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Emerging Media in 18th Century Literature: How Jane Austen Invented Facebook

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"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."-Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice

Time and again, the opening lines of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are used to reinforce the contemporary interpretation that the author's only goal in seven lengthy novels was to marry off women to the perfect men. The traditionally accepted Austenian woman is one-dimensional and finds pleasure only in companionship; the championing men, on the other hand, are strong-willed, wealthy, ever-so-interesting characters that every lady would throw her closest friend under the carriage for. In turn, critics disfigure the personalities, emotions, and personal goals of the likes of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet and *Sense and Sensibility*'s Elinor Dashwood to project the "womanly" qualities onto the author. Many critics believe Austen to be the shallow, disinterested woman her characters appear to be at first glance; this great trespass on her novels and characterization developed an incredibly misinformed public that remains today. The daughter of a rector and a member of the gentry, Austen was well-read and informed on current affairs—political, economic, and social. It is clear that she understood new and complex scientific research, like cognitive cues, whether she was fully conscious of her inclusion of these concepts in her novels or not (Zunshine). Because of her deep understanding of social settings, interactions, and connections, Austen can be seen as the touchstone for eighteenth century social networking.

One of the primary reasons critics of Austen's time found her writing sub-par was the fairly recent emergence of the novel. Instead of musings on philosophy and science, the novel was a creative endeavor, full of the lives of fictional characters in fictional situations with fictional outcomes. Recreational reading was no longer based in reason and knowledge, but in

adventure and imagination. Society believed novels were whims of passion that caused women to read passively, without involving reason in their interpretations; in fact, in her time, it was said that "novels become a habit-forming vice," according to Thomas Gisborne's writings on gender during her time (Uphaus 335). Robert Uphaus suggests that Austen understood the collective attitude toward the novel as a genre and the struggle of writing novels for women. The very basis of referring to this phenomenon as "female reading" or "female writing" calls into question the gender politics of criticism, reading, and writing.

The focus on the downfalls and misunderstandings of the Austen anthology has allowed critics to ignore her incredible ability to scientifically dissect the intricate workings of social circles and networks comprised of psychologically accurate characters and interactions. For instance, her portrayals of gender roles (heterosocial/sexual and homosocial/sexual) within those circles were so apt that they often still true today. The transcendental human nature of individuals like *Emma's* Emma Woodhouse and *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price causes us to question how Austen amplifies and enlightens our understanding of how modern social networks, like Facebook or Twitter, stem directly from historically complex affective networks based on gender, socioeconomic standing, politics, occupation, and other important aspects of our everyday life in the contemporary technological age.

How Austen Writes

With a complete understanding of both how women actually read and the public perception of reading being forced on them, Austen was able to intelligibly maneuver the minefield of writing as a woman for women by criticizing her own creations in the novels. As an apt example of her hyperawareness of the metacritisicm and conversation, Austen purposely

sketched Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* as a naïve young lady with the propensity to represent the impressionable female reader of novels. Purposely drawing out Catherine's outrageous actions and thoughts, Austen is able to mock the ridiculousness of the idea of the "female reader," while still retaining the integrity of the plot and her writing style. Her novels are "new not only in its representation of a heroine, but new in its substitution of gratitude for 'tender emotions'" that are wrongly attributed only to the female gender (Uphaus 335). Catherine is a caricature of the heroine Austen later penned. Later female characters, like Elizabeth Bennet were her "new representations," strong-willed women whose "tender emotions" are toned down in favor of non-gendered emotional reactions. Based only on the fact her novels were self-reflexive, it is already clear that there is a deeper understanding of how to navigate literature for women, particularly in her four most social novels: *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Persuasion,* and *Emma.* Rather than ascribe to female reading, "Austen uses her own novel to reshape the prior conventions of female reading" (Uphaus 335).

Because Austen recognized gender as a social construct, both male *and* female readers are able to situate themselves as close to the characters' minds as possible because of: a) her journalistic third-person omniscient narrative, and b) those empathetic appeals to emotion that transcend gender. Much like an "individual blog," Austen displays a carefully crafted snapshot of an event with opinions and reactions on topics important only to a limited audience within the social networks of the novel (Thevenot 288). Had she penned the novels in only subjective points of view, the opinions and reactions would fall flat; however, her utilization of objective points of view draws the reader in. The reader desires rational thought, which objective point of view provides, tempering the more emotional response to subjective point of view. The novel provides that rational format: sequential events, characters with names and homes, and the ability to

evaluate the civil propriety, morals, and ethics. In order to fully appropriate the rationality of her novels, Joseph Weizenbaum states that readers fuse with the othered counterpart. Humans can only navigate and negotiate new and foreign objects by relating them to human characteristics, the only characteristics they are able to conceive (and very specifically, their *own* qualities) (Weizenbaum). Readers anthropomorphize the characters that do not actually exist in the physical realm by projecting their own interpretations on people, places, and interactions. They relate Fanny to someone they have met or envision Mansfield Park as a place they have actually seen. These subjective material referents are necessary in order to fully develop the novel for each individual reader. Without them, Austen lives only on a page and within words used a thousand times before her and a thousand times after.

