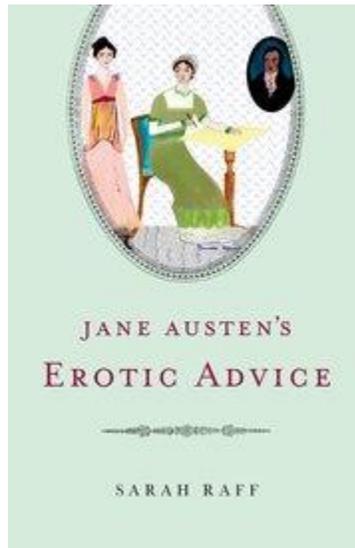


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Guest Edited by Kate Holterhoff and Nicole Lobdell



Wishful Telepathy: Austen's Role as Romantic Advisor

[*Jane Austen's Erotic Advice*](#). Sarah Raff. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 201 pp.

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<1>Sarah Raff's *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice* is based on a very sexy premise: Austen designed her novels to seduce readers into believing in her all-knowing and all-encompassing council on matters of courtship, love, and marriage. According to Raff, Austen's readers are all encouraged to be paradigmatic eighteenth-century "quixotes," emotionally charged, enthusiastic consumers of fiction who believe that their lives are indistinguishable from that of the fictional heroines they adore, readers who are convinced that their fate can be irrevocably altered by what they learn from books. Raff's argument helps to explain the plethora of self-help books inspired by Austen, the explosion of Austen products and accessories, the many websites devoted to dressing in Regency costume, and the booming Austen tourism industry.

<2>The history of the author's role as Pygmalion-like creator to the reader as Galatea (the ideal woman sculpted by Pygmalion who magically comes to life) can be traced, Raff suggests, back to Samuel

Richardson, one of Austen's favorite novelists. Yet while "Richardson's epistolary novels train their readers' erotic attention on characters who voice the novel's central lessons" (2), Austen concentrates instead on focusing "erotic attention, through her narrator, on herself" (2). This phenomenon manifests itself in Austen's most devoted fan base, known as the Janeites, who are led to believe that Austen represents "the utopian figure who, having solved our love problems by getting us a match or marrying us herself, metonymically thereby solves *all* our problems" (4). Austen accomplishes this feat of reader seduction through the use of "generalizations" (1). Raff explains that generalizations work because they operate as a "narratorial speech act that most directly acknowledges that it is *speaking to* the reader and therefore attempting to establish a *relation with* the reader...Once applied, the generalization has made contact with the personal experience of the addressee and thereby enabled its speaker to treat the addressee not as a stranger but as an intimate, as one on whose particular circumstance she can comment" (5). Simply put, when Austen's readers (particularly Janeites) become absorbed in her books, specifically her last three novels, *Emma* (1815), the revised *Northanger Abbey* (1817), and *Persuasion* (1817), they will be captivated by the premise that Austen is leading them towards their own potential happy endings.

<3>Raff concentrates her study on Austen's final works because they coincide with her most important experience of administering "erotic advice," at least the most significant one we know of, since her sister Cassandra burned the majority of her correspondence. Austen's surviving letters contain a portion of the charged exchange between herself and her niece, Fanny Knight, who wanted her aunt's wise council on encouraging or rejecting her would be suitor, John-Pemberton Plumptre. Raff argues, "Austen's last three novels each promote the fantasy that, to replace the suitor who got away, Austen's narrator can supply Fanny — and by extension, any reader — with a new lover, one who appears in the shape either of Austen's own loving spirit or of a third party conjured into being by Austen's authorial voice" (4). The chapters follow the novels in order of publication, with more extended discussions of *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion*, and a brief conclusion which touches on the loss of applied generalizations in the works of George Eliot but curiously does not mention how Austen's author/reader relations are reprised or reworked in Charlotte Brontë's novels.

