

Fathers and Daughters

Fathers in Jane Austen

By I.P. Duckfield.

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Review by Claire Denelle Cowart.

The dedication page of I.P. Duckfield's book *Fathers in Jane Austen* states "For readers of Jane Austen's novels," indicating that this work is intended for a general audience rather than a scholarly one. The tone and language of the book, which can occasionally be very informal and chatty, make it quite readable and easily accessible to the general reader.

Duckfield's thesis is that "fathers and father figures" in Austen's novels show "how the destiny of the daughter is dependent upon the father's character and foibles." To prove this point, the author works methodically through each novel, relegating fathers who don't quite fit the author's approach (such as Henry Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility*), into a chapter titled "Orphans and Outsourcing." According to Duckfield, Austen uses "three simple standards [by which she] assesses the fathers she creates: the provision of financial security, of education, and of moral principles." Imposing these standards, and interpreting Austen's attitude to her characters in such a way, works well in some respects but is limiting, causing Duckfield to go outside the scope of these standards for some novels.

Both Mr. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, who is labeled "The Complete Delinquent," and Mr. Woodhouse of *Emma*, who is called "The Complete Dependent," are judged in fairly black and white terms. Mr. Bennet is accounted a failure by all three standards. Duckfield points out that he has set aside no money from a fairly generous income (helpfully converted into a 2012 value of about 150,000 English pounds a year), has provided no formal education for his daughters, and has neglected to oversee

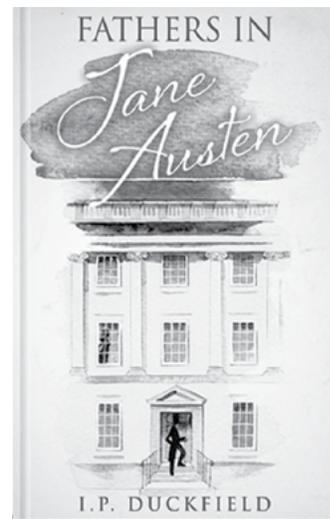
their moral education. That things turn out well for his daughters Duckfield attributes solely to luck, and to the intervention of Mr. Darcy at a time of crisis. Duckfield does point out some of Mr. Bennet's redeeming features, including his affection for his oldest daughters Jane and Elizabeth, and his reluctance to force his daughters into unhappy marriages for financial reasons. Some of the characteristics which Duckfield regards as flaws can be viewed in a different light, however, especially in connection with Mr. Bennet's influence on his daughter Elizabeth. His propensity to ridicule others may be a failing, but it may also be the root of Elizabeth's ready wit. The lack of a governess for his daughters—decried by Duckfield—has allowed Elizabeth to develop the independence of spirit which attracts Mr. Darcy to her. Mr. Bennet's well-stocked library may serve as his escape from responsibility, but access to it has stimulated Elizabeth's intellect.

Duckfield recognizes that Mr. Woodhouse of *Emma* has provided for his daughter financially and educationally, but he is criticized for leading a "narrow life of selfishness and self-indulgence," which has caused Emma to be socially and intellectually isolated. Mr. Woodhouse is further blamed for over-praising Emma and giving her an inflated sense of self-worth. Austen famously stated that Emma would be "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like," and many readers are indeed put off by aspects of Emma's behavior. Her loving, selfless care for her father may be viewed as her saving grace. The goodwill generated by her gentle father, who is repeatedly characterized by Austen as "tender-hearted" and "kind-hearted," also gives Emma a foundation for building a new relationship with the people of Highbury once she amends her attitudes.

Of the other imperfect fathers which Duckfield considers, General Tilney of *Northanger Abbey* and Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion* certainly deserve their respective descriptions as "The Complete

Tyrant" and "The Witless Peacock." They are undoubtedly terrible fathers, but their exaggerated deficiencies cross into the realm of caricature, which serves Austen's purpose in various ways. Sir Walter's devotion to rank and fashion once threatened his daughter Anne's happiness, but she rejects his values, and the contrast makes her own modest good sense more appealing. When *Northanger Abbey* is read as a parody of the Gothic genre, the overbearing behavior of General Tilney, which Duckfield sees as threatening, becomes ridiculous.

The most problematic father in this book is Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, and Duckfield recognizes that, finding tragedy in the gap between Sir Thomas's intentions and the way his children turn out. He meets Duckfield's three standards, but, as Duckfield realizes, other points must be considered. Sir Thomas is emotionally distant and authoritarian, causing at least three of his four children to react against his expectations. Ironically, his niece Fanny Price turns out to be the kind of daughter Sir Thomas wished for but did not know how to create. Perhaps Duckfield should have included a fourth standard—affection. Despite their individual failings, the fathers in Austen's novels who create a loving environment are able to raise heroines who find happiness, and who value their fathers.



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