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Scandal, the Comic, and the Sublime: the Seaside in Jane Austen

Lecture, Warsaw, 2010

'Those vile sea-breezes are the ruin of beauty and health'

— Mary Crawford to Fanny Price, Mansfield Park, ch 43

The seaside in Jane Austen's novels may sound a frivolous and unlikely subject with which to open this Warsaw Conference. Granted, it is an unusual idea to connect the stature of one of the world's great novelists with a subject seemingly so limited. Yet the seaside played an important part in the life of the Austen family and in the life of Jane Austen herself — in her emotional life as a young woman and increasingly in her life as a writer. Most of all, this is evident in the last of the six novels, in the seaside chapters of *Persuasion*; and finally in *Sanditon*, a seventh novel that Jane Austen began in 1817, in the final year of her life, a novel set in a small and newly-established seaside resort on the south coast of England.

By this time seaside resorts had become a familiar feature of the English social scene. First established in the 1730's, they soon became popular and spread extensively, especially along the coast of southern England; and between 1793 and 1815, the period of Britain's wars with Republican and Napoleonic France, the English gentry found themselves unable to travel freely in war-time Europe, a restriction which provided a further impetus to the growth of new resorts such as *Sanditon*.

To-day, I want to consider two main areas. One is the place that seaside resorts came to occupy in English social culture. The second Jane Austen's own treatment of resorts in the novels, with particular regard to the three terms used in my title, 'Scandal, the Comic, and the Sublime'. And throughout this talk I am assuming that readers unfamiliar with the detailed geography of the English coastline will refer to the accompanying map, where the numbered resorts — all of them mentioned in Austen's letters, her novels or in the Austen family correspondence — run from Cromer on the east coast to Tenby and Barmouth, both Welsh resorts, in the west.

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First, then, the importance of these resorts in English society. Although the very earliest resorts, Scarborough in the north of England and Margate in the south, can be dated back to the

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1730's, the rapid expansion came twenty years later. In the 1750's a number of doctors living along or near the English coast began to write enthusiastically about the health-giving properties of the sea. It was a discovery which they publicised energetically, since at the same time it enabled them to promote themselves professionally and profitably. So they were happy to sing the praises of sea air healthily laden with saline particles and to recommend the curative effect of sea water either taken internally, in medicinal doses, or externally, by way of 'dipping'. Dipping was immersion beneath the waves, three dips being a standard prescription. Then, to keep the blood circulating vigorously, bathers were advised to change back into their clothes and take a brisk walk along the beach. For the delicate and elderly, or when the sea was to rough, clients could make use of bathhouses in which the sea-water was comfortably heated and the 'dipping' could take place gently within doors.

Sea-water was claimed as an effective cure for a wide range of ailments, from gout to melancholia, including disorders of the glands, the organs of the body, and afflictions of the skin. A full course of treatment was normally from four to six weeks and since the treatments were usually given in the morning, between six and nine, there was ample time for patients to enjoy the rest of the day at their leisure, with healthy walks and carriage rides out to local beauty spots. Over the course of time and as the resorts expanded, they began to attract a new breed of visitor: those who came not in need of medical treatment but in pursuit of pleasure and good society, exactly what attracted so many visitors to the inland spas at Bath, Tunbridge Wells and elsewhere. And very soon, like visitors to Bath and the other inland spas, the needs of this new generation of seaside visitors were met with assembly rooms for balls, dances and card-playing; coffee rooms for conversation and the daily papers; lending libraries with the latest best-sellers; and shops selling holiday trinkets and souvenirs.

In the assembly rooms of the larger resorts, social etiquette was strictly regulated by a Master of Ceremonies. As shopkeepers, tradesmen and others below the level of the gentry were not welcome, he controlled the right of entry. He also ruled on matters of correct dress and the order of social precedence in dances, the highest-ranking couple having the right to lead the dance. Another of his important functions was making formal introductions between strangers, exactly as we see in chapter 3 of *Northanger Abbey*, where the Master of Ceremonies in the Lower Rooms at Bath introduces Catherine Morland to Henry Tilney. This was a scene that could be replicated in the assembly rooms of any of the larger seaside resorts. Here, too, theatres were to be found and during the summer months, when the London theatres were closed, these resort theatres were able to attract first-rate theatre companies from the capital.

