Where N. Takes M.

Jane Austen and Marriage

By Hazel Jones.
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1 B/W illustration. Hardcover. $34.95.

Review by Marsha Huff.

Courtship and marriage are central to Jane Austen's novels. The 1999 AGM in Colorado Springs acknowledged the plethora of marriages in *Emma* by decorating the banquet tables for a wedding celebration, with miniature tiered wedding cakes doubling as centerpieces and dessert. The marriage of an Austen hero and heroine is the culmination of a realistic love story and, at the same time, an Enlightenment symbol of perfect unity. Hazel Jones's *Jane Austen and Marriage* provides information and historical perspective that illuminate the importance and meaning of marriage in Austen's fiction.

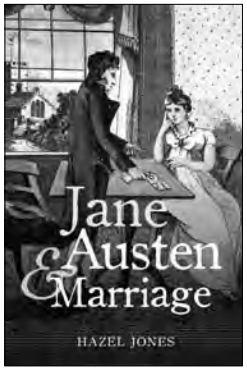
Jones surveys the subject through its various stages—courtship and proposal, wedding ceremony, married life, childbearing, and divorce—concluding with the fate of unmarried women. Her narrative is built on historical data and anecdotes from Austen's novels and from Georgian life, drawn from a variety of primary sources, including diaries and journals, correspondence, ladies' periodicals and the *Gentleman's Magazine,* newspapers, and Austen family papers, notably Jane Austen's own letters.

With the eye of a storyteller, Jones blends dry facts with illustrative examples. Mrs. Bennet anticipates that Elizabeth and Darcy will marry by special license, which, Jones explains, could be obtained from the Archbishop of Canterbury at a cost of about £700 in today's currency and would allow them to hold the ceremony wherever they wished. Most marriages were by banns, which cost the equivalent of £150 for the requisite three callings of the banns and the ceremony in the parish church, though couples could avoid the publicity of banns by obtaining a license for the equivalent of £100, plus £200 for church fees.

An English marriage could be contracted only in the Church of England, but Scottish law did not require church, banns, or license. Couples in a hurry might elope to Gretna Green across the border in Scotland. The Bennets hope to hear that Lydia and Wickham have gone to Scotland because a Gretna Green marriage would be better than none. Jones relates the story of an Austen family elopement in 1826, when Edward Knight (eldest son of Jane's brother Edward) married Sir Edward Knatchbull's daughter in Gretna Green. Sir Edward had been unwilling to approve the marriage because his second wife, Fanny, was Edward Knight's sister, and, while the young people had no blood ties, he found the connection unseemly. A month later after an English wedding, the couple took up residence at Chawton Great House.

Jane Austen and Marriage underscores the extent to which marriage laws and customs in Georgian England were stacked in favor of men. Jones quotes extensively from contemporary conduct books aimed at girls and women, which preached obsequiousness during courtship and obedience after marriage. Jane Austen has Mr. Collins choose one of the most conservative conduct books—*Sermons to Young Women,* by the Reverend James Fordyce—to read aloud to the Bennets.

Men clearly dominated in cases of divorce. Husbands could sue for divorce on the grounds of adultery, while wives could not. Like much of English law, the rule was founded on the protection of property rights. Jones quotes Dr. Johnson: "We hang a thief for stealing a sheep; but the unchastity of a woman transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner… Wise married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands … The man imposes no bastards upon his wife." Jones does not, however, explain how divorces were obtained. We are left to wonder exactly what Mr. Rushworth and his mother had to do to rid themselves of Maria.



For most women, married life meant multiple pregnancies, each posing the risk of death in childbirth. Two of Jane Austen's sisters-in-law died following the birth of an eleventh baby. Austen's letters show sympathy for women who were always "breeding" (the common term for pregnant); in one letter she advocates "the simple regimen of separate rooms" for a couple with eighteen children. Jones explains that, as a last resort, women could find illegal abortionists through newspaper advertisements.

In spite of the risks of childbirth and domestic unhappiness, marriage offered the only means of support for gentlewomen without resources, as Jones's chapter on spinsterhood makes clear. After Austen's father died, she, her sister, and her mother had an annual income of £450, like the Dashwood ladies with their £500 a year. The Austen women were able to live comfortably only with the financial assistance of the Austen sons. They invited their friend Martha Lloyd, in similar straits but with no brothers, to economize by joining their household.

Continuum, the publisher of *Jane Austen and Marriage*, is now the owner of Hambledon & London, which published several well-regarded Austen books, including *Jane Austen and Food* and *Jane Austen and the Clergy.* The new volume is similar in format, but, unlike the Hambledon titles, is not illustrated. It is an entertaining and informative addition to an Austen library.

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