

The Curious Case of *Old Friends and New Fancies*

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Sybil G. Brinton's *Old Friends and New Fancies* (1914), a published Jane Austen sequel, sits in a strange limbo between its source texts and more recent transformative works. Sourcebooks, its most recent publisher, claims it is 'the first Jane Austen sequel ever written' on the cover. The novel features 39 characters from all six of Austen's major novels. Similar to Austen, Brinton marries several characters off by the end of the novel; but unlike Austen, Brinton pairs characters who never crossed (fictional) paths. By the end of the novel, Brinton has married off a slew of characters: Colonel Fitzwilliam (from *Pride and Prejudice*) and Mary Crawford (from *Mansfield Park*), Thomas Bertram (from *Mansfield Park*) and Isabella Thorpe (from *Northanger Abbey*), Georgiana Darcy (from *Pride and Prejudice*) and William Price (from *Mansfield Park*), and finally Kitty Bennett (from *Pride and Prejudice*) and James Morland (from *Northanger Abbey*). Moreover, *Old Friends and New Fancies* is an odd case within the Jane Austen fandom. In the approximately 200 years since Austen's death, Brinton's book sits almost exactly in the middle of Austen fandom; well before Colin Firth's wet torso catapulted Austen to cottage-industry status. Furthermore, almost nothing is known about Brinton; this is the only novel she published, which makes this book perhaps the only real way to ascertain who she was. Finally, Brinton's novel is an example of an emergent cultural practice, on two fronts: both in terms of early fanfiction writing, and early Austen fan culture. In comparison with Austen's original novels and more modern adaptations and fanfics, *Old Friends and New Fancies* is not like other Austen texts.

Like many other fanfics, *Old Friends and New Fancies* does not merely play in a world or with

characters, but actively critiques its sources. Jun Xu, who compared Austen's linguistic patterns with Austen fanfiction's linguistic patterns, writes that '[t]he different "Austens" emerging' from fanfiction 'suggest[s] that the death of the "Author" is only part of the story: we see not only the Author's death and the birth of the Reader, but a ghostly projection of a new "Author" in the reader's cultural context' (2011: 82). Hui Min Annabeth Leow agrees, writing that transformative works often contain 'a form of commentary on the canon (source material) by introducing new perspectives and interpretations that subvert the original intention of the canon' (2011). Furthermore, Leow states that fanfiction writers reveal 'the assumptions of the canon, and by means of this assumption' reveal 'new concerns on the part of the fan creator' (ibid.). Brinton's divergence from her source texts exposes her reaction to Austen, both as a romantic expert and a moralizer. Brinton does not quite destroy Austen's vision, but she does not blindly abide by it either. Brinton reads some of Austen, particularly *Mansfield Park*, against the novel's grain, and in doing so, projects her own ideas onto the text.

Old Friends and New Fancies modernises several aspects of Austen's novels, and in doing so, also works to critique them. The novel frequently mentions the age of its characters, particularly centring on age gaps as a source of conflict. For instance, Georgiana, although betrothed to Colonel Fitzwilliam, finds it difficult to see him as a potential husband. Brinton writes that Georgiana 'had been accustomed to look upon the Colonel as, after her brother, her eldest and best friend, a feeling which their disparity of their ages served to strengthen' (1914: 2). By the end of the novel, Brinton pairs Georgiana and

Colonel Fitzwilliam with different partners, ones closer to their age (especially for Georgiana). Brinton appears to have a mostly-conservative attitude towards arranged marriages; unlike Austen, she emphasises the importance of an individual choosing a partner that (most) of their family approves of, where Austen emphasised the importance of individual choice, especially for her heroines. Moreover, modern updates have made a point of changing the age differences between characters. Two recent webseries adaptations, *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (YouTube, 2012-2013) and *Emma Approved* (YouTube, 2013-) significantly narrow the gap between their heroes and heroines, even though there is quite a gap between the original counterparts. Brinton's revised age differences align her with the more modern adaptations, even though her attitude towards arranged marriages make her more conservative than Austen.

Although Elizabeth Darcy née Bennet's perspective governs most of the novel, Mary Crawford is *Old Friends and New Fancies*' heroine. Critics like to point out that Austen's fans only like her novels because they are a form of wish fulfilment, which seems perhaps doubly true about those who put themselves in Austen's role as writer. In Austen's novels, it is the single woman who is the star of the show, and given *Old Friends and New Fancies*' intended audience, is probably where Brinton wants us to focus our attention. In other words: if Brinton was writing a 'Mary Sue' for herself and her audience, it would probably be the single Mary Crawford, not the already-married Elizabeth. Moreover, by making Mary the heroine, Brinton significantly diverges from Austen. Austen did not write Mary as the star of *Mansfield Park*; that honour would go to Fanny Bertram née Price. But within the fandom, Fanny's, and her rival Mary's, **statuses** are contested. Many Austen fans hate mousy, quiet Fanny, preferring the more-social Mary. Still, Mary is ultimately marginalised within *Mansfield Park*, since she does not win the hero's affections. Although *Old Friend and New Fancies* seeks to bring Mary closer to the centre of the action, various forces at work, including Lady Catherine, seek to marginalise Mary as much as possible. The text highlights this marginalisation, but in doing so, it also has to keep Mary marginalised.

