



## Bookburning in Chaucer and Austen

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YOU’RE SIXTEEN, YOU WANT TO BE AN AUTHOR, but you already have a favorite author: What do you do? You must tease him into submission, and with him, the whole idea of authorship. You must write a fiction showing that you yourself define the very notion of “author,” and thus your own existence as an author—even if that entails the provisional death of another one, and even though it entails undoing the idea of an “author” as a determinable identity.

Sometime between 1790 and 1792, aged around sixteen, Austen composes the opening act of *Sir Charles Grandison / or / The happy Man*, and later writes the four following acts, for family performance, probably in 1800, with the drafts of *Lady Susan*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey* having intervened (1793–1799).<sup>1</sup> Austen reduces Samuel Richardson’s huge novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* to a playlet made of snippets and wit, excising motive, causation, and development. All are cut off or out, stripping narration down to verbal atoms, that elemental level where words may make sense *or* nonsense, mean one thing *or* its opposite, where words’ inherent equivocation forces us to make up the meaning as we read, just as writers make up their authorship as they write. In setting us up to be cre-

ating readers, Austen creates creators, and becomes the author of authorship—a divided, spliced authorship.

This project to author authorship accounts for one vivacious gesture Austen chooses to add amidst her work of subtraction, a moment that does not appear at all in the Richardson, but is drawn from a clear precedent for her own blending of moral authenticity and skepticism, her consort in comedy, Geoffrey Chaucer. Both Austen and Chaucer write scenes in which a woman steals, injures, and burns a man's book.<sup>2</sup>

In Austen's *Sir Charles Grandison*, in the scene labeled "Act Two," Sir Hargrave Pollexfen attempts to force marriage upon Harriet Byron, a heroine known in Richardson's novel for fits and faints rather than decisive action. When the co-opted Clergyman dragged in off the street first takes out his service-book to begin the ceremony, "Miss Byron screams & faints away," but after being revived with salts and water, she responds to his second attempt to recite the service by vehemently declaring, "I see no Dearly beloveds here and I will not have any!";<sup>3</sup> and then "dash- es the prayerbook out of his hand" (42). The third beginning elic- its a more violent act of destruction, as she "snatches the book out of his hand and flings it in to the fire" with the anti-liturgical incantation "'Burn, quick, quick'" (43). It's as if the witches from *Macbeth* had jumped into a Marx Brothers movie.

Austen has indeed called another author's scene onto her stage. At the same moment as she is throwing whole chunks of Richardson into the fire, she reconstitutes bookmaking by putting an equally giant predecessor at her service. She shows her author- ity by simultaneously dismissing one author and electing another. Chaucer has also composed a scene in which he, a maker of books, makes a character who destroys books, combining both making and unmaking in the work of creation.

Near the end of her *Prologue* to the story she tells in *The Canterbury Tales*, Alisoun the Wife of Bath lets us in on her latest scrimmage with her fifth and favorite husband, Jankyn. In her first mention of it, she tells us that he once hit her so hard that she went deaf in one ear, just because she'd torn a page out of his book:

By God! He smoot me ones on the lyst,

For that I rente out of his book a leef,  
That of the strook myn ere wex al deaf. (634-36)

Her being deaf in *one* ear is Chaucer's jesting image for her ability to hear clearly but not completely. She embodies the listeners or readers put in the position of making up half the meaning of a text for themselves.

After reviewing some classical and biblical examples of bad marriages, she begins a second time, re-ordering events so as to admit her destruction of his book to its rightful place as the cause of the subsequent smiting:

Now wol I seye yow sooth, by seint Thomas,  
Why that I rente out of his book a leef,  
For which he smoot me so that I was deaf.  
He hadde a book. . . . (666-69)

Behind her tearing out the page lurks the reading of a book: Jankyn's anthology of misogynistic texts to read in bed at night.<sup>4</sup> After another digression she begins a third time, with phrasing that centers the matter concisely on herself and the book: "But now to purpos, why I tolde thee / That I was beten for a book, pardee!" (711-12). This is not wife abuse: this establishes her equality of force with the book, and implicitly her authority to use or destroy it. By her fourth beginning (having lingered ambiguously to list the nasty tales about women that her husband has read to her), she enters upon the climactic scene in a manner that clearly re-establishes her power over his reading:

And whan I saugh he wolde never fyne  
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,  
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght  
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke  
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke  
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun. (788-93)

The deed has grown like a fisherman's catch: three pages, not just one; and it now seems she hit him first, and so hard that he himself falls into the fire. How very decorous Austen is, in sending only the prayerbook, and not the Clergyman, into her fiction's fire.

