#### 8

#### Research Article

Nikolina Hatton\*

# A Tale of Two Pianos: Actants, Sociability, and Form in Jane Austen's *Emma*

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0012 Received August 21, 2018; accepted January 6, 2019

**Abstract:** This essay examines the materiality of the two pianofortes in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815). Rather than focusing on the piano's symbolic function—its cultural capital, for instance—this essay highlights how the physical qualities of the piano as an object enable specific plot and aesthetic effects within the novel. The instrument's conspicuousness—the continuous human attention that it demands—allows these two instruments to become objects of sustained discourse within the plot. However, in addition to affording certain narrative effects, the piano also functions as a site of interpretive ambiguity, as the object continues to call attention to itself even after its narrative fecundity has been allegedly resolved. By examining the novel's engagement with these pianos, this essay argues for a more open understanding of narrative agency—one that acknowledges the narrative generating and genre-undermining power of things.

Keywords: actor-network-theory, aesthetics, agency, narrative

Descriptions of interiors rarely appear in Austen's novels, and catalogues or collections of objects in the novels are almost non-existent. When these textual elements do appear, they are usually focalised through a specific character, as seen in the loving description of Fanny's schoolroom in *Mansfield Park* (1814) or Harriet's collection of "treasures" that remind her of Mr Elton in *Emma* (1815) (Hardy 149). In contrast to the "architectural approach" to interiors that Cynthia Wall argues became prevalent in the eighteenth century or the minute attention to historical setting in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Austen's lack of material signification can appear peculiar (Wall 543). However, this absence of material specificity and description does not mean that objects are not a key component of Austen's aesthetic enterprise; as I demonstrate in the following reading of *Emma*, material objects have a significant role to play in the novels as generators of narrative, even if they appear only rarely.

Austen's usage of plot-enhancing material objects may set her apart from some forms of eighteenth-century description, but her strategy is by no means unprecedented. While her novels are mostly lacking in the storage spaces identified by Miruna Stanica in early eighteenth-century fiction, Austen's objects, like the objects in these early novels, facilitate or, to use a design theory term recently appropriated by Caroline Levine to literary studies, *afford* certain narrative effects (Stanica, "Bundles, Trunks, Magazines" 521; Levine 6). In order for objects to operate in this way, it is necessary for these objects to be *materially motivated* in the novel: their materiality must be integrated into the causal workings of the plot. Often, objects in Austen's novels operate in this manner as they wield not just symbolic power but become integral tools or "actants" in her aesthetic repertoire. The nonhuman aspect of these objects, i.e. their ability to bring to the novel courses of action that would be impossible or unthinkable without them, strengthens the causal probability of the plot. Simultaneously, these objects, because they exist materially within the novel's fictional space, may gesture towards alternate readings of the novel's resolution, even when such readings are not discursively acknowledged.

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: Nikolina Hatton, University of Freiburg, E-mail: nikolinah@gmail.com

## **Materially Motivated Objects in Narrative**

While both Mieke Bal and Michael Riffaterre have drawn attention to the "narrative generating" potential of description (Bal 572; Cf. Riffaterre 282), Stanica focuses on the material objects of such descriptions specifically, noting that "in the picaresque and early novel tradition lists of objects introduce rival agents to human characters, which provide motives for action and propel the plot forward" ("Bundles, Trunks, Magazines" 526). Stanica's use of "rival agents" emphasises the active role of the inanimate object in the creation of the literary text; in recent years, such an interest in the work of the material has been fueled by the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour. Latour emphasises the role of the material nonhuman object in helping to constitute with humans "society" mutually. In Latour's ANT, any entity, human or nonhuman, can function as an *actant* because he expands the definition of agency to include "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (*Reassembling the Social* 71).

Latour's ANT allows for a reevaluation of the roles of inanimate objects in all aspects of society—including literature—and sees all cultural production as the result of an *assemblage* of the human and the nonhuman. In Latour's point of view, there is never an underlying social or symbolic system that is not also enabled by inanimate objects: "It is always things—and I now mean this last word literally—which, in practice, lend their 'steely' quality to the hapless 'society'" (68). Latour argues vehemently against an analytical approach that separates the social lives of humans from the world of inanimate materiality; instead "the prime mover of an action" becomes "a new, distributed, and nested series of practices whose sum may be possible to add up but only if we respect the mediating role of all the actants [humans and nonhumans] mobilized in the series" (*Pandora's Hope* 181).

Latour's work has been adapted by literary scholars interested in both how human and nonhuman networks are represented in literature and in how this broadened view of agency transforms understandings of literary production and form (Cf. Alworth; Bennett; Felski; Tischleder). In another essay, Stanica argues for applying Latour's ANT to the study of literary form, noting that eighteenth-century it-narratives function as narrative *actants*, as these object-delegates enable the human author to enact an impersonal and omniscient narrative voice before the naturalisation of nineteenth-century non-focalised narration (Stanica, "Portraits of Delegation" 238). Stanica's and others' applications of Latour suggest the insight that new materialist approaches can bring to the study of literary texts as they broaden the focus of interpretation to include the *work* of the nonhuman and in so doing question the centrality of the human. Tony Bennett writes that the new materialisms allow for

a singular-planar or flat ontology in which the real is understood as comprised by the interactions between varied assemblages whose operations and interactions generate significant transformative capacities through the combinatorial productivity of the heterogeneous elements (things, persons, technologies, texts, et cetera) they bring together. (259)

This "flat ontology" approach affords an understanding of the literary text as made up of assemblages of humans and nonhumans on both formal and representational levels.

