



Shades of Austen in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

JULIETTE WELLS

Juliette Wells, an assistant professor of English at Manhattanville College, is the author of several articles on Austen's novels and her cultural legacy; she also co-edited *The Brontës in the World of the Arts* (2008). She is working on a book project about appropriations of Austen in contemporary popular culture.

“Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?”

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room. (McEwan xi; *NA* 197-98)

THE PASSAGE FROM *Northanger Abbey* reproduced above appears as the epigraph to Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement*.¹ McEwan's decision to feature this Austen quotation has several effects. First, it encourages his readers to apply Henry Tilney's words to *Atonement* as well as to identify parallels between this novel and Austen's work more generally.² War looms over 1930s

England in *Atonement* as it did in Austen's own world, though the "atrocities" (NA 197) perpetrated in McEwan's novel, including rape and war crimes, are much more horrible than anything depicted by Austen. So, too, the consequences of the mistaken "suspicions" and misinterpreted "observations" of Briony Tallis, McEwan's young and over-imaginative heroine, which are far grimmer than those that result from Catherine Morland's erroneous conclusions. (Unlike General Tilney, who proves himself capable of extreme lack of consideration if not outright cruelty, the man whom Briony accuses is indeed innocent and is jailed as a result of her testimony.) The action of the first of *Atonement's* three main parts takes place at a country estate that is, despite the modernity of its construction, reminiscent of those at the center of Austen's novels. As in *Mansfield Park*, the young people's behavior in *Atonement* is affected by the absence of the father—in this case Jack Tallis, a government minister absorbed in concerns about the buildup to the second world war—and the retreat into illness of the mother, here a sufferer from migraines.

In addition, McEwan's choice of epigraph invites readers to consider more broadly what *Atonement*, which includes allusions to and pastiches of authors from throughout the English literary tradition, owes to Austen in particular.³ In interviews, McEwan himself has commented on this influence:

Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, was a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible things. For many, many years I've been thinking how I might devise a hero or heroine who could echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do it in writing—do it through storytelling, I should say. (Noakes and Reynolds 20)

To *Newsweek*, McEwan characterized his literary inspiration rather differently, mentioning that he referred to *Atonement* in his notebooks as "'my Jane Austen novel.' I didn't have *Northanger Abbey* or even *Mansfield Park* specifically in mind, but I did have a notion of a country house and of some discrepancies beneath the civilized surface" (Giles 62).

These interviews point us to two deeper levels on which to think about McEwan's use of Austen, levels that remain as yet unexplored in criticism. He has gone "a step further" than Austen, crucially, by making Briony a novelist who, like Austen herself, began taking her writing seriously at a young age. What McEwan shows us of Briony's youthful writing—a rhyming, melodra-

matic playlet—is not especially suggestive of Austen’s own juvenilia. Yet McEwan’s characterization of Briony as being precociously concerned with language and the trappings of professionalism is certainly reminiscent of Austen, as of the other “child writers” whose work has recently been illuminated by Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster.⁴

McEwan’s description of *Atonement* as his “Jane Austen novel” (Giles 62), together with his many references to the British literary tradition within the work, raises further questions, especially for those readers well acquainted with Austen. To borrow the words used by Harriet Margolis in another context, “what does the name ‘Jane Austen’ authorize?” (Margolis 22). Or, in other words, what does it mean for a male British author, born in 1948, winner of the Booker Prize, to ally himself with Austen? How does his claim of affinity differ from other such claims, especially those made by contemporary writers of popular fiction? How does *Atonement* affect our understanding of Austen’s literary legacy nearly two centuries after her death? Finally, how—if at all—do *Atonement*’s Austen allusions transfer to Joe Wright’s acclaimed film version of the novel, with which McEwan was closely involved? Underlying all these questions is Austen’s cultural legacy in our own era, derived from her writings as well as from the many adaptations of her work and even the projections of her “historical” self for a present-day popular audience. Indeed, for film viewers and readers of contemporary novels, these versions of Jane Austen may outweigh any sense of her identity derived from her writing.

TAKING AUSTEN “A STEP FURTHER”: BRIONY AS CHILD WRITER

The very first thing that we learn about Briony Tallis in *Atonement* is that she is a dedicated writer with a keen and informed concern for the presentation of her work. “The play—for which Briony had designed the posters, programs, and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch” (McEwan 3). With this first sentence of his novel, McEwan establishes the degree of Briony’s commitment to all aspects of her writing and its reception, a commitment on which he elaborates in the succeeding pages. So intense is Briony’s immersion in the process of writing that she will miss meals for it; McEwan later confirms that “Briony could not have been held back from her writing” (7). Briony’s control over the details of her play’s production, from publicity to ticket box, indicates both her familiarity with the conventions of the theater and the depth of her desire to take charge and im-

pose what McEwan subsequently calls her “love of order” (7). Briony’s determined preparation for her play, however, proves unequal to the pressure of outside events, and the performance she envisions does not come to pass.

