

Love, That Four-Letter Word: A Response to Amanpal Garcha*

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Amanpal Garcha's critique of my reading of *Mansfield Park* with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* hinges on what he regards as my underestimation of sexual desire in Austen's novels. In fact Dr. Garcha often neglects to add "in Austen's novels" and formulates his sentences in an all-too extrapolable way, e.g., "In adopting Veblen's social theories, Toker thus also repeats Veblen's inability to see men and women's sexual relations in any terms other than 'invidious emulation' that takes the form of the constant, mercenary striving for social status" (184-85). The use of a theory in so far as it affects one's reading of a novel does not amount to *adopting* that theory, but this is less important than the methodological error of extrapolating the distribution of emphases in a specific essay in the author's "inability" of envisioning that which is outside this focus. An even more cavalier statement follows half a page later: "Toker and Veblen imagine desire in only one way, as desire for power and distinction, a view that many characters in Austen's novels also put forth" (185). No one can nowadays tell what Veblen could or could not imagine (it is more relevant which concepts would or would not have been considered appropriate in the genre of sociological theory to which his book belongs). On the other hand, "Toker" can testify against such disparagements of the scope of her imagination, whether launched as a provocative deniabil-

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ity or stemming merely, as I would like to think, from a hastiness of formulation.

The question of the tact of critical idiom aside, my notion of “invidious sexuality” is not the same as “conspicuous sexual charisma.” Conflating the two is a conceptual error in Amanpal Garcha’s response. Dr. Garcha suggests that I present Mary Crawford as using the former in order to pursue worldly status and esteem. When, in the second paragraph of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen notes that neighbourhood families tend to consider a wealthy newcomer as the “the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters” (3), the formula “some one or other” prepares us for the young ladies’ competition for the attentions, or—yes, Dr. Garcha is right—desire, of the new arrival: the dialectics of conspicuousness and modesty in this theatre of action is one of the most sophisticated of Austen’s subjects. Yet “invidious sexuality,” connoting “invidious emulation,” is, primarily, a matter of relationships not between women and men, but *among individuals of the same sex*. It is over women that Mary Crawford needs to triumph in her own understated but nonetheless clearly evinced way; and she needs this triumph not to further any of her aims but because she has come to enjoy it for its own sake.

Mary states repeatedly that it is one’s duty to do as well for oneself as one can: marriage that would be conducive to the enhancement of one’s social status is clearly her goal, and sexual charisma one of the means of achieving it. And since, in the ironic language of *Mansfield Park*, there are “not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them” (5), the goal involves an early training for competition, with the concomitant reward of enjoying victories. Mary is almost ready to change her preferences when she falls in love with Edmund Bertram, who is also in love with her but has no intention to oblige her by making a figure in the capital: he sees his ordination as a matter of vocation rather than a *pis aller*. It is to her honour, moreover, that for a long time after the break-up between them she cannot settle down to marrying anyone else, though her vivacious good looks and large portion can well be expected to con-

tinue attracting suitors. One of the central points of my paper, conveniently downplayed in Dr. Garcha's response, is that the twist of the plot which turns Mary into a link in the causal chain leading to her brother's elopement with Mrs. Rushworth amounts to the following suggestion: Mary's indulging in the pleasure of watching the sexual defeat of other women, whether the victor is herself or another, is what eventually leads to her loss of the one true love in her life.

Love, rather than "sex," "desire," or, to quote Garcha quoting Joseph Litvak, "triumphant genital heterosexuality enshrined in the institution of marriage" (188), is the point at issue with Austen's heroines. And the concern with love lies in the background of my analysis; there are frequent references to this background in the paper, but the problem consists in that four-letter word, love, being more popular with the fans of the Beatles than with much recent literary criticism. This notion is not entirely barred from Amanpal Garcha's text. Yet his position on the issue, e.g.,

With Elizabeth Bennet and her love for Darcy, Austen represents feminine sexuality in a way that shows a woman's potentially excessive erotic desires and her more mundane needs for income and status as, at least, mutually reinforcing drives if not completely and complexly entangled ones (187)

could easily (and perhaps unfairly) be attacked for reducing love (in Austen or in general?) to a combination of erotic desires and mundane needs.