Jenkins writes that modern feminine fans are imagined as 'screaming teenage girls who try to

tear the clothes off the Beatles' (2012: 15). Feminine fans were 'unable to maintain critical distance from the image, they want to take it inside themselves, to obtain "total intimacy" with it' (2012: 15). Austen fans could easily be imagined as being obsessed with Colin Firth, but Brinton seems to distance herself from *Mansfield Park*. It feels less like Brinton wants to achieve a complete intimacy with Austen's other source text, but rather as if the other source texts had managed to worm their way in. Jenkins writes that the feminine fan 'becomes an erotic spectacle for mundane male spectators while her abandonment of any distance from the image becomes an invitation for the viewer's own erotic fantasies' (2012: 15). Brinton does not do that here. She resists erotic spectacle, both on the page and as a figure of spectacle herself, and pushes the viewer away from a whole immersion in the text. If anything, Brinton invites her readers to see *Mansfield Park* from a more critical lens. Furthermore, it seems as if Brinton wants her reader to see the apparent difference in social philosophy between *Mansfield Park* and Austen's other five major novels.

Brinton's version of Mary may then represent a feminist counter-writing to *Mansfield Park*. Leow notes that 'there is a distinguished history of their use of fan works to accomplish feminist counter-readings of source material'; that 'women have participated strongly in fandom—both as consumers' and 'as producers...of fan work' (2011). In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny is ultimately rewarded for being mostly silent and loyal to her (often unloving) family. On the other hand, Mary is cut off from the Bertram family because of what they deem to be inappropriate behaviour. It would be easy to see how Austen punishes Mary on gendered lines of behaviour, but Brinton's text works to show how undeserving Mary is of her continued punishment years after the offence.

However, a notable exception is Brinton's treatment of Lydia Wickham née Bennet. Austen punished Lydia's transgressions at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* by marrying her off to Wickham, a noted cad. Other, more recent transformative works have restyled Lydia as decidedly different from Austen's version. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* turned Lydia from a transgressor deserving what she got into a victim of a pushy man, and later, a survivor. Yet Brinton is unsympathetic to Lydia as Austen, and her stance is clear: it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to have

a falling out, to break off one's engagement to a man, and to have badly-behaved brothers, but it is not acceptable for a woman to seek romantic and sexual relationships with a man without the consent of her family.

One of the most interesting things about the book is what it has to say about the value of women's artistic production, which Brinton explores with Mary. Elizabeth befriends Mary after Mary gives a performance on her harp. Lady Catherine, now Elizabeth's mother-in-law, informally invites Mary to play at a party she is giving. When Elizabeth asks Mary if she is attending later in the novel, Mary notes that Lady Catherine has not paid her a visit or issued an official invitation, a social faux-pas. Mary feels so slighted by Lady Catherine, she says that she might as well 'send the harp alone' since this 'would answer all purposes as far as Lady Catherine was concerned' (1914: 54). When Elizabeth asks Mary why she feels particularly slighted by Lady Catherine's behaviour, Mary explains that since she is 'not paid in money' for her music she must 'be paid in manners' (1914: 53). Later on in the text, when Mary thinks Lady Catherine is about to present her with a 'fee' for playing the harp at the aforementioned party, Lady Catherine instead uses it as an opportunity to rip Mary to shreds for having broken her engagement to Edmund Bertram, and for her brother's scandalous behavior (1914: 66). In both of these moments, Mary indicates that she wants to be acknowledged for artistic labours, but both times her social connections disappoint her. If Brinton is speaking through Mary, perhaps she felt that as an artistic expression her writing, comparable to Mary's music, went unappreciated and thus was not worth sharing with a larger audience. It may be that Brinton was resigned to never receive financial compensation for her writing, but still longed for acknowledgement by her friends and family. Scholars have noted that 'appraisal is also a negotiation between different systems of evaluation, determining not only the object's value but also how that value can be measured' (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 87). Perhaps Brinton, like Mary, was wary of the varied evaluations of her work, which might not have been to her liking regardless of their conclusions. Moreover, scholars have noted that 'each party involved in exchanging material may have a different conception of its value and/or worth' (Jenkins, Ford, and Green

2013: 85). Brinton's fanfic here might itself note one of the complications of fanfic: it is not received equally by all groups of people. Henry Jenkins notes that '[n] one of us really knows how to live in this era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture' (2006: 170). Brinton might not have either. Given that Brinton never wrote anything else, perhaps she felt her fanfic was like Mary's music: an unloved art that only the marginalised practiced.

In my research on 19th century American women writers, I have found that they have sometimes constructed themselves as quite literally having the itch to write. My first assumption was that although Brinton wrote only this book, perhaps she had desired to write more. Women were under enormous social pressure not to write, even when it was economically beneficial for their families. It was not uncommon for women to publish one book their entire lifetime, often before they married. But reading Mary's comments on her own artistic endeavors and their reception, it could be inferred that Brinton may have had a more complicated relationship with her writing. Perhaps she found writing emotionally draining. Perhaps the market forces involved in the production of the book turned her off from publishing. Or perhaps this was the only story she ever wanted to write.

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