"From Every Window There Were Beauties to Be Seen": The Tourism of Great Houses

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"From Every Window There Were Beauties to Be Seen": The Tourism of Great Houses

William Watts, with the help of several illustrators, made the tourism of the great houses of England even easier with his The Seats of the Nobility and Gentry, in a collection of the most interesting and picturesque views. The book, which came out in parts between 1779 and 1786, was subscribed to by several pages worth of those who enjoyed seeing how the upper class lived, including the clergy. Throughout the entirety of his 191 pages, Watts describes exactly what one would see if they were to stand on the grounds of some of the most beautiful and grand private homes. For example, when discussing West Combe (a home near Greenwich in Kent), he states, “The Pleasure-Grounds around are laid out as to render them a perfect Scene of rural Simplicity” (Watts 7). He also goes on to discuss the shape of the Thames from where he stands at West Combe (it’s “Serpentine”) and the fact that many cattle can be seen grazing nearby. By listing these specific aspects of the grounds of a great home he provided the subscribers to his work a perfect picture of what they could expect to see if they were ever lucky enough to visit it. Along with the details of the grounds and of the houses he deemed fit to include in his work, he made sure to inform the reader of exactly who owned the home and had several eminent artists at the time provide illustrations to assist with the understanding of what each place looked like.

In Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice we really are only given one instance of tourism of a great house. When Elizabeth Bennet visits Pemberley, the home of Mr. Darcy, with the Gardiners she somewhat takes the part of Watts. She moves from window to window once inside, enjoying the shifting view of the grounds as she makes her way from room to room. “Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene—the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it.” This description by Lizzy is reminiscent of the way Watts discusses the grounds of West Combe and how pleasing it would be to look upon them. When Pride and Prejudice was written, it was common for the very rich to open their homes during certain days for the public to come and view it. This is, at least partially, why Lizzy is at Pemberley. While some had the luck to be able to view such homes in person, those who could not had the opportunity to view them through another’s eyes by reading the work of Watts.