The Making of Jane Austen

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Visual Austen Experiments

From Lush Landscapes to Bearded Heroes

A *Pride and Prejudice* book cover featuring a seated Lydia who flirts with three officers at once. A *Sense and Sensibility* frontispiece with a bearded Willoughby. Tiny human figures in lush landscapes drawn for an early *Mansfield Park* edition. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, Austen illustrations by artists other than Ferdinand Pickering began to emerge in print. They may now strike us as very peculiar. When Austen's novels were released, one by one, from copyright protection in Britain, new frontispieces and front-board illustrations with these idiosyncratic images appeared. They remain little known and rarely seen today, no doubt due to the paucity of surviving copies of these books.[1] After learning about these images, some readers may decide that their scarceness is all for the best. Some illustrations from this period were simply derivative. But others reveal curious innovations, depicting scenes and characters from Austen's novels in ways that shatter stereotypes and invite speculation.

The derivative illustrations are easier to explain. Victorian artists created designs for Austen's novels out of air that was, if not thin, certainly not oxygen rich. With few conventions in place, some artists just copied Pickering in substance and style. The old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" may apply. But the raft of idiosyncratic illustrations presents a greater challenge to understand. One possibility is that Austen's reputation as a particular kind of novelist was debated, unstable, unknown, or malleable among artists, publishers, and reading audiences, creating much more of an "anything goes" historical moment. Some artists and publishers seemed almost to be casting about for new Austen representations that would strike a chord with audiences. They seem to have sought out images that would stick. As it turns

out, very few did. This mid-nineteenth-century moment is sometimes called the "first golden age" of book illustration, but for Austen it was not.

The Austen illustrations that echoed Pickering prove his impact. American and British publishers from this period include illustrations in their single editions that are "reminiscent of those of the Bentley 'Standard Novels' issues of 1833, on which they may be based," as David Gilson puts it.[2] It's an assessment especially accurate for describing the images brought out by publisher George Routledge in its Railway Library series. These books themselves were imitative objects, designed for sale at bookstalls in train stations, copying the Parlour Library series.[3] Later editions in the Railway Library use wood-engraved illustrations on their front boards, in a style that came to be called "yellowback." These books seemed to do very well in the market, if only because they were cheap. Yellowbacks sold at a fraction of the price—one or two shillings—whereas Bentley's (formerly the "regulation cheap fiction") had gone for five or six.[4] Some yellowbacks also include interior illustrations.

One single title that deserves description in this context is Routledge's *Pride and Prejudice* (1851), with its frontispiece by Sir John Gilbert (1817–97). Gilbert would become a noted painter and engraver, creating a slew of designs—more than eight hundred—for a three-volume edition of Shakespeare.[5] Both prolific and successful, Gilbert may have known Pickering from their overlapping years at the Royal Academy Schools.[6] (Of course, nearly every nineteenth-century artist studying there would have overlapped some period of years with the perpetual student.) Gilbert was, in any case, at first following in Pickering's footsteps in illustrating Austen, before far outperforming him in a decades-long, successful career as an artist. Even with his large body of work, Gilbert brought to Austen and his other illustrations interpretations that weren't necessarily appreciated or enduring. Late nineteenth-century Austen critic Austin Dobson (1840–1921) would later make fun of Gilbert as old fashioned. Dobson has scorn for Gilbert's plain images, calling them ignorant of value, tone, and point of view.[7]

It's likely that George Routledge didn't fret overmuch about Gilbert's artistry. The publisher's approach to single Austen titles in the 1850s was hardly aiming for high quality or originality. Routledge advertised its own Standard Novels by echoing Bentley's earlier formula, touting that its (cheaper) titles featured an illustration by Gilbert. Gilbert's body of work is generally considered successful by today's critics, despite Dobson's snarkiness. One recent critic calls Gilbert an "illustrator of strength; especially in the area of historical

Figure 2.1. Frontispiece, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice; and Sense and Sensibility. With an illustration by John Gilbert.* London: George Routledge & Co, 1851.

romance—an exciting, swashbuckling and often dramatic performer and one who, by sheer force of personality, can impress the reader with a thorough understanding of the literature." The critic continues, "Without a trace of facetiousness [Gilbert] may be seen as the Errol Flynn of mid-nineteenth-century literature."[8] It is amusing to imagine an artist in the mold of Errol Flynn, the early adventure film actor best known for his Robin Hood, illustrating Jane Austen.

