Title of Paper: *North and South* as Jane Austen Fanfiction: How Gaskell’s Use of Austen’s Characters and Structure Strengthen Her Social Protest Novel

Author: Lauren M. Rohrs

Affiliation: Notre Dame of Maryland University

Section: Articles

Date of Publication: April 2018

Issue: Volume 6, Number 1

Abstract:
The genre of fanfiction has, arguably, existed for centuries, with many well-known pieces of literature matching the definition of “fanfiction”. While countless classics meet the requirements of a “fanfiction” text by retelling the stories of classic figures such as King Arthur or Julius Caesar, others offer more subtle examples of early fanfiction, using characters and storylines from earlier works. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, which largely parallels Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is, arguably, an example of fanfiction writing prior to the official recognition of the genre in the early 20th century.

This paper explores Gaskell’s use of Jane Austen’s characters (namely, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, as well as minor archetypal characters) and story structure in her novel, *North and South*. I will argue that Gaskell’s amount of "borrowing" from Austen could potentially categorize *North and South* as an alternate universe (AU) fanfiction of *Pride and Prejudice*, and will explore the ways in which this severe amount of “borrowed material” from Austen strengthens, rather than weakens, Gaskell’s novel and serves her politically motivated purposes in writing *North and South*.

Author Bio:
Lauren Rohrs is currently enrolled in the English Literature M.A. program at Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore, MD. Her educational background is, to say the least, eclectic, with degrees in Equine Science, Philosophy and Psychology, and Contemporary Communications. She has been published and invited to speak on topics as wide reaching as the homosexual male gaze, regency-era inheritance laws and literature, Shakespeare in science fiction, and Victorian-era fanfiction. Currently, she is continuing to conduct literary research as she prepares to apply for admission into a PhD program in English Literature.

Author email: lrohrs2@live.ndm.edu
North and South as Jane Austen Fanfiction: How Gaskell’s Use of Austen’s Characters and Structure Strengthen Her Social Protest Novel

The genre of fanfiction has, arguably, existed for centuries, with many well-known pieces of literature matching the definition of “fanfiction”. While countless classics meet the requirements of a “fanfiction” text by retelling the stories of classic figures such as King Arthur or Julius Caesar, others offer more subtle examples of early fanfiction, using characters and storylines from earlier works. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, which largely parallels Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is, arguably, an example of fanfiction writing prior to the official recognition of the genre in the early 20th century.

I will explore Gaskell’s use of Jane Austen’s characters (namely, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, as well as minor archetypal characters) and story structure in her novel, *North and South*. I will argue that Gaskell’s amount of “borrowing” from Austen could potentially categorize *North and South* as an alternate universe (AU) fanfiction of *Pride and Prejudice*, and will explore the ways in which this severe amount of “borrowed material” from Austen strengthens, rather than weakens, Gaskell’s novel and serves her politically motivated purposes in writing *North and South*.

**What is Fanfiction?**

Fanfiction, “the practice where fans write stories based on the characters and storyworlds of a single source text or a ‘canon’ of works” (Jenkins, 371) or “fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by someone else” (Xu, 82) is a genre of writing with a long history; “the Latin author Virgil is often cited as an early fan fiction writer, as are the medieval writers of stories and poems in the Arthurian legend cycle and the Renaissance playwright Shakespeare, who borrowed and recycled characters and plots from existing worlds” (Willis). While these authors, and many others, have been argued to have been early examples of fanfiction, the genre arose, officially, in the 1920s, when fan magazines began publishing fanfiction stories as their own genre (Jenkins, 371).

As an extension of the fanfiction genre, stand-alone pieces of literature known as “profics” have arisen (or, as some would argue, have existed long before the recognition of fanfiction as a genre). “Profic, like fanfiction, draws upon source texts, but writers are paid and often experience more critical acclaim...” (Jenkins, 371).

