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"Pictures of Perfection . . . Make Me Sick and Wicked": Jane Austen, Reginald Hill, and the Mysteries of Butcher's Meat

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By **Emma Major**

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***Sanditon* ›**

Jane Austen had a taste for misdeeds that extended from her characters' "blunders" to the moral dubiety of mercenary marriages, spousal murder, and other crimes.[1] As she wrote to her niece Anna, "[P]ictures of perfection . . . make me sick & wicked" (23–25 March 1817); she found the exemplary characters of didactic fiction dull and preferred to discuss the everyday flaws, sins, and crimes of her contemporaries and fictional characters. In her letters she is open about the social pleasures of crime as gossip—"The Wylmots being robbed must be an amusing thing to their acquaintance" (21–22 January 1801)—and claims superior powers of detection, boasting to Cassandra that "I have a very good eye at an Adultress" (12–13 May 1801). Deaths can be epistolary prizes: she notes casually, "I treat you with a dead Baronet in almost every Letter" (8–9 September 1816).

Her early open glee in crime as plot—when in her youthful writings her heroines stole, were violent, and confessed, "'I murdered my father at a very early period of my Life, I have since murdered my Mother, and I am now going to murder my Sister'" (*Juvenilia*

222)—was tamed in her more mature prose. As her heroine Catherine Morland learns, in polite England villainy does not often display itself in dramatic gothic form. Yet there are more connections between the early writings and the later than the general neglect of the former would suggest. The convenient death of Mrs. Churchill in *Emma* looks more sinister when viewed in the context of Lady Susan's good wishes for the swift demise of her friend's inconvenient husband (*Later Manuscripts* 71–72), or Mary Stanhope's mutterings about "'the use of a great Jointure if Men live forever'" (*J* 82). In this article I turn Austen upside down and back again to explore Austen's lasting interest in deception and transgression. Drawing on Reginald Hill's perceptive and affectionate conversation with Austen in *A Cure for All Diseases*—his 2008 novel, published in the U.S. and Canada as *The Price of Butcher's Meat*—I look at the unpublished early writings alongside the unfinished *Sanditon* to argue that in *Sanditon* Austen develops her early interest in mysteries and violence to create a fictional world fit for a female detective.

Austen's final work is one which shows a restless questioning of literature: even though Austen herself loved Burney's novels, Charlotte Heywood turns away from Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796) because "she had not Camilla's youth, and had no intention of having her distress" (*LM* 167). Like a less innocent Female Quixote, Sir Edward Denham spouts fashionable literary nonsense, Samuel Richardson's rake Lovelace having gone to his head (183–84), while Clara Brereton, immediately identified as the "complete heroine"(169) by Charlotte, is aware of Sir Edward's ambitions to be "a dangerous man" but "had not the least intention of being seduced" (184).[2] We are presented, then, with a heroine who feels that she has outgrown the usual stories of young ladies, a handsome man with expectations who cannot understand what he reads but fantasizes about abducting young ladies to Timbuctoo, and, in Clara, a heroine's heroine who can see through schemes of seduction. In *Sanditon*, conventional protagonists prove themselves unheroic on further acquaintance, but Charlotte's response to human failings is pragmatic rather than sermonic. Her instinct, on catching sight of an illicit tryst, is to sympathize with the difficulties of finding a safely secret location rather than to dwell on any transgression. Unlike Tom Parker, Charlotte perceives the morally corrupting consequences of Lady Denham's meanness, reflecting, "'Thus it is, when rich people are sordid'" (181). Rich people's tendency to sordidness and the crimes of venality and seduction have of course long been the staple fare of crime fiction. Lady Denham's sybilline assertion that Charlotte too will come to think of "'the price of butcher's meat'" in time (170) is transformed by Hill into a prediction of Lady D's own grisly murder; the discovery of the pig-farm-owning dowager roasting in place of the hog at her own party in turn fulfills the prophecy, as Charley becomes fascinated by the murder and by the competing motives of the heirs. Hill responds to the cues in *Sanditon*: in only a few pages, Austen offers us a morally unstable world, where speculation in an unreliable fashion for sea-bathing provides a backdrop to the scheming of corrupt and manipulative heirs hungry for uncertain inheritance.

