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Epilogue:
"From My Clay To Mould Me": Romantic and Regency Literature in Pastiche

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As the online conference, *Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation* made clear, this is a subject that provokes lively and stimulating debate. It can also act as an inspiration for individual creativity. In my case, the conference stimulated me to look again at some British theatre adaptations of the works of the Romantics and Regency writers of English literature. In the spirit of both adaptation and appropriation, I have rewritten some classic passages from the novels and poems of the early 19th century to reflect an engagement with their more recent theatrical manifestations. Here are the results:

Two theatre-goers discuss a handful of Jane Austen adaptations

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any good theatre must be in want of a Jane Austen adaptation, especially if it is neo-romantic. However little known the feelings of the novels' fans may be about such ventures, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the theatre-going public, that the adaptation is considered the rightful property of anyone who has an opinion on the original novel.

"My dear Mr Fan," said Dr Academic to him one day, "have you heard that *Pride and Prejudice* is on the stage at last?"

Mr Fan replied that he had not. "But it is," returned the good doctor, "for Mr Lukis has just been here, and he told me all about it."

Mr Fan made no answer.

"Do you not want to know about it?" cried their companion, impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, you must know, Mr Lukis says his play is a one-man show about Mr Wickham, who is now ready to set the record straight. So he has let us see *Pride and Prejudice*'s most roguish gentleman, George Wickham, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, lifting the sheets on what exactly happened thirty years before. And allows us to discover his own version of some very famous literary events. What really happened with Darcy? What did he feel about Lizzie?."

"What kind of adaptation?"

"A very free-form kind."

"How so? How can it be just a one-man show and do justice to its source? Surely the romance will be unrecognizable."

"My dear Mr Fan," replied his companion, "how can you be so tiresome? You must know that I love those adaptations that are not literal re-tellings. The best *Emma* one is Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, which is not even set Regency England."

"Is that being faithful to the original?"

"Faithful? Nonsense, how can you talk so! The whole point is to re-imagine the book in a different medium."

"I see no occasion for that."

"But why? You are over-scrupulous, surely. Consider this. Don't you remember when we saw *Northanger Abbey* by Zoe Cooper? It had actors offer explanations of the plot direct to the audience, comment on how their own re-enactment of the story is progressing, and switch between dialogue and narrative, between sincere naturalism and physical theatre — and between showing and telling. It was full of adventure and joy."

"In such cases, yes, I suppose it is so."

"And I dare say there are other adaptations, such as Laura Wade's *The Watsons* and Isobel McArthur's *Pride and Prejudice (sort of)*, which likewise exalt in theatricality and the imagination."[1]

The playwright unhappily finishes their final draft of a Mary Shelley adaptation

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the drafts of my drama around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless pages that lay on my desk. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my mouse was nearly out of charge, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow manuscript of my creature before me; I breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated my limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this wonder, or how delineate the play's monster whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His character was coherent. His actions were in proportion, and I had selected his dialogues as beautiful. Beautiful!— Great God! On re-reading, his shrivelled utterances and clumsy exchanges filled me with dread. Indeed, he was a perfect replica of the horrid original.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing drama into an inanimate book. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the play I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on

[1] Zoe Cooper, *Northanger Abbey* (2024), Adrian Lukis, *Being Mr Wickham* (2024), Laura Wade, *The Watsons* (2018) and Isobel McArthur, *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)* (2018). Source: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain: I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams.

I thought I saw Mary Shelley, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Bath. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the text — the story I had turned into a play. The words on my screen seemed to me black insects, if insects they may be called, and were in constant motion. I escaped and rushed downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation.

Morning, dismal and wet, at length dawned, and discovered to my sleepless and aching eyes an email from the theatre, which indicated an expect of delivery of my script. I issued again into the streets, pacing them with quick steps, as if I sought to avoid the director whom I feared every turning of the street would present to my view. I did not dare return to the apartment which I inhabited, but felt impelled to hurry on, although drenched by the rain which poured from a black and comfortless sky. I fled from my own creation.[2]

A 22nd-century tourist contemplates a statue of Sir Tom Stoppard in the West End

I met an android from an antique land,
Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the West End… Near them, on the Strand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that wrote them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
‘My name is Stoppardius, Writer of Writers;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level streets stretch far away.”[3]

[2] Nick Dear, *Frankenstein* (2011), Carl Miller, *Frankenstein* (2019) and Rona Munro, *Frankenstein* (2019). Source: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818).
[3] Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993). Source: Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’ (1818).

