



Jane Austen and *Rhoda*

DAVID GILSON

David Gilson was a librarian for thirty-four years at the Taylor Institution Library in Oxford, England, the library of Oxford University's Faculty of Mediaeval and Modern Languages. He is the author of *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (1982, reissued 1997).

WILLIAM JARVIS, in his article “Jane Austen and the Countess of Morley,” quotes Lady Morley’s disparagement of *Emma* in a letter of 7 January 1816 written to her sister-in-law Theresa Villiers; he goes on to relate that in a further letter, written before the end of January 1816, the Countess tells Mrs. Villiers that she has read “a new and somewhat sensational novel called *Rhoda*. She praises it to the skies to her sister-in-law and concludes, ‘In short I don’t know when I have read a novel that has pleased me so much. . . . *Rhoda* herself I think the most natural character I have ever read of.’ But,” says Mr. Jarvis, “Who today has heard of *Rhoda*?”

Who, indeed! But I have found one more contemporary mention of this novel. Chris Viveash, in his article “Lady Charlotte Bury and Jane Austen,” quotes a hitherto unrecorded comment on *Emma* from a letter (writer unknown) written to Lady Charlotte Bury and received by that lady on 6 March 1820. After the comment on *Emma* comes a sentence not quoted by Mr. Viveash: “*Rhoda* is of a higher standard of novels [i.e., than *Emma*] and very good and interesting.” The writer of the letter (who adds that “these [*Rhoda* and *Emma*] are the only novels I have read these many months”) sounds in many ways like Mrs. Anne Grant of Laggan (1755–1838), who knew Lady Charlotte Bury and whose *Letters from the Mountains* (1807) and *Memoirs of an*

American Lady (1808) were read by Jane Austen; but Mrs. Grant would have been aware of the authorship of *The Antiquary*, as the letter writer, from a subsequent remark, clearly was not.

The coincidence of the apparent popularity in 1816 of two novels published anonymously, each with a two-syllable woman's name for its title, seems to deserve further investigation. *Emma* has gone on to be accepted as one of the classic works of English literature, while *Rhoda*, which Lady Morley and Lady Charlotte Bury's correspondent seem even to have preferred to *Emma*, has been forgotten. The fortunate acquisition in 1997 of a copy of *Rhoda* has occasioned this article.

The book's title page describes it solely as *Rhoda: A Novel*, with its writer named only as "The author of *Things by Their Right Names* and *Plain Sense*" (two novels that seem also to be now unknown). Andrew Block's book *The English Novel, 1740-1850: A Catalogue* identifies the author of *Rhoda* as Alethea Brereton Lewis (197), but I can find no mention of this lady in the published catalogue of the British Library or in the more obvious reference books (her first name reminds us of Jane Austen's friend Alethea Bigg [1777-1847]).

According to the title page, there are three volumes; in fact, there are four small duodecimo volumes, since the second one is divided into two parts. The imprint gives the book as issued in London, printed for Henry Colburn, Conduit Street, and G. and S. Robinson, Paternoster Row, 1816; it was presumably brought out very early in 1816 if Lady Morley read it before the end of January, possibly even, like *Emma*, before the end of 1815, but with the next year's date. Each volume has a printer's name on the verso of the title page and at the end of the text; in all but one instance the name is that of W. Flint, Printer, Old Bailey, London, but at the end of volume 3 there appears the name T. Davison, Lombard Street, Whitefriars, London (Davison also printed early in 1816 volume 3 of the second edition of *Mansfield Park*, and was to print in 1817 volumes 3 and 4 of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*).

There is an odd point about the chapter numbering; volumes 1, 2, (part 1), and 2 (part 2) have separate sequences of chapters, 1-19, 1-13, and 1-16, respectively, whereas volume 3 begins with chapter 49 (as if the previous volumes had had their chapters numbered consecutively) and continues to chapter 74, the final one.

