theories and methodologies

Aging with Austen

SUSAN S. LANSER

"You did not use to like cards; but time makes many changes."

"I am not yet so much changed," cried Anne, and stopped, fearing she hardly knew what misconstruction.

—Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

IN 2015 I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM THE MLA INFORMING ME THAT SINCE I HAD NOW BEEN A MEMBER FOR FORTY YEARS, I NO LONGER HAD to pay dues. That should have been welcome news, but I was horrified. Could I be that old? Had I actually given papers and chaired sessions at some thirty-five annual meetings since 1975, as my hastily consulted curriculum vitae proclaimed? Though rhetorical, the questions prompted a nostalgic encounter with a few nearly forgotten conference talks and a deeper contemplation of the person who delivered them. (How) had my reading and writing altered across the decades in which I moved from graduate student through the tenure ranks to professor emerita? What had it meant to age as a reader? Or, for the purposes of this short meditation, what had it meant to age as a reader of Jane Austen, whose presence threads through my teaching and writing from beginning to not-yet end?

In focusing on Austen, I risk conflating several temporal arcs. For starters, Austen today resembles the Austen of 1975 even less than I resemble my young self. In 1975, her meteoric rise in public currency was nowhere on the horizon: the cinematic explosion was two decades off and the trade in Austen tchotchkes beyond imagining.[1] Almost no one had engaged Austen's work through the still-fledgling lens of feminist criticism, as it was then called. The dominant scholarly paradigms for reading Austen were formalist and moralist; most monographs focused on structure and style. Across the next four decades, interpretive practice would change dramatically as theory's heyday yielded a succession (and a simultaneity) of approaches—Marxist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, reader-response, new historicist, unhistoricist, multicultural, postcolonial, cognitive, queer—each bidding

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for devotees. And in the wake perhaps of the theory fatigue that has ensued, the past decade has kept us busy contesting methods of reading so that close, distant, reductive, large, symptomatic, surface, suspicious, and postcritical approaches now compete for primacy.

It is difficult, then, to separate age from *the* age when I consider how I read. Still, I can plot four factors along a spectrum from the age to old age: the alterations wrought by changing critical conversations, the effects of shifting interests, the gains and perhaps losses attendant on rereading, and the developmental differences that may attach to increasing years. Although I cannot always distinguish these causalities, I can recognize their combined effects.

The succession of theoretical approaches that have jostled for primacy during these lively four decades surely exerted the most pervasive and consequential influence on my, and arguably on my generation's, reading practices. Doubtless, some isms have been more formative than others for any one of us (for me, Jacques Lacan never really took), but I can find a startling number of them embedded in my engagement with Austen over time; structuralism, feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism, queer studies, and critical race theory have been the most prominent sequential players. Austen's persistence in my—and our—teaching and writing over these decades of changing critical paradigms is revealing; I'm reminded of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's suggestion in *Contingencies of Value* that canonical texts remain so in part because successive generations invent new justifications for reading them (49–52). Reading over time, in this sense, may well mean using newer critical rubrics to hang on to old literary loves.

If theoretical paradigms are so powerful, then for all our pretensions to scholarly originality, the interpretive communities founded on shared values and practices do shape, even control, the ways in which literary critics read. In the 1970s Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" became the locus classicus for the silenced and confined writer-wife desperate unto madness to decipher the paper on her wall. In the mid-1980s, I started looking at the yellow in the paper and wrote an essay rereading the story through Gilman's racial politics and questioning the interpretive method feminist critics had championed. That essay has had a lively afterlife, and when young scholars ask how I came to the new reading, I tell them without false modesty how little credit I can take. Back then, feminist essentialism was on the chopping block, and a new intersectional paradigm led me to recognize "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a story by and about a white, privileged-class New England woman rather than simply as a woman's text.

Austen scholarship has moved through similar steps of critical logic, and on the whole I have moved with it in ways that are embarrassingly predictable. There is hardly a reading of Austen now in which gender as gender doesn't factor; there was hardly a reading before 1975 in which it did. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offered the possibilities of a homoerotic Emma Woodhouse or an autoerotic Marianne Dashwood; Austen's position on the colonial slave trade led to resounding debate in the wake of Edward Said's "Jane Austen and Empire"; Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* encouraged readers to deconstruct Austen's realism and its arrogation of authority; psychoanalysis unveiled a lively textual unconscious not only in Austen's characters but also in her represented worlds; Franco Moretti's distant reading mapped the endogamous geography that returns even Austen's most mobile characters to England's southern shires. All these critical concerns have turned up in my teaching and many of them also in my scholarship. New lenses encourage new subjects, of course. Over fifty monographs bear titles beginning "Jane Austen and," covering topics as wide-ranging as the navy, the

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body, the clergy, and the state, each work a sign of its own time as well as of Austen's.

