

3-31-2010

Zombies, Sea-Monsters and Vampires: Jane Austen Flirts with the Horror Genre

Christopher Wilkes
Pacific University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/jasc>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkes, Christopher, "Zombies, Sea-Monsters and Vampires: Jane Austen Flirts with the Horror Genre" (2010). *Jane Austen Studies Center*. 2.
<http://commons.pacificu.edu/jasc/2>

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jane Austen Studies Center by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

Zombies, Sea-Monsters and Vampires: Jane Austen Flirts with the Horror Genre

Description

Notes for a panel at Pacific University.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

Rights

Terms of use for work posted in CommonKnowledge.

**Zombies, Sea-Monsters and Vampires:
Jane flirts with the Horror Genre.
A Polemic.
Chris Wilkes**

Notes for a Panel at Pacific University

Wednesday, 7.00- 8.30 p.m., Library Conference Room, March 31, 2010.

Hosted by the English Club for Women's History Month.

In these brief remarks, I want to develop a sociological take on the recent intervention by several authors in Austen-land who have as their common interest attempts to write novels that mix the Austen oeuvre with various forms of the horror genre. I'm interested in three related issues. *First*, what is it about Jane Austen's writings, apart from simple market-based greed, that attracts this new interest? *Second*, what has been the reaction to these writings from Janeites and others. *Third*, what does this phenomenon say about the present state of our mass culture?

1. Why Start in the First Place¹ : The Market Rules. Horror and Motivation. At first take, and probably the last, it seems like a really silly Hollywood idea with no substance whatever, except to make money. For example, here's what the initiators of the P&P and Zombies novel said:

[Rekulak] called me one day, out of the blue, very excitedly, and he said, "all I have is this title, and I can't stop thinking about this title. And he said: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. For whatever reason, it just struck me as the most brilliant thing I'd ever heard ... According to the author, the original text of the novel was well-suited for use as a zombie horror story:

'You have this fiercely independent heroine, you have this dashing heroic gentleman, you have a militia camped out for seemingly no reason whatsoever nearby, and people are always walking here and there and taking carriage rides here and there . . . It was just ripe for gore and senseless violence. From my perspective anyway.'²

In early 2009, awareness of the forthcoming novel rose due to attention from Internet bloggers, newspaper articles, National Public Radio, and even on TWiT's MacBreak Weekly Podcast. In response, the publisher increased the initial print run from 12,000 to 60,000 copies, and moved the publication date to April 1st.

Another author, Michael Thomas Ford³ says exactly the same cynical, market-driven thing about the source of motivation for writing in this genre :

"I wasn't a rabid Austen fan," said Michael Thomas Ford, the author of the upcoming vampire series. "One day I was talking to my agent about the publishing industry and one of us said, 'You know, the only thing selling right now is Jane Austen and vampires. We could do this book and call it *Jane Austen Sucks*.'"⁴

In short, some of the most brilliant minds of our generation, people who are so bright that their knowledge defies understanding, have decided to take us for a ride, to 'game' us, to sell us more books, and feel terribly

¹ Seth Graham-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Quirk Books, Los Angeles, 2009; Jane Bites Back, Michael Thomas Ford, New York, Ballantyne, 2010, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, Steve Hockensmith and Patrick Arrasmith, Quirk, San Francisco, 2010; *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, Quirk, San Francisco, 2009, among others.

² Wikipedia, *Pride and Prejudice and the Zombies*.

³ This is what he says about himself at his blog : "I am lazy and ill-tempered. My favorite pastimes include scuba diving in cold water, napping, tarantulas, photography, more napping, chasing the dogs around, horror films, avoiding writing, and getting inked." (mtford.blogspot.com/). He sells himself short. He knows a lot about how to make money as well. Of course, it's all terrifically funny.

⁴ Taken from www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-03-31/monsters-vs-jane-austen/2/.

clever about the whole thing. Agents and publishers, not to mention talk-show hosts, magazines, indeed, the whole cultural apparatus, are in love again.

2. The Reaction to the Books.

Here I pull out some themes that speak to the social reaction to the books. The first reaction is from Janeites, who are divided down the middle. Some think it's hilarious, and an entertaining addition to the canon. Others think it's the worse thing since Austen died, and can't bear it. Yet others sneer at the way the *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* book rips Austen's original off so completely that it's guilty of the worst kind of plagiarism.

Second, could it be that there's the faintest whiff of misogyny in all this? There's a broad sentiment in the blogs from women contributors that 'guy-friends' are obsessed with zombies, and that this new genre allows a male invasion of a predominantly female environment. The invasion is extremely violent, and is very much celebrated by commentators and writers alike. Writers cannot wait to tell you how many pints of blood are splattered on the chandeliers, how many brains are being eaten, and how much blood is being sucked out of the main characters of the new novels. Most of the writers in the genre are male, most of the vampire/zombie crowd are male, and the proposed video game that is being developed as we speak around the P&P Zombie boom (soon to be a film) falls very much into the male-dominated, violence-obsessed game culture of teenage males. Doubtless I am overstating the case. It's just a thought.

Third, there's the reaction of the publishing and media world. For them, it's just a money maker. It hardly matters what the content of the book is, as long as it boosts sales, gets to the New York Times best-seller list, rides the wave at Amazon. This is the kind of 'sell-your-mother-for-a-pound/dollar' sort of thinking that penetrates the phenomenon, and it will endure until the money goes out of this market and into the next cultural wave.

3. The Culture

Modern mass culture has been variously referred to as a trash culture⁵, a garbage heap of bad ideas, an elaborate marketing strategy to force us to buy even more, and gather yet more debt about our ears. We all live in a culture that is unavoidable, and inevitably it sells to us all the time. Such a culture inevitably breeds cynicism; it enhances the power of bigotry, prejudice, violence and pleasure. It uses whatever mechanisms are available to carry out its mission of advancing the cause of late capitalism. It is an immensely amusing, creative, absorbing system, and we are all intrigued by it, absorbed into it, amused by it, won over by it, disgusted by it.

In 1985, Neil Postman wrote a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death; public discourse in the age of show business*⁶. He argued that Huxley was right in 'Brave New World' when he wrote that the public of the future would be addicted to amusement. Violence, of course, is terribly amusing, according to these new books. Death is hysterical, spewing brains and sucking blood a real laugh. Of course Austenites should not take themselves too seriously. There's nothing sacred about Austen's books, and they shouldn't be defended as if there's something untouchably fundamental at stake here. People will go on reading Austen for 200 more years, so perhaps none of this matters. In the meantime, the mass culture will go on laughing at everything. Better to distract people than face up to the real violence of the world, the deaths in Darfur, the disaster in Haiti, the 16,000 murders in the U.S. in 2008. What a laugh! The trouble is that the more violence we watch 'for a laugh', the more we 'joke' about violence, the more we become inured to the actual violence all around us, domestic violence, street violence, symbolic violence, violence against gays, violence against outsiders, violence aimed at people who don't think like us, violence in our politics and in our public discourse. And that may be no laughing matter.

So do these books matter in the end? I don't think so. Since the culture is already making use of these violent tropes everywhere we look, this addition makes little difference. In the meantime, people enjoy the books, money gets made, authors buy a second home, and publishers please their shareholders. It's business as usual.

⁵ The term was coined originally by Richard K. Simmon.

⁶ Viking, New York, 1985.