Even apart from the content of Briony’s play, what she shares with child writers from Austen forward is apparent. Like Austen and her siblings, whose theatricals at Steventon are well known,⁵ Briony occupies—or at least has created for herself—a world in which a beloved brother’s return from college is celebrated by the presentation of a homemade play, intended to be acted by family members (in this case, Briony’s cousins from the North, who are fleeing the fallout of their parents’ divorce). Carol Shields has speculated that Austen’s youthful literary productions must have focused attention on her that would otherwise have been difficult to attract in her “large and gifted household” (29–30). Though Briony’s family is smaller than Austen’s, as the much-younger sibling she too seeks the notice and the appreciation of her family circle. McEwan makes clear the degree to which Briony craves this approbation: having taken her just-finished play to her mother, Briony “studie[s] her mother’s face for every trace of shifting emotion” while she reads it and requests permission to quote her mother’s judgment—“stupendous”—on one of the posters she has made (4). Not all the response that Briony receives from her family is as encouraging: her older sister Cecilia, who has recently graduated from Cambridge with a degree in literature, mocks Briony by suggesting that “each bound story [should be] catalogued and placed on the library shelves, between Rabindranath Tagore and Quintus Tertullian” (7).

While Briony senses and decides to “ignore” (7) her sister’s disdain, she does indulge fantasies of being admired one day as an author rivaling those in her family’s collection. “[M]y younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her,” she imagines her brother one day “boasting” to his friends (4). She prepares for her future vocation and fame not only by writing and daydreaming but by rendering her stories in a polished form: she would “punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, [and] paint or draw the cover” before taking each one “to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home” (6). Such care with imitating the appearance of published works recalls the efforts made by Austen and other nineteenth-century child writers, perhaps especially the Brontës, who illustrated their stories and mimicked typography with their penmanship. Austen, we know, divided even short tales into chapters and included tables of contents as well as dedications in her three manuscript volumes; Cassandra’s drawings accompany her sister’s *History of England*.⁶

Park Honan has contended that Austen's juvenilia allowed her not only to work through her reactions to her own reading but also "to reconcile herself to attitudes she did not like without taking positions her family might oppose" (70). Many nineteenth-century child writers, according to Christine Alexander, sought to impose order through their writing on worlds more disturbing and chaotic than the one in which Austen grew up: "Writing," explains Alexander, "allows even the neglected child some ability to control the world, or at least to negotiate an unhappy family situation" ("Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia" 22). Moreover, asserts Alexander, such writing permitted young people to assume "a power they would not otherwise have in a world where children were frequently denied quite basic human rights, let alone a voice" (11). The psychological importance to Briony of her writing aligns exactly with Alexander's theories. I have already mentioned some ways in which Briony's plans for her play fulfilled her need to exert control over her environment; McEwan emphasizes too that the process of writing afforded Briony the gratification of creating a "world . . . in five pages" in which she could exercise her own "principles of justice" (7).

What, then, of the content of Briony's play? *The Trials of Arabella* can be seen on one level as a microcosm of *Atonement* itself: as McEwan's narrator describes it, the play is "[a]t some moments chilling, at others desperately sad" and tells "a tale of the heart" (3), much like this novel. The play's other elements, however, pay tribute to Briony's own reading: she weaves in "reckless passion," "a prince in disguise," and several sudden reversals of fortune, before ending with marriage as a deserved reward (3). Versions of such elements appear as well in Austen's juvenilia, although not in any of three tiny dramas that remain to us. Generically, *The Trials of Arabella* is, McEwan tells us, "a melodrama, [although] its author had yet to hear the term" (8). Austen, in contrast, designated all of her plays as comedies: "The Visit: A Comedy in 2 Acts" (*MW* 49-54); "The Mystery: An Unfinished Comedy" (55-57), and "The first Act of a Comedy" (172-74). These differences in content between Briony's composition and those of Austen recall Margaret Anne Doody's claim that Austen's juvenilia are "remarkably distinct" from the works of other youthful writers: "She never catches us with unconscious slippage on her part—instead, her satiric and comic vision remains steady; it is we who blink" (106).

