



“The unmeaning luxuries of Bath”: Urban Pleasures in Jane Austen’s World

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But who is that bombazine lady so gay,
So profuse of her beauties in sable array?
How she rests on her heel, how she turns out her toe,
How she pulls down her stays, with her head up to show
Her lily-white bosom that rivals the snow!

(“A description of the Ball, with an episode on Beau Nash,”
The New Bath Guide, or Memoirs of the B-N-R-D Family
in a series of Poetical Epistles, 1797?)

No place in England, in a full season, affords so brilliant a circle of polite company as Bath. The young, the old, the grave, the gay, the infirm, and the healthy, all resort to this place of amusement. Ceremony beyond the essential rules of politeness is totally exploded; every one mixes in the Rooms upon an equality; and the entertainments are so widely regulated, that although there is never a cessation of them, neither is there a lassitude from bad hours, or from an excess of dissipation. The constant rambling about of the younger part of the company is very enlivening and cheerful. In the morning the rendezvous is at the Pump-Room;—from that time ’till noon in walking on the Parades, or in the different quarters of the town, visiting the shops, etc;—thence to the Pump-Room again, and after a fresh strole, to dinner; and from dinner to the

Theatre (which is celebrated for an excellent company of comedians) or the Rooms, where dancing, or the card-table, concludes the evening.

(Christopher Anstey, *The New Bath Guide, or, Useful Pocket Companion*, 1799)

IN THE LATE GEORGIAN ERA Bath was the most famous resort town in England, the queen of the spa towns. Others such as Cheltenham, Tunbridge, and Brighton would try to eclipse it, but without success. Bath was one of the largest cities in the country, and good roads and an effective postal system added to its popularity. By the end of the eighteenth century it housed over 30,000 residents and thousands of visitors flocked there every season. By 1800 there were in the region of 40,000 visitors, an average weekly attendance of 8,000 visitors (Neale 46). A Mecca for health and leisure, it was popular with young and old. As the historian John Brewer describes it: “Crowded with valetudinarian politicians, retired soldiers, gouty squires and rich widows taking its medicinal waters, visited by mothers and daughters in pursuit of suitable husbands and frequented by young men in search of eligible heiresses, it was a city of quackery, leisure and intrigue” (299).

Bath had earned its reputation as the epitome of the urban renaissance in the provinces, ever since Beau Nash had set about his crusade to civilize the rural gentry. Nash introduced a polite code of behaviour, which aimed to refine and civilize, and educate the gentry into urbane and genteel values. He drew up a set of rules, forbidding gentlemen from the wearing of boots and leather breeches in the assembly rooms, and requiring them to leave swords by the door. There were strict rules about dancing and etiquette. He also satirized the boorish country squire: ill at ease in the ball-room and associated with hunting, drinking and animals. This would become a stock figure in literature, as with Squire Weston in *Tom Jones*, Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer*, and John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*.

In the eighteenth century, sociability was perceived as one of the most civilizing influences, and it was promoted through a range of activities. Bath, as a spa town devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, offered outdoor and indoor concerts, theatrical entertainments, public breakfasts and dances in the Upper and Lower Rooms, libraries, chocolate, and coffee houses. The theatre was run in tandem with the Bristol playhouse and was regarded as one of the best in the country. It had been patented in 1768, becoming the first Theatre Royal of the English provinces. In particular Bath prided itself on its relaxed atti-

tude towards rank, as the opening quote from the *New Bath Guide* emphasized.

Not merely a city of pleasure and amusement, it was also a health spa for the sick and dying: the line between “recuperation and recreation was a thin one” (Borsay 33). Bath also had a reputation for being a marriage market, though Tunbridge Wells and Cheltenham were also considered to be the good places to “make alliances.” In 1783 the Dean of Gloucester, however, was appalled to find that the women of Bath made advances to men, and the Methodist John Wesley considered Bath “the headquarters of Satan” (Neale 29; Wesley 413). But the facilities in Bath were, as the historian Peter Borsay notes, “carefully organized to promote the market’s smooth operation” (246). Jane Austen’s parents George Austen and Cassandra Leigh met and married in Bath, and they no doubt had their two unmarried daughters in mind when they made their decision to relocate the family to Bath in 1801. The poor health of Jane Austen’s mother was also a contributory factor.

