Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War

That Better Whiles May Follow Worse

Edited by

David Owen
Cristina Pividori

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CHAPTER 2

Conscripting Gentle Jane: Getting the Austen Treatment in the Great War

David Owen

The trench combatants of the First World War probably read anything they could; and if ever they had the luxury of choice, they would surely have selected writing that, however momentarily, took them away from the horror of their circumstances. Amongst the authors whose works British soldiers appear to have read is Jane Austen. Indeed, Austen's novels also formed part of the therapy that some wounded soldiers received in British hospitals. This chapter assesses what aspects of these works might have appealed to such readers and what underlying ideas led to this application of Austen. A tendentious use of a now-canonical writer emerges. For soldiers, the apparent tranquillity of Austen's world was a reminder of calm, order and decency. For military authorities, Austen's works were a timely injection of an ideal 'England' whose values and virtue needed to be re-instilled in those expected to sacrifice their lives to it.

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire, O still, small voice of calm

When talking of Austen and War, it is now almost conventional to cite the letter from the historian (and jurist) Frederic Harrison to Thomas Hardy, late in 1913 and on the very eve of the First World War, in which Austen is accused of being 'a rather heartless little cynic [...] penning satires about her neighbours whilst the Dynasts were tearing the world to pieces and consigning millions to their graves' (in Kent 1989: 59). And it is perhaps now equally conventional—at least in the ambit of Austen Studies—to point out how significantly this view misunderstands or ignores the submerged, subliminal and indirect manner in which Austen engages with questions of war (what exactly were all those uniformed young men quartered together for up in Meryton? How is it that Captain Frederick Wentworth comes home such a financial catch from his ocean exploits?).

1 John Greenleaf Whittier, 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' (1884).
2 A more sympathetic version of this view, though one that essentially makes the same point, is that voiced by Virginia Woolf. Referring both to Scott and Austen, she observes that 'neither of them in all their novels mentioned the Napoleonic wars. This shows that their model, their vision of human life, was not disturbed or agitated or changed by war' (1975: 130–131).
The most elegant and informative rebuttal of Harrison that I know of is Christopher Kent’s ‘Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen’, which deftly reveals the extent of this misunderstanding and points to far more constructive ways of reading the novelist’s handling of warfare (among other issues). His views show us that, not unexpectedly, our own position—privileged as it is by decades of literary research and debate—takes us in very different interpretative directions to those of earlier readers.

But even accepting that there must have been many other critical ideas on Austen than Harrison’s visceral defenestration, it is equally clear that, at the time of the Great War, she would also have been appreciated by general readers in markedly different ways from those of the readers of today. Yet any reliable access to just how Austen may have been understood widely and generally over a century ago is surely a hopeless task. Today’s blogosphere and online-bookseller reviews will doubtless provide future researchers with a wealth of reader-response insight into our own times, from the trivial and partial through to the dispassionate and judicial, but—looking back to the First World War—we are almost entirely bereft of such information. Instead, if we want to glean anything at all meaningful with respect to views on Austen and on her work, all we really have left to us is professional critical response (which accelerated dramatically post-1870 with the publication of her nephew’s hagiographic Memoirs of Jane Austen) and, largely as a part of that same critical response, the various opinions expressed in the almost notorious Janeite/Anti-Janeite debate, if that is what we should call it, which would rage up to, and indeed go well beyond, the Great War.

