

Of Things in Austen: Or, Encounters with Bonnets, Harps, and Sofas

PEACE, Mary <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3455-1874>>

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Of Things in Austen: or, encounters with bonnets, harps and sofas

In 1948 F.R. Leavis declares that Jane Austen is "the first modern novelist" on account of her humanism, the "intense moral preoccupation" of her work (16). Leavis's association of modernity with humanism is what the philosopher Bruno Latour characterizes as itself a modern habit, one that "overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity' – things, or objects, or beasts ..." (13). This essay will contribute to a body of criticism concerned to reinstate the "nonhumanity" in the modern, to think about the role of Things in constituting the humanism of the novel. I will consider how objects signify in the world of Austen's novels, and how they script and choreograph the worlds they furnish. This approach seems important at this point in the twenty-first century, when the growth and sustainability of commodity culture can no longer be taken for granted. It seems important now to recover the specific histories of our cultural negotiations with the world of commodities.

Abundance and the novel:

The art historian Norman Bryson argues persuasively that the emergence of still-life painting in seventeenth-century Holland must be understood as a cultural response to material abundance. It is a response to the cargos of new Things brought back on the tides of colonial exploration and overseas trade — a reflection on "how the phenomenon of plenty is to be viewed and understood" (104). This claim is equally valid for the emergent form of the novel in eighteenth-century England.

Eighteenth-century Britain experienced, if anything, an even greater influx and proliferation material things. As Neil McKendrick writes in *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982), within the "space of a few generations," "[m]ore men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions"(1). Contemporaries' accounts consistently register this unprecedented and unrivalled material wealth, but also their disquiet.ⁱ For a classically educated elite, the only precedent was ancient Rome and this was a history freighted with gloomy prognostics. In the classical-republican political theory which dominated the economic thinking of the seventeenth century, it was material abundance, or luxury, as it was known, which led to the fall of the Roman Empire.

"Luxury," as David Hume describes in 1751, "had long been suppos[d] the Source of every Corruption and Disorder in Government ..." (30). The issue of luxury, and of how eighteenth-century Britons made their cultural and ethical peace with the growth of a commodity culture, is much debated by historians and literary critics. But it's clear that the cultural energies of the eighteenth century were substantially devoted to this problem.

By the time Austen is writing at the end of the eighteenth century, the novel and the consumer society are both well established. Luxury, moreover, has been substantially redefined in positive terms thanks to the moral-sense philosophy of the mid-century and most definitively to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). But as the historian Amanda Vickery notes: "Concern about immoral profusion and meaningless glitter was still not a spent force in the early 1800s" (167). There is still much anxiety among contemporaries about the rising tide of luxury, particularly in Evangelical religious discourse and in the Rousseauvean ideas which pervade the writings of the Romantics. William Cobbett, in *Rural Rides* (1825), typically expresses concern at the progress of luxury into farmhouses, "... formerly the scene of *plain manners and plentiful* living" (184). But now, he complains, there are "showy chairs and a sofa (a *sofa* by all means): half a dozen prints in gilt frames hanging up: [and] some swinging book-shelves with novels..." (185). The sofa, as we shall see later in this essay, is a peculiarly potent symbol of luxury.

Jane Austen and Things

Critics of Austen have differed substantially over the use of Things in her writing. On the one hand, ever since Walter Scott's anonymous review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* (1815), Austen has been associated the kind of attention to Things that we find in seventeenth century still-life painting. For Scott, Austen has

something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are often not elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader (197).

This comparison of Austen's writing with still-life painting is echoed as recently as 2013, in Paula Byrne's study of "small things" in the Austen's world. Here the writing is compared to of the art of Vermeer who 'creates the sense of a real world by means of an opened letter, a

pearl earring, a latticed window, a jug and a tablecloth, a musical instrument'.ⁱⁱ "Objects" Byrne argues, "play a key part in bringing alive Austen's fictional worlds" (9).

