

Laura Dabundo, *The Marriage of Faith: Christianity in Jane Austen and William Wordsworth*. Mercer University Press, 2012. Pp 152. \$35. ISBN 9780881462821.

‘And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Revelations 21:2)

Laura Dabundo’s *The Marriage of Faith* begins with and rests its focal metaphor on this passage, ‘marrying’ Wordsworth and Austen in their Christian faiths. She subdivides her work into five ‘meditations’ on Wordsworth and three on Austen, comparing them only in the first and final chapters. Whereas it is necessary to read both within the religious framework that was contemporaneous to their time, her arguments in justification of reading them together are not persuasive. Dabundo presents Scripture as a creative source and force, but does not adequately persuade why she has chosen to ‘metaphorically marry [Austen and Wordsworth] in order to discuss them as partners in the unfolding expression of their Christian faith’ (4). She raises prickly issues: is Austen a Romantic writer? Does she uphold a community of faith in the manner that Wordsworth does? However, she does not address whether or why their shared religious views are enough to merit a full-length study.

Showing that Anglican Christianity runs through both Wordsworth and Austen is not a new discovery, as the territory has previously been explored by Irene Collins, Peter Leithart and others in the case of Austen, and Nancy Easterlinn and William Ulmer amongst others on Wordsworth. Her insights regarding Christianity, duty and nationhood are illuminating to both authors, but binding Wordsworth to Austen in a metaphorical matrimony due to their shared faith is as much a marriage of ‘Affection’ as her own was.

In her chapters on Wordsworth, Dabundo seeks to explain the ‘practical application of Christianity in the world of Wordsworth rather than a theological position’ (64). However, she fails to recognise the Enlightenment legacy that religion has no essential connection to ethics – good actions do not imply a good Christian. That Wordsworth was a grounded poet, rooting himself and his works ‘in the very world, which is the world | Of all of us’ suits Dabundo’s argument, and she is correct in continuously pointing her readers back to this aspect of his poetry. However, she casts Wordsworth in both an apostolic and rabbinic role, turning him into an Anglican evangelist, which could yield fruit, but instead only conflates analogies from Old and New Testaments.

Dabundo’s ideas concerning Austen’s use of Christianity in her works are novel, particularly regarding biblical influence by means of character and plot. However, the Fall and redemption pattern which Dabundo highlights is not enough to assume the guiding hand of the Church of England, as it is a common literary trope. Similarly, it is perhaps a stretch to draw parallels between the meeting of Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet in the ‘wilderness’ and Jesus’ temptation on the recurrence of that term. The following chapters on Austen’s private prayers and sisterly love present interesting discussions that would have worked better as discrete arguments. The prayers, she states, place Austen in a community of the living faithful in their appropriation of the communal first person plural. Like Wordsworth, Austen attempts to gain self-knowledge through ‘the importance of every day, and every hour as it passes’ (106). This worldliness is an example of how Austen’s characters make quotidian ethical decisions guided by a Christian light. The difference between Austen’s prayers and Wordsworth’s poems is that hers arise from a communal faith to affect the individual, they are ‘not utterances from a hermitage’ (102). Wordsworth, on the other hand, with his affinity for hermits and other outcasts, writes from the solitude of the individual soul outwards towards the community. This Dabundo has failed to identify.

As a whole, *The Marriage of Faith* reads very much like a series of articles that have been woven together with the frail thread of ‘community.’ At times, she employs weak methodologies, uses non-academic sources and has omitted fundamental academic ones, such as Abrams’ *Natural Supernaturalism* when discussing Wordsworth’s religious views. Her omissions also include the vital communities and marriage in ‘Home at Grasmere’ and ‘Nutting’, and Austen’s lesser known works. Furthermore, the text contains several typos, the most notable being a quotation from Wordsworth’s *The Exclusion* [sic] and a consistent misspelling of Deeanne Westbrook’s name.

Dabundo’s book is exemplary of the problems surrounding studies in literature and theology – namely, a conflation of a profession of faith which is actively sought out in the work, with the genuine study of the text as text. The nature of religion is such that it can – and does – permeate all aspects of human life, and can thus be ‘read into’ any literary text. Just as psychoanalysis or deconstruction can be, correctly or incorrectly, used to provide a specific reading, so can religion provide a stretched lens. Overall, though often wanting and underdeveloped, Dabundo’s study opens up questions that merit further consideration and discussion.

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