3 See Jane Austen’s Beginnings (Grey 1989: 59–72).
4 However, see Johnson’s Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures (2012: 100–111) for a discussion of contemporary reflections on Austen by (among others) Reginald Farrer in his The Void of War: Letters from Three Fronts (1918). For additional approaches and discussion, see Favret’s ‘Reading Jane Austen in Wartime’ (2008).
5 The term ‘Janeite’ is generally agreed to have been coined by George Saintsbury (Trott 2005: 94, in reference to the OED), who used it in 1894 in his introduction to an edition of Pride and Prejudice, though it is perfectly possible that it was in less formal currency prior to this. Certainly, the notion of Austen devotees pre-existed the nomenclature. Brian Southam traces the origins of what would become the Janeite/Anti-Janeite division to the early 1830s (1986: 237), and it had become a fairly consolidated fault-line in both popular and critical opinion by the end of the century. Essentially, readers who identified themselves as ‘Janeites’ were (often self-admittedly) visceral in the nature of their approval of Austen’s work; ‘anti-Janeites’, on the other hand, though usually not challenging the literary quality of Austen’s novels, drew attention to what they saw as a certain ‘suspension’ of critical insight in Janeite approbation. Southam (op. cit. 239) cites S.F. Malden’s late-Victorian study (Jane Austen 1889: 210)
However, precisely from the nature of this interpretative rift itself comes the focus of my discussion in this chapter. The Janeites in the Great War, in holding and promoting a culturally elite view of Austen, were instrumental in applying a highly particular notion both of her own value and, especially, of the significance of her work, which—I argue—served a determined political objective, namely that of reinforcing a rather tendentious idea of England as a place of measured civility, of decent codes of behaviour and, above all, of dependable calm and order; in short, a place very much worth suffering and fighting for.

More specifically still, my concern here is not with the arcane give and take in the decades prior to war of those besotted by a peculiar feeling of pertinence to Austen and to her writing or those, in contrast, who sensed something amiss in all of this but—rather—with the manner in which the former (the Janeites) appear to have held sway in what was the extraordinary use made of this writing during the war itself: as I will consider more fully below, a number of soldiers back on sick leave from active service—the exact figure is unknown—had a course of therapy administered to them by the British Army Medical Corps that included reading literature. For those suffering the worst effects of shell shock, the programme provided Austen's major novels. To my mind, as I argue throughout this discussion, this was not simply a well-intentioned attempt to bring a little relief to the horrendous mental disorder that these men were undergoing—although the fact that such relief might be attained through the reading of designated and approved literary texts is, in itself, a curiosity—but I believe that it also (and perhaps especially) corresponded to an emphatically propagandistic use of Austen's work in order to promote, in effect, the perception and consolidation of an idealised view of Home that attempted to give meaning to the chaos of frontline conflict, and which aimed at reinforcing a willingness to defend the values that this body of work conveyed. It is in this very direct sense that, as, Claire Harman (2009) observes, 'Austen's novels can be said to have seen active service themselves'(183); in this way, indeed, we

to the following effect: ‘Those who do appreciate her novels will think no praise too high for them, while those who do not, will marvel at the infatuation of her admirers; for no-one ever cares moderately for Jane Austen's work: her readers either award them unbounded praise or find them insufferably dull. This distinction is not, however, a dichotomy of opinion that faded with the turn of the century. As Halsey (2013) points out, in 1922 the Times—in reporting the death of Mary Austen-Leigh Austen's great-niece)—cited the former's view that the novelist was 'a cult' to those of more refined sensibilities (203–204); in contrast, as late as 1928, H.W. Garrod was addressing the Royal Society of Literature with a talk titled 'Jane Austen: A Depreciation'.

might argue that Jane Austen—or at least a rather partisan view of the writer and of her work—was *conscripted*, once again, in the name of king and country.

At least as an initial response, it might appear reasonable to us in the twenty-first century to assume that the calm and seemingly quiescent world of Austen's novels could not have been of any real interest to the trench combatants in the First World War, a conflict that—we readily imagine—in its sheer brutality and in the very intensity of its almost-constant proximity to violent death can have had little truck with the niceties of Emma's misunderstandings or the adolescent angst of Marianne Dashwood. However, although detailed supporting evidence for these claims is rarely given, it is not infrequently asserted that Austen was a popular choice with the soldiers. For instance, Harman observes, without further citation, that 'Austen was prime among the texts that went to war, and the trenches were full of Janeites' (2009: 181); and Paula Byrne—in an interview in 2013 with the *Telegraph*, promoting the latest in a long line of biographical accounts of the author—affirms, with no evidence in tow (though, in fairness, the conventions of newspaper interviews rarely require or expect such proof) that 'she [Austen]

