

Sickness and Silliness in *Sanditon*

JOHN WILTSHIRE

La Trobe University, School of English, Faculty of Humanities, Bundoora,
Victoria 3083 Australia

INTRODUCTION

Only two manuscripts of Jane Austen's mature novels survive. The last two chapters of *Persuasion* are in the British Library in London; the manuscript of what we now call *Sanditon* is at King's College, Cambridge. The manuscript is kept in an annex of the library which is humble indeed. As I remember, it's a low, cottage-like building, and as you climb the bare wooden stairs to the upper room where the rare manuscripts can be read, you might well be reminded of the stairs going up to the Bates's room above the shop. The room where you read the manuscript is low ceilinged, almost an attic, beneath the roof. The manuscript arrives in a little plain cardboard box. It's tiny. Inside is a small notebook, not much bigger than a diary; it's been made by folding sheets of ordinary writing paper together and stitching them together down the centre by hand. The writing covers the pages from margin to margin, as if making as much use as possible of a scarce and valuable commodity. As Brian Southam has said, "there's something 'precious, poignant and tantalising'"¹ about this object which seems to epitomise, to symbolise, a woman's, a gentlewoman's lot, among all the magnificence of King's College.

Reading the MS of *Sanditon* is a poignant experience, too, because the manuscript tells two stories simultaneously. One is the narrative of the country girl, Charlotte Heywood's, introduction to the resort and to a range of wildly eccentric, nearly monomaniacal characters. It's an audacious narrative; swift-moving and inventive. But the other story the narrative tells is of its author's struggle against ill-health and disease. Jane Austen rewrote the final chapters of *Persuasion* and finished them in early August 1816. She may have tinkered with the manuscript of *Northanger Abbey* in the next few months. Then, perhaps despairing of bringing that novel's depiction of a fashionable resort up to date, she began a new novel, this one at the cutting edge of contemporary fashions and interest. At the head of the manuscript is written "Jan. 27 1817," and about two thirds of the way through, "March 1st." At the very end of the writing, as if to sign off, is written "March 18." "To date is to sign," writes Derrida: these dates are marks of the author's own corporeality, and they inevitably link the manuscript with the circumstances of its production.² So one can feel, reading this MS of *Sanditon*, that one is witnessing a battle to write, a battle of professional commitment,

against the debilitating disease that was to kill its author just four months after she wrote its final words, on July 18, 1817.

“NERVES”

Sanditon is a wonderful book, incomplete though it is. But is it “a new direction”? I shall begin my discussion of *Sanditon* by emphasizing its continuity with the other novels of Jane Austen. Which character among them makes this speech?

“Tell him what a dreadful state I am in—that I am frightened out of my wits; and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me, such spasms in my side, and pains in my head, and such beatings at heart, that I can get no rest by night or day. . . .”

Is this Mary Musgrove? Fanny Price perhaps? Mr. Woodhouse? It is Mrs. Bennet, of course. But it might just as well have been one of the hypochondriacal characters who populate *Sanditon*.

After the elopement of Lydia and Wickham Mrs. Bennet “keeps her room.” As is her habit, she expresses her distress—her despair, even—through the medium of her body. We can call this, very loosely, a hysterical condition. Most often, of course, Mrs. Bennet voices her complaints in the typical idiom of her time (and even of ours) as “nerves.” “Nerves,” ever since the publication of George Cheyne’s *The English Malady or a treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds* in 1733, had been known as a typical complaint of the Anglo-Saxon middle and upper classes. “English” is interesting: this points to the fact that the British were the first country with a substantial middle class. “Nervous disorders are the Diseases of the Wealthy, the Voluptuous and the Lazy,” Cheyne wrote. He saw nervous disease as the result of too much leisure and too little activity, too much to eat and too little exercise, but he had no doubt that it was a reality, that the people who expressed such symptoms as Mrs. Bennet does, were not imagining what they said they experienced in their bodies.

