

We Still Want Our Mr. Darcy
Romancing Jane Austen: Narrative, Realism, and the Possibility of a Happy Ending

By Ashley Tauchert.
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Reviewed by Michael Edson.

Ashley Tauchert's *Romancing Jane Austen* knows what readers want: that we still want our Mr. Darcy. Or more precisely: that despite spiraling divorce rates, growing skepticism about marriage, and increasing numbers of persons for whom heterosexual pairing comprises no part of their lives, twenty-first century audiences still delight in Austen's implausibly blissful conjugal conclusions. Austen's cultural staying power seemingly stems from her satisfying a desire—according to Tauchert, a specifically feminine desire—for a happy ending despite all the contemporary evidence for its impossibility. For Tauchert, explaining this oddity of reception prompts returning to a classic Austen conundrum: “the problem of Austen's happy endings in relation to her otherwise unremitting realism.”

Understanding the appeal of Austen's endings lies in rethinking the term “romance.” In her introduction, Tauchert argues that Austen's novels wed “romance” as a heterosexual love story with “romance” as a salvational quest narrative. Her heroines' desire for a male suitor doubles as a desire for salvation in a fallen world. Although touted for her “realism,” for her empirically plausible portrayals of women's often desperate lives in Regency England, Austen uses many “romance” elements: a series of crises, a sudden recognition of desire, and an ending that defies the unhappiness prescribed by the class and gender realities shown elsewhere in her novels. Despite the empirical odds, girl gets guy; romance (as narrative mode) always wins in the end. The tension between

realism and romance in Austen's fiction corresponds to a strain between two desires: one a masculine desire for competition, the other a feminine desire for community in the form of “love.” The endings are thus “feminine wish-fulfillments,” for both Austen and her female readers. This explains their enduring popularity: in satisfying this “universal” desire, they enable women “temporarily to suspend our belief in the inevitability of suffering” that attends social contradiction and separation. Far from escapist, however, Austen's endings offer glimpses of agencies and social arrangements foreclosed by a realism that takes for granted female exclusion and patriarchal domination.

The next six chapters trace the interaction of realist and romance elements and their consequences in each of Austen's six major novels. Tauchert argues that *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* “mediate” between realist and romance modes. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, the story “oscillates” between Catherine's “‘romantic’ misperceptions and Henry's realist demystifications,” only to embrace the disavowed romance form in the final unification of Catherine and Henry. The middle chapters scrutinize the extent to which the happy endings in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* depend on their heroines' securing “rational autonomy.” In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen “proposes a reinterpretation of marriage as an appropriate object of a rational feminine desire,” demonstrated in the “overcoming of difference, and [the] meeting of minds” embodied in Elizabeth and Darcy's loving marriage. The closing chapters consider the relation between romance and agency in *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Tauchert's discussion of *Persuasion* is the highlight of the book. Reading Anne's movement from stasis to action through the lens of romance, Tauchert argues that Anne's “holding out for ‘love’” in the face of empirical unlikelihood comprises a kind of feminine agency.

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At one point, Tauchert states that “it is necessary to take a quite lengthy detour through archetypal, structuralist, and Marxian theory.” Sadly, “detour” describes too much of this book. Theoretical roadblocks constantly spring up: a recap of Frederic Jameson's materialist revision of Northrop Frye's literary typology, or a review of Roland Barthes's levels of narrative structure. Whether all this theoretical priming is in fact “necessary” to the argument is debatable. Little of this material goes on to directly inform Tauchert's too-brief analyses of specific passages from the novels. This sort of theoretical survey can be valuable, but it may satisfy neither of Tauchert's intended audiences. For theory devotees, the rehearsal of Frye's and Barthes's theories will seem tired; for Austen fans, superfluous.

There are other problems. Tauchert's claim about the “deluge of empirical evidence testifying to [the] impossibility” of a happy marriage seems more a truism of our own post-conjugal age than the view offered in Austen's texts. Certainly Austen's novels show many unhappy unions, but they also depict some happy ones (e.g., the Crofts in *Persuasion*). Tauchert's thesis ignores the implications of such marriages. A further problem arises with her linking of Austen's “romances” to modern bodice-rippers. If “romance” addresses a feminine desire and appeals to a female readership, then how might her appeal to men be explained? Austen's persistence in popular culture today might owe something to her charm for male audiences, something that distinguishes her from both modern romance writers and other female authors of her time. *Romancing Jane Austen* offers a long overdue treatment of Austen's romance elements, but Tauchert cannot seem to explain why heterosexual men still want their Mr. Darcy too.

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