

The Watchers of *Sanditon*

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I want to begin with that “close, misty morn^s” when Charlotte Heywood sallies forth from Trafalgar House with docile Mrs. Parker and little Susan to walk to Sanditon House, on their visit to Lady Denham.

When they reached the brow of the Hill, they could not for some time make out what sort of Carriage it was, which they saw coming up. It appeared at different moments to be every-thing from the Gig to the Pheaton,—from one horse to 4; & just as they were concluding in favour of a Tandem, little Mary’s young eyes distinguished the Coachman & she eagerly called out, “T’is Uncle Sidney Mama, it is indeed.” And so it proved. (*Sanditon* 425)¹

It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s SIDNEY PARKER!—who is probably destined to be the hero of *Sanditon*. But *seeing* the hero is not easy: not for the heroine, and not for us readers either, who must rely on the *heroine*’s young eyes to distinguish his identity and his place in the large pattern of events and characters that make up the novel.

Jane Austen plays with that trope of identifying the hero elsewhere in her novels. In *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor and Marianne are out walking, they discern

a man on horseback riding towards them. In a few minutes they could distinguish him to be a gentleman; and in a moment afterwards Marianne rapturously exclaimed,

“It is he; it is indeed;—I know it is!” (SS 86)²

But she is “mistaken”: it is Edward Ferrars, not Willoughby. Later, Elinor is similarly mistaken, when “the figure of a man on horseback drew her eyes to the window. . . . It was a gentleman, it was Colonel Brandon himself. . . . But—it was *not* Colonel Brandon . . .” (358). Again, it turns out to be Edward. It tells us something of both sisters that Marianne sees what she wants to see, even when it isn’t there, and Elinor doesn’t see what she does want to see, even when it—or rather *he*—*is* there. In *Pride and Prejudice* there is further speculation from afar about the identity of a mounted gentleman riding with Bingley—“who can it be?” wonders Kitty. “Elizabeth, to satisfy her mother, went to the window—she looked,—she saw Mr. Darcy with him, and sat down again by her sister” (PP 333).³ These are significant moments, when the heroine is posted at a window or other vantage point, like Sister Anne on the battlements of Bluebeard’s castle, to watch her world and distinguish her man’s place in it. The heroine’s effort to see is also an effort to understand, and we judge her, partially at least, for the scope and accuracy of her vision.

I take the little passage of mystification about the mist-obscurd view of Sidney Parker to be strong indication that Sidney Parker is to be Charlotte Heywood's man, and the hero of *Sanditon*. But what I want to explore now is not the love story (which isn't there yet), but the activity of seeing itself, which seems to me so prominent a concern in this narrative. Charlotte Heywood herself is a very energetic viewer, and an able interpreter of what she sees. But she is not the only one engaged in watching. All of Sanditon, it seems, busily lives up to Henry Tilney's construction of "a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" (NA 198).

Sanditon as a location is itself very much up for viewing. The genteel housing development above the old fishing village is spanking new, up on a hill, commercially advertised, with open views on all sides, and itself open to view. The pointed contrast we are given between Mr. Parker's old ancestral home, the "very snug-looking Place" (379) that Charlotte admires, and his new-built and trendy Trafalgar House emphasises the sheltered retirement of the one, the glaring exposure of the other. The old house is in a valley ("Our Ancestors, you know always built in a hole" says Mr. Parker dismissively [380]); it has a well-grown garden, orchard, and trees. "So Shady in Summer!" says Mrs. Parker fondly (381). Trafalgar House, on the other hand, offers no shelter against wind or storm in winter, nor sun in summer. It is on "the most elevated spot on the Down . . . standing in a small lawn with a very young plantation round it" (384). Until the plantation grows, there is no shade, except what must be artificially procured by a canvas awning or a parasol (381). It is a place to see from, and to be seen in: almost the proverbial glass house, complete with French windows (395). Privacy is not easily available.

