

John Wiltshire. *Recreating Jane Austen*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. x + 179pp. US\$54.95 (cloth); US\$18.95 (paper). ISBN 0-521-80246-6.

Versions of all six chapters of *Recreating Jane Austen* appeared before the book's publication either as conference papers or articles. As revised and ordered here, they provide an important study of Jane Austen as a cultural commodity and an interesting analysis of creativity as an intertextual phenomenon. John Wiltshire examines the ways in which her life and novels have been recreated in recent biographies, novels, and films. Resisting those who wish to protect Austen from adaptations that distort her morality or misrepresent her historical moment, he argues that "redesigning and plundering the creations of the past ... rather than their preservation, is a process so continuous and so endemic, that ... it is the central motor of artistic development" (p. 3). From this perspective he views adaptations "not as piracies, but ... as coherent readings of the original books, which by their public, objective existence can throw unique light on the nature of reading" (p. 7). He can even express fondness for the far-fetched—Constance Pilgrim's *Dear Jane: A Biographical Study*, for example, which proposes that Wentworth in *Persuasion* is modelled on William Wordsworth's brother, drowned at sea.

Wiltshire's tolerance, however, extends only so far; not all interpretations are acceptable. Addressing the question "What does Jane Austen mean?" he provides a succinct summary of current disagreements. On the one hand, Austen is viewed (or in films, performed) as the mistress of propriety and domestic comfort, the queen of a dominant "English" culture, the guardian of manners and conventions, and thus—as an author who upholds patriarchal and heterosexual norms—the enemy of "nations, peoples, and classes seeking their own identities" (pp. 8–9). On the other hand (and as a backlash to the former), she is viewed (or in films, performed) as "sassy, spunky, postcolonial, radical, transgressive, sexually complex and ambiguous" (p. 9). Wiltshire's sympathies seem to be with a radical Austen; certainly, he has no truck with nostalgic traditionalism or, in adaptations, with "genteel replication" (p. 39). But while never less than respectful of critics such as Moira Ferguson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Claudia Johnson, and Terry Castle, he puts himself at some distance from the transgressive Austen they have variously (re)created. Tellingly, his most sustained criticism is of Patricia Rozema's film of *Mansfield Park*, which (at some strain to his earlier tolerance) he views as falsely presenting Fanny Price as a proponent of the self's liberty. By representing Fanny as a "whip-swinging tearaway," Rozema creates "a figure who reflects back to contemporary audiences the traits most acceptable to ... late capitalist society" (p. 137); but in so doing, she actually creates a less radical heroine than the one in the novel: "the comfort of a contemporary audience will hardly be disturbed by being shown that slavery is evil, or that a patriarch is corrupt" (p. 138).

If Wiltshire's study is partly concerned with the political mediation of conservative and subversive readings of Austen, his main concern is with the psychological and epistemological issues that such readings raise. Central to this concern is the work of D.W. Winnicott (and, to a lesser extent, Jessica Benjamin), which discovers the origin of creativity in the child's early responses to the world. To summarize Wiltshire's argument reductively, we might say that just as the infant must move from identification with the mother's breast to the "destruction" of the same in order to achieve independence, so the reader of

Austen has to go beyond narcissistically identifying with the texts (and thus producing compliant readings) to using them destructively (and in this way recreating them). Wiltshire is aware that Winnicott's "usage" is an ambiguous term that opens itself to "abuse" as well as to "use." Hence perhaps his critique of Rozema's film. Even so, his heuristic deployment of Winnicott, especially the latter's ideas of "transitional space" and "transitional objects," is consistently thought-provoking.

Chapter 1 addresses recent biographical recreations of Austen by Deirdre Le Faye, John Halperin, David Nokes, Park Honan, and Claire Tomalin. In the relative absence of hard facts, all biographers—even Le Faye, the most objective—have to engage in imaginative identification of one kind or another; but how they do this is open to ethical assessment. Wiltshire finds negative projections in Halperin's biography and objects to Nokes's "adversarial" life in which "statements of foolish characters are lifted out of context and distorted to serve the biographer's overriding destructive intent" (p. 27). Rather puzzlingly, given his later discussions of Austen's use of free indirect discourse as the equivalent of Winnicott's transitional space (p. 81), he is critical of Honan's use of the technique in the narration of the Harris Wither episode. Tomalin comes off best in Wiltshire's assessment; by shifting her narrative between present and past and by positioning the viewpoint between herself and her readers through the use of "you," she occupies a "genuine transitional space" (p. 32).

