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The Authoress

England in April. Even here, in Southampton, in a town full of soldiers and sailors, in a country at war, April is still April. Sunlight and shadow chase one another across the sea ramparts, while the waves dance, mischievous, sparkling, to welcome in the yearly miracle of an English spring. The sun shines down on the house in Castle Square, and on the garden behind it. It shines on the careful, orderly rows of the shrubbery; on the young leaves; and on a small child in a pinafore, squawking and flapping her arms like wings, then crouching to scoop up a handful of gravel and offer it to her companion, as astonished and enchanted as if she's found jewels. Everything seems new at this time of the year, even in this old-fashioned house. Everything seems possible. A few weeks more, and the lilac will be out, and after the lilac, the long yellow fronds of the laburnum, and then the roses. The buds are still furled tight, but, buffeted by the salt breezes, they're beginning to stir.

The other inhabitants of the house are stirring, too. They have been a dutiful lot in Castle Square, these three years past. The man of the house has spent much of the time at sea, as an officer in His Majesty's navy, leaving all his many womenfolk together – his young wife, his tiny daughter, his widowed mother, his two unmarried sisters, and a family friend who had nowhere else to go. A houseful of women, they have been a comfort to each other during his absences. His brothers have helped to support them, but now, at long last, the richest (newly bereaved, newly generous) is offering help of a more practical kind – a cottage for his mother and sisters, rent-free, on one of his Hampshire estates – and, until that should be made ready, a visit

to Godmersham, his grand house in Kent. The captain has done his duty. The Southampton household is to be broken up. They remain for only a few weeks more. The lilac, the laburnum, and the roses will flower here without them.

The child has thrown herself on to the path, legs kicking in fury. Her companion lifts her and, turning towards the house, points up to one of the windows. The little girl exclaims with delight. The woman watching at the window – a brown-haired, brown-eyed woman of 33, caught idling when she ought to be working – waves down at her niece, and mouths an apology to her sister. She turns back to the room, to the neat bed with its dimity cover, the old chair and the small rickety table, which are all that could be spared from downstairs, and to the letter which she hasn't even begun to write.

She's never had any cause to write a letter of business before. At the Abbey school, in Reading, she sat through hours of lessons in French and sewing. A year, did she spend there? It can't have been much more. The garden, the tall trees, are vivid in her memory; so, too, the view to the ruins of the church; the other girls bundled in shawls giggling round the fireplace, dying of laughter, as they used to say. The big girls had lessons, though not, she suspects, very good ones, in all the usual feminine accomplishments, dancing and drawing and music, but if letter-writing was taught at the Abbey, she doesn't recall it. And before that, at Mrs Cawley's ... well, of Mrs Cawley's school, here, in this very town, she remembers little. Only fever-dreams, and her sister Cassandra being sick, too; and their cousin Jane Cooper; and more than anything else the pain that twisted and twisted in her bowels. They nearly died of the typhoid fever.

She was seven, then. More than 25 years have passed, and what has she done, in all that time? She has no husband, no children – unless she counts the ones nestled, sleeping, about her room. Elinor and Marianne tucked up in a tin trunk under the bed, together with all the foolish stories from her childhood; and Susan in the writing box, half-hidden here at the back of the closet, behind a pile of shifts and petticoats, safe from

little fingers. She sets the box on the bed, and, kneeling, turns the key in the lock, folds back the lid, opens, looks, touches the faint roughness of the leather on the writing slope. The wood – smooth and cool as satin under her fingers – warms until it almost feels like a living thing. Here are her pens and pencils, her penknife, her inkwell, waiting to be filled. Paper. Wafers of wax to seal her letters. And Susan.

It is about Susan that she is to write. Susan, not the most dear of her children, but nonetheless the only one who has shown any promise to date.

Such a deal of paper, though! The woman – who has not lived for three years in so expensive a town as Southampton without getting to know the price of everything – winces inwardly at the extravagance. To salve her conscience, she leafs through the old correspondence in her writing box, searching for a piece of scrap paper. She finds one sheet which has only a line or two written at the top and, seizing a pencil, scrawls on it the single word ‘Gentlemen’.

Well then, to the point.

‘In the Spring of the year 1803 a manuscript Novel in 2 volumes entitled *Susan* was sold to you by a Gentleman of the name of—’ What was the name again of her brother Henry’s lawyer, who had helped to oversee the sale? Seymour. That was it. ‘—of the name of Seymour, & the purchase money £10 received at the same time. Six years have since passed, & this work of which I avow myself the Authoress—’

She pauses. Why not? Why not avow herself an authoress? After all, she has been writing for nearly all her life.

‘—of which I avow myself the Authoress has never to the best of my knowledge, appeared in print, tho’ an early publication was stipulated for at the time of Sale.’

She knows little of the publishing trade but is it not queer – extraordinary, even – to purchase a book and never to publish it? How proudly, how happily, she set to the work of copying out her novel for these men, all those years ago; powdering and polishing the pages, tending her pen nib as carefully as ever she could, worrying over the

tinest smudge of ink. But perhaps publishers, seeing so many manuscripts, don't cherish them as authors and authoresses do. Perhaps poor Susan is lying forgotten somewhere, nibbled by mice. Maybe a maidservant has used her to start a fire, thinking that one bundle of paper would never be missed among so many. Did they think that the novel was too short, or the title too unexciting? Perhaps it is what Susan says – but surely there is very little in it that could worry even the most anxious publisher. And did not this Mr Benjamin Crosby publish William Godwin's *Things as they Are*? If ever there was a novel that criticised the world and everything in it—! Only, of course, that was before the treason trials, and before the publisher Joseph Johnson was sent to prison for printing a book that did not meet with the approval of the men in government. Perhaps Mr Crosby has grown more cautious, since then.

Well, enough of caution. 'I can only account for such an extraordinary circumstance by supposing the manuscript by some carelessness to have been lost; & if that was the case, am willing to supply You with another Copy if you are disposed to avail yourselves of it, & will engage for no farther delay when it comes into your hands.'

But when is she to sit and write out another copy? Not soon. There is so much to be done. The house to be packed up – all their belongings – and only she and Cassandra to do it; Frank gone to sea; her sister-in-law Mary expecting again and complaining; their mother; the visit to her brother Edward and his motherless children in Kent; a week lost in travelling there, and another in travelling back again; then setting the new house in order. She loves her family – truly, she does – but the days seem to slip through her fingers. There is always some demand on her time; someone needing to be nursed or entertained, a letter of condolence to be written, paper boats to be sailed on the river, yet another new niece or nephew to sew caps for. The hours of her life that she has wasted, feigning deafness while the women of Southampton drink tea and compare their latest lyings-in; the weeks that have vanished this past ten years, in moving in and out of rented houses and rented rooms, in

making new acquaintances and taking leave of them again. Sometimes she thinks that, since they left home, she has not remained in the same place for three months together.

That part of her life is over now. No more removals. She will stay in Chawton until she is 70 at least, except for visits. And she means to be more particular about visits. She will go and see Henry in London because she loves him, and because his wife, fashionable, fascinating cousin Eliza, makes her laugh. Besides, London has galleries and theatres and all manner of diversions. And she will go and see her brother Edward because he is rich, and she loves to stay at Godmersham, his great estate in Kent, where the grounds are delightful and the cooking very much superior to her usual fare. She's looking forward to the walks and the dinners she will have soon. Besides, now that Edward's wife is dead, she has a duty to the children; the little ones will soon grow accustomed, but the older ones will not, and poor Fanny, just turned sixteen, is of an age to feel the loss of her mother most acutely.

Chawton is not yet home, but it is no more than fifteen miles from where she grew up. She will have her native skies, her native air and, Cassandra has promised her, time for her writing. It is only a question of being firm, of holding fast, as sailors say, to her purpose.

‘—It will not be in my power from particular circumstances to command this Copy before the Month of August, but then, if you accept my proposal, you may depend on receiving it.’

She will sit up at night and copy it out, if need be. She will order working candles every night she is in Kent and then smuggle them to Chawton in her luggage. Writing paper, too. It is not the least of the attractions of Godmersham that there are no quibbles over candles, no complaints about expense. Edward might, perhaps, not even complain about a London publisher addressing letters to her at his house, but he will not care for it. She will instruct the publishers to reply quickly, and to the Southampton post office. It will be easy enough to slip out for half an hour, even in all the bustle of the coming fortnight. But it will have to be soon. They have no idea of time, these people. To hold on

to a book for six years and not to publish it! She should have written this letter years ago.

‘Be so good as to send me a Line in answer, as soon as possible, as my stay in this place will not exceed a few days. Should no notice be taken of this Address, I shall feel myself at liberty to secure the publication of my work, by applying elsewhere.’

She reads over what she has written, her pencil poised above the page. It is a trifle brusque, perhaps, but this is a letter of business after all, and that last sentence should fetch her a prompt answer, at least. It will do for a first draft. She dashes off her signature: her initial – J – and her surname.

She has always envied her sister Cassandra for having a pretty name. Cassandra is named for their mother, while she is named not for her aunt Philadelphia nor her aunt Leonora – both of whom had names to conjure with – but for her aunt Jane, Jane Cooper’s mother, who caught the typhoid fever from them and died. A plain name, and a common one, too. When she was at school she was obliged to share it not only with her cousin Jane but with any number of Janes besides, so that the mistresses, and the other pupils, assigned them all nicknames and nursenames – Jane A., and Jane C., and Janet, and Janice, and Jenny. She had been Jenny – little Jenny, snotty-nosed. Patted on the head, sent away, forgotten.

Has he even read her book? This publisher, this Mr Crosby?

But of course he doesn’t yet know it is her book. Six years ago, she remained decorously in the background. Henry had thought it necessary. So far as Mr Crosby is concerned, *Susan* is simply a book ‘by a lady’. Once she signs her name to this letter, once he knows who she is, will he put it in advertisements? In catalogues? Will it be printed on the book’s title page or tooled in gold on a leather binding in the grand libraries of grand houses? It is possible. It’s happened to other authoresses. But once it is out it cannot be taken back again. And then, her brothers will be so angry, because after all, the name Austen does not belong only to her—

She pours ink into her inkwell, spilling out the letters of her name in her mind, shuffling them about like the ivory alphabets you play with on a rainy day, when no better entertainment offers. The letters rearrange themselves into a riddle. Who doesn't love a riddle? She can hardly help smiling.

She will create an imaginary husband to give her countenance, and, since he may as well have an elegant name, she will call herself Mrs Ashton Dennis. And she will sign the letter with the initials 'M', 'A', and 'D' – 'I am sirs, your most obedient humble servant, M.A.D.' A joke, to make Mr Crosby take notice of her letter. An acrostic, a word puzzle, to show him that he should read her book more carefully.

A joke, but also a private admission to herself. Ashton is nearly (but not too nearly) her own surname, and Dennis is not so very far from Janice or Jenny. The letter will still be an avowal of sorts – an acknowledgement of her children, a declaration that plain Jane Austen is an authoress, even if no one outside the family ever reads her.

She writes over the pencilled draft in ink, to test out her phrases and to try out her new, imaginary signature, and, though she can hear voices downstairs, duties calling, she selects a sheet of expensive, hot-pressed paper and copies out what she has written, slowly, carefully, stopping every few words to dust the page with powder and rub it dry. The next day she cherishes the perfect polished copy all the way to the post office.

This time the publishers do not keep her waiting long. Mr Richard Crosby's answer reaches her within the week. Torn open with shaking fingers, read in the street, it sends her back to Castle Square as angry as she has ever been in her life, its phrases sounding in her head: '... we purchased of M^r Seymour a Novel entitled *Susan* and paid him for it the sum of 10£'; that is, it is nothing whatever to do with you, Mrs Ashton Dennis, whoever you may be. The novel is not worth publishing, but it is ours, and ours is a world of stamped receipts and 'full consideration', and threatening 'proceedings to stop the sale' if you try to take the book elsewhere. These matters are, by far, less simple than you imagine, you empty-headed female. And the final insult – you clearly value the novel,

Mrs Ashton Dennis, but because I value it not at all, and because I pity you for your ignorance, you can have it for the £10 that we paid for it.

That night, in the dark, she lies rigid in her narrow bed, cursing herself for her clumsiness, imagining a dozen ways in which she could have managed the business better. Did she think her punning pen name would charm him? Nothing of the sort – he didn't even notice it. How can she avow herself an authoress when she cannot write a simple letter? An authoress, when people don't even bother to read what she's written? Why didn't she speak to Henry, as she should have done? What would a few weeks or months more have mattered, after all this time? Where was the hurry?

The night offers her no answers. Nor does the next day, nor the days after, as she pulls trunks from the box-room, folds clothes, invents games to distract little Mary-Jane, who wanders, cross and bewildered, through the once-familiar rooms. By the time the evenings come she is exhausted, her hands grey with dust. The weather turns chill and damp. Spring, optimism, possibility – all seem far away. It is some consolation to think herself useful, to know that, even if she is a most indifferent kind of authoress, she is a good daughter, a good sister and a good aunt. There is china to be divided between the two households, furniture to be sold or swathed in dustsheets, farewell visits to be made, a last service at the church, a last walk on the sea ramparts.

