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Theft

Property was sacrosanct to the Georgians and had to be protected at all costs. A man could be hanged for stealing a chicken, but until 1803 attempted murder was classed only as a ‘misdemeanour’. ‘Stealing an heiress’ meant death because an heiress was property incarnate, but stealing a child was not even a criminal offence.¹ Theft could never be regarded as ‘petty’ in Jane Austen’s time.

Mrs Weston’s poultry-house was robbed one night of all her turkies – evidently by the ingenuity of man.

Emma

One of the most striking aspects of Georgian law is the vast number of its capital offences. From the accession of George I to the end of George III’s reign, there seemed an almost limitless variety of human actions which attracted the death penalty. Posing as a gypsy, burning a hayrick, cutting down an ornamental shrub or forging a signature – these were just a few of the deeds which could result in a hanging. During Jane Austen’s life-time by far the most common crime was small-scale theft, and the new laws created were in response to these ‘attacks’ on property. Every Georgian had to take theft very seriously indeed.

In 1799 theft, and all its possible consequences, intruded itself dramatically and rudely upon the lives of the Austen family. Mrs Austen’s brother James Leigh Perrot of Gloucestershire was a wealthy man. In 1764 he had married Miss Jane Cholmeley of Lincolnshire (who, with only £3,000, was lucky to ‘captivate’ a rich man) and the couple lived at his estate Scarlets in Berkshire and at their other home, 1 Paragon Buildings, in Bath. They were a contented couple and if niece Jane Austen had no great affection for her aunt, she did her best to keep this hidden. The Leigh Perrots’ happiness was shattered, in a great glare of publicity, in the summer of 1799. Out shopping in Bath, Jane Leigh Perrot called in at a haberdashers run by a Miss Elizabeth Gregory, and there she purchased some black lace with which to trim a cloak. The lace cost her £1.19s and she had to wait at the counter while change was fetched for the £5 note she had proffered for it, and while her lace was wrapped in a parcel. Mrs Leigh Perrot then left the shop, rejoined her husband and walked off with him.

Suddenly the couple were accosted by Miss Gregory, who asked her customer if another lace had been wrapped up by mistake with the black.



Mrs Jane Leigh Perrot, Jane Austen's aunt, who was accused of the hanging offence of shoplifting. (Jane Austen Museum Trust, Chawton)

The parcel was handed to her and opened, and revealed a card of white lace tucked in with the black. At that moment the shop assistant, a Mr Charles Filby, appeared on the scene and demanded James Leigh Perrot's address, which was duly given. Hoping no more would be heard of the matter, the couple returned home. However, the affair of the lace had only just begun.

A few evenings later an anonymous note arrived addressed to 'Mrs Leigh Perrot Lace dealer', advising that all her friends and acquaintance would soon be advised of her 'theft' of lace. (The *OED* gives the first recorded use of the word 'shoplifting', i.e. 'the crime of stealing goods privately out of Shops and Warehouses', as 1698. Dr Johnson, however, chose not to include it in his *Dictionary*). Other letters followed, giving the appearance that there had been a deliberate planting of the lace for purposes of blackmail, but the letters made the Leigh Perrots indignant, not compliant. Indignation, however, turned to terror when Mrs Leigh Perrot was summoned before the Mayor of Bath on a charge of theft – a very serious charge indeed. The lace was valued at 20 shillings, and any theft of twelve pence (one shilling) or more was Grand Larceny, punishable by death. The King was frequently merciful, and Jane Leigh Perrot knew that if found guilty, she was more likely to be transported than hanged. Guilty or not, she had to wait for a trial at the Spring Assizes, still eight months away.

The intervening months were miserable. Letter writing, to her husband's Austen relations, to her own cousin Mountague Cholmeley and to the

distinguished men who would testify to her character at the trial, was one of her few consolations during this traumatic time. Formally committed to the county gaol and refused bail, Mrs Leigh Perrot, accompanied by her devoted James, was accommodated in the home of a Mr Scadding, governor and gaoler of Ilchester County Gaol, inside the gaol itself. There they lived with the Scaddings in dirt, noise and confusion: 'Not Bedlam itself can be half so noisy', Jane Leigh Perrot wrote to her cousin.