This marriage of the object and subject is Austen's drive for character development. She will revisit scenes from an objective and subjective point of view to show both character and cognitive backgrounds without directly referencing their history (Zunshine 113). She doesn't need to *tell* the reader that *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth and Darcy are compatible; rather, she *shows* their passion through the verbal discourse between them or with other characters or by providing the reader a personal snapshot of Elizabeth's private thoughts, not unlike a journal or blog:

> She [Elizabeth] was in hopes that the evening would afford some opportunity of bringing them [herself and Darcy] together; that the whole of the visit would not pass away without enabling them to enter into something more of conversation than the mere ceremonious salutation attending his entrance. Anxious and uneasy, the period which passed in the drawing-room, before the gentlemen came, was wearisome and dull to a degree that almost made her uncivil. She looked forward

to their entrance as the point on which all her chance of pleasure for the evening

must depend. (Austen 394)

When Austen warps her point of view or provides this internal exposition to serve a

higher purpose, it supplements the reader's understanding of the inner workings of characters

and plot-driven relationships. In *Mansfield Park*, she also tends to give Fanny both objective and

subjective points of reference, but by offering objective points of reference within the novel, it is

very clear to the reader in an overall sense how Fanny's mind works and what her opinions are of

those around her. For instance, much of the exposition between dialogues during the early

meetings with the Crawford's is fairly objective. Miss Crawford does this and Fanny says that.

Austen breaks these objective moments up with lengthy paragraphs of subjective reactions or

evaluations of the actions of other characters from Fanny (Zunshine 107). When Fanny and

Edmund have joined the Crawfords on horseback, there is a switch from objective to subjective.

First, the narration states, "Edmund was close to her [Miss Crawford]; he was speaking to her; he

was evidently directing her management of the bridle; he had hold of her hand; she [Fanny] saw

it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach" (Austen 461).

Then Austen delves into Fanny's evaluation of the event, packed with Fanny's trademark

level-headedness and a rationalization of Edmund's closeness to Miss Crawford, judging only

his good character, and not the reality of the situation:

She [Fanny] must not wonder at all this; what could be more natural than that

Edmund should be making himself useful, and proving his good-nature by any

one? She could not but think, indeed, that Mr. Crawford might as well have saved

him the trouble; that it would have been particularly proper and becoming in a

brother to have done it himself; but Mr. Crawford… probably knew nothing of the

matter, and had no active kindness in comparison of Edmund. (Austen 461)

Whereas some of the exposition offers a simple, blow-by-blow account of action, there

are other points, like Elizabeth's emotional reactions to Darcy or Fanny's account, that expose

the real underbelly of how the event *affects* the characters and motivates the plot. Zunshine

argues that this play on perspective is intentional:

> If the pleasure afforded by reading novels is foremost a mind-reading pleasure,
>
> stemming from the intensely social nature of our species, we can predict that
>
> writers would intensify the pleasure of their readers by increasing what we may
>
> call the mindfulness of social situations that they conjure. That's what Austen
>
> does (intuitively, of course) by adding an extra mind to a seemingly completed
>
> scene and thus reversing our perception of its sociocognitive dynamics. (Zunshine
>
> 111)

The mindfulness of the characters creates a situation that readers enjoy scrutinizing.

Adding another dimension to the conversation creates new interpretations of social connections

or possibilities of the future, pushing the reader to continue the novel to confirm or deny the

interpretations.

What Exactly Is A Network?

