

Feminine Guardian of the Green Core

Joanne Wilkes

Penny Gay

JANE AUSTEN AND THE THEATRE
CUP, \$125hb, 212pp, 0 521 65213 8

Clara Tuite

ROMANTIC AUSTEN:
SEXUAL POLITICS AND THE LITERARY CANON
CUP, \$125hb, 242pp, 0 521 80859 6

John Wiltshire

RECREATING JANE AUSTEN
CUP, \$42.95pb, 190pp, 0 521 00282 6

MUCH RECENT WRITING about Jane Austen has been concerned with situating her more firmly in her own context, or with relating her to ours. Her novels' apparent immunity to the turmoil of their own era once led critics to concentrate on their ethical themes and their formal properties. More generally, Austen was associated either with a genteel, orderly, country-house world safely distant from the complexities of the present, or with a remote, stultifying society populated by prudes and snobs. But, in the last thirty years, commentators have debated Austen's political and literary views, and how these are inflected by her sense of herself as a writer from a greatly disadvantaged sex. The recent spate of screen interpretations of her novels has generated much speculation about what these versions reveal of contemporary attitudes to Austen.

These three new books, all by Australian academics, offer notable contributions. Penny Gay's *Jane Austen and the Theatre* highlights Austen's strong liking for theatrical performances, and discusses how plays, some of them by now-obscure women playwrights, were important influences on her novels. John Wiltshire's *Recreating Jane Austen* is also concerned with questions of creative influence: how biographers engaged with Austen, how Austen responded to Shakespeare, and how film and television have appropriated Austen's works. Meanwhile, in *Romantic Austen*, Clara Tuite examines both present and past, arguing that Austen's novels themselves, in tandem with Romantic and post-Romantic cultural developments, created their own canonical and hence dehistoricised status.

Jane Austen and the Theatre assembles the biographical evidence for Austen's lifelong interest in theatre, challenging the assumption (usually based on the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*) that she was hostile to such displays. Moreover, Gay suggests, aspects of her plots and characters are probably

MARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Art and Art History

Patrick McCaughey: An Essay on Fred Williams
Daniel Thomas on Robert Klippel
Evelyn Juers on Albert Namatjira
Edwina Preston on Brett Whiteley
Angus Trumble on Charles Conder

Other contributors include: Mary Eagle, Morag Fraser, Miles Lewis, Christopher Menz, Jason Smith, George Tibbits and Chris Wallace-Crabbe

indebted to plays by famous writers such as Oliver Goldsmith, R.B. Sheridan and, of course, William Shakespeare, as well as to those of the then-popular Hannah Cowley, Frances Sheridan and Elizabeth Inchbald. Woman-centred sentimental comedy was the most extensive influence, but the emotional and bodily suffering evoked in Sarah Siddons's stage renditions of tragic protagonists could have contributed to Austen's heroines as well, while the naval hero represented by *Persuasion*'s Frederick Wentworth had many parallels in stage celebrations of contemporary naval victories. The book also draws attention to a theatrical convention that had some affinity with fictional technique: plays often featured an epilogue addressed to the audience by the principal actress, in and out of character, with a tone similar to that of Austen's endings, 'both authoritatively knowledgeable about her fictional world and ironically dismissive of its reality'.

The book addresses Austen's awareness of 'the pervasive theatricality of contemporary genteel society'. This meant that women not given to self-display, such as Jane Bennet and Fanny Price, must learn this art. But Gay also shows how fascinated the novels are with people keen on role-playing: Henry Tilney, Willoughby, Wickham, Frank Churchill, the Crawfords, and even Elizabeth and Darcy. The latter pair both perform socially and talk about social performance, and the change in their relationship after the mutually embarrassing proposal scene, Gay argues, can be seen as a movement beyond the social world as theatre.

Gay claims *Sense and Sensibility* is 'a more fragile and complex comedy ... than the stage could countenance', and it is the complexities of Austen's apparently seamless fictions that are the subject of Clara Tuite's volume. The most ambitious of these studies, it is also the most uneven. The first chapter, focusing on *Catharine; or The Bower* (a transitional work between the juvenilia and the published novels), uncovers much, but the discussion piles up so many etymologies and historical and familial allusions that the effect is more confusing than enlightening. The book might also have been better edited, with the stylistic infelicities of this chapter ironed out, and some curtailing of Tuite's repetitious use of 'engage' (to mean 'discuss', 'deal with' and so on).

That said, the subsequent chapters are very rewarding, if hard to do justice in a brief compass. Arguing for a conservative Austen, Tuite demonstrates how *Sense and Sensibility* places itself in, but also partly transcends, the rather hoary contemporary debate between sentimentalism and anti-sentimentalism. It transforms sensibility (associated then with French radicalism) into a sympathy that both acts as a conservative force and fosters a style replete with the sort of irony and ambiguity that disarms a politicised reading. Austen's heroines foreground, of course, an intelligent female subjectivity, but they also show, claims Tuite, how the stability of the patrilineal landed order can be safely renovated via marriages with intelligent women of lower

social status. Tuite makes a thought-provoking parallel here between the marital significance of Elizabeth Bennet or Fanny Price and the function eventually fulfilled by Austen herself in the largely male canon of English literature: as a woman writer, she was both a 'mobile commodity and the stable, official feminine guardian of the green core' of the British nation. But Tuite argues that in *Sanditon*, Austen's final fragment, a disjunction emerges between 'the ideal of landed culture and its stability and tradition' and the 'mobility' of both the females and the mode of fiction needed to bolster this. The woman has ceased to function in a heterosexual romance plot — indeed, in what Austen completed of the novel, there is no sign of such a plot.

As John Wiltshire illustrates, less convincing speculations about absences are rife in accounts of Austen's life. The tantalising dearth of reliable information about Austen's inner world has generated immense biographical speculation, a phenomenon he interprets less as deficient scholarly rigour than as evidence of too much emotional investment in Austen on her biographers' part. They have not sufficiently separated themselves from the object of their attention to see her as an independent entity.

Wiltshire's book uses the biographers' speculations as a starting point for a theory of influence based on the psycho-analytical ideas of Donald Winnicott. These concern how the child comes to register others as independent beings, and hence acquires the potential for mature love. Although Wiltshire's explications of Winnicott become somewhat repetitive, his applications of the theory illuminate both Austen's deployment of Shakespeare and the adaptations of her novels to the screen. (He also illustrates the theory with reference to the courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy, in an account that complements Penny Gay's.) Wiltshire contends that one artist engages creatively with another's work by first projecting his or her own desires and preoccupations onto it, and then coming to recognise it as something separate, a process that entails a kind of destruction, followed by a reconciliation that in turn enables re-creation.

So Austen's specific allusions to Shakespeare are less telling than her adaptation of his soliloquy mode to convey her characters' inner lives. Moreover, Patricia Rozema's film of *Mansfield Park* fails to convince, in Wiltshire's view, because Rozema remains hostile to what she sees as the text's conservatism, panders to modern viewers' assumptions, and ignores the genuinely disturbing aspects of the novel. On the other hand, Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, irreverent towards *Emma* as Austen herself could be irreverent towards the Bard, represents for Wiltshire a genuinely loving re-creation of the original. He also discusses screen versions of *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Although some readers will challenge his conclusions, this is the recent book on Austen most likely to interest non-specialists.