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# Becoming Jane on stage: queerness in early twentieth-century Austen bioplays

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**Abstract**

Bioadaptation has become a recent trend in Austen media, from *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008) to the BBC series *Miss Austen* (2025). This article considers the role of the less studied twentieth-century bioplay in shaping Austen's cultural legacy. Three case studies - *A Pageant of Great Women* (1910) by Cicely Hamilton, *Jane Austen* (1939) by Helen Brown, and *Dear Jane* (1919) by Eleanor Holmes. James Edward - are analysed using Pamela Demory's theory of queer adaptation and Amber K. Regis' theory of the bioplay as feminist praxis. This article argues that bioadaptation can be a form of queer, feminist praxis, as each play reimagines Austen outside of the heterosexist image popularised by Edward Austen-Leigh's Victorian biography *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869). The bioplay genre therefore allows and encourages adapters to question gaps and silences in traditional, conservative narratives around Austen that had been widely accepted until the 1930s. The dates of the chosen case studies make clear that 'queering' is not synonymous with modernising, and that a queer vision of Austen has always existed in the minds of her adapters and readers.

*Keywords: Jane Austen; adaptation; bioplay; gender; queer theory.*

In 1911, a 'Miss Jane Austen' performed on stage as part of a suffrage play at the Lyceum Theatre in New York. This Jane Austen was a 'black and tan terrier dog belonging to George Worthington' ('DOG TO BE A STAR IN SUFFRAGE PLAY', 9). *The New York Times* reviewed the play, and Miss Austen's performance, positively:

> [She] is described as 15 years old, with an aristocratic little head [and] a funny little tail… Jane Austen is the little suffragette dog who carries Aunt Lizzie's suffrage contribution basket marked: "Votes for Women," and who, as Aunt Lizzie says in the play, gathers in £5 in a single morning (9).

This performance—now forgotten by Austen scholarship—demonstrates a longer history of Jane Austen on the stage than we currently assume. The BBC drama *Miss Austen* (2025), adapted from Gill Hornby's novel of the same name, is a recent example of the enduring allure of Austenian bioadaptations. Over the last twenty years, Austen scholarship has increasingly focused adaptation studies, and Richard Burt, Deborah

Cartmell, and Juliette Wells have studied the biopic genre through analysis of films such as *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008). Conversely, little research has been conducted on theatrical adaptations—and even less so on bioplays. This article analyses three early twentieth-century stage productions that feature Austen as a character; *A Pageant of Great Women* (1910) by Cicely Hamilton; *Jane Austen* (1939) by Helen Brown; and *Dear Jane* (1919) by Eleanor Holmes Hinkley. These three plays predate Hollywood bioadaptations of Austen's life by almost one hundred years, and yet similarly display the development of her sexuality as intrinsic to her literary career. Both Devoney Looser and Marina Cano have researched theatrical adaptations and bioplays in some chapters of *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017) and *Jane Austen and Performance* (2017), respectively. This article narrows their focus to dimensions of sexuality and gender in Austen bioplays, and explores how these themes may reveal or suppress competing ideological beliefs about the author. Distinct versions of Austen are presented by the three plays; Hamilton's Austen is a feminist author revered by queer women for rejecting the patriarchal sex-gender system; Brown's Austen is a heterosexual woman whose relationship with men has the singular greatest influence on her writing; and Hinkley's Austen is a masculine woman whose queer relationship with her sister is the source of her creativity. Analysis of these earlier, lesser known adaptations of Austen shows how political, social, and literary contexts first began to shape representations of her sexuality and gender in popular culture.

In my survey of British and American stage productions related to Austen, initial findings suggest that 18 percent of productions between 1901 and 2024 are bioplays or productions which feature Austen as a character. This is the second largest category behind *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), her most widely adapted novel. The prominence of Austen bioadaptations is at once surprising yet obvious: the adapter's subject material is thin, since Cassandra Austen burned her sister's letters posthumously, and relatively little is known about Austen's life in comparison to literary figures whose lives are well documented.[1] This lack of source material serves as both a stimulus and restraint for the imaginations of adapters and fans, leaving several gaps and silences in the narrative that bioplays seek to address.

Prevailing images of Austen as a maidenly spinster or conservative writer are largely informed by the successful Victorian biography *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869) by her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh. 'She was a humble, believing Christian', Austen-Leigh writes, 'Her life had been passed in the performance of home duties, and the cultivation of domestic affections, without any selfseeking or craving after applause… Her sweetness of temper never failed' (130). Austen's nephew cultivates her image as one of a humble domestic woman, who was sweet and retiring, in line with Victorian concepts of femininity. He conceals aspects of the Austen family story which are less palatable for readers, like Austen's disabled younger brother (who is included in the film *Becoming Jane*). Elements of Austen's humour related to sex and gender are redacted, for example an 1813 letter is included which removes her mention of 'some naked Cupids over the Mantlepeice, which must be a fine study for Girls' (*Letters*, 211). Austen-Leigh's contemporary Margaret Oliphant suggested that his biography showed that, 'The [Austen's] were half-ashamed to have it known that she was not just a young lady like the others, doing her embroidery' (30). Indeed, Kathleen Barry suggests that, 'all biographies are

located in sex-class hierarchies' and have been traditionally shaped by 'great men' (75). A source text for Brown and Hinkley, the influence of the *Memoir* on the public perception of Austen imparts its hagiographic vision of Austen as an intertext for the three bioplays.

