The Anthology of Babel

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Published by Punctum Books

Simon, Ed, et al.
The Anthology of Babel.

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“All My Heroines Must Like Him”: Circumscribing the Spouse in Jane Austen’s *Plan of a Husband*

Tom Zille

Ever since the publication of J.E. Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1869, literary critics have been intrigued by the fact that the inventor of so many a subversive marriage plot herself remained unmarried throughout her life. The recent rediscovery of Austen’s lost *Plan of a Husband* has further stimulated this interest. Written in December 1815, around the time of her fortieth birthday, the text in many ways anticipates its natural counterpart, *Plan of a Novel* (1816).

In the *Plan of a Husband*, Austen develops a vision of the perfect spouse, “a man so abominably excellent that I must be determined to marry him,” as the letter to her niece Fanny Knight

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in which the Plan is embedded explains. The main intention of the text seems to have been to amuse Fanny, to whom it is also dedicated. As the description of this “abominably excellent” man unfolds, however, it quickly starts to contradict the jocular rhetoric of its paratext. The first part of the Plan is headed by a list of physical and character traits, outlining the fictional husband’s features and qualities in such an extremely specific way as to appear positively obsessive. The same holds true for the second half of the Plan, in which the narrative of an imagined visit to London is used to present an absurdly detailed account of the husband’s habits and actions, and the effect he has on each and every person the couple encounter on their way through streets and shops.

Following the rediscovery of the Plan, most critics have engaged with the text on the basis of biographical readings. The present essay, by contrast, will trace the obsessive undertones that are present throughout the whole of the Plan of a Husband in order to argue that it is best understood as a mock-autobiographical experiment turned literary project. An examination of passages from both parts of the Plan as well as the letter that frames it will show that the way in which Austen conceives of her ideal husband resembles the construction of a literary character more than anything else. Freed from the necessity of embedding this character in a continuous narrative, the writer embarks on a literary experiment that is strongly reminiscent of her juvenilia. The essay will also look at some of the connections and influences between the Plan and Austen’s novels, Persuasion in particular. Finally, it will consider the exaggeratedly prescriptive tone of the Plan of a Husband in relation to Austen’s characteristic use of irony. In doing all this, it hopes to make a contribution

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2 Plan, 342.
3 Sid Omen tells me that his upcoming paper, “Spenser–Sidney–Austen: The Petrarchan Tradition in Plan of a Husband” will examine hitherto unknown traces of the Petrarchan blazon in Austen’s text; while the present essay proposes an altogether different interpretation, the interested reader would do well to attend Sid’s presentation at the Fourteenth International Colloquium on Literary Influence, to be held in Boston, MA, in October of 2019.
not only to a better understanding, but to the canonization of this undeservedly forgotten literary masterpiece as well.

The Paratext

The Plan of a Husband is contained in a long letter Austen wrote to her niece Fanny in December 1815, shortly before Christmas. Unlike their usual correspondence, the letter starts not with an acknowledgement of recent correspondence or an account of family events, but directly introduces the Plan:

[...] — I have the shameless pleasure of also sending you a perfectly new peice [sic] of Perfection. Recovering from my little cold, I amused myself by composing these very serious lines, my Plan of a Husband; I think it is very clever, & you must think it very amusing at least.⁴

Much of this introduction is devoted to a prefaceatory apology of the project. Austen cautiously hopes that her niece “will not think me too presumptuous in venturing upon such an enterprise — yet I believe [sic] you will agree that ladies are always the best judges of men.”⁵ Judgment is indeed a recurring motif of the Plan, and it is invariably the author-narrator herself who fills this role.⁶ The introductory paragraphs closes with the proclamation: “All my Heroines must like him.”⁷ Pointing to the fictional nature of the husband in a way that would already seem to strongly discourage biographical readings, this is only the first

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⁴ Plan, 342.
⁶ While some critics (esp. Dott, “Jane Austen’s Lost Text”) have argued that since the Plan is embedded in regular correspondence, its speaker must be Austen herself, it seems more adequate — especially if we regard the text as literary to at least some extent — to conceive of the speaker as a blend of author and conventional narrator. Hence, in this essay, the voice of the Plan will consistently be referred to as the “author-narrator.”
⁷ Plan, 342.
of many instances in the text in which the subject of the Plan is clearly conceived of as a literary character.

