



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

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

Book production

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Jane Austen wrote and published during a half century in which hundreds of new bookshops and subscription and circulating libraries opened their doors; the volume of book production surged, and print penetrated ever more deeply into British society – to both the delight and horror of contemporaries.

The broader revolution in book production is dramatic: before 1700 up to 1,800 different printed titles were issued annually; by 1830 up to 6,000 – and this is simply a crude title count disregarding the huge increases in the edition sizes of certain types of publication, increases that escalated during the 1820s.¹ Books, print and novels notably contributed to a new age of conspicuous consumption in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Book-trade entrepreneurs like Thomas Longman, John Murray, Charles Rivington, Thomas Cadell and George Robinson ranked with Hogarth, Boulton, Watt and Wedgwood as the promoters and beneficiaries of an evolving 'consumer society'. It was not just that printed advertisements and other promotional publications advanced a great range of consumer goods (the subject of much lively social history²), but books, magazines and prints themselves became prominent exemplars of the new decencies adorning the homes of propertied men and women.

During Austen's writing career, publishing remained, as it had since the late seventeenth century, dominated by questions of monopoly price-fixing, centralised production and control, technological constraints (and breakthroughs) and the efficiency of distribution networks. The British book production regime was characterised by the extreme variability of the size and price of the printed text, by multiple but modestly sized reprintings of successful titles (instead of ambitious single print runs) and by the manufacture of many non-commercial books where full costs were not always recovered from sale. Above all, the price of new and reprinted

books had been modulated for most of the eighteenth century by the effective cartelisation of the trade in which booksellers' protection of reprinting rights maintained monopoly prices in England (although not in Ireland and only ineffectively in Scotland, whose booksellers led the challenge against English claims to perpetual copyright).³

The ranks of booksellers fundamentally divided between those who invested and dealt in the ownership of the copyright to publication, and those who either printed, sold or distributed books for the copyholders or who traded entirely outside the bounds of copyright materials.⁴ This division endured even after new freedoms to reprint out-of-copyright titles followed legal decisions weakening leading booksellers' monopolistic control of copyright in 1768 and 1774. Further Copyright Acts in 1808 and 1814 imposed new restrictions, sharply reducing the number of titles coming out of copyright. A raft of cheaper reprints contributed to the four-fold increase in publication in the three decades after 1770, but most new in-copyright publications were more expensive than ever and by the 1810s the reproduction of obsolescent literature for lower income book-buyers was renewed (St Clair, *Reading Nation*, chs. 4, 6).

Only at the end of Austen's life did steam-driven paper-making machines and printing presses shatter the principal technological constraint to the expansion of publishing. In the year that *Mansfield Park* was published, *The Times* became the first publication printed by Koenig's new steam press, allowing the printing of 1,000 impressions each hour. The bookseller Charles Knight declared that 'what the printing press did for the instruction of the masses in the fifteenth century, the printing machine is doing for the nineteenth' (Weedon, *Victorian Publishing*, pp. 64–76). It was, however, no overnight revolution and Austen would derive no direct benefits from it. What *The Times* (1814), called 'the greatest improvement connected with printing since the discovery of the art itself' was not widely used until the 1820s.

What the first buyers of Austen's novels did experience was a more competitive and expanding market for books, together with more efficient distributive systems. In 1775, the year of Jane Austen's birth, thirty-one new novels are known to have been published in Britain; in 1811, the year that *Sense and Sensibility*

appeared, eighty new titles were published; and in the year after her death, the combined edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* joined sixty-one other new novel titles with an 1818 imprint. Altogether, British bookseller-publishers issued 2,503 new novels between 1775 and 1818. Output rose sharply before 1800 before a trough in the mid 1810s (with a strong recovery in the 1820s), while the early dominance of the epistolary novel (more than three-quarters of all titles published in 1776) had declined by the 1790s (when Jane Austen penned her novel in letters *Lady Susan*).⁵

It was hardly surprising that all of Austen's novels were first published in London. By the early nineteenth century some 90 per cent of all new British books were published in the capital and the mushrooming numbers of provincial booksellers mostly served not as publishers but as the distribution agents of new books. In the year of Jane Austen's birth only one of the thirty-one new novel titles was not printed in London, and in the year of her death only three of fifty-five. Nevertheless, publishing in Edinburgh and Glasgow advanced during the final third of the eighteenth century, and, after 1800, general book and magazine publication increased in Manchester, Liverpool, Aberdeen, Newcastle, Leeds and other cities.

