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Mary Beth Tegan

Saint Xavier University, [tegan@sxu.edu](mailto:tegan@sxu.edu)

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## Review of *The Making of Jane Austen*

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Devoney Looser. *The Making of Jane Austen*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2017. 282 pp. Index. ISBN: 978-1-4214-2282-4.

Reviewed by Mary Beth Tegan  
Saint Xavier University

Devoney Looser's delightfully discontinuous history signals straightaway the materiality of its Subject and its place between scholarly and popular mythologies. More subtly, it coaxes the reader to confront her own self in the act of "making" Austen. With its deep Tiffany-blue, off-center title and intertextual play, the cover claims a contemporary commercial appeal, while the authorial bricolage enacts Looser's frankly partial construction. The figure is a mashup of the "Rice Portrait" and a silhouette owned by London's National Portrait Gallery; both are unconfirmed representations of Austen's body, which eluded readers so memorably in Claudia Johnson's 2012 *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures*. Shed the jacket, and the text's postmodern spirit gives way to "quaint Aunt Jane," embodied now in a soft blue hardcover, itself embossed like a floral sprigged muslin. *The Making of Jane Austen* thus invites readers to approach Austen's legacy "with historical nuance and cultural scope" and to discover new incarnations of Austen's life and works (221). "We're writing inferior literary and cultural histories," Looser argues, "if we leave out the incredible range of people, practices, texts, and images that contributed to her complicated and unlikely trek to becoming an icon" (11). Her inclusive, imaginative account is an important marker in the critical turn toward "matters of fact," building upon work by Janine Barchas, Claudia Johnson, and Kathryn Sutherland that historicizes Austen's referential texts, their reception, and her gradual institutionalization.

Each of the four parts of Looser's manuscript addresses how Austen has been "made" through a specific set of cultural practices. We encounter Jane Austen, "illustrated," "dramatized," "politicized," and "schooled,"—acts that emphasize the ongoing historical processes through which a broad range of Austens have been known. Considering Austen from multiple sites, Looser demonstrates that "Jane Austen has taken many shapes and forms" (4), enlisted both by progressives and conservatives, pop culture and the academy. She brings to light hitherto little-known fragments of Austen's legacy, weaving persuasive accounts that disrupt conventional or critical wisdom at one moment, then assert new continuities the next. This might mean exposing our critical bumbles and self-importance, as with late twentieth-century feminist critics' confidence that they are the first to recover "political" Austen. Or it might help us see that Austen's heroes were typically underplayed in the illustrations and amateur theatricals of the nineteenth century, and that Darcy's "McSteamy" status is a twentieth-century innovation, owing much to Colin Keith-Johnston's star turn in Helen Jerome's 1935 Broadway hit *Pride and Prejudice*. Importantly, Looser helps her readers to realize—immediately and self-reflexively—that the "invention of Jane Austen has been, and continues to be, a fraught public process" (1). Reading here is an act of conversation: the author's playful speculations encourage readers to offer counter-speculations and theories of their own—another form of Austenian production through which we mindfully become "part of her legacy" (4).

Commencing with Henry James's complaint about the muddying "twaddle" of Austen's illustrators and publishers (13), the first part demonstrates that despite such gatekeeping attempts, Austen's illustrators had a profound impact on the way we have seen her. Not only do

