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Elisabeth Chretien

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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GENTILITY AND THE CANON UNDER SIEGE:
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES, VIOLENCE, AND CONTEMPORARY
ADAPTATIONS OF JANE AUSTEN

by
Elisabeth Chretien

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ADAPTATIONS OF JANE AUSTEN

Elisabeth Chretien, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2011

Adviser: Laura Mooneyham White

This thesis examines the canonical literature/monster mash-up subgenre, focusing specifically on its originating text, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, as a case study to explore and understand the cultural work being done in this subgenre. This thesis argues that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and other texts like it are a form of vital and original popular postmodern interaction with and appropriation of the existing literary canon. As a whole, this subgenre re-imagines the English and American literary canon and heritage, providing new or alternative ways for readers to relate to and understand it. While many reviewers, scholars, and Austen enthusiasts have casually dismissed these novels as purely ridiculous or a gimmick to make an easy profit, this thesis argues that they are actually an attempt to move beyond previous ideological attacks on the literary canon and into a popular interaction with the existing literary canon.

This thesis makes use of a number of critical theories to argue that depictions of violence in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are used to suggest a variety of new ways of interacting with the idea of 'Jane Austen' in popular culture. A historical analysis demonstrates how the violence in this novel provides readers a new way of understanding Austen's own historical moment. The application of reader response theory shows how a

text can have multiple valid meanings, and that in this case, the violence in the novel undermines and appropriates the contemporary 'branding' of Austen and her works in popular culture. Finally, a feminist reading of this work shows that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* takes place in a feminist re-envisioning of Austen's historical world, caused by the incorporation of violence into society on a broad scale.

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GENTILITY AND THE CANON UNDER SIEGE

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Introduction

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains” (Austen and Grahame-Smith 7). Thus begins the New York Times bestseller, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a “mash-up” that combines the text of Jane Austen’s original 1813 novel with added scenes of zombies, violent martial-arts-style combat, and gruesome descriptions of blood and gore.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies follows the plot of Austen’s original text, the primary difference being that a strange plague had arisen in England in the past twenty years, causing the dead to rise and attack and consume the living. The Bennet sisters are highly skilled in ‘the deadly arts,’ having been assiduously trained by their father and by Shaolin Master Liu in China. Recognized as the foremost defenders of the living in Meryton, the sisters receive a great deal of professional attention from gentlemen warriors and officers, though Mrs. Bennet continuously frets that the girls are not lady-like enough to attract good husbands. Elizabeth Bennet in particular is more interested in defeating zombies than matrimony, while Mr. Darcy is quickly impressed by her unrivaled martial skills. The result is that Elizabeth and Darcy must not only overcome their pride and their prejudice, but also survive combat with scores of the undead along the way.

The novel itself is approximately eighty-five percent Austen’s original text, with the other fifteen percent comprising added and rewritten scenes. Seth Grahame-Smith, the coauthor of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, attributes the idea to an editor at Quirk Books, a small, independent publishing company, best known for their *Worst Case Scenario* guidebooks and other humor titles. After Grahame-Smith agreed to take on the

project, he was faced with the question of how actually to rewrite *Pride and Prejudice*.

Grahame-Smith explains in his preface to the ‘Deluxe Heirloom Edition’¹:

I opened the original manuscript [of *Pride and Prejudice*] on my computer...and set about changing words, adding lines, and inserting all-new scenes...In order to keep track of my changes, I made the text red (seemed appropriate)... As I wrote, I constantly zoomed out to view the manuscript as a whole, judging my success by how much red I’d left behind. (10-11)

Thanks to technology such as modern editing software, the internet, and Google Books, Grahame-Smith was able literally to rewrite Austen’s novel. With these technological tools, Grahame-Smith created a coauthored, hybridized text, written across two centuries, with a complex and occasionally contradictory purpose and function.

First published in 2009, this hybridized book has received somewhat mixed reviews. Macy Halford of *The New Yorker* describes the book as “eighty-five per cent Austen, fifteen per cent a television writer named Seth Grahame-Smith, and one hundred per cent terrible, [a] book [which] effectively undermines the seriousness of, in the original, the Bennet sisters’ matrimonial quest” (par. 1). This complaint that the addition of zombies to Austen’s novel somehow undermines or diminishes it and its purposes is common and Halford’s review is representative of many negative reviews of the novel.

On the other side of the spectrum, Alfred University English professor Allen Grove was enthusiastic enough about *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* to write the afterword to the ‘Deluxe Heirloom Edition.’ In it, Grove argues that “what begins as a gimmick ends with renewed appreciation of the indomitable appeal of Austen’s language,

characters, and situations” and that the overt violence in this rewriting of Austen’s classic helps readers better understand the historical, political, and social realities of Austen’s day (“AU Professor Analyzes New Take on Austen Classic”; Grove 356-357). By situating Austen and her works in their historical context, Grove and other reviewers who responded positively to Grahame-Smith’s revisions, maintain that the addition of zombies to *Pride and Prejudice* is, in fact, true to the spirit of Austen’s own time.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these mixed reviews, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* has been a huge commercial success for its publisher. With nearly one million units in print less than six months after its initial publication, it spent more than fifty weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list, started a trend in this new mash-up subgenre (“*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by the Numbers”), and has since been optioned for a major motion picture deal, with the role of the zombie-slaying Elizabeth Bennet to be played by recent Oscar-winner Natalie Portman.

Since the 2009 publication of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, numerous other works in this canonical literature/monster mash-up subgenre have appeared, inserting zombies, vampires, sea monsters, androids, werewolves, and mummies into other works of canonical literature. The majority of these works are from the nineteenth century, with Austen being the most popular, though certainly not the only, author whose work has been rewritten. The lone pre-nineteenth-century author whose work is also being reworked in this way is William Shakespeare. All of the novels and plays that have been rewritten in this mash-up subgenre have the added benefit of being in the public domain and therefore free from any copyright restrictions.² This fact makes these works even more attractive to cash-strapped publishing companies who do not have to pay royalties

to the original author and can legitimately offer the contemporary coauthor lower royalties than they normally would, since the coauthor is doing less work. As a result, the popularity of these mash-up works has soared in the past two years as publishing companies both large and small continue to publish them at a steady rate.

This essay examines the canonical literature/monster mash-up subgenre, focusing specifically on its originating text, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, as a case study to explore and understand the cultural work being done in this subgenre. I believe that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and other texts like it are a form of vital and original popular postmodern interaction with and appropriation of the existing literary canon. All of these works re-imagine the English and American literary canon and heritage, providing new or alternative ways to relate to and understand it. While many reviewers, scholars, and Austen enthusiasts have casually dismissed these novels as purely ridiculous or a gimmick to make an easy profit, I view them as an attempt to move beyond previous ideological attacks on the literary canon and into a popular interaction with the existing literary canon.³

In my focus on *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in this essay, I argue that depictions of violence are used to introduce new ways of interacting with the idea of ‘Jane Austen’ in popular culture. Specifically, I first examine how the violence in this novel provides readers a new way to understand Austen’s historical moment. I then turn to how the application of reader response theory allows a text to have multiple valid meanings, and that in this case, the violence in the novel undermines and appropriates the contemporary ‘branding’ of Austen and her works in popular culture. Finally, I present my own interpretation of this re-interpretation: that it takes place in a feminist re-

envisioning of Austen's historical world, caused by the incorporation of violence into society on a broad scale. This entire analysis is based on a combination of New Historicist, reader response, and feminist criticism, as I examine a variety of ways in which this novel can be appreciated and understood.

