



## Austen(s) on the Screen: An intertextual reading of *Becoming Jane*, *Miss Austen Regrets*, and her Biographies

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The cult of Jane Austen has extended well beyond literary manifestations and criticism, into the realm of the cinema. Besides all the filmic adaptations of Austen's novels and the whole series of Austen-themed adaptations, the famous English writer has become the protagonist of two recent biographical films: *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2010). These two cinematic attempts at portraying Austen's life for the screen investigate two different periods of her life and appear to be very different in their approach. Beside making use of published material about the author such as biographical accounts, letters and memoirs, both try to reinvent the writer's life, as well as re-imagine and give voice to some of the most crucial and formative periods of her life. Austenian critics and enthusiasts recognize the fact that Austen is a notoriously problematic figure, whose biography brims with gaps and hazy details. In order to contribute to the ongoing debate on the biographical information on Jane Austen's life, this essay aims to outline the ways in which the cinematic medium has helped re-imagine the life of the author, and to assess whether such representations have opened up new perspectives or have merely recovered and recycled older, and already familiar, materials.

**KEYWORDS:** Jane Austen; biopic; biographical film; *Miss Austen Regrets*; *Becoming Jane*

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The cult of Jane Austen has extended well beyond literary manifestations and criticism, into the realm of the cinema: almost all of her six novels have a long tradition of filmic and television adaptations dating back to the early 1940s. In subsequent years, the phenomenon gradually emerged and developed to reach its climax in the mid-1990s, with the production of the BBC/A&E (British Broadcasting Corporation/Arts & Entertainment Network) mini-series of *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the most famous

Austenian adaptations. Some seventeen years later, this trend shows no sign of abating: there have been Austen-themed productions such as the film *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007) and the postmodern mini-series *Lost in Austen* (2008); in the UK, in 2007, ITV screened the “Jane Austen Season” which comprised the 1986 BBC version of *Emma* and three new adaptations of *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*; while in 2008 and 2009 new adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* were released. In most recent times, a couple of interesting documentaries were broadcast in UK: “The Many Lovers of Jane Austen” (2012) investigating why so many people adore the English writer and which are the modern manifestations of

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this cult; “Jane Austen: the Unseen Portrait” (2012), publicizing the recent discovery of a portrait which might well be that of the author. Interestingly, this very documentary explains why it is so important for us to give a face to Jane Austen and, in some ways, this process of identification and portrayal is also found in the most recent cinematic attempts to represent and portray the author for the screen.

Beside all literary re-interpretations, re-inventions and filmic adaptations of her novels, there is a strong demand to see Austen herself. This is why the celebrated writer has now joined the list of many other English and American authors who have already been the subjects of ‘biopics’ and has appeared in two recent films: *Becoming Jane* (2007), written by Kevin Hood and Sarah Williams, and directed by Julian Jarrold; and the BBC/Masterpiece series *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008), written by Gwyneth Hughes and directed by Jeremy Lovering.

It could be argued that the interest in portraying Austen’s life for the screen is not an entirely new thing. Austen scholars and enthusiasts will certainly remember a previous attempt carried out in the dramatised documentary broadcast by the BBC in 2002: *The Real Jane Austen*. Also, academics have widely examined the affinities that Patricia Rozema’s Fanny Price shared with Austen in the 1999 version of *Mansfield Park*. These can be considered mere exercises, however there is no doubt that both the documentary and the intertextual reference in *Mansfield Park* have helped pave the way for a more complex and wider-ranging engagement with the representation of the author.

The main reason why directors and screenwriters have repeatedly focussed on Austen as a subject for their productions is not simply her potential and continuous marketability but also owes much to the fact that she is a notoriously problematic figure, whose biography brims with gaps and hazy details. Thus, this lack of information gives directors the chance to experiment on the subject and shed new light on rather obscure facts in her life. In recent years, moreover, a number of biographers have also tried to re-imagine Austen’s existence from different angles, as an attempt to reconstruct the puzzling blanks in its development. Sutherland has intelligently pointed out that, now that directors have engaged in the representation of her biography for the screen, a “significant barrier” has been overcome, since “the film’s visual rhetoric will find in the relationships it explores [...] a persuasive and more satisfying interpretation of the puzzle which is Jane Austen” [Sutherland (2009), 29].

It is my aim, therefore, to investigate and outline the ways in which the cinematic medium has helped to re-imagine the life of the author, and to assess

whether such representations have opened up new perspectives or have merely recovered and recycled older, and already familiar, materials.