The reason Austen is able to play with our "intensely social nature" is because we operate

in networks, socializing with people we have ties with based on our economic, political,

educational, or familial interactions. Whether meetings are happenstance or premeditated, the

bonds created weave intricate and unpredictable webs of connections. The connections create

layers of primary, secondary, even tertiary levels of relations. For instance, in the early stages of *Emma*, Harriet's connection to Emma is not direct. Harriet's primary relationship to Mrs. Goddard creates a secondary relationship to Emma. As Harriet grows closer to Emma, they form a friendship, a primary bond. Harriet is then connected to Emma's friends, family, and acquaintances, by association with the Woodhouses. This relationship has formed Harriet's network, a small network within that of Highbury, within that of the county, within the country, and so on and so forth. These networks stem from a person, infinitely outward. Like the radicle-system of a rhizome, the network is based on indefinite amounts and variations of spreading roots, different from the typical "tree" metaphor of connection; though the branches of a rhizome operate as separate entities, they still work together in a "folding" manner to create a "controlled social rhizome" within each novel, however contradictory "controlled rhizome" may sound (Deleuze and Guattari). This is because a rhizome is not the absence of organization, but instead, "the privileging of certain kind of structure, the horizontal network, over another structure, the tree" (Galloway 61). Rather than completely random intertwining connections spreading out from a center, the links between the characters are those of family, friends, or proximity; however, there are some happenstance meetings that create rhizomatic branches from the more traditional family trees. The Bennets themselves are connected linearly and hierarchically; Elizabeth's meeting with Darcy by simply attending a public ball would be the rhizomatic branch from her linear family tree. Rhizomes in Austen networks "enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms…[that] we can never fully account for or predict" (Dean 22).

The Affective Network

The map of networks, however, comes absolutely secondary to the fact that Austen pens *affective* networks. These are not merely stagnant relationships. They are intricate interactions that we are driven to actively participate in by circulating information and creating new nodes. This "[a]ffect… is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of" the way we share with others (Dean 21). Social media is a viral explosion of information that "displaces the content of any one utterance," because the action of communication from the whole network is more important for affect than the content produced by the single entity (Dean 24). The affective network is deeply emotional and relies on the involvement of the whole in order to maintain the possibility of the individual. It doesn't matter what is said, only that we feel that we have participated. Those emotional aspects gender the network, much like the novel, and create an intense "drive," as Dean defines it. She states that we are constantly working toward a goal we cannot reach. Users fail consistently, but the repetitive action of attempting and failing, and then attempting and failing again creates an enjoyment in the pursuit. She cites Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek in their definition of this desire to fail, the latter of which she quotes stating, "the subject can 'find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object'" (Žižek qtd. in Dean 21). Drive sustains social media because it sustains the process and actions of pursuit. In turn, we enjoy Austen novels because her characters persist in failure, framed by universal issues we find exceedingly important in reading social media—gender, occupation, social hierarchy and socioeconomic standing, and personal relationships.

The connections to social media and affective network dependency in Austen novels are inextricable. Social media relies on validation—from others, whether close friends or complete

strangers—just as the ladies of the novels rely on validation through independence, whether gained by marriage or other means. Our statuses and "tweets" only have value if they are "liked" and "retweeted", which are merely actions perpetuating our own actions. Our pictures are artistic, beautiful, and meaningful only if they are shared with others. Viral videos, memes, or articles are explosions of validations. If my status remains "unliked" and my "tweets" "untweeted", they are less valuable than those that have been. It is clear that an affective network centers on the action of participation, not necessarily the content of the action. Placing this exchange-value on human *labor*, not the *product*, commodifies not only the product of the work, but also the worker herself. The importance of new media, whether Austen's novel or a social media site, is the inexclusive promotion of reproduction and accessibility; it is both a means of production and consumption, which creates a market for both the social media site and the user (Enzensberger 266). The differentiation between commodity and consumer is blurred in a world where we are only validated by "likes" and "retweets". This delicate exchange upholds the commodification of the user.

Coined in modern terms as "communicative capitalism," Jodi Dean supports the idea that consumers are the commodity "offer[ing] [them]selves up to the web-crawling, content-scraping marketing gods" who "almost always ends up sustaining an information and marketing network" (Lupton 1). In a review of Dean's book, *Blog Theory*, Julia Lupton cites Dean's term, defined by Dean as "'that economic-ideological form wherein reflexivity captures creativity and resistance'" and displaces the profits (Dean qtd. in Lupton 1). Dean is worried that the production of online content and the distribution is unequal to the production-value, exchange-value, and use-value. Users, however, don't care; that lack is what keeps social networks successful. Users are only interested in the recognition and validation. Users propagate the "reflexive communication,"

focused on the individual and not on the whole community (Lupton 2). We are only worried about constantly changing the background and color-coordination of *our* cell phone interface, but only in conjunction with the standards of the controlling popular culture. We live up to an aesthetic expectation, ignoring conceptual expectations.

