

Jane Goes to Sanditon: An Eighteenth Century Lady in a Nineteenth Century Landscape

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“My beloved Laura (said she to me a few Hours before she died) take warning from my unhappy End and avoid the imprudent conduct which had occasioned it . . . Beware of fainting-fits . . . Though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable yet beleive me they will in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution. . . . One fatal swoon has cost me my Life. . . . A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the Body and if not too violent, is I dare say conducive to Health in its consequences—Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—”

(102)

Upon reading this passage from Jane Austen’s *Love and Freindship*, one wants a convenient fainting sofa to receive the lifeless form of its intended occupant, the swooning female. The passive receptacle for a passive response to crisis, it is like Mr. Thomas Parker’s unfortunate wife in the opening pages of *Sanditon*, who stands, “terrified and anxious . . . unable to do or suggest anything useful,” when ordinary matters are overturned—or, perhaps, in Jane Austen’s case, when an author’s previous manner of writing becomes inadequate to her purpose. Sophia’s dying advice to Laura, to “Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—” is that of one who has learned the cost of incapacitation. The unhappy Laura, we may be sure, henceforth will never fail to maintain a healthy level of useful activity—rather like the indefatigable Diana Parker. Almost thirty years after the composition of *Love and Freindship*, the author and giver of good advice will follow her own counsel in her final creation.

It has been observed by some that Jane Austen had committed the fatal error of running out of things to say. But this is by no means the case, for *Sanditon* marks both an ending and a beginning in Austen’s development as an author. The fragment breaks new ground in its exploration of a landscape and narrative scale which enlarges the scope and subject matter of her previous writing. Cheerful, satirical, at times bordering on farce, the unfinished work abounds with optimistic new directions closely linked to a new and highly “visible” emphasis on landscape. Had she lived, this evolution of Austen’s traditional sphere of interest, “3 or 4 families in a country village,” might easily have led her into the mainstream of nineteenth century novel-writing. *Sanditon* is almost Dickensian in the variety

of character types, even caricatures, which it presents, while its meticulously rendered landscape—itsself still to achieve its final configuration—provides an open-ended setting in which Austen's narrative design could have worked itself out.

A work in progress, *Sanditon* is a work *about* progress, specifically, a “new place . . . starting up by the Sea, & growing the fashion” (368). Jane herself had both lived in the coastal town of Southampton, and visited a number of seaside resorts, including Sidmouth, Dawlish, Teignmouth, and Lyme Regis, and was thus well qualified to employ such a vehicle for her plot. Begun at Chawton Cottage in 1817, the manuscript of *Sanditon* follows precedent in its close scrutiny of the characters and their motivations, but establishes new thematic directions in its openly satirical treatment of its subject matter—all of which occurs in the context of a real estate speculation, the establishment and promotion of a new spa on the English seacoast.

Sanditon is being promoted by its developers, Mr. Thomas Parker and his not so silent partner, Lady Denham, for the healthy virtues which its setting encompasses. In their enterprising minds, it possesses in abundance all the qualities needed for it to become the principal ornament of the English therapeutic landscape, and in establishing its presence as such in the minds of her readers, Austen provides a succession of landscape descriptions which are without precedent in her earlier works in number and detail.

Nature had marked it out . . . the finest, purest Sea Breeze on the Coast—acknowledged to be so—Excellent Bathing—fine hard sand—Deep Water 10 yards from the Shore—no Mud—no Weeds—no slimy rocks—Never was there a place more palpably designed by Nature for the resort of the Invalid. (369)

And, occasionally, one might add, the last resort! Observers of Mr. Parker would be forced to conclude that “the success of *Sanditon* as a small, fashionable Bathing Place was the object, for which he seemed to live” (371), and his character and actions are inextricably bound up in and defined by the landscape which he so enthusiastically promotes. Indeed, without the landscape of *Sanditon* there would be no premise for the novel.

The scope of the work also represents a broadening of Austen's awareness beyond the marital need for an adequate income in its fascination with the getting and spending of money—a major concern in nineteenth century fiction. The crucial difference is that this is *old* money in search of new, not the reverse, an ingenious mode of transition from the purely social sphere to one which marries “trade” to gentility, in this instance, a gentleman and lady openly engaged in a commercial speculation. *Sanditon*, therefore, like its author, is grounded firmly in the eighteenth century in its social values, but

more wide-ranging in its narrative scope, with resolution of plot complexities grounded in a landscape which is itself in the process of becoming.