Austen biographies and adaptations attempt to satisfy readers' questions about the gaps and inconsistencies in her life, and one question is addressed by all of Austen's bioadaptations: why did she remain unmarried until her death? Austen-Leigh does not satisfy readers as to his aunt's relationship with men: 'Of Jane herself I know of no such definite tale of love to relate', he declares (28). This silence has led to serious enquiries on the part of historians, scholars, and Janeites into queerness in the author's life and works. Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick defines the 'queer' as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (8). During the 'Queer Austen' debate of the 1990s, scholars argued that Austen's identity as an unmarried woman and a female author was queer, as it placed her outside of the nineteenth-century sex-gender system, drawing attention to the passionate, homosocial female relationships in her novels. In 1995, Terry Castle's 'Sister-Sister', a review of Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen's Letters,* argued that 'Sororal or pseudo-sororal attachments are arguably the most immediately gratifying human connections in Austen's imaginative universe' and that 'homophilic fascination' is clear in Austen's letters to her sister and nieces (NP). The essay was extremely controversial and widely debated, with some readers misconstruing Castle's argument to mean that Austen was a lesbian and engaged in lesbian sex. Johnson herself agreed despite the negative backlash, noting that 'an unwillingness to acknowledge [Austen's queer reception] would seem to confirm Castle's sense that she has polluted some shrine' (NP). Johnson further declared that 'Jane Austen 'is a cult figure for many gays and lesbians' (NP). Whilst Brian Southam, author of the *Critical Heritage* volumes, suggested that this idea was, 'an observation of historical value which should find its place in [his] next Critical Heritage volume, on the *modern* period', (NP) Hamilton, Brown, and Hinkley's plays show that adapters and audiences have been identifying queer dimensions of Austen's life since at least the 1910s.[2]

Pamela Demory's theory of queer adaptation suggests that whilst adaptations may reimagine characters as LGBTQ (*Clueless* (1995) features a gay Frank Churchill, for example) or make queer subtext from the source text more obvious to the viewer (for instance, the 'lesbian scenes' in Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999)), queer adaptations may also draw attention to silences from the source material. Demory writes, 'A queer perspective on adaptation can be a way of resisting normative ideologies and of revealing the fissures, absences, or silences of canonical texts' (4). All three bioplays discussed in this article are queer adaptations that wrestle with biographical silences and prevailing conservative images of Austen as perpetuated by the *Memoir*. Extant playscripts, reviews and theatre ephemera show how and why certain versions of Austen—gay, straight, feminist, or conservative—have been realised on stage for British and American audiences. Austen bioplays and their reliance on edited source materials—biographies, surviving letters, and oral histories—always reflect and challenge their gaps and silences around sexuality and gender, resulting in queer adaptations of the author's life.[3]

## Austen in suffrage plays

The first known theatre makers to adapt Austen as a character for the stage were members of suffrage organisations. The cultural activities of these suffragettes and suffragists—parades, plays, literature, speeches, and marches—are littered with references to and invocations of the author. These very first instances of Austen being bioadapted attach significant political meaning to her gender and sexuality. The second chapter of Marina Cano's *Jane Austen and Performance*, 'Jane Austen and Suffrage', opens with one such example:

> On Monday 29 June 1914, novelist, poet and suffragette May Sinclair walked into the Grand Hall of the Hotel Cecil, London, dressed as Jane Austen. The occasion was a costume dinner held by the Women Writers' Suffrage League and the Actresses' Franchise League to raise social awareness and funds for the cause of women's enfranchisement. (19)

For the suffragettes, the reanimation of Austen and other historical female figures, could be used to 'prove' that women were deserving of the vote. The suffrage campaigns' identification with Austen is interesting, considering that she was commonly linked to conservatism in the period. Virginia Woolf did not consider her a feminist author, writing that 'A clergyman's daughter in those days was, no doubt, very carefully brought up', and that 'the chief damage which this conservative spirit has inflicted on her art is that it tied her hands together when she dealt with men' (2.12). Instead, this early form of bioadaptation portrayed Austen quite differently, as she provided feminists concrete proof that women should be equal to, if not greater, than men. Cano's *Jane Austen and Performance* considers a wide range of suffrage 'performances' that use the figure of Austen as a political tool, using a feminist framework for its analysis. The pageant plays by The Actresses' Franchise League also show the beginnings of Austen's reanimation in the biogenre. Furthermore, these plays reveal that suffragettes identified with queerness or non-conformity in relation to sex and gender in Austen's own life, both complicating and expanding commonly held notions about Austen in the early twentieth century. One such example is the American suffrage play *Woman, A Morality Play* (1913) by Alice Pike Barney.[4] The playscript is now considered lost, however, a *Washington Times* article from May 21, 1913, reveals that the play was performed at the National Theatre alongside the play *One Hundred Years Hence*, also written by Barney. The pageant-style play features a character called 'Freedom' arguing the cause for 'Woman' against Sin, Prejudice, Ignorance, and Man (who, interestingly, was played by the writer herself) ('Satire and Art in Suffragist Plays' 11). To do so, Freedom calls on stage great women of the past—Sappho, Zenobia, and Joan of Arc, for example. The cast list shows that a Mrs. Alexander Jenkins played Jane Austen, 'the novelist' (11). As is the case today, from the earliest depictions of Jane Austen's life on the stage, her gender has been a main thematic concern of the bioadaptation.

The American suffragettes who wrote, produced, and acted in this play may well have been inspired by a very similar pageant-style performance given four years earlier by their British counterparts. Winifred Mayo, co-director of Rosina Filippi's 1901 play *The Bennets* (an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*), would go on to play Jane Austen in *A Pageant of Great Women*, written by Cicely Hamilton and co-directed by Edith Craig. Craig was a lesbian and partner of Christabel Marshall, who frequently adopted the

