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Jane Austen's House of Friction

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By **Clara Tuite**

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Writing (Style, Genre, Technique, Language) ›

(2002) and, with Claudia L. Johnson, is currently working on *30 Great Myths About Jane Austen* (forthcoming Wiley-Blackwell).

An equivoque, pun, asyndeton, *Sanditon* is an intriguingly ambiguous, contradictory text—stylistically, thematically, materially, and biographically. It is a late text in Austen’s oeuvre, not only anticipating the modernist innovations of interior monologue and impressionism but also looking back to the theatrical effects and formal experiments of Austen’s youthful writings. It is the final work that plunges the rise of Austen’s novel—after the six major works—into the fall of the minor. It is a fragment that has sustained a long and busy afterlife of completions and continuations. Written probably to make money, at a time of multiple financial crises that threatened Jane Austen, her mother, and her sister with being turned out of the family home, *Sanditon* is the post-Waterloo novel that equivocates between the country house and mobile property.¹ As the equivoque of printed text and manuscript fragment, written while Austen suffered from the illness that would shortly lead to her death, *Sanditon* registers rich enigmas at the intersection of Austen’s life and writings.

As for the fabled Austenean romance plot, *Sanditon* would seem to take the form of a courtship novel, but it also embodies, as D. A. Miller notes, an “intensive thematic concentration on morbidity . . . which engages us in distinctly un- and even anti-conjugal ways” (77). The family, too, as a novelistic unit, is queerly configured in *Sanditon*, as “the mediating [site of] the destructive, commodifying effects of the expanding economy” (Copeland 126). And *Sanditon* speaks obliquely of Austen’s own


queer status as one of a pair of “unmarried sisters of singular character,” to use James Edward Austen-Leigh’s term for the female of the Parker hypochondriac species (203)—as though the condition of unmarried femininity were not in itself singular. Rather more proudly, Mr. Parker refers to his unmarried brothers and sisters as “all single, all independent” (Later Manuscripts 147). Central among them is Diana Parker, the contra-suggestible invalid, whom we first meet crawling from bed to sofa, writing to say she is too ill to contemplate coming to Sanditon, before promptly coming to stay: “It was not a week since Miss Diana Parker had been told by her feelings, that the sea air would probably in her present state be the death of her, and now she was at Sanditon, intending to make some stay, and without appearing to have the slightest recollection of having written or felt any such thing” (191–92).

Such uncomfortable reminders of corporeal debility, risky financial speculation, and a preponderance of unmarried women were perhaps reason enough for the Austen family to feel disinclined to bring this wayward child of their sister-aunt’s maturity-debility into the public. Sanditon unsettles the Austen oeuvre and with it Austen’s place in the domestic realist novel tradition. So too does it disrupt the authorial romance that the family collaborated on as they shaped the oeuvre and “scrupled” to present Austen’s writings to an increasingly eager public (J. E. Austen-Leigh, Preface). The Austen family production of the oeuvre must also be considered, then, as part of the story of Austenean domestic realism—a kind of family romance itself—just as it is part of the story of Austen’s authorial career and reception. There are many ways in which the final text that had “received no name” (J. E. Austen-Leigh 192) and that Jane Austen had apparently intended to call “The Brothers” (see Le Faye 219) disturbs an easy reading of Austen’s work and life and death and afterlife.

In this essay, I engage Sanditon's equivocality in a spirit of celebration, emphasizing the text's strangeness but also its capacity to invite speculation—for Sanditon has always been a text to conjure with. I take up this invitation by considering how Sanditon's equivocal and enigmatic status within the oeuvre inspires us to reflect on Austen's place within a genealogy of the realist novel. Sanditon recasts narrative practice and the author-narrator-reader relations that prevailed in the earlier but still "mature" work (i.e., *Emma* and *Persuasion*) associated with the classic realist novel. It therefore offers an exemplary case study for reconsidering Austen's place within the history of the novel, on account of its spectacular departure from the consecrated form of psychological realism that Austen's fiction had been evolving through the refinement of free indirect style. I try to get a measure of that departure from form that Austen's fragment enacts as a way of opening up the question: what other trajectories for the history of the novel might Sanditon inspire?

Recent re-evaluations of the realist novel seek to expand the capacities of the genre—now and then. Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* details what Catherine Gallagher refers to as "that previously unmapped continent of nonnarrative novelistic features that increasingly cluster around the pole of affect" (129). For Jameson, "any proposition about affect is also a proposition about the body" (34), thus identifying affect with the body and sensation—or knowledge through the senses, not reason, to engage its eighteenth-century meaning. Austen's *Sanditon* is the novel of sensation par excellence, "superfluity of sensation" (LM 192). Mr. Parker announces: "My sensations tell me so already" (141), as though to flaunt the power of instinctive feelings over rational thought and attest to their reliability by speaking about them in the third person.² My argument is essentially that Austen's novel fragment anticipates some of these new ways of reading and practicing the realist novel, by pushing out into

affect. And I locate my reading within this broader critical context that re-evaluates the realist novel genre by engaging the abundant capacity for self-reflexivity of third-person “omniscient” narration;³ exploring the author-narrator-reader nexus that is sustained by desire (and its play of identifications); and illuminating the forms of that desire for an overlapping of author and narrator that is, within the critical protocols of realism, both mandated and verboten, and that the unfinished fragment Sanditon has always (nevertheless) effusively solicited. All of these things are part of that “previously unmapped continent of the realist novel and affect” and its domain of the body, which has always been Sanditon’s domain, for better and worse.

 break graphic

Where do we locate Sanditon in the house of fiction that is the European realist novel? Austen is one of those exemplary realist authors, as Gérard Genette observes, “most closely associated with classical dignity and/or realistic transparency: an Austen, a Flaubert, a Zola, a Proust, the Balzac of 1842, James up to the New York edition” (293). The canonical manifesto of realist transparency, or omniscience, is offered in Henry James’s 1908 Preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881):

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their

own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may not open; “fortunately” by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the “literary form”; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (46)

James’s figure of the artist—the campy pantomimic figure of the authorial God watching through binoculars—is almost a parody of realist omniscience.

