

South Atlantic
Modern Language Association
Award Study

JANE AUSTEN AND MOZART

*Classical Equilibrium
in Fiction and Music*



ROBERT K. WALLACE

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TO JOAN FERRANTE WALLACE

Introduction

for the purposes of wit, he did so not with violence but with effortless ease. So did Austen. One celebrated example is the description of Miss Bingley as “all that was affectionate and insincere.”²⁶

Less celebrated, but more to my purpose, is the description of Mary Bennet as “deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature” (p. 55). “Thorough bass” and “human nature” are as heterogeneous as “affectionate” and “insincere.” The one refers to music, the other to life; the one to technique, the other to spirit. The wit in their juxtaposition is governed by Mary’s being the common denominator. As the phrase in its context shows, Mary is unable to discriminate; she approaches both music and life in the same overzealous and unimaginative way: “They found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature; and had some new extracts to admire, and some new observations of thread-bare morality to listen to.” The wit is not limited to the juxtaposition of the unlike. Austen might have written that Mary was “serious” in her study. Instead she wrote “deep.” Applied to thorough bass, *deep* means low in the register of the instrument (as Austen, from her own keyboard experience, knew). Applied to human nature, *deep* means profound. The “depth” of Mary’s study highlights the ironic portrayal of her insensitivity to the nuances of both subjects. The clarity of diction and of syntax contributes to the wit as much as does the juxtaposition of the heterogeneous.

The pages that follow risk not only duplicating Mary’s mistake but compounding it: they juxtapose not only technique and spirit, not only art and human nature, but fiction and music. Such items are, of course, related. The trick, which Mary lacked, is to approach them in a discriminating spirit. Austen’s artistic world is animated by just such a spirit. So is Mozart’s. Each is a world in which apparent paradoxes and seemingly incongruous juxtapositions usually do turn out to be harmonious and revealing.

Part One

CLASSICAL EQUILIBRIUM IN FICTION AND MUSIC

