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Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen's *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies's 2019 ITV Adaptation

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Abstract: Jane Austen's final novel fragment *Sanditon* has inspired continuations of many kinds from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The most recent literary afterlife it has generated is the 2019 British adaptation for ITV, created by Andrew Davies, and with a screenplay by Davies, Justin Young and Andrea Gibb. This eight-part adaptation attempts to recreate Austen's Regency world but reimagines and develops *Sanditon* through the lens of twenty-first century sexual sensibilities. Most notably, depictions of male nudity and sex acts demonstrate the adaptation's engagement with contemporary sexual politics. Scenes offering salacious views of naked men sea-bathing counter the historical tradition of the female nude offered up for male gaze; the female body, in contrast, remains fully clothed in response to the contemporary Me-Too context. Furthermore, the inclusion of sex scenes, a character with a backstory of sexual abuse, a relationship featuring coercive control, and an ending denying the heroine her man reflects the zeitgeist. However, the disappointing British viewing figures for *Sanditon* suggest that sex does not always sell, particularly when it comes to creating a successful twenty-first century Austen adaptation.

Keywords: Jane Austen; *Sanditon*; Andrew Davies; Adaptation; tv series; ITV; bodies; sea-bathing



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Jane Austen's final novel, the twelve-chapter fragment *Sanditon*, remained unfinished due to her premature death in 1817 and only emerged in print in full for the first time in 1925. It is a departure in setting, subject and style from her previous books, particularly the mature fiction, as Janet Todd notes (Todd 2014, pp. 92–93).¹ The novel fragment is set in the fledgling seaside resort of *Sanditon* on the south coast of England. The heroine, Charlotte Heywood, stays with the Parker family, and encounters a variety of invalids, mercenaries and oddities. The draft narrative returns to Austen's 'youthful style of burlesque and caricature' (Todd 2014, p. 93); unlike the mature novels, there is little free indirect discourse as a way of accessing the heroine's thoughts. The fragment ends when Charlotte visits the grande dame of the resort, Lady Denham.

Unsurprisingly, *Sanditon* is 'the least adapted of the novels' (Marshall 2017), yet the incomplete and relatively un-Austenian nature of the text did not deter the phenomenally successful screenwriter Andrew Davies and his peers from transposing it onto the small screen for a lavish ITV series in 2019; it was directed by Olly Blackburn, Lisa Clarke and Charles Sturridge. *Sanditon* aired on Sunday evenings at 9 p.m. for eight 60-min episodes, including advertisements, from 25 August to 13 October. Davies wrote the first, second and eighth episodes, and co-scripted the third with Justin Young; the fourth, sixth and seventh were Young's work, and Andrea Gibb wrote the fifth. Although it was a collaborative effort, story producer Nick Lambon confirms that Davies set the 'tone and vision'; they 'all followed his lead' (quoted in Sheridan 2019, p. 130), no doubt because of 'Davies's brand-name recognition and industry standing', since he is one of 'a handful of screenwriters' to gain international "'star" literary adapter' status (Murray 2012, p. 147). *Sanditon* is, to adopt Linda V. Troost's categorisation, a 'Fusion adaptation', combining 'Hollywood style and British heritage style' (Troost 2010, p. 82): it casts heartthrob Theo James as the male

romantic lead and reshapes the characters and plot, whilst providing period authenticity. The adaptation gets through the novel's plot within the first episode and continues by imagining the story of Charlotte's romantic encounters.

The source novel was ground-breaking, albeit incomplete at around 23,500 words: Brian Southam calls *Sanditon* 'a pioneering work that stands as the first genuine resort novel in English literature' (Southam 2010, p. 171). The adaptation is innovative in its own way, specifically in its representations of the body: hitherto, Austen's texts had inspired comparatively restrained adaptations, particularly in their dramatizations of masculine bodies, whereas *Sanditon* features male characters fearlessly baring all. Furthermore, it offers a much franker treatment of sexual relationships and their outcomes than earlier Austen adaptations. In what follows, I consider the ways in which the novel and adaptation reflect the sexual ideologies of their times: in particular, the focus is on their depictions of bodies and bathing, and sexual relationships. To date, the adaptation has received scant critical attention. Damianne Candice Scott focuses on the significance of the pineapple emoji fans used to show their support for the adaptation: she argues that followers' refusal to see the emoji as 'extremely offensive to Black fans of the show' illustrates approval of the British Empire amongst many, even though the adaptation criticises colonialism through the symbolism of the rotten pineapple in episode 2 (Scott 2021). The treatment of race and racism in the adaptation is a very fertile ground of future critical enquiry, but, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article. My reading of physical forms and erotic encounters exemplifies Ellen Belton's argument that 'adaptation offers an opportunity for filmmakers to reread a narrative from another age through the lens of their own time and to project onto that narrative their own sense of the world' (Belton 2003, p. 195). Davies has made clear this is his agenda in the past: when interviewed by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan about his adaptations, he said 'I choose and perhaps build up and highlight the elements of the book that I think are most likely to appeal to a modern audience and soft-pedal the rest' (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010, p. 247).² So, the adaptation reveals as much about twenty-first century attitudes to bodies and sexual relationships as it does about early-nineteenth-century codes of propriety.