"Surface" Identity

Because conceptual expectations are the part of social interaction that we deem to exist on a higher intellectual plane, the women who openly live up to aesthetic expectations in the novels are often deemed foolish. In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter and Elizabeth are caricatures of the fallen-mighty, struggling to grasp what is left of their high-class life by maintaining the appearance of wealth. Anne, on the other hand, is considering plain and aesthetically lacking because she is frugal and strives to keep the family from ruin by suggesting maintaining a reasonable lifestyle in a more affordable home. Their home is the modern-day Facebook page. As long as they portray their class publicly by displaying their grand home and kept grounds, they believe they may still take part in the network without direct penalty. The same ridiculous struggle for appearance in exchange for acceptance into the network is littered all throughout Austen's novels. Kitty and Lydia are seen as silly and immature in *Pride and Prejudice*, constantly attempting to uphold the "surface" social expectations that actually go much deeper than appearance. The girls want to marry into the militia, wear different ribbons on their bonnets every day, and don't see the need for "non-female" pursuits (for instance, extensive scientific reading or rigorous physical activity). These surface fixes are directly connected to deeper needs. The girls need to make profitable connections as the younger daughters of not-so-wealthy landed family. Therefore, they make material changes in order to achieve abstract, immaterial goals.

Using their physical appearance to portray their "selves" is much like the appearance of our social media. It is "symbiotic social media [that] gives us a surfeit of options to tell the truth about who we are and what we are doing, and an audience for it all, reshaping norms around mass exhibitionism and voyeurism. Twitter lips and Instagram eyes: Social media is part of ourselves; the Facebook source code becomes our own code" (Jurgenson 1). Just like internalizing the Austen characters and the character's internalization of material standards, users internalize social media and our own networks. Suddenly, it becomes appropriate to break the fourth wall publicly. Dean says that we perpetuate this voyeurism because "[u]nderstood reflexively, constant, pervasive communication can be a regime of control in which the people willingly and happily report on the views and activities and stalk their friends" (35). My "profile" is incomplete until I have filled in my most personal history and information: hometown, current town, all past and current jobs, university, high school, elementary school, favorite quotes and entertainment, and relationship status. What privileges outsiders to this information, why is it demanded of me, and why am I comfortable freely sharing it? It is because "[w]e can make and be our own spectacles," a kind virtual voyeurism becoming the new norm, whereas Austen's characters participate in a more traditionally veiled voyeurism (Dean 35). It is important to the marriages and relationships of her characters that they are able to visualize and auralize a future with this other person and their personality. After Darcy writes a letter to Elizabeth outlining all the misfortunes suffered at the young lieutenant's, Wickham's, hands, Elizabeth recounts how she had so quickly and wrongly formed a good opinion of wicked Wickham; "his *countenance*, *voice*, and *manner* had established him at once in the possession of every virtue" (italics for emphasis, Austen 322). Elizabeth realizes she has relied entirely on Wickham's physical and material appearance to develop a false understanding of deeper,

immaterial virtues. This is why Elizabeth's attachment to Wickham is so immediately intense—

she is able to visualize and auralize his qualities, wicked though they may be.

Deriving Social Power

An individual's social status, when viewed independently from occupation or economic

value to a community, is also pivotal to an Austen novel. Surely, the socioeconomic aspects of

class (careers and money) lend to the social hierarchy, but I mean to point to social powers alone

for the moment; for instance, the audience must be aware of the characters' affective ability to

manipulate others, to sympathize or empathize, to compromise despite personal losses, or to

exercise moral or ethical judgments. These inherent qualities of human nature are *perpetuated* by

socioeconomic standing, but are *enacted* by emotion and a deep understanding of social order.

This is where Austen's understanding of the sociocognitive cues that Zunshine cites is critical.

Scholars often differentiate between the cues in two ways: they are either deeply personal to the

author's history or they are scientifically crafted for optimal emotional moments. Certainly, her

novels are dually meaningful.

