

Lynda A. Hall, Women and ‘Value’ in Jane Austen’s Novels

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Hall, Lynda A. *Women and ‘Value’ in Jane Austen’s Novels: Settling, Speculating and Superfluity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. \$79.99. 225pp.

Lynda Hall’s magnificent *Women and ‘Value’ in Jane Austen’s Novels* offers a comprehensive account of Jane Austen’s minor female characters and the ways in which their presence speaks to the harsh social and economic realities of eighteenth-century women. Hall offers a brilliant analysis of female characters that are not frequently discussed in critical conversations. She argues that the lack of focus on these characters in the plot is tied to their lack of intrinsic or extrinsic value. If we do not take Hall’s analysis seriously, we run the risk of leaving these characters’ social positions unevaluated and undervalued, in the same way Hall claims these women were left behind in their own society. Literary scholars interested in feminist critique, theories of economics, and sociology will themselves find great value in Hall’s book, particularly in how it conceptualizes the ways that the money market can be surprisingly and problematically tied to human value in fiction and in culture.

Hall uses minor characters such as *Emma*’s Jane Fairfax, *Sense and Sensibility*’s Lucy Steele, and *Emma*’s Miss Bates to assess women’s limited opportunities for economic growth in the long eighteenth century. She carefully describes how value was directly tied to the changing marriage market. Hall defines “intrinsic value” as women’s “moral or essential human worth” and “expressed value” as “their economic worth or social position” (15). Hall argues that the emergence of “market capitalism” creates room in fiction for debates on the “balance of trade, the existence of credit, the use and regulation of paper money, the distribution of wealth, the division of labor, and the value of commerce” (17). Hall’s research argues for the necessity and significance of understanding Jane Austen’s work in this way. She writes, “although Jane Austen’s novels might not let us in on the actual lives lived by women of her class and time, the dramatization of her fictional characters’ lives gives us a glimpse into what she saw as important enough to ironize and on which to confer meaning” (17). She uses Thomas Hobbes’ influential ideas on value based on “perception and use” and John Locke’s understanding of the intrinsic value of the coin and human values, as well as other influential philosophers of the time, in her readings of Austen’s fiction (20). Hall recognizes that during the eighteenth century the value of the coin became susceptible to fluctuating markets and that those markets created the value. Hall makes use of Adam Smith’s transformative understanding of the value of money. Although prior to the eighteenth century, gold and silver held their value because of the material of which they were made, during the eighteenth century there was a shift to valuing money only for what it could buy. This shift becomes central to Hall’s argument as she maintains that the value of women can be similarly viewed. Moreover, Smith’s argument regarding competition in the marketplace directly influences Austen’s novels and their focus on competition in the marriage market. In Austen’s novels, the minor characters that may lack expressed or intrinsic value, or often both, are much more likely to face hardship in retaining their value than the more prosperous heroines.

Hall begins with a detailed discussion of monetary value in the long eighteenth century in her Introduction and Chapter 2: Money, Value, and Circulation. Interestingly, Hall relates that the value of banknotes and coins were frequently debated issues in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. She also tells the lesser-known history of the “It-narratives” of the eighteenth century, which give a narrative voice to coins that were circulating in the burgeoning new economy. Hall argues, “This keen interest in valuation reflected in these circulation narratives is

consistent with the valuation and circulation of women within the marriage market" (28). In Chapter 3: Marriage, Credit, and a Woman's Education, Hall gives a much-needed historical account of works of fiction and social ideals in the eighteenth century that specifically engage with "women's credit" through established standards of "education" and "moral behavior." These first few chapters are carefully researched and well executed to allow the reader to understand the broader historical and economic factors that may have had an impact on Austen's novels.

Once Hall has carefully set the historical and literary stage for her analysis, she analyzes the marriage market through the perspectives of certain minor characters. Chapter 4: Sense and Settling uses *Pride and Prejudice*'s Charlotte Lucas, *Mansfield Park*'s Maria Bertram, and *Emma*'s Jane Fairfax as examples of minor female characters who have low expressed or intrinsic value. Despite their intrinsic value, they decide to marry men who might not have as much intrinsic value as they themselves possess, in order to save themselves from obscurity and isolation. In fact, Hall writes, "Each woman finds herself controlled by one structure or another, unable to escape these confines within a market economy that does not privilege a woman's intrinsic value" (Hall 109).

Chapter 5: Speculation and Predatory Behavior, is an analysis of women whose environment has created a space where society rewards women who scheme and plot to increase their expressed value through marriage. Here Hall gives specific examples of speculators, including *Northanger Abbey*'s Isabella Thorpe, *Sense and Sensibility*'s Lucy Steele, and *Mansfield Park*'s Mary Crawford, as minor female characters whose talents do not always win them men with high intrinsic value. For example, Hall writes about Isabella Thorpe, "Clearly Isabella's gambling and fiction-making represent some of the most troubling aspects of the marriage-market culture, and her characterization is a clear critique of this type of female speculator, which continues in Austen's subsequent novels with Lucy Steele and Mary Crawford" (127). Hall argues that Austen pairs her heroines who have high intrinsic value with male counterparts who have the same high intrinsic value. She contrasts those who have seemingly done well on the marriage market with the superfluous female characters who are unable to secure husbands and struggle to stay relevant in their communities. In Chapter 6: Superfluous, Invisible, and Invalid, it is Miss Bates in *Emma* and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion* on whom Hall focuses. Interestingly, the book ends with an analysis of Fanny Price in Chapter 7: The Minor Protagonist, or the Reluctant Heroine. Since Fanny Price is a heroine with little to no expressed value, she falls outside the typical understandings of heroines in Austen's fiction. Hall writes, "Ultimately, through Fanny Price's battle to avoid becoming a settler or a speculator, and to move from a *superfluous* place within social structure, her story reveals just how a minor character might find a major role" (Hall 195). Hall provides a brilliant analysis of the characteristics that tend to make a female character seem minor and the way in which Austen's narrative works to make her a heroine.

Hall has a remarkable talent for bringing larger concepts regarding economy, social history, and culture to bear on Austen's novels in a way that is illuminating. Hall recognizes the unique position of Austen's heroines who "...were able to transcend this valuation spectacle and found marriages of affection that merged the intrinsic and expressed value that so often conflicted on the marriage market" (207-8). Hall's work is significant in bringing the more commonly studied issues of eighteenth-century marriage in fiction in new directions, helping us further our understanding of the devaluing of women in these texts. Given the high intrinsic value of Jane Austen's female heroines, such as Emma Woodhouse, Elizabeth Bennet, and Elinor Dashwood, their minor female counterparts often receive less analysis or harsher critique. Hall writes, "Just as the average middle-class woman of the period may have been overlooked by the marketplace, the minor women in this study are in the margins of this narrative" (208). Hall's progressive research allows our scholarly conversations to move forward into deeper and more nuanced analysis of these minor female characters and the everyday women they represented in Regency England. *Women and 'Value' in Jane Austen's Novels* offers new ways to think through all of Jane Austen's characters and is a must-read for scholars interested in a socio-historical reading of Austen and other works of eighteenth-century fiction.

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