When applied to the study of objects in Austen's novels, such an approach highlights the importance of inanimate objects in the construction of her narratives. Objects in Austen are significant both because of how they function within the society of her novels, as they enable sociability and foster neighbourly discourse, hospitality, et cetera, but they are also aesthetically important, as the object helps produce a narrative and strengthens the causal probability of the plot.

However, to speak of objects as "helpers" obscures these textual entities' independence. In Austen's novels, objects are not simply important for their symbolic value, but also for the effects that they have upon humans regardless of human intention. As I will demonstrate in a case study on the pianofortes in *Emma*, these materially motivated objects potentially destabilise generic norms by generating further "natural" causal relations that resist the artificiality of the marriage plot resolution. If objects sometimes surprise or disrupt the desires of characters within the novel, the same disruptive potential of the textually-mediated actant may affect the formal level as well. The *material motivatedness* of these objects ensures that, although not carefully described, their physical purposes are acknowledged and contribute to the

work as a whole. Once an object is dynamically invoked in the narrative, its existence and all its effects become significant, especially in a novel concerned with a realist illusion of probability—something very important to Austen's aesthetics.1

This leads one to the potential risks—and possibilities—of introducing materially motivated objects into a text; when not carefully employed, these material tools, as nonhuman delegates of the human user, may unmask the contrived nature of the fictional plot or draw attention to unresolved ambiguities within the novel.<sup>2</sup> Bill Brown draws attention to this potential when he writes about the excess and confrontation of the thing, that is, the tendency of material objects to flout their human users and the crisis of human meaning and control that this realisation precipitates ("Thing Theory" 3-4). He argues that, ordinarily, humans believe their material tools to be simply extensions of themselves: "We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts" (4). But this false belief is bound to fracture when the object—which Brown terms the *thing*—behaves contrarily to the human user's wishes.

While Latour's and Brown's approaches to materiality have sometimes been contrasted with one another,<sup>3</sup> they each highlight the mediating nature of the material world and the problem of viewing the work of the material as simply an extension of an all-powerful human agency. Latour notes how even textually mediated objects have a tendency to do more than their author wishes: "Their action is no doubt much more varied, their influence more ubiquitous, their effect much more ambiguous, their presence much more distributed than" the purposes and usages "granted to them by their author's own philosophy of matter" (Reassembling 85). This potential ambiguity is rooted in the fact that the human must delegate or translate their wishes to the material object, and this process requires a partial ceding of control to the nonhuman object (Latour, Pandora's Hope 190). These objects are powerful because they bring a level of concrete probability to the narrative, but Latour argues that they still must be seen as independent actants. However, such independence need not necessarily be inimical to a novel's aesthetics. In the narrative, significance is often attributed to such objects because of their ability to set in motion unforeseen events and contribute to counterfactual narratives, which, writes Hilary Dannenberg, satisfy "the human psyche's fascination with events that might have been" (5). The tension identified by both Latour and Brown—the human ability to utilise objects-helpers, but the inability to control them—is exemplified by how the pianoforte functions within the plot of *Emma* as its inclusion both generates narrative and challenges generic conventions.

## **Re-evaluating Objects in Austen's Novels**

Commentary on objects in Austen's novels varies widely from studies on class and shopping habits (Spring; Selwyn "Consumer Goods") to comments on the symbolic nature of objects in a text (Tanner 85; Elliott 313) to investigations concerned with questions of sociability through objects (Hardy, 136-165; Thompson 217,

<sup>1</sup> Austen's interest in "probability" was not lost on her reviewers. Sir Walter Scott highlights the "difficult task" of reflecting the "ordinary probabilities of life" as the author "places his composition within that extensive range of criticism which general experience offers to every reader" (193). In 1821, Richard Whately writes that she represents a "modern" school of novelists because of how "the story proceeds without the aid of extraordinary accidents; the events which take place are the necessary or natural consequences of what has proceeded" (360).

<sup>2</sup> Such objects draw attention to the novel's own narrative construction—such is the case with Lucy Steele's hair-ring in Sense and Sensibility (1811): Edward's wearing of the ring cannot be accounted for based on any rational motivation (since their engagement is a grave secret). The ring is thus revealed to be little more than a plot device, an object utilised to create suspense, something Elinor may observe and Lucy may cite as evidence of the truth of her claims (Hatton 126-34).

<sup>3</sup> Isobel Armstrong suggests that Brown relies on an anthropocentric viewpoint when she writes that in Brown, "naming the thing really means naming a subject-object relationship" (23). Similarly, Stanica argues that Latour's approach already accounts for objects that do not behave as humans desire, without situating such objects as "alien" as Thing Theory suggests (Stanica, "Portraits of Delegation" 236-37). However, both of these dismissals of Brown are misleading, because it is often in this very moment of Eureka-in which the modern human subject recognises the thing-that awareness of human-nonhuman interdependency emerges. I find the combination of Brown's and Latour's theories helpful because they provide different perspectives on the same underlying phenomenon, namely the relationship between the human and the nonhuman and how humans have characterised and responded to this relationship for the last several centuries.

224-25). As many of these studies are interested in the relationship between consumption and character, one recurring aim of these investigations surrounds Austen's moral relationship to her class's burgeoning standard of living. A consumer dichotomy is often proposed: Edward Copeland writes that "Jane Austen's novels imagine two separate acts of consumption: on the one hand, the low life of money exchange in the market, and, on the other, the elegant life of genteel consumption in the home" ("The Austens and the Elliots" 136). Diego Saglia, while arguing for a nuanced understanding of luxury in Austen's works, emphasises that luxury can be "good or bad, excessive or controlled," with each instance being carefully codified according to "historically and culturally situated signs, selves, and social groups" (364-65). Barbara Benedict goes even further in her evaluation of the moral aspect of consumption, noting that "purchasable things become the means for the struggle between a cooperative and a competitive sociability" (343).