male name Christopher St. John and wore male clothing. Both Craig and Hamilton, who was also a lesbian, collaborated with St. John on suffrage plays as members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) (Collis 73–92). Mayo, who was frequently imprisoned for violent protest, played Austen in the play's debut on November 10, 1909, at the Scala Theatre in London (Looser, 'Jane Austen, Feminist Icon' NP). As in *Woman, A Morality Play*, 'Woman' must defend herself against the male character 'Prejudice'. Prejudice believes that '[Woman] is a very child in the ways of the world', and thus Woman deems it necessary to call forth various excellent women from the past in order to showcase how female brilliance has survived in spite of these sexist conditions (Hamilton 23). She brings on stage 'THE LEARNED WOMEN' who have, against prejudice and male domination, managed 'To dream, to write, to paint, to build, to learn' and are 'those who knew that life was more than love/ And fought their way to achievement and to fame!' (27). Jane Austen is of course included in this category of 'The Learned Women' and is introduced alongside the French novelist George Sand: 'Twas a woman's hand/ That penned a novel first—de Scudery's!/ And on her follow her disciples twain,/ Jane Austen and George Sand of France' (27). Sand was the most popular French novelist of nineteenth-century France; male presenting, bisexual, and once referred to as 'That damned lesbian!' by the husband of her female lover (Barnes-McLain, 63–4). Next, 'THE ARTISTS' enter, and the first woman called forth is the Greek poet, Sappho. A symbol of female homoeroticism, the English words sapphic and lesbian derive from her name and her birthplace, Lesbos Island. In the early twentieth century, Sappho undoubtedly held conscious homoerotic connections in the minds of some of those familiar with her work.[5] Woman calls her forth to argue against Prejudice, crying, 'Woven of passion and power, thy mighty verse/ Streams o'er the years, a flaming banner of song!' (29). Also brought onstage is the French lesbian artist Rosa Bonheur, played by Edith Craig, whom Woman first mistakes for a man and describes as 'virile' (29). The association of the suffrage movement with lesbianism and gender non-conformity has been elucidated clearly by Martha Vicinus, who argues that, 'In the eyes of male journalists, medical men and most politicians, suffragists were assumed to be usurping male power, both in the bedroom and in parliament. Lesbian innuendo was pervasive… the ravening mannish lesbian endangered society' (197). The suffragettes subverted this negative association between feminism and lesbianism to portray queer women in a positive light. As shown through the lives of Hamilton, Criag, Marshall, Mayo and Barney, the suffrage movement and women's emancipation were dependant on the efforts of lesbians and queer women who defied normative gender roles and relationship structures. Members of the AFL, many gender non-conforming and queer, and who lived outside of heteronormative social structures, likely identified with Austen's own decision to remain unmarried.

After this initial performance of *A Pageant of Great Women*, the costumes were sent on loan to regional suffrage groups to perform, and so women of the middling classes performed as these queer figures from history. As Cano suggests, 'Austen's name thus became suffrage propaganda: the writer whom family members had constructed as immovably attached to village life was taken to tour the country to demand gender equality' (24). The character Jane Austen was played by 'a Miss Elsie in Hayton, Miss Maud Levesley in Sheffield and Mrs Payne in Ipswich' (Cano, 21–22). These women

participated in amateur suffrage performances, embodying a queer Austen in front of their communities. Their reanimation of historical female figures, like Austen, was the result of the clever use of the conventions of street theatre, protest, and public performance to craft political propaganda. The pageant genre of suffrage plays encouraged amateur performance and collectivist action, during which Austen is situated between various queer figures from history. *A Pageant of Great Women* is therefore interesting not just for its use of Austen as a 'Learned Woman' who can fight modern prejudices, but also because of her relational position to other queer figures of female genius in the play. The suffragettes believed not just that Austen proved women were worthy of equality through exemplary female genius. They also identified with queerness in her life and works. The suffragettes, rather than believe Austen's marriage plots promoted the heteronormative and sexist 'marriage market' of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, promoted Jane Austen as a genuinely radical feminist author. Suffragette pageant plays clearly show that queer identification with Austen has been going on for longer than is commonly understood in Austen studies, and indeed that the bio-genre has been used not only to represent Austen's life, but to drive a political agenda.

### Jane Austen by Helen Brown (1939)

The first Austen bioplays demonstrate the same thematic concerns with gender and sexuality as in suffrage pageant plays, and they often wrestle with, or conform to, the hagiographic version of Austen created by Austen-Leigh. One of the first recorded Austen bioplays, simply titled *Jane Austen*, was a sold-out production at the Little Theatre in Bath in 1930 ('Little Theatre, Bath' 15). The playscript no longer exists, but we know it was a success, as according to the *Bath Chronicle and Herald*, it revealed 'great enthusiasm on the part of citizens of Bath for the works of Jane Austen and for plays dealing with the literary traditions of the city' (15). The news article tells us that, '[u]niversities and schools have sent their members, who all welcome the *unique* opportunity of witnessing a dramatic version of the art and subtlety of Jane Austen' (15). Whilst an Austen bioadaptation was 'unique' to an audience in 1930, the following years saw a marked rise in the Austen bioplay, and this trend mirrors the increase of new biographies from increasingly varied political and social standpoints. In *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism* (2011), Laurence Mazzeno argues that, '[d]espite the scarcity of primary source documents, biographers were busy during the 1930s attempting to extrapolate details of Austen's life from her fiction or embellish the few facts known about her with extensive commentary on the age in which she lived' (53).[6] Contrary to Austen-Leigh's depiction of his aunt, Beatrice Kean Seymour's *Jane Austen: Study for a Portrait* (1937), was 'written to eradicate the idea of Austen as the "Essential Spinster"' (54). Ida O'Malley 's *Women in Subjection: A Study of the Lives of Englishwomen before 1832* (1933) recognises that '[Austen] described the cage [of patriarchy] and in doing so she showed qualities which were not expected of the canary' (243). Readers and literary critics had long since publication understood the feminist contexts of Austen's novels, as shown through the suffragette pageant plays discussed above, however, the 1930s was the first decade in which biographers sought to correct and question the myths that had been widely believed since the Victorian era—bioplays followed suit.

