Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 15 | Issue 2 Article 15

1-31-2003

Review of: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. June Sturrock, and *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Robert P. Irvine

Barbara K. Seeber

Recommended Citation

Seeber, Barbara K. (2003) "Review of: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. June Sturrock, and *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Robert P. Irvine," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 15.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol15/iss2/15

Copyright ©2013 by Eighteenth-Century Fiction, McMaster University. This Article is brought to you by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eighteenth-Century Fiction by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

Review of: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park,* ed. June Sturrock, and *Pride and Prejudice,* ed. Robert P. Irvine

This article is available in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol15/iss2/15

Jane Austen. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. June Sturrock. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001. 521pp. $11.95; US$8.95; £4.95. ISBN 1-55111-098-9.

Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Robert P. Irvine. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2002. 493pp. $9.95; US$7.95; £4.99. ISBN 1-55111-028-8.

Students at first often dislike *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price, but are intrigued by the theatricals. Why is the usually obliging Fanny so adamant that she "cannot act" (p. 166)? And why does Sir Thomas burn "every unbound copy of 'Lovers' Vows' … that met his eye" (p. 207)? While *Mansfield Park* invites questions, *Pride and Prejudice* is seen as self-explanatory. Students initially fall into two categories in their response: those who like *Pride and Prejudice* because it is a love story, and those who do not because it is "just" a love story. Broadview Press is well known for its editions of canonical and non-canonical texts geared towards the undergraduate classroom, and June Sturrock's *Mansfield Park* and Robert P. Irvine's *Pride and Prejudice* are welcome additions to the Austen landscape, as they respond to the needs of the classroom and to current critical debates.

Lionel Trilling felt confident that "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" (*The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, 1955, p. 212), and many readers have agreed. Sturrock's engaging and comprehensive introduction vindicates Fanny Price: she emerges as a complex character with poignant vulnerability and admirable strength. Sturrock also draws attention to Fanny's comic foibles: Austen's heroine is not perfect and interesting parallels are made between Fanny Price and Marianne Dashwood, "with whom Fanny shares literary ardour and intensity of feelings" (p. 15), and even between Fanny and the youthful, quixotic Catherine Morland (the footnotes demonstrate the novel's richness in literary allusions). Sturrock presents a convincing psychological reason for Fanny's adherence to conduct-book ideals: Fanny "inevitably longs for the love and approval which she is consistently denied. The predictable result of this denial is that she learns rapidly to be 'a good girl'" (p. 13). Among the most compelling scenes in the novel are those in which Fanny does not do as she is told and refuses Henry Crawford. Fanny's conviction is attributed to her Christian faith (supported by selections from conduct-books and Jane Austen's prayers in appendix B), but it is also given a political edge. The novel is a "narrative of different forms of resistance to the patriarchal values of Sir Thomas" (p. 22) and thus it "takes part in the long debate of the Romantic period about the permissible forms and extent of authority" (p. 23).

Sturrock's context section for the theatricals is excellent: there are appropriate sections from *Lovers' Vows* and conduct-books, and Austen's own participation in private theatricals is emphasized. The appendices also cover landscape improvements, the education of female characters, and slavery. While the range is admirable, there is an attempt to represent too many contemporary documents in fifty pages. Fewer, but longer, selections would allow students to examine the contemporary documents as complex texts,

rather than as fairly flat "evidence" for the novel's themes. For example, the excerpt from Joseph Lowe's *An Inquiry into the State of the British West Indies* consists of only six lines, and the appendix on women's education samples four sources in six pages.

While *Mansfield Park* "is hardly conducive to romantic daydream" (Sturrock, p. 11), *Pride and Prejudice* seems to offer a romance more seductive, reassuring, and universal than any of Austen's other novels. One glance at Irvine's detailed chronology of "Jane Austen and Her Time" administers an excellent corrective to the view that the novel is timeless. Irvine argues that the continued appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it "represents a *fantasy* of what England is like that is very familiar" and that this "fantasy has its roots in the peculiarly English social settlement of the eighteenth century, one which compromised between a system of inherited social status and the sheer power of money" (p. 9). Irvine familiarizes students with Marilyn Butler's and Alistair Duckworth's readings of Austen in the context of Burke, and Margaret Kirkham's and Alison Sulloway's readings of Austen in the context of Enlightenment feminism. He identifies the flaws in both schools: the first cannot fully explain away the appeal of Elizabeth's "wrong" ideas, and the second is troubled by Elizabeth's submission in marriage. Irvine, in contrast, argues that the "compromise being worked out in terms of the sexes is a displaced version of one being sought between the social ranks" (p. 25), and that Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage "narrates this historical compromise ... between bourgeoisie and aristocracy" (pp. 9–10). Rather than conquering all obstacles and defying social norms, this love story, in Irvine's argument, participates in the production of a national culture in which "the English propertied classes define their nationhood by appropriating their own élite as custodians of national culture" (p. 31).

While students will find Irvine's introduction less readable than Sturrock's and less rich in close textual analysis, the ample appendices (one hundred pages) are superb. Irvine's primary interest is historical, but Austen's letters on the novel and reviews also are included. We have come to expect Wollstonecraft, More, Burke, and Gregory in discussions of Austen, but the strength of Irvine's edition is found in some wonderful surprises. For example, when Lydia and Catherine report the latest news from Meryton to Jane and Elizabeth, readers often do not pause over the oddity of the list: "several of the officers had dined lately with their uncle, a private had been flogged, and it had actually been hinted that Colonel Forster was going to be married" (p. 95). It is characteristic of Austen that she puts what we do not expect of her world—"a private had been flogged"—to the expected—dining and getting married. Irvine illuminates this detail in appendix F: "The Militia Regiments on the South Coast of England." The section also puts Elizabeth's fears about Lydia's visit to Brighton in context, and while students usually love Mr Bennet's wit, Irvine will make them consider that his *laissez-faire* parenting borders on neglect. The text is well annotated, but at times overly so. For example, "Mr Bingley had danced with her [Jane] twice, and she had been distinguished by his sisters" is annotated: "That is, picked out for special attention" (p. 51).

Austen's novels still meet the prejudice summed up by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1992): "This is an important book ... because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women

in a drawing room" (p. 96). Sturrock and Irvine do justice to the complexity and importance of Austen's art and context. Their editions are highly suited to introducing Austen in a range of undergraduate courses, but also are of interest to scholars and devoted readers of Austen.

Barbara K. Seeber
Brock University

Please note that pagination within this pdf file does not correspond to the pagination in the print version of this issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, published in January 2003.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION, Volume 15, Number 2