Famously, Jane fainted when she was told that she was moving to Bath. Her feelings of bereavement on leaving a beloved family home for lodgings in Bath had a structural if not a specific parallel in *Persuasion* (where Sir Walter Elliot and his two unmarried daughters also leave their family home to relocate to Bath). But once Jane Austen had got over the shock of the removal to Bath, she began to look forward to the greater freedoms urban life would bring:

I get more & more reconciled to the idea of our removal. . . . —For a time we shall now possess many of the advantages which I have often thought of with Envy in the wives of Sailors or Soldiers. (3-5 January 1801)

Austen knew the city from literary sources such as Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, and Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline*. But she also knew Bath as a visitor. In November 1799, she had a long stay with her brother Edward, who had come to the town to take the waters for his gout. She had taken advantage of the amusements on offer, visited the theatre, where she enjoyed a performance of Kotzebue’s comedy *The Birth-Day*, and especially enjoyed Sydney Gardens, purported to be the best pleasure gardens outside London. Filled with exotic plants and trees entwined with variegated lamps, it boasted spectacular water cascades, well-rolled gravel paths for promenading and taking in the views, a stone pavilion with seating for taking refreshments and looking out over to the well-lit orchestra below, and there were even swings for the ladies (Egan). For lovers there were intimate cov-

ered boxes or grottoes. Famously, one of the most private grottoes had been a courting spot for Richard Sheridan and Elizabeth Linley. There was also a charming maze or labyrinth, measuring half a mile long, and which could take up to six hours to traverse, at a cost of an extra three pence per person. On gala nights, in the summer, there were spectacular fireworks, illuminations, and transparencies.

Jane Austen attended Sydney Gardens on at least two occasions in 1799, where she especially enjoyed the illuminations and the fireworks. She observed: "There was a very long list of Arrivals here, in the Newspaper yesterday, so that we need not immediately dread absolute Solitude—& there is a public breakfast in Sydney Gardens every morning, so that we shall not be wholly starved" (17 May 1799). She then told of plans to attend a gala night: "There is to be a grand gala on tuesday [sic] evening in Sydney Gardens;— a Concert, with Illuminations & fireworks;—to the latter Eliz: & I look forward with pleasure" (2 June 1799). Jane was disappointed when it rained but they returned to another gala evening two weeks later and she wrote, "We did not go till nine, & then were in very good time for the Fire-works, which were really beautiful, & surpassing my expectation;—the illuminations too were very pretty" (19 June 1799). She thought of Sydney Gardens in 1801 when she and her family scoured the newspapers in search of a place to rent: "it would be very pleasant to be near Sydney Gardens!—we might go into the Labyrinth every day," she wrote to Cassandra (21-22 January 1801). They were delighted to find advertised in the Bath Chronicle No. 4 Sydney Place for rent: the house, which was on the outskirts of Bath, on the edge of open countryside, looked out over the Sydney pleasure Gardens.

In order to give a flavour of what life was like for Jane Austen in the period she lived in Bath between 1801-06, I consulted the contemporary newspapers. What sort of impression of her new world would she have gained when she scanned the local newspapers, ostensibly looking for lodgings for the family? Amongst the advertisements for tooth whitening, false hair, lotions for the face to reduce freckles, muslin dresses trimmed with lace; between the countless medical cures for rheumatism, gout, sprains, bruises, and women's ailments (the celebrated Cordial of Balm of Gilead, curing wind in the stomach and the bowels, and all nervous complaints), she would discover an array of enticing urban pleasures for the discerning tourist or civilized inhabitant. Tickets for the Assembly rooms were on offer, boxes at the Theatre Royal, musical concerts, and of course the pleasure gardens with fireworks and illuminations. She could discover that there was to be a Ball for

the Queen's birthday at the Lower Rooms and she could read the latest theatre gossip about the famous actors who flocked to Bath in the summer months.