In brief, it could be said that Brighton and other fashionable resorts followed closely in the footsteps of the inland spas. They copied their range of entertainment, their architecture, their patterns of social life and their medical claims for the cure of disease and the promotion of health. Contemporary guidebooks note these similarities and referred to inland spas and coastal resorts with a single term: both are described as 'watering places'; and this is a term that Jane Austen herself uses of her own fictional resort of Sanditon, describing dinner time as 'The very quietest part of a Watering-place Day.' While the seaside resorts gradually developed as centres of leisure with a wide range of entertainments and relaxing activities, the medical side became less important; and the larger resorts, including Brighton, Margate, Ramsgate and Weymouth, flourished as centres for fashionable society. So while the inland spa towns such as Bath, Cheltenham, Harrogate or Tunbridge Wells continued to be active during the winter season, in the summer and autumn months it was the seaside that became the focus of polite society, particularly those coastal towns patronised by the royal family. In this light, Weymouth was a stronghold of Hanoverian respectability, counting George III and two of his brothers

among its regular visitors. The Duke of York came first in 1758, followed in 1771 by the Duke of Gloucester, who built a lodge for himself overlooking the bay. When George III began to suffer from bouts of mental illness, the Duke of Gloucester offered him the use of his Weymouth house. After the King paid his first visit in mid-1789, he took to Weymouth as his regular holiday home and in 1801 purchased Gloucester Lodge from his brother.

Accompanied by the Royal Family, the King made no fewer than fourteen visits between 1789 and 1805.[1] His early morning dips saw a marked improvement to his health, both mental and physical and opened his typical routine for the day. Following his sea-medication, he made a formal visit to review the troops encamped nearby for his protection; then a cruise on his yacht, the *Royal Sovereign*, with others of the Royal Family, accompanied by an escort of naval vessels and a fleet of loyal well-wishers in their yachts. On his return, the King would take the salute at the evening parade and conclude the day with an evening at the theatre. The resort was crowded; where the King went, society followed; and the *Western Flying Post* reported that in September 1804 Weymouth 'was never known to be fuller of company than this season, since the Royal Family has been here'.[2] At this very moment the Austens were holidaying in the West Country, Cassandra at Weymouth itself and Jane, who had never visited Weymouth, at Lyme Regis, a day's journey eastwards along the coast. Jane didn't miss the opportunity for piece of gentle mockery, writing to her sister that she thought the resort 'altogether a shocking place…without recommendation of any kind…'.[3]

While royal Weymouth was a byword for Hanoverian respectability, the opposite was true of Brighton, made notorious by the Prince Regent and his hangers on. In 'Lesley Castle', an early work, Jane Austen, uses a term then much in vogue, naming the town as one of Lady Lesley's 'favourite haunts of dissipation'; this was in 1792, when young novelist was sixteen or seventeen.[4] By this time**,** the Prince Regent could stay at Brighton in splendid self-indulgence. The Royal Pavilion was already in its first stages of transformation into an exotic pleasure dome, his very own palace-by-the-sea. On the Sussex coast, Brighton had the great advantage of being close to London. At a distance of sixty miles, it could be reached in a day, as was also true of Ramsgate and Margate, the two resorts on the seaside of east Kent most heavily patronised by Londoners.

These and other resorts along the coast of southern England were well-known to the Austens. During their years at Bath between 1801 and 1806, it was the family custom to escape the stifling summer heat — Bath, surrounded by hills, lies in something of an amphitheatre — by fleeing to the coast. In 1801 they went southwards to Sidmouth and the surrounding area of the West Country.

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[1] But from 1805 onwards, the King's illness became more acute, his seaside visits ended, and for long periods he was confined under medical supervision at Windsor Castle.

[2] *Western Flying Post*, 10 September 1804, quoted in *Letters*, p.380.

[3] Letter to Cassandra Austen from Lyme Regis, dated 14 September 1804 (*Letters*, p. 92).

[4] In her use of the word 'dissipation', Jane Austen shows her skilful handling of fashionable slang. See the reference to John Wesley in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'We hear of the still increasing dissipations…the word…was hardly heard of fifty years ago. And yet it is so in every one's mouth, that it is already worn threadbare; being one of the cant words of the day' (1788 WESLEY *Serm.* LXXIX. *Dissipation* Wks. 1872 VI. 445).

In 1802, they went again to the West Country, this time staying at Dawlish and Teignmouth, with a further excursion north-westwards into Wales, travelling to Tenby and Barmouth. The following year, Jane Austen saw her sailor brother Francis at Ramsgate and towards the end of the year the family paid an out-of-season visit to Lyme Regis. This was in November, the very month Anne Elliot visits Lyme in *Persuasion*; and the Austens visited Lyme Regis again in the summer of 1804.