Austen's affinity with mystery writing has long been noted. Her niece Anna provided characters in *Sanditon* with sinister backstories in her incomplete attempt to finish Austen's manuscript; Tony Tanner identified in *Emma* an exposition of the importance of mystery (206–07); and P. D. James asserted that *Emma* provided the essentials of a detective story (250). Susannah Fullerton's work helpfully situates Austen as living through a period that saw a marked increase in crime and sentencing (3, 5). Hill's Charley Heywood, finding herself in a seaside crime wave, proves as intelligent and perceptive as her Austen namesake, prompting DCI Andy Dalziel to comment to his unlikely new friend, "you've got sharp eyes, a sharp brain and you're nebby" (*Cure* 445).

As the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that Charley's powers of detection rival even those of the great Dalziel (373).

Charley's detailed emails to her sister Cassie invite comparisons with the similarities between Hill's heroine and Jane Austen herself. Like Jane and Cassandra, the sisters are close and keen letter-writers, and even the epistolary roles of the sisters are alike: Jane Austen, like Charley, feels herself to be the more forthcoming correspondent, complaining to Cassandra, "I tell you everything, & it is unknown the Mysteries you conceal from me" (24 January 1809). Austen is joking, of course, perhaps conjuring the wild impropriety of "The beautifull Cassandra," in which her sister spends a satisfying day stealing bonnets and devouring ices. Yet the reference to "Mysteries" is telling, implying a comic and transgressive other existence shared by the sisters. Charley, like Austen, jestingly speculates about her sister's life in the absence of information and is the teller of stories. Hill's suggestion in *Cure* that Austen's last heroine, with her mature humanity, cool assessment of others' opinions, and search for character beyond outward appearance, is the one most like her creator and that Austen herself might make a fine detecting heroine, is even more persuasive when Austen's letter-writing is considered alongside her fiction.[3]

Hill's familiarity with Austen's writing and capacity for literary play meant that the pairing of Sandytown in *A Cure for All Diseases* with *Sanditon* was never going to be a simple one. His earlier Austen-themed novel, *Pictures of Perfection* (1994), took as its setting Enscombe, from *Emma*, but ranged over her other novels. *Pictures* often alludes to *Pride and Prejudice*, and even recasts Elizabeth and Darcy's courtship as the unlikely pairing of a gay biker detective and an antiquarian book dealer. In *Cure*, the attention is more on the *First Impressions* aspect of *Pride and Prejudice*: mistaken first impressions and misreadings are as important to crime novels as they are to love stories. Like Austen and her family, Hill is a keen reader, and his skillful weaving of literary references into the novel compels us to read with attention so that we can identify the Austen novels while following the contemporary crime plot, set in Enscombe, an improbably named Yorkshire village (the kind of name, Hill notes, someone might invent who had never been farther north than Hampshire [393]).

The teasing, self-conscious bookishness of Hill's clues recalls both the Austen family's pleasure in literary pursuits and the joyful exuberance of Austen's satirical early writings (Sutherland and Johnston xxxv). His transposition of Austen into a crime-infested northern village echoes her irreverent compression of the infamously long *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) into a comically short play. Yet the links between Hill's writing and Austen's teenage fictions work on a more sinister level too. As we saw earlier, Austen's early fictional world is one in which murderers confess to the actual and planned killing of family members, the suicide of sentimental lovers is met with a comic epitaph, and there is open discussion of the benefits to young women of marrying rich older men with short life expectations. It is not so far from there to Lady Susan's suggestion that her rival, the current Lady Manwaring, might be encouraged into an early grave by frequent reminders of her husband's unfaithfulness (*LM* 72). Sir James Martin's life expectations seem even less propitious; he irritates Lady Susan to exclaim, "'I could have poisoned him,'" long before their marriage, and she does not seem the kind of woman to suffer his "'silly'" conversation for long once she is secure of his property and income (42). Indeed, Hill jokes that it was reading Austen's "A Letter from a Young Lady, whose feelings being too Strong for her Judgement led her into the commission of Errors which her Heart disapproved" that inspired him to become a crime fiction writer ("Jane Austen" 80).