The tendency for theoretical shifts to shape topical interests leads to a second aspect of reading over time, related to the first but arguably more idiosyncratic: the changing interests that emerge from a complicated synchrony of personal investments and happenstance as well as from the tenor of the times. In my engagement with Austen, I can track a strong shift from narratological concerns in the 1970s to a focus on gender, female relations, and family dynamics in the 1980s to a preoccupation with the French Revolution, slavery, and the nation-state by the late 1990s. Like critical paradigms, these interests don't so much shift as accumulate, challenging me to make deeper connections among seemingly unrelated social concerns and the textual practices that embed them. Certainly the ways I now read Austen also result from my resistance to her fandom; if my students aren't young enough to have chewed as toddlers on the board book inviting them to "stroll through 1 English village to meet 2 rich gentlemen and discover what happens when the 5 Bennet sisters encounter 4 marriage proposals" (Adams), their cathexis with *Pride and Prejudice* is sometimes hardly more nuanced. One of my recent teaching strategies has been to assign the first chapters of all six Austen novels before students read any of the novels as a whole; invariably they emerge as shocked as W. H. Auden to see that Austen's putative love plots "reveal so frankly and with such sobriety / The economic basis of society" (84).

Rereading, the third and perhaps most obvious of factors, may not be tied to growing old but is inevitably tied to growing older: if I happen to be teaching *Emma* four times in as many semesters, I am aging only a little, but I am certainly reading over time. Literary critics don't need much prompting to hail rereading as the way to see more sharply and to see anew. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes of having read Austen's works so often that she is aware of "the shape and substance of most sentences" (58). Spacks underscores the palimpsestic quality of rereading: "[T]he layers of experience accruing from early readings, partly erased, remain partially discernible. Each new layer both adds to and subtracts from what has gone before" (274). Spacks finds something new in each rereading, but I fear that rereading can also reify prior readings so that one keeps missing what one has never seen; my longtime myopia about Austen's whiteness, to which I will return, affirms that risk. Sometimes I find myself reading too quickly in order to reach the treasured moment or the gorgeous phrase—the "liberty to think and be wretched" of *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen, *Novels* 1: 135), the "Till this moment, I never knew myself" of *Pride and Prejudice* (2: 208), the "Time did not compose her" of *Emma* (4: 376), the "Remember that we are English" of *Northanger Abbey* (5: 197). And occasionally I'm startled by a colleague's or student's reading of Austen that builds on a sentence I cannot remember ever seeing in the text.

Ideally, though, the first two factors that shape my reading feed this third—that is, rereading Austen in a changing critical zeitgeist and with changing interests means that I am returning to texts so well-known that I can reframe them readily, draw on them for illustrative purposes, and deploy them with versatility. Reading over time, in this sense, puts Austen into some equivalent of muscle memory that makes her work a touchstone for my writing as it is here. And certainly Austen has become a utility infielder for much of my teaching: *Northanger Abbey* for the French Revolution, *Sense and Sensibility* for the afterlife of Rousseau, *Mansfield Park* for the nation, *Persuasion* for empire, *Pride and Prejudice* for theory of narrative.

From rereading I slide into the fourth factor and the one that propelled this essay: changes wrought simply because I am four decades older than when my career began. Most research on older readers concerns fail-

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ing powers of attention or retention, though it has also been claimed that vocabulary does not peak until the age of sixty-five (Hartshorne and Germine 438). Some fascinating studies of higher-level reading practices suggest that while younger readers are better at focusing on textual details, older readers are faster at constructing what G. A. Radvansky calls a "situational model" for the text (50). Particularly compelling is research suggesting that those who read literature as a profession read significantly better over time because they "have built up a literary competence that involves both declarative knowledge (knowledge of authors, book titles, genres) and procedural knowledge (knowledge of how to read these books)" (Dijkstra 95). Older literary scholars are thus better able "to integrate their knowledge . . . with new texts and have better text comprehension skills than younger expert readers of literature" and tend "to generate and maintain a wider range of inferences" (96, 99). That wider range may explain my late-life promotion of what I call "large reading," a term I introduced in *The Sexuality of History* to describe a methodology poised between the close and exhaustive mining of passages and the distant extraction of data from texts (21). Large reading looks across a specified corpus for recurrent patterns, tropes, and tendencies as a way to understand the social significations embedded in textual practices and thus the historical work in which those texts might be engaged.