The assessment may allow us to understand better why Gilbert's *Pride and Prejudice* frontispiece is so lifeless. Perhaps he didn't know what to do with a novel of manners. Gilbert's bonneted, flat-faced Elizabeth walks

blankly through a wood, reading Darcy's letter. Wearing a neat Victorian dress, carrying a handkerchief, and wrapped in a shawl, she looks more like Little Red Riding Hood than a formidable heroine. Gilbert's illustration is a pale, emotionless half imitation of Pickering's image of Elizabeth in the woods. Pickering's design had featured her deep in conflict with Lady Catherine. Gilbert's Elizabeth, however, is tediously alone. She reveals little vivacity, resembling instead a forlorn damsel in distress. Elizabeth's lackluster depiction may even have arisen from Gilbert's chauvinism. As Thomas Wilcox puts it, "The chivalry [Gilbert] had glorified in fifty years of picture-making was based on the firm belief in the superiority of men over women."[9] Gilbert was not, from that vantage point, a very propitious choice for illustrating Elizabeth or Austen. He created a meek heroine who seems to be crying out for a swashbuckling rescuer. That visual version of her did not survive long in the Austen illustration corpus.

Gilbert's Austen image may now seem intriguingly boring, but others were just plain odd. Chapman and Hall's yellowback edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (1870) depicts a scene not even really in the novel. It's a cover illustration of Lydia Bennet at Brighton Camp, seated in front of the officers' tents.[10] In the novel itself, Lydia fantasizes that, once she gets to Brighton, she'll talk to six officers at once. The Chapman and Hall illustration (unsigned) shows her with a paltry three. One critic describes these yellowback-era cover illustrations as "surprisingly attention grabbing."[11] Another unusual (and also unsigned) image appears in Boston publisher Ticknor and Fields's dual edition of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* (1863). It's a wood-engraved frontispiece, captioned "Willoughby's Farewell." The image represents a pretty, if generic, Marianne in Victorian dress with her hair gathered in a bun. She clasps the hand of a tall, dark, and perhaps handsome Willoughby. It is difficult to gauge his attractiveness, because he's presented from behind. His most noticeable feature is his beard. He may be the first bearded Willoughby—a depiction of that hero-turned-rake that did certainly not stick. Marianne shows no sign of spirit, fire, or romance, and Willoughby looks more like a clerk than a cad. This is one of those images of which we might skeptically wonder, "Did the artist really read the book?"

One landmark Austen edition from the period suggests greater artist involvement and direct engagement with the text: Alexander Francis Lydon (1836–1917) and his designs for Groombridge & Sons' *Mansfield Park* (1875). That edition has the claim to fame of being the first to go beyond a frontispiece and title-page vignette, something that took a full forty years after

Figure 2.2. Frontispiece, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), by unknown artist.