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7 Although it is not the case that any propagandistic attempt had been made before the First World War to utilise Austen and her writing in exactly the ways that I propose, *passim*, in this current discussion, even during her lifetime Austen was pressurised into a certain endorsing of political positions. In November 1815, she was *encouraged* by the Prince Regent's royal librarian, James Stanier Clarke, to dedicate her forthcoming novel (*Emma*) to the prince. By temperament, upbringing and deep personal conviction, Austen felt no little antipathy towards this controversial and divisive national figurehead; referring to the Prince Regent's wife in personal correspondence of 1813 (Le Faye 2011: Letter of February 16), she asserts that 'I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband'. The dedication eventually read as follows 'To His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, this work is, by His Royal Highness's permission, most respectfully dedicated, by His Royal Highness's dutiful and obedient humble servant, the author', made more suitable for purpose by the publisher (John Murray), who modified Austen's original and rather taciturn phrase *'Emma, Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H. The Prince Regent'. For a fuller historical discussion of the implications of this episode and even the wording of the dedication, see Sheehan (2006).

8 A significant, though only partial, exception to this is the informative discussion set out by Claudia Johnson in Chapter 3 of her *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures*. Whilst Johnson's discussion does not quantify or otherwise substantiate claims of Austen's *trench* popularity, she nevertheless gives ample account—through reference to specific writers and scholars involved in a variety of ways in the war—of why Austen resonated so profoundly, in her view, with soldier readers.
was read in the trenches. She was a prescribed script for tortured, troubled souls’ (cited in Furness 2013).

Much earlier, in its Number 69 of December 1915, *The War Illustrated* (a rather gung-ho British magazine of the time that would be revived in the Second World War and carry on its publication activities until 1947) suggested that ‘[w]hat he [the man in the trenches] does not want is fiction about the war […]. He likes tales of strong domestic interest, and it is worth noting that Jane Austen has taken her fragrant way into a surprising number of dug-outs’.9 Related to these reflections, a very short but highly informative account of trench literature by Davies, Goellmann and Melendre refers to *The War Illustrated* article and takes note of its remarks, but then goes on to ask the following question (perhaps more firmly planted in the soil of the twenty-first century and its easy preconceptions of conflict mentality than in that of a century previous): ‘[…] would a soldier really read *Pride and Prejudice* without being mercilessly ridiculed by his colleagues?’ (2013: website). As if in answer to this rhetorical query, the authors then list a number of popular works from the time of the Great War, or thereabouts, including Rudyard Kilping’s *Kim* (1901); W.W. Jacobs’ anthology of short stories *The Lady of the Barge* (1902); Nat Gould’s *The Rajah’s Racer* (1905); H.G. Wells’ *The History of Mr Polly* (1910); Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912); John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and Capt. R.W. Campbell’s *Private Spud Tamson* (1916), suggesting, in marked contrast to *The War Illustrated*, that far greater weight was given in the trenches to tales of adventure and comedy than to refined accounts of ‘domestic interest’. But having said that, it is worth making at least two observations on this: first, as Davies *et al* in fact recognise, soldiers most surely read absolutely ‘anything they could get their hands on’, (2013: website) probably including the scraps of newspaper that were sent to them as package wrapping, in spite of what is often recognised as the highly effective work of the Field Postal Service (which ensured a steady supply of books from home).10 The long periods of inactivity that characterised trench conflict would doubtless have led to the extensive reading and re-reading, and prizing, of whatever printed material made its way to the front. And, second, there is unquestionably a significant sociological distinction in our understanding of trench reading to be made between an officer class that was, in its most part, highly educated, and the conscripted soldiers of the lower ranks, who mostly were less so. Officers

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9 The magazine was published by William Berry, later owner of the *Daily Telegraph*. This citation is from ‘The Solace of Literature’ (lxvi) by ‘C.M’. According to *Time* (‘War Weeklies’), *The War Illustrated* had a circulation by around 1918 of c. 750,000.