The layout of the manuscript letter as a whole provides some evidence of how highly Austen rated this product of her imagination. The Plan itself starts on a fresh page, which leaves the second half of the letter’s first page blank, an almost singular instance of deliberate wastefulness on Austen’s part. In fact, the Plan can in many regards be treated as an entirely separate text, even though the occasional “you” in the text is usually interpreted as directly addressing the intended reader, Fanny Knight.8 While the paratext covers only the first half manuscript page of the letter, the Plan is a full three and a half pages long.

Biographical Readings

A complete absence of reliable evidence notwithstanding, a number of critics have entertained speculations about the Plan’s supposed background in Austen’s biography. The leading theory interprets the text as a “history” of Austen’s relationship with Tom Lefroy — no less than the long-lost key to her adolescent love life, or at least a “literary rendering” of the same.9 The majority of these studies rely on what meagre information about these relationships J.E. Austen Leigh’s Memoir yields: “In her youth, she had declined the addresses of a gentleman who had the recommendations of good character, and connections, and position in life, of everything, in fact, except the subtle power of touching her heart.” Austen Leigh also relates the even vaguer story of an acquaintance between the Austen sisters and “a gentleman, whose charm of person, mind, and manners was such that Cassandra thought him worthy to possess and likely to win

8 Dott, “Jane Austen’s Lost Text.”
her sister’s love,” an acquaintance of which, however, nothing ever became.¹⁰

Djane Dott has pointed out that Austen conceived of the Plan on a momentous date: It was written almost exactly twenty years after her youthful infatuation with Tom Lefroy. In 1795, he and Austen had flirted with each other at Ashe Rectory — in a letter dated January 9, 1796, she described him as “a very gentleman-like, good-looking, pleasant young man” —;¹¹ in 1815, Austen put pen to paper to compose her outline of a perfect husband.¹² One might add that this was also shortly after she had begun work on Persuasion — a novel, among other things, about the regret over an unfulfilled relationship.

All this notwithstanding, there are numerous arguments that refute this logic, only one of which shall be discussed in greater detail here. Evidence may be gleaned from the very letter in which Austen praises Lefroy: “[W]e received a visit from Mr. Tom Lefroy and his cousin George. The latter is really very well-behaved now; and as for the other, he has but one fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove — it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light.”¹³

It seems surprising that critics should fail to recognize the significance of this passage. The “one fault” mentioned here is a grave one indeed — at least in Austen’s eyes, whose fondness of heavy coats cannot possibly be overestimated. Eileen Kalvini has noted that Austen’s heroines all prefer men in heavy coats; she even goes so far as to say that in the realm of male attire, heavy coats in these novels “certainly rank as the garments with the greatest pulling power.”¹⁴ Prime examples can be found in

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¹³ Letters, 2 (original emphasis).
Northanger Abbey, the heroine of which loves a man who on occasion makes an entrance by coming “booted and great coated into the room” where she sits, while Catherine Morland herself admiringly thinks that “the innumerable capes of his great coat looked so becomingly important!” To Austen, the fact that Tom Lefroy’s coat was “too light” would indubitably have marked him as too light a suitor himself. As we shall see, moreover, the husband of the Plan is anything but a light-coated man.

Last but not least, readings which interpret the Plan as a melancholy attempt at recapturing the experience of a past love will be unable to account for its comic elements. As a recent critic put it, “the tone of the Plan of a Husband is not primarily wistful, but playful.” This text does not look back at any of Austen’s early suitors, but painstakingly constructs a new, better one.

