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Friends or Lovers? Austen's Modern Men

Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man. Michael Kramp. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. 202 pp.

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<1> Despite the reinvigorated "Darcy mania" that spread after Colin Firth's brooding, sexually charged performance of Austen's hero in the 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, or what Michael Kramp calls more generally "the romantic draw of the men in the late-millennial filmic versions of Austen's tales," *Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man* asserts that Austen's male characters are appealing "precisely because they regulate their susceptibility to amorous emotions" (x). The insistence on disciplining love, Kramp explains, was a crucial component of post-Revolutionary England's efforts to provide a secure and stable national community. Kramp reminds us that Austen's corpus is a useful site to study how modern men respond to cultural anxieties about masculinity because, he argues, Austen offers us multiple examples of men who "opt to pursue the ordered rationality of secure/securing love rather than the messiness and complications of sexual desire" (7), allowing them to "provide the civic and cultural leadership required to stabilize the modern English nation" (3). Kramp contrasts the "modern love" expressed by Austen's heroes with the all-consuming, "powerful desire" described by theorists Deleuze and Guattari (3). Rejecting the notion that masculinity was fixed and static, Kramp draws upon what he calls Foucault's "flexible understanding of sexualized subjectivity" in *The History of Sexuality*, which Kramp finds more useful than Freud's idealized masculinity in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, in order to stress efforts by Austen's men to regulate their desires (6).

<2> Kramp makes an excellent case for his intervention, correctly observing that while much work has been done on Austen's female characters, less attention has been paid to the men in her novels. Noting the usefulness of such sources as Roger Sales' *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994), *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (1995) by Claudia Johnson, and Audrey Hawkridge's *Jane and Her Gentlemen: Jane Austen and the Men in Her Life* (2000) – all of which deal in some way with Austen's men – Kramp contends that there still is much more work to be done on Austen's male characters. By discussing the development of masculinity in the post-Revolutionary period, Kramp succeeds in placing his discussion not only of masculinity, but of Austen's heroes, in an historical context. *Disciplining Love*, "fundamentally a reading of Austen's novels" (xiii), devotes a chapter to each

one (and part of a chapter to the juvenilia), including a brief consideration of Austen's uncompleted fragment, *Sanditon* (1818), in the conclusion. Kramp limits his discussion to the male characters who "reveal important shifts" in the modernizing of the nation, rather than trying to tackle all of Austen's male characters (10).

<3> The first chapter of *Disciplining Love* is helpful in framing Kramp's reading of Austen's novels with a discussion of late-eighteenth-century discourses on masculinity. Kramp explains that with the waning of aristocratic power and the rise of the middling classes, the need to teach men how to train their bodies and sexualities resulted in numerous male courtesy books on the subject. The two main schools of thought in the debate about proper masculinity were led by the conservative Edmund Burke, who favored a "nostalgic chivalric" notion of masculinity, and the more radical Jacobin writers, who rejected Burke's man as outdated and effeminate, preferring instead a reasonable, industrious modern man (21). Furthermore, writers of the 1790s frequently discussed the proper balance men should maintain between reason and passion, a theme, Kramp observes, that Austen takes up in her novels. Increasingly during the period, conduct books warned of the "volatility of love," and writers like Mary Wollstonecraft labeled the male lover as an "unstable creature," according to Kramp (32). The clear, interesting, and useful information in this chapter provides readers with the background and terminology to fully appreciate the reading of Austen's novels that follows.