So there is a link between *Pride and Prejudice*, the most romantic and rational of Jane Austen’s novels, and *Sanditon*, in which both romance and rationality take a back seat. There is another link, just as significant. When the regiment departs for Brighton, we are told that Lydia and Kitty feel that their hearts are broken, and that “their affectionate mother shared their grief; she remembered what she had herself endured, five and twenty years ago.” Like her younger daughters, she longs to persuade Mr. Bennet to take a family holiday there, and remarks “A little sea-bathing would set me up for ever.” Sea bathing was widely understood as the most efficient remedy for diseases of the nerves, and Brighton, like other resorts, was booming. We are led to understand, of course, that it is not sea-bathing that is the real attraction of Brighton in the Regency period.

When Mrs. Bennet speaks of “sea-bathing” she does not mean swimming: “immersion” meant that you were taken out in a “bathing machine” drawn by a horse and then “dipped” into the cold sea, suddenly, by an attendant. No wonder that poor Miss Lambe, the West Indian heiress of *Sanditon*, “chilly & tender” (421),³ is “frightened, poor Thing,” of her first dip (424). (The phrase “chilly and tender,” by the way, is one which Jane Austen probably found in a popular eighteenth-century manual about nursing.)⁴ Immersion in sea water was thought to toughen and strengthen the fibres, to invigorate the circulation, and thus generally strengthen the constitution. (Rather like cooking vegetables in salt water—they get tougher.) In the 1770s Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale used to go to Brighton and experience immersion in the chilly waters of the English channel in October. Johnson called the man who attended them “Doctor Dip.” As we have learned, bathing was undertaken under medical supervision. (Johnson also was known to growl “I hate immersion.”)

Sea bathing wasn’t the only form in which water was associated with health. “Taking the waters” at an inland spa was also regarded as medicinal, and spa towns, like the coastal resorts, flourished by offering a self-righteous pretext (taking care of one’s health) for meeting one’s social equals, and having a good time. Visits to spas and resorts were so much a part of polite culture in the period that it isn’t surprising that they play a role in Jane Austen’s novels as they do in those of her contemporaries. Bath, of course, is important in *Persuasion* as well as in *Northanger Abbey*, and Weymouth, another holiday town on the south coast, is where Frank and Jane met. Lyme Regis in *Persuasion* is visited even in autumn, as a fashionable resort, Regis signifying that royalty had given its stamp of approval. Mary Musgrove bathes at Charmouth in November! But Jane Austen’s interest in such resorts was not merely incidental: as I shall suggest, they are pivotal to her long-standing concern with the body as the space or site on which social and cultural dramas are enacted.

“Sea air” was also, probably reasonably, thought advantageous for health. Perhaps the clearest anticipation of that communal obsession with health which is *Sanditon*’s subject, in fact, is the extended comic dialogue between Mr. Woodhouse and his daughter Isabella in Chapter XII of *Emma*; the one preferring Mr. Wingfield’s advice and embrocations, and the air of South End, the other Mr. Perry’s advice and the air of Cromer. Isabella remarks that “You must not confound us with London in general, my dear sir. The neighbourhood of Brunswick Square is very different from almost all the rest. We are so very airy!” “*we* are so remarkably airy!” This is as daft as anything in *Sanditon*. I’ve been told that Brunswick Square was in the neighbourhood of the city’s abattoirs. “A little of our own bracing sea air

will soon set me up again,' says Mr. Parker." In the manuscript "own" has been inserted, just to intensify the effect.

SANDITON

"Nerves" are only one form of hypochondria. As Anita Gorman notes in her *The Body in Illness and Health: themes and images in Jane Austen*, "Eighteenth century writers were fascinated by the complex interweaving of body and mind they called vapors, fits, hysteria, melancholy and hypochondriasis . . ." as well as nerves. "The focus on hysteria/hypochondria," as she argues, "demonstrates the period's fascination with the mind/body relationship, and its suspicion that illness often conveyed meaning beyond the literal and apparent."⁵ In *Sanditon*, then, Jane Austen draws together and intensifies subject-matter that she has scattered, in a more incidental fashion, throughout her earlier books. Both the setting and the concern with hypochondria reflect preoccupations of the author through the whole body of her work, from the early skit "Catherine, or, The Bower," and the earlier unfinished novel *The Watsons*, to the concern with injury and wounding, of various kinds, in *Persuasion*. In this fragment there are no less than three figures who suffer from hypochondriacal conditions, and the whole text is preoccupied with questions of middle-class leisure and its relation to sickness and the pursuit of health.