On the other hand, Norman Page, in his seminal work, *The Language of Jane Austen* (1973), notes a surprising absence of material detail in the novels. He finds "almost none of the [expected] minute description of externals — people and their dress, houses and furniture and landscapes" (56). And Jason Sollinger has more recently argued that the definition of Austen's novels as real "Literature" is predicated on her "removal" of the kind of specific historical details that are found the novels of predecessors such as Frances Burney (284). In Latour's terms, Austen's novels are characterised by the "modern habit" of "overlooking" the simultaneous birth of "nonhumanity" (13).

So, what can we make of these rival critical characterisations of Austen's relationship to the world of Things? Do Austen's novels, like the still-life paintings of the seventeenth century, come alive because of their attention to Things, or do they read to us as peculiarly "modern" because of their striking oversight of Things?

Jane Austen and realism

To understand how critical opinion could be so apparently contradictory, it's helpful to turn to Ruth Yeazell's wonderfully nuanced study of Dutch painting and the realist novel. Yeazell explains that when nineteenth-century critics talk about the realism of the novel and reach for comparisons with Dutch and Flemish art, they can mean very different things. They might be highlighting a "detailed rendering of material particulars" (7). But they might equally be pointing to "the representation of 'ordinary' people and events rather than heroic and mythical ones, [or to] the close attention to the rituals and habits of daily life" (7). In the case of Scott, Yeazell argues, his comparison is designed to highlight Austen's "close attention to the... domestic life of the middle classes" (7). This seems to me entirely plausible, as Scott's review details the "subjects" and not the "objects" in Austen's novels. This does not, however, explain Byrne's sense of Austen's Vermeer-like tableaux.

Byrne traces her inspiration for writing *The Real Jane Austen* to a couple of scenes in *Mansfield Park* (1816). The first describes the objects in Fanny's "dear" east room: "a faded footstool ...too ill done for the drawing-room," "three transparencies," "a collection of family profiles," the "small sketch of a ship" (178-9). The second is the "scrap of paper and a simple gold chain" which Fanny treasures as symbols of her apparently unrequited love for Edmund (Byrne 10). These scenes do stand out in Austen's novels as moments which notice

material objects, but I would argue they do not render material detail in the manner of a Vermeer painting.

Austen's writing is extremely short on sensual, pictorial material detail. If we compare her tableaux to the realism of a George Eliot novel, it's clear that she offers only outlines. This is striking if we compare the opening of *Emma* (1815) with that of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2). Austen's opening simply outlines Emma's situation in life and her disposition:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her (3)

Eliot's opening, on the other, hand, fills in the outline with painterly detail. Miss Brooke, we are told:

... had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters (7)

We, the reader, are referred in the second sentence to the detail of Miss Brooke's "hand and wrist," to imagine it in sleeves and then asked to conjure up the Blessed Virgin as depicted by Italian painters in order to imagine the quality of this beauty.

Austen's relationship to Things, it seems to me, is most effectively understood in the context of the eighteenth-century neo-classical aesthetic with which she grew up, and not retrospectively through the lens of the nineteenth century novel. Her depiction of Things harks back to an aesthetic where, as Samuel Johnson's protagonist says in *Rasselas* (1759), "The business of a poet, [is not to]... number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest" (Johnson 28). The neo-classical or Augustan "poet" must rise above particularity and acquire a "just Idea of beautiful forms" (Reynolds 7). In relative terms Austen's writing eschews Things for "forms".

Austen, Things and Decorum

One of the other key tenets of neo-classical aesthetic theory is the need for Decorum. Decorum, as dictated in Horace's *Ars Poetica* requires that a work of art be appropriate in style and genre to the rank and significance of its subject matter. Much of the humour and moral comment in Austen's novels is focussed on the offense against Decorum, and Decorum is generally measured in relation to Things. The most common expression of this is Bathos, the yoking of the sublime with the ridiculous that we find so frequently in Alexander Pope's writing. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia Bennet, much like Pope's Belinda, is unable to distinguish between the gravity of a tear in the moral fabric and a tear in her new gown. But Lydia is only one of a parade of characters across Austen's novel, who does not properly distinguish between the value of material possessions and the value of sexual propriety, sentimental bonds or social responsibility. Think of Mrs Allen, in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), whose only objection to Catherine Moreland's outing with Mr Thorpe in an open carriage is the effect it will have on a "clean gown" (105). Or of Walter Eliot in *Persuasion* who is happy to give up the social prestige and responsibility of being a country land owner for the luxuries of Bath. There is no detailed or pictorial focus on the objects themselves in the writing: things function instead as generalized symbols of a misplaced sense of priorities. The history of this neo-classical aesthetic, however, shows us clearly that this representation of objects is rooted in an anti-luxury discourse.

