



Review of Cano, Marina. 2017. *Jane Austen and Performance*. Houndmills: Palgrave. 212 pages. ISBN: 978-3-319-43987-7.

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The aim of Marina Cano's *Jane Austen and Performance* is to investigate the performativity (that is to say, the nature of the artistic or dramatic performance) from the mid-nineteenth century to the present of Austen's work. Cano demonstrates how Austen's novels "'act' upon readers, and how readers have 'acted' upon the novels to achieve particular effects" (2017: 3). By exploring theatre productions, sequels, films, and radio adaptations, Cano shows how Austen, "the female counterpart to Shakespeare" (2017: 5), has been intertwined in a major way with politics at pivotal times in Western history, such as women's suffrage campaigns and World Wars I and II. Cano's pioneering book breaks new ground, offering fascinating, insightful, and unique material that should prove to be of interest to the general reader as well as to specialists in the field.

Chapter 2, "Jane Austen and Suffrage", considers how Austen was commandeered by the women's suffrage movement in the early twentieth century for pageants, parades, plays, novels, and memoirs. Using Austen as a paradigm, suffrage supporters frequently invoked her fiction to underscore the intellectual capacities of women and, in this way, transformed Austen into "an agent of political change to redefine British civic identities" (2017: 12). Pointing out the astonishing number of suffrage activities and cultural productions alluding to Austen, Cano argues persuasively that Austen's "ubiquity in the suffrage movement matters because it makes her a participant in the democratic process" (2017: 33). Cano stresses how Austen's work "offered a common point of reference within a national and international framework of suffrage workers" (2017: 33). According to Cano, Austen's texts could be expanded to accommodate opposing sides or different groups of a dispute, as in her appeal to militant as well as to more moderate suffrage supporters.

The most persuasive and poignant sections of the book are the third and fourth chapters. In Chapter 3, "Jane Austen and the Theatre of War", and Chapter 4, "Early Re-Enactments",

Cano explores how Austen's fiction played a major part in molding and remolding Englishness in the repercussions after World War I and in leading a swing toward nostalgia during the time between the wars. The sources used in these chapters are particularly interesting since they include never before researched short stories that continue Austen's novels and also amateur theatricals that reveal how the conservative ideal of Englishness linked with Austen in this era "was literally performed into being" (2017: 12). During and after World War I, lay readers in particular read Austen's novels because they symbolized a seemingly peaceful, organized, and civilized rural world. Austen was especially popular for these reasons (along with the comedy and brilliant prose of her work) with soldiers in the trenches. Indeed, her novels were highly recommended by an Oxford academic who worked in military hospitals as therapy for severely shell-shocked soldiers, as well as to comfort and heal the mentally wounded civilian population. In the 1920s, sequels, continuations, and stage and radio adaptations of Austen's novels helped to create the myth of "England's Jane", a phrase from Kipling's short story "The Janeites" (1924–1926). In particular, Austen's unfinished novel *The Watsons* generated two full-length continuations by L. Oulton and Edith Brown between 1920 and 1929. As Cano remarks, "[i]n the post-war period, the fragment [of *The Watsons*] stands as the remains of a dead civilization; Austen's novels become self-contained ruins, perfect in their state" (2017: 43). Rewriting Austen at this time was an act of remembrance, an attempt to preserve the glory of England's past. In the 1920's, Austen's works are recomposed as "metaphors of national unity and identity and the sequels' strong sense of geographical awareness highlights their patriotism" (2017: 49–50). Cano points out, for example, how E. Barrington's short story "The Darcys of Rosings" (1922) exaggerates Austen, and especially the novelist's portrait of nature, creating "a pre-industrial, greener and more static [world] than anything Austen ever wrote" (2017: 53). In this way, post-World War I writers monumentalized Austen, "rebuilding Austen as a war memorial, [so] that her seemingly apolitical novels take on political connotations" (2017: 53).