they guide readers' interpretations of the novels' plots and characters, they also shaped impressions of Austen herself and of the dramatizations and films that succeeded their renderings. Looser magnifies the attention Sutherland gives in *Jane Austen's Textual Lives* (2005) to nineteenth-century illustrators such as Hugh Thomson, the Brock brothers, and Christiana Hammond, but her corrective attribution of the Bentley editions' illustrations to Ferdinand Pickering breaks new ground. The first English illustrator of Austen, Pickering encouraged readers to imagine her fiction as Victorian, lending a post-Gothic, sensational quality to domestic scenes that centered on female characters' moments of distress or confusion. Looser concludes that the melodramatic tenor of Pickering's work "may well have led early audiences to downplay or misjudge the importance of humor, irony, sociality or social criticism in her fiction" (28), and that this influence continued until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Most of the mid-century mass-market Austen illustrations remained wed to Victorian ideals of feminine modesty, in characterization and in style. A noteworthy exception is the 1875 Groombridge edition of *Mansfield Park*, illustrated by Alexander Francis Lydon—the only Austen novel he completed. A perennial favorite among Victorian readers, *Mansfield Park* is drawn by Lydon in ways that subordinate character to setting and landscape, leading readers to make connections between natural and psychological landscapes and to see characters' lives as very much shaped by their rural environment. In contrast, the illustrators of the *fin-de siècle* reinstate the historically appropriate Regency fashions and shift the editions' tone from "moral seriousness to mild comedy and genial satire" (49). Looser examines Thomson's "Cranfordization" of Austen's novels in depth, arguing that his humorous style and tone helped to spark readers' imaginations and shift their perceptions. Such humor characterizes the work of Hammond as well, and there is a memorable illustration depicting Mr. Elton bidding upon three women posed on a dais, like contestants in *The Dating Game*. Intriguingly, Hammond is identified as the first illustrator to depict death and war, a reminder, suggests Looser, that women too are impacted by the great events of history. The section as a whole is informative, entertaining, and cohesive, despite the collected materials' resistance to a simple, straightforward narrative, as Looser herself acknowledges; that said, there are brief digressions, such as Pickering's professional difficulties, that failed to hold this reader's interest.

"Jane Austen, Dramatized," the second part, is arguably the most audacious and engaging of the four, if the marginalia with which my copy is now littered might serve as evidence. Looser argues convincingly that the dramatic adaptations appearing during the "golden age" of Austenian illustration (and continuing through the first four decades of the twentieth century) "ensured Austen's continued relevance and cultural reach as much as—and perhaps more than—the dramatically skeptical Austen-loving literati" (105). Efforts begin with Rosina Filippi's "duologues" of the 1890s, brief scenes that were meant to be simply staged for amateurs and remained faithful to Austen's own prose. Filippi's widely circulated scripts drew primarily on the comic novels, and Looser speculates that these early stage adaptations shaped how many young people first came to know the author and her writings. Informed by the energies of the New Woman movement, the duologues feature strong women characters and voices, and the action represented focuses on domestic and familial conflict, not heterosexual romance. Filippi later collaborated with Virginia Mayo on the *The Bennet's* (1901), a play that introduced the first professional complex characterization of Darcy, but nevertheless maintained women's concerns at its core. Another popular version among college and other student players was Mary Keith Medbury's 1906 version of *Pride and Prejudice*; like the work of Filippi and Mayo before her,

Medbury privileges the character of Elizabeth Bennet and stresses her resistance to courtship and marriage. In showing how most of these early twentieth century plays were written and produced by politically active progressive women, Looser makes possible a new understanding of Austen's classic "romance," one that destabilizes its persistent heteronormative status. The queer tendency observed in the many all-female casts and cross-dressing heroes culminates in a 1932 production of Eleanor Holmes Hinkley's *Dear Jane*, when two lesbian lovers portrayed Jane and Cassandra Austen. Jane Austen's characterization as a "feminist flirt" and jilt did not endear the play to audiences (115), and reviewers indicated discomfort with the marginalization of male roles. The trend toward women-centered productions is radically reversed with Jerome's 1935 stage production; as noted above, her hit gives us the first of many "sexy Darcys" and, more problematically, a weepy Elizabeth Bennet. Looser argues that Jerome "do[es] more to shame the heroine . . . than Austen's original" (110), although that humbling impulse certainly exists in the novel, as Susan Fraiman has convincingly argued in "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet." Darcy's ascent is pretty much clinched after Jerome's focalizing characterization, especially given Laurence Olivier's follow-up performance in MGM's 1940s film adaptation. In her assessment of the many revisions screenwriters produced in that film's pre-production process, Looser presents a startling array of possibilities and omitted scenes, among which Zoe Atkins's Netherfield gypsies and Regency "boys night out" are stellar examples.

