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Review of Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and the Mentor-Lover

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**Patricia Menon, *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë*
and the *Mentor-Lover* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
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Patricia Menon's title may be cumbersome, but her theme of the lover who becomes the instructor, guide and judge is a fascinating one. In her Prologue, she finds the 'mentor-lover' in Richardson's *Pamela*, Rousseau's *Émile*, Dryden's adaptation of Ovid's *Pygmalion and Galatea*, and the mediaeval letters between Abelard and Héloïse which were widely read in the eighteenth century. She also sees a keen interest in moral judgements in those proliferating 'conduct-books' which sought to regulate behaviour, promote the right education for middle-class women and the right attitude to love and marriage. Such anxious concern with orderly living was intensified by the chaos across the Channel at the turn of the century when 'a flurry of reprinting occurred with every crisis of public confidence over the conflict in France'.

Patricia Menon's brief is a wide one, embracing three women novelists. She shows with admirable clarity how one writer illuminates another, and the comparisons and contrasts she draws are not only intriguing but closely illustrated from the text. Her Prologue whets the appetite: she maintains that Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot all use the figure of the mentor-lover extensively though to different ends. Thoughtful assessments are made, not least in the realm of sexuality. Menon believes that Jane Austen is the writer least threatened by the power of sexual attraction which, even if it sometimes induces blindness, 'is not necessarily in conflict with judgment, and may indeed prove a stimulus to better choices than may rational consideration'. Charlotte Brontë sees the dangers of sexual attraction, the risks of self-annihilation and loss of freedom, although at the same time 'that threat to freedom is as exhilarating and erotic as it is terrifying'. Of the three novelists, Menon sees George Eliot as the one most threatened by the perils of sexuality because its passionate force may endanger the selflessness she wants to encourage. Menon does not confine herself to heterosexual couples: she includes those intense relationships that exist between parents and children, between siblings, and between those of the same sex.

The first novelist Menon analyses is Jane Austen – one suspects, her favourite. According to the traditional view, Austen 'exalted judgment over passion' and therefore set a high value on the rôle of the mentor. Menon quarrels with this view since Austen's mentors are so often flawed. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney elicits from Catherine the naïve conviction that 'Henry must know best', but Henry does *not* necessarily know best: critics have called him 'weak', 'smug', 'manipulative', no fit teacher for a girl who is not wholly devoid of judgement herself. He too has much to learn. Indeed, Jane Austen 'demonstrates that judgement may grow with love. Catherine, by being lovable, is as much an agent for change in her lover as he for her', as love jolts him out of compliance with the unreasonable wishes of his father. Unlike Maggie's dilemma in *The Mill on the Floss*, a conflict of loyalties between family and love is settled in favour of marriage. Austen believes that moral equality is the foundation of a good marriage. Elizabeth and Darcy learn from each other: even if Menon thinks that Darcy is scarcely the moral equal of Elizabeth, later disclosures help to redeem him. Meanwhile his responses to her lively wit and physical vitality sway the reader's judgement in his favour and make us see her as an important agent for change. Menon finds fault with such mentors as Sir

Thomas Bertram and Edmund, but a less fallible guide in Emma's Mr Knightley. Love between a young woman and a surrogate father is challenging but we quickly see their social and sexual compatibility. In the end, Mr Knightley appears to repudiate his mentorship: 'My interference was quite as likely to do harm as good'. Because moral equality is the ideal, Jane Austen 'works towards the elimination of the need for mentorship'.

More than Austen or Eliot, Charlotte Brontë felt the 'charm of recreating a charismatic Abelard in a school-room setting'. In her first and last novels, 'the lover-teacher relationship is central'. Power is the key element. Indeed, the eroticism of power in Brontë's juvenilia suggests that Monsieur Heger was 'a disaster waiting to happen'. When Crimsworth proposes to Frances, she is 'as still as a mouse in its terror'. The sado-masochism Menon finds in some of Brontë's writing may startle us. In *Jane Eyre*, two male mentors try to vanquish the heroine: St John Rivers paralyzes her with his 'freezing spell', while Rochester arouses more hot-blooded reactions; although leaving him causes her despair, his threats of 'violence' also exhilarate her, and she emerges as the triumphant mentor at the end. Jane's appetite for power is subtly conveyed, but in *Shirley* power and its absence are more nakedly exposed. Here and in *Villette*, Menon sees Brontë as a highly complex personality who mentors her readers, indulges in teasing that mingles hostility with affection, and never wholly escapes from an immaturity that shows itself in preoccupation with self. Brontë lovers may not recognize her, but Menon presents her case convincingly.

Lovers of George Eliot may not recognize her either. Menon maintains that an uncomfortable feature of her mentorship with her readers appears in her assumptions about their responses, assumptions that may subtly put them in the wrong. On this theme, Rosemarie Bodenheimer comes to a charitable conclusion: 'These imagined readers ... are necessary embodiments of the many shadowy voices with whom George Eliot boxes in order to write.' Yet it is difficult to box with a voice, difficult to counter imagined enemies, especially when she needed friendly mentors herself (and was lucky enough to find one in Lewes). Because she both gave and valued moral guidance, mentors are significant features in her fiction, sometimes flawed and sometimes idealized. Edgar Tryan counsels Janet; Dinah tries to guide Hetty; Philip is Maggie's mentor, and so is the self-righteous Tom; Dorothea would like the impotent Casaubon to be both her lover and her intellectual guide. Patricia Menon finds Felix Holt a bully and Daniel Deronda inept. Although there is excellent analysis of Gwendolen 'from her underlying sense of powerlessness ... to the violence that silences a canary or withholds a rope', Menon's hostility towards Deronda inhibits compassion: surely if he sometimes fails, his fallibility makes him more human and interesting.

Patricia Menon distrusts mentors. In these days when counsellors shrink from moral guidance and clinical psychologists are reluctant to tell their clients what to do, such distrust is understandable. Certainly the rôle of the mentor is even more problematic if it is entangled with sexuality. Yet we cannot always avoid the challenge of judgement, the risks of responsibility. Although Menon understands the risks more than the responsibility, and although there are times when I would like her to show more tolerance and more understanding of the cultural climate in which her characters live, her book is well and clearly argued and has interested me from the first page to the last.

Ruth M. Harris