

Capturing the Queen: Jane Austen's Pedagogy of Playful Reading

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Speaking to the eighteenth-century's embrace of play as a popular approach to educating youth, Walter Scott bitterly complains in the opening pages of his novel *Waverley* (1814) that "the history of England is now reduced to a game at cards" and he cautions that those "who learn history by the cards" will "prefer the means to the end." The teenage Jane Austen certainly did. In her juvenilia piece *The History of England* (1791), she gleefully allows playful "means" to thwart disciplinary "ends" as the line between fact and fiction, study and play breaks down under the ludic (and often ludicrous) force of Britain's squabbling, crown-grabbing royals.

Traditionally, Austen's short history is read as satirical revenge on the tedious and politically partial schoolroom histories that she, her siblings, and her fellow young British peers were forced to read and memorize; in other words, she had a bit of fun with Oliver Goldsmith by revising English history in light of her own pronounced bias for the Stuarts. This paper argues that Austen does much more than play with history. Rather, in this text, she identifies an inherent affinity between reading and playing. Throughout *History of England*, Austen exposes the complicated forms of play—between reader and writer, history and politics, indeterminate reality and narrative cogency—that historiography necessarily includes, requires, and effaces. And the stakes, Austen says, couldn't be higher since historiography, during the eighteenth century, provided one of the key disciplinary training grounds where British children learned to become British citizens. Given such high stakes for the genre, Austen's history tries to elicit a more diagnostic reader, one who detects, considers, resists, anticipates, and participates in response to the historian.

This paper's argument is twofold: first, recognizing the elements of play already at work in reading, particularly in reading history, Austen structures her approach to historiography through a set of strategies and languages associated with play, which she borrows from the drawing room and the school room, including charades, puzzles, board games, and cards. Conflating real royal figures like Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots with royal token figures like chess pieces and face-cards, and highlighting the "rules" of genre by which historians and readers tacitly agree to play (including anachronism, invention, and revision), Austen disrupts the conventions of "real solemn history" (as she would later call it in *Northanger Abbey*) and tosses her reader into a topsy-turvy game full of detection, puzzling, and strategic maneuvering. Second, that such maneuvering ultimately works throughout the text to unsettle an assumed masculine privilege to civic agency and, thus, lays bare the genre's complex machinations for creating the modern (male) national subject.

Long before Benedict Anderson's articulation of the role of imagination in community, or Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial attention to the surreptitious work of narration, young Austen proposed her own theory regarding the way discursive, imaginative networks produce meaningful national constructions. Working at the very heart of such a network—the genre of historiography—Austen's *History of England* imagines (or perhaps remembers) a civic agency for Britain's women. Strikingly, in a literary age characterized by the didactic, Austen demonstrates herself more interested in the pedagogic, teaching readers *how* to think instead of what to think. Put another way, teenage Austen might have (anachronistically) told grouchy Walter Scott that children *must* learn history "by the cards," for the "means" of doing so have far greater civic consequence than the supposed "ends."