While each of these assessments provides insight into the culturally inscribed meanings of the objects and the forms of consumption that take place within the worlds of Austen's novels, they often imply that the limited space given to objects in Austen's texts flows out of her moral stance on consumption. In such critiques, "material specificity disappears" because, as Brown notes, traditional Marxist readings treat commodities as "nothing but values" and thus fail to account for the material *excess* contained in the object as revealed in its tendency to flout delineated courses of action or modes of human meaning ("The Bodies of Things" 222). However, examining objects in the novels for their "material specificity" makes possible another interpretation, one that sees the curtailed deployment of objects in these novels as having as much to do with aesthetics as with morality—that is, it has as much to do with what these inanimate objects are capable of within the structure of narrative, as with how they draw attention to certain ideologically motivated consumer choices.

In Austen's narratives, the excess of *things* is mostly evident in objects used for purposes their human owners did not foresee and objects that make possible other courses of action or alternate resolutions. Focalising objects through a human character within the narrative helps mostly avoid this problem by limiting that object's "existence" to one person's subjective awareness; however, some objects within the novels are so dynamically embedded in the causal relations of the plot that their narrative existence continues to assert itself even outside of focalisation.

Austen's *Emma* is full of objects that aid, enable, and also disrupt human endeavours and attempts at communication. Unlike objects introduced into a novel merely to "set the scene," the objects in *Emma* are thoroughly integrated into the causal and material workings of the plot. *Emma* demonstrates both how humans deploy objects as delegates "to enlarge their powers good or bad, with the aid of things" (Hardy 161), and how objects can be deployed to facilitate and generate narrative in the formal sense. In *Emma*, these two levels of importance become blurred as a pianoforte become the subject of neighbourhood speculation and the impetus for Emma's own personal fictions.<sup>4</sup>

The novel features two new pianofortes, a grand purchased by the upwardly mobile tradesman, Mr Cole, and a square piano given anonymously to Jane Fairfax, the relation of the impoverished Mrs and Miss Bates. The Coles' pianoforte demonstrates how the instrument is entwined in a network of humans as expressed by the act of performance—itself an assemblage of the human and the nonhuman. It further provides a discursive space for a discussion of Jane's pianoforte, which in turn enables previously unimaginable narrative possibilities. An examination of the physical qualities of the Coles' pianoforte hints at why Jane's pianoforte functions so well as a means of facilitating and complicating the plot, as it highlights how the instrument's material qualities are crucial to its role in maintaining an interest that the mystery surrounding Jane's piano initially sparks. For both of these pianofortes, the effects that they have within the novel are tied not simply to their symbolic value, cultural capital, or significance within a gift-exchange, although these aspects are important and have been explored (Cf. Zionkowski; Lustig; Selwyn, *Jane Austen and Leisure* 124-25; Wiesenfarth 157). But these effects are also attributable to the pianoforte's role as a musical tool and

<sup>4</sup> Sandie Byrne notes how some of the objects in *Emma* take on the quality of a "MacGuffin" from a Hitchcock film (Byrne 121). While it true that Jane's pianoforte functions as a "spark that sets the story in motion" (Whitty 245), unlike a MacGuffin—which is often nothing more than a mirage, unimportant in its specificity—the physical properties and usage of this object are central to its narrative work.

to its physical dominance, as its conspicuous material presence blurs the boundary between public and private (as it is housed in the more public part of the home), attracts human attention, and affects human behaviour. In the piano, symbolic and physical traits combine to make it an irresistible object that becomes entwined with key events in the novel.

# The Coles' Pianoforte and Material Sociability

Although the Coles are not the only family changing their social position within the world of the novel, we are to assume that the Coles have made the most vertical movement, their style of living having become "second only to the family at Hartfield" (223). In a passage of free indirect discourse, Emma considers them "very good sort of people—friendly, liberal, and unpretending," but remembers that "they were of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel" (Emma 223). Despite her dismissal, however, the rest of her neighbours accept the Coles and their attempts to rise in social class. As a family, the Coles aspire to the status of the pseudo-gentry, a term coined by Alan Everitt to refer to a class emerging in the eighteenth century and set on acquiring the trappings of gentry-status (Everitt 170; Spring 60). This could be done, according to David Spring, by attaining "the schooling, the accent, the manners (from style of conversation to dressing for dinner), ... the large house in its own grounds, servants, carriages and horses..." (60). To these objects, the Coles add a grand pianoforte, which—if it came from Broadwood and Sons like the other piano of the narrative—would have cost between 40 and 46 pounds in 1815 (Harding, 394).

Owning a pianoforte satisfies a nexus of taste, sociability, and conspicuousness, all of which aid the Coles' social climbing. Historically, it was a favoured object: the pianoforte had been gaining in popularity since the 1770s with John Broadwood leading advances in English piano technology well into the nineteenth century; Cyril Ehrlich attributes Broadwood's market success to "the affluence and social ambitions of a prosperous middle class"—families precisely in the Coles' position (16). Mary Burgan goes so far as to argue that the piano became a "necessity in many middle-class homes" by the beginning of the nineteenth century (52). The instrument displayed not only a family's disposable income but also their refinement. Jodi Lustig writes of how it "quickly became the emblematic object of upper and middle-class daughters who learned to play the instrument as an 'accomplishment' illustrating their grace and their family's gentility" (85). However, what is taken for granted in accounts that focus on the piano's ability to aid social mobility through symbolic capital is how this effect is only made possible by the pianoforte's physical presence and material properties, i.e. its actual usage in a social setting. Because the pianoforte is itself such a complex material object, it enables the formation of a number of interpersonal bonds through multiple senses and types of experience.

