

The Romance of Business and the Business of Romance: The Circulating Library and Novel-Reading in *Sanditon*

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“Charlotte was to go,—with excellent health, to bathe & be better if she could—to receive every possible pleasure which Sanditon could be made to supply by the gratitude of those she went with—& to buy new Parasols, new Gloves, & new Broches, for her sisters & herself at the Library, which M^r P. was anxiously wishing to support” (374). The library, in fact, is the first place Charlotte and Mr. Parker visit on their arrival in Sanditon. Sanditon’s circulating library is central to this developing novel as well as to the town, the one place of certain satisfaction but also the locus of anxious desires. Situated on the “short row of smart-looking Houses called the Terrace, with a broad walk in front, aspiring to be the Mall of the place” (384), it defines, with the milliner’s shop, hotel and billiard room, the center of both the new town and the fantasies and desires of its imaginists. Its subscription book records the names of the would-be fashionable, while Mrs. Whitby also seems to function as a rental agent for the resort. It “afford[s] every thing; all the useless things in the world that c^d not be done without” (390). It supplies parasols, gloves, and brooches, “pretty Temptations” (390) to a visitor like Charlotte, but it can also fill the deficiencies of the new Trafalgar House: the shades of the garden at the Parker’s old house can be replaced “at any time,” says Mr. Parker, by a parasol from Whitby’s (381). And, of course, it furnishes books—more novels than even Sir Edward Denham can read himself.

This description of Sanditon’s library suggests its centrality to the world of the novel. In it meet the shaping energies of both business and romance. The very existence of the library derives from the transforming power of Mr. Parker’s energetic speculations; it markets both captivating fashions and the access to fictional worlds. By the time *Sanditon* was written, the circulating library had developed as a mainstay of the leisure industry. In spas and seaside resorts it was particularly important, providing a place for people of fashion to see and be seen, as well as marketing novelties and novels. As Paul Langford has noted, “No aspiring spa town could afford to be without a bookshop-cum-subscribing library where morning browsers might meet and chat before the serious business of pump-

room and assembly got under way” (94). In 1814, for the cost of two guineas per year, one could join a circulating library with the privilege of withdrawing two volumes at a time; the cost of *one* three-volume novel in 1815 was one guinea.¹ Even given the collusion between publishers and circulating libraries which kept the prices of fiction artificially high, the economic advantages to consumers who would read a novel once—and who wanted their novels to be *new*—seem clear. As Terry Lovell points out, novels were “commodities which were for consumption not possession” (51).²

The circulating library, then, is implicated in the discourses of romance and business that animate its world. It becomes, in fact, a counter in the debate over the dangers of novel-reading which raged during the last quarter of the eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth centuries.³ In 1775, Sheridan’s *Sir Anthony Absolute* attributes Lydia Languish’s sentimental behavior to the temptations offered by a steady diet of novel-reading: “a circulating library in a town is an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge! It blossoms through the year! And depend on it, . . . that they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last” (I.ii). Mr. Collins, of course, rejects a book about which “every thing announced it to be from a circulating library” (*P&P* 68). But Anna Laetitia Barbauld in her 1810 essay “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing” denies that the food supplied by the circulating library is either “vicious” or “poisoned”: “Our national taste and habits are still turned towards domestic life and matrimonial happiness, and the chief harm done by a circulating library is occasioned by the frivolity of its furniture, and the loss of time incurred” (185).

Thus, the anxiety about the dangers of the circulating library reflects the larger cultural anxieties about the dangers of the novel. The debate over those hazards recognized the novel’s power as a secret pleasure.⁴ Sir Walter Scott at the beginning of his review of *Emma* remarks that “There are some vices in civilized society so common that they are hardly acknowledged as stains upon moral character, the propensity to which is nevertheless carefully concealed, even by those who most frequently give way to them” (225). Austen’s “only a novel” peroration in *Northanger Abbey* (37-38) rebukes those who would deny their seduction by fiction and denigrate the novels that both delight and instruct them. Writing in a December 1798 letter of Mrs. Martin’s “inducement” of more than just novels in her circulating library, Jane Austen points out that “She might have spared this pretension to *our* family, who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (26). But the sense that the bulk of novels are, if not dangerous, at least trivial persists.