In terms of language, what little we are given of Briony's play's text during its abortive rehearsals in chapter one bears out McEwan's declaration that her "long afternoons . . . browsing through dictionary and thesaurus" have led her to "constructions that were inept, but hauntingly so" (6). The play's prologue begins:

This is the tale of spontaneous Arabella
Who ran off with an extrinsic fellow.
It grieved her parents to see their firstborn
Evanescence from her home to go to Eastbourne
Without permission . . . (15-16)

Each of Briony's dictionary words here (spontaneous, extrinsic, evanesce) is obviously not quite right, but also not fully wrong: a delicate balance that, like McEwan's phrase "inept, but hauntingly so," indicates fundamental appreciation of this youthful writer's powers. A comparable attitude of respect for juvenilia has been called for by Alexander, as she, together with McMaster, establishes parameters for scholarly work on these texts: she cautions readers both against condemning "errors or immature features (spelling mistakes, infelicities of style, language and the like)" and against maintaining the "illogical assumption that adult endeavours are somehow intrinsically 'better' than youthful ones" ("Defining and Representing" 72-73).

At the end of part three of *Atonement*, McEwan reveals to us that the adult Briony herself is the author of the narrative thus far. What we have read is her recreation of the events that have defined her life, as well as her effort at "atonement" for the crime she committed as a girl by falsely identifying a rapist. Thus we realize, belatedly, that the attitude towards Briony's youthful writings conveyed in chapter one is that of the now-successful writer herself, looking back on her earliest efforts. Knowing this, we reinterpret those efforts as an apprenticeship stage, one that demonstrates not mere precocity or out-sized ambition but the nascent talent of a woman who will indeed grow up to be a renowned author. From this perspective, furthermore, we view afresh what we now recognize as Briony's own appreciation of what her younger self achieved. Not for her the "prejudice against juvenilia" that, as Alexander asserts, is frequently displayed by authors who have reached adulthood, as well as by their editors and readers ("Defining and Representing" 73). In this respect, too, we sense behind the characterization of Briony a hint of Austen, who returned in later life to her manuscript volumes and whom we can easily imagine continuing to enjoy the early works that Doody has called "very polished, disconcertingly sophisticated" (103).

Briony's reconsideration of her juvenilia takes place not only in the creation of her narrative but in a fresh encounter with *The Trials of Arabella*, as she recounts in the first person in the novel's coda, titled "London, 1999." A surprise treat for Briony's seventy-seventh birthday⁷ that features the acting of her youngest family members, the play's first-ever production takes place at

the Tallises' onetime home (now, in another nod to *Northanger Abbey*, "Tilney's Hotel" [342]). The first lines of her play's prologue strike the elderly Briony with "a ring of the supernatural," one that instantly conjures her own younger self: "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl" (346). Indeed, Briony's recovered sense of this self exceeds any familiarity with the play's text itself: "I knew the words were mine," she comments, "but I barely remembered them" (347). She remarks as well on her wonder at the performance's speed: "In less than ten minutes it was over. In memory distorted by a child's sense of time, it had always seemed the length of a Shakespeare play" (347).

Given the parallels McEwan has already implied between Briony and Austen as child writers, this final scene bears an additional charge, especially for those readers steeped in Austen's life and works. For us, it is poignant to envision Austen able to sit, as Briony does, among her extended family at the age of seventy-seven, enjoying the tribute due her after a long, successful career as a novelist and relishing as well the reminder of how much talent and determination she possessed in her early teens.

Though some might prefer the direct representations of "Jane Austen" as a character offered in recent novels and films,⁸ in my view McEwan's evocation of Austen through Briony gains in power because of its obliqueness. Fictionalized versions of Austen run the risk of distracting us with their poetic license, rather than leading us to think anew about her life, her writings, and her effect on us. By creating a character reminiscent of yet distinct from Austen, McEwan allows us to imagine for ourselves what Austen might have said, both in girlhood and maturity, about her youthful compositions.

"MY AUSTEN NOVEL": SOME THOUGHTS ON
AUSTEN'S LITERARY LEGACY

McEwan's evocation of Austen has consequences as well for both his literary reputation and—in the popular imagination at least—Austen's own. As Hermione Lee remarked in her review of it, *Atonement* "asks what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited and what it can do now. One of the things it can do, very subtly in McEwan's case, is to be androgynous. This is a novel written by a man acting the part of a woman writing, a 'male' subject, and there's nothing to distinguish between them" (qtd. in Childs 137). In his subsequent works, too, McEwan has explored creativity primarily through female characters. His novel *Saturday* (2005) emphasizes the talent of the young, newly-published poet Daisy Perowne rather than the established fame

of her grandfather and mentor, John Grammaticus. And in *Chesil Beach* (2007), the violinist Florence, not her husband Edward (a historian), occasions McEwan's discussions of artistry and the creative process.

