feminist, empowering goals, only to re-establish basic patriarchal inequalities.
between the sexes. These perceptions translate to Austen’s work, too, recreating characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy to fit into the molds of performed romance, false post-feminist empowerment, and the twenty-first century ideal of true love. However, as this essay contends, this vision of Austen and the message of her novels carry rather negative connotations, in line with the negative connotations of their inherently capitalist, “marketplace feminist” aspects. Indeed, the elements which the author presents as ironic, amusing, or neutral, are taken to the level of a cult by the modern Janeites, building a very selective – white, middle class, patriarchal – reputation for the author in the present day, not unlike the one of her original passionate fan base of a century ago.
Bibliography


Davies, Andrew, screenplay. Pride and Prejudice. Produced by BBC1, 1995. TV mini-series. DVD.


