

“Was There a Servant . . . Who Did Not Know the Whole Story before the End of the Day?’ Upside-Down Points of View in Austen”

DREDGE, Sarah

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/26464/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

DREDGE, Sarah (2020). “Was There a Servant . . . Who Did Not Know the Whole Story before the End of the Day?’ Upside-Down Points of View in Austen”. *Persuasions : the Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 40 (2).

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

“Was There a Servant . . . Who Did Not Know the Whole Story before the End of the Day?”

Upside-down Points of View in Austen

Sarah Dredge

Sarah Dredge (email: S.Dredge@shu.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Nineteenth-Century Literature at Sheffield Hallam University. She contributed a chapter “‘Within View of His Own Warehouses’: Sites of Change in *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South*” to the collection *After Austen* (ed. Lisa Hopkins) and publishes primarily on nineteenth-century women writers’ engagement with political economy.

In recent years, Austen novels have proved ripe for reworking with alternative narrations, ones that take different characters’ point of view on the action of the plots and re-tell the story from that perspective.¹ Though of wildly varying quality, these alternative tellings can draw our attention to what tight narrative control Austen exerts over the point of view of her readers. While Austen’s narrator is a coolly distant third person, the focalizing point of view is almost exclusively that of the female protagonist. In abandoning this perspective, the Austen “reimaginings” and “variations” thus find plenty of scope to see the stories differently. These versions do tend very much to find their *raison d’être* in offering another way for readers to experience the love narratives that fuel the Austen industry. Far more intriguing, however, is Jo Baker’s *Longbourn*, which allows the familiar narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* to take place very much in the background. It reverses the usual point of view, in which servants are more like domestic objects than inhabitants of the great houses, to focus on the lives of Longbourn’s servants, and it is only peripherally interested in the doings of the gentry characters who make all the work. It offers a startlingly different way of imagining life at Longbourn by asking readers to consider the daily experiences, desires, and histories of those who are barely a name in Austen’s novel: primarily the maid Sarah and footman James.

¹ Armelle Parey considers many different types of such shifted-perspective texts based on Austen novels in *Prequels, Coquels and Sequels in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, chapter 5.

This is decidedly *not* the perspective that Austen’s novel invites us to embody, and—as my title quotation indicates—the genteel central characters in Austen’s work mark that gentility by maintaining the illusion that servants neither see nor hear the private conversations and actions that drive the plots and development of character. These servants are both domestic cohabitants and strangers: frequently having long-standing ties to the family (and *Longbourn* reminds us that even closer relations often existed between the family and the household), in times of trouble servants could turn into manifestations of a judgmental public view of private events.² Elizabeth’s question ““was there a servant . . . who did not know the whole story before the end of the day?”” (292) is thus a rarely expressed reminder that the Longbourn servants could be thought of as subjects in their own right, with opinions of their own and voices that may express them. The invisible insiders suddenly come into view in the guise of outsiders within. This article seeks to draw attention to the slight ruptures in this class-bound narrative control, where readers are given a glimpse of the plots and families in Austen’s novels “upside down”: from the bottom of household hierarchy up. By tracking and analyzing the moments when the viewpoint of servants is acknowledged, imagined or narrated, and most importantly *needed*, I suggest that the novels both ask readers to participate in the determined forgetting of servant witnesses that makes the ideal of the private, leisured home possible and at the same time expose the fault-lines in the maintaining this ideal. Such moments make visible as polite fictions the idea of the *private* gentry home.

Upholding this notion of a leisured home, separated from work, in a household that depended on a staff of servants, required that “the family” resist thinking of servants as

² “Criminal conversation” trials for divorce offered contemporary readers real life examples; in these cases, it became apparent that the servants who displayed their good training by not being seen and appearing not to see, *did* in fact see the private goings-on of the homes they supported. (Thanks to Janette Rutterford for this reminder.) Lawrence Stone’s *Broken Lives* relates such cases (e.g., 238–41). Servant testimony on marital infidelity appears in *Mansfield Park*, where Mrs. Rushworth’s maid refuses to keep quiet about Maria’s elopement with Henry Crawford.

independent subjects and hence potential witnesses; in reality, as Roger Sales points out in discussing Austen screen adaptations, “gentry life was a drama that had to be acted out daily in front of an audience of servants” (190). This circumstance must also be forgotten by the reader in order to endorse the ending of each novel in the attainment of genteel domestic privacy by the focalizing characters. When Elizabeth Bennet looks forward to escaping the “society” of her gossiping and interfering family to enjoy the privacy of her new “family party” at Pemberley, she—and we in identifying with her—must ignore the presence there of a community of staff paid to supply its “comfort and elegance” (384) without such intrusions. The effects of the slight ruptures in this process of ignoring servants’ constant presence—the moments where the forgetting must be dropped—leave a lasting trace that reflects on and qualifies these closures.