Interestingly, the verso of the half-title in each volume carries

advertisements for other books, chiefly novels, presumably issued by the same publishers; these include Madame de Staël's *Zulma*, apparently in translation, two works in French by Madame de Genlis and L. B. Picard, the third edition of Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (which Jane Austen enjoyed), and Lady Morgan's *O'Donnell*, besides other less-known titles (Lady Morgan, Sydney Owenson, was the author also of *The Wild Irish Girl* [1806] and *Woman, or Ida of Athens* [1809], both of which Jane Austen mentions in her letter of 17/18 January 1809). One of the less-known titles is *Mystery and Confidence*, a three-volume "tale," by Mrs. Pinchard of Taunton; could this writer be the wife of John Pinchard, Attorney, of Taunton, who published one of the three pamphlet accounts of Mrs. Leigh-Perrot's trial in 1800?

My copy of *Rhoda* is bound in contemporary half calf and grey paper boards, from the library of Anne Renier and F. G. Renier; each volume carries also a printed label reading simply "M.4" (presumably a library shelfmark).

A retelling of the plot, and some mention of other features of the novel, will show how very much *Rhoda* differs from *Emma*. To begin with (a point of difference from Jane Austen) names and ages of the chief characters and names of places are often not given early in the novel or not given at all; but for the sake of clarity I will, where possible, give them as if they were supplied at the outset.

The story begins, in romantic fashion, with Rhoda's uncle (in fact her great-uncle, who is never named) telling her a story, which is actually her life story up to this point. Her father was Captain Strickland, who died in an unspecified war; her mother (unnamed, apart from her surname, Wentworth) died in childbirth, leaving the child with a box of papers proving her identity and a cornelian heart bearing the initials of her parents hung around her neck. Rhoda was at first looked after by a soldier and his wife, who later, for reward, took her to her mother's family; the Wentworths rejected her (and play no further part in the novel). The child was next taken to her father's elder brother, Sir William Strickland (more than twenty years Captain Strickland's senior) and his wife, Lady Elizabeth (so named throughout, and thus presumably the daughter of a peer). They refused to care for her, so the unnamed old great-uncle did so. This was all ten years ago; Rhoda seems now to be seventeen or eighteen. The old great uncle then dies, leaving Rhoda an unspecified (but not

large) sum of money and having, so he thought, persuaded Sir William's son, Rhoda's cousin Mr. Thomas Strickland, to give her a home—her only other friends, the vicar of the parish (a village named Byrhley, apparently in Staffordshire), Mr. Wyburg, and his unmarried daughter, Frances, being unable to do so. Mr. Wyburg has a pupil, Mr. Ponsonby (who seems to have more than friendly feelings for Rhoda, which we are to suppose are reciprocated). Mr. Strickland (who lives in London, in Grosvenor Square) is not anxious to give Rhoda a home, but he is persuaded to do so by his wife, Wilhelmina (she really wants Rhoda as a companion, and more especially as an excuse for spending money, since Mr. Strickland is parsimonious). They therefore receive Rhoda in London.

In three of the most effective chapters in the novel (volume 1, chapters 14-16) Mrs. Strickland, who is intensely worldly and fashionable, tells Rhoda that she must "make a splendid establishment," and instructs her as to how she is to do so. Here is Mrs. Strickland on dress: "To be well dressed is a duty that we owe to society; and it is not possible to be well dressed without bestowing a great deal of thought on the matter." Even better is Mrs. Strickland on reading. Rhoda sees some attractively bound volumes on a shelf behind some china ornaments and attempts to pick them up. Mrs. Strickland exclaims, "Pray, my dear, don't touch those books—their whole value is in their binding; I had them bound in that beautiful manner wholly for the sake of effect—the gold shews off the china so well—I did not care what the contents were, as I never meant that they should be removed from their place." Mrs. Strickland does admit that to be fashionable one should be able to give an opinion on the books of the day, but there is no occasion to read the whole—"A quick eye, and a sharp wit, will enable you to catch enough at a glance to serve the purposes of "conversation."

Rhoda is to make her debut at a Christmas house party, with Sir Frampton and Lady Morris, at Overleigh Park, Oxfordshire (boar's head and "goose pye" are mentioned [300], but otherwise the season and its religious significance play no part in the story). This house party lasts from chapter 18 of volume 1 to the end of chapter 9 of volume 2, part 1, so its importance in the plot is considerable.

