

Sanditon, Empire, and the Sea: Circles of Influence, Wheels of Power

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I would like to begin with a delightful quote from Jane Austen's *Sanditon* in which Charlotte Heywood is rescued from Sir Edward Denham's unwanted attentions:

They were now advancing so deep in Physics, that Charlotte veiwed the entrance of the Servant with the Tea things, as a very fortunate Interruption.—It produced a great & immediate change. The young Man's attentions were instantly lost. He took his own Cocoa from the Tray,—which seemed provided with almost as many Teapots &c as there were persons in company, Miss P. drinking one sort of Herb-Tea & Miss Diana another, and turning completely to the Fire, sat coddling and cooking it to his own satisfaction. . . . When his Toils were over however, he moved back his Chair into as gallant a Line as ever, & proved that he had not been working only for himself, by his earnest invitation to her to take both Cocoa & Toast.—She was already helped to Tea— (416)

This passage from Jane Austen's unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, was written at a time when British wheels of power and colonial expansion overseas had led to fashionable social circles patterning themselves around tea tables abundantly supplied with endless varieties of tea. It would be no exaggeration to say that Empire building changed the habits of the British forever as they took to drinking coffee, cocoa, and tea. The Boston Tea Party may have been a major event in this country, but little has been written in English literature about colonial exploitation in Asia where the tea came from. Much less is known about Chinese and Indian rituals of tea drinking. Though Austen makes no mention of far away, exotic lands like China and India that supplied the English with this symbol of leisure, there is no evidence that her ironic tone plays with the world of tea plantations that made possible the life of leisure she describes as in the passage above where Sir Edward Denham "Toils" in preparing his Cocoa seated comfortably beside a fire. Though the spreading seas of influence and power do indeed create a stable world on land, Austen makes no such connections between stable homes and spreading seas. However, she triumphantly destabilizes this peaceful domestic world by introducing battle imagery mixing and mocking gallant acts in the line of duty. In this passage, having attended so completely to his own needs, Sir Edward Denham now "moves back his Chair into as gallant a Line as ever . . ." (416). Charlotte, meanwhile, has witnessed his advance into Physics being checked by the appearance of a whole army of teapots and cups. To her delight,

“The young man’s attentions were instantly lost” (416). She thus delights in his loss and her triumphant release from his incessant, meaningless conversation.

Such battle images among the tea things signal storms that crack open tea cups. To conquer and subdue may not be typical of Austen’s fictional world. Yet, not the battlefield where individuals kill and are killed, conquered and subdued, but battles on the domestic stage are of keen interest to her. She is alert to the clash and ring of battle that signals war between the sexes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, in their fierce attempt to conquer a husband, Mrs. Bennet and her daughters “attacked him [Mr. Bennet] in various ways; with barefaced questions, ingenious suppositions, and distant surmises; but he eluded the skill of them all” by giving no satisfying response (9). To conquer a husband or to subdue a wife, to balance power against powerlessness, is Austen’s typical strategy. She concerns herself with the whole social game, played out in social circles of powerlessness and power, as it relates to property and the woman question. In her interest in property and power, she belongs to what Margaret Kirkham refers to as the age of Enlightenment Feminism; however, her interest in property and power is limited to exploring what empowers women and why a woman of no property should ever be in want of a husband. If she belongs to the age of Enlightenment Feminism, she also belongs to the age of Enlightenment Colonialism. The ownership of property in far flung regions of Empire that have a direct relevance to material prosperity and power in English social and political circles, is not her concern.

In writing her comedies of manners, Austen typically arranges her characters around tinkling tea tables; not the tea, but the people drinking the tea are of interest to her. Though she explores the social context of tea and elaborates on the ritual of English tea time, she chooses to ignore its larger cultural implications. However, for the Eastern reader of Jane Austen’s novels, a ritual borrowed from ancient civilizations in the East, and recreated by British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, as a symbol of civilized living, carries with it a ring of irony. Austen of course plays with elaborate social structures to make fine moral distinctions between different types of tea, coffee, and cocoa drinkers. As Charlotte Heywood drinks her tea, she watches Sir Edward Denham adjust his social mask to offer her cocoa and toast, but, as we know, he is already too late.

In *Sanditon*, Austen further explores what goes into the making of Sir Edward Denham’s character and personality. When Charlotte asks him to describe the sort of novels he approves of, Sir Edward Denham responds with enthusiasm, “The Novels which I approve are such as display Human Nature with Grandeur—such as shew her in the Sublimities of intense Feeling—such as exhibit the progress of strong Passion from the first Germ of incipient Susceptibility to

the utmost Energies of Reason half dethroned,—where we see the strong spark of Woman’s Captivations elicit such Fire in the Soul of Man as leads him . . . to hazard all, dare all, atcheive all, to obtain her—” (403). Sir Edward’s reading of sentimental novels has occupied the greater part of “his literary hours, & formed his Character” and thus he has only derived “false Principles from Lessons of Morality” (404-05). It naturally follows that Sir Edward’s “great object in life was to be seductive” and he fancied himself “quite in the line of the Lovelaces.” Sir Edward’s designs on seducing Clara thus parallel Lovelace’s designs on Clarissa, “If she could not be won by affection, he must carry her off. He knew his Business . . . he felt a strong curiosity to ascertain whether the Neighbourhood of Tombuctoo might not afford some solitary House adapted for Clara’s reception . . .” (405-06).