Important to note in regards to Gaskell, fanfiction has been noted as “a socially motivated transgressive force, offering a voice for marginalized groups and revealing the subversive potential of seemingly safe or familiar storyworlds” (Jenkins 372). Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and structure, which can categorize *North and South* as a fanfiction, provide this “safe storyworld” in
which the struggles of Gaskell’s highlighted marginalized group, northern factory workers, can be explored.

Jane Austen fanfiction has been recognized as a fairly unique subset of fanfiction writings, not least of all because Jane Austen fanfiction is one of the earliest “officially” recognized fanfiction categories, along with fanfictions based on the stories of Sherlock Holmes (Xu, 82). While authors of Harry Potter fanfictions, for example, are allowed extreme license with their alterations of characters, plots, relationships, etc. the Jane Austen fanfiction community maintains strict guidelines regarding the loyalty of fanfiction writers to the characters, plots, and overall spirit of the Austen novel central to the fanfiction in question (Steenhuyse, 167).

Another striking difference between Austen fanfiction and that of other storyworlds is of particular interest in regards to Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and story structure. “Austen’s fanfic tends to have more of an agenda than other fanfic universes, and the agenda is not about personal fulfillment as a writer. The agenda therefore is something absent in Austen’s text detected by the fans” (Xu, 82). This tendency throughout Jane Austen fanfiction is important to note when discussing Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and story structure; the use of Austen’s works as a foundation from which to explore other issues untouched by Austen is common in Jane Austen fanfiction, grouping Gaskell with a large number of Austen’s fan writers.

North and South as Pride and Prejudice Fanfiction

“Alternative Universe” fanfictions (or, AU fics) are defined as “stories which feature source characters but take place in a different universe than the canonical one” (Steenhuyse, 169). In other words, AU fanfictions offer the answer to “what if”: “what if Mr. Darcy was a factory owner?” or “what would Elizabeth do if she knew about the conditions in the factories?” Examples of confirmed AU fics of Austen’s novels include films such as Clueless, a retelling of Emma set in a 1990s-high school, the novel Pride and Prejudice and Zombies by Seth Grahame-Smith, an AU version of Pride and Prejudice in which the Bennet sisters find themselves fighting zombies, and lesser-known online fanfictions, such as Of Fire and Ice, a high school drama retelling of Pride and Prejudice. In each of these AU retellings of Austen’s works, as in most AU fics, the overarching storyline of the original work remains the same, with the settings, character names, and some plot aspects altered to meet the goals of the author or screenwriter.

