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

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

Edited by
Janet Todd

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

4
Letters

DEIRDRE LE FAYE

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.'[1]

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 (JEAL) (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 JEAL'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 (1818–77, 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

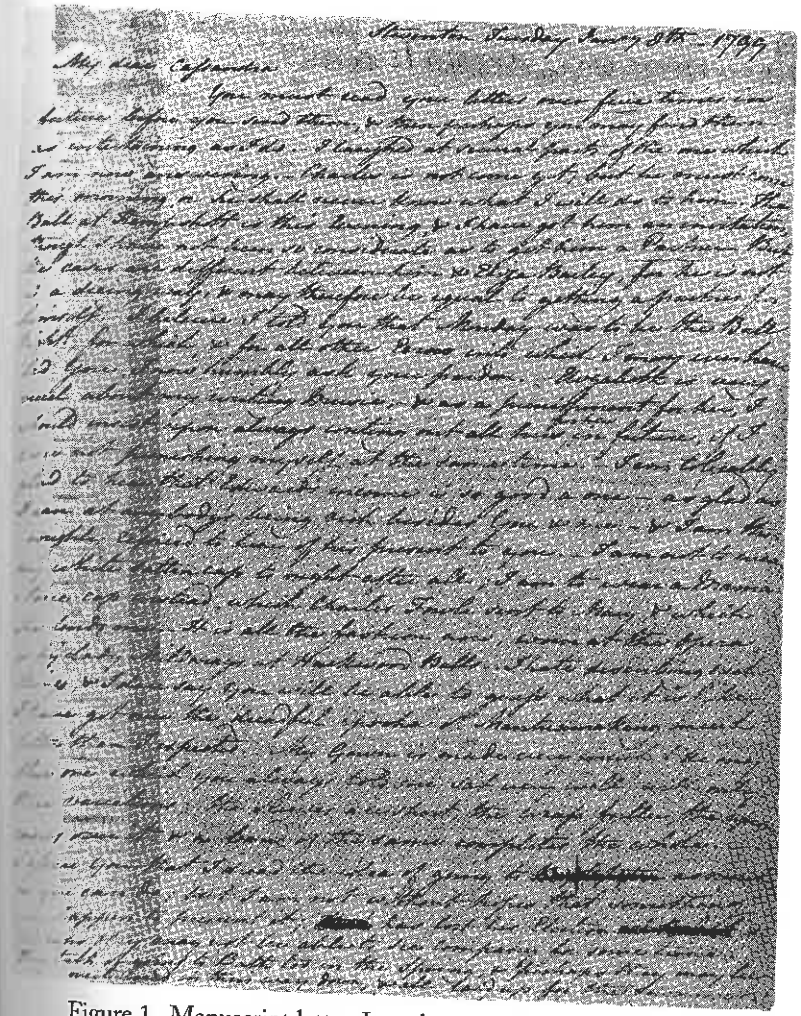

Figure 1. Manuscript letter, Jane Austen to Cassandra, 8 January 1799. Jane Austen made a mildly derogatory reference to their Cooke cousins of Great Bookham, which her sister attempted to obliterate in later years.

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 a 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.'[3]

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.[4] At the end of 1807 Austen noted that, having started the year with £50.15s.0d. in hand, she had spent £3.17s.6½ d. on 'Letters & Parcels';[5] 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 illbreeding 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 . . .'[6] 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 trawl 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 posterity's greatest loss, for when she wrote to Cassandra on 8 April 1805 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 'agony 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: 'Lyme 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 JEAL, 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 *Esqre* – 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 Guineas 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 laughing 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 Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 171. In addition to reprinting the second (enlarged) edition of the original *Memoir*, this new publication includes Henry Austen's two biographical 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.
2. *L*, 16–17 December 1816, 28–29 May 1817.
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, 1680–1919* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), pp. 71–4.
5. Patrick Piggott, 'Jane Austen's Southampton Piano', *Collected Reports* of the Jane Austen Society 3 (1976–85), 146–9.
6. E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (1936), pp. 156–7.