The same applies, by extension, to the rest of Sanditon. Prominent among the modern buildings are "a Prospect House, a Bellevue Cottage" (384); Lady Denham's Sanditon House, though surrounded by groves, stands out above them, as both view and viewpoint (384). Even in these grounds, even in the mist, the secret assignation of Clara Brereton and Sir Edward is observed, although "Privacy was certainly their object" (426).

The characters are frequently posted at windows. Charlotte and Sir Edward, positioned at "the low French windows of the [Parkers'] Drawing room which commanded the Road & all the Paths across the Down" (395), are like sentries at their post, and see everyone who goes by—especially Clara, whom Sir Edward has marked out for his own. Arthur Parker professes to be "very fond of standing at an open Window"—provided, of course, that there is no wind (415). We hear that there is "a beautiful view of the Sea" in the Terrace House lodgings of the three Parkers, but that instead of looking at the view

they are huddled round the fire at the other end of the room. The sea is not what interests them; but they are alert to the human scene. We soon hear that “they could distinguish from their window that there *was* an arrival at the Hotel, . . .” and they are at once busily counting carriages and chaises, and speculating about seminaries (414). The fashionable Miss Beauforts, we hear, mean to be “very elegant & very secluded” (421), but in fact they are eager to see and be seen—especially in their six new dresses! Miss Letitia, exerting her own eyes on the scenery while she sketches, hopes at the same time to stimulate “curiosity & rapture” in those who watch *her*. These two fashion-conscious girls make quite an elaborate display of themselves, as pictures framed at their own window, and themselves surveying and commanding full view of glaringly visible Sanditon:

They had, in 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, & made many a Gazer gaze again. (422)

In spite of their elaborate apparatus of viewing—the sketching equipment and the telescope so arranged that they can busily look at nothing through it—it’s clear that the Miss Beauforts’ best efforts are really directed more toward being seen themselves than toward the act of seeing. And their conspicuous manoeuvres have their effect, for even the sedentary Arthur Parker exerts himself to add a few extra yards to his walk, “for the sake of a glimpse of the Miss Bs—” (423).

The Miss Beauforts are part of a shared specular economy of Sanditon, a culture of gazers and gazees (to coin a term), in which identity and power inhere in the acts of vision and cultivated visibility.

The most notable figure at a window, of course, is Charlotte Heywood, whom Roger Gard refers to simply as an “objective, uncharacterised pair of eyes.”⁴ As soon as she arrives at Trafalgar House and has found her room,

Charlotte . . . found amusement enough in standing at her ample Venetian window, & looking over the miscellaneous foreground of unfinished Buildings, waving Linen, & tops of Houses, to the Sea, dancing & sparkling in Sunshine & Freshness.— (384)

This vision of the sparkling sea has often been cited, like the passages on the sea at Lyme in *Persuasion*, to show that Jane Austen grew more sensitive to natural beauty as her career progressed, and more romantically inclined to take inspiration from nature. But I want to linger a moment over the content of Charlotte’s view here. There is a specificity that takes in messiness as well as beauty—miscellaneous and unfinished buildings and the washing on the line

as well as the poetic brilliance of the sea in sunshine. Charlotte sees not just houses but the “tops of Houses,” not just distance but a discriminated “foreground,” so that the angle of vision from viewer to things viewed, and by implication back from things viewed to viewer, is very much before us. One is inevitably reminded of Henry James’s memorable evocation of “the house of fiction” in his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. He defines the house of fiction as having innumerable windows over the human scene, at each of which

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. . . .

In this house of fiction,

The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad and 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.⁵

The angle of vision from viewer to scene thus typifies and defines the work of art, and makes it *this* work of art, among infinite possibilities, and no other. Jane Austen, of course, was always sensitive and often brilliantly creative in her handling of point of view, as *Emma* (above all) demonstrated. But here she seems to have reached a new level of critical awareness about angle of view, and a more intricate exploration of the *process* of vision, than in her previous works.