The reason why I have left "love" more or less in the lexical background of my paper is that explicitly and repeatedly insisting upon the importance of love in Austen's novels (not just in the religious but in the romantic sense) would be, to borrow a simile from a Nabokovian context, "like looking for allusions to aquatic mammals in *Moby Dick*" (Nabokov 304). Austen stages the process through which desire is channeled, in the course of the novels, into the right slots,¹ but the rightness of the slots is determined not only by social eligibility. Fanny's and Edmund's shared "attitudes to labor and leisure" (Toker 231; Garcha 190) are not my exclusive concern in discussing their

companionate marriage: in Austen shared moral/ideological attitudes are needed for the transformation of desire into love. Desire is, indeed, one of the main motivating forces of Austen's heroines, and, as Nancy Armstrong has pointed out, their ideology of self-perfection works to domesticate desire. Armstrong shows that the eponymous protagonist of Austen's *Emma* achieves the required standard of civility only when she has become conscious of her desire for Mr Knightley (153-54), but one could equally argue that it is at this point of rising into consciousness, the point where fulfillment seems endangered, that, in *Emma*, desire is shaken into love.

Not to devote textual space to love "in any erotic sense" (Garcha 190) does not amount to a denial of the sexual tensions that are subtly evoked in Austen's novels, unmistakably enough to undermine the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ideological doctrine of women's "passionlessness" (see Cott) but not explicitly enough to offer to refute it.

As far as I know, the causal chain in which Mary's almost voyeuristic wish to observe Henry's meeting with Mrs. Rushworth in London (after he has declared his intention to marry Fanny) is conducive to their adulterous affair, has not been previously noted in Austen criticism. It is often difficult to determine precisely why we notice what we do: I believe that my thinking about Veblen's "invidious emulation" as complemented by "invidious sexuality" is what drew my attention to that detail and placed it within a network of associated textual links. Though other paths could have arrived at the same destination, one reason why enlisting Veblen in the study of Austen's novels seems useful is that it lays out one such path. Another reason is that Veblen's approach to social stratification leads to conclusions about the possibility of converting the best achievements of what he regards as leisure-class traditions to the non-predatory (peaceable) culture, whether of Austen's lower-rung gentry or of modern intelligentsia. Such a middle-way agenda is close to the principles reflected, fine-tuned, and disseminated in Austen's novels. This does not mean that the whole package of Veblen's positive and negative historically

determined values² is integrated into the analysis of Austen's text. Veblen's 1899 notion of "invidious emulation," comprising "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure," is no less a legitimate analytic tool than the notions of desire and sexuality derived from conceptual systems such as those of Freud's, René Girard's, or Nancy Armstrong's, rooted in the cultural history of the century that began one year after the publication of Veblen's book.

The pragmatic benefit of the use of any theoretical or historical contexts in the discussion of a novel can be judged by its contribution to the system of significances for which the novel has created the conditions. Amanpal Garcha's conceptual structure has its own validity if only because it has yielded the following remark, which I quote at length:

If [Mary Crawford] did not desire Edmund in his own right, she could easily give him up to focus on a wealthier eligible mate, yet cannot rid herself of her strong erotic attachment to Edmund. *Instead, she can only hope that Tom dies so that her erotic desire and her calculations no longer have to stand in opposition to one another.* The very inappropriateness and extremity of the quasi-murderous wish, moreover, signifies the irrational nature of this non-predatory affection. (187; italics mine)

The conceptualization of Mary's attitude to Tom's illness as her hope of settling her own inner conflict is a very valuable point. Even though the ensuing redescription of it in terms of a "quasi-murderous wish" is rather overstated, one might wish that the sensitivity to the literary text that the italicized sentence displays might also extend to Dr. Garcha's reading of rival critical discussions, especially those that can make do with the old-fashioned four-letter word, *love*, instead of operating with euphemistic synecdoches such as sex, desire, eroticism, or genital heterosexuality.

NOTES

¹It must, however, be noted that this is one of the numerous possible descriptions and redescriptions of the main pattern of Austen's plots. For a recent narratological redescription, see Phelan 67-68.

²See Amanpal Garcha's useful discussion of their historical context (190-91).

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