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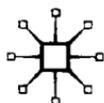
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Romancing Jane Austen

**Narrative, Realism, and
the Possibility of a Happy Ending**

Ashley Tauchert
University of Exeter

palgrave
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Dedicated with love to Chris, who continually reminds me of the possibility of a happy ending in spite of overwhelming odds to the contrary.

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Preface

'If love is a conspiracy, it is much older than the age of "bourgeois individualism" in which some historians tend to locate it.'

Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*¹

'The articulation of a feminist standpoint based on women's self-definition and activity ... embodies a distress which requires a solution. The experience of continuity and relation – with others, with the natural world, of mind with body – provides an ontological base for developing a non-problematic social synthesis, a social synthesis which need not operate through the denial of the body, the attack on nature, or the death struggle between the self and other, a social synthesis which does not depend on any of the forms taken by abstract masculinity.'

Nancy M.C. Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint*²

'A woman with the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can.'

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*³

Following on from the publication of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of the Feminine* (Palgrave, 2002), this study closes a research cycle which initiated in a desire to participate in contemporary debates concerning the dawn and daybreak of women's Anglophone literary history. Taken together, these two books offer a revised account of Wollstonecraft and Austen as peculiarly resonant figures in that documented history, through engagement with contemporary critical questions concerning femininity, subjectivity and writing. *Accent of the Feminine* tested the arguments of the 'equality/difference' debate raised in recent feminist philosophy against the textual evidence of Mary Wollstonecraft's interventions in late eighteenth-century political theory. My key focus there concerned the anachronistic implications of a resonance between the eighteenth-century feminist polemic of Mary Wollstonecraft and the twentieth-century 'feminine philosophy' of Luce Irigaray. *Romancing Jane Austen* considers the Jane Austen cultural phenomenon through the strong lenses available from accounts of the romance as a narrative mode. It is both an attempt to make conscious the complex and sometimes contradictory network of associations centred on the romance, and to

offer yet another account of Austen as the first female writer who seems to have transcended her social coordinates as a narrative artist.

Austen has been traditionally understood as a 'high' realist writer, but one who was limited to the representation of feminised zones, further curtailed by her identity as a product of the lower gentry and clergy. She has also become a successful English brand: the increasingly popular, and culturally valuable, mother of the popular 'feminine romance'. Narrative romance has come into focus as a distinctive literary mode in the defining antinomy that characterises the history of narrative writing: 'Romances oppose reality'.⁴ Critical interest in the romance is split between a feminist literary history that locates Austen as a key figure in the history of the realist novel, and a Marxist-inflected narrative theory that has largely overlooked her work.⁵ I want to consider a number of significant structural parallels between romance as narrative expression of a pre-capitalist 'mythic' form, and romance as a debased 'feminine' genre, both of which can be apprehended in Austen's famous body of work. This study approaches Austen as a missing link between otherwise strongly diverging strands of the 'mythic' and 'feminine' romance. It considers the epistemology of romance – and its tendencies to accommodate femininity, irony and the comic – as focused through Austen's accomplished narrative romances.

The discussion starts from a hypothesis that Austen's six famous novels can be read productively as late adaptations of romance narrative, which, according to Erich Auerbach, has an exacting 'relationship to the objective world of reality'.⁶ This relationship is captured in the structural necessity of the series of *aventures* undertaken by the courtly hero: 'trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence'. Furthermore, 'the most significant actions are performed primarily for the sake of a lady's favor'.⁷ That lady, in the hands of critics as diverse as Northrop Frye and Margaret Doody, can be read for tropes of what has recently been described as the 'feminine divine'. This makes Austen's work particularly interesting to ongoing attempts to develop a 'feminist standpoint', and her work can be taken as audacious evidence for our understanding of an otherwise culturally belittled feminine agency.

The romance – whether feminised or not – is a narrative formation centred on the possibility of salvation. Austen's work captures, under conditions of meticulous realism, the narrative formula of the feminine subject of romance. This is not necessarily a new figure, in fact by definition archaic if not archetypal, but expressed and represented under new conditions. With reference to the powerful Marxian critical frame, as received through Fredric Jameson's analysis of the 'ideology of form',

I am particularly interested in a structural analogy available between the feminine romance, the salvational narrative quest, and the problem that is feminine subjectivity in the narrative of history. Austen's narrative fiction, from this perspective, provides evidence that feminine subjectivity might yet have a role in salvational historicity.

Since starting this project I have learnt that 'romance' resists definitive closure. At the point of finishing the book, I am still uncertain of what it is that the term names. I am inclined to think that it might indicate something no longer, or not yet, within our range of consciousness. Raymond Williams noted some problems with defining 'romantic' that point to the inherent ambiguity of 'romance':

Romantic is a complex word because it takes its modern senses from two distinguishable contexts: the content and character of romances, and the content and character of the Romantic Movement.

