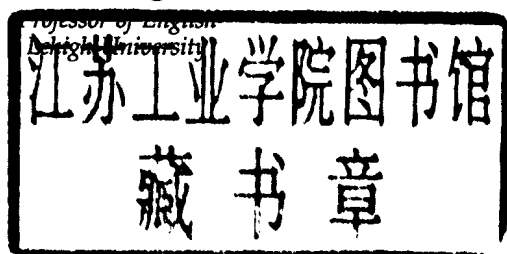


Jane Austen

A Literary Life

Jan Fergus



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Preface and Acknowledgements

You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S[ense] & S[ensibility] is sold & that it has brought me £140 besides the Copyright, if that sh^d ever be of any value. – I have now therefore written myself into £250 – which only makes me long for more.

These words of Jane Austen to her brother Frank, written on 3 July 1813, after she had published two novels, are those of a professional author who is acutely conscious of her sales and eager to increase her profits. Most biographies have set Austen within her social context. This biography places her firmly within her professional context as one of an increasing number of women who published novels between 1790 and 1820. Being a professional writer was, apart from her family, more important to Austen than anything else in her life.

¹Austen wrote when opportunities for women to publish had never been greater, and from her childhood her aim was to see her works in print. Her literary career depended to some extent upon the other women novelists of her time, who created and sustained a market for domestic fiction by women, and whose attitudes toward writing, like Austen's own, became increasingly professional.¹ To discover the effect of the literary profession on Austen's life, I have studied the remaining publishing records of the period. Some of these are familiar, like the Archives of John Murray, publisher of *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion*, and the second edition of *Mansfield Park*. Others are less well known: the records of the House of Longman and of Hookham and Carpenter, firms that published more novels than Murray, and far more by women. Chapter 1 uses these sources, among others, to depict what it meant to be a woman writer during Austen's lifetime, and Chapter 5 draws upon them to offer new insight into Austen's options, choices and earnings as a professional writer.

Once Austen is placed within her professional context, not only her life but her works take on new meaning. Acutely conscious of other women's writing and of women's subordinate and marginal

position within society, Austen began by writing burlesques that offer comic images of female power and possibility. Her unconventional portraits of women in the juvenilia reflect her scepticism about contemporary notions of what women were like – and what they should be like. When she began to write novels, she necessarily addressed a wider audience than her like-minded family and friends. She therefore transformed the images of female power that pervade the juvenilia, giving them more conventionally acceptable dress. From picturing women who literally get away with murder in her burlesques, Austen went on to portray women who figuratively do so in her earliest realistic fiction – women who confront and reject conventional behaviour. In her later novels, she managed to convey an increasing sense of women's insecure and even threatened position within their social worlds without destroying a comic tone. Austen's comedy remains secure, however serious its implications.

Those who are interested in reading more about Austen's life can refer to the list of primary and secondary sources heading the Notes. Almost all the available biographical information on Austen and her family is conveniently and impressively collected in Deirdre Le Faye's recent revision of the 1913 *Life and Letters*, but the less familiar works by Constance Hill and Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh still repay reading; all these works are cited before the Notes. J.M.S. Tompkins' entertaining and scholarly work, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800*, originally published in 1932, still remains the best introduction to the minor writers of Austen's period, although Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) and Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) provide modern feminist perspectives. Roy Porter's *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1982) offers a fine social history of the world that Austen was born into. For visual images of the distance between the freedom of her world and the confinement of Victorian women, see *Mrs Hurst Dancing & Other Scenes from Regency Life 1812–1823*, a book of watercolours by a Regency woman, Diana Sperling, who portrays young Regency women (and men) leading active lives despite their elegant costumes – riding on trunks of trees, slipping on grass, planting and digging, fishing and so on (text by Gordon Mingay, 1981). Literary criticism of Austen's novels is extensive, as David Gilson's impeccable *Bibliography* (1982) attests. The classic works by Mary Lascelles (*Jane Austen and Her*

Art, 1939), A. Walton Litz (*Jane Austen and Her Artistic Development*, 1965) and Stuart Tave (*Some Words of Jane Austen*, 1973) remain valuable and very readable.

I am grateful to the Oxford University Press, by whose kind permission all citations of Austen's fiction are drawn from the editions of R.W. Chapman, 5 vols, 3rd edn (1933) and *Minor Works*, vol. 6 (1954). Page references are inserted directly into the text, with the following abbreviations whenever any ambiguity may occur: NA *Northanger Abbey*; SS *Sense and Sensibility*; PP *Pride and Prejudice*; MP *Mansfield Park*; E *Emma*; P *Persuasion*; MW *Minor Works*. The Oxford University Press has also permitted quotations from Austen's letters to be drawn from Chapman's edition of *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, 2nd edn (1952). Citations from this edition will be inserted directly into the text, using the abbreviation L followed by the page number and date of the letter.