Illness, the basic reason for Sanditon's existence, is of "infinite use" in most Austen novels. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood is almost carried off by a "putrid fever" brought on by overindulgence of her runaway emotions, whereby she acquires a sense of moderation. In a similar fashion and with similar results, Tom Bertram, the heir apparent of *Mansfield Park*, is "the better forever" for his brush with death, an experience which gives him time during his recovery, to reflect on his former recklessness and lack of respect for his long-suffering family. It also reveals the true motives of the mercenary Mary Crawford, who is moved on the occasion to speculate about her marital prospects to his younger brother, Edmund, should there be in the event of Tom's demise, "two less poor young men in the world." In *Emma*, the disagreeable Mrs. Churchill has the good grace to perish opportunely of a convenient off-stage ailment, the momentous event which resolves many plot complexities. The gout takes Mr. and Mrs. Allen and their young charge, Catherine Morland, to Bath; later, Northanger Abbey is liberally embellished with the fantasies of her overwrought imagination. Finally, in the most humorous confrontation Austen manages to contrive, the reader acquires a constant companion in Mrs. Bennet's nerves (which some might consider to be the real subject of *Pride and Prejudice*).

On the other hand, Austen is capable of real compassion for the afflicted. This is shown in her sensitive and sympathetic treatment of her emotionally damaged heroine, Anne Elliot, and the invalid Mrs. Smith, in *Persuasion*. Significant to the understanding of *Sanditon*, the greater half of the earlier work is set in the streets and squares of Bath, a similarly energized physical setting in which real healing of past and present wounds is allowed to take place, in some of the most poignant and vividly rendered scenes in Austen's entire repertoire. Physical and emotional illness, therefore, has an important place in Jane Austen's novels, and is commonly linked to a specific landscape, especially in the later works. This establishes important precedents.

All of which brings us to the place of Sanditon in the world of therapeutic medicine. Mr. Parker's ambitious plans for his new spa follow a long tradition which links good health to a benign natural landscape. Ancient medicine was intimately connected to the spiritual forces of nature as well as the pragmatic lore of the herbalist. Sea-bathing, the taking of medicinal waters, a summer in the country, a prescribed daily walk or carriage ride, the visit to the spa—all have had their day in the sun. The resurgence in popularity in the present

era of coastal resorts, from Seaside to Sea Ranch, where the sick or weary can obtain some form of personal or physical renewal, continues this philosophy, the roots of which reach back to Austen's time and beyond.

A very few years ago, & it had been a quiet Village of no pretensions; but some natural advantages in its position & some accidental circumstances having suggested to himself, & the other principal Land Holder, the probability of it's becoming a profitable Speculation, they had engaged in it, & planned & built, & praised & puffed, & raised it to a something of young renown. (371)

Nature (and wishful thinking) placed Sanditon's restorative powers at the cutting edge of therapeutic medicine of its day, but getting it built and occupied was another matter. The impediments to its progress were much different than twentieth century developers are accustomed to encounter, because the economics of building Sanditon involved private rather than public or corporate capital. Subscribers to such speculations were often wealthy private individuals, like the shilling-conscious Lady Denham, who would have to be flattered or cajoled into liberality in both the social and financial sense. Varying degrees of anonymity, unlike Mr. Parker's openly enthusiastic activity in this arena, might also be seen as desirable by some investors from the more rarified strata of society. In addition, the courting of capital and marketing strategies involved word-of-mouth advertising and referrals, as opposed to bank prospectuses and master plans. The end result was a courtship which could be arduous at times, or even humiliating if one's partner and coadjutor were uneducated, narrow-minded, or decidedly lacking in vision. Such an individual is Lady Denham, Mr. Parker's neighbor and principal investor to date, who is both a sceptic and a skinflint.

That's very sensibly said cried Lady D— And if we c^d but get a young Heiress to S! But Heiresses are monstrous scarce! I do not think we have had an Heiress here, or even a Co—since Sanditon has been a public place. Families come after Families, but as far as I can learn, it is not one in an hundred of them that have any real Property. . . . Clergy may be, or Lawyers from Town, or Half pay officers or Widows with only a Jointure. And what good can such people do anybody?— except just as they take our empty Houses—and (between ourselves) I think they are great fools for not staying at home. (401)

Thus the seeds of failure and financial catastrophe—this is a risky business—are sown even at Sanditon's creation.