To appreciate the significance of the adaptation's treatment of bodies and bathing, it is important to consider the pastime of sea-bathing in Austen's life, period and the novel fragment. When writing *Sanditon*, Austen drew on her knowledge of the diversions available at resorts in South West England. When her family anticipated moving to Bath due to her father's retirement, Austen was reluctant, but consoled herself with its proximity to the seaside, telling her sister Cassandra in January 1801 that 'the prospect of spending future summers by the Sea or in Wales is very delightful' (Austen 2011, p. 71). Austen's desire was granted: the family holidayed at coastal resorts in Devonshire and Wales from 1801 to 1804 (see Southam 2010, 2011). As Southam notes, British seaside resorts emerged in the 1730s as places to recover good health; by the 1780s, they became leisure grounds that competed with inland spas such as Bath, offering everything from assembly rooms to theatres; and they became increasingly popular during the wars with France when the rich could no longer travel to Europe (Southam 2010, p. 168). Royalty endorsed the new 'practice of sea-visiting and sea-bathing', as Maggie Lane confirms: George III favoured Weymouth; his son, the Prince of Wales, preferred Brighton (Lane 2013, p. 13). Brighton was 'Britain's leading' resort from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century (Brodie 2014, pp. 5–6). In *Sanditon*, Tom Parker refers to Brighton, Worthing and Eastbourne as 'large, overgrown places'; in contrast, *Sanditon*'s smaller size, in his view, enables it to 'avoid the evils of civilization' (Austen 2013b, p. 142). Seaside resorts, famous and fictional, fed and reflected the contemporary appetite for the water.

Multiple—and contradictory—claims were made for the benefits of sea-bathing. In *Sketches from Nature* from 1779, George Keate summarises bathers' views at Margate: 'it thinned and it thickened the blood—it strengthened—it weakened—it made people fat—it made them lean—it braced—it relaxed—it was good for every thing—and good for nothing' (Keate 2014, p. 46). In *Sanditon*, Austen ridicules the ludicrous claims of sea enthusiasts

through Tom Parker's assertions, conveyed through free indirect speech, that 'sea air and sea bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every disorder, of the stomach, the lungs or the blood; they were anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-septic, anti-bilious and anti-rheumatic' (Austen 2013b, p. 148). Although she clearly enjoyed lampooning the excessive curative claims made for the sea in *Sanditon*, Austen loved her coastal holidays. And it is likely that the heroine Charlotte would have relished her time at Sanditon, had Austen finished the novel: when arriving at the Parkers' home, Trafalgar House, she looks out of the window and is fascinated by 'the sea, dancing and sparkling in sunshine and freshness' (Austen 2013b, p. 161). When Austen visited Lyme Regis for a second time in September 1804, she called on acquaintances, promenaded, attended balls and bathed in the sea water, as well as undertaking her usual satirical observations, poking fun at visitors—including herself—who made a fashion of their physical indispositions (Austen 2011, pp. 96–99). During this visit, Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra about how well she was, 'in proof of which [she had] bathed again this morning' (Austen 2011, p. 96); her experience was 'delightful', although she stayed in too long, leading to fatigue, so postponed her planned bathe the following day (Austen 2011, p. 99). Prior to this trip, the family visited Sidmouth in 1801, Dawlish and Teignmouth in 1802, and Lyme for the first time in 1803 (see Southam 2011, p. 127); all resorts had bathing machines, so it is conceivable that Austen bathed in every place.

Both men and women used bathing machines to enter the water; they were utilised from the mid-eighteenth until the early twentieth century to preserve bathers' modesty (Brodie 2014, p. 18). Bathing machines were wooden vehicles with doors at either end.³ Bathers entered at one end to undress, were transported to the water, normally by a horse led by a man, then emerged into the sea through the other door when the water had reached the floor of the machine. Ladies had bathing women to accompany them. These 'dippers', as they were also known, 'were women who encouraged timid bathers into Britain's cold waters and they also served as a safety measure for people who could not swim' (Brodie 2014, p. 64). Women wore flannel dresses and caps in the sea; usually, 'men were naked from the waist up' (Lane 2013, p. 16). Numerous medical practitioners recommended up to three short dips—Dr Thomas Reid acknowledges this as standard practice in his 1795 *Directions for Warm and Cold Seabathing* (Reid 2014, p. 83)—but John Harvey states that 'the bather [is] at liberty to play and sport as long in the briny waves as suits his pleasure and convenience' in *Harvey's Improved Weymouth Guide*, c. 1800 (Harvey 2014, p. 52).

