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Brno studies in English. 2021, vol. 47, iss. 1, pp. 129-143

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2021-1-7
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/144297

Howard Jacobson's *Live a Little*: The Jewish Jane Austen's 21st Century Novel of Manners

Brno Studies in English
Volume 47, No. 1, 2021

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2021-1-7

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Abstract
As the British Jewish novelist Howard Jacobson has called himself the "Jewish Jane Austen," this essay aims to examine the relevance of this characterization by arguing that Jacobson may be seen as continuing in the tradition of the English novel of manners, as exemplified by Austen. In particular, the plot of Jacobson's sixteenth novel *Live a Little* (2019) resembles Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), as it features a development of a romantic relationship between two characters who first show little interest in each other. However, as Jacobson's couple of protagonists are in their nineties, another text that provides a useful frame of reference is Austen's last novel *Persuasion* (1818), which deals with the themes of aging and the passage of time. In turn, this essay approaches *Live a Little* as a novel of manners reminiscent of Austen, but updated for the early 21st century.

Key words
Howard Jacobson; Live a Little*; contemporary British novel; novel of manners; Jane Austen*

Introduction

Howard Jacobson is a British Jewish writer, journalist, and former professor of English literature who has been active as a novelist since the 1980s. So far, he has published sixteen novels and six works of nonfiction. His eleventh novel *The Finkler Question*, dealing with British Jewish people's perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict, was awarded the 2010 Booker Prize, making him a key figure in the previously overlooked field of British Jewish fiction. Even earlier, Jacobson's ninth novel *Kalooki Nights* (2006), the author's first text to provide extensive references to the Holocaust, received the 2007 Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize. While Jacobson's novels do not always thematise Jewish identity in the context of religion and politics, they tend to focus on intimate relationships between the sexes, usually described from the point of view of the male Jewish protagonists. This recurring theme has resulted in numerous comparisons of Jacobson's writing to Philip Roth's; yet, Jacobson himself said he prefers to be considered the "Jewish Jane Austen" (Brown 2010).

While it may seem surprising that a male Jewish novelist would compare himself to Jane Austen, the comparison highlights Jacobson's relation to English literary tradition. Prior to becoming a writer, Jacobson studied English at Downing College, Cambridge, under F. R. Leavis. This experience led him to recognize the representatives of what Leavis calls "the great tradition" of English literature: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad (1948: 1). A respect for canonical English literature continues to be voiced in both Jacobson's fiction and nonfiction; for instance, in one of his essays, Jacobson maintains: "The dichotomy between great works of literature and the books we 'secretly' enjoy is a false one. Trashy novels are less enjoyable to read than good ones. The greater the book the more pleasure it gives" (2011: 86). Many of Jacobson's novels may also be approached as respectful responses to earlier canonical English texts. Most strikingly, Jacobson's fourteenth novel *Shylock Is My Name* (2016) is an acknowledged rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice*, written for the Hogarth Shakespeare project. *Pussy* (2017), Jacobson's recent fictional critique of Donald Trump, may be seen as a satirical inversion of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (Anténe 2019), and even Jacobson's debut *Coming from Behind* (1983) has been called an update of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* for the 1980s (Gold 1985).

It is no coincidence that Kingsley Amis has been numbered among the authors of novels of manners by Annette Weld (1992: 6), as this essay will contextualize Jacobson's sixteenth novel *Live a Little* (2019) within this very subgenre. The novel of manners is believed to have been best exemplified by Jane Austen whom Jacobson has compared his own novels to. While Paula Byrne observes that Austen's novels provide "a fascinating repository of the manners of 'polite' society" (2009: 299), represented by the landed gentry, Mary Ann O'Farrell even writes: "Much of what our culture knows about manners it has learned by way of Jane Austen, and her name has come to stand for manners in our cultural lexicon" (2012: 100). This essay will thus aim to examine the relevance of Jacobson's own comparison to the exemplary early novelist of manners, by using his most recent novel. While the analysis will begin with a survey of the development of the concept of the novel of manners in general, *Live a Little* has been selected for its resemblance to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), as it features the development of a romantic relationship between two characters, who first show little interest in each other. However, as Jacobson's couple of protagonists are both in their nineties, another text that provides a useful frame of reference is Austen's last novel *Persuasion* (1818), which deals with the themes of aging and the passage of time. Austen's other texts will be mentioned tangentially to provide further connections of Jacobson's writing to Austen's oeuvre. In addition, this essay will need to modify the concept of the novel of manners for the analysis of a text addressing the society of the early 21st century.

The novel of manners in Austen's and Jacobson's oeuvre

Although the subgenre is usually considered to have started with Austen, its definitions tend to be rather brief and general. While several handbooks of literary

terms and theory do not include the term at all (Childs and Fowler 2006, Cuddon 2013, Mikics 2007), Edward Quinn defines the novel of manners in the following way: "A type of novel in which the social conventions of a given society – its speech, habits, and values – play significant roles. The main focus of the form is summarized in the title of Anthony Trollope's novel of manners *The Way We Live Now* (1875). As a novelist of manners, Trollope followed in the tradition of Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, and William Makepeace Thackeray" (2006: 294). Quinn suggests the subgenre is no longer prominent, as "the relatively stable societies depicted in [nineteenth-century] novels seem to be a thing of the past" (2006: 294); however, Weld argues for its continuing relevance, as "the predictable provides necessary solace in an often unpredictable world, and no fictional form seems more stylised and predictable than the novel of manners" (1992: 9). To provide an illustration of this view, Claudia L. Johnson highlights that Austen's novels were recommended as therapy to WWI veterans who suffered from post-traumatic shock syndrome, as "the famously limited dimensions of Austen's fictional world could feel rehabilitative; her parlours could feel manageable; her very triviality could feel redemptive" (1996: 154). This therapeutic approach to Austen's oeuvre thus challenges the idea of the novel of manners being an obsolete and irrelevant subgenre.

Weld also emphasizes that the roots of the novel of manners lie in the comic rather than tragic mode, particularly in "Greek and Roman comic drama, Restoration and Shakespearean comedy, indeed, the whole of the English comic tradition" (1992: 8). While Weld finds one of the elements of comedy in Austen's novels of manners in their happy endings that feature the main characters' "celebratory marriages" (1992: 62), in relation to twentieth-century literature, she argues in more general terms that "the comic response is most appropriate" for dealing with the uncertainties and problems of that century (1992: 8). Although Jacobson has never theorized on the novel of manners, he closes his study of the comic in literature *Seriously Funny* by voicing a similar preference for comedy over tragedy: "Tragedy flatters us into believing we are grand, when put to the test; something more than flesh that falls away. Comedy answers to our suspicions that we are not grand at all, *only* flesh that falls away – but how much the more remarkable *then* our exuberant persistence!" (1997: 242). The comic mode inherent in the novel of manners, among other literary forms, may thus aptly address the complexities of human experience in the twentieth century and beyond.

The concept of the novel of manners has rarely been mentioned in reference to Jacobson's writing and if so, then only to highlight how he subverts it. Ruth Gilbert suggests that in *Kalooki Nights*, Jacobson "rewrites the English novel of manners, turning it instead into a particularly British-Jewish comedy of bad manners" (2013: 107), and Janet Maslin proposes that in *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson writes the novel of "atrocious manners," as opposed to Austen's novels of "much better manners" (2010). However, in this essay, I will approach both Jacobson and Austen as contributors to the novel of manners who display a not dissimilar understanding of the social world surrounding them. There is only a difference in the extent to which the two authors use their own experience. Austen's novels can hardly be considered autobiographical, as Nicholas Dames aptly notes that the

author, "the unmarried woman who spent much of her adulthood living on the not particularly lavish charity or hospitality of male relations, is nowhere present in them" (2017). Yet, in more general terms, Austen's novels heavily draw on the author's own experience by focusing on the domestic spaces of the landed gentry. In contrast, Jacobson's novels have often been approached as autobiographical; for instance, Jonathan Foreman observes the novels "come in two types: erudite autobiographical works that draw on his childhood in a lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood of Manchester and erudite autobiographical works about middle-aged sex and adultery among the academic and literary upper middle class" (Foreman 2010: 47). In particular, the "two types" of Jacobson's novels reflect two phases of the author's life, characterized by gradual social mobility enabled by the prestige of higher education. On closer inspection, Jacobson's novels that focus on the upper middle-class environment rather than a strong sense of the characters' Jewish identity resemble the novel of manners as practiced by Austen to a larger extent than has been observed so far. Jacobson himself says he intended to contribute to the English literary tradition rather than explore "the Jewish experience," which he did not even conflate with his own as a working-class boy from Manchester ascending to a higher social level by means of his Cambridge degree (Boylan 2011: 61). As Weld identifies "subtle gradations of social class" among the characters (1992: 13) as a common feature of the novel of manners, in Jacobson's case, the characters lower on the social scale are usually men of Jewish heritage who aspire to become accepted by the English upper middle classes; in a hyperbolic passage, the protagonist of Jacobson's novel *Who's Sorry Now?* (2002) is told by his mother to "do [his] homework and become Prime Minister" (4). In turn, while Austen's characters tend to accept the social mores of the group they were born into, Jacobson's characters take over the social mores of the group they have become members of later in their lives.

Despite these general similarities between Austen's and Jacobson's writing, there seems to be a difference regarding the distribution of positive and negative personality features among the two authors' characters. In Austen's writing, the major characters undergo significant personal developments throughout the narratives, making Robert Miles conclude that Austen brought "the device of moral education to a new level of sophistication within the English novel" (2003: 41). These complex major characters, such as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, get to know themselves and each other better, learning a moral lesson so that the novel can reach a happy ending. The major characters are contrasted with flat minor characters, who serve as objects of ridicule; while they may have created obstacles to the main characters, these will have been overcome by the end of the narrative. The complex characterization or lack thereof thus distinguishes the characters who are to be empathized with from those who are to be laughed at. Even Austen's well-mannered characters are not always moral; as Beverly Haviland points out, "Austen does use her incomparable satire on numerous occasions to show how manners can be misused" (1988: 451), such as in the case of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* whose formal and polite behaviour has no real value. Still, all Austen's characters have to navigate a complex set of social conventions; for instance, intimate relationships are preceded by

courtship and illicit sexual relationships shame not only those who participate in them, but their whole families. Also, women are expected to get married in their early twenties, and differences in social rank present an obstacle to a marriage. In *Persuasion* (1818), Anne Elliot is persuaded to break off her engagement to Commander Frederick Wentworth at the age of nineteen; eventually, she marries him at twenty-seven, rather late for an Austen heroine, after he has risen up on the social ladder.

Jacobson's novels, however, for the most part do not fit any such clear pattern. Written and set at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, they reflect a world of fewer and less strict social conventions as well as a relaxation of sexual mores and increase in women's rights and independence. In particular, Jacobson's novels mirror a society where sex may be talked about rather openly, unmarried couples of any age may live together and separation or divorce are not condemned by the majority. As one of the minor female characters in *Who's Sorry Now?* puts it, "Victorian expectations of one marriage to one man no longer apply" (165). Also, while adultery is a recurring theme in Jacobson's writing, in Austen's oeuvre, the only instances of adultery are presented in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Lady Susan* (1871), a short epistolary novel that the author never submitted for publication. Moreover, while Jacobson's major characters may learn a moral message and gain self-knowledge, these developments may come too late to lead to a happy ending. The male protagonist in *Who's Sorry Now?* realizes how self-centred he has been only when his wife is ready to leave him for good. Nevertheless, some of the novels do feature themes and plots reminiscent of Austen's novels of manners, although critics have not paid attention to these. For instance, David Brauner (2007: 141–42) seems to focus on the few sexually explicit scenes in *No More Mr Nice Guy* (1998) rather than on the plot, which closes with an affirmative ending, as the protagonist reconciles with his wife after he spends some time in a convent and learns to appreciate his marriage.[1] Given that Jacobson's protagonists tend to be older than Austen's and often already married at the beginning of the narratives, this closure seems rather similar to the happy endings in her novels.

Finally, the most complex characters in Austen are undoubtedly her female protagonists. While Austen does not use first-person narration, she has become recognized for her usage of free indirect discourse, thereby mediating her female protagonists' thoughts and feelings to the reader. Austen's male characters, in contrast, tend to be described from the outside; a significant part of the appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* stems from the reader's having direct access only to Elizabeth's observations and therefore being left to speculate about Mr. Darcy's mind for a considerable part of the novel. It has even been pointed out that as a woman, Austen hardly ever attempts to report a conversation between men where there is no woman present (Ferris 1967: 201). Rather rarely, Austen does provide a male character's point of view to a limited degree: for instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen eventually adds Darcy's letters to Elizabeth's point of view, while in *Emma* (1815), she supplies the protagonist's perspective by having Chapter 41 narrated from Mr. Knightley's point of view.

Jacobson's novels, as suggested before, favour the male point of view, whether by means of a limited omniscient narration or a first-person narration.

Unlike Austen's, Jacobson's female characters have often been seen as having little depth. Ruth Gilbert even states that Jacobson's fiction "is populated by a series of hapless Jewish men who suffer repeated romantic and sexual humiliations at the hands of the heartless Aryan women whom they find unbearably cruel and magnetically irresistible" (2013: 6). While this statement may also be read as a criticism of the Jewish males who repeatedly inflict the humiliation on themselves, one could elaborate on it by arguing that even some of Jacobson's Jewish female characters may appear rather flat, as they are usually described only from the outside. At the same time, Jacobson employs, albeit rarely, similar techniques to Austen in providing the reader with access to the mind of minor, in his case female, characters. For instance, Jacobson's second novel *Peeping Tom* (1985) features a letter written by the narrator's wife as an explanation that she had left him. Similarly, *Who's Sorry Now?* reports the thoughts of its male Jewish protagonist and three other characters, two of whom are female. Both authors thus use similar strategies in order to enrich their novels by adding the perspectives of characters of the other gender.

In fact, Jacobson significantly extends this strategy in his sixteenth novel *Live a Little* (2019), which provides equal access to the minds of its two main characters, the Englishwoman Beryl Dusinbery and the Jewish man Shimi Carmelli. While I find the novel ground-breaking in the context of Jacobson's oeuvre for its extended presentation of gender, I also see it as Jacobson's novel that is closest to Austen, despite featuring a couple of aging protagonists. As suggested in the preceding paragraphs, rather than novels of courtship, Jacobson's novels are novels of married life, separation and, in some cases, reconciliation. However, *Live a Little* could be characterized as a full-fledged novel of courtship, as it follows the development of a romantic relationship leading to a wedding. Moreover, like Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Beryl and Shimi first show little romantic interest in each other and eventually learn about the other as well as themselves during the process. Their falling in love late in their lives is also reminiscent, although in a different context, of the two protagonists' belated wedding in *Persuasion*.

Live a Little as a 21st Century Response to Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion

As suggested before, *Pride and Prejudice* provides a representative example of an Austen novel that features the two characters' moral education as a pre-requisite for their happy union. Early on, the difference in Elizabeth's and Darcy's social standing is tied to their perception of each other's manners that contribute to their mutual incomprehension; while Elizabeth, the daughter of an impoverished gentleman, considers Darcy too proud and self-important, Darcy is not interested in her due to her immediate family members' improper behaviour. In Robert Miles' words, the novel suggests that manners "mislead as much as they inform" (2003: 83). Eventually, Darcy overcomes his pride and accepts Elizabeth for who she is regardless of her family, and she puts her prejudice against him aside.

The class issue is not linked to manners in the same way in *Live a Little*, which follows the development of a romantic relationship between its aging protagonists, the upper-class Englishwoman Beryl being higher on the social scale than the Jewish man Shimi. Yet, due to their different social backgrounds, the two can hardly believe they both live on Finchley Road, which they only discover towards the end of the novel. Like Darcy, Shimi is not attracted to his future wife when he first sees her. While Darcy famously says of Elizabeth at the Meryton ball that she is "tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt [*him*]" (11), Shimi, after noticing Beryl for the first time in a park, not knowing her yet, describes her as "a diminutive elderly lady, still taking trouble with her eye make-up and lipstick, though supported on either side by a carer" (33). Regardless of the male characters' social status, both novels stress the lack of attraction they initially feel.

Still, Jacobson's main characters' being in their nineties makes them strikingly different from Austen's, who are never older than in their late twenties. While in *Persuasion*, Austen, who died at the age of forty-one, includes several female and male characters who are in their fifties, they serve rather as foils to the protagonist Anne Elliot and her future husband Frederick Wentworth. Given the life expectancy in Austen's time and nowadays,[2] the narrator's description of Anne's father as "still a very fine man" at fifty-four (2) is even more of a compliment than it would be today. At the same time, Susannah R. Ottaway argues that in eighteenth-century England, the "critical transition for female aging was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude" (41). This belief is illustrated in several passages in *Persuasion*. Not only does Anne's father describe the thirty-year-old Mrs Smith as "old and sickly" (155), but even Anne herself, at the age of twenty-seven, hopes "to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty" (121). It follows there were considerably stricter criteria on female than male appearance, which, as some have highlighted, have continued until recently (e.g. Sontag 1972). Yet, rather than with double standards on aging, Jacobson, who published *Live a Little* at the age of seventy-seven, seems to be concerned with the idea that love indeed grows at any age. For this effect, he creates characters whose ages are unexpectedly high even with regard to life expectancy in early twenty-first century Britain.

Besides being ninety-eight years old, Beryl is a widow, which again distinguishes her from Austen's protagonists; the only widow in *Pride and Prejudice* is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the main antagonist of Elizabeth Bennet, who actively threatens her union with Darcy. While *Persuasion* has been characterized as "a novel of widows" (Deresiewicz 2004: 127), female characters whose husbands have died are again secondary to the single protagonist, Anne, who is only referred to as "a metaphorically widowed heroine" by Laura Fairchild Brodie (1994: 699), as she had been persuaded not to marry then Commander Frederick Wentworth at the age of nineteen due to his low social rank. Indeed, the development of a relationship between a woman who is higher on the social hierarchy than her suitor is another shared feature of *Live a Little* and *Persuasion*, although Wentworth rises up the social ladder, moving from Commander to Captain over the course of the novel and increasing his wealth. While Anne Elliot is a daughter of a baronet who is exceedingly proud of his heritage, Beryl Dusinbery used to

teach at "a Hampshire school that numbered foreign royalty among its pupils" (79) and she even calls herself the Princess. Due to her advanced age, she has two carers, an African and a Moldovan, one of whom is always at her disposal should she need any assistance. This element of the text highlights not only Beryl's age but also her social position, and her carers are reminiscent of servants in the families in Austen's novels.

While Beryl never tries to control the younger generation like Austen's Lady Catherine, as a widow who continues to be concerned with her appearance despite her age, she resembles the protagonist of Austen's early epistolary novel *Lady Susan*. Laura Fairchild Brodie suggests that in this text, Austen complicates the earlier stereotypical character of the so-called Merry Widow that appears in novels by eighteenth century male writers such as Sterne or Fielding. While the original Merry Widow simply lusts for men and power, Austen foregrounds the "economic and social motivations" for her behaviour (1994: 701), as widows were marginalized by the society. Writing in the early twenty-first century, Jacobson refers to a different social context. Living in a spacious mansion that belongs to her, Beryl does not need to worry that anyone will challenge her social position. Rather, as a woman who used to be noted for her good looks, she simply wants to make the most of the time left to her, as she tells her African carer that she fears "being dead while [she is] still alive" (23).

As a former teacher, Beryl also puts emphasis on good manners; she even prepares a manual for her carers, titled *A Guide for Young Serving Women of Foreign Extraction in the Lower and Middle Ranks of Life*, and consisting of five sections: hygiene, respect, discretion, gratitude, and language (65). Yet, behind her façade of self-confidence, Beryl struggles with losing her memories, as she often cannot recall people's names or identify faces in old photographs. To capture all that she has not forgotten yet, she starts writing her journal, parts of which are inserted into the text. These retrospective passages reveal that her first husband, the headmaster of a primary school, died in World War II. While Jacobson includes historical background to a larger extent than Austen, it primarily serves to provide more detailed personal histories of his characters. Later in life, Beryl had other partners and children. Two of her sons are in the House of Lords, and all her grandchildren have jobs in the City or Westminster. Beryl often fails to distinguish between her grandchildren who occasionally call or visit her, motivated by a vision of inheritance rather than genuine love or concern. Like some characters in Austen's novels, Beryl's family members thus misuse their well-mannered behaviour to hide their purely pragmatic concerns.

The passages reporting Beryl's earlier life alternate with those focusing on Shimi. Being seven years younger than her, Shimi was just a boy during World War II, growing up in Little Stanmore with his parents and brother Ephraim. Shimi's heritage strikingly differs from Beryl's; he considers himself "half a Jew" (171), as his father was "Maltese pretending to be Italian" (45) and his mother was Jewish Ukrainian. While the war itself did not result in any of Shimi's family members' death, his mother died of breast cancer shortly after it. Once he reached adulthood, Shimi lost touch with both his father and brother, whom he considered his more successful rival. Unlike Jacobson's typical male protagonists, Shimi has little

formal education, but since his childhood, he has been interested in phrenology, a theory that the shape of human skull determines the individual's character. In contrast to Beryl, who sometimes cannot even recall the exact number of her former partners, Shimi is an anxiously private man who has spent most of his life in solitude. At the time of the story proper of the novel, he lives in a small flat above a Chinese Restaurant, in which he practices cartomancy, the telling of fortunes by cards, to the Jewish widows of North London. Cartomancy attracts him, as he thinks of it "as a version of phrenology, in that it discovered the springs of human action outside individual decision making" (73). Shimi's belief in outside forces that influence an individual's fate does not lead him to try to change his life.

To the Jewish widows, Shimi seems one of the last eligible bachelors, by which they mean he is "able to do up his own buttons, walk without aid of a frame and speak without spitting" (18). While Shimi is always elegant and well-mannered when he meets them, the narrative reveals that "a man untroubled by memories of childhood, assuredly venerable, confident in his own body and at ease in the proximity of women's, would not dress as finically as Shimi does" (14). While in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's manners, described as "well-bred" but "not inviting" (15), reflect his self-confidence, Shimi's proper manners are intended to hide his own insecurity. Still, many of the widows are attracted to him and one in particular, Wanda Wolfsheim, actively tries to capture his interest. Yet, none of the widows know that Shimi does have one health problem that adds to his distress whenever he meets them, as he needs to urinate increasingly more often.

Beryl and Shimi are indeed rather unlikely partners, as it is no other event than Ephraim's death that brings them together. While in the traditional novel of manners, the "occasional death" tends to be "reported from offstage" (Weld 1992: 14), in *Live a Little*, the theme becomes more prominent due to the novel's focus on aging and the transience of life. When Shimi is informed about Ephraim's death, he realizes he had not seen his brother for "over half a century" (131). At the funeral, Shimi is embarrassed to admit to his ignorance of his brother's life as well as surprised by the amount of friends and acquaintances Ephraim apparently had. On the point of leaving, Shimi notices the elderly woman he had met once before in the park. To his surprise, she recognizes him as the deceased's brother and introduces herself as Beryl Dusinbery. Beryl reveals she briefly met Ephraim due to his being a close friend of her oldest, now deceased son Neville, and she would like to find out more about the man who was so important in her son's life. As Shimi agrees to meet with her regularly in order to exchange information about Ephraim, both of them also learn about each other's personal histories in the process.

Beryl confides in Shimi that despite her memory getting lost, she can never forget her realization that she "protected Neville against all harm except the harm of being with a mother who couldn't love him" (215), as she had given birth to him at the age of seventeen and she had left him with her aunt, unable to be a mother then, "no more than a child [herself]" (214). After she shares this piece of information with Shimi, he confides his most troubling childhood memory to her, his trying on his mother's bloomers at the age of eleven: "Aghast in his mother's rayon bloomers, little Shimi saw his reflection in the bathroom mirror,

and waited for the earth to open up and swallow him. Did it have to be like that? Couldn't he have struck a pose and laughed off what he'd done? Couldn't he have pulled his trousers back on and chalked it down to experience? Assuredly, if he'd been someone else" (32). As the narration reveals, a sensitive boy like Shimi felt so guilty about following his curiosity and abhorred by his mother's cheap lingerie that he never got over the memory, the more so as he was seen by his brother and in turn beaten by his father. Despite their different backgrounds, both Beryl and Shimi have troubling experience from their early lives, and sharing these helps them to deal with them. In turn, Shimi becomes less introspective and secretive, while Beryl becomes more down-to-earth, controlling the signs of her somewhat excessive confidence.

Besides, it is Beryl's and Shimi's being well-mannered and organized that enables them to cooperate: "They were both methodical in nature. She would leave life with everything labelled. Shimi would slide out of existence, probably screaming, but assuredly in the right clothes" (174). Similarly to the rules of conduct Beryl introduced to her carers, she and Shimi agree on a set of orders for their meetings, the most important of which are the need for kindness and consideration. Yet, while these aspects of their manners gradually bring Beryl and Shimi closer together regardless of their different social background, Shimi also realizes his usual proper manners do not allow him to openly admire Beryl's appearance, when she happens to toss her long hair and show him her throat: "Once no doubt magnificent, [her throat] is furrowed now like a squeeze box. If I were a different man, Shimi thinks, I would find magnificence in it still. But he is who he is and does what he always does and looks away. Manners, he calls this. But it might be madness" (172). As the last quoted sentence suggests, Shimi realizes that he has been often using manners to create distance, which is not always valuable in itself. In this case, Shimi is able to subject his manners to scrutiny in a way not essentially different from Austen's Darcy. Also, the fact that Shimi practices cartomancy, which, as he tells Beryl, became especially popular in Italy, "where women wanted to learn who their future suitors would be" (197), may be seen as foreshadowing the courtship plot of the novel, providing another link to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Weld argues that traditional novels of manners require "a manageable geography, familiar enough to envision at a glance and preferably encompassable in the course of an after-dinner stroll," adding that "strangers and dangers enter from outside, since inside is a close-knit, inbred, almost claustrophobic familiarity" (1992: 11). In *Live a Little*, this feature of the subgenre is somewhat revised, as the novel centres on two distinct social worlds located in one space. One could thus argue that Shimi appears as much of a stranger to Beryl's upper-class family members as Beryl does to Shimi's acquaintances, represented by the Jewish widows of North London. As Shimi and Beryl are occasionally seen together in public, rumours about the nature of their relationship and their companion's identity abound in both social circles. When Beryl's sons ask her Moldovan carer about Shimi, she tells them he is a card player and possibly a Russian agent, to which they react with both scepticism and unease: "Russian agent could be useful. But they think it unlikely. Card players go through their own fortunes and then any