There were also a number of less salubrious entertainments on offer, such as martial arts exhibitions (The Exhibition of Androides, with real guns fired), or illegitimate theatrical performances at New Circus near the marketplace, where comedies were staged, and the Little Theatre in Frog Lane, where there was rope-dancing and feats on horseback. In Albemarle Street, there were private theatricals for people of fashion only; no professional actors allowed to take part. People could even attend public trials, such as the one in August 1802, where soldiers were tried for gang-raping a 22-year-old girl on the Bath Road. In 1803, the papers were filled with an account of the Gala Fete held in Sydney Gardens where 1200 attended, and danced all evening.

As I have argued elsewhere, twentieth-century criticism was fixated on the assumption that Jane Austen was immovably attached to village life and deeply suspicious of urban pleasures—the theatre foremost among these. Of course she herself parodied such a clichéd view when she wrote from Cork Street in London: “Here I am once more in this Scene of Dissipation & vice, and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted” (23 August 1796). My book *Jane Austen and the Theatre* sought to present another picture: an Austen who enjoyed urban life, who attended the theatre whenever she could, and who took enormous pleasure in the theatrical scene. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland declares her enthusiasm for Bath observing that “there is much more sameness in a country life than in a Bath life. One day in the country is exactly like another” (58).

Austen's residence in Bath in the years 1801-06 coincided with one of the most prosperous and exciting times in the history of the local stage. The period from 1790 to the opening of the new theatre in Beaufort Square in 1805 marked an unprecedented time of “prosperity, of brilliancy and of progress” (Penley 81). Outside London, Bath was the most important theatre, maintaining a regular company which was supplemented by London stars. Many famous actors had cut their teeth in the Orchard Street playhouse, such as Sarah Siddons who had begun her career there and frequently returned during the summer seasons, when Jane Austen resided there. But Austen's favourite actor, the theatre's main asset, was the charismatic Robert William Elliston, known as the “best Elliston” or the “fortnightly actor” because he was loaned to the London playhouses once a fortnight. One of his best roles

was as Frederick in *Lovers' Vows*, whilst Mrs. Edwin, not one of Austen's favourites, played Amelia. He was finally lured to London in 1804, though his wife refused to join him, preferring to stay in Bath to run her dance academy. When a rumour circulated in 1807 that Elliston was to quit the stage, Austen was alarmed: "Elliston . . . has just succeeded to a considerable fortune on the death of an Uncle. I would not have it enough to take *him* from the Stage; *she* [i.e., his wife] should quit her business, & live with him in London" (20-22 February 1807). Elliston was a maverick and a drinker, and when Austen saw him act in London some years later she complained of his falling standards of his acting and moaned that there was nothing of the "best Elliston" about him.

Austen was also a fan of the circulating library. There were over ten circulating libraries in Bath by the end of the eighteenth century. In the year that she moved, the *Bath Journal* advertised the opening of a new public library. Its purpose was to benefit both residents and visitors, with a collection of books not commonly met with in the circulating libraries: books of reference, foreign journals, history and mathematics and astronomical tables, etc. Also in 1801 there was also news of a new coffee house on the London model, "serving breakfasts, dinners and suppers, on the same plan as the London coffee-houses."

Perhaps of all the leisure facilities that developed in Bath in this period, the two most popular were the public assemblies and the walks. Walking and dancing could be regarded as a form of exercise but more importantly, these pastimes provided for socializing and personal display (Borsay 150). Jane Austen loved dancing and walking. In the few extant Bath letters, she lists the long walks she has taken, one lasting for two hours up to Beacon Hill and across the fields to Charlcombe. She also enjoyed promenading the crescent, and walking by the Crescent Fields and Lansdown Hill. Walks to Weston, Lyncombe, and Widcombe were other favourites. The squares and circuses in Bath were in effect open-air rooms, where people promenaded, flirted and gossiped.

Above all, the supreme arena of polite leisure was the public assembly. The assemblies combined dancing, cards, tea, and conversation. For young girls, it was an education in social intercourse. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu maintained that assembly rooms provided "a kind of public education, which I have always thought as necessary for girls as boys" (Vickery 227).