In the novel fragment, there are multiple allusions to bathing. Sanditon beach possesses 'bathing machines' (Austen 2013b, p. 161), and Tom Parker tells Mr Heywood that there is 'excellent bathing—fine hard sand' (Austen 2013b, p. 143): this suggests that it is perfect for horses to traverse, pulling the bathers to the water without the wheels of the bathing machines sinking into the shingle. There is 'deep water ten yards from the shore' (Austen 2013b, p. 143), so it would be extremely easy to access the water from the machines. When Charlotte Heywood is to return with the Parkers to Sanditon, she is 'to bathe and be better if she could' (Austen 2013b, p. 150): although Charlotte's health is excellent, so does not require restorative measures, as the narrator suggests, the novel may have described her experiences in the water had Austen lived to finish it. Mrs Parker says that if her family 'want to bathe', this is quite easy now they live at Trafalgar House, which is near the sea (Austen 2013b, p. 157). Lady Denham tells Charlotte that Miss Esther frequently alludes to 'the good bathing always does her' (Austen 2013b, p. 180). Diana Parker busies herself in making the necessary preparations for the arrival of Mrs Griffiths and her ladies, including the appointment of 'bathing women' (Austen 2013b). Diana accompanies 'Miss Lambe in taking her first dip'; she had previously promised to 'go in the machine with her if she wished it' (Austen 2013b, p. 205). Brodie notes that although 'bathing etiquette' suggests the private nature of the experience, certain bathing machines could transport multiple bathers (Brodie 2014, p. 19), so same-sex sea lovers could bathe together. The novel fragment validates the idea of ladies and families bathing for enjoyment and good

health, just as Austen did herself. The adaptation runs with this idea, creating eye-catching scenes in the process.

During Austen's time, bathing machines were segregated into different areas of the beach according to sex, so men and women bathed separately; dippers helped 'enforce the separation of the sexes on the beach', as well as assisting bathing: they were known to expel men who appeared in the women's area (Brodie 2014, p. 65). In the adaptation, the men swim in a separate section of the water—initially, the sexes were to bathe together, however Paula Byrne, consultant to the series, advised them of the historical inaccuracy (see Sheridan 2019, pp. 110–11)—but they do not use bathing machines to enter the sea, flouting Regency codes of propriety. In episode 1, the naked torsos of Kris Marshall's Tom Parker and Jack Fox's toned Sir Edward Denham are observable to all, followed by shots of their naked behinds, as they walk a considerable distance into the sea, followed by Turlough Convery's Arthur Parker as he runs after them. This scene was 'much-trumpeted' to generate pre-publicity interest in the adaptation, as James Jackson of *The Times* noted (Jackson 2019). The sight of corpulent Arthur trying to extricate himself from his clothing, followed by his flamboyant run into the sea, transforms the initially voyeuristic scene into a comical and light-hearted one.

Episode 2 features another naked man. Rose Williams's Charlotte Heywood, hitherto alone on the beach searching for shells, is surprised and shocked to see a naked Sidney Parker, played by Theo James, emerging from the sea. Viewers observe his out of focus back emerging from the sea, his bare front down to his genital hair, then his naked rear profile. This scene is more provocatively salacious than the previous one of the three men in episode 1. In particular, the focus is on the physical beauty of James's face and body in episode 2, so Sidney is offered up to the audience via a combination of the camera's omniscient perspective and Charlotte's view of him. In Austen's text, Sidney is 'very good-looking' (Austen 2013b, p. 207); in the adaptation, he is so stunning that the audience get to see most of him. In an interview, fellow male actor Marshall remarked that 'the sight of naked Theo . . . [is] a beautiful thing' (quoted in Daly 1819). At the beginning of episode 3, Mrs Parker asks Charlotte if 'anything impressive ca[ught] [her] eye' when shell-hunting the previous day, which prompts a flashback of Sidney's naked torso emerging from the sea, thus giving viewers another glimpse of James's admirable physique in this humorous moment (Sanditon 2019).

James was known to *Sanditon* viewers familiar with the first season of costume drama *Downton Abbey* in 2010; he played a minor but very memorable role as the Turkish diplomat Kemal Pamuk who is so handsome that everyone residing in the Abbey, servants and aristocrats, women and men, find him irresistible (Box of Broadcasts 2019). Michelle Dockery's Lady Mary disregards sexual propriety and risks a huge scandal by allowing him into her bed; he dies of a heart attack during their—evidently—very lively sexual encounter. After this, James became a Hollywood heartthrob through his leading man role in *The Divergent Series* film trilogy, then Hugo Boss fragrance ambassador, starring in the high-end commercials. James's appeal to a youthful global audience was no doubt influential in his casting for *Sanditon*; Joanna Tilley reported that the executive producer Belinda Campbell 'said she hoped the combination of a youthful cast and strong stories for women would attract younger viewers' (Tilley 2019). Nineteenth-century novel adaptations traditionally 'appeal to women . . . with their foregrounding of relationships and women's issues' (Troost 2010, p. 75); casting James potentially extended the appeal to teenagers who were fans of his films.