Pickering, and sixty years after first publication, to happen (Gilson, "Later Publishing" 135). Making the edition even more unusual is that it was a one-off volume; Groombridge & Sons brought out no other Austen novels. A publishing house that specialized in nonfiction titles, Groombridge made its name through lavishly illustrated editions of birds and fish, county seats,

and ruined abbeys. The latter efforts were led by its star printer-engraver Benjamin Fawcett (1808–93). Fawcett's protégé was the younger Lydon, who went by the name Francis.[12]

How and why did Groombridge move from fish and fowl into the Austen market, and why was Lydon chosen to illustrate one of her novels? The publisher had dabbled in literary titles, including the Groombridge Classics series, "illustrated with vignette engravings," and its Miniature Classics, pitched to a growing student book market. Groombridge had also produced, with Fawcett and Lydon, a popular volume, *Gems from the Poets* (1860). Lydon had further literary experience, having done designs for single-volume works of Daniel Defoe, John Bunyan, Oliver Goldsmith, and James Fenimore Cooper. Knowing this, Groombridge's bringing out its *Mansfield Park*, with drawings by A. F. Lydon, looks a little less peculiar. The volume was marketed as an exemplar of artistic innovation. The publisher plugs its inclusion of "tint engravings in a new style." Gilson notes that the engravings were reproduced "apparently, lithographically, in tones of purplish grey" ("Later Illustrations" 135). The advertisement emphasized, "Be careful to order Groombridge's Edition, as it is the only one issued in this style." The book was presented as a cutting-edge artistic product, a collector's item.

Choosing *Mansfield Park* from among Austen's six novels might seem unusual for this purpose, because it's rarely her most acclaimed or beloved title today. But that novel ranked as her best for some nineteenth-century readers. We can see the appeal of *Mansfield Park* in an essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863 and much reprinted thereafter. It describes an unattributed anecdote that "a party of distinguished literary men met at a country-seat." When "discussing the merits of various authors, it was proposed that each should write down the name of that work of fiction which had given him the greatest pleasure." On opening the slips of paper, "*seven* bore the name of 'Mansfield Park.'"[13] That this was an exercise in a country house may be the key detail. *Mansfield Park* might well occur to and appeal to men gathering in a provincial retreat. But it was also a male preference that would survive some years as a niche Janeite identity. Logan Pearsall Smith, for example, defined himself as a "Mansfield Parker" in 1936.[14] In 1875, though, a main point of interest for Groombridge may have been that *Mansfield Park* fit nicely alongside its geographical books.[15] The illustrations show that fictional place and the natural world were central to Lydon's vision of Austen.

Lydon brought his experience illustrating nature to *Mansfield Park*. The volume is in a gilt-edged, gift-book style, including a decorated title page and

seven illustrated scenes. In three of these illustrations, the people are presented in miniature, dwarfed in relation to the English landscape. His illustrations include a total of six female and four male figures, most often either solo or in a courtship relation, but almost all overwhelmed in size by the natural world. It's a scale that may strike us today as an unusual choice for Austen. Why would novels now valued most for their characterizations include so many illustrations in which the characters are miniaturized against woods, estates, and distant church steeples? It's an emphasis that suggests an understanding of Austen that did not become mainstream—one that sees her tied to nature and geographical place, rather than to character and family conflict. It's almost an anti-Pickering Austen. Lydon's illustrations offer an artistic vision that helps us to reflect on what it would mean to have learned to read Austen's novels as fiction that emphasizes setting and landscape. It's clearly Lydon's dominant visual sense of her novel, and it ought to give us some pause.

Lydon's designs are detailed and striking. The scenes are labeled with page numbers that correspond to actions in the novel, which his illustration sets out to depict. A close examination of the frontispiece may stand in for the spirit of Lydon's entire body of design work on Austen. That image is captioned "p. 64," pointing reader-viewers to the scene in which Fanny Price, waiting for her turn to get her needed exercise on horseback, suspects that she's been forgotten by her cousin (and love interest) Edmund Bertram. Edmund has gone riding with his romantic interest Mary Crawford and has not returned on time with Fanny's promised horse. The novel's page 64 informs us that Fanny "could look down the park, and command a view of the Parsonage and all its desmenes, gently rising beyond the village road," and that what she sees before her is "a happy party." It's "Edmund and Miss Crawford both on horse-back, riding side by side, Dr. and Mrs. Grant, and Mr. Crawford, with two or three grooms, standing about and looking on."