Significantly, it is precisely this usage that Mrs Cole stresses when she brings their new purchase into the conversation at a dinner party which may have been planned specifically to show off the new instrument. After bemoaning the injustice that such a fine artist as Jane Fairfax should ever be without a pianoforte, she continues:

"It seemed quite a shame, especially considering how many houses there are where fine instruments are absolutely thrown away. This is like giving ourselves a slap, to be sure! and it was but yesterday I was telling Mr Cole, I really was ashamed to look at our new grand pianoforté in the drawing-room, while I do not know one note from another, and our little girls, who are but just beginning, perhaps may never make any thing of it; and there is poor Jane Fairfax, who is mistress of music, has not any thing of the nature of an instrument, not even the pitifullest old spinet in the world, to amuse herself with. ... only [Mr Cole] is so particularly fond of music that he could not help indulging himself in the purchase, hoping that some of our good neighbours might be so obliging occasionally to put it to a better use than we can; and that really is the reason why the instrument was bought-or else I am sure we ought to be ashamed of it.-We are in great hopes that Miss Woodhouse may be prevailed with to try it this evening." (*Emma* 233)

This is a very diplomatic speech. Given that neither she nor her daughters can do the pianoforte justice, they risk being perceived as having purchased the instrument merely for the prestige it confers (a perception that should be avoided, even if true). To counter this assumption, Mrs Cole downplays the symbolic importance of the piano and instead invokes the convenience and pleasure it will afford. She attributes the purchase to the taste of Mr Cole, and she tactfully beseeches Emma and Jane Fairfax to play for the pleasure of the party. Thus, rather than focusing on the incipient accomplishments of her daughters, she turns her gaze outwards to the neighbourhood and validates the purchase by emphasising how it will enable her family to enjoy their neighbours' performances. The Coles ask their visitors to sanction their new social position—evidenced by the pianoforte—by actually forming a physical relationship with this instrument: to touch it, to hear it, to enjoy the pleasure it can confer.



Figure 1. Grand Piano, John Broadwood and Sons, London, 1808, No. 4099. Dimensions with lid closed: 246(l), 114(w), 90(h) cm. Image reproduced with permission from the Royal Academy of Music, London.

Mrs Cole's stress on the neighbourhood's usage of the piano and the pleasure that it will create highlights the instrument's intermediary as well as symbolic role and reveals that its physical qualities are what allows it to function so effectively as an actant in forming the new social bonds that the Coles desire. These qualities range from the most basic to the more complex. First, given its size and the impracticability of moving it, the pianoforte exerts its presence within their drawing room; its material properties make it conspicuous, unavoidable. Second, as a piano performance requires both a player and an instrument, it exemplifies Latour's concept of the "assemblage," the human and nonhuman working together. This human-nonhuman performance, in turn, attracts attention and induces pleasure, as the Coles' guests are

seated "round the instrument, to listen" (Emma 245). In Pride and Prejudice (1812), the piano's potential for bringing characters within the novel into intimate social relations is also evident: Burgan notes, "Without the availability of the piano for dance music, the confrontations of Jane Austen's Elizabeth and Darcy could hardly have been staged" (54). In both novels, the piano as a nonhuman object facilitates new bonds between humans and fosters social reorganisation and, eventually, inclusion—exactly the effects that the Coles seek. Finally, the pianoforte generates discourse because there may be so much difference between musical instruments of the same type. When Mrs Weston hears of Jane's pianoforte, Austen writes that, "Mrs. Weston, kind-hearted and musical" had "so much to ask and to say as to tone, touch, and pedal" (Emma 237). One thus engages with the pianoforte through multiple embodied senses: one does not simply listen to a pianoforte but also touches it, interacts with it, sings or dances to it, looks at it, and, finally, one discusses its physical and musical qualities for no two pianofortes are alike.

In no way does such a material analysis downplay the social and symbolic significance of the pianoforte or the fact that the Coles' motivation for the purchase springs from their social aspirations. On the contrary, it sheds light on the physical realities that undergird social practices and in so doing helps account for why the piano functioned so well at enabling social mobility for the rising middle classes of the period. The Coles' piano thus throws Jane's into relief by highlighting the instrument's material conspicuousness.

#### Jane Fairfax's Pianoforte as a Generator of Narrative

Jane's piano demonstrates that when an additional level of secrecy is added to an object that is already a fine inducement to conversation and sociability, that object becomes irresistible. In the novel, Jane's anonymous gift becomes a mystery to be solved by Emma, the neighbourhood, and the reader. The material properties of the gift combined with the mystery surrounding it foster speculation and generate a host of narrative possibilities, ushering the reader into a dynamic, imaginative relationship with the plot of the novel.