The Augustan aesthetic is driven originally by an explicitly Tory, landed, agenda which decries the growth and encouragement of commerce and its attendant luxury. Pope, John Gay and Jonathan Swift are all declared opponents of Robert Walpole's Whig government and propagandists for the Tory opposition. Their most famous satires, Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728), Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728) and Swift's, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), all target the rising influence of luxury through satires of indecorous attention to and consumption of Things.

But this aesthetic, however, does not focus on Things as pernicious in their own right, rather on Things as they highlight the trivial and corrupt preoccupations of modern society and offer a contrast with the virtues of the ancient world. Indeed, there is no absolute definition of what constitutes a luxury item in this discourse: the decorum of a consumer is determined solely by his or her rank in society. It is the increased availability of commodities to all ranks that threatens the established social order. Swift even proposes as a remedy to "enforce sumptuary laws against luxury, and all Excesses in Cloathing, Furniture and the Like" (95). In Austen's novels, we find precisely this relative relationship to Things. It is not indecorous,

for example, for Lydia Bennet to be thinking about clothing *per se*. Indeed, Elizabeth Bennet is first seen trimming a bonnet. However it is indecorous for Lydia to be thinking about clothing when she should be thinking about sexual propriety.

There are, however, some objects in Austen's novels that always seem luxuriously disproportionate, whatever the social status of the consumer, and these objects come more into focus in their own right: although even here there is no sense of the particularity of the object, or of its material details. These are objects, I suggest, which have been brokered into legible symbols in the conduct writing of the previous century.

Take the harp. There are harps in all of Austen's last three novels: *Mansfield Park* (2014); *Persuasion* (1817), and the unfinished *Sanditon*. In each case, the harp figures as the luxury which it is never decorous to possess regardless of one's social status. In *Persuasion*, the harp is one of the Things introduced by the Musgrove girls into the "old-fashioned square parlour" in the Great House (43). The narrator comments that this creates such "an overthrow of all order and neatness" that the ancestors in the portraits that line the room, "seemed themselves 'to be staring in astonishment" (43). The purchase of a harp, it seems, is not Decorous even for consumers who live in the Great House. This sense of the extreme indecorum of a harp is echoed in *Mansfield Park*, where Mary Crawford attempts to hire a local farmer to transport her harp. She complains: "I found that I had been asking the most unreasonable, most impossible thing in the world, had offended all the farmers, all the labourers, all the hay in the parish" (68). But it is *Sanditon* which offers us the key to always already indecorous nature of this symbol. Here we are told that the Beaufort sisters, "though naturally preferring anything to smallness and retirement," have been obliged to retreat to Sanditon to retrieve their finances (202). To compensate, Miss Beaufort has hired a harp in the hope "of praise and celebrity from all who walked within the sound of her instrument" (202). The harp here figures as an objective correlative for a kind of ego and vanity which is unacceptable in a "proper woman". The historical context for the emergence of the harp as a symbol of "unpleasant, narcissistic self-promotion" is very usefully laid out in Ann Bermingham's essay "Elegant Females and Gentlemen connoisseurs" (496).

There are a few other Things in Austen's novels which function as symbols in their own right. I have not the space to discuss these individually here, but would just pick out the "ivory tooth-pick case" which Robert Ferrars deliberates so long over in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and the simple gold chain in *Mansfield Park*. Like the harp, both of these have been

brokered into particular moral symbols, although at no point are any of them rendered in their material detail.