### *Becoming Jane*: “my Irish friend”

In 2007 the first full-length Austenian biopic to appear on screen was *Becoming Jane*, a film loosely inspired by Jon Spence’s biography *Becoming Jane Austen* (2005). Its plot is set in 1795–1796 and opens with a twenty-year-old Jane at the time when she is developing her literary talent. Her mother is anxious for her to find a suitable match, whereas her father, a loving and mild figure, only wants her happiness. Austen herself is not looking for suitors: she is more interested in writing than in finding a partner, at least until the young Irishman Tom Lefroy appears.

According to family recollections and the extant correspondence, Austen and Lefroy met in the winter of 1795–1796, when the Irish young man visited his aunt Mrs. Lefroy at Ashe [Le Faye (2004), 93–94] It seemed that Austen enjoyed the company of her Irish friend a great deal: in her letters to Cassandra she describes her openly flirtatious behaviour as well as their sharp-tongued discussions [Le Faye (1995), 2–4]. Apparently, however, the alleged love story ended briskly since, in mid-January, Lefroy was sent back to London and the two never met again. Biographers have long speculated on the degree of intimacy of the relationship between the young Jane and her Irish friend, yet the exact circumstances and details are still unclear.

Deirdre Le Faye, who wrote a factual biographical account of Jane Austen introduces this affair by stating that Jane (as the author always calls her protagonist) was much interested in the flattering admirations she was receiving from the “shy, intelligent young stranger” [Le Faye (2004), 92] with whom she danced and flirted. However, while talking of their separation, she claims that Jane’s “disappointment was only temporary” [*ibid.*, 94] since months later she engaged in the writing of one of her most delightful novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, which, in Le Faye’s opinion, cannot be the product of a broken-hearted girl.

Other biographers have re-imagined the sentimental encounter with much more complex consequences. Park Honan, who wrote and published in 1987 a biography of Austen, analyses the situation from another angle. He claims that Austen suffered a great deal and that she was the victim of her own excessive imaginings. Honan goes as far as writing that, as a proof of her attachment, months after the separation, Austen “was to copy

out Irish love-songs for a considerable time” [Honan, 108]. There is no proof that this ever happened, but Honan liked to imagine this sad and romantic scene. As far as the reasons for their separation, Honan suggests that Austen had been too imprudent while flirting with Tom and that this behaviour, to an extent, might have been the real cause of their separation. Honan thus presents us a young and flirting Austen who eventually was angry at herself and frustrated because of her failings with Lefroy [*ibid.*, 111].

Another biographer of Austen, Claire Tomalin, has attempted a different interpretation and speculation of this romantic encounter. Tomalin suggests that Austen might indeed have liked the prospect of marrying Lefroy and also believes that “[T]here must have been something more than dancing and sitting down together: kisses, at least, a stirring of the blood, a quickening of the breath” [Tomalin, 120]. Still, as the story goes, their difference of class and education marked the end of their relationship. Tomalin does not speculate any further – her Austen has chosen art as a partner [*ibid.*, 119]. Still, her interpretation sheds light on the formative aspect of this experience, in fact, it was thanks to this encounter that Austen was first exposed to “sexual vulnerability” and she also understood what it meant “to be entranced by the dangerous stranger; to hope, and to feel the blood warm; to wince, to withdraw” [*ibid.*, 122]. The romantic encounter is thus supposed to be something of a sexual awakening.

Though *Becoming Jane* takes many liberties, the biopic undeniably presents some interesting points that are worth further examination. For a start, one of the main theses of the film, drawn from Jon Spence’s biography, is that Austen found much of the inspiration for her later works thanks to her passionate romance with Lefroy. Indeed, after the love story, Jane is ready for her great literary composition: it is in London, while staying at Langlois’ that she starts *First Impressions* during a long and sleepless night. By thus espousing a biographical theory of inspiration, the film frames her real love experience as the main episode which stirred the author's creativity.

By making this hazy episode the central theme of their film and by implicitly assuming that it was “the most romantic experience of her life” [Hood], screenwriters and directors have tried to demonstrate that the love affair has not only influenced, but above all inspired all the author's subsequent written productions. Austen’s extant (and scarce) correspondence – the only source of information – suggests that their “love” story ended after the fortnight Lefroy spent at Ashe [Le Faye (1995), 4], but the biopic reinvents most of its

circumstances and makes them culminate with an elopement. In the style of Lydia Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, Jarrold’s Austen leaves everything behind and runs off with her mismatched lover. Still, Jane does not get the happy ending she usually awards her heroines, since she leaves Lefroy and returns to her parents, as soon as she understands that poverty in their marriage would destroy their love.