On arrival, the guests are characterized. It is a fashionable gathering, mainly of titled people; only Lord and Lady Randolf personify

sense and moral goodness (Lady Randolph is Sir Frampton Morris's sister); others are primarily selfish, malicious, and so on, their qualities being well described ("The volubility of Lady Renkin particularly struck Rhoda, as she seemed to utter words in proportion as she wanted ideas"—this is reminiscent of Mrs. Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*). There are two unmarried men: Lord William St. Quintin (age not stated), who is the arbiter of taste and fashion, and Sir James Osbourne, who is forty-five and "the object of every mother's vows who has daughters to dispose of."

Rhoda is carried away on a tide of vanity and trivial amusements; she becomes "the principal star in the constellation of youth and beauty assembled at Overleigh Park." She is constantly trying to do what her conscience tells her is right (for example, to write to her friend Frances, or to make a stand when religion is mocked), but equally constantly failing to do so. She is fascinated by Lord William, but Mrs. Strickland (Mr. Strickland, although present, is almost never mentioned) is determined that she shall marry Sir James (shades of Lady Susan, Frederica Vernon, and Sir James Martin in *Lady Susan*—although Sir James Osbourne is far from being a fool). Mr. Ponsoy appears at the house party, for no apparent reason (except perhaps to personify Rhoda's good angel, to whom she never pays attention).

Lord and Lady Randolph take the Stricklands to stay with them at their estate, Temple Harcourt (county not specified, but the name is reminiscent of Stanton Harcourt, near Oxford). The Randolphs would have good influence on Rhoda, were it not that Mrs. Strickland soon insists on returning to London, where Rhoda is again taken up with social engagements and fashionable amusements that stifle her good intentions. Mrs. Strickland is described as watching with satisfaction "the increasing influence that the pleasures of the world...daily obtained over the vacillating mind of Rhoda... She well knew that Rhoda did not love Sir James Osbourne, and that she did love Mr. Ponsoy; but... she durst trust to her vanity for her marriage with the one, and for her rejection of the other." In the end Rhoda is flattered into agreeing to marry Sir James, which she does, aged nineteen, in spite of a letter from her old friend, the vicar's daughter Frances, imploring her not to take leave of her senses, and she and Sir James go to his villa at Twickenham.

Rhoda is not happy in her marriage and seeks advice from Lady

Randolf; but when she most needs that advice, the whole Randolf family goes to an estate in Scotland, out of her reach. Rhoda asks Sir James to take her to the sea; they go to the Isle of Wight, but are no company for each other. Lord William St. Quintin appears and becomes a frequent visitor, taking Rhoda sailing and so on. They tire of the sea and go to Sir James's country house, Osbourne Park in "Dorsetshire," where they are much visited. Rhoda becomes friendly with Lady Emily Grantham, a frivolous cousin of Lord William; she is dazzled by her and can see no fault in her, in spite of Sir James's warnings. In fact Sir James had earlier come near to marrying Lady Emily (before her marriage to Mr. Grantham), but he had discovered her mercenary nature and other failings in time; in consequence, Lady Emily now hates him and, because of him, Rhoda. When she realizes that Rhoda does not really love Sir James, she plans to work mischief.

Mrs. Strickland becomes ill; her maid, Wilson, helps Rhoda look after her in London, but she dies, begging Rhoda to look after Wilson. Rhoda again feels alone, and again regrets the absence of Lady Randolf; the novelist says extravagantly, "Rhoda was doomed to navigate the ocean of life without a pilot." During Mrs. Strickland's illness Sir James has gone back to bachelor habits, and a gulf of misunderstanding opens between them, although Rhoda believes Sir James still loves her, and in her better moments wishes she could love him. It is not of course Lady Emily's intention that she should do so, so she speaks slightingly of Sir James (referring to him, incidentally, as "caro sposo"—shades of Mrs. Elton!). Sir James warns Rhoda of Lady Emily and wants to break the intimacy between them for her sake, not wanting her to "become a cold, unfeeling, heartless woman of fashion." But although Rhoda begins to become aware of worldliness and selfishness in Lady Emily, she obstinately spends all her time with her, lends her money, and constantly goes to her parties (at which Lord William is always present).