10 See, for example, Harman (2009: 180–181).
might indeed be inclined to read works of a more obviously literary character (and in this respect, ‘Trench Literature’ highlights works popular with officers in action, such as F.T. Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics*, first published in 1861, or, more generally, ‘Shakespeare’) (Davies, Goellmann and Melendre 2013). All of which tends to suggest that it is by no means outlandish to claim that Austen would have been at least part of the literary diet consumed by English-speaking soldiers during the years of conflict.

But, to return to my main concern in this chapter, I wish primarily to consider the significance attached to Austen during the Great War, not *in* the trenches but *out* of them; not to enquire into whether she was read by battle-ready soldiers, but instead to look at the ways in which her writing was used to treat the traumatised *away* from the field of conflict, and to consider the possible reasons for and implications of such use.

A first and obligatory port of call in this is Rudyard Kipling, whose story ‘The Janeites’ is probably the most renowned contemplation of Austen and her soldier-readers’ responses to her in the First World War. The tale was published in the British monthly fiction magazine *The Story-Teller* in May 1924. To summarise:

In ‘The Janeites’, Kipling tells of a group of soldiers who are also Masons. They have formed a shadow Masonic lodge based on their deep admiration and extensive knowledge of Jane Austen’s novels, which are a source of consolation and support as they undergo the horrors of World War I trench warfare. Initiates of this shadow lodge recognize each other by references to her novels, and admission to the Austen fellowship is gained by an examination on them. Beneath the comic, ordinary surface of the narrative lies the random brutality of the Great War; almost all the Janeites are killed in action, and the surviving Janeite who tells the story is damaged psychologically. Having learned about Austen while at the front, he asserts, “There’s no one to touch Jane when you’re in a tight place”.

The story has had considerable critical reverberation and is given far more attention—when reviewing the reception and reputation of Austen in the early twentieth century—than the application of her fiction to troubled

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11 For an image of the front cover, see Lilia (2009). The soldier—clearly in battlefield surroundings—is reading a novel by Austen.
12 See, for instance, Harman (2009: 183–186) or Johnson (1997: 214–217), both of whom directly approach the use of Austen for trauma recovery through detailed assessment of
patients; furthermore, in its engagement with what is often held to be the
capacity of Austen's writing (and the worlds that this creates) to make some
sort of sense out of the horrors of conflict, the tale hints very effectively at why
her novels may have been used for medicinal purposes, so to speak. But without
wishing to challenge the importance of Kipling's text both in forwarding and
consolidating certain ambi ts of Austen's reception, and whilst recognising that
it has attracted the interest of most Austen specialists concerned with the
nature and development of her literary standing, Kipling's tale was written
somewhat post factum and gives only the most nebulous of insights into why
exactly Austen appeared to have such strange, one might say almost mythical,
power over such readers (since, it should be recognised, such clarification is
not usually the focus of these specialists). But whilst it clearly conveys some
of the zeal that attaches to the Janeites and, in a certain sense, may even fore-
shadow the fandom that was to await Austen later in the twentieth century,
nevertheless it still brings us no closer to answering the practical questions
of what use, by whom and for what purpose the fiction of Jane Austen was
brought to bear on recuperating shell-shocked soldiers. For this, we need to
look elsewhere.

Since the admission for neurasthenia (or shell-shock) of Wilfred Owen and
Siegfried Sassoon in 1917 to Craiglockhart hospital, where the two poets were
to meet and spend some time together, the Edinburgh hospital and its
doctors—notably W.H. Rivers and Arthur Brock—have had a special place in
the literature of the Great War, and it is this location and these men that we
most commonly associate with therapy and rehabilitation in our context. At
Craiglockhart, which treated officers only, the patients were given psycho-
therapy, talking through their traumas in ways not familiar to or, indeed,
broadly accepted by many at the time. Non-officers were sent to institutions

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13 Although see Halsey (2013): '[i]t is probable that Kipling knew that wounded soldiers
were advised to read Jane Austen' (203). Interestingly, in keeping with much critical dis-
cussion of this issue (see my p.34), Halsey fails to qualify this remark any further. See also
my n.8.