Charlotte Heywood is very much our focaliser, our pair of eyes on the action. We even hear that she is physically well equipped for the job, “considerably” taller and with “more observant eyes” than Mrs. Parker (426). As she drives into Sanditon with the Parkers, “a Prospect House, a Bellevue Cottage, & a Denham Place were to be looked at by Charlotte with the calmness of amused Curiosity, & by Mr. P[arker] with the eager eye which hoped to see scarcely any empty houses” (384). Already her vision is characterized as unbiassed and accurate, in contrast with that of Mr. Parker, who like Marianne Dashwood is apt to see wishfully. (Notice that “eager eye which hoped”—here an eye is endowed with a character and yearnings of its own, apart from those of the man it belongs to.)

Like other Austen heroines who make observing others their business, such as Elizabeth and Emma, Charlotte not only sees but interprets; and at least as far as *Sanditon* goes (or *almost* as far), and unlike Elizabeth and Emma before her, she reads and interprets accurately. She has heard about Lady Denham and Clara from Mr. Parker, but she has already learned that Mr. Parker’s representations aren’t always to be trusted, and she wants to see for herself. “She observed them well,” we hear (391); and in Lady Denham as seen by

Charlotte we get information on her body and her physical motions as indicative of traits of character.

Lady D[enham] was of middle height, stout, upright & alert in her motions, with a shrewd eye [another characterized eye!] & self-satisfied air—but not an unagreeable Countenance—& tho' her manner was rather downright & abrupt, as of a person who valued herself on being free-spoken, there was a good humour & cordiality about her—a civility & readiness to be acquainted with Charlotte herself . . . which was inspiring the Good will, she seemed to feel. (391)

One might read that last comment—about her admirable “readiness to be acquainted with Charlotte herself”—ironically, as we read Emma when she concludes that Harriet “must have good sense and deserve encouragement” only because she is “pleasantly grateful” and “artlessly impressed” by Hartfield (*E* 23). But Charlotte does guard against making too much of first impressions, and she reserves judgement, and revises it as she sees more evidence.

How well does Charlotte read the body?—and does Jane Austen encourage us to read the body morally? Charlotte registers the stable characteristics of Lady Denham's person—her height and her stoutness—as visible data that are morally neutral. By and large, Austen was like her brothers, who published an essay against physiognomy, the doctrine that character can be read in the face and body.⁶ Body size—like length of nose or colour of hair—is usually beyond personal control, and is therefore not morally indicative. But body movement, being within control, can be indicative and expressive. Lady Denham's upright carriage, alert motions, and shrewd eye (presumably so judged for its movements) do convey information about the kind of person she is, as does her speech, and Charlotte judges accordingly. She does allow her imagination to dwell on the idea of Clara Brereton as “complete Heroine” because of her situation and her visible beauty: that is, she shows signs of being a naive reader like Catherine or an imaginist like Emma. But an authoritative narrator assures us that Charlotte is really “a very sober-minded young Lady, sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement, but not at all unreasonably influenced by them” (391-92). And very soon she sets aside her fanciful constructions after more attentive “subsequent observation” (392).

In matters of physical constitution, indeed, Charlotte does bring a diagnostic eye to bear on the body, and make judgement on appearances. This is Susan Parker, as Charlotte first sees and interprets her for us as readers: She is like her sister, “tho' more thin & worn by Illness and Medecine”—a shrewd discrimination, that, since Charlotte already notes that “Medecine” is not the cure but part of the problem. The “Illness” is presumably beyond Susan Parker's

control, but the medicines she takes aren't, and so she becomes responsible for them and is judged accordingly:

excepting that she sat with salts in her hand, took Drops two or three times from one, out of the several Phials already at home on the Mantelpeice,—& made a great many odd faces and contortions, Charlotte could perceive no symptoms of illness which she, in the boldness of her own good health, wd not have undertaken to cure, by putting out the fire, opening the Window, & disposing of the Drops & the salts by means of one or the other. (413)

That is, Charlotte is a bold observer, proceeding (in her own mind at least) from observations on the body to implied judgement on the mind that partly produces that body, to imagining her own interventional remedies of the condition she observes. Likewise we are encouraged to deduce her judgement of Arthur's stoutness and "sodden complexion" (414)—both physical conditions which she deems within his control, and correctable.