This array of naked men and Charlotte's observation of the most attractive of them all in the adaptation is striking considering Regency practice. Robin Jarvis quotes the anonymous writer of *Observations on Indecent Sea-Bathing* (1805) who lamented the fact that 'at Brighton, men have taken to bathing with no clothes on in full view of the public—"a most unmanly insult to the Fair Sex"' (Jarvis 2015, p. 253). The author also expressed concern that the ladies have, as Jarvis summarises, 'become habituated to the sight of men bathing in the nude' (Jarvis 2015, p. 253). Furthermore, satirical prints such as George

Cruikshank's *Hydromania—or a touch of the sub-Lyme and Beautiful* of 1819 features naked female bathers, and a man with a telescope looking voyeuristically on (Cruikshank 1819). However, curator Graham Davies confirms that the print 'is a fantasy as female Regency bathers wore voluminous clothes' (Davies 2011). The norm was for women to be fully clothed, and men partially so; when men were naked in the water in view of women, it was considered indecent, as the anonymous writer's response to naked male bathers in Brighton confirms. Another satirical print gives a further perspective on this: in *A View on the Banks of the Thames* (1807), Thomas Rowlandson 'gave full rein to his erotic fantasies in depicting . . . fully-clothed women sneaking a look at nude male swimmers' (Jarvis 2015, p. 253). In this etching, naked, attractive young men dive into and bathe in the Thames; two fully clothed women walk by. The older female chaperone is horrified and transfixed, as her facial expression attests, and the inset text declares, 'Oh shame on the nasty fellows do Sophia/tell me when we are past them' (Rowlandson 1807). The pretty young woman clearly likes what she sees—she is wide-eyed and smiling—so her chaperone's request is no hardship.

Admiration of the male form can be detected in Austen's fiction too, despite her conservative reputation. Jill Heydt-Stevenson argues convincingly that in *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliot thinks Lady Russell can see her former suitor, the attractive Captain Wentworth, then learns her friend was only looking for the "'best hung'" curtains in Bath, this 'leads us next to think about Wentworth's . . . sexualized body' (Heydt-Stevenson 2000, pp. 333–334). Indeed, Heydt-Stevenson and Alice Chandler before her have provided detailed and persuasive evidence of coded references to sex throughout Austen's novels (Chandler 2019). So, Sidney's 'eye-catching' appearance may have synergies with latent allusions to attractive male bodies in the novels. In this, Davies's series challenges late twentieth-century Austen adaptations' affirmation of the writer's status as, in Julian North's words, 'a conservative icon' whose works exemplify 'sexual propriety' (North 1999, p. 38).

It is a significant reflection of the zeitgeist that only men bare all in the adaptation. When Sidney mentions the naked incident to Charlotte in episode 3, she replies by saying that she has no reason to feel embarrassed, since she 'was fully clothed' (Sanditon 2019). In pre-publicity for the adaptation, Williams said that '[f]or so long it has been the norm for women to expose their bodies, so the shift is needed' (quoted in Smith 2019). The female nude has been 'an object of male erotic looking nearly from the beginning', as Peter Brooks notes, citing, for example, a naked Aphrodite from antiquity (Brooks 1993, p. 17). When it comes to the twentieth century, Laura Mulvey has argued influentially that in classic Hollywood movies, 'the image of woman' provides 'erotic pleasure' (Mulvey 2009, p. 16), and the male screen idol becomes the 'powerful ideal ego' the male viewer identifies with (Mulvey 2009, p. 21). The issue of female nudity on screen has a specific twenty-first century context. In the same interview, Davies added that there is 'more male nudity these days because female nudity can be a contentious area' (quoted in Smith 2019). In the adaptation, the female actors were supposed to bathe naked too until Byrne corrected them of the historical error (Sheridan 2019, pp. 110–11). If the original plan had been adhered to, it is doubtful that their bodies would have been in full view, given the contemporary context.

The issue of female nudity, and how it could be a result of sexual exploitation, was in the spotlight during the period of conception of the adaptation due to the Me-Too movement. On 15 October 2017, two years before the airing of *Sanditon*, the movement took off via social media when American actor Alyssa Milano asked followers to reply to her tweet if they had been 'sexually harassed or assaulted' with the words 'me too' (quoted in Me-Too 2022). Public allegations by female actors against the immensely powerful Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, alongside other accusations, inspired Me-Too. This 'global advocacy movement that seeks to expose and prevent sexual harassment and assault, esp[ecially] against women, by raising awareness and holding perpetrators to account publicly' is ongoing (Me-Too 2022). In February 2020, Weinstein was convicted of rape; his history of using his Hollywood privilege to force himself on aspiring female actors

inspired a reassessment of the treatment of women on the big and small screen, particularly how they could be placed in positions of vulnerability when filming nude scenes.