In the novel, Fanny sees from a distance that Edmund takes hold of Mary's hand, prompting Fanny's speculation on others' motives and concern for her mare, in typically self-deprecating ways. It is a very detailed and psychologically complex scene that Fanny's perspective paints—both observing and imagining—as told through the narrator. Lydon captures this complexity but takes some liberties in placing Fanny in a remote wood, leaning against the trunk of an enormous tree, rather than in a location near the great house. The human figures she's observing, too, are so small that it seems impossible she'd be able to make out any of their gestures or actions. Yet Lydon gets at the grand anxiety of the scene, with Fanny positioned as a

fragile outsider, looking on others' pleasure. Lydon's illustration accentuates the beauty and sublimity of both the natural and psychological landscapes. He gives us an illustration that makes clear how connected those landscapes are in the novel.

In a later, similar illustration, Lydon depicts Fanny seated on a bench, fatigued, at Southerton, watching as Mary and Edmund go off to "determine the dimensions of the wood" without her. Lydon's illustration again mirrors the situation communicated in text, showing Fanny's dual status as both observer and observed. Two further Lydon illustrations cement the sense that his designs were crafted with an eye to the novel's confluences of physical and psychological landscapes. One shows the carriage that holds Edmund, Fanny, and Susan Price, as it returns to Mansfield Park. In the novel, Fanny invests the scenery (just as the viewer of the Lydon illustration might) with her multilayered emotional response. Lydon does include one landscape illustration from the perspective of a character other than Fanny: Henry Crawford's description to Edmund of his having happened upon Edmund's future clergyman's living and home at Thornton Lacey. In each case, Lydon emphasizes Austen's fiction as most important for its overdetermined natural and psychologized landscapes. The places mirror, or are invested with, the emotions of the characters.

Just three of Lydon's illustrations depart from this pattern of large landscapes and small figures, although they, too, juxtapose human and natural relationships. One is an outdoor scene, depicting Fanny and Edmund walking in the "shrubbery," here clearly transposed into a woods. Edmund guides Fanny on the path, trying to convince her to accept Henry Crawford's offer of marriage. Another illustration shows Henry with Fanny and Susan at the dockyards at Portsmouth, with Fanny again depicted as fatigued. Henry stands with his dog, looking on the two seated women, with wooden docks and ships' sails in the background. This may be Lydon's most striking image of human figures, not overwhelmed pictorially in the same way by the natural world. The people seem more central, with figures drawn in darker outline than the grayscale, wood-grained shipyard. Only one of Lydon's designs offers an interior—although it, too, might rightly be judged an interior landscape. It's the scene in which Fanny takes an inventory of all of the objects in her favorite room, the little white attic, her domestically isolated apartment.

Because he includes multiple illustrations, Lydon's plates, for the first time in the history of Jane Austen, offer reader-viewers the opportunity to read the pictures narratively, as a visual story within a story, separate from the

Figure 2.3. Frontispiece, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1875), by A. F. Lydon.

text itself. Lydon's designs make up a kind of graphic novel, as we'd call it today, another first in the history of illustrated Austen. (Pickering's ten illustrations were separated, two by two, in different volumes, hardly making a "story," even if they reveal patterns of interpretation.) Lydon's designs, held within the pages of one book, provide an image story in sequence: A lone woman peers onto an estate and its inhabitants. She sits alone on a bench, while another couple has a tête-à-tête. A man hovers over the woman, inside the home. A man on horseback looks over another majestic landscape. A man and a woman on a wooded path are in deep conversation. At a shipyard, a man stands over a distressed-looking woman, whose hand is held by another female. A carriage approaches a great house. What appear to be—and are—landscape-driven images also, in this stand-alone reading, offer a story of a heroine's detachment, observation, engagement, conflict, suffering, and reintegration into the landscape, ending with her probable arrival at the great house. Lydon's images, too, interpret Austen's novel as a particular kind of fiction—a story of courtship that firmly puts the land back in landed gentry.