Despite this—indeed perhaps because of all this campy figurality—James’s manifesto seems particularly apt for a reading of *Sanditon*, which produces its own allegory of fiction-making. It proliferates houses, windows, and points of view to produce an “impression” in a “field” (James 46); it has its own preferred optical instruments, like James’s field-glass—the telescope and window—and produces all this in the service of its own self-reflexive account of fiction-making. And how it proliferates houses—so many houses of different kinds: terrace houses (a “short row of smart-looking houses, called the Terrace” [160–61]); “fisherman’s houses” (159); “a great many empty houses” (180); “nice little snug houses” (180); an “indifferent . . . double tenement” (140); a

“manor and mansion house” (151); “an old farm house” (159); “a moderate-sized house” (155); “the house of my forefathers” (155); “my old house” (155); “our new house” (156); “a better house” (156); “a proper house” (194); “a very comfortable house” (156); “the old house . . . quite left behind” (158); “some solitary house” (184); “no house large enough” (188); “a house at the top of the hill” (140); “the only gentleman’s house near the lane” (137); the “corner house of the Terrace” (203); Trafalgar House (202); Prospect House (160), Sanditon House (159)—“[t]he house was large and handsome” (208). But Sanditon is also about the misrecognition of “a house, . . . the said house” (137) that is actually “a cottage” (138), “that cottage” (140), not even “a tasteful little cottage ornée, on a strip of waste ground” (153). This country-house novel is in search of a country house.

Sanditon’s house of fiction is wide and open. Like Charlotte Heywood’s “ample, Venetian window” (161) and the “low French windows . . . which commanded the road and all the paths across the Down” (173), it is a particular kind of Austenean optical instrument; it involves both the scandal and enigma of a withdrawal from precisely the kinds of refinements of consciousness and subtle piercings of aperture that marked Austen’s mature form of the novel with its mediating sight-lines of free indirect discourse, in favor of unfixed, unmoored, and mobile points of view. Commanding different vistas and viewpoints to those enabled by James’s “posted presence of the watcher,” Sanditon is unnervingly mobile—restless even. But cool, droll, and deadpan, too. The still and the skeptical (Charlotte Heywood) mixes with the restless and the enthused (the Parkers): Sanditon as equivoque.

Sanditon is famous-notorious for swerving away from Austen’s evolution toward the mature form of free indirect omniscient narration. As the TLS noted in its 1925 review

when Austen's fragment was first published, Sanditon is a "curious . . . rebound from Persuasion" ("Jane Austen's Last Work" 117). Where—and how—does it go? Sanditon marks a volte face turn from the perfectly evolving sonnet of the six completed novels back toward the juvenilia, "as if," D. A. Miller writes, "in her maturity Austen were beginning, without acknowledging it, perhaps without even knowing it, a second collection of juvenilia" (89), and, as if, Kathryn Sutherland writes, "to disinter the freaks and extravagances of her juvenilia" ("Serious" 253).

But which particular freaks? A significant if somewhat counter-intuitive precursor for Sanditon is the playlet "The Mystery. An Unfinished Comedy," the only youthful work that the Austen family made public in its entirety in the nineteenth century, as part of the second (1871) edition of Austen-Leigh's 1870 Memoir; here it was included as a "specimen" of the "transitory amusement which Jane was continually supplying to the family party" (44).

What can "The Mystery," one of Jane Austen's earliest works, tell us about Sanditon, her last work? It is a textual precursor of incompleteness; but, unlike Sanditon, which was interrupted by Austen's preparations for death, "The Mystery. An Unfinished Comedy" is a deliberately unfinished text that embraces incompleteness as a structural feature. By titling the text "An Unfinished Comedy," Austen produces the intriguing phenomenon (cued by the title "The Mystery") of an intentionally unfinished work. Austen heightens this sense of the unfinished text as a—paradoxical—completion of authorial intention by prefacing the text with a dedication to her father, "the Revd. George Austen." By soliciting the patron-father-reader's indulgence (however parodically) and requesting patronage for an "unfinished" work, Austen celebrates textual instability and thus invites her readers to reconsider the power and value of

the unfinished. These two paratextual gestures raise vital questions about what constitutes a finished work. Thus Austen's "Unfinished Comedy" is an illuminating pretext for *Sanditon* because it foregrounds the value of the incomplete, the fragmentary, and the unspoken. As Anne Toner writes of "The Mystery," "Austen's early comedy of the undisclosed is striking when we consider that she becomes one of English literature's great innovators of omniscience, furthering the novel's potential to communicate with subtlety those externally indiscernible secrets of the mind" (Ellipsis 94). So too, then, is *Sanditon*—coming from the other side of Austen's career with a similarly illuminating power—as much a mature comedy of the undisclosed as an unfinished fragment.

"The Mystery" is also linked to *Sanditon* through its subtle realignment of genre and tone: namely, the alignment of "mystery" (usually aligned with tragedy or melodrama) with comedy. *Sanditon* generates mystery through comedy in its arresting tonal equivocality: ebulliently comic and farcical but also coolly reflective and reserved. *Sanditon* is a kind of farce, a return to the farce of the youthful writings. For Roland Barthes, in a formulation that draws attention to the allegorical nature of farce, "Farce is an ambiguous form, since it permits us to read within it the figure of what it mockingly repeats" (88). *Sanditon* is a kind of farcical allegory of fiction. By referring to it as "a feast of absurdity," that first TLS review of *Sanditon* attributes to it a knowing absurdity.