Her own belongings are packed in haste, on the final evening. She leaves her writing box till the end – she need only empty out the powder pot and the inkwell, and make everything secure so that nothing will rattle about on the journey. She needn't read the letter again – but still she cannot help herself. If only—! But she does not have £10, nor is she likely to, and even if she did, how is such a thing to be managed, without the aid of one of her brothers, drafts on banks, men of business? No. It is not to be thought of any more.

She scrabbles under the bed for the tin trunk and flings its contents on to the bed in brisk handfuls. She had meant only to bury Susan and Mr Crosby's letter at the bottom, under the bundles of paper she has

so foolishly treasured all these years, but here too are her notebooks, gifts from long ago, and, reading through them, she grows tender. Here are the absurd plays she wrote, and her tales of legs broken in man-traps and drunkenness and sudden, surprising marriages. A heroine who steals ices from a pastry-cook's shop – how gloriously wicked she and Cassandra had thought it! And *Love and Freindship*, too – she never was a great hand at spelling – the story which made her father cry with laughter. Her *History of England, by a partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian*; Cassandra's pictures of all the kings and queens. Her hand brushes against the story about the clergyman's daughters which she had started but could never finish. Here are other infant novels, begun and abandoned. And some completed, more or less. Wicked Lady Susan is too short, not even a volume. She has never been quite happy with the beginning of *Elinor and Marianne*. *First Impressions*, too. Her father had thought a great deal of her stories, had even written to a publisher about one, though he met with a flat refusal. The whole of her life is here, in ink and paper. She cannot but treasure it.

Little Mary-Jane won't remember the house in Castle Square at all, won't take any memories away.

Jane travels with hers, the tin trunk solid under her feet as they jolt through the streets of Southampton, northwards, towards the common, parallel with the river. She will miss the river, and the sea. She will miss the flowers. By the time the cottage at Chawton is ready for them it will be too late to plant any.

Jane stares out at the pale early morning; the day becoming by degrees brighter, too bright, showing her that the sleeve of her black velvet pelisse is growing sadly rubbed. They will pass through Winchester first, with its ancient cathedral, then on to Alton. Alton to Farnham, Farnham to Bagshot, through Staines, past the charming little villas about Richmond, and so on, to Brentford, and to London. To London, and a night at brother Henry's house. Eliza and the latest fashions await them there, an evening being plied with coffee and plum cake and scandal before they travel on to Godmersham. Jane can imagine it already

– her sister-in-law moving by delicate, insinuating degrees on to family matters.

What luck, Eliza will say, that Edward felt able to promote the scheme of moving to Chawton! And at such a time! How good he is, how truly generous. Have they seen the house? Has it a pleasant aspect? Will they have agreeable neighbours? And Cassandra, with a reproving frown, will reply that Edward is very kind to them.

Cassandra always says what ought to be said, but Jane has very little opinion of Edward's kindness herself. Edward is not the eldest nor the cleverest nor the bravest of her brothers, no, nor the kindest either. He is only the richest. But Edward is bereft, Edward is grieving – this is no time to be thinking about the four years that have passed since their father died, no time for the resentful voice which whispers that a truly generous man would have welcomed his mother and sisters into his own home, either of his homes, rather than housing them in the cottage where his estate manager used to live. Jane sets herself to thinking about the children, about her niece Fanny, and to wondering whether perhaps it had been harder for Edward than she had supposed, to be separated from his family when he was so young – no older than Fanny is now – whether she might love him better if he felt more like a real brother, and she felt less like a poor relation.

The sound of the wheels, the jingling of the harnesses, lull her into restless sleep; thoughts rattle against each other, pictures bloom. Godmersham, Edward's Kentish estate. Sorbet and French wine; chocolate and white rolls for breakfast; the park, walks in the woodland. 'Run mad as often as you chuse ...'

Another home left behind; sisters, poor while their brother is rich; a young woman running, tumbling on a hillside; a handsome gentleman with an ugly character; fine houses and cottages; journeys; city streets, London bustle. Sensibility fighting sense. Love and loss, greed and gain.

So long, so long since they have spoken to her, but she thinks – she is almost sure – that the young girl running on the hillside is someone

that she knows. An impulsive girl, passionate, grieving for the loss of a father. And a sister, quieter, more serious – rational, controlled, sensible.

Jane's fingers, resting in her lap, twitch. She opens her eyes.



We're all going to be seeing a lot more of Jane Austen. 2017 is the bicentenary of her tragically early death at the age of 41. And by way of celebration, the Bank of England is introducing a new £10 note with her face on.

Actually, it's not her face. It's an idealised picture commissioned for a family memoir published 50 years after she died. She looks richer, prettier, and far less grumpy than she does in the amateurish, unfinished sketch it's based on. And there are some other problems with the design for the note.

In the background there's going to be a picture of a big house – Godmersham, where Jane didn't live. Also featured will be an illustration of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet reading some letters and a quotation from the same novel: 'I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!' – a line spoken by a character who shortly afterwards yawns and throws her book aside.

The biggest problem, though, it seems to me, is that for most people that's Jane Austen. That's what they recognise – pretty young women, big houses, *Pride and Prejudice* – demure dramas in drawing rooms. Seeing it on a banknote half a dozen times a week is only going to embed it further.

Jane was born five years after the poet William Wordsworth, the year before the American Revolution began. When the French Revolution started, she was thirteen. For almost all of her life, Britain was at war. Two of her brothers were in the navy; one joined the militia. For several years she lived in Southampton, a major naval base. It was a time of clashing armies, and warring ideas, a time of censorship and state surveillance. Enclosures were remaking the landscape; European

empire-building was changing the world; science and technology were opening up a whole universe of new possibilities.

We're perfectly willing to accept that writers like Wordsworth were fully engaged with everything that was happening, and to find the references in their work, even when they're veiled or allusive. But we haven't been willing to do it with Jane's work. We know Jane – we know that however delicate her touch, she's essentially writing variations of the same plot, a plot that wouldn't be out of place in any romantic comedy of the last two centuries.

We know wrong.



The indisputable facts of Jane Austen's life are few and simple. She was born in the small Hampshire village of Steventon, on 16th December 1775, the seventh of a clergyman's eight children. Apart from five years spent in Bath between 1801 and 1806 and three years in Southampton, a few months at school, and occasional visits and holidays, she spent all her life in rural Hampshire. She never married. She died in Winchester on 18th July 1817, aged 41, and was buried in Winchester cathedral. In the four years between the end of 1811 and the end of 1815 she published four novels – *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. Another two novels – *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* – were published right at the end of 1817, the year she died.*

Two hundred years on, her work is astonishingly popular. It's difficult to think of any other novelist who could be compared to her. Yet Jane herself remains a shadowy, curiously colourless figure; one who seems to have spent the majority of her 41 years being dragged along in the wake of other people's lives.

But what lives the people around Jane had – her father, orphaned in early childhood, who worked his way out of poverty; her mother, who

* The novels carry the date of 1818 on their title page, but were published in the final week of 1817.

could claim kinship with a duke but found herself making ends meet in a country vicarage; her aunt Philadelphia, who, with no prospects in England, travelled out to India to find herself a husband; Philadelphia's daughter, Eliza, who lost her French spouse to the guillotine. The eldest of Jane's brothers, James, was raised in the expectation of succeeding to the property owned by his maternal uncle; her second brother George seems to have suffered from some form of disability and lived apart from the rest of the family; her third brother, Edward, was adopted into a life of luxury; Henry, the fourth of the Austen brothers, bounced from career to career – first a soldier in the militia, like that scoundrel George Wickham, then a banker, and then, finally, after his bank went bust, a clergyman. The two youngest brothers, Frank and Charles, born either side of Jane, went into the navy and led lives full of excitement and danger. Even Jane's only sister, Cassandra, had an engagement to her name, a story of her own.

We know what most of these people looked like, we know about their careers, their marriages, their children. We know that one of Jane's aunts was accused of stealing lace from a shop in Bath, and that one of her cousins died in a carriage accident. We know that her sister's fiancé died of yellow fever, and that her great-great-uncle was the Duke of Chandos. All of Jane's modern biographers repeat these facts, just as they reproduce the portraits of her brothers and her aunts and her cousin and the men who may (or, more probably, may not) have wanted to marry her, and the confused, contradictory opinions of people who barely knew her, in the belief that somehow, by combining together every scrap, something will take shape – an outline, a silhouette, a Jane-shaped space. But in spite of all their efforts, Jane remains only a slight figure vanishing into the background, her face turned away – as it is in the only finished portrait we have of her.

The more determined our pursuit, the more elusive Jane becomes. Where should we look for her? Will we find her in modern-day Bath, in the rain-drenched gold-stone buildings that are now flats or dental surgeries, in the park which occupies the place where the Lower Assembly

Rooms once stood, or at the Upper Rooms, which were rebuilt almost entirely after fire damage in the Second World War? Will we find her in the Jane Austen House Museum at Chawton? She did live there, for eight years, and her sister Cassandra for nearly 40. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was divided into separate dwellings; a century later it was turned back into one. Dozens of people have lived there. And if any trace of Jane remains, then the thousands of tourists who trudge through the rooms each year will have driven it away. Visitors are shown a piano 'like' Jane's; a modern reproduction of a bed 'like' the one Jane had when she was twenty; a table at which Jane 'may have' written; the caps that Jane's nieces and nephews wore as babies. The museum's proudest boast is Jane's jewellery – a topaz cross, a bead bracelet, a ring set with a blue stone. These are displayed in a narrow room off the largest bedroom, sitting dumbly in their glass cases, carefully lit but offering no sense of the woman who once wore them.

The rectory at Steventon – the house Jane lived in until she was 25 – is long gone. The church it served survives. It's left open, with a plaque on the wall and flowers, continually replaced, to reassure the pilgrims who make it this far that they really have come to the right place. It's almost possible, closing the church door, brushing past the ancient yew tree, to catch a glimpse of a little girl running ahead of you – but, like all ghosts, this is only a trick of the mind.

We have to look for Jane elsewhere.

In the spring of 1809 the 33-year-old Jane Austen was living, not in the countryside, nor in Bath, but in Southampton, in a house rented by her sea captain brother Francis, usually known as Frank. Southampton is less than twenty miles along the south coast from Portsmouth, where the Price family lives in *Mansfield Park*. A guide book of the period describes Southampton as 'handsomely built' and 'pleasantly situated', with views 'to the water, the New Forest, and the Isle of Wight'. It mentions with approval that the streets are 'well paved and flagged' – a reminder that this was by no means a given for all town centres at this point. What the guide book glosses over is the fact that Southampton

was also a naval dockyard. It was heavily fortified and, during the time that Jane was living there, towards the end of the long war with France which dominated her adult life, it was a major port of embarkation for soldiers going to fight Napoleon's armies in Spain and Portugal.

If we associate Jane with an urban space, it's likely to be genteel Bath, not a dock town filled with public drunkenness, street prostitution, and violence. In addition to press-ganging – the state-sanctioned abduction scheme by which the Royal Navy ensured it had enough men to sail its ships – both the army and the navy welcomed into their ranks men who would otherwise have been in prison. Fighting men were, by and large, rough men and Southampton can't have been an altogether pleasant place for a household of women who were usually without a gentleman to protect them. Jane seems to have enjoyed some aspects of her time in Southampton well enough, however. She talks in her letters about walking on the ramparts, and rowing on the River Itchen with her nephews. But – so far as we know – it seems to have been the prospect of leaving Southampton and moving back to the country which reignited Jane's interest in getting her work published.

For some few years before she moved to Southampton at the end of 1806, Jane's life had been unsettled. You'll usually read that Jane lived in Bath from 1801 to 1806, but in fact she was almost continually on the move, and the city was more a base than a home. Together with her sister Cassandra, their mother, and (until his sudden death at the beginning of 1805) their father, she lodged in various parts of Bath – in Sydney Place, Green Park Buildings, Gay Street, and Trim Street – making lengthy visits to family, and for months at a time removing to seaside resorts, among them Dawlish, Sidmouth, Ramsgate (where Wickham trifles with Georgiana Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*) and Lyme Regis (the setting for some of the pivotal scenes in *Persuasion*). You may also come across the claim that Jane didn't take much interest in her writing while she lived in Bath, but that's not the case. It was during this period, in the spring of 1803, that she first had a novel accepted for publication.

That novel was *Susan*, almost certainly a version of the book we know as *Northanger Abbey*.^{*} We know, too, that Jane had written at least one other full-length novel before she moved to Bath – a book she called *First Impressions*. This may have been an earlier version of *Pride and Prejudice*, and it may or may not be the same book her father offered, unsuccessfully, to the publisher Cadell in 1797. We have a fragment – the beginning of a novel – about a clergyman’s numerous family, which is usually known as *The Watsons*, written on some 1803-watermarked paper. A neat copy of *Lady Susan*, a short novella in letters, is written out on paper which bears an 1805 watermark, although it seems probable from the immature style that it was composed earlier. Between 1803 and the spring of 1809, however, we can be certain about virtually nothing connected with Jane’s writing, other than that she wrote one poem in December 1808, on her 33rd birthday – a memorial poem to a friend who’d died in a riding accident exactly four years earlier. Maybe she stopped writing prose altogether. Maybe she was working on pre-existing drafts, or on pieces which were later incorporated into the other novels. Maybe she was writing something she later destroyed. We simply don’t know.

