

Food for Thought

A companion guide to this production, written and compiled by Heather A. Beasley.

Fanfiction and All Things Jane

One definition for **fanfiction** is “a story based within a pre-existing world, written by someone other than the original author of the work that it was based on.” Fanfiction typically includes one or more **canonical** characters (say Harry Potter and Ron Weasley), while sometimes introducing new, original characters.

Known as **fanfic** for short, the phenomenon exploded with the birth of the Internet, when publication of new texts became nearly instantaneous and practically free. It became impossible to pursue copyright claims against every scribbling amateur with the creation of websites like Archive Of Our Own (AO3). AO3 allows over a million individual writers to self-publish their work instantly, for free, to members of tens of thousands of fandoms.

The fanfic phenomenon, however, began long before the birth of the internet. It predates *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, the Marvel universe, and even amateur clubs composed of *Sherlock Holmes* fans. When you get right down to it, even Virgil's *Aeneid* is Homeric fanfic, written about a minor character from *The Iliad*. So perhaps unsurprisingly, Jane Austen's works have inspired all kinds of fanfiction since their original publication. (AO3 has over 1,400 Austen works on site.)

With *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*, playwrights Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon set out “to reverse-engineer the perfect holiday play.” Melcon wanted a play that felt like an adult woman's experience of the holidays, “being with family, specifically the way you're all on top of each other, and everybody brings their current self, and yet you also can't help but turn into this person your family thinks you are.”

Why turn to Austen at the Christmas season? As Gunderson remembers, “As a young writer, I admired Austen's life as a writer as much as I admired her stories, with their unstoppable humor and literary observation. She wrote with grace and sharpness. She was funny and kind, romantic and wise, astute and fanciful, and put women at the center of timeless literature. She taught me that I could be and do the same.” As the playwrights considered their options, they chose to put *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mary Bennet at the center of their new holiday script.

Several of Gunderson's other works are known for putting smart feminist women center stage, as you may remember from BETC's recent productions of *Silent Sky* and *The Revolutionists*. In choosing their storyline, Gunderson notes another key difference between *Miss Bennet* and another 19th century holiday classic, *A Christmas Carol*: “Our main character Mary doesn't change like Scrooge

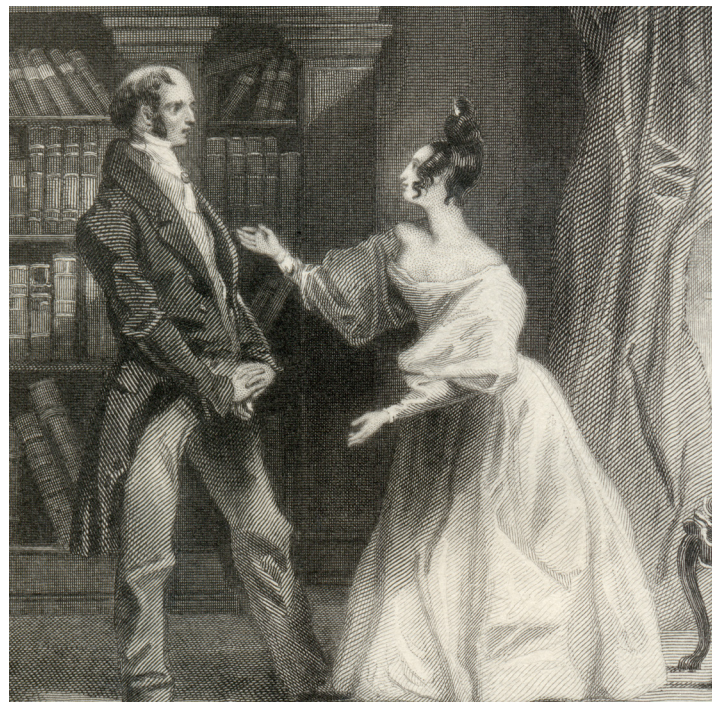
does. It is not required for her to adjust to the world, but for the world to adjust to her.”

Working as a long-distance team through a shared Google Doc, the two playwrights crafted a delightful, witty piece of Austen fanfic. *Miss Bennet* retains many of the canonical characters from *Pride and Prejudice*, while introducing the original character of Lord Arthur de Bourge. Long-time Janeites will appreciate the occasional tidbits of backstory from *Pride and Prejudice*. Those new to the world of Pemberley will find a warm, charming holiday play at hand. There's no required reading in advance, but perhaps a spark of curiosity might later lead you to a bookshelf of Regency delights!

Austen Across the Arts

Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley joins two centuries of other writers and artists' adoration, criticism, and self-identification with Jane Austen's works, especially *Pride and Prejudice*.