The Outline of a Character

In her seminal study, The Construction of Literary Characters, Firey Lee Dread develops the concept of “obsessive characterization.” Her theory assumes that “[g]enerally speaking, the care which a novelist lavishes on a particular character is directly proportional to their sense of attachment to, sometimes identification with, that same character.” According to Dread, “obsessive characterization” often relies on long, overly specific lists of attributes and qualities associated with a particular character and tends to be “repetitive in its attention to minute details.” Dread also links this to the issue of an author’s control over their characters: “When developing their fictional personnel, obses-

16 Ibid., 157.
19 Ibid., 45.
sive writers usually rely on reported speech rather than dialogue to rule out any chance of their characters’ turning out to be unruly.”

While Dread’s concept is quite—not to put too fine a point on it—obsessive itself, several of its key components can certainly be detected in the Plan of a Husband.

In Austen’s novels, characterization usually takes place through dialogue and direct action—“when it comes to showing versus telling, Austen is heavily in favour of the former.”

The letters, on the other hand, more commonly rely on reports and succinct descriptions of the writer’s friends and acquaintances. Stylistically, the Plan occupies a middle ground between the two; at the same time, its two parts lean towards different ends of the spectrum.

The first part of the Plan consists mainly of a list of required physical and character traits that covers almost two manuscript pages. The standards are not only exceedingly high, but extremely specific as well. Most of Austen’s heroines have either a rather simple or a rather vague idea of what they are looking for in a potential spouse. For instance, we learn of Catherine Morland that “her general notions of what men ought to be” are “unfixed.”

By stark contrast, the author-narrator of the Plan knows exactly what her husband, the “handsomest man of my acquaintance,” must look like.

The imaginary gentleman’s face has “not too red, nor too pale a look, but with just the right degree of colour in his complexion […] and a forehead two inches high.” He possesses “a most intelligent and animated eye” as well as, unsurprisingly, “the most becoming great coat you could imagine.” While many of the qualities contained in the list belong to the standard equipment

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21 Sootheana Randgras, “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. […] I will not allow books to prove any thing’; The Metafictional Gender Discourse in Jane Austen’s Persuasion,” in Discourse into Literature, ed. Col. Horatio Springfield (New Orleans: Mosaic, 2002), 38.
22 Austen, Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, 66.
23 Plan, 343.
24 Plan, 344.
of the desirable male in early nineteenth-century literature, the artful blend of physical and mental capacities is characteristic of Austen’s style in particular.\textsuperscript{25}

As for the husband’s other qualities: “His manners are affectionate, and thereby engage the affection of others.” His conduct “can only excite the greatest admiration.”\textsuperscript{26} This idea of reciprocity will become more important in the second part of the \textit{Plan}. Furthermore, his is “a sanguine temper joined with an earnest concern for worldly propriety.” He is “a most gallant man who moves with a natural grace.”\textsuperscript{27} Unusually, the description of the ideal husband makes no mention of his being a good, or even an adequate dancer — which, given the relevance attached to balls and dancing in Austen’s novels, might seem surprising; yet at the time of the \textit{Plan}’s composition, the dinner party had already begun to slowly usurp the social role of eighteenth-century entertainments such as the ball.\textsuperscript{28}

The list continues describing the husband as, among other things, “liberal but prudent,” “naturally fond of [...] company,” and possessing a “decided, steady manner.”\textsuperscript{29} It does by no means limit itself to qualities of character and manner; as a matter of course, the man described here “is of consequence wherever he dwells,” and by his social status “commands the respect of everybody in the world.” There appears to be only one (perhaps unavoidable) limitation to his greatness: the husband of the \textit{Plan} only has “a Mind almost as strong as my own.”\textsuperscript{30} This playful qualification marks the first instance in which the author-narrator explicitly refers to herself. While the format of the exercise naturally invites an almost exclusive focus on the husband, es-

\textsuperscript{25} See R. Merta Chaplawn, “Jane Austen’s Ideal of Beauty,” \textit{Proceedings of the Hampshire Philological Society} 34 (1921): 468–77, at 469, who takes the metaleptic “intelligent eye” as the starting point of her investigation.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Plan}, 344.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Plan}, 345.

