



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

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Literary influences

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In a letter of December 1798 Jane Austen told Cassandra that they were subscribing to a new library. The proprietress 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, encompassing '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, garrulous 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 enthusiasm 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 toleration for those who defied convention was not unlimited, however, and she later discarded a

translation of Madame de Genlis's *Alphonsine* (1807). 'We were disgusted in twenty pages . . . it has indelicacies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure' (L, 7-8 January 1807). Mr Austen's library of more than 500 books had to be sold when the family left the parsonage at Steventon and moved to Bath. Despite her glee at exchanging her copy of the oft reissued Robert Dodsley's *A Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (1748-58) for ten shillings, her resentment at the sale and her thwarted attempts to find stimulating reading material when they visited southern coastal resorts comes through in her memory of the library at Dawlish twelve years later as 'particularly pitiful & wretched . . . & not likely to have anybody's publication' (L, 10-18 August 1814).

Books were expensive commodities and the Austens' decision to purchase William Cowper's works and James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) and his *Life of Johnson* (1791) in 1798 was carefully calculated. While a subscription to a circulating library cost about a guinea a year, the first edition of Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) cost £1.1s.6d in quarto and Austen thought it was 'very generous' (L, 10-11 January 1809) of her to send a copy (R. W. Chapman suspects it was probably a later edition) to her brother Charles: it becomes, perhaps, slightly less generous when we recall that she had been disappointed on hearing Scott's poem read aloud the previous year. Reading aloud was an important evening entertainment and - as with the home theatricals - this gregarious practice shaped Austen's art of dialogue. In these live performances Austen's novels and those of her niece, Anna, were tested against traditional English works of fiction - the novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and Jonathan Swift.

One of Jane Austen's luxuries in later life would be free range of the library at Godmersham Park. She confided to Cassandra: 'The Comfort of the Billiard Table here is very great. - It draws all the Gentlemen to it whenever they are within, especially after dinner, so that my Br Fanny & I have the Library to ourselves in delightful quiet' (L, 14-15 October 1813). At Chawton Austen belonged to a book club and gloried in its eclectic stock, including 'an Essay on the Military Police & Institutions of the British Empire, by Capt. Pasley of the Engineers' which she found 'delightfully written & highly entertaining' (L, 24 January 1813). Her retentive memory and talent for mimicry meant that she effortlessly absorbed other

styles, alert to the various responses they provoked in a range of different readers.

Records of book ownership, her writing and family testimonials tell us that Austen knew the poetic tradition of William Shakespeare, John Milton, Alexander Pope, James Thomson, Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper and George Crabbe; she was also familiar with the more recent Romantic legacy of Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, William Wordsworth and Robert Burns as embraced by Sir Edward in *Sanditon* ('Burns is always on fire', S, 7). Austen roamed through the novels of her contemporaries Scott, Charlotte Smith, Jane West, Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth. The last two were her most immediate literary influences. Austen subscribed to Burney's *Camilla* (1796); ranked Edgeworth above nearly all other authors and joked about Scott as a rival. Like Burney and Edgeworth she blended omniscient narration with Richardson's device of intimate letters to track the evolution of a courtship. Through epistolary exchange, Burney's *Evelina* (1778) follows a young woman's navigation of the traps of English society and the obstacles of embarrassing relatives and unwelcome suitors towards marriage with a worthy aristocrat. Austen found the impeccable Lord Orville unnatural but enjoyed Burney's grotesquely comic characters. In Edgeworth's 'Moral Tale' *Belinda* the heroine learns to recognise false guides and rely on her own judgement. Edgeworth cultivated a strong ethical and practical dimension in her female characters but she was wary of novels as a genre. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen rebukes novelists who degrade 'by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding' (1:5): Edgeworth's advertisement to *Belinda* (1801) repudiated the 'folly, error, and vice . . . disseminated in books classed under this denomination'.

Themes of education and moral development permeated eighteenth-century fictional and non-fictional prose. They underpin Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels, blended with sensational adventures and descriptions of sublime scenery; they turn up in religious or philosophical dress in periodical literature and conduct guides. Austen declared herself 'pleased' by Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) (L, 24 July 1806) which is to modern ears at least as conservative as the Fordyce sermons inflicted on the Bennet girls by Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* (1:14).

