Review

Patricia Menon
Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and the Mentor-Lover
Palgrave Macmillan 2003
viii+217 pp., hardback, £45.00, 1 4039 0259 3

This book is firstly a relief: anyone who fears that it is now impossible for judgement in literature to be published by mainstream publishers will be comforted. Dr Menon takes the novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot seriously as thinking about human life. The book is quite free from the modern superstition that what we read means anything we choose to make it mean, and from the even more prevalent academic disease that we, the superiors of the old writers, can best use them as examples of how much the world has improved since they wrote. It does quote many critics, not all of the first order, but is also free from the modern orthodoxy that no criticism written before 1980 is worth attention.

The book has, however, two serious, interconnected flaws which together make it less exemplary as literary criticism than it could have been. (It is the nature of discussion to concentrate on disagreements, and this review will do so; but this should not distract attention from the judgement I began by making.)

The argument is that the common theme of the mentor-lover is one that none of the three novelists handles satisfactorily. The objection that these novelists never show us successful marriage as based in mature sexual love is certainly pointing to something of importance in the Victorian novel. It is true that happy marriage as the centre is as rare in a good Victorian novel as in a play of Shakespeare.

If we think a novel is great and classical the assumption is that we can learn something from it, if only by being taken more deeply into something familiar. Dr Menon is well aware of this; but she seems so completely in command of what she knows already that it is not easy to see what there is left for a novel to show. This emerges as a problem because her criteria are sometimes unsound. When Tolstoy notoriously observed that all happy families are alike he said something that is not actually true in the way Dr Menon assumes. For her, it seems fair to say that mature sexual love is the foundation of marriage, and that’s that.

Dr Menon is severe on Charlotte Brontë though Charlotte is actually to a surprising extent in agreement with her. The contest for Jane’s heart between Mr Rochester and St John Rivers is between two kinds of love. Jane, and surely Miss Brontë with her, cannot recognize what Rivers offers as a possible basis for marriage. She

rejects Rivers because “we did not love one another as man and wife should” (5th edn, 1855, p. 417). Dr Menon might have made the same comment. *Jane Eyre* is in the line from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (“Oh hell, to choose love with another’s eyes”!). Jane is certainly in the right. But what generalizations can safely be made from a novel? The weakness in Dr Menon’s treatment of her theme is that she is so sure of the kind of love that leads to marriage as being an easily recognizable and dependable thing that she never inspects it.

Dr Menon again and again rebukes these novelists for not trusting sexual love as the basis of marriage. She protests against “distrust of sexuality” (p. 139). But is sexuality in general either to be trusted or distrusted? “Sexuality, for [Marian Lewes] a threat to selflessness, was for her a dangerous force.” (p. 163) (Dr Menon nowhere considers the importance of sex in Marian’s liaisons with Chapman and Lewes or her falling in love with Herbert Spencer—who *did* realize that sexual attraction was indispensable.) Well, sexuality *is* a dangerous force—amongst other things.

When love and judgement go together let’s hope that both are reinforced. But people do fall in love sometimes with someone it would be quite wrong or inappropriate or bloody hopeless to marry. Isn’t this one of the things that art shows us? Dr Menon is very severe on *Mansfield Park*. Jane Austen is accused (in the quoted words of another critic) of finally depicting Mary Crawford “as little better than a prostitute, beckoning seductively from a doorway” (p. 63). A prostitute can be paid and then left; Edmund’s trouble is that he is in love with her and takes her seriously. The critics’ implication is that Edmund should have gone back, ignored Miss Crawford’s defective moral judgement and the family circumstances, married her, procured some living in a fashionable resort and been miserable for life. Both Edmund and Jane Austen are wholly right. Edmund resists the “smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me”—a smile surely in the character so vividly created in the novel? (Ed. Chapman, p. 459) To put it baldly, Mary Crawford’s indulgence in her brother’s playing with fire, leading to her seeing his absconding with Mrs Rushworth as only folly, makes her an unsuitable marriage partner for a clergyman, especially one she has “subdued”. Edmund overcomes his being in love with her to make this right judgement.

For Charlotte Brontë, Dr Menon thinks, love is a power struggle and, “erotic though she found such power struggles, they also made of love a very threatening thing … .” (p. 126). But *of course* the loves both of Mr Rochester and of St John Rivers are threatening—amongst other things. As Jane Eyre says herself, “To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgement.” (p. 431) Jane Eyre is right, in a wonderfully done passage, when by hook or by crook or by providence she manages to break away from Mr Rochester. In *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot “for the first time … depicts a heroine who is fully and unequivocally caught up in the power of sexual attraction. But here, in the novel in which sexuality is allowed its

fullest expression, it is also most clearly depicted as something to be feared.” (p. 141) Is love not fearful? There is no sense in *The Mentor Lover* of

> I dar not seyn / his strokes been so sore
> But “God save swich a lord” / I kan na moore

For Charlotte Brontë love is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for marriage. She gives another clear instance of the triumph of judgement over love in St John Rivers’s rejection of Rosamond Oliver:

> While something in me … is acutely sensible to her charms, something else is deeply impressed with her defects: they are such that she could sympathise in nothing I aspired to—co-operate in nothing I undertook. (p. 384)

His love for Miss Oliver might be called by that handy word *infatuation*, but he shows all the symptoms demanded by Andreas Capellanus. He is really in love with her and clearly recognizes that marriage with her is impossible. St John Rivers is right. George Eliot adopted the name Rosamond for Miss Vincy: Lydgate’s disaster can be blamed on his inadequate understanding. In the context of that inadequate understanding his trouble springs directly from his trusting sexual love.