'My dearest Perrot ... bids fair to have his patience tried in every way he can. Cleanliness has ever been his greatest delight and yet he sees the greasy toast laid by the dirty Children on his knees, and feels the small Beer trickle down his sleeves on its way across the table ... Mrs Scadding's Knife *well licked to clean it from fried onions* helps me now and then – you may believe how the Mess I am helped to is disposed of – here are *two dogs and three cats* always *full as hungry* as myself'.²

Mrs Austen, unwell and not able to go herself to support her sister-in-law, offered her two daughters Jane and Cassandra in her place. It is not known how Jane Austen reacted to her mother's suggestion, but Mrs Leigh Perrot's refusal to allow 'those Elegant young women' to share her

The Gaoler's house at Ilchester Gaol where Jane Austen's aunt, Mrs Leigh Perrot spent many unpleasant months in the 'vulgar and dirty' house, on a charge of shoplifting. Mrs Austen offered to send Jane and Cassandra to join her here.



sufferings was probably greeted with relief. Perhaps, though, Jane Austen brought to mind her aunt's descriptions in letters of her time with the Scaddings when she came to create the noisy, greasy home of the Prices in *Mansfield Park*.

At last, on Saturday 29 March, 1800, the trial was held in Taunton Castle. More than 2,000 spectators turned up for the show. Filby, the shop-assistant, was proved to have a dubious reputation as other witnesses told of extra items included in their parcels. In contrast, Mrs Leigh Perrot had reputable Bath tradesmen speaking of her integrity and respectability. The summing up by the judge, Sir Soulden Lawrence, lasted nearly an hour. The jury (consisting, amongst others, of a postmaster, schoolmaster, soapboiler, tallow-chandler, sergemaker, miller and a currier) needed only 15 minutes to decide their verdict. When they announced 'Not Guilty' there was cheering, kissing and weeping. The trial was costly in financial terms – nearly £2,000 was spent by James Leigh Perrot to clear his wife's name. She looked 'very pale and emaciated' by the end of it and needed rest in the weeks that followed.³ Indeed, she could well have taken up her sister-in-law's invitation to recuperate in Hampshire, but her letters from this post-trial period have not survived. The haberdashers remained open on Bath Street and Miss Gregory continued to serve at the counter there. Neither she nor Filby, who was her lover, were charged with false accusations or a deliberate planting of the lace. During her residence in Bath Jane Austen must have frequently passed the shop, although she is most unlikely to have shopped there.

Jane Austen was a young woman of 25 at the time of this shoplifting trial, quite old enough to be aware of every ramification. The trial, and its likely outcome, must have been endlessly discussed at Steventon. It was well reported in newspapers and pamphlets. Jane Austen could have heard that the same Assizes which tried her aunt convicted five prisoners to death, including a 14 year old charged with theft. The Austens, as a respectable clergy family, hated the public disgrace and breathed a huge sigh of relief when their relation was cleared. But while they supported Jane Leigh Perrot throughout her imprisonment and trial, what they thought privately has, unfortunately, not been recorded. Rumours circulated that Mrs Leigh Perrot was a kleptomaniac and there is a small piece of evidence that supports this theory. An anonymous manuscript, now at an American university, talks of Mrs Leigh Perrot being 'charged with stealing plants'⁴ some years after her trial. In 1844 a friend of James Edward Austen (who inherited Jane Leigh Perrot's fortune when she died in 1836) recorded that 'the lady had an invincible propensity to stealing'.⁵ The evidence is too scanty to convict Jane Leigh Perrot of kleptomania. Perhaps more suspicious is the strong, almost morbid desire her husband

showed from the time of the lace theft, never to be away from her. Letters he wrote her in 1806, when they were apart for a short time, reveal a chronic anxiety about her being left on her own. Was this due to a worry that she may repeat her offence if he was not there to guard her? Probably we will never know, but a doubt as to her honesty has lingered through history, making it easier for biographers to share Jane Austen's dislike of the woman who may have inspired the creation of Mrs Norris.