We do have a list of composition dates for Jane’s novels, but it was written by Cassandra, not Jane, and we have no idea when it was drawn up. Writers on Jane have tended to treat this document as if it were completely reliable; they really shouldn’t.

One thing we do know for sure is that in April 1809, only a week or two before Jane was due to leave Southampton for a lengthy visit to her brother Edward at Godmersham, she wrote to the publishing firm which had bought *Susan*. We have a draft of Jane’s letter, written on a sheet of paper that had originally served as an envelope, with the

* As we’ll see in the next chapter, we can be very nearly sure that *Susan* is *Northanger Abbey* and not *Lady Susan*. *Lady Susan* is short – nowhere near two volumes long – and is not at all the sort of work which a publisher would have been likely to accept.

words 'Miss Austen' written on the other side. Jane wrote in pencil initially, inking over the words afterwards, when she also changed the signature from 'J. Austen' to 'M.A.D.' We have Crosby's disobligingly businesslike reply, crammed with quasi-legal terms ('full consideration', 'stamped receipt', 'stipulated', 'bound'), offering to sell her *Susan* for £10, and threatening that he will 'take proceedings' to stop the novel being published anywhere else.

But what effect this letter had on Jane is unclear. We don't find another reference to *Susan*/*Northanger Abbey* until 1817 and – as we'll see in the next chapter – she continued to view the book very negatively. But she soon had other projects in hand.

Sense and Sensibility was the first of Jane's novels to make it all the way through the publication process. It appeared in October 1811, and must have been completed some time before the end of 1810, as by April 1811 Jane was busy correcting the proofs. Later in her career, when she had a regular publisher, Jane worked on the assumption that a year would intervene between her finishing a novel and that novel appearing. The gap between Jane finishing writing *Sense and Sensibility* and copies being put on sale may well have been longer.

Before Jane could think about sending a novel off, she would have had to copy it out by hand, which would have taken a number of weeks, perhaps a couple of months. Then she had to send the package off, wait for the publisher to read the novel, respond, and negotiate terms. Jane may already have been working on *Sense and Sensibility* before she wrote to Crosby to enquire about *Susan*.

In the summer of 1809 Jane's writing is full of an unaccustomed exuberance, very similar to the bubbling enthusiasm that appears in her letters of 1813 when she receives *Pride and Prejudice* from the printers. Frank's wife Mary had given birth to a boy in the second week of July, and a fortnight later Jane sent her brother a rather lovely piece of writing which can only properly be described as a letter-poem; part congratulation, part affectionate remembrance of their childhood, and part description of her happiness in the house at Chawton. She addresses

him warmly as ‘My dearest Frank’, and expresses the wish that the baby will resemble his father even in his faults – the ‘insolence of spirit’, and ‘saucy words & fiery ways’ which the grown-up Frank had worked so hard to correct. ‘Ourselves’, she assures him, ‘are very well’, and ‘Cassandra’s pen’ will explain in ‘unaffected prose’ how much they like their ‘Chawton home—’

—how much we find
Already in it to our mind,
And how convinced that when complete,
It will all other Houses beat,
That ever have been made or mended,
With rooms concise or rooms distended.

The poem also offers the rarest of insights into the Austen family nursery, in a charming image of Frank as a naughty little boy with ‘curley Locks’ poking his head around a door and assuring someone named ‘Bet’ that ‘me be not come to bide’. There’s an eagerness and a warmth here which is rare in Jane’s other letters to her family, an easy flow to her words which is very different to the rather stiff and formal mourning poem she had written six months earlier, in remembrance of her friend. It’s tempting to conclude that something had shifted, that she had started to write again.

Too tempting, perhaps. We don’t know what Jane was thinking in the spring and summer of 1809. Having waited for six long years, why write to Crosby then, when she was just about to move? Why the punning initials of the pen name? Why not simply change a few details and publish the novel elsewhere, without alerting him? Why not enlist the help of her brother Henry, who had presumably been involved in selling the manuscript in the first place?

We know so little about Jane’s life, and that little is so difficult to interpret accurately, that we can’t afford to dismiss what’s revealed in her fiction. At least it speaks, and at least it was written by her. As for the

rest, there are so many gaps, so many silences, so much that has been left vague, or imprecise, or reported at second or third hand, that the task of filling everything in is very far from being the 'short and easy' one that her brother Henry – the first of her many biographers – claimed in his *Biographical Notice of the Author*.



Of course, if Henry is to be believed, Jane barely thought at all.

On Henry's telling, his sister's books sprang into life fully-formed – painlessly, effortlessly. According to him, Jane's composition was 'rapid and correct', a flow of words which 'cost her nothing', washing through her to appear, as everything she wrote appeared, 'finished from her pen'. We are to imagine no labour, no dedication, no ambition, no intellect or skill, but simply a 'gift', a 'genius', an 'intuitive' power of invention. For modern-day readers, schooled on the image of Jane's near-contemporary, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, hopped up on vast quantities of opium, writing down his famous poem of Xanadu and Kubla Khan while still in an inspired dream, this is an attractive idea. It allows us to imagine Jane's novels, not as pieces of deliberate, considered art, but instead as whatever we like – a wrestling with her own repressed desires, a rewriting of her own unhappy love affairs, even an accidental tapping into a wellspring of culture and language. Jane's novels have been read in all these ways, and others besides.

The problem with any of these imaginings is that what Henry said was wrong. We don't have very many of Jane's manuscripts, but enough exist to tell us that she worked at her writing. The draft fragment we know as *The Watsons* is dotted with crossings-out, additions, and alterations. We even have an earlier attempt at an ending to *Persuasion* which Jane was dissatisfied with, and rewrote. You can see her, choosing one word over another, checking that the sentence balances, that she's picked the right phrase, and put it in the right place.

Henry's *Biographical Notice of the Author* appeared in the first, joint edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, which was hurried through

the print presses a scant five months after Jane died. The *Notice* is short, but crammed with what might politely be called inconsistencies. Having assured his readers that Jane's novels appeared almost without effort, Henry includes in a postscript Jane's own famous description of her work as akin to miniature painting – a 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour'. In the *Notice*, Henry says that Jane never thought of having a book published before *Sense and Sensibility* – even though he was well aware that *Susan/Northanger Abbey* had been accepted for publication in 1803. He claims that Jane never 'trusted herself to comment with unkindness', when it's obvious to even the most uncritical of readers that *Persuasion* contains one exceptionally vicious passage, in which the feelings of a bereaved mother are mocked as 'large fat sighings' simply because the character happens to be 'of a comfortable substantial size'.

A charitable assessment of Henry's comments, noting that he must have begun his biography very soon after Jane died, might call these errors or misreadings, and attribute them to grief. It might be right to do so, if it weren't for the fact that Henry sets out to create an entirely false image of his sister. He does all he can to convince his readers that Jane wasn't a proper author, and never considered herself one. She had, he says, very little opinion of her work, and no thought of obtaining an audience. He tells his readers that, having at last yielded to the persuasions of her family and sent *Sense and Sensibility* to a publisher, she was 'astonished' at its success. This Jane could never have been persuaded to put her name to her novels; indeed, Henry insinuates, they should not be considered as solely her work, since she was 'thankful for praise, open to remark, and submissive to criticism' from her family.

Henry, in short, was lying, and his lies were deliberate ones. In part his aim was to protect himself and his siblings from the damaging idea that their sister may have wanted – or even needed – to write for money. He insists that 'neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives'. In his world, gentlewomen didn't work and would never have dreamed of looking for public acclaim. We should bear in mind, too,

the context of Henry's remarks – a 'biographical notice' intended to help the sale of two novels, neither of which Jane herself had seen fit to have published.

But then again, his motives may have been fundamentally sound enough. He would have known how very unsympathetically female authors were treated. As a writer called Mary Hays explained in 1801, 'the penalties and discouragements attending the profession of an author fall upon women with a double weight'. They are, she continued, tried in the court of public opinion, 'not merely as writers, but as women, their characters, their conduct' searched into, while 'malignant ingenuity' is 'active and unwearied' in finding out 'their errors and exposing their foibles'.

The reputation of the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft had been dragged through the mud after her death in 1797. Rumours circulated that Ann Radcliffe, the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – Catherine Morland's favourite novel in *Northanger Abbey* – had gone insane. Charlotte Smith, whose writing Jane read and enjoyed, anticipated that some people would find the 'political remarks' in her 1792 novel *Desmond* 'displeasing'. And she was right: her forthright defence of the principles of the French Revolution saw the novel rejected by her usual publishers and, we are told, 'lost her some friends'. Even Maria Edgeworth, the most successful novelist of the period, was forced to rewrite her 1801 novel *Belinda* in order to remove a marriage which critics thought 'disgusting' and morally dangerous because one character was white and the other black.

We have to remember, too, that the Austen family lived in a country in which any criticism of the status quo was seen as disloyal and dangerous. Britain and France were at war from 1793 to 1815, with only two brief pauses – in 1802–3, and from summer 1814 to February 1815, when Napoleon was temporarily confined on the island of Elba. From 1812 to 1815, Britain was also at war with America, the colony it had lost in 1776, the year after Jane Austen was born. Revolutionary ideas had travelled from America to France, but the infection had its roots

in England, in particular in the writing of Thomas Paine, who'd left his native Norfolk to spread his radical ideas across the globe. In 1792 Paine was convicted in his absence of seditious libel – essentially, of writing down ideas dangerous to the state – but he continued to write, if anything more dangerously than before, questioning the very notion of private property, of organised religion, even.

Saddled with a monarch who was periodically insane, and an heir to the throne who was not only dissolute and expensive to run but had also illegally married a Catholic widow, the British state was under an enormous strain even before the war with France began. The war, for many years, went badly for Britain. French armies marched through Europe, French ships menaced Britain's trade; the fear of invasion was constant. People who criticised the behaviour of the royal family, or complained about corrupt parliamentary elections; who turned away from the Church of England or asked whether those in power should really keep it, were perceived as betraying their country in her hour of need. To question one aspect of the way society worked was to attempt to undermine the whole.

Throughout Jane's late teens and twenties the government built coastal batteries and forts to defend Britain against invasion from France, and it brought in a number of measures designed to protect the country against the spread of danger from within. In the process, Britain began to look more and more like a totalitarian state, with the unpleasant habits that totalitarian states acquire. Habeas corpus – the centuries-old requirement that any detention had to be publicly justified – was suspended. Treason was redefined. It was no longer limited to actively conspiring to overthrow and to kill; it included thinking, writing, printing, reading. Prosecutions were directed not just against avowedly political figures, such as Paine, the radical politician Horne Tooke, or the theologian Gilbert Wakefield, but against their publishers. A school-master was convicted for distributing leaflets. A man was prosecuted for putting up posters. The proprietors of the newspaper *The Morning Chronicle* were brought into court. Booksellers were threatened. Words

were dangerous – reciting a piece of doggerel saw one Hampshire carpenter imprisoned for three years. There can hardly have been a thinking person in Britain who didn't understand what was intended – to terrify writers and publishers into policing themselves.

In a letter of 1795 the well-connected Whig politician Charles James Fox pondered 'how any prudent tradesman can venture to publish anything that can in any way be disagreeable to the ministers'. William Wordsworth's brother Richard urged him to 'be cautious in writing or expressing your political opinions', warning him that 'the ministers have great powers'. It was expected that letters would be opened and read by the authorities; it was accepted that publishers would shy away from anything which challenged or questioned societal norms too openly. Conservative writers flourished. The response from writers of a less reactionary frame of mind was to turn to nature and emotion – as the Romantic poets did – or to the relative safety of the past or foreign settings. Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, published in 1814, is often described as the first historical novel, but in fact dozens were published in the 1790s and the first decade of the nineteenth century. Almost every Gothic novel is set in the past, usually in the 1400s or 1500s. Writers were wary of writing about the present, and they were right to be. This is the atmosphere that Henry – and Jane – had lived through; this is the context in which Jane Austen wrote.

Of course, Henry's insistence that Jane shouldn't be considered an author, that she hardly intended to publish her work, that she bowed to the superior knowledge of her family – of her brothers, pillars of the establishment, clergymen, naval officers, a landowner – might make us think that he was protesting quite a lot too much. Why, after all, would he be so anxious to assure Jane's readers that she was 'thoroughly religious and devout' and that her opinions 'accorded strictly with those of our Established Church', unless he knew that her novels could easily be read as being critical of the Church of England?

Think of Jane's landowners, of her soldiers, her clergymen, her aristocrats. In *Sense and Sensibility* John Dashwood feels that

generosity to his impoverished sisters would demean him; in *Mansfield Park* Henry Crawford elopes with a married woman, the cousin of the very woman he has proposed marriage to. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the militia officers spend their time socialising, flirting, and – on one occasion – cross-dressing, rather than defending the realm. The Reverend Mr Collins is laughable. None of Jane’s clergymen characters has a vocation, or even seems to care very much about the well-being – spiritual or physical – of their parishioners.* Does Lady Catherine de Bourgh look like a character designed to justify the aristocracy? Or *Persuasion*’s vain and wasteful Sir Walter Elliot?