For instance, E. Margaret Moore suggests Austen's issues with money and family trauma

influence her plots greatly; "the interaction of personality and economic circumstances" are

exemplified in *Mansfield Park,* when Fanny explains the importance of frugality when raising

nine children (574). In another instance, Moore argues Austen's own experience with maternal

neglect shapes the relationships with each main female character and their mother, mother

figures, sisters, or fathers in situations where a dominant female in not present. The mothers and

mother figures are often absent or inadequate, and fathers are not appropriate stand-ins for the

love only a mother can give; instead, a strong sisterly figure is often maternalized, as Austen

maternalized her own sister, Cassandra. The parallel to Elizabeth and Jane Bennet is unmistakable. Unlike Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet is easily excited, ignorant, flighty, and unavailable; therefore, Elizabeth clings instead to Jane, and vice versa. Where there is no sisterly figure in the novels, anxiety grows and characters misplace emotions. In *Mansfield Park,* Moore states that, without a supportive maternal figure, Fanny "agonizes about her value to others" much like Austen may have because they both "imagine themselves to have been deprived of maternal love because of their own unworthiness" (576). Sir and Lady Bertram neither provide the guise of paternal a stand-in or maternal figure for Fanny and therefore, she consistently questions her worthiness in her relationships, particularly with Edmund.

If the audience ignores Austen's biographical background, they are left with the more scientific approach in which the characters are in conversation with one another, rather than with Austen's subconscious. In his article, "Law and Propriety, Sense and Sensibility: Austen on the Cusp of Modernity," David Kaufmann posits that the sense of propriety derived from social hierarchies demands a certain set of "manners" that police the novels better than autobiographical connections. Ultimately, however, the webs of their networks are based on those rhizomatic "nodes", pinpoints where a person is referred to as an individual within the network, an abrupt breaking point from the straight lines we draw between Emma and Harriet in *Emma* or Elizabeth and Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*. "She [Austen] starts from the premise that [the characters] begin as and remain individuals with feelings, needs and desires that are essentially personal" and drive their interactions with others (Kaufmann 391). Because "we have no immediate access to...what they are thinking nor what they have done," it is absolutely imperative that the novels enact moments in which characters are able to develop empathy for others outside of their monetary class, education level, or network (Kaufmann 391).

Those empathetic moments are necessary both for the reader and for the characters to understand the different between socioeconomic standing and social hierarchy. More plainly, I mean to say that social hierarchy is like a node within socioeconomic standing; its basis is, of course, related to economy, but there are intangible, abstract, and purely human qualities to a social hierarchy that are not defined by wealth. For characters, social order and manners are necessary to drive plot, teach moral lessons, and set civil law. For a reader, it serves as a trans-historically effective connection from one character's human nature to one reader's human nature. Empathy is essential in affective networks. Connections are based on commonalities that we extrapolate from those pivotal moments in a relationship. Those impossible feelings of "she understands me" or "he feels the same way" are merely relations to our own emotional responses, but they give us that invisible tether to others.

Relationships

The tethers are important to the relationships of the novels, particularly the romantic, and are vital to understanding how adeptly Austen navigates networks from the "surface" level. Susan Sprecher's study on romantic relationships from an outsider's point of view exhibits eerily accurate similarities to the actions of the bitter Caroline Bingley or the sweeter Emma Woodhouse. Sprecher explains that outsiders to a relationship believe that they influence the strength of the relationship. The behaviors of the outsider (positive or negative), Sprecher says, are actually directly connected to the success or failure of the relationship they are attempting and succeeding to manipulate (Sprecher 631). Anne Eliot's destroyed relationship in *Persuasion* is revealed to have been so heavily influenced by outsiders valuing a relationship based on monetary wealth that Anne refused Wentworth, though she personally felt the emotional and

intellectual connection was worthy. The open disapproval of outsiders (her father and sister, but most significantly, Lady Russell), persuaded Anne to end the relationship, but only when the connection had gotten as far as a marriage proposal.

Those romantic relationships garner the most attention during what Sprecher refers to as the "serious stage." For instance, Emma is unthreatened by women like Jane Fairfax or Harriet; that is, until their relationships with Frank and Knightley, respectively, develop more deeply (either in actuality or in Emma's mind). When those relationships reach the "serious stage," Emma takes on a more assertive role as an active outsider to the relationship, therefore influencing the success or failure and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her delusions, however, are morally "wrong" and she must be "put in her proper place by the narrative" (Jones 319). Knightley counterbalances Emma's trespasses before she is able to realize his function in her life. Whereas Emma stands for materiality, Knightley is her dose of morality. Very few occupations are directly mentioned, but are increasingly hinted at as the novels progressed, like Knightley's position as a magistrate (Drum 94). His position as a magistrate has taught Knightley the code of gentlemen, by making him responsible for the people who rely on Donwell Abbey. Tobin rationalizes that that Emma's lesson relies entirely on her relationship with Knightley, who teaches her that "gentlemanliness is not derived from riding in carriages, or from owning large houses, or even from being witty and charming," like Frank Churchill (231). It is instead "doing one's duty, carrying out one's responsibilities, and being considerate" (Tobin 231). To teach Emma to take focus away from status, Knightley is sure to make her feel somewhat inferior to those with lower social statuses by praising someone like Miss Bates. Emma scorns Miss Bates for trying to level with the higher class members of the picnic at Box Hill, but Knightley is sure to let Emma know that because she has trespassed on morals and

virtues, she sinks below Miss Bates' status. Only when Emma learns from Knightley can their romantic relationship develop.