If we are to trust family tradition, one of these Devonshire resorts carried sorrowful romantic associations for Jane. According to Cassandra Austen, it was at some point during these years, 1801 to 1804, in Devonshire that a 'mutual attachment' tantilisingly 'nameless and dateless' was formed between her sister and a 'very charming man' who died before they could meet again the following year.[5]

In October 1806, the Austens moved from Bath to Southampton. Principally a working port, Southampton also enjoyed some fashionable life as a resort. Although its heyday lay in the past, for its proximity to Portsmouth, the Navy's largest and most important base, it was a convenient for naval families and was still visited by the occasional 'family of distinction' during its high season, from July to October. It still enjoyed sufficient number of visitors to support a respectable list of amenities and attractions, including two theatres, a pump room, two sets of assembly rooms, Botanic Spa Gardens and several seawater baths, together with circulating libraries, a subscription room for newspapers, good shops and three banks.

Jane and Cassandra were also familiar with Ramsgate and Margate, resorts within convenient distance of their brother Edward's home near Canterbury in east Kent; and there was a particular incentive for visiting Ramsgate between 1803 and 1804, when their sailor brother Francis, stationed there on naval duty, married into a local family.

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Turning to the 'scandal' of my title. Contemporary moralists from Cowper to Hannah More were in no doubt as to seaside scandal. Resorts were regarded as hotbeds of 'folly, dissipation and sin', and the practice of bathing attracted a torrent of abuse. It was seen as an indecency threatening 'to undermine the ramparts of public decorum'.[6] These and other equally stern warnings were delivered, although in reality there was little enough to complain about. Ladies emerged from bathing machines, entering the water almost unseen, and were usually clothed in flannel from head to foot, The bathing machines were small wooden huts on wheels, horse-drawn or pulled a short distance into the shallows, where the bather would be helped down steps into the water, not to swim but to be briefly pushed under the waves by women attendants known as 'dippers'. And this entire procedure could be carried in total privacy, under cover of a concertina-like awning, known as a 'modesty hood', that extended from the rear of the bathing-machine down to the surface of the sea. By this means, lady bathers could bathe unobserved and the strictest decency preserved. Nonetheless, dipping was a favourite subject for the cartoonists. A typical scene would show the cliffs of a resort thronged with male spectators, all of them equipped with telescopes, all of them supposedly looking seawards to regard the wonders of the ocean, or observe the passing ships. But the attention of these *voyeurs*

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[5] Letter from Caroline Austen to James Edward Austen-Leigh, c1869 (*Memoir*, 2002, p. 188).

[6] An Old Seaman, *A Journal* (1816), p.21; Loudon, *A Treatise* (1806), ii.667.

was really elsewhere. The focus of their gaze was close at hand — upon a group of curvaceous ladies desporting themselves in the waves, enrobed or naked, just as the cartoonist chose to reveal them. More rarely portrayed were male bathers; following custom, they entered the waves costumeless and well out of sight of the ladies.

Jane Austen has none of this prurient humour. Instead, her focus is upon the other, larger, area of scandal, the so-called relaxation in manners. Amongst the gentry, girls and young ladies were closely chaperoned and their behaviour, and the behaviour of those they met, was regulated by a strict code of conduct. At the seaside, however, a much freer atmosphere prevailed. This could bring problems and Jane Austen describes one such dubious situation in chapter 5 of *Mansfield Park*. Thomas Bertram tells Mary Crawford about a 'dreadful scrape' he got into at Ramsgate when he met one of his cronies, Sneyd,[7] accompanied by his mother and two daughters, to whom he had not been introduced. As Bertram describes it, the mother was 'surrounded by men', so he 'attached' himself to one of the daughters. He had 'walked by her side all the way home, and made myself as agreeable as I could; the young lady perfectly easy in her manners, and as ready to talk as to listen. I had not a suspicion that I could be doing any thing wrong'. But soon afterwards Bertram discovers that he 'had been giving all' his 'attention to the youngest, who was not *out*, and had most excessively offended the eldest'.