Rhoda now has money problems (this is a recurring topic: on her first arrival in London she told Mrs. Strickland that she did not want to run up bills at shops, but was led into doing so; she paid her debts at the time of her marriage, but now she has more debts). Not wanting to apply to Sir James, she foolishly asks Wilson if she knows where she could borrow two hundred pounds; the maid says that her brother could get it for her (but in fact Wilson gets the money from

Lord William, whose agent she is; he hopes to entrap Rhoda by making her indebted to him).

Rhoda at a party tells Mr. Grantham how much she would prefer to live in the country; Lady Emily, in “fear that Rhoda was about to escape the snare which she had spread for her,” overwhelms her with attentions (Rhoda is clearly meant to be lured into an affair with Lord William, who is to be seen as the type of the immoral man-about-town). Another shock for Rhoda: Mr. Ponsonby tells her that he has married her friend Frances. At the opera Lord William embarrasses Rhoda by slipping her a note; later, at Lady Emily’s, where a ball is in preparation, he traps her into dancing the waltz with him (something that she has always previously refused to do, on moral grounds), and of course Sir James comes in at the wrong moment and makes the wrong deductions.

Mr. Grantham (who is shown to be a man of character, quite unlike his wife) becomes an intermediary between Rhoda and Sir James; he produces another note from Lord William (which Rhoda had in fact never received) and also proves that she had borrowed money from him. All appearances seem to be against our heroine. Lord William and Sir James fight a duel with pistols; Sir James misses his target and then shoots himself. Lady Emily now hypocritically claims that Rhoda is a guilty woman and rejects her.

Sir James has left Rhoda little money. Mr. Grantham finds lodgings for her, but although Rhoda has fallen ill, the maid Wilson allows Lord William to come into the house, ruining her character in the eyes first of the landlady and then of Mr. Grantham. However, help is at hand. Frances comes to look for Rhoda, who convinces her that she has been foolish, not sinful; Lord William’s villainy is made clear, together with Wilson’s part in his devious schemes. Mr. Grantham is separated from Lady Emily; society now scorns both her and Lord William.

Lady Randolph returns and gives Rhoda money to repay the two hundred pounds that had come from Lord William so that she may be entirely free of him. Lady Randolph also provides a cottage home for her in the grounds of Temple Harcourt. Rhoda goes home to the village of Byrhley and confesses all to Mr. Wyburg. Sir William and Lady Elizabeth now have a rich new daughter-in-law and have no interest in Rhoda, who returns to her cottage. Fortunately, Sir James’s heir, Sir

Charles (an older man), decides that she deserves better provision from the estate and sends Rhoda £5,000 plus some jewelry (which she had given back), and also guarantees her an income of £3,000 per year. Rhoda is thus restored to respectability and relative wealth; “She bowed with much submission to the chastisements of her heavenly Father, and gratefully enjoyed the blessings which his hand still preserved to her.”

The final paragraph of the book implies that its whole purpose was to teach a moral lesson. If nothing else were to point the striking differences between *Rhoda* and *Emma*, this moralizing termination would suffice. Jane Austen is not primarily concerned with inculcating moral lessons (except perhaps in *Mansfield Park*), but the author of *Rhoda* seems anxious chiefly to do so, since the plot basically deals with Rhoda’s behavior when faced with temptations of one kind or another; apart from Mrs. Strickland’s induction of her cousin by marriage into fashionable life, no incident seems there for its own sake. There is not a wide range of characters; almost all belong to the aristocracy. Children hardly appear; Lady Randolph is represented as a sensible and careful mother, in contrast to Lady Renkin at the house party who wants only to toy with prettily dressed children for a few moments before dinner, and Lady Emily, who similarly is concerned only to show off her children at social functions (her daughters Emily, Harriet, and Caroline are named, but we see none of them). In Jane Austen’s novels, servants almost never play a significant role in the plot; in *Rhoda* the devious maid Wilson has a very large part to play, flattering Rhoda and Mrs. Strickland almost from the beginning, deceiving Mrs. Strickland when she is dying, and then working to encompass Rhoda’s downfall.