Scott is careful to define both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* as “attract[ing], with justice, an attention from the public far superior to what is granted to the ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering-places and circulating libraries” (227).

Scott’s terms are curiously economic. Novels are defined as the “ephemeral productions” that satisfy the incautious demands of literate consumers. Libraries, then, are the linguistic warehouses which stock a changing inventory of the varieties or possibilities of language desired by those consumers. Among all the incessant and clamorous language in *Sanditon* two strains predominate: a language that re-imagines and transforms the very shape of the world through the activities of business, and a language that re-shapes and transforms the idealizing powers of love in terms of capital investment; the Romance of Business and the Business of Romance. Finally, both strains of language converge in the novels that stock the shelves of the circulating library.

Characters such as Mr. Parker, Miss Diana Parker, and Lady Denham are all, in their different ways, seduced by the Romance of Business, the adventure and fantasy of the creation of capital in a variety of forms. The novel opens as Mr. Parker is “induced by Business to quit the high road” (363) and then drawn to a cottage “romantically situated” (364) which the evidence of the newspaper advertisements he has misread convinces him must be the house of the surgeon he is seeking for Sanditon. Sanditon’s transformation begins with a kind of temperate detachment: “some natural advantages in its position & some accidental circumstances” suggest “the probability of it’s becoming a profitable Speculation” (371). But Austen’s grammar suggests the enthusiasm generated by capital: “they had engaged in it, & planned & built, & praised & puffed, & raised it to a Something of young Renown” (371).⁵ Indeed, under this seduction, Sanditon becomes “a second Wife & 4 Children to [Mr. Parker]—hardly less Dear—& certainly more engrossing . . . his Mine, his Lottery, his Speculation & his Hobby Horse; his Occupation his Hope & his Futurity” (372). The language of romance even pervades both the narrator’s and Mr. Parker’s account of the financial expectations of Lady Denham’s family: she is “courted by” (376) the Breretons, the Hollises, and the Denhams; Sir Edward has earlier been “without a rival, as having the fairest chance,” but now Clara Brereton “bid fair by her Merits to vie in favour with Sir Edward” (377).

For Lady Denham, who loves money for its own sake, the Romance of Business involves transforming family members like Sir

Edward and Miss Denham into renters of Sanditon properties and projecting her own fantasies of economic fulfillment (tempered by a cost benefit analysis) onto the landscape: “a French Boarding school, is it? . . . They’ll stay their six weeks.—And out of such a number, who knows but some may be consumptive & want Asses milk—& I have two Milch asses at this present time.—But perhaps the little Misses may hurt the Furniture.—I hope they will have a good sharp Governess to look after them” (393). This transforming process of the Romance of Business co-opts not merely family, friends, and unknown multitudes but also the work of Nature and the events of history: “Nature has marked [Sanditon] out—had spoken in most intelligible Characters” (369); Waterloo has been and Trafalgar will be pressed into service for the houses and crescents which reshape Nature’s work.

While much of the Romance of Business stems from the enthusiasm generated by and through the creative process itself, some is also due to the attraction of busy-ness. Mr. Parker, Lady Denham, and especially Miss Diana Parker love to be doing. This often frenetic activity is not just a way of transforming the world but of asserting the power of the self which defines and transforms that world. So Miss Diana Parker involves what seems to be all of Surrey in her efforts to send people to Sanditon, finally hurrying there herself to help dispose its properties: “I will tell you how many People I have employed in the business—Wheel within wheel.—But Success more than repays” (387); “Here was a family of helpless Invalides whom I might essentially serve” (409). For Mr. Parker, a pair of blue shoes in William Heeley’s window becomes a measure of his triumph: “Glorious indeed!—Well, I think I *have* done something in my Day” (383).

