

Brian Southam

## *Rears, and Vices*

*Letter published in TLS, 23 January 2004*

Sir, - Richard Davenport-Hines justly praises Graham Robb's *Strangers* (January 9), pointing out that, among his other gifts, the author is "a great debunker". Davenport-Hines also praises Robb's treatment of Mary Crawford's notorious "Rears, and Vices" pun in *Mansfield Park*. But this is a point at which Robb falls down badly. Here was a golden opportunity to debunk, to nail a succession of critics who have seen the pun (*pace* Davenport-Hines) as a "sodomitical joke". Instead of debunking, Robb merely follows in their train. Mary Crawford's uncle, Admiral Crawford, Jane Austen tells us, is "a man of vicious conduct" who brought "his mistress under his own roof" after his wife's death, and the *Rears, and Vices* " pun simply connects the titles of two lower ranks of Admiral with the kind of behaviour going on at her uncle's house when his naval cronies were around. Sexual it would have been. But not homosexual.

Anyone who looks at the matter historically, in terms of the publishing practice of the day, the conventions of ladies' fiction, and the author herself, will know that whatever jokes she made in private – and some of these were pretty broad – Austen could never have allowed herself, nor would she have been permitted by her publisher, to perpetrate such an outrageous joke in print, least of all to let it cross the lips of a female character in mixed company.