

June Sturrock, *Jane Austen's Families*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2013. Pp. 148. £60. \$99. ISBN 9780857282965.

This short, engaging study of Jane Austen's fictional families initiates a potentially enormous project, Austen's 'ethics of ordinary life,' exemplified in her complex representations of married happiness as always achieved and ongoing within the context of larger family and communal relations. Paramount to her protagonists' characters as moral agents is their capacity for 'attention,' understood as 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (Iris Murdoch) or as Aristotle's 'practical wisdom,' 'the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation' (Martha Nussbaum). Moral conduct for Austen is not something we switch off in between occasional moral choices but the strenuous, ongoing exercise of such attention to all the complexities of daily existence with which family life is always engaged.

Mothers and sisters, substitute mothers, fathers and daughters, spoilt children, 'dysfunctional' families: Sturrock turns her own 'just and loving gaze' on the Morlands, Thorpes and Tilneys; the Dashwoods and the Bennets; the Prices and the Bertrams; the Woodhouses and the Elliots. Noting Austen's scepticism about the family and only rare emphasis on parent-child love, she discusses the extent to which such family dynamics are essential both to the plots of the novels and to their protagonists' moral education towards greater knowledge of others and themselves. Parental over-severity and interference on the one hand and over-indulgence and neglect on the other are common failings throughout the novels, with interestingly different effects upon the children: Sturrock's unusual comparison of Darcy and Emma as 'spoilt children' who consequently develop a pride and fastidiousness bordering on arrogance and contempt for all who fall 'outside' the family makes us realize how markedly this differs from the effects of parental indulgence on the Bertram daughters and Tom. Mrs. Dashwood's indulgence of the excesses of sensibility in both Marianne and herself ('parental narcissism') is just one of the failings we see in 'single-parent' families (Mrs. Thorpe, General Tilney, Mr. Woodhouse, Sir Walter Elliot), and the absence or death of the mother is acutely felt, most notably of course in *Persuasion*. Implicit within Austen's portraits of deficient family relations is an unrealized ideal of marriage that the protagonists by contrast will succeed in actualizing: thus do their happy marriages stand out in relief against this necessary family backdrop.

The strength of the book lies in the acuteness of Sturrock's wonderfully attentive and discerning local observations about character and conduct (especially Emma's) in her all-too-brief readings of the novels. But the book's organization is unsettling: the first three chapters attempt comparative readings of several novels at once under thematic headings, with the result that each novel gets very short shrift. Distinctions are flattened because we lose a sense of the distinct whole that guides Austen's treatment of the family within each novel. Austen uses distinctively "family" forms of pride and prejudice (among others) for example to illuminate their many manifestations: Mrs. Bennet accuses Mr. Bennet of being "partial" towards Elizabeth, i.e., prejudiced; and the question of whether family affection blinds or sharpens one's discernment of other family members is continually raised. The idea of family is not an end in itself for Austen but serves quite different ends in different novels.

The second half of the book by contrast does devote its three chapters to single novels: 'father-daughter' attitudes to money in *Mansfield Park*, to conversation and speech in *Emma*, and to personal appearance in *Persuasion*. Here the discussions more clearly attempt to demonstrate how Austen uses family relations to serve larger ethical concerns distinctive to each novel. But does "attitude to money" really characterize the central ethical concerns of *Mansfield Park*? Isn't that just part of the novel's larger argument about the proper use vs. abuse of moneyed leisure, the necessity of affluence, luxury, and leisure for developing

Fanny's (anyone's) morally improving habit of reflection? The idea of family is also far more explicitly and intensely Austen's focus in this novel than in the other five, deserving much fuller treatment. Similarly, Sturrock could do more to connect the different attitudes towards personal appearance, change, and death in *Anne and Sir Walter Elliot* to the novel's larger concern with the virtue of 'constancy'—understood as Anne's flexibility yet stability, persuadability yet firmness in the newly post-revolutionary world—a constancy exemplified in her fidelity to an 'ideal' object 'when all hope is gone': the memory of her dead mother.

This loss of a larger sense of the whole within local details raises a final question: when it comes to communal virtues for Jane Austen, doesn't 'friendship' in the end trump 'family'? Acknowledging only *Pride and Prejudice* as rising above mere domesticity, Sturrock risks diminishing the virtues to purely domestic ones (e.g. 'usefulness and exertion'), and just, clear-eyed discernment to familial affections.

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