Chapter 4 contemplates the significant number of Austen-inspired theatrical and radio adaptations published and performed in the 1920s and 1930s. The Regency past was reanimated through Austen sketches, full-length plays, and school performances, "whose insistent reenactment served to stabilize the post-war identity of the British nation" (2017: 60). Nonetheless, as Cano points out, "such insistence betrays a sense of anxiety that this identity is neither stable nor cohesive, and this is why the nation needs to keep performing what it supposes, or desires, itself to be" (2017: 60). Cano offers school theatricals as examples of "dynamic processes of identity formation" (2017: 62). Adaptations of Austen's novels, such as Rose Patry's renditions of Austen in *Dramatic Scenes from Great Novelists* (1909, republished in 1911, 1920, and 1924) and Evelyn Smith's *Northanger Abbey in Form-Room Plays* (1921) have a strongly didactic function, suggesting that Austen's novels offered a prototype of femininity for the schoolgirl in the 1920s. In these compilations, Austen is viewed as "a national literary heroine" (2017: 64) akin to Shakespeare. Moreover, Cano

argues cogently that “Austen [...] might have been acting as an agent of social mobility after the war for those who sought, or expected their children to seek, upward social mobility” (2017: 65), since the adaptors highlighted genteel politeness, elocution, and good manners in their selections from the novels. Elsewhere in Chapter 4, Cano investigates the subversive, comedic, and escapist qualities of amateur theatrical re-enactments of Austen, especially the popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* with women’s institutes and village dramatic societies during the postwar period, as for instance in *Elizabeth Refuses: A Miniature Comedy from Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice* (1922). Cano also considers reworkings of Austen’s novels on the professional stage, specifically at the Palace Theatre in London, and BBC wireless recordings. The BBC came into being in 1922, and, as historians such as Asa Briggs have argued, in the early years broadcasting became a form of cultural imperialism (2017: 73). *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* were serialized and dramatized for a broad audience, especially the middle and lower middle classes who made up the majority of the BBC’s early audience. As Cano remarks, the radio and stage adaptations like the serializations, sequels, and completions all “gave a sense of coherence to the mourning family and nation. Yet this repeated re-enactment was precisely a sign of doubt and disunity: the brevity of most of these pieces, the multiple fragmentations of her novels in the radio serializations, reveal this coherence to be illusory” (2017: 75).

Chapters 5 and 6, “Reinscribing *Emma*” and “Jane Austen Abroad”, shift the analysis to World War II and show, once again, how Austen’s works are made to serve multiple purposes. Chapter 5 argues that Austen’s novels were implicated in the democratization process that developed in connection with World War II. *Emma* (often viewed as Austen’s most English novel) experienced a major afterlife in the 1940s and 1950s, and this novel, in particular, became “a public forum, a public stage, to negotiate and rehearse British identity—nationally and internationally. Her works served as a medium for channeling and framing disparate notions about the cultural past and, in particular, the future of a nation in jeopardy” (2017: 82). Taking *Emma* as the point of departure, Cano explains that this novel’s creative afterlife in print, on the stage, and on television reveals how Jane Austen appealed to the postwar generation and became part of the essence of modern English culture after World War II, assisting them in devising a new social order for the nation (2017: 82). She suggests that most germane to *Emma*’s popularity in this period is its famous discussion of Englishness and depiction of the English character and countryside, as well as the blending of the classes. In 1940, Naomi Royde-Smith published *Jane Fairfax*, a full-length continuation of *Emma*. Cano points out that Royde-Smith democratizes Austen’s original novel, allowing lower-class characters to express themselves. As a number of historians have argued, social barriers were eroded during World War II, resulting in the mingling of people of different class backgrounds, for example, in bomb shelters. For Cano, the fact that “an attempt is being made to reconceptualize shifting class barriers through Austen is but a sign of the relevance of her novels to the make-up of the modern nation” (2017: 88). In addition to fictional

continuations, Cano considers the overwhelming number of theatrical productions of Austen's fiction in the 1940s and 1950s: for instance, Gordon Glennon's very successful *Emma: A Play* (1945), which is still being performed in our own day, and M. Hope Dodds' adaptation of *Emma* for the radical Progressive Players of Gateshead in 1944, which transforms Austen's novel into "a social, even socialist, tale" (2017: 90) and demonstrates that her work can be co-opted by radicals as easily as by conservatives. Cano concludes by remarking that whereas in the early twentieth century "Austen's oeuvre had generally been perceived as a source of (upper-class) social order that could take the nation back to an ostensibly steadier past", in the 1940s and 1950s *Emma* operates as "a cultural thermometer, measuring the temperature of the nation: this is a nation struggling to renew itself, and Austen's most English novel, where national identity is of the essence, is a pre-eminent site for debating what the modern English nation should be" (2017: 102).