The first illustrator of Jane Austen's novels was Ferdinand Pickering. His melodramatic 1830's illustrations featured then-contemporary costumes rather than Regency fashions, and they shaped a generation's understanding of Austen's work.



Ferdinand Pickering's 1833 illustration of *Pride and Prejudice*

By the second half of the 19th century, celebrity illustrator Hugh Thomson produced the Peacock edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, so-called because one book cover and title page is illustrated with peacock feathers. By 1907, this version with his whimsical line drawings had sold over 25,000 copies, more than all Austen's works had previously sold, combined.

In 1895, Austen's works began moving from page to stage, with the *Duologues* of Rosina Filippi. Meant to be performed by amateurs in homes and drawing rooms, these two-person scenes taken from Austen's novels emphasized the comedy and romance of her novels. Filippi was an actress and elocution teacher who numbered George Bernard Shaw among her fans.

Austen's popularity grew from home and amateur theatricals to the professional stage with the production of several versions of her novels in the first half of the 20th century. In a little-remembered moment of theatrical history, actress Eva Le Gallienne and her lover Josephine Hutchinson starred in the first Austen stage biography, *Dear Jane*, in November 1932. It was performed at Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre in New York City.

Around this time, versions of Austen's novels began to appear on the silver screen, then the small screen. The legendary Laurence Olivier was the only Mr. Darcy of note for generations of Austen lovers, quite possibly maintaining his superiority in the role up to the 1995 miniseries with Colin Firth in the same role:

1995 also sparked a wave of new film adaptations for Austen fans, including *Clueless*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), the Indian adaptations *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) and *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), the Latina story *From Prada to Nada* (2011), *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2013), and *Pride & Prejudice & Zombies* (2016).

Austen's popularity reaches far beyond Great Britain and its former colonies. In Iran, author Azar Nafisi recalled teaching Austen and other authors secretly in the 1990s to a group of teenage girls, in her best-selling book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The highest rated TV series in South Korea in 2014 was *Omangwa Pyungyeon* ("Lawless World"), a resetting of *Pride and Prejudice* in a contemporary South Korean prosecutor's office. Within the past three years, manga versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility* have been published in Japan. Janeites even have a virtual home online: *Ever, Jane* is a Regency-era multiplayer role-playing game inviting Austen fans further into the world of her novels.

Around the world and since their first publication, Austen's works continue to inspire new artistic creations in the visual and performing arts as well as mass media, while warming the hearts and challenging the minds of readers everywhere.



A brief synopsis of the original *Pride and Prejudice*

When Charles Bingley, a rich single man, moves to the Netherfield estate, the neighborhood residents are thrilled, especially Mrs. Bennet, who hopes to marry one of her five daughters to him. When the Bennet daughters meet him at a local ball, they are impressed by his outgoing personality, but are less impressed by his friend Fitzwilliam Darcy, a landowning aristocrat too proud to speak to any of the locals. Elizabeth Bennet overhears him refusing to dance with her.

Bingley and the oldest Bennet daughter, Jane, soon form an attachment. Their relationship, however, is opposed by Bingley's sisters (because of Jane's lower social class) and by Darcy (who believes that Jane is indifferent to Bingley). Meanwhile, Darcy finds himself attracted to Elizabeth's spirited wit and expressive eyes, despite his objections to her family.

As Darcy grows more interested in Elizabeth, Elizabeth is instead attracted to George Wickham, a handsome, personable militia officer. Wickham tells Elizabeth that his father worked for Darcy's father and that he and Darcy

grew up together. He claims that Darcy denied his father's bequest of a clergyman's revenue to Wickham out of selfish resentment. Wickham's tale makes Darcy appear proud and cruel, but Elizabeth accepts Wickham's account without question.

Next to visit the Bennet family is Mr. Bennet's cousin, William Collins, a clergyman who will someday inherit the Bennet estate. Full of praises for his patroness, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, Mr. Collins plans to choose a wife from the Bennet daughters. He settles on Elizabeth, but is stunned and offended when she refuses him. He quickly turns to Elizabeth's friend, Charlotte Lucas, who aims to marry for security rather than love. They are soon engaged and married.

At the same time, Jane is dismayed to find out that Bingley and the entire Netherfield party have unexpectedly left for London. Although Jane quietly resigns herself to a life without Bingley, Elizabeth is angry and suspects that Bingley's sisters and Darcy are trying to keep him from Jane.