So, *Sanditon* returns to the juvenilia. But that is not all it does. Rather, it mixes the early with the mature style. This return to the juvenilia is also a return to a certain kind of self-reflexivity about fiction-making not usually associated with realist omniscience—a kind of muddying of that dignified transparency that is constitutive of

the realist novel. Indeed, Sanditon's extraordinary self-reflexivity makes it a robed allegory of fiction and vision (and of the evolution toward and falling away from the "mature" narrative style of the free indirect).

In Sanditon, the third-person form of "omniscient" narration of the classic realist novel has apparently left the building. But, if we look closely, we can see that, rather than a departure, other forms and genres enter the scene and rub against this classic realist narration, generating what I would call—after Diana Parker—a "judicious" and "immediate use of friction alone, steadily persevered in" (163): a range of voices, styles, and genres within an open house of fiction.



break graphic

Sanditon opens with the farce of the overturned carriage, and with it overturned conventions of realist novel-making, such as protagonicity: "a lady and a gentleman . . . remain anonymous for 11 pages," as the TLS reviewer observes ("Jane Austen's Last Work" 117). The coach of Henry James, on the other hand, proceeds with due propriety and caution, as the preface to *Portrait* outlines the role of minor characters as "but wheels to the coach," not "belong[ing] to that body of the vehicle, or . . . for a moment accommodated with a seat inside. There the subject [protagonist] alone is ensconced." The minor character for James is "the light ficelle [the string or thread who] may run beside the coach [but never] ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road" (55). Of Sanditon's protagonist, it could hardly be said that Charlotte is anywhere "ensconced." Indeed, it has been frequently noted how difficult it is to discern Sanditon's protagonist, so slight is the distinction between major and minor characters, subject and ficelle.

To move from the figurative thread and scale up to the material threads of fashionable clothing, Oliver MacDonagh's discussion of Sanditon refers suggestively to the "gauzification" of women's fashion in the Regency (149); and the figure of gauze is a rich and productive one for reading Sanditon. Gauze is a thin transparent fabric of silk, or cotton, a fine mesh of wire, and "a slight haze" (OED). Its synonym, "mesh," also hosts intriguing associations:

a network fabric or structure. 2. Each of the open spaces or interstices between the strands of a net or sieve. A network; a snare; an interlaced structure; intransitive, to be harmonious; transitive: catch in a net. (OED).

"Gauzification" is an apt term, too, for the topographical mise en scène of Austen's Regency seaside utopia:

The village contained little more than cottages, but the spirit of the day had been caught, as Mr. Parker observed with delight to Charlotte, and two or three of the best of them were smartened up with a white curtain and "Lodgings to let"—, and farther on, in the little green court of an old farm house, two females in elegant white were actually to be seen with their books and camp stools—and . . . the sound of a harp might be heard through the upper casement.—Such sights and sounds were highly blissful to Mr. Parker. (159)

Gauzification, then, is the vital element of this renovating, decorating, "smartening up" spirit of the day. "Such sights and sounds" are "highly blissful" not only to Mr. Parker but

to the text itself. Austen had originally written “exhilarating,” before replacing it with “blissful,” thereby intensifying the text’s keyword of pleasure.

These gauzy sights and sounds are repeated in Charlotte’s view “looking over the miscellaneous foreground of unfinished buildings, waving linen, and tops of houses, to the sea, dancing and sparkling in sunshine and freshness” (161). They’re also there in the parasols on sale at Whitby’s (157); the blinds of the Miss Beauforts, opening and closing (203); Miss Brereton’s “white ribbons” (208); the “close, misty morning” (206) on the way to Sanditon House; the vision that is possible “in spite of the mist” (208), and Mr. P’s “canvas awning” that brokers shade and indoor “comfort” out of doors (157). Of such Regency innovations that connected indoors and outdoors, the architectural historian Donald Pilcher notes: “To get as close as they could to nature was, in one sense or another, the consistent ambition of Regency architects. They had started by carrying the house into the landscape. They finished by bringing the garden into the house” (43).⁴

These architectural innovations that reticulate insides with outsides are echoed in clothing and in the scandal of underwear worn on the outside, which was how muslin garments first appeared to many in the Regency. For the key protagonist of Regency “gauzification” (though strangely absent from MacDonagh’s account) is surely muslin, which, as Laura George suggests, was so transformative for the Regency that it functions as an emblem for the period (72). Just as the idea of the house as a tent was inspired by Eastern design, so too was the finest Regency muslin “a true Indian muslin,” as Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* reminds us (20). (And while *Northanger Abbey* reminds us that Indian muslin came to England through the entrepreneurial activities of the East India Company, Sanditon marks the influence of empire through

the influx of rich West Indians.) One of muslin's great innovations is that it was a relatively light and transparent fabric "at least to late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century viewers, whose eyes were accustomed to much heavier and more opaque fabrics" (George 91). Yet "muslin's transparency" was in many ways anything but. Rather, it has much in common with the proverbial transparency of omniscient narration and of free indirect style—each, like muslin, complex mediums of semi- and seeming transparency—all of which have their own particular forms of occlusion and indirection.