Accordingly, the film presents an ongoing and pervasive preoccupation with writing. The opening scene shows Austen as she tries to compose some verses for her sister’s engagement. She struggles with words and tries to find new ideas and stimulations in music, while the chiming clock signals the passing of unproductive time. Interestingly, in this case, the director’s representation of the young Austen embraces a theory shared by some contemporary critics, such as Kathryn Sutherland, according to whom Austen’s prose was susceptible to frequent changes and revisions. In particular, this critic claims that, although almost all her novels have come down to us in the state of the final text, all her manuscripts of unpublished material (such as the *Juvenilia*, *The Watsons*, *Sanditon*) are clearly “making it hard to ignore the kinds of evidence of preparation, revision, and attention to textual presentation they contain” [Sutherland (2005), 201]. The version of Austen-as-writer given in this biopic follows the idea that manuscripts are “sites of creation”, as well as the principle that writing does not come in unique and fixed forms. This view contrasts with what Austen’s family would have us believe. In his *Biographical Notice of the Author*, her brother Henry wrote that “everything came finished from her pen” and that “in composition she was equally rapid and correct” [Austen, H. (2002), 141 & 138].

Moreover, *Becoming Jane* frequently shows Jane and Tom discussing her literary compositions. In one of such discussions, when Lefroy defines her writings “accomplished enough”, but still suffering too much from “extended, juvenile self-regard”, Austen immediately reacts by burning all those she considers too naïve or childish. This reaction defines Jane as a passionate young girl who constantly struggles to improve her style and find the right words, a tenacious girl who reads aloud her compositions to ensure her prose is flowing, or with the intent of editing and cutting redundant words and keep only “the best chosen language”. This Jane adheres to the image of an artist of the miniature and provides evidence of that aesthetics of essentiality that we have come to associate with Austen.

The problem of style reappears several times in the biopic. For instance, when Jane and Tom discuss Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*, Austen clearly states that she is not convinced by its prose. In point of fact, as she claims, "a novel must show how the world truly is, how characters genuinely think, how events actually occur. A novel should somehow reveal the true source of [our] actions". Her opinion is clear and, again, screenwriters have recovered and recycled another fixed aspect of Austen's reception – her hallmark promotion of realism, or better, her reinvention of realism. Another animated discussion with Lefroy allows the author to give voice to her ideas on literature. In particular, by adapting the famous and robust defence of the novel which Austen introduced in *Northanger Abbey*, director and screenwriters have translated the writer's point of view on a literary genre that was becoming extremely popular, as well as significant as a didactic tool. Austen's opinions on the value of literature are well known, yet, through Catherine's words in *Northanger Abbey*<sup>1</sup>, the novelist's nice irony on the double-edged function of literary creation is displayed at its best: although dangerous if confused with real life, literature (and novels in particular) can give us a much deeper insight into the "knowledge of human nature" than any other form of cultural production.

Significantly, this biopic expands further its representation of Austen as a self-conscious writer by introducing a meeting with the Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe in London. There is no historical evidence that the meeting ever occurred, however it is well known that Austen had read her works. This imaginary meeting is interesting not only because Radcliffe encourages Austen to embark on a literary career, but because, in some respects, the published authoress illustrates the difficulties of being a female writer at that time. Radcliffe tells Austen that her independence was gained "at a cost", both for herself and for her husband, since, "to have a wife who has a mind is considered not quite proper. To have a wife with a literary reputation nothing short of scandalous". Through Radcliffe's words, the screenwriters have made explicit some of the well-known difficulties that female writers had to overcome to make their way in the literary marketplace, throwing light on the anxieties linked to the impropriety of being a woman writer

<sup>1</sup> "Oh! It is only a novel!" replied the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. – 'It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;' or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of the human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language." [Austen (2005), 24]

according to contemporary socio-cultural conventions.

In this biopic the romance with Tom Lefroy has a crucially formative significance. This view is borrowed from Jon Spence, the historical consultant for the film, whose biographical account maintains that the relationship with Lefroy gave Austen's imagination a literary boost. In particular, Spence has developed a theory according to which Austen, in order to construct her fictional characters, would have drawn inspiration from some people she actually knew, but also adopted a strategy of masquerade by transforming their gender. For instance, Spence suggests that when Austen wrote the fragment *Catharine, or the Bower*, she had made her cousin Eliza de Feuillide into Edward Stanley and continued to exploit this trick in some of her subsequent novels [Spence, 102]. In this case, she would have portrayed herself and Tom respectively as Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. According to Spence, Jane Austen was not the Elizabeth Bennet we sometimes like to assume. [...] she herself did not possess Elizabeth's spontaneous wit and charm. Jane certainly did not see herself as a Lizzy. But she did see Tom Lefroy that way. [...] By an imaginative squirt she created a woman who might have been Tom's sister, a woman with his charm and liveliness and intelligence transformed into a feminine model [Spence, 102].