The discursive potential of Jane's pianoforte is evident from its very first mention in the novel as Mrs Cole imparts to her guests the latest Highbury news:

she had been calling on Miss Bates, and as soon as she entered the room had been struck by the sight of a pianoforté —a very elegant looking instrument-not a grand, but a large-sized square pianoforté; and the substance of the story, the end of all the dialogue which ensued of surprize, and inquiry, and congratulations on her side and explanations on Miss Bates's, was, that this pianoforté had arrived from Broadwood's the day before, to the great astonishment of both aunt and niece-entirely unexpected; that at first, by Miss Bates's account, Jane herself was quite at a loss, quite bewildered to think who could possibly have ordered it—but now, they were both perfectly satisfied that it could be from only one quarter;—of course it must be from Col. Campbell. (Emma 232)

Although this account is focalised through Mrs Cole, the pianoforte's significance within the text clearly goes beyond reflecting on the speaker, as the instrument becomes embroiled in a number of conversations and subplots. In a novel known for its gifts (Zionkowski par. 26), this particular one is made especially conspicuous by its "large-siz[e]," its expense, and its supposed anonymity.<sup>5</sup> The giver of the gift, Frank Churchill, to whom Jane is secretly engaged, remains a mystery until the final pages of the text. But while the gifting is anonymous, the manner in which it is given is conspicuously public, making it impossible for Jane to refuse it realistically. Although the transport of the instrument is not addressed in *Emma*, the practical difficulty of moving large, expensive instruments is a topic of discussion in Mansfield Park (1814) when Mary Crawford expresses her surprise that, even with compensation, a farmer will not give up a horse and cart in the middle of the harvest season so that she may transport her beloved harp (Mansfield Park

<sup>5</sup> In her work on the history of English pianos, originally published in 1933, Rosamond Harding includes a Broadwood and Sons pricelist from 1815 which lists a "square with single action" at 17 pounds, 6 shillings, and an "elegant" model at 26 pounds (394). A more recent publication reports that a Broadwood square piano from 1809 cost 32 guineas (almost 34 pounds) (Cole and Broadwood 132). At either end of this spectrum, the piano would have been highly valuable, especially considering Copeland's estimate that Mrs and Miss Bates live on as little as 100 pounds per annum (Women Writing about Money 28).

68-69). A piano would have posed an even greater difficulty, leaving little doubt that its arrival would have attracted attention, with the anonymity of the giver only amplifying the interest with which it is discussed.



Figure 2. Square Piano, John Broadwood and Son, London, 1801. No. 5999. Dimensions with lid closed: 163 (l), 61 (w), 83 (h) cm. Image reproduced with permission from the Royal Academy of Music, London.

Frank gives the gift as a love token, the purpose of which, as Sally Holloway has highlighted, is to "stimulate remembering of the absent, and hasten the development of intimacy," but it remains unclear if he entirely anticipates (for afterwards he seems to relish) another function of the love token, how it works as a tangible sign and hence "as a means of publicity" (88). The public nature of love tokens that Holloway has identified could be interpreted in light of Marcel Mauss's observation that "it is not individuals but collectives that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other" (6). Mauss's point is further demonstrated by mid-nineteenth-century cases in which gifts were presented as evidence in breach of promise of marriage suits (Frost 17). This idea of the love token as a means of publicity or even as legal evidence suggests that the love token must be materially embodied, an enduring physical object rather than a one-time private gesture. One may only preclude this public purpose if the love token is given in secret, but Frank's anonymity only hides his own identity and the specific sentiments behind it, not the gesture itself. By allowing the gift to be public without offering a plausible reason or narrative behind it, Frank creates a discursive void that allows the instrument to become "subject to the speculation of the entire village of Highbury" (Copeland, *Women Writing about Money* 106).

The narrative possibilities fostered by the gift appear almost instantaneously, for Jane must account for it to Mrs and Miss Bates and, inferring that it must be from Frank, is forced to immediately sanction (as one imagines Miss Bates invents) a supposition which she knows to be false: "of course it must be from Col. Campbell." Sandie Byrne writes that the gift compounds Jane's "complicity" in the couple's secret engagement (134), and the public nature of the gift essentially heightens both the precariousness of Jane's position and her embarrassment. With only the insufficient supposition that the gift *may* have come from the Campbells, the circumstances surrounding the gift make it the perfect evening conversation piece, and when Jane and Miss Bates appear at the Coles' home after dinner "the subject was almost immediately introduced" (*Emma* 237).

Much of the confusion that follows as well as many of Emma's own mistakes and her subsequent repentance are fuelled by this mysterious object. The manner in which the piano functions as a catalyst for the events of the novel has led several literary critics to draw a direct parallel between the discourse in Highbury surrounding the piano and the act of writing: Tony Tanner writes that the "mystery" and

"surprise" surrounding the piano help "make the novel possible" (206) and Olivia Murphy writes that the piano provides a blank space in which Emma can humour her own "novelizing tendencies" (107). Lustig draws attention to the instrument's narrative productivity when she delineates the "possible narratives" the pianoforte brings into being: "Jane, the fallen woman betrayed by a married man; Jane, the povertystricken governess forced to serve below her station; Jane, the invading temptress preying on unsuspecting men" (90). Emma's speculation involves a forbidden love match: she imagines Mr Dixon has fallen in love with Jane after already having proposed to her friend. In her fantasy, Emma thinks that Jane would wish to change places with Harriet, "to have purchased the mortification of having loved—yes, of having loved even Mr Elton in vain—by the surrender of all the dangerous pleasure of knowing herself beloved by the husband of her friend" (Emma 237).

