Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra, dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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ethical structures. Additionally, Jane Austen associates this linguistic and moral dissipation with the role that money plays in the marriage market; nevertheless, her fiction is paradoxically saturated with the discourse of economics, to the point that her plots are driven by financial imperatives. Despite this, Austen does attempt to locate a solution by constructing an alternative discourse of 'manners' – a particularly difficult paradigm for the modern reader to come to terms with, given the further linguistic deterioration that has taken place in the intervening two centuries. This search for an appropriate linguistic-ethical system manifests itself on a technical level, in those stylistic achievements and that painstaking attention to detail that have come to be perceived as quintessentially Austenian. What Austen's writing demonstrates, then, is the author's particular attunement to the changing socio-cultural context of Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century, and how this is reflected microcosmically at the linguistic level. Consequently, if her novels seem somehow detached from the ideological debates that were raging during her lifetime, this is owing to Austen's carefully controlled choice of language. As Scott himself said so appositely: 'At Highbury Cupid walks decorously, and with good discretion, bearing his torch under a lanthorn, instead of flourishing it around to set the house on fire' (Quarterly Review, p. 196).

NOTES

1. Walter Scott's review of Emma in The Quarterly Review 14 (October, 1815 [March, 1816]), 200. Subsequent references are included in the text.

2. In an earlier letter, Austen described the 'pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in' (L, 1 April 1816).

At a conservative estimate, Jane Austen probably wrote about 3,000 letters during her lifetime, of which only 160 are known and published. The surviving manuscripts are scattered round the globe from Australia to America; most are in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, some in the British Library in London and a few are still in private hands. They are usually written on quarto size paper, folded to form two leaves (i.e. four pages of text), but a few are on octavo sheets or even smaller scraps. As Jane Austen's niece Caroline Austen (1805–80) recalled: 'Her handwriting remains to bear testimony to its own excellence; and every note and letter of hers, was finished off handsomely – There was an art then in folding and sealing – no adhesive envelopes made all easy – some people's letters looked always loose and untidy – but her paper was sure to take the right folds, and her sealing wax to drop in the proper place.'

The first of Austen's letters to be published were No. 146 and No. 161(C),2 some very limited extracts of which were used by her brother Henry in his 'Biographical Notice of the Author', prefixed to the posthumous publication of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion in 1817 (Memoir, pp. 142–3). Thereafter, it was not until the 1860s, when her nephew, the Revd James Edward Austen-Leigh (JELAL) (1798–1874), was contemplating writing a biography of his aunt, that his elder sister Anna, Mrs Lefroy (1793–1872), suggested: 'Letters may have been preserved, & this is the more probable as Aunt Jane's talent for letter writing was so much valued & thought so delightful amongst her own family circle' (Memoir, p. 162).

Jane Austen's sister Cassandra (1773–1845) had indeed preserved many of Jane's letters, and JELAL's sister Caroline confirmed: 'Her letters to Aunt Cassandra (for they were sometimes separated) were, I dare say, open and confidential – My Aunt looked them over and burnt the greater part (as she told me), 2 or 3 years before
her own death — She left, or gave some as legacies to the Neices [sic] — but of those that I have seen, several had portions cut out' (Memoir, p. 174). It would seem that Cassandra's censorship was to ensure that these younger nieces did not read any of Jane Austen's sometimes acid or forthright comments on neighbours and family members who might still be alive later in the nineteenth century (see fig. 1), for before this destruction Cassandra had discussed some of them, during the late 1830s, with one of Admiral Francis Austen's daughters, Catherine (1815–77, later Mrs Hubback), who understood from Cassandra that 'Jane Austen] always said her books were her children, and supplied her sufficient interest for happiness; and some of her letters, triumphing over the married women of her acquaintance, & rejoicing in her own freedom from care, were most amusing' (Memoir, p. 191).

