An Imaginary Romance

Jane Austen: An Unrequited Love

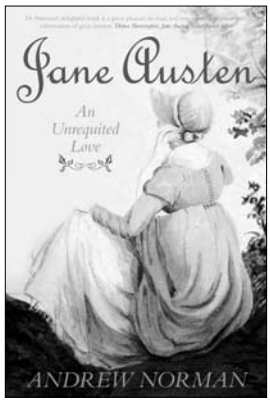
By Andrew Norman.
The History Press, Stroud, Glos., U.K, 2009
vi + 185 pages.
36 B/W illustrations (8 pages). Hardcover. £20 sterling—no dollar price given.

Reviewed by Deirdre Le Faye.

Andrew Norman is a retired medical practitioner, now living in Dorset, who has taken up a second career as a writer. He has to date published more than a dozen books, most being short biographical sketches of various modern authors, plus essays on Dorset local history. He is a neighbour of Mrs. Diana Shervington, now aged 90 and a great-great-grand-daughter of Edward Knight of Godmersham, who has allowed him to photograph the items of family memorabilia which she owns and which she believes date back to Jane Austen's time, and who has also provided a kindly foreword to his book. Norman says on his website that 'My Jane Austin [*sic*] biography was inspired by seeing some of her personal possessions displayed on the Antiques Roadshow' [a popular television programme in the U.K., in which people present their objects for identification by experts].

Jane Austen: An Unrequited Love seems to have been written in a great hurry, without reference to any reliable modern biography or the latest literary criticism, and without any attempt to study the social history of Jane's period; it therefore contains many factual errors and misinterpretations. It consists of 25 very short chapters or sections, in which Norman repeats the well-known basic biography of Jane Austen and her family, interspersed with elementary synopses of her novels. Unfortunately, due to this lack of background knowledge, there are numerous strange errors—e.g., Caroline Austen could not have written in 1870 to Mary Leigh of Adlestrop, since the latter had died in 1797 (89); and Jane's niece Fanny Knight, mother of Lord Brabourne, is said by Norman to have become her son's second wife (91). The playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe (c.1735–c.1812), were he alive today, would be surprised to learn that he was no more than a pen-name for the poet, satirist and clergyman Dr. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) (28). The synopses of the novels are no more reliable, that of *Northanger Abbey* being quite remarkably confused.

The 'Unrequited Love' of the title is Norman's attempt to claim that the Reverend Samuel Blackall, who is mentioned only briefly in Jane's letters and then in derogatory tones, was nevertheless the unnamed man with whom she is said to have fallen in love at some West Country seaside resort between the years 1801–04. With his knowledge of local history, Norman has noticed that Samuel had a brother John, who was a well-known physician practicing in Exeter and Totnes in Devon (94–6); and from this builds up his theory: that Madam Lefroy must have kept in touch with Samuel after his visit to Ashe in 1797, that she must have told him the Austen family were holidaying in Devon, that Samuel must have gone to stay with John, that Mrs. Austen must have consulted John, and so Samuel must have met Jane again somewhere in Devon after 1801, and that they must have fallen in love. As Norman cannot fit into his theory the awkward facts that Jane never married and Samuelmarried someone else in 1813, he has to invent some reason for their separation, and therefore makes Cassandra the villainess of the piece, claiming that she wanted Samuel for herself and so broke up her sister's romance. Unfortunately, he hinges this claim upon a complete misunderstanding of an Austen manuscript, as follows: David Selwyn's edition of *Collected Poems and Verse of the Austen Family* (Carcanet, Manchester, 1996), prints on pp. 21–23 the four versions of 'Verses to rhyme with "Rose"'—an example of a literary parlour game played by Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, Jane, and Edward's wife, Elizabeth, and dating probably to the late summer of 1807. Each of the four wrote a short poem on the subject, and Jane afterwards copied out all four poems on to the same sheet of paper, which is now kept in the Fondation Martin Bodmer in Geneva. Mrs. Austen's verse starts, 'This morning I woke from a quiet repose'; Jane's is 'Happy the Lab'rer in his Sunday Cloathes'; Elizabeth offered, 'Never before did I quarrel with a Rose'; and Cassandra wrote, 'Love, they say, is like a Rose'. Despite the clear identification in the manuscript of Cassandra as being the *author* of this piece ('Miss Austen'), Norman thinks that *Jane* wrote it as *addressed* to her sister, and that it betrays Jane's resentment at Cassandra's part in breaking up the match with Samuel Blackall. If Norman had taken the trouble to read the *Collected Poems*, or the more detailed discussion of these four verses given in the *Later Manuscripts* volume of the new Cambridge University Press edition of Jane Austen's works (2008, 243–4, 579–81, 709), he might not have propounded so foolish a theory.




La Belle Assemblée, October 1806


Maura Powers from Marion's Mills MA

Deirdre Le Faye has researched the life and times of Jane Austen and her family for the last forty years, and has published the definitive factual biography, Jane Austen, a Family Record*, plus a new edition of* Jane Austen's Letters, *several other books and numerous scholarly articles. She still has plenty of ideas for further publications.*