In order to appreciate fully the context in which *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* operates in contemporary culture and literature, I open by examining crucial historical, critical, and theoretical background before returning to the novel itself. I begin by discussing Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in its historical and literary contexts, focusing how Austen wrote in response to the political and social turmoil, as well as the popular literature, of her own day. By examining the dual contexts of violence and popular literature in Austen's own period, we can better understand the use of violence and popular literature and media in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and how it interacts with Austen's original text.

I then turn to the ways in which Austen and her works are generally used, perceived, and rewritten today, in order to contextualize more fully what *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is setting itself up in opposition to in the current literary marketplace. In particular, I examine several critical approaches to understanding why and how texts from the past, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, continue to be re-worked and re-imagined today. I also address the idea of Jane Austen as a 'brand' in the contemporary culture market and how that branding has affected perceptions of her and her works.

With these contemporary critical approaches to Austen in mind, I then discuss an alternative approach to reading and interacting with a text, as presented by literary and

cultural critic Henry Jenkins. His arguments about the relationships between readers, texts, the producers of texts, and the various interpretations of texts generated by readers then leads me back to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* itself. I end with a close reading of the novel in a specifically feminist context and an examination of how readers can respond to this novel in a wide variety of ways, based on what they as readers seek to get out of this engagement with this new kind of ‘Austen Novel.’

Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice* in a Historical Context

Jane Austen lived during a period that saw some of the greatest civil unrest, military conflict, and political oppression in England since the Glorious Revolution more than one hundred years earlier. Beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 when Austen was thirteen years old, and continuing into Britain’s war with France, which began in 1793 and ended with the battle of Waterloo in 1815, Britain saw almost continual international conflict. Internally, growing upper class fears that radicalism and revolution would cross over from France into Britain and increasing lower class frustration with and anger at industrialization and enclosure caused constant class conflict, friction, and fear during Austen’s lifetime (Scheuermann 169).

None of these tumultuous events are discussed overtly in any of Austen’s novels, which has caused generations of scholars to think of Austen and her novels as being “outside” of history and the wider world in which she lived, or even uninformed of the political and social issues of her day (Roberts 4-5). In reality, quite the opposite was true, as Austen was deeply aware of, and in fact responded to, the conflict, division, and violence of her times in her novels. As John Wiltshire puts it, Jane Austen’s novels

“were deeply implicated both in the political controversies of her age, and in the literary and ideological traditions through which they were conducted” (*Jane Austen and the Body* 3).

In fact, hints of these international and domestic conflicts abound in Austen’s novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, a militia regiment is quartered in the village of Meryton, presumably to defend against a potential French invasion during the hostilities that lasted for most of Austen’s adulthood.⁴ Both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* contain naval characters who have seen military action. *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* hint at contemporary debates about slavery and colonialism. In her personal life, Austen’s brothers Henry, Charles, and Frank were in active service in the militia and navy from the 1790s onward (Roe 359-360). All of these wider social and political concerns are present in Austen’s novels, but they are subsumed beneath the more soothing and traditional concerns of establishing one’s place in society and finding a proper mate.

But even the traditional marriage plot that forms the basis for Austen’s novels is not entirely apolitical. Mona Scheuermann points out the “tremendous fear of change in Austen’s social class” (174). Austen’s class, the landed gentry, had come to prominence and social power at the end of the seventeenth century after England’s Glorious Revolution when the English Bill of Rights was written and the rights and status of landowners was secured. As a result, the gentry feared another revolution—either foreign or domestic—that could potentially displace them (Roberts 5). With threats, both perceived and real, of French invasion and lower class revolt, the upper classes feared that their way of life was in danger of disappearing. As a result, they resisted any kind of

reform or social change, making the 1790s through the 1820s a time of counter-revolution and traditionalism among the British upper classes (Scheuermann 174-181).

Scheuermann goes on to argue that it is this class-based fear of change that is reflected in Austen's novels. She states, "the seeming timelessness of [Austen's] world...is wishful thinking, a picture not of a world assured to those who inhabit such social grids but of a society that seems to be isolated from change" (174). In short, the unchanging world represented in Austen's novels was in fact a reflection of her class's desire to maintain their traditional social status and their fear that it was being actively threatened by war, radicalism, class conflict, urbanization, industrialization, growing capitalism, and a host of other factors that were felt during Austen's lifetime.

In addition to being engaged with the current political and social developments and conflicts of her day, Jane Austen was also highly knowledgeable about contemporary literature. In his study of Austen's life and writing in *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, Peter Knox-Shaw characterizes Austen and her family as products of the Enlightenment, specifically the skeptical tradition within it that flourished in England and Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century. This movement celebrated reason, the scientific method, and social reform, while still recognizing the irrationality of human nature (5). He describes Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, as "an avid and omnivorous reader, a keen classicist, a dabbler in science, and ... delighted in the many new – and still opening – fields of inquiry that were giving greater definition to the created world" (Knox-Shaw 8).

In this environment, young Jane Austen was exposed to the works of the most important Enlightenment thinkers of her day, as demonstrated, Knox-Shaw argues, in her

novels. Austen's emphasis on the careful observation of individuals and society, coupled with her use of devices borrowed from highbrow literary devices such as parody and moral seriousness, have long caused both scholars and popular audiences to think of Austen as a serious writer of the Enlightenment tradition and an important part of English high culture and literature (Know-Shaw 8-9). It is this perception of Austen and her writings that is a large part of the contemporary popular 'Austen brand.'

While Jane Austen did have a close relationship and association with the elite thinkers of the Enlightenment, she was also an avid reader of popular novels. She and her family subscribed to a local lending library, the primary medium through which fiction reached readers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and her letters to family and friends abound with references to popular novels (Benedict 64). Despite the current perception of Austen as a writer of highbrow literature, she clearly conceived of her novels within the context of contemporary fiction and the commercial circulation of popular literature through lending libraries (Benedict 64). When she (through her father) submitted an early version of *Pride and Prejudice* for publication in 1797, it was sent to the firm of Cadell & Davies, the publishers of numerous popular fiction writers of the day, including Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, and Ann Radcliffe. Furthermore, Austen's cover letter specifically referenced Burney's novel *Evelina* in an attempt to give an idea of the length of her own novel (Mandal 57).

In her study of the relationship between the novels of Austen and her contemporaries, Mary Waldron describes the strong structural and thematic connections between two of Burney's other novels, *Cecelia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796), both of which were extremely popular during Austen's youth and were primarily distributed to readers

through the lending libraries, and Austen's own *Pride and Prejudice* (*Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* 37). Austen's novels frequently made use of devices and topics that were successful in novels in the lending libraries, including the topics of female education and marriage, social ritual, female conduct, internal consciousness in heroines, and elite settings and characters (Benedict 65). In writing her novels, Austen was aware of and attempting to compete in the popular literary marketplace of the day by making use of commercially successful themes and devices.