Like Knightley, we can see that insiders to romantic relationships have equally distinct control over the success or failure of their relationship, of course. By breaking some norms of expectation, they too create they own self-fulfilling prophecies for their future. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is expected to accept Mr. Collins' proposal. It would unite the cousins, secure the future of her sisters and the family home, and ensure a modest and steady income. At that point in the novel, it is Elizabeth's only prospect, and very possibly, the only prospect she will ever have. Her decision to deny Collins is unpopular ("unliked," as it were) according to those influential outsiders, but because she breaks the norm of accepting the first stable offer of marriage, she disrupts the power of influence; however, in Austen novels, there is a heavy expectation to retain norms as well. These norm-breaking choices cause anxiety for characters and social media users alike, but the tension is managed by "maintaining control of their deeper feelings until they can step from the safety of 'apartness' [physical or emotional withdrawal]…to the safety of an economically and socially respectable marriage" (Moore 576). The delicate balance is ultimately difficult for characters and users to break out of, as important as it may be for social freedom.

Gender Authority

Regarding social expectations, relationships become even more sensitive to influence when gender roles are recognized. There is the case of Emma's manipulation of relationships, which is unique to Austen because of Emma's social standing; "[Emma] has usurped [male authority] both by her privileged social position and her manipulation of events" that directly

correlate to the success of the romantic relationships in her own network (Jones 318). Emma's

male authority calls into question the power of the gender in the novels. Emma's inverted power

is based on her father's wealth. She is secure in her future, whereas characters like Fanny Price

or Charlotte Lucas must marry in order to avoid social ruin, as their families are unable to absorb

the costs of spinsterhood (both monetarily and by reputation). Put simply by Richard Handler

and Daniel A. Segal, "men are active; women, passive" and this "hierarchy…is rationalized as

natural or given" (694-695). A woman is dependent upon her father until she marries; then her

dependence is given like a dowry to her husband. This release of dependence from the

patriarchal figure to her husband is a sort of release or independence in itself, as an Austen wife

may be the mistress of her husband's landed estate, as is so common with the men of the novels.

Darcy's fortune is Derbyshire itself, and the money gained from the patronage of those who

reside there. Though Elizabeth's dependence is merely transferred to Darcy from her father, it

providers her with independence from her family because she is "governed only by [her] own

will," which is the most a woman could ask for at this time (Handler & Segal 692).

Austen's men, on the other hand, live in a very different gendered realm with a hierarchy

of its own. The concept of primogeniture was the understanding that the amassed wealth and

land of a father passed directly to his eldest son; only very rarely did it pass to another son, and

even more rarely, a daughter. "The eldest son of a wealthy family need not depend upon a

profession or trade," because his age and place in the family bred the expectation that his

maturity and desire to honor his family name would ensure the safety of the wealth and success

of the entire family left behind by the father (Handler & Segal 694). Younger sons, therefore,

had to find occupations and "[lacked] a fixed position *in* society (original italics, Handler &

Segal 694). It is not surprising to see that many of the female characters choose to transfer their

dependence to the most independent male of a family— the eldest son. Marriage into landed wealth provided more stability than one based in occupation. For instance, readers feel more gratified by the stable marriage of Knightley and Emma, both having received wealth from their fathers, than they do about Elinor and Edward. Edward's second-in-line attitude is based on the secondary place in his own family and the demand for him to find an occupation, which he wavers on until the end of the novel. This wavering weakens Edward's character as a male. Though he is the eldest son in a family with three children, Edward lives in the transition time between landed wealth and capitalism, and he is expected to take a profession to compensate; his younger brother has amassed greater wealth through the money-market, which puts Edward in that secondary position, in a time when primogeniture was waning. At his age, a genteel woman searching for a viable relationship would likely pass over the man with no prospects because he would not offer the transference of dependence or stability of future; Edward must first become independent from his own family to become marriage material.