The first family member to see the potential success of a staged biography of Austen's life was her great-great-grand niece, Helen Brown. Brown's mother, Edith, had already published three sequels and continuations to Austen's novels, and one biography of Frank and Charles Austen. Her daughter Helen was, '[a] librarian by profession, [who] graduated in classics at Newnham College, Cambridge, and was trained in librarianship at London University' ('Day to Day in Liverpool: Men and Matters on Merseyside by the Post Man', 3). Her work, *Jane Austen* (1939), is a bioplay which investigates Austen's romantic relationships with men, which had only been briefly touched upon in Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*. Brown uses extant letters and family myth to piece together a narrative that focuses on her many male 'suitors' and the majority of the play portrays this hyper-heterosexual Austen. However, Austen's gender identity is less feminised than in the *Memoir* and, as discussed later, her depiction in the final scenes of the play as an unmarried author is imbued with queer subtext.

The Austen character fluctuates between obeying and disregarding certain gender roles throughout the play. Brown initially seems to conform to established ideas about the author's femininity, but deviates to characterise her aunt as a tomboy, whose wit and brashness comes from playing with her brothers (not unlike *Northanger Abbey's* heroine Catherine Morland):

> [*She takes an ivory cup-and-ball which stands on the table beside her and makes two or three throws*.]
> **EDWARD**. A cup-and-ball?
> **JANE**. Certainly. It is one of my chief accomplishments. I can beat all my nephews and nieces at cup-and-ball (94).

Austen plays cup-and-ball throughout the play, although she makes effort to hide it from her mother. The 'sporty' and vigorous characterisation of Austen is likely inspired by her heroine Elizabeth Bennet, and in modern film adaptations of Austen's novels, it is often the author herself who inspires the portrayal of her heroines. Take, for example, Fanny Crawford of Rozema's *Mansfield Park*. Rozema creates a hybrid character between Austen and Fanny, using Austen's juvenile writings and snippets of her letters to transform Fanny into a quick-witted, feminist novel writer. Although weak and prone to illness in the original novel, the adaptation envisions her as a strong and confident horseback rider, who even rides astride, and one scene portrays her galloping angrily through the rain after Sir Thomas returns from Antigua. The link between female heroines, Austen herself, and physical activity becomes a symbol of gender transgression or feminism. However, whilst *Mansfield Park* displays Austen/Fanny as an ally of abolition, there is an uncomfortable moment in Brown's play between Austen and her cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, concerning the family's involvement in the colonies:

> **JANE**. You may imagine how eager we are to see [Charles]. His wife comes from Bermuda, and we have even never set eyes on her.
> **ELIZA**. A wife from Bermuda! Not a black one, I hope.
> **JANE**. I believe she is white, but of course we have only Charles' word for it.
> …
> **ELIZA**. If he brings a black wife to my party, I shall never forgive you, Henry. (54–55)

Although Brown's Austen deviates from conservative Victorian depictions around her gender, the play certainly does not envision her to be as politically progressive as the suffragettes, or twenty first-century film directors. What this scene does show, however, is that the play questions silences found in Austen's work, with issues surrounding the British colonies only briefly touched upon in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny remarks, '[T]here was such a dead silence!' after she asked her uncle about the slave-trade in Antigua (178). Investigating the Austen's involvement in the colonies and their attitudes towards slavery can only go so far—in her study of 1930s bioplays based on the Brontë sisters, Amber K. Regis concludes, 'Biodramatic texts draw attention to the archival and curatorial contingencies from which their narratives emerge: those ineluctable gaps, elisions and errors that permeate the historical record, textual and material, rendering provisional any attempt to write or perform a life' (117). Just as Demory theorises that queer adaptation is a way of revealing these gaps and absences, Brown's interest in political silences in Austen's world mirrors her concern with her sexual relationships and romantic life. Questioning these biographical silences leads to the portrayal of a queer Austen in the play's final scenes.

Robert Grandi argues that, 'to imagine the subject's personal story as one that hinges on heterosexual relationships as the source of the writer's genius and inspiration' (293) is a generic convention of the literary bioadaptation. Accordingly, Brown's play is primarily focused on Austen's many 'suitors' with whom she had flirtations. In the opening scene, Eliza declares that, 'Though [she] arrived only yesterday, the fame of [Jane's] conquests has already come to [her] ears… She is grown a sad flirt, I fear' (12). Indeed, each act deals with or mentions a new man, portraying the usual love interests like the Irish lawyer Tom Lefroy, the Reverend Samuel Blackhall, and Austen's twelve hour fiancée Harris Bigg-Wither. In fact, the inclusion of a love plot between Lefroy and Austen in this bioplay refutes Bronwyn Polaschek's claim that the relationship was 'generally considered a minor event in earlier biographies' with only more recent books and adaptations from the 1990s onwards having 'emphasised the significance of the relationship between the two' (128). Austen's main love interest in this play—Mr. Robert Hunter—has been created for Austen by her ancestor. In stage directions, Brown describes Hunter as being like '*whatever one chooses to imagine the only man* JANE AUSTEN *ever loved*' (31). This is purposefully vague and centres the reader/watcher in the position of desire, rather than Austen herself—the reader is invited to fill his absence from the *Memoir* by projecting their own ideals onto Austen's heterosexual world. The Hunter love interest is derived from an Austen family myth, handed down orally, and only vaguely described by Austen-Leigh:

> [W]hile staying at some seaside place, they became acquainted with a gentleman, whose charm of person, mind, and manners was such that Cassandra thought him worthy to possess and likely to win her sister's love. When they parted, he expressed his intention of soon seeing them again […] Within a short time they heard of his sudden death. I believe that, if Jane ever loved, it was this unnamed gentleman (29).