Pride and Prejudice was first drafted in 1796-7 under the title *First Impressions*, as a family entertainment. It remained a family favorite for many years, even after its first failed submission for publication in 1797, and it continued to be circulated among family and friends for many years (Mandal 61). Once Austen was able to publish *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, she returned to *Pride and Prejudice* and re-worked it, finally able to publish it in 1813 (Mandal 57). The fact that *Pride and Prejudice* was again submitted for publication, though it enjoyed such popularity among Austen's own circle, suggests that Austen was eager for publication and commercial circulation, and was interested in more than just the pleasures of writing. In a letter to her sister Cassandra dated January 14, 1796, Austen wrote, "I write only for fame, and without any view to pecuniary Emolument" (3). While this statement is highly ironic, it does suggest that Austen was interested in literary fame beyond her small family circle.

While *Pride and Prejudice* is generally considered Austen's finest social satire, it remains her most popular work, being reprinted in book form and re-made into films more often than any of Austen's other novels (Pucci and Thompson 4). In her own lifetime, it was the novel that established her career and made her reputation. Austen

received critical praise from Walter Scott, Maria Edgeworth, and other popular writers of the period for it (Mandal 86). Within two months of its publication, *Pride and Prejudice* received glowing reviews in the *British Critic* and the *Critical Review*, two important review venues (Waldron, “Critical Responses, Early” 85). Almost immediately, *Pride and Prejudice* was a novel that appealed to a broad popular audience, while also being recognized as an excellent piece of literature.

In the years since *Pride and Prejudice*’s original publication, numerous adaptations of it have appeared in a wide variety of genres and media. As early as 1850, novelists, playwrights, scholars, and humorists were adapting Austen’s works. The first recorded adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* was a theatrical adaptation by Filla Maria Risdon, publishing under the name Davis Risdon. The play was copyrighted in Gallup, New Mexico in 1895 (Breuer).

Since then, adaptations of Austen’s novels have only increased in popularity. In the past fifteen to twenty years in particular, Jane Austen and her novels have been the subject of a great deal of popular attention. In 1995 and 1996 alone, six film adaptations of Austen novels appeared in the United States and Britain, and since then dozens more have been produced. With the popularity of these films, a burgeoning publishing industry brought out sequels, prequels, and re-tellings of Austen’s novels from other characters’ perspectives (Troost and Greenfield 2). Jane Austen and her novels remain commercially viable in many forms.

Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice* in a Contemporary Context

Various adaptations of Austen's novels, ranging from films that claim faithfully to reproduce Austen's characters and society, to novels that rewrite Austen's stories in a contemporary setting, have received a great deal of critical attention in recent years. In general, the film adaptations of Austen's novels have received far more critical attention than novels based on or rewriting Austen's own work and scholars seem to be more interested in how Austen has been adapted to the screen, rather than how she has been re-imagined in print. As a result, the few scholars who have addressed written adaptations of Austen's works have generally done so in a context of cinematic adaptations. While this can be problematic, for the purposes of this essay I choose to overlook the differences between film and text adaptations, and instead focus on the critical theories of adaptation that have arisen based on recent reinterpretations of Austen in popular culture.⁵

In order to understand popular contemporary interpretations of Austen and Austen adaptations, I find three critical theories particularly useful. They are John Wiltshire's theory of the importance of adaptation put forth in his 2001 book, *Recreating Jane Austen*, Suzanne R. Pucci's and James Thompson's theory of re-telling the past through Austen in the introduction to their 2003 edited volume, *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*, and Harriet Margolis's examination of Jane Austen as a contemporary marketing 'brand' in her 2003 article "Janeite Culture: What Does the name 'Jane Austen' Authorize?" All three of these works focus specifically on film adaptations of Austen novels produced in Hollywood or in Britain, such as *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones' Diary*. However, their arguments about adaptation and re-creation are particularly helpful in understanding why Jane Austen and her works continue to be re-

worked in popular texts, including the more recent mash-up novels such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

John Wiltshire is specifically interested in the process of what he terms “recreation,” and he uses contemporary cinematic re-imaginings of Austen novels as a case study. He argues that texts “are constantly being re-worked, rearranged, recycled. Redesigning and plundering creations of the past, indeed, rather than their preservation, is a process so continuous and so endemic, that it is arguable that it is the central motor of artistic development” (3). He advocates examining *how* contemporary Austen “recreations” adapt and use Austen’s original text in new and creative ways, rather than judging and condemning them for not being “historically accurate” (7). By using texts from the past in new and different ways, contemporary writers and readers are able to feel that they are interacting with the past in a deeper and more authentic way than simply reading an unaltered text from the period. Wiltshire’s validation of the re-working of old texts in new ways paves the way for books such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* to be published. In this context, it is simply another new way of re-working Austen’s original text that deserves to be analyzed and addressed.

Pucci and Thompson are less concerned with the process of adaptation and more concerned with representations of the past in contemporary culture. They argue that, in the popular imagination, the novels of Jane Austen hold a nostalgic appeal for an agrarian, pre-Industrial past—a past that exists more in the imaginations of twenty-first century postmodern readers than in reality (2-3). The emphasis in their volume is on “the process of mediation between past and present, our moment of postmodernity and the nostalgic appeal of another, more distant moment” (5). In their reading, the continued

popularity of Austen and her works, even when re-imagined in new ways, is due to a nostalgia for an imagined past and the desire to make that past knowable and accessible. Based on this, the fantastical past offered readers of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is simply an alternative way for contemporary readers to access and understand the past that is not offered to readers of Austen's original novel. Specifically, the violence of Austen's lifetime, which was not overtly present in her novels, can be better understood through the use of violent figures from contemporary movies and popular culture, which are familiar to twenty-first century readers.

Finally, Harriet Margolis builds on the idea of Austen's novels holding a nostalgic appeal to argue that Jane Austen has become a popular contemporary 'brand', a marketing technique that involves name recognition that is identified with certain recognizable qualities or characteristics (26). In this case, the 'Austen brand' signals to consumers

a high culture aesthetic that values literature; history; class hierarchies; an appreciation of irony and satire at the expense of class hierarchies; anglophilia, or at least a tolerance thereof, with a latent or implicit nostalgia attached to it; dialogue-driven narratives delivered in an elevated language; and the repression of foul language and overt sexuality.

(Margolis 27)

I would also add to this description of the 'Austen brand' an emphasis on traditional gender roles and the apparent absence of violence or war in society, as mentioned above. As a result, the 'Austen brand' feeds into potential consumers' nostalgia for a high-culture past. Again, this past may or may not have actually existed, but the 'Austen

brand' suggests that this particular version of the past can be accessed and enjoyed through the purchase of Austen-themed items ranging from novels rewriting Austen's original novels, to music inspired by the novels, to even Jane Austen mugs, calendars, tee shirts, and action figures. This concept of the 'Austen brand' is highly important to my analysis of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and I will return to it several times.