"Gauzification" can be extended to Austen's style itself, then, especially in these scenes that celebrate the sunshine and sea air as forms of mediation, forces of enlivenment, and agents of aesthetic and corporeal pleasure. It is a key effect of Austen's style, a kind of fuzzy mediation of the aesthetic effects and vestigial intrigues of romance plotting that sustain the readerly pleasures of *Sanditon*. This gauzification can include the meshiness of the free indirect style as well as the hazy (but pleasurable) effect of the "close, misty morning," Charlotte's "glimpse" of Miss Brereton as "something white and womanish," and the vision that is possible "in spite of the mist" (208). Gauze is both transparent and silky but also resistant at times with the friction and scratchiness and wiriness of mesh—resistant at times with the "spite of the mist." This hazy, gauzy impressionism also seems significant for registering the formal innovation that makes *Sanditon* so in-time and in-tune with its first moment of publication-reception in 1925—rendering it a contemporary of those modernist experiments that it in fact anticipates. It appears at a moment when the classic domestic realist novel had started evolving into the forms of modernism, and when the great innovators of domestic realism—James and Woolf—had positioned themselves in relation to (and against) Austen.

Let's take a closer look at this scene of Charlotte's view, as the narration accompanies Charlotte on a digressive, meandering walk to Sanditon House with Mrs. Parker:

The fence was a proper park paling in excellent condition; with clusters of fine elms, or rows of old thorns following its line almost every where.—Almost must be stipulated—for there were vacant spaces—and through one of these, Charlotte, as soon as they entered the enclosure, caught a glimpse over the pales of something white and womanish in the field on the other side;—it was a something which immediately brought Miss Brereton into her head—and stepping to the pales, she saw indeed—and very decidedly, in spite of the mist—Miss Brereton seated, not far before her, at the foot of the bank which sloped down from the outside of the paling and which a narrow path seemed to skirt along;—Miss Brereton seated, apparently very composedly—and Sir Edward Denham by her side. (207–08)

This pre-Jamesian, deconstructed portrait of a lady as “something white and womanish” presents a self-reflexive vision of seeing. Its gauzy, meshy vision is an effect enhanced by the text's manuscript form, with the meshiness of the interlinear insertions—which enhances the mediating free indirect style in the narratorial point of view with the mediating power of the author's own hand, as it intervenes and crosses out and adds—introducing a certain kind of friction into the surface of the text, in this heavily worked

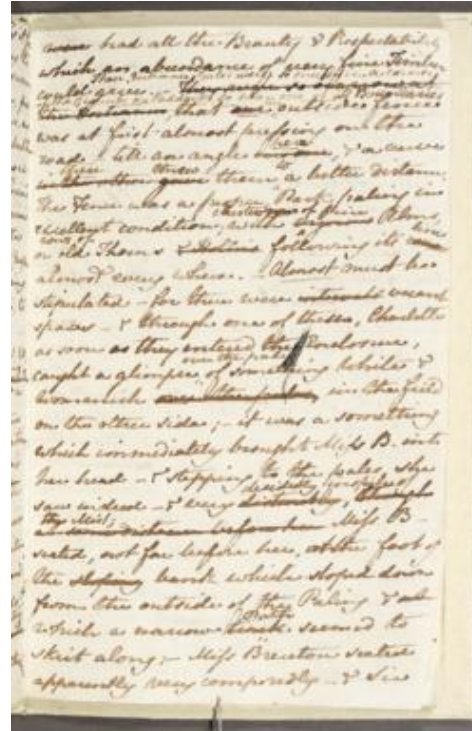
Jane Austen Fiction Manuscripts,
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piece of manuscript text. “[D]ecidedly, in spite of the mist” had originally been “she saw indeed— & very distinctly, though at some distance before her Miss B.,” the text itself hovering in its interlineations between the decided, the distinct, distance, and mist, as Austen seeks out the right collocation of words for this presentation of vision despite opacity.

The figure of seeing indeed in spite of the mist can also be seen to figure the particularly mediated vision that is the free indirect style. For the mature narrative style of free indirect discourse is another of those “typical features of her developed style in the mature novels” that B. C.

Southam identifies in *Sanditon*, such as “formality, polish, and delicately judged irony” (108). That style is here in the presentation of “Miss Brereton seated,” focalized through Charlotte’s point of view but also palpably self-aware in a self-reflexive thickening of the narrative plot:

They were sitting so near each other and appeared so closely engaged in gentle conversation, that Charlotte instantly felt she had nothing to do but to step back again, and say not a word.—Privacy was certainly their object.—It could not but strike her rather unfavourably with regard to Clara;—but hers was a situation which must not be judged with severity.—. . . Among other points of moralising reflection which the sight of this *tete a tete* produced, Charlotte could not but



think of the extreme difficulty which secret lovers must have in finding a proper spot for their stolen interviews.—Here perhaps they had thought themselves so perfectly secure from observation!—the whole field open before them—a steep bank and pales never crossed by the foot of man at their back—and a great thickness of air, in aid.—Yet, here, she had seen them. They were really ill-used.
(208)

One of the insights produced through this passage of free indirect discourse (which moves between indirect and free indirect, as is the technique's wont, and which continues this sense of Sanditon as an allegory of fiction) is an insight about "privacy"—specifically, the breach of privacy upon which the psychological insights of the realist novel are based. As Peter Brooks argues in *Realist Vision*, "Privacy is both the subject and the condition of the novel, though with this paradox that both subject and condition repose on an invasion of privacy, a promiscuous broadcast of the private" (12). Indeed, this passage produces both "the sight of [a] tete a tete" and a resistance by its protagonists to being made into a sight, thereby registering both the desire of the supposed "secret lovers" to be "secure from observation" as well as "a great thickness of air, in aid" of securing that privacy.

Austen's narrator occupies a free indirect style to register and embody this invasion of privacy that Charlotte registers as though she were the narrator. Or is it that the narrator registers it as though she were Charlotte? This is the marvelous ambiguity constitutive of the free indirect style, highlighted by the ironic deadpan tone of "They were really ill-used." At this point, the narration tantalizingly shifts from this voyeuristic overlooking back to the country-house plot, as Charlotte's point of view is restored to its proper object and aim of the walk: "The house."