For further recent discussion of their meeting and its effect on both men, see Moorcroft

15 See Anderson.

16 See Julian Walker's 'The Silence after The War': 'Reticence was praised more highly then
than now. Sangfroid was employed and no doubt felt at all levels—"nothing makes you
feel madder than being fired at when doing a job that has to be done slowly and carefully,
such as Netley hospital (the old Royal Victoria Military Hospital) in Hampshire, England, or to other institutions that were able to attend them. Here, the treatment consisted of ‘more physical forms of “cure” such as physiotherapy’.17 This much forms a part of the relatively familiar backstory to writers and writings of the Great War. But other courses of action were also put into practice throughout British hospitals, and one of these has Austen’s novels at its very centre.

During the war, Herbert Francis Brett-Smith, an Oxford history lecturer exempt from active military service, worked for the Army Medical Corps in preparing reading lists for patients admitted to military hospitals. A former student of Brett-Smith, Fr Martin Jarret-Kerr, later indicated that ‘[f]or the severely shell-shocked, he selected Jane Austen’ (1984: iii).18 Additionally, it appears that the choice of literature was related to the degree of trauma experienced by the patient. As Kathryn Sutherland explains, Brett-Smith’s work consisted of ‘[grading] reading matter according to a “fever-chart”, and—as part of the patients’ rehabilitation—assigning Austen’s novels to the worst cases (2005b: 53).

This remarkable circumstance is one that is alluded to frequently in accounts of Austen’s writing,19 but, since little more than bare fact is available to us, all references to it are tantalisingly brief. We know almost nothing of the details of how Brett-Smith went about his task; almost nothing of the patients; nothing of their own educational backgrounds or reading tastes; nothing of the number of people involved; nothing of the hospitals in which this treatment was applied; nothing of its duration; nothing of its results or of any official or unofficial opinion on its degree of success. It hardly needs pointing out that this is

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17 See Anderson.
18 Unfortunately, no further details on the criteria of selection at play in this decision would appear to be available. Brian Southam attempted to ascertain ‘the evidence on which this is based’ (2009: letter to the TLS), but seemingly to no avail. I am unaware of any source that has substantiated Jarret-Kerr’s claims or provided additional information on the application of Brett-Smith’s treatment.
19 See, among others, Kent (1989); Johnson (1997); Lynch (2000); Dames (2003); Harman (2009) and Halsey (2013). Curiously, however, it is absent from Johnson’s monographic account of Cults and Cultures.
very little to go on. And yet I believe that there are significant ways in which we can infer, from this barren outline of events, a considerable interconnection of purpose and ideology.

It is perhaps a somewhat elitist cultural assumption to imagine that exposure to great literature would be a welcome—let alone efficacious—approach to dealing with conflict-induced trauma, and in some ways it tells us rather more about Brett-Smith’s faith in reading than about any other aspect of this treatment. This may in turn be understood by the impetus given to the general study of literary texts in the 1870 Education Act, the cultural assumptions that underlie this and the consequent growth in significance of a number of authors and works at a national level, although these reflections begin to lead us away from the question in hand. Beyond this, however, it would appear to be a markedly Janeite coup to have ensured that it was Austen, and not any other writer, whose works were given paramount importance in this undertaking.

What reason might be forwarded to justify such a choice? John Mullan has aptly observed, in discussing Brett-Smith, that ‘[i]t is impossible not to speculate as to his reasons for thinking Austen the best solace for those who were severely traumatised’, noting that Austen’s writing is widely celebrated for the quality of its irony and that this facet, whilst valued by many, is ‘not comfortable’ (Mullan 2013). In opposition to this view, however, there is a host of commentators who have emphasised a quality of (perceived) peacefulness in Austen’s writing that, one imagines, might plausibly have certain therapeutic effects. Indeed, although his comments attach to eighteenth-century literature as a whole rather than to specific authors, Paul Fussell also recognises in such writing what he calls ‘an oasis of reasonableness and normality, a place one could crawl into for a few moments’ respite’ (1975: 162).