The authors of such fan stories have been criticized as “textual poachers’, who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests” (Steenhuyse, 166). In the case of Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and story structure, Gaskell’s “poaching” to serve her “different interests” serves as an example of how this use of AU fanfiction has the power to allow an author to make a political statement by using familiar characters and story structures to illustrate a concept. By recycling Austen’s characters and romantic plot, Gaskell does not, as some may criticize, reduce her novel to a re-write of Pride and
Prejudice, but rather allows herself to focus her original content on the social issue she is addressing, making the romantic storyline secondary to the political objective of the novel. Gaskell's readers are therefore given a tried-and-true romantic storyline that they will enjoy, but Gaskell is able to dedicate her efforts as a writer to her more political themes. Perhaps the most obvious of Gaskell's "borrowed" aspects of Austen's Pride and Prejudice is her use of the novel's leading couple, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, or, as they are named in North and South, Mr. Thornton and Margaret Hale. The parallels between the two sets of characters are difficult to deny; Mr. Thornton is a wealthy, dark, brooding young man who appears to consider himself greater than everyone else. His affection for Margaret is met with hostility because of her loyalty to Thornton's pitiful and lowly rival, Mr. Higgins. Margaret, like Elizabeth, lives with her gentle and scholarly father and her difficult hypochondriac mother. Like Elizabeth, she is by no means wealthy, but has been introduced to "good society" in her formative years, and is well prepared to successfully navigate social protocol and seek a profitable marriage. Both characters receive proposals of marriage that would prove profitable, and both refuse in hopes of someday marrying for love. High-spirited and firm in her opinions, Margaret, like Elizabeth, is quick to form judgements and is unafraid to argue with men and women alike, regardless of social standing, as evidenced through her interactions with Mr. Thornton, Mrs. Thornton, and in the opening scene of the novel, in which Margaret meets a man's mockery of the women's interest in scarves with an unabashed defense of their interest (Gaskell, 10). Like Elizabeth, Margaret will not allow herself to be the punchline of a man's joke, and is unafraid to counter his claims regarding the value of women's interests. As Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice, Margaret forms an early, negative opinion of Mr. Thornton, which shapes many of her interactions with him throughout the novel. This dislike is furthered when Margaret befriends Mr. Higgins, who has, in his estimation, been wronged by Mr. Darcy. The two pairs of eventual lovers meet each other with hostility through most of each novel, though over time each couple is drawn closer together as dislike slowly evolves into love. Misunderstandings between the couples threaten the relationships following the early development of feelings; in Pride and Prejudice, this conflict is a misunderstanding of Darcy's motives behind separating Bingley and Jane, while in North and South the conflict lies in a misunderstanding of Margaret's relationship with her brother, who Thornton mistakes for a lover. Both couples are driven by passionate conversations, and appear to be on the point of professing love for one another when tragedy strikes; for Darcy and Elizabeth, this comes in the form of Lydia's elopement with Wickham, while for Thornton and Margaret, this comes in the form of Thornton's financial downfall. However, as Mr. Darcy is able to rescue the Bennets' reputation by paying Wickham to marry Lydia, so Margaret is able to rescue Mr. Thornton by sharing her newly begotten inheritance with him in order to salvage his business. As money saves
the day, the two couples discover their love for one another, and are able to marry with their finances and reputations intact. Almost as important as the similarities between the two novels is to note the differences between Gaskell’s work and Austen’s. Apart from the obvious differences in time, place, and character names and occupations (which set Gaskell’s work apart from Austen’s but offer little alteration to the plot), Gaskell included important differences from Pride and Prejudice, which added the “social protest” dimension to her novel. For example, while the overarching plot of North and South follows that of Pride and Prejudice, Gaskell includes scenes that are unique to the northern factory districts central to the novel’s political objective. Such aspects include the workers’ protest scene, and the storyline of Bessy’s cotton-filled lungs and resulting illness and death. It is these differences which mark North and South as a social protest novel, and which validate Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and structure. These scenes and aspects of North and South not only differentiate the novel from its source text, Pride and Prejudice, but add an additional layer to the well-known story of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, creating a social protest component of the story that Pride and Prejudice lacks. While Austen’s novels focus on the politics of marriage and the importance of profitable matches for women of the time, Gaskell’s novel focuses on the conditions experienced by, and the treatment of factory workers in northern England. This political goal required a number of scenes unique to factory worker communities; Gaskell’s use of these scenes can be viewed as completely unveiled political statements. These scenes, which stand apart from Pride and Prejudice as completely unrelated (apart from Higgins’ substitution for Wickham) are significantly more violent and dramatic than any scene in Pride and Prejudice. Readers, who have been drawn into a well-loved romance story, are exposed to scenes of violent protesting, un-romanticized poverty, fatal illness from factory work, and hostile bitterness from those who suffer in northern factories. The difference between Gaskell’s portrayal of poverty compared to Austen’s is striking, and, perhaps, noteworthy in regards to the regions in which each author lived. Austen, who wrote for and about southern Englanders, portrayed the poor much as Margaret does when living in the south; the poor, quintessential peasants who are deserving of “charity” are generally self-sufficient and want for little more than to be graced by the presence of the more fortunate (as seen in Margaret’s early interactions with the poor, as well as heroines in Austen’s novels). In Gaskell’s portrayal of poverty in the north, however, the poor are far from self-sufficient. Higgins’ friend, Boucher, for example, is driven to suicide as he cannot succeed in feeding his family; he is entirely dependent on his employment at the factory and, because of his urban environment, cannot practice any level of self-sufficiency without his pay from the factory. Higgins and his daughter Bessy also present an image of poverty beyond any description found in Austen’s novels. Bessy, who began work in the factories at a very young age, suffers and eventually dies from lung complications that resulted from breathing in the fluff of the cotton mills. Higgins, who has watched his
daughter and friends suffer in the factories, is passionately discontent with his situation in life and, unlike the poor of the south (as depicted by Austen and Gaskell), is willing to take dramatic actions to fight for his rights as a human, despite his socio-economic standing.

