



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

# JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Janet Todd



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3. Samuel Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 5 October 1753, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 245.
4. *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 48.
5. *Fanny Knight's Diaries: Jane Austen Through Her Niece's Eyes*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Alton: Jane Austen Society, 2000), p. 39.
6. Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London: Routledge, 1969), p. 40. Subsequent references are included in the text.
7. D. J. Greene, 'Jane Austen and the Peerage', *PMLA* 68 (1953), 1018. In Wentworth's case in *P*, the coincidence prompts Sir Walter Elliot to wonder sourly 'how the names of many of our nobility become so common' (1:3).
8. David Robinson (as 'Y. Y. Y.'), 'The Church of England and the Dissenters', *Blackwood's* 16 (1824), 397, quoted in Perkin, *Modern English Society*, p. 22.
9. Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 516.
10. Lord Townshend to Coke, 17 February 1806, quoted by A. M. W. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends*, 2 vols. (1908), vol. II, p. 338.
11. Charles Jenner, *The Placid Man; or, Memoirs of Sir Charles Belville*, second edition (1773), vol. II, p. 177, quoted in Langford, *Public Life*, p. 513.
12. Egerton Brydges, *The Autobiography, Times, Opinions, and Contemporaries of Sir Egerton Brydges*, 2 vols. (1834), vol. I, p. 196.
13. David Spring, 'Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World: Literary Critics and Historians', in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), pp. 60–1.
14. Robert Southey, *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 37.

## Reading practices

ALAN RICHARDSON

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, England experienced a literacy crisis, though not one brought on by an appreciable spike in the number of readers. Literacy rates climbed gradually from the middle of the seventeenth century to the last decades of the nineteenth, when something close to universal literacy was finally reached. But during the period of Jane Austen's girlhood and youth – the 1780s and 1790s – the incremental growth of reading proficiency across classes and among both men and women became noticeable enough to inspire a host of pronouncements, some congratulatory, others dire.<sup>1</sup> For a bookseller like James Lackington, it could only be a cause for celebration that 'all ranks and degrees now READ', while the reactionary *Anti-Jacobin Review* provided a ready outlet for grimmer remarks: 'Those taught to read, to write, to reason, we now see grasping with curiosity every pernicious treatise within reach.'<sup>2</sup> Although probably not much more than half of lower-class males were literate by the turn of the nineteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his radical youth now far behind him, could worry in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) that 'Books are in every hovel. The Infant's cries are hushed with *picture-books* – and the Cottager's child sheds his first bitter tears over pages, which render it impossible for the man to be treated or governed as a child.' For Coleridge, however, as for a wide spectrum of liberal and conservative reformers, the only way forward was not to extinguish, but to manage the rise of literacy: 'Here as in so many other cases, the inconveniences that have arisen from a thing's having become too general, are best removed by making it universal.'<sup>3</sup> If Austen's era can rightly be seen as an age of educational innovation, expansion and reform, this may well owe less to benevolent impulses to spread literacy than to anxious schemes for controlling it.

In relation to the ever-growing number of women readers – and writers – over the course of Austen's lifetime, anxieties found

equally widespread expression, especially in relation to novel reading, frequently surfacing in works of fiction themselves. When Lady Augusta, in Maria Edgeworth's 'Mademoiselle Panache,' is discovered by her worthy suitor reading an immoral French novel – and the 'second volume' at that – he drops her immediately, an event Edgeworth does not expect her readers to take satirically.<sup>4</sup> Jane Austen, however, has already begun to satirise such fictive condemnations of fictionality in her juvenile work 'Love and Freindship', as the ridiculous Edward Lindsay refuses on principle to marry the woman of his choice with his father's approval ('Never shall it be said that I obliged my Father') and his flustered parent replies: 'You have been studying Novels I suspect' (Letter 6th). Novel reading, or at least the reading of all but a select few 'best' novels, finds condemnation throughout the age's extensive literature on female conduct, and any number of female writers – from the outspoken feminist Mary Wollstonecraft to the staunchly conservative Hannah More – expose the dangers of fashionable novels in their polemical and fictional works alike. Austen stands out the more, then, for including a robust defence of novel reading in her early work *Northanger Abbey*, lest readers take her satire on the Gothic novel craze as yet another sweeping condemnation of female reading habits.