Shoplifting was a widespread problem in Georgian England. When the First Fleet sailed to Botany Bay in 1787 it contained many who had been found guilty of this crime. Eliza Beckford, who was 70, had taken 12 pounds of Gloucester Cheese; an 11 year old boy had taken ten yards of ribbon and a pair of silk stockings; John Nicolls had pinched razors and combs so he could start his own barber's shop; and a 15 year old had grabbed a pinch of snuff from an apothecary's counter.⁶ The available statistics show that the second half of the 18th century saw a huge rise in minor theft. An increasing amount and range of merchandise in shops and homes meant that there was more to steal, and greater poverty provided the temptation.

Through her aunt Jane Austen had a more serious connection with shoplifting than with any other crime. It must have been tempting for her, as a novelist, to make use of her aunt's experience, with all its dramatic potential. However, Jane Austen was aware that doing so would have taken her work dangerously close to the melodramatic fiction she had parodied in her youth. Mrs Leigh Perrot's case was unusual. The average person would not have feared being wrongly prosecuted for shop-lifting. Frank Churchill, therefore, is *not* accused by Mrs Ford of stealing Men's Beavers along with York Tan gloves when he leaves her shop in *Emma*. Jane Austen deliberately left out events her readers might consider unrealistic or improbable.



Jane Austen wanted no truck with highwaymen either and deliberately excluded theft on the highway from the world of her novels. This was not because meeting a highwayman was an unlikely experience – it was quite the opposite – but because she knew that highwaymen had become a favourite image of the sentimental novelist and a standard ingredient of melodrama. Novels and plays had glamorised the 'gentlemen of the road' to such an extent that Jane Austen determined to avoid them in her own fiction.

In the decade of Jane Austen's birth the Prime Minister, Lord North, was robbed by highwaymen. So were the Prince of Wales and his brother the Duke of York. The Lord Mayor of London was relieved of his



'Footpads ambush a traveller', an 18th century illustration. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

possessions 'in sight of all his retinue' and the Ambassador from Naples was robbed in the heart of London by 'gentlemen of the road'. Travellers returning to London at night would gather at inns until their numbers were sufficient to deter all but the most intrepid highwaymen. The 1805 introduction of horse patrols on the roads of England (an innovation originally suggested by novelist and magistrate Henry Fielding) resulted in the roads being somewhat safer in the early 19th century, but there were still no guarantees of safety. The prospect of encountering highwaymen must have been in the mind of every Georgian traveller, including that of Jane Austen. She depicts this fear in the minds of some of her characters when they travel.

When General Tilney, his family and guest return to Northanger Abbey from Bath, they are accompanied by 'numerous out-riders'. Mr Darcy's sister travels with two men-servants to protect her. Contemporary readers would have found such escorts perfectly normal and would have expected 'out-riders' to be well armed. It was legal to carry weapons for self-defence when travelling – in fact, it was recommended. The *Gentleman's Magazine* suggested taking a 'Brace of Blunderbusses' and putting 'the muzzle of one out of each Window, so as to be seen by Robbers'.⁷ John Knyveton,

Georgian diarist and doctor, travelled to Portsmouth from London in 1794. The journey, which passed very near Chawton, was a nerve-wracking experience for him:

‘the coachman and I were all armed to the teeth, with a blunderbuss and a bludgeon and a pocket pistol apiece; perils all the way over the dismal wastes of Surrey and many rogues lurking of course in the ditches near the great and busy port’.⁸

Horace Walpole, the novelist, complained that one was ‘forced to travel at noon as if one was going into battle’.⁹