As other critics have noted, Austen’s novels abound in servants whom readers, like the gentry characters, are not meant to see until they spring into action to perform a service for a more important character. They may be summoned to dress hair; they may be called upon to bring refreshments; they may be the vehicles by which the numerous notes are delivered between houses. As Natalie Walshe notes, “Jane Austen doesn’t write novels about the servants who tend to her ladies and gentlemen, but she never writes novels without them.”³ Judith Terry calls them “non-witnesses” (105). But on occasional moments, they *are* called upon to witness, or the narrative makes clear that they have *all along* been witnessing, and such instances shatter the illusion that governs their relations with their employers.⁴ Paying attention, then, to those occasions when servant witnesses *are* acknowledged and their perspectives are given narrative recognition, draws attention to the

³ John Mullan, too, reminds us in *What Matters in Jane Austen?* that Austen’s characters—and original readers—would always be aware of the presence of servants (118).

⁴ Even more rarely do we sense an unsolicited opinion that may suggest a transgressive point of view on the employer class, such as the narrative’s offering an implied response from the butler Baddeley in *Mansfield Park* to the idea of Mrs. Norris as the recipient of a marriage proposal: “And there was a half-smile with the words which meant, ‘I do not think *you* would answer the purpose at all’” (325).

porousness of those apparently private domestic spaces to which “families” retreat at the ending of each novel. Elizabeth Veisz notes that the integration of paid workers within the home was “increasingly mystified by middle-class domestic ideology” (74);⁵ this mystification, the willed denial of servant witnesses, is dispelled in those narrative moments that rely on information that these co-inhabitants in genteel houses have, indeed, seen and heard.

My title quotation from *Pride and Prejudice* exposes this process of determined forgetting of servants as witnesses. As Elizabeth arrives back from Derbyshire in the aftermath of Lydia’s elopement, Jane reports the effects of first hearing the news on the household:

“My mother was taken ill immediately, and the whole house in such confusion!”

“Oh! Jane,” cried Elizabeth, “was there a servant belonging to it, who did not know the whole story before the end of the day?”

“I do not know.—I hope there was.—But to be guarded at such a time, is very difficult.” (292)

Part of the “confusion” of the house is the very breaking down of the invisible barriers maintaining the private façade of the Bennet family within their decidedly non-private home, as Elizabeth’s response makes clear. The two communities inhabiting the home have become confused. Jane’s comment about being “guarded” exposes the kind of self-control that normal circumstances entailed. Immediately after acknowledging Elizabeth’s concern regarding what servants heard, however, Jane goes on to describe visits of consolation from their Aunt

⁵ Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone in *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* discuss the new desire for family privacy that affected the construction and modification of great houses increasingly throughout the eighteenth century. The placing of servants’ rooms on upper floors, corridors to allow rooms to be self-contained, plus the innovation of the bell-pull in the second half of the century “went a long way to achieve some of that privacy now so earnestly desired by family members” (348). These changes were part of a process, they note, that aimed to “physically segregate the two separate communities” of family and staff (348).

Phillips and Lady Lucas, which makes clear that these neighbors are fully aware of the news, and soon, in response to the scandal, reports arrive of every tradesman claiming to have been cheated by Wickham.

Clearly everyone in the neighborhood knows what has happened, but Elizabeth, Jane and the Gardiners—the standard-bearers of right behavior that the novel presents to its readers—need to believe that the household servants do *not*. Mrs. Bennet’s failure of genteel behaviour is shown by her inability to recognize proper invisible barriers between family and servants. The narrator notes, in regard to Mrs. Bennet’s taking to her room and “vent[ing] all her feelings on the housekeeper, who attended, in the absence of her daughters”:

Though her brother and sister were persuaded that there was no real occasion for such a seclusion from the family, they did not attempt to oppose it, for they knew that she had not prudence enough to hold her tongue before the servants, while they waited at table, and judged it better that *one* only of the household, and the one whom they could most trust, should comprehend all her fears and solicitude on the subject. (288–89)

The housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, becomes the token servant who can know, which enables the continued self-deception on the part of the better-behaved family members that the rest do not. She is allowed to be a transition figure between servant and family to make this sharing of family business possible, though not on equal terms: the movement in the passage among “brother and sister,” “the servants,” and “the household” both makes the distinction and allows Mrs. Hill to slightly bridge the gap. Though we well know that the housekeeper is called Mrs. Hill, she remains unnamed here. This tactic attempts a narrative distinction that

reasserts difference and places her firmly back with “the servants”; she is still part of the “household,” not of the family.⁶

A key aspect of Lydia’s lack of propriety, which enables her inappropriate behavior and marriage, is shown in her constant refusal, like her mother, to be “guarded” in what she says in front of and to whom. She ignores the presence of the inn waiter before launching on her story of Wickham and Mary King on her sisters’ return journey to Longbourn (220); she interrupts Mr. Collins’s reading of Fordyce’s *Sermons* to talk about a servant at her uncle’s house (68); and on her visit to Longbourn after her wedding makes no distinction between neighbours and servants in her desire to show off her marriage:

She longed to see Mrs. Phillips, the Lucasses, and all their other neighbours, and to hear herself called “Mrs. Wickham,” by each of them; and in the mean time, she went after dinner to shew her ring and boast of being married, to Mrs. Hill and the two housemaids. (317)

As with her mother, Lydia’s refusal to not-see the servants in the house signals her failure in appropriate genteel behaviour.

But this elopement narrative puts under strain and therefore exposes the polite fiction that servants do not see or hear. Times of particular stress often cause the stripping away of the illusory boundaries. Jane and Elizabeth hear that the keenly awaited express from Mr. Gardiner has arrived by the inquiry for news from Mrs. Hill, who of course knows it has arrived, which the mistress and daughters of the house do not and who is equally able as they to guess its significance. This occasion is one of the few occasions when a servant breaks into the narrative with reported speech: “I beg your pardon, madam, for interrupting you, but I was in hopes you might have got some good news from town, so I took the liberty of coming to ask” (301). Her request to be told the contents of the letter seems to imply that as

⁶ For more on the role of the housekeeper in relation to household and family, see Tessa Boase, *The Housekeeper’s Tale: The Women Who Really Ran the English Country House*.

she has been given open access to the family secret, she has the right to early notice of its conclusion: illusory boundaries once breached have lost their power to maintain distinctions. The narrative does not allow Mrs. Hill's anxiety to be immediately allayed, however: Jane and Elizabeth run to find their father, who licenses them to read the letter and tell their mother. The narrative attention thus turns from Mrs. Hill's momentary intrusion into family business and narrative presence and follows Jane and Elizabeth, so that as readers we run away with the sisters and share in the private disclosures with the family. We leave Mrs. Hill behind in her suspense; she has to wait to be rung for by the incorrigible Mrs. Bennet, who wants her help dressing and brings her back into private confidence.

Mrs. Hill returns in order, it seems, to display Mrs. Bennet's lack of discretion: Mrs. Bennet asks her if she has heard the news, as if they did indeed inhabit the same community, and draws the servants into the family concerns by declaring "you shall all have a bowl of punch to make merry at her wedding" (307). This behavior appears to be part of the "folly" that so sickens Elizabeth that she leaves the room; the narrative moves with her, to reflect in privacy on Lydia's situation. It is only when Lydia returns that Mrs. Hill is again invited to share in narrative attention and family concerns, to be shown Lydia's ring. Mrs. Hill's intrusions into the narrative, however, have served the function of reminding readers that those who answer the doors and deliver the notes are privy to inside information and might also have feelings involved.

This instance also, though, fulfils another narrative function in the novel, of emphasizing *Mr.* as well as Mrs. Bennet's family failings. If Mrs. Bennet is criticized for inappropriately communicating with servants as if they were family by the narrative adoption of Jane and Elizabeth's perspective, the use of Mrs. Hill's intercession also serves to criticize Mr. Bennet for shutting himself away so that his wife must share her feelings with the housekeeper, and for leaving his family to hear of private intelligence from servants. Mrs.

Hill's unwonted entry into the narrative, result of both Bennet parents' lapses in "proper" behavior, draws attention to the illusoriness of the boundary between servants and family. The fiction of servants as "non-witnesses" is exposed to readers, who are then meant to forget it again so that we can share the novel's judgment on Mr. and Mrs. Bennet for exposing it to us.