As mentioned, there was a transition during Austen's time from landed wealth ("old money," like Darcy's) to capitalism ("new money," like Emma's). This new economy of patronage and money-market was an "important change in gentry life and its relationship to the professions, and this is the new emphasis on work ethic" (Drum 102). As Austen's novels progress, even the eldest sons are expected to work in some way. The change is mapped by Alice Drum:

> [T]here is a hardly surprising correlation between profession and diligent work. Frank Churchill, with no profession, appears to follow Dr. Samuel Johnson s dictum that a gentleman should never be observed earning a living. Others, such as Mr. Weston and Mr. Woodhouse, lead gentlemanly, leisurely lives. In contrast,

Mr. Knightley who might never have to work at earning a living is nevertheless

fully occupied as overseer of his estate and magistrate of the parish. His brother

John also has a strong work ethic. Whether John Knightley is a solicitor or the

more highly respected barrister is not entirely clear, but he is probably the latter,

given his fairly strict time commitments. (102)

The men of the novels are not meant to be shown doing their work, gaining their money,

or taking part in the economy in any way. Instead, Austen uses veiled cues here and there to

express her understanding of the changing economy and the repercussions for families

(particularly the men) and the small networks that are so easily influenced by small changes.

Mansfield Park celebrates "wealth locked up in land, property passed from father to eldest son,"

whereas the later novel, *Persuasion*, exemplifies the possibilities of the nouveau riche status

gained by the military (Fraiman 809). Austen understood the slight social changes for men of

her time, and documented those transformations in her novels.

Socioeconomic Standing

These glimpses into the complex cognitive underpinnings of social interaction now

prepares us to discuss the differentiation between social hierarchy and socioeconomic standing,

because of the influences of gender, romantic and non-romantic relationships, and authority *on*

socioeconomic standing. According to Mazlish, the network built in each novel is "a small group

of persons knowing one another [who] determine, or attempt to determine, the allocation of jobs

and power" (12). Therefore, it is by no accident that Austen meticulously reveals the standing or

income of the men of the families and some of their occupations, primarily showing their wealth

via ownership of land, social connections, and titles. Their socioeconomic standing is in many

ways deemed more important than females'. However, the women play an equally important role in each of the novels, serving as the social gauge for interactions with other lower or higher-class characters. For instance, *Emma*'s low-class Mrs. Bates is exceedingly well-treated by her Highbury network because of the precedent set by Emma early in the novel; Emma brings the Bates' food, cares for them when they are ill, invites them to balls and parties, and visits them at their home on a regular basis. Emma's compassion, however, is ultimately derived from Knightley, whose own "knight-like" obligations to Highbury are directly connected to his responsibilities as a magistrate. Knightley is responsible, much like a patron, for the upkeep of the power dynamic of the area, though it is never openly revealed this is how his power functions in society. His "acts of consideration are evidence of his active supervision of his estate and community, duties incumbent upon him as lord of the manor," which is how "Austen links virtue and land stewardship" (Tobin 235). In similar situations, the characters that are depicted are often of the aristocratic/genteel class, which is often called "middle-class" by critics. The differentiations between American and British views of "middle-class" have made it unclear exactly how to define this title, but neither depicts the technically correct social standing. In the novels, the highest high-class characters and the lowest low-class characters (with significant roles) still remain within the confines of the genteel, for Austen's purposes. Therefore, the social obligations of Knightley toward the Bates' are merely a snapshot of his greater responsibilities for those outside of their social group.

To position Austen historically, any evaluation of her work must contain some understanding of her personal experiences and why she focuses on this particular class. Though it is generally considered the middle-class depicted by Jane Austen, James Downie outlines the specific social positioning of most families and individuals in prominent Austen novels (*Pride*

and Prejudice, Emma, and *Mansfield Park*) as gentry (81). The gentry are actually part of British

aristocracy and the three most prominent Austen families (Bennets, Woodhouses, and Bertrams)

are fairly well-off for their time. This is because Austen's own family was positioned in a very

similar social situation; she knew the distinguishing characteristics of this class well. The

specific differences between the subcategories of landed gentry and landless, or nouveau-riche,

gentry are important distinctions she draws throughout her writing. The landed gentry were the

moral standard to live up to, whereas the landless gentry were fairly new and untrusted. Emma's

family and wealth, substantial though it may be, is based in the money-market; Knightley's

wealth, on the other hand, is landed. Knightley understands the inherited codes he must uphold in

the community and provides services and support as the local magistrate because his wealth

relies on his social situation directly. Emma's family's wealth did not instill her with this

responsibility because the money does not rely on her social situation, and therefore, she is

unschooled in the appropriate interactions with her community (Tobin 233-237). Since landed

wealth is fairly uncommon in the modern age, we rely entirely on the money-market. Jobs pay

money, money makes payments on bills, those payments feed into payment for labor, and the

cycle continues. Like Emma, modern society is unschooled in the responsibility that landed

wealth inherits. The codes have been rewritten.