For the most part, however, Charlotte brings her shrewd observing eye to bear on behaviour rather than bodies, and her visual evidence of movement and action conduces to moral understanding and often moral judgement. (She pays attention to speech and tone of voice too, but since these are aural phenomena rather than visual they are outside my topic.) She is an excellent observer and moral guide, so far as we know, through most of the fragment. Although Sir Edward's "fine Countenance" and flattering attentions initially produce a "halfhour's fever" for him, her alertness to visual signs swiftly cures her: when he sees Clara and Lady Denham from the French window she notices "there was instantly a slight change in Sir Edw[ard]'s countenance—with an anxious glance after them as they proceeded." Charlotte's watchfulness of his eye movements, and her ability to interpret these minuscule signs, restore her to "a more capable state of judging" (395). Presently, when she sees him again with Clara, her "first glance told her that Sir Edw[ard]'s air was that of a Lover" (395). And even when he renews his attentions to herself and walks by her side, her capability in judgement, backed by her capability in observing, makes her immune to his blandishments. She sees that he intends his attentions to her "to pique Miss Brereton. She had read it, in an anxious glance or two on his side" (398). That is, Charlotte is a very good reader of bodily signs, pinning her conclusions on what we learn is the right kind of evidence.

The whole incident is an intriguing chronicle of the progress of a significant half-hour's acquaintance, which proceeds from initial male flattery and female susceptibility to the heroine's shrewd understanding of the man's other relationship, all achieved by sharp and alert observation, and the ocular interception of looks and glances.

This cool young woman who can learn so much about the affairs of Sanditon in only her first few days is also concerned to observe how much others have observed. She wonders whether Lady Denham guesses at Sir Edward's designs on Clara, and momentarily glimpses "the evidence of real penetration" on the matter, but she is not sure (401). Similarly, Charlotte notices Diana Parker's chagrin, when the mistake about the seminary comes out, at the "sensation of being less clear-sighted & infallible than she had beleived herself" (420). That is, as a highly qualified seer herself, Charlotte pays marked attention to her competition, and the qualifications of others.

Diana Parker affords a striking contrast with our seeing-eye Charlotte. Although Charlotte enters eagerly into the specular economy of Sanditon, and makes her own sharp observations and shrewd judgements, her observations, as we have seen, are limited to occasions that are legitimately on view, the spreading scene of overt human behaviour, and not until she accidentally sees Clara and Sir Edward together, at the end of the fragment, does she feel like a spy, a concealed spectator of what is meant to be private, indeed secret. Diana Parker, however, is definitely a *Nosey Parker*, a busy-body who makes everybody's business her own, and a greedy gatherer of private information. I can't help believing, in fact, that the British expression "Nosey Parker," for "an inquisitive person," which possibly goes back to the 1500s, and is especially apt to have currency among members of the Anglican Church, was in Jane Austen's mind when she created the Parker family, especially Diana Parker.⁷ When Charlotte sees and diagnoses symptoms, as in Susan and Arthur Parker, the treatments she projects of opening windows and throwing out drops and salts are enacted only in her imagination. But with Diana Parker, to see is to diagnose, and to diagnose is to intervene, vigorously and with unshakable conviction. Like Charlotte, we all remember her drastic measures with her sister: Susan has a persistent headache; Diana "on examination" decides the seat of the trouble is the gum; hence she has three of Susan's teeth out (387). Most of us would think twice before submitting to "examination" by Diana Parker! "How were you treated?" she writes to her brother when she hears of his sprained ankle. "Send me more Particulars in your next" (386). She practises her surveillance at long distance; but also she can hardly wait to set her eyes and hands on him. The way in which her inquisitive visual operations extend to action is realized in her hands-on approach to therapy. When a coachman sprains his ankle—and he's not her own family Coachman, but one in a family she only happens to call on—she boasts, "I rubbed his Ancle with my own hand for six Hours without Intermission" (386). (Jane Austen surely doesn't want us to miss the touch of the Shandean here: in *Tristram Shandy*, which is full of sexual innuendo, an

attractive young nun rubs Corporal Trim's wounded knee, and below the knee and above it, until other sensations make him forget all about the wound.)⁸ As part of her project to interfere and control, she takes on long-distance charity, busily raising funds for philanthropic causes in York and Burton-on-Trent (425).⁹ She is like Dickens's long-sighted Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* (another novel that is constantly concerned with watching and vision), who busies herself with missions to Borrioboola-Gha while her own family is in disarray.¹⁰