The notion of a tranquillising Austen is emphatically remarked by the Shakespearean scholar A.C. Bradley, who said in 1911 that ‘her novels make exceptionally peaceful reading. She troubles us neither with problems nor with painful emotions, and if there is a wound in our minds she is not likely to

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20 For further discussion of this aspect, see Lynch: ‘In recognising universal literacy as a national priority, this legislation set in motion new initiatives for the teaching of literature as a national heritage: initiatives […] for managing social upheaval with the notion of a changeless, “classic” Englishness preserved in great books […]’ (2000: 112–113).

21 At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves—at the very least to counter possible objections concerning Austen’s own chronology—that she lived well over half her life (and all of her formative years) in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, it is relevant to recall that much of Austen’s mature fiction was first drafted in the 1790s, though sometimes in markedly different form to eventual publication. See Sutherland (2005a).
probe it’ (Bradley cited in Southam 1987: 235); it is an idea that has subsequently been taken up and developed by others. For instance, A.B. Walkley suggested that Austen's was the 'literature of consolation' for a world that was 'war-weary and shell-shocked' (cited in Halsey 2013: 202); and Sutherland, referring to a remark by Rupert Brooke (who apparently felt that his confusing, meaningless eastern-Mediterranean wartime existence could only be made sense of by 'Miss Austen'), observes the following:

Soothing, empty of incident, anaesthetic, healing, specific, yet non-particular; the small-scale intimacy of [Austen's] fictional worlds, and the equally small span of her output reassured the early twentieth-century reader, who valued literature according to its 'sanity'. (2005b: 53)

Although it espouses a critical assessment of the novelist's legacy that is in opposition to those ideas that would eventually be circulated and that would insist on her bitterness and social dissension, this understanding of a therapeutic Austen is clearly well established. And whilst it might be argued that the telling contrast between a possibly better then and a certainly horrendous now could have set in motion a whole new series of disturbing reflections on the part of the patient-reader, it seems equally reasonable to posit that, for wounded soldiers who had only very recently been facing the brutal terrors of a highly mechanised conflict (hitherto practically unimaginable) and, more generally, for whom life had become complex, unpredictable and unrecognisable, a sojourn into what Claudia Johnson has memorably termed ‘a world before history blew up, before rules and codes lost their efficacy’ [1997: 217; emphasis in the original], the seemingly ordered realms of a quieter, pre-industrial and slower-moving time reflected in the chapters of an Austen novel can surely have done little harm.

Exactly which of the novels were used in this therapeutic approach is not possible to say; the evidence on this matter is practically non-existent. But all or any of the mature works would be plausible candidates, although it is highly unlikely that the so-called minor works—the juvenilia and later unfinished pieces—would have formed part of this literary rehabilitation. For a start, the minor works became available generally only much later in

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22 This remark first appears in a lecture given at Newnham College, Cambridge; it was then read to the English Association (in the same year) and finally published with notes—also in 1911—in Essays and Studies.

the century\textsuperscript{24} and, more significant still in this case, the juvenilia are largely of an iconoclastic, irreverent character and tone emphatically distinct from that of the later novels, and therefore (we must assume) quite unsuitable for Brett-Smith's objectives.

Beyond this, attempting to engage with the specific novels or episodes that may have been used for particular therapies, and the further details of whatever methodology of use may have been applied, leads us inevitably into the terrain of pure speculation. But having said that, it is clearly of relevance to recall the obvious but important point that—throughout practically all of Austen's major fiction—those characters of a tyrannical bent are systematically undermined, and are revealed as undesirable, duplicitous and harmful to the broader community. Through gentle if unequivocal means (by twist of plot or by narrative intervention), reason and virtue triumph and the objectionable elements are gracefully consigned to irrelevance. This is as true for General Tilney as it is for Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to mention two obviously over-imperious characters seeking to force their excessive ideals and objectives onto the world. But it is also true for characters such as Mr Collins, or Willoughby or Sir Walter Elliot, or John Thorpe, or Lucy Steele (the list goes on), less dramatically domineering but equally or even more damaging than the autocrats, and who, through personifying values that are seen to be fundamentally at odds with decent society, threaten the peaceful, harmonious and civilised balance of what can readily be interpreted as the idyllic world of Austen's fiction.