This mistake constituted a social *faux-pas* but no more than that. More seriously, the incident illustrates a dangerous freedom of manners, a culpable laxity of behaviour, an aspect of resort society invariably attacked by moralists. An encounter such as this would draw their fire. What mother, in the company of her daughters, would allow herself the self-indulgence of being 'surrounded by men'? Her first duty was the care of Augusta, her younger daughter, who was not yet '*out*', meaning that she was not yet of marriageable age, usually around 16. In society, Augusta was still to be treated as a girl, not an adult, and she was expected to act modestly and demurely and certainly not be left exposed to the company of an older man, someone like Bertram who, despite his friendship with her brother, is in all other respects a stranger to her and her family. Fitting judgement on the incident is delivered forthrightly by Mary Crawford, to whom Bertram is recounting the incident: 'it was entirely the mother's fault. Miss Augusta should have been with her governess'. The governess's duty was to stand in the way, literally and metaphorically, of any direct communication between the girl and anyone outside the family, most of all someone such as Bertram, an older man and a stranger. Although Bertram has no designs upon Augusta, nonetheless Jane Austen throws the faintest of shadows, sexual shadows, over this scandalous encounter, so typically a resort encounter, between an open and talkative girl, 'easy in her manners', and a man described by Jane Austen in chapter 12 as a protean companion, capable of being as 'gay, agreeable, and gallant…as occasion served, or Miss Crawford demanded…'. This unsupervised contact between Bertram and Augusta would have been understood by many readers as having all the warning signs of a first step along the treacherous road to seduction, a routine crisis of popular fiction.

It is precisely this disreputable road, a *resort* road, leading in turn to Ramsgate and Brighton, that Jane Austen exploits in the background melodrama to *Pride and Prejudice*. I say 'background melodrama' because the facts of the case are communicated to us at second hand, not depicted directly and the melodramatic element is thereby considerably muted. As to

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7 There was a well-established Staffordshire family of this name. Yet Jane Austen may have had something more indicative in mind: 'sneyd' was a cant term for someone sharp and cunning.

Ramsgate, the bare circumstances are communicated to us via Darcy's letter to Elizabeth Bennet (ch 35) describing Wickham's attempt on his sister Georgiana, a rich young heiress of fifteen, with a fortune of £30,000 — to-day, equivalent to over two million pounds — staying at Ramsgate. Lady de Bourgh, her aunt, is alert to the dangers of such places and has already taken precautions and 'made a point of sending two men servants' for the girl's protection. But this is no deterrent to Wickham. With a grudge against Darcy, he plans to get his hands on the girl's money and enlists Georgiana's governess as his co-conspirator in a scheme of elopement. With her 'affectionate heart', Georgiana falls for him and 'was persuaded to believe herself in love, and to consent to an elopement'. However, quite out of the blue Darcy arrives; Georgiana confesses the plan to her brother and Darcy puts a stop to Wickham's plot.

Nonetheless, Wickham proves a tenacious villain. From Ramsgate, he moves along the coast to Brighton and this time meets with success, eloping with sixteen-year-old Lydia Bennet. Once again, if belatedly, Darcy comes to the rescue. In a long drawn-out sequence he tracks down the fugitive couple, negociates a price with Wickham, who agrees to marry Lydia, a move that saves both her and the Bennet family from lasting disgrace, the burning question being whether or not Elizabeth's and Jane's marriage prospects are blighted. Yet again Jane Austen avoids the descent into melodrama. Lydia's return to Longbourn is the finest comedy. Now basking in her married status as Mrs Wickham, 'Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless'. Unabashed by her disgrace, she announces that her four remaining sisters 'must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands. What a pity it is, mamma, we did not all go'.

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In *Emma*, Weymouth is the seaside resort that provides a distant but threatening backcloth to the immediate foreground action in Highbury. Gradually, we learn of the circumstances in which the engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax was formed the previous year. The scandal is not the engagement itself but that it is a clandestine engagement. This secrecy brings further scandal in its train, since at Highbury it forces Jane Fairfax into an unwilling course of concealment and deception, whereas Frank Churchill delights in the situation and enjoys playing deceptive games. At Highbury, he behaves as if he was a man unattached, flirting with Emma and dropping heavy hints of an adulterous affair in Weymouth between Jane Fairfax and the recently-married Mr Dixon. Throughout the novel, we are reminded that it was at Weymouth that the beginnings of the Churchill-Fairfax connection took place; so insistently reminded, indeed, of its Weymouth origins, that the guiltiness of the couple gathers a further stigma from its resort origin.