By proposing a completely different theory to that presented by other biographers, such as David Nokes, Spence claims that "Jane herself was has [*sic*] far more affinity with Darcy" than with Elizabeth. Nokes, on the contrary, thought that Jane "had given Elizabeth her wit" [Nokes, 490]. Spence has based his theory on a remark from the Austen family tradition: Frank Austen once admitted that his sister, "[...] though rather reserved to strangers so as to have been by some accused of haughtiness of manner, yet in the company of those she loved the native benevolence of her heart and kindness of her disposition were forcibly displayed" [Spence, 102]. Although a little imaginative as well, the parallel with the character Darcy is easily drawn.

At this point, we could also try and explore to what extent *Becoming Jane* may function as a sort of intertextual dialogue with *Pride and Prejudice*. If we analyse both closely, we will also notice that Jarrold's *Becoming Jane* is peopled with prototypes of Austen's best-known characters from *Pride and Prejudice*. The invented character of Lady Gresham is nothing but another version of Lady Catherine de Bourgh: just like her fictional counterpart, she is supervising eligible young women for her nephew and has to struggle against a girl of "independent thought," plausibly Jarrold's Jane or Austen's

Elizabeth. Austen's domineering mother is a convincing model for Mrs. Bennet, although she has far more pragmatic sense. We cannot deny, however, that her willingness to find a suitable rich husband for her daughter is an evident point in common. Mr. Austen, a kindly old father, partly resembles Mr. Bennet, who only wants her daughter's happiness. To crown it all, it is Mr. Wisley who allegedly gives Jane the inspiration for the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* by uttering the well-known and today much-exploited quotation "It is a truth universally acknowledged".

The biopic presents yet another recurrent preoccupation, also found in *Pride and Prejudice*, namely the urgent need to find a suitable match for Jane. While Cassandra is already engaged to Tom Fowle, Jane was still unattached. This is why her mother wants her to get married soon and, more explicitly, she wants her daughter to consider Mr. Wisley as a man who would provide her with financial comfort and a plausible excellent match. Mrs. Austen repeatedly urges her daughter to consider matrimony as the only way through which she could find independence. On this point, the biopic dramatises an animated discussion between Mrs. Austen and Jane. Their almost opposite view reveal on one hand the realism and pragmatic sense of a mother who knows that marriage and a secure match are the only ways through which a woman could acquire independence, and on the other hand the dreams and aspirations of a young girl who wishes to "live by her pen". Mrs. Austen's view encompasses many of the cultural assumptions of the period. These are, most visibly, the fact that opportunities for employment were limited for women in those days, so that girls had very few choices. Marriage only could give women the prospect of a home and economic security. Such opinions are also well made explicit in all of Austen's productions and her correspondence. Her notorious remark "[S]ingle Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony" [Le Faye (1995), 332] shows that, much more than love, money was an essential ingredient in a good union. And in her novels, as Edward Copeland points out, "[T]he heartbeat of romance lies in a good income" [Copeland, 133].

### ***Miss Austen Regrets: Happily Unmarried?***

*Miss Austen Regrets* offers a quite different approach to the visual representation of Austen we have just analysed, but the topic of marriage and financial independence is as crucial as in *Becoming Jane*. Released in 2008, this film narrates the story of the mature, published Jane Austen, who approaches her

fortieth birthday and ponders on the implications of her own unmarried status, while advising her niece Fanny Austen Knight on possible suitors. Solidly based on the events that occurred between 1814 and 1816, the script follows closely Austen's surviving correspondence to her sister Cassandra and her niece Fanny. The chosen title, *Miss Austen Regrets*, might tempt us into assuming that the film will tell the story of Austen and the great love in her life whom she regretted not marrying, but this is not the case: the focus lies elsewhere.

The film starts with a flashback and recounts the well-documented episode of Jane's brief engagement to Harris Bigg-Wither. The initial statement "Tell me I have done the right thing. Dear God, let me never regret this day!" will resonate throughout the film. The narrative then resumes in 1814, when Austen is in Kent, at Godmersham, and finds herself in the position of adviser to her niece Fanny on marriage and courtship, as the surviving correspondence suggests.