Chapter 6, "Jane Austen Abroad", scrutinizes Austen's reception outside England, especially in Scotland, calling attention to the way Austen's fiction helped to define modern Scottish identity and performed as an intermediary in the peace accord after World War II in Europe. Particularly noteworthy are the sections dealing with how her work was used as a democratizing tool in the Allies' teacher training program in Germany after World War II. One journalist even reported in *The Scotsman* that "Jane Austen would probably be astonished to learn that she is playing quite a part in the de-Nazification of German youth" (2017: 120). Austen's work was also admired in Russia. During World War II, Austen became one of the most popular authors in Leningrad even while the battle was still in progress, and was reported by *The Scotsman* to be one of the favorite authors of Marshal Sokolovsky, Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Occupation Troops in Germany (2017: 121). In the USA, readers relished Austen's seemingly halcyon home country, while adding their own distinctive qualities to the texts in theatrical productions and television adaptations by celebrating Austen for reinforcing American ideals of liberty and the pursuit of happiness (2017: 126).

Chapter 7, "Women's Rewriting", provides an analysis of the novels written in the period of Austenmania of the 1990s by interpreting films and sequels in the context of the feminist rewritings of the canon (by such writers as Angela Carter and Michele Roberts). The works considered run counter to each other in their reading of Austen's gender politics, alternately construing her work as subversive and as traditional, and even as a blend of the two. Focusing on such adaptations as Emma Thompson's screenplay for Ang Lee's movie of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and contemporary sequels such as Emma Tennant's *Elinor and Marianne* (1996) and Joan Aiken's *Eliza's Daughter* (1994), Cano argues that the "old novels were repackaged as agents of cultural change at the turn of the twenty-first century—as means to facilitate better futures for women, in the terms of Adrienne Rich" (2017: 13).

The book concludes in Chapter 8, "Jane and the Fans", by contemplating whether Austen still matters in the twenty-first century, and how she may be considered to have

generated a literary brand for others to follow. In this concluding section, Cano at times sides unapologetically with popular readers of Jane Austen (frequently called “Janeites”, after the title of Kipling’s short story), rather than professional critics to document the voices of modern Austen fans (2017: 9). Based on 300 responses from Austen fans all over the globe, Cano reveals the powerful grasp Austen still has on the lives of modern readers. A major number of respondents were inspired to read Austen after viewing films such as Simon Langton’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), Richard Z. Leonard’s film of *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995), and Dan Zeff’s *Lost in Austen* (2008). For Cano, such testimonies “contradict the idea that Austen cultural artefacts are irremediably taking readers away from the novels sanctified by official culture” (2017: 158). Cano’s evidence in this chapter reinforces her earlier claims about the power of Austen’s works to soothe and heal those who are emotionally and physically damaged in an internationalized contemporary world, claiming that her fiction helps readers to overcome personal limitations (2017: 161), and even helps young academics to deal with the depression and isolation of modern university careers. Cano ends by stating that as Austen’s fan base and afterlife expand in proportion and distance (2017: 179), so fans “through their artefacts, are involved in a perpetual process of construction and reconstruction that results in the modern Austen icon” (2017: 162).

Marina Cano’s *Jane Austen and Performance* is an eminently readable and compelling book, rich in sources and allusions. Other books related to this topic include Paula Byrne’s *The Genius of Jane Austen: Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood* (2016), an updated edition of Byrne’s debut book *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002), and Penny Gay’s *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002), both of which explore how Austen took part in theatricals and frequently attended the theatre. Byrne’s *The Genius of Jane Austen* also explores the history of stage adaptations, and why Austen’s novels work so well on the screen. But Cano’s work goes beyond these books because it studies the performativity of Austen’s novels in depth and brings to light new materials. Furthermore, it explores the political connotations of Austen’s works in the twentieth century and is the initial book to include a survey and consideration of Austen fans in the twenty-first century. Since Cano’s aim is to deal with the performativity of Austen’s novels from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, it would have been beneficial to incorporate more analysis of works from the second half of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, since this is the first work of its kind, it paves the way for other research. Combining the popular and the traditional, this excellent study is unique in its approach to how Austen acts upon readers and how readers in turn act upon Austen.

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