

Austen Agonistes

Fan Phenomena: Jane Austen

Edited by Gabrielle Malcolm.

Intellect (distributed by University of Chicago Press) 2015. 168 pages.

Illustrated. Paperback. \$22.00.

Review by Elsa A. Solender.

I found this book pretentious, exploitive, and clueless, especially when it comes to separating literature and/or culture from dross and drivel. Undemocratic? Reader beware: I do discriminate (That last warning is called a “tag” in fandom).

Two problems aroused my antipathy: The first is the actual physical character of the book, which imposes unnecessary burdens on any reader. The second is a kind of pernicious equivalency: Almost everything gets treated with equal seriousness.

Sadly, a few decent essays deserve better company, including: Carl White on settings for Austen-inspired films; Rebecca White on Austen bio-films, and Allison Thompson on Austen-inspired handicrafts.

The book is weirdly designed. Essays are set in itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny typeface ordinarily reserved for footnotes. Even a reader with 20/20 vision (which, despite my advanced age, I do have) will need magnifying glasses to decipher the text. Restricted space requirements seem not to have dictated the microscopic body type since selected quotations get a full page each, as do titles; footnotes, though, are curiously wide-spaced. Broad margins offer a critic opportunity to scribble notes like %#!??#? beside sentences like, “This is the sort of novel that requires an active endeavor from the reader and enables them (sic) to break out of their familiar position and discover real ‘bliss’ (or ‘jouissance’) with the art form;” or an assertion that Lady Catherine de Bourgh “provides a character with ‘older beauty’ that is—at the very least—an identifiable characteristic for the established readers of Austen... (and) greater opportunities for a full age-range of readers to find

a deep connection with an Austen character.”

Illustrations are small, some are murky, and others nearly bleed into the binding, tempting at least one reader to wrench open the seam (I resisted).

Interviews are inexplicably set in larger type. One may read, without spectacles, about the “creative process” of a sequel writer whom the uncritical interviewer (the editor of the book) spares any potentially troubling questions about parasitical appropriation of Jane Austen’s characters to supply the supposed cravings of readers for “more Austen” than she left us. Or perhaps some kind of “spectacle” is indeed at work in completing, expanding, or improving the creations of an immortal. Next we might want to improve Lear with better parenting skills, Hamlet with an anti-depressant, Romeo and Juliet with a happy marriage, or students with alternative reading options so their sensitivities may be left unoffended by violence, sadness, disappointment, complexity – or greatness.

In another interview, an official of the Bath festival is not challenged to account for the establishment of a venue for Austen worship in a setting notable for the paucity of the novelist’s literary output while living there. A boast about her many Bath residences ignores the downward slide of the Austen women as their reduced circumstances chased them to less and less comfortable Bath flats. Austen’s relief and renewed literary output after escaping to Chawton village are conveniently overlooked. Chawton Cottage and Chawton House (now Chawton House Library) receive short shrift in this version of Janeite “fandom.”

“Fandom” is a term that can be defined broadly as fascination with Jane Austen; or, in this case, obsession with some not-necessarily-accurate or authentic impressions of Jane Austen, her life, her works, her era, her celebrity, and, most importantly, the encounter—“mash-up”—between twenty-first-century online “culture,” such as it is, and everything

Austen, such as it has become.

That’s wrong: Not “everything Austen,” but everything that has been tormented into some sort of Austenian narrative, not necessarily including actual careful reading of her novels, although it’s apparently okay for her texts to be bowdlerized for purposes other than study or appreciation now that it’s been done so often.

What is there to say about a treatment that boasts that it is 70% Austen and 30% vampire? Most of the scavenging, literary or commercial, is accomplished without apology, with little or no trace of appreciation for, or accurate understanding of Austen’s actual body of work, and precious little respect for it, despite abundant avowals of true love and the Joy of Jane. Rarely do commentators betray a sense of humor, much less annoyance or outrage about the preposterousness of early nineteenth-century novels of manners, widely acclaimed as masterpieces of English style and social commentary, being paired with twenty-first century fantasy super heroes, sea monsters, ghouls, zombies, vampires, or teeny boppers, much less an array of commercial exploitations of someone’s idea of Regency merchandise.

Would Jane Austen laugh? I suspect she’d sue, or barf, or both.

I want to do violence to this book, shred it, burn the shreds, and scatter them in a swamp. In a mash-up between, say, the movie classic *GWTW* (yes, that’s *Gone with the Wind*) and the oldie-but-goodie twentieth century Austen bumper-sticker, my final words on this book must be: “Frankly, my dears, I’d rather be reading Jane Austen.”

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