

“Excellently Qualified to Shine at a Round Game”

MARY MARGARET BENSON

Northup Library, Linfield College, McMinnville, OR 97128

None of us gathered here in Vancouver can doubt the value and significance of card games. After all, a preference for vingt-un over commerce helped bring together Jane and Bingley. And, Aunt Bertram finds speculation “Very entertaining indeed,” though she goes on to call it, “A very odd game. I do not know what it is all about. I am never to see my cards; and Mr. Crawford does all the rest” (*MP*, 240). Speculation and vingt-un are the round games played in *The Watsons*. Later this hour, members of the Vancouver JASNA chapter will be showing us all how to play a round game or two. First, however, I will give you some background on round and other card games, and then briefly comment on their appearances in the works of Jane Austen.

Quadrille became popular early in the eighteenth century, replacing ombre in fashion. Quadrille, in turn, was replaced by whist. Hoyle’s treatise on whist was first published in 1737, and the game remained fashionable through the end of the nineteenth century.

There has always been a large range of literature on the subject of card playing. Following are some titles available in Jane Austen’s day:

Some Thoughts on the Nature and Use of Lot, shewing the immorality of Playing at Cards, and dissuading from it. By a Protestant. London: Printed for R. Hett, at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry. 1750.

A Letter to a Lady on Card Playing on the Lord’s Day. London: Printed for J. Leake at Bath . . . 1748.

Serious Reflections on the Dangerous Tendency of the Common Practice of Card Playing; especially of the Game of All Fours as it hath been Publickly play’d at Oxford in this Present year of our Lord. London: Printed for W. Owen, at Homer’s Head near Temple Bar. 1754.

An Address to Persons of Fashion, containing some particulars relating to Balls, and a few occasional Hints concerning play houses, card tables, &c, in which is introduced the character of Lucinda, a Lady of the very best fashion and of most extraordinary piety. By a Gentleman of the University of Oxford. London: Printed for George Keith, at the Bible and Crown in Gracechurch street: and sold by J. Robson in New Bond street. 1761.

A Dissertation on the Pernicious Effects of Gaming. Published by appointment, as having won a prize (June, 1783) in the University of Cambridge. By Richard Hay, LL.D., Fellow of Magdalen College. The second edition. Cambridge: Printed by J. Archdeacon, Printer to the University. 1784.

Of the games mentioned above, not all are round games. Round games are card games played by two or more players, each working for her or his own ends. There are no partners. All round games are gambling games. Of the round games mentioned in the works of Jane Austen, vingt-un has the longest history. It was played in the early seventeenth century as “one and twenty.” (Tilley, 107) In the eighteenth century it was known variously as vingt-un, vingt-et-un, and vingt-une; later it was also

known as pontoon. The first citation for vingt-un in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from a piece in the *Westminster Magazine* of 1782: "Give the Beau-monde impertinent advice, Proscribe Vingt-une! prohibit box and dice!" (The second citation from the OED is from *The Watsons*.) The popularity of vingt-un is witnessed by its having developed variations early on. Two of these were costly colours and bone ace. In the 1676 edition of *The Compleat Gamester*, Charles Cotton calls the latter: "'trivial and very inconsiderable, but played by ladies and persons of quality and a licking (round) game for money'" (qtd. in Strutt, 263). Of the other round games listed in Jane Austen's works, loo (early on called lanterloo), commerce, and brag go back at least to the early eighteenth century. The first printed example for speculation, the game, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from *The Watsons*.

It is evident from the titles I have cited previously that the morality of gaming has always been questionable. Most of the early accounts of card playing take on a strict moral tone. Charles Cotton is at least humorous. In his chapter on "The Character of a Gamester" he writes:

He speaks the language of the game he plays at, better than the language of his own country; and can less indure a solecism in that than this. . . . He loves Winter more than Summer, because it affords more gamesters, and Christmas more than any other time, because there is more gaming then. . . . He . . . is never more religious than when he prays he may win. He imagines he is at play when he is at Church; he takes his prayer-book for a pack of cards, and thinks he is shuffling when he turns over the leaves. (Cotton and Lucas, 11)