The inclusion of this myth in the biography, and subsequently Brown's play, is particularly interesting considering that Caroline Austen did not want the *Memoir* to reveal any of Austen's factual, confirmed relationships. In a letter to Austen-Leigh, she writes

about the Bigg-Wither proposal: 'My own wish would be, that not any allusion should be made to the Manydown story—or at least that the reference should be so vague, as to give no clue to the place or the person' (187). Deliberate obfuscation of Austen's romantic life leads to bioplays which attempt to address this silence and reconstruct heterosexual narratives using the very materials that seek to obscure Austen's sexuality as source texts. In her study of the Brontës, Regis examines 'biodrama's creative engagement with archival and curatorial evidence' and explores 'how their contingencies construct competing life narratives and serve to (re-)produce myth—traditions that supply a lack within, or counter the historical record. Thus biodrama is critical in its praxis' (118). Brown similarly attempts to reconstruct Austen's life through a patchwork of myth and archival evidence (letters and biographies), to rectify readers' frustrations with the intentional censorship around her romantic life.

Whilst this interpretation of Austen's life largely confines her to heterosexual understandings of romance, Brown's desire to rescue Austen from her afterlife as Austen-Leigh's maidenly 'Aunt Jane', ultimately leads to a queer portrayal of the author in the final scenes, during which her devotion to her novels manifests itself as queer desire. In Act 3 Scene 1, Austen is wearing an evening gown splattered with ink as she frantically revises *Pride and Prejudice*. She cries: 'My darling child! How sweet it looks in its long clothes! [*She holds up a bundle of proof.*] My own precious baby! [*She holds it like a baby, the long ends hanging down over her arm, and begins to walk up and down with it.*]' (50). The novel as child has autoerotic implications, indicating Austen's complete rejection of heterosexuality through a queer parody of motherhood and authorship. Brown has drawn inspiration for this dialogue from an extant letter that Austen wrote to her sister in 1811. She writes, 'I can no more forget [*Sense and Sensibility*] than a mother can forget her sucking child' (*Letters*, 25 April 1811, 182). As Sonia Hofskosh identifies in *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (1998), female authorship was a site of sexual anxiety for nineteenth-century society, described as a 'concomitant feminization in "the masculine imaginary" where female writers were connected in the minds of men like Thomas Gisbourne as unregulated sexual desire' (14). In this scene, Austen as the self-reproducing parent of her novel feminises the masculine imaginary of Romantic authorship. It is also masturbatory in nature: her frantic writing as something done in secret with the ink 'splattered' on Austen's dress serves as an erotic metaphor. It is like she has been caught with a lover—the stage directions describe Austen '*disentangling herself*' from her manuscript as her brother, Henry, enters shocked, crying, '[a]bsurd creature!'…'My dear sister, you seem likely to strangle yourself' (50). In 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', Sedgwick argues that Marianne Dashwood's sickness represents nineteenth-century masturbation phobia and historicises the figure of the masturbating girl as a queer outsider. Sedgewick identifies that an autoerotic analysis of Austen's text serves mostly to satisfy the readers' own sexual anxieties towards the author:

> The sight to be relished here is, as in psychoanalysis, the forcible exaction from her manifest text of what can only be the barest confession of a self-pleasuring sexuality, a disorder or subversion, seeping out at the edges of a political conservatism always presumed and therefore always available for violation. That virginal figure "Jane Austen," in these narratives, is herself the punishable girl who "has to learn," "has to be tutored" in truths with which,

> though derived from a reading of Austen, the figure of "Jane Austen" can no more be credited than can, for their lessons, the figures "Marianne," "Emma," or, shall we say, "Dora" or "Anna" (126).

Thus, the scene dramatizes nineteenth-century anxieties around masturbation and female authorship, which often overlap. Bioadaptation and its replication and/or rejection of that 'virginal' Aunt Jane therefore reproduces this fixation with Austen's sexuality. What begins as a strictly heterosexual adaptation which uses materials like Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*, extant letters, and family myth to envision Austen's inner heterosexual world, ends as a queer adaptation of Austen as a female authoress on the fringes of nineteenth-century society, usurping ideals of masculine Romantic authorship, showcasing how the bioplay subtly reproduces readers' sexual anxieties around female writers in a queer light.

### *Dear Jane* by Eleanor Holmes Hinkley (1919)

*Dear Jane* (1919) is a bioplay that places focus on Austen's relationship with her sister, Cassandra. Devoney Looser was the first scholar to study the play in a chapter of *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017), an analysis which contributes to the overarching argument that Austen achieved posthumous fame through various uses of her work in politics, adaptations, schools, and illustrated editions of her work. When analysed as a queer adaptation alongside Brown and Hamilton's plays, *Dear Jane* displays how performance contexts like casting influence queer representations of the author and highlight the performative nature of gender. Written in 1919 by T.S. Eliot's cousin, Eleanor Holmes Hinkley, the play borrows its title directly from Henry James, who mockingly described the writer as 'their 'dear,' our dear, everybody's dear, Jane' (NP). The play opens with Samuel Johnson, David Garrick, James Boswell and Joshua Reynolds enjoying a pint at the pub where they discuss female writers like Frances Burney and Hannah More:

> **JOHNSON**. You mistake me, gentlemen, if you think that I blame the fair sex for her condition. It is not her fault that her life is a round of petty cares and trivial amusements
> **BOSWELL**. Sir, if their lives were different?
> **JOHNSON**. (*Growing severe again*) There would be no improvement. The power of interpretation of life has not been given a woman. She can feel but cannot see.
> **GARRICK**. (*Delighted*) You are drastic!
> **JOHNSON**. Women share the divinity of creation only in that relation which is lease [*sic*] divine.
> **BOSWELL**. The love of man and woman?
> **JOHNSON**. (*Nods*) Yes, that sacred and most dangerous flame (1–5).