Sanditon is exuberant, outlandish, terrifically animated, and comic. In fact, in the eleven and a half chapters that Jane Austen lived to complete, it's the most amusing, almost, one might say, the most manic, text that Jane Austen composed. Its mania is in the characters, though, not in the narrator, or the narrative. Some readers have claimed that *Sanditon* shows a return to the style of Jane Austen's satirical and parodic juvenilia,⁶ but this, I'd argue, is a misreading for two reasons. One is that however extraordinary the characters are, they are kept within the limits of plausibility and the framework of realism (except perhaps Sir Edward Denham). The other is that technically the novel shows remarkable innovation.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The narrative technique of *Sanditon* is most interesting and it is perhaps this, most of all, that makes this fragment suggest a new direction to Jane Austen's art. After an introductory sequence, in which Mr. and Mrs. Parker's carriage crashes and he sprains his ankle, the first four, and even five, chapters of the novel consist almost entirely of what is said, or reported, by the irrepressibly optimistic and loquacious Mr. Parker. In Chapter 1 he explains who he is to Heywoods, the country family who come to his assistance, and launches into a panegyric on Sanditon, the resort town he is

building and in which he has invested both his money and his hopes. In Chapter 2 he tells more about his family and talks even more about Sanditon. "He could talk of it forever," the narrator comments. "It had indeed the highest claims;—not only those of Birthplace, Property, and Home,—it was his Mine, his Lottery, his Speculation & his Hobby Horse; his Occupation his Hope & his Futurity" (372). As the cadences of the writing indicate, Mr. Parker is given to rhapsody and hyperbole, and he says some amazing things about Sanditon, though they can be found replicated in advertising promotions for similar resorts of the period.⁷ A "Hobby Horse" was an exercise machine, and as this comparison neatly captures, Sanditon is for Mr. Parker both an obsession and a form of physical work-out: his enthusiasm and energy simultaneously express both his physical and his emotional temperament. In Chapter 3, on the journey to the coast with Miss Heywood, the young lady who has been invited back with them, Mr. Parker gives her a "detailed account" of his partner in the enterprise of Sanditon, Lady Denham, in the same style, interspersed with yet more rhapsody about Sanditon.

His companion, Charlotte, is his silent listener, but at the opening of Chapter 4, her voice enters into the novel for the first time, with very striking effect. "And whose very snug-looking Place is this?" she asks. Her question's succinctness, shrewdness and good humour are sharply thrown into relief by the enormous loquacity and verbosity (as well as enthusiasm and good-nature) of Mr. Parker which has until this point occupied the text. As they approach new Sanditon, the reader is given a view of it (and of old Sanditon, the comfortable home abandoned for a new house on the top of a cliff) not through Charlotte's, but through Mr. Parker's, eyes. "He longed to be on the sands, the Cliffs, at his own House, & everywhere out of his House at once. His Spirits rose with the very Sight of the Sea & he cd almost feel his Ancle getting stronger already" (384).

"All that he understood of himself, he readily told," the narrator comments, "for he was very openhearted;—& where he might be himself in the dark, his conversation was still giving information . . ." (371). In Chapter 5, the same very effective technique for conveying simultaneously a great deal of "information" and a great deal of insight into character continues, when Mr. Parker reads aloud his sister Diana's letter about her own and her brother and sister's ill health. Charlotte asks a few questions, and gradually her attitude, her character, becomes more plainly defined to the reader. So in a way a little like the gradual emergence of Anne Elliot as a speaker in *Persuasion*, Charlotte becomes a figure with whom the reader is aligned. The skill of the whole technique is that it has put the reader into the same position as Charlotte, an amused and perhaps sceptical listener to a wealth of material that is as new and overwhelming to

us, as it is to her. What might be a sane and reasonable attitude to the material Mr. Parker's monologue discloses is not stated, only glimpsed and inferred. Only in Chapter 6 are Charlotte's internal thoughts introduced—and they characterise her as self-reflective, sensible, and perhaps a shade staid, at least in this company.