Characters who have ventured on the Business of Romance, on the other hand, reveal a habit of converting the songs of love into the ring of pounds, shillings, and pence.⁶ Lady Denham’s marriages are defined as financial transactions in which acute negotiation guarantees success: “I do not think I was ever over-reached in my Life; & That is a good deal for a Woman to say that has been married twice” (399). Her first marriage, to the elderly Mr. Hollis, leaves her “everything—all his Estates, & all at her Disposal” (375). About her second, to Sir Harry Denham, she “boast[s] . . . ‘that though she had *got* nothing but her Title from the Family, still she had *given* nothing for it’” (376). Indeed, the Business of Romance is evident and *natural* to those who populate Sanditon: “For the Title, it was to be supposed that she had married—& M^r P. acknowledged there being just such a degree of value for it apparent now, as to give her conduct

that natural explanation” (376). Even Lady Denham’s fantasies reveal the financial calculation that informs them: “if we could get a young Heiress to be sent here for her health—and if she was ordered to drink asses milk I could supply her)—and as soon as she got well, have her fall in love with Sir Edward!” (401). Lady Denham’s inability to complete this sentence suggests the unlikely coincidence of conditions and consequence. Unfortunately, with the exception of the “important & precious” (421) Miss Lambe, the Misses Beaufort seem to be all that the efforts of the Parker clan can attract: “their time [is] divided between such pursuits as might attract admiration, & those Labours & Expedients of dexterous Ingenuity, by which they could dress in a stile much beyond what they *ought* to have afforded; . . . & the object of all, was to captivate some Man of much better fortune than their own” (421). “Heiresses,” as Lady Denham has earlier remarked, “are monstrous scarce!” (401). But even the Miss Beauforts can themselves be transformed into commodities by the energies of Sanditon. “A little Novelty has a great effect in so small a place” (422). Indeed, Lady Denham in a kind of ironic justice is transformed into a commodity herself: “Every Neighbourhood should have a great Lady.—The great Lady of Sanditon, was Lady Denham” (375).

Though he makes his appearance in the garb of sentiment, Sir Edward Denham, too, undertakes of necessity the Business of Romance. He appears at first to Charlotte as a “Man of Feeling” (396), a man, that is, somewhat self-consciously displaying the qualities of benevolence and sentiment. He is, as Charlotte notes, “very sentimental, very full of some Feelings or other, & very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words” (398). As the narrator suggests, he “had read more sentimental Novels than agreed with him” (404): “Sir Edw.’s great object in life was to be seductive” (405). Indeed, Sir Edward succeeds so well in his “great object” that he becomes both the subject and the agent of seduction: he himself becomes seduced by the role of seducer. But just as the “tasteful little Cottage Ornée” he is “running up” is designed to be a rental property (377), so these twin seductions must compete with economic necessity: “it was Clara whom he meant to seduce. . . . Her Situation in every way called for it. She was his rival in Lady D.’s favour, she was young, lovely & dependant. . . . He knew his Business” (405). Clara’s role as a financial competitor—here again rendered in the language of romance—is as crucial as her identity as sentimental heroine. Indeed, even the grand termination of his adventure must be scaled back to fit the dimensions of his income: “he must naturally wish to strike out something new, to exceed those who had gone

before him—and 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! of Measures in that masterly style was ill-suited to his Purse, & Prudence obliged him to prefer the quietest sort of ruin & disgrace for the object of his Affections, to the more renowned” (405-06).⁷

But for Sir Edward Denham and all the other romantic entrepreneurs of Sanditon, these very fantasies persist in the seductive form and language of what Tony Tanner calls the “parafictional” (279) lives they lead. Charlotte Heywood, whom most critics define as a rational and normative observer, is herself caught up in the shaping fancies of novelistic design. So while the “history” of Lady Denham “serve[s] to lighten the tediousness of a long Hill, or a heavy bit of road” (375), the “interest of [Mr. Parker’s] story increase[s] very much with the introduction of such a Character” as Clara Brereton (378). Mr. Parker’s description of Clara as “lovely, amiable, gentle, unassuming, conducting herself uniformly with great good sense, & evidently gaining by her innate worth, on the affections of her Patroness” converts Charlotte’s detached “amusement” to a more engaged “solicitude & Enjoyment” (378).