Think, too, about the fact that Jane was the only novelist of this period to write novels which were set more or less in the present day, and more or less in the real world – or at any rate a world recognisable to her readers as the one in which they actually lived. Jane doesn’t offer us wicked villains and perfect heroines. She doesn’t give us storms, or miraculously reappearing heirs. She invents villages and towns (Meryton, Highbury), but locates them within the known landscape – Highbury is in Surrey, exactly sixteen miles from London. Often she has her characters walk along real streets in real places. In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe saunter together through the streets of Bath. You can follow in their footsteps even now. It’s still possible to stand on the harbour wall at Lyme and see where Louisa Musgrove fell in *Persuasion*.

Critics of Jane’s own generation praised her for her unparalleled ability to accurately reproduce what she saw around her. ‘Her merit consists altogether in her remarkable talent for observation’, pronounced Richard Whateley, the Archbishop of Dublin in 1821, in a lengthy review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. For Whateley, what made Jane great was her ‘accurate and unexaggerated delineation of events and characters’. He was the first to suggest that she was as great as

* Captain Wentworth’s clergyman brother is a partial exception but we never actually meet him.

Shakespeare, repeatedly comparing the two. Robert Southey, friend to William Wordsworth, brother-in-law to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and one-time revolutionary, was by this point snug in the bosom of the establishment as Poet Laureate, the official poet to royalty. In future years he would strongly discourage Charlotte Brontë from writing, but he admired Jane's novels and thought them 'more true to nature ... than any other of this age'. The American writer Henry Longfellow admitted that Jane's writings were 'a capital picture of real life', but complained that 'she explains and fills out too much'. In 1830 an unsigned essay in the *Edinburgh Review* called Jane 'too natural'. There was clearly an agreement that Jane's novels were realistic, and it was this which made them unique.

With a shift of generation, though, readers began to struggle a little more. Serious literary critics such as Thomas Macaulay and George Henry Lewes (both born the year Jane died) repeated and strengthened the comparison to Shakespeare, a comparison which concentrated on Jane's depiction of character to the exclusion of anything else in her novels, and consigned her, not unlike Shakespeare, to the status of genius – inexplicable, mysterious, timeless. Popular opinion echoed, obediently. An early American textbook on literature, published in 1849, claimed that Jane's novels 'may be considered as models of perfection'. An article in an English magazine series on 'Female Novelists' which appeared in 1852 asserted that Jane was the 'perfect mistress of all she touches'.

Few mid-Victorian readers questioned Jane's greatness but often they seemed bemused by her writing. They wondered why Jane should have chosen to depict a society 'which ... presents the fewest salient points of interest and singularity to the novelist'. Charlotte Brontë admitted to finding Jane's novels unengaging, though she thought it was probably 'heresy' to criticise. 'Miss Austen', she announced in a letter to a literary correspondent in 1850, is 'a rather insensible woman'. She may do 'her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well', but she 'ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her'.

But Charlotte had such a very definite idea of what Jane's writing consists of that, finding it confirmed in the one novel, *Emma*, which she's discussing in this letter, she didn't think it necessary to consider anything else that Jane might have written. As the century went on, increasingly readers appeared to pay more attention to what they already 'knew' about Jane's novels – that is, to what was already said about them – than to the texts themselves. Increasingly, too, there was a hunger not for novels, but for novelists.

Charlotte Brontë died in 1855, and a biography of her appeared two years later. G.H. Lewes, writing about Jane in 1859, complained that so little was known of Jane's life in comparison to Charlotte's. He was, he said, baffled at the spectacle of 'a fine artist whose works are widely known and enjoyed, being all but unknown to the English public, and quite unknown abroad'. This isn't quite true. In 1852 an American fan – the daughter of a former President of Harvard University, no less – had written to Jane's brother Frank, begging for a letter or even a sample of Jane's handwriting. What was still true, though, was that nothing more was known of Jane's life than what Henry had written in 1817.



In the late 1860s, Jane's nephew James-Edward Austen-Leigh – the son of her eldest brother James – started to collect material from his sisters and cousins and published the result in 1869 as *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Two years later a second edition appeared. Born in 1798, James-Edward had lived through enough of the war period – and absorbed enough of its caution in literary matters – to remain tight-lipped on the subject of his aunt's personal beliefs. He explained that she never wrote about subjects she didn't understand, and paid 'very little' attention to political questions – or only enough to agree with whatever the rest of the family thought. She lived a life 'singularly barren ... of events'. She was 'sweet', 'loving', her personality 'remarkably calm and even'. So entirely devoid of interest is this Jane, in fact, that James-Edward had to

pad out his memoir with other material: his own memories of growing up in the rectory at Steventon; some ponderous history lessons on the manners of the late eighteenth century; a letter sent by an aristocratic great-great-grandmother. The second edition of the *Memoir* includes, as well, quite a lot of previously unpublished material by Jane. Notable by its absence – for James-Edward certainly had access to it – is Jane's teenage *History of England*, a hilarious piece of writing which delights in upsetting religious and political sensitivities. At one point the authoress even declares herself 'partial to the roman catholic religion'.

The *Memoir* does, however, succumb to little spurts of Victorian romance. James-Edward gives the reader an improbable story about his uncle Henry and aunt Eliza escaping through wartime France when the brief peace of 1802–3 abruptly ended. He tells us that his aunt Jane had at one point 'declined the addresses of a gentleman who had the recommendations of good character, and connections, and position in life, of everything, in fact, except the subtle power of touching her heart'. He records 'one passage of romance' – an acquaintance with a man at 'some seaside place' who died soon afterwards. Although this tale is so vague as to be scarcely worth the telling – even James-Edward admits that he is 'imperfectly acquainted' with the details, and 'unable to assign name, or date, or place' – he nevertheless assures his readers that 'if Jane ever loved, it was this unnamed gentleman'. His source, at several removes, was apparently Cassandra, whom biographers have tended to view as Jane's confidante and – as James-Edward calls her – a 'sufficient authority'. But in Jane's novels even the closest, the most affectionate of sisters – Marianne and Elinor Dashwood, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet – have secrets from one another.

In fact none of the romantic stories about Jane stands up to scrutiny. The two most frequently repeated ones concern Jane's relationship with a young Irishman called Tom Lefroy, and her 'broken engagement' with a neighbour, Harris Bigg-Wither. The story that Jane was betrothed to Harris for one night, and broke off the engagement in the morning, has been repeated so often that it's viewed as a matter of fact. Biographers

even offer a date for the proposal – Thursday 2nd December 1802. This information comes from a letter written in 1870 by James-Edward's sister Caroline. 'I can give, I *believe*', writes Caroline, then aged 65 and so not even alive in 1802, 'the *exact* date of Mr Wither's proposal to my Aunt.' Caroline's source is 'some entries in an old pocket book which make *no* allusion to anything of the sort – but some peculiar comings & goings coinciding exactly with what my Mother more than once told me of *that* affair, leave me in no doubt'. Caroline's mother Mary, whom Jane disliked, had died in 1843. This is family or even neighbourhood gossip, transmitted long after the event; how much can we trust it?

There seems at first to be much more evidence to support the idea that, in her early twenties, Jane had some involvement with Tom Lefroy, the nephew of the vicar in the neighbouring village. He dominates a letter of January 1796 – Tom's birthday, Tom's good looks, Tom's coat, dancing with Tom, sitting out with Tom, Tom being teased about her. In another letter, apparently written around a week later, Jane jokes about giving up her other admirers – 'Mr Heartley', 'C. Powlett', and 'Warren' – because 'I mean to confine myself in future to Mr Tom Lefroy, for whom I donot [*sic*] care sixpence'. Tom is mentioned a second time towards the end of the letter, in a tone which, again, doesn't seem entirely serious, though perhaps the humour is defensive; 'at length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will all be over – My tears flow as I write, at the melancholy idea.' As late as November 1798 Jane seems still to be emotionally invested in Tom: 'I was too proud to make any enquiries; but on my father's afterwards asking ... I learnt that he was gone back to London in his way to Ireland.' There's been a popular biopic (2007's *Becoming Jane*) based on these letters, and they look very promising – romantic, stirring – until we delve a little deeper.

All three letters are missing. We have no idea where they currently are. Two of them – the first and the last – have never been seen by *anyone* outside the Austen family. Our only authority for what they say – or indeed, for the fact that they existed at all – is the volume of *Letters*

published in 1884 by Lord Brabourne (Edward Austen's grandson, and so Jane's great-nephew).

The most recent edition of the complete *Letters*, published in 2011 and edited by Deirdre Le Faye, lists 161 of Jane's letters, notes, and drafts. When it comes to manuscripts of the letters, however – the actual objects themselves, written in Jane's own handwriting – it's a different story. Over twenty are missing altogether. Another 25 are either scraps (some of them tiny) or have been significantly cut about. Of what remains, more than twenty can't really be dated at all, and nearly 30 others only from internal evidence, with varying degrees of confidence.

But biographers need the letters – they need all of them. They need Henry's *Biographical Notice*, even though it's full of lies, and they need James-Edward's *Memoir*, which has so very little to say about Jane. They need Harris Bigg-Wither, and Tom Lefroy, and they're not prepared to let the absence of proof that anything happened between Jane and either of these two men stand in their way.

There is a story to be told, though. We don't need to doubt everything. We can use quite a number of the letters, with caution – certainly the ones written in Jane's own hand, and which can be dated confidently. And even if we accept that we'll never know whether Jane really wrote on a small table in the dining room at Chawton, or whether there was a huge hiatus in her writing life, we do still have the writing itself – in particular, the novels of her maturity, balanced, considered, artful.

We can't discount the possibility that her novels underwent some degree of external editing. In a letter written in January 1813, Jane, brimming with happiness at the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, cheerfully mentions some 'typical errors' (that is, typographical errors made in the setting of the book), and talks about having 'lop't and crop't' it at some point. We have no way of knowing whether this shortening was the result of Jane's own artistic judgement or was suggested by the publisher.

Even edited, even shortened, it's the novels as they were printed that bring us as close to Jane as we're ever going to get, closer than any memoir or biography could – closer not necessarily to what she might

have done or felt, but to what she thought. It's impossible for anyone to write thousands upon thousands of words and reveal nothing of how they think or what they believe. And, contrary to popular opinion, Jane *did* reveal her beliefs, not just about domestic life and relationships, but about the wider political and social issues of the day.

She did so warily – and with good reason, as we have seen. But when she was writing, she was anticipating that her readers would understand how to read between the lines, how to mine her books for meaning, just as readers in Communist states learned how to read what writers had to learn how to write. Jane's novels were produced in a state which was, essentially, totalitarian. She had to write with that in mind. The trick was never to be too explicit, too obvious, never to have a sentence or a paragraph to which someone could point, and say – Look, there – it's there you criticise the state, it's there you say that marriage traps women, that the Church is crammed with hypocrites, that you promote breaking society's rules. Jane did fail, once, to err on the side of caution. *Mansfield Park*, alone of all her books, wasn't reviewed on publication. This, as I will show, is because it was an inescapably political novel, from the title onwards – a 'fanatical novel' which continually forced its readers to confront the Church of England's complicity in slavery.

Jane talks in one letter about wanting readers who have 'a great deal of ingenuity', who will read her carefully. In wartime, in a totalitarian regime, and in a culture which took the written word far more seriously than we do, she could have expected to find them. Jane expected to be read slowly – perhaps aloud, in the evenings, or over a period of weeks as each volume was borrowed in turn from the circulating library. She expected that her readers would think about what she wrote, would even discuss it with each other.

She never expected to be read the way we read her, gulped down as escapist historical fiction, fodder for romantic fantasies. Yes, she wanted to be enjoyed; she wanted people to feel as strongly about her characters as she did herself. But for Jane a story about love and marriage wasn't ever a light and frothy confection. Generally speaking, we view sex as

an enjoyable recreational activity; we have access to reliable contraception; we have very low rates of maternal and infant mortality. None of these things was true for the society in which Jane lived. The four of her brothers who became fathers produced, between them, 33 children. Three of those brothers lost a wife to complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Another of Jane's sisters-in-law collapsed and died suddenly at the age of 36; it sounds very much as if the cause might have been the rupturing of an ectopic pregnancy, which was, then, impossible to treat. Marriage as Jane knew it involved a woman giving up everything to her husband – her money, her body, her very existence as a legal adult. Husbands could beat their wives, rape them, imprison them, take their children away, all within the bounds of the law. Avowedly feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the novelist Charlotte Smith were beginning to explore these injustices during Jane's lifetime. Understand what a serious subject marriage was then, how important it was, and all of a sudden courtship plots start to seem like a more suitable vehicle for discussing other serious things.

No more than a handful of the marriages Jane depicts in her novels are happy ones. And, with the possible exception of *Pride and Prejudice*, even the relationships between Jane's central characters are less than ideal – certainly not love's young dream. Marriage mattered because it was the defining action of a woman's life; to accept or refuse a proposal was almost the only decision that a woman could make for herself, the only sort of control she could exert in a world which must very often have seemed as if it was spiralling into turmoil. Jane's novels aren't romantic. But it's become increasingly difficult for readers to see this.