As for the idea of using Jane Austen's letters as the basis of a biography, Caroline Austen was doubtful: 'There is nothing in those letters which I have seen that would be acceptable to the public — They were very well expressed, and they must have been very interesting to those who received them — but they detailed chiefly home and family events; and she seldom committed herself even to an opinion — so that to strangers they could be no transcript of her mind — they would not feel that they knew her any the better for having read them' (Memoir, pp. 173–4).

Nevertheless, no other documentary evidence for a biography was available, and so the first of the letters to appear in anything like their entirety were those used by JEAL in his Memoir of Jane Austen, published in 1869. Even then, he had at his disposal only a very limited quantity, merely those letters which had passed down in his own senior line of the Austen family, plus a few more lent to him by his cousins in the Charles Austen line of descent. When Jane Austen's eldest niece Fanny Knight (1793–1882, later Lady Knatchbull) died after being senile for some years, her son, the first Lord Brabourne, found amongst her effects more than eighty letters from Austen, which he published in two volumes in 1884, as Letters of Jane Austen.

In 1906 another five of Austen's letters which had descended in Admiral Francis Austen's family were published by John Hubback and his daughter Edith in their collaborative work Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers; and a few years later JEAL's descendants William

Figure 1. Manuscript letter, Jane Austen to Cassandra, 8 January 1799. Jane Austen made a mildly derogatory reference to their Cooke cousins of Great Bookham, which her sister attempted to obliterate in later years.
Life and works

and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh wrote *Jane Austen, her Life and Letters* (1913), and published extracts from a few more letters, including some addressed to Caroline Austen which had not been used in the *Memoir*.

The first 'collected edition' was made by the Austen biographer Brimley Johnson as *The Letters of Jane Austen* (1925), but this reprinted only forty-four of them, selected from the Brabourne volumes, the Hubbacks' *Sailor Brothers* and the Austen-Leighs' *Life*. Further letters belonging to Admiral Charles's last two poverty-stricken spinster granddaughters, the Misses Jane (1849–1928) and Emma Florence Austen (1851–1939) were sold by them in 1925–6.

R. W. Chapman published the first proper collection in 1932, giving the complete texts of all the letters then known, and in 1952 he published a second edition, which included another five letters that had surfaced in the intervening twenty years. Since 1952 a few more scraps of letters have come to light, and much more has become known about Austen and her family, hence I compiled a third, and completely new, edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*, published by Oxford University Press in 1995.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney teases Catherine Morland with his provocative statement: 'As far as I have had opportunity of judging, it appears to me that the usual style of letter writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars... A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar' (*NA*, 1:3). Austen cannot be accused of the second and third of these faults, but in the past her letters have been criticised for the first reason, 'general deficiency of subject'. This criticism is probably due partly to the way in which her letters have only gradually crept piecemeal into the public domain, and partly to some degree of short-sightedness or tunnel-vision in the critics themselves.

In the *Memoir*, JEAL was apologetic about his aunt's correspondence: 'A wish has sometimes been expressed that some of Jane Austen's letters should be published. Some entire letters, and many extracts, will be given in this memoir; but the reader must be warned not to expect too much from them... The style is always clear, and generally animated, while a vein of humour continually gleams through the whole; but the materials may be thought inferior to the execution, for they treat only of the details of domestic life. There is in them no notice of politics or public events; scarcely any discussions on literature, or other subjects of general interest.' (*Memoir*, pp. 50–1)

In 1884 Lord Brabourne made no apology for publishing this family correspondence, but declared: 'the public never took a deeper or more lively interest in all that concerns Jane Austen than at the present moment... This being the case, it has seemed to me that the letters which show what her own "ordinary, everyday life" was, and which afford a picture of her such as no history written by another person could give so well, are likely to interest the public which, both in Great Britain and America, has learned to appreciate Jane Austen... amid the most ordinary details and most commonplace topics, every now and then sparkle out the same wit and humour which illuminate the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, etc., and which have endeared the name of Jane Austen to many thousands of readers in English-speaking homes.'