Sanditon, by its very fragmentary nature, invites us to focus on beginnings, but reading it in the context of crime fiction illuminates the extent to which this novel is preoccupied with mistaken readings and misleading appearances. But whereas in, say, *Cecilia* (1782) Frances Burney dwells on the dazzle of fashionable life and its confusing pleasures and fears, Charlotte Heywood seems already to have gone beyond Burney's reach, leaving the praise of "'Civilization'" in the form of the appearance of "'Blue shoes, and nankin boots'" in a Sanditon shop window to Mr. Palmer (*LM* 160). Charlotte seems unshaken by the fashionable modernity of Sanditon, which manifests itself in its social circles as well as in the circulating library and nankin boots. Austen comments that "every body must now 'move in a circle'—to the prevalence of which rotatory motion, is perhaps to be attributed the giddiness and false steps of many" (203).[4] The suggestion that these new destabilizing circles might be as poor an exchange for settled sociability as Mr. Parker's swap of his safe old house for the windy heights of his kitchen-gardenless Trafalgar House adds an air of danger to the narrative that is reworked by Hill into the perfect setting for a crime story. The impossibility of keeping house names fashionable is satirized in Mr. Parker's regret at having named his new home "Trafalgar House" ("'for Waterloo is more the thing now'" [156]) and is pleasingly mirrored by Hill, whose Tom Parker wonders whether he should have called his new house "Al Gore" rather than "Kyoto" (*Cure* 21). Austen's Mr. Parker characteristically looks forward to new building work, however, and predicts that a Waterloo Crescent will not be long in arriving.

Circles of fashion are powerful forces in Sanditon, uprooting established families and changing old maps, undermining social, semantic, and even topographical understandings of the world. Charlotte is one of the few to remain level-headed despite the seaside whirl: unlike Lady Denham and Diana Parker, she is not carried away by fantasies of wealthy heiresses needing asses' milk or crowds of fashionable young ladies from a large boarding school; unlike Mr. Parker, she sees past Lady Denham's status to her failings. Mr. Parker might point out that "'[t]hose who tell their own story you know must be listened to with caution'" (152) and admit the truth of some of his brother Sidney's jokes, but he is too desirous to see everything relating to his beloved Sanditon in a positive light to admit to any serious failings in those around him. "'He is too kind hearted to see clearly.—I must judge for myself,'" concludes Charlotte after encountering Lady Denham (181).

Charlotte's situation, however, is not as steady as her mind. Lady Denham's prediction that Charlotte will come to think about "'the price of butcher's meat'" (170) highlights Miss Heywood's position as an equivocal heroine, suspended between the youth of a Camilla and the age of a settled married woman or confirmed spinster, just as she is suspended between home and the wider world in a seaside resort. She is currently a visitor and not wealthy, and so is spared the duties of a female inhabitant such as a Lady Denham or an Emma Woodhouse in dispensing (or withholding) butcher's meat and soup to the worthy poor. Nor is she yet a Miss Bates, garrulous in gratitude for the whole hindquarter of a porker from Hartfield. As a woman, though, she is party to Lady Denham's discussion of the potential inflation of meat prices by the hypothetical profligacy of wealthy West Indian heiresses, and she witnesses the wealthy widow's gleeful economies. Charlotte may be passing through Sanditon—though of course, given the conventions of the novel and the time, she may escape Miss Bates's poverty and spinsterhood by marrying into the community—but she has access to the gossipy realm of "important nothings" (15–17 June 1808). Like her fellow traveller Lady Mary Wortley Montagu at the start of the previous century, and in another country, Charlotte finds that even as a domestic tourist her gender and class allow her access to privileged intimate information, and she uses it to judge her new circle.