'Romance', he notes, was already changing when it appeared in English from 1650: 'The word in varying forms, *romanz*, *romaunz*, *roman*, *romant*, etc., had come through of and Provençal from *romance*, mL – "in the Romantic tongue": that is to say, in the neo-Latin vernacular languages.'⁸ I am not equipped to offer a complete formal study of the origins and directions of 'romance' beyond the ordinary awareness, available from many sources including Williams, that narratives which attract this label tend to be defined in distinction to what has come to be recognised as the literary 'realism' characteristic of 'the novel'. What I intend to offer instead is a meditation on the peculiar tendencies of romance in the here and now, refracted through Austen, to denote two quite distinct literary phenomena: one best captured by Marxian analysis of the dialectical history of 'realism'; the other crystallised more immediately in the resolutely feminised realm of the love story.

Jane Spencer has already noted that romance held 'an especially strong appeal for women', and played a significant part in the development of women's writing through the eighteenth century.⁹ I would add that this powerful hold continues, as evidenced by the phenomenal contemporary interest in popular romance narrative in general and Austen adaptations in particular. My argument is simply that there is a structural – or formal – relation between the two critical connotations of the romance, as salvational narrative and as heterosexual love story, which suggests something interesting about what we are now beginning to understand as feminine subjectivity. Furthermore, I think that Austen was conscious of what she was doing when she brought these strands into peaceful relationship in her six key works.

If romance can now be said to *be* anything at all, it seems most likely to refer to a fantasy formation that still has a central place in the emotional lives of women. My local charity shop is large enough to set aside a separate room for books. Those books are organised around bold categories that fit the reading habits of a mixed socio-economic demographic: 'Thrillers', 'Gardening', 'Education', 'Children's', 'Miscellaneous' and 'Romance'. 'Romance' is by far the largest section, crowding a wall of shelves usually populated by women browsers. The local library, with its more sophisticated referencing system, also highlights the category of the 'Romance', in which section Austen is sometimes found sitting unobtrusively alongside reams of paperback bodice-rippers. Whether we choose to understand this persistent narrative phenomenon as a cultural symptom of the powerful ideology of 'heteronormativity', or as the natural expression of inherent and instinctive feminine desires, is not my immediate concern here. Women as a genus crave romance. Romance structures femininity in a way that demands attention. That kind of craving calls on the language of psychoanalysis, which comes readily to hand:

The issue of female sexuality always brings us back to the question of how the human subject is constituted. In the theories of Freud that Lacan redeploys, the distinction between the sexes brought about by the castration complex and the different positions that must subsequently be taken up, confirms that the subject is split and the object is lost. This is the difficulty at the heart of being human to which psychoanalysis and the objects of its enquiry – the unconscious and sexuality – bear witness.¹⁰

This is also the difficulty at the heart of Austen's feminised romance narratives. Exemplified by Austen at its aesthetic high-point, the feminine romance can be read as a kind of cultural day-dreaming common to women. That daydream concerns the splitting of the subject and quest for the object, focalised through the feminine subject of narrative. Whether we, as academically trained readers, revel in or resist that day-dreaming tendency is not the point. Everyone reading this book will have indulged to some extent in the compelling romance fantasy available through Austen's narrative performances. Some might raise an eyebrow at its ironic reincarnation in the *Bridget Jones* phenomenon, or its postcolonial recasting as *Bride and Prejudice*. We would probably share a smirk at the innumerable popular examples revealing the structure of the fantasy in all its literal infelicities, and stripped of all pretensions to

critical consciousness:

She jumped, her eyes going wide and startled. Then as her gaze flashed to his, she saw his control shatter in an explosion of raw need that stunned every sense she possessed. His face went hard, his eyes fierce, blazing, almost savage in their passionate hunger. He looked primitive, as if polite society had barely touched him.

Fear, sheer primal female fear, streaked through her, urging flight, but at the same time she was paralysed, completely and helplessly fascinated.¹¹

This may seem trivial material, until we recall that 95 per cent of Hollywood films have been defined as containing dominant or secondary romance narratives.¹² One of the things that makes Austen so astonishingly successful as a writer is also the thing that associates her work with the basest of feminine fantasies: she narrates the daydream of the heroine's persistent desire to be *somehow* saved by an ideal gentleman: a common desire to be rescued from 'all this', and to live 'happily ever after'. The 'somehow' seems to involve a feminine power to transform an animalistic masculine desire into civility, or gentlemanly action.