This is Jane Austen's stern judgement upon the contamination that resort life can spread, even infecting this rural corner of Surrey. Yet, at the same time, resorts are never far from comedy: 'the idlest haunts of the kingdom' Knightley calls them. He condemns them as places where Frank Churchill spends his 'leisure' and 'money'. Knightley's judgement delivered with all the weight and authority of a landowning gentleman farmer, is heavy with derision: 'We hear of him for ever at some watering-place or other'. Nonetheless, in the final pages of the novel comes a neat ironic reversal. Knightley finds himself set upon the very same path: for their honeymoon, Knightley and Emma take a 'tour of the sea-side' ─ a detail through which Jane Austen tells us which of the couple now holds the upper hand, for earlier in the novel it was Emma who remarked plaintively that she had never seen the sea.

The resort comedy also involves issues of health. Mr Perry, Highbury's local doctor, and Mr Wingfield, John Knightley's London physician, hold opposing views. We hear the competing claims of Cromer and South End, the benefits of their 'sea air and bathing', South End disparaged as 'an unhealthy place', Cromer commended for its 'fine open sea…and very pure air'. Thrown into the debate, we also have the decisive opinion of Mr Woodhouse, with his pronouncement that 'the sea is very rarely of use to any body. I am sure it almost killed me once'. Doubtless, Jane Austen let her own family into the secret, but we, as mere readers, are left unguided, wondering precisely where along our coasts Mr Woodhouse's near-death encounter might have been.

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Jane Austen eventually takes the reader to the seaside itself in Persuasion, the last of the six novels, with a narrative that brings us to the small West Country resort of Lyme Regis. The month is November, and we find a resort out of season, the visitors 'almost all gone', the assembly rooms 'now deserted and melancholy looking', the 'little bay' no longer 'animated with bathing machines and company'. There is no scandal here. Louisa Musgrove's jump from the Cobb is a minor accident, the outcome of seaside high spirits. Of the comic, there is only the morbid fascination of Louisa's fall: the amusing glimpse Jane Austen gives us of the 'many' 'workmen and boatmen' gathered 'to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report'.

As to the sublime, this is a quality of emotional experience that Jane Austen leads up to gradually in her description of the natural wonders to be observed and contemplated in 'the grandeur' of the countryside, and in the wonders of the seashore around Lyme: 'the very beautiful line of cliffs stretching out to the east of the town'; Charmouth, 'with its high grounds and extensive sweeps of country, and still more' its 'retired bay, backed by dark cliffs', with 'fragments of low rock among the sand' making 'it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide…in unwearied contemplation'; 'and, above all Pinny, with its green chasms between romantic rocks…scattered forest trees and orchards of luxuriant growth…'. In these descriptions of the landscape, the cliffs and shoreline, we hear the true romantic voice, a quiet voice, mingling the tones of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats.

Immediately following this passage, Jane Austen comments on how precious, how greatly to be treasured, is the experience of returning to the coast to view the sea. Having walked down from the town to the beach, the visitors have just reached Lyme Bay on their way to see the Cobb and visit Captain Harville. Jane Austen describes them as 'lingering' and we are to visualise them taking their time as they stroll along the shore, 'lingering only, as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserve to look on it at all…'. This 'lingering' on the shoreline and the contemplation of the sea are not, as Jane Austen reminds us, commonplace or casual activities to be taken for granted, but a privilege to be deserved.Jane Austen's words in this passage are heavy with emotion, as if, for the narrator, the author herself, they emerge from some intensely personal experience; they convey a feeling for the sea little short of reverential; sentiments which may have been connected in Jane Austen's mind with the sadness of her own seaside romance, 'nameless and dateless', so tragically ended many years before.

Jane Austen also conveys the combination of awe and veneration that was said to inspire tourists when they encountered the sublime. This was an experience that readers in 1818, when *Persuasion* was first published, could identify without difficulty; indeed, they were conducted towards it, since tourist guides and travel books of this period conventionally speak of sea views

as being ‘sublime’, awe-inspiring for what they revealed in the contemplation of the ocean’s immensity and the vastness of the sky: as Cowper put it ‘The seas globose and huge, th’ o’erarching vault’.[8] Jane Austen grants this experience to Anne Elliot and Henrietta Musgrove. As we hear at the end of this passage (at the opening of chapter 12), it is an experience that lies beyond words.