Yet, here, she had seen them. They were really ill-used.—

The house was large and handsome; two servants appeared, to admit them, and every thing had a suitable air of property and order.—Lady Denham valued herself upon her liberal establishment, and had great enjoyment in the order and importance of her style of living. (208)

The long, performative dash and the paragraph break between “ill-used” and “house” exemplify the ellipsis and asyndeton that drives the narrative—that structures the narrative by de-constructing it. The dash works as a meaningful form of observant silence—giving the pair, the tetes, their privacy, saying perhaps nothing to see here, with all the ambiguity that entails: either something is being hidden (a “stolen interview” between “secret lovers”), or a meeting between “secret lovers” is merely how it “appears.”

For, of course, Clara Brereton and Edward Denham are not secret lovers. Edward Denham does not have any kind of love in mind, only seduction: “it was Clara alone on whom he had serious designs; it was Clara whom he meant to seduce.—Her seduction was quite determined on. Her situation in every way called for it” (184). Even more arresting than Austen’s cool occupation of the casually malign libertine reveries of Edward Denham (“He felt that he was formed to be a dangerous man—quite in the line of Lovelaces” [184]) is her narrator’s swift retort to and magnificent interruption of these fantasies through the free indirect assertion of Clara’s refusal to succumb: “Clara saw through him, and had not the least intention of being seduced” (184). No mist or distance or opacity here to obstruct her clear vision. Austen occupies both points of view, as she does Charlotte’s, deploying the mobile and varying perspectives, inhabiting

multiple points of observation in order to open upon—and from—the text's wide scene of contending protagonists and major-minor characters.

Charlotte's vision of Clara Brereton and Edward Denham as "secret lovers" is a repetition with difference of that moment in *Emma* (another moment of realist indirection that allegorizes vision) where Emma observes Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton: "The lovers were standing together at one of the windows" (96). Yet Elton and Harriet are not lovers, as Austen's ironic staging of this free indirect scene of reading reminds the reader. Likewise, Sanditon's "secret lovers" are not lovers. But where *Emma*'s romance plotting, matchmaking, and mismatching is informed in all its comic bravura by the grand, fantastical crazy-love intertext of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Sanditon invokes the dark patriarchal intertexts of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. And it is a particularly baleful scene of seduction that Edward Denham fantasizes, financially costed and subject to prudential regulation, and with an eye to offshore imperial expansion: "he felt a strong curiosity to ascertain whether the neighbourhood of Tombuctoo might not afford some solitary house adapted for Clara's reception;—but the expence alas! . . . was ill-suited to his purse, and prudence obliged him to prefer the quietest sort of ruin and disgrace for the object of his affections, to the more renowned" (184–85). Not a grand sort of ruin that he fantasizes—this minor, prudent, proto-bourgeois libertine. And despite Austen's free indirect narratorial retort (that Clara Brereton "saw through him, and had not the least intention of being seduced"), it is this vision of the "quietest sort of ruin" in an invisible "solitary" house on the fringes of empire that ends the chapter and is left to disturb and disquiet the reader.

Tonally here, for all its zaniness elsewhere, Sanditon is much closer to *The Watsons*, in its mordantly ironic presentation of the casual social violence and exploitation of women's social vulnerability enacted by male aristocratic privilege. Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave are far more muted characters, less aspirational in their libertinage—and less exuberantly caricatured by their author than the likes of Edward Denham—but they are all accorded nevertheless a similar tendency to bathetic social violence. In *Emma*'s fantastical romance world, Austen elevates her heroine far beyond these dangers by making her socially triumphant (and sexually unassailable) as the Queen of Highbury. In *Sanditon*, however, the vulnerable “situation” of the socially marginal yet educated young woman (explored and then aborted in *The Watsons*) returns, but this object of interest and “dependant on poverty” also has a protector (Lady Denham): “which [as the Lady herself says] makes a great difference” (180). Or does it? . . .

It is often argued that *Sanditon*'s is the style of debility and dying—Jane Austen rushing to put thoughts on paper before she runs out of time. But there is a deliberate logic of parody and irony here, in this breaking off of the narrative at exactly that point before moving on to “the house”—hastily shifting the view from the lovers (ahem) to the house. And here, at last, so near its end, the text finally arrives at Sanditon House, which, incidentally, was first introduced in the original manuscript as “Sanditon Hall,” but was then crossed out (Jane Austen Fiction Manuscripts, *Sanditon* b. 1: 30). Far from being a

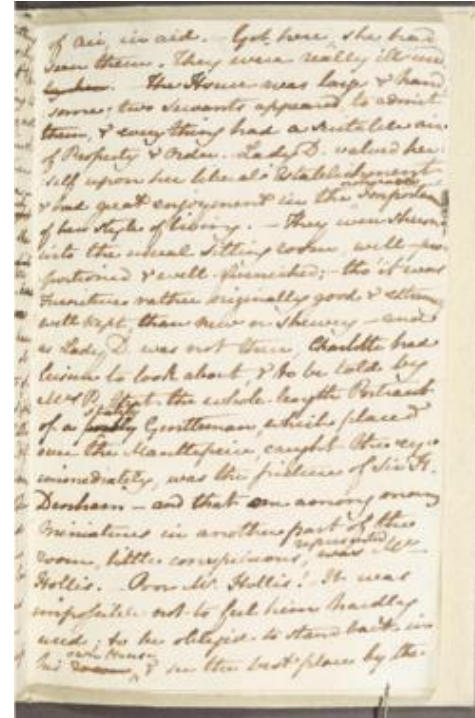
Jane Austen Fiction Manuscripts,

Sanditon, b3:39

[\(Click here to see a larger version.\)](#)

fault of style, there is a calculated effort of revision toward the effect of blurriness, perspectivism, and impressionism.⁵ But there is more here too: another piece of text, later erased, —“ill-used. by her.” (b. 3: 39).