Yet Austen hardly stood alone in advocating the benefits of at least some kinds of reading for girls and women: another Edgeworth heroine, the title character of *Belinda* (1801), proves attractive not least because she is 'fond of reading', rather than engaging solely in empty amusements and 'superficial' displays (ch. 1). Most writers on the question, whether their pronouncements took direct or fictional form, could agree that certain kinds of books (say, religious ones) would grace any 'middling' – or upper-class woman's chamber and help to form and discipline her mind. The disagreements largely concerned just what sorts of books might be allowed, the dangers especially of novels and other fictional works, and whether and in what contexts a woman might appropriately bring her reading into public knowledge and conversation. Along with this diversity of opinion on women's reading went a diversity of reading practices, ranging from the uncritical absorption in improbable fictions caricatured by Austen in her early works to the diverse range of methods and aims inspired by different sorts of reading material described in the journals of a historical woman reader like Anna Larpen.<sup>5</sup>

Historical studies of actual women readers suggest that homogenising models of the passive woman reader, however well they may correspond to influential conduct book prescriptions or stock fictional representations, do scant justice to the variety of reading styles and practices found in the historical record – and in the pages of Austen's novels. Nor does the well-known shift towards practices of reading silently and in private by the end of the eighteenth century altogether crowd out earlier practices of reading aloud and of reading as a form of social interaction. Studies of book purchasing and borrowing patterns, though again based on small samples, serve also to warn against any simplistic association between women readers and the 'rise' of the novel – not all women chose to read fiction, and some men preferred novels to other available genres. Nevertheless, both a profusion of writings on female conduct and education and any number of fictional scenes of reading reflect at least a common *perception* that women found novels seductively attractive and that young women in particular might prove liable to confuse the fictions they so greedily absorbed with the actualities of the social world they must eventually negotiate.

Two novelistic genres in particular were regularly singled out for condemnation: the Gothic, with its thematics of female constraint and persecution and its fictive indulgence in forbidden lusts and passions, and the sentimental novel, with its ideal or 'romantic' picture of life and its over-valuation of erotic love as the key to female happiness. The concern over both genres reflects a pronounced ambivalence towards the earlier genre of prose romance out of which the modern novel emerged. Gothic fiction was born, according to the first Gothic novelist, Horace Walpole, from a desire to reincorporate supernatural and sublime elements of the romance into the 'modern romance' of 'common life'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, to charge a sentimental novel (or its heroine) with harbouring too 'romantic' a picture of life meant, at a time long before 'Romanticism' had become a literary historical term, to portray characters, situations and modes of behaviour that might be found in old romances but never in the real world. Austen's *Northanger Abbey* might be taken as a particularly amusing satire on the tendency to read life through the lens of improbable fictions. Its impressionable young heroine, Catherine Morland, immerses herself in Gothic novels and tales and then, to her eventual humiliation, imposes

Gothic scenarios onto the social world she is only just 'coming out' into: 'This is just like a book!' (NA, 2:5). But in fact, as a number of critics have noted, the Gothic proves in some ways a reliable guide to male behaviour in a social world that can grant overwhelming power to certain well-born, well-placed and well-heeled men: the stern family patriarch Catherine views as a Gothic tyrant indeed proves by the book's end to embody 'parental tyranny' (NA, 2:16), and despite her comically deflated suspicion that he has murdered his wife, Catherine seems finally to have 'scarcely sinned against his character' (2:15).

At once a critique and a validation of Gothic, *Northanger Abbey* also gives a more complex picture of contemporary reading practices than simply the impressionable Miss avidly reading away in the privacy of her bedroom or 'closet'. Catherine, for example, reads not only for pleasure but for social affiliation, eagerly discussing her reading with her fellow Gothic devotee, Isabella Thorpe. Isabella's boorish brother, John, exposes his shallow ignorance by affecting to despise novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, although he does admire the works of Ann Radcliffe – its author (NA, 1:7). Henry Tilney, Catherine's eventual suitor, establishes his character as a man who appreciates women partly by his affirmation of novel reading, claiming to have read all Radcliffe's novels and 'hundreds and hundreds' more, and mocking men who routinely disparage novels when in fact 'they read nearly as many as women' (NA, 1:14). Here Austen herself exposes the popular consignment of novels to a largely female readership as itself a kind of fiction, and unmasks male condemnations of the novel as mere posturing. In the voice of the narrator, Austen goes still further, mocking the self-defeating practice of novelists censoring fiction reading in the very pages of their own novels, and asking rhetorically, 'if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard' (NA, 1:5). Within the pages of *Northanger Abbey*, novel reading emerges as much more than an escapist or self-deluding pursuit: it promotes friendship, contributes to social distinction, forms a common topic and pursuit for men and women and can at best convey the 'greatest powers of the mind' (NA, 1:5).