Moral lessons were also drawn from periodical literature, histories and *belles lettres*. Austen's 'History of England' revels in pronouncements which subvert the one-sided authority of historians such as Goldsmith. In *Mansfield Park* Fanny's horizons, like Austen's, are widened by her enthusiasm for travel writing and anti-slavery literature. Biography, like historiography, celebrated great men rather than exposing private vice. The persistent tone of eulogy evidently grated as Austen turned to Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813): 'I am tired of Lives of Nelson, being that I never read any' (L, 11-12 October 1813).

Dr Samuel Johnson was another hero of the age; his appeal as a moralist resides in his good-humoured efforts to secure a stable ethical perspective on human frailty. Austen described a servant who wished to leave her brother Henry's London house as having 'more of Cowper than of Johnson in him, fonder of Tame Hares & Blank verse than of the full tide of human Existence at Charing Cross' (L, 3 November 1813). Johnson was no admirer of blank verse and this judgement echoes his response when Boswell remarked on the cheerfulness of Fleet Street: 'Why, Sir, Fleet-street has a very animated appearance; but I think the full tide of human existence is at Charing-cross' (2 April 1775). Johnson's exhilaration at the variety of London life was legendary. He decreed, for example, that a man was in less danger of falling in love indiscreetly in London than any where else because the difficulty of deciding between a variety of attractions 'kept him safe'. When Anne Elliot reminds Captain Harville that 'We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us' (P, 2:11), she points to the difficulty women experience in maintaining such a robust outlook although she tries to balance Captain Benwick's dependence on Scott and Lord Byron with 'such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering . . . as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind' (P, 1:11). Johnson was, however, also susceptible to poignant sentiment, particularly the novels of Richardson.

Richardson's novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4) was an Austen family favourite and, according to Henry Austen, his sister knew the work in minute detail. Richardson's fiction itemises the flux and reflux of emotional turmoil as revealed in the traces of a blush or the broken heel of a shoe. *Grandison's* heroine, Harriet

Byron, is thrust into the London marriage market, tries to evade the advances of the villainous Sir Hargrave Pollexfen and falls in love with the charitable patrician Sir Charles, who is distracted by his love for a beautiful foreigner. He struggles at great length between different desires and principles and when he eventually asks Harriet to marry him, she is overcome by his magnanimity. Scholars have traced multiple resemblances between *Sir Charles Grandison* and Austen's later works: the growth of Fanny's love for Edmund in *Mansfield Park*, for example, or the episode at Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth is impressed by the housekeeper's esteem for Darcy as a benevolent landlord.¹ Just as significant as these suggestions of direct influence, however, is the versatility of Austen's use of Richardson and her deft transformations of available literary traditions.

Richardson's influence does not stamp Austen's writing in any single way; rather, his novels provided characters, situations, narrative tensions and a consuming fascination with inner life which Austen developed in different contexts. Her youthful dramatic version of *Sir Charles Grandison* is instantly funny as a feat of compression: a seven-volume novel shrinks to five very short acts. Catherine Morland's mother in *Northanger Abbey* 'often reads Sir Charles Grandison' and Isabella Thorpe finds it 'an amazing horrid book' (1:6). In *Sanditon* Sir Edward's character has been mal-formed by the Richardson school of sentimental novels featuring 'Man's determined pursuit of Woman in defiance of every opposition of feeling & convenience' (S, 8). In her letters Austen refers to Richardson's heroines with playful familiarity. When she thanks Cassandra for a long letter she invokes one of them again: 'Like Harriot Byron I ask, what am I to do with my Gratitude? - I can do nothing but thank you & go on' (L, 11-12 October 1813). Gentle mockery of Richardson's sensitive virtuous heroines is evident in 'Frederic and Elfrida' when Elfrida hurries into 'a succession of fainting fits' (ch. 5) and 'Love and Freindship' where the heroines 'fainted Alternately on a Sofa' ('Letter the 8th'). This feminine delicacy, like the 'cruel Persecutions of obstinate Fathers' ('Letter the First'), also characterises Sheridan's and Radcliffe's plots.²

