

“Here & There & Every Where”: Is Sidney Parker the Intended Hero of *Sanditon*?

DAVID BELL

English Department, California State University, Sacramento, CA 95819

When students study *Sanditon* at the end of my seminar on Jane Austen’s novels, I give them the following assignment:

Readers frequently puzzle over whether Sidney Parker is the intended hero of *Sanditon*. Taking into account Austen’s practices in her published novels, what arguments can you advance to support the claim that Sidney *is* the intended hero? What arguments can you advance to support the claim that he is *not*?

Note the subtle brilliance of my pedagogical strategy. Students cannot respond adequately to these two questions without drawing on their knowledge of the entire Austen oeuvre; thus they have no choice but to begin preparing for the final exam days earlier than they otherwise might. Few of my readers, however, face the imminent threat of a final exam. And some of the more cantankerous may want to quarrel with the assumption which underlies my assignment. How can we be sure that studying Austen’s practice in her published novels will help us better understand her plans for *Sanditon*? Austen explicitly identifies Charlotte Heywood as the heroine, but isn’t it possible that she is a different sort of heroine, less a participant than a detached observer reflecting with amusement on what she sees? Perhaps the love story, if there is one, will be of minor importance, and the plot will focus instead on the collapse of Mr. Parker’s business ventures. To be sure, nothing requires Austen to structure her seventh novel in ways similar to her previous six.

However, even though Austen’s novels are very different from one another, they have many elements in common. Perhaps the most obvious is that all are courtship novels. Does this mean that Austen *must* have been planning another courtship novel? Of course not. But it does suggest that she probably was. A courtship novel requires a heroine and a hero. If Charlotte is the heroine, is Sidney her future mate?

The most obvious argument in favor of Sidney’s being the intended hero is that no one else is available. Sir Edward Denham, that bookful blockhead who misreads every novel he gets his hands on, and Arthur Parker, the imaginary invalid whose only malady is an aversion to work, are both out of the question. Each is a caricature, a figure of fun, treated by the author with amused contempt. Apart from Sidney, they are the only bachelors to appear in the story. It is possible, of course, that Austen was planning to introduce eligible young men later—Sidney is expecting a friend or two. But in all her

previous novels, the hero appears on the scene very early. Knightley, for instance, is introduced in chapter one, Edmund Bertram in chapter two, Darcy in chapter three, and Wentworth in chapter seven (Anne recalls their brief engagement in chapter four). Though Sidney does not arrive in Sanditon until chapter twelve, he is first mentioned in chapter two. If Austen had planned to wait even later than chapter twelve to introduce her hero, she would have been deviating significantly from her practice in previous novels.

Unlike Arthur and Sir Edward, Sidney is an intelligent, sensible young man, clearly capable of attracting a discerning young woman. And unlike Mr. Parker and Lady Denham, he is not caught up in the foolish speculative frenzy that almost no one in the once quiet village seems able to resist. The town is full of opportunists—from the legacy hunters to the entrepreneurs—all with schemes for making fortunes. Like Charlotte, Sidney is clear-sighted enough to recognize folly when he sees it; he reacts, as she does, with amusement, laughing at the improvements of Mr. Parker and at the imaginary disorders of his two sisters and younger brother.

Sidney is himself financially independent—as “well-provided for” as Mr. Parker by a “collateral Inheritance” (371)—and, presumably, his money is not invested in Mr. Parker’s wild projects. He could clearly offer Charlotte a good home and a secure future.

Isn’t it then safe to assume that Sidney and Charlotte would have ended up as lovers had Austen lived to complete the book? Marie Dobbs, author of a completion published in 1975, thinks so. She cites the collateral inheritance passage as one piece of evidence to support her contention that Sidney has been “marked out for the hero.” “This is the sort of information Jane Austen’s faithful readers immediately register as a clue. It is, in fact, quite unnecessary information to include at this stage [chapter two] as Sidney is not even to appear for another ten chapters.” She then goes on to say, “The next reference to him is dropped so carelessly into chapter four that surely Jane Austen would have disguised her intentions more in any final revision” (328). Here is the passage to which Dobbs refers:

“There—now the old House is quite left behind.—What is it, your Brother Sidney says about it’s being a Hospital?” “Oh! my dear Mary, merely a Joke of his. He pretends to advise me to make a Hospital of it. He pretends to laugh at my Improvements. Sidney says any thing you know. He has always said what he chose of & to us, all. Most Families have such a member among them I beleive Miss Heywood.— There is a someone in most families privileged by superior abilities or spirits to say anything.—In ours, it is Sidney; who is a very clever Young Man,—and with great powers of pleasing.—He lives too much in the World to be settled; that is his only fault.—He is here & there & every where. I wish we may get him to Sanditon. I should like to have you acquainted with him.—And it would be a fine thing for the Place!—

Such a young Man as Sidney, with his neat equipage & fashionable air,— You & I Mary, know what effect it might have: Many a respectable Family, many a careful Mother, many a pretty Daughter, might it secure us, to the prejudice of E. Bourne & Hastings.” (382)

It is surprising that Dobbs should point to this passage in arguing the case for Sidney as Austen’s intended hero, for to my mind, the passage casts considerable doubt on her claim. Which of Austen’s previous heroes might be described in terms similar to these? Captain Wentworth? Mr. Knightley? Edmund Bertram? Mr. Darcy? Edward Ferrars or Colonel Brandon? “If we compare Sidney to Jane Austen’s other male characters,” says John Lauber, “he seems most similar to Henry Tilney, the wit and ironist of *Northanger Abbey*” (361). If Lauber had said “heroes” instead of “other male characters” I would have no quarrel with his statement. Of all Austen’s heroes, Henry Tilney is the only one who at all resembles Sidney Parker, and even that resemblance is fairly superficial—just as Henry enjoys teasing Catherine and Eleanor, so Sidney laughs at his brothers and sisters. No. Henry Tilney is not the *male character* to whom Sidney seems most similar. As we shall see, he much more closely resembles a good many others.

All six of Austen’s completed novels end with the heroine’s marriage, but in each case that marriage comes about only after a period of maturation and growth during which the heroine becomes involved in some way with a man other than her future husband (Elinor Dashwood is the only exception—her maturation comes about in other ways—but the pattern holds true for her sister and co-heroine, Marianne). It is hard to know what to call these other men in the heroine’s lives, but for our purposes I think “would-be hero” might be the most appropriate term. Each of them is attracted to the heroine (or, in the case of Frank Churchill, appears to be), and in every novel except *Pride and Prejudice*, some sort of proposal is either actually made, expected, or imagined. In some cases, the would-be heroes are better off financially than the heroes. Even before he inherits Kellynch, William Walter Elliot is probably a good deal wealthier than Wentworth, and Henry Crawford’s income no doubt far exceeds Edmund’s even after Edmund acquires his second living. Frank Churchill can expect to inherit Enscombe and Willoughby (who already possesses one estate), Allenham. Only Wickham and probably Thorpe are too poor to support a wife in some degree of comfort. My point is that Austen’s heroes and would-be heroes cannot necessarily be distinguished on the basis of wealth. Sidney’s collateral inheritance is not convincing evidence that he is the intended hero.

Nor are his sense and intelligence. Mr. Parker’s comment that Sidney is “a very clever Young Man” could apply to all of Austen’s

