

Literary Criticism

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Michael Suk-Young Chwe *JANE AUSTEN, GAME THEORIST* 288pp. Princeton University Press.

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978 0 691 15576 0 It is not often that a Nobel Laureate in economics endorses a book on Jane Austen. Humanist scholars tend to ignore economists and vice versa. As Lorraine Daston notes, insofar as there has been any humanistic response to game theory "it has been a rolling of the eyes heavenward and a shrugging of shoulders about the absurdity of it all (sentiments and gestures richly reciprocated by the other side, especially the indifference)". Michael Suk-Young Chwe aims to bridge this divide.

Austen's novels turn around choices and preferences, from the most significant, like a marriage decision, to the seemingly trivial, as when Betsey must decide whether to return the knife she has taken from her sister Susan in *Mansfield Park*. Game theory, which assumes that subjects always act rationally, choices translate to numerical pay-offs and complex mixtures of feelings can be reduced to a single sentiment (commensurability), is also about choices and preferences. It is therefore commonly accused of promoting selfishness, amorality and financial calculation. Chwe, a political scientist who specializes in game theory, uses Austen's fiction to defend game theory against these accusations. More compellingly, Austen emerges from Chwe's reading as possessing insights not yet approached by modern game theory, especially regarding changes in preference and co-operation between two actors to manipulate the decisions of a third.

In this account, Emma Woodhouse can be understood as a game theorist in her teamwork with Mr Knightley, but her skills in strategic thinking also make her overconfident.

The result is often what Chwe calls "cluelessness", after the 1995 film adaptation of *Emma*. Chwe's discussion of cluelessness, whereby people fail to understand that others make their decisions based on their own preferences, is particularly sharp for illuminating how social distance and status distinctions can cause people to make poor strategic choices.

This insight, in one of this study's more unexpected juxtapositions, leads Chwe from Austen's *Lady Catherine* and General Tilney to examples of "real-world cluelessness" in his account of the United States' response to the Fallujah insurgency in 2004.

Chwe makes a convincing case for how mathematical models and fictional narratives can work towards reciprocal illustration. Nonetheless, those interested in the subtleties of Austen's language or the charm of her fiction may find this book more convincing as an introduction to game theory than as a reading of Austen's novels.

Jonathan Sachs