Chapter Six

The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen

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On December 23, 2011, the BBC broadcast The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen, which attempts to explain why Austen has been recognized as a literary genius whose fame rivals Dickens and Shakespeare. Presented by historian Amanda Vickery, the program explored how and why generations of readers have been captivated by her novels.

In keeping with the theme of this anthology, we asked six different colleagues to review the program, all coming from very different cultural backgrounds. The result is a fascinating example of how Austen appeals in different ways to different people.

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From the beginning of The Many Lovers of Miss Jane Austen, the intention to reconcile the popular and elite aspects of Austen is clear. Austen is claimed as “second only to Shakespeare in popularity,” and host Amanda Vickery positions herself as both a Georgian historian and a lover of Austen; as befits Matt Hills’s designation of the scholar fan (Hills). It is this hybrid approach to Austen that renders the material accessible to a range of potential viewers of this program. Rather unusually, director Rupert Edwards takes us immediately into the world of Austen fandom, with footage of the Jane Austen Society of North America’s (JASNA’s) annual convention in Texas. This aligning of Austen with the once cultish practices of science fiction and comic book readers is both modish and timely. With the mainstreaming of events such as ComicCon and the high-profile online presence of Harry Potter and Twilight fans as consumers and participants in the continuation and reauthoring of their favored texts, fan practices are no longer the hidden preserve of the nerd. As a consequence,
the obligatory visit to an authoritative Austen site—the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton—takes place much later in the program. “Austen the brand” is constantly intertwined with Austen as serious novelist and fit subject for academic enquiry. Vickery follows her interviews with fans in Texas with a trip to Sotheby’s for the auction of a rare handwritten Austen manuscript of the unfinished work “The Watsons,” which was promptly sold to the Bodleian library for £850,000. This oscillation between the academic and fan modes renders the material broadly accessible to a range of viewers, although in an Anglo-American context, it does at times feel as if it is almost impossible to be totally unaware of Austen’s work.

The program is punctuated with various experts reading aloud from Austen’s novels as a demonstration of both expertise and fandom—the reading of source text always follows the discussion rather than preceding it, in an attempt to prevent an overtly academic tone. The program also offers a tongue-in-cheek approach to “the Austen myth”—Kathryn Sutherland of St Anne’s College, Oxford, is the expert on hand at the cottage in Chawton, where she and Vickery comment on the legacy of Austen-Leigh’s polite biography of Austen, and how it imposed Victorian ideals of femininity on to the “Austen myth.” Both of them note how the configuration of the furnished rooms at the cottage sustain this myth, with the placement of a small writing table in view of the door, where Austen reputedly listened out for approaching footsteps, and concealed her writing accordingly.

There is little in the way of reenactment in the program; this serves to maintain the focus on the figure of Austen the author, while giving plenty of opportunity for fans and academics alike to speak. Those who are filmed or interviewed are content to read and appreciate the books, while enjoying the opportunity to don period dress for dinners and dances—as many do at the annual Jane Austen Festival in Bath, as well as the JASNA gathering. There is also footage of an outdoor theater production of Sense and Sensibility performed in June 2011 at Lainston House Hotel in Hampshire. The Austen fandom analyzed here focuses exclusively on British and American fans; it would have been fascinating to see evidence of how Austen has been appreciated in translation and some comparison of how different fan communities express themselves globally.

Perhaps predictably, there is a section devoted to Austen onscreen, and it is here that Vickery defines herself as a fan-scholar rather than a scholar-fan. She takes as her theme the 1995 BBC television adaptation of Pride and Prejudice and its much-discussed wet-shirt sequence. Interspersed with an interview with screenwriter Andrew Davies,