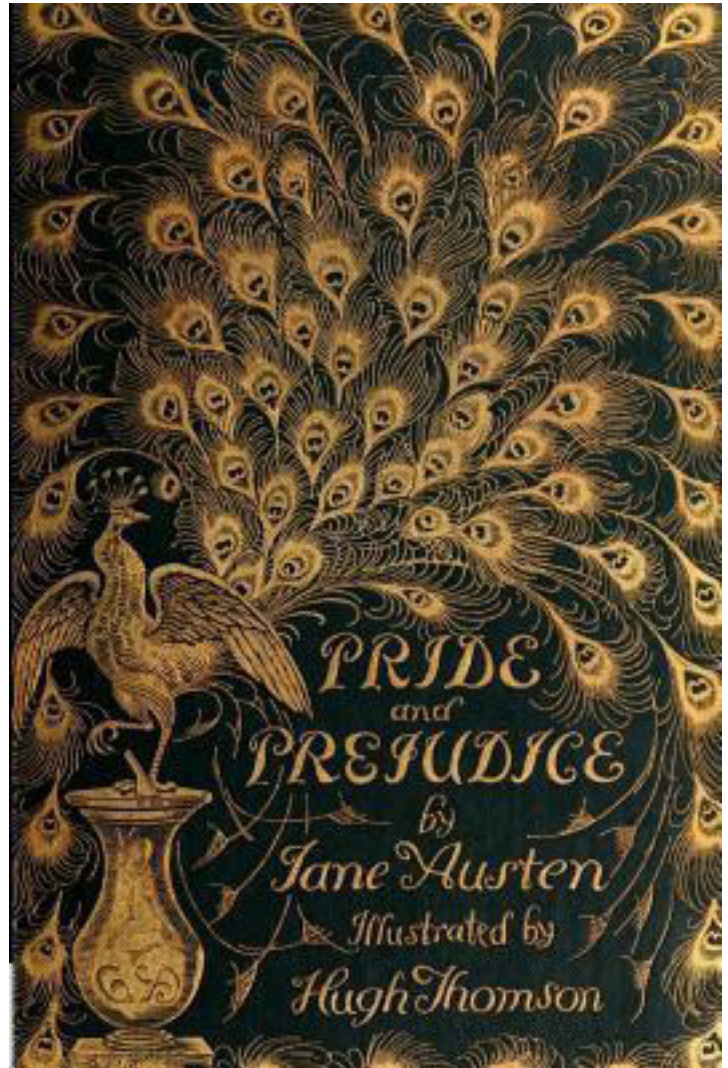
Elizabeth visits Charlotte at her new home in Kent, and meets Mr. Collins' patroness and Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, an overbearing woman who thrives on meddling in other people's lives. Soon after Elizabeth's arrival, Darcy visits his aunt with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy puzzles Elizabeth with his behavior; then, one day, he surprises Elizabeth by proposing to her. Still believing Darcy is responsible for Bingley's separation from Jane and for Wickham's misfortune, Elizabeth refuses him. The next day, Darcy gives her a letter explaining his role in influencing Bingley away from Jane, and details the facts of Wickham's situation. Darcy, while proud, is innocent of wrongdoing, leaving Elizabeth mortified at her discovery of how her own pride prejudiced her against Darcy.

After returning home for a month, Elizabeth goes on a trip with her aunt and uncle Gardiner to Derbyshire county, where they visit Darcy's estate of Pemberley. They meet Darcy unexpectedly and are all surprised at how graciously he treats them. He calls on Elizabeth at her inn, introduces her to his sister, and invites her to Pemberley for dinner. Darcy is still in love with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth begins to have similar feelings for him.

In the midst of this promising situation, Elizabeth receives letters from Jane telling her that Lydia has eloped with Wickham. Elizabeth fears the Bennet family is permanently disgraced and that her newly-discovered love for Darcy is hopeless. When Lydia is found, however, she and Wickham marry. Elizabeth discovers that Darcy was instrumental in orchestrating the marriage, thereby saving the reputation and marriageability of the other Bennet daughters.

Bingley returns to Netherfield, and soon asks Jane to marry him. She of course accepts. As this happy news emerges, Lady Catherine De Bourgh arrives. She has heard a rumor that Darcy and Elizabeth are engaged, which they are not. She lectures Elizabeth on the imprudence of such a

match, and demands that Elizabeth promise not to accept any proposal from Darcy. Elizabeth refuses, causing Lady Catherine to tell Darcy about Elizabeth's impertinence and to scold him about the folly of an engagement between them. Lady Catherine's description of events gives Darcy hope that Elizabeth has had a change of heart. He proposes again, and Elizabeth happily accepts.



A reconstruction of the 1894 Hugh Thomson
"Peacock" edition