Jankyn jumps out of this exposure to the fire of their hearth and their relationship like a crazed lion, she says ("as dooth a

wood leoun" [794]—she relishes his energy), and hits her back, whereupon she drops to the floor and pretends to be dead. The motif of fictive fatality turns up in the Richardson-Austen, too: after Harriet is squeezed in the doorway while trying to escape, she screams, faints, remarks “So, I hope you have killed me at last,” and refuses water because “I do not want anything that can give me life” (44).<sup>5</sup> While not shrewdly delusive like the Wife, Harriet uses language similarly hyperbolic and manipulative. Playing at their own deaths sets them in positions of authority over the story to be told of their lives, and their fictions illustrate the killing-yet-mobilizing effect authoritarian reading has on them. If the letter killeth, imagination both kills the deadening letter, and revives it in a revised non-standard version.

Jankyn is taken in by the Wife’s playing possum, and rushes to her side, apologizing, and giving her an occasion to hit him once more for luck: “Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke! / And yet eftsoones I hitte hym on the cheke” (807-8). The final condition of making up with him, aside from getting control of his house and land, is the moment when the Wife “made hym brenne his book anon right tho” (816). Having arrived at the actual book-burning, Chaucer adds insult to injury by letting the Wife make Jankyn destroy his own book. Sic semper tyrannis. The chronology of this scene indicates that throwing a husband into the fire, while catalytic and cathartic, is not as crucially important as throwing in his book.

The shared motif of bookburning, the absence of any such scene in Richardson, and the two authors’ devotion to both truth and irony suggest that Austen thinks of Chaucer’s Wife when writing up Harriet’s assertion of autonomy against heavy social pressure. Perhaps the theme of feigning death sent Austen’s mind to the Wife. She has her heroine, like the book, die into a new creation. Both authors show us books abused, and those books are then destroyed to undo that abuse. They eschew proposing a positively good book, or a correct interpretation, keeping alive the need to do away with one thing in order to signify (or understand) another. So the men are shown to be inadequate interpreters of the written words they supposedly control; and if the women (Alisoun, Harriet, or Jane) sometimes speak or read inaccurately,

they always do so imaginatively, with a nice, creative violence.

The main difference between the scenes is that the Wife of Bath wants Jankyn's attentions, while Harriet detests Sir Hargrave's. This difference gives increased point to Austen's episode. Chaucer, in showing the Wife sparring continually with Jankyn, displays her ambivalence about him, delighting in his liveliness but doubtful about binding up her identity in love for another person who is her equal in desire and imagination. By alluding to this scene, Austen tacitly imports the idea of ambivalence in love into her revision of Richardson. Harriet and Sir Charles presumably feel some ambivalence about each other, or it would not have required so very much book to get them together. Austen discerns this in the novel, and heightens it in her skit. Her Harriet's moment of violence invites us to wonder if hatred of Sir Hargrave is a displaced expression of hesitation about Sir Charles. Where the Wife of Bath expresses both love and resentment toward one man, Harriet divides those two feelings between two men—a difference reflecting that between the Wife's first-person, densely ironic autobiography, and the novel's third-person narrative unfolding at great leisure. When Austen turns Richardson's plot into dramatic vignettes, she throws into higher relief the heroine's conflict over authoritarian marriage, whether to the oppressive Sir Hargrave or the perfect Sir Charles. (One recalls Austen's remark in a letter to her niece Fanny, who had pressed a mutual acquaintance into unknowingly reading some of her aunt's work: "He & I should not in the least agree of course, in our ideas of Novels and Heroines;—pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked—but . . . I particularly respect him for wishing to think well of all young Ladies" [23-25 March 1817]).<sup>6</sup> Austen, like Chaucer, prefers relationships between equals. By spicing Harriet with the Wife of Bath, Austen makes her more expressly the equal of Sir Charles, while bringing forward the ambivalence any self-respecting person must feel about marriage.<sup>7</sup>

The final turn is how Austen's interference with Richardson resembles the Wife's with Jankyn's book. Like the Wife, Austen shows her literary mate both esteem and defiance. Her Chaucerian Harriet, like the reductiveness of the playlet form, cuts the ideal-

ization of Sir Charles down to size and mocks Richardson's perfect gentleman. Austen plays matchmaker between her beloved Richardson and the revisionist Wife, and thus creates a new authorial voice. In the Wife of Bath, she finds a figure for her own ability to subvert the authors who formed her, enacting the tension between power and the critique of power, such as Chaucer and Richardson both appreciate. Austen's new creation of that conflict must give them the pleasure of seeing that someone who knows how to read them well is out there, and writing, and creating more author-readers.