Love can be quite arbitrary: on the other hand it can be clairvoyant. Love itself will not judge which. To trust or not to trust cannot be decided by “mature sexual love” itself.

Happy marriages are, *pace* Tolstoy, about as various as unhappy ones. To say that all happy marriages are based on mature sexual love, would be to exclude the majority of happy marriages there have been since the world began, for the whole understanding is modern and Western.

> You may not be an angel
> ’Cos angels are so few
> But until the time when one comes along
> I’ll string along with you. (Old Song)

For Dr Menon the mentor-lover is more or less ruled out because the mentor-pupil relationship gets in the way of mature sexual love. Dorothea is quoted as she considers Casaubon’s eligibility as husband:

> “I should not wish to have a husband very near my own age. … I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgment and in all knowledge. … A wise man could help me to see which opinions had the best foundation, and would help me live according to them.”

Dr Menon's comment begins, "We are shown a Dorothea who fails to understand that age is no guarantee of wisdom, or even of knowledge of any vital kind." (p. 159) Well, there is no reason to suppose that Dorothea, with the daily example of her uncle Mr Brooke before her, is so stupid as to believe that age guarantees widsom. Here it is Patricia who is generalizing, not Dorothea. Dr Menon (and the common reader) is surely right to see that if Dorothea had realized the importance of sex in marriage she would have thought twice about Casaubon. But what is wrong with a particular woman's discovering that what she needs is a husband she can look up to? Not all women, but this one? So far I can't see how Dorothea is supposed to have gone wrong.

As against this general disapproval of the mentor-lover, equality between the marriage partners is offered as generally a good thing. (See p. 154, for instance.) Why should it be (assuming we know what equality means—and I would take Jane Eyre to Rochester as about as good a working definition as we shall get)? Sometimes the woman happily governs, sometimes the man, sometimes it is democratic and equal, but there is nothing in any of these to rule out good marriage—provided that within the institution the couple forge the loving bond appropriate to their characters, abilities and situations.

The weaknesses of this interesting book arise when Dr Menon is so intently focused on her theme that she to some extent loses a more primal necessary critical focus, on what is the centre of life in these books that makes them worth attention in the first place. A novel should exercise the reader's judgement as deep as that judgement will go. An objection to *Scenes of Clerical Life* is that "these women's attraction to 'the clerical sex' " is "examined with less than full seriousness by their creator". (p. 132) That is in the right area but still does not hit the bull's eye of the *life* of this very surprising book—and in consequence is not quite spot-on, either, about what is wrong with it.

Take just the third of the three stories, "Janet's Repentance"—which in my view would have been enough in itself to establish George Eliot as permanently belonging to the literature, though it also points the way to that very odd mix, throughout George Eliot's career, of classical depth of moral insight with inauthenticity about religion and morality. Dr Menon's antagonism to the mentor-lover makes her miss the real weakness of the tale. George Eliot is of course a far better theologian than either Dickens or Trollope. The Countess Czerlaski in "Amos Barton" clearly derives from Trollope's Contessa Vesey-Neroni, as well as real life, but for Trollope the parties in the Church are distinguished mainly by manners and class. He could never have attempted "Janet's Repentance", which really is about repentance. Even Mrs Gaskell, in that beautiful and well-observed tale "Lady Ludlow", steers comparatively clear of inner depths. George Eliot actually narrates, without any dismissive irony, a conversion, of the most standard Evangelical kind, with a drunkard being rescued from her vice by

admitting Christ into her life. Now George Eliot herself was, of course, not a Christian of any sort. The theological and moral accuracies of the first half of "Janet's Repentance" are steadily playful and looked down upon from a superior height. Despite the author's sense of security this is actually a weakness because one is not sure how seriously she is trying to take evangelicalism or how seriously she thinks it deserves to be taken. When she tries to give straightforward omniscient-narrator judgement she is unconvincing because her own morality is more primitive than what she feels she can satirise.

> Nevertheless, Evangelicalism had brought into palpable existence and operation in Milby society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self,which is to the moral life what the addition of a great central ganglion is to animal life. … They had learned this—that there was a divine work to be done in life, a rule of goodness higher than the opinion of their neighbours … . (Ch. X)

It is firstly impossible to imagine that there was no sense of duty in Milby before the arrival of Mr Tryan. Secondly, to reduce his gospel to anything so vague is both to denature it and to lose any sense of the life in the movement that might have actually affected human souls. The comment, not to put too fine a point upon it, is theologically coarse—but the fiction is both fine, intellectual and real. The word "inward" seems called for, yet the inwardness of a writer who could not herself endorse what she shows with a kind of admiration. The central critical question is about relation between George Eliot's fiction and her real-life belief. In fiction George Eliot could do what she could not conceivably have allowed in "real life". One may wonder why she thought real life more true than her fiction. George Eliot here solves her own problems about her relation to religious belief by simply suspending her disbelief, a remedy she was not able to repeat.

