



Jane Austen and the Price of Happiness

Inger Sigrun Bredkjær Brodey. Johns Hopkins Univ, \$27.95 (320p) ISBN 978-1-4214-4820-6

Contrary to Austen’s reputation as a “purveyor of delicious rom-com satisfaction,” close study of her novels reveals she actually “fidgeted, strained, and flinched at the convention of happy endings,” according to this meticulous analysis. Examining the “anti-romantic flourishes” in Austen’s fiction, Brodey (*Ruined by Design*), an English professor at UNC Chapel Hill, contends that in *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator’s ironic intrusions belittle the central marriage plot by emphasizing how “commonplace” the pairing is compared to the “grander portrayals of authors like Edgeworth and Burney,” diminishing the emotional payoff. Fanny Price’s rushed marriage plot in *Mansfield Park* plays second fiddle to the novel’s allegory of state power, Brodey argues, suggesting that the “real happy ending” arrives when Fanny’s uncle, the patriarch of Mansfield Park and a stand-in for the head of state, belatedly recognizes his niece’s wisdom. At that moment, “merit and authority are united,” drawing attention to “how seldom such unions happen either in society or in romance, and how disparate merit and authority generally are.” Elsewhere, selections from Austen’s letters revealing how she “feared the loss of time and independence involved in marriage” contextualize the ambivalent treatment of matrimony in her

fiction. Brodey's interpretations of Austen's writings are subtle and penetrating, and discussions of popular Austen film adaptations shed light on how Hollywood tramples over the novels' ambivalence. Austenites will want to take a look. (*June*)