

Parasols & Gloves & Broches & Circulating Libraries

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“Charlotte was to go . . . & to buy new Parasols, new Gloves, & new Broches, for her sisters & herself at the Library, which Mr. P. was anxiously wishing to support” (*Sanditon* 374). What kind of library was this circulating library at Sanditon? It is certainly not like any library familiar to most contemporary readers. Not only could one purchase “so many pretty Temptations” (*S* 390), but Mrs. Whitby, the “librarian,” seems as likely to refer one to sources for Chamber-Horses as to a copy of *Camilla*.

Before the eighteenth century, libraries in England were strictly for those who were associated with universities or other learned societies, or for those wealthy enough to collect and house their own books. While we don't see the former sort of library in the works of Jane Austen, we certainly see the latter. The library at Pemberley is surely magnificent—even though we have Miss Bingley's word for it. As Mr. Darcy says, “It ought to be good . . . it has been the work of many generations” (*P&P* 38). One can imagine that Mr. Knightley, too, would have an excellent library, though perhaps his collection would be of less antiquity. However, for those who could not afford a “gentleman's” library, or even for those gentlemen who were in town or at a spa for a short time, the circulating library filled the gap. Circulating libraries were part of the popular culture of the day, and references to them are found throughout Jane Austen.

The estimable James Fordyce, in his *Sermons to Young Women*, counsels strongly against the sort of books offered by circulating libraries. “What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured (for we have not read them) are in their nature so shameful, in their tendency so pestiferous, and contain such rank treason against the royalty of Virtue, such horrible violation of all decorum, that she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will be. Can it be true . . . that any young woman, pretending to decency, should endure for a moment to look on this infernal brood of futility and lewdness?” (Fordyce 176-77). However, though such advice was undoubtedly heeded by Mary Bennet and Mr. Collins—Fordyce's *Sermons* were, after all, first published in 1766—the patrons of Sanditon library were modern folk, and undoubtedly devoured popular novels without too much fear of censure, as did most of Austen's other characters.

While probably not great readers themselves, Lydia and Kitty Bennet were attracted by Meryton's circulating library. Lydia tells her mother, "'my aunt says that Colonel Forster and Captain Carter do not go so often to Miss Watson's as they did when they first came; she sees them now very often standing in Clarke's library'" (*P&P* 30); Lydia later writes her mother from Brighton that the library there is a gathering place for officers (*P&P* 238). And, of course, when invited to read to the Bennet ladies, "Mr. Collins readily assented, and a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels. . . . Other books were produced, and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce's Sermons" (*P&P* 68).

Fanny Price, being Fanny Price, of course, has more elevated uses for circulating libraries. While at Mansfield Park she had the use of her uncle's library, but at Portsmouth, "She became a subscriber—amazed at being any thing *in propria persona*, amazed at her own doings in every way; to be a renter, a chuser of books! And to be having any one's improvement in view in her choice! But so it was. Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself" (*MP* 398). Note that she does not introduce Susan to novels.

Henry Tilney, of course, sees circulating libraries with his usual perspicacity. When Catherine describes murder and mayhem to poor Miss Tilney, he explains: "'My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?—And you, Miss Morland—my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London—and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hope of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents'" (*NA* 113).

Jane Austen, too, was a subscriber to circulating libraries. On December 18, 1798, she wrote to Cassandra from Steventon: "I have received a very civil note from Mrs. Martin, requesting my name as a

Subscriber to her Library which opens January 14, & my name, or rather Yours, is accordingly given. My mother finds the Money. . . . As an inducement to subscribe, Mrs. Martin tells me that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of literature, &c. &c. She might have spared this pretension of *our* family, who are great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so; but it was necessary, I suppose, to the self-consequence of half her Subscribers" (*Letters* 38-39). (In 1807 she writes from Southampton that, "'Alphonsine' did not do . . . and we changed it for the 'Female Quixote' which now makes our evening amusement" [*Letters* 173]).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first use of the term "circulating library" in a 1742 advertisement for "a proposal for creating a circulating library in London . . . Librarian, Samuel Fancourt." However, this was only the first use of the term itself. There were a few rental libraries in existence in the seventeenth century; by early in the eighteenth century they began to crop up all over England and Scotland. Alan Ramsey established one in Edinburgh in 1725.

Unlike the personal or learned libraries, these were business enterprises, aimed at readers who could not afford to buy books, but who would be willing to pay perhaps half a guinea a year as a subscription fee, and then a few pence rental fee for each volume, or at readers who were away from town—perhaps at a seashore spa!—for a time, as well as those voracious readers who wanted the latest books at bargain prices. By Jane Austen's time, circulating libraries were popular, successful businesses found all over England and Scotland, both in the larger cities and in the smaller ones—as well as in the spa towns such as Bath and Lyme Regis. In general, only circulating libraries in the larger cities such as London and Edinburgh were devoted exclusively to books. Though some of the best libraries were run by publishers, many also started out as adjunct departments in printing establishments and stationers' shops; some even sold patent medicines, as well (Altick 57). In 1791, William Lane, famed for the Minerva Press, advertised "'complete CIRCULATING LIBRARIES . . . from One Hundred to Ten Thousand Volumes' for sale to grocers, tobacconists, picture-framers, haberdashers, and hatters eager for a profitable side line" (Altick 62).

