

Jane Austen's Attractive Rogues: Willoughby, Wickham, and Frank Churchill

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I don't know if Jane Austen had anything to do with my own retreat from the rogues in my life, but I do know that I've always been fascinated by the rogues in Jane Austen's novels—especially the ones who capture the attention, if not always the hearts, of the most headstrong heroines: Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse. The more malleable ones—Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot—do not seem to need the rogues to show them their real match. These women, no matter their age, know their hearts from the start. Marilyn Butler notes that the headstrong heroines must rely on “objective evidence” rather than “private intuition” (101). The need to experience rather than merely believe is important even to Marianne Dashwood. Butler points out that “if feeling is an unreliable aid in choosing a husband, it is equally wayward as a general guide to conduct,” as Marianne learns on the brink of death (101).

This idea is not new; one early critic wrote a particularly vivid analogy of Jane Austen's use of the rogue in her plot development. In 1870, an anonymous reviewer of *Pride and Prejudice* saw the rogue as a meteor:

The star of love on its rising is enveloped in mists; and the mists are dispersed not by its own beams, but by the heat of a meteoric love which crosses its path, and bursts, and clears the air. The false glare is extinguished, and the immortal and unquenchable light which had long been shining in secret is revealed to consciousness. (Southam 263)

Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma needed a meteor to burst through the mist of their own self-delusion. What is it about the Willoughbys, Wickhams, and Frank Churchills of the world that continues to attract us? We understand that Marianne is easily fooled, but what is it that deceives and attracts Elizabeth and Emma?

Most first-time readers of *Sense and Sensibility* probably understand that Willoughby's sudden arrival and departure foreshadows an unreliable suitor. But because “his person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story” (*S&S* 43), Marianne has no choice but to fall for Willoughby. He possesses the first, and perhaps the most important trait of the attractive rogue—he fulfills the heroine's idea of good looks and romance.

Elizabeth Bennet's first view of Wickham includes a picture of good looks, but her romantic eye is not as well trained as Marianne's. She is most attracted by George Wickham's charm:

Mr. Wickham was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned, and Elizabeth was the happy woman by whom he finally seated himself; and the agreeable manner in which he immediately fell into conversation, though it was only on its being a wet night, and on the probability of a rainy season, made her feel that the commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting by the skill of the speaker. (*P&P* 76)

Wickham is a good talker, and who would be more appreciative of this trait than quick-witted Elizabeth? Her sisters may be attracted to his red coat, but Lizzy primps for the Meryton ball in anticipation of meeting with Wickham in order to continue the conversations she meets with so rarely at home. What she fails to recognize, however, is that she should beware of a man who is a master of conversation; the quiet, proud, reserved man may be more truthful.

But truth can be overrated when a heroine is in search of a hero. Willoughby's romantic attractiveness is compounded by the obscurity of his background; Wickham is more interesting to Elizabeth because of the past he has fabricated. It would, of course, follow that Emma Woodhouse, the princess of imagination, must be attracted to that same obscure past, that same sense of mystery that compels her to create a past for Harriet Smith. And although Frank Churchill's real history is known throughout the neighborhood, his mystery is reinforced in Highbury because "he had never been there in his life" (17). Frank Churchill's appearance fulfills everything that had been anticipated, and he continues to make himself both beautiful and mysterious when he disappears to London for a haircut. Frank reveals to Emma and company only what he wishes to reveal—he retains all the power. It is toward that power over space, time, and the word that these strong-willed women are attracted.

Austen's rogues are beautiful, charming, independent seducers. Colonel Brandon soon convicts Willoughby by revealing that this rogue has seduced young Eliza, fathered a child, and abandoned the pair. Willoughby has no scruples in escorting Marianne through Mrs. Smith's estate unchaperoned, and he gives her a horse—an act that Alice Chandler sees as particularly sexual (29). George Wickham is also a seducer. He has tried to elope with Georgiana, he eventually elopes with Lydia with no clear intention of marriage, and we have every indication that without Darcy's intervention, he would have continued his pattern of seduction.

Frank Churchill has not followed the pattern set by Willoughby and Wickham. He has no reason to seduce for money; he has only to wait for his ailing aunt to die. But, he is willing and able to

coerce the perfect Jane Fairfax to carry on a secret engagement. Frank Churchill, given more time and less money, has the potential for deception and selfishness that drove his rogue predecessors to seduce.

Willoughby's selfishness does not waiver. After his confession, when even Elinor has found some sympathy for him, she still sees his character clearly: "At present, . . . he regrets what he has done. And why does he regret it?—Because he finds it has not answered towards himself. It has not made him happy" (*S&S* 351). Willoughby loves Marianne because she can bring him joy; he misses her because he cannot have her.

Wickham's selfishness can be seen most clearly through money. He is the gambler—the man who can be bought. Every move he has made in his life can be traced to the shilling or the pound. This mercenary focus is continued by Lydia at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* as she appeals to her sister for a place at court for her dear Wickham.