However, while the pianoforte makes each of these fictive story-lines possible, they remain only possibilities. Even Emma admits to Frank, "One might guess twenty things without guessing exactly the right" (234). Yet Emma is more on track than those who believe the gift comes from the Campbells; this is why Frank can honestly, though ironically, tell her that "now I can see it in no other light than as an offering of love" (236). Yet for the reader, and even for Emma herself, doubt pervades these suppositions: "There was no occasion to press the matter further. [Frank's] conviction seemed real; he looked as if he felt it" (236; italics mine). The narrative, focalised through Emma, expresses her concern that Frank may be playing some kind of game. Whatever speculations have been voiced, it is clear that the true story has yet to be revealed.

Other objects in the narrative provide additional hints towards the truth of the mystery. P. D. James has argued for reading the novel as a proto- or pseudo-detective novel (Cf. Bell). She notes the various "blunders" that provide hints to the reader throughout the text: Frank asks Mrs Weston about Mr Perry's plan to set up a carriage, a plan which he mistakenly thinks was communicated to him by his step-mother when he had actually read about it in one of Jane's letters. He follows this mistake by another misstep, using some children's alphabet blocks to give Jane the letters for the word "blunder" (Emma 373-377; James 256-57). Interestingly, both of these "blunders" are observed by Mr Knightley, the case of the alphabet blocks being especially interesting, for very much like the piano, it registers Frank's lack of concern as to how his messages to Jane, when transformed and expressed in material form, are also observable and readable by others. As nonhuman objects in the physical, discernible world, these objects and Frank's gift gesture towards the couple's secret.

Pierre Bourdieu criticises Mauss's conceptualisation of the gift for failing to consider the place of timing in the gift exchange:

It is all a question of style, which means in this case timing and choice of occasion, for the same act—giving, giving in return, offering one's services, paying a visit, etc.—can have completely different meanings at different times, coming as it may at the right or the wrong moment. (Bourdieu 6)

Bourdieu's focus on style and the right moment inadvertently highlights the physical context, especially the place and the others present, of the gift exchange. Building on the work of Mauss, C. A. Gregory argues that one thing which distinguishes the gift from the commodity is its inalienability from its original giver, a relationship often resulting in "personification," leading him to argue that "things are anthropomorphised in a gift economy" (45). While "anthropomorphisation" assumes human dominance in this process, Latour's ANT highlights how it is not only the nonhuman object that becomes imbued with humanity, but that this process also works in reverse, as the nonhuman supplements the human and, in so doing, alters what were thought to be purely human-directed meanings and intentions. <sup>6</sup> Thus Kirstyn Leuner can argue that each of the prized possessions in Fanny's dressing room in Mansfield Park not only "invokes its family-counterpart" but also "comforts her when her cousins do not" (55). In extending themselves through objects, humans also cede control (and parts of themselves) to the object. Similarly, the piano functions as a mediator for Frank, as the gift extends his influence and memory. However, Emma demonstrates that by delegating his

<sup>6</sup> Latour frequently emphasises the fatuity of the human/nonhuman binary: "Anthropos and morphos together mean either that which has human shape or that which gives shape to humans" ("Where Are the Missing Masses?" 235).

desires to the external, nonhuman object, Frank loses control of the gift's usage and meaning as well as—like the alphabet blocks that Mr Knightley intercepts—who interprets it.

Even within the more intimate context of Frank and Jane's secret relationship, the pianoforte remains interpretively ambivalent. At the novel's resolution, Frank writes Mrs Weston that "its being ordered was absolutely unknown to Miss F—, who would never have allowed me to send it" (*Emma* 479), but, looking back at earlier episodes in the novel, the pianoforte provides an excuse for Frank and Jane to come together, and Jane seems to take a secret pleasure in the gift, even if she feels its impropriety (see 237 and 262). When Emma visits the Bateses to hear the instrument, Frank tells Emma that, "I have been assisting Miss Fairfax in trying to make her instrument stand steadily, it was not quite firm; an unevenness in the floor, I believe. You see we have been wedging one leg with paper" (259). Whether an unevenness in the floor or of the instrument itself, the material dimension of the instrument invites care, concern, and sustained attention.

Many have read this scene as a cover-up: Frank and Jane have been left alone for a few choice minutes with only a sleeping Mrs Bates. Frank's usage of the first-person plural denotes their shared activity: the piano, in this reading, is the material excuse for what David Bell calls "a few rare moments of intimacy" as they work "in such close proximity that physical contact is surely inevitable!" (Bell par. 12; Cf. McMaster 98). However, while the piano allows them an external outlet for shared experience, the piano's physicality is not limited to their own convenience. If the pianoforte offers a rare opportunity for the two of them to come into close contact, it also gestures dangerously to others of the existence of a secret.

When the engagement is broken off, the *thingness* of Frank's material delegate becomes especially apparent as the piano's sheer materiality continues to be a burden to Jane. As Emma sits in Miss Bates's parlour musing on Jane's fate after the latter has resigned herself to becoming a governess, Emma's gaze rests on the pianoforte:

quite unconscious on what her eyes were fixed, till roused by Miss Bates's saying, "Ay, I see what you are thinking of, the piano forté. What is to become of that?—Very true. Poor dear Jane was talking of it just now.—'You must go,' said she. 'You and I must part. You will have no business here.—Let it stay, however,' said she; 'give it house-room till Colonel Campbell comes back. I shall talk about it to him; he will settle for me; he will help me out of all my difficulties.'—And to this day, I believe, she knows not whether it was his present or his daughter's." (*Emma* 417-18)

Even when not thinking about the pianoforte, Emma's eyes move towards it, an indication of its prominent position in the room and its unavoidable physicality. Jane begs her aunt to keep it, to "give it house-room" as though it were a person: here the pianoforte's physical attributes combined with other values, i.e. its inalienability from its giver, Frank, makes its thingness especially problematic.

