

Sanditon, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Camilla*: Back to the Future?

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Jane Austen's first five novels conclude with the heroine marrying and settling down on her husband's estate or in his rectory, but at the end of *Persuasion* Anne Elliot exchanges her father's bankrupt estate for the nomadic life of a sailor's wife, and by the opening of *Sanditon* the developers have moved in. In this sense *Sanditon* continues in the new direction first charted in *Persuasion*, a movement away from the patriarchal estate into a world of instability and change. The Parkers, after all, have abandoned their snug ancestral estate on the downs for the sublimities of Trafalgar House and the necessity of parasols. While Austen clearly views Anne Elliot's removal from her father's home as liberating, in *Sanditon* she invites us to share the sharper judgement of Charlotte Heywood, who is by no means convinced that such hectic movement leads to true improvement.

When Charlotte ventures forth from her father's comfortable, static estate, she encounters the latest fashions in housing, hypochondria, and literature. New-fangled jargons of post-war real-estate speculation, of a growing health industry, and of the fashionable literary reviews permeate the speech of the eccentric characters she meets at *Sanditon*.¹ This topicality signals Austen's return to familiar territory, for just such comic satire of contemporary social, economic and verbal behaviour characterizes all of her published novels beginning with the oldest, *Northanger Abbey*, originally composed around 1798-99 but revised for publication in the months before Austen began to work on *Sanditon*.²

Consider the plot of *Sanditon*: A young lady from a large, old-fashioned rural family is invited by generous friends to visit a resort town where she encounters other young people who pay her flattering attention and who talk to her in a new aesthetic jargon. Her host is an enthusiastic improver of his property eager to show off his household innovations. Despite the dubious motives of some characters, her own common sense and good nature protect her from being imposed upon. Surely we've been here before. For all its trendiness, in fact, *Sanditon* takes us back to the beginning, to *Northanger Abbey*.³

There are differences, of course. In *Northanger Abbey* the opening journey to Bath proves unpropitious: "Neither robber nor tempests

befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero" (19). *Sanditon*, in contrast, begins with a "lucky overturn" which may or may not prove emblematic of the speculative enterprise of Mr. Parker. In *Northanger Abbey*, moreover, Catherine Morland's good nature leads her to think better of people like the Thorpes than they deserve; she is "candid" in the eighteenth-century sense of the word. Like Jane Bennet, she puts the best possible construction on other people's behaviour, a trait which endears her to Henry Tilney. In *Sanditon*, however, enthusiastic Mr. Parker proves to be the naive, good-natured, "candid" character, while the younger, inexperienced heroine, Charlotte, has the perspicacity to read motives accurately.⁴

Indeed, she is remarkably astute for a country girl of twenty-two on her first trip from home. Charlotte is an even less likely heroine than Catherine Morland, for she has nothing to do in these twelve chapters but to keep her eyes open and to make sense of whom she meets and what she sees. This is a radical revision of the standard Burney situation, which Austen had adapted in her earlier novels, of a lovely young girl entering society ill-equipped to negotiate the pitfalls of manners and morals and therefore dependent upon the sometimes dubious guidance of her elders and betters. In fact, it is Charlotte's unusual character more than the unpredictable plot or the much-discussed romantic "mistiness" of *Sanditon* which suggests to me that something new is happening here.

Others disagree. Margaret Drabble finds Charlotte Heywood "something of a cipher . . . prim and uninteresting" (25, 29), while Brian Southam, to whom every reader of *Sanditon* must be grateful, doubts even her status as heroine, for (he says) "we feel nothing for her" ("Introduction" xvi).⁵ Indeed, most commentators on *Sanditon* view Charlotte as a mere narrative device through which the dying Austen communicates her ironic, satiric observation of human foibles and social change.

To my mind, however, Charlotte is potentially one of Austen's most interesting heroines, and I deeply regret that I will never have the opportunity to improve my acquaintance with her further. Her acute observations, generous but shrewd, colour every detail of the novel. The real interest and action of *Sanditon*, in fact, consist not in Mr. Parker's speculative improvements, nor in Lady Denham's partial, parsimonious patronage, nor in Miss Diana Parker's officious hypochondria, nor in Sir Edward Denham's seduction plot, nor even in the possible romance between Charlotte and Sidney Parker. Rather, the real business of this novel, or at least the twelve chapters of it which we possess, consists of Charlotte's observations of,

and judgments about, the people she meets at Sanditon. We read Charlotte reading them. In this respect, too, *Sanditon* is vintage Austen.