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Kalvini, “Formen von Männlichkeit,” 121.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Plan}, 346.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Plan}, 348 (original emphasis).
pecially later parts of the text tend to increasingly emphasize the relation between the two spouses.

A further, decidedly unusual quality of Austen’s would-be husband is that he plays the pianoforte “as well as, nay, better than any accomplished young lady.” In addition to this, he has “the pleasantest singing voice imaginable.” While this combination is by no means unique among literary descriptions of gentlemen in this period, in the context of Austen’s novels it is a thoroughly eccentric characteristic. Leaving aside the issue of biographical readings, this is one of numerous elements of the description that also suggest the husband of the Plan was not inspired by, or derived from, any of the heroes of her novels. In fact, there is quite a strong discrepancy between the kind of man with whom Austen’s heroines are supposed to experience marital bliss and the spouse she envisages for herself. As Snatij Tirić-Anker puts it in her recent monograph:

The “perfect husband” in the Plan is […] unlike Austen’s heroines’ choices, constructed with a care that goes beyond anything we find in her novels. Whereas each of the young men in her published works has a series of obvious character flaws that both make them human and underline the compromising nature of marriage, the husband she “imagines” for herself is both physically and character-wise infallible, at least according to Austen’s standards.

This becomes most evident towards the end of her rundown of the husband’s qualities. It concludes with the observation that he is, “in short, all that a man should be.” If further proof of this

31 Plan, 348.
34 Plan, 350.
figure’s fictional nature were needed, this would be it. Moreover, we can detect a note of mock-exasperation attached to the modal verb here, a reminder that the text has a familial addressee at a marriageable age, the author’s niece.

As mentioned before, the complete list (less of a quarter of which has been quoted here) makes up almost half of the whole text. Despite the great lexical variety and stylistic accomplishment Austen displays, the physical characterization seems obsessively detailed to the point of absurdity, especially in contrast to the comparatively succinct descriptions of gentlemen’s qualities and features in the novels. At the same time, we encounter a narrator no longer bound by the limits a conventional narrative would impose on characterization, and Austen exploits that freedom to its fullest extent. While the second part of the Plan exhibits a completely different structure and style than the first, it is nevertheless characterized by this same tension.

The Narrative Turn

To some extent, the very title, *Plan of a Husband* suggests a text of a somewhat facetious nature, similar to Austen’s subsequent project, the *Plan of a Novel*. The title definitely points to the artificial construction of the husband, which from the outset puts him in a kind of ontological proximity to the fictional characters in Austen’s novels.

The second part of the *Plan* is characterized by a change of tense, and is framed in a different manner than the first. It comes under the subheading, “A Visit to London / interesting history, written by Jane Austen for the amusement of Miss Knight.” While at many points, this section of the text is again suggestive of Dread’s concept of “obsessive characterization,” its most noticeable feature is the increasingly narrative character of the text. Instead of listing attributes of her spouse, the author-narrator now lets his actions speak, in a sequence of scenes that

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revolve around the couple’s activities during a visit to the city. The issue of control becomes even more dominant now, with the detailed accounts of the verbal contributions made by the husband, and the overly precise depiction of the effect he has on each and every single person he and his wife encounter in the streets, shops, and theater they visit. Due perhaps to the use of the past tense, this part of the text in particular has attracted biographical readings, all of which, however, have remained unsatisfactory. The stylistic discrepancy between the way Austen reports on her activities and encounters in the extant letters and the idiosyncratic style of the *Plan* once more suggests that the latter is best understood as a literary experiment.