Heaths and other such lonely places were popular places for highwaymen to ‘work’. Windsor Forest, Wimbledon Common, Maidenhead Thicket, Shotover Hill, Epping Forest and Hampstead Heath were some of the particularly treacherous areas for travellers. Highwaymen liked the districts around London for they provided a plentiful supply of travellers, and a large metropolis to disappear in after the robbery. Jane Austen’s cousin Eliza de Feuillide felt she had had a narrow escape in one such place:

‘We returned to town on Sunday and of all the dreadful storms of thunder and lightning and rain I ever remember, I think that we experienced on that amiable place called Hounslow Heath was the worst; however, I believe it saved us from being robbed as we afterwards heard that two highwaymen were at that very moment in waiting for their prey, and nothing but the violent storm prevented their stopping us’.¹⁰

As late as 1814 highwaymen in such places were still a matter for concern. Anna Austen, Jane Austen’s niece, who married Ben Lefroy in the winter of that year, had to leave her wedding party early – the young couple had to reach Hendon for their wedding night and their way lay over Bagshot Heath. As this was a common resort of highwaymen, it was essential for them to pass the Heath before dark.¹¹

Highwaymen were also referred to as ‘knights of the road’ and English newspapers of the time show that it was a common experience to be treated with great politeness as the robbery took place. The *Morning Chronicle* recorded such an example in January 1797:

a very gallant highway robbery was lately committed on Wimbledon Common upon the person of a young married lady. After receiving her purse, the robber politely demanded an elegant ring which he discovered on her finger. This she peremptorily refused, saying ‘She would sooner part with life’; the hero of the turf rejoined, ‘Since you value the ring so much, madam, allow me the honour of saluting the fair hand which wears it, and I shall deem it a full equivalent’. The hand was instantly stretched through the chariot window,



Distinguished gentlemen were not immune from highwaymen – a common problem on the roads in Jane Austen’s day. Here James McLean, the ‘Gentleman Highwayman’ robs Horace Walpole and Lord Eglinton on Hounslow Heath. Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey hopes to have an encounter such as this with a highwayman, but is not so fortunate. (© Copyright The British Museum)

and the kiss being received, the highwayman thanked her for her condescension, and instantly galloped off perfectly satisfied with the commutation.¹²

No wonder Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* felt disappointed that ‘neither robbers nor tempests befriended them’ (my italics) when she travelled to Bath with the Allens.

There was an excellent chance that any highwayman in Georgian England would actually be a gentleman born. The ‘gentlemen of the road’ saw themselves as members of a criminal elite and they asked for a traveller’s purse with grace and courtesy. Horace Walpole, when he was robbed, readily admitted that ‘the whole affair was conducted with the greatest good breeding on both sides’.¹³ Many highwaymen, when captured, were found to have attended the best public schools and universities, were the sons of parsons or the younger sons of very well-to-do gentlemen. Captain Alexander Smith’s *Complete History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads etc* outlines the careers of 59 highwaymen. Of those 32 were the sons of respectable and comfortably-off families.¹⁴ Gambling debts, a taste for drink and a strong distaste for work had led them to a life of crime on the road. Most ill-treated only those who tried to defend themselves and retain their possessions.

THEFT

The roads of England were ‘decorated’ with the grisly remains of highwaymen, hanging in gibbets near the scenes of their crimes. This hanging of executed criminals in chains remained common practice in England until 1834, and the decomposing corpses became well-known landmarks in the English countryside. The *Salisbury Journal* of 1783 recorded that William Peare, who robbed a mail coach, would

be executed at Fisherton gallows ... and his body will then be enclosed in a suit of chains ... and affixed to a gibbet erected near the spot where the robbery was committed ... as a dreadful memento to youth, how they swerve from the paths of rectitude, and transgress the laws of their country.¹⁵



Highwayman James McLean being tried for his crimes at the Old Bailey in London. The speech bubbles read, 'What has your L—p to say in favour of the Prisoner at ye Bar?' and 'My L—d, I have had the Pleasure to know him well. He has often been about my House & I never lost any thing.' McLean was executed on 3 October 1750, aged 26. Such trials attracted a great deal of publicity and public interest. (© Copyright The British Museum)

So that they could act as forceful warnings, the gibbets were erected in conspicuous places. Jane Austen, travelling in southern England, is certain to have seen some.

