'Waltzing with Wellington, Biting with Byron: Heroes in Austen Tribute Texts'


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Abstract

At the close of Georgette Heyer’s most famous novel, Regency Buck, the heroine, Judith Taverner, tells the hero, the Earl of Worth, that she had no idea he could knock a man down. The earl, who has just done precisely that, is highly amused: of course he can knock a man down, because he boxes regularly at Jackson’s and has sparred with the great Jem Belcher. Regency Buck is a thoroughly Austenian book; at one point Judith actually shows a passage from Sense and Sensibility to her cousin, the joke being that she is at that very moment putting her trust in the wrong man just as an Austen heroine might do, but is unable to apply Austen’s text to her own situation. Where Regency Buck departs from its Austenian model, however, is in the range of activities in which its hero is involved - fighting, yachting, gambling, horse racing, hobnobbing with Beau Brummell and thwarting the Prince Regent, and even a little light (and well-intentioned) kidnapping. (In the sequel, An Infamous Army, we discover that Lord Worth is also an ex-hussar.) In this Regency Buck is typical both of Heyer’s romances in general and also of other, more recent books influenced by Austen, including Stephanie Barron’s Jane Austen Mysteries in which Austen herself acts as a detective, aided in the early books by the dashing spy Lord Harold Trowbridge and in the later by the painter (and also spy) Raphael West; Maya Slater’s Mr Darcy’s Diary; Carrie Bebris’ Mr and Mrs Darcy mysteries; Susanna Clarke’s Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell; Patrick O’Brian’s series of books about Captain Jack Aubrey; Emma Tennant’s Pemberley and An Unequal Marriage; and Reginald Hill’s detective novels Pictures of Perfection and A Cure for All Diseases, which revisit Emma and Sanditon respectively (in the case of the latter bringing the novel to the conclusion Austen was prevented from reaching, in which Sir Edward Denham and Sidney Parker are revealed as a gay couple). All these books pay open homage to Austen, but all also do what she did not: they not only show men conversing alone with no women present, but they imagine men as leading full and rounded lives of which women are only part.

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Lord Byron is often described as the most flamboyant and notorious of the major Romantics due to his indulgent life and numerous love affairs. Many of his poems are autobiographic in nature and much of his work is pervaded by the Byronic hero, an idealised but flawed character capable of great passion and talent but rebellious, arrogant and self-destructive. Lord Byron is regarded as one of the greatest English poets ever and he continues to be influential and widely read. Byron's narrative poem tells a fragment of a Turkish tale through three narrators with different points of view. The titular character, the giaour, loved a woman named Leila. However, her master Hassan has her drowned after learning that she has been unfaithful to him with his enemy.