

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Carol Adams, Douglas Buchanan & Kelly Gesch, *The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Jane Austen* (NY: Continuum, 2008)

The claim of this Jane Austen Companion is that it offers something for everyone. There are 51 short sections listed in the Contents covering a wide range of topics such as 'The Importance of a Good Carriage', 'Why I Married Her. By Mr Bennet', 'The Clergy in Austen's Fiction', 'What Happened at the Ha-ha?', 'Jane Austen Film Chronology' and 'Was Lady Russell Wrong?' There are interesting chapters on film and television versions of the novels and a crossword and an aptitude test are included for those who wish to test their familiarity with the texts. Altogether, it is an amusing and thought-provoking collection.

The book is very well-presented and inviting, and has many charming illustrations from the period, some by Rowlandson and Gillray from the Yale University collection. Others are from early editions of the novels, as well as copies of British postage stamps that delineate characters from the novels. One minor difficulty in reviewing this work is that the particular writer of a chapter is not identified. It is therefore necessary to refer throughout to each contributor in general terms as 'the writer'.

Each of the novels, including the unfinished works and the juvenilia, are examined, with an outline of the plot for those unfamiliar with Austen's work and a development of some aspect or aspects of the novel. In the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, the apparent dichotomy between sense as embodied in Elinor and sensibility in Marianne is explored. The writer suggests that 'neither can claim a perfect attitude or outlook. Scholars disagree precisely on just how much "sensibility" Elinor in the end possesses, and how much sense can be found in Marianne'. Carol Shields in *Jane Austen, A Life* is quoted as saying: 'We have real sisters here, not convenient contraries' (27).

In a chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*, the writer isolates women's education as an equally important theme to the marriage plot. The acquisition of 'genteel accomplishments', it is argued, is not the prime requirement for a young woman. She must, in fact, be able to judge rightly as Elizabeth learns to do through the action of the novel. The writer suggests that 'in many of Austen's novels, fathers are a disappointment' (8). Even Mr Bennet is fallible. His is a dangerous cynicism; he takes the line of least resistance rather than confront the problems in his family.

The writer of the chapter on 'First Impressions: Letting Jane Austen Into Your Life' argues that, in misjudging Wickham, Elizabeth is 'definitely her mother's daughter' (1). Certainly her prejudice against Darcy leads her to misjudge Wickham, but so too do all the Meryton inhabitants. They accept Wickham at face value. Mrs Bennet, of course displays no judgment at all and Lydia, who *is* 'her mother's daughter', learns nothing from experience.

In the chapter on THE Sentence, the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, the irony in the assumptions implicit in the statement is analysed. The writer suggests that mothers of marriageable daughters are the most likely to wish for the statement to be true. Speaking in this chapter of the rhythm of the language, the writer regrets that much is lost

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when the novels are made into movies (12). The elements brought to a film can, of course, add richness otherwise supplied by imagination in reading the text. However, as the writer of the chapter on 'Austen the Novelist' argues, 'in being made into a film, the most important thing about Austen - the language - gets lost' (207), as too does the irony. Nevertheless, there are interesting articles on what can be gained through the visual, emotional and audio possibilities of film, and a discussion of the importance of costume, music, setting, and of landscape itself as a character in the film.

One particularly interesting chapter analyses the music for the BBC/A&E *Pride and Prejudice*. The writer asks how the music in this production manipulates the audience's feelings, and examines the effect of the choice of Beethoven's *Septet in E Flat Major* in appropriate scenes to give a chamber ensemble setting, and the feeling of close interaction of a few performers. The opening scene in the film with Bingley and Darcy riding across open country backed by the French horn with its echoes of hunting and nobility sets the scene at the beginning of the film for the entrance of the 'heroes'. Collins's signature tune on bassoon is the perfect caricature for the comic vicar. The scene where Darcy dives into the lake at Pemberley is accompanied by appropriate water music.

This scene is also dissected in another chapter to explain how the Darcy character is made more compelling and masculine through focussing on his physicality; 'fencing, swimming, riding, bathing, walking. Indeed, the BBC dips Darcy into the water three times: a bath at Netherfield, washing his face after penning his letter at Rosings, and then his swim at Pemberley.' The writer argues that Andrew Davies's recreation of Darcy to stress his masculinity and sexual attraction to Elizabeth is 'the central motor which drives the story forward' (133).

An article on *Emma* stresses the close-knit society of Highbury, Hartfield and Donwell Abbey. Everyone knows everyone and there is much opportunity for gossip and also for the misunderstanding which creates much of the mystery in the novel. A second reading and a more careful monitoring of Miss Bates's chatter always provide clues to the intricate plot and the machinations of Frank Churchill. As the writer comments, all the action takes place in the one county. There is no visit to Hunsford to stay with the Collins, like Elizabeth's in *Pride and Prejudice* and, in the same novel, her visit to Derbyshire, the setting for Pemberley (not Devonshire as the writer of this chapter has it) (69).

In a chapter on *Northanger Abbey* (82-88) the work as a novel about reading novels is discussed and Austen's championship of the novel form is stressed. The narrator as omniscient author clearly defines the powers of the mind and the knowledge of character and human nature that must inform a novel to be persuasive. The Gothic elements of this particular novel, although they are satirised through Catherine and Isabella's uncritical acceptance of stories such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, are shown to be present in contemporary domestic life. Catherine's entrapment in a web of lies perpetrated by the Thorpes, together with General Tilney's treatment of her as his guest,

verge on the Gothic.

As well as chapters on many aspects of the novels themselves, their publication and the media, there are interesting interviews, such as that by Mary Lou White on 'The Ideal Jane Austen Tour' of the UK. This would be of particular interest to overseas aficionados giving up-to-date directions for visits to places associated with Austen and the settings for her novels. It is illustrated with photographs of important sites and includes some provided by the Jane Austen Society in Melbourne. Also included is an interview with Karen Joy Fowler, author of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, and a chapter on Regency Dress by Baronda Ellen Bradley.

There is no index to the collection but there is a chapter of acknowledgments and the chapter headings at the beginning of the book give helpful hints as to their focus.

Although written with a light touch, and with fairly short entries, this book offers good coverage on many aspects of the novels, and opens up different avenues for further exploration. The relaxed style of writing will particularly appeal to younger readers, and the wide coverage will satisfy anyone interested in the novels. It can, indeed, be said to have 'something for everyone'.

Kate Twidale