But the neo-Classical suspicion of the material world still so influential in Austen's aesthetic is tempered, in places, by the influence of moral-sense philosophy. Where Things do come into focus in Austen and do not seem contaminated by an implicitly anti-luxury discourse, it is most often when they have been transformed by the delicate tastes and sentiments of their owner. When for example, Edward Ferrars, in *Sense and Sensibility*, speculates on the marvellous purchases the Dashwood sisters would make if they had money, these purchases don't figure as corrupting luxuries, even though he imagines their purchases as limitless. For Miss Dashwood, we're told, "would give a general commission for every new print of merit" and for Marianne would there would scarce be "enough music in London" to satisfy her "greatness of soul" (197). The refinement of the sisters' tastes dictates that they could never indulge in corrupting luxuries.

Equally Things are lifted out of the anti-luxury discourse when refined by sentiment. None of the Things in Fanny Price's "dear room" could possibly be described as a luxury, indeed they are scarcely even commodities. The footstool has been worked by her cousin, and is "faded" and "too ill done for the drawing room" (178). The transparencies speak to Fanny's refined taste for sublime landscapes and the other items are "family profiles," considered "unworthy of being anywhere else," and the "sketch of a ship sent by her brother William" (178-9). These "dear things" do not register as luxuries they are redeemed by the sentimental relationship to them. Indeed as the narrator comments "Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend..."(178).

Even so, sentimental Things are only exempt if they observe the rules of Decorum. Think of Harriet Smith in *Emma* and her pathetic collection of sentimental keepsakes for a man decidedly above her station. Harriet's lack of Decorum is cruelly exposed when Emma exclaims "Have you actually found happiness in treasuring up these things" (368)? It is apparent from this example that, although the influence of moral-sense philosophy can be seen in Austen, it does not trump the rules of Decorum, and remains fundamentally an anti-luxury discourse.

A Brief History of the Sofa:

I want to conclude with a case study of the sofa in Austen's work. I have chosen the sofa because it is still a peculiarly potent symbol of luxury when Austen is writing, but also

because it opens up a different way of thinking about how Things function in Austen's novels. It demonstrates the role of things and particularly the role played by the new commodities in choreographing the action of the novel.

Sofas had not been in existence for more than a century when Austen first began writing. The prototype was delivered to Louis XIV's mistress, Madame de Montespan, on July 20, 1671 (DeJean 113). But the sofa took much longer to make an appearance in England. The physical item did exist, but was in very limited production until the second half of the eighteenth century. Even as late as 1755, Johnson's *Dictionary* defines the sofa as an oriental word describing "a splendid seat covered with carpets". And, although sofas had become much more commonplace in Britain by the end of the century, their appearance in a farmhouse, as Cobbett's comment suggests, could still raise an eyebrow as late 1825.

Indeed, in Britain of the mid-to late eighteenth century sofas became synonymous with the corrupting power of luxury; Nowhere more famously than William Cowper's *The Task* (1782). This Mock Epic, as with earlier Augustan satirists, is ruled by the aesthetics of Decorum in which the humour and moral comment comes from the substitution of ancient heroic themes with the trivia of the modern world. The trifling subject of the "sofa" becomes the occasion for a stadial history of Britain which uses the increasing comfort of seating design as an index to the rise of luxury. The poem is steeped in classical-republican nostalgia for a simple more manly age when "libertine excess" did not make the sofas necessary for the repose of "arthritic limbs" (Cowper 61). Austen's career begins in the wake of Cowper's poem and is testimony to the persistence of the sofa a potent symbol of luxury well into the 1800s.

