

Quixotes and Galateas

Jane Austen's Erotic Advice

By Sarah Raff.

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Review by Diana Birchall.

First impressions of this volume are deceiving. It announces itself, with its slightly risqué title and pretty Chawtonesque cover art, as something spicy, amusing, and not to be taken very seriously. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Packaging ought not to be the most important subject in a book review, but it is worrisome that readers may fork over the price of a new book reasonably expecting a mildly frothy entertainment under the respectable imprimatur of the Oxford University Press.

Those taken in by this piece of publishing disingenuousness will discover that, nakedly examined, this proves to be (gasp!) a purely academic work. Fair enough; but it is unhappily one of the sort written on the end of the jargon scale where most of the sentences require reading two or three times over in order to understand what, exactly, they mean.

Author Sarah Raff's subject is Janeites, and she observes that their obsession "is the consequence of Austen's own design." The modern Janeite she sees as a bit of a fool, decked in Regency costume, dedicating sequels to her husband, and wanting to be scattered at Chawton; but she recognizes the Janeite as resembling the Female Quixote, from Charlotte Lennox's 1752 novel. Raff believes that Austen aimed her novels at this reader because of "the distinctive erotic relation with the reader that quixotism seemed to allow, the opportunity to become Pygmalion to the reader's Galatea." Austen thus focused erotic attention on herself, and Janeites today are her own Galateas.

Raff divides the six novels into two sets. The first three published "explore the ethical failings, including Pygmalionism, which Austen had discerned in the ideology that marked the emergent novel,

didacticism." In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen gives the reader Mr. Darcy to adore, but in her last three published novels, *Emma* and the posthumous *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, she herself becomes "lover and pander-author to the reader, either by deploying with special success the erotics of instruction of her didactic predecessors or by finding, in *Persuasion*, a new, nonpedagogical mode of engaging the reader's erotic life."

The "catalyst for this mid-career shift," Raff explains, was Austen's function as romantic advisor to her niece Fanny Knight, who in 1814 was trying to decide whether to marry suitor John-Pemberton Plumptre. There exist several of Austen's letters giving excited, contradictory advice to Fanny, and relishing her correspondence. She wrote, "You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my Life. Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent!—Such a description of your queer little heart!—Such a lovely display of what Imagination does.—You are worth your weight in Gold, or even in the new Silver Coinage."

These letters show Austen in the act of advising, yet evincing vacillating opinions and a tone of oddly excessive over-involvement, unusual in an author of such assured voice and almost unassailable rationalism. Did she feel that Fanny was useful material, or was she thrilled at participating vicariously in the experiences of a young ardent girl deciding her whole future, that enviable but perilous state in life that was dead and gone and closed to herself?

Austen's acknowledgements of Fanny's own letters are fulsome: "if I were to labour at it all the rest of my Life & live to the age of Methuselah, I could never accomplish anything so long and perfect," she writes, perhaps already aware "the rest of her life" would be the opposite of Methuselah's. She labors to influence Fanny's right decision, and the responsibility troubles her. Indeed, this may be the only time we see Jane Austen

not succeed at something, and she ruefully concludes, "Who can understand a young Lady?"

The letters leave much about Jane Austen's own attitudes

and choices for the romantic novelists and scholarly theorists (those unhappy bedfellows) to speculate over; thus far, she may continue to sleep safely with her secret of her loves and her proclivities, her sacrifice and her abstention, closed to us. Raff, however, gamely labors to make these letters into an important central thesis about Austen's writing. She claims that a "utopian" Austen who "metonymically thereby solves all our problems, derives from an advisory effort that Austen imagined botched and from fictions compelled to rectify, apologize for, but yet repeat the errors of life."

This theory is perhaps taken too far: It is difficult to accept that Austen's key creative motivation in writing her three last masterpieces was to atone for her own guilt in her flipflopping advice to Fanny, an apology based on the reparation of the bad advice given by Lady Russell and Emma. This supposition is ingenious, and, in her imaginative examination of Austen's intentions, Raff makes an original contribution. Perhaps one should not complain too much if the process revealing the kernel of the Musgroveian glossy nut is laborious to secure. Not everyone writes well enough to be unintelligible.

Diana Birchall is a story analyst at Warner Bros, and author of many "Austen-esque" stories, plays, and novels, including Mrs. Darcy's Dilemma, which in true Janeite style she dedicated to her husband. She has also written a scholarly biography of her novelist grandmother.