In fact, all of these characters speak as if they were themselves in the business of making novels. Their powers of novelistic design take over, over-riding, for example, alternate readings of a Clara who, like Jane Fairfax, is essentially inscrutable. The “Beauty, Sweetness, Poverty & Dependance” (378) attributed to Clara by Mr. Parker provide a pattern for Charlotte’s playful but tenacious perceptions—one which (unlike his reading of Lady Denham) she is never tempted to qualify.

Elegantly tall, regularly handsome, with great delicacy of complexion & soft Blue eyes, a sweetly modest & yet naturally graceful Address, Charlotte could see in her only the most perfect representation of whatever Heroine might be most beautiful & bewitching, in all the numerous vol:^s they had left behind them on M^{rs} Whitby’s shelves.—Perhaps it might be partly owing to her having just issued from a Circulating Library—but she c^d not separate the idea of a complete Heroine from Clara Brereton. . . . She seemed placed with [Lady Denham] on purpose to be ill-used. Such Poverty & Dependance joined to such Beauty & Merit, seemed to leave no choice in the business. (391)

Though Austen’s narrative immediately asserts that “These feelings were not the result of any spirit of Romance in Charlotte herself” (391), that she is “sober-minded” and “not at all unreasonably influenced” (392), her romantic view of Clara persists.⁸ With no

evidence to speak of, she is “inclined to think” (396) that Clara sees through Sir Edward. When faced with the image of Clara and Sir Edward alone in the grounds of Sanditon Hall, “so near each other & . . . so closely engaged in gentle conversation” (426), she again resorts to novelistic formulae: Clara’s “was a situation which must not be judged with severity” (426); “Among other points of moralising reflection which the sight of this Tete a Tete produced, Charlotte c^d not but think of the extreme difficulty which secret Lovers must have in finding a proper spot for their stolen Interviews” (427). Odd morality indeed.

The connections between the fiction-making designs of the foolish Sir Edward Denham and those of the sensible Charlotte Heywood lead to an interrogation of the fiction-making designs of Jane Austen.⁹ The desire of this would-be Lovelace to seduce (and, if necessary, carry off) his *nouvelle* Clarissa directs his own designs (405), but does it direct, would it ultimately have directed the design of *Sanditon*? How would this novel respond to the contention of one of Charlotte Smith’s heroines that this is no longer a world for Lovelaces?¹⁰ What is to be understood of Clara Brereton? Is she “the complete Heroine” Charlotte would have her be? The narrator states enigmatically that “Clara saw through [Sir Edward], & had not the least intention of being seduced—but she bore with him patiently enough to confirm the sort of attachment which her personal Charms had raised” (405). Does this patience suggest a modern-day Clarissa whose gentleness does not convey the force of her disapproval? Or does it suggest a cannier and more elegant version of Lucy Steele? What is the connection between the Charlotte who designates Clara Brereton as “the complete Heroine” and Jane Austen the novelist who designates Charlotte Heywood as “my Heroine” (395) just as she is describing Charlotte’s initial attraction to Sir Edward?¹¹

The fragmentary nature of *Sanditon* provides intriguing questions if no answers. What it does seem to reveal is the very power of fiction to simultaneously serve and critique the marketplace of which it is a part. The circulating library and the novel itself are in the Business of Romance, selling for Mrs. Whitby and her daughter a taste for more novels and for the fashionable novelties promoted by them. At the same time, however, a novel like *Camilla* can also empower Charlotte to check such consumption through its depiction of economic disaster.¹² In other words, the novel is a commodity that can both stimulate and suppress consumption, that resists a limited economic role. Its power to sustain the Romance of Business, to participate in the excitement of the adventure of growth and change, is even stronger. Like the library, the novel circulates a rich vocabulary for investment. The power of this fragment—its ability to serve as the resort for imaginative play, the site for the construction of

arguments and continuations—argues for the probability of at least one ephemeral production—Jane Austen's *Sanditon*—becoming a profitable speculation.