When I chart changes in my readings of Austen that I cannot attribute to the pressures of theoretical paradigms or the vagaries of shifting interests—that is, changes that I think have to do most directly with age—I recognize a more urgent impulse to integrate words and world. Perhaps because I now see my life and work as less intentional than I ever expected, though, I have lost my longtime fascination with Austen as a historical person. It's not that I've turned New Critic; it's that with age I have come to believe how complicated and arbitrary human beings and human creations are, how readily characters can get out of control, how much power literary conventions exercise, and how little we will ever know about Austen's personal life, desires, or even literary imagination outside the works themselves. This may also be a question of legacy, a recognition as I draw nearer to the end of life that only my words and others' memories will survive the breathing person that I am still grateful to be. In a modest novel called *Consider This, Señora*, Harriet Doerr—who not incidentally published her first novel, *Stones for Ibarra*, at seventy-four—reflects that "the interval between birth and death is scarcely more than a breathing space," that a life, in the end, is "nothing more than a stirring of air, a shifting of light. No one of us, finally, can be more than that. Even Einstein. Even Brahms" (194). For me, the shifting of light that was Jane Austen is not the interval between birth and death but the luminescence of the page.

Conversely, but perhaps for the same developmental reasons, I am more interested than ever in Austen's historical moment, in change over time, indeed in time; even my interests in form have become interests in form's history. This emphasis may evoke the adage that old people live in the past, only it is not my past but the human past that draws me, and not as a way to evade the future but as a way to make fuller sense of it. It's a kind of collective version of the joke my friends make when we hit another milestone birthday: How did this happen? And though I have no illusions that literature will change the world, I find myself interested in the uses of texts in ways that I might once have shunned. A quiet thread through some of the scholarship I've produced since my late fifties asks whether novels have any effect in fomenting social change; empirical research lends no ready response. A few years ago I retitled one of my Austen courses Just Jane Austen to ask how various forms of justice—narrative,

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retributive, compensatory, distributive—work themselves out in Austen's texts. This project made me happier than it made my students, not least on occasions when narrative justice and social justice diverged. *Persuasion*, for example, wants us to applaud Wentworth's recovery of Mrs. Smith's West Indian property, so the novel makes no murmur about the slave labor that would have underwritten that wealth or indeed the wealth of Captain Wentworth himself.[2] Narrative justice in *Persuasion* amounts to the redistribution of economic rewards among white British subjects, affording neither retribution for enslavement nor compensation for the enslaved.

As I age, then, I have become more invested in balancing the scholarly celebration of Austen as a social critic with a critique of Austen herself. I would no longer make her out as what a recent book by Helena Kelly oxymoronically dubs a "secret radical."[3] Another course that I created late in my career, which I called Jane Austen's Eighteenth Century, focused as much on what Austen doesn't say as on what she does: students read abolitionist writings, Jacobin novels, Wollstonecraftian feminism, and revolutionary manifestos before they approached Austen's work. And I have broken my lifelong vow against teaching Austen sequels by assigning the first two chapters of Jo Baker's *Longbourn*, which does more than my words could accomplish for exposing the unacknowledged labor that makes possible the Bennet family's seemingly impecunious but actually quite privileged life. I like to compare Austen with her continental contemporary Isabelle de Charrière. Caroline Warman comments that "if Austen refused to go beyond what she knew, or to say everything she suspected, Charrière partly knew more, and partly dared more" (xii); she "did not confine herself to the limits of the marriage plot," and "she also offended every possible target audience of her time" (xiii). Even as I acknowledge that Charrière did not need to earn her keep, and even as my awe of Austen's formal perfection increases, the older I get the more I'm drawn to messy writings that offend every audience and the less I feel the need to defend Austen against herself.

This more critical stance has led me to read Austen's plots differently. To take one small example, in 1985 I published a piece rhapsodic about the sister relationships in Austen's novels ("No Connections"). Three decades later, my book *The Sexuality of History* argued that the intimacies between women central to so many late-eighteenth-century novels are largely absent in Austen's works; with the exception of Mrs. Smith and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, nonsibling female friendships are rarely close. As for siblings, one might recall that in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet confides so little in her sister Jane that Jane is as shocked as are their parents when Elizabeth announces her engagement to Darcy. Whereas in the 1980s I saw the closing paragraph of *Pride and Prejudice* as proof that sisterly intimacy outlived the marriage plot, in *The Sexuality of History* I note that only after Jane and Elizabeth are safely married is that intimacy extolled. An essay I am completing on "second-sex economics," about novels in which women attempt to rescue other women, finds Austen at the conservative edge of a fictional paradigm: while the Bennets must rely on Darcy to buy off Wickham and Anne Elliot on Wentworth to aid Mrs. Smith, Charrière's *Trois Femmes* is one of several novels in which women come to one another's aid, very often across class lines. As for confronting colonialism and the slave trade, Charrière wins hands down.