In 1767, Isaac de Pinto published a work *On Card Playing*, which was popular enough to be extracted in various contemporary periodicals. De Pinto maintained that "card playing dissipates the passions and thereby subdues the man—makes him tame for anything except cards" (Pitcher 215). Charles Lamb, a contemporary of Jane Austen's, subscribed to this theory, which he treated in his *Essays of Elia* (Pitcher). However, Jane Austen seems hardly interested in propounding such theories in her literary work. She shows us a society with an objective, and usually practical, view of financial matters. Characters in her domestic novels, as well as in those of her contemporaries—Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. Radcliffe—are all vitally aware of the importance of income (cf. Copeland). Surviving on a competence or dispossession by the entail of an estate are real life concerns. This practicality, I think, extends to considerations of gambling. On the one hand, wasteful gambling beyond ones income is certainly condemned. Jane Bennet is truly shocked to learn that Wickham is a gamester (p. 298). Jane Austen herself writes in a letter, "There were two pools at commerce, but I would not play more than one, for the stake was three shillings, and I cannot afford to lose that twice in an evening" (qtd. in Firkin, 189). And, like her author, Elizabeth Bennet must be prudent: "On entering the drawing room, she found the whole party at loo, and was immediately invited to join them; but suspecting them to be playing

high she declined it" (p. 37). Jane Austen's judgements concerning gambling, both for herself and for her characters, are practical. On the other hand, the Austen family all played games for small stakes, as do the characters of the novels. (Games played within the family circle, however, were as likely to be played for fish. Scores for games were kept on a board, with peg counters. The board and pegs were of French origin, so the pegs were known as *fiche*, and often shaped as fish, as well (Pinion, 43-44). Fish are mentioned as the stakes in *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Watsons*.)

Like the domestic society of the novels themselves, the card table imposes a closed, known society, dictated by defined well-known rules. Occasionally the card table may offer two elements beyond the regular structure of domestic society: the element of independence—for in round games, at least, one acts without a partner—and the element of luck. In general, one can say that people behave in the games as they behave in their own real world. A brief survey of some card playing incidents in the novels will demonstrate this analogy.

The title of this paper gives us a biting exposé of the character of Tom Musgrave:

He was in fact excellently qualified to shine at a round Game; & few situations made him appear to greater advantage. He played with spirit, & had a great deal to say & tho' with no wit himself, cd sometimes make use of the wit of an absent friend; & had a lively way of retailing a commonplace, or saying a mere nothing, that had a great effect at a Card Table. (p. 112)

The Watsons, more than the other works, shows a society of conflicting social classes, with Emma Watson as the outsider in her own home. This fragment has more allusions to games than any other Austen work, with the exception of *Mansfield Park*. Mr. Watson's preferred game, like Mr. Woodhouse's, is whist; but Mr. Watson is a true invalid, unlike Mr. Woodhouse, and his head cannot stand the rigors of the game. The choice between speculation and vingt-un is a choice between Croydon and Osborne Castle. Mrs. Robert, the early champion of speculation, must be the loser of this round; she can triumph over her in-laws, and condescendingly suggest a mere game of cribbage for an old man, but she, the epitome of social snobbery, knows better than to triumph over the truly superior offerings of Osborne Castle. This is no petty issue for her; the social order is at stake, and she must not admit to being on the wrong side. "Mrs. Robert offered not another word in support of the game. —She was quite vanquished, & the fashions of Osborne-Castle carried it over the fashions of Croydon" (p. 110).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lady Middleton and Mrs. Jennings play both whist and casino. Marianne hates both games. At one point, "Lady Middleton proposed a rubber of Casino to the others. No one made any objection but Marianne, who, with her usual inattentions to the forms of general civility, exclaimed, 'Your ladyship will have the goodness to excuse *me*—you know I detest cards. I shall go to the piano-forté'"

(p. 144). Undoubtedly playing either game with either Lady Middleton or Mrs. Jennings—not to mention with both—could be tedious. Mrs. Jennings offers to play round games for Marianne, but Marianne has no interest in those games, either. Marianne's sensibility is at odds with general civility; she is unable to rebel within the confines of the rules of her society, so she simply tries to escape those rules.