Some part of the research for this book was made possible by a Travel to Collections grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful to the present representatives of the firm of John Murray and especially to Mrs Virginia Murray, archivist, for permission to examine their archives and for much assistance in doing so. My department chair, Professor Edward J. Gallagher, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, James Gunton, and Provost David Sanchez of Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, very generously provided time for me to write the book. I am grateful also to the editor for the series, Dr Richard Dutton, who has been helpful, encouraging and patient to an exemplary degree. I would especially like to thank my friends Dr Anne Beidler, Dr Antonia Forster and Geoffrey Holt for looking over much of the typescript, and particularly Dr Virginia Hjelmaa, Hazel Holt, Dr Ruth Portner and Dr Janice Farrar Thaddeus for their careful readings, excellent advice and absolutely indispensable conversation, ideas and encouragement at every stage. I offer gratitude tinged with shame to Ruth Portner; without her astonishing willingness to listen to and comment upon immense blocks of text over the telephone, this book would never have been begun, far less completed.

Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1 Conditions of Authorship for Women, 1775–1817	1
Problems of Authorship	5
The Process of Publishing	9
Literary Property and Sale of Copyright	14
Publishing on Commission	16
Other Forms of Publication	17
Book Production and Distribution	19
The Audience for Fiction	21
2 Background and Literary Apprenticeship, 1775–1793	28
Family	29
Education and Reading	34
Early Friendships	43
Money and Class	46
Literary Apprenticeship	51
Women and the Juvenilia	53
<i>The Loiterer</i>	60
‘Catharine, or the Bower’	64
3 The Idea of Authorship, 1794–1800	69
<i>Lady Susan</i>	72
Flirtation	75
Drafting the Early Novels	78
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> , Sexuality and Romance	81
The Community of Women in <i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	88
Versions of <i>Northanger Abbey</i> ,	95
4 The Unpublished Author, 1801–1809	104
Love and Marriage	108
<i>The Watsons</i>	113
Southampton	120

5 The Professional Writer, 1809–1817	126
First Publication: Thomas Egerton, <i>Sense</i> <i>and Sensibility</i> and <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	129
Power and <i>Mansfield Park</i>	141
Security and Marginality in <i>Emma</i>	151
Last Works: <i>Persuasion</i> and <i>Sanditon</i>	164
 <i>Notes</i>	 173
 <i>Index</i>	 194

1

Conditions of Authorship for Women, 1775-1817

Many biographers have written social lives of Jane Austen, and for good reason. Material for a biography of Austen's life is scanty. Apart from her works themselves and the letters that were selected by her sister to be as unrevealing as possible, for information about her we have to rely on family records and traditions along with a few comments from other contemporaries. The family sources tend to stress Austen's ordinariness, indeed to seem proud of it. They considered the decorous absence of 'very important, very recordable events' in her life as appropriate for an unmarried woman as it was for the ball at the Crown in *Emma* (326). In short, although Austen's genius, her brilliant wit, and her consummate art confront us in all her writing, she herself must always elude us in what is written about her.

In these circumstances, biographers have chosen to place what they know about Austen in context, generally by describing the family and the social world she grew up in. This choice, evident in the earliest accounts by her brother Henry Austen (1818)¹ and her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh (1870), as well as in the most recent studies, makes good sense. Her family was clearly central. All sources agree that family life took up most of her time, energy and affection; social life occupied a good deal of the rest; and literary life had to be crammed into what remained.

But a clear distinction between these three 'lives' is not really possible. When Austen lived, the term 'social' had a much broader meaning than it does now. Social life included both private and public life: in the pre-romantic world Austen was born into, private satisfaction and individual fulfillment grew out of a properly enacted public role. Duties and obligations to others constrained but also enriched the self. In this world, the realities of class, gender, estate, money and manners dictated relationships to family, friends and neighbours; and one's life, especially

as a woman, was firmly grounded in these relationships. Austen's novels sharply mirror this world, and literary critics as well as biographers have devoted much effort to rendering it and defining Austen's own place within it. Their work has firmly established the importance of seeing her life and work in context. The need to do so has become in fact a truth universally acknowledged.