Her reading and her visits to the theatre emphasised the glamorous image of the highwayman. A favourite author, Henry Fielding, had written a popular history of Jonathon Wild, the highwayman and thief hanged in 1725. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* about the gallant bravado of Captain Macheath was the most popular play in England in the 18th century. Sermons were preached against its heroic portrayal of the criminal and Magistrate John Fielding (brother of the novelist) was certain that audiences were corrupted and turned to crime as a result of watching it. He even wrote to playhouse managers, asking for the play to be suppressed. His request was ignored – the play continued with full houses. Ballads and prints about Dick Turpin and his horse Black Bess abounded in the 18th century, and newspapers were filled with stories of highwaymen's activities, trials and well-attended hangings. Jane Austen, a writer who shunned the sentimental and melodramatic, therefore chose to refer to the 'gentlemen of the road' only very obliquely in her novels.

Being held up by highwaymen belonged to the realm of popular fiction as well as to real life, but being accosted by gypsies was a different matter. Novelists of the day had ignored gypsies – they had not become an ingredient of melodrama. They were, however, a visible and realistic danger throughout the Georgian age and Jane Austen was therefore willing to introduce them into one of her novels.

Gypsies were a major problem in England during her life time. Although there had been an attempt in 1563 to expel every gypsy from the country, its failure meant that for the next 200 years gypsies eked out an existence on the margins of society, pilfering and moving



Gruesome sets of irons such as these were a common site in Jane Austen's England. She would have seen them hanging from gibbets with decomposing corpses inside them. (© Copyright The British Museum)

on, raiding hen-houses and moving on, avoiding the authorities as much as possible. In the juvenile work *Evelyn* the 'hero' Mr Gower is so terrified when he rides home at 'nine o'clock, with no light to direct him but that of the moon almost full'¹⁶ that he 'shuts his eyes as he rides to prevent his seeing either Gypsies or Ghosts'. In *Our Village*, her description of a late-Georgian childhood, Mary Russell Mitford exults:

We have few gypsies in our neighbourhood ... I am afraid that we are too civilised, too cautious; that our sheepfolds are too closely watched; our barnyards too well guarded; our geese and ducks too fastly penned; our chickens too securely locked up'.¹⁷

Highbury is not so fortunate. Mrs Weston's chickens, as she discovers to her cost at the end of *Emma*, are not 'securely locked up'. Perhaps the gypsies have reconnoitred on their first visit, and later return to steal the poultry!

Harriet Smith encounters gypsies when she goes for a walk with her school friend Miss Bickerton. The gypsies want money from her and are prepared to use violence to get it. Soon abandoned by her friend, Harriet is left to their mercy, 'half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy, all clamorous and impertinent', and gives them a shilling. She tries to walk away, the gypsies follow and surround her 'demanding more'. Harriet is terrified. She speaks to the gypsies, begging them not 'to use her ill' and, by doing so, commits a hanging offence. Conversing with gypsies, or being found in their company, was one of the offences in England punishable by death. Harriet Smith could be hanged for her misadventure! Any humane judge would have been likely to find poor silly Harriet innocent of such a crime and accept her tale of an accidental encounter, but her excuse was used by many of those who were caught with gypsies, and sometimes the excuse was not believed. In 1782 a fourteen year old girl, protesting her innocence, was hanged for being found in the company of gypsies. No wonder Harriet 'fainted away' upon being rescued. Jane Austen's contemporary readers would have had a clear understanding of her peril.