While Wiltshire, Pucci and Thompson, and Margolis all provide important ways of understanding contemporary adaptations of Jane Austen's novels specifically, I wish to turn to a more general and reader-centered way of thinking about textual adaptation. Henry Jenkins' 1992 book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* examines the interactions between fan viewers and popular television programs that inspire strong fan followings. Although his book is primarily a study of television fan culture, Jenkins' analysis of the myriad interactions between text and textual consumer are relevant to this discussion of the adaptation and re-imagination of *Pride and Prejudice* through the introduction of zombies.

Specifically, Jenkins draws on, develops, and expands Michel de Certeau's notion of 'poaching' as a part of the reading process, in which readers and writers struggle for possession of a text and for control over its ultimate meanings (Jenkins 24; de Certeau 174). Jenkins claims that as children in school, we as readers and consumers of media are taught to "serve as the more-or-less passive recipient[s] of authorial meaning while any deviation from meanings clearly marked forth within the text is viewed negatively, as a failure to successfully understand what the author was trying to say" (25). In this context, he argues that we are taught that there is a 'correct' and 'incorrect' way to interpret a text (26-27). De Certeau's original theory of 'poaching' suggests that there

are multiple ways of understanding and interpreting a text that may not have been intended by the original author and that readers struggle for control of the text and its meaning as they read (de Certeau 174). As Jenkins explains, “[t]he raw materials of the original story play a crucial role in this process [of instructing a reader in how a text should be read], providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader” (63). This is a theory of agency and appropriation in the reading process, as a reader may not understand and relate to a text in the way the author intended and that understanding may even change over time as a reader appropriates more textual knowledge (Jenkins 33-34).

Jenkins expands this notion of readers’ agency in negotiating their understanding of a text over time and based on other experiences. He argues that alternate interpretations of a text that were not specifically intended by the creators are not only possible, but can actually be equally valid in that they provide readers alternative and potentially more meaningful ways of understanding and relating to a text. These alternative readings of a text can also revitalize interest in the original text, even after repeated readings or viewings (76). In Jenkins’ view, in ‘poaching’ a text, a reader finds other, more personal interpretations than what was originally intended by the author, thus allowing a text to have multiple valid meanings, be made available to a wider audience, and be revitalized through a broader array of interpretations.

It is interesting that the term ‘poaching’ was used by de Certeau and Jenkins, as historically, poaching was an illegal practice by which the poor and/or disenfranchised in society have taken from the wealthy and/or enfranchised. It is a violent term that historically meant outright stealing, and was sometimes overlooked by property owners,

but sometimes also ruthlessly punished. The use of this term in describing reading practices and interpretive strategies “recognizes the power differential between the ‘landowners’ and the ‘poachers,’” or between those who produce and control the meaning of texts and those who are the consumers of texts who generally do not have control over their meanings (Jenkins 32). Both de Certeau and Jenkins recognize that in contemporary society, most people do not have access to the dominant forms of cultural production and representation, as the vast majority of people are unpublished and unsigned. Thus, most individuals are recipients of texts and textual meaning, putting them in a position of social weakness compared to the producers of texts and textual meaning. Instead, they must ‘poach’ the meanings of the texts they have, in order to make them useful and meaningful in their own lives and experiences (Jenkins 26).⁶

Of course, one of the hallmarks of contemporary literary and cultural criticism is its willingness and even eagerness to consider new interpretations of and critical approaches to texts. For example, a feminist or queer reading of a literary text would be perfectly acceptable in academe today, although sixty years ago they would not have been approved reading strategies. But because Jenkins is studying contemporary fan culture and not the contemporary academy, his theory of textual poaching goes beyond what is and is not considered an acceptable reading strategy to include fans’ outright re-writing of texts. Jenkins examines several modes of creative output in fan culture, including writing fan fiction, producing fan videos (what today would be YouTube videos), and producing fan art. He argues that fans’ re-writings and re-imaginings of the texts in which they are interested are a valid way of understanding the primary text, in

that they allow the fans to enter into a more personal understanding of and relationship to the text (76).

This notion of textual poaching as a reading and writing practice is valuable to my discussion of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, because it allows for the possibility of readers (and writers) entering into a more personally meaningful understanding and interpretation of Jane Austen and her novels than what is offered by Wiltshire, Pucci and Thompson, and Margolis. While Wiltshire does validate the process of re-writing Austen's texts, he is primarily interested in the scholarly examination of *how* contemporary adaptations make use of Austen's original text and does not address readers' receptions of these texts. On the other hand, Pucci and Thompson are more interested in the representation of the past in contemporary culture. They, like Wiltshire to a lesser extent, envision a passive, popular readership that reads Austen's novels and adaptations of those novels for the specific purpose of interacting with an imagined past for which our culture has been taught to feel nostalgia. They also tacitly suggest that this imagined past is the same for all general readers and that any re-interpretations of Austen and the past are done by the producers of texts, not the consumers. Margolis's discussion of Jane Austen as a popular marketing brand is also somewhat guilty of this conception of readers as passive consumers of a text. However, she does allow for the possibility of more agency on the part of the reader/consumer in that she posits that 'Jane Austen' is a brand with certain identifiable qualities or characteristics, not a set of pre-determined meanings. By purchasing different Jane Austen-branded products, readers/consumers are able to specify what version of Austen they want to experience. For example, consumers can choose between purchasing a DVD of BBC/A&E's 1995 production of *Pride and*

Prejudice, which aims to reproduce the novel on film through the use of historically accurate costumes, sets, and dialogue; or the 2001 film version of *Bridget Jones' Diary* that re-imagines *Pride and Prejudice* in a contemporary setting; or both; or something else entirely. Consumers are thus able to choose a version of 'Jane Austen' that is the most personally meaningful or interesting to them.

As mentioned previously, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was not inspired by coauthor Seth Grahame-Smith's desire to understand and interact with Austen's text in a more personally meaningful way, but rather as an intellectual exercise he was given by his editor. However, in the process of re-writing *Pride and Prejudice*, he did make it more meaningful for himself and his envisioned audience as he changed the text to reflect what he and his imagined audience were interested in. An example of this catering to an imagined audience for the book is found in the winning book trailer for *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* on YouTube.

When *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was first published in 2009, Quirk Books held a contest to create the best book trailer for it. Book trailers are a recent popular marketing tool for large publishers to promote books. Based loosely on movie trailers, they combine acting, voiceovers, music, still photos, and clips from movies to promote a book. The winning *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* book trailer was created by Amie Wright, a youth librarian who had been creating her own book trailers for young adult fiction in an effort to encourage reading among teens.⁷

The trailer combines clips from the 1995 BBC/A&E production of *Pride and Prejudice* by Andrew Davies and horror director George Romero's 1968 zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*. It opens with on-screen text asking viewers:

Did you ever have to read Jane Austen's Timeless Classic *Pride and Prejudice*[?] But does dialogue like this... [cut to a scene from *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Jane Bennet urges Mr. Collins to assist Mary in understanding a passage in Fordyce's *Sermons*] ... make you want to gouge out your eyeballs from boredom? Maybe you need some zombies!!!! (Wright)

With her book trailer specifically aimed at a young adult audience, which has been raised on video games and action movies, Wright assumes her audience, and the audience for this book in general, is bored by the dialogue delivered in an elevated style and lack of action or violence in Austen's original *Pride and Prejudice*. In addition, by asking viewers if they ever *had* to read *Pride and Prejudice*, it assumes an audience for whom Austen's novel was at some point required reading for school, rather than something that was read by choice. In this context of required reading, *Pride and Prejudice* is described as a "timeless classic," identifying it as a part of the high-culture canon, not as something that is a part of the everyday lives of readers.