Pride and Prejudice offers another example of the narrative drawing attention to and then forgetting the witnessing of servants, in the form of Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper at Pemberley. As Elizabeth and the Gardiners tour Pemberley, Mrs. Reynolds's disclosures about the private side of Darcy, the result of witnessing him in close proximity from childhood onwards, is initially dismissed as a "kind of family prejudice" by Mr. Gardiner, who is amused by it (249), as if she were one of the garrulous and gullible servants of gothic romance. But Elizabeth is now keen for a private view of Darcy and is differently aware of the value of the servants' privileged access to family privacy than when she later regrets Mrs. Hill's ability to witness. She now wonders: "What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant?" (250). This question is expressed in free indirect discourse, which brings the narrator into Elizabeth's inquiry, rather than sealing the view point off into the exclusive voice of a character. The narrative thus allows two perspectives on Mrs. Reynolds's disclosures as we listen both with Mr. Gardiner (skeptically entertained, and voicing the genteel dismissal of a servant's true witnessing) and Elizabeth (already eager to believe): one maintaining the polite discounting of servant perception, the other dropping it in order to gain from its information.

As the Gardiners grasp that Darcy is in love with their niece, however, their perspective switches as they too realize that it is in their emotional and material "interest" now to trust the validity of what a servant has seen and the conclusions she has drawn from her access to the Darcy family's domestic privacy ("There was now an interest, however, in believing the

housekeeper” [264]). The selective forgetting is abandoned as the information Mrs. Reynolds can convey is now recognized to be important to the Gardiner/Bennet family. Mrs. Reynolds has been allowed her narrative moment, and on its *reconsideration*, if not first listening, its credentials are respected: “they soon became sensible, that the authority of a servant who had known him since he was four years old, and whose own manners indicated respectability, was not to be hastily rejected” (264). The narrator’s humor at the Gardiners’ expense exposes the choice involved to give credence to servant knowledge, as it now reflects their “interest.” Elizabeth also employs Mrs. Reynolds’s witness account later; when Wickham attempts to insinuate his closeness to the Darcy family by his intimate allusion to ““Poor Reynolds”” being fond of him (327), Elizabeth is able to deflate him and his pretensions (as son of the steward) by repeating Mrs. Reynolds’s report that he had joined the army and gone ““wild”” (247).⁷

Despite these acknowledgements of servants as credible witnesses, however, when the novel returns to Pemberley, it has been reestablished as a site of close domestic privacy and a respite from those Hertfordshire relations and neighbors who could not observe genteel restraint: Elizabeth “looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley” (384). The selective forgetting is now back in place to enable Elizabeth and Darcy’s retreat from prying eyes. “Family party” means privacy again: they can hide from both the awareness that servants share this home and the relatives who would remind them otherwise. The novel ends with references to visits by relations of the new married couple, the Gardiners and Lady Catherine, who, for all her faults, can be relied upon to maintain distance between family and servants. Inviting the reader to sympathize with Elizabeth’s

⁷ Dropping the title “Mrs.” signals family privilege as it also discriminates housekeepers from the family members whose first names or titles are used: the narrative always gives housekeepers their titles as in “Mrs. Hill” or “Mrs. Reynolds” whereas family members familiarly discard it. Wickham therefore lays claim to family status in calling Mrs. Reynolds “Reynolds.”

relief and properly appreciate her new domestic circumstances therefore implicates the reader in maintaining the illusion of family privacy.

Persuasion also provides useful examples of the momentary forgetting that the “family party” was *not* private, instances that require the narrative and readers to acknowledge the witnessing of servants or paid staff within the home and thus make visible the process by which this awareness is usually ignored. There are earlier moments where servants not only witness but the narrative recognizes it, as in the case of the inn servant at Lyme, who has both heard the gossip of Mr. Elliot’s groom about his master’s status and passed it on to the party of ladies and gentlemen above stairs. Mary Musgrove is enabled by this means to learn that she has narrowly missed seeing her cousin, and Anne and the reader discover the identity of the man who had previously admired her. But the clearest example where the recognition of servant witnessing proves necessary to the narrative comes in the person of Nurse Rooke.