Five weeks after the adaptation of *Sanditon* concluded, *The Guardian* reported on the British actor Emilia Clarke's experience of filming nude scenes in her role as Daenerys Targaryen for HBO's global phenomenon, *Game of Thrones*; it aired from 2011–2019 and she was a major character in all seasons of the show. Clarke revealed that she found the scenes 'terrifying', and 'would be in tears before shooting' them (*The Guardian* 2019). The series was, as Kelly-Anne Taylor notes, 'notorious for its explicit nudity and salacious sex scenes' (Taylor 2020), and Chelsea Steiner recently reported on 'many actors' on *Game of Thrones* being 'cajoled into nudity with little or no direction' (Steiner 2021). Since then, some sets have used intimacy coordinators; their 'role is not only to choreograph a sex scene, but to act as an advocate for the actors in the scene and to ensure that consent is always in place' (Steiner 2021). To avoid any controversy, *Sanditon* avoids female nudity and sex scenes that could be discomforting for the actors, with a few exceptions. In episode 6, Sir Edward and Lily Sacofsky's Clara have sex, but remain clothed; in a later post-coitus scene, he is bare-chested, whereas she is already dressed (*Sanditon* 2019). In episode 8, there is a post-nuptial scene featuring Charlotte Spencer's Esther and Mark Stanley's Lord Babington (*Sanditon* 2019). Both are in bed naked, but his shoulder obscures her breasts, so only her shoulder is visible (*Sanditon* 2019). For the nude male sea-bathing scenes, the actors wore 'modesty pouches made of flesh-coloured Lycra', confirms costume designer Sam Perry (quoted in Sheridan 2019, p. 255).

When it comes to the female bathing scenes, the adaptation follows the Regency practice of covering up the women. In episode 1, Charlotte and Clara go sea-bathing, and use machines to change and enter the water (*Sanditon* 2019). Pictorial representations from the period such as West's *The Bathing Place at Ramsgate*, c. 1788, confirm that adult female bathers wore pale dresses and caps (West 1788); in the adaptation, the young women change into striking red bathing clothing. This is an interesting decision, since it makes them reminiscent of handmaids from the phenomenally popular Hulu television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* that first aired in the UK on Channel 4 in May 2017 and is ongoing. When reviewing the first episode, Chitra Ramaswamy commented on how the women 'look like they've come off the set of *The Handmaid's Tale*' (Ramaswamy 2019). The adaptation dramatizes how commanders ritually rape handmaids so they can bear their children. The dressing up of Charlotte and Clara to resemble handmaids can hardly have been the overt intention of the adaptation, making it a very odd wardrobe choice, unless the costume designers were simply hoping to create striking visuals that were memorable to viewers, given that one source of appeal of costume drama is the clothing and general look.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, handmaids are forbidden to look at or be looked upon by men; in Davies's *Sanditon* adaptation, Charlotte observes Sidney, and the audience admires him too. This has synergies with Davies's strategy in his phenomenally successful 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice*; as Lisa Hopkins argues astutely, in this adaptation Colin Firth's Darcy is 'offer[ed] up to the female gaze' (Hopkins 1998, p. 112). This adaptation instituted, as Roger Sales notes, 'a period of what was variously called "Austenmania", "Austenfever", "Austenitis" and, perhaps the most frequently used description of all, "Darcymania"' (Sales 1997, p. 228). Scenes featuring Darcy fencing and famously plunging into a lake to cool his ardour for Jennifer Ehle's Elizabeth Bennet contributed to Darcymania. However, this was not due to sexual objectification of him; even when swimming, he retained his shirt and breeches. Davies originally wrote the scene 'with Mr Darcy bathing nude', but 'this was vetoed by the producer, who felt that Darcy emerging soaking wet in breeches and a shirt was sexier!' (Sheridan 2019, p. 106). The production team kept all the cast buttoned up and restrained physical intimacy, heightening the sexual tension. Yet the reason the adaptation was such a hit was not primarily because of its portrayal of repressed sexual desire. It captivated its audience through its depiction of Darcy's intense gaze at Elizabeth, as Hopkins suggests: viewers observed Darcy watch Elizabeth with such adoration that

it enabled them to invest emotionally in the romantic fantasy that a man could love a woman that much (Hopkins 1998, p. 120). In the penultimate episode, it is Darcy's face, specifically his response to Elizabeth's piano playing and singing, that is foregrounded and framed; for the first time in the adaptation, a smile lingers, as he views Elizabeth with total devotion (*Pride and Prejudice* 1995). This is quite different from, I would add, 'the close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo)' that creates another level of 'eroticism' in Hollywood films that Mulvey notes (Mulvey 2009, p. 20). So, 'the deepest appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* lies in the extent to which it has exploited the medium of television to lend physical actuality to th[e] fantasy' that female authors such as Austen create, namely 'male characters who crave the love of the heroines with an intensity which, we may fear, real men rarely experience' (Hopkins 1998, p. 120).