Security was a worry for every Georgian householder 'The Back Gate is regularly locked',¹⁸ Jane Austen reassured her sister in 1813. They kept dogs for added protection. Their house-mate Martha Lloyd seems to have been especially fearful of thieves: 'Tell her that I hunt away the rogues every night from under her bed',¹⁹ Jane teased in an 1813 letter. Burglars lying in wait under unsuspecting females' beds and coming out after dark, seem to have been a particular 'bogey' for Georgian ladies. *Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel set in the Georgian age of Gaskell's youth, has Miss Matty rolling a ball of wool under her bed from the

safety of the door. If the ball came out the other side, it meant there was no burglar impeding its progress and she could get into bed and go to sleep. Leaving a house empty left it easy prey to house-breakers. In 1813 Jane Austen reports to Cassandra that their aunt Mrs Leigh Perrot is hurrying back to her Bath house: ‘they have an apprehension of their House ... having been broken into!’²⁰ Theft was a fact of life in the cities with the picking of pockets, the plundering of homes and belongings when a fire broke out (as was the case when Jane Austen watched the fires in Southampton), night-time break-ins and even the theft of small children, who were then used brutally by chimney sweeps to climb up chimneys. Harriet Smith, emerging from the entertainment at Astley’s, is made ‘uneasy’ by the press of the crowd and needs Robert Martin to protect her. City authorities did employ watchmen to patrol the streets – Anne Elliot hears a passing watchman call out eleven o’clock on her first evening in Bath – but they were generally ineffective. Theft was too large-scale to be stopped by a few men with truncheons, who kept to the main streets and avoided back alleys.

It was hardly surprising that Jane Austen, who had so few valuable belongings, should imagine the theft of what she held most dear – her manuscripts. Both her friend Martha and her nephew Edward are suspected of such thieving. It is done jokingly but Jane Austen’s jest gives an indication of the fear of theft that every Georgian lived with, and the importance to her of the novels that had not yet been printed. Posterity must be grateful that no such theft ever occurred.



In her juvenilia Jane Austen parodies the sentimental novels of the day and theft is a part of her satire. She portrays ridiculous thefts, encouraging her readers to laugh at the absurdity of the stealing that goes on. Sophia, one of the heroines in *Love and Freindship*, is caught ‘majestically removing the 5th Bank-note’²¹ from a drawer in Mr Macdonald’s library. She breaks out in a rage because she has been interrupted, and calls the owner of the bank-notes a culprit and a ‘Base Miscreant’. Eliza, in *Henry and Eliza*, is ‘detected in stealing a banknote of fifty pounds’.²² This is a capital offence, but Eliza calls her benefactors ‘inhuman’ when they merely evict her from the house. Augustus in *Love and Freindship* ‘gracefully purloined from his unworthy father’s Escritoire’ a ‘considerable sum of Money’,²³ Philander and Gustavus, in the same story, help themselves to ‘the Nine Hundred Pounds’²⁴ kept in a parlour table by their mothers and run away with it. Children rob their parents and relatives instead of asking them for money. Reasons for these thefts are not given – that would be far too prosaic for the youthful author.

She leaves her readers to wonder why such huge sums are kept in such ridiculous places. The flowery language of sentimental fiction masks the reality of these crimes, which would all have attracted grim penalties in real life. But the young Jane Austen was contrasting real life with the unrealistic world of popular fiction. In *Catharine, or The Bower* characters who fear being robbed, can gain absurd consolation from the fact that they are robbed by ‘a Gentleman in a Chaise and Four’.²⁵

After Jane Austen wrote her juvenilia, her Aunt Leigh Perrot was arrested. Theft from that time on could no longer be a joking matter and so in her mature novels it is portrayed very differently. She scrupulously avoided anything that could smack of melodrama, but she did include serious theft in her fiction to tell her readers, in subtle ways, a great deal about the characters who either commit or condemn these thefts.

Admiral Croft in *Persuasion* has been the victim of a particular type of naval theft. Captains sometimes stole each other’s men to make up their crews and Admiral Croft strongly disapproves of such dishonesty. In the streets of Bath he has no wish to stop and speak to Admiral Brand and his brother because they once ‘got away some of [his] best men’.²⁶ Anne Elliot particularly admires the Admiral’s simplicity and honesty. He is not the sort of man to commit such an offence.