In Bath, assemblies were divided into the regular assemblies, and ones associated with a brief special occasion, for example the Queen's birthday ball. The Lower Rooms, according to Anstey's *New Bath Guide*, had a fabulous

ball-room 90 feet in length and 36 feet in breadth with a stucco ceiling and fine views of the river, valley, and adjacent hills. Paintings adorned the walls—most prominent was a portrait of Beau Nash—and the rooms were elegantly furnished with chandeliers and girandoles. There were two tea rooms, an apartment devoted to the games of chess and backgammon and a 60 foot long card room. The Balls, according to the Guide, “begin at six o’clock and end at eleven. . . . About nine o’clock the gentlemen treat their partners with tea, and when that is over the company pursue their diversions till the moment comes for closing the ball. Then the Master of the Ceremonies, entering the ballroom, orders the music to cease, and the ladies thereupon resting themselves till they grow cool, their partners complete the ceremonies of the evening by handing them to the chairs in which they are to be conveyed to their respective lodgings.”

It was at a ball in the Lower Rooms that Henry Tilney was first introduced to Catherine Morland: when he was “treating his partner to tea” he laughingly accused her of keeping a journal in which he feared he should make but a poor figure. “Shall I tell you,” he asks, “what you ought to say? I danced with a very agreeable young man introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him; seems a most extraordinary genius” (*NA* 13). Mr. King was the real life Master of the Ceremonies at the Lower Rooms, from 1785 to 1805, when he became Master of the Ceremonies for the Upper Rooms. The ball-room was also used during the daytime as a promenade, as its windows commanded extensive views of the Avon. It was the fashion also for the company to invite each other to breakfast at the Lower Rooms after taking their early baths or first glass of spa water.

The New Assembly rooms, which had opened in September 1771, were located at the east end of the Circus. They were built by subscription under the direction of John Wood. The Ballroom was 105 feet long, and 42 feet wide, furnished with Gainsborough portraits and boasting five spectacular chandeliers from its ornate panelled ceiling. At the end of the room were gilt-framed looking glasses. On the way to the concert or tea-room one would cross the octagon-room, with its elegant domed roof and frieze, opening out to the ball-room, the tea-room, and the card-room. The open-plan architecture was deliberate: the rooms were built in a roughly circular fashion to encourage the free flow of guests. It is in the octagon room that Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe arrange to meet their brothers for a rendezvous, and this room is also the setting for the scene between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth when Anne allows herself to hope that he still loves her.

The Bath assemblies, unlike for example those at Tunbridge, were organized on a subscription basis. Balls and concerts were held at least twice weekly. According to the *New Bath Guide* there were two Dress Balls every week, at the New Rooms on Monday and on Friday the Lower Rooms. Then there were two Fancy Balls every week, at the Lower Rooms on Tuesday and at the new Rooms on Thursday, subscription half a guinea. Concerts were held on Wednesdays. The Monday dress ball was devoted to country dances only, and at the fancy ball on Tuesdays and Thursdays two cotillions were danced, one before and one after tea. The fancy ball was not a fancy dress or masquerade ball but an occasion when the stringent rules regarding evening dress were relaxed (Hill). The ladies wore shorter skirts for the cotillion, with their over-dresses pinned up, as in *Northanger Abbey* when Isabella and Catherine pin up each other's train for the dance.

As well as the twice weekly assemblies and the mid-week Wednesday concert, the theatre held performances on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. In *Northanger Abbey*, the regulated uniformity of the Bath social circuit is parodied in a dialogue between Catherine and Henry in the Lower Rooms:

"Were you never here before, Madam?"

"Never, sir."

"Indeed! Have you yet honoured the Upper Rooms?"

"Yes, sir, I was there last Monday."

"Have you been to the theatre?"

"Yes, sir, I was at the play on Tuesday."

"To the concert?"

"Yes, sir, on Wednesday."

"And are you altogether pleased with Bath?"

"Yes—I like it very well."

"Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again."