This is part of the "excess" that Brown speaks of when he argues that things even exceed their materiality, as they exert "their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 5). But the emotional connection, rather than doing away with the materiality of the object, is made more complicated by that physicality: how does one rid oneself of a large, substantial, and valuable object that also happens to stimulate such strong feelings? This question raises the possibility that the pianoforte will sit in the Bateses' parlour, unused, like a spectre of the mystery that has yet to be revealed. The challenge of parting with a gift which holds so many painful associations is further heightened by the fact that it is practically difficult to dispose of such a conspicuous object. Here again, Jane's lack of material resources as well as her position as the receiver of the gift put her at a disadvantage. Had she the financial and spatial means she could have it moved, placed out of sight, but her poverty forces her not only to accept but also to keep the gift because rejecting it or even giving it away would raise more questions than she is willing to answer. One foresees a future in which, on every return to Highbury to visit her aunts, Jane is welcomed by a material reminder of her failed relationship with Frank.

The object thus far enables the aesthetic aims of Austen's text by hinting at a mystery that is materially motivated and thus dynamically integrated into the plot structure. Linda Bree writes that devices such as Jane's pianoforte allow, at the end of the novel, for "the reader to discover, on revisiting earlier chapters, an entirely logical but quite different sequence of events from what appeared to have been taking place" (139). Lustig also highlights the narratively productive nature of the instrument, but she limits her examination to the piano's symbolic cultural meaning as "a point where woman meets man, nature meets culture and art

meets artifice" (103). Such a position leads her to argue that the piano as plot device enables a number of narrative possibilities only to then negate them with the revelation that the piano is from Frank, a strategy in which the piano "serves as a rhetorical device that re-establishes the dominion of conservative bourgeois values within the fictional universe" at the end of the novel (90). However, highlighting the material aspects of the instrument and especially the object's continued presence within the fictional story-world challenges such a conclusion, as the instrument continues to foster narrative ambiguity just at the moment of formal resolution.

Although Jane's potentially tragic story-line is forestalled by Mrs Churchill's death and the reinstatement of Frank and Jane's engagement, the gifting of the pianoforte maintains a peculiar status. When Frank tries to clear Jane of any hand in it in a letter to Mrs Weston, he in effect lays the blame of the matter squarely on his own shoulders. While James suggests that Frank's letter is part of the explanation usually rendered in the last few chapters of a detective story, in which "the significance of all the moves in this game of love and misunderstanding are clearly explained," the "explanation" only accounts for previously obscured actions but fails entirely to clarify Frank's dubious motivations (266). Mr Knightley aptly describes the problem when he reads Frank's letter and exclaims to Emma,

"the piano-forte! Ah! That was the act of a very, very young man, one too young to consider whether the inconvenience of it might not very much exceed the pleasure. A boyish scheme, indeed!—I cannot comprehend a man's wishing to give a woman any proof of affection which he knows she would rather dispense with; and he did know that she would have prevented the instrument's coming if she could." (Emma 486)

Mr Knightley's own general harshness towards Frank aside, he highlights a problem of resolution at the end of the novel: namely, can the reader ignore Frank's liberalities with both Jane and Emma's feelings throughout the text in order to anticipate happiness for the couple at the end? One must wonder, what will the couple do with the pianoforte? Surely, the "inconvenience" of the gift remains even after their reconciliation since the instrument can only recall ambivalent feelings in Jane, whatever it recalls for Frank.

At the end of the novel, the pianoforte destabilises the certainty of a "happy" resolution. While the Coles' pianoforte will most likely continue to foster sociability by forming a material bridge between neighbours of different backgrounds and similar tastes, Jane's pianoforte remains a material testament to a number of undesirable memories and feelings. As a witness to Frank's lack of consideration of Jane as well as Emma, the instrument registers the problems posed by his and Jane's love match, and, in so doing, the pianoforte augurs future conflict. Thus, in addition to highlighting its ambivalent role as romantic mediator, the pianoforte complicates a simple evaluation of the novel's marriage plot denouement.

Examining the narrative generating effects of Jane's piano suggests the aesthetic potential of employing objects in narrative and demonstrates the nonhuman's ability to produce lasting effects both within the social world of the story and upon the formal makeup of the novel. While a materially motivated object strengthens the aesthetic illusion by making the events of the narrative feel "probable" or causally given, it also enables alternative narratives and timelines that can be used to challenge generic norms like the marriage plot. Dannenberg speaks of the nineteenth century as a "site of a struggle between forces of narrative convergence and divergence" in which "harmonious conclusions and happy marriages" are felt to be "inimical to ... a realist depiction of the position of women" (16). In a novel which satisfies the basic requirements of the marriage plot, the pianoforte provides a subtle but material testament of the marriage's tenuous felicity.

#### **Works Cited**

Alworth, David J. Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form. Princeton University Press, 2016. Armstrong, Isobel. "Bodily Things and Thingly Bodies: Circumventing the Subject-Object Binary." Boehm, pp. 17-41. Austen, Jane. Emma. Edited by Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan, Cambridge University Press, 2005. ---. Mansfield Park. Edited by John Wiltshire, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Bal, Mieke. "Over-Writing as Un-Writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time." *The Novel: Volume 2: Forms and Themes*, edited by Franco Moretti, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 571-610.

Bell, David H. "Fun with Frank and Jane: Austen on Detective Fiction." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2007, http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol28no1/bell.htm.