In order to expand their trade, many novel publishers expertly practised innovative advertising techniques. Advertising was expensive, however, and its cost in newspapers, catalogues and separate notices often proved a shock for authors.⁶ In 1816 John Murray II charged Jane Austen £50 for advertising *Emma* in the first nine months of publication, some of which was a charge for advertising in Murray's own catalogue.⁷ Small editions also characterised novel publication before and after Austen's lifetime. Most novels were printed in editions of no more than 500. Even some of the most successful titles were issued in editions of 750 or 800. Risk had to be measured carefully. Between 1770 and 1800 about 60 per cent of all novel titles (and in some years, two-thirds) were never reprinted, even in Ireland. Such caution in the novel market contrasts with the monster and repeatedly reprinted editions of successful school and service books of the time. Playbooks reached editions of 2,000 copies or more (and *Emma*, Austen's largest first edition, was also of 2,000). Some histories with proven appeal comprised 4,000-copy editions, but these palled before the huge printings

commissioned by Thomas Longman II for staple titles like Watts's *Hymns*, and numerous instruction books, such as an 18,000-copy edition of Fenning's spelling manual.

The production of novels in small editions also enabled artful price setting. Not that printing and typographical flourishes came cheaply – and one production cost, that of paper, proved a further critical variable. The price of the novel increased gradually from the late 1780s until a far steeper acceleration in nominal prices after 1800. What was to be a long-running increase in the price of novels resulted from the increase by about a third in the labour costs of composition and press work between about 1785 and 1810, but, more importantly from the doubling in the price of quality paper between about 1793 and 1801. The average price for a three-volume novel rose from 12s between 1802 and 1805 to 18s between 1813 and 1817.⁸ In 1811 Thomas Egerton priced the three-volume *Sense and Sensibility* (printed in an edition of 750) at 15s; the same bookseller sold *Pride and Prejudice* two years later for 18s for the three volumes (as he did *Mansfield Park* the year after that). In 1816, during difficult economic conditions and at the low point in general novel production, John Murray reflected both rising costs and his own higher pricing by selling *Emma*, also in three volumes, for 21s. In 1818 (against a general recovery in economic fortunes) the four-volume set of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* retailed at 24s in boards.

In the fashionable novel market, other production decisions followed from high retail pricing. Duodecimo proved the favoured format for popular book production, but octavo was also adopted when booksellers aimed to give publications a certain distinction (even though this format still accounted for only 4 per cent of total novel output in the 1810s). By the 1810s the three-decker (three-volume) novel also began an ascendancy that dominated almost to the end of the century. The greater spacing of text attempted to ensure, at standard pricing per volume, greater returns from retail or from library subscriptions and charges – but it was achieved at great critical cost. Complaints about bloated novels pepper the reviews.

Partly in reaction to hostile critical reviewing, but also as a result of the relationships between publishers and authors, most title pages did not carry the writer's name. Jane Austen continued to use

intermediaries in negotiations with publishers and in at least one letter to her would-be-publisher, Crosby, disguised herself as 'Mrs Ashton Dennis' (Fergus, *Jane Austen*, p. 111). Egerton and Jane Austen published *Sense and Sensibility* as 'By a Lady' and the first title pages of all Austen's subsequent novels attributed the work to 'the author of' a named title. Nearly three-quarters of all novels published between 1770 and 1820 were without attribution of author; among these, the vague and often highly dubious tag of 'By a Lady' or 'By a Young Lady' gained special popularity. By the 1790s more than a fifth (21 per cent) of all novel title pages gave named female writers, with an increasing number of women writing under cover of pseudonyms and anonymous title pages.⁹ By the 1810s, as Peter Garside concludes, 'the publication of Jane Austen's novels was achieved not against the grain but during a period of female ascendancy' (Garside, 'The English Novel', p. 75). It was only in the 1820s that male novelists resumed numerical dominance.

Few authors were beneficiaries of fresh economic opportunities in the book trade.¹⁰ Before the early nineteenth century, very few writers in Britain and certainly very few first-time writers could avoid outright copyright sale, full self-financing (and thus acting as publisher themselves) or deals in which the author bore liability for all losses. Commission agreements whereby the bookseller put up the capital for printing an edition on the understanding that the author would bear any loss, seem to have been very rare – even though these were favoured by Austen. Despite the promotion of new literature as fashionable and expensive delicacies, authors (and especially novelists) also suffered from much poor quality printing. Murray's literary adviser, Gifford, wrote to him in 1815 in praise of *Pride and Prejudice* (sent to Murray by Austen), but found it 'wretchedly printed, and so pointed as to be almost unintelligible'.¹¹ After *Emma* was published by Murray in December 1815, he issued a second edition of *Mansfield Park* in the new year, improving on the badly printed 1814 Egerton edition. The majority of bookseller-publishers issuing new novels did operate a printing press, but other notable publishers of novels, from the Nobles in the mid eighteenth century to Thomas Norton Longman at the close of the century contracted out the presswork. Egerton used Charles Roworth, a popular printer trading on his own from at least 1799 until 1832 and then with his sons for at least a decade more. Roworth was to