All agree that marriage is a 'woman's natural destiny' and Johnson ironically declares, 'Gentlemen, on this sixteenth day of December 1775'—conveniently Jane Austen's birthday—'I vouch that there breathes no female heart alive who is, or ever shall be capable of true creation' (1–6). The curtain falls. What follows in the playscript shows Austen as a female genius who chooses to become an author rather than conform to pressure from her family to marry. Her oldest brother, James Austen, is portrayed as the villain, and represents the patriarchal opinions of the male literati:

> **CASSANDRA**. (*Quietly*) Who knows but Jane is happier single.
> **MRS. AUSTEN**. (*Overcome*) A single woman happy!
> **JAMES**. My dear, you are ridiculous! What does the future hold for Jane, unless she marries?
> **CASSANDRA** (*Thoughtfully*) It might hold much.
> …
> **JAMES**. 'Tis most unsuitable for a female to be always scribbling. (*Impressively*) Domestic bliss is a woman's sphere.
> **CASSANDRA**. (*Thoughtfully*) Who knows but Jane may fill a larger calling that that of wife-hood (2–6).

The tension in the script, displayed here in a *tete-a-tete* between James and Cassandra, is summarised by an extant review of the play on Broadway, which reveals that the play focuses 'less on the theatrical presentation… than on the large subject of the availability of biography as material for drama and on the particular question of the availability of Jane's Austen's life' ('Jane Austen in a Play'). Just as Brown's Jane Austen questions the 'availability' of her life by using biographical materials as source texts, Hinkley attempts to reconcile Austen-Leigh's portrait of his aunt, the twee 'Dear Jane' that Henry James mocks, using the available material to portray Austen as a queer, feminist author, as in the work of Hamilton and the suffragettes.

*Dear Jane* is similar to Brown's *Jane Austen*: both plays are structured so that Austen epiphany that she must dedicate her life to her novels comes in parallel with the feminist awakening that occur after she rejects a marriage proposal. Men in Austen's personal life again parallel well-known scenes from her novels, with characters similar to Mr. Wickham, Mr. Collins, and Mr. Darcy, suggesting that her works has a disguised auto-biographical dimension. In Scene 2, for example, Austen directly uses her relationship with the Irish lawyer Tom Lefroy as the inspiration for the proposal scene in *Pride and Prejudice*:

> **CASSANDRA**. (firmly) Jane, is Tom Lefroy—
> **JANE**. In love? How can you ask! He will declare himself tonight. (Smiling and whispering again) And to-morrow morning Darcy will propose to Lizzie! I cannot wait to learn what she will say to this! (She chuckles)
> **CASSANDRA**. You have your answer ready? (Persisting)
> **JANE**. Did I not tell you she rejects him? (2–15).

Austen directly draws inspiration from her relationship with Tom Lefroy for the development of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. Here, Hinkley uses sparse biographical material to answer how Austen may have been inspired for her novels despite her apparently romantically limited worldview. In 'Familiarity versus Contempt: *Becoming Jane* and the Adaptation Genre', Deborah Cartmell notes that this is a recurring motif of the bioadaptation genre, as biopics present 'a portrait of the artist as a young person, concentrating on the events leading up to success and ending with the price that success brings. The emphasis is in the dawning of authorship, the 'becoming' the person we know as the author. The Romantic notion that art is inspired by love is also central to films depicting the life of the author' (28). Bioplays repeatedly portray Austen's rejection of heterosexuality as a necessity to her destiny as a female

author. Again, Regis' theory of that bioplays function as praxis through which archival evidence is both employed and questioned in order to (re)-represent the figure of the author outside of hetero-sexist ideologies is apparent in *Dear Jane*.

*Dear Jane's* most apparent attempt to subvert Austen-Leigh's apolitical yet conservative depiction of the author comes with her first appearance in Scene Two:

> (*Enter left,* **JANE AUSTEN**, *her cheeks aglow, waving in both hands the Union Jack of the period*) An engagement at last! A battle on the Nile! The whole French fleet destroyed! The most glorious victory since the armada! (*Half sobbing in her eagerness, for the navy, in which two brothers rose to be admirals, she deeply loves*) Long live the British navy! (2–12).

Warren Roberts discusses how the Austen family remained silent on the author's feelings about the war in *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*:

> Her niece Caroline discussed this point after a visitor asked what Austen's 'opinion on the great public events of her time had been', and mentioned that, after all, she had been a 'young woman, able to *think*, at the time of French Revolution'. Reaching into her memory, this niece searched for clues about 'what part such a mind as her's had taken in the great strifes of war and policy which so disquieted Europe for more than 20 years'. Having retraced her 'steps on *this* track' she was able to find 'absolutely nothing' (4).

Just as Brown draws to light issues around the Austen's involvement in the British colonies, Hinkley gives Austen a voice to discuss the French Revolution, which is not mentioned directly in her novels or indeed addressed by her family members and their work in crafting her legacy. This politically charged, feminist version of Austen works to resolve gaps and silences in the competing narratives about her life.

The play was first performed in 1932 on Broadway at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York. The playscript, once considered lost, now exists only at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C in the Eva Le Gallienne papers. Le Gallienne and Josephine Hutchinson played Cassandra and Jane Austen, respectively, and the company was familiar with undertaking both bioplays and feminist theatre. Just a year previously in 1931, the company's production of *Alison's House* by Susan Glaspell, inspired by the life and works of Emily Dickinson, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Alongside photographs of the pair in Regency garb in the collection, holding quills and wearing bonnets, exists photographs of Le Gallienne in several cross-dressed roles—St. Joan, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and as Peter Pan alongside Hutchinson as Wendy. One reviewer for the play *L'Aiglon,* in which Le Gallienne played Napoleon II, writes that 'She is as believable a lad as ever wore a uniform. She is, as I think I said earlier, as boyish as any actress has a right to be' (Stevens, NP). Whilst female crossdressing was common in comedic roles, like Peter Pan, during the early twentieth century, and Le Gallienne is not unusual in this way, the reviewer goes on to suggest that the actress is baiting for a female Hamlet. It would be successful, he writes, 'as proves her princeliness as well as her ability to cancel her sex without either revolting or convulsing us' (Stevens, NP). This divergence from comedic roles to tragic ones like that of Hamlet marks Le Gallienne as a skilled performer known specifically for her work in crossdressing. Furthermore, Le Gallienne's personal identity as a lesbian likely informed both her embodiment of these roles and their identification with a lesbian audience. In her analysis of crossdressing on

the eighteenth-century stage, Beth H. Friedman-Romell identifies crossovers between queerness and performance:

> A lesbian audience member could both enjoy the looking and recognize herself in the character. Moreover, heterosexual women in the audience also may have revelled in the momentary lifting of restrictive gender roles that the breech performer embodied. Whether as soldiers, sprites, or thieves, these actresses and their roles imagine a world of female activity and agency (470).

