

could anything remotely similar happen now?"

In his introduction to the symposium, *American Literary History* editor Gordon Hutner seems somewhat pained by all the hostile responses. "It is unfortunate enough that writers have mostly turned away from what professors have to say, but this rejection is all the more regrettable for being based, as it often is, on 20-year-old perceptions about the academic tolerance for jargon, a conviction about the sterility of the academy for which, with a little bad faith, justification can always be found. Not even three of the 26 respondents have mentioned the scholar-

ly turn to history, much less something called the New Historicism, or cultural studies. Nor do they seem to care much about the nuances in our various, frequently [heated] exchanges over multiculturalism and the canon."

Nevertheless, Hutner believes there is "richness to be found in continuing exchanges" between academic critics and writers. But Gass, for one, disagrees: "Academics are consumed by political issues they have made as petty as themselves. So I don't at this time envision profitable exchanges between such scholars, such critics, and such writers."

A Thoroughly Modern Austen

"Jane Austen Changes Her Mind" by Christopher Clausen, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1999), 1785 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036.

It sometimes seems that the most popular serious novelist at the close of the 20th century is an author of the early 19th: Jane Austen (1775–1817). All but one of her six novels have made their way to movie theaters and television screens in recent years. Something about Austen's well-regulated bucolic romances, in which the woman gets not only her man, but an estate and a fortune as well, is charming readers and audiences on an impressive scale.

Critics, however, have had difficulty pinpointing just what that "something" is. They have interpreted the social commentary of Austen's tales to represent everything from radical feminism to "systematic conservatism[ism]." But for all that diversity, there has been remarkable consensus that all of Austen's novels are consistent in whatever social ideology they display.

But Clausen, an English professor at Pennsylvania State University, argues that Austen's last novel, *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1818), "represents an unprecedented shift of direction." *Persuasion* is still quintessential Austen in its plot and the value it places on the happiness of a match well made. But where her other novels hold marriage from or into the landowning, fortune-holding gentry as the standard for success, *Persuasion* promotes different, more modern manifestations of that happiness.

Persuasion finds Anne Elliot, the second

daughter of the flighty, spendthrift Sir Walter Elliot, having fallen in love with young Captain Wentworth, but nonetheless being dissuaded from marrying him: Wentworth, without family background or money, is hardly qualified for a match with an Elliot. However, after eight years of separation and a good deal of miscommunication, Anne and Wentworth marry and find their own sort of happiness. True, Wentworth possesses an impressive fortune, but it is a fortune won in his naval victories, not bequeathed along with a title and manor. That the hero of the novel would thus choose and pursue a vocation (and do so enthusiastically and successfully) would be unheard of in Austen's earlier novels. But in *Persuasion*, it is only the sailors and their wives, never the gentry, who find fulfillment in their marriages, wherein men and women appear to have nearly equal status and childlessness does not equal failure. Significantly, Lady Russell, a family friend of the Elliots who can be taken as a stand-in for Austen herself, at long last admits (in Austen's words) that "she had been pretty completely wrong" in her earlier criticism of Wentworth and counsels Anne to marry him after all.

Though Austen herself was silent on the cause of her shift in values (and Clausen wisely declines to speculate), the result is a new spin on the "authentic" Austen novel. And happily for Austen fans, it still makes a pretty good movie.