(12)

When Jane Austen arrived at Bath in May 1801 she attended the penultimate ball of the season. She was surprised that the assembly rooms were so quiet, with merely four couples dancing before tea:

I dressed myself as well as I could, & had all my finery much admired at home. By nine o'clock my Uncle, Aunt & I entered the rooms & linked Miss Winstone on to us.—Before tea, it was rather a dull affair; but then the beforetea did not last long, for there was only one dance, danced by four couple.—Think of four couple, surrounded by about an hundred people, dancing in the

upper rooms at Bath!—After tea we *cheered up*; the breaking up of private parties sent some scores more to the Ball, & tho' it was shockingly & inhumanly thin for this place, there were people enough I suppose to have made five or six very pretty Basingstoke assemblies. (12-13 May 1801)

Nevertheless she enjoyed staring at a distant cousin, the notorious Mary Cassandra Twiselton: "I am proud to say that I have had a very good eye at an Adulteress"; she was "not so pretty as [she] expected." She then excitedly described her new white dress for the last ball of the season. Jane seemed to prefer larger parties: "I detest tiny parties—they force one into constant exertion" (21-22 May 1801). Catherine Morland is less favourably inclined towards large parties. When she attends her first assembly, she is shocked to find Mr. Allen heading off for the card-room, leaving the ladies to negotiate their way through the throng of young men by the door. So crowded is the room that she can only glimpse the high feathers of the ladies.

Austen's first Bath novel depicts a city of amusement, sociability, and pleasure, though it can of course also be painful and humiliating if the social codes are misunderstood. Catherine's innocent breaches of propriety do cause her distress, as do broken engagements and the absence of a dancing partner at a ball. Like the teenager that she is, Catherine oscillates between extreme happiness and despair; one minute her "spirits danced within her, as she danced in her chair all the way home," the next she experiences the "heart-rending tidings" that the Tilneys have called on her only to discover that she has gone out driving with John Thorpe. That night she cries herself to sleep. Austen's ironic third person narration maintains the necessary distance from her heroine, but she is never callous about how seemingly trivial matters such as the feelings of a young girl matter. She is much harsher towards characters who, in her phrase, tell lies to increase their importance, or manipulate others for their own ends, regardless of every thing but their own gratification. Catherine's entrance into society is an education in growing up, as much as it was for her literary predecessor, Fanny Burney's Evelina.

Jane Austen was well aware of Bath's reputation as a marriage market. In *Emma* Mrs. Elton tells Emma, "'And as to its recommendations to *you*, I fancy I need not take much pains to dwell on them. The advantages of Bath to the young are pretty well understood.'" In *Northanger Abbey*, the spa-town fulfils its reputation as a place devoted to the pursuit of social and sexual liaison. Isabella hooks Frederick Tilney by playing him off against Catherine's brother. For Henry Tinley, "his affection [for Catherine] originated in noth-

ing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought" (198). But for Catherine Bath is a city of pleasure, where she finds a husband in the first man she dances with: "Here are a variety of amusements, a variety of things to be seen and done all day long, which I can know nothing of there. . . . I really believe I shall always be talking of Bath—I do like it so very much. . . . Oh, who can ever be tired of Bath?" (58-59).

Persuasion of course does present us with a heroine who is tired of Bath, even before she sets foot in it. As I noted earlier, Bath was popular not just for recreation, but also for recuperation. It was a place associated with sickness and the dying as much as it was with health and pleasure. Austen's health began to fail at the beginning of 1816, when she was working on *Persuasion* in earnest. Sickness had been much on her mind. She had also been nursing her brother Henry towards the end of 1815 after he had been very ill and had almost died. She knew by spring 1816 that she was ill, arranging to take the waters at Cheltenham.

Austen's second Bath novel depicts a place of invalidism, sickness, and death. This is the health resort par excellence, where Admiral Croft, like Jane Austen's brother Edward, comes to cure his gout with the hot baths and medicinal waters. Here we see little of what Henry Tilney describes as "'The honest relish of balls and plays and every-day sights.'" The Elliots, far from adhering to the Bath code of sociability, politeness and disregard of rank, only attend private parties, where Anne has little chance of meeting Captain Wentworth. "The theatre or the rooms, where he was most likely to be, were not fashionable for the Elliots, whose evening amusements were solely in the elegant stupidity of private parties" (170). For Anne it presents "a state of stagnation."