Benedict, Barbara M. "The Trouble with Things: Objects and the Commodification of Sociability." Johnson and Tuite, pp. 343-54.

Bennett, Tony. "Sociology, Aesthetics, Expertise." New Literary History, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 253-76. JSTOR, doi:10.1353/nlh.2010.0010.

Boehm, Katharina, editor. Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Bree, Linda. "Emma: Word Games and Secret Histories." Johnson and Tuite, pp. 133-42.

Brown, Bill. "The Bodies of Things." Boehm, pp. 221-28.

---. "Thing Theory." Critical Inquiry, vol. 28, no. 1, Oct. 2001, pp. 1-22. JSTOR, doi:10.1086/449030.

Burgan, Mary. "Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1986, pp. 51-76.

Byrne, Sandie. Jane Austen's Possessions and Dispossessions: The Significance of Objects. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Cole, Michael, and John Broadwood. Broadwood Square Pianos. Tatchley Books, 2005.

Copeland, Edward. "The Austens and the Elliots: A Consumer's Guide to *Persuasion." Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Profession*, edited by Juliet McMaster, Macmillan, 1996, pp. 136-53.

---. Women Writing About Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Dannenberg, Hilary P. Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction. University of Nebraska Press. 2008.

Ehrlich, Cyril. The Piano: A History. Rev. ed., Clarendon Press, 1990.

Elliott, Kamilla. "Jane Austen and the Politics of Picture Identification." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 34, no. 4, Sept. 2012, pp. 305-22. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/08905495.2012.711615.

Everitt, Alan. "Kentish Family Portrait." Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500-1800, edited by C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden, Longman, 1974, pp. 169-99.

Felski, Rita. "Context Stinks!" New Literary History, vol. 42, no. 4, 2011, pp. 573-91. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/nlh.2011.0045 Gregory, C. A. Gifts and Commodities. Academic Press, 1982.

Harding, Rosamond E. M. *The Piano-Forte: Its History Traced to the Great Exhibition of 1851*. 2d ed., Gresham Books, 1978. Hardy, Barbara. *A Reading of Jane Austen*. Owen, 1975.

Hatton, Nikolina. Conspicuous Objects: The Agency of Things in English Prose, 1789-1832. PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 2018.

Holloway, Sally Anne. *Romantic Love in Words and Objects during Courtship and Adultery c. 1730 to 1830*. PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013.

James, P. D. "Emma Considered as a Detective Story." *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*, Faber, 1999, pp. 250-66.

Johnson, Claudia L., and Clara Tuite, editors. A Companion to Jane Austen. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Latour, Bruno. Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies. Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. Oxford University Press, 2005.

---. "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts." Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change, edited by Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 225-58.

Leuner, Kirstyn. "The End of All the Privacy and Propriety': Fanny's Dressing Room in Mansfield Park." Boehm, pp. 45-65.

Levine, Caroline. Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Lustig, Jodi. "The Piano's Progress: The Piano in Play in the Victorian Novel." *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, edited by Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 83-104.

Mauss, Marcel. The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies. Translated by W. D Halls, Routledge, 2002.

Murphy, Olivia. "Rethinking Influence by Reading with Austen." *Women's Writing*, vol. 20, no. 1, Feb. 2013, pp. 100-14. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/09699082.2013.754261.

Riffaterre, Michael. "On the Diegetic Functions of the Descriptive." *Style*, vol. 20, no. 3, Fall 1986, pp. 281-94. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42945609

Saglia, Diego. "Luxury: Making Sense of Excess in Austen's Narratives." Johnson and Tuite, pp. 355-65.

Scott, Walter. "Emma; a Novel." The Quarterly Review, vol. 14, Oct. 1815, pp. 188-201.

Selwyn, David. "Consumer Goods." Jane Austen in Context, edited by Janet Todd and Deirdre Le Faye, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 215-24.

---. Jane Austen and Leisure. Hambledon Press, 1999.

Spring, David. "Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World: Literary Critics and Historians." Women & Literature, vol. 3, 1983, pp. 53-72.

- Stanica, Miruna. "Bundles, Trunks, Magazines: Storage, Aperspectival Description, and the Generation of Narrative." *Style: A Quarterly Journal of Aesthetics, Poetics, Stylistics, and Literary Criticism*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2014, pp. 513-28. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5325/style.48.4.513.
- ---- "Portraits of Delegation." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2016, pp. 235-49. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/ecy.2016.0015.

Tanner, Tony. Jane Austen. Macmillan, 1986.

Thompson, James. "Jane Austen's Clothing: Things, Property, and Materialism in Her Novels." *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 13, 1984, pp. 217-31.

Tischleder, Babette Bärbel. The Literary Life of Things: Case Studies in American Fiction. Campus Verl, 2014.

Wall, Cynthia. "Approaching the Interior of the Eighteenth-Century English Country House." *Style: A Quarterly Journal of Aesthetics, Poetics, Stylistics, and Literary Criticism*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2014, pp. 543-62. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5325/style.48.4.543.

Whately, Richard. "Modern Novels." The Quarterly Review, vol. 24, Jan. 1821, pp. 352-76.

Whitty, Stephen. The Alfred Hitchcock Encyclopedia. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

Wiesenfarth, Joseph. "A Likely Story: The Coles' Dinner Party." Approaches to Teaching Austen's Emma, edited by Marcia McClintock Folsom, Modern Language Association of America, 2004, pp. 151-58.

Zionkowski, Linda. "Small, Trifling Presents': Giving and Receiving in Emma." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 37, no. 1, Winter 2016, http://www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol37no1/zionkowski/.