ENJOYMENTS IN INVALIDISM

Like Mr. Parker's speech, his sister Diana's letter is a stream of uninterrupted and amazing thought. The letter introduces the three hypochondriacs who amplify and exaggerate all Jane Austen's previous writing about what Charlotte is later to call the "enjoyments of invalidism." "I sh^d have been with you at all hazards the day after the rec^{pt} of your Letter," Diana begins, "though it found me suffering under a more severe attack than usual of my old greivance, Spasmodic Bile, & hardly able to crawl from my Bed to the Sofa" (386). What makes this letter so amazing and hilarious is the combination of breathless energy—caught in the detail and specificity of the style—with simultaneous claims of radical debility and illness. Her sister Susan's nerves are a prominent concern:

"She has been suffering much from the Headache and Six Leaches a day for 10 days together releived her so little that we thought it right to change our measures—and being convinced on examination that much of the Evil lay in her Gum, I persuaded her to attack the disorder there. She has accordingly had 3 Teeth drawn, & is decidedly better, but her Nerves are a good deal deranged. She can only speak in a whisper—and fainted away twice this morning on poor Arthur's trying to suppress a cough. He, I am happy to say is tolerably well—tho' more languid than I like—& I fear for his Liver." (387)

It seems clear that these people live in their bodies much more vividly than the characters of earlier novels. There is something in Jane Austen's writing here that, perhaps, wants to celebrate the physical, however oddly achieved. The feverish, almost manic quality of Diana's enterprises and schemes, her endless busy-bodding, could be compared with Mrs. Norris's in *Mansfield Park*. Mrs. Norris's attentions to rheumatic coachmen and sick housemaids can readily be read as mere perversions of instincts, promising a covert reward in the exercise of power, but Diana's "activity run mad" (410), as Charlotte calls it, cannot be so moralistically dismissed. What seems to be depicted is what one might call a micro-society or culture of illness. Mrs. Bennet is on her own, her symptoms given the cold shoulder by her husband and daughters, but the three Parkers share a conviction of their own bodily infirmities. They continually re-inforce, and therefore make real, the bodily symptoms from which the others suffer. In other words, the Parker family circle is a smaller,

more intense domain of the whole culture that Sanditon has been designed to capitalise on. Ill-health, quite simply, is social currency.

THE BODY IN CULTURE

But, extraordinary as it is, the book is a logical development in Jane Austen's concern, throughout her novels, with what we usually can call "the body." Quite often people think of the novels as comedies of manners, in which social behaviour and the ethical or moral issues of family life are the dominant concerns. In this reading of the novels, her heroines Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet, even Anne Elliot, express their author's participation in the early feminist tradition. The primary attribute of heroines is their aspiration to recognition as "rational creatures."⁸ This, of course, is the phrase that Elizabeth Bennet uses to Mr. Collins: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." There is, however, a more radical Jane Austen. This Jane Austen has a deep understanding of the workings of culture in and upon the body, and this understanding is expressed not through the healthy heroines, like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, but through the "unhealthy" heroines, Marianne Dashwood, Fanny Price, Jane Fairfax in particular, and through her representation of a string of characters whom we might want to call, for convenience, as I have already, hysterics—Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Woodhouse, Mrs. Churchill, Mary Musgrove, the Parkers of *Sanditon*.