For a reader today, opening one of Jane's novels, there's an enormous amount standing between them and the text. There's the passage of 200 years, for a start, and then there's everything else – biographies and biopics, the lies and half-truths of the family memoirs, the adaptations and sequels, rewritings and re-imaginings.

When it comes to Jane, so many images have been danced before us; so rich, so vivid, so prettily presented. They've been seared onto our

retinas in the sweaty darkness of a cinema, and the after-effect remains, a shadow on top of everything we look at subsequently.

It's hard; it requires an effort for most readers to blink those images away, to be able to see Edward Ferrars cutting up a scissor case (a scene which arguably carries a strong suggestion of sexual violence) rather than Hugh Grant nervously rearranging the china ornaments on the mantelpiece. By the time you've seen Darcy poised to dive into a lake 50 times, it's made a synaptic pathway in your brain. Indeed, I'd question whether we can get away from that, certainly how we do.

And this ought to concern us, because a lot of the images – like the images on the banknote – are simplistic, and some of them are plain wrong. Pemberley *isn't* on the scale of Chatsworth; Captain Wentworth *doesn't* buy Kellynch Hall for Anne as a wedding present at the end of *Persuasion*; the environs of Highbury, the setting for *Emma*, aren't a golden pastoral idyll. We have, really, very little reason to believe that Jane was in love with Tom Lefroy. But each image colours our understanding in some way or another, from Henry Austen's careful portrait of his sister as an accidental author to Lily James delivering roundhouse kicks in the recent film of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

The effect of all of them together is to make us read novels that aren't actually there.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, famously suggested that there were three classes of knowledge. There were known knowns – things you know you know. There were known unknowns – things you know you don't know. And there were unknown unknowns – things you don't know you don't know.

I would suggest that, when dealing with someone like Jane Austen we could add another, and more dangerous, class of knowledge; what might be termed the unknown knowns – things we don't actually know, but think we do.

If we want to be the best readers of Jane's novels that we can be, the readers that she hoped for, then we have to take her seriously. We can't make the mistake that Crosby made, and let our eyes slide over

what doesn't seem to be important. We can't shrug off apparent contradictions, or look only for confirmation of what we think we already know. We have to read and we have to read carefully, because Jane had to write carefully, because she was a woman, and because she was living through a time when ideas both scared and excited people.

And once we read like this, we start to see her novels in an entirely new light. Not an undifferentiated procession of witty, ironical stories about romance and drawing rooms, but books in which an authoress reflects back to her readers their world as it really is – complicated, messy, filled with error and injustice. This is a world in which parents and guardians can be stupid, and selfish; in which the Church ignores the needs of the faithful; in which landowners and magistrates are eager to enrich themselves even when that means driving the poorest into criminality. Jane's novels, in truth, are as revolutionary, at their heart, as anything that Wollstonecraft or Tom Paine wrote. But, by and large, they're so cleverly crafted that unless readers are looking in the right places – reading them in the right way – they simply won't understand.

Jane wasn't a genius – inspired, unthinking; she was an artist. She compared herself to a miniature painter; in her work every stroke of the brush, every word, every character name and every line of poetry quoted, every location, matters.

It's here, in the novels, that we find Jane – what there is of her to find, after all these years, after all her family's efforts at concealment. It's here we find a clever woman, clear-sighted, a woman 'of information', who knew what was going on in the world and what she thought about it. An authoress who knew that the novel, until then widely seen as mindless 'trash', could be a great art form and who did a lot – perhaps more than any other writer – to make it into one.

We've grown too accustomed to the other Janes – to Henry's perfect sister and James-Edward's maiden aunt; to the romantic, reckless girl in *Becoming Jane* and the woman on the banknote. I'll try hard to shake these Janes off. In what follows, I offer flashes of an imaginary Jane Austen, sometimes in ordinary life, sometimes in the places she revisited in her

books, but always primarily as a writer. They're intended as glimpses of what the authoress might have been thinking, of how real events and locations, and people, might have made their way into her novels. I don't claim these as biography; even though they stay close to Jane's manuscript correspondence, and to her own writing, they're fiction.

Jane wouldn't, I think, have disapproved of this approach. *Northanger Abbey* contains a lengthy passage about history, about its blend of fact and fiction. The naive heroine Catherine Morland states an undoubted truth, that 'a great deal' of history is made up – 'the speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs – the chief of all this must be invention'. The older and more intelligent Eleanor Tilney, who reads history chiefly for pleasure, expresses herself 'very well contented to take the false with the true'. For Jane herself, though, fiction isn't simply an enjoyable embellishment. It can offer deeper truths than fact. It's in fiction, Jane says, that we should look for 'the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties'.

The 'truthful fictions' in *Jane Austen, The Secret Radical*, the glimpses of an unfamiliar woman, should help to prepare readers for novels which will also become suddenly unfamiliar. Each chapter is devoted to one book and suggests how, by forgetting what we think we know, and focusing instead on the historical background, and on the texts themselves, we can make an attempt at reading as Jane intended us to. Tackling them in the order in which they were made ready for publication, we'll move from *Northanger Abbey* to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and then on to *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. But these won't be the novels you know and love. These novels deal with slavery, with sexual abuse, with land enclosure, evolution, and women's rights. They poke fun at the monarchy, and question religion. I'll also shed new light on characters – on their behaviours and motivations – and the results won't always make for easy reading.

If you want to stay with the novels and the Jane Austen you already know, then you should stop reading now. If you want to read Jane as she wanted to be read – if you want to know her – then read on.

CHAPTER 2

‘The Anxieties of Common Life’

Northanger Abbey

*Summer 1799, the pleasure gardens at Bath.**

Trumpets sound. Fireworks explode against the night sky.

One gentleman, who has been squinting frowningly at the crowd, reaches a decision. He thrusts the watch away and looks about him for his sister. She is standing with a group of their Bath acquaintance, smiling and laughing, and it takes some little time to extricate her.

Would Jane be so obliging as to come with him to find his wife? He wouldn’t ask, only Elizabeth has been gone these twenty minutes or more. He is concerned that she might have been taken ill.

Jane takes her brother Edward’s arm and allows him to escort her along the avenue, between high hedges hung about with lanterns. They pass a couple murmuring and sighing in the shadows as the drifting light of a rocket reveals a bosom barer than even the most outlandish fashion is ever likely to approve.

Edward mutters something under his breath and hurries Jane on. She starts to giggle, and is still giggling as she skips up the steps and into the ladies’ retiring room. She stops only when she sees Elizabeth. Elizabeth is sitting on a chair, a basin on her lap, her face green. Jane, who has been drinking rack punch all the evening, feels her own stomach turn.

* Based on Jane Austen’s letters to Cassandra Austen (11th June and 19th June 1799).

Is it something Elizabeth has eaten? Jane asks. Or a bilious attack? Jane knows all about bilious attacks; half her family suffers from them.

No, replies Elizabeth, with what seems unwarranted ill-temper, not something that she's eaten, and she would have thought Jane knew enough of the world by now – she jerks forward and retches painfully into the bowl.

Jane, sobering, demands a cloth from one of the attendants and hesitantly – for she has never been close to her sister-in-law – sets about helping her.

And all she can think, all the while, is that William, the baby, is scarce nine months old, and that women aren't even sick straight away, and how could Edward—



Let's begin with *Northanger Abbey*, though I'm not altogether sure it's what Jane would have wanted.

The novel wasn't published until after her death in 1817, when it appeared together with *Persuasion*, but it belongs much earlier, to the beginning of her career as an 'authoress'. We've almost certainly had a glimpse of it already. Unless exactly the same fate befell two of her books independently, we can be confident that it's a version of *Susan*, the two-volume novel sold to the publisher Crosby in 1803. And unless yet another manuscript has gone missing altogether, we can also be fairly confident in identifying *Susan/Northanger Abbey* with the novel which, in one of her letters, Jane calls 'Miss Catherine'.*

* The issue is complicated by the survival among Jane's papers of a (very) short novel-in-letters focusing on the shockingly immoral behaviour of a character named Lady Susan Vernon and usually referred to as *Lady Susan*, though the title isn't Jane's. This survives copied onto paper which bears an 1805 watermark. There's also a short fragment of writing about a young girl called Catherine. The first isn't long enough to fill even half a volume, let alone two, while the second

But, whatever you want to call it, it wasn't a work which Jane could be confident about. It had been her first taste of success as a writer – £10, all of her own, her novel advertised in the press – but that success had turned into humiliating, inexplicable failure. For years the novel had sat on a shelf or in a drawer in Crosby's publishing house, tantalisingly out of her reach, utterly beyond her control.

Aside from its pre-publication history, and the fact that it's the shortest of Jane's six novels – even shorter than *Persuasion* – there's not, on the surface, much that's remarkable about *Northanger Abbey*. Few people ever name it as their favourite Jane Austen novel. Few people hate the book, either; it tends not to evoke particularly strong feelings from readers. And you can see why.

The main male character, Henry Tilney, definitely belongs to the second tier of heroes; he's not a Darcy, or a Wentworth. He is 'rather tall', has 'a pleasing countenance' and 'a very intelligent and lively eye', but he is 'not quite handsome'. Firmly under the paternal thumb for most of the novel, he dominates where he can, lecturing the women in his life about anything and everything. At times this is teasing, it can even be flirtatious; over time, one suspects, it would grow wearisome. We're told that Henry's love for Catherine, the heroine, 'originated in nothing better than gratitude', that 'a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought'. It's hardly a romance to echo down the ages.

Catherine has none of Lizzy Bennet's impatient intelligence, none of Fanny Price's panicky fastidiousness. She isn't self-consciously

is not much more than a very tentative first sketch of an opening. Unless we start inventing manuscripts from nowhere, then, the safest hypothesis is that *Susan*, 'Miss Catherine' and *Northanger Abbey* are essentially one and the same text. As we'll see, nearly all the incidental detail in *Northanger Abbey* points to it having been written in the late 1790s or the first couple of years of the nineteenth century, strengthening the supposition that it is *Susan*. The identification remains hypothesis, however, rather than fact.

unconventional like Marianne, or complacent like Emma. Comparing her to Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, published alongside *Northanger Abbey* and, like *Northanger*, set partly in Bath, shows how far Jane matured as a novelist between her twenties and her early forties. Anne is clever, she is good, but she's also fully psychologically real.

Catherine is ... well, nothing very much. She's neither intelligent nor dim; 'often inattentive and occasionally stupid', she nevertheless learns to recite 'the fable of "The Hare and Many Friends" as quickly as any girl in England'. On her best days, in the first flush of her youthful bloom, she is 'almost pretty'. Even her virtues are vague, weak, described by *not* being faults: 'she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper, was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny.'

What she is, is malleable, impressible. As a child with three older brothers she's 'fond of all boy's plays' – 'cricket, base ball, riding on horseback and running about the country'. With the onset of puberty, she adapts herself with great docility to the business of becoming a young woman. She begins to 'curl her hair and long for balls'. She develops 'an inclination for finery'. In matters of gender conformity, of fashion, of flirtation, in her own conception of herself, Catherine is easily swayed. She retains a tendency to run rather than walk, and she has moments of resistance and independent thought, but they're few and far between, and readers of a pessimistic disposition may worry that marriage to Henry will do very little to encourage her to think for herself.

Catherine isn't much of a heroine. It's the point that Jane makes over and over again. She's a heroine whom 'no one' would imagine 'born to be a heroine'. Everything is against her; 'her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition'. Her mind is 'unpropitious for heroism'. Even her artistic skills fall 'miserably short of the true heroic height'. She has 'by nature nothing heroic about her'. It's something she has to work at, to be 'in training for'.

Her training takes the form of reading. 'From fifteen to seventeen', Catherine ploughs through 'all such works as heroines must read'. The reading itself isn't a new pastime for her; it's only the 'works', the texts, which have changed. Reading is the sole pleasure which survives from Catherine's childhood, the only occupation she's been allowed to pursue throughout her life. The horse-riding, the cricket, the 'rolling down the green slope at the back of the house', she's had to abandon all of these. Even as a tomboyish child, though, she liked to read, 'she never objected to books at all'.

But she does it wrong, doesn't she? Everyone knows that's what *Northanger Abbey* is about – Catherine's inability to read properly, her inability to interpret texts correctly, to separate fiction and reality. Excited, and rapidly obsessed by Gothic novels, she convinces herself that they present an accurate picture of the world around her. When the modern appearance of *Northanger Abbey* disappoints her fevered expectations, she invents a Gothic plot for herself – a secret chamber, a wife murdered or imprisoned by her husband. Henry discovers her suspicions, shows her how absurd they are, and she obligingly abandons the 'alarms of romance' for 'the anxieties of common life'. That's what happens; that's the point, the moral. Silly girls shouldn't read silly novels.

Are we sure, though, that *we're* reading properly?