TTwentieth-century audiences, those who were loyal to the Civic Rep and were aware of Le Gallienne's repertoire no doubt carried this knowledge into *Dear Jane*, a play that aimed to imagine Austen's world as one of 'female activity and agency'. Hinkley notes Austen's gender directly in stage directions: '(JANE *leaning over the window still with mock tenderness, takes up the next four verses, changing the feminine to the masculine with quick facility*)' (2–17). Austen is performing a poem here, and Hinkley portrays her gender as something inherently fluid, depending on the social and literary contexts that shape its performance. Whilst not a cross-dressed role, these stage directions reflect Judith Butler's foundational theory of gender performativity, which suggests that 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (45). Hinkley's depiction of Austen's gender as performative and fluctuating between masculine and feminine undoubtedly appealed to the Civic Rep, with their history of queer performances, adaptations, and bioplays. In *Biographical Plays About Famous Artists*, Meyer-Dinkgräfe writes that:

> [R]ecent feminist biographical plays emphasize the real-life acts and transgressive gender performances of feminist and protofeminist women, a recovery facilitated by the very performativity of gender. These plays avoid merely holding up historical women as museum pieces removed from their audiences and choose instead to hold up their subjects as dynamic agents who, through accessible and repeatable acts, resisted or exploded traditional gender roles (119).

*Dear Jane* proves that this is not simply a recent dynamic of bioplays in relation to changing attitudes towards gender, rather the playscript evidences that gender and performance are inherently linked concepts in both adaptation and theatre, and the company's history of crossdressing marks Le Gallienne and Hutchinson as actresses who embraced these queer dimensions of performance.

It is right to point out lesbian identification with crossdressing and the theatre, Le Gallienne and Hutchinson were having a documented affair that lasted five years between 1927 and 1932, during which they played the sisters. Their affair, and the newspaper reports surrounding it, were intertexts to the production: in her chapter on *Dear Jane*, Looser gathers evidence to suggest that the play's audience would have known many details about the affair. During Hutchinson's divorce from her husband Robert Bell in 1930, divorce papers named La Gallienne in the divorce proceedings as a co-respondent. *The New York Daily News* headlined 'Bell divorces actress, Eva Le Gallienne's shadow', with shadow being a contemporary euphemism for lesbian partner (*The Making of Jane Austen*, 115). According to biographer Robert Schanke,

gossip magazines used scandal to entice readers, even going so far as to claim that the couple had had 'sex in the office' at the Civic Theatre (88). Other journalists were more understanding of the relationship and less salacious in their writing; a columnist for the *New York Daily Mirror* commented that 'some people will regard this as a new angle in the old love triangle. But the affinity of one girl for another is older than the pyramids' (Schanke, 88). The affair between Hutchinson and Le Gallienne must impact our analysis of *Dear Jane* and how the audience perceived the Austen sisters. Linda Hutcheon argues that, 'If the audience knows that a certain director or actor has made other films of a particular kind, that intertextual knowledge too might well impinge on their interpretation of the adaptation they are watching' (126). Beyond other acting credits, the personal lives of actors also inform audiences' reception of their work. The Hutchinson-Le Gallienne affair, and the newspaper reporting around it, therefore serve as intertexts to the production. These queer subtexts add new dimensions to the playscript: the love story between Jane and Cassandra is the central relationship of the play, mirroring a short passage in the *Memoir*, in which Austen-Leigh admits that, '[t]he sympathy of Jane was probably, from her age, and her peculiar attachment to her sister, the deepest of all' (28). *Dear Jane's* playscript is littered with language that mimics that of a romantic partnership, as seen in this exchange between Cassandra, Jane, and Jane's suitor, James Digweed:

> **DIGWEED**. Ah, Cassandra, you and Jane are such devoted sisters, I look on you as one.
> (*Cassandra drops him a curtsey, smiles, and moves to the door*)
> **JANE**. You go, my better half? (2–19).

Looser's analysis of this scene with the affair in mind changes our understanding of this scene. She writes, 'Hutchinson's Jane referring on stage, in character, to Le Gallienne's Cassandra, her real-life lover, as her 'better half' cannot have been lost on the most knowing viewers or on the actors themselves for its momentousness' (*The Making of Jane Austen*, 119). Indeed, throughout the play Jane acts as a husband to Cassandra, at one point suggesting that, if she marry Digweed, Cassandra could 'live with [her] of course, and be a nurse-maid to [her] children…' (2–24):

> **JANE**. How smug and cosy we should be!
> **CASSANDRA**. And where would Jamie be in all these pleasant scenes?
> **JANE**. (lightly) To be sure! I had quite forgot James Digweed (2–24).

Jane's vision of domestic bliss is far removed from the traditional heterosexual family structure and the word 'cosy' is significant in that it suggests intimacy between the sisters, specifically that they will share a bed. In her defence of 'Sister-Sister', Castle defends her suggestion that the Austen's bed-sharing has queer dimensions:

> Unmarried women, especially siblings, frequently shared a bed—as Austen and Cassandra did for all of their adult lives. I have been accused of 'not realising' that such physical intimacy between women was in fact 'normal' or 'common' in the period, when that was precisely part of my point. The culture at large reinforced—far more than our own culture does today—same-sex intimacy of all kinds. To point to a 'homoerotic' dimension in the Austen/

> Cassandra relationship is in one sense simply to state a truth about the lives of many English women in the early 19th century: that their closest affectional ties were with female relatives and friends rather than with men.