From this moment on, Austen is confronted with a series of romantic encounters that make her reflect on her unmarried status. The first man she meets is Reverend Brook Edward Bridges, who appears to be a former suitor whom she seemed to have politely turned down years before. According to biographical information [Le Faye (2004), 112], the two had first met in 1805, during a visit that Jane had paid to her brother in Kent. It is believed that, during that early meeting, Bridges tried to catch Jane's attention, but there is no direct evidence that he had ever proposed to her. Only Deirdre Le Faye, a famous independent scholar of Jane Austen, maintains the contrary, according to what Austen wrote to her sister in one surviving letter from 1805, where she told Cassandra of the attentions Mr. Bridges was paying to her [*ibid.*, 150].

In Kent, Austen also makes the acquaintance of the gentlemanlike Mr. Lushington, who actually stayed at Godmersham in October 1813. In the film he tries to seduce Austen by quoting George Crabbe's poetry and by claiming he has read and admired all her novels, and never travels without them. Austen does not avoid his company, and even flirts and dances with him for a whole evening, greatly amused and flattered by the situation to the extent that she goes as far as jokingly admitting to be "rather in love with him" [Le Faye (1995), 240].

The film also evokes Austen's flirtation with Tom Lefroy, detailed in a conversation between Austen and her niece Fanny. With few words, the protagonist admits that "[S]hocking amounts of dancing went on" and that she "was a horrible flirt". Still, she knew Lefroy would never become her husband, since neither of them had any money. This

brief exchange, seen through Jane's eyes and memories, is brilliantly reconstructed and manages to reproduce the very scanty materials that we have in the letters.

The last lover in the list of Austen's flirts is another central figure, whom Jane met in London in the winter of 1815: Dr. Charles Haden. In 1815 Austen was visiting her brother Henry in London as well as arranging for the publication of *Emma* with her new publisher, John Murray. As history goes, Henry fell ill quite suddenly and Dr. Charles Haden, a 28-year-old surgeon and neighbour of Henry, was called in along with Dr. Matthew Baillie (one of the Prince Regent's physicians and brother of the poet and dramatist Joanna Baillie). In the film, Haden's charm does not go unnoticed and catches Austen's attention by particularly praising her novels and introducing himself as an admirer who has read *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen is flattered by the fact that he loves her works, and her fondness increases as soon as he makes the attractive proposal of a meeting with the Prince Regent's Librarian, James Stanier Clarke. According to Le Faye [ (2004), 225-6], Haden had probably secured an invitation to see the Librarian through his senior partner, Dr Baillie. The surviving correspondence features several references to Haden, but there is hardly enough support for the screenplay's invention of a possible romantic involvement. Although in a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen had defined Haden as "a sort of wonderful nondescript Creature on two Legs, something between a Man & an Angel" [Le Faye (1995), 303] other references in her letters suggest that she enjoyed both his company and his flirtation with Fanny [*ibid.*, 298 & 301]. Only D. Nokes speculated on the fact that, however hard "[S]he [Jane] tried to convince herself that her enthusiasm for this young man was all on Fanny's behalf", she also found it difficult to "disguise from herself how fretful she became when Haden's attentions were devoted to her niece and not at all to her". [Nokes, 472]

All these romantic, or would-be romantic, encounters make Austen reflect on her unmarried status, and also qualify her as an irreverent and ironic woman who still likes to indulge in wine, gossip and innocent flirts with fascinating men. In short, Williams' Austen does not seem the kind of woman who regrets any of the choices she has made in her life. As in *Becoming Jane*, where, to an extent, marriage and money go together, in *Miss Austen Regrets* all of Austen's reflections on matrimony bring to the surface the sensitive topic of women's financial independence.

Interestingly, as with *Becoming Jane*, also this biographical film features a somewhat cruel

exchange of opinions between Austen and her mother, in which Mrs. Austen brutally blames her daughter for turning down Harris Bigg-Wither's marriage proposal. The episode, somewhat sadly remembered, took place in Manydown on the night of December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1802. In the evening, Austen hastily accepted Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage only to withdraw her consent the morning after. Had she not done so, the Austen women could count on financial security instead of depending on their relatives' charity and incomes (now particularly insecure after Henry's bankruptcy). It is interesting to note how the film does not focus on the scandal that such a refusal might have caused, but rather how it investigates the reasons that led Austen to accept and then reject the proposal. Austen discloses all her emotions (and partly her motives) to the audience and, by so doing, she emerges as a tough woman whose choice to remain unmarried was made out of rationality and not bitter disappointment. On the one hand, she did not love Harris Bigg-wither and, on the other hand, she really wanted to devote her life to writing. In the closing scene, Austen herself reveals to her sister Cassandra that her only regret about not marrying Bigg-Wither is the unstable financial situation in which she is leaving her mother and sister. This interesting dialogue between the writer and her sister also reveals a darker side to the story, since Cassandra admits that she eventually made her sister change her mind and persuaded her to withdraw her consent that night at Manydown. The idea that Cassandra would have talked Jane out of marrying Harris Bigg-Wither appears also in Nokes' biographical account [Nokes, 253-5]. He was the only biographer to have hinted at a rather complicated relationship between the Austen sisters. In his opinion, there might have been "rivalry – even treachery" between the two. Nokes also read Austen's refusal in the light of what Austen composed immediately after the event occurred, which is to say the unfinished work, *The Watsons*. Nokes noted that, in this novel, the eldest sister Penelope is a "powerful off-stage presence" [Nokes, 254] who also ruins her sister's matrimonial prospects. In the biographer's opinion, therefore, though this parallel must be treated with extreme care, since Austen was never an autobiographical writer, it certainly strikes a rather disturbing note.