NOTES

- ¹ See Erickson (134, 131). According to Griest, a subscription to William Lane's circulating library in London was five guineas a year in 1814.
- ² Margaret Anne Doody points out that Jane Austen was an exception to this trend, rereading "even minor or mediocre novels" (357).
- ³ According to J. M. S. Tompkins, "Writers of standing dissociated themselves ostentatiously from libraries. . . . In general, heroines do not read novels except as a prelude to seduction, while a scene in a circulating library, with its personnel of ignorant bookseller, driven hack, avid girl readers and empty-witted fine ladies, is a commonplace of satire" (3-4).
- ⁴ Lovell argues that "Novels in the last quarter of the century were something to be hidden away, and read in private rather furtively. They were not objects for display in the public parts of the bourgeois home" (50-51). See also Uphaus on Austen's relationship to the debate over the corruptions attendant on women reading.
- ⁵ As Copeland suggests, "Mr. Parker's *Sanditon* is the purest of consumer objects, almost solely an object of the imagination" (114).
- ⁶ John Wiltshire also points to the imaginative activity involved: "their own bodies have become the grounds for inventiveness and energy, preoccupying their imaginations and becoming the source of sufficient activity to direct the conduct of every hour of the day" (198-99).
- ⁷ Both Southam and MacDonagh make the point that Sir Edward is out of date, in Southam's phrase "out of touch with the geography of dissipation" (*Sanditon* 8). Barker points out that Sir Edward is not "impulsive" but "calculating" (159) but sees him also as "a highly ironic attack on the eighteenth-century critic-moralist of the novel" (150). Marilyn Butler puts him in the category of "the philosophical would-be seducer of the . . . anti-jacobin novel of the 1790s" (287).
- ⁸ Barker sees Charlotte as someone "willing to turn the inhabitants of *Sanditon* into fictional stereotypes for her own entertainment" (159). Tanner's reading is slightly different. Though Charlotte is "the most sensible, clear-sighted person" in *Sanditon*, "even she is not immune to the influence of reading. The implication is that by now *everybody* is likely to live a parafictional life to some extent" (279).
- ⁹ Duckworth argues that "Jane Austen seems no longer centrally concerned with the drama of a deluded imagination. . . . Nor does she seem concerned to set Charlotte up as a figure of moral consistency and fundamental principle. . . . Charlotte's function in *Sanditon* is rather that of neutral observer and private commentator" (218).
- ¹⁰ Geraldine Verney, the heroine of Smith's *Desmond* (1792), writes, "I know you . . . suppose that he is a sort of modern Lovelace; but, believe me, my Fanny, that character does not exist now; there is no modern man of fashion, who would take a hundredth part of the trouble that Richardson makes Lovelace take, to obtain Helen herself, if she were to return to earth" (2.25). Although Margaret Kirkham sees the character of Sir Edward as part of Austen's "most outright attack on Richardson" (154), Park Honan suggests that Austen learns from another of Richardson's novels that the rake (in this case Sir Hargrave Pollexfen) is "weak, puerile, self-doubting, and timorous, a pathetic man in need of consolation and understanding" (174-75).

- ¹¹ Lauber suggests that *Sanditon* could have been "a radically new sort of novel—a novel without a recognizable heroine or hero" (116). Southam too suggests a new fictional direction, "this enigmatic quality from [the novel's] beginning until late in the story" (Introduction xvii).
- ¹² See Bander for more on the role of *Camilla*.

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