One of the most obvious features of Austen's early writing is its burlesque mockery of another work through a reproduction of its style in an exaggerated form. In her juvenilia we find merciless

skits on literature of sensibility, picturesque conventions, conduct literature and melodrama. Austen's relish of literary parody continued throughout her life. The antidote to *Alphonsine* was Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), a work influenced by both Johnson and Richardson. In this novel the heroine, Arabella, is led astray by isolated reading of French romances into a series of social blunders in Bath and London, where she earnestly expects to flee from ravishers. Austen found the book 'quite equal to what I remembered' (L, 7-8 January 1807). She praised James and Horace Smith's popular *Rejected Addresses* which caricatured the farcical poetry competition staged around the reopening of the Drury Lane Theatre in 1812; in 1814 she recommended Eaton Barrett's novel *The Heroine, or Adventures of Cherubina* (1813) as 'a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style' (L, 2-3 March 1814). Later that year she flippantly projected a parody of Mary Brunton's earnest *Self-Control* (1810), a novel Austen had found 'excellently-meant, elegantly-written' and 'without anything of Nature or Probability in it' (L, 24 November 1814; 11-12 October 1813).

In the letters to Cassandra in particular, we can hear the ways in which shared reading nourishes allusive asides between the sisters in the form of private jokes about, for example, the inexperience of provincials in the big city. Borrowing Hannah Cowley's comedy *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780), Austen strikes at renewed plans to visit London: 'I am rather surprised at the Revival of the London visit - but Mr Doricourt has travelled; he knows best' (L, 14-16 January 1801).³ Austen was aware, however, that more consciously learned allusions were an obligatory feature of polite literature. This convention is ridiculed in *Northanger Abbey* when we are given the sum total of Catherine's knowledge via a series of free quotations from Pope, Gray, Thomson and Shakespeare (1:1). Hannah More's parade of classical learning in the title of *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) earned Austen's derision: 'in Cœlebs, there is pedantry & affectation. - Is it written only to Classical Scholars?' (L, 30 January 1809).

Young ladies were encouraged to peruse improving works of literature through elegant anthologies which selected the 'beauties of' a particular author and omitted anything risqué - this was the age of

the bowdlerised Shakespeare. Nevertheless, conduct writers such as Hannah More warned that encounters with extracts alone would result in a superficial mind. *Emma's* Harriet Smith is so superficial that she fails to appreciate even the extracts dutifully read aloud by Robert Martin and tries to introduce him to Radcliffe and Regina Roche (E, 1:4). *Emma*, like Elizabeth Bennet, at least knows that her reading is deficient, and Austen also plays down the extent of her literary expertise. Later in her life she declined a request from James Stanier Clarke, the Carlton House librarian, that she should write about an English clergyman 'Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature' (L, 16 November 1815). Austen insisted that she was unequal to the task, not being 'abundant in quotations & allusions' to classical literature, science and philosophy which were expected in 'Man's Conversation' (L, 11 December 1815). Austen does not advertise her reading but she expects readers to be aware of the relevant work's provenance and reputation, surrounding allusions with ripples of irony.

When Maria Bertram invokes the starling's pathetic refrain, 'I cannot get out' from Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) (MP, 1:10), Austen is having her signal her (un)availability to Henry Crawford through words often extracted in anthologies designed to cultivate female sensitivity and moral worth. Elizabeth Bennet's joke about not wishing to disrupt the party walking at Netherfield ('You are charmingly group'd and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth', P&P, 1:10), is all the more provocative for the readers who know that Gilpin's theory of picturesque groups includes a discussion of the ideal number of cattle. Ostentatious displays of reading are often used to expose a character's weakness. After Lydia's elopement Mary Bennet consoles herself with 'moral extractions' such as Villars's exhortation in *Evelina*: 'Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and most brittle of all human things' (vol. 2, ch. 8) - at which Elizabeth 'lifted up her eyes in amazement' (P&P, 3:5). While she might read sermons and homilies in private, Austen recognises the folly of applying literature directly to life. Fanny Price's quotation of Scott to signal her disappointment at the chapel at Sotherton - 'No signs that a "Scottish monarch sleeps below"' (MP, 1:9) suggests

an amusing faith in Scott's Gothic window-dressing whereas Austen herself invokes Scott more playfully: "I do not write for such dull Elves" "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves" (L, 29 January 1813). Mrs Elton exposes her shallowness when she applies the 'charming' lines of Gray's *Elegy* to the 'charming' Jane Fairfax and later when she echoes Mr Elton's affected reference to Milton's 'L'Allegro' (1645) while recounting small setbacks in their marriage plans: 'he was sure at this rate it would be *May* before Hymen's saffron robe would be put on for us!' (E, 2:15, 2:18). Less pretentious and artificial, but just as funny is Miss Bates's garbled gratitude: 'We may well say that "our lot is cast in a goodly heritage"' (E, 2:3) where a biblical Psalm is misquoted in a way that brilliantly follows Miss Bates's stream of consciousness from a gift of food to curiosity about a letter.⁴