In the preface to his 1932 edition R. W. Chapman gave an explanation, not an apology, for the content of the letters: most of them were addressed to Jane Austen's sister, whose life she shared, hence daily news and family information would obviously need to take priority over other topics; high postal charges would inhibit long discussions on politics, morality or literature, all of which could wait until the sisters were again in each other's company.

He did not enlarge upon the question of postal charges, but they were indeed considerable, and had to be paid by the recipient, not by the sender. First levied in the seventeenth century, charges had risen steadily ever since, with increases during Austen's lifetime in 1784, 1797, 1801, 1805 and again in 1812, when the minimum rate became 4d. for a letter travelling not more than 15 miles, 5d. for 20 miles, 6d. for 30 miles and so on by intermediate stages up to 17d. (1s.5d.) for 700 miles; double rates were payable on two-sheet letters, and fourfold rates on anything heavier. At the end of 1807 Austen noted that, having started the year with £50.15s.0d. in hand, she had spent £3.17s.6½d. on *Letters & Parcels*; and in 1813 she had to pay 27d. (2s.3d.) for a letter received from brother Francis when his ship was on duty in the Baltic Sea (*L*, 25 September 1813).

R. W. Chapman's explanation did not satisfy the author E. M. Forster, who complained: 'Triviality, varied by touches of ill-breeding and of sententiousness, characterises these letters as a whole,
particularly the earlier letters... Miss Austen's fundamental weakness as a letter-writer... [is that] she has not enough subject matter on which to exercise her powers. Her character and sex as well as her environment removed her from public affairs, and she was too sincere and spontaneous to affect any interest which she did not feel. She takes no account of politics or religion, and none of the war except when it brings prize-money to her brothers. Her comments on literature are provincial and perfunctory... nothing in her mind except the wish to tell her sister everything..." For Forster, Austen was a frivolous, sharp-eyed, hard-hearted young woman, with far too much 'eighteenth century frankness' clinging to her, he thoroughly disapproved of the reference to a bastard child in Sense and Sensibility, and thought it quite right that the wording had been toned down in the second edition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, as Austen's life and works became the subject of serious study, Lord Brabourne's opinions were proven to be correct. At the present time, literary critics travel through the letters to pick out every possible hint that can give some clue as to the source of her plots or the origins of her characters, and social historians seek for precise information on the life of the middle-ranking professional classes of the period. Now that the complete texts of Jane Austen's letters, such as do survive at least, are arranged in chronological order, it can be seen that they fall into several clearly defined groups, the style and content of which are appropriate to the recipient. For example, to her brother Francis, away at sea, she sends a bulletin of information about all the family, such as someone away for a long period would need to know: 'Behold me going to write you as handsome a Letter as I can' (L, 13 July 1813). No doubt similar letters went to her younger sailor brother, Charles - his diaries note the receipt of a number of letters from Jane, but unfortunately he preserved only the very last of them, that written on 6 April 1817 during her final illness. None of the letters Jane Austen sent to her brother Henry survives, and this is perhaps posthuma's greatest loss, for when she wrote to Cassandra on 8 April 1806 she explained: 'I was not able to go on yesterday, all my Wit & leisure were bestowed on letters to Charles & Henry...'

As the next generation of nieces and nephews grew up, the letters to Fanny Knight became those of an 'agonising aunt' in the modern sense - giving sympathetic advice on affairs of the heart to this motherless teenager; 'Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor - which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony, but I need not dwell on such arguments with you, pretty Dear, you do not want inclination. - Well, I shall say, as I have often said before, Do not be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last' (L, 13 March 1817). Anna Lefroy's attempt to write a novel led to the group of letters in which Austen gives practical information and constructive criticism as to how a naturalistic, credible work of fiction should be composed: 'Lyne will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there... You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life; - 3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on...' (L, 10-18 August, 9-18 September 1814).