In contrast, in *Sanditon*, Sidney is aggressively insulting to Charlotte for much of the adaptation; it is only later that his view of her changes, and his response softens into nascent love, but it lacks the candid intensity of Firth's Darcy's adoration of Ehle's Elizabeth. James's Sidney is a morose (anti)hero with a past participation in slavery that he is haunted by, a far remove from the Sidney of Austen's *Sanditon* who is, according to his brother Tom, a bit of a joker who likes to ridicule his siblings' valetudinarianism (Austen 2013b, p. 162). The most James's Sidney offers Charlotte is, inadvertently, his naked male body, then, wilfully, his love, but he relinquishes the attachment in favour of a mercenary marriage to save his brother's beloved resort. Davies's statement in his Foreword to Sheridan's *Sanditon* that Austen creates 'a fascinatingly complex and moody hero' is disingenuous, given the source text; the Sidney of the adaptation is very much his creation (Sheridan 2019, p. 2). Penny Gay notes that in Austen film adaptations, 'images of the nation, of the family, of gender behavior, courtship and sexual desire, will be delineated according to contemporary agendas—whether intellectual, political, or commercial' (Gay 2003, p. 90). It may be that Davies thought that creating a 'complex and moody hero' who shows off his admirable physique at moments would increase the likelihood of the adaptation's commercial success.

Pride and Prejudice maintains the tension of the adaptation through loving glances, not desirable bodies, whereas the bare it all presentation of the men in *Sanditon* leaves nothing to the imagination. Ramaswamy's review pointed to the limits of 'Davies's 2019 update' by suggesting that it works 'to redress the gender balance by undressing the men' (Ramaswamy 2019); this strategy is reductive rather than progressive. As indicated earlier, the portrayal of the male bather Arthur serves a comic, rather than scopophilic, function, although Sir Edward has a much more attractive derriere, and after his sex scene with Clara in episode 6, his naked chest is on view for, potentially, 'erotic contemplation' as female ones have been in the past (*Sanditon* 2019; Mulvey 2009, p. 20). And the naked James emerges from the sea as an 'erotic spectacle' that works 'to freeze the flow of action in [a] moment . . . of erotic contemplation' for Charlotte, and, by extension, the viewer, in a gender reversal of Mulvey's proposition (Mulvey 2009, pp. 19–20). This objectification of James's body is akin to the historic fetishization of female forms.

The decision to film James baring all did not boost the adaptation's popularity: viewing figures were much lower than those for *Pride and Prejudice*. Sales notes that over ten million viewers watched the final episode of the 1995 adaptation, 'the highest that there has ever been for a classic serial' (Sales 1997, p. 228). In comparison, *Sanditon* achieved 'an overnight average of 2.8 m (15.7%) from the August Bank Holiday weekend onwards, eventually consolidating to 4 m (16.4%) over 8 days' (Goldbart 2019). So, it seems that encouraging a female gaze that is analogous to a male one, a gaze that offers a body for scopophilic purposes, does not sell universally well when it comes to Austen adaptations, although the lesser-known status of *Sanditon* amongst Austen's works may have played a factor in the low viewing figures. Another costume drama that aired the following year, *Bridgerton*, featured male nudity, and was phenomenally successful. However it is significant that the series was not an adaptation of Austen, which made audience expectation quite different: *Bridgerton* appealed to a youthful, global Netflix consumer demographic rather than British terrestrial television viewers. The low viewing figures for *Sanditon* meant that a sequel to

the series was not commissioned initially. In an interview, 'Davies implied that ITV dramas need to return an overnight of more than 3 million to be considered for recommission' (Goldbart 2019). Since then, extensive campaigning from die-hard #SaveSanditon fans—self named the 'Sanditon Sisterhood'—has paid off, and seasons two and three have been commissioned by Masterpiece on PBS, where season one aired in America (Sanditon Sisterhood 2020; Sanditon Renewed for Seasons 2 and 3 2021). Season two premiered on BritBox UK on Monday 21 March 2022 (Sanditon Season 2 Release Date 2022).

Another way in which each text—novel and adaptation—reflects the ideologies of its time is through the presentation of sexual relationships. Austen's novels suggest a connection between bathing places and sexual laxness: in *Pride and Prejudice*, Wickham nearly elopes with Georgiana in Ramsgate; he succeeds in doing so with Lydia in Brighton; in *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby seduces Eliza at another watering place, this time an inland one: Bath. *Sanditon* features another male libertine, Sir Edward; he is a stupid, affected and amoral aristocrat who plans to be 'Lovelace' to Clara Brereton's Clarissa as a way of defeating his 'rival in Lady Denham's favour'; Clara is aware of his designs, and has 'not the least intention of being seduced' (Austen 2013b, p. 184). Charlotte assesses Sir Edward's character accurately when she has a conversation with him; it leads her to conclude that he is 'downright silly... very sentimental, very full of some feelings or other, and very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words' (Austen 2013b, p. 176). However, his plans for Clara suggest that he is not just harmlessly, laughably stupid; his desire to be 'a dangerous man', if fulfilled, could ruin her (Austen 2013b, p. 184).