Diana Parker's bold interventions in the body, always based on totally inadequate observation, are the literal and physiological extension of her interventions in people's lives, as with the intricate and invasive procedures she follows—employing a long chain of busy-body neighbours, “Wheel within wheel” (387)—in bringing her “two large families” to Sanditon. When we see her with her siblings craning their necks at their window to watch the arrivals in the street—“could it be the Camberwell Seminary?—No—No” (414)—we realize that Diana Parker and Charlotte Heywood, as the two most prominent outsiders in Sanditon, are to some extent rivals and competitors in the business of observation and judgement. In the comic first encounter between them, we see them actually racing up the hill to Trafalgar House, to be the first to deliver the tidings of what they have seen in the town (410). As fellow watchers, and mutual watchers of each other, at one point they enter into a kind of duel of looks. “I see by your Looks,” Diana challenges Charlotte, “You hardly know what to make of me” (410).

In fact Charlotte, who has indeed been looking and listening hard, knows quite well what to make of her. “Unaccountable Officiousness!—Activity run mad!”—had just passed through Charlotte's mind” (410). She is similarly able to judge others with the same confidence, based on her careful attention to what she sees and hears. “She is thoroughly mean,” she concludes of the niggardly Lady Denham. “. . . Thus it is, when Rich People are Sordid” (402). “He is too kind hearted to see clearly,” she tells herself of Mr. Parker. “—I must judge for myself” (402). And judge for herself she does, and pretty accurately too, because she *can* see clearly.

But is our focaliser infallible? For eleven chapters, she is trustworthy; but then, cool and detached, she sees the people and incidents of Sanditon as an emotionally amused observer and assessor rather than as a participant. Will she retain her accurate vision once she becomes involved? Should we read that mist-mediated vision of the approaching Sidney Parker as a new complication of her hitherto clear and direct perception?

My own sense of this intriguing and visually obsessed fragment is that Charlotte, who has been characterized as so clear-sighted,

is headed for some major crisis in vision (like Elizabeth, the “studier of character” [PP 42] who gets her character assessments so resoundingly wrong). But Charlotte’s crisis will be different from Elizabeth’s discovery that she has been “blind,” and must correct her perceptions: *Sanditon* seems to suggest that clarity and accuracy of vision may not be enough; that shrewd observation, even intelligent interpretation and penetration, still leave out something essential; in fact that the process of vision itself is what deserves attention. Charlotte’s perspicacity, her ability to penetrate to some objective reality out there, seems ready to give way to some achieved consciousness of complexity, subjectivity, even inscrutability.

Let me resort to an analogy. It may take some of us an effort to recall that Turner, the great forerunner of the French Impressionist painters, was born in the same year as Jane Austen, and was maturing his artistic practice alongside hers. The paintings of the first half of his career were pellucidly clear, as sharp in their definition and as light and bright and sparkling as *Pride and Prejudice* itself. But as his career progressed he became more and more concerned with the medium of vision itself, with mist and haze and vaporous effulgence; the *process* of seeing, too, absorbed him: he hung out of a railway carriage window for fifteen minutes in the rain to gather the visual experience he records in “Rain, Steam and Speed” (1844); he had himself tied like Odysseus to the mast of a boat in a stormy sea, to observe the effects he was later to capture on canvas. These were visual feats belonging to the later years of his career; but even by 1816, in an article Jane Austen could have read, Hazlitt could already characterize Turner’s paintings as “representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen.”¹¹ Turner became the painter less of landscape than of atmosphere.