While Jane never enumerates titles found in circulating libraries, Richard Sheridan is more specific about what Mrs. Malaprop terms "vile places, indeed" (1: 85). Lydia Languish—next to whom Catherine Morland seems quite as staid as any Fanny Price—is well read in contemporary novels. Her maid Lucy returns from a jaunt to several of Bath's circulating libraries with the following vol-

umes: *The Gordian Knot*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *The Tears of Sensibility*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *The Memories of a Lady of Quality*, written by herself, as well as the second volume of *The Sentimental Journey*. (Lydia later begs Lucy to hide these same volumes behind *Fordyce's Sermons*.) Lucy had been unable to turn up a reasonable copy of *The Memoirs of Lady Woodford*. She says, "Yes indeed, Ma'am.—I ask'd everywhere for it; and I might have brought it from Mr. Frederick's, but Lady Slattern Lounger, who had just sent it home, had so soiled and dog's-ear'd it, it wa'n't fit for a christian to read." Lydia responds, "Heigh-ho!—Yes, I always know when Lady Slattern has been before me.—She has a most observing thumb; and I believe cherishes her nails for the convenience of making marginal notes" (1:80). Such are the perils faced by the circulating library subscriber!

In spite of the stereotypes and satire abounding about circulating libraries and novel readers, however, we know that novels were not the only literature available for rent. In addition to the poetry and biography beloved of Fanny Price, the libraries stocked uplifting literature such as conduct books and sermons, as well as travel, philosophy, etc. A 1759 Catalogue for Francis and John Noble's circulating library lists some of the following inventory:

history and antiquities	642	
lives & memoirs	241	
voyages & travels	210	
novels & romances	629	
poetry & plays	750	
mathematics, philosophy	249	
law	37	
arts, music	53	
divinity	312	(Manley 77)

So, however popular novels were, other areas were also well stocked. And, since these were business enterprises, we can assume that the other areas were also well read.

Subscription prices varied somewhat, but generally were thought to be reasonable. The Nobles' brothers charged ten shillings sixpence per year, or three shillings per quarter. The subscriber was then entitled to any two books from the collection at any time. For an additional charge they would even deliver books to your London residence (Manley 75-77). Many libraries also had reading rooms attached; in these cases, the subscription charge was usually higher. Some libraries, such as Hookham's, had sliding rates according to services selected.

The subscription books themselves were useful records of who was who in town. When Mr. Parker takes Charlotte Heywood to Mrs.

Whitby's library, they examine the subscription book, but "The List of Subscribers was but commonplace. . . . Mr. P. could not but feel that the List was not only without Distinction, but less numerous than he had hoped. It was but July however . . ." (S 389). The clientele of circulating libraries crosses some class lines, though of course would exclude the illiterate. It could include the milliners' apprentices (Tompkins 2) and the Harriet Smiths, who could not afford to purchase all the new romances they might want to read, as well as the Charlotte Heywoods, who might be visitors at a spa or in town for a season, and the upper class women who wanted to read the latest publications and have the opportunity to be seen at the fashionable libraries. At any rate, the majority of subscribers were female, upper and middle class readers who often preferred, like many do today, to read books by women writers (Mellor 137).

A noted feature of the circulating library was the three-decker novel, also known as "leviathans." In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century, the circulating libraries—especially Mudie's, which was founded in 1842—were powerful enough to insist that all novels be published in three volumes. (Occasional novelists who refused to be published in this manner either had to be tremendously popular, and therefore more powerful than the libraries and publishers combined—Dickens and Thackeray would be examples—or might end up unpublished.)

Many circulating libraries were also publishers, and usually publishers of novels. It is interesting to note that many of these books were "lost"—that is, while circulated widely in their time, no copies have come down to us. A study by Edward Jacobs and Antonia Forster compared contemporary review literature of fiction against the British Library's *Eighteenth Century Short Catalogue on CD-ROM* and *The National Union Catalog of Pre-1956 Imprints* and determined approximately 8% of the titles reviewed to be missing from contemporary libraries; most of these had been published by circulating libraries (268), and undoubtedly had been considered mere ephemera by later collecting research libraries.

Circulating libraries—including Boots and Harrods and Smiths—remained a staple for general readers in the UK into this century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they had a brisk business with the colonies; if you lived on a tea plantation in Ceylon, for example, you could subscribe for a monthly shipment of books from your favorite London library. Circulating libraries did especially well at home during World War II, but met their demise with the popularization of television.

I proposed this paper on the history of circulating libraries because I thought that it would be an interesting research project, and, indeed, it was. However, I now realize that my proposal was something of a

joke—perhaps a joke played on me by Jane Austen. That was no circulating library in Sanditon, any more than it was a parasol shop or a glove shop; it might as well have been called “The Umbrellas of Sanditon.” Mrs. Whitby’s shop was a general merchandise shop providing all things to all people, and undoubtedly included a few rental novels that she—and Mr. Parker—called a library. Jane Austen, of course, was well acquainted with much better circulating libraries, and had subscriptions herself. Mr. Parker, on the other hand, was no great reader, and so perhaps knew no better when he advertised Mrs. Whitby’s shop as a library. In taking Mr. Parker at his enthusiastic word I was as credulous as any other new visitor to Sanditon.

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