Although *Miss Austen Regrets* revolves around Austen's romantic entanglements, its director and screenwriter have also been alert to other issues, and especially Austen's occupation as a professional writer. Here, Jane is a published author: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) were already circulating and

she had almost completed her new work, *Emma* (whose manuscript she brings to Godmersham to finish it). At this time, also, the first translation into French of *Sense and Sensibility* had already appeared. On this point, the film dramatises a brief dialogue between Jane and one of Godmersham's house maids where the French version of this novel is mentioned and discussed. *Miss Austen Regrets* probably alludes to Isabelle de Montolieu's "free translation", published in 1815 and whose title page read: *Raison et sensibilité ou les deux manières d'aimer*<sup>2</sup>. As briefly stated before, the film also shows Austen negotiating with Reverend James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's Librarian, for the dedication of *Emma*. Finally, the writer is portrayed during the composition of some passages from *Persuasion* at Chawton cottage, interrupted only by the noise of the creaking door. While *Becoming Jane* shows Austen as she tries to find a suitable style, carefully selecting words and adjectives, *Miss Austen Regrets* presents an author who has perfected her style and whose prose comes "finished from her pen", to borrow Henry Austen's remark [Memoir, 141]. Here, there is not much investigation into Austen's habits of composition and her preoccupation with language. Instead, the representation mostly takes inspiration from what the *Memoir* has to say about her artistry.

Although this biographical film does not devote much attention to the writer's chronology of composition, it is interesting to note that, in one scene, Austen and Mr. Bridges talk about the time she had spent in Bath, one that is notoriously associated with a period of creative sterility. Her remarks that she "barely wrote a useful word in ten years" and that the move to Chawton restored her inspiration seem to reinforce this idea. Living at Chawton cottage meant fewer financial concerns as well as a peaceful and quiet place which would enable her to re-establish her own habits of composition. These, according to Jan Fergus, for instance, were all the things that Bath and Southampton made unavailable to her [Fergus, 122-5]. We know from the scarce biographical hints that, once in Bath, Austen started *The Watsons*, a new novel, but she eventually abandoned the manuscript and never picked it up again. By 1803, also, *Northanger Abbey* was finished and she had made a fair copy of it, in the hope of getting it published. The negotiations for its publication with the publisher Benjamin Crosby & Son. had already started and she sold her manuscript for £10, with a stipulation for

early publication. *Susan* (the former title of *Northanger Abbey*) was in fact advertised as being "in the press", but Crosby never printed it. The years she spent in Southampton seem to be the most unproductive of her life: in her *Literary Biography* Fergus argues that the busy life Austen led in Southampton left no space and time for committing to a new novel [*ibid.*, 106 & 122-5]. Almost all the biographies support this opinion and it is somehow believed that Chawton restored her habits of composition. To borrow Claire Tomalin's words, with *a room of her own*, almost separated from the outer world, Austen was "restored to herself, to her imagination, to all her powers" of literary creation [Tomalin, 211].

Thus, this second biopic focuses also on Austen's profession and, especially the negotiations that led to the publication of her novels. For instance, with her brother Edward, she considers the possibility of choosing another publisher for her new novel, *Emma*. Austen is proud of her achievement and, although she often jokes about money, it is clear that financial security is one of her main concerns. Edward does not want her sister to "seek employment", since this would cast the family, especially the Austen brothers, in a bad light. These concerns were the same that, in the *Biographical Notice of the Author* and in the *Memoir*, induced her relatives to place her firmly in her family circle and in the social world that surrounded her, instead of admitting that her literary life took up most of her time.