One context, however, has not yet been fully explored: the literary or professional. This 'literary life' of Austen will focus on how the conditions of being a writer at the turn of the nineteenth century affected her life and work. These conditions were quite different from those we know. For instance, writers could much more readily publish, though their chances of supporting themselves by writing were as slim. To focus on the literary context, on what it meant to be a writer between 1775 and 1817, does not mean ignoring other contexts. It does mean that Austen's most familiar words and actions, those reiterated by biographers and exhaustively mined by critics, will gain fresh immediacy when they are seen as part of her professional life. For example, most commentators have not fully understood the frequently quoted advice Austen sent to her niece Anna, who was herself attempting a novel. Austen wrote:

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 - & I hope you will write a great deal more, & make full use of them while they are so very favourably arranged. You are but *now* coming to the heart & beauty of your book; till the heroine grows up, the fun must be imperfect.

(L 401; 9 Sep. 1814)

The phrase '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' is usually taken as a definition of Austen's own deliberately limited territory, chosen with delight. But in fact, this phrase applies to the action of only parts of her novels - except *Emma*, which she had been working on for seven months when she wrote this letter to her niece on 9 September 1814. *Emma* does in fact focus on '3 or 4 families' in Highbury, and Austen is probably expressing in part her pleasure in working on the novel. But

she is also advising her niece to refrain from introducing more characters until she develops those she has already assembled. In the previous letter to Anna, written one month earlier, we hear of more than 15 characters belonging to at least five different families and appearing in five settings (London, Bath, Lyme, Dawlish and Ireland), all before the heroine has grown up. In that letter too, Austen had mentioned her sister Cassandra's fear that 'there will be too frequent a change from one set of people to another', but added that she herself thinks that 'Nature and Spirit cover many sins of a wandering story – and People in general do not care so much about it – for your comfort' (L 395-96; 10 Aug. 1814).

Evidently in the month between this remark and the next, Anna's story wandered too far, so that in context '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' is less a statement of Austen's own territory than advice on technique of characterisation: concentrate, dramatise, develop your characters, permit them to interact with one another, 'make full use of them'. A country village is one place where those interactions might occur, but so is Bath, so is Portsmouth, so is Rosings. This technique of concentrating characters, permitting them to interact among themselves, to talk about their relationships at the same time that they dramatise them, is an art that Austen brought to perfection, although in the novels she certainly did not confine it to village settings.

Equally striking in Austen's advice is that she was thinking firmly in terms of publication: she comforts her niece by referring to her likely audience ('People' do not mind a wandering story). That is, her advice is geared to the market; it is professional as well as aesthetic. She tells Anna in addition that six of her 48-page booklets 'will make a very good sized volume', and she corrects a detail because it will '*appear* unnatural in a book' (L 394; 10 Aug. 1814). Although Anna burnt the uncompleted novel some time after her aunt's death, Austen herself assumed that she would not only finish but publish it. She took the same stance toward Anna's brother Edward's novel-in-progress, telling her sister Cassandra that it will be 'in a style, I think, to be popular' (L 462; 4 Sep. 1816).

Anna was 21 and Edward 17 when Austen made these comments; clearly, in her view, youth was no bar to publication. Although today few would be likely to encourage young

unpublished writers to expect to see their novels in print, Austen does not hesitate. She takes printing for granted in a way that reflects the greater availability of publication in her lifetime. We know too that she herself began to write very early. She told her twelve-year-old niece Caroline that she wished she had '*read more and written less*' when she was her age.² Publishing probably *always* formed some part of Austen's idea of authorship even when she was a child, certainly because her family encouraged it, but also in part because the conditions that prevailed in her youth were favourable to such ideas.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, increasing numbers of novels were being published, especially by women. Until recently, literary curricula have treated Austen's lifetime as a vast novelistic wasteland, occupied only by herself and perhaps Frances Burney or Ann Radcliffe. Many of her contemporaries, however, including Radcliffe and Burney, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth and Amelia Opie, among others, received much greater fame and fortune as novelists in their own time than Austen did. Current interest in women's writing has brought scholarly attention to such writers, modern reprints of their works, and their inclusion in course reading lists at universities. But these novelists are only the most visible of a large mass of women who rushed into print at the end of the eighteenth century. The number of women writers increased dramatically throughout the century, as Judith Phillips Stanton's research has shown, but exploded at the end, rising by 'around 50 per cent *every decade* starting in the 1760s'.³ What conditions of authorship made this publishing explosion possible for women?

This question raises others. What problems did authorship create for women as they entered a profession that men had dominated? What was a literary property and how was it published? How was a book actually produced, advertised, reviewed and distributed (by sale or loan) to readers? What audience was available? Frances Burney's first novel *Evelina, or a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, published in January 1778 (when Austen was two years old), offers a revealing case study in relation to most of these questions. The case is also particularly relevant to Austen, who admired Burney and may have modelled her career to some extent on hers.