This revision further demonstrates that the effect is calculated. It shows that Austen first conceived of the stolen view (of the interview) as exclusively Charlotte's, of Charlotte as the invader of privacy; but then the revision works to universalize this “ill-using,” so that they are “ill-used” not just by Charlotte, but by the situation, the text, the whole milieu of the realist novel and its readers.



Here, Austen's subtle impressionistic realism maintains an omniscient realist irony; it does not simply represent the pleasures of voyeurism but produces them for its reader, allegorizing the process and practice of looking and of fiction-reading.

The narration lingers on sights and sounds—and on words, both written and spoken—as in the passage on the Miss Beauforts, which conflates the pleasure of the view with self-reflexive textual pleasures:

The corner house of the Terrace was the one in which Miss Diana Parker had the pleasure of settling her new friends, and considering that it commanded in front the favourite lounge of all the visitors at Sanditon, and on one side, whatever might be going on at the hotel, there could not have been a more favourable

spot for the seclusions of the Miss Beauforts. And accordingly, long before they had suited themselves with an instrument, or with drawing paper, they had, by the frequency of their appearance at the low windows upstairs, in order to close the blinds, or open the blinds, to arrange a flower pot on the balcony, or look at nothing through a telescope, attracted many an eye upwards, and made many a gazer gaze again. (203)

This is one of those moments that inspires celebration. Again, we have a passage about privacy: “the seclusions of the Miss Beauforts” (as though it was their thing), but also about how these multiple “seclusions” are available as the objects of a desiring gaze. What I wish to celebrate is the way Austen’s text indulges the sovereignty of the desiring eye: it sustains the pleasurable gaze, universalizing that gaze and that pleasure to “many an eye,” as though to fully implicate the narrator and the author; then the beautiful alliteration and assonance seals this vision with the author’s self-reflexive kiss of approval—“made many a gazer gaze again”—divine Jane’s seal of approval. There is, to quote the previous passage, “a great thickness of air”—textual air; this is acute self-reflexivity about fictionality and fiction-making; a thick moment of word play, lyricism, and sound threatening to overwhelm sense.

Immediately after this rapturous moment, however, the point of view becomes “slit-like” and “low-browed” (James), as the text narrows into satire:

A little novelty has a great effect in so small a place; the Miss Beauforts, who would have been nothing at Brighton, could not move here without notice;—and even Mr. Arthur Parker, though little disposed for supernumerary exertion, always quitted the Terrace in his way to his brother’s by this corner house, for the sake

of a glimpse of the Miss Beauforts—though it was half a quarter of a mile round about, and added two steps to the ascent of the hill. (203–04)

After all the pleasurable word play, suspending its bubble of desiring vision, the text here returns to its senses, transforming these pleasures into little fixed targets of satire: Mr. Arthur Parker and Sanditon itself, as though the narrator-Austen-God is swiftly disavowing her own desire. She disavows her pleasure in the Miss Beauforts—only interesting in Sanditon, she alleges, and “nothing at Brighton,” where there are far more fascinating women. So, the narration turns on the pleasures of the Miss Beauforts and of Sanditon that it had just a moment ago celebrated with its immersion in word play. It turns and equivocates, in its own compelling way. This is a moment where we read not only the narrator but the author too.

The emphasis here on the measurement of the “supernumerary exertion” of Arthur Parker parodically aligns with his brother’s speculator’s practice in quantifying the extractions of value out of Sanditon. For speculation is both imaginative and economic, as is the authorial labor of imagination-speculation in its capacity to generate income. It also traces lines of desire, in authorial and property speculation alike. In the case of authorial literary speculation, those lines of desire are traced in the words Austen wrote four days before she worked on the Sanditon manuscript for the very last time: “I have just rec^d nearly twenty pounds myself on the 2^d Edit: of S & S- which gives me this fine flow of Literary Ardour” (14 March 1817). And, for the property speculator, those lines of desire are traced through the narration’s focalization of Mr. Parker: “He longed to be on the sands, the cliffs, at his own house and everywhere out of his house at once” (160). This equivocal “longing” is at once speculative/economic, corporeal and aesthetic (and, like the word “blissful,” a word of

very high affect). This is another of those extraordinary turns that Sanditon marks thematically and ideologically: as it equivocates in its economic alignments between the country house and mobile property, ambiguously poised between nostalgia for the landed order and embrace of nascent capitalist dynamics—participating in both.

In a plot of farcical deferral, the country-house and prospect plot is seduced by and into speculation at every turn: “Charlotte had been ten days at Sanditon without seeing Sanditon House, every attempt at calling on Lady Denham having been defeated by meeting with her beforehand” (204). Like Mr. Parker, who wants to be “at his own house and every where out of his house at once” (160), Lady Denham is never at home to receive any would-be guests and to dispense hospitality; she is out and about looking for “empty houses” to fill (179, 180). Charlotte herself is distracted by cottages, tenements, and empty houses that have “a beautiful view of the sea” (193). Sanditon is a novel that, like its chief speculator, seems to be fuelled by the imaginative license provided by empty houses—wanting them empty in order to be filled. For “empty houses,” it must be said, are also the novelist’s dream for the projection of domestic and property plots. The panorama of “unfinished buildings” (161) is blissful for speculators; Lady Denham identifies a spot with “a great many empty houses” (180) that can be rented by sad invalids or sickly schoolgirls; these unfinished buildings and empty houses are available too for the novelist, like the unfinished novels that quicken the speculative pulse of literary historians.