would-be heroes except the first—that dim-witted caricature of a gothic villain, John Thorpe. Each of the others is astute and resourceful, capable of providing—at least for a time—intellectual companionship to the novel's heroine. Willoughby has read widely enough to discuss poetry with Marianne. Wickham intrigues Elizabeth with his knowledge of Pemberley. Emma is delighted by Frank's playful banter, and even Fanny, who does her best to avoid talking to Henry at Mansfield, is refreshed by his conversation when he visits her at Portsmouth, so much so that her attitude toward him softens considerably. An active mind and a facility with language are a significant part of the appeal of the would-be heroes. In many cases, they are more accomplished conversationalists than the heroes, who can be awkward, shy, and uncomfortable when first becoming acquainted with the heroine—or in Wentworth's case, reacquainted. Austen makes a point of mentioning their social skills when first introducing the would-be heroes. His abrupt entrance into Barton cottage carrying Marianne, Willoughby explains “in a manner so frank and so graceful that his person, which was uncommonly handsome received additional charms from his voice and expression” (SS 42). Wickham's “appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best parts of beauty, a fine countenance, and a very pleasing address. The introduction was followed up on his side by a happy readiness of conversation—a readiness at the same time perfectly correct and unassuming . . .” (PP 72). “Henry Crawford, though not handsome had air and countenance”; his manners were “lively and pleasant” (MP 41-42). Frank Churchill “was a *very* good-looking young man; height, air, address, all were unexceptionable, and his countenance had a great deal of the spirit and liveliness of his father's.” In Frank, Emma discovers “a well-bred ease of manner, and a readiness to talk which convinced her that he came intending to be acquainted with her, and that acquainted they soon must be” (E 190). Mr. Elliot's manners, Lady Russell tells Anne, “were an immediate recommendation; and on conversing with him, she found the solid so supporting the superficial that she . . . could not seriously picture to herself a more agreeable or estimable man” (P 146). With these quotations in mind, how confident can we be that Austen is introducing a hero when she says, “Sidney Parker was about 7 or 8 & 20, very good looking, with a decided air of Ease & Fashion, and a lively countenance”? Mr. Parker has already mentioned his “great powers of pleasing” and his “neat equipage & fashionable air.” Do comments like these remind us of Brandon, Edward, Darcy, Edmund, Knightley, and Frederick, or do they rather bring to mind Willoughby, Wickham, Henry, Frank, and William Walter?

But it is not just his easy manners and fashionable air that call to mind Austen's would-be heroes. What most clearly connects Sidney

with the would-be heroes is his unsettled way of living. "He lives too much in the world to be settled," says Mr. Parker. "He is here & there & every where." An unreliable correspondent and inveterate rover, Sidney arrives in Sanditon intending a brief stay before moving on, perhaps to the Isle of Wight: "He was just come from Eastbourne proposing to spend two or three days at Sanditon—but the hotel must be his quarters" (424). Every one of Austen's would-be heroes is, like Sidney, frequently on the move, unwilling to stay in one place. From *Northanger Abbey* to *Persuasion* the pattern is the same. Catherine Morland first glimpses John Thorpe driving recklessly along the streets of Bath, and she quickly learns that his gig and his horses are his only interest in life. Anne Elliot first encounters William Walter on the beach at Lyme. He has been spending the night at an inn as he journeys from Sidmouth to Crewkerne en route to Bath and London. Willoughby travels about the country in pursuit of pleasure he can ill afford, seducing one girl in Bath, falling in love with another in Devon, and marrying a third in London. Elizabeth meets Wickham the day after his arrival in Meryton, a newly commissioned officer in the militia. Despite a sick aunt, Frank Churchill seems to have little difficulty in pursuing schemes of pleasure in various parts of the kingdom; doing his duty comes less easily to him, and he delays his much anticipated visit to Highbury until he can do his duty without sacrificing his pleasure. "To anything like a permanence of abode or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike" (*MP* 41). He refuses to settle on his own estate even to provide his sister a home, but he's happy to escort her into Northamptonshire, and stands ready "to fetch her away again at half an hour's notice whenever she [wearies] of the place" (*MP* 41).

Jane Austen's would-be heroes are charming but selfish, their restlessness indicative of their unwillingness to accept responsibility. At the Coles' party, Frank is the first to join the ladies after dinner, leaving the other gentlemen to discuss parish business. He "hated sitting long—was always the first to move when he could . . ." (*E* 221). Henry Crawford visits Everingham so rarely that he doesn't know the tenants of his own estate (*MP* 402). Darcy, by contrast, is, according to Mrs. Reynolds, "[n]ot like the wild young men now-a-days, who think of nothing but themselves. There is not one of his tenants or servants but will give him a good name" (*PP* 249). Colonel Brandon demonstrates his sense of stewardship by offering the Delaford living to a worthy young man instead of enriching himself by selling the presentation rights. And Mr. Knightley, the antithesis of the charming young man on the move, rarely leaves Donwell and devotes a good deal of his time and energy attending to the needs of the Highbury community. Those heroes who aren't landowners have professional responsibilities to attend to—

Henry, Edmund, and Edward, are, or intend to be, clergymen, and Wentworth is a naval officer. Wentworth's case is particularly noteworthy, success in the navy requiring technical expertise, dedication, courage, and the ability to inspire and lead. Hundreds of lives depend on a captain's devotion to duty.