Whatever the case, I would like to suggest that there is a further strand to Brett-Smith's therapy, one that derives directly from his Janeite affinities and that connects with a broader propagandistic objective of considerable importance for a war effort that needed not only to physically and mentally heal its injured soldiers\textsuperscript{25} but also to ensure that their resolve to head off once more to the battlefields and to fight for their nation was unwavering. As Lynch has suggested, an essential quality of Janeite 'allegiance' is 'how their Austen love takes them out of the wider world and into a smaller, more select and closer-knit circle (into a “loyal tribe”, a “haven”...)' (2000: 112). This, I believe, is also part of the Austen Treatment. Beyond the injection of a welcome measure of calm, it is

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\item \textsuperscript{25} In this regard, see Lynch who suggests that Austen's fiction represents for certain readers 'a kind of time travel to the past, because they preserve an all but vanished Englishness or set of “traditional” values [...]. This may demonstrate the influence of a sentimental account of Austen's novels that presents them as means by which [such] readers might go home again—to a comfortable, soothingly normal world' (1997: 113–117).
\end{itemize}
a timely reminder that the combatants are—by national character and identity—separate from the wider world of the inhumanity and brutishness that they had so recently experienced, and it is a re-affirmation of their pertinence to the closely bonded society of a loyal tribe.

In short, Brett-Smith’s fever chart presses Austen’s fiction into national service, reinforcing the image of a worthy and upright ‘England’ and of its noble values and distinctiveness, subliminally pervading the recuperating soldiers’ consciousness with a sense of greater duty.26 Referring both to the intentionally narrow scope of Austen’s fiction and to the nature of particular critical responses to this in the Great War (Farrer, Quiller-Couch, Chapman, Spurgeon), Claudia Johnson suggests that Austen was ‘the beneficiary of efforts to see precisely such “narrowness” as national grandeur, and to define particular sites of rural life as England tout court, and with this to celebrate specific qualities of temper as befitting English character in general and English manhood in particular’ (2012: 11). I would add to this suggestion that the therapeutic approaches of Brett-Smith, another academic Janeite in close professional and critical sympathy with Farrer and company, is a further means of reinforcing and celebrating this awareness of national grandeur and of reminding recuperating soldiers of the distinct cultural values that they hold and, indeed, represent. It is an understated and oblique means—in stark opposition to the voracious ferocity of turbulent conflict—that gently recalls for them a sense of belonging and allegiance to a more decent and upstanding tribe, and in doing so, contributes to strengthening their resolve to take up the struggle afresh.

This is, admittedly, a good deal to claim from evidence that is either pitifully scarce or else most probably utterly irretrievable; but nevertheless it is closely in keeping not only with the zeitgeist of Great War critics’ and (perhaps) general readers’ attitudes towards an exceptionally highly valued novelist but also with the broader drive in contemporary wartime medical care to ensure that soldiers were able to return to the front as soon as this was feasible.27 Within this context, then, I would say that—however unlikely it may now seem both

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26 This idea also comes to the fore in the Second World War. Commenting on this in terms that are readily transferable to the earlier conflict, Favret observes that ‘[t]here was an assumption at the time [1939–45] that re-reading books from Britain’s tremendous literary past served as fortification against the upheavals of wartime. Austen provided something additional, at least in the eyes of British novelist Rebecca West: her work demonstrated an “underlying faith that the survival of society was more essential to the moral purpose of the universe than the survival of the individual”, and such faith could prove crucial in wartime’ (citing from West’s The Court and the Castle).

27 See Anderson, (subsections on ‘Sickness and Malingering’; ‘A Final Cure’).
as a form of trauma treatment and as a source of propaganda—Brett-Smith's use of Jane Austen was, at that time and under those very specific circumstances, a perfectly plausible attempt to kindle in his patients a sense of urgency to get back to the trenches and, instilled with a deeper awareness of England's *sublimity*, to manfully fight the good fight once again.

**Works Cited**