Northanger Abbey, after all, is the book which includes a lengthy passage defending the novel, as a genre, against its critics. 'I will not', Jane begins, 'adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding.' She's addressing (ostensibly at least) not her readers, but other novelists. 'Let us not desert one another,' she pleads, 'we are an injured body.' Novelists shouldn't join in with the 'threadbare' complaints of 'the reviewers', Jane says. Rather than censuring or abusing novels, Jane praises them – and in grandiose terms. 'Our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world', she declares. Novels have 'genius, wit,

and taste'; they display the 'greatest powers of the mind'. In them, 'the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language'. The novels she mentions by name – *Cecilia*, *Camilla*, *Belinda* – aren't just named for women, they're written by them too.

It wouldn't make all that much sense for Jane to go from celebrating women's novels to openly deriding a particular subset of novels – Gothic ones – which were also largely female-authored. In fact, the first reference to Gothic novels comes immediately after this impassioned defence of novels and novelists. It's true that Jane invites us to sneer at the 'literary taste' which Catherine and her new friend, the vapid Isabella Thorpe display, their desire for 'horrid' novels. A little later, though, she tells us that both Henry Tilney and his altogether admirable sister Eleanor enjoy Gothic authors.

We're missing something.

And this – it seems – was precisely what Jane worried about.



As we've seen, the publishing firm Crosby, having bought *Susan* in 1803, did nothing with it. Shortly before she moved from Southampton to Chawton, Jane wrote to them, in an attempt to force their hand. The attempt failed. We have no really reliable record of how and when she regained the rights,* but around 1816 or the beginning of 1817 she seems to have devoted some time to looking over the manuscript, and to thinking about finally publishing it. In the eight years that had passed since her run-in with Crosby in 1809 Jane had published four novels, had seen favourable reviews – some very favourable – and had been invited to dedicate one of her books to the Prince Regent. None of this had

* The story recounted in the family memoirs that Henry bought it back before taunting the publisher with the fact that the author had also written *Pride and Prejudice* seems terribly neat; possibly too neat to be true.

done away with her resentment. She composed a short, acidic 'advertisement', apparently intended as some sort of foreword to the book, and explaining what had happened to it. Most of the advertisement is a complaint about Crosby, though the firm is never named. It indicates how bruising the encounter had been, how sore a point the refusal to publish still was for her.

And perhaps her feelings were justified, because so far as Jane was concerned the delay in publication created endless – perhaps insurmountable – issues for her readers. The thirteen years that had passed since Crosby had accepted the book, the 'many more years' before then that she had worked on it, had, as she explains in the advertisement, made 'parts of the work ... comparatively obsolete'. Not only 'places', but 'manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes'.

If we believe Jane – and who else should we believe? – this tells us that we should be looking for the beginnings of the novel to a period 'many' years before 1803 – that is, to Jane's early twenties, somewhere in the mid-to-late 1790s.

We have a few of Jane's letters from this period. Several describe a visit to Bath in 1799 with her mother, her brother Edward and his wife Elizabeth. Edward rented a house in Queen Square, an area which, in *Persuasion*, the Musgrove sisters think undesirable, but which Jane liked, even if the house was number 13. It was 'cheerful', and the view from the drawing room window was 'rather picturesque'. She enjoyed travelling with her rich brother – the 'comfortable rooms' at the inn in Devizes, the 'asparagus, & lobster' and 'cheesecakes' they had for dinner.¹ She enjoyed the Bath shops – so much so that at times an underlying kinship with *Northanger Abbey's* fashion-obsessed chaperone Mrs Allen becomes apparent, with Jane sketching the pattern of some lace in the margin of a letter and announcing that, 'I saw some Gauzes in a shop in Bath Street yesterday at only 4s a yard, but they were not so good or so pretty as mine'.²

Like Catherine Morland, Jane was caught up in the social whirl of Bath. She saw an evening concert and fireworks display in the pleasure

gardens; 'the Fire-works ... were really beautiful, & surpassing my expectation; – the illuminations too were very pretty', she writes. Like Catherine, she attended a ball at the Assembly Rooms, promenaded in the Pump Room, and arranged to go to the theatre, which we know was showing *The Birthday* and *Blue Beard*.³

The Birthday, or *The Reconciliation*, is a sentimental comedy adapted from a German original by August von Kotzebue. Kotzebue also wrote the original German version of *Lovers' Vows*, which Jane has her characters plan to perform in *Mansfield Park*.

The Birthday features a lovely young woman – seventeen, like Catherine Morland – softening an unpleasant, bullying older man. It's preoccupied with novels. 'O dear! You must not read novels', says the heroine's sick father, 'I scarcely know three or four of them that I would put into your hands'. A man with a romantic interest in the heroine tries to seduce her with novels and, when his attempts at seduction fail, blackens her character. But the hero of *The Birthday* (in as far as there is one) is a doctor who actually writes novels. In addition, there's a dead mother and a locked chest.

Blue Beard was a comic operetta, a hugely popular Orientalised version of the fairy tale we're familiar with, in which a young woman, encouraged to wander freely around the house of an older, tyrannical man, is forbidden access to only one room – which she immediately becomes obsessed with getting into.

There are several other flashes in the letters from this visit which illuminate *Northanger Abbey*.

Driving into Bath, the Austens pass two acquaintances on the street, suggesting that the constant coincidental meetings in *Northanger* and *Persuasion* are a reflection of reality and not novelistic contrivance. Edward renews his friendship with a Mr Evelyn, a 'Yahoo', according to Jane, who 'has all his life thought more of Horses than of anything else'. Jane encounters a Mr Gould, who 'walked home with me after Tea; — he is a very Young Man, just entered of Oxford, wears Spectacles, & has heard that Evelina was written by D^r Johnson'. If we want to, we

can find something of these two gentlemen in John Thorpe. He too is obsessed with horses, and he too is an Oxford student with absurd views about novels. Mr Gould thinks that Fanny Burney’s novel *Evelina* must have been written by a man; John Thorpe doesn’t express an opinion on *Evelina*, but he dismisses Burney’s *Camilla* as a ‘stupid book’, ‘the horriddest nonsense you can imagine’, adding a touch of mindless racism about the author’s marriage to ‘a French emigrant’ for good measure.

The references to Burney in *Northanger Abbey* date to the late 1790s or very early 1800s, certainly no later than 1802 or 1803, since in 1802 Burney travelled to France to assist her French husband in some family business, taking advantage of the short-lived cessation of hostilities between France and Britain. When the war resumed in 1803, she was trapped on the wrong side of the Channel, remaining there for the next ten years. She didn’t return to England until shortly before the publication of her final novel, *The Wanderer*, in 1814 – a novel which sold poorly. For a reader of 1816 or 1817, Burney’s name would have had a very different meaning to the one it had held a decade or more earlier.

One of the books which had ‘undergone considerable changes’ between 1803 and 1816 was Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda*. In the original version of the novel a reader would have found reference to an interracial marriage. They would also have found a heroine who gives serious consideration to marrying a ‘Creole’ character. The term is a notoriously slippery one. At the end of the eighteenth century it denoted – usually – someone born in the West Indies, though whether of European parentage, or African, or of mixed racial heritage, wasn’t ever entirely clear. Edgeworth’s description of her ‘Creole’ character (Mr Vincent) is no more fixed. His ‘aquiline nose’ suggests European ancestry, but he has ‘large dark eyes’ and a ‘manly sunburnt complexion’. Purely European? Well, just like the first Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, maybe not. The 1810 edition of the novel, though, excises every suggestion of interracial or possibly interracial relationships.

It’s the first version of *Belinda* which Jane holds up as an example of the greatness of the novel, not the second, censored version. Her

literary references had taken on a different meaning; they no longer read as she'd originally intended. There was, in the late 1790s, something of a fashion for locked boxes in literature, and not just in Gothic novels. As mentioned above, they appear in Kotzebue's play *The Birthday*, in the novel *Caleb Williams* (written by Mary Shelley's father, the anarchist philosopher and conservative hate figure William Godwin), and in the play clearly based on *Caleb Williams*, *The Iron Chest*. These are the texts which Catherine's adventures at the abbey ought to be calling to mind.

The delay in publication separated *Northanger Abbey* for ever from the readership it had been designed for.

Did Jane decide that, after all, the delay had been too long, that the book couldn't be read as she had meant it to be? A letter to her niece Fanny suggests that the manuscript came to profoundly dissatisfy her, certainly that she didn't any longer consider it fit to be published as it stood: 'Miss Catherine is put upon the Shelve for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out.' This letter can be dated, from the postmark, to March 1817. Jane was taken very ill in April and continued that way for five or six weeks. In May she moved to Winchester for medical treatment. By the middle of July she was dead. There's not really much time for her to have revised the book. If 'Miss Catherine' is *Northanger Abbey* – and there's no other obvious candidate – then the text that Jane was so dissatisfied with, the text that she'd decided to put back on the shelf, perhaps to leave there permanently, must be almost exactly, word-for-word, the text that we're reading.



When we open *Northanger Abbey*, when we leaf through its pages, we're venturing somewhere that Jane wasn't really willing to let us go.

We're trespassing.

In a way it's quite fitting. Catherine, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, is constantly making her way into places where she has no business being; pushing past a servant at a front door; opening chests and cabinets; sneaking into a bedroom she knows she isn't meant to enter.

Jane herself – like so many people at a time when families of ten children were common, and families of twenty not unheard of – didn’t ever have that much privacy.* But in her novels, bedrooms – unless they’re also sick rooms – are clearly considered private spaces. The rule even applies to guest rooms. While staying with her friend Charlotte in Kent, Lizzy Bennet retreats to the ‘solitude of her chamber’ to think, or to read letters from her sister. No one disturbs her there. When, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters are staying in London with the well-meaning but vulgar Mrs Jennings, Jane sees fit to remark that the lady of the house doesn’t always wait for her knock to be answered before coming into their room – it’s a breach, not of etiquette precisely, but of a more profound social rule. It’s viewed as invasive.

And it’s seldom that we, as readers, are allowed into bedrooms – Jane takes us there far less often than the film and television adaptations would lead you to believe. Take *Mansfield Park*, for example; there are times when Sir Thomas Bertram’s interest in his niece Fanny Price drifts a little too far from the purely avuncular, but he never pursues her into her bedroom to berate her, as happens in the 1999 film version. Fanny’s cousin Edmund never sits on her bed to chat. She has a sitting room of her own. You’ll look in vain in *Pride and Prejudice* for the scene where Mrs Bennet, a heap of trembling lace propped up in bed, wails to her daughters and her brother about the runaway Lydia; we’re told specifically that she’s in her ‘dressing-room’.

It can be difficult to recognise the taboos of your own culture until you’re somewhere that doesn’t observe them. There’s a taboo, in modern British culture at least, against going into the bedroom of a married couple, a taboo which becomes far stronger when neither half of that couple is a member of your blood family. I hadn’t appreciated quite how

* The best-selling author of the day, Maria Edgeworth (who we’ll encounter briefly in the chapter on *Emma*), had 21 siblings and half-siblings. The Duchess of Leinster, mother of the Irish rebel leader Lord Edward Fitzgerald, gave birth 22 times.

strong it was until a few years ago, when I was in India for a friend's wedding. We were visiting her fiancé's house, and were ushered up into his parents' bedroom, where they were lying on the bed. They were fully dressed; there was a table of tea things. It's a normal way to socialise, apparently, in middle-class Delhi circles. But I had to force myself over the threshold of their bedroom. It felt profoundly unnatural to me. And this taboo – or one very similar to it – also seems to be operating in Jane's novels.

Jane makes a particular point of not taking us into the bedrooms of married women. She ventures in there on only two occasions. One is the brief scene in *Persuasion* when the unconscious Louisa Musgrove is carried to the bed of Captain and Mrs Harville, which doesn't really count, because Louisa is ill. The other occasion – the one which stands out – is in *Northanger Abbey*, when Catherine becomes obsessed with the idea of getting into the bedroom which belonged to the dead Mrs Tilney.

In fact *Northanger Abbey* is very much the exception when it comes to bedrooms. In it Jane offers us no fewer than three bedroom scenes, all of them lengthy, and all of them featuring the heroine Catherine.

In each scene we see Catherine working herself into a frenzy of excitement before opening or entering something. In one scene we're invited to visualise her half-dressed, her clothes falling off her ('having slipped one arm into her gown'). In another she's in her nightie. The sexual element is unmistakable.

Jane was a spinster, yes, but she wasn't prudish. The birds and the bees weren't a mystery to her. She grew up in the country, for one thing; in addition to his duties as a clergyman, and his tutoring, her father farmed. During her lifetime, her brothers produced 23 nieces and nephews for her. She often comments on pregnant women and childbirth in her letters. A sister-in-law 'is to be confined in the middle of April'.⁴ A neighbour, a Mrs Warren, 'has got rid of some part of her child, & danced away with great activity, looking by no means very large'.⁵ 'Dame Tilbury's daughter has lain in', Jane tells Cassandra, noting a few

lines later that another neighbour has been 'brought to bed of a dead child'.⁶ She boasts about picking a scandalous woman out of a crowd – 'I have a very good eye at an Adultress'.⁷ Her novels feature sex outside marriage, illegitimate children, adultery.