Mr. Parker’s equivocal longing is the longing of commodity culture, reminiscent of Harriet Smith’s desire at Ford’s: “tempted by every thing and swayed by half a word, [and] always very long at a purchase, . . . hanging over muslins and changing her mind” (251), perpetually oscillating between incompatible desires—to be not just here but

everywhere; to have not just this muslin but that other one too; or, like the Miss Beauforts before the windows, “to close the blinds, or open the blinds” (203). Sanditon farcically celebrates the sovereign wishes of commodity culture, the power of consumer desire to command a commodity and other “pleasanter things” such as “Dinner on Table” (165, 166), as Mr. Parker jovially remarks to Charlotte at the Hotel. Here Mr. Parker and Charlotte both receive “Dinner on Table,” but Mr. Parker welcomes it not so much as food and nourishment that he will consume and enjoy and take into his body but in its abstracted, figurative, commodity form, as the advertiser’s blazon, adorned with the marvelous quotation marks that deliver it through commodity culture’s prism of conjuration—as another magical commodity fetish with which to lure “Visitants” to Sanditon.

Sanditon offers an inspired if enigmatic anatomy of capitalist desire. Copeland argues that “Sanditon, written in the midst of Henry’s disgrace, thus becomes an opportunity for [Austen’s] exploration of the new money-based economy” (123), suggesting that in the character of Mr. Parker Austen is celebrating Henry Austen’s eager and resilient entrepreneurial spirit (121), or, as I would argue, vindicating it at the point of bankruptcy. We might read this too as Austen’s attempt to propitiate the gods of economic speculation that had, of late, as Austen was writing, been smiling so sparingly upon the Austen family, raining financial calamity and domestic friction down upon them.

Everybody in this novel is out of doors, on the move, and in the hunt for mobile property: Mr. Parker and Lady Denham, especially, but also—intriguingly—Diana Parker, the supposed invalid, who is, in fact, “evidently the chief of the family; principal mover and actor” (193), “posting over the Down after a house for this lady whom she had never

seen, and who had never employed her” (192); “she had been on her feet the whole morning, on Mrs. Griffiths’s business or their own, and was still the most alert of the three” (193). So this farcical house-hunting, this neurotic drama of “secur[ing] a proper house” (194), involves a comic-apotropaic transmutation of the threat that the Austen women faced of being turned out of doors.

 break graphic

As we know too well, Jane Austen’s farce of imaginary invalids bears a proximity to the author’s final illness and death (like Moliere’s before it), written as it was before the journey to Winchester from which she would never return. Jane Austen was not an imaginary invalid, but, at this point in her life when she was writing *Sanditon*, she was also dying.

Another spectacularly ambiguous feature of *Sanditon* is that all this illness and morbidity is accompanied by such energy—particularly in the character of Diana Parker, the self-identified “invalide” who is also “the chief of the family; principal mover and actor,” and, in her own inimitable way, a vital driver of real estate in *Sanditon*, running her own little feet into the ground, while forcing upon her family, the narration, and the reader an excessive attention to other people’s feet and ankles, as so splendidly dramatized in the letter she writes that is read aloud by Mr. Parker:

He read.—“My dear Tom, We were all much grieved by at your accident, & if you had not described yourself as fallen into such very good hands, I sh^d. have been with you at all hazards the day after the rec^{pt}. of your Letter, though it found me ~~hardly able to crawl from the [my] Bed to the Sofa~~ suffering under a more severe attack than usual of my old grievance, Spasmodic Bile & hardly able to

crawl from my Bed to the Sofa.—But how were you treated?—Send me more Particulars in your next.—If indeed a simple Sprain, as you denominate it, nothing w^d. have been so judicious as Friction, Friction by the hand alone, supposing it could be applied instantly.—Two years ago I happened to be calling on M^{rs}. Sheldon when her Coachman sprained his foot as he was cleaning the Carriage & c^d. hardly limp into the House—but by the immediate application use of Friction alone w^{ell} steadily persevered in, (& I rubbed his Ankle with my own hand for 4 six Hours without Intermission)—he was well in three days.”— (444–45)

What does it mean for this late Austen novel to fashion a character that is such an object of intrigue and amusement but also closest to the author as a certain kind of social protagonist: the ill, childless spinster beloved by a large family? What does it mean that Diana Parker shares fragments of epistolary correspondence with Jane Austen herself, who also limps from the Sofa, suffers from Bile, and wants to treat herself?

“We have entirely done with the whole Medical Tribe. We have consulted Physician after Phyⁿ—in vain, till we are quite convinced that they can do nothing for us & that we must trust to our own knowledge of our own wretched Constitutions for any releif.” ~~to be obtained~~ (446)

Sanditon’s representation of hypochondria draws attention both toward the author’s illness and away from it.

The fiction here reconfigures the authorial life in a mode of farcical displacement, with rhetorical inflation around illness as a key mode of that displacement. The emphasis on “our own knowledge” recalls and seems to re-voice a letter Austen wrote to her friend Alethea Bigg, shortly after she had recovered from the early stages of her illness and shortly before she started her six-week period of work on the manuscript that was to become *Sanditon* (putting the manuscript down for the last time on March 18, 1817):

We are all in good health [&] I have certainly gained strength through the Winter & am not far from being well;& I think I understand my own case now so much better than I did, as to be able by care to keep off any serious return of illness. I am more & more convinced that Bile is at the bottom of all I have suffered, which makes it easy to know how to treat myself. (24 January 1817)

There is a striking sense here of fragility, precarity, stoicism in the face of physical frailty: if the doctors can't help, we have to rely on ourselves. “Farce is an ambiguous form,” writes Barthes, that “permits us to read within it . . . what it mockingly repeats” (88). In *Sanditon*, what we read the second time as farce, in the letter by Diana, comes first as tragedy, or pathos, in Austen's own.