As Austen spins her narrative to expose Sir Edward’s motives that have clearly been shaped by his inability to understand fiction or fact, she raises fascinating questions about the dangers as well as values inherent in the experience of reading fiction. Sir Edward’s fanciful world of fiction leads him to the real Clara whom he fancies himself seducing and removing to the remote fantasy world of Timbuctoo. However, Timbuctoo is also a remote land due to its very real geographical distance from Great Britain; it is a place and a name rich in connotative meaning in the discourse of Empire. Though Timbuctoo is no longer colonized, even today in a post-colonial world, its name continues to represent some sort of God-forsaken place quite apart from the civilized English center. No doubt copies of Jane Austen’s *Sanditon* will be freely available in libraries in the “Neighbourhood of Tombuctoo” today; it would therefore be interesting to get a Timbuctooan’s response to this fictional reference. I would argue that Austen makes a sophisticated reference to Timbuctoo as fantasy within the concentric circles of the larger wheel of her narrative structure. Yet, whether one considers the Timbuctoo of romance or reality, it inevitably leads to the cultural complexities embedded in the rhetoric of Empire. Whether a reader interprets this reference to Sir Edward’s stupidity in being so influenced by the fanciful and sensational in novels, or whether she or he sees in it Austen’s doubly ironic reference, since she appears to be only partly aware of its cross-cultural implications, is an open question. To romanticize the exotic and far away is attractive, and, in this fictional context, amusing. However, it does not cancel out the reality of Gayatri Spivak’s acute observations on nineteenth-century British novelists. In “Three Women’s Texts and A Critique of Imperialism,” she asserts, “It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that Imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural repre-

sentation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" (798). Austen's sophisticated and complex aesthetic designs do not exclude her in this regard from the achievements of her contemporaries.

Like *Sanditon*, her earlier novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* are also what I call her sea novels. The setting of *Mansfield Park* includes the larger colonial context of the sea; Sir Thomas Bertram travels to Antigua to attend to his plantation. In *Persuasion*, Austen re-creates a whole world of sailors and of sailing, of colonial enterprises, adventures abroad, and rewards leading to prosperity at home. *Sanditon* does not detail the life of sailors and sailing, but its setting by the sea is vividly realized and readers are referred to exotic, far away lands like Timbuctoo. In *Sanditon*, Jane Austen continues to write in the same vein as she had written *Persuasion*. She explores different social circles and their limitations on land, and moves toward new ground bordering the sea. Literally, *Sanditon* is a new location, a new holiday resort that Mr. Parker and Lady Denham seek to promote. As landed property, it borders the sea, and, indeed, acquires more value because it borders the sea.

Sanditon has no ending since it is an unfinished novel, but the concluding passage of *Persuasion* is an ironic comment on Austen's typical pattern of happy endings, "Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection. . . . She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (252). Such an ironic conclusion comes as no surprise to critics who have long since rejected the earlier notion that Jane Austen's novels were confined to the domestic sphere with no interest in larger historical or political contexts. Her awareness of England as a seafaring nation triumphant in victories abroad, points to the larger world her smaller island nation defines itself against. In *Sanditon* too we get clues to how well attuned she is to colonial and contemporary social discourse. If colonial expansion changed the habits of the colonizers for ever, how much deeper must be the inner modes of thought and feeling, of attitudes toward self and others. Of these Austen was not unaware.

The sea motif connects with the journey motif in *Sanditon* as well as in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. *Sanditon* begins with a journey associated with Mr. and Mrs. Parker's eagerness to develop *Sanditon* by the sea as a holiday resort. Ironically, such attempts at progress lead nowhere with their carriage wheels spinning out of control as it "quit the high road and attempt[ed] a very rough Lane" and were thus "overturned in toiling up it's long ascent half rock, half sand" (363-64). Things are thus turned upside down at the very beginning

of the novel. A "wild goose chase," "hurry and confusion," a carriage overturned, an ankle sprained, such details introduce us to Mr. and Mrs. Parker who seem to be going in circles instead of arriving at a destination. Austen mocks their clear sense of purpose at the novel's opening. The comic confusion of losing their way precedes their overturned carriage with its wheels spinning meaninglessly in the air.

Out of this circular motion of powerless wheels, comes the meeting of the Parkers and the Heywoods and the opportunity for Charlotte Heywood to journey to Sanditon and move in very different circles of influence and power than she has been used to. Much of the fictional action is seen through Charlotte's consciousness. Through her eyes we catch a glimpse of unforgettably beautiful scenes of nature as in, "Charlotte . . . found amusement enough in standing at her ample Venetian window, & looking over the miscellaneous foreground of unfinished Buildings, waving Linen, & tops of Houses, to the Sea, dancing & sparkling in Sunshine & Freshness—" (384). Set beside this is the harshness and ill-will of human nature. Of Lady Denham, Charlotte observes, "But she is very, very mean.— I can see no good in her—" (402).

The serenity of Sanditon's setting by the sea contrasts with the restless activity on land. In this her last novel, Austen is unable to contain the chaos created by human limitations. There is in *Sanditon* a sense of constant motion, of wheels ever-turning, and a never-ending restlessness. A criss-cross pattern of journeys undertaken for real or imagined causes alerts the reader to Austen's struggle to contain conflicts that veer out of control. She seems to take a long, lingering look at endless vistas of beauty and hope in nature. She also seems to take a long look at human possibilities, but comes up with nothing. There is no conclusion other than an ironic passage pointing to life's never-ending absurdities. The setting of the sea—and all its associations with the romance of adventure, the glories of Empire, and storms in teacups—ultimately suggests nothingness in *Sanditon*. The characters do not live happily ever after but are trapped in their meaningless exertions. A compelling modern novel, *Sanditon* is complex and disturbing. Its center displaced, the wheel cannot come full circle.

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