For example, just as in Elinor's struggle to interpret Edward's behaviour, or Emma's first meeting with Mrs. Elton, or Anne Elliot's attempts to penetrate Mr. Elliot's character, Charlotte studies Lady Denham, modifying her first impressions as their conversation unfolds. When Charlotte first meets Lady Denham, she takes Mr. Parker's summary of her character as a working hypothesis to be tested by her own observation. During the journey to Sanditon, Mr. Parker cautions Charlotte:

"There is at times . . . a little self-importance—but it is not offensive;—& there are moments, there are points, when her Love of Money is carried greatly too far. But she is a goodnatured Woman, a very goodnatured Woman,—a very obliging, friendly Neighbour; a cheerful, independant, valuable character.—and her faults may be entirely imputed to her want of Education. . . . When you see us in contact, you will judge for yourself." (376)

After her extended tête-à-tête with Lady Denham, however, Charlotte concludes:

"She is thoroughly mean. I had not expected any thing so bad.—Mr. P. spoke too mildly of her.—His Judgement is evidently not to be trusted.—His own Goodnature misleads him. He is too kind hearted to see clearly.—I must judge for myself." (402)

This complex satire reveals as much about Mr. Parker and Charlotte as it does about Lady Denham.

Similarly, when Charlotte first meets Sir Edward Denham, she responds favourably to Sir Edward's superior air and manner, handsome looks, good address, and flattering attention. The narrator asserts that her reaction is perfectly wholesome:

She liked him.—Sober-minded as she was, she thought him agreeable, & did not quarrel with the suspicion of his finding her equally so, which *would* arise from his evidently disregarding his Sister's motion to go, & persisting in his station & his discourse.—I make no apologies for my Heroine's vanity.—If there are young Ladies in the World at her time of Life, more dull of Fancy & more careless of pleasing, I know them not, & never wish to know them. (395)

Almost immediately, however, Charlotte perceives a "slight change in Sir Edw:'s countenance" when he observes Lady Denham and Miss Brereton walking by,

which altogether gave a hasty turn to Charlotte's fancy, cured her of her halfhour's fever, & placed her in a more capable state of judging, when Sir Edw: was gone, of *how* agreeable he had actually been.—"Perhaps there was a good deal in his Air & Address; And his Title did him no harm." (395)

After Sir Edward entertains Charlotte with his literary opinions (sounding rather as though he had taken up the practice of deconstruction after attending a particularly learned break-out session at a JASNA AGM),

She began to think him downright silly.—His chusing to walk with her, she had learnt to understand. It was done to pique Miss Brereton. She had read it, in an anxious glance or two on his side—but why he sh^d talk so much Nonsense, unless he could do no better, was unintelligible.—He seemed very sentimental, very full of some Feelings or other, & very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words—had not a very clear Brain she presumed, & talked a good deal by rote.—The Future might explain him further— (398)

In *Northanger Abbey*, when the Tilneys mystify Catherine Morland by discussing the picturesque, “they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her” (110). Charlotte, in contrast, can distinguish between sophisticated discourse and pretentious baffle-gab. In her “more capable state of judging” she accurately judges Sir Edward Denham.

Sir Edward, clearly, is the sort of reader who gave Samuel Richardson bad dreams, for he views Richardson’s Lovelace as a hero to be emulated rather than as an object lesson in error to be avoided. His conversation is an egregious amalgam of romantic cant and contemporary literary jargon:

“It were Hyper-criticism, it were Pseudo-philosophy to expect from the soul of high toned Genius, the grovellings of a common mind.—The Coruscations of Talent, elicited by impassioned feeling in the breast of Man, are perhaps incompatible with some prosaic Decencies of Life. . . .” (398)