Gaskell’s portrayal of poverty in *North and South* is one of the greatest differences between her novel and *Pride and Prejudice*; it is the scenes that so openly portray poverty that set *North and South* apart from *Pride and Prejudice*, and that play into Gaskell’s political objectives. These scenes, which have little impact on the love story lifted from *Pride and Prejudice*, make up the story that truly belongs to Gaskell. It is this story that Gaskell aimed to tell to her readers, but it was not a story that her readers wanted to hear. Instead, Gaskell was able to share this unsettling story with her readers by “sugarcoating” the dreadful realities of life in northern England with a sweetly comfortable love story, taken from a beloved novel by Jane Austen. Because of the nakedness with which Gaskell presents her political agenda, the *Pride and Prejudice* love story interwove throughout the novel becomes incredibly important for Gaskell’s readership. Without the romance aspect of the novel, the political overtures would have been overpowering and, most likely, uninteresting and/or distasteful to Gaskell’s readers. By providing this romance to her readers, Gaskell could ensure a continued readership for her novel, despite the difficult topics and themes presented in the original portions of the novel.

**Purpose of Gaskell’s Use of Austen’s Characters and Structure**

While it would be easy to criticize Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and structure, it is arguable that this “borrowing” served a purpose in Gaskell’s writing, and increased the success of *North and South* as a social protest novel. Gaskell’s goals in writing *North and South* included using the novel as a protest against factory conditions in northern England, a topic of controversy to some readers, and a topic of disinterest to others. Gaskell needed to develop a story within which she could share her political views; the purpose of presenting the ideas in novel form in the first place was to avoid the forwardness of an essay or other more traditional approach. The novel, as a form of protest, allowed Gaskell to draw her readers into the overall story, investing them in the plot in order to keep them engaged with the political messaging within the novel. By utilizing characters and structures familiar to her readers, Gaskell skillfully presents her readers with a story that they both know and are comfortable with: boy meets girl, girl hates boy, feelings develop, conflict drives the two apart, money saves the day, and boy and girl can fall in love and live happily ever after. Gaskell’s contemporary readers would have been familiar with Austen’s work, making the characters and structure familiar and comfortable to them. Gaskell skillfully utilizes Austen’s familiar works to draw her readers into a story that they already know and love (with just enough details altered to make the work appear unique) and then, through these familiar characters and structures,
The Victorian

presents her readers with the political statements that the novel intends to defend.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the characters and story structure of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* strongly parallel those of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to such a degree as to categorize *North and South* as a *Pride and Prejudice* Alternate Universe fanfiction. While fanfiction authors have often been criticized for “poaching” the works of others, Gaskell’s use of Austen’s characters and plot served her purpose of making a political statement within the format of a novel. By providing her readers with an overarching story based on the well-loved *Pride and Prejudice*, Gaskell was able to appeal her readers’ desire for such a romance, while drawing her readers into the political messaging of the novel. In this way, Gaskell ensured that her readers would return to her novel for the romance aspects of the story, thereby exposing the readers to the social and political aspects that are woven into the *Pride and Prejudice* storyline. Through this use of Austen’s characters and plot, Gaskell was able to strengthen her novel, balancing her hard-hitting original content with the comfortably familiar story of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy.