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EXPERT COMMENT: The Dunciad: Giles Coren's sexist attack on Jane Austen has unpleasant echoes of Alexander Pope

Claudine Van Hensbergen, Senior Lecturer in 18th Century English Literature, discusses language used by Giles Coren when criticising Jane Austen literature.

In his latest documentary, and accompanying article, Giles Coren reinvents himself as a literary critic. The problem is, he's not a very good one.

If you're going to attack an author's works, you should at least get your facts right. Despite his fierce opposition to Austen's novels, Coren displays little precise knowledge of their content: there are three – not two – sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*; not all the sisters marry in *Pride and Prejudice*; in *Persuasion*, Maria falls off a wall in Lyme Regis – not in Bath.

There are more blunders and if Coren made these types of errors in his Oxford exams today, he would fail to secure another first-class degree. But Coren, I imagine, is being facetious on purpose – trying to stoke a controversy to generate publicity. After citing one of the above errors he brazenly notes in an aside that:

I might have got that a bit wrong, I went to Wikipedia to refresh my mind about the plot, but couldn't even get through the short synopsis there.

Coren purposefully draws attention to his lack of knowledge, ably performing the part of the dunce critic.

With this self-caricature, he could almost be inserting himself into the landscape of Alexander Pope's mock-epic poem, *The Dunciad* (1728), a work John Mullan has labelled "the greatest unread poem in the language".

The Dunciad took aim at aspiring literary critics, authors and publishers, seen by Pope to be flooding the marketplace with false-learning and trash.

Austen would have been familiar with Pope's landmark satire – the library she used at her brother's house, at Godmersham Park, held lavish first editions of Pope's collected works.

Pope had long satirised literary critics of Coren's dunce-like ilk. In his earlier *Essay on Criticism* (1711), he bewails:

Such shameless bards we have; and yet 'tis true,

There are as mad, abandon'd critics too.

The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,

With loads of learned lumber in his head,

With his own tongue still edifies his ears,

And always list'ning to himself appears.

Coren's rationale for the documentary lies in his supposed disdain for the amount of media coverage Austen has received on the 200th anniversary of her death. Yet his latest venture adds to the very thing he decries. He notes this fact with gusto, presenting himself as the anniversary's crowning glory:

... as 2017 draws to a close, only one more hellish Jane Austen-related public brain fart left to be endured. Mine.

Attacking women writers

Such self-promotion would not be so worrying, save for Coren's choice of language. In his article, Coren sexualises Austen, seeing her and her writings as a body to be "penetrated". He recollects his first reading of an Austen

novel:

Jane Austen first waddled into my consciousness in her stiff skirts and unforgiving bodice in the summer of 1985, as I prepared for my university entrance exams.

Who knows (or cares) if Austen waddled? But Coren's vision of her in "stiff skirts and unforgiving bodice" draws attention to Austen's physical body in an uncomfortably voyeuristic way. Unfortunately, he takes the metaphor yet further:

That summer, while my friends frolicked in the sunshine, smoked their first joints and kissed their first girls, maybe got a bit further, I sat locked up at home trying to penetrate Jane Austen. Reader, she did not yield. As I banged away fruitlessly day after day, the loss of my actual, earthly virginity was delayed by at least two years – oh, irony of ironies – by the cast-iron chastity belt of my Austen studies.

Perhaps Coren's failure to understand Austen's works lay in his unfounded hope that she wrote pornography? Let's hope not. But the string of sexual innuendos employed here is a worrying reflection of the way women – and their professional work – are still demeaned today, reduced to mere sex objects.

Coren's words take us back to Pope's *Dunciad*, and are reminiscent of the poem's attack on Eliza Haywood. Haywood was an early professional woman writer, who died some two decades before Austen's birth. A prolific author, she produced some of the earliest English novels and journalism.

In Pope's mock Olympic-games set in the bookselling world, Haywood is offered up as the prize in a publishers' pissing competition:

See in the circle next Eliza placed,

Two babes of love close clinging to her waist [...]

The Goddess then: 'Who best can send on high

The salient spout, far-streaming to the sky,

His be yon Juno of majestic size,

With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes.

Characterising Haywood as a fecund and oversized bovine creature, Pope's satire was long accepted as an accurate reflection of the corresponding value of her writings.

Scholars have now shown that Pope's satire was so vicious because Haywood was an influential force within their contemporary literary world. Coren, we should note, attacks Austen for exactly the same reason.

The language of misogyny

Much media attention has been given in recent months to the misogynistic treatment of women by men in positions of power and influence. Sexualising Austen's novels as a female body at which he "banged away fruitlessly day after day" is not the only clichéd misogyny Coren employs. He notes that he took some delight in the 200th anniversary of Austen's death since it gave him:

... a 'ding-dong, the witch is dead' spring in my step over the event that marked the shutting down of her grisly literary production line.

Characterising a woman he doesn't like as a witch is hardly novel. In his article, Coren revels in the casual sexism that is an everyday feature of our society. The language Coren uses to write about Austen is so problematic because it reveals how normal – and supposedly entertaining – readers find misogynistic attacks on women.

In publishing this type of denigrating language, the media is doing little to dispel its complicit endorsement of the types of attitudes and behaviours that reduce so many women, despite (or because of) their achievements, to mere meat. To Pope's cow- and ox-like prize.

If Coren doesn't enjoy reading Austen's novels, that's completely fine. Reducing those novels to a female body he tries (albeit fails) to penetrate, is not.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. You can view the

original article [here](#).

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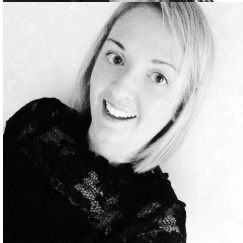


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