other fortune they can lay hands on" (223). As the sons are reluctant to admit to their curiosity and ask Beryl about Shimi, their speculations based on the carer's misjudgement result in a brilliant illustration of the novel of manners' persisting to be a comic subgenre. Additionally, due to Beryl's age, *Live a Little* subverts the recurrent situation in nineteenth century novels of manners, as it is the protagonist's sons rather than parents that are worried about her choice of a life partner.

Similarly, Wanda Wolfsheim and her acquaintances are curious about the mysterious woman Shimi was seen with in Regent's Park, as the witnesses describe her in the following way: "An extravagantly demonstrative woman rather older than a man in [Shimi's] condition has any need to be so attentive to. [...] Tall, aquiline, imperious, fine-boned, educated. Could be a stage actress of another era is one guess. A feminist poet. A mistress of Ernest Hemingway. A once-famous traveller in Arabia. An heiress to the Nivea fortune. The illegitimate daughter of Pablo Picasso" (234–35). Wanda learns about Shimi's companion after Shimi had reluctantly agreed on reading cards at an event she organizes for the widows of North London, where one of the confirmed participants is Hilary Greenwald. In Wanda's circles, it is known that Shimi broke Hilary's heart "more than half a century ago" (234); Shimi himself recalls he did not marry Hilary, as he was "unable to convince himself" he was really in love with her (178), leaving her to marry the dishonest Harvey Greenwald shortly thereafter. This subplot may remind the reader of Anne Elliot's refusal of Charles Musgrove in *Persuasion*; as she did not marry him because she could not love him, he married her self-absorbed younger sister Mary instead. Both *Live a Little* and *Persuasion* thus feature subplots dealing with marriages that lack genuine affection, as opposed to the relationships of the main characters.

Until late in the novel, Shimi tries to keep the two social worlds of his life apart so that he does not even tell Beryl about his planned card reading performance for reasons he can hardly explain: "Does he see her as a higher being, too rarefied to know what he gets up to on Finchley Road?" (193). Indeed, Beryl appears culturally superior to Shimi due to her education ranging from classical literature to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which makes her similar to Austen's Anne Elliot, who is an avid reader of Romantic poets. Only after Beryl finds out about Shimi's card reading event by accident, he lets her come to what she insists on calling the "Widows' Ball" (237), the nearest event in *Live a Little* to balls in Austen's novels. Yet, the fact that Beryl is going to be present adds to Shimi's distress, and to deal with the situation more easily, he asks his doctor to prescribe him stronger medication for his urinary problems, and gets a prescription for oxybutynin chloride. On the day of the event, Shimi does well until he reaches the table where Beryl, Hilary and Wanda are seated, and suddenly crashes to the floor, due to oxybutynin chloride overdose.

This unfortunate event leads to Shimi's waking up in Beryl's mansion and eventually serves as a catalyst to the development of their relationship. He appreciates not only her concern with his momentary situation, but especially her urging him not to be afraid of change and "live a little" (199), to which he responds: "We should get married, then" (256). Finally, both Shimi and Beryl reach the stage of their relationship when she is prepared to introduce him as her partner to all her family members. Yet, Beryl leaves one more surprise for Shimi for the

end, as one of the people present at the family gathering is Ephraim's son, Tahan, whom Beryl brought up, accepting him as a substitute son for Neville whom she was unable to take care of. Shimi, who believed there were no living members of his family left, thus finds out he has a nephew. In turn, although early in the novel, Beryl tells her carer she will share her life story with her, urging her "[not to] make the error of expecting happy endings" (24), against all odds, the story eventually reaches one.