Jerome's inversion of women-centered dramatic adaptations would have delighted the "Men's Club Janeites" that Looser studies in part three, "Jane Austen, Politicized." Turning her attention to the competing versions of Austen emerging between these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary elites and feminist activists, she examines the images and arguments deployed by both during a transitional historical moment. Where the former group celebrated Austen's association with an oversimplified past in which women knew their place, suffragists and their feminist sisters viewed her as a "foremother" who demonstrated women's capacity for greatness. Looser highlights the complex affinities between the men who worshipped "the divine Jane" (151), arguing that a shared conservatism, a heterosexual attraction to the author and her heroines, and a homosocial pleasure in each other's conversations united such notables as A. C. Bradley, William Dean Howells, and G. K. Chesterton. From the lectures and conversations held in private men's clubs, she turns to suffragist costume parties and their colorful marches, with banners unfurled to celebrate the women who paved their way. Several of the dramatizing women discussed earlier return as activists in this section, illuminating the parallels between their confident heroines and suffragist depictions of Austen as a rebel. In addition to the parades where her suffrage banner flew, Austen was a presence in Cecily Hamilton's suffrage play *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909), performed over one hundred times in the next decade. Also of note in this section is Bertha Brewster's 1917 essay "The Feminism of Jane Austen" (1917), published in the suffrage newspaper *Votes for Women*. Looser observes that Brewster casts Austen not as activist but as an independent thinker, and she urges her readers to revisit the essay as an important supplement to better known work by contemporaries Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf. In fact, the takeaway lesson from this section is that the "feminist Austen" imagined by West, Woolf, and later literary critics appeared quite a bit earlier, not only in the writing of Brewster but also in Annie Martha Gladstone Wilton's response to Walter F. Lord's 1906 book, which she read as too narrowly concerned with a reductively political agenda.

*The Making of Jane Austen's* final section, "Jane Austen, Schooled," chronicles how the author's celebrity coincided with great changes in the education system, including the substitution of English literature for classical texts and women's increased accessibility to an education. Looser emphasizes that Austen surfaced in classrooms and curricula of many kinds before she became an object of critical scrutiny and disciplinary study, though her careful attention to George Pellew's extended essay *Jane Austen's Novels* (1883) fills a gap in the history of Austen's critical tradition. Known primarily because of his correspondence with Henry James, Pellew is worth reading not only because his work anticipates the close reading associated with twentieth-century New Criticism but also because his broad knowledge of eighteenth century novels helps him to identify Austen's influences. Perhaps more useful for the teacher of Austen is Looser's account of the many educational resources developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here too she addresses an important misperception regarding Austen's place within educational institutions, arguing that scholars have "overestimated the extent to which Austen's established critics served to create her legacy in schools and elsewhere" (198). To correct this lapse, Looser reviews everything from study guides for Victorian cribbers (Dobson's 1874 *Civil Service Handbook of English Literature*) to McGuffey's Readers, which were first used in American primary schools and repurposed for high schools in 1889, to Craik's *English Prose Selections* (1893-96). Most of these resources Looser finds to be conservative-leaning, as they reinforce the cultural status quo, but she does credit them with building a "massive readership" among those seeking an education (208). It is also worth noting that she distinguishes American Josephine Woodbury Heermans for editing the first single Austen work for use in the schools, a Macmillan Pocket Classic text published in 1908. What is particularly notable is the argument that Heerman's edition of *Pride and Prejudice* shows a rigorous attention to primary sources and textual accuracy, suggesting she should be acknowledged as a precursor to the Standard Edition of Austen edited by R. W. Chapman in 1923 (203). Finally, the vast number of Austen abridgments circulating in schools suggests that student shortcuts have always been to some extent encouraged, and while Lionel Trilling might lament that mid-twentieth century students came to Austen's fiction through the MGM film, the popularization of her works has only solidified her staying power. So, too, does Devoney Looser's careful excavation of the "cultural detritus" dismissed by generations of scholars promise to "school" Austen readers for years to come (11).

### **Biographical Information**

Mary Beth Tegan is an Associate Professor at Saint Xavier University, specializing in nineteenth-century British literature. Her most recent essays, published in *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *Women's Writing* and *Studies in the Novel*, explore narrative form and female novelists' management of literary affect. She is currently working on a manuscript titled *Vanity's Heirs: Popular Romance and the Reproduction of Women Writers*, which pursues questions raised by the persistent links between vanity, imitation, and popular romance reading made in literary reviews and conduct literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.