The trailer then moves to a montage of clips from *Night of the Living Dead* with zombies attacking and eating people, while the song "Jesus Built my Hotrod," by industrial band Ministry, plays in the background. Against the fast driving beat of the song, the trailer moves to conclude with stills of the illustrations in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and on-screen text, informing viewers:

For fun-filled zombie action, gut-eating zombies, kick-ass sisters, graveyard slugfests, [and] ninja swordfights, but with a touch of refinement... [cut to a scene from *Pride and Prejudice* of Elizabeth

Bennet playing the pianoforte surrounded by Mr. Darcy and Col.

Fitzwilliam] ... all this and more... *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*...

on library bookshelves NOW!!! (Wright)

The incongruity of the clips and original music from the *Pride and Prejudice* film, set alongside the images of zombies and the industrial music, emphasize to the trailer's audience both what this book is and what it is not. It promises viewers (and potential readers) that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is not boring and filled with difficult dialogue, but rather is fast-paced, action-packed, and exciting. The addition of zombies to the novel promises a different reading of the text, even though the novel is still largely grounded in Austen's original.

This winning book trailer ably highlights the different approaches to adapting *Pride and Prejudice*. The clips from Davies' production emphasize that film's efforts to reproduce the book on film, complete with historically accurate costumes, sets, music, and dialogue. This film generally adheres to the 'Austen brand' and caters to the presumed nostalgia of viewers for the idealized, imaginary past that Jane Austen is supposed to represent. This kind of adaptation is generally considered the approved or 'correct' way to adapt or re-interpret Austen's novels. Its use in the trailer is meant to represent what the 'Austen brand' is presumed to be to those who are not interested in what that brand promises, specifically, dialogue-driven narratives, nostalgia for a fictitious past, the repression of violence, sexuality, and foul language, and an overall high culture aesthetic.

In the second half of the trailer, the combination of images of zombies, industrial music, references to horror and martial arts movies, and the excessive use of exclamation

points promises potential readers a new interpretation of Jane Austen's novel, one that is exciting and in direct opposition to the 'Austen brand.' It offers readers an action-packed version of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the characters are not on the sidelines of world events, interested primarily in matrimony and manners, but rather are on the frontlines of a violent and bloody conflict and must balance both personal and societal expectations and desires. To readers who are not interested in what the 'Austen brand' usually offers, this new adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* is both more thrilling and more personally relevant. This violent and popular culture-driven adaptation is not generally the approved way to re-imagine Austen's novels, but, based on Henry Jenkins' argument, it does offer readers a valid alternative way to interact with and appropriate Austen's narrative and characters into their own experiences, culture, and worldview.

While *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is obviously historically inaccurate, the addition of zombies, ninjas, and violence in the text allows contemporary readers a way to better understand the society in which Jane Austen lived, as Allen Grove argues in his afterword to the book's 'Deluxe Heirloom Edition.' Thus, the fears of violence, revolution, and uprising in Austen's own day are better expressed in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* than in the original *Pride and Prejudice*. The recognition that Austen was writing for a general popular audience can be appreciated by the use of tropes from twentieth-century horror and martial arts films in the place of the tropes and themes in Austen's original novel that would have been popular and commercially successful in the lending libraries of her own day. Based on the theories of all of these scholars, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* offers readers an alternative way to understand Jane Austen, her novels, and the era in which she lived, in ways that have not previously been available.

Traditionally, the ‘Austen brand’ has been the approved way to understand and interact with these. The addition of violence to the novel determinedly undermines this branding, allowing readers to form different, but equally valid understandings of and personal relationships to the characters and text.

Although *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* does offer an alternative reading of *Pride and Prejudice* which has not been previously authorized, one does face the conundrum that, in being published on a large scale by a commercial publisher, that reading has been granted at least *some* authority by cultural producers. Many of the negative reviews of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* focus on how the addition of zombies to Austen’s novel undermines or diminishes the original, as mentioned in Macy Halford’s review in *The New Yorker*. Reviews such as this function as gatekeepers of traditional understandings or interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice*, trying to keep Grahame-Smith’s adaptation from becoming a valid or ‘correct’ way of re-imagining the novel. However, based on the success of the canonical literature/monster mash-up subgenre, I believe it is fair to say that this alternative way of interpreting the nineteenth-century English literary canon has found an accepting audience.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

Before I turn to a close reading of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, I first want to briefly address a question that I have been asked by many individuals who have heard about my interest in this novel and others like it. Put simply: why zombies? If the value of this book is its offering an alternative way of interpreting and interacting with Jane Austen, her novels, and her time period through the addition of violence, there are

countless ways of doing so other than adding zombies, most of them at least somewhat more historically accurate.

Zombies themselves are rooted in African and African-Caribbean folklore and first entered the English language through early Caribbean travel literature. In 1929, American adventurer William Seabrook published his travel book, *The Magic Island*, and brought the zombie to international attention. With the New York stage production *Zombie* and the Hollywood film *White Zombie*, both from 1932, the figure became permanently attached to the entertainment industry. For decades the zombie figure was used as a subordinate or servant to vampires or evil humans in horror films (Dendle 2-3).

In 1968, George Romero established the zombie as we know it in contemporary popular culture with his film *Night of the Living Dead*. This film, and the countless others that have been made since it, liberated the zombie from being a servant and established it as a purely physical creature driven by biological cannibalistic cravings to consume human flesh and brains. *Night of the Living Dead* also established the idea that zombies were not just lone monsters to defeat, but rather were part of a massive zombie apocalypse that could potentially wipe out the human race (Dendle 6-7). This is the kind of zombie that is featured in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

Because of its African and African-Caribbean origins, the zombie is one of the few film and popular culture ‘monsters’ not of European origin (Dendle 2). The zombie is also unique among monsters in its working class pedigree. Zombies are not ancient aristocrats who have accumulated power, influence, and wealth over centuries, as vampires such as Dracula are often portrayed. They are not the creation of a highly educated aristocratic scientist, as Frankenstein’s Creature was. They have no literary

heritage, no claims to high culture, and no power other than their physical strength and overwhelming numbers. In a purely Marxist reading, zombies represent the threat of the masses rising up and overthrowing the ruling classes. As zombies, individuals no longer have any social rank or distinction (Dendle 11).

With this background it quickly becomes apparent why zombies make an excellent choice as the vehicle to inject overt violence into *Pride and Prejudice*. With upper-class Britons afraid of a French invasion and a lower-class revolution during Austen's lifetime, zombies offer an enemy that contemporary readers recognize as both foreign *and* based on a massive uprising. Based on the proliferation of books and movies about 'the zombie apocalypse,' as it is popularly referred to, zombies in popular culture represent both an invasion force that overthrows and displaces the human race, and also a revolution or uprising of "people" who struggle to change the dominant paradigm of human life.