Through these characters Jane Austen is exploring how social pressures and circumstances are expressed in bodily conditions, just as George Cheyne had claimed. Mrs. Bennet expresses herself in illness metaphors because that is one of the few available idioms of distress for a genteel female in her time. It is also one of the few available routes to a kind of power. As a recent study of the *Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*⁹ has emphasised, the sickroom was often the only room of one's own that was available in nineteenth-century middle class society, and many Victorians, from Charles Darwin to Florence Nightingale, availed themselves of its privileges. To be sick was the only way of exercising domestic prerogatives. Mrs. Bennet, like Mrs. Churchill and Mr. Woodhouse, in their different ways, employs her body, or her bodily symptoms, as a technique of control. She is not successful, but when the sufferer from nerves occupies a senior position in society, like Mr. Woodhouse, he or she can easily—and unconsciously—use their symptoms as a covert means of putting pressure on others to act against their will. And lack of social function, a defined role, afflicts men as much as gentlewomen, Arthur Parker, the youngest son, as much as Mary Musgrove.

What I think Jane Austen is especially interested in, is the interaction between the hypochondriac body and social institutions. The body's illness—its hysteria, its nerves—are the result of social forces, perhaps, in particular, the dilemmas of the genteel woman. Such illnesses give rise to social institutions set up to cater for them. Thus the establishment of spas, resorts and bathing places, the whole culture of taking the waters, immersion and bathing, is predicated upon a leisure class. These institutions, in turn, with their associated medical attendants, make "real" the conditions they draw their customers and clients from. As Elaine Showalter argues in her recent book *Hystories*, if everyone agrees that what you suffer from is real, then it is real, to all intents and purposes. The invalid, or "invalide" (a relatively new, French, term), becomes an established social role. Thus the body is the repository of social tensions but in turn gives rise to cultural phenomena. There is a kind of feedback loop or reciprocal formation. The novelist Jane Austen is thus seeing, or arguing, that the body is socially and historically situated, and, in a contrary mode of thought to contemporary Western medicine, considers illness and the body as specific to particular times and places. (It is characteristic of her work, though, that major, and life-threatening or mortal conditions are left out of account. Mrs. Churchill dies "offstage" from something that we are specifically told has no connection with her previous complaints.)

MEDICINE AND SEXUALITY

In this reading, then, *Sanditon* is the logical culmination of Jane Austen's work. It takes a new resort as its subject, and it is clearly concerned with the way hypochondria, burgeoning commercial enterprise in a capitalist economy, and social tensions interplay with each other. Most particularly, though, it is concerned with the way that the medical and the erotic are related. One might say that the resort of Sanditon combines the attraction of Club Med and a retirement village. Like a retirement village, the medical facilities occupy a central place in the enterprise set up by Mr. Parker and Lady Denham. The engine that starts the whole novel is Mr. Parker's search for a surgeon or surgeon-apothecary to take up practice in the resort. But like Club Med, it offers a holiday for singles, plentiful opportunities for social contact with eligible partners, and sexual stimulation. (Like retirement villages, too, come to think of it.) Sanditon aspires to become a place of fashion—that is why Mr. Parker is so disappointed that the guest list contains no titled names—and, that, implicitly, means a place of courtship.

Sanditon, it is hinted, with the introduction of the young Miss Beauforts, who take care to be seen posing at their windows, is to be an inviting ground for sexual intrigue. As Brian Southam writes,

“Sanditon is an infant Brighthelmstone, with all that promises in Regency raffishness and the risqué undertones of fast society.”¹⁰ Sir Edward Denham, the amateur seducer in residence, is one of the signals that the ensuing novel is to have a strong erotic dimension.

One of those whose gaze is drawn upwards to the Miss Beauports posing at their windows is Arthur Parker, Diana’s brother. “Though little disposed for supernumerary exertion, [he] always quitted the Terrace . . . for the sake of a glimpse of the Miss Bs,—though it was 1/2 a qr of a mile round about, & added two steps to the ascent of the Hill” (423), the narrator comments dryly. The intermingling of the medical and the erotic in *Sanditon*, in fact, is most sharply and most hilariously seen, I think, in the depiction of Arthur Parker. Here he is in conversation with Charlotte Heywood. Like all the main characters, he speaks *at* her rather than *with* her:

When they were all finally seated, after some removals to look at the Sea & the Hotel, Charlotte’s place was by Arthur, who was sitting next to the Fire with a degree of Enjoyment which gave a great deal of merit to his civility in wishing her to take his Chair.—There was nothing dubious in her manner of declining it, and he sat back again with much satisfaction. She drew back her Chair to have all the advantage of his Person as a screen, & was very thankful for every inch of Back & Shoulders beyond her preconceived idea. [She has thought from the description of his sister that he would be frail and sickly.] Arthur was heavy in Eye as well as figure, but by no means indisposed to talk;—and while the other 4 were chiefly engaged together, he evidently felt it no penance to have a fine young Woman next to him, requiring in common Politeness some attention. . . . “I am not afraid of any thing so much as Damp.—” . . . “I am very subject to Perspiration, and there cannot be a surer sign of Nervousness.—” (Chapter 10, 414-16)

It takes a few moments to realise that this is Arthur Parker in courtship mode. He is trying to seduce Charlotte, this “fine young woman,” by offering her toast and telling her details about the lining of his stomach. It is as if he imagines that one kind of intimacy might be a surrogate for, or lead to, another. “A good deal of Earthy Dross hung about him” (418), remarks the narrator, suggesting, once again, an interest in the physical and material that inflects Jane Austen’s concern with the body in a new way.

This brings me to one final point. I think it is worth comparing *Sanditon* to that great modernist novel of ill-health, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, published in 1927. As in *Sanditon*, the setting of *The Magic Mountain* is an institution, and a business, specifically set up for health care, in this case a tuberculosis sanatorium. Like Charlotte Heywood, the hero, Hans Castorp, is an unimaginative, prosaic type, who journeys from “the flatland” to the mountain, and it is through his eyes, as it is through Charlotte’s, that the reader is first struck by the extraordinary behaviour of the inhabitants. In *The*

Magic Mountain the medical merges in a most unnerving (so to speak) fashion with the sexual. The sanatorium is a place where fever prevails and bodily feeling is heightened. Hans eventually succumbs to its bizarre atmosphere, falls in love, and in a gesture typical of the mingling of the morbid and the erotic in the novel even takes a glass plate of an x-ray photograph of his lover as a souvenir of their tryst, and wears it close to his heart. It's an x-ray of her tubercular lungs. Is something similar going to happen to Charlotte Heywood in *Sanditon*, whose "moralising" staidness is so persistently under siege?

The twelve chapters of the manuscript of *Sanditon* that Jane Austen left at her death are, as I've suggested, an extraordinarily precious—but also mysterious—document. They certainly do signal a kind of new start for Jane Austen, but also, as I've suggested, the culmination of her explorations of health, illness, the body, and their social consequences. Was Jane Austen going to write a comedy of sickness that in some way would anticipate the macabre and inventive comedy, the intelligence of the modernist Thomas Mann? Jane Austen is a novelist increasingly recognised as comparable in stature to the greatest European and American writers. Anything is possible. But we shall never know.

NOTES

- ¹ B. C. Southam, "Introduction" to *Sanditon, an unfinished novel by Jane Austen, reproduced in facsimile from the manuscript in the possession of King's College, Cambridge* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), p. viii.
- ² Derrida, *The Ear of the Other, Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (1985). I owe this reference to Deborah Rechter's Ph.D. dissertation, "Balancing the Books: Frances Burney and the Economy of the Proper," Monash University, 1997.
- ³ Page references to *Minor Works*, ed. Chapman (Oxford [1954], 1977).
- ⁴ I owe this suggestion to Lisbeth Haarkonssen.
- ⁵ Anita G. Gorman, *The Body in Illness and Health: themes and images in Jane Austen* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 5.
- ⁶ Eg. Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (London: MacMillan, 1975). "Much of the substance and manner recalls the author's early burlesques and parodies," p. 187.
- ⁷ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 205-06.
- ⁸ Adapted from Anthea Todd, review of *Jane Austen and the Body, Literature and History*, 4, 2, 1995.
- ⁹ Miriam Baillin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Introduction, *Sanditon, an unfinished novel by Jane Austen, reproduced in facsimile . . .* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; London: Scholar Press, 1975), p. xii.