Indeed, what seems to me most urgent as I age with Austen is recognizing the extent to which her novels afford what Mary Favret has called "the comfort of whiteness." We may see this whiteness most sharply not only when we acknowledge Austen's investments in empire but also when we read her works side by side with divergent texts without necessarily trying to reconcile them. In the anonymous 1808

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novel *The Woman of Colour*, for example, the biracial heroine Olivia Fairfield is effectively denied a happy marriage in ways so blatant that the novel itself is compelled to defend its resolution. Reading *The Woman of Colour* alongside Austen exposes the whiteness of the heroine's plot that all of her finished novels, and eighteenth-century British novels more generally, perpetuate.[4]

Age has freed me, though, from entering other new conversations even about Austen. Just as I can watch my grandchildren compose text messages with a speed I do not even try to match, I can sit at the sidelines of debates about Austen and popular culture. (I have also excused myself from animal studies, Giorgio Agamben, and most topics with the prefix *bio*.) I don't aspire to be deadwood, but perhaps age confers the privilege to pick and choose our critical investments. I think of Janie Crawford's famous words near the close of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, words I read as something of a paean to age: "Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons" (284).

In these and doubtless other ways, the Austen with whom I have aged has aged with me. Yet when I take a quick look back through forty years of notes and handouts from my courses—a material history that runs from purple Ditto sheets through PowerPoint slides—I find unexpected consistencies of thought. I would never say aloud now what my teaching notes tell me I pronounced in 1994: that *Northanger Abbey* "is a text doing and undoing its own politics; it brings up what it would avoid, as if therefore to trivialize it, and yet it ends up deconstructing its assertions about England—then tries at the end to deconstruct its deconstruction through its happy ending." But the substance of my argument, without that poststructuralist attempt at cleverness, is basically the same, more like another turn of the screw than a sea change.

At an early moment in *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth meets Anne Elliot after a lapse of eight years and finds her "so altered that he should not have known her again" (Austen, *Novels* 5: 63). But that is only his first impression, one perhaps not unlike the experience many of us have when we encounter at the MLA Annual Convention a colleague not seen for decades—or when that colleague encounters us. If my investments in Austen have become more complex and perhaps more cantankerous, have developed new lineaments rather like those of my aging face and the faces of my aging colleagues, I still recognize them after a closer look and the momentary dislocation of difference. And students who enter my classroom forty and more years later, whether they recognize me or I them, will find that I still begin every class session with what I call free space—their space—and end every class session with a poem.

I have now belonged to the MLA for more years than Austen lived. While "I must leave off being young," as Austen wrote of herself when she was not yet thirty-eight ("To Cassandra Austen"), I am fortunate to work in a field where people don't peak at twenty-six and a half, as has been claimed of mathematicians (Simonton 72). Indeed, literary theorists may well do their best work in older age: Erich Auerbach published his towering *Mimesis* in his mid-fifties; Mikhail Bakhtin was seventy when he finished *Rabelais and His World*. In the end, it seems probable that they, and we, owe that scholarly longevity to the pleasures and powers of reading over time.

Notes

1. The year 1995 saw the production of Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*; the British Broadcasting Corporation's miniseries *Pride and Prejudice*, which turned Fitzwilliam Darcy permanently into Colin Firth; the brilliant reinvention of *Emma* as *Clueless*; and the evocative candle-lit *Persuasion* that starred Amanda Root.

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2. Protecting Britain's investments in its West Indian slave economy certainly motivated the February 1806 Battle of Santo Domingo that gave Wentworth, as it gave Jane's brother Frank, his monetary rewards.

3. I wonder how radical one can be if one is radical only in secret, and so, unsurprisingly, what Kelly considers radical—for example, that Elizabeth Bennet "reserves the right to decide questions for herself" (148)—seems to me standard liberal individualism and hardly radical in comparison with Austen's radical peers.

4. Austen does create a biracial character in *Sanditon*'s Miss Lambe, and it is intriguing to imagine the future that the author might have meant for her. But that character clearly would not have become one of the novel's heroines, and it is also striking that Austen minimizes Miss Lambe's darkness by calling her not simply "mulatto" but "half mulatto" (*Novels* 6: 421).

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