In spite of its newness, however, Sanditon has had some success. The youthful Clara Brereton, Lady Denham's penniless cousin and companion, is presented to the reader as being "as thoroughly amiable as she was lovely—& since having had the advantage of their Sanditon Breezes, that Loveliness was complete" (379). But Sand-

iton's dual existence as a center of healing and fashion still has many obstacles to overcome, and under such circumstances, it is understandable that Mr. Parker's praise takes on rather a hysterical quality at times.

—He held it indeed as certain, that no person c^d be really well, no person, (however upheld for the present by fortuitous aids of exercise & spirits in a semblance of Health) could really be in a state of secure & permanent Health without spending at least 6 weeks by the Sea every year.—The Sea Air & Sea Bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every Disorder, of the Stomach, the Lungs, or the Blood; They were anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-sceptic, anti-bilious, & anti-rheumatic. Nobody could catch cold by the Sea, Nobody wanted appetite by the Sea, Nobody wanted Spirits, Nobody wanted Strength.—They were healing, softing, relaxing—fortifying & bracing—seemingly just as was wanted—sometimes one, sometimes the other.—If the Sea breeze failed, the Sea-Bath was the certain corrective;—& where Bathing disagreed, the Sea-Breeze alone was evidently designed by Nature for the cure. (373)

While Austen's presentation of Mr. Parker's particular brand of snake oil is humorously intended, it is very much in line with orthodox medicine of the day, and would be taken quite seriously by a paying guest such as the curiosity-provoking Miss Lambe, the wealthy young West Indies invalid and heiress so interesting to Lady Denham. It is, of course, taken *very* seriously, indeed, by Mr. Parker himself. His belief, shared by many others, in nature's restorative powers has in fact been shown to be quite well-grounded, especially in the fields of homeopathic, preventative, and ayurvedic medicine (which emphasizes diet and detoxification, the theme of a recent film comedy, *The Road to Wellville*). Contemporary experience, of course, has shown that a healthy environment promotes a healthy state of being, and Mr. Parker's panegyrics on Sanditon's natural virtues, therefore, are not entirely silly. This is indeed fortunate, for while the rich and famous might flock to fashionable spas, they expected positive results, and would stay away in droves if these were not forthcoming.

Aesthetically speaking, Sanditon also has to compete with the established centers of health and social intercourse. At this point in its development it is presented as a rather ingenuous combination of the sophisticated beauties of Bath and the commonplaces of Lyme Regis and its famous Cobb, where *Persuasion*'s Louisa Musgrove experiences a precipitous "decline in health." Sanditon was to have style (architectural at least) in addition to real substance—or would when its promoters' plans were in place. Trafalgar House, a Hotel, a Terrace on which were located the best shops, and Denham Place are already in position, and the additional glories of a Crescent and a

Mall are hoped for. Charlotte Heywood can look out over a bright prospect, indeed, from her ample Venetian window with its pleasing view of “the Sea, dancing & sparkling in Sunshine and Freshness” (384). Unfortunately, we are not to learn whether Charlotte herself is destined to acquire these desirable qualities, for at this stage in her development she resembles Jane Eyre more than Elizabeth Bennet.

In creating *Sanditon*, Jane Austen looks ahead and designs, even as a landscape gardener might, a scene in which nature and technology merge in the futuristic, as well as in the physical sense. Her intimate familiarity with most aspects of the fashionable world would have made it relatively easy for her to engage the onrushing nineteenth century, in spite of her personal distaste for rapid change, and the fact, surely known to her, that she was not to be a part of it. Sanditon, the place, is ever before the reader’s eyes, however, even if shrouded by fog at certain interesting moments when the reader is offered only a tantalizing glimpse of “something white and womanish.” While one can only speculate about Austen’s shift towards a more ample descriptive style, her ability to depict a landscape with, at times, a *very* few well chosen words should not be underestimated even at a distance of almost two centuries. Description, especially written description, requires refined and well-honed perceptions, as well as a high degree of attention and commitment to the present as a springboard towards the future. This is a landscape of desire, for it not only captures the sense of what is, but also engages the rosy prospects of what might be. *Sanditon* is the point of transition which, had she lived and continued to write, might have caused Jane Austen to be re-evaluated as a mainstream nineteenth century author, and her previous work a prelude to a more wide-ranging ambition.