In this way Austen allows even cherished works to be mangled by less perceptive characters. Henry Austen tells us that Cowper was her favourite moral writer in verse. Cowper's earnest blank verse ranges over conversational sketches of rural life to stern warnings about the corrupting effects of luxury and commerce. Marianne Dashwood and Fanny Price express their inner convictions and integrity through Cowper's poetry, but there is also more than a hint of naive fancy in each. Only Mr Knightley invokes Cowper's poetry of naive fancy in each. Only Mr Knightley invokes Cowper's poetry with anything like the subtlety of its author. Suspecting a 'private understanding' between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, Mr Knightley is yet wary of 'errors of imagination' and being 'like Cowper and his fire at twilight, "Myself creating what I saw"' (E, 3:5). In *Sanditon*, Mr Parker strains to apply Cowper's line on Voltaire to the pretensions of Brinshore to be a seaside resort (S, 1). Frequently the energy a character expends in the retrieval of a quotation turns out to be misplaced or ignored by the rest of the party. Reading in Austen's world is supposed to be a sociable activity – either because it instructs the individual in the duties of corporate existence or because it is itself a shared activity. But when Fanny rhapsodises (MP, 2:4) or when Marianne and Willoughby idolise the 'same passages' (S&S, 1:10), Austen points out varieties of self-centred immolation. Even newspaper reading divides characters in terms of their attention to social obligation. Austen often details snippets from newspapers that have been relayed to her (L, 21–22 January

1801). Her male characters, however, use the newspaper as a barrier to shield them from social interaction: in *Mansfield Park*, Edmund and Mr Price both neglect Fanny while they bury themselves in a newspaper; in *Persuasion*, Charles Hayter takes up a newspaper and fails to take little Walter off Anne's back. Taciturn newspaper reading defines Mr Palmer's existence (S&S, 1:19).

Scholars have traced myriad influences for Austen's satire but they cannot wholly account for her unforced linguistic precision and her stringent character surveillance. We do not know everything that she read and we cannot always gauge her reaction to a particular work even when she records one. Lady Morgan, for example, is saluted and slighted in the same breath: 'We have got *Ida of Athens* by Miss Owenson; which must be very clever, because it was written as the Authoress says, in three months' (L, 17–18 January 1809); Laetitia Matilda Hawkins receives a carefully balanced appraisal: 'very good and clever, but tedious' (L, plate February–early March 1815). Austen's view of Byron is teasingly enigmatic: 'I have read the *Corsair*, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do' (L, 5–8 March 1814); and her recommendation of Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), a lyrical celebration of female passion, to a deaf, housebound old man in Southampton is similarly inscrutable: 'He has lived in that House more than twenty years, & poor Man, is so totally deaf, that they say he c^d not hear a Cannon, were it fired close to him; having no cannon at hand to make the experiment, I took it for granted, & talked to him a little with my fingers, which was funny enough. – I recommended him to read *Corinna*' (L, 27–8 December 1808). Contemplating the lack of gravitas in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen acknowledged the literary tradition that she was bypassing: 'an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte' (L, 4 February 1813). These non-existent chapters are important. While maintaining a critical distance between 'those enormous great stupid thick Quarto Volumes' (L, 9 February 1813) and what she encountered in the 'mere Trash of the common Circulating Library' (S, 8), Austen read almost indiscriminately, but wrote with an exacting sense of the narrative voices that needed to be kept at bay as she created a new fiction out of highly important 'Little Matters' (L, 9 December 1808).

NOTES

1. See Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 130–68; Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 105–7.
2. B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts: A Study of the Novelist's Development through the Surviving Papers*, new edition (London and New York: Athlone Press, 2001), pp. 9–11.
3. Discussed in Paula Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (London: Hambledon, 2002), p. 133. Doricourt has completed his Grand Tour and, seeing himself as an experienced cosmopolitan, is somewhat disdainful of provincial England.
4. The Psalm reads: 'The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. / The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant *places*; yea, I have a goodly heritage' (ch. 16, verses 5–6).