

Women as Serious Agents

Jane Austen's Civilized Women: Morality, Gender, and the Civilizing Process

By Enit Karafili Steiner.

Pickering and Chatto Publishers Ltd, 2012. viii + 228 pages.

Hardcover. \$99.

Review by Paul J. deGategno.

Enit Steiner analyzes the Austen novels seriously, cogently, and with a passion for examining “the ways in which... [her] women learn to empower their environment while empowering themselves.” What were women’s rights in the late eighteenth-century, and what can we learn about the role of women in an evolving civilization? In answering these questions, Steiner has taken her dissertation topic and freed it from much of the formal exposition typically found in clarifying some scholarly problem. Instead, we have a balanced view of Austen’s intellectual links to the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers who studied societal development plus early feminist views, like Mary Wollstonecraft’s, on “moral development and interpersonal relations.”

Beginning with a full, if not intimidating, Introduction focusing on “Civilization and Gender, “Moral Development in Separate Spheres,” “Resisting Solitary Independence,” and concluding with “Austen’s Civilized Women,” we have the thesis: Austen portrays “women as active agents in the civilizing process.” The book proceeds in the following six chapters with a lively analysis of each Austen novel and the Juvenilia (the 27 early prose, drama, and verse pieces). Throughout, Steiner shows how Austen has collapsed the divide between public and private societies. Unlike men, women can set aside “ego boundaries” and move beyond the patterns of behavior and action that men have set, while positioning themselves for a new definition of human autonomy.

With any complex argument concerning Austen—and Steiner decides early on to set aside questions about the novelist of manners for a more nuanced discussion of moral development—the critic must regularly summarize the progress of civilizing influences reflected in Austen’s work. Women remain an “excluded group of knowers,” and the exclusivity created by men and their resulting political and economic power should force the reader into doubting the truthfulness of certain characters. As Austen becomes a more skilled and sophisticated writer, she moves from the early *Lady Susan*, which reveals a heroine whose private thoughts cannot be trusted, to *Northanger Abbey*, where the injustices visited on the female within the private society remain object lessons on morality and how its survival is threatened. Are we becoming active thinkers and responsive to feelings? Steiner suggests this was always Austen’s intention: we have become trained “to see mischief [and] have been producers rather than consumers of moral judgement.”

Appreciating the achievement of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* becomes a natural response for most critics, and Steiner does not disappoint. Elizabeth Bennet’s wit and sense of humor serve as metaphors as Austen develops her argument for practicing mutual understanding and the exchange of ideas between “moral agents” (people). Steiner believes the same can be said for Elinor and Marianne, for whom the choice is not valuing sense over sensibility; instead the novel rests on the “necessary relation between the two.” Sympathy does seem the critical element where the reader should learn to appreciate two kinds of feeling, two kinds of understanding. Steiner makes this point but wades through Bakhtin’s literary theory of dialogical thinking first before concluding that both novels reinforce the necessity of making allowances for “difference[s] of situation and temper.”

Leaving aside the analyses of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, I find that the most compelling chapter in the last part of the book deals with *Emma*,

because the change from the earlier novels to this one does meet Steiner’s criticism: “as drastic a change as conceivable.” Focusing on power and influence within the courtship skirmishes in the novel, Steiner sees *Emma* as a well-wrought early model of the unconscious. Autonomy, free-thinking, intellectual exchange, self-assessment—all reflect the ways in which Emma’s mind explores the boundaries of her private and public societies. Though Emma’s self-sufficiency falls short and she embraces the patriarchal marriage bonds, the intellectual stimulation as seen in the quarrels with Knightley validate the relationship as positive. No guilt or humiliation should linger since Emma has raised her consciousness—her individuality has been transformed and the partnership enriched.

Steiner, a research and teaching assistant in the Department of English at the University of Zurich, has written a complex but rewarding study of Austen’s novels, appraising the role of society, gender, and feminist interpersonal relations. As an informative addition to the Austen library, the book is the 9th in the Gender and Genre series of Pickering and Chatto dedicated to studying gender in relation to the media used by writers from the Renaissance to the contemporary.

Paul J. deGategno is Professor of English and Director of Academic Affairs at Penn State-Brandywine in Media, Pennsylvania.