Not only is *Atonement* a male-authored novel written in the voice of a woman writer, but its epigraph and McEwan's remarks in interviews identify a woman author as a central source of inspiration. Rather than make a broad, and to me dispiriting, observation about how unusual such acknowledgments are among contemporary male authors, I will focus instead on the rarity of McEwan's enlistment of Austen in particular. With the important exception of Austen-related films, many of which have had male directors, present-day creators who claim Austen as a model seem overwhelmingly to be women. I have addressed elsewhere, with some skepticism, the affinity to Austen declared by writers of "chick lit," all of whom are female (Wells). Lists of Austen sequels and Austen-inspired novels likewise turn up scarcely any men's names. That men do appreciatively read Austen we know from JASNA's membership, as well as from compilations of comments from her devotees.⁹ Mention of Austen in reviews and publishers' descriptions of new fiction, however, generally means only that the work in question features women characters, some humor, and romance, and is aimed at women readers.

By linking Austen to *Atonement* as he does, McEwan stakes a very different claim for our author. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that McEwan rescues Austen from the all-too-common assumption that she is merely a writer of light comedies from a feminine perspective and restores her, in the popular imagination, to her position as a central author of the English literary canon. Of course, in the realm of scholarship she has never been anywhere else.

In so doing, arguably McEwan consolidates his own position in that canon as well, a position that may not be so distant from Austen's. Recent critical appraisals of McEwan's work are remarkably suggestive of common ground with Austen. Dominic Head, for instance, credits McEwan (along with several of his male novelist peers) with having "resuscitated the link between morality and the novel for a whole generation" (1). In a formulation that in my view could apply quite well to *Mansfield Park*, Head contends that *Atonement* in particular "presents narrative fiction as having centrally *to do* with moral questions, without necessarily being able to *resolve* them" (160). Perhaps most crucially, Head remarks as well that

McEwan is one of those rare writers whose works have received both popular and critical acclaim. His novels grace the bestseller

lists, and he is well regarded by critics, both as a stylist and as a serious thinker about the function and capacities of narrative fiction. It is that bridge between notionally different readerships, the ability to make the serious popular, and the popular serious, that indicates McEwan's importance, as a writer who has helped reinvigorate thinking about the novel within and without academia. (2)

Such broad and crossover appeal is, and has always been, a primary quality of Austen's writing.

SUGGESTIONS OF AUSTEN IN JOE WRIGHT'S
ADAPTATION OF *ATONEMENT*

In our time, Austen's legacy manifests itself in films as well as novels, mostly through the many screen adaptations of her works. Joe Wright's 2007 film version of *Atonement* offers us a different view of how Austen's influence percolates through cinema, one that complements but does not reproduce McEwan's references to Austen in his novel.

Indeed, *Atonement* the film makes no explicit allusions to Austen at all. No one mentions *Northanger Abbey*, and even "Tilney's Hotel" does not appear: the conclusion of the film, rather than staging *The Trials of Arabella*, takes the form of a television interview with Briony, who is played in old age by Vanessa Redgrave. (Indeed, this final section represents one of the most substantial changes made to the film's plot, which otherwise, like its dialogue, hews quite close to the novel.) As the film opens, we see Briony typing and rehearsing her play, but nothing suggests an association with other youthful writers. Nor, very understandably, does the script include such passing references to Austen from the novel as McEwan's specification that Robbie Turner's shelves include, among other works, a "third-edition Jane Austen" (87).

Yet the film version of *Atonement* is nevertheless pervasively suggestive of Austen, thanks to its connections to two prior Austen-inspired films. *Atonement* is director Joe Wright's second feature-length film; the first was his 2005 *Pride & Prejudice*. Though the visual worlds and moods of these two films are miles apart, several common elements reinforce their affinity. Perhaps the most obvious is the casting of Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet in Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* and as Cecilia Tallis in *Atonement*. (For a perfect correspondence, she would have had to play Briony; but Briony is not the romantic lead of *Atonement*.) Knightley was nominated for the Best Actress Academy Award for her role in *Pride & Prejudice* and remains strongly associated with her incarnation of Elizabeth, especially by viewers too young to re-

member Jennifer Ehle's portrayal of this character in the 1995 BBC/A&E miniseries version. In the supporting cast, Brenda Blethyn, who played Mrs. Bennet in Wright's earlier film, returns in *Atonement* as the mother of Robbie Turner, the romantic lead. The musical score of *Atonement*, like that of *Pride & Prejudice*, was composed by Dario Marianelli and features pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet; a central theme for each score is derived from a repeatedly-struck note E, which cascades into a major chord for *Pride & Prejudice* and into a suitably menacing phrase for *Atonement*. Finally, Sarah Greenwood's production design and Jacqueline Durran's costume design for each film, while appropriately distinct in terms of period, underscore the shared importance to both stories of interior backdrops and of dress.¹⁰