The "important nothings" are the currency of domestic fiction, and the modern Charley's records of Sandytown conversation and speculation in her emails to Cassie become an important source of information for the police investigations into the Sandytown murders. The realm of the domestic quotidian to which Lady Denham consigns a future Charlotte is presided over in crime fiction by that other "Aunt Jane," Miss Marple, who not only knows the price of butcher's meat but can unravel murder through the clue of a haddock or the apparently innocent addition of hundreds and thousands to a pudding.[5] Hill, having early in his novel series established in Dalziel's partner, Peter Pascoe, an unlikely fondness for Agatha Christie, weaves her into *A Cure for All Diseases* more often than usual. Christie—in Aunt Jane mode—is fitting here, a provincial town with three or four families being as much Christie's preferred fictional territory as "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" was famously that of Austen (9–18 September 1814). Christie's Aunt Jane would have read the brief interval between Frank Churchill's bad-humored departure and the convenient demise of his aunt that enabled him to marry Jane Fairfax as suspicious rather than fortuitous; Hill himself offers a criminous take on Emma Woodhouse in his speculative short story "Poor Emma," in which Emma is driven to extreme measures to secure her desired happy ending. Yet Austen never leaves her heroines in the role of spinster observer, and they usually gain an occupation in addition to a husband: whether as clergyman's wife, lady of the manor, or sailor's wife, the women enter positions that involve activity to support their husbands' roles in society. In Hill's Sandytown, Charley can go on to become a clinical psychologist, but the unmarried female protagonists of Austen's world generally face marriage or impoverished spinsterhood. Clara's precarious situation adds a shadow to Charlotte's: both are young single women who need to secure themselves an income for the future. Austen's own profession, that of novelist, is tacitly present as creator of the text itself and as part of the community of authors represented by Sanditon's fashionable circulating library.[6]

Austen and her family were "great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so" (18–19 December 1798), and she was withering in her letters as well as in her fiction about those who sneered at the novel genre. Her depiction in *Sanditon* of a man whose mind has suffered through his addiction to reading fiction is unusual for the time, as compulsive novel reading was popularly understood to be a female malaise. The fact that he has also misunderstood these novels, because his intellect is inadequate to the task, is a reminder that men as well as women can sometimes lack the brains or education to cope with the power of literature. Here, Austen is circling back to debates she tackled in *Northanger Abbey*'s defense of the novel, in which she lamented: "Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers" (30–31). The fashionable sexism latent in dismissing a genre out of intellectual snobbery is a sin Austen lampoons first in John Thorpe, whose brutish assertion that he never reads novels, as "'they are the stupidest things in creation'" (*NA* 43), is swiftly followed by claims that make it evident to Catherine (and to the appreciative novel reader) that he has not read Ann Radcliffe and was incapable of understanding *Camilla*. Henry Tilney, the hero Austen renders distinctive through his appreciation of novels, disabuses Catherine of her notion that all "'young men despised novels amazingly'" by informing her that it would be amazing indeed if they did so, "'for they read nearly as many as women'" (108).

In *Sanditon*, Sir Edward represents a more advanced form of John Thorpe's undergraduate bluster, and Austen—who, like Burney, has a fine ear for fashionable jargon—this time pairs him with a more confident female listener for comic effect. Encountering Charlotte as he emerges from the library, Sir Edward explains:

> “I am no indiscriminate novel-reader. The mere trash of the common circulating library, I hold in the highest contempt. You will never hear me advocating those puerile emanations which detail nothing but discordant principles incapable of amalgamation, or those vapid tissues of ordinary occurrences from which no useful deductions can be drawn.—In vain may we put them into a literary alembic;—we distil nothing which can add to science.” (181–82)

His lecture on the right and wrong kind of novels for “‘the most anti-puerile man’” (182) continues for some time. “‘If I understand you aright’—said Charlotte—‘our taste in novels is not at all the same’” (183). Her brief but firm response, in clear English, counters fashionable babble with plain sense. But Sir Edward’s disingenuous speech—given while we are told “a young Whilby” can be seen “running off with five volumes under his arm to Sir Edward’s gig” (181)—confirms him as a character whom the reader cannot trust. As in *Northanger Abbey*, modish patter is a symptom of sickly morals: the Thorpe siblings, with their hyperbolic imprecision of speech, are shown to be shallow liars, and Sir Edward is soon revealed to have plans to seduce his rival, Clara, out of the running for Lady Denham’s inheritance.