But English culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wasn't all that prudish either. It was sexist and morally judgemental, absolutely, but in other respects it was far more relaxed about bodies than we are. You find adverts for nipple cream in early nineteenth-century newspapers.* I've never seen a commercial on television or in the national press for that kind of product. An advertisement for 'Balm of Gilead' – again, in a newspaper – has no hesitation in announcing that it 'assists wonderfully in recovering the tone of the urinary and genital organs'. The advertisement refers openly to 'bad lyings-in', 'immoderate courses of the menses', 'repeated and difficult labours'. The only moments of bashfulness come when discussing masturbation and sexually transmitted disease, and even then the euphemisms are pretty transparent – 'those unhappy youths, who have been deluded at an early age into a secret and destructive vice'; 'where the fountain is polluted, the streams that flow from it cannot be pure'.⁸

There's a matter-of-factness here about sex and its dangers, and about the physical toll that childbirth takes on the female body, an awareness, a respect, almost, that in some ways we've lost. It was generally accepted that pregnancy and giving birth weren't unalloyed pleasures for women; in fact the eighteenth century saw quite a lot of research and development into surgical devices designed specifically to correct anal and vaginal prolapse. All of this perhaps goes some way towards explaining why, for the first two-thirds of Jane's life, abortion was perfectly legal. Up until 'quickening', that is, when it becomes possible to feel foetal movement, which usually happens closer to five months' gestation than four, women could take whatever measures they chose

* For example, in June 1799, when Jane was in Bath, the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* was running adverts for 'nipple liniment'.

to restore their ‘natural courses’ – their periods. In fact, before the passing of The Malicious Shooting or Stabbing Act (also known as Lord Ellenborough’s Act) in 1803, the law wasn’t altogether clear that even late abortion, after quickening, was a crime.*

Throughout the eighteenth century ‘female pills’ were freely advertised and sold alongside toothpaste, cough mixture, and face cream. It was claimed that they would correct ‘blocked’ or ‘suppressed’ periods. The adverts often mention something called chlorosis, or green-sickness, an illness unique to women who were past puberty but still virgins, and which was thought to be caused by a blockage of menstrual blood. There was, then, a ‘genuine’ medical need for such products, unrelated to abortion. But it’s difficult to believe that suppliers didn’t intend to suggest that their pills could ‘correct’ an unwanted pregnancy as well. We know the composition of some of these pills, either from *materia medica* (chemists’ recipe books) or because adverts list the ingredients. Many contained recognised abortifacients – myrrh, aloes, senna, savin oil. They might not have worked, but they weren’t difficult to come by. Even after 1803 the advertisements continued unabated. You could purchase by mail-order, at chemists, at booksellers and – a point to bear in mind – in circulating libraries.†

The culture Jane had grown up in didn’t require women to be always joyously accepting of pregnancy.

Childbirth, after all, was dangerous. The figures are difficult to get to grips with, because cause of death was seldom recorded, and even where it was, accuracy can be an issue. Historians of the subject generally agree, though, that maternal mortality fell quite substantially between the mid-seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century.

* Lord Ellenborough’s Act also altered the law on infanticide, which previously automatically assumed that the mother of an illegitimate newborn baby found dead had murdered it.

† Britain’s largest chain of chemists, Boots, ran lending libraries in many of their stores until the middle of the twentieth century.

The fall doesn't coincide either with the move towards 'man-midwives' or the introduction of forceps. Of course, England was in the throes of a bloody civil war during the middle of the seventeenth century. There would have been an increase in levels of stress and in the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, and a decrease in the quality of nutrition – all of which can affect pregnancy outcomes, often for more than one generation – so part of the fall may be a return to more 'normal' levels.

But those levels are still, for us, unimaginably high.

It's estimated that during the Regency period, two women died for every hundred babies that were born, so a 1 in 50 risk. That compares to modern maternal death rates in the UK of about 1 in 12,000 live births, and of about 1 in 7,000 live births in the US, according to the most recent figures from the World Health Organization. Still, 1 in 50 doesn't sound all that bad, does it, for the olden days? But these figures aren't the lifetime risk for a woman. That is higher, and it depends – now, as then – on how many children she gives birth to: nowadays, in developed countries with access to contraception, rarely more than two or three, but during Jane's lifetime perhaps as many as eight (as in her own family), or ten, or a dozen or more.

Not every labour is dangerous, but having lots is. Even now, first labours are statistically riskier, with the risk then decreasing before rising again sharply on the rare occasions that pregnancies get towards double figures. Independently of the number of pregnancies a woman has had, she runs a greater risk the older she is. Very young women are also in greater danger. But the fact remains that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the lifetime risk of a woman dying while giving birth or from complications of labour was substantial. Post-partum haemorrhage, sepsis; they were very likely to kill you. And there were complications of pregnancy to be considered as well. Ectopic pregnancy was inevitably fatal. In 1855, the novelist Charlotte Brontë died from what was very probably hyperemesis – the violent, unrelenting nausea and vomiting which the current Duchess of Cambridge has suffered from in both her pregnancies. The only treatment for eclampsia

was to deliver the baby (this remained the sole treatment until 1957). Caesarean section was very rarely used; surgeons weren't skilled in it. In the pre-hygiene era, it amounted to a death sentence for the mother anyway.

Almost every family had a tale of maternal death to tell, though of course they might not always have told it. One of Jane's own grandmothers, Rebecca Austen, seems to have died giving birth. Class and wealth didn't make much difference. At the end of 1817, Princess Charlotte, the second in line to the throne, laboured for two days to give birth to a still-born son, before dying herself.

And even when childbirth didn't prove fatal, even when there weren't life-altering birth injuries, frequent and repeated pregnancies took a physical toll. This is very much the view that Jane expresses in her letters. Consoling her niece Fanny on a disappointed love affair, she points out that, 'by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while M^{rs} W^m Hammond [one of Fanny's friends] is growing old by confinements & nursing'. Later in the letter, she glumly informs Fanny that another niece, Anna, seems to be pregnant again; 'Anna has had a bad cold, looks pale, & we fear something else. — She has just weaned Julia.'

After Anna's pregnancy had been confirmed, Jane wrote to Fanny again, a letter which fairly reverberates with rage about the endless child-bearing she saw all around her. 'Poor Animal', she says of Anna, 'she will be worn out before she is thirty. — I am very sorry for her. — M^{rs} Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children. — M^{rs} Benn has a 13th —.'

This negative attitude towards pregnancy and childbirth, the sense of how relentless reproduction could be, isn't really expressed in the novels. A number of Jane's married female characters are childless – more than one would expect. The Crofts, in *Persuasion*, have no children, nor do the Allens in *Northanger Abbey*. Lady Russell, Mrs Smith, Mrs Norris – all were married for years and none, so far as we know, has ever had a child.

With the possible exception of Mary Musgrove, in *Persuasion*, the characters who are mothers take pregnancy in their stride.* The two children to be born in the main action of the novels – and it is only two, since we don't learn about one of the births in *Sense and Sensibility* until afterwards – make their appearance very unproblematically. Mrs Palmer is pregnant for most of *Sense and Sensibility*, giving birth about two-thirds of the way through; there's no indication that anyone ever worries about her at all. In *Emma*, when the heroine's friend and former governess Mrs Weston gives birth, we're told that her 'friends all rejoiced in her safety', indicating an undercurrent of suppressed anxiety. But this is the only place in the text that anything approaching concern for her condition is mentioned – even by the health-obsessed Mr Woodhouse.

True, in *Mansfield Park*, the heroine's mother, married, we're told, eleven years and already 'preparing for her ninth lying-in', is described – unsurprisingly – as 'bemoaning the circumstance'. The pregnancy is unwanted – surely resented. But the problem appears to be money. There is 'such a superfluity of children, and such a want of almost everything else'. Other large families in the novels – the Lucases in *Pride and Prejudice*; the Morlands in *Northanger Abbey*; the Musgroves in *Persuasion* – are generally pretty cheerful. The mothers, in each case, are hale and hearty.

It's odd. We know that this isn't how Jane saw the matter, and that it isn't an accurate representation of childbirth at the time. And it's particularly odd in fiction. Novels of the period almost always made their heroes and heroines orphans, or apparently orphans. Tragic deaths in childbirth happened all the time in books.

Jane even jokes about it, at the very beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, saying how 'remarkable' it is that her heroine's mother should possess

* It seems probable that Mary Musgrove is pregnant during the main action of *Persuasion*. She likes to coddle herself, but the younger of her two sons is two years old, a very usual age-gap, and we're told that she is 'indisposed' and expects 'that she should not have a day's health all the autumn'.

such a 'good constitution', how unexpected that, rather than dying having Catherine, Mrs Morland has 'lived on to have six children more' and 'see them growing up around her'. It's part of the fun Jane has in the opening chapters, skewering every novelistic convention she can think of.

But when Jane re-read the novel in 1816 or 1817, with a view to possibly publishing, did she wince at this passage? In 1814, after all, her sister-in-law Frances died giving birth to a fourth child. Edward's wife Elizabeth had given birth to ten children without turning a hair – just like Mrs Morland. In 1808, an eleventh child killed her.

What is clear is that Jane was aware that, in the absence of any information to the contrary, her readers would assume that it was complications of labour which had killed characters of child-bearing age. She quite often makes a point of explaining that a death wasn't related to childbirth. A 'lingering illness' does for one character. Anne Elliot's mother, it appears, has also been ill for some time – she anticipates her own demise. Two characters die of consumption – or so we're told: Jane Fairfax's mother in *Emma*, and Colonel Brandon's first love Eliza in *Sense and Sensibility*.*

Just as we, hearing of the sudden death of a young or youngish woman, default to ideas of a car crash or cancer, so Jane's readers would guess at childbirth as a cause of death before anything else, for married women at least. So even if Jane herself had a less negative view of the risks of reproduction at the time she wrote *Northanger Abbey*, before her sisters-in-law started to die in childbed, she knew that for her readers the prospect of dying giving birth wasn't distant. The real risk was substantial; the fear must have haunted every pregnant woman. It wouldn't have been amusing – it was deathly serious.



* Consumption was a leading cause of death, but as we'll see later, there could be reasons to mistrust some of the assertions made about these two deaths.

But most critics agree that *Northanger Abbey* shouldn't be taken too seriously. It's comic – ridiculous, light-hearted, Jane's 'funniest novel'.¹⁰ They all agree that Catherine's view of the world, her expectations of what she'll find at Northanger, are completely – and hilariously – warped by the Gothic novels she's read.

As we've seen, though, Jane surely hoped – she surely intended, when she wrote it – for her readers to find something different and altogether more complicated in the novel. Jane assumed, when she was writing the book, that her readers would know certain novels and plays, would read certain references into the text. This is what she's talking about, in the advertisement. She expected, originally, readers who were familiar enough with Gothic novels to realise what's passed nearly every modern reader by – the fact that Catherine Morland, probably the best-known Gothic novel reader in the world, reads only one Gothic novel, and doesn't even seem to finish it.

We're told that the Gothic is a new sub-genre for Catherine, told, indeed, that she hasn't read very many novels, certainly not as many as the other characters she encounters. 'New books', she explains, 'do not fall in our way.' The only 'new book' she does read, or begin to read, is *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by Ann Radcliffe. Radcliffe was the most famous Gothic novelist of the 1790s. She wrote six novels and a book of travel writing, and made quite a lot of money by doing so. She received £800 for one of her works, a considerable sum for the rights to a novel. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794, is Radcliffe's fourth novel. It's a big book – getting towards 700 pages in the modern Oxford World's Classics edition, four volumes in the original. It's set during the sixteenth century and tells the story of a French girl, Emily St Aubert, beautiful, virtuous, and unlucky. Her mother dies at the end of the first chapter, her father in Chapter 7. Taken in by an unfeeling aunt, she shortly acquires a new uncle in the form of the villainous Italian Montoni, and is carted off to Italy – first to Venice and then to the mysterious, crumbling Castle of Udolpho.

Udolpho, as the novel's title suggests, is full of mysteries, and of threats – unwanted suitors, brigands, the unspeakable horror that lurks behind a picture covered with a 'black veil'. The most tangible threat, though, is Montoni himself, who wants to gain control of his wife's money and estates. Once his wife dies in suspicious circumstances, Montoni turns the pressure onto Emily, who is her aunt's heiress. Emily eventually escapes, returns to France, is rescued from a shipwreck, and takes refuge with the Count de Villefort and his children, Henri and Blanche. Mysteries continue, however; haunting music plays, strange sounds are heard, characters inexplicably resemble the dead, or vanish from a locked room. Mad nuns mutter. But the truth, when it emerges, is all resolutely natural. There are no ghosts; everything is explained. There has been murder, though. One of Emily's uncles has indeed murdered his wife, but a different uncle, not Montoni. Montoni has only ever been interested in money. Emily eventually marries Valancourt, her anaemic love interest, and returns to her family estates in France.

Catherine Morland, or so we gather, is introduced to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by her friend Isabella Thorpe. Isabella, who is four years older than Catherine, and 'at least four years better informed' in matters of society and fashion, has a course of 'horrid' novel reading planned; 'when you have finished Udolpho', she tells Catherine, 'we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you'. The list, in fact, contains only seven titles – 'Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries'. These are all real novels; they're a handful of the rash of second-rate imitations that emerged as the Gothic became successful. Jane probably wouldn't have ever anticipated that her audience would know them really well.