<4>Raff is at her best in her careful and lively close readings. In her chapter on "Emma and the Betrayal of Fanny Knight," for instance, Raff demonstrates the persuasive connections between Austen's advice on Fanny's doomed romantic liaisons and Emma's relationship with Harriet Smith. She asserts: "Emma explores the fantasy that the novelist might bring about a happy ending for the reader as easily as she does for her characters" (77). Raff sees Emma's painting of Harriet as an example of her attempts to refashion Harriet's image into someone who will "creditably fill the place Emma destines for her in the marriage that, like the portrait, will serve as a 'standing memorial' to the excellence of Emma's 'friendship'" (81). By drawing connections among events in the novel and the Austen/Fanny letters, which highlight "Austen's avowed ambivalence at the prospect of Fanny's marriage, the erotic and literary rivalry that subtends the exchange, and sometimes even the dissuasive purport of Austen's advice" (98), Raff reformulates critics' longstanding desire to separate Austen from her least likable heroine. In her chapter on *Northanger Abbey*, Raff focuses on how the novel presents "a vision of the author's erotic and intellectual mastery over its reader" (102) through the character of Henry Tilney.

Henry's playful remarks about Catherine's "journal" suggest his role as "a seductive novelist" (111). Ultimately, "Henry takes the role both of the seductive author and the extra-textual lover to Catherine's quixotic reader" (112). For Raff, this novel represents Austen's vision of Fanny Knight as its ideal reader and that "unrealistic heroine [Catherine] whom the narrator declines to write about" (128).

<5>Raff's chapter on *Persuasion* comes closest to a discussion of the ways in which erotic content infuses Austen's narratives. In what Raff calls "an erotics of mutual application" (130), the novel encourages its readers to read in code, in other words to make the "same application to an external word or object" (131) which demonstrates their mutual understanding and connection to one another. In addition, "*Persuasion* makes didactic ideology the primary scapegoat for Austen's advisory mistakes" (135). In an excellent reading of the end of the novel, Raff foregrounds Austen's narrative strategies of "reciprocal communication" (161), showcasing how Austen creates an almost telepathic bond of sympathy and desire between Anne and Wentworth without having them speak their feelings directly. This connection extends to the magical assumption that Austen is reaching out directly to her readers through her prose.

<6>Strategically Raff has placed herself in the tricky position of trying to negotiate an argument that is both formal and biographical. Although Raff acknowledges seminal work that has been done on situating Austen within her cultural and historical context by Deidre Lynch and Claudia Johnson as well as recent scholarship on the legacy of the Janeites and Austen and popular culture by Juliette Wells, John Wiltshire, Rachel Brownstein, and others, she explains that "it will be obvious that the current work diverges from this historicist approach" (11). Raff aligns herself more closely with D.A. Miller, whose analysis of Austen similarly suggests that "the secrets are in the sentences" (11). Fair enough. But it also seems strange to base an argument on a historical premise without closely considering the subject's biography. This is not to say that the book would have benefitted from a more historical approach, but rather, that the crucial questions that Raff smartly asks about the significance of Austen's letters in relation to the novels, and the various ways of reading and misreading what we actually have in the Austen archive, are not fully fleshed out in Raff's narrative. It might have strengthened Raff's claims, for example, if she had included more of a sense of how Austen's letters position her as an erotic advisor and/or an erotic subject. Does she only play the role of advisor with Fanny? How do we get a sense of Austen's erotic presence if we do at all?

<7>Also missing from the argument is a clarification of what Raff actually means by "erotic." Raff's eros is a very tidy one, aligned with courtship, marriage, and the occasional heartbreak. This is not the messy erotics that Jill Heydt-Stevenson explores in her important work, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions; Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (Palgrave, 2008). Unlike Heydt-Stevenson who concentrates on the significance of Lydia's ripped dress in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Marianne's transgressive carriage ride with Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Austen's potential bawdy double entendres throughout her novels, Raff generally stays away from the connections between eros and embodiment. For Raff, Austen's eros is not subversive, strange, or risqué, it is for the most part, like the phenomena of Janeism "compensatory and reparative" (4), which gives the book a slightly old-fashioned feel, despite some of its innovative arguments.

<8>Ultimately, Raff's study succeeds in making us think deeply about Austen's elusive relationship to her audiences both past and present, highlighting the significant ways in which Austen's narratives continue to draw seductive comparisons between the world of fiction and the realm of real life. The book locates Austen's power to advise in her narrative strategies, an argument that adds an important element to current analyses of Austen and fandom.