The final scene of the play depicts Austen and Cassandra escaping Digweed's proposal of marriage together, with Austen deciding to live with her sister as a writer. Looser argues that it is a love scene:

> It provides a twist on the couple riding off into the sunset happily ever after, substituting a running off into the darkness. In this play, Hutchinson and Le Gallienne played a same-sex couple mock-eloping before an audience, in the guise of Jane and Cassandra Austen (*Making of Jane Austen*, 121).

Hinkley therefore uses the *Memoir's* depiction of Cassandra as Austen's true love to expand upon their relationship, and alongside the audience's knowledge that the actresses were having an affair, *Dear Jane* pieces together a homoerotic intimacy between the sisters, showing how bioplays can be a form of praxis in that they rescue queerness from dominant historical narratives.

## Conclusion

The impulse to represent or re-envision Austen on stage began well before any Hollywood films that we have come to associate with her life, and several tropes and motifs of the Austen biofilm have been circulating in the public imagination well before Hollywood translated them to the screen. Early twentieth-century bioplays wrestle with, or conform to, the hagiographic version of Austen created by her first biographer, James Edward Austen-Leigh. Hamilton, Brown, and Hinkley each attempt to fill the gaps and silences found in the *Memoir*, and question subsequent ideals about the author that circulated in the public imaginary, in line with Demory's theory of queer adaptation. Bioadaptation and the use of extant letters, biographies, and oral myth this becomes a form of queer, feminist praxis, as argued by Amber K. Regis in the case of the Brontë sisters; the suffragettes Austen represents feminist politics, emboldening a queer reading of her life and works by lesbians in the movement; Brown's Austen undertakes a journey from heterosexuality to queer motherhood in the autoerotic and masturbatory final scenes that privilege female literary authority; and Hinkley's Austen, as played by Le Gallienne, draws attention to the homoerotic dimensions of sisterly relationships found in her life and works that were largely forgotten in the *Memoir.* Bioplays also expose or draw attention more clearly to gender as a performance, with each Austen replicating or rejecting Austen-Leigh's portrait of Victorian femininity for various political and social concerns. Hamilton's Austen evokes the 'mannish lesbian' associated with the suffragette movement, whilst Brown's Austen is a tomboy who becomes a self-reproducing mother, and Hinkley's Austen fluctuates between the masculine/feminine, as performed by a theatre company known for crossdressing.

The replication of family myth through Brown's character, Robert Hunter, is a further example of how bioplays invite the audience to project their sexual fantasies (queer or heterosexual) onto Austen. The bioplay and its mission to resolve ideological tensions and competing beliefs about Austen's romantic life, both reflects and questions attitudes

towards female authorship and sexuality. In the article 'Jane Austen, Queer Theory and the Return of the Author', Vincent Quinn suggests that:

> The author is a fiction we desire, but also one that we must repudiate. And, whatever our critical persuasion, the 'actual' author remains as elusive as the words that the author writes. Just as there can be no definitive textual interpretation, so too can there be no final recognition of the author's aims or identity: yet it is this very lack that keeps us reading, and projecting' (79).

Adaptational intervention into Austen's afterlives on stage highlights new potential for our understanding of performance, queerness, and the rejection of traditional conservative narratives founded by Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*. The bioplay genre both adapts extant materials and creates new fantasies about Austen's sexual world to answer biographical silences, and to offer queer readings of her life and works. The dates of the chosen case studies make clear that 'queering' is not synonymous with modernising, and that a queer vision of Austen has always existed in the minds of her adapters and readers.

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[1] Gill Hornby has called Cassandra Austen a 'literary arsonist'. See Gill Hornby, 'Cassandra Austen: Literary Arsonist, or a Heroine in Her Own Right?' *Literary Hub*, May 1 2020, https://lithub.com/cassandra-austen-literary-arsonist-or-a-heroine-in-her-own-right/. However, this is not to suggest that new discoveries about Austen's life cannot be made. For example, Frank Austen's unpublished manuscripts are currently being transcribed by volunteers at the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton.

[2] For examples of historic queer identification with Austen's work, see the discussion of Oscar Fay Adams in Juliette Wells, *A New Jane Austen: How Americans Brought Us the World's Greatest Novelist*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

[3] This paper and the wider project surrounding it have been supported by the Goucher College Archives and Special Collections, the Scottish Theatre Archive, the British Library, and the New York Public Library.

[4] Barney's daughter, Natalie Clifford Barney, was a writer and lesbian who wrote plays and poetry around lesbianism and feminism. She moved to Paris, where she was known as the 'Empress of the Lesbians', and hosted an infamous literary salon which involved dramatic readings from plays and novels.

[5] For example, an 1889 collection of poetry, *Long Ago*, praises her sapphism and directly handles her lesbianism. Published under the pseudonym Michael Field, the poetry was written by Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece respectively but also a lesbian couple. See Emily Zarevich, 'One Name, Two Writers: The Story of Michael Field', *JSTOR Daily*, July 9, 2022, https://daily.jstor.org/one-name-two-writers-the-story-of-michael-field/.

[6] Mazzeno lists David Rhydderch's *Jane Austen: Her Life and Art* (1932), Guy Rawlence's *Jane Austen* (1934), Isabel Clark's *Six Portraits* (1935), Margaret Lawrence's *The School of Femininity* (1936), Ida O'Malley 's *Women in Subjection: A Study of the Lives of Englishwomen before 1832* (1933), Beatrice Kean Seymour's *Jane Austen: Study for a Portrait* (1937), and Mary Lascelles *Jane Austen and her Art* (1939), to name a few.

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