Virtually every person the couple encounter on their way through the streets “expressed their admiration of his figure” and “witnessed his general benevolence,” while on every occasion, the husband “spoke and acted exactly as he ought to,” in other words, without showing the slightest vanity with regard to his appearance. To the narrator, walking at his side provides “the most exquisite felicity.” While this introductory account is still quite vague, the “narrative” part of the *Plan* is characterized by a steady move from the general towards the specific. One of the first scenes in which this becomes noticeable involves an extremely detailed description of a visit to a shop where the author-narrator purchases a new bonnet, accompanied by a long conversation (in reported speech) between her and the adoring husband. Among other experiences, the author-narrator also describes a visit to a London theater, a scene that would be very difficult indeed to relate to a concrete biographical background:

> We had a private box at the theatre, where we talked of his recent promotion to Captain, and he amused me with stories of his adventures at sea, while we paid scarcely any attention to the amusing scenes acted out in front of us. He would

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37 *Plan*, 352.
38 *Plan*, 353.
not cease giving me new proofs of love at every occasion, by laughing heartily at every witty comment I made, professing his due admiration of my cap, and generally being attentive and entertaining. — He talked wit all night.  

The reference to the husband’s “adventures at sea” also exemplifies the way Austen’s preoccupation with naval matters bled into her texts around the time she was working on *Persuasion*. The theater scene moreover contains what Messler in her comment has called “the single most remarkable sentence in the whole of the *Plan of a Husband*.” Speaking of the way fellow audience members watch the couple’s behaviour in their private box, the author-narrator vouches “for their beleiving [sic] we were flirt ing shamelessly; and why indeed should matrimony be allowed to put an end to flirting?” In the context of Fanny Knight’s recurrent plans to marry, which Austen’s letters regularly comment upon, this provocatively unconventional statement can also be read as a kind of tongue-in-cheek advice to the much younger woman.

The “Visit to London” turns fully narrative in its last paragraphs. The husband is now almost exclusively characterized by his words and actions, in scenes that continue the trend towards greater specificity in all descriptions. One of the most remarkable of these passages is the one in which, after the couple have left the theater, husband and wife board the carriage that will drive them back home:

He handed me into the carriage with his usual grace, and glancing—as is his wont—towards my foot as to be perfectly sure I should not stumble and fall;—all in the most decorous manner you can imagine. Once we had taken our seats, he beg’d that I should read to him after dinner, the Lady of the Lake we both find very agreeable. The beauty of my

40 *Plan*, 363.
41 *Plan*, 355.
reading is so gratifying to him, etc. I should mention that my husband addresses me always by my name, and indeed I would never suffer a My Dear or some similarly unfeeling denomination.\footnote{Plan, 356–57. The Lady of the Lake is also mentioned in Persuasion, 100.}

The overall prescriptive tone and uncharacteristic verbosity of the final passages — all of which read like the above — mark them out as perfect instances of “obsessive characterization.” While at its outset, the “Visit to London” relies on somewhat general notions of perfect male behavior, a trend towards the more specific and anecdotal continues until at its end, the Plan of a Husband comes full circle, in narrative passages that recall the obsessively detailed lists of character traits at the text’s beginning.

The Question of Irony

Given Austen’s reputation as a great ironist, it should come as no surprise that ever since the Plan’s rediscovery, critics have debated whether its intention was serious or ironic, with the majority favoring the latter interpretation.\footnote{Cf. e.g. Tirić-Anker, who believes that the text’s “irony and cynical undertone […] make it obvious that Austen imagines a […] creature […] that, even if brought to life from the pages of her manuscript, would remain an empty cadaver controlled by her” (Reclaiming Spinsterhood and Lesbianism, 204).} As we have seen, the author-narrator of the text obsessively paints a picture of perfection — yet to Austen herself, the concept of personal perfection was always a highly dubious one.