The late J. B. Jackson, noted geographer and like Jane Austen, a close observer and interpreter of human scenery, saw the everyday landscape which surrounds us as a text which could be deciphered (or “read”—a visual activity) and analyzed. Almost singlehandedly, he put this idea into practice, legitimized it through his writings, and raised it and its subject almost to the level of a new art form. In his landmark book, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, Jackson redefined the idea of landscape:

Landscape is not scenery . . . it is *never* simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is *always* artificial, always synthetic (i.e., it brings diverse influences together in sometimes unexpected combinations), always subject to sudden or unpredictable change. . . . We created them and need them because every landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time. (156)

This is as true for an author as it is for the rest of us, especially an author so skilled in capturing the essence of space, place, and time as it relates to landscape. Like Jackson, Jane Austen also surveys both the social and physical scene, and her heroines encounter her landscapes—narrative spaces, so to speak—with increasing levels of involvement as her writing progresses. Marianne Dashwood debates the artistic merits of the picturesque scenery near Barton Cottage with Edward Ferrars, while Elizabeth Bennet admires the changing panoramas of Pemberley. Catherine Morland endows Northanger Abbey with the supernatural which it so sorely lacks, while on an astral plane, Fanny Price rhapsodizes on the theme of a starry night over Mansfield. Emma Woodhouse contemplates the social landscapes at Donwell with complacency and satisfaction, while Anne Elliot persuades herself to find consolation in the gentle melancholy—“so sweet and so sad”—of a prolonged autumn in the country.

In *Sanditon*, however, Austen's heroine, Charlotte Heywood, is not merely an observer, or commentator on landscape scenery, but *part* of the scene. This is something new in an Austen novel, perhaps the more noticeable in the work's unfinished state. There are precursors of this idea in *Persuasion*, and in Elizabeth Bennet's tour of Pemberley, but for the most part, Austen's heroines tend to observe landscape more than they interact with it. *Sanditon*, however, is no stationary drawing room comedy or novel of manners involving a superfluity of marriageable women. Here is nothing less than a fully drawn *landscape* of manners—a nod to the eighteenth century, perhaps—but one which is also changing, dynamic, and the bringer of nineteenth century wonders. Austen's gaze is both inwardly focused and outwardly directed. She continues in her long-established tradition as a miniaturizer and minimalist, but at the same time turns her vision upward and outward from the two inches of ivory towards a larger narrative space in which her microcosms of society can be embedded.

In *Sanditon*, the enframing narrative acquires a new direction and a new vitality entirely its own. Austen's creation is imbued with sufficient life to merit being regarded and embraced by the reader, under the author's direction, as a character in its own right. “3 or 4 families in a country village” may have been for a long time the “very thing to work upon,” but no longer. The village has outgrown its own spatial and narrative boundaries, and is rapidly overspreading the country landscape, and Austen is going with the flow.

Maggie Lane writes in *Jane Austen's England*:

Architectural beauty was founded on the classical order; in landscaping, on the seeming artlessness of nature. The two sat well together,

and suited the contours and climate of England. Nothing jarred in a land where green and tranquil parks provided the foil for perfectly proportioned buildings. (23)

This, however, is design *and* nature, art and artlessness, seen from a distance. Nature may have been reshaped and replaced by landscape in contemporary eyes, but Austen's vision evokes the idea of design *with* nature, the integration of art and artlessness, in both a literal and literary sense. This idea, and its expression in *Sanditon*, is like nothing else in her work.

It is true that admiration, contemplation, and stability give way in *Sanditon* to landscapes taut with enthusiasm, creative tension, and a strong sense of the possible. Nature is viewed as the vehicle for (or at least is identified with) revisionist ideas and the revision of old social codes. Its inhabitants are swept along or, at least, "rocked in their beds," by the winds of change and the shock—not necessarily unpleasant—of the new. *Sanditon* presents the reader with a more democratic landscape to which one only needs sufficient funds to gain access. Exploring the interaction of old and new money, in this respect it is firmly grounded in Austen's literary tradition. But it is also more open-ended and open-minded in its presentation of these confrontations in the context of the landscape "painting," in which they are visible. Indeed, landscape is Austen's chosen medium, even the driving force of her narrative, whether it be an accident-prone country lane, a commercial venture "starting up by the sea," or a mist-shrouded morning in which certain things are both revealed and promised. Austen's serene self-possession is electrified by a reinvented self-expression, a sense of anticipation and excitement, and the potential for romance. The sense of confinement identified in Judith French's *My Solitary Elegance* has indeed given way to a sense of space . . . far from lagging behind in the dust of the long eighteenth century, in her engagement of nineteenth century literary challenges, Jane Austen was leading the charge.

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