Bruce Mazlish argues that this moral economy is the basis for the socioeconomic

standing of characters. During this time, patronage was a common practice, and several of

Austen's novels depict relationships of power and status utilizing it. Public and private

relationships of the "patron" and the "client" flourished because of the monarchical hierarchy

(particularly in the Medici era). The prince was the ultimate patron, but unlike the common

patron, exercised a greater power because his station could not be challenged (Mazlish 2). As

intellectual changes came about, individuals were given identity and status that branded them through their associations with others. Austen's era of patronage is based on an "economy of power" that is "a constantly shifting, ambiguous, amorphous entity"; "[w]hile money is quantifiable, patronage is incalculably subjective" (Mazlish 3-4). The judgment of the morals and ethics of the patrons in the novels and the discovery of what is inherently good or bad about each gentleman or lady is the basis on which they build social structures, and therefore, their wealth; their money does not always rationalize their social standing, as discussed before, but instead shapes the power they hold and the wealth they may amass (and how they may amass it). Because all of Austen's characters remain within the genteel, aristocratic sphere of society, it is necessary for her to break down small sub-sets of status within this broader category. For instance, Elizabeth Bennet marries somewhat above her station or sub-set, but not outside of her sphere or network.

The affective network operates much in the same way. To call the economy of technology "communicative capitalism" necessitates that the exchange is abstract. It is more than the commodification of computer code. Rather, it is the commodification of the communication that the code allows. The value of a blog or Twitter update is not quantifiable or monetary. Instead, it is how much the content is distributed. On the internet, we are all within that same sphere, like Austen's characters. Rather than being categorized into sub-sets of status, we are broken down into fandoms, chat groups, message boards, Reddit categories, and Facebook groups. The network decides in which websites to place power, sometimes contributing money, though this does not guarantee social power, again like Austen's characters. Dean says that "[w]hat appears as an exchange of reasons is a vehicle for the circulation of affects" (35). Our abstract online exchange is like patronage, whereas our material economy is a money-market; if

a user upholds their technological responsibility, we will reward them with loyalty and continue to support their social situation.

It is important to explain that I pose a distinction between the connection of current social media to Austen's social networks, and the connection between modern society's interaction with social media and their interaction with Austen's novels. There are interactions with social networks and Austen *networks*; separately, there are different interactions with the interpretations of social networks and Austen's *novels*. Not only is the content of her novel relevant, but also the physicality of a novel itself. We must not forget that a book is a form of media. We so commonly forget forms of media in the twenty-first century are more than technological inventions. Austen's ultimate goal was the distribution of these novels within the networks of readers. Treating her plots as propaganda on networking completely reframes the content, for today and eighteenth century. Critics must learn to evaluate her work in other ways or, perhaps, under a microscope of affective networking. To read Austen on that surface level is dangerous; like the girls who act on surface impulses, there are much greater, deeper connections that can change interpretations of the novels entirely.

Now it was far clearer that the emotional impacts of Austen novels are not far from the emotional impacts of our own social networks. We are organized similarly, divided into groups, and expected to uphold certain social standards. We, like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth or *Persuasion*'s Anne, are taught slowly but surely to be driven by our anxiety of failure. To place the anxiety in a marriage or to place the anxiety in cyberspace is what we desire. There is no way to eliminate the anxiety altogether, however. This is why Austen's novels leave us wanting more, but must end. We want to know what happens after the happy ending, but we come to find that if viewed realistically, it is possible Elizabeth Bennet has not become less prejudicial and Anne

Eliot has not become less overly prudent. Their anxiety still lingers, but that's what continues to give them drive. Our anxiety in social media is only ever displaced because "networks of communicative capitalism [remain] affective [when] characterized by drive. Their affective dimension thus should not be reduced to desiring productivity or a nurturing emotional practice" (Dean 41). When it comes down to the basics of a network, the social network of Austen or the internet are based on the same affects, the same drive, and the same wants and needs of the people interacting. The content will become so varied and constantly repeated that our actions will replace our words entirely; this is what Austen gives readers. It is not the words on her page that entice us back time and again, necessarily; it is the action of her characters that are timeless and what users and readers strive for in their own affective networks.

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