In *Emma* ‘Mrs Weston’s poultry-house was robbed one night of all her turkies – evidently by the ingenuity of man’. The local thieves have been busy – ‘other poultry-yards in the neighbourhood also suffered’. This pilfering is ‘*housebreaking* to Mr Woodhouse’s fears’.²⁷ This crime is included to draw attention to Mr Woodhouse’s timidity and to further the plot of the novel. It is never solved, although the gypsies are the likeliest culprits, and Mr Woodhouse, to avoid being ‘under wretched alarm every night of his life’, finally agrees to Mr Knightley marrying Emma and coming to live at Hartfield. Only the presence of the local magistrate actually residing in his home will make Hartfield safe again. This is a nice comic touch that has theft furthering the love story and allowing the hero and heroine to be united as a result of crime.

Like Mr Woodhouse, Fanny Price is appalled at the very idea of theft. She blushes deeply when Mary Crawford, who is offering her Henry’s necklace, asks ‘Do you think Henry will claim the necklace as mine, and fancy you did not come honestly by it?’²⁸ To be even jestingly suspected of theft makes Fanny tremble and protest.

The most bare-faced piece of theft in Jane Austen’s works occurs in the famous second chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*. In fact, the scene, although a piece of comedy, is hardly surpassed anywhere in literature for its ruthlessness. John Dashwood, who promised his dying father that he ‘would do everything in his power to make (his sisters and stepmother)

comfortable',²⁹ initially plans to give the women £3,000. In the space of three pages Mr Dashwood, encouraged by his wife, strips that intended fulfilment of his promise down to some 'fish or game, whenever they are in season'.³⁰ He would be shocked to have this named as theft, but for his sisters it is nothing less. The idea of robbing is, however, subconsciously in his mind because he wonders: 'How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum'.³¹ He has 'just compunction enough for having done nothing for his sisters himself, to be exceedingly anxious that everybody else should do a great deal'.³² John Dashwood's theft is a moral, rather than a legal one, but its consequences to his sisters are harsh and long-lasting.



There is an intriguing moment in *Mansfield Park* that tells the reader a great deal about Mrs Norris. Fanny has been spending time in the flower garden with her aunts, and because Mrs Norris wants a supply of roses for her own home, Fanny has had to carry them there for her. Fanny, at the end of the day, has a headache and Edmund is trying to discover its cause:

'But were there roses enough to oblige her to go twice?', he asks his aunt.

'No; but they were to be put into the spare room to dry; and unluckily Fanny forgot to lock the door of the room and bring away the key, so she was obliged to go again'.³³

Why does Mrs Norris lock her spare room? What does she keep in there, apart from dried flowers, that is so valuable it must be protected? Has Mrs Norris no trust of her servants? This locking of doors within a house was not normal behaviour for the time.

Jane Austen well understood that there are none so quick to suspect others of dishonesty as those who are dishonest themselves. She makes Mrs Norris an excellent example of this. The average Georgian householder took care to lock all exterior doors, but locking interior doors was not so common, unless the room contained family silver or other items of great value. Mrs Norris is paranoid about thieves because she is a petty thief herself. Detecting others in their thievery distracts attention from her own pilferings.

When Sir Thomas Bertram is away and the theatrical proceedings begin, Mrs Norris takes the opportunity of frequent visits to Mansfield and she doesn't like to go home empty-handed. One day she had 'been looking about [her] in the poultry yard, and was just coming out' when she runs into Dick Jackson, ten year old son of Christopher Jackson, the Mansfield carpenter. He is carrying wood to his father and as the servant's dinner

bell is ringing at that moment, Mrs Norris suspects him of being there at that time on purpose to cadge a free meal and anything else he can get for nothing. She speaks sharply to Dick ‘and I dare say it will cure him of coming marauding about the house for a while’.³⁴ This is Mrs Norris’ version of the incident. Jane Austen is hinting here that there could well be another version. Perhaps Mrs Norris, emerging from the poultry yard with eggs she has helped herself to, is uncomfortable at being caught out? She then attempts to turn the tables on poor Dick, accusing him of wanting to take a free meal from Sir Thomas.