The biopic also brilliantly reconstructs and compresses the well-documented meeting with the Reverend Stanier Clarke in a couple of amusing scenes, with the aid of the extant letters [Le Faye (1995). 296-7 & 305-7]. During the encounter, the Regent's librarian suggests that she dedicate her next novel to the Prince Regent, who is "a great admirer" of her works. The meeting with Clarke raises two issues: first, as soon as the librarian proposes that she write about a clergyman and renovate her style in a more modern fashion, Austen's reluctance to do so demonstrates her well-established ideas on writing techniques and reinforces her self-assessment as a novelist. Austen's highly ironic remarks are brilliantly handled by Olivia Williams, who appropriately conveys the author's sarcastic and mocking attitude towards Clarke. Secondly, it is known that one of the outcomes of this meeting was the "Plan of a Novel" [Austen (2003), 230-2]. The biopic takes it as an occasion to make Austen discuss this potential plan with Haden, her niece Fanny and her brother Henry. As we hear in their amusing dialogue, Austen would have written the kind of novel "where

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the first translations of Austen's novels, see Crossy V. and Saglia D. "Translations" in Todd J. (ed.) (2005) *Jane Austen in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 169-81.

every heroine must be the daughter of a clergyman. Perfectly good, tender, sentimental. Have not the tiniest sense of humour, speak several foreign languages brilliantly and be wonderful at music, obviously". Her heroine would have excelled at the piano, and her hero would have been "[O]ne who is too perfectly boring and boringly perfect to contemplate". While it is improbable that Austen would have turned her "Plan" into a fully achieved novel, it is most likely that she had written it with the purpose of entertaining her family, as a sort of funny parody of modern evangelical narratives. In such respect, the biopic brilliantly represents the effect that the "Plan" was intended to have.

Finally, *Miss Austen Regrets* devotes some extended scenes to the representation of Austen while drafting her last work *Persuasion* and reading it aloud to her sister. On the whole, the film dedicates more space to *Persuasion* than any of her other novels: long passages are quoted which might induce viewers to wonder if this were a deliberate attempt to reinforce the idea that Austen, in the end, regretted her decision not to marry, and had she had to write a new story, she would have given her heroine the second chance that she had not received, in order to "do it right this time". By embracing David Nokes' idea that "[N]o other heroine she had yet attempted had come so close to her own sensibility as Anne Elliot", [Nokes, 490] the parallel is easily drawn. This view is also reinforced by another of Nokes' ideas, according to which "[T]he persuasion of Lady Russell, to which Anne had succumbed in refusing the man she loved, must recall, however obliquely, the family persuasions that had put an end to any hopes of marriage between Tom Lefroy and Jane herself". The biographer explicitly states that, while writing *Persuasion*, Austen "allowed herself to imagine how it might have been". [Nokes, 490-1] The repeated quotation of passages from *Persuasion* reinforces the idea that the representation of Anne Elliot is, in reality, a representation of the author coming to terms with her life and pondering on her sentimental choices.

If the director and screenwriter have somehow succumbed to this commonplace comparison, the film must be given credit for yet another reason. In point of fact, it tries to balance this view by making Austen warn us, several times, that we must not confuse characters in a novel with 'real people'. Fanny is a great admirer of her aunt's novels, yet is still unable to distinguish between fiction and real life. For instance, after having read her aunt's novels, she still thinks that the central plot revolves around the issue of finding true love and that, as long as there is love, nothing else would matter. Fanny has "misread" her aunt's novels, and her father promptly

tells her that "[I]f that's what you think they say, my dear, perhaps you should read them again..." Indeed, the function of Fanny's character and her remarks is far more complicated than one might initially think. A couple of important issues are raised. On the one hand, Fanny is the representation of the young and naïve girl to whom a certain part of the audience can easily relate to: those Austenite or Janeites who appreciate Austen for her "romantic" plots eventually crowned by a happy marriage, and who, just like Fanny in the biopic, "still think that there is a secret love story to uncover" in Austen's life. On the other hand, Fanny is a sort of re-elaboration of the naïve and impressionable Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey*, who sees the world through the distorted lenses of improbable fiction. If, in *Miss Austen Regrets*, Austen goes as far as claiming that "[T]he only way to get a man like Mr. Darcy is to make him up", this is because she has understood that fictional representations distort Fanny's ideal of man. Of course, the presence of one of Austen's reader in the biopic is also undoubtedly a tribute to all the readers in Austen's novels: in all her works, after all, Austen gives an overview of different typologies of potential readers and contemplates the consequences that the reading experience has on "her" characters.