Pride and Prejudice is full of game-playing scenes. Most of them are noisy: one can easily imagine listening to Kitty and Lydia playing lottery tickets at Aunt Phillips's. The games are quieter at Rosings; in fact, "As Miss De Bourgh chose to play at cassino, the two girls had the honour of assisting Mrs. Jenkinson to make up her party. Their table was superlatively stupid. Scarcely a syllable was uttered that did not relate to the game" (p. 166). In general, the games in *Pride and Prejudice* are used to provide further illumination of character, or an excuse for satire, or both. Never does Mr. Collins appear sillier, "employed in agreeing to every thing her Ladyship said, thanking her for every fish he won, and apologising if he thought he won too many" (p. 166).

Mansfield Park, too, abounds in game scenes and references to games. The older characters—Aunt Norris, Sir Thomas, Dr. and Mrs. Grant—all play whist. The younger people, together with Aunt Bertram, prefer speculation; their table, at least, may be free of outside interference. Here Mr. Crawford's character shines:

He was in high spirits, doing every thing with happy ease, and pre-eminent in all the lively turns, quick resources, and playful impudence that could do honour to the game; and the round table was altogether a very comfortable contrast to the steady sobriety and orderly silence of the other. (p. 240)

We see Mr. Crawford at his best—perhaps not deep, but still resourceful, fun-loving, encouraging to Fanny, and kind to Aunt Bertram. One can almost wish that Fanny would encourage him for these estimable qualities. Both card tables, we are told, are "predetermined" by Mrs. Grant and her sister. However, this predetermination only works to a point; then speculation, at two levels for Mary Crawford, ensues. Both Crawfords show themselves to be superbly competent in game strategy, but neither has luck.

Card games play a passive, rather than active, role in *Emma*. The active games are word games. The references to card games are mostly to whist: Mr. Woodhouse plays whist every evening that Emma can get a table together for him. On the night of the dance, Mr. Woodhouse plays backgammon with Mrs. Bates. Mrs. Elton mentions superior card parties, but does not elaborate on which games; one cannot, however, imagine Mrs. Elton involving herself in any of the more lively round games.

Neither *Northanger Abbey* nor *Persuasion* makes much use of games. In *Northanger Abbey*, the major reference is to Mr. Allen's selfishness: "He repaired directly to the card-room, and left them to enjoy a mob by themselves" (p. 20). Card games have less value in *Persuasion*; the Bath evening card parties appeal to Sir Walter, but not to Anne, whose continued dislike of cards is recognized by Frederick as a sign of her constancy.

Of course, Jane Austen herself played all the round games she has her characters play. She taught her nephews to play speculation, and wrote to her sister: "Our evening was equally agreeable in its way! I introduced speculation, and it was so much approved that we hardly knew how to leave off" (p. 94). The children, however, later prefer brag. She writes again, "The preference of Brag over Speculation does not greatly surprise me, I believe, because I feel the same myself; but it mortified me deeply, because Speculation was under my patronage; and, after all, what is there so delightful in a pair royal of Braggers?" (p. 102). "We do not want amusement: bilbocatch, spillikins, paper ships, riddles, conundrums, and cards, and watching the flow and ebb off the river, and now and then a stroll out, keep us well employed" (p. 91).

WORKS CONSULTED

- Austen, Jane. *The Novels* edited by R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- . *Letters 1796-1817*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935.
- . *The Watsons: A Fragment*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. London: Athlone Press, 1985.
- The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Copeland, Edward. "What's a Competence? Jane Austen, her Sister Novelists, and the 5%'s." *Modern Language Studies* 9 (1979), 161-167.
- Cotton, Charles, and Theophilus Lucas. *Games and Gamesters of the Restoration: The Compleat Gamester, by Charles Cotton, 1674, and Lives of the Gamesters, by Theophilus Lucas, 1714*. Introd. Cyril Hughes Hartmann. Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1971.
- Duckworth, Alistair M. *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971.
- Firkins, O. W. *Jane Austen*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965.
- Hargrave, Catherine Perry. *A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930.
- Phillips, Hubert. *The Popular Book of Card Games*. New ed. London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1972.
- Pinion, F. B. *A Jane Austen Companion*. London: Macmillan, 1973.
- Pitcher, W. E. "Elia, Mrs. Battle, and Lamb's Theory of the Effects of Card-Playing." *Notes and Queries* 29 (1982), 214-216.
- Strutt, Joseph. *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*. Ed. J. Charles Cox. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968.
- Tilley, Robert. *A History of Playing Cards*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1973.