PROBLEMS OF AUTHORSHIP

Like Austen and many other women, Burney insisted on anonymity when she published her first novel. Anonymity addressed a major problem: for a woman in this period, the fame of any kind of authorship could become infamy, and novels were particularly reprehensible, as their famous defence in *Northanger Abbey* indicates (37-8). Proper women were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship of any kind entailed publicity, thrusting oneself before the public eye - thus loss of femininity. Matthew Gregory Lewis, author of the notorious *The Monk* (1796), was outraged when he learned in 1804 that his mother intended to publish a novel. He forbade publication; she yielded but tried to argue with him. His reply pronounced that 'I always consider a female author as a sort of half-man'.⁴ Just as 'notoriety' for a woman meant becoming de-sexed, it also involved loss of caste, possibly even loss of marriageability, if one's social position were high enough. In 1815, Lady Louisa Stuart (whose works circulated only in manuscript during her lifetime) told Lady Hood, who was being urged to publish her journal from India, that to do so would be 'losing caste'. The journal remained unpublished, Lady Hood remarried, and Lady Louisa adds a cautionary tale:

she has told me since, she once said to her present husband [Mr Mackenzie], "Do you know I was on the very point of publishing a book." "I am sure" answered he, "I would never have married you if you had."⁵

Perhaps Mrs Mackenzie had twinges of regret, or a fleeting vision of what might have been, at this provocative dictum from her spouse - or perhaps not. Few questioned that 'for well-educated young women of small fortune, . . . [marriage] must be their pleasantest preservative from want' (*PP*, 122-3). Conservatives like Stuart certainly endorsed this notion as well as the late eighteenth-century prejudice that authorship vitiated female modesty and sacrificed gentility. They were fighting a rear-guard action against authorship, however; such attitudes were in retreat - or at least they were ineffective in preventing women of all classes from venturing to publish.

Predictably, amassing money through print was in some ways

even more compromising than seeking fame, and not just to women. In the eighteenth century, literature became firmly fixed in the marketplace, to the dismay of many. Before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, it had been an aristocratic amusement: Geoffrey Chaucer in the act of reading a Canterbury Tale to a courtly audience or writing a begging poem to his patron presents us with the most familiar images of 'polite letters' before print. An élite audience and a patron would yield court appointments or pensions, not direct payment for writing. Eventually, the new technology was accompanied by changed attitudes towards literature, changes that Alvin Kernan has succinctly summarised:

An older system of polite or courtly letters – primarily oral, aristocratic, amateur, authoritarian, court-centered – was swept away at this time and gradually replaced by a new print-based, market-centered, democratic literary system.⁶

The public replaced the patron as a source of income. But the older aristocratic attitudes that saw print and payment as vulgar were surprisingly persistent. As late as 1751, Thomas Gray was circulating his 'Elegy in a Country Church-Yard' in manuscript, just as Sir Philip Sidney had done his *Arcadia* or Lady Mary Wroth her *Urania* one or two hundred years earlier. Gray agreed to print his poem only to forestall a pirated version: a periodical was planning to include an unauthorised text. He accepted no money for the poem, but in this respect Gray was exceptional. Most male writers of all classes in the eighteenth century were happy to be paid for their writing, and many unabashedly obtained the best terms – like Alexander Pope, generally said to be the first poet who truly gained his living by his pen.

Not surprisingly, as literary men made themselves at home in the marketplace, they preferred it to be rather exclusive. Much of the old aristocratic disdain for all print was transferred with renewed energy to hack writers – the notorious denizens of Grub Street – and to women who wrote. Only desperate financial need, preferably to support aged parents, a sick husband or destitute children, could excuse a woman's exposing herself in print to obtain money. Accordingly, women's prefaces often apologise for writing by alluding to distresses of this kind, causing reviewers frequently to condescend kindly to their work, though

increasingly they bemoaned the number and grammar of 'female scribblers'. Antonia Forster cites a 'small masterpiece of a review of *The Trinket. A Novel, by a Lady* in 1774' which manages to patronise and criticise at once:

As this Novel is said to be written by a lady, and really appears to come from a female hand, we are too polite to point our critical cannon against her. Could we believe it to be the composition of a man, we should not scruple to say that it contains a crude and indigested heap of characters, incidents, and adventures, tossed and thrown together without much meaning, and less moral.⁷

A woman who managed to overcome all these prejudices might also face legal obstacles to authorship if she were married. Married women had no legal existence. They could not own property or sign contracts. Although Charlotte Smith began to publish in order to support herself and her children after her feckless husband was imprisoned for debt, a contract for her novel *Desmond* (1792) survives signed not by her but by Benjamin Smith, who was at the time residing in Scotland under an alias.⁸ The publishing records for Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) list William Radcliffe, her husband, as the work's author; he apparently received £40 for the second edition (1792).⁹ Comparable restrictions survived in France within living memory: 'it was not until 1965 that married women were legally permitted to publish a work or to engage in any profession without the consent of their husbands'.¹⁰