Jane Austen, I suggest, with the famous mist at the end of *Sanditon*—the “great thickness of air,” as she calls it (427)—is becoming a painter of atmosphere too, is experimenting not just with clarity and obscurity, but with the noumenal, with speculation and the specular, with the medium through which things are seen. She presents what Roger Gard calls “a drama about perception.”¹² A fiction filled with energetic viewers and snoopers, observers and interpreters both clear-sighted and muddle-headed, comes to investigate vision as an activity, to perceive the objects of vision as atmospherically adjusted, ambiguous, dimly glowing with a significance that eludes even the best-equipped observer. Charlotte’s memorable view of the sea sparkling in sunlight is like an early Turner painting. But chapter 12, the last we have, is surely like the late Turner. Here the clear-sighted Charlotte is struggling with the difficulty of the act of seeing, peering through the mist to identify the approaching stranger, glimpsing

through occasional “vacant spaces” that vague “something White and Womanish” (426).¹³ The thick atmosphere is augmented by a backwash of her feelings—her sense of guilt at overlooking a secret assignation, her mystification that her “heroine” should be so compromised. Yet there is clearly beauty, too, about this very thickening of atmosphere. In this “new direction” of Jane Austen’s art, she does not penetrate directly to an objective reality “out there”: Like an Impressionist painter for whom Light is a major character, or like a Henry James enamoured of nuance, she lingers on all that lies between.

NOTES

- ¹ The Works of Jane Austen: Volume VI: *Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, revised by B. C. Southam, 1987 reprint). Subsequent page references to this edition of *Sanditon* will appear in the text.
- ² For reference to Jane Austen’s novels, I cite page numbers in Chapman’s edition.
- ³ Elsewhere I have commented on the loaded implication of this apparently neutral phrase, “and sat down again by her sister.” We know Elizabeth is surprised, disturbed, excited by what she sees, but her emotion is conveyed only indirectly by her apparently calm behaviour. See *Jane Austen the Novelist* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 136.
- ⁴ Roger Gard, *Jane Austen’s Novels: The Art of Clarity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 210.
- ⁵ Henry James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, New York edition (1908) as reprinted in facsimile (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1970), I, pp. x-xi.
- ⁶ See the essay entitled “The Science of Physiognomy Not to be Depended On,” in *The Loiterer, a Periodical Work*, in Two Volumes, [edited by James Austen] (Oxford, 1789-90), II, number 51. Here the Loiterer makes a series of deductions about character based on the physical appearance of those he observes, and discovers all his deductions are incorrect.
- ⁷ The *OED* finds no written instances of the expression “nosey Parker” before this century, but cites the caption of a picture post-card of 1907, “The Adventures of Nosey Parker,” which suggests the expression was already firmly rooted in popular culture. Eric Partridge, however, notes that the expression “is prob. very much older, and may—for this sort of thing does happen—have existed, unrecorded, for several centuries, esp. if the allusion to Matthew Parker (1504-75), who in 1559 became Archbishop of Canterbury, as being an interfering and unduly inquisitive man has justification. He . . . introduce[d] many reforms into the Anglican Church; and he was bitterly opposed by Catholics and Puritans alike.” *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), II, p. 1200.

- ⁸ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1770-76), VIII, chapter 22.
- ⁹ B. C. Southam notes that Austen satirizes philanthropy as a business for Diana Parker, in "Sanditon: The Seventh Novel," in *Jane Austen's Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 21.
- ¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-53), chapter 4.
- ¹¹ William Hazlitt, "On Imitation," *The Examiner*, 18 February 1816, p. 109. I have explored the issues of Turner, Dickens and atmosphere in my chapter on *Bleak House* in *Dickens the Designer* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 151-53.
- ¹² Roger Gard, *Jane Austen's Novels* (see above), p. 216. Gard quotes Robert Liddell on "the famous *chiaroscuro* in the last chapter." Although Gard doesn't mention Turner in his text, Turner's painting "Petworth: The Old Library" (c. 1828) is used for the jacket of his book.