

**Enit Karafili Steiner, *Jane Austen's Civilized Women: Morality, Gender and the Civilizing Process*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. Pp. viii + 228. £60. ISBN 9781848931770.**

This monograph is the ninth volume in Pickering and Chatto's 'Gender and Genre' Series, a collection which – since its inception in 2009 – has included work as disparate as reconsiderations of Mary Cholmondeley, Edith Wharton and Winifred Holtby. Including Austen on this list brings the first truly canonical writer to the table. Any critic who wishes to publish a new monograph on Jane Austen must of course pick through the scholarly terrain with care. In a dense introduction, Steiner references a great many recent studies on the novelist – this is not, we are told, a similar examination to Hazel Jones's 2009 *Jane Austen and Marriage*, nor is it Sarah Emsley's *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues* (2005). In its linking of Austen to the philosophical tradition of the eighteenth century, it owes something to Jenny Davidson's *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen* (2004), but it is clear, and acknowledged, that in some ways the greatest debt is to Peter Knox-Shaw's magisterial *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (2004).

That said, Steiner takes care to point out that Knox-Shaw's work pays little attention to gender, and even less to the work of Scottish Enlightenment philosopher John Millar. The 'question of gender hierarchy and its relationship to morality and manners' (2) underpins *Jane Austen's Civilised Women*: her attention to Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), the author feels, is what makes the study important and unique. I quite agree. But I wish that Steiner did not feel the need to constantly differentiate her own work from that of her peers and predecessors. Many readers may wish, too, for greater clarity of prose, and indeed for a great deal less critical apparatus. It can be difficult to sustain interest in the careful close readings of individual novels if we first have to rehearse responses from Richard Simpson in the 1870s to Claudia Johnson in the 1990s, via Bakhtin's dialogical thinking, 'the atomized self contested by Elias, Arendt and Benhabib', and prominent theorists from Freud to Judith Butler. There is, at times, an anxiety of citation, and occasionally a defensiveness that is quite unnecessary. And heavy-handed readings of individual lines quash the exuberance of an author loved by 'common' readers as much as by critics. Let me give an example from the first chapter:

The opening sentence of the juvenilia and the first line of 'Frederic and Elfrida' ushers the reader into what will be Austen's point of departure during her entire career – the family setting: 'The Uncle of Elfrida was the Father of Frederic; in other words, they were first cousins by the Father's side' (J4). As a matter of fact, 'Frederic and Elfrida were first cousins by the Father's side' would have been an easier formulation to follow, but it would have failed to convey the linkage that typifies human existence. (29)

Certainly. It would also have failed to be funny, something that this piece – dedicated by the young Austen to her friend Martha Lloyd – is clearly attempting to be.

This is not to say that there is not a great deal to admire here. The book provides comprehensive coverage of Austen's oeuvre, and reads it alongside important questions of Enlightenment philosophy and proto-feminism. Following recent critical fashion, the writer's career is considered chronologically, and in its entirety – from manuscripts unexplored until the twentieth century to novels the author herself saw into print. An examination of the juvenilia is given an entire chapter, before the 1790s *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey* are read alongside each other, and this is followed by chapters devoted to, respectively, *Sense*

*and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and finally *Persuasion*. We are invited to consider ‘the diachronic evolution of Austen’s fiction’, and as we do so, relevant quotations from Austen’s letters punctuate the discussion. The chapter on *Mansfield Park* is particularly fine. It is useful to remember, in this bicentenary year for the novel, that Austen’s portrait of Fanny Price is a deep psychological study of a young girl’s development, informed by the philosophy of the day and relevant to twenty-first century theories of child development. Steiner reads Fanny alongside the heroines of Austen’s contemporaries (Edgeworth, Burney and More), and, like many feminist critics and scholars in recent years, rescues her from scholars such as Marvin Mudrick who have seen only ‘uneasy stiffness’ in the novel.

This ambitious, meticulously researched and wide-ranging study is likely to be of most use to critically engaged scholars of Austen. Steiner reads Austen in and of her times, as well as in relation to abstract concepts. One must sift through the theoretical framework. But at its best, *Jane Austen’s Civilized Women* provides some genuinely new close readings, and insightful comments on much-read and discussed novels.

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