

Letters to the Editor

The editors of *Persuasions* invite readers to send them short comments or opinions relevant to articles in the journal. A selection of reader responses will be published. If appropriate, authors will be given an opportunity to respond. Letters may be edited for publication.

Send letters to Gene Koppel, Department of English, University of Arizona, Modern Languages Building No. 67, Tucson, AZ 85721.



Dear Gene Koppel,

I am writing in accordance with the suggestion on p. 3 of Issue 17 of *Persuasions* that readers might like to send “Letters to the Editor” in connection with articles in the journal.

I am sure it is difficult for you and your fellow editors to maintain a balance between articles of academic interest and articles for the general reader; I have sometimes in previous issues found a preponderance of the first sort. I particularly enjoy articles dealing with subjects which have NOT been treated in detail by previous writers; in Issue 17 therefore I was fascinated by Lorna J. Clark’s “Jane Austen and Sarah Harriet Burney” and Elaine Bander’s “The other play in *Mansfield Park*: Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*.” Both of these articles contained new information and new insights, and are therefore valuable.

I would like to add a comment on Inger Sigrun Bredkjaer Brodey’s “Papas and Ha-has.” A ha-ha, although it may, and often does, contain a sunken fence, does not necessarily have one. I refer the writer to the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989: “A boundary to a garden, pleasure-ground or park, of such a kind as not to interrupt the view from within, and not to be seen until closely approached; consisting of a trench, the inner side of which is perpendicular and faced with stone [or brick, in fact], the outer sloping and turfed; a sunk fence.” I admit that *OED* includes the second definition, but I submit that the definition given first (and at length) is more accurate (much more so than what is stated in the article, p. 91; a ha-ha is NOT “located on lower ground”). In visiting country houses I have seen far more ha-has (for example at Rousham Park, Oxfordshire) which agree with *OED*’s first definition. This

seems significant, since the writer of the article (unless I have misunderstood her) seems to be developing the concept of the ha-ha as a species of fence, which it is not necessarily (except in a general sense as a barrier).

Yours sincerely,
David Gilson

Response:

I would like to thank David Gilson for his comment on my paper. It is indeed true, as the *OED* suggests, that there were a number of ways of constructing ha-has. The different physical shapes of the ha-ha, if Humphrey Repton is to be trusted, has to do with the kinds of creatures meant to be excluded by the ha-ha, in order to protect the pristine prospect. Sunken ditches might suffice for cows, but Repton informs us that "where [a ha-ha] is higher than the eye, as it must be against deer, the landscape seen through *its bars* becomes intolerable" (*Theory of Landscape Gardening*, 131, my emphasis).

I would only briefly suggest that the first and lengthiest part of the *OED*'s definition, dealing with the *overall characteristics* of the ha-ha are also the most important to my argument about "hidden barriers": according to the *OED*, it serves as a "boundary to a garden, pleasure-ground or park" and it must never "interrupt the view from within, and not . . . be seen until closely approached." These are precisely the central characteristics that provide Austen with an opportunity, I argue, of illustrating the points about the difference between hidden and visible restraint, about the separation of "park" and "wilderness," and about various characters' reactions to authority that I develop in my article.

Now, in terms of *Mansfield Park*, it seems to me that there can be little doubt that the ha-ha which figures prominently in Chapters Nine and Ten must have included a fence. How else can we account for passages like the following? Mary Crawford complains: "I have looked across the ha-ha till I am weary. I must go and look through that *iron gate* at the same view, without being able to see it so well" (*MP* 96). Maria, we learn, agrees with Mary: "that *iron gate*, that ha-ha, gives me a feeling of restraint and hardship" (*MP* 99). And finally, we don't see Julia scrambling over a ditch, instead "she immediately scramble[s] *over the fence*," when the ha-ha begins to thwart the fulfillment of her own passions (*MP* 101, my italics in each passage). In short, the diversity of ha-has that Mr. Gilson has indicated helps underscore Austen's choice of using a ha-ha that includes both fence and gate for her symbolic purposes in this novel.

Inger Sigrun Brodey