It seems a double-bind, then, on turning to feminist criticism for an account of this structurally persistent daydream, to find the romance is widely denounced as a dangerous lure towards a cultural 'idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage' which should be resisted by the conscious woman.¹³ Alison Light notes this tendency in her positive reconstruction of romance reading for feminist literary politics:

[Romance is] seen as coercive and stereotyping narratives which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who only finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male. What happens to women readers is then compared to certain Marxist descriptions of the positioning of all human subjects under capitalism. Romance thus emerges as a form of oppressive ideology, which works to keep women in their socially and sexually subordinate place.¹⁴

A recent comment on the character of Dawn in *The Office* gives a grumbling account of her 'passive' characteristics, aligned with the romantic Austen heroine:

She's been instilled from birth with that great feminine virtue of forbearance. ... The really chilling thing about Dawn is that her character would sit as easily in a Jane Austen novel as it does in the 21st-century office; despite 150-odd years in the advance of

women's education and professional achievement, the same contours are visible of female subservience to male ego.

Dawn, like Lizzy, still suffers the 'fantasy of being discovered, of someone else stepping in to make their destiny – a man, a talent scout or a head-hunter'.¹⁵ Maybe this is because the moderately educated Dawn might plausibly be imagined reading Austen in her quiet moments. Psychoanalysis offers a vocabulary to think through the fact of this persistent daydream as a structuring principle of feminine subjectivity, recognisable under historical conditions as palpably different as the pre-industrial Regency and the post-industrial wasteland in which Austen's romance still flourishes.

Jungian psychoanalysis makes strong claims for the existence of 'patterns of functioning', or 'primordial images', which 'are present in every psyche'. The persistence of romance implies just such a primordial image, but it is important to distinguish between the form and the content of this image:

A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience. Its form, however, as I have explained elsewhere, might perhaps be compared to the axial system of a crystal, which, as it were, preforms the crystalline structure in the mother liquid, although it has no material existence of its own.¹⁶

The 'form' of romance, taken as an 'axial system', expresses a very human desire for salvation. Its content under conditions of narrative realism has become inextricably entwined with feminine fantasy in the name of love.

While psychoanalysis offers an available vocabulary for thinking through romance as a persistent subjective fantasy, late Marxian analysis offers an equally advanced vocabulary for thinking through the cultural function of romance as 'ideologeme'. In these discussions, the romance operates as a covert narrative mode in dialectical relation with the overt tendency of the historical moment in which it arises. I find Frederic Jameson's account of the 'political unconscious' particularly productive for considering the historical significance of Austen's successful mediation of romance and realism, expressed through feminine narrative consciousness. Austen's foregrounding of Providence in the working out of her narrative equations can be read as an example of 'adequate theoretical mediation between the salvational logic of the romance narrative

and the nascent sense of historicity imposed by the social dynamic of capitalism'.¹⁷ Mode and archetype are equally abstract principles of a structural causality, and I think we need both concepts to understand the forces at work in Austen's exquisite narrative performances.

Vladimir Propp's formulation of narrative 'functions' as 'stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled' exposes the 'problem of the character' in 'its incapacity to make a place for the subject'.¹⁸ In short, narrative functions exceed the role of individual characters, much as heroic actions exceed the role of individual actors in the example offered by cinema. The supplements of stuntman and special effects bridge the gap between the individual's range of possible actions and the 'Action' demanded by narrative function. Alex Woloch notices this 'strange doubling' at work in *Pride and Prejudice*:

Darcy quickly substitutes a servant for himself, transforming what would have been an action growing out of and elaborating the novel's emotional center into a mundane, meaningless duty. The strange doubling – 'let me, or let the servant' – reveals a sudden similarity between the two characters who exist at the poles of the narrative's asymmetric structure. In this brief moment we can see what the system of characterization usually distorts but ultimately relies on: the radical continuity, or similarity, of all human agents.¹⁹

Beyond the 'story of "individuals" ' or 'the chronicle of generations and their destinies', Jameson asks us to consider narrative 'rather as an impersonal process, a semic transformation', which performs itself through a series of transformational relations between paired characters.²⁰ What I find interesting when applying this thought to Austen is that it allows us to regard the powerful feminine agency of her heroines as one yielding to narrative providence. This yielding agency, represented through key characteristics of patience, humility, gentleness, civility and forbearance, and expressed through the determinants of actions available to realist subjects, calls on a faith and hope in futurity that is now very difficult to imagine possible. Perhaps we still read and care about Austen because she imagines it for us, and allows us at least temporarily to suspend our belief in the inevitability of suffering. That may well seem a tall order for 'Dear Jane', unless we recognise in her a woman with the 'misfortune of knowing' something we have since largely forgotten, and who concealed it as well as she could.

ASHLEY TAUCHERT,
University of Exeter