In addition to its monitory depiction of the dangers of pretentious speech and the disrespect of the novel form, *Sanditon* contains a cautionary tale about marriage for male readers. Austen’s warning is emphasized by the point at which the novel breaks off, to leave us musing over the fate of Lady Denham’s first rich old husband. Looking out from an inglorious miniature from an obscure corner in his own house, the old man is forced to contemplate his titled successor’s whole-length portrait commanding the room. “Poor Mr. Hollis!—It was impossible not to feel him hardly used; to be obliged to stand back in his own house and see the best place by the fire constantly occupied by Sir Henry Denham” (209). Here again Austen is revisiting themes first explored in her early writings, where, in “The Three Sisters,” competition to bag a rich husband earlier than one’s rivals is unashamedly the main consideration in deciding whether to accept a marriage proposal. In *The Watsons* (1805) Emma and her sister Elizabeth debate whether marriage to an ill-tempered man would be worse than being a teacher; while Emma still balks at the idea of marrying without affection, her sister (who has been to school) is definite: “‘I would rather do anything than be teacher at a school’” (*LM* 83). Their sister Penelope, Elizabeth warns, “‘has no faith, no honour, no scruples, if she can promote her own advantage,’” and “‘[t]here is nothing she would not do to get married’” (81). Yet, as Elizabeth points out, “‘it is very bad to grow old and be poor and laughed at,’” which is what will happen to them all as impoverished spinsters (82). She fears Emma has become too refined in her notions when she opines that education should prevent women from mercenary marriages; Elizabeth concludes with pragmatism that “‘I think I could like any good humoured man with a comfortable income’” (83).

Lady Denham is a fearsome example of what happens when women lack the education to see beyond financial gain in a marriage. A “rich Miss Brereton, born to wealth but not to education” (151), she first marries an elderly man of great wealth, inheriting everything on his demise, and then marries Sir Harry Denham, and gains a title. The allusion to the obscurity of her “motives for such a match” in the same chapter as Lady Denham’s introduction as “a very rich old lady, who had buried two husbands” and “who knew the value of money” (150–51) suggests the burial of husbands as a possibly more active process than conventional understanding of the phrase might allow. Her boast that “though she had *got* nothing but her title from the family, still she had *given* nothing for it” (151) confirms the unashamedly mercenary attitude Lady Denham has towards marriage. Austen never loses sight of the avarice that often accompanies marriage, and Lady Susan is a more significant character for understanding later Austen than is generally allowed.

Turning Austen upside down to look at *Sanditon* in the context of her early writings reveals an Austen who is drawn to mystery from her first literary productions to her last. Turning her temporally round again to read her after Hill's responses to her work, helps illuminate an Austen whose published and unpublished texts evidence a consistent interest in "the happiness of frightful news" (*Emma* 363). The fainting, sick, and dead bodies that regularly appear in Austen's novels and letters are too often tidied away. Literary snobbery about the crime genre and insistence on reading Austen as a novelist of propriety can prevent us from engaging with her open acknowledgement of the pleasures of frightful news that draw crowds to see "two dead young ladies" on the Cobb (*Persuasion* 120) or that compel Isabella's children to beg for the story of Harriet and the gypsies to be retold even though they themselves already know it by heart (*Emma* 364). In *Sanditon*, Austen introduces us to a world rendered giddy by circles of modernity and to a heroine who, like her creator, has "a very good eye at an Adultress." In doing so, she left us with scenes of suspicion and artifice that are the very opposite of a picture of perfection.

NOTES

[1] This article comes from a larger ongoing project on Austen and crime. I am grateful to Sarah Dredge, Susan Allen Ford, Lisa Hopkins, and Kathryn Sutherland for their comments on earlier drafts. "Blunder" is a word made famous in *Emma*'s word games, but it is used early in *Sanditon* by Tom Parker about the mistake that led to him coming to the wrong Willingden (*LM* 140).

[2] In Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), the heroine, Arabella, attempts to live her life as though it were a heroic romance. Lydia Languish is determined to be the heroine of a fashionable novel in R. B. Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), and, in a less extreme manner, Marianne Dashwood's head is also turned by reading in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811).

[3] Janet Todd perceptively notes the links between the ill Austen and Diana Parker (22–25).

[4] The term "circle" in this sense gained in popularity during the eighteenth century, and Austen provides two of the examples in the *OED*.

[5] See, for example, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple stories "The Thumb Mark of St. Peter" and "The Tuesday Night Club." On Austen and Christie, see Juliette Wells (199–220).

[6] On writing as a profession for women, see Schellenberg (1–25).

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