Sanditon is the novel that in some ways seems closest to the author herself (her life, her body, her social type), as it works the attenuation of the line between authorial life and fictional text that the manuscript form of the text seems to license. *Sanditon* as a print and manuscript equivoque brings the reader close to Austen's “life,” then, paradoxically, at the point of death. The existence of a manuscript, however, does not necessarily simplify the question of authorial intention but can work on the contrary to

complicate it, by proliferating mystery, intrigue, and desire for the authorial intention that it defers revelation of. Fittingly, then, *Sanditon* is also the text where the author's intention is perhaps furthest away and least accessible.

The Austen family found it hard to accommodate this strangely juvenile outpouring from their mature sister and aunt—an uncanny effusion from a familiar that, by returning to youthful excesses, rendered the familiar sister and her work spookily unfamiliar. In his 1871 *Memoir*, Austen-Leigh prefaced censored extracts of *Sanditon* with the assertion that “[s]uch an unfinished fragment cannot be presented to the public” (193). Why not? What would it have taken? His answer: “If the author had lived to complete her work it is probable that these personages might have grown into as mature an individuality of character, and have taken as permanent a place amongst our familiar acquaintance.” For the Austen family, Diana Parker, the unmarried sister, in all the energy of her friction-applying ways (“Let me feel your ankle” [187]), is perhaps disturbingly close to Austen herself, in all the energetic activity of the “fine flow of Literary Ardour” (that courses through her non-reproductive body). Hence the desire of the Austen family to widen the gap and keep them apart, to deny Diana Parker and the other “personages” of *Sanditon* their public and “permanent . . . place amongst [their] familiar acquaintance.” But what if Austen and her personages are seeking to step outside the magic circle of the familiar acquaintance? Diana Parker might be “chief of the family,” but as “principal mover and actor,” she finds pleasure outside it.

Reading the traditional novel as “casting the family in the form of a magical household,” Nancy Armstrong asks, “What is the future of the novel once the household no longer shapes the future in novels?” (8). We might respond to this question by framing another: what if this future was already in its past (and present)? That is, what

if Austen's novel had started to imagine a life for the novel "after the family" and beyond the bourgeois household and was already pushing out into this "future of the novel"? Armstrong argues that "our literary critical models have neither incorporated new theories of affect . . . nor understood how and to what purpose a growing body of contemporary fiction invalidates domestic realism" (10). One way we might start to develop such critical models is by attuning them to the futures of Austen's fragment—this strange outgrowth of classic domestic realism; this fiction, written in 1817 but not published until 1925, which has always been a contemporary of the later fictions it anticipates; this harbinger of our contemporary fiction—and how it starts, itself, if not to invalidate domestic realism at least to transform it, into something strange and new and inspiringly unfamiliar, by stepping outside the magic circle of familiar acquaintance, and making it vibrate to the strange, the unfamiliar, the presence of strangers, and a particular kind of domestic friction.

For Diana Parker has already taken up an enduring place within and beyond this familial acquaintance and within her public: if not, necessarily, "grown into as mature an individuality of character" as her author, then, unequivocally, grown out of her, and through her, in that "fine flow of Literary Ardour" that is the "judicious" and "immediate use of friction alone, steadily persevered in" (163). Austen's house of friction is the unfinished fragment "still pierceable" (James) through the mesh of intermixing voices, styles and genres (novel, drama, epistle, and notebook (Toner, "Jane Austen"). Sanditon, this "singular character," this house of friction, this "still pierceable aperture," lives to continue its mysterious work; it finds its place amongst an unfamiliar acquaintance, like us, perhaps—its strange contemporaries—with whom, in spite of the mist, it is ready to mesh.

“[N]othing,” as the spirited invalide says, is “so judicious as friction.”

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NOTES

¹The Austen family was troubled at this time by three financial crises: the lawsuit that threatened Edward Knight with the loss of two-thirds of his estate; the wreck of Charles’s ship in February 1816, in a storm off Smyrna; and the collapse of Henry’s bank in March 1816. For details of these crises and their impact upon Sanditon, see Copeland (118), who argues that “the Austen family’s financial crises of 1816–17 produced the economic ambiguities that we find so unsettling in Sanditon” (122). For a recent discussion of Henry Austen’s bankruptcy and its influence on Sanditon, see E. J. Clery (esp. 281–92).

²And while these sensations speak, they do not necessarily mean, at least not in the way that named emotions do, which is why Jameson identifies affect with sensation and then distinguishes affect from emotions: “the isolated body begins to know more global waves of generalized sensations, and it is these which, for want of a better word, I will here call affect. . . . I will therefore begin by distinguishing affect . . . from emotions as such” (28, 29).

³Omniscient narration, as it is traditionally understood, is paradoxically (and problematically) all-knowing but un-self-reflexive, un-self-aware, and naive. Austen’s apotheosized form comprises “that anonymous, impersonal, universal narration (usually called, after its least important feature, omniscient) . . . and . . . free indirect style. Both forms are Austen’s greatest and most recognized contributions to culture, but they are also her weirdest, and her least assimilable” (Miller 27).

⁴As Pilcher further explains, Humphry Repton’s idea of the house as “an elaboration of the tent” was exemplified in the Prince Regent’s Brighton Pavilion, which replaced windows and roofs with hanging drapery, demonstrating how “this sense of impermanence is a real factor in Regency architecture” (43).

⁵For this emphasis on the “impressionistic” and the “heightening” of effects of “perceptual opacity,” see Kathryn Sutherland (Textual 172, 184); on “varying the narrative point of view,” see Southam (129). In Jameson’s account, Henry James’s fiction offers both the apotheosis of realist perspectivism (his “name remains indissolubly related to the concept of point of view” [181]) and the point at which it all dissolves, whereby “in the floodtide of the everyday [moral reactions and evaluations] are quickly swamped by the sheer multiplicity of points of view” (184).

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