A political playwright considers retirement

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-pilèd books, in my neat study,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
When I behold, upon the theatre programme's face,
Huge shiny previews of a historical romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Bloody Poetry's sequel with the hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair subject of an hour,
That I shall never write about thee more,
Never have relish in the fiery power
Of joyful creation — then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.[4]

A critic reviews Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*

Arcadia is a specimen of the purely romantic drama, in which the interest is not historical, or dependent upon fidelity of portraiture, or the natural connection of events, — but is a birth of the imagination and union of the elements granted to, or assumed by, the playwright. It is a species of drama which owes no allegiance to time or space, and in which, therefore, errors of chronology and geography — no mortal sins in any species — are venial faults, and count for nothing. It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty; and although the illusion may be assisted by the effect on the senses of the complicated scenery and decorations of modern times, yet this sort of assistance is dangerous. For the principal, and only genuine excitement ought to come from within, — from the moved and sympathetic imagination; whereas, where so much is addressed to the mere external senses of seeing and hearing, the spiritual vision is apt to languish, and the attraction from without will withdraw the mind from the proper and only legitimate interest which is intended to spring from within.

The story opens with a witty scene about Septimus the tutor and Thomasina his pupil, and is admirably appropriate to the kind of drama, giving, as it were, the keynote to the whole harmony. It prepares and initiates the excitement required for the entire piece, and yet does not demand anything from the spectators, which their previous habits had not fitted them to understand. It is purposely restrained from concentering the interest on inessentials, but used as an induction or tuning for what is to follow. In the second scene, the entrance of Bernard and his meeting with

[4]Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (1984). Source: John Keats, 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be' (1818).

Hannah puts the audience in possession of all the information necessary for the understanding of the plot. Observe, too, the perfect introduction of material about matters poetical, landscape sculpting, and scientific meditations.

The appearance and characters of the dramatical entertainment are finely contrasted. Bernard embodies the romantic temper, being stylishly flamboyant, energetic passionate and intuitive, yet his "gut instinct" about Byron's duel proves to be an error. Contrast this with Hannah's instinct that the hermit of Sidley Park is Septimus, which shows a rare equipoise of the faculties, in all their distinctive energies of faith, patience, constancy, fortitude, as opposed to masculine illusion. In the counterpoint 1809 scenes, Septimus, once Byron's university friend — and himself Byronic in his keen mind and sharp wit — has his own romantic bearing, whereas Thomasina is the pupil whose genius (like Byron's daughter Ada) intuits the second law of thermodynamics, a palpable improbability hazarded by a great genius of playwriting. Finally, the contemporary Coverly family are exemplars of distinctness and subordination, being instances of scientific thinking (Valentine), young innocence (Chloë) and metaphysical speculation (Gus). All contribute to a comedy of ideas, set between past and present, art and science, romance and reason, all means towards accomplishing the chief end, that of producing and supporting this willing illusion, serving to increase the inward excitement, wit and sensibility of the whole.[5]

A philosopher-novelist recalls plays about Percy, George, Mary and Claire

Their lives have for several years been a theatre of calamity. They have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny, and they could not escape. Their fairest prospects have been blasted. Their enemies have shown themselves inaccessible to entreaties, and untired in persecution. Their fame, as well as their happiness, has become their victim. Every one, as far as their story has been known, has refused to assist them in their distress, and has execrated their names: Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Byron, Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont. They have not deserved this treatment. Many playwrights have been incited to the penning of these dramas only by a faint idea that posterity may by their means be induced to render them a justice which their contemporaries refuse. Their story will, at least, appear to have that consistency which is seldom attendant but upon truth.

The spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterised these dramatical works, was poetry. It was this that gave them an artistic turn. In fine, these plays produced in me an invincible attachment to ideas of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I watched, I devoured dramas of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health. My curiosity, however, was not entirely ignoble: my imagination must be excited; and when that was not done, my curiosity was dormant.[6]

[5]Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993). Source: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Notes on *The Tempest*' (1836).
[6]Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (1984), Liz Lochhead, *Blood and Ice* (1982) and Helen Edmundson, *Mary Shelley* (2012). Source: William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (1794).

A romantic poet praises actor Mrs Siddons

She talks in beauty, like the light
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every curly tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How sure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in make-up spent,
A mind that thrills the crowd below,
A heart whose spell is divinely lent.[7]

Another poet travels to see a show at the Theatre by the Lake

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er rails and smoke,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
An audience of theatre folk;
Beside the lake, just past the trees,
Queuing and chatting in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,

[7] April de Angelis, *The Divine Mrs S* (2024). Source: Lord Byron, 'She Walks in Beauty' (1815).

They stretched in an expectant line
Next to the theatre of the day:
Some hundreds saw I at a glance,
Holding their heads in demure stance.

The waters beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling sheen in glee:
A playwright could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed — and gazed — and surely thought
What wealth the play to me had brought.[8]

[8] Nicholas Pierpan, *William Wordsworth* (2017). Source: William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807).