## Conclusion

Both *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets* portray different Austens in different ways and, probably, for different audiences. In the former, Jarrold's Austen emerges as a "fresh, feisty, lively and full of energy twenty-year-old girl" [Hood (2007b)]. The director's aim was that of giving his audience not so much an image of "Jane Austen as prim and proper and obsessed with propriety and middle aged and sitting quietly on her sofa in the living room," [Hood (2007b)] but rather that of a fresher, more provocative, brighter and approachable figure. In short, a modernised, twenty-first century character, with which viewers can easily identify: witty and lively, intelligent and self-confident, although slightly naïve at times, but still endowed with a great talent and a great fondness for literature.

On the other hand, *Miss Austen Regrets* produces a far more complete work, definitely more reliable on a biographical level because solidly based on the writer's letters. Here Austen is featured as a tough woman, approachable and witty, but with a darker side to complete her portrait: she melancholically thinks over the choices she has made in her life, and regrets some of them only because they have



not brought economic independence to herself and her family. However, her pragmatism is attuned to her sensibility and makes Olivia Williams' Austen emerge as a far more complicated character than we might have initially assumed, a woman with her feet firmly on the ground, and thus definitely bolder than the fanciful Austen in *Becoming Jane*.

Being biopics, both films seek to contextualize Austen's writing within the development of her life narrative. Jarrold has managed to do so by suggesting that her brief but intense romantic attachment to an Irish young man might have given a boost to her literary inspiration. His attempt is dubious, just like his somewhat naïve treatment of *Pride and Prejudice* as a seemingly autobiographical novel that sprang out of a crucially intense moment in the author's life. Creating parallels between what we think actually occurred in the novelist's life and what she wrote in her works is also very frequent in biographical accounts, however misleading these may be. *Miss Austen Regrets* offers a deeper understanding of Austen as a published author, as we see her actively working on her novels to see them in print. By this approach, the audience is able to gain deeper insights into her profession and artistry, even if the way in which she is depicted when she writes lacks that nice notion of first drafts as "sites of creation" suggested by Sutherland [Sutherland, 120]. To an extent, also *Miss Austen Regrets* tends to identify Austen with her heroine Anne Elliot, but the reference is definitely more veiled and indirect, if compared to the reference to Elizabeth Bennet in *Becoming Jane*.

This essay, however, was originally set out to verify whether these biographical films would have been able to shed new light on some of the unclear circumstances that characterize Austen's life. By focusing on a well-documented period, *Miss Austen Regrets* does not offer any new perspectives. However it widely investigates reasons and thoughts – or second thoughts – on particular events, and mainly explores Austen's feelings. The result is a more psychological portrait of its subject, revealing the darker sides of Austen. She emerges as a passionate but also pragmatic figure, in particular when dealing with her writings and disclosing the rather risky decisions she had to take during her life. Lovering's Austen shares also some features with the representation of the author given in Nokes' and Tomalin's biographical accounts. As a matter of fact, it seems that *Miss Austen Regrets* has absorbed both versions, since Austen is at the same time Nokes' *wild beast* and Tomalin's tough woman. For this reason, it scarcely adds new information to what we already know. On the contrary, *Becoming Jane* affords some new perspectives. Although loosely

drawing on Spence's 2003 biography, it tries to reinvent and re-imagine how things might have actually ended between Austen and Lefroy. One could claim that the director and screenwriters have fallen prey to a widespread commonplace by retelling a story in which Austen herself is portrayed as the heroine. One could also argue that their approach is historically inaccurate and thus improbable.

In a postmodern perspective, the fascinating task of digging up elements and re-creating a whole body out of many scattered parts produces a wide range of artistic illusions. This essay repeatedly touches upon the idea that these two biographical films often share references and points in common, either directly or indirectly, with both the written production of Austen, her surviving letters, and the whole lot of biographies published these last years. This sort of intertextual dialogue underlines all the possibilities of connecting fragmentary material and underlines to what extent it is difficult to detach from already 'established' views on the author. Yet, despite adding less vital information to what we already know about the writer, the cinematic medium adds anyway another small piece to the Austen puzzle, at least as a visual representation of her life.

Furthermore, it goes without saying that films stress the continuous and heterogeneous interest on the writer - pointing as well to one fundamental aspect: her wide-ranging potentials in terms of modernity and contemporaneity. Jane Austen on the screen, as presented in *Becoming Jane* and *Miss Austen Regrets* is a modern figure, an approachable character, with whom the audience can easily identify. The success and novelty of the directors' approach is that of abandoning the documentary-like structure of the film in order to portray a modern author - in a way the heroine of her own life - who, we can be sure, is not dead, but survives up to our own day.

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