The Mansfield theatricals end with a clearly-stated theft on the part of Mrs Norris:

Mrs Norris contrived to remove one article from [Sir Thomas’s] sight that might have distressed him. The curtain over which she had presided with such talent and such success, went off with her to her cottage, where she happened to be particularly in want of green baize.³⁵

Green baize was often used to cover carpets and prevent them fading, or even as a cheap substitute for carpet itself.³⁶ Nobody’s permission is asked, no offer of payment made, Mrs Norris pinches an amount of expensive fabric that would have seen her hanged had she been caught with it as a common thief!

Jellies, too, are whisked away from Mansfield the day after the ball. The excuse is that Mrs Norris needs them for a sick maid, but it is likely that only the housekeeper, and not the provider of the jellies Sir Thomas, was ever informed of their removal from his premises. Mrs Norris loves to get something for nothing and is not punctilious about how she gets it. Her favourite niece Maria notices this tendency and accuses Mrs Norris of ‘sponging’ at Sotherton. That day’s booty is four pheasant’s eggs, a little heath and a cheese. She plans to ‘borrow’ a coop for the time when the eggs have hatched. The word ‘sponging’ is a strong one. It means to ‘live off someone parasitically’. A ‘sponging-house’ was a bailiff’s lodging house for debtors in his custody before their committal to prison, and ‘sponging’ in Jane Austen’s time was a word with criminal connotations. Jane Austen wants her readers to know that Mrs Norris’ booty has not been hospitably presented, but has been acquired deviously through self-serving flattery.

Jane Austen saw in 1799 how easily her own aunt could sink from the world of respectability and prestige, to being an accused criminal in danger of her life. In Mrs Norris she depicts her heroine’s aunt engaged in a perilous activity. Her ‘sponging’ could drag her so easily from respectable clergyman’s wife down to the level of common thief.

We do not know how much sympathy Jane Austen actually felt for her aunt. In her novels, however, there are examples of her showing charity

for thieves. The woman who could understand and not condemn the motives for poaching, could also sympathise when poverty drove the poor to steal food. After all, she greatly admired Crabbe, the poet who championed the oppressed and poor. She allows the gypsies who attempt to steal from Harriet to escape the dread hand of the law although ‘notice of there being such a set of people in the neighbourhood is given to Mr Knightley’.³⁷ The poultry thieves also get away with their booty. There is a telling incident in *Persuasion* when Mr Shepherd, a ‘civil cautious lawyer’ reminisces about a farmer’s man, a poor rural employee, who is ‘caught in the fact’ stealing apples. The Reverend Mr Wentworth, brother of the novel’s naval hero, helps arrange ‘an amicable compromise’. The culprit thus manages to evade the dreadful punishments of the law. Mr Shepherd’s reaction to this theft represents that of the law courts and statutes of the day: It is ‘contrary to [his] judgment ... Very odd indeed!’³⁸ But the clergyman brother of the hero has a different response, one which surely reflects the reactions of Jane Austen herself. The Reverend Mr Wentworth displays charity and sympathy for the offender and, in so doing, is shown to be a more estimable man than lawyer Shepherd, with his desire to harshly punish the offender.

In her early writings, Jane Austen laughed over theft, but as she grew older she found that theft was no laughing matter in the Georgian world. It attracted the most draconian punishments, it offended against the laws of the land no matter how trifling and it almost resulted in the death of one of her relations. After that she never joked about it. There is nothing surviving in her letters or in family documents to record her opinion of her aunt’s arrest and acquittal, but it is certain that, as a result of it, she never referred to theft lightly again.