BOOK REVIEW

Does She or Doesn't She?

Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques: A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis

By Massimiliano Moroni.
Ashgate Press, 2009. vii + 163 pp.
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Review by Nora Nachumi.

One of the difficulties in writing about Austen's novels is that almost any interpretation inevitably will be countered by radically different readings of the same texts. In *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques,* Massimiliano Moroni explains why this is so. "Perhaps," he remarks, "if opposing analyses can be presented in similarly convincing ways, the novels had better be read as complex acts of ideological balancing rather than unbalanced, biased manifestos." Moroni's goal is not to reinstate a "de-historical, socially and intellectually harmless reading" of the novels, but to consider the technical means by which Austen's "'indeterminacy' is created." Austen's novels, he explains, are constructed as "dialogues among voices whose struggle for power can never be finally decided (which is why opposing readings are possible and plausible)." In order to analyze the workings of these "dialogic machines," he employs the "tools of linguistics." The result is a consideration of Austen that does not favor one interpretation over another, but instead demonstrates how the novels actually invite these scholarly face-offs.

In the first half of the book, Moroni employs evaluation theory and stylistics in order to understand "'who evaluates whom' in the novels," His subjects are Austen's narrators or, more precisely, her narrative

Masked reveler Elspeth Flood at the 2010 AGM Bal Masqué.

techniques. Both, he contends, work to dismantle the "authority of the evaluative sources she sets up." To this end, Austen's narrators "seem to change during the course of each novel;" their "level of detachment varies greatly;" and "their vision disturbingly hovers between omniscience and ignorance." Moreover, he notes, the narrative frequently shifts from the narrator's perspective to one or more of the characters; occasionally, the two are conflated, leaving readers unsure "whether they are being afforded insight into the heart of the matter, or whether they are only following this or that character (or the narrator-as-character) in their misreadings." Such practices, Moroni explains, result in a web of "evaluative opacity" which Austen "progressively extends" over the course of her career. To illustrate, he briefly reads, of all of the novels, *Sanditon* and *The Watsons.* He concludes with a longer and more thorough analysis of *Mansfield Park,* which he regards as the slipperiest evaluative mystery in Austen's oeuvre.

Part Two of *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques* demonstrates that indeterminacy stems from how characters speak to each other. As in Austen's world, complex systems of rules concerning issues like turn-taking, dominance, choice of topics, vocabulary, and grammar govern conversation in "Austenland" (Moroni's term for the world in the novels). Consequently, whenever a character in Austenland speaks, he/she "conveys knowledge about his/her context, other characters, and him/herself." From *Sense and Sensibility* onwards, Moroni contends, all of Austen's work is about the "loss or gain of social-conversational power, about how certain characters . . . receive instruction in the ways of humility, while others . . . acquire the greater social 'consequence' and/or conversational 'dominance'." To illustrate, he reads the heroines' educations as a linguistic as well as a moral process. Brief considerations of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion,* for example, confirm them as "Cinderella-like tales in which

forwardness in conversation is punished and bashfulness rewarded." A bit more problematic is Moroni's assertion that *Pride and Prejudice* centers on "Elizabeth's taming of the 'educated boor' Darcy." What's missing is any discussion of Elizabeth's own educational process and its relationship to her use of language. Does her language—like Darcy's—evolve as her perceptions of others and of herself are corrected?

Moroni ends the second part of his study with another long reading; in this case he uses the tools of pragmatics to map the conversational joust that occurs during the Box Hill episode in *Emma.* To illustrate the complexity of the way language is used in this scene, he compares the scene as Austen wrote it to two Italian translations. The translators, he demonstrates, "often lose track of Austen's fine balance between explicit and implicit meanings." However, he asserts that it is almost impossible for the English reader to determine who "scores the most points" in this scene. A frustrating conclusion, perhaps, but—as in his reading of *Mansfield Park*—Moroni's interest is not in presenting another soon-to-be-contested reading of Austen but in mapping the indeterminacy of her narrative style. Ideologies are at war in Austen's narrative, he admits, but "Austen's 'chameleonic' ability" makes "it close to impossible . . . to separate winners and the losers." This study will not stop others from trying to do so, but it does a good job explaining why no one, so far, has had the last word.
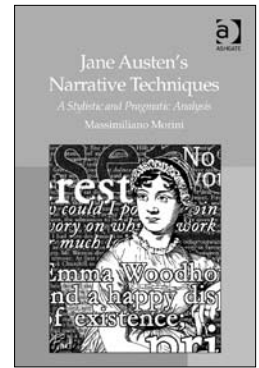
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