print fourteen of the twenty-seven volumes of the various editions of Austen's novels published in her lifetime (Fergus, *Jane Austen*, p. 131). The first editions of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* were printed by both Roworth and George Sidney of the Strand, each taking responsibility for different volumes in the set. Murray, publishing *Emma* in 1816, continued to employ Roworth, but again, as was common, shared the work with another printer, in this case J. Moyes of Hatton Garden.

Austen's complaints were shared by almost every writer of her age. Examples of badly executed novel printing are common and evidence of rushed production can be found from almost all booksellers. Jane Austen called Murray, half-jokingly perhaps, a 'rogue', and her own grievances can be set against attempts to defend authors' rights going back to the botched 1710 Copyright Act, Trusler's Society of Authors in the 1760s and then, in Austen's lifetime, the establishment of the philanthropic Royal Literary Fund in 1790. For many authors, if copyright could not be sold outright for a reasonable sum (or at all), then the only options were to fund the costs of publication from their own resources, launch a subscription scheme or attempt to persuade a bookseller to enter a profit-sharing arrangement. Subscription schemes supported much novel publication. A particular attraction for novelists seeking subscribers was an association with an illustrious dedicatee. *Emma* was sent by Murray to the Prince Regent in order that he might provide the lustre of a royal dedication.

Although it seems that few booksellers turned down a novel if financing were available, it is simply not known how many manuscripts were refused. In 1803 Austen sold *Northanger Abbey* (then titled 'Susan') for £10 outright to Benjamin Crosby of Stationers' Court, in the heartland of the trade. In 1809 after her enquiry, Crosby offered to return the manuscript if she paid back the £10. Some seven years later Austen finally accepted this and the novel was not published until its posthumous issue with *Persuasion*, in four volumes, by Murray in 1818. Inexperience also ensured that many novelists, like Jane Austen herself, proved maladroit in negotiations. Austen rejected Murray's offer of £450 for the copyrights of *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*, yet ultimately received very little in return for *Emma*, and her sale of the copyright to *Pride and Prejudice* ensured that Egerton,

not she, benefited more from the most popular novel in her lifetime.

Where a novel was 'printed for the author' the bookseller often acted as little more than a vanity press, although in some cases authorial risk-taking did pay off. Of the total number of first editions of novels published in the 1780s and 1790s, 7 per cent were described as 'printed for the author'. These must be minimum figures, when many title pages, such as Mary Robinson's *Widow* of 1794, hide known commission agreements 'on account of the author', where the publisher-writer assumed responsibility for any loss. It was indeed as a question of publishing 'First Impressions' at 'the expence of publishing at the Authors' risk; and what you will advance for the Property of it' that George Austen unsuccessfully approached Cadell and Davies on behalf of his daughter in November 1797 (Fergus, *Jane Austen*, p. 12).

What such unpromising circumstances did was to put heavy responsibility upon authors to choose, in what was largely a buyer's not a seller's manuscript market, the best option for having their work published. Such circumstances explain both Austen's early timidity in relations with booksellers, but also the shrewdness of her commission agreements. Despite her later disappointments over *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Austen received £140 from her first published work, *Sense and Sensibility*, negotiated through her brother Henry, and for which she had risked £180. Egerton seems to have made about £36 from his 10 per cent commission on sales (Fergus, *Jane Austen*, pp. 16–17, 131). Nevertheless, the combined profits of the four novels published in her lifetime amounted to no more than £700, a decent but by no means a great fortune (Smiles, *A Publisher*, vol. 1, p. 283).

In fact, extraordinary differences appear in the financial rewards of novel writing, especially after 1800. From her contracts securing a share in the returns from later editions of *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814), Frances Burney gained more than £4,000 (Fergus, *Jane Austen*, pp. 13–15). Maria Edgeworth pocketed £1,050 for her 1812 series, *Tales of Fashionable Life*, and a further £2,100 two years later for her less successful *Patronage*. By contrast, Lane issued advertisements offering from between five and 100 guineas for 'manuscripts of merit', although no one seems to have claimed his top reward. Although the vast majority of the agreements have

been lost, we know that, at the top of the range, Cadell and Davies (who rejected Austen's early version of *Pride and Prejudice*) paid Ann Radcliffe £800 for her *Italian* in 1797. Of the fifty or so survivals of agreements the average payment seems to have been about £80, although such estimates rely heavily on the surviving contracts of Longman in the late 1790s, and the Robinsons, known for their relative generosity.