From the misery of "broken promises" of *Northanger Abbey*, we move to the broken hearts of *Persuasion*. From the opening pages of the novel we are confronted with deaths, that of Anne's mother, Lady Elliot, and her still-born son. Later, we learn of the premature deaths of Fanny Harville, Richard Musgrove, the wife of William Walter Elliot, and Mr. Charles Smith. Austen also brings us too close to some near misses. Little Charles Musgrove breaks his collarbone and suffers a potentially serious injury in his back, which "roused the most alarming fears" (54). Most memorable is Louisa's fall from the Cobb and the serious head injury that threatens her life. Captain Harville is lame and in poor health, and lives in Lyme for his health and the benefits of sea air. There is also sickness of the mind, real and imaginary. Benwick suffers from

depression; Mary Musgrove is a hypochondriac, who believes that her nerves are shattered. Then of course there is the former Miss Hamilton, to my mind, one of the most interesting characters in the novel.

Miss Hamilton is now the widow Mrs. Smith, whose “severe rheumatic fever, which finally setting in her legs, had made her for the present a cripple.” Anne’s renewed friendship with her old school friend fallen on hard times is central to the novel, and is pivotal in the (uncharacteristically clumsy) plot twist of Anne discovering the real character of the duplicitous Mr. Elliot. Mrs. Smith has come to Bath to recuperate and is in reduced circumstances in insalubrious lodgings “near the hot-baths, living in a very humble way, unable to afford herself the comfort of a servant, and of course almost excluded from society” (144). Mrs. Smith’s life has been scarred by reversals of fortune. At one time she had health, youth, and good-looks, and had married a man of fortune, living a dissipated life in London. “Twelve years had transformed the fine-looking, well grown Miss Hamilton, in all the glow of health and confidence of superiority, into a poor, infirm, helpless widow.” By her own admission she mixed in a fast set: “I was very young, and associated only with the young, and we were a thoughtless, gay set, without any strict rules of conduct, we lived for enjoyment” (190).

Inevitably the “dissipations of the past” and “having lived much in the world” have taken their toll on Mrs. Smith, now a widow with “no child to connect her with life and happiness again, no relations to assist in the arrangement of perplexed affairs.” She lives in a small, dark, noisy apartment with no servant, only a part-time nurse.

The woman in the late eighteenth century most associated with a similar reversal of fortune was “Perdita” Robinson, the notorious first mistress of the Prince of Wales. A celebrated actress, beauty, and style icon, she was once the most infamous woman in England, whose life was changed when she became paralysed from the waist down at the age of 25. Mary Robinson remade herself as an author, poet, and feminist, more popular in her day than Wordsworth, and admired by men such as William Godwin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Like Austen’s Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Robinson’s paralysis was caused by acute rheumatic fever, which also settled mainly in her legs. Mrs. Robinson also spent much time in Bath, where, like Mrs. Smith, she was carried to the hot baths for respite from her great suffering and constant pain. Both the real-life Mrs. Robinson and the fictional Mrs. Smith have led a life of dissipation, but show great courage in overcoming their disability.

Despite the vicissitudes of her life, Mrs. Smith amazes Anne with her

spirit and resilience: “Neither the dissipations of the past—and she had lived very much in the world, nor the restrictions of the present; neither sickness nor sorrow seemed to have closed her heart or ruined her spirits” (145). Neither is she cynical, though she has been exposed to the darker side of society: “The wife had been led among that part of the mankind which made her think worse of the world, than she hoped it deserved.” The word “hoped” is important here. Hope is a central theme of *Persuasion*. The re-awakening of Anne’s hope gives the novel its beauty and pathos, most memorably expressed by Anne herself in the phrase “All the privilege I claim for my own sex is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope has gone.” Mrs. Smith also has hope, in the face of her appalling illness, poverty, and isolation. She contrasts markedly to the selfish hypochondriac, Mary Musgrove. One of the most striking phrases in all of the novels is made in relation to Mrs. Smith. Anne is amazed to find that Mrs. Smith suffers only fleeting moments of “depression”:

How could it be?—she watched—observed—reflected—and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or resignation only.—A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that *elasticity of mind* (my italics), that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and Anne viewed her friend as one of those instances in which, by a merciful appointment, it seems designed to counter-balance almost every other want. (146)

Jane Austen does not often invoke religion in her novels, preferring to keep her faith a strictly private affair. But her phrase “elasticity of mind,” which is described as heaven’s “choicest gift,” is what truly renders Mrs. Smith such a dignified and noble figure.