Charlotte is taken in neither by his flattering attention nor by his pretentious, polysyllabic praise of Robert Burns: “This was very fine:—but if Charlotte understood it at all, not very moral . . .” (398). Her reading of Sir Edward’s character is subsequently confirmed by Austen’s own comment, for after Sir Edward holds forth at length to Charlotte, the narrator reveals:

that Sir Edw: whom circumstances had confined very much to one spot [just like Charlotte herself, one might observe] had read more sentimental Novels than agreed with him. His fancy had been early caught by all the impassioned, & most exceptional parts of Richardsons. . . . He read all the Essays, Letters, Tours & Criticisms of the day—and with the same ill-luck which made him derive only false Principles from Lessons of Morality, & incentives to Vice from the History of it’s Overthrow, he gathered only hard words & involved sentences from the style of our most approved Writers. (405-06)

Weak-minded Sir Edward learns bad morality from good books. Charlotte, in contrast, profits from the exemplary lessons of Burney’s

Camilla. Here is yet another instance of Austen's return to earlier themes, for in *Northanger Abbey*, Burney's *Camilla* serves as a moral touchstone for judging characters. Thus when Catherine asks John Thorpe, politely, if he has read Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, he replies:

"Udolpho! Oh Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do. . . . No, if I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliff's; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in them."

"Udolpho was written by Mrs. Radcliff," said Catherine, with some hesitation, from the fear of mortifying him.

"No sure; was it? Aye, I remember, so it was; I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French emigrant."

"I suppose you mean *Camilla*?"

"Yes, that's the book; such unnatural stuff!—An old man playing at see-saw! I took up the first volume once, and looked it over, but I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it must be before I saw it: as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through it." (48-49)

As always in Austen's work, such a vulgar, ignorant, swaggering criticism of novels in general and *Camilla* in particular condemns Thorpe as a fool and a knave.⁶

Jane Austen, herself a subscriber to the first edition of *Camilla*, was a life-long admirer of Fanny Burney and a staunch defender of the innocent pleasures of fiction. In *Northanger Abbey*, it is true, her heroine Catherine falls briefly into quixotism, but only under the naughty influence of Henry Tilney, who provokes her against her own common sense to anticipate gothic horrors at the Abbey. Austen's stirring defence of novels in *Northanger Abbey* is one of her most often-quoted passages:

"Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—"It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (38)

Significantly, two of the three novels cited in this passage are by Burney. Clearly Austen admired Burney and despised those who did not share her taste.⁷

In *Sanditon*, Austen alludes again to *Camilla*. (I carefully avoid new-fashioned hard words like "inter-textuality.") The allusion occurs in Chapter 6, when Charlotte pays her first visit to the Library at Sanditon:

The Library of course afforded every thing; all the useless things in the World that c^d not be done without, & among so many pretty Temptations, & with so much good will for M^r P. to encourage Expenditure, Charlotte began to feel that she must check herself—or rather she reflected that at two & Twenty there c^d be no excuse for her doing otherwise—& that it w^d not do for her to be spending all her Money the very first Evening. She took up a Book; it happened to be a vol: of *Camilla*. She had not *Camilla*'s Youth, & had no intention of having her Distress,—so, she turned from the Drawer of rings & Broches repressed farther solicitation & paid for what she bought. (390)

In *Camilla*, the young heroine, while visiting fashionable Tunbridge Wells with worldly friends, is tricked into spending more cash than she possesses on trinkets and clothes. Her debts cause her great anguish and, compounded by the consequences of bad advice from parents, guardians, tutors and friends, madness and near ruin.

Unlike *Camilla*, fortunately, Charlotte trusts her own judgment rather than that of the unreliable Mr. Parker; as he has advised, she judges for herself. Her glance at the volume of *Camilla* is thus particularly apposite, for it reinforces her already mature resolve to spend her money prudently and, unlike *Camilla*, to resist the dangerous urgings of others.

This allusion is quite deliberate, moreover, for Austen revised this passage to emphasize Charlotte's reflective habits.⁸ Originally she had written: "Charlotte began to feel that she must check herself—or rather *began to feel* that at two & Twenty there c^d be no excuse for her doing otherwise. . . ." Later she amended this passage to read "or rather *she reflected*" (Southam, *Facsimile* 51, 178; my emphasis). Reflection thus replaces feeling: Sir Edward may consider himself to be a Man of Feeling, like Burns, but Charlotte is a woman of reflection, and her habit of reflection is both reinforced and valorized by the sight of Burney's *Camilla*.