*Sense and Sensibility* complicates stock critiques of sentimental novel reading in comparable ways. Marianne reads sentimental

fiction and the poetry of sensibility – she slights her sister's love-interest for his inadequate appreciation of the poetry of William Cowper (SSS, 1:3) – and she falls for the more dashing Willoughby in part because he enters her world like the 'hero of a favorite story' (1:9). Yet both sisters owe their attractiveness in no small part to their refined (if, in Marianne's case, excessive) sensibilities, in stark contrast to the comparatively 'illiterate' Lucy Steele (SSS, 1:22), whose lack of an inner imaginative life leaves her prey to unmodified 'self-interest' (2:2). Reading promotes not simply social distinction but can constitute a kind of moral discipline, training the heart to feelings of empathy and benevolence; on the other hand, habits of sentimental self-indulgence and 'romantic' projection must be guarded against. Reading also emerges, here, as a form of courtship. Willoughby first gains Marianne's affections by adopting her favourite authors and books: 'He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm', and by the end of his first formal visit has established himself as a fellow-devotee of Cowper and an equal admirer of Walter Scott's verse romances (SSS, 1:10). Discussing books and authors can announce one's attainment of a certain educational level, manifest one's sensitivity to 'high' literature and to matters of the heart and help carve out a space within the significant constraints of bourgeois courtship rituals for displays of mutual enthusiasm and emotional responsiveness.

One of the more striking social changes between the end of the seventeenth century in Britain and the beginning of the nineteenth concerns the very provision of books. Changes in printing technology, in paper manufacturing, in copyright law and in the retail book trade made books far more common and readily available over the course of the 'long' eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In the world of Austen's novels, the very possession of books can serve as a marker of social pretension and intellectual attainment. The importance of a 'family library' comes in for explicit discussion in *Pride and Prejudice*, and helps to establish an initial connection between Elizabeth Bennet, who unfashionably prefers reading to card playing, and Mr Darcy, whose library at Pemberley is the 'work of many generations,' extensively augmented by himself (PEP, 1:8). Caroline Bingley, in contrast, demonstrates both her insipidity and her unsuitability as a wife for Darcy by failing to become caught up in reading, despite her hollow wish for an 'excellent library' such as Darcy's own (PEP, 1:11).

In the same novel, however, the social anxieties raised by the increasing availability of books finds voice in the fastidious horror of the fatuous Mr Collins upon discovering he has been asked to read aloud from a novel 'from a circulating library' (*P&P*, 1:14). In contrast to the home library, the contents of which might be carefully monitored by the family patriarch, the circulating library (where books could be borrowed in exchange for a one-time fee or regular subscription) represented the threat of promiscuous reading and individual autonomy of choice. Even a young woman of no great means or social standing, as Fanny Price becomes when she returns to her birth family in Portsmouth, might in this way gain access to a considerable variety of reading materials: 'She became a subscriber, amazed at being anything in *propria persona* . . . to be a renter, a chuser of books!' (*MP*, 3:9). Although frequently described as Austen's most passive heroine, Fanny actively seeks access to books, selects them herself and utilises them not only for much needed private amusement but for the 'improvement' of her bright but under-educated sister, Susan.

Reading is associated throughout Austen's novels with education in the broadest sense, that is, with intellectual and moral development. Yet not just any reading practice will result in such 'improvement'. Mary, Elizabeth's pretentious younger sister in *Pride and Prejudice*, exemplifies the error of reading for superficial knowledge and memorising set passages for the purpose of showing off. To 'read great books, and make extracts', however, does not result in genuine mental growth (*P&P*, 1:2). Darcy describes the proper method, a bit later in the novel, in completing his formula for a truly 'accomplished woman' as the 'improvement of her mind by extensive reading' (*P&P*, 1:8). Reading, for Darcy, should not involve mere acquaintance with a list of classics, much less of anthology pieces, but years of wide reading with an end to attaining habits of mental discipline as well as gaining general knowledge. Mr Knightley, in *Emma*, touches on the same ideal in lamenting the absence in Emma's life of a 'course of steady reading', in contrast to the ambitious lists of books she draws up but never gets around to reading (*E*, 1:5). Like Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, Emma devises as well a plan of mental improvement for her rather rapid protégée, Harriet, but again good intentions give way to the vagaries of an undisciplined mind, and Harriet's participation in 'this age of literature' amounts

to accumulating an album of 'charades' and 'conundrums' (*E*, 1:9). Mary Bennet at least makes her own volume of elegant extracts (the title of a then-popular anthology); Harriet only collects riddles.