A single woman with no matrimonial millstones, Frances Burney wrote three increasingly equivocal prefaces to the anonymously published *Evelina*. In them, she apparently accepts but actually rejects the prejudices against female authorship. She apologises for possible faults in the work itself but not really for writing it. Later in life, she asserted that she wrote *Evelina* for 'private recreation' and 'printed it for a frolic, to see how a production of her own would figure in that author-like form'.¹¹ So far, she sounds conventionally diffident: her writing was amateur, her printing a 'frolic'. The term 'author-like' also suggests proper diffidence. Burney wished to try out for the role of author, not to be known as one, and the three prefaces, addressed to her father, to the reviewers and to readers, witness how problematic the role was

for her. All three allege incapacity for authorship and take comfort in concealment and obscurity – anonymity. Yet the subtext in each case is increasing assertion of power. In addressing her readers, for example, she evokes the great names that have preceded her – Rousseau, Johnson, Marivaux, Fielding, Richardson and Smollett – associating herself with them and yet claiming originality too. Significantly, as she becomes more assertive, she adopts a male persona: ‘no man need blush at starting from the same post’ as the six writers she cites.¹² Implicitly, she rejects the condescension usually bestowed on novels and on women’s writing. She asks to be judged by the highest standards.¹³

If women were increasingly able, like Burney, to confront or disregard prejudices against their writing, other hindrances were less easy to set aside. Women’s lives usually made authorship difficult. Although a few lower-class women and men took up the pen for profit in the eighteenth century, most were debarred by lack of leisure and education from doing so. Women of the ‘middling’ classes – wives and daughters of artisans, tradesmen, farmers, and the like – were apt to find themselves engaged in sewing, cooking, shopkeeping, housekeeping and above all child-raising, all the forms of women’s work that have proved so tenacious over time and sometimes so hostile to writing. And even women of the professional classes or on the fringes of the gentry, like Burney or Austen, devoted themselves to serving and nurturing in the traditional ways. When Austen was left in charge of housekeeping, she wrote jokingly to her sister:

I often wonder how *you* can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House; – and how good Mrs. West c^d have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb.

(L 466; 8 Sep. 1816)

Burney, as her father’s regular scribe, had more family duties than Austen, who occasionally did copy a sermon for her father or brother, but as a rule was responsible only for breakfast and the charge of tea, sugar, and wine stores.¹⁴ Burney copied her father’s works for the press from her sixteenth year.¹⁵ Her hand was so well known to publishers that when she desired anonymity for *Evelina*, she was forced

to disguise her writing in making her own fair copy.

Burney never complained of her unpaid secretarial work for her father, but Laetitia Hawkins, another contemporary novelist, did, even though her father Sir John Hawkins sometimes paid her: 'I was, I will not say *educated*, but *broke*, to the drudgery of my father's pursuits'.¹⁶ But Hawkins goes on to describe quite remarkable activity, considering the demands that her parents made on her:

I had no time but what I could *purloin* from my incessant task of copying, or writing from dictation – writing six hours a day for my father, and reading nearly as long to my mother. But two thousand pages never daunted me. I learnt Italian, and extracted from every book that came in my way; I made as large a part of my clothes as could be made at home; I worked muslin; I learnt botany; and I was my mother's storekeeper. Air and exercise were little thought on. I aired indeed with Lady H. in the carriage, but I read or worked.¹⁷

And what Hawkins means by 'work' is the needlework that all conventionally proper women engaged in, not the work that she was actually paid for.

THE PROCESS OF PUBLISHING

The obstacles to women's writing make their success in publishing all the more remarkable. They were assisted by a rising demand for print, certainly, and by a somewhat more open market than the one we know. For instance, anyone could submit short pieces of fiction or poetry to dozens of magazines – such as the *Lady's Magazine* or the *Gentleman's* – that printed selected readers' submissions without payment; Thomas Chatterton's poems first appeared in several periodicals, particularly the *Town and Country Magazine*. Quite decent payment was offered to regular contributors to the review journals, from about two pounds to four guineas a 'sheet' (sixteen pages), and it was possible for an unknown to obtain such work, but more frequently writers were recommended by other writers, that is, they already had some literary connections.¹⁸ All writers, known or unknown, who wished to obtain payment for a longer work had four options for publishing: by subscription, by profit-sharing, by selling