Granted, Jane Austen doesn't provide us with a great deal of information about Sidney Parker, and only at the very end does he actually appear. But almost all the information she does provide suggests a would-be hero rather than a hero—a Frank Churchill or a Henry Crawford rather than a Darcy or a Wentworth (even his satiric comments about family members suggest a flippancy and lack of propriety more characteristic of a would-be hero than a hero). But perhaps Sidney would have become Charlotte's "project"; perhaps under Charlotte's influence Sidney would have abandoned his pleasure-seeking ways and settled down to a life of quiet respectability. Aren't Austen's novels about growth and change, the redemptive power of love? Doesn't Darcy improve under Elizabeth's influence, and Emma under Knightley's?

Elizabeth and Knightley are indeed instrumental in helping Darcy and Emma learn valuable lessons. Darcy had taken Elizabeth's acceptance for granted when he proposed to her and Emma had thoughtlessly assumed that her superior social position licensed her to say what she wished to a defenseless inferior. Both are reprimanded, and both, to their credit, take the reprimands to heart. Emma realizes that this was not the first time she had mistreated Miss Bates; and Darcy, who prides himself on his gentleman-like behavior, is mortified by his own rudeness. Both come to understand that they have disregarded their own codes of conduct. Their subsequent actions—Darcy's gracious reception of Elizabeth and the Gardiners at Pemberley, and Emma's penitential visit to Miss Bates the morning after the Box Hill outing—represent genuine attempts to live up to their professed ideals. Guided by principle and shamed by reproof, they struggle to make amends for past transgressions.

This process of moral growth, which Austen so vividly dramatizes, is not to be confused with a transformation of character. The distinction is important; Austen is clearly skeptical about significant changes in character. Without getting into the fascinating but enormously complex questions of nature versus nurture in the novels, suffice to say that in Austen's view, character is usually established well before adulthood. "If you, my dear father," pleads Elizabeth, "will not take the trouble of checking [Lydia's] exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt in the world" (*PP* 231). And later to an alarmed

Wickham, Elizabeth remarks that she thinks Mr. Darcy "improves on acquaintance." "I dare not hope," Wickham replies, "that he is improved in essentials." "Oh, no," says Elizabeth. "In essentials, I believe he is very much what he ever was" (234). Part disposition, part education, part habit, character can be simple (as is Lydia's) or complex (as is Darcy's), but once formed, it is not often or easily altered, even under the influence of a passionate attachment. Can anyone seriously doubt that even after his marriage to Jane Fairfax Frank Churchill will still be Frank Churchill? After all, Jane's influence seems to have had little effect before their marriage. And Henry Crawford, whose love for Fanny is deep and sincere, genuinely tries to improve himself, but his efforts are superficial and short-lived. After visiting Fanny in Portsmouth, he defers his planned trip to Everingham because he doesn't want to miss the opportunity of seeing Maria again: "curiosity and vanity were both engaged, and the temptation of immediate pleasure was too strong for a mind unused to making any sacrifice to right . . ." (MP 466). Sidney Parker is "7 or 8 & 20." Is it really likely that the love of a good woman will inspire him to give up his pleasure-seeking ways and settle down to a life of duty and routine? Had she lived to complete *Sanditon*, would Jane Austen, the hard-headed realist, the shrewd observer of human nature, have suddenly gone soft? Every woman dreams that she can reform her man, make him into what she knows he ought to be. And Charlotte, a resourceful young lady, could surely expect to be every bit as successful with Sidney as my wife has been with me.

Almost all of the admittedly limited evidence suggests that Sidney Parker is not hero material. The title of this weekend's conference is "*Sanditon: The New Direction?*" If in her seventh novel Austen were to decide that her heroine can do no better than Sidney Parker, that would be a new direction indeed.

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