Lydon was both a talented artist and a model citizen. When he left the town of Driffield in 1883, its inhabitants gave him an award for his contributions there to its Mechanics Institute and Literary Association.[16] Lydon was also a poet, having published, as A.F.L., a book of verse about a butterfly's journey, titled *Fairy Mary's Dream* (1870). He illustrated the book, too, in exquisite color, with a peacock-feather motif title page. It includes an image of an estate that seems a precursor of his illustrations for *Mansfield Park*. *Fairy Mary's Dream* is described in one advertisement as a handsome gift book for a girl.[17] It was published, of course, by Groombridge. The verse tale is about a girl who dreams she is a butterfly, takes off on a fantasy flight away from home, and encounters dragonflies, spiders, a human boy, and other adversaries. At one point, as a butterfly, she vows to stay in a safe place, but vanity drives her forward on the journey. In the end, she decides it was all a dream. A "passing spirit" confirms this interpretation, encouraging the girl-butterfly to understand her dream teaches her

> that your state,
> Though humble, may be very great,
> And if you read the dream's intent,
> You'll cheerful strive and live content.[18]

This sentimental tale and its self-effacing moral lesson also make one wonder whether publishing *Mansfield Park* was a suggestion to Groombridge from Lydon himself. Fairy Mary has some of the same qualities as *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price.

Whatever led to *Mansfield Park*'s being its sole Austen title, Groombridge's not continuing with any further illustrated volumes of her work has raised questions for critics. Did the volume not sell? Did the publisher have second thoughts about Austen? A more likely explanation is that the publishing firm (run by a father and his sons) faced financial difficulties. The firm's setbacks included one son's death, a business reorganization, and, ultimately, a dissolution. Sometime in the late 1870s, Groombridge failed. One source reports that engraver-mentor Fawcett went into the engraving room and said to Lydon, in a quiet, restrained voice, "Groombridge have gone down, Francis."[19] The appearance of just one Groombridge/Lydon Austen may speak to the publisher's exigencies, the volume's profitability, or both. The choice of *Mansfield Park* as its single Austen title is intriguing, demonstrating, too,

that *Pride and Prejudice* had not yet solidified with the reading public as a bookseller's best financial bet for an Austen one-off.

The fact that just one, and not all six, of Austen's novels was illustrated by Lydon in the 1870s ought also now to seem to us an opportunity missed. He could have packaged Austen in new ways and emphasized other aspects of her fiction. Lydon's vision of Austen's novel as a psychological character study communicated through landscape description seems distinctive for its time. Had Lydon's large-terrained, diminutively peopled illustrations of Austen become as dominant as Pickering's images, it may have advanced critical and popular perceptions of Austen in alternative directions. Lydon's illustrations of Austen's novels could have linked her fiction more solidly to rural topography, for instance, or to descriptions of the natural world. As it is, she's rarely *first* thought of in those terms now. Nudging forward such readings through Lydon's images could have made Austen seem far more like her renowned poet-contemporaries in the Romantic era, heightening the sense of her similar artistic sensibility for subsequent generations of readers. Instead, for years her fiction was classed by critics as an heir to the classically inspired Augustans of the eighteenth century, or she had her scenes depicted, as we've seen, as if Victorian. Ferdinand Pickering's wide-eyed, gothic illustrations prepared decades of readers to anticipate female-dominated, intimate, domestic scenes of anxious or terrible struggle in Austen. (As we saw, there was just a tinge of humor for those in the know.) Lydon's natural-psychological Austen landscapes were exercises in the sublimity of human relationships and geographical places. Despite their visual power, they seem not to have made much of an impression on readers, then or since, probably because of their modest circulation.