Mrs. Smith, unlike the depressed Benwick, does not quote lines from Byron on a “mind destroyed by wretchedness.” She does not allow herself such indulgences, nor does she harbor illusions about illness and how it affects the human heart. She tells Anne that she makes a living by knitting thread-cases, pin-cushions, and card racks, and Nurse Rook sells them to families: “She always takes the right time for applying. Every body’s heart is open, you know, when they have recently escaped from severe pain, or are recovering the blessings of health” (147). Furthermore, when Anne suggests that the sick-room brings out the best in people, she is gently rebuked by her friend: “Here and there, human nature may be great in times of trial, but gen-

erally speaking it is its weakness and not its strength that appears in a sick chamber; it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude that one hears of” (148).

Austen allows herself a rare dig at the heroine she described in a letter as “almost too good for me.” When Anne pays a visit to Mrs. Smith the day after her memorable meeting with Wentworth in the octagon room, she is described somewhat tartly as musing on eternal constancy “enough to spread purification and perfume all the way” (181). On her arrival she is told the history of Mr. Elliot with the promise from Mrs. Smith that ““Your peace will not be shipwrecked as mine has been.” Anne’s kindness to Mrs. Smith releases her from any guilt she may have harboured towards Mr. Elliot and Lady Russell: “She had never considered herself as entitled to reward for not slighting an old friend like Mrs. Smith, but here was a reward indeed springing from it! —Mrs. Smith had been able to tell her what no one else could have done” (200). Anne does not forget Mrs. Smith: she is the Wentworths’ first visitor after they are married, and Captain Wentworth acts for her to recover her lost fortune. Strikingly, the penultimate and the greater part of the final paragraph of *Persuasion* are devoted to Mrs. Smith:

Mrs. Smith’s enjoyments were not spoiled by this improvement of income, with some improvement of health, and the acquisition of such friends to be often with her, for her cheerfulness and mental alacrity did not fail her; and while these prime supplies of good remained, she might have bid defiance even to greater accessions of worldly prosperity. She might have been absolutely rich and perfectly healthy, and yet be happy. Her spring of felicity was in the glow of her spirits, as her friend Anne’s was in the warmth of her heart. (252)

The contention between the health of the mind and the body continued to interest Austen. In a period of remission from the Addison’s disease that would kill her, she began what would be her final novel, which took for its very theme the vagaries of the health industry. Here we have another town devoted to recuperation and the sick. But *Sanditon*, in contrast to the ancient polite urban spa town of Bath, is a small, new seaside village, on the cusp of developing into a fashionable health resort, replete with hypochondriacs and all the latest fads in health cures, such as immersion bathing, tonic pills, and the drinking of asses’ milk.

Sanditon is extremely close in spirit to the juvenilia, a dying return to Austen’s natural medium of satire and love of the ridiculous. In contrast to the elegiac *Persuasion* there is a lightness of touch and exuberance of tone in her

prose highly reminiscent of one of her earliest parodies, *Love and Freindship*. *Sanditon* begins with an accident involving an overturned carriage, as *Love and Freindship* ends with the deaths of the heroines' husbands from a similar road accident. In *Love and Freindship*, the sight of their husbands "most elegantly attired but weltering in their own blood" sends the heroines into a frenzy, from which only one of them recovers. Sophia's ludicrous death-bed advice to her friend is "'Beware of fainting fits . . . a frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious. . . . Run mad as often as you chuse, but do not faint,'" providing a hilarious codicil to her most important pearl of wisdom given at the start of the narrative: "Beware of the unmeaning luxuries of Bath and the stinking fish of Southampton."

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