There are cheerfully teasing letters to the young J.E.A.L., as he grew from good-natured Winchester College schoolboy into charming Oxford undergraduate: 'One reason for my writing to you now is that I may have the pleasure of directing to you Egre - I give you Joy of having left Winchester - Now you may own, how miserable you were there; now, it will gradually all come out - your Crimes & your Miseries - how often you went up by the Mail to London & threw away Fifty Guinea at a Tavern' (L, 16-17 December 1816) and little joking notes to the much younger Caroline: 'I am sorry you got wet in your ride; Now that you are become an Aunt, you are a person of some consequence & must excite great Interest whatever You do. I have always maintained the importance of Aunts as much as possible, & I am sure of your doing the same now' (L, 30 October 1815).

Outside the family, there are chatty letters to her old friends Martha Lloyd and Alethea Bigg, and to Anne Sharp, the one-time governess at Godmersham; crisp business correspondence with Crosby & Co. and John Murray regarding publication, and carefully formal replies to the imperceptive Revd James Stanier Clarke. It is to the latter that Austen writes a self-assessment which has now become most significant for modern literary critics and biographers: 'I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg, might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country
Villages as I deal in — but I could no more write a Romance than
an Epic Poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious
Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it
were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laugh-
ing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before
I had finished the first Chapter. — No — I must keep to my own
style & go on in my own Way; and though I may never succeed
again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other
(L, 1 April 1816).

As for her correspondence with her beloved sister Cassandra,
Jane herself explains her intentions, in her letter of 3 January 1801:
'I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are
always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the
same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost
as fast as I could the whole of this letter.' To read these letters,
even though it is two hundred years since they were written, is the
nearest we can come to hearing Jane Austen talk to us as well.

NOTES
1. A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections, ed. Kathryn
addition to reprinting the second (enlarged) edition of the original
Memoir, this new publication includes Henry Austen's two biog-
graphical essays, Caroline Austen's My Aunt Jane Austen, a memoir,
and Anna Lefroy's Recollections of Aunt Jane, together with extracts
from other family papers. Subsequent references to this edition are
included in the text.
3. Edward, Lord Brabourne, Letters of Jane Austen (1884), vol. I,
pp. xii–xv.
4. Cyril H. Rock, Guide to the Postal History Collection, Tottenham
Museum (1938), pp. 14–16; also Frank Staff, The Penny Post, 1680–
5. Patrick Piggott, 'Jane Austen’s Southampton Pianos', Collected

In a letter of December 1798 Jane Austen told Cassandra that they
were subscribing to a new library. The proprietor had written with
the assurance that her collection was not limited to novels, prompting
Austen to comment: 'She might have spared this pretension to
our family, who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being
so' (L, 18–19 December). Mr Austen's taste was liberal, encom-
passing 'every species of literature', according to Henry Austen's
Biographical Notice'. The family's enthusiasm for the stage meant
that the barn at the rectory at Steventon was fitted up as a theatre
and Austen's earliest experiences of English drama was in hearing
rehearsals of comedies or farces by writers like Isaac Bickerstaffe,
Susannah Centlivre, Hannah Cowley, Henry Fielding, David
Garrick and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Despite her brother's
emphasis on serious literature in his memoir Jane Austen was as
fond of low comedy and sensational novels as collections of
sermons. Theatrical productions helped to populate her work with
comic archetypes: rakes, hypocrites, simperers, blusterers, gar-
rus purveyors of scandal and trivia and grumpy spouses wearily
resigned to the incorrigible folly of their partners.

Gothic fiction also found its way into the parsonage: Jane Austen
described her father in the evening reading The Midnight Bell (1798)
by Francis Lathom (L, 24 October 1798). Isabella Thorpe's enthu-
siasm for the same story in Northanger Abbey (1:6) explains why
Mr Austen borrowed it from the library rather than buying it.
He did, however, acquire Arthur Fitz Albini (1798) a novel by
Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, who had rented the parsonage at
Deane. Austen found it odd 'that we should purchase the only one
of Egerton's works of which his family are ashamed'. But, she told
Cassandra, 'these scruples ... do not at all interfere with my reading
it' (L, 25 November 1798). Austen's tolerance for those who defied
convention was not unlimited, however, and she later discarded a