

The Curtain Lifts

DONALD GREENE

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0354

The publication of my note "Hamstall Ridware: A Neglected Austen Setting" in *Persuasions* No. 7 (1985, pp. 58-61) has had a happy sequel—the closing at last of a long vacant gap in our biographical knowledge of Jane Austen.

We know from *Letters* No. 54 that Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, and Jane moved from Bath to Clifton on July 2, 1806, and from a letter of Mrs. Austen in the Austen papers that they were at the ancestral home of her family, Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, on August 13 and planned the next day to leave for Hamstall Ridware, Staffordshire, to visit its rector, the Reverend Edward Cooper, Mrs. Austen's nephew. At that point, write W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh (*Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record*, 1913, p. 197), "The curtain drops on them once more, and is not raised until Jane is writing from Southampton on January 7, 1807."

Because of the Austen-Leighs' omission, in their 1913 transcription of Mrs. Austen's letter, of the name of the place she and her daughters planned to travel to on August 14, early biographers of Jane Austen were unaware of the visit to Hamstall: the Austen ladies are at Stoneleigh in mid-August and then disappear from sight until Jane Austen's letter from Southampton nearly half a year later. The name was supplied by R. A. Austen-Leigh in his fuller transcription of Mrs. Austen's letter in 1942 (though in 1913 he and his uncle had written, "We may imagine the Austens to have gone on to pay a promised visit to Hamstall Ridware"). Later biographers have taken note of this, and sometimes make the visit a definite one—e.g., Jane Aiken Hodge (*The Double Life of Jane Austen*, 1972, p. 96): "After the usual long visit at Stoneleigh Abbey, they went on to visit more cousins, the Coopers at Hamstall-Ridware." (I'm not sure what Mrs. Hodge meant by "the usual long visit at Stoneleigh." No other record of such a visit has so far been found, and this one lasted only eight days. Moreover, Mrs. Austen's detailed description of Stoneleigh Abbey

suggests that this was the first time she had visited it.) I too, in my piece in *Persuasions*, assumed that Mrs. Austen's plan for a visit was realized.

It is therefore pleasant to be able to report that the dates of the Austen ladies' movements during that hitherto vague half year have now been firmly established, thanks to the researches of Gaye King of Lichfield, Staffordshire, who has been exploring the Leigh family papers, now deposited in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-on-Avon. I am greatly indebted to Mrs. King for communicating her findings to me, and permitting me to pass them on to the readers of *Persuasions*.

She writes,

In a letter dated August 1, 1806, sent from Adlestrop, the Rev. Thomas Leigh writes to Joseph Hill, the Leighs' solicitor: "Mrs. and Miss Austens will be of the party, & will then be so far on their road to Mr. Cooper's whom they are going to visit at Hamstall."

This of course only confirms what we knew already. They actually made the trip from Adlestrop to Stoneleigh on August 5 (*Life and Letters*, p. 194), along with "Mr. Leigh, his sister (Miss Elizabeth Leigh), Mr. Hill (agent of Mr. Leigh)."

But Mrs. King continues,

A later and more specific reference comes in a letter from Edward Cooper at Hamstall, addressed to the same Joseph Hill, dated September 26, 1806. He says, "Mrs. Austen and her daughters after staying with us about five weeks, have left us for Southampton."

The curtain has been raised, and the gap between Stoneleigh and Southampton is filled by the five weeks at Hamstall. Mrs. King adds, "The Reverend Mr. Cooper goes on to say that his [eight] children had whooping cough, though not too badly, and one can imagine this being somewhat trying to Miss Austen"—indeed, to all the Austens. Indeed, as might almost have been expected, Jane caught the "hooping cough," as she spells it, from them (see her letter of 7 January 1807).

The question may occur to other readers, as it did to me, how in the world did the Austen ladies manage to occupy themselves for five weeks at Hamstall?

Gaye King anticipated my question by a study of the local Staffordshire newspapers for the early weeks of September 1806. A great deal of the kind of activity that appealed to Jane Austen was going on within easy driving distance of Hamstall Ridware. Plays by travelling troupes of actors were regularly performed in Lichfield, eight miles away (not ten, as I wrote earlier). Most interestingly, on September 5 *Lovers' Vows* was presented in Cheadle, twenty or so miles northwest of Hamstall (with a good team of horses you could do it in around two hours in each direction). During the Austens' stay in Hamstall a great race meeting took place in Lichfield, under the patronage of Lord Granville Leveson Gower, scion of the great aristocratic family of the county, Marquesses of Staffordshire and later Dukes of Sutherland. The press reported that it might even be honored by the presence of the Prince of Wales, as Prince Regent and later King George IV an aficionado of Jane Austen's novels

and dedicatee of *Emma*. When they lived in Steventon, the Austen sisters used to attend the race meets and associated balls in Newbury, Berkshire.

Moreover, Mrs. King has been able to answer a final question that I raised: given what Jane Austen considered (in 1799) an inadequate income, would Edward Cooper have had the means to provide the extensive travelling suggested above? The answer is emphatically yes. Mrs. King has been going through the diaries of another relation of the Coopers, who spent much time with them, and she discloses that they "had both carriage and horses to ride, and there are wonderful descriptions of trips to Tutbury, Burton, and Derby, as well as Lichfield." A trip to Cheadle to see the much-discussed *Lovers' Vows* would have been easily possible, as would one (to ride my favorite hobby-horse) to Bakewell and Chatsworth, which so much resembles Pemberley. The old image of Jane Austen as an unworldly, cloistered spinster, whose "limited" knowledge of what went on outside a country vicarage makes the composition of her novels miraculous, becomes more and more eroded. Mrs. King will no doubt in time publish a fully documented account of her remarkable findings, to which we shall all look forward. Meanwhile she has arranged a display at the Ridware Arts Centre of Jane Austen memorabilia.

One last point. Is there any place in Jane Austen's novels that might provide evidence of her familiarity with the topography of Hamstall Ridware (as, I have argued, the topography of Pemberley shows her familiarity with that of Chatsworth)? Gaye King thinks there is, and I agree. I'll put it in the form of a quiz question for readers of Jane Austen. Where in her novels do we find a "nice old-fashioned place . . . quite shut in with great garden walls . . . some delightful stewponds [the remains of both of which can be seen at Hamstall] . . . and the parsonage house within a stone's throw [of the 'mansion-house']"? Where the lord of the manor offers the rectory of the parish to a young man (first name, interestingly, "Edward"), explaining apologetically that it is "but a small one," worth no more than two hundred pounds per annum, but "certainly capable of improvement"? (Recall Jane Austen's comment, in her letter of 1799, quoted in *Persuasions* 7, on the news of Edward Cooper's presentation to the living of St. Michael's, Hamstall, that it is "valued at £140 a year, but perhaps it may be improvable.") Where a friend derides his apology that "the parsonage is but a small one," and points out that it is "a house that to my knowledge has five sitting-rooms on the ground floor, and, I think the housekeeper told me, could make up fifteen beds!'"? (Look at the photograph of the rectory of St. Michael's in *Persuasions* 7, and consider how easily it could have found beds for ten Coopers and three Austens.) Where the same candid friend prophesies that the new incumbent and his supposed future wife "will have a child every year, and Lord help 'em! How poor they will be!'"? Where, in the happy ending of the novel, one of its two heroines is found inhabiting this sizable rectory, and the other the manor hall ("mansion-house") a stone's throw away? Perhaps Jane Austen's imagination, during her five weeks stay at Hamstall in 1806, occupied itself with more than the plays and race meets in Lichfield and its neighborhood, much as she would have enjoyed them.