Poetry was still considered in Austen's time a higher and more serious genre than prose fiction, and Austen's most resolutely serious heroines, Fanny in *Mansfield Park* and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, both find occasion to demonstrate their intimate knowledge of poetry. Twice Fanny quotes a line of poetry to her cousin Edmund – first from Cowper and then from Scott, Marianne Dashwood's favourite poets – at moments that contrast Fanny's appreciation for nature and tradition and her religious sensibility with the urbane cynicism of Mary Crawford, her rival for Edmund's affections (*MP*, 1:6, 1:9). Fanny's internalisation of a certain poetic tradition helps establish her depth and seriousness of character, in contrast both to Mary ('She had nothing of Fanny's delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling', *MP*, 1:8) and to Edmund's sisters ('something must have been wanting *within*', *MP*, 3:7). Anne Elliot quotes poetry silently at a moment of high stress, 'repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn', as a way both of controlling her emotions and exhibiting (to the reader) her own 'delicacy' of mind (*P*, 1:10). Anne, too, however, does not confine herself to silent and private literary experiences: on getting to know Captain Benwick (with his own 'considerable taste in reading', 'principally in poetry'), Anne discusses with him the comparative merits of Scott and Lord Byron, returning to the same topic the next day (*P*, 1:11, 12). More strikingly, given the stock conduct book advice on deferring to men in conversation, Anne takes it upon herself to recommend a different, less provocative course of reading, and 'feeling in herself the right of seniority of mind', offers to put Benwick on a literary diet of prose moralists. Here the usual courtship pattern, with an older male like Henry Tilney, Mr Knightley or Edmund Bertram helping to 'regulate' the mind of a less educated young woman, gets reversed, as Anne's long-term habits of extensive reading give her intellectual and moral authority over a man close to her own age but 'younger in feeling' (*P*, 1:11).

As the reading practices represented in Austen's novels repeatedly cross the line between the private and the social, silent reading (whether alone or in a group) sometimes gives way to quotation (as with Fanny's quotations from poetry) and reading out loud.

The choice of reading material and manner of performance can be revealing: Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, after rejecting the novel from a circulating library, chooses instead James Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women*, one of the very conduct books that finds novels 'unspeakably perverting and inflammatory'.<sup>8</sup> Tom Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*, recalls that he and Edmund were regularly asked to recite or read out loud as boys to fit them for public discourse in later life (1:13), and Mr Elton, another fatuous clergyman, is asked to read to the young women, busy on a portrait, in *Emma* (1:6). Austen's most memorable scene of reading as performance, however, occurs when Henry Crawford reads to Fanny and her aunt from Shakespeare in *Mansfield Park*, to such effect that Fanny's reservations about his character are nearly overcome. All these readers, one notes, are males. But in the scene just mentioned, Fanny has been reading aloud to her aunt, from the same volume of Shakespeare, before Edmund has brought Henry into the room: 'She often reads to me out of those books', according to her aunt (*MP*, 3:3). Women may not read aloud to men in Austen's novels, but they read to one another.

Women may also have been expected to read Austen's own novels to their friends or families. Jane Austen herself, according to her brother Henry's 'Biographical Notice', 'read aloud with very great taste and effect'; her 'own works, probably, were never heard to so much advantage as from her own mouth'. One critic has convincingly argued that Austen's novels bear a number of marks, in the use of italics, in certain habits of sentence construction and in paragraphing, suggesting that she prepared them with successful reading aloud in mind, even by a first-time reader.<sup>9</sup> Austen's novels do not only represent their heroines actively choosing and defending their reading materials and bringing their reading experiences into the social arena, but may themselves have been designed to promote reading as an active female performance.

## NOTES

1. For an overview of debates on literacy and education in Austen's era, see Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-108.
2. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 39-40.
4. Maria Edgeworth, 'Mademoiselle Panache', Part Two, in *Tales and Novels*, 10 vols. (1893), vol. I, pp. 396-7.
5. John Brewer, 'Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, Texts and Strategies in Anna Larpent's Reading,' in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, eds. James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 226-45.
6. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother*, ed. Montague Summers (1924), p. 13.
7. James Raven, 'New Reading Histories, Print Culture and the Identification of Change: the Case of Eighteenth-century England,' *Social History* 23:3 (1998), 268-87.
8. James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women* (1796), p. 75.
9. Patricia Howell Michaelson, *Speaking Volumes: Women, Reading, and Speech in the Age of Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 180-215.