And Frank Churchill may have the money he needs and the woman he wants, but he is not satisfied without the affection and attention of everyone else. Frank Churchill "complicated the machinery of his plot unnecessarily," Marilyn Butler notes, "and gave Jane additional pain, because he enjoyed his own cleverness while he was deceiving people" (257).

Austen focuses on the selfishness of these men more than on their moral ineptitude. She comments on the genesis of this selfish behavior through the words of Edward Ferrars. Although he is far from a rogue, he is uncomfortable in his own inactivity:

It has been, and is, and probably will always be a heavy misfortune to me, that I have had no necessary business to engage me, no profession to give me employment, or afford me anything like independence. But unfortunately my own nicety, and the nicety of my friends, have made me what I am, an idle, helpless being. (*S&S* 102)

The rogues do not possess Edward's introspection. Willoughby has enough independence to roam the country in search of willing Elizas and Mariannes; Wickham cashes in the vocation chosen for him by his father and his benefactor; Frank Churchill is as free as he wishes as he waits for the death of his aunt. None of these men have any real responsibility or purpose.

Since Frank Churchill's indiscretion is less material than the seduction and selfishness of his predecessors, Mr. Knightley must contrast with his foil in character. He must see the propriety of the match between Harriet and Robert Martin; he must dance with Harriet when he chooses not to dance; he must protect the pride of Miss Bates when no one else will; he must wait to marry Emma until Mr. Woodhouse deems it necessary. Frank Churchill, conversely,

does not have the moral character to see beyond his own wants and needs. Emma even notices the defect when he cannot find a way to visit his father and new stepmother, and when he leaves Highbury for a haircut. Without real responsibility and purpose in his life, he will see no need to satisfy anyone but himself.

Jane Austen's use of the rogue as a foil may be obvious, but her commentary about the idleness of the young, independent man is not as clear. Employment does not insure character. But idleness can persuade a man with potential—Frank Churchill seems to be the most redeemable—to slide into a pattern of self-serving motives and acts.

Each of Austen's rogues is self-serving, but each serves the heroine with a learning experience that the mothers or mother surrogates cannot or will not provide for their daughters. They become a manifestation of the romantic hero about which each heroine has learned through literature and/or the imagination. And, through the rogues' seduction and/or deception, each heroine is given an opportunity to mature. What is probably the most unique aspect of this traditional plot development is that these women are allowed to mature through their own exertion, not through an illicit or implicit sexual encounter. Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma are encouraged, through heartbreak or disappointment, to reach inward. They must find the strength and maturity within themselves to look to the "boy next door."

Austen's rogues are necessary to the development of the heroines. They shape the plot of the novel: Willoughby's indiscretion reveals Colonel Brandon's deep devotion and prepares the reader for the Colonel's eventual "real" rescue of Marianne; Wickham unknowingly reveals Darcy's generosity, love for Elizabeth, and eventual rescue of the Bennet family; Frank Churchill tempts Emma into revealing her own selfishness and harsh cruelty, which then persuades her to turn to Mr. Knightley for correction. Colonel Brandon, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and George Knightley may not be perfect heroes—they don't have the rugged romance or mystery to which the heroines are first attracted—but they do provide the stability, honesty, and generosity that is imperative for a healthy relationship.

If each of our heroes is rewarded with the woman he desires, it might follow that the rogues would be punished. Willoughby's punishment derives from the realization that he could have been both "happy and rich"—he could have married Marianne and reconciled with Mrs. Smith.

But that he was forever inconsolable, that he fled from society, or contracted an habitual gloom or temper, or died of a broken heart, must not be depended on—for he did neither. He lived to exert, and frequently

to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity. (S&S 379)

Willoughby has most of what makes him happy—money, freedom, and good hunting dogs.

Wickham is not so fortunate since he must live with Lydia: “His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; her’s lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her” (P&P 387).

Frank Churchill is not punished at all. He gets everything he wants; he has had his fun at the expense of the one he loves most. Frank Churchill may have some remorse, however, and may become a responsible husband. As Mr. Knightley observes:

He has had great faults—faults of inconsideration and thoughtlessness; and I am very much of his opinion in thinking him likely to be happier than he deserves; but still as he is, beyond a doubt, really attached to Miss Fairfax, and will soon, it may be hoped, have the advantage of being constantly with her, I am very ready to believe his character will improve, and acquire from her’s the steadiness and delicacy of principle that it wants. (*Emma* 448)

Frank Churchill meets the same fate as Emma. His crime is not great, he redeems himself, and he gets another chance. But the punishments do not always fit the crimes. Willoughby’s crime seems to be much greater than Wickham’s, but Wickham may be punished more severely. According to an eighteen-year-old friend of mine, “Well, the guys that break your heart really don’t get punished. That would be too perfect, but that’s just reality.”

Jane Austen must have known that the Willoughbys, Wickhams, and Frank Churchills of this world will continue to divert the attention of the most independent and strong-willed Mariannes, Elizabeths, and Emmas. How else will we ever understand that our own Colonel Brandon will come to our rescue, that our Mr. Darcy will bail out our sisters, or that our Mr. Knightley has been waiting next door all our lives?

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