However, other than the prequel and sequel to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, none of the other books in this mash-up subgenre use zombies as the primary monsters.⁸ In fact, in looking at the list of works in this subgenre that I compiled in my bibliography, vampires are by far the most popular monsters for these novels. So clearly zombies are not the only, or even ideal, monsters for these types of works. While all of these mash-up novels are somewhat different in how and why they combine the original text of a novel and what are essentially characters from twentieth-century horror movies, they all similarly combine elements of dangerous Otherness with the novel. This Otherness is used for a wide range of effects, ranging from the humorous to the philosophically provoking, depending on the purposes and skills of the writer.

In the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, even if Grahame-Smith was merely trying to be funny with his use of zombies, they also have a function in providing a pop cultural element that can be used to understand and interact with the past. Here, zombies and violence are used to undermine the accepted ‘Austen brand.’ Through the use of violence, they offer an alternative reading of Austen’s original text, the time period in which Austen actually lived, and contemporary readers’ understandings of how both relate to our own culture and society. As highlighted above, there are a wide variety of ways a text can be interpreted, even this interpretation of Austen’s original text, based on how a reader understands it. In this case, my own interpretation of Grahame-Smith’s undermining of the ‘Austen brand’ is that this novel presents a feminist re-envisioning of Austen’s world, caused by the incorporation of violence into society on a much broader scale than what was actually present in Austen’s own society.

In the opening lines of the book, the violence in this society is seen in the initial exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet:

‘My dear Mr. Bennet,’ said his lady to him one day, ‘have you heard that Netherfield Park is occupied again?’

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not and went about his morning business of dagger sharpening and musket polishing—for attacks by the unmentionables had grown alarmingly frequent in recent weeks... ‘Prattle on if you must, but leave me to the defense of my estate!’ (Austen and Grahame-Smith 7)

Immediately this is established as a violent society where it is the daily business of a gentleman to make sure that his weapons are all in good repair. It is a gentleman’s duty

to defend his estate physically through violent means and it is not until later that the militia arrives to assist in the defense of the village of Meryton.

Mr. Bennet also considers it his duty to ensure his daughters' ability to protect themselves and others against zombies. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are described thus: "[t]he business of Mr. Bennet's life was to keep his daughters alive. The business of Mrs. Bennet's was to get them married" (9). This conflict between the two elder Bennets over what their hopes and goals for their children should be are deeply influenced by the violence of this society. Both are concerned with securing protection and safety for their daughters, but they seek it in different ways. Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to master the more traditional 'womanly arts,' to attract a wealthy husband who can afford many bodyguards. Mr. Bennet, a former warrior of great renown, prefers to see his daughters master the 'deadly arts' and be able to defend themselves. These conflicting goals are balanced by the five sisters in different ways in their attention to manners, feminine modesty, social obligations, and their training as warriors.

Throughout the novel, the calm walks or drives in between more familiar scenes set in the drawing rooms in Meryton or Longbourn become scenes of gory battles between the Bennet sisters and zombies. The outdoors is considered unsafe in this society, and the characters arm themselves whenever they leave the house. When Jane Bennet falls ill while visiting Netherfield Park, Elizabeth insists on walking over to visit her and Kitty and Lydia accompany their sister as far as the village:

Elizabeth accepted their company, and they set off together, armed only with their ankle daggers. Muskets and Katana swords were a more effective means of protecting one's self, but they were considered

unladylike; and, having no saddle in which to conceal them, the three sisters yielded to modesty.” (27)

This is a society in which *all* young gentlewomen must be able to defend themselves when venturing out of doors, even to the extent that there are wide-spread social codes regarding what weapons are and are not proper for young ladies to be seen carrying.

In spite of the myriad signs of violence in this society, there are still social codes and manners that must be observed at least among upper classes, such as this concern about feminine modesty. An attention to the details of manners and class is an important part of the recognized ‘Austen brand,’ and its persistence in this novel is both an adherence to this and also a parody of it. Most of the manners and social codes mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are in the context of the proper use and handling of weapons, particularly for ladies, as in the passage quoted above about how certain weapons were considered “unladylike.”

When zombies attack the ball at Meryton, none of the gentlemen in the party are armed and a general panic ensues as the guests try to escape. Only the Bennet sisters are armed, though again they only carry the more “ladylike” ankle daggers:

As the guests fled in every direction, Mr. Bennet’s voice cut through the commotion. ‘Girls! Pentagon of Death!’

Elizabeth immediately joined her four sisters, Jane, Mary, Catherine, and Lydia in the center of the dance floor. Each girl produced a dagger from her ankle and stood at the tip of an imaginary five-pointed star. From the center of the room, they began stepping outward in unison—each thrusting

a razor-sharp dagger with one hand, the other hand modestly tucked into the small of her back. (14)

Not only are the Bennet sisters excellent fighters, they also adhere to society's expectations for female modesty, which in this case refers to proper fighting technique. They do not fight with their arms flailing about uncontrollably, but are rather very poised and elegant. The pen-and-ink illustration of this scene on the facing page depicts the five Bennet sisters in the 'Pentagram of Death,' all with erect postures, squared shoulders, identical arm positions, and only slightly tousled hair and dresses. Were it not for their grim facial expressions and the zombies the sisters are fighting, this illustration could easily be of them dancing.

Even the language used to describe the 'Pentagram of Death' fighting pattern is evocative of the description of an English country dance. The sisters follow an imagined pattern on the dance floor, "stepping outward in unison." Here the violence of the zombies appropriates and re-writes the language of a ball, language that is not actually found in the original *Pride and Prejudice*, but is evocative of the 'Austen brand' all the same.

The use of the language of the 'Austen brand' when referring to the violence in this zombie-plagued society is found throughout the book. A particularly telling example of this is that it appears to be considered impolite among the upper classes to refer to the monsters as 'zombies,' though the narrator does several times. Instead, the terms 'unmentionables,' 'dreadfuls,' or 'sorry stricken' are preferred among genteel society. Even the prominent London-based organization that Bingley is a patron of, the *Society of Gentlemen for a Peaceful Solution to Our Present Difficulties* (83) does not openly state

what those “difficulties” are. This culture is one that accepts and even embraces open displays of violence, but is unable and unwilling to discuss or name the reason for it. The wide variety of polite allusions to or code words for zombies parody the ‘Austen brand’s’ recognized preference for dialogue delivered in elevated language and elimination of foul language. Mrs. Bennet’s preferred term for zombies, ‘unmentionables,’ is an example of this, as the very term suggests that the subject of the monsters ought not be mentioned.⁹

The upper classes place a great deal of importance on being able to defend one’s self and estate, while still maintaining genteel manners and skills. The Bennet sisters, while recognized for their extraordinary combat abilities, are still raised to be accomplished young women, being trained in music, dancing, and singing. In discussing the ideal accomplished woman, Mr. Darcy argues, “[a] woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages; she must be well trained in the fighting styles of the Kyoto masters and modern tactics and weaponry of Europe...” (34). Mr. Darcy believes a woman must be both a skilled warrior and refined lady to be called truly accomplished.