This scene thus illustrates the positive influence of novels. No writer, of course, is proof against a perverse reader. Sir Edward also believes that lessons may be learned from novels. In a speech which seems to parody the traditional moralists' arguments about the didactic role of fiction, he deploys some of his hard words to disparage "The mere Trash of the common Circulating Library" and to defend his reading of *Clarissa*:

"You will never hear me advocating those puerile Emanations which detail nothing but discordant Principles incapable of Amalgamation, or those vapid tissues of ordinary Occurences from which no useful Deductions can be drawn.—In vain may we put them into a literary Alembic;—we distil nothing which can add to Science. . . . T'were Pseudo-Philosophy to assert that we do not feel more enwrapped by the brilliancy of [a character like Lovelace's] Career, than by the tranquil

& morbid Virtues of any opposing Character. Our approbation of the Latter is but Eleemosynary. (403-04)

(Readers who prefer Mary Crawford to Fanny Price should pay particular attention to this speech and its provenance. No doubt Sir Edward would think Fanny a dull prig and see Mary as the fascinating, liberated, true heroine of *Mansfield Park*.)

Unlike the weak-minded Sir Edward Denham, then, who has learned only hard words and bad morality from books, Charlotte is encouraged by Burney's novel to be prudent. She has read *Camilla* sympathetically, intelligently, reflectively, as Burney wished it to be read, while Sir Edward, Regency deconstructionist that he is, turns the values of *Clarissa* upside down, reading against authorial intention to make an exemplary hero of Lovelace and, alas, a victim of Clara Brereton.

Austen develops this quixotic theme further by guiding us through Charlotte's reflections as she encounters Clara just after quitting the library. Like Sir Edward, she too is first struck by Clara's romantic appearance and situation, for unlike Catherine Morland, Clara is clearly "born to be an heroine":

Charlotte thought that she had never beheld a more lovely, or more Interesting young Woman. . . . 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^r Whitby's shelves.—Perhaps it might be partly oweing to her having just issued from a Circulating Library—but she could not separate the idea of a complete Heroine from Clara Brereton. Her situation with Lady Denham so very much in favour of it!—She *seemed* placed with her on purpose to be ill-used. Such Poverty & Dependance joined to such Beauty & Merit, *seemed* to leave no choice in the business.—These feelings were not the result of any spirit of Romance in Charlotte herself. No, she was 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; & while she pleased herself the first 5 minutes with fancying the Persecutions which *ought* to be the Lot of the interesting Clara, especially in the form of the most barbarous conduct on Lady Denham's side, she found no reluctance to admit from subsequent observation, that they appeared to be on very comfortable Terms.

(391-92; my emphasis, except for "ought")

With the possible exception of Fanny Price, every Austen heroine is at some point led astray in her "reading" of other characters by her desire to have them conform to some *a priori* or fictional model. Catherine Morland imagines gothic crimes at Northanger Abbey. Elinor no less than Marianne casts the worldly Willoughby as a romantic hero. Elizabeth interprets Darcy's behaviour in light of her first impressions of him, failing to revise her hypothesis according to

her later observations. Emma, had she ever visited Sanditon in order to fulfill her ambition to glimpse the sea, would surely have imagined an elaborate romance concerning the lovely Clara, rationalizing away all evidence to the contrary. Even Anne Elliot allows the elegiac poets to blind her to the possibility of a second spring.

Charlotte, like them, like all of us, is vulnerable to romantic first impressions, but she reflects, reasons, and revises her views as shrewdly as the author who created her. In a novel characterized by hazy glimpses and restless change, her good-natured, tough-minded presence is remarkable. Apart from Charlotte, only Clara Brereton and Sidney Parker might possibly turn out to be sensible judges in this novel, but Clara is too remote for us to read her accurately; like Charlotte, we catch “just a glimpse over the pales of something white and womanish” (210), although unlike Charlotte, we also benefit from the narrator’s assurances that Clara “saw through” Sir Edward “and had not the least intention of being seduced” (405). Sidney, in turn, emerges out of the morning mist too late in the fragment to do more than display his dashing looks, his easy manners, and his elegant carriage. Only Charlotte offers us the clear-eyed consciousness we expect in an Austen novel. What she would have made of Sidney, who according to his older brother, “has always said what he chose of & to us, all [and] is a very clever Young Man,—and with great powers of pleasing” (382), we can only speculate. But speculation is, of course, what *Sanditon* is all about.