In the final chapter of the novel fragment, Charlotte sees Sir Edward and Clara in the grounds of Denham Park, sitting together and 'closely engaged in gentle conversation' (Austen 2013b, p. 208). Charlotte thinks this not proper, but she does not want to judge Clara 'with severity' (Austen 2013b, p. 208). The fragment ends at this point, so we do not know how the relationship would have developed, but the last chapter underscores how fragile a woman's reputation was at the period. As Paula Byrne notes, '[p]olite society in Austen's time was predicated upon strict standards of decorum, particularly for women. Chaperoning was of vital importance for young women of marriageable age: it was not acceptable for a young unmarried woman to be alone in the company of a gentleman (save for close family friends)' (Byrne 2010, p. 300). Edward and Clara are both related to Lady Denham, but they are not kin—Sir Edward is Lady Denham's step-nephew by her second marriage, and Clara is a member of Lady Denham's original family—and Sir Edward is certainly not a 'close family friend' of Clara. This means that the *tête à tête* is a breach of contemporary expectations of female behaviour; in the adaptation, Charlotte's awareness of this is clear in her surprised response to seeing the two together in episode 1; however, she cannot comprehend exactly what they are doing, since she observes them from a distance (Sanditon 2019).

This private meeting between Sir Edward and Clara is transformed into an explicit sexual act in the adaptation. Clara gives Sir Edward hand relief to prevent him raping her (the scene required no physical intimacy between the actors); later in the episode, Clara tells Charlotte that she had to do something 'she didn't want to do to avoid something worse' (Sanditon 2019). This explicit encounter is unimaginable in any Austen fiction, even the more risqué juvenilia. Although she was no prude, as Chandler and Heydt-Stevenson have shown, Austen observes propriety so that 'her heroes and heroines scarcely ever make even the slightest physical contact' (Clery 2014, p. 163).

In episode 2, Esther speaks privately to Clara about the incident with Sir Edward; during this combative conversation, Clara alludes to her history of abuse by a 'depraved' man 'when [she] was too young to know a prick from a pencil' (Sanditon 2019). Clara has evidently had to suffer horrific mistreatment; when Esther digs her nails into Clara's burn in episode three, she says 'you have no idea what I endured before I came here', indicating that the agony Esther inflicts is nothing to the past abuse she has suffered (Sanditon 2019). In episode four, Clara confirms that she was a victim of her uncle (Sanditon 2019). So, in the

adaptation, Clara is a sufferer of sexual abuse, and Esther and Sir Edward are, initially at least, her new predators.

Yet Clara uses her sexuality to empower herself as the adaptation progresses; when she engages in intercourse with Sir Edward in episode 6, she does so on her terms (*Sanditon* 2019). During the act, they are framed by a serpent mosaic on the floor of Lady Denham's drawing room, indicating their roles as a latter-day Adam and Eve (*Sanditon* 2019). The production designer Grant Montgomery decided to associate Lady Denham with the snake emblem (*Sheridan* 2019, p. 65); here it indicates her relatives' fallenness, and the power of the temptress Clara/Eve. This takes us way beyond the source material. Chandler confirms that Austen 'was bound by pre-Victorian limitations of subject-matter which had already turned physical sex into a topic for covert implication rather than overt description' (*Chandler* 2019); these limitations applied even more rigorously to 'Lady' authors such as Austen. In 2019, there was little shock value in such television scenes in and of themselves; their sensationalism lay in the fact that they appeared in an *Austen* adaptation for television. Up until this point, Davies relied on heaving bosoms and erotic dreams in *Northanger Abbey* (*ITV* 2007) and a (carefully edited) opening-sequence seduction in *Sense and Sensibility* (*BBC* 2008) for audience titillation.⁴ In *Sanditon*, he pushed the boundaries of what is acceptable in an Austen adaptation even further. When reviewing the first episode, Jackson and fellow television critics Ramaswamy for *The Guardian*, Neil Smith for *BBC Entertainment*, Ellie Harrison for *The Independent* and Gerard O'Donovan for *The Telegraph* all drew attention to its sexed-up nature (*Jackson* 2019; *Ramaswamy* 2019; *Smith* 2019; *Harrison* 2019; *O'Donovan* 2019).