#### NOTES

1. Southam, Introduction to *Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison,"* 14–15 and 33, n. 34.
2. Southam notes in his Introduction (24) that this scene is based on events reported by letters in Volume I.29–33 of Richardson's novel. He gives some of the closest verbal parallels in his notes (137–138), remarking that "The throwing of the prayer-book into the fire and the lost key are Jane Austen's invention" (138, n. to ms. p. 17).
3. According to Southam's transcription (77), Austen cancels the spoken line, "I see no Dearly Beloveds here, & I will not have any," retaining the direction "She dashes the book out of his hand." Southam speculates: "A good joke cancelled. Why?—because it trod rather heavily on clerical ground and might be thought to be in bad taste?" (125, n. to ms. p. 16, ll. 7–9). This motive seems out of keeping with the fearless satire of the whole marriage-service scene, and with the way the line parodies Richardson's more hapless heroine, who "tries unsuccessfully to grab the book, . . . and is left to utter the memorable cry, 'No *dearly beloved's*'" (138, n. to ms. p. 16). The only speculation I can add is that Austen may like the dramatic effect of the action standing alone. In any case, Southam wisely restores the line in his edition (42).
4. The Wife reports that the volume he reads includes Walter Map's *Epistola Valerii ad Rufinum de non Ducenda Uxore* [Valerius's Letter to Rufinus on Not Taking a Wife], Theophrastus's *Liber de Nuptiis* [Book on Marriage], St. Jerome's *Epistola Adversus Jovinianum* [Letter Opposing Jovinian], one or more treatises by Tertullian (perhaps *De Exhortatione Castitatis* [On the Advisability of Chastity], *De Monogamia* [On Monogamy], or *De Pudicitia* [On Modesty]), something by or about Heloise (the friend of the unfortunate Abelard), and, ironically, the respected gynecological treatises attributed to a midwife of Salerno known as Trotula (I rely on Robertson's note to ll. 670ff.), along with the biblical book of Proverbs and Ovid's *Ars Amoris* [Art of Love].
5. Southam gives the Richardson parallel: "So, so, you have killed me, I hope—Well, now I hope, now I hope, you are satisfied" (138, n. to ms. pp. 19–20; Richardson I.31). Austen condenses the speech's ambiguously paired themes of death and satisfaction. Being killed seems to comprehend both the villain's and the heroine's gratification.

6. This is the same letter in which she reports that *Persuasion* is ready for the press, voicing some playful concern to Fanny that “You may *perhaps* like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for me,” and that she herself is just recovering from many weeks’ illness, when her complexion was “black & white & every wrong colour.” She seeks to be as patient about her own decline as she is impatient with “pictures of perfection”: “I must not depend upon being ever very blooming again.” The idea that Anne Elliott “is almost too good” appears in the novel itself, as when Anne is walking to Mrs. Smith’s the morning after the concert where Captain Wentworth and cousin Elliot compete for her interest: “Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way” (192). This reaction to perfection does not date only from the end of her life, as show by Brian Southam in his nuanced essay on “*Sir Charles Grandison* and Jane Austen’s Men,” especially in his discussions of the Richardson allusion in *Volume the First’s* “Jack and Alice” (78), and of Austen’s letters to her niece (87).

Southam too thinks of these lines against perfection when commenting on *Grandison*, but decides its satire is “not of that order,” but rather “a shrewd and amusing swipe at the character of Richardson’s ‘happy man’” (Introduction, 27). I do not quite see his distinction, unless it be simply a matter of his being more unwilling than I to accept the strong indictment of perfection and its pretenses as part of Austen’s satire on the compelling geniality of Richardson’s hero. In an era when titles like *The Book of Virtues* (whose compiler, by the way, completely reverses the meaning of the selection he excerpts from Chaucer without its ironizing frame) allure so many minds and pockets, I would argue for a robust embrace of the variations in the human fabric, and a cooler regard for the prettiness of socially acceptable goodness. Would we put all our Clergymen out of work?

7. In *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, J. Harris takes up the theme of men’s ambivalence to women, and how they are transformed by love, in her chapter on *Persuasion* and the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the romance of the Loathly Lady. (This medieval story appears in many versions, usually giving its bewildered hero the dilemma of choosing between a wife’s being beautiful by day but ugly at night, or beautiful at night but ugly by day; or between a wife ugly but faithful and a wife beautiful but besieged by lovers: the right guess resolves into the metamorphosis of the loathly lady into a beautiful one.) The case made for influence here is too general, however, nor does it link the old romance she tells to the character of the Wife in the *Prologue* to her *Tale*. In a chapter “Mainly on Jane Austen,” Derek Brewer addresses medieval antecedents like the Loathly Lady to the modern Cinderella story he sees in Anne Elliott, but does not bring in the Wife of Bath.

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