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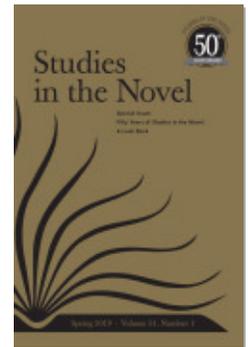
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Studies in the Novel, Volume 51, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. 33-35 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2019.0005>



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JANE AUSTEN AND THE SEX-POSITIVE NOVEL

DEIDRE SHAUNA LYNCH

Introducing Alice Chandler’s “A Pair of Fine Eyes’: Jane Austen’s Treatment of Sex,” first published in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 7, No.1 (special number: “Jane Austen”), spring 1975, pp. 88-103.

At a time when most scholars of the English novel were determined to treat the marriage plot in moral and metaphysical terms, presenting it as the form’s primary vehicle either for character development or for the analysis and repair of social division, Alice Chandler floated a modest, or maybe immodest, proposal. She reminded readers that all those marriages that conclude Austen’s novels also consummate stories of sexual attraction.

Other critical accounts from this era—Wayne Booth’s, for example—were heavily invested in a notion of the Austenian plot as the vehicle of a wayward heroine’s moral education. That investment produced the “Girl Being Taught a Lesson” school of Austen criticism that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would identify in 1991: readings that extracted from the works the spectacle of a girl receiving punishment and which often, as Sedgwick noted, positioned Austen herself as another erring female in need of some knuckle-rapping. More than a decade and a half before “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Chandler anticipated, though in a more tentative idiom, Sedgwick’s challenge to the repressive hypothesis that had come to govern this strand of Austen criticism. “Jane Austen’s books treat many...serious themes...[,] art and nature, feeling and reason, freedom and order, the individual and society,” Chandler wrote, conceding some ground to prevailing critical convention, and then continued, “[i]t is precisely because all these issues...are dramatized in her novels through the incidents of wooing and wedding that we cannot leave sex out” (89). In the wake of Chandler’s effort to redress the critical balance, the sex-positive dimensions of an oeuvre that numerous earlier commentators had presented as a “palace of prudery” (93) became more conspicuous.

So did the rhetorical sophistication that enabled Austen to register her carnal knowledge. Austen's verbal dexterity enabled her to speak in polite company about the topics that female writers were supposed to avoid and all the while retain a kind of plausible deniability. Chandler exhibited to her readers an Austen who, in order to dramatize "the subtleties of sexual relationship that lie behind the surface of convention and restraint" (102) made highly efficient use of "covert implication" (89): of in-jokes and witticisms hinging on double entendres, for instance, as well as of allusions to the then-not-yet-bowdlerized plays of Shakespeare. Far from being conceived as a site of repression and silence, the body is in this essay presented as crucial to Austen's project. Chandler thus asked her readers to notice, for instance, all the noticing of pubescent female physicality that goes on in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). ("Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained in so much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle": thus the comically cringe-worthy passage in *Mansfield Park* in which Edmund Bertram ventriloquizes on his father's behalf his fresh appreciation of their poor relation's newly womanly body [198].) When a twenty-first-century historicist critic like Jill Heydt-Stevenson proposes that the body, not the mind, is the ground of love for heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, and when she reconstructs in support of this proposition Austen's borrowings from the racy jokes found in late-eighteenth-century ladies' magazines, she follows in Chandler's footsteps.

Putting sex back into Austen novels, "A Pair of Fine Eyes" opened up possibilities for reading that by 1975 a reception tradition centered on a Gentle Jane had nearly closed down. This for me is the prime reason for assigning Chandler's essay landmark status in the history of Austen criticism. Chandler called time on the patronizing of Austen as sexual innocent or prude. The result was an essay that educates us (still) about the sexual politics of criticism, as well as about sex in fiction.

The portrait of the novelist projected by mid-twentieth-century criticism, which to some degree took its cue from Austen's Victorian nephews and nieces, generally showed Austen as prim parson's daughter and inhibited maiden aunt. The writer so portrayed was not simply a satirist of excessive or feigned feeling, but someone armored against feeling in general. Despite the formidable achievements that guarantee her hyper-canonical status, this Austen knows less than her more worldly critics do, about one thing at least—the realities of human beings' libidinal lives.¹ In "A Pair of Fine Eyes," Chandler by contrast presented an Austen *who knows*: "Jane Austen, then, is not so innocent as we have imagined her, nor devoid of resources for expressing what she knows" (94).

Sure, one might worry about the heteronormative assumptions that make the eros at issue in Chandler's essay awfully tidy. Sex, marriage, and procreation interlock smoothly here, in ways that make the essay seem now quite vulnerable to criticism. There are reasons to regret that the conceptual

framework developed in late-twentieth-century feminist and queer theory for separating gender from sex and sex from sexuality—for distinguishing between physiological fact and cultural effect—was not yet available to Chandler. Chandler’s repeated references to Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet meeting as “male and female” and to the *balance* and *fusion* that are achieved when they do feel, alas, somewhat indigestible in 2019 (see, e.g., 98).

And for all that she highlights Austen’s commitment to “a sense of total human relationships” (94), Chandler gives short shrift to some of the varieties of libidinal energy that Austen gestures toward through that technique of “covert implication”—those which ultimately fail to be sanctified by her marriage plots. “A Pair of Fine Eyes” thus sets to one side the feelings that within Austen’s fiction on occasion spring into existence when *woman meets woman*. (As for those feelings: recall the evening when Emma Woodhouse first makes the acquaintance of Harriet Smith and when she too sets to pondering—as Mr. Darcy had in *Pride and Prejudice*—the “very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow” [Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 27; compare *Emma* 24].) But I feel sure that Chandler’s sex-positive essay helped lay the ground for the reading practices that today strive to grant those feelings, too, their due.

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NOTE

¹ This claim that Austen required some tutoring from twentieth-century scholars about what she didn’t know was made, of course, by radical critics as well as conservative ones. Sedgwick comments on the relish with which the suspicious readings she associates with the New Historicism exacted from Austen’s “manifest text...the barest confession of...a disorder or subversion, seeping out at the edges of a political conservatism always presumed and therefore always available for violation” (834).

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