

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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Jane Austen's Dirty Jokes

While folklorists, including Katherine Briggs, have asserted that Jane Austen's novels contain no folklore, Jill Heydt-Stevens and other Austen scholars have argued that Austen knowingly inserts obscene humor, puns, and riddles in Emma, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park. This paper is an effort to combat two notions: 1) an absence of obscene (folk) humor in upper classes, and 2) an absence of obscene folklore in "high" literature. Obscenity has been neglected in the "classics" of Western popular fiction. The lack of scholarship surrounding Austen's use of traditional bawdy humor is symptomatic of the now out-dated conception of "the folk" as rural, uneducated and lower class. While folklore scholars have pushed the boundaries of the identity of "the folk," few have tackled obscenity in "high" literature. In this paper I argue that Austen is drawing upon traditional obscene folklore of her class and of her day. In doing so, Austen employs an enduring and popular form of folk-speech—the dirty joke. I explore Austen's bawdy humor through a folkloristic lens, employing the works of Gershon Legman, Alan Dundes and Rayna Green. Contrary to previous critical opinion, I assert that Austen's novels contain a great deal of folklore, and that her bawdy humor can be directly traced to an oral tradition which included the upper classes. Explicating the connections of Austen's humor to bawdy folklore overturns the enduring popular ideas that Austen herself was a sheltered paragon of women's literature, "taste" and high culture, and that upper class communities have no folklore.

Acknowledging that Austen's bawdy humor has its roots in folklore and oral tradition opens up Austen's work to a further examination of the form and function of folklore of all types within Austen's works. This paper attempts to answer pertinent questions, including: With what intention does Austen employ oral tradition in the form of the dirty joke? How must popular critical views of Austen's attitudes and writings change in order to accommodate an understanding of Austen's use of obscene folklore? How might a clearer understanding of the functions of obscene folklore in Austen's fiction change a folkloristic view of her works? How ought obscenity, and obscene folklore in particular, to be conceived within "high" fiction? And finally, what forms of communication are open to "upper-class" communities?

Contemporary Austen scholarship bemoans the difficulty of understanding "Jane." This paper invites folklorists and Austen scholars to consider a hitherto unexplored side of the mysterious, masterful, and surprisingly bawdy, Jane Austen.