Dr Menon rebukes George Eliot for trying to manœuvre the reader on to the side of the Tryanites by making the opposition, Dempster, so indefensible, by making Mr Tryan's first appearance "haloed" and so on, despite the grounding of the scene, as she allows, "in the comic and the local". The challenge set to the novelist is much greater: she has to show *working* a religion she claims to disbelieve, and the "comic and local" elements of which are the first signs of her keen sense of hypocrisy that later found wonderful embodiment in Mr Bulstrode. Dr Menon writes of "the attempted evasion of the sexual by its transformation into the religious".The questions that arise from the primal critical attention to what is actually vivid in the tale are more interesting.

Janet has been in love with her husband, we are told not unconvincingly. She is driven to drink by his brutality. Her

conversion (a moment of temptation to go back to the brandy strongly rendered, by the way) makes her think of the possibility of a new life with him that is both religious and sexual. After Dempster's accident and the delirious ravings, the reader (this one anyway) reads with 'bated breath: will the author give them a deathbed reconciliation scene to make Janet's charitable love effective? The wonderful moment in *Bleak House* when Bucket writes down Sir Leicester's message, "full forgiveness", was nearly new when George Eliot was writing "Janet's Repentance". She makes use of the phrase at the end of chapter XXIV, but avoids any sentimentality whatever. "He kept his eyes fixed on her, and there was a faintly perceptible motion of the lips, as if he wanted to speak. But the moment of speech was for ever gone." George Eliot is first and foremost a superb novelist.

Mr Tryan, the evangelical Mentor, does not live to marry the widowed Janet Dempster but dies of tuberculosis after they have once kissed. I don't think this is a denial of the sexual. The religious, in the tale's theme, comes first, as with Janet and her husband, but in both cases it leads to love that is at least potentially marital love, if on Tryan's side of a not very burning kind. At the last Edgar Tryan "could not resist the sense that life had a new sweetness for him, and that he should like it to be prolonged a little." (XXVI) The novelist's centre of interest is Janet, not Mr Tryan, who is a little shadowy in comparison. But in the terms of the story there is no reason to doubt that but for his medical condition they would have married, they would have been a devoted couple and she would have helped with the parish work—as she already does when married to the bullying lawyer—without Edgar losing his authoritative position as Evangelist in this pilgrim's progress. That happens not to be George Eliot's subject, which is Janet's Repentance. Where is the concept of repentance better embodied in English? But the more you keep hold of the life of the tale, the more it incidentally vindicates the mentor-lover.

It does not follow from taking novels seriously that we judge characters in a novel exactly as we would judge characters in real life or even in history. To take one example: *Jane Eyre* is a compound of on the one hand very naturalistic social comic writing of the school one has to associate with Jane Austen, and on the other gropings, ("immature", perhaps), of various degrees of success, after something more akin to myth or fairy tale. I expect *Jane Eyre* is one of the novels Virginia Woolf had in mind when she differentiated *Middlemarch* as one of the few English novels written for grown-ups. But immaturity is not always crippling. On the first level Mrs Reed is too bad an ogress to be convincing in a naturalistic novel, though not impossible in real life, and Jane humiliated in front of the whole school by Mr Brocklehurst is not quite too bad to be true. On the second, Jane's imprisonment in the red room, which haunts her throughout the book, is surely successful. Mr Rochester imitating a gypsy is grotesque, and the mad wife in the attic melodramatic though not feeble. Catherine Morland, in Jane Austen's much more

securely comic-naturalistic manner, never stumbles on skeletons. It is of course wildly improbable that Jane Eyre, escaping in as random a direction as she can from Thornfield, should find herself, after several days of homeless wandering, in the house of her cousins. But those days of wandering penniless and being rebuffed as a beggar still have a created reality that is not to be dismissed as just childish, though we can't take it as exactly what would happen in "real life". (Is *King Lear* about "real life"?) Dr Menon does not raise these questions about the different kinds of work in the novel, but without them the focus on the theme of "the mentor-lover" is not as close to the actual life of the work of art as it should have been.

Villette, we are told (p. 125), is unsuccessful in conceiving of a mature sexual relationship. "As in much of *Jane Eyre*, the reader is, at the close, permitted to forgo the difficult problems of maturity for the satisfactions of fantasy." (p. 124) Well, novelists ("the novel as dramatic poem") do occasionally use elements of fantasy, sometimes successfully. The question for the critic is: would *Villette* have been a more gripping book if it could have conceived of a mature sexual relationship?

Does it matter much whether Charlotte Brontë (pp. 107–8) or Jane Austen was a feminist? If it does matter it is only as the feminism is alive in the novel. When any critic wanders away from the life of the novel the criticism suffers.

These objections arise only in the course of thinking about a book that is a rarity at the present day in allowing matters of such importance to arise at all.