Mrs. Rooke’s narrative import comes when she, via Mrs. Smith, is able to give Anne Elliot crucial information about Mr. Elliot’s intentions towards Anne and her family. She has attained this information as she has private access to a gentleman’s home, as she has been employed as a nurse during Mrs. Wallis’s pregnancy, but also by being, in gentry terms, a person of no importance and therefore not regarded as a witness. Her invisibility to the eyes of the gentry has already been established in that Anne did not notice that it was she who opened the door to admit her: when Mrs. Smith asks if Anne noticed who opened the door to admit her, Anne replies, ““No. Was not it Mrs. Speed, as usual, or the maid? I observed no one in particular”” (197). To Anne, no one of note had opened the door: the door had just been opened. The narrative pulls Anne up for this oversight, though, when we gain an insight into Nurse Rooke’s point of view: Mrs. Smith tells us that *Nurse Rooke* had witnessed *Anne* and was glad to do so, as Anne had featured in these “private” conversations and was thus somewhat of a spectacle to Nurse Rooke. It is impossible to ignore here the awareness that,

as Sales puts it, “gentry life was a drama that had to be acted out daily in front of an audience of servants” (190).

The narrative having also informed readers that Mrs. Smith had by her poverty been excluded from “society” (153), we know too that Nurse Rooke’s is not company that ordinarily counts—despite Anne’s conversation with Mr. Elliot in the previous chapter about the difference between “company” as defined by mere status or by good companionship (150). Anne’s definition of “good company” (“the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” [150]) sounds a lot like Mrs. Smith’s commendation of Nurse Rooke: “she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received “the best education in the world,” know nothing worth attending to” (155). Nurse Rooke does not herself gain unmediated access to the narrative: her words are conveyed by Mrs. Smith. But what is important is that her witnessing must be acknowledged and that it affects the narrative. Nurse Rooke emerges from the ranks of those who invisibly tend to the needs of the protagonist class and who are not to be included as “society” (153), and she shifts the narrative forward.

Anne’s happy ending therefore is partially dependent on the (initially reluctant) recognition that those in servant positions not only *do* see and hear what takes place in a gentleman’s house but that as witnesses and auditors they can be intelligent enough to draw conclusions based upon this private information, which those in more privileged positions—and readers—may need to hear. Having performed this service, however, Nurse Rooke and her ilk return to the shadows, and the end of the novel returns characters and readers to a more familiar form of “domestic virtues” (though this is now of the professional not dissolute gentry class). Even Mrs. Smith is lifted above the level of poverty that made her dependent on the conversation and society of Nurse Rooke. She regains her husband’s property and

thus social position as a property owner, and her friends are now the newly settled Captain and Mrs. Wentworth, not the landlady of rented rooms and her wage-earning nurse sister. Presumably, Mrs. Smith then has the “comfort” of servants (153) to wait upon her, rather than to provide the company and employment that her loss of income necessitated. Nevertheless, this happy ending of private establishments for both Mrs. Smith and the new Mrs. Wentworth has been brought about by a broader notion of “society” and the momentary recognition that those who open doors are also social agents, with a viewpoint and a stake in the domestic communities they inhabit.

The ideological inconsistencies of a domestic organization that necessitates the invisible labour and inevitable witnessing of paid strangers is made clear in those cases where the family privacy is exploited by servants. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* has been permitted private access to the Darcy home and family due to his father’s position as estate steward—a paid employee of the estate, if not a domestic servant. George Wickham later uses this closeness to the family later to try to seduce the daughter of the house; Mrs. Yonge likewise exploits her privileged access via the position of governess to enable this attempt. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the projected elopement of the young Colonel Brandon and his cousin Eliza (in this case an elopement that readers are meant to see as honorable) is thwarted by the disclosures of her maid, leading ultimately to Eliza’s downfall. Maria Rushworth’s elopement with Henry Crawford cannot be hushed up due to the disclosures of Mrs. Rushworth’s maid in *Mansfield Park*. In these cases, characters and readers are forced again into the acknowledgement that servants within the houses of ladies and gentlemen are not leading separate, parallel lives from the property-owning class, never touching or impacting on each other. What they see, what they hear, and how they act is *part of* the main narrative of these homes, and it becomes so of the novels based around them. Their exclusion is part

of the polite fiction that enables the ideology of domestic privacy and the leisured home to perpetuate itself.

