
Morris Zapp, the American Professor in David Lodge’s campus comedy *Changing Places*, had the ambition of writing ‘a series of commentaries on Jane Austen ... saying absolutely everything that could possibly be said about them.’ Here we have the Morris Zapp version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Opposite every page of text is a page of notes, glossing, commenting, explaining. It makes a hefty volume of nearly 750 pages, less than half of which contain Jane Austen’s words. Does *Pride and Prejudice* need any annotation at all? Does such zealous and obtrusive continuous commentary add to our understanding or pleasure?

The editor, David M Shapard, seems to have had some hesitations. In his ‘Notes to the Reader’ he suggests that ‘First-time readers might ... prefer to read the text of the novel first, and then to read the annotations and introduction.’ But the text is liberally sprinkled with superior numbers, indicating a note, making the annotations difficult to ignore.

When I saw that the cover picture, Cassandra Austen’s well-known watercolour of her niece Fanny, painting, was also given no less than four annotations I assumed this was a spoof, implying an admission that this edition was annotated to excess; but after a few pages I was not so sure. There is little evidence of irony or humour in this enterprise.

Unlike Morris Zapp, who disliked Jane Austen and the entire business of Literature, it is clear that Professor Shapard loves this novel and is only too anxious to share his pleasure and understanding; and he leaves nothing to chance. (Though I do take a slightly malicious delight in pointing out one careless error: On page 57, note 4 he writes ‘Mr Bingley’ when he clearly means ‘Mr Bennet’). Every time the word ‘sensible’ occurs meaning ‘aware’ or ‘conscious’ instead of its more usual current meaning (which also occurs in the novel) it is duly glossed. The reader is given no credit for a learning process, or for understanding in context.

Of course, this is not an edition intended for the general reader. It ‘has been designed so it can be used as a reference’, and it is obviously intended for readers who know nothing of Jane Austen, or of England circa 1810. The blurb on the back cover claims that it ‘is a sheer delight for Jane Austen fans’, but I expect that very few such fans (I am certainly one) will find it so. It can get rather irritating to have a friendly and very busy American professor reading over your shoulder and constantly, eagerly, commenting and explaining. It is interesting to have the exact definition of a phaeton, with illustration, and how it differs from a chaise or a gig. But the crucial significance of the various vehicles is in the social status they reflect – something that any modern reader can understand by analogy, and which is usually made clear to the alert reader by the context. Professor Shapard leaves nothing to the alert reader. And this spoils our pleasure.
The great pleasure of reading Jane Austen, which makes her books so endlessly re-readable, lies in fine-tuning our minds to hers, so that we appreciate the subtlest of ironies. To have them pointed out and explained to us is very like having a joke explained: it is then no longer funny. It takes away that warm feeling of self-congratulation when we ‘catch on’ for ourselves. The annotations constantly get between us and the author.

Some of the glosses are questionable. When Bingley’s sisters appear Jane Austen introduces them thus: ‘His sisters were fine women with an air of decided fashion’ (16). ‘Fine’ is glossed as ‘elegant, refined’, and ‘fashion’ as ‘high social standing. It could also mean the expected elegant behavior and demeanor of those belonging to upper-class society. The word will be used often in the novel, almost always with these meanings.’ Are these glosses helpful? Neither of them refers to the ladies’ dress, which is surely an implied meaning here. Elsewhere the militia officers are described as ‘in general a very creditable, gentleman-like set’ (142). ‘Creditable’ is glossed as ‘honorable’. Does this take us any closer to Jane Austen’s meaning?

However in general the glosses, though often superfluous, are reasonably accurate, as is all the factual information given. And some of the explanations, particularly those on the laws of inheritance and the fragile situation of unmarried women – especially of unmarried women living with a man – are genuinely helpful to today’s students who, having grown up in a more forgiving society, may wonder what was all the fuss about Lydia. Though even here, the student who needs these explanations will never get much pleasure from Jane Austen, or understand what makes her any better than a Mills and Boon romance.

The real trouble is with the commentaries. In his ‘Notes to the Reader’ Professor Shapard modestly admits that his ‘Literary interpretations ... represent the personal views and interpretations of the editor’ and will ‘inevitably provoke disagreement.’ They seldom provoke more than the Bart Simpson comment, ‘Well...Duh!’ being statements of the bleedin’ obvious. An example: when Mr Collins rapidly transfers his attentions from Elizabeth to Charlotte Lucas, the latter:

would have felt almost sure of success if he had not been to leave Hertfordshire so very soon. But here, she did injustice to the fire and independence of his character, for it led him to escape out of Longbourne House the next morning with admirable slyness and hasten to Lucas Lodge to throw himself at her feet.

This delicious passage provokes a gloss: ‘admirable slyness’ = ‘surprising secrecy’; and ‘independence’ has the longer comment:

Meaning, most likely, his willingness to defy whatever conventions might demand longer courtship. The term has an ironic edge, since in general Mr Collins shows so little independence (not to mention fieriness) of spirit.
An ironic edge indeed! Anyone who needs a comment like this would be incapable of reading Jane Austen in any but the most superficial way. Jane Austen once wrote:

I do not write for such dull elves
As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves.

This is an edition for the dull elves. I doubt whether they will be properly grateful.

Humphrey Tranter