> They ‘agreed to stroll down to the sea before breakfast.
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> ― They went to the sands, to watch the flowing of the tide,
>
> which a fine south-easterly breeze was bringing in
>
> with all the grandeur which so flat a shore admitted.
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> They praised the morning; gloried in the sea;
>
> sympathized in the delight of the fresh-feeling breeze ―
>
> and were silent…’.

This experience lives on for Anne. Towards the end of the novel, she tells Wentworth how much she would like to see Lyme again, ‘So much novelty and beauty!’ ― ‘novelty’, in the Oxford English Dictionary ‘The quality or state of being new, original, or unusual’. Far from referring to the meretricious or trivial, in Jane Austen’s time the word carried a far heavier charge of meaning than it does to-day.

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Persuasion was completed in August 1816. Only a few months later, towards the end of January 1817, Jane Austen set to work on *Sanditon*. By this time she was in the grip of her final illness and in the following weeks she only managed to reach chapter twelve, perhaps a fifth or a sixth the length of a full-scale work. Yet it would be wrong to allow ourselves to be guided by biography. Far from betraying Austen’s state of physical weakness, Sanditon is a true product of the creative imagination, a mature work of amazing invention and abundant energy, with a succession of characters whose eccentricities and strange individuality recall elements of Fielding, Smollett, Sterne and Dickens. Overall, there is a new freedom of style; a certain wildness to the action; and, entirely new to Jane Austen, contemporary financial and social themes that belong to the post-war world following the defeat of Napoleon.

Fragment though it is, these opening chapters of *Sanditon* make it clear that Jane Austen was embarking upon the first truly seaside novel in English literature; for at the centre of the story is Sanditon itself, an old fishing village on the Sussex coast now in the process of transformation into an up-to-date resort. Earlier novelists, going back to Smollett, depicted seaside and resort scenes. But these locations were largely incidental to the plot and narrative line, whereas the topography of Sanditon and features of its growth and development play an active part in the novel’s structure and themes.

The story opens in July, at the very beginning of the season. Rapid change is in progress. The two local landowners, Mr Parker and Lady Denham, have invested in building the resort

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[8] ‘Retirement’ (1782), line 552.

as a commercial enterprise, an investment — or, to use Jane Austen's words for it, 'a profitable Speculation', a speculation whose success is by no means certain. They form a sharply contrasted couple: Mr Parker 'of a sanguine turn of mind, with more Imagination than Judgement', while Lady Denham, an extremely rich old widow, is hard-nosed and calculating. According to Mr Parker, the prime mover in the scheme, their ambitions are not excessive. He tells Mr Heywood, a sceptical gentleman-farmer, not unlike *Emma's* Mr Knightley, that they are not planning to rival other resorts along the Sussex coast, such 'large, overgrown Places, like Brighton, or Worthing, or East Bourne'. Their ambitions are more modest: to see Sanditon —'a quiet Village of no pretensions' — established as 'a small, fashionable Bathing Place': 'the sure resort of the very best Company, those regular, steady, private Families[9] of thorough Gentility & Character, who are a blessing everywhere…'. Altogether, Sanditon will come to resemble the small West Country and Welsh resorts that the Austens were visiting in the early 1800's.

To observe the growth of Sanditon, Jane Austen brings a stranger to the village, a clear-eyed and level-headed young heroine, Charlotte, one of Mr Heywood's daughters. Through her eyes, through Mr Parker's running commentary and through Jane Austen's direct reporting we learn of the resort facilities: Sanditon's hotel and billiard room; its circulating library; its terrace along the sea front; its newly-built houses, still empty, awaiting the arrival of summer visitors; cottages in the old village advertising 'Lodgings to let'; a shop selling fashionable shoes; and bathing machines on the beach. And from her window in the Parker's home, Charlotte finds herself 'looking over' a 'miscellaneous foreground of unfinished Buildings, waving Linen, & tops of Houses…'; and, beyond this semi-urban scene, 'the Sea, dancing & sparkling in Sunshine & Freshness'.

As to the three terms of my title — scandal, the comic and the sublime — Jane Austen embodies all three within a single character, Sir Edward Denham, the impoverished nephew of Lady Denham. The comic aspect of his character is rapidly established. Upon Charlotte Heywood Sir Edward releases a virtually unstoppable flow of rhapsodical language, a massive outpouring of verbiage, which she brings to a halt, deftly and amusingly, on three occasions in chapters 7 and 8. During the course of these outbursts, Sir Edward refers several times to the 'sublime', showing it up as one of the most over-used term in the literature of sensibility.