In Sense and Sensibility, Marianne Dashwood complains that “the more I know of the world, the more I am convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!”\footnote{Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 18.} The Plan, of course, requires infinitely more of its husband than Marianne would ever dare to ask. The “piece of Perfection” which Austen’s prefatory announcement in the let-
ter promises is exactly what the text sets out to create.\textsuperscript{45} Yet this very formula recalls statements of the writer’s that bespeak little attachment to that very concept. In a letter to Fanny dated November 18–20, 1814, Austen had mockingly promised that

[t]here are such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thousand, as the Creature You & I should think perfection, where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart & Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own County.\textsuperscript{46}

Gary Hillinspur has proposed passages like this one “are tinged with regret over the perfect husband Austen herself never had.”\textsuperscript{47} Yet firstly, the deliberately overblown rhetoric clearly marks this as a facetious remark, and secondly, only two and a half years later, a letter to the same addressee would include the passing remark, “pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked.”\textsuperscript{48} The “Plan of a Novel,” Austen’s other return to the style of her juvenilia written in 1816, as ironically as desultorily would introduce its hero as “all perfection of course.”\textsuperscript{49}

All this strongly suggests that the Plan was at least partly ironic in its intent. And even if we look beyond the broad issue of “perfection,” there are a few obviously ironic passages in the text. Its first part, for instance, among other things describes the husband as “an officer of the navy […] with ten or twenty thousand pounds a year; and the son of a priest, like the great

\textsuperscript{45} Plan, 342.

\textsuperscript{46} Letters, 292.


\textsuperscript{48} Letter to Fanny Knight, March 23–25, 1817 (Letters, 350).

Nelson.” The fact that Austen was far from sharing in her ages’ adoration of Nelson can be gathered from a letter to her sister Cassandra, in which she complains that she is “tired of Lives of Nelson, being that I never read any.”

Not infrequently, however, the irony of passages like this one are in clash with the overall serious tone of the text. It seems most adequate, therefore, to regard the *Plan of a Husband* as a serious literary experiment infused with, but not solely determined by, Austen’s characteristic use of irony. The “obsessive characterization” that runs through the text certainly relies on an overblown rhetoric, sometimes to comic effect. At the same time, it betrays the author’s deep attachment to the issue discussed. There is no evidence to suggest that Austen was tackling sorrow over a past or unfulfilled relationship, but the *Plan* is nevertheless a genuine attempt at fashioning an ideal husband at least in theory. Features such as the two-page long list of character traits and personal features demonstrate that at points, this attempt developed a dynamic of its own.

**Conclusion**

As this brief study of Austen’s *Plan of a Husband* has demonstrated, the widespread biographical readings of this text can once and for all be dismissed. In her letter to Fanny Knight, Austen does not look back wistfully on any of the light-coated men of her past. When the author asserts that “all [her] heroines must like him,” she likens the husband more to his equally fictional counterparts in the novels. Yet the man introduced here is more impressive than Mr. Darcy and Captain Frederick Wentworth combined (and, one might add, he wears a heavier coat than either of them). What might indeed have once been intended to become a mock-autobiographical project quickly

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50 *Plan*, 347.
51 October 11--12, 1813 (*Letters*, 245).
52 *Plan*, 342.
turns into an exercise in rigidly controlled fiction that goes beyond anything we encounter in the novels.

Using Dread’s concept of “obsessive characterization,” it has been shown that the process in which the author-narrator of the *Plan* describes the husband in both parts of the text is characterized by an extreme attention to minute details, a propensity for drawing the character’s outlines a little too sharp, and an overall prescriptive tone. The husband’s many minor and major perfections notwithstanding, the reader is never meant to forget who is in control of this experiment; the man described will only ever have “a Mind almost as strong as my own.”

When read in conjunction with its paratext, the *Plan* appears as a remarkably self-aware text. If Marianne Dashwood says, “I require so much!” the author of the *Plan of a Husband* has discovered that the only way to be sure a husband meets all the necessary requirements is to leave nothing to chance — no detail of his person and character, nor even the way he will behave in any given situation. The fact that this literary self-indulgence turns out everything but trivial is due to the literary genius of its creator. It is high time that this text take its rightful place among the oeuvre of Jane Austen.

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53 *Plan*, 348.
Bibliography

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