Much of the comedy of Austen's novels, however, comes from the impropriety of those gentry characters (and their more vulgar relations and neighbors) who do *not* play the game of denying the personhood of servants and draw attention to their seeing, hearing, and participating in the life of the houses they inhabit. In so doing, these characters serve to expose the fiction of the private family and the home as a place of leisure and affection rather than paid work. These could be seen as bridging characters: by not behaving towards servants as their class propriety demands, they blur those divisions between servants and family upon which the idea of the private home as a site of genteel leisure relies. Mrs. Bennet and Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* are two such characters already discussed; others include Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, who not only questions servants for private information about the family and guests but, by being such a close observer herself, draws attention to how much can be gleaned about the life of others by living in close proximity to them. She does not scruple to use this information to draw conclusions about private actions and feelings, suggesting the vulnerability of family members to this intimate scrutiny also from servants. If Mrs. Jennings knows something is amiss with Marianne because of the number of notes she writes, how many she receives, and how she acts when a visitor calls, then so do the servants who take and bring the notes and answer the door. In acting like a spy within the house, Mrs. Jennings makes visible the possibility of spying.

Another comically monstrous example is Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*. She not only incessantly bothers the servants and thus draws attention to their presence and labor within the gentry home, but she also treats Fanny *as* a servant and so again blurs lines between the family and servant cohabitants of the house. If Mrs. Hill becomes, by Mrs. Bennet's transgression of propriety, a surrogate family member, Fanny becomes a surrogate servant via

Mrs. Norris's failures of politeness. She reminds Fanny of the material transactions that brought about her presence in the home, thus exposing the importance of market concerns within the private domestic space (which this novel is very aware of) and making her seem like a paid companion rather than a family member: she is paid in board and education, not wages. Fanny, of course, is also the ultimate witness as well as a bridging character. She observes all the dangerous social interactions within the Bertram home that Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, and even Sir Thomas are oblivious to, and so her alignment with the servants further underlines the capacity of workers within the home to see and judge the behavior of the family.

This alignment also functions spatially within the home; like the servants, Fanny sleeps in the attic, and her place in the family rooms of the house is dependent upon the services that she renders the family, such as running errands for Mrs. Norris and waiting on the whims of Lady Bertram. As Mrs. Norris makes clear, she owes this service for her care and keep in the home. The distinction between paid and familial inhabitants of the home that maintains the illusion of domestic privacy depends upon clear separation of space. Fanny's place is on the margins, like the servants with no fire in her room, until her value as a marriageable commodity to the family is made clear with the proposal of Mr. Crawford. It is only at this point that Sir Thomas realizes where she sleeps and in what condition and orders fires for her. Fanny's movement between domestic servant and family member serves to highlight that each private home has two kinds of inhabitant, sharing the space on different terms of work or leisure, which only ideologically programmed blindness could disguise.

This importance of space is made further evident in *Mansfield Park* by the impoverished Price household in Portsmouth. As is the case with the Bateses and Jane Fairfax in *Emma* and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, change in fortune can itself erode class distinctions, but this alteration then makes relations with servants even more crucial as a

marker of social hierarchy. As the Price family cannot afford a house big enough to maintain the illusion of living separately from servants, they too function as bridging characters who, by making visible the integration within the home of servants and family, work and leisure, expose the myths of domestic ideology. The narrative offers Fanny's point of view on the shock to her nerves of the Portsmouth house, and this rupturing of the façade of separation of family and paid workers is figured as noise: "Whatever was wanted was halloo'd for, and the servants halloosed out their excuses from the kitchen" (392). The same distinctive verb is used to describe the means of communication between the servants and family, which again draws attention to their likeness rather than difference.

Fanny's experience of returning temporarily to *this* home, however, serves in the novel to underline her emotional and ideological alignment with the Mansfield family so that the insights gleaned from the Portsmouth home are determinedly forgotten in Fanny's longing for Mansfield Park. It is surely only by willed ignorance that she can believe that

At Mansfield . . . all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; every body had their due importance; every body's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place. (391–92)

This novel ends, like the others, with the relief of a retreat into the right private home with the appropriate family centered around a newly married pair, but after the bullying Fanny has faced, the seductions, elopements, deceptions, betrayals, and general explosion of the myths of domestic propriety that the novel has related, it is very difficult to read un-ironically its final lines:

On that event [the marriage of Fanny and Edmund] they removed to Mansfield, and the Parsonage there, which under each of its two former owners, Fanny had never been able to approach but with some painful

sensation of restraint or alarm, soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been. (473)