The characters of *Sanditon*, like those of *Persuasion*, are set adrift from the rooted world of the landed gentry. Those who build their houses upon the sand, however, may require more than parasols to protect them when the winds begin to blow.

NOTES

- ¹ Both Southam (“*Sanditon*: the Seventh Novel”) and MacDonagh demonstrate the historical accuracy of Austen’s portrayal of these changing social trends.
- ² Although Austen herself, in the “Advertisement” to *Northanger Abbey*, claims that the novel “was finished in the year 1803” (NA 11), I follow Southam’s dating of the period of composition as essentially 1798-99 (“*Sanditon*: the Seventh Novel” 3).
- ³ Southam argues that “*Sanditon* can be regarded as a recasting of *Northanger Abbey* (“Introduction” 7).
- ⁴ When Mr. Parker characteristically misreads “the neat-looking end of a Cottage, which was seen romantically situated among wood on a high Eminence at some little Distance” from where his carriage overturns in Willingden, as a gentleman’s cottage *ornée* like the one which Sir Edward is running up at Sanditon (364), Mr. Heywood corrects him: ““But as to that Cottage, I can assure you Sir that it is in fact—in spite of its spruce air at this distance—) as indifferent a double Tenement as any in the Parish, and that my Shepherd lives at one end, & three old women at the other”” (366). Things seen from afar in this novel are hazy, romantic, attractive; up close, they reveal themselves to be more prosaic or sinister. Charlotte, like Mr.

Parker, forms misguided impressions of people and things, but she quickly revises her views upon a closer or subsequent look.

- ⁵ He later concedes that she "is labelled as the heroine and occupies the heroine's role," although she remains remote from our sympathy ("*Sanditon: the Seventh Novel*" 16).
- ⁶ In Jane Austen's time, literary critics were shifting from judging a work of literature by its effects upon readers' morality to judging readers by the quality of their responses to literature. I have discussed this issue at length in my unpublished dissertation "Jane Austen's Readers" (McGill University, 1981).

Following the lead of moralists like Dr. Johnson, quixotic novels from *The Female Quixote* to *Waverley* had implicitly blamed sensational literature for inflaming weak fancies such as Sir Edward's. A bad book was, by definition, one which provoked bad behaviour. According to this view, it was a writer's responsibility to reader-proof his novels by painting wicked characters as loathsome fiends and virtuous characters as attractive paragons. Richardson was far too good a writer to create such one-dimensional characters. Nevertheless, he remained anxious over his readers' license to read as perversely as Sir Edward does.

Austen, in contrast, trusts her readers. Of course, she has the advantage of the third-person narrative voice to direct readers' judgements. As Mr. Parker himself observes, echoing Richardson's anxieties about his epistolary narrative structure: "Those who tell their own Story you know must be listened to with Caution" (376). In some cases—notably *Mansfield Park*—Austen may lay traps for dull elves unable to construe a "mixed" character, but in *Sanditon*, in which the narrator openly condemns Sir Edward's "perversity of Judgement" for misreading the "most approved Writers" (404-05), the fault lies not in the books but in Sir Edward.

- ⁷ On 1 September 1796, the year of *Camilla*'s publication, Jane Austen alludes to an incident in the novel when writing to her sister Cassandra from their brother's house: "To-morrow I shall be just like Camilla in Mr. Dubster's summer-house; for my Lionel [Camilla's prankster brother] will have taken away the ladder by which I came here, or at least by which I intended to get away, and here I must stay till his return. My situation, however, is somewhat preferable to hers, for I am very happy here . . ." (*Letter 4*). A few days later she writes again to Cassandra: "Give my love to Mary Harrison, & tell her I wish whenever she is attached to a young Man, some respectable Dr. Marchmont may keep them apart for five Volumes" (*Letter 5*). (Dr. Marchmont is the cautious tutor in *Camilla* who advises the hero not to propose to Camilla.) A third letter in this sequence refers to a new acquaintance: "There are two Traits in her Character which are pleasing; namely she admires Camilla & drinks no cream in her Tea" (*Letter 6*). Clearly *Camilla* was fresh in their minds, serving both as a shorthand for the sisters' communications and as a stick for measuring real and fictional characters.
- ⁸ Southam demonstrates that most of Austen's revisions serve to heighten the verbal satire by emphasizing distinctive comic speech patterns and use of jargon (*Literary Manuscripts* 120; Introduction 10).

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