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*Jane Austen, Game Theorist*. By Michael Suk-Young Chwe. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2013. 272pp. \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-15576-0.

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From the perspective of a game theorist with a romantic nature, Michael Chwe explores the six novels of Jane Austen. Chwe argues that Austen was a pioneer in the understanding of strategic thinking that shapes individual choices, and hence individual behaviour. The result is an original interpretation of Austen's imagination whose unique critical way of thinking put her ahead of her time not only for English literature but for understanding the individual motives driving human interactions.

How can individual behaviour be explained? Can 19<sup>th</sup> century marital fixtures from Austen's lens help understand the process of individual decision-making? Similarly, how can African-American folktales and US foreign policy be explained by game theory? Perhaps more surprisingly, how can there be a common link between Austen's romances, African-American folktales and US foreign policy? In those different historical and geographical settings, Chwe shows how "inferiors" (i.e., groups of individuals perceived to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy) develop more sophisticated and more advanced strategic skills than their "superiors". The rationale behind is that inferiors need to adopt a survival strategy by elaborating moves that will maximize their chance of survival, or at least minimize the costs attached to any action in a social situation. Additionally, superiors tend to experience cluelessness (or the absence of strategic thinking) which is exploited by inferiors and enable them to choose the best possible strategy in any circumstances. In the instance of Austen's writings, the distinction between superiors and inferiors is often based on class but mostly on gender, whereby women, historically inferiors, have developed more sophisticated strategic skills than men. In the instance of African-American folktales, the oppressed nature of African-Americans lead them to develop an ability to anticipate moves, as chess players would do, by being ahead of the game with superiors- i.e., whites. In the instance of US foreign policy, and referring more specifically to the Fallujah attack by US military force on 5 April 2004 in retaliation for the death of four American soldiers on 31 March 2004, the rationale is to maintain the superior status of the US which had been previously challenged by insurgents. This is despite the negative impact the attack would have on the local population and the consequent negative perception the local population would have of the US military forces. The common link in all these instances is that superiors' cluelessness is simply the result of superiors' obsession to maintain their status and who overlook the fact that inferiors can prove to be independent strategic thinkers.

At the heart of the book is the promotion of rational choice theory (RCT) to anyone interested in understanding the mental mechanisms behind individual decision-making. To do so, the author not only explains the foundations of game theory and strategic thinking (Chapter Two), he also analyses Austen's supposedly own vision of game theory (Chapter Six) by providing countless citations across her six novels. By doing so, the author provides evidence for the critique of RCT as being concerned with passionless atomistic individuals regardless of the specific context in which their actions take place. In effect, Austen's novelty of presenting romances to be purely down to the interaction of calculating characters endowed with various degrees of strategic skills is extremely well documented, to the extent that Austen's competing models (Chapter Seven) may look unreasonable. These competing models describe the factors shaping the context in which strategic thinking takes place, namely emotions, instincts, habits, rules, social factors, ideology, intoxication, and constraints, which is argued to have no place in the author's interpretation of Austen's imagination, or the rationale choice theorist that Austen is interpreted to be. By applying RCT concepts to the context of

19<sup>th</sup> century British traditions, to the folktales dating back to slavery days in the US, and to 21<sup>st</sup> century US foreign policy, the author proves that the context of decision-making is, in effect, not essential in explaining the virtues of strategic thinking as a means for individual actions. In his concluding remarks, the author comes back to the importance of context in determining the value of goods in market exchange, or in this instance to the value of spouses in the marriage market “the value of a good cannot be reduced to its attributes or the labor that went into making it, but depends on the entire context of how the good is exchanged...” (p.230). What does context bring to the analysis of strategic thinking? One response is that it provides some understanding of the groups historically perceived to be superiors and inferiors and therefore, once socially acknowledged, it forms a basis for change. Part of Austen’s intellectual contribution is to have described and publically acknowledged the strategic superiority of women over men, a contribution that enabled her to become financially independent and thus to break the norms of her time.

Finally, it would be tempting to imagine Austen’s view of Chwe’s book, but it may be wiser to avoid a paternalistic critique and just comment on the fact that Chwe’s book is already a success among academics with a taste for RCT and among Austen fans. It is highly recommended for students of game theory who would like to place the theory within different contexts, as well as students of political economy who would like to understand the extent to which a unique context influences individual objectives in strategic thinking.