Elizabeth, who is the best warrior of all her sisters, counters this assertion: “[i]n my experience, a woman is either highly trained or highly refined. One cannot afford the luxury of both in such times” (34). This rejection of traditional feminine refinement and accomplishments is one of the defining elements of Elizabeth’s character. It sets her apart from all of the other women in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, both other female warriors, like her sisters, as well as women who are not warriors, like Charlotte Lucas and Caroline Bingley.

This Elizabeth Bennet has little time for traditional female refinement and spends more time training in her family's dojo than practicing her needlework. When she is first introduced to the reader, she is “employed in carving the Bennet crest in the handle of a new sword” (9), rather than being “employed in trimming a hat” (3), as she was in Austen's original *Pride and Prejudice*. Although she *can* dance, sing, and play the pianoforte, she is more comfortable showing off her martial skills. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth argues that a woman should be able to defend herself against zombies and also financially support herself if need be, even suggesting at one point that she and her sisters could become bodyguards to the wealthy if they prove unable to find husbands before Mr. Bennet's death and Mr. Collins' inheriting Longbourn (50).

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies offers female readers a more egalitarian world than what women generally find in the world of the ‘Austen brand.’ The Bennet sisters, and Elizabeth in particular, see themselves and are accepted by men as their equals on the battlefield and recognized as the best warriors in Hertfordshire. Mr. Darcy, who is considered one of the greatest warriors in the kingdom, realizes that, “were it not for his considerable skill in the deadly arts, that he should be in danger of being bested by [Elizabeth's]—for never had he seen a lady more gifted in the ways of vanquishing the undead” (42). All of the Bennet sisters are strong, confident, hard working, and, I would argue, professional, in their dedication to their status as warriors and defenders of the living. They are characters with whom contemporary women can identify, particularly in their personal struggles between their dedication to being warriors and society's expectations that they marry and retire from being warriors to raise children.

The primary reason Elizabeth is so uninterested in matrimony is that, in genteel society, it is considered unseemly for married women to continue being warriors. While Elizabeth at first finds Mr. Collins' marriage proposal merely humorous, it is when he compliments her fighting skills and then tells her, "'naturally, I will require you to retire them as part of your marital *submission*' (emphasis mine)" (85), that Elizabeth takes serious offense and explicitly refuses his offer. Elizabeth Bennet is not a woman who submits to anyone and she particularly takes offense at the idea of submitting to Mr. Collins, who has no martial training and whom she could easily defeat in combat. In attempting to convince him that she would not be a good wife for him, she points out:

'You forget, sir, that I am a student of Shaolin! Master of the seven-starred fist!...You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who could make *you* so...for I am a warrior, sir, and shall be until my last breath is offered to God' (emphasis in original). (85-86)

Of all the Bennet sisters, Elizabeth takes her duties as a warrior the most seriously and she is opposed to giving them up. In describing her sister Jane as "a warrior first, and a woman second," (20), Elizabeth seems to be speaking of herself. If one thinks of Elizabeth's dedicated role as a warrior as her career, it is easy to read this Elizabeth Bennet as a contemporary female professional, a figure that appears in a wide variety of contemporary narratives, who often struggles to balance the demands of work and family. It is this very struggle that Elizabeth seeks to resolve throughout the novel, as she is forced to choose between her honor and duty as a warrior and her emotions and feelings for Darcy.

Darcy demonstrates his suitability as a match for Elizabeth in his high respect for her martial skills and warrior training. In contrast to Mr. Collins, who expects Elizabeth to give up being a warrior and *submit* to him upon marriage, Darcy looks forward to fighting side by side with Elizabeth after their marriage. Immediately after Elizabeth and Darcy confess their love to one another at the end of the novel, they encounter a large group of zombies in the woods. The new couple responds by “sharing a glance and a smile, [they] realized they had stumbled onto their first opportunity to fight side by side. And so they did” (302). Darcy and Elizabeth seal their new relationship by fighting together in battle, establishing themselves as equals on the battlefield and also forging a new level of trust as they protect each other in combat.

On the facing page, the final illustration in the book depicts Elizabeth and Darcy, each with a bloody sword in hand, surrounded by zombies. Elizabeth’s sword is in motion and has just decapitated a nearby zombie whose head flies through the air while the body slumps at her feet. Yet Elizabeth and Darcy stand side by side, holding hands and gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes. Framed by the background of the English countryside, from the waist up, they could easily be a pair of young lovers on a quiet stroll. This illustration establishes them not just as lovers, but as equals and partners both in their relationship and on the battlefield.

The companionate marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is here expanded into a true partnership of equals. Darcy’s respect for Elizabeth’s skills and the suggestion that they continue to battle zombies side by side into the future offers readers a marriage that is more in line with contemporary expectations of

shared marital responsibility. While the ‘Austen brand’ does present a romantic marriage based on a “meeting of minds,” as Shakespeare says, it is not a marriage of equality.

Through the introduction of zombies in Austen’s text, Grahame-Smith creates a world that allows both men and women to be equally violent and develop similar skills within the warrior ‘profession.’ This equality of ‘professional’ skills between men and women is what allows Elizabeth and Darcy to enjoy a presumably equal marriage. It also offers readers a more egalitarian world in terms of gender relations than what is typically found within the ‘Austen brand,’ where there are strict differences between what men and woman can do and how they are expected to interact in society. While the sexes are still not fully equal in this culture, readers are presented with an arrangement of gender relations that are more in line with contemporary expectations.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

There are many different ways of thinking about and understanding ‘Jane Austen’ in contemporary society, most of them governed by the ‘Austen brand’ that sells a particular idea of who Austen was and what kind of world she lived in. This brand is largely rooted in the idea that Jane Austen and her novels represent an imagined past for which most contemporary readers have been conditioned to feel nostalgia. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* undermines this brand and provides a new interpretation of one of Austen’s novels, based on the addition of violence to a world that *appears* to be without violence. These added depictions of violence provide readers several ways of interacting with and understanding ‘Jane Austen’ that have not been available to readers before.

The violence in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* gives readers a way to understand the violent world in which Austen actually lived and wrote, even though this violence is not always reflected in her works. My own interpretation of this re-interpretation is a feminist and a reader-focused one, in which I examined how the violence in the novel allows for greater gender equality within the story and reflects the concerns of contemporary women. In this society based on violence, the Bennet sisters, and women like them, are allowed to transcend customary gendered boundaries and hierarchies to pursue traditionally masculine activities. This re-imagining of Austen's society gives contemporary female readers a new way to relate to Austen's characters that move beyond conventional gender expectations.

Another example of this can be seen in the short film, "Jane Austen's *Fight Club*," which went viral on YouTube in the summer and fall of 2010, getting over a million views in six months.¹⁰ This short film takes the idea of the 1999 movie *Fight Club*, in which groups of men find renewed self-awareness and confidence through gathering to fight each other, and applies it to the female characters of Austen's novels. In this short, a pink-gowned Elizabeth Bennet encourages the other heroines of Austen's novels to fight each other. As a result, they all become more confident and quickly discard nineteenth-century standards of feminine modesty and propriety. In a montage, the various heroines are shown reveling in bruises and scars, taking physical revenge on their enemies, seducing men, engaging in twenty-first century styles of club dancing, and exhibiting a renewed passion for life.