The casting of *Atonement* supplies its link to a second Austen-related film as well. Just a few months before *Atonement* opened in theaters, James McAvoy, who stars as Robbie, appeared before audiences as Tom Lefroy, Jane Austen's love interest, in the biopic *Becoming Jane*. For viewers familiar with that film and Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, watching McAvoy's passionate on-screen romance with Knightley in *Atonement* is, at least on one level of association, like seeing Jane Austen's supposed lover united with Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine who arguably most embodies Austen's own wit and brilliance.

Unlike the connections to Austen's life and writings that McEwan constructs in his novel, the film version's hints of Austen remain in the realm of cinema. In other words, Wright alludes only to other Austen-related films, not to Austen's own words or experiences. Nevertheless, it is striking that Wright makes, in his own way, so much use of the links established by McEwan, which one might expect would not translate at all into a film adaptation.

The critical term "intertextuality" encompasses the two kinds of allusions I have discussed in this essay, those made by McEwan in his novel and those incorporated in Joe Wright's film adaptation. Ultimately, both *Atonement* the novel and *Atonement* the film demonstrate in different ways the power of thoughtful intertextual invocations of Austen. By taking an Austen passage as his epigraph, McEwan ensures that his reworking of her themes and the circumstances of her youthful authorship do not eclipse her actual words and, in a broader sense, her literary achievement. Wright's oblique evocation reminds us of how many layers of imagination separate us from Jane Austen as a historical figure and from the characters she originally created. To paraphrase Henry Tilney, both versions of *Atonement* encourage us to consider what ideas we have been admitting about Jane Austen.

NOTES

1. I have reproduced the passage as it appears in *Atonement*; its punctuation varies somewhat from Chapman's edition.
2. The fullest accounts of these connections have been made by Hidalgo and Finney, both of whom attend to the resonance of *Atonement*'s epigraph; Hidalgo also considers parallels in narrative technique. In addition, John Mullan has posited a link between the extreme summer heat that affects the action in the first part of *Atonement* and the heat wave that takes place in *Emma* (Childs 142).
3. As Childs has noted, "*Atonement* draws on the many precedents" of Austen, E. M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, Rosamond Lehmann, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf (130).
4. McMaster calls attention briefly to *Atonement*, noting the effects on Briony's "artistic vision" of the "erotic moment between adults" that she witnesses (57). McMaster is certainly correct that "[t]he child's stolen vision of adult sexuality, however disastrously misapplied, is an indispensable constituent of her creativity" (57). In this essay, I will concentrate not on *Atonement*'s intertwined thematic strands of sexuality, knowledge, and imagination but instead on other aspects of the presentation of the child writer.
5. See for instance Tomalin (31-32, 40-42, and 55-57).
6. Fergus has remarked that by "creating something very like a printed book, but for family circulation, Austen was typically having it both ways: treating her writing both privately, as a family entertainment, and yet seriously, 'publishing' her own collected works" (52-53).
7. Both the age McEwan has chosen for Briony and the tone of her writing in this final section suggest a connection with the British author P. D. James, who has claimed Austen as a model and a source of inspiration. *Time to Be in Earnest*, James's diary of the year between her seventy-seventh and seventy-eighth birthdays, was published in the U.K. in 1999, two years before *Atonement*; it contains a number of musings on Austen and prints as an appendix James's lecture for the 1998 AGM of the Jane Austen Society, "Emma Considered as a Detective Story."
8. In terms of novels, I am thinking in particular of Nancy Moser's *Just Jane: A Novel of Jane Austen's Life* (2007), a first-person account of Jane Austen in late girlhood and early adulthood, and Veronica Bennett's *Cassandra's Sister: Growing Up Jane Austen* (2007), which covers a similar span of Austen's life in a third-person narrative. What Austen felt, near the conclusion of her life, about her writings is explored in the films *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008).
9. See for instance those edited by Fullerton and Harbers, and Lane and Selwyn.
10. Another minor common element between these two films, which deserves mention only because of its prominence in commentary on Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, is the brief appearance of pigs.

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