As the serial continues, the spotlight is turned to Esther's incestuous relationship with her stepbrother, and how damaging it is to her. Esther evolves from tormentor, coercively willing her brother to ruin Clara by having sex with her, to victim, a woman trapped by her desire for Sir Edward and jealousy of his sexual relationship with Clara. In episode 7, Lord Babington says that Esther has been her brother's 'prisoner; he has abused his power in ways [he] can barely even guess at'; Babington determines that her brother will not make 'a victim out of' her (*Sanditon* 2019). In the final episode, Lord Babington declares that he does not want to marry Esther so that he can 'own' her; he wants 'to walk through life by [her] side' (*Sanditon* 2019). This non-coercive, egalitarian relationship offers a model twenty-first century viewers would endorse, particularly in light of recent changes to the law in the matter of domestic abuse, specifically the December 2015 'coercive or controlling behaviour offence' that punished perpetrators of 'extreme psychological and emotional abuse' with up to five years' imprisonment (*Home Office and Karen Bradley* 2015). So, Esther's abuser is punished with disinheritance, as is his co-conspirator Clara, and Lady Denham packs her back to London; in this, the adaptation may mirror Austen's own punishment of women's excessive 'sexual drives' in her novels (*Chandler* 2019). For example, in *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram has to endure life with the hideous Aunt Norris in a remote 'establishment' after the exposure of her affair with Henry Crawford and subsequent divorce from Mr Rushworth: 'shut up together with little society . . . their tempers became their mutual punishment' (*Austen* 2013a, p. 538). That suggested an alternative, and perhaps more persuasive, interpretation of Clara's fate is that it is part of a wider framework giving us a more 'realistic' Austen. The adaptation does not shy away from what happens to unprotected women, as we see elsewhere, for example when Charlotte narrowly avoids being raped outside Sam Siddaway's tavern due to Sidney's intervention in episode 6 (*Sanditon* 2019).

Davies's more realistic take on Austen triumphs at the end, too; neither Charlotte nor Clara gets their happily ever after. Both women end up alone, upsetting Austen adaptation fans' expectations, but, as Davies said when quizzed about it, 'happy endings don't always happen' (quoted in *Ling* 2019). It is perhaps fitting that this Austen adaptation ends as it does, given Melissa Sodeman's point that '[a]s an unfinished fragment, *Sanditon*, in particular, resists what we have thought to be the narrative compulsions of domestic fiction; it lacks, after all, even a marriage plot' (*Sodeman* 2005, p. 808). And, of course, the happy

ending did not happen for spinster Jane Austen.⁵ Although Davies ended the serial in this way to create momentum for a second series continuing Charlotte's adventures in life and love (see [Ling 2019](#)), the conclusion reflects Austen's own reality, and, arguably, the trajectory of the later novels that emphasise 'female mobility' over incarceration within defined, static homes ([Sodeman 2005](#), p. 792). The ending also reflects the realities for many twenty-first-century viewers. According to the Office of National Statistics, 'there has been a gradual decline in the proportion of the population who are married' and 'the proportion who are single (never married or in a civil partnership) has shown a steady increase' in England and Wales in 2019 ([Sharfman 2020](#)). Many viewers may have identified with Charlotte's singleton status at the end of the adaptation.

Austen's refusal to describe bodies in detail reflects her adherence to contemporary standards of decorum, not necessarily her conservatism; Davies's presentation of naked male, not female, bodies is a direct response to contemporary concerns about female exploitation. Yet the voyeuristic spectacle of male bodies had limited success, as the viewing figures confirm. Davies's inclusion of sex scenes, a character who has suffered sexual abuse, and a relationship featuring coercive control, reflect a franker age. His willingness to withhold happiness from his heroine also echoes a world that finds it increasingly difficult to believe in fairy tale endings. Despite its disappointing viewing figures, Davies's reimagining of *Sanditon* has brought wide-reaching attention to the novel fragment that was previously known and discussed primarily within the closed world of academia, surely affirming Linda Hutcheon's view that 'adaptation is not vampiric', since it may 'keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise' ([Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013](#), p. 176). The current second season of *Sanditon* provides further evidence of the fragment's enduring afterlife within contemporary culture, and I hope to turn my attention to it in future work.

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Notes

- ¹ See ([Todd and Bree 2013](#)) for a summary of the diverse critical evaluations of the novel fragment.
- ² For a monograph on Davies's oeuvre, including close analysis of his stylistic motifs, see ([Cardwell 2005](#)). My methodology differs from Cardwell's: she adopts a medium-specific approach in her criticism on adaptation, including Davies's work; in this and other published criticism, I focus on how his adaptations reveal as much about the ideology of his own time as they do about the cultural world of the texts they are transposing. See, for example, ([Ballinger 2022](#)).
- ³ In my description of bathing machines and their usage, I am drawing on a passage describing the practice in *Humphry Clinker* that the editors of *Sanditon* quote on pp. 649–50, as well as contemporary art, specifically West 1788 and information in Brodie's collection.
- ⁴ See ([Ballinger 2018](#)) for a consideration of how Davies sexes up *Northanger Abbey*, specifically pp. 152–58.
- ⁵ See ([North 2012](#)) for an examination of the ways in which Austen's life has been read 'as a failed romance' by some biographers and filmmakers (p. 110).

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