Wiltshire's second chapter on cinematic recreations of Austen's fictions provides further grist for his mill. *Jane Austen in Manhattan*, for example, is about the contest between two stage companies vying to produce Jane Austen's *Sir Charles Grandison* (itself an odd act of homage to Samuel Richardson). Representing nostalgic and progressive views, respectively, the attempt by the two companies to stage Austen's work as either a period or an avant-garde piece serves as a perfect example of Wiltshire's argument concerning the two modalities of love: that which strives to identify with the loved object, and that which, by destroying it, achieves originality and independence. *Clueless*, too, lends itself to a convincing Winnicottian reading. Here, *Emma* "is not a mother text that is idealised or revered but an inner presence that has been loved, destroyed in fantasy, survived and can now be treated 'cavalierly'" (pp. 56–57).

Wiltshire's third chapter provides an excellent summation of the long tradition comparing Austen and Shakespeare, with each being used to confirm conservative notions of English culture. Again, the preference is for creative destruction rather than identification; Wiltshire finds Austen superior, in her use of Shakespeare's plays, to Frances Burney and Charles Dickens, who, in his debatable argument, are instances of more identificatory forms of love. Shakespeare's importance continues in the fourth chapter, though his influence here seems rather more direct. Shakespeare's soliloquies, Wiltshire argues, when leavened with narrative commentary, contribute to Austen's innovative use of the free indirect style. The representation of interiority in films then becomes the issue. Admitting film's difficulties in this respect, Wiltshire is yet able to distinguish between poor adaptations—such as the 1971 *Persuasion* serial, which falls back on stage conventions and melodrama—and successful ones—such as the 1995 film of the same novel, which successfully discovers "substitutive means" for the representation of inner thoughts and feelings (pp. 90–92). In the discussion of the "great variety of sensory modes" (p. 95) by which film elicits viewers' emotions, more could have been done,

perhaps, with diegetic and extra-diegetic uses of music in the Austen adaptations.

In chapter 5, Wiltshire's ethical extension of Winnicott and Benjamin takes him to *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel he reads as being about the dangers of seeing others as "internal objects." Elizabeth's need is to go beyond "object relations," in which Darcy is a projection of her own pride and prejudice, towards a "recognition" (Benjamin's term) of his separateness; that recognition comes at Pemberley, when Elizabeth, viewing Darcy's portrait, "fixed his eyes upon herself." In his long and nuanced reading of the novel, Wiltshire, it seems to me, transcribes Austen's own formulations into Winnicottian language. The relationship of Darcy and Elizabeth, he writes, is one of "distinct subjectivities whose very alterity is the ground of their rapport" (p. 122). In viewing the novel's final disposition favourably, however, Wiltshire comes close to replicating Austen's intentions, which some have found objectionably patriarchal. While he disagrees with those who claim that Elizabeth dwindles at the end into a wife, he does concede that the novel is in some respects a conservative romance. What saves it for the modern reader is that the "ethical" narrative overrides the reduction of relationships to questions of political power.

*Emma* is the subject of the final chapter, which is, among much else, an energetic rehabilitation of D.W. Harding's often misunderstood "Regulated Hatred" essay. Harding's discussion of Austen's dilemma (deep frustration with her society combined with respect for its conventions) is brought to bear on that most contentious of interpretative challenges: how to read the Box Hill episode. Wiltshire's complex argument centres on the paradox that Emma's witty rejoinder to Miss Bates is at once evil and creative (p. 134). His "both/and" solution, too detailed to be briefly summarized, seeks to resolve the impasse of the "either/or" represented in the disagreements between conservative and progressive interpreters of the scene. As in all his chapters, Wiltshire lays out his case lucidly for his readers to identify with or, better perhaps, to destroy creatively in the formation of their own independent views. Those looking for an intelligent and very well-informed guide to Austen's contemporary cultural significance will find in *Recreating Jane Austen* the starting place they seek.

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