Books like Lydon's were collectors' items, gift books, and show pieces. They were out of reach of those of low or moderate income, as were most books. Austen had largely been left out of the serialization-illustration craze that brought the works of Dickens before so many readers, with a novel appearing in periodical-published parts at regular intervals. For Austen, more inexpensive editions (and newsprint serialization) began in the 1880s.[20] Austen's inclusion in the illustrated *Dick's English Library of Standard Works* was a momentous innovation. It is estimated that *Dick's* print run was twenty thousand copies an issue, and it was the first time, Annika Bautz argues, that owning Austen (and illustrated Austen) was within reach of the working classes (111). In terms of its circulation, the "sixpenny *Pride and Prejudice*"

rivaled best-selling gift books of the 1890s, which were pitched to middle- and upper-class readers.[21]

Dick's English Library of Standard Works would include three of Austen's novels in its pages in the 1880s: *Pride and Prejudice* (1887), *Sense and Sensibility* (1886), and *Mansfield Park* (1884). *Mansfield Park* was first, suggesting again (along with Lydon's single volume) the primacy of that title for Victorian readers. *Dick's* reprinted well-known fiction in installments. For the *English Library of Standard Works*, weekly issues were sixteen pages long, with four total illustrations. Each issue included excerpts—in tiny-print triple columns—from multiple classic works. There was little rhyme or reason as to which texts were published in the same issue. Installments of *Mansfield Park*, for instance, sat alongside installments of Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, among others.

Comparing the *Mansfield Park* images in *Dick's* alongside those of Lydon is illuminating. Lydon, as we've seen, emphasized natural-psychological worlds, but *Dick's* illustrator centered entirely on heroine Fanny's moments of honorable humility and humiliation. Most of *Dick's* images of her, as the perfect Victorian woman in ornate surroundings, show her with her face and eyes cast down. One image has her observing Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford from behind a tree. Another has her throwing her hands around her just-arrived brother's neck, looking up at him adoringly. But the rest are interior social scenes, with characters observing Fanny being humiliated or manipulated. You might caption half of them, "Fanny Price is modest." The traditional, modest, passive femininity on display is a visual pattern in the working-class Austen editions published at this time.

Owning Austen's fiction became tied up, during this period, not only with women's modesty illustrated for working-class women but with other kinds of consumer purchasing. The novels were marketed as giveaways by a soap company, as Janine Barchas has described.[22] Advertisements began to appear more prominently in and even on the covers of the novels. A Routledge edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (1883), as Deirdre Gilbert notes, "advertised patent medicines on its lower boards while its upper boards depicted the stomach-churning marriage proposal from Collins to Elizabeth—an unintended juxtaposition." Gilbert remarks on the humorous possibilities in reading these advertisers' wares along with the scenes featured. She describes this as a new era in which Austen was first advertised with "products independent of the novel" rather than with other books (para. 11). Austen's novels

had become fictional products used to sell things other than books, a new moment in their commercial history.

Humor was not generally emphasized in these mass-market Austen illustrations pitched at middle- and working-class audiences from the 1880s. Instead, they featured more serious themes and imparted heavy-handed lessons, when they didn't include lurid teasers. As one critic puts it, these illustrations show "little sign of humour and instead impart strong moral messages about young ladies' conduct" (Bautz 123). Indeed, Austen's humor would not be given much visual expression at all, in novels pitched at readers of any income bracket, until the 1890s. Then, comic moments were centrally featured in editions sold to those with greater levels of disposable income, not to the working classes. Perhaps it's because such visual humor and whimsy would become the dominant mode that the Austen illustrators of the midcentury period now look so odd and out of place. This era and its artists produced illustrations that appear to us as either conservative moralizing throwbacks or puzzling eccentricities. Neither fits well with our present sense of Austen or with prevailing understandings of the spirit of her fiction, yet several generations of nineteenth-century readers may have felt perfectly at home imagining Austen otherwise. For a time, through her illustrations, Austen could easily have been conceived of as a novelist of the natural world, with markedly humble heroines and heroes who were facially hirsute.