In terms of the main novels, sofas feature in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*. In each case their significance can be read in terms of the Classical-Republican narrative of decline. In *Pride and Prejudice*, sofas are mentioned just once, during one of the evenings spent by Elizabeth at Netherfield Park during Jane's illness. When tea is over: "Mr. Hurst reminded his sister-in-law of the card-table--but in vain. ... [he] had therefore nothing to do, but to stretch himself on one of the sophas and go to sleep" (59-60). Mr Hurst is Bingley's brother-in-law, and his association with the sofa symbolises his lack of moral substance and refusal of social responsibility. He "looked the gentleman," Austen tells us, but "lived only to eat, drink and play at cards" (10; 38). Mr Hurst, has a house in Grosvenor Square, but apparently no landed estate with its attendant responsibilities. He seems content to live for extended periods of time at the expense of his brother-in-law. His

association with the sofa renders him readable within the context of the whole classical-republican discourse of decline. He is physically and morally attenuated, and makes a good foil to Mr Darcy who we later discover is an active and responsible landlord.

Austen spells out the moral symbolism of the sofa most clearly in *Mansfield Park*, where Mrs Norris scolds Fanny: "it is a shocking trick for a young person to be always lolling upon a sofa" (84). Julia, uncharacteristically, comes to Fanny's defense, protesting: "I must say, ma'am, that Fanny is as little upon the sofa as anybody in the house" (84)! This is, of course, absolutely true, and rightly marks Fanny out as one of the most actively virtuous members of the house. By implication, however, Julia marks her own mother out as one of the most morally irresponsible. For Lady Bertram, we are told "spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children" (22). It is no wonder, then, to Austen's readers, steeped in classical republican narratives of decline, that her daughter, Maria, like Rome itself, falls to ruin.

Austen repeats this trope with her final completed novel, *Persuasion*, where we are first introduced to the lazy, self-serving and irresponsible Mary Elliot "lying on the faded sofa of the pretty little drawing-room" (39). Mary's indolence is consistently contrasted with the active virtue of her sister Ann, but in the context of the classical republican narrative it should also be read as contrast with this novel's depiction of the active virtue of the Navy. It is, after all, as Edward Young declared in the midst of the Seven-Years War, 'On the soft beds of Luxury most kingdoms have expired' (60).

But sofas make two other appearances in Austen's major novels where they don't so much figure as symbols of luxurious decline but serve to choreograph intimacy. The sofa is a dangerous location in Austen's novels, not only because of its symbolism in classical-republican narratives, but because it insists upon a physical proximity not otherwise available. It should not be forgotten that the sofas first made their appearance in the mistresses' private quarters at Versailles, or indeed, that a French erotic novel entitled *Le Sopha*, had made a considerable noise when it was published in translation in 1742.

The sofa first appears as choreographer in *Emma*, when Mr Elton "with scarcely an invitation" seats himself between Mrs Weston and Emma on the sofa (134). This unlooked for physical intimacy is the prelude to Emma's discovery that she and not Harriet Smith is the

object of Mr Elton's desires. Then, in *Persuasion*, a sofa provides the first occasion for a renewed intimacy between Anne Eliot and Captain Wentworth. Anne and Mrs Musgrove are sitting together on a sofa when Mrs Musgrove begins to thank Captain Wentworth for his kindness to her now dead son. Captain Wentworth moves over to comfort her and Mrs Musgrove makes room for him on the sofa. The moment, focalised from Anne's perspective, is extremely significant:

They were actually on the same sofa.... they were divided only by Mrs Musgrove.and while the agitations of Anne's slender form, and pensive face, may be considered as very completely screened, Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for ...self-command (73).

The extent to which Austen's novels are scripted by the new staples of the commodity economy is very striking; from chance encounters while shopping to the seating limitations of a barouche to the constant assembling for the drinking of tea and coffee.

If we turn Austen's novels "upside down," and look at the world of her "objects" rather than her "subjects," two things become apparent. Firstly, that although Things in her novels feature comparatively rarely and are never rendered in any material detail, they function much more starkly therefore as moral symbols. They are legible in the context of eighteenth century moral and aesthetic discourses. Secondly that the Things that do appear on Austen's sparsely furnished stage are a key part of the moral and physical negotiations which constitutes the "humanism" and modernity of her novels.

3900 words.

Dr Mary Peace, Senior Lecturer in English Literature, Sheffield Hallam University.

m.v.peace@shu.ac.uk

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ⁱⁱ (9) Paula Byrne :