Although more than 600 firms were involved in the publication of novels between 1770 and 1830, many of them were short-lived and during the final quarter of the eighteenth century, four particular firms boasted publication totals: Thomas Hookham, the Robinsons, the long-established Nobles (until 1789) and, from 1775 itself, the newcomer and greatest novel manufacturer of all, William Lane.¹² By the 1790s Lane's 'Minerva Press' published one third of all new novel titles in London, and by the 1810s the firm, directed by A. K. Newman after Lane's retirement, issued almost a quarter of all new fiction titles of the decade. Newman continued the 'Minerva' name until 1820. Minerva writing was rarely distinguished and continuing attacks on circulating libraries and popular novels made the press an easy target. In *Northanger Abbey* the nine 'horrid' novels thrilling the foolish Isabella Thorpe were all authentic titles and six of them were published by Lane.

The further and crucial feature of the businesses founded by Hookham, Lane and then Henry Colburn (at least until the end of the 1810s) was the extent to which their publishing and retail operations turned on the success of their own circulating libraries and the supply of ready-made fiction and belles-lettres libraries to other booksellers and new proprietors. In 1770 one author, making an optimistic estimate of total edition size, suggested that 400 of every 1,000 copies of novels were sold to circulating libraries.¹³ As Austen wrote in 1814, given the high price of new novels, readers were 'more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy' (*L*, 30 November 1814).

For consumers of these novels, possession of a beautiful thing had its own importance. Botched printing was a recurrent disappointment, but well-executed typographical design, distinctive running heads, chapter breaks and page layouts added to the reading experience. Both the high price of new novels and the limits of literacy determined readership boundaries, but these can never be clear cut.

Purchases of non-essential goods depend upon individual taste as much as supply, opportunity, alternative spending attractions and the fundamental level of income. For many, cost bars to new novels were breached by the second-hand market, as well as by library circulation and by other means of acquisition, including gift and simple inheritance. Most aspirants to these 'widening circles' placed a premium on access to the latest literature, and the novel typified modern publication. Many books promoted as typical products of the consumer revolution were also grossly overpriced. Publications reliant not just on literary content but on design and modishness, created fortunes for the most successful of their commercial producers. The other, most obvious feature of the publishing regime negotiated by Jane Austen, was that those who might be deemed the original manufacturers, the authors, largely failed to benefit from the market boom.

NOTES

1. *English Short-Title Catalogue*, A. Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 45-52. Subsequent references are included in the text.
2. J. Alden, 'Pills and Publishing: Some Notes on the English Book Trade 1660-1715', *The Library*, 5th ser., 7 (1952), 21-37; *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*, eds. N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb (London: Europa, 1982); L. Lippincott, *Selling Art in Georgian London: The Rise of Arthur Pond*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
3. M. Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 1. Subsequent references are included in the text.
4. See G. Walters, 'The Booksellers in 1759 and 1774: the Battle for Literary Property', *The Library*, 5th ser., 29 (1974), 287-311; T. Belanger, 'Booksellers' Trade Sales, 1718-1768', *The Library*, 5th ser., 30:4 (1975), 281-302.
5. Tallies are taken from *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*,

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6. R. M. Wiles, *Serial Publication in England before 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 149-53; R. Munter, *The History of the Irish Newspaper, 1685-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 57, 61-6; M. Harris, 'The Management of the London Newspaper Press During the Eighteenth Century', *Publishing History* 4 (1978), 95-112.
7. Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991). Subsequent references are included in the text.
8. H. Amory, *New Books by Fielding: An Exhibition of the Hyde Collection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 44; P. Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era' in Garside et al., *The English Novel 1770-1829*, vol. II, p. 93. Subsequent references are included in the text.
9. James Raven, 'The Anonymous Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1830,' in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. R. J. Griffin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003), pp. 141-66.
10. N. Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
11. Gifford to Murray, 29 September 1815, cited in S. Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the late John Murray*, (1891), vol. 1, p. 282. Subsequent references are included in the text.
12. James Raven, 'Location, Size and Succession: The Bookshops of Paternoster Row before 1800,' in *The London Book Trade: Topographies of Print in the Metropolis from the Sixteenth Century*, eds. R. Myers, M. Harris and G. Mandelbrote (London: British Library, 2003), pp. 89-126.
13. E. and R. Griffith, *A Series of Genuine Letters Between Henry and Frances*, 6 vols. (1767-70), vol. VI, p. 15.