Rhoda is human in her weakness, if too much given to moralizing introspection, but few other characters seem so, especially the virtuous. Frances Wyburg is a paragon who writes letters of unrelieved high-principled morality, and Mr. Ponsonby is wholly artificial (not least in his sudden appearances from time to time, which even the characters in the novel seem unable to explain); he has no genuine feeling for Rhoda, although she, indeed, shows no normal reaction to the sudden tidings of Mr. Ponsonby’s marriage to her friend. The most curious character is Lady Williams, who appears suddenly in chapter 13 of volume 2, part 2: “How gay you have made Sir James!”

said her new friend Lady Williams”—and disappears without trace after two chapters. Very little attention is paid to the setting; although Staffordshire, Oxfordshire, and “Dorsetshire” are mentioned, any other counties would do just as well. The Isle of Wight plays a small part, demonstrating Rhoda’s passion for the sea (but it is not described), while there is nothing of London apart from a few street names (Rhoda does go to a bookseller, attend an auction, and visit the opera, but there are no names of books or paintings or composers; all is impersonal).

Another point of difference from Jane Austen is the fact of the reader’s being present at a death scene; in Jane Austen, if there is a death, it generally occurs at some place remote from the action—but here Mrs. Strickland’s dying is a lengthy process. Rhoda is present and is much affected by it. In Jane Austen’s novels, too, the plot always leads up to the heroine’s marriage, which provides a natural termination; what happens after marriage (at least as far as the chief characters are concerned) is not discussed. But in *Rhoda* the story is both of what happens before the heroine’s marriage and also of the consequences of that marriage; the novel’s ending is in fact unsatisfactory, since the reader is given no clue as to what will happen to Rhoda after her return to respectability and wealth.

The novel is peppered with French words and phrases; there is a temptation to see it almost as an early example of the novels of the so-called silver-fork school of the 1820s and 1830s, which hold up for admiration the lives of the wealthy and fashionable (by writers such as Thomas Henry Lister and Catherine Gore). But in its moralizing character *Rhoda* looks forward rather to the type of story written more especially for young readers in the Victorian period; to a twentieth-century reader, its contemporary readers’ enthusiasm seems hard to understand or to justify.

POSTSCRIPT: When I more recently had occasion to refer to my notes on the first edition of *Emma*, I found to my surprise that two German reviews had more to say about *Rhoda* than they did about *Emma*, thus strengthening the evidence for contemporary preference for the former title. The first review appeared in the *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*, Vol. 9, published in Tübingen by J. G. Cotta, 1816, in the supplement

to No. 137, Friday 7 June 1816, entitled “Übersicht der neuesten Literatur,” No. 9, p. 33. Here the reviewer discusses several new novels by English women writers, and rather damns with faint praise by describing its writer as “eine glückliche Beobachterinn des stillen häuslichen Familienlebens.” He (or she) goes on to speak of *Rhoda* as “die beliebteste unter den letzten Erscheinungen in diesem Fache,” and praises its author for her depiction of the way of life of the upper and middle classes: “ihre innige Bekanntschaft mit den höhern und mittlern Ständen, deren Sitten sie in sprechend ähnlichen Gemälden darstellt” (although *Rhoda* was anonymous, the reviewer is quite sure that its author was a woman). *Rhoda*, says the reviewer, has given its author a place among the chief women novelists of her native land (“hat ihr einen Platz unter den ersten Novellen-Dichterinnen ihres Vaterlandes verschafft”).

A briefer comment comes in the *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, Vol. 13, 1816, Intelligenzblatt, No. 37, June 1816, Kurze Übersicht der neuesten englischen Literatur, Col. 293, Romane. Again there is faint praise for *Emma* (described as containing “gutgezeichnete Familiengemälde”), while the reviewer definitely prefers *Rhoda*, calling it “noch beliebter” and saying of it: “Plan, Gemälde, Tendenz und Stil sind gleich lobenswerth.”

WORKS CITED

- BLOCK, ANDREW. *The English Novel, 1740-1850: A Catalogue*. Rev. ed. 1961.
- JARVIS, WILLIAM. “Jane Austen and the Countess of Morley.” *The Jane Austen Society Report for 1987* (1987): 9-16.
- Rhoda: A Novel*. London: Henry Colburn and G. and S. Robinson, 1816.
- VIVEASH, CHRIS. “Lady Charlotte Bury and Jane Austen.” *Persuasions* 19 (1997): 29-30.