<4> Employing the dialectic discussed in the opening chapter between the chivalric man and the more rational one, Kramp argues that Henry Tilney of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) has been exposed to the chivalric system by his father, General Tilney, but that Henry nonetheless remains committed to reason. Pointing to the comment by Austen's narrator that Henry's love for Catherine stems from his gratitude for her obvious love of him, Kramp states that Tilney clearly "maintains stable and ostensibly rational preferences for the heroine rather than uncontrollable amorous passions" (53). Kramp also notes that by contrasting Henry Tilney with other "unmanaged males" (50) of the novel, Austen allows us to see that Henry's reason will ensure his "hegemonic stability" (55). Turning in chapter 3 to Colonel Brandon and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Kramp asserts that Brandon was formerly a man of sensibility who has disciplined his love and reverted to the chivalric masculinity advocated by Burke, while Willoughby is a passionate lover for most of the novel who rarely bothers to check his passions. Noting the history between the first Eliza and Brandon, Kramp describes the Colonel as having much in common with Willoughby in his youth, though by having disciplined his love, Brandon is now able to contribute to social stability. Willoughby, in contrast, shows no inclination to perform social duties; rather, his "libertine behavior" threatens social instability (62). In order to "solidify his social/sexual subjectivity," Kramp contends, Willoughby must separate himself from Marianne, whom he loves, and make a marriage based on "rational choice" and "informed by business" (65). Though Kramp admits that Willoughby is a "man in training" (72) who is still learning to regulate his sensibility, his conversion into a disciplined modern man is one of the only unpersuasive examples Kramp uses, especially considering Austen's remark at the end of the novel that Willoughby still "lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself."(1)

<5> Kramp nicely illustrates the transition of power from the aristocracy to the rising middle class by juxtaposing his fourth chapter, a discussion of tradesmen in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813),

with the fifth chapter, a reading of the declining aristocracy in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Kramp begins the particularly insightful chapter 4 with a brief discussion of Darcy, whom he describes as a model man: “virile yet genteel, romantic yet responsible” (74). However, Darcy’s “exceptional status,” Kramp maintains, foreshadows the collapse of the idealized Burkean masculinity (74). For Kramp, then, *Pride and Prejudice* is about the need to accept new social classes of men such as those of/from trade, including Bingley and Mr. Gardiner. Kramp explains that Darcy must teach the pleasure-loving Bingley how to create a hegemonic social/sexual identity for himself so that Bingley can solidify his new class position in the nation. Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, meanwhile, struggles to reconcile his respect for “ancestral systems” (91) and wish to foster “clerical gentility” (92) with modern sensibilities, represented especially by his desire for Mary Crawford. Only by marrying his cousin Fanny can Edmund concentrate on his clerical, aristocratic, and national duties.

<6> In the sixth chapter, Kramp sees Knightley’s masculinity in *Emma* (1815) as being essential to the nation’s transition into a modern state because Knightley values old customs at the same time that he is willing to adapt; in other words, his type of masculinity is marked by “finitude” (121). Even more so than Darcy, Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion* (1818), discussed in the final chapter, represents a counterargument to Kramp’s thesis. Kramp argues that Wentworth is governed by love rather than rationality or chivalry. Kramp goes on to make the intriguing point that, unlike Emma and Fanny, Anne Elliot does not imagine her husband as a “guardian or friend,” but as a lover (136). As a model for passionate, Deleuzian love, Wentworth’s and Anne’s emotions “engender personal insecurity,” and thus they fittingly will live a nautical lifestyle (140).

<7> *Disciplining Love* provides an interesting and fresh reading of Austen’s novels, and Kramp’s thesis is both persuasive and well-supported. Kramp is especially skilled at making connections throughout the book between Austen’s characters and plots and those in eighteenth-century Jacobin novels. For those readers of Austen who have always felt that the unions between, for example, Henry and Catherine and Edmund and Fanny are not nearly as romantic as those between Darcy and Elizabeth and Wentworth and Anne, Kramp’s argument will provide them with possible explanations for their instincts. And if Austen’s men are not striking for their passion, as many film versions have led us to believe, perhaps what is most striking about them is that these heroes manage to “monitor their amorous emotions” while also maintaining “romantic relationships with women” (2). Insights such as these insure that *Disciplining Love* will be a valuable source, whether for scholars of Austen, gender, or sexuality.

Endnotes

(1)Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Kathleen James-Cavan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001): 380.(^)