It seems Jacobson wrote a novel whose ending parallels his own interpretation of the conclusions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, as he earlier suggested that "a happy ending is rescued from the near certainty of despair in *Pride and Prejudice*, and [...] *Persuasion* closes with the heroine balancing felicity on a tray so precarious that we can barely turn the final pages for fear of causing her to drop it" (2016: 48). Regarding *Pride and Prejudice*, Jacobson probably refers to Darcy's saving the Bennets' reputation by paying Wickham to marry Elizabeth's youngest sister Lydia, the revelation of which significantly contributes to Elizabeth's changing perception of him. If it had not been for this intervention, the novel would not have ended with multiple weddings. *Persuasion*, then, closes with Anne's and Captain Wentworth's wedding after he declares his love for her in a letter, motivated by overhearing her saying that women love even "when existence or when hope is gone" (237). Anne's speech also highlights that the happy ending of *Persuasion*, similarly to that of *Live a Little*, is slightly tinged with the main characters' awareness of death; while both Beryl and Shimi may die soon because of their advanced age, there is an indistinct threat that Captain Wentworth may die prematurely in "the dread of a future war" that "could dim [Anne's] sunshine" (254). In both cases, this awareness makes the protagonists appreciate their final union and make the most of the time they can spend together. In the final scene of *Live a Little*, Shimi repeats Beryl's own words to her: "It's never too late for anything" (280).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to examine the relevance of Howard Jacobson's own comparison of his writing to Jane Austen in the context of the concept of the novel of manners in English literature. A comparative analysis of the recurrent themes of Jacobson's and Austen's oeuvre revealed that on a general level, the authors share a focus on the development of relationships between the sexes, usually described from the male point of view in Jacobson and from the female one in Austen. Yet, the authors focus on different aspects of the relationships; while Austen follows her young characters' courtship which leads to a wedding, Jacobson deals with his middle-aged characters' marriages, disagreements and, in some cases, reconciliations. Additional differences between Austen's and Jacobson's novels are largely motivated by the authors' historical background and social context, as Jacobson writes in a considerably less conservative and more permissive society; yet, both authors' texts show that manners may be desirable as well as misused. Class issues also continue to be significant in Jacobson's novels, as his Jewish characters strive to become accepted by the English upper middle classes.

While Jacobson's most recent novel *Live a Little* may seem the most different one from Austen due to its couple of protagonists being in their nineties, on closer inspection, the opposite is the case, as it is the author's only novel that fully focuses on the main characters' courtship leading to a wedding. In addition, *Live a Little* goes beyond the dominant male perspective of Jacobson's earlier novels by providing the reader with an equal access to the thoughts of both the male and the female protagonist, Shimi Carmelli and Beryl Dusinbery; in the context of Jacobson's writing, the extended employment of the female point of view may thus be seen as approaching Austen's narrative strategy. While Shimi's and Beryl's moral education and way to self-knowledge is reminiscent of Elizabeth's and Darcy's character development in *Pride and Prejudice*, their advanced ages bring to mind Anne's and Captain Wentworth's belated wedding in *Persuasion*. *Live a Little* shares additional features with *Persuasion*: the female character is higher on the social hierarchy than her male suitor, and there is also a hint of a threat of separation for Anne and Captain Wentworth, although it does not stem from their ages but from a possibility of his having to fight in a future war. Unlike the more light-hearted ending of *Pride and Prejudice*, the affirmative closures of *Persuasion* and *Live a Little* lead to their protagonists' union, but with the increased awareness that they need to make the most of the time available to them.

Notes

[1] In Brauner's 2020 monograph on Jacobson, the thematic foci are the comic, masculinity, and Jewishness. Brauner thus analyses *No More Mr Nice Guy* in frame of Jacobson's depiction of masculinity, characterizing the ending of the novel as "bittersweet" (10), and arguing that the protagonist "finishes his journey of self-discovery as quiet, quiescent, all his rebellious spirit quelled" (103). The monograph also occasionally refers to Austen, but not in the context of generic conventions of the novel of manners.

[2] The Carlisle Mortality Table, constructed from information in two parishes of Carlisle over 1779–1789, puts aside the fact of widespread infant mortality and concludes that the expected age at death for a 20-year-old was 61.46, and for a 40-year old 67.61. For additional information, see O'Brien (2017).
According to the Office for National Statistics, life expectancy at age 65 years was 18.6 years for males and 21.0 years for females in the UK from 2016 to 2018. For additional information, see Office for National Statistics (2019).

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