That Fanny, the surrogate servant within the family, has become its moral center, yet one that is de-centered in order to observe it from its margins, seems to suggest that domestic privacy is not *threatened* but *upheld* by its inside-outside witnesses, just as the genteel home is maintained by its invisible staff. As in the cases of Mrs. Hill of Longbourn and Mrs. Reynolds of Pemberley, the gentry homes need their servant observers, which is made clear in moments where their observations are suddenly needed to support family interests. Jo Baker's *Longbourn* also helps Austen readers to see the necessity of servant observers as it imagines a long, shared history of intertwined lives for Mrs. Hill and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

We can perhaps finally turn to *Northanger Abbey* to help de-code how Austen's novels want readers to *see* the determined forgetting of servant witnesses and servant points of view, to share in those times of crisis when characters have to acknowledge that they must always be "guarded." Her burlesque of the gothic genre is central to this disclosure in drawing attention to those aspects of polite family life that the novel form was increasingly obscuring via the mystifications of domestic ideology. *Northanger Abbey* is much concerned with both narrative truth and witnessing, as Catherine Morland uses her fiction-reading skills to uncover the mysteries of Northanger Abbey. During her attempted investigation of the death of Mrs. Tilney, Catherine's spying is much hampered by the omnipresence of servants, or at least her fear that servants could always come upon her. The use of the gothic genre reminds us of the servants in gothic fiction who *do* have narrative roles, who *do* observe their aristocratic masters and mistresses, and *do* offer their opinions; it thus functions to remind readers of the fiction of invisible, non-witnessing servants who make possible their "leisured" home. But Austen also transfers this sense of always being watched and of needing always to

be “guarded” without acknowledging it onto the gothic genre, and so—again—defamiliarizes the norm of the unacknowledged observers within the home and makes it visible. The secret that the laundry list discloses is that servants are *always* part of the main narrative, but that the polite fictions of every day genteel life need to forget this uncomfortable fact.

Each novel has brief moments where servants must jump out of the shadows and become visible and audible cohabitants in the family home in order to serve a function of plot or characterization, before fading again from view. As readers, we are made complicit in forgetting these unsettling disclosures in order to appreciate the ending of each novel in the domestic privacy of the marital couple. We can thus share Elizabeth Bennet’s relief at achieving a “family party” of herself and Mr. Darcy and appreciate the harmony of Mansfield Park from the view of its vicarage with Fanny and Edmund. We can also value Captain Wentworth’s endeavors on Mrs. Smith’s behalf that mean she need not resort to Nurse Rooke and her sister for friendship and be relieved that Catherine Morland can escape the intrusive servants associated with the gothic threats of Northanger Abbey for Henry Tilney’s parsonage at Woodston. But these moments of narrative dependence on those servants whose work the genteel establishment in turn relies upon nevertheless serve to expose the polite fictions that made the ideology of these “family parties” and their private homes possible. Once we have seen these homes from the “upside down,” it is hard to un-see the process of ideological mystification that enables their harmonious appearance.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *The Works of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933–1969.

Baker, Jo. *Longbourn*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

- Boase, Tessa. *The Housekeeper's Tale: The Women Who Really Ran the English Country House*. London: Aurum, 2014.
- Handler, Richard, & Segal, Daniel. "Hierarchies of Choice: The Social Construction of Rank in Jane Austen." *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 691–706.
- Horne, Pamela. *Life in the Victorian Country House*. Oxford: Shire, 2010.
- Mullan, John. *What Matters in Jane Austen? Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Parey, Armelle. "Servants with a Voice in Jo Baker's *Longbourn*, a Coquel to *Pride and Prejudice*." *Prequels, Coquels and Sequels in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2019. 81–93.
- Sales, Roger. "In Face of All the Servants: Spectators and Spies in Austen." *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*. Ed. Deirdre Lynch. Princeton: PUP, 2000. 188–205.
- Stone, Laurence. *Broken Lives: Marriage, Separation and Divorce, 1660–1857*. Oxford: OUP, 1993.
- Stone, Lawrence, and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone. *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1986.
- Terry, Judith. "Seen but Not Heard: Servants in Jane Austen's England." *Persuasions* 10 (1988): 104–16.
- Veisz, Elizabeth. "Writing the Eighteenth-Century Household: Leapor, Austen, and the Old Feudal Spirits." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 30.1 (2011): 71–91.
- Walshe, Natalie. "The Importance of Servants in Jane Austen's Novels." *Persuasions On-Line* 35.1 (2014).