

Jane Austen's Designs

Jane Austen & Company: Collected Essays

By Bruce Stovel, with an introduction by Juliet McMaster and an afterword by Isobel Grundy. Ed. with a Preface by Nora Foster Stovel.

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Review by Jocelyn Harris.

Bruce Stovel, teacher, scholar, and co-organiser of two triumphant conferences—JASNA at Lake Louise in 1993 and “The Talk in Jane Austen” at Jasper in 1999—died suddenly and too soon. As Nora Foster Stovel explains, it was Austen who lured this passionate classicist into a life-long fascination with comic structure and vision. Stovel invites us to inhabit what he calls the “holiday world of comedy,” writes Juliet McMaster in her affectionate introduction. Although he delighted in Fielding, Sterne, Lennox, Burney, Scott, Waugh, and Amis, Jane Austen was to him the consummate comic author. Of this brilliant and orderly-minded critic, she promises, “You don’t lose your way in these essays: if you hear of seven pillars of wisdom, seven pillars you will get.”

Of particular interest to Austen readers are Stovel’s humane and personal readings of the novels and prayers. In “Jane Austen and the Pleasure Principle,” he tells how Emma Woodhouse’s devotion to her own pleasure “leads her to the very different, and greater, pleasures of mutual love and self-reform.” Catherine Morland chooses similarly between her pleasure in Gothic fiction and her attraction to

Henry Tilney, while Elizabeth Bennet abandons the pleasure of exercising her “Olympian judgement” for a proper appreciation of Mr Darcy. Along with Marianne Dashwood and even Captain Wentworth, all three pursue pleasure and end up finding happiness.

In “Asking versus Telling: One Aspect of Jane Austen’s Idea of Conversation,” Stovel notes that while telling is easy, asking leads to a genuine two-way exchange. Nicely distinguishing Austen’s consultative questions from her rhetorical, announcing, leading, accusing, browbeating, pleading, abject, strategic, and pseudo-questions, he shows how Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton tell rather than ask, in their proposal scenes. Darcy’s questions and Wentworth’s, however, leave them on tenterhooks, while the self-questioning of Elizabeth and Emma leads to self-knowledge. Thus Stovel’s initial observation about grammar leads to significant psychological insights.

Stovel shows equal skill in “A Contrariety of Emotion: Jane Austen’s Ambivalent Lovers in *Pride and Prejudice*,” where he sketches an intricate pattern of love and self-love, hate and self-hate, until the “sparkling duels of wit give way to tongue-tied, blushing, floor-scrutinizing encounters that would make Bingley and Jane seem brash and poised by comparison.” That ambivalence, he argues, draws Elizabeth and Darcy together.

“Once More, with Feeling: The Structure of *Mansfield Park*” traces “the large arc that unifies the novel and provides its spine.” Austen “plays the same melody once more, with feeling,” says Stovel, as when the rising action and climax of the first volume reappear in the second and third, or when Sotherton’s theatrical scenes in Volume 2 mirror the actual theatricals in Volume 1. As he contends, this “strange and puzzling” novel, “like its heroine, is all too easy to underestimate.”

In “Comic Symmetry in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,” Stovel argues that Austen’s

ironies make *Emma* “so subtly symmetrical, so mined with interconnected details,” that criticism has yet to define its structure adequately. Identifying its main threads as the hidden love of Mr.

Knightley and Emma, the counterpointing of that secret love with the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, and the way that other characters embody aspects of Emma, he concludes that the main action of the novel is her “search for, and triumphant discovery of, a true friend” in Mr. Knightley.

Under the circumstances, the most poignant essay in the collection is “The Sentient Target of Death: Jane Austen’s Prayers,” where Stovel identifies the “difficulty and yet the necessity of self-knowledge” as the principal theme of prayers “meant to be read as the work of a common, generic believer.” Although Janet Todd and Linda Bree cite that generic quality as evidence for doubting Austen’s authorship in their Cambridge University Press edition of the later manuscripts, Stovel’s survey of their history, echoes of the *Book of Common Prayer*, reception history, possible dating, and relation to the letters and novels is still useful. As Isobel Grundy remarks in the Afterword, reading Stovel’s essays is always a pleasure, “partly because Bruce is so attuned to the pleasures of reading, partly because he always has something specific to say, something of value for the understanding and enjoyment of the texts or texts he discusses, and partly because of the lucidity and friendliness, often the humour, of his style.”

Finally, the appearance of the beautiful Mrs. Harriet Quentin for the cover is particularly serendipitous, for as Martha M. Rainholt suggests, it may have been this very portrait, exhibited on 24 May 1813 at the Spring Gardens, London, that Jane Austen identified as Mrs. Bingley.



Jocelyn Harris is the author of *A Revolution Almost beyond Expression: Jane Austen’s “Persuasion”* (2007); *“Jane Austen and Celebrity Culture: Shakespeare, Dorothy Jordan and Elizabeth Bennet”* (*Shakespeare* 6:4, 2010, 410-30), and *“Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park”* in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, 2nd edition (2011).