While this short film is clearly meant to be humorous and ahistorical, it does directly address the traditional gender hierarchies that are found in the 'Austen brand.' In

this film, like in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, it is overt and open displays of violence that allow the women to overturn those hierarchies and engage in behaviors that are conventionally considered more masculine. Both of these works use violence to offer readers more “modern” versions of Austen’s heroines, versions that contemporary women can relate to and understand in ways that were not previously available to them.

I recognize that this essay and my focus on reader response criticism within it, along with my use of the theoretical approaches of Henry Jenkins, could be read as advocacy for or apologetics on behalf of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and other novels like it. While this was not my intention when beginning this project, I frequently found myself having to defend the value of even examining this novel in a scholarly context to those to who are more accustomed to traditional literary interpretation and criticism. Thus, I consciously directed my research towards reader-driven theories to better understand and articulate my *own* interest in these novels. My emphasis on reader response criticism is a result of this direction, though it is certainly not the only way to approach these novels.

To the best of my knowledge, this the first scholarly paper to consider *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and the mash-up subgenre seriously, and as such, there is a still a great deal that can be said about this novel and others like it. My analysis, which is heavily informed by reader response criticism, highlights what I feel is one of the strengths of these novels, namely, their diversity in theme and approach. While my own reading of the text of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was a feminist one, a Marxist reading would have been equally effective, and would have yielded further insights into this complex hybrid text. Additionally, having read a large number of other novels in this

subgenre, there are other, more sophisticated novels that have appeared since that also deserve attention in how they handle issues of social satire, the role of technology in society, myth, the role of history in nation-building, and the very idea of the literary canon. As these books continue to be published, there is room for further exploration of how they relate to their original text, contemporary popular culture, and even each other.

Notes

¹ The ‘Deluxe Heirloom Edition’ is a hardcover edition of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, released on October 1, 2009, seven months after the publication of the original paperback edition. It contains a preface by coauthor Seth Grahame-Smith, an afterword by a literary scholar, thirteen full-color illustrations, and additional graphic scenes of violence and zombies within the novel itself. The volume’s high production values, including heavier and thicker paper, gilded edges, a leatherette binding, and a satin ribbon page marker, all contribute to make this edition look and feel like the high-quality ‘heirloom’ editions of classic literature. It was produced primarily for the holiday book market, in an effort to further boost the book’s sales during this key book-buying season. At first, it appears that this higher-quality treatment of the book is ridiculous or even satiric, since *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* appears to be an irreverent joke. But the jacket copy claims, “this hardcover volume honors a masterpiece of classic zombie literature.” In this context, the ‘Deluxe Heirloom Edition’ is not only a parody of the higher-end ‘heirloom editions’ of classic literature, but is also an ‘heirloom edition’ of one of the most important zombie novels of the twenty-first century, which established an entirely new subgenre.

² In the United States, anything published prior to 1923 is in the public domain and is therefore not subject to any copyright restrictions.

³ Since the 1960s, there has been ongoing debate within academia and popular culture about the nature and status of the literary canon—those works that at some point in time were deemed the most important and influential in shaping Western culture. Works in the canon are often considered to be the "greatest works of artistic merit" and important to the development of a high culture status. Much of the debate that has surrounded the canon over the past fifty years is rooted in critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, and Marxist theory, and seeks to either remake or altogether remove the literary canon (Hicks 18-20).

One of the main reasons the canon has come under attack is its perceived emphasis on the works of 'Dead White European Males' and its lack of inclusion of works by women and ethnic minorities. These debates about what and whom to include and exclude from the canon are often cast as political and ideological. The more conservative critics argue that the traditional literary canon is important because the works it includes have been historically and culturally influential and that they reflect common shared human experiences and concerns. More liberal critics argue that the traditional literary canon represents the intellectual and cultural oppression of women and minorities by white males, and that the works included in the canon reflect the lives and experiences of an elite few, not the majority (Searle, sec. 1). My argument is that these mash-up novels, which use works from the traditional Western canon in combination with monsters, move beyond these debates about the importance of the canon and what

should or should not be included in it, into a new and creative popular interaction with works from the canon.

⁴ Austen's younger brother Henry served in the Oxfordshire militia, which was much like the militia portrayed in Meryton in *Pride and Prejudice*. Henry's militia never saw action or had to defend Britain against the French, but they did care for the wounded from fighting on the continent (Roberts 203).

⁵ Many of the studies of film adaptations of Austen's novels tend to focus on elements of visual storytelling, such as costuming, set design, location, dancing, and music, in order to form the basis of their arguments about these films and their relationships to Austen's original texts. Obviously, when dealing with a textual adaptation of Austen's novels, these elements are not as important and cannot form the basis of my argument. However, the *theories* of adaptation that arise from the analysis of these visual elements can be helpful in understanding *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and other textual adaptations.

⁶ This question of 'poaching' alternative readings of texts actually became an open conflict that nearly became a full-scale legal battle between textual producers and textual consumers/poachers in 1981-1982. In 1981, Lucasfilm Ltd., which owns the rights to the *Star Wars* franchise, circulated a letter to all of the major *Star Wars* fanzines, which published fan-produced fiction based on *Star Wars*. The letter threatened legal action against any editors who published fan fiction that did not meet Lucasfilm's "family values" ethics code. Thus, any *Star Wars*-based or -inspired fan fiction that was not rated PG or that portrayed any of the characters as homosexual could be met with legal action. Because these fanzines were, as a rule, sold at cost, and thus the writers and editors were not making a profit off of Lucasfilm's intellectual property, the writers and editors took

issue with Lucasfilm's attempt to control their interpretations of characters or storylines. This conflict eventually died out, with the appearance of new fanzines, the underground circulation of stories, and eventually, the arrival of the internet, which allowed for greater anonymity for fan fiction writers. However, it does highlight the historical legal aspects of poaching as well as the contemporary power imbalance between textual creators and textual consumers in the creating and enforcement of textual meaning (Jenkins 31-32).

⁷ You can still watch the winning book trailer on Amie Wright's YouTube channel, though it is no longer available on Quirk Book's YouTube channel. The trailer can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/lis9763#p/u/1/FzowFJTApfY>

⁸ A few, such as *Jane Slayre*, do use zombies as background monsters who are servants to more powerful and important figures such as vampires or evil humans. This is a return to the way zombies were primarily used in Hollywood prior to Romero's makeover of the zombie in 1968.

⁹ For contemporary readers, for whom the term is generally used to refer to underwear, this is another example of the novel's humorous undermining of the 'Austen brand.' In this case, foul or impolite language is not actually used, as is accepted in the brand.

However, the double meaning of 'unmentionables' pokes fun at the brand's standard attempt to avoid mentioning the unmentionable, such as underwear.

¹⁰ Directed by Emily Janice Card and Keith Paugh, and written by Emily Janice Card.

This video is still available on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2PM0om2E18>.

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