As to 'scandal', there is every indication that this area also belongs to Sir Edward's role. Jane Austen puts it straightforwardly, more directly and bluntly than in any of the earlier novels: Sir Edward's 'great object in life was to be seductive….He felt that he was formed to be a dangerous Man — quite in the line of the Lovelaces'. That is to say, Sir Edward's ambition was not just to be a seducer, but a violent and ruthless seducer in the style of Robert Lovelace, the villain of Richardson's novel *Clarissa* (1747-48). Richardson tells the tragic story of Clarissa Harlowe, who is attracted by Lovelace and elopes with him. But when she resists his attempts at seduction, he drugs and rapes her. So although Jane Austen draws Sir Edward as a comic

[9] Quiet and everyday as opposed to 'public', implying families of importance and self-importance who came in some style and sought publicity.

figure, the allusion to Lovelace, however light-hearted, casts a faintly ominous, faintly sinister shadow, some far possibility of his becoming a real threat.[10]

Sir Edward's immediate target is Clara Brereton, a niece and companion to Lady Denham. Jane Austen's language changes register. From the elaboration of Sir Edward's impassioned rhetoric, we move once again to a narrative voice that is spare and purposeful:

it was Clara alone on whom he had serious designs; it was Clara whom he meant to seduce. — Her seduction was quite determined on.

Her Situation in every way called for it. She was his rival in Lady D.'s favour, she was young, lovely & dependant….If she could not be won by affection,

he must carry her off. He knew his Business.

Clara, however, is no Lydia Bennet. As cool-headed and sensible as Catherine Heywood, she 'saw through him, and had not the least intention of being seduced'; and as chapter 8 ends we are left with Sir Edward pondering, comically, whether he should 'exceed' previous seducers and 'strike out something new', perhaps 'the Neighbourhood of Tombuctoo' or whether he should act more prudently and 'prefer the quietest sort of ruin & disgrace for the object of his Affections…'.

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Whether or not Jane Austen intended the resort of Sanditon to be a success is an open question. The story breaks off too early for us to make any firm guesses about the future of the characters and plot. Important questions remain unanswered. For example, who is to be the hero, that eligible young man, as yet unknown, to capture the heart of Catherine Heywood? And possibly another young man for Clara Brereton? And will Sir Edward turn his speculative eye upon Miss Lambe, that 'half Mulatto' young lady of 'immense fortune' just arrived at Sanditon? One clue to Jane Austen's thinking may lie in the title. Although the manuscript is untitled — *Sanditon*_was an invented title given much later by a branch of the family — according to another family tradition Jane Austen intended to call it 'The Brothers'.[11] This would point to the three Parker brothers: Thomas Parker, the developer, optimistic for his new resort; his youngest brother, Arthur, a comic invalid with strange dietry habits; and Sydney, a highly eligible bachelor of 'about 7 or 8 & 20, very good-looking, with a decided air of Ease & Fashion, and a lively countenance'. More than that, Sydney is the family humorist, outspoken and sceptical, casting an amused and sardonic eye upon the 'Improvements' to Sanditon. Or is the hero to be one the friends whom Sydney has invited to join him at the hotel? Or is it to be

[10] For a consideration of Sir Edward's serious function in representing an 'ironic attack on the eighteenth-century critic-moralist of the novel in his dogmatic insistence on didactic, exemplary fiction devoid of all "mixed figures"', see Barker (1976).

[11] Letter from Mrs Janet Sanders, *Times Literary Supplement* (19 February 1925, p. 120). Writing to James Edward Austen-Leigh, 20 May [1869?], Anna Lefroy referred to a copy of the manuscript as of 'Sanditon' (*Memoir*, 2002, p.184).Yet when extracts from the work were first published, together with passages of summary, in the second edition of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1871), Austen-Leigh referred to it as 'The last Work' (p. 181).

Sanditon's future doctor, as yet unknown, the medical man Mr Parker was seeking at the very opening of the story?

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We can only guess, as Jane Austen means us to, at the answers to these and other questions that the story would gradually resolve, slow disclosure being part of *Sanditon*'s narrative method. Too many writers, however, have attempted to solve the story's uncertainties, producing their own continuations or completions. So if I can end with a single request, it is to leave *Sanditon* alone, exactly as it is, a fragment, undoubtedly an unfinished masterpiece, enigmatic — as Jane Austen wished it to be — and wonderful in its own way.

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