Isabella, it's clear, hasn't read any of these novels herself; she's going on the recommendation of her 'particular friend' Miss Andrews who has 'read every one of them'. *Not* reading is quite a theme in this most self-consciously bookish of Jane's novels.

How much of *Udolpho* Isabella has read is unclear. Catherine announces that 'I am got to the black veil', that is, early in Volume 2, where Emily becomes intrigued by a veiled picture frame hung in a 'dark corner' of one of the castle's many unoccupied chambers. Isabella's response is to exclaim, 'Are you indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?', which suggests that she has at least glanced at the final pages of the last volume. There's no indication she's read more, though. Elsewhere in *Northanger*, Jane takes the time to indicate exactly how familiar a character is with a particular novel. Henry Tilney demonstrates that he has indeed read *Udolpho*; he comes close, at one point, to quoting sections of it from memory. It's made just as clear that Isabella's brother John tends to skim-read the novels he does bother to open. Isabella, fickle and impatient, may well have developed similar reading habits. So too, it turns out, may Catherine.

At the time Jane tells us she was writing *Northanger*, though, most readers *would* have read *Udolpho*. Jane could have expected them to recognise that, if Catherine has only got as far as the 'black veil', she has another two and a half volumes of *Udolpho* to go, over 400 pages in modern money. And she has no time to read them.

In fact, from the very point that we're told how far Catherine has got in the text, everything conspires to interrupt her reading.

In the next chapter, her brother James and Isabella's brother John, who are university friends, arrive in Bath.* Catherine reads a little more during that afternoon, and a little the next morning, but later that day drives out to Claverton Down. The evening is spent at a theatre, the morning after at the Pump Room. All that afternoon, and the next day (a Thursday), her 'chief concern' is 'what gown and what head-dress she should wear' at the ball on Thursday evening. On the Friday morning, Catherine doesn't read but instead divides her attention between the

* Incidentally, since it's February and term-time, they're breaking the University of Oxford's strict residence requirements.

window and 'the clock', anxious that her planned walk with Eleanor Tilney will have to be put off because of the weather. She drives out in the afternoon – tricked into it by John Thorpe, who claims that he has seen the Tilneys setting off without her. The evening is spent with the Thorpes. On Saturday, Catherine can think of little else but her fear that she has offended the Tilneys; in the evening she sees them at the theatre and is happy to discover that the situation is repairable. No reading here.

The day after, as Jane makes a point of reminding us, is Sunday and Catherine, clergyman's daughter that she is, surely doesn't read novels on a Sunday. On Monday she goes for a walk to Beechen Cliff with Eleanor and Henry Tilney, and then goes shopping 'for some indispensable yard of ribbon'. She may perhaps read a little, but we're not told that she does. On Tuesday the news of Isabella and James's engagement is revealed. Catherine spends most of this day, and the next, with Isabella, 'in schemes of sisterly happiness'; later that day she dines with the Tilneys. The next day she visits Isabella, and the evening is spent at a ball – there is no mention of reading.

At the beginning of Chapter 17 we learn that Catherine has been in Bath for five weeks. There's a week or ten days which passed before Catherine made any acquaintances. She then met Henry one day, and the Thorpes the next. 'Eight or nine days' later, James and John arrive. Call that three weeks or thereabouts. Almost all of the next two weeks are detailed above. It's also in Chapter 17 that Eleanor Tilney invites Catherine to come for a visit when they leave Bath at the end of the week. That week, for Catherine, passes away in dreams of Northanger, and in growing suspicions of Isabella's devotion to James, but not, it seems, in reading.

Henry Tilney is highly educated, highly literate, a self-confessed lover of novels ('I have read hundreds and hundreds'). He's an expert reader. He boasts that he finished *Udolpho* 'in two days', that's two full days of uninterrupted reading. Catherine never manages to carve out anything approaching this kind of reading time. And she isn't a terribly experienced novel reader – she hasn't, for example, read Burney's

Camilla, which was a hugely successful, popular book. As we saw above, it's clear that she's read the first volume of *Udolpho*, and that she's started the second.

But it's also strongly suggested that, even though Catherine at one point seems to mention a scene which takes place in the fourth volume, she *hasn't* read any of the rest of the second half of the novel, or if she has, she's been flicking through in an effort to find all the really exciting bits. On the journey to Northanger, Henry starts to tease her about what she might find at the abbey:

'But you must be aware that when a young lady is (by whatever means) introduced into a dwelling of this kind, she is always lodged apart from the rest of the family. While they snugly repair to their own end of the house, she is formally conducted by Dorothy, the ancient housekeeper, up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before. Can you stand such a ceremony as this? Will not your mind misgive you when you find yourself in this gloomy chamber—too lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size—its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance? Will not your heart sink within you? [...] Dorothy, meanwhile, no less struck by your appearance, gazes on you in great agitation, and drops a few unintelligible hints.'

Catherine is naively entranced. 'Oh! Mr Tilney, how frightful! This is just like a book!' It's like lots of books – Henry's patching together scenes and descriptions from Gothic novels and adding his own exaggerations. He takes the bedchamber without a lock from the second volume of *Udolpho*, but what the whole passage most resembles is the third and fourth volumes of the novel, in particular the chapters when the family of the Count de Villefort arrive at Chateau-le-Blanc and, shortly afterwards, help to rescue Emily from shipwreck, and the chapters which

concentrate on the apparently haunted bedchamber in which the former mistress of the chateau died.

The housekeeper at the Chateau-le-Blanc is called Dorothée. On the first night that Blanche, the daughter of the Count de Villefort, spends at the chateau, she has to pass ‘through a long oak gallery’ to reach her bed-chamber, a room with ‘spacious and lofty walls’ and ‘high antiquated casements’. It has a ‘gloomy air’ and is in ‘a remote situation’, away from the rest of the family. The chamber is ‘hung’ with ‘faded tapestry’. Blanche’s canopied bed is draped with ‘blue damask’. Dorothée later remarks on Emily’s similarity to her late mistress (unsurprisingly, since Emily is that lady’s niece). A little later in his story Henry mentions a fluttering tapestry which conceals a secret entrance; that, too, is a scene which takes place at the Chateau-le-Blanc.

Catherine doesn’t seem to register any of these quite obvious similarities. ‘I am sure your housekeeper is not really Dorothy’, she says, half-doubtingly – surely if she’d actually read these chapters, she would have recognised not just the name but this part of the story, straight away, would realise that Henry is teasing her. She would get the joke, as Henry means for her to do. But it seems to sail over her head. Concerns about ghosts, madness, or secret entrances – all of which are prominent towards the end of *Udolpho* – never occur to her. Nor does she seem to realise that there’s a character named ‘Henri’ in the novel – and that the name of Henri’s sister Blanche, like the name Eleanor, is a French name, associated with European royalty.* Wouldn’t the coincidence have caught her interest?

When Catherine finds the chest in her bedroom at the abbey, she’s completely perplexed by the monogram; ‘She could not, in whatever direction she took it, believe the last letter to be a T; and yet that it should be anything else in that house was a circumstance to raise no common degree of astonishment.’ Why is she so astonished? The chest has presumably come from one of the women who married into the

* One of the granddaughters of Eleanor of Aquitaine was named Blanche.

Tilney family. If Catherine has read the second half of *Udolpho*, she's encountered numerous examples of female characters inheriting property from other women.

Well, actually, all of this points to the same conclusion as her continued fascination with the character of Montoni: she hasn't read the second half of the novel. The characters of Henri and Blanche aren't introduced until the middle of the third volume; what Henry's Gothic story does, as well as igniting Catherine's imagination, is to indicate that, just as we ought to be suspecting from how little time she's spent reading, Catherine hasn't reached that point in the book yet. Thinking of Gothic buildings, she doesn't think about the Chateau-le-Blanc, the building which dominates the last third of *Udolpho*. She talks about buildings being 'uninhabited and left deserted for years, and then the family come back to it unawares, without giving any notice, as generally happens' – that's what happens with *Udolpho*, but in the case of the Chateau, servants are sent ahead from Paris to prepare the house.

Catherine, we're told, has brought both her writing desk and her netting box with her to Northanger; she hasn't brought *Udolpho*. We don't know where her copy of the novel – probably the property of a circulating library – even is at this point. She has no opportunity to return to the text. Catherine is, from the first, enthralled by *Udolpho* – 'I should like to spend my whole life in reading it', she says – and it seems that we're meant to understand that, in essence, this is what happens. She's destined never to complete the novel, to spend her whole life in the state of reading it, its mysteries remaining forever mysterious to her.

What Jane's trying to do here, it seems to me, is to keep Catherine trapped in a state of suspense which her own readers never have to share. Jane's readers, if they've read *Udolpho* properly, to the end, ought to be able to pick out all the references and in-jokes that pass Catherine by so completely. Jane's readers ought to be able to pat themselves on the back for recognising that the names Henry and Eleanor deliberately echo Henri and Blanche. They should know Catherine's suspicions about General Tilney are absurd precisely

because she compares him to Montoni, and they're already aware, not only that Montoni hasn't murdered his wife, but that, in the second half of the novel, he doesn't pose any threat. Reading the second volume of *Northanger Abbey*, we ought to be continually coming across passages which we recognise already, anticipating scenes and settings and actions before they occur.

Any reader familiar with *Udolpho* would have been waiting for Catherine to find her way into Mrs Tilney's room – just as Emily St Aubert makes her way into the rooms of the dead Marchioness. Alerted by the close resemblance between Henry's story and the Chateau-le-Blanc chapters of *Udolpho*, they would have found echo after echo. Catherine shares her distaste for the new with Blanche, who prefers the 'antient' to 'the modern ... gay and elegant'. Like Blanche, she explores the building. The position of the late Mrs Tilney's room – in a 'gallery', close by a 'winding staircase' – seems intended to recall Blanche's discovery of the rooms of the Marchioness, that other dead mistress of a house ('she found herself in another gallery, one end of which was terminated by a back stair-case'). When Henry comes up the staircase, and finds Catherine loitering outside his mother's room, her reaction ('How came you here?' she demands, her voice one 'of more than common astonishment') corresponds to the aged Dorothee's surprise at unexpectedly finding Blanche: 'How could you find your way hither?' she asks, her 'countenance' marked with 'terror and surprise'.

All of this leads us to the rather odd conclusion that Catherine, at *Northanger*, is acting out parts of *Udolpho*, slipping from one role to another, but – apparently – without being aware of what she's doing.

It's only fair to mention that there is one point where Catherine does seem to refer consciously to a scene in the second half of *Udolpho* ('Would the veil in which Mrs Tilney had last walked, or the volume in which she had last read, remain to tell what nothing else was allowed to whisper?'), but this is one solitary, fleeting reference to weigh against every other indication in the text. She's ignorant of everything else.

It's not even entirely clear that we're in Catherine's mind at this point – the voice of the narrator is more intrusive in *Northanger* than it is in Jane's later novels, and far less deftly deployed. Then, too, there was, by 1803, a copper-plate illustration of precisely this scene in *Udolpho* – when Emily and Dorothee venture into the rooms of the dead Marchioness, untouched since her death years before.* Perhaps Jane means to indicate that Catherine has done no more than glance at the illustration in the fourth volume while Isabella Thorpe was reading it.

Catherine finds nothing Gothic in Mrs Tilney's room – no veils cracked with age, no prayer books, no discarded gloves. She's disappointed, and profoundly ashamed of herself. Henry's discovery of her compounds her feelings; he all but forces Catherine into naming her hazy suspicions about General Tilney, and then scolds her for doing so. In spite of the fact that he was the one to excite her expectations of *Northanger* when he might just as easily have calmed them, Henry appears genuinely appalled; 'What have you been judging from?' he demands, 'Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?'

Poor Catherine scuttles off to her own room. Once there, she's quick to locate all the blame at the feet of 'Mrs Radcliffe'. There's no breath of criticism of Henry's foolish story-telling (that 'dearest' has perhaps had its effect). Catherine doesn't even really blame herself very much. She blames Gothic novels: 'She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled, long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged.'

Critics have tended to agree with Catherine, but, as I think the reader must have been intended to recognise, this is grossly unfair. Jane has gone to quite a lot of trouble to suggest that Catherine either hasn't read more than half a Gothic novel, or, if she has, has read it with such a breathtaking lack of attention that she might as well not have bothered. If Catherine had read *Udolpho* properly, read it to the end, she

* In a French edition of the novel from 1803.

would have discovered, in the final pages, one of Radcliffe's clearest messages: 'when the mind has once begun to yield [...] trifles impress it with the force of conviction'. Even as early as the first volume of *Udolpho*, Radcliffe remarks how 'lamentable' it is, that Emily's 'excellent understanding should have yielded, even for a moment, to the reveries of superstition, or rather to those starts of imagination, which deceive the senses'. If Catherine had taken that on board, her experiences at Northanger might have been very different.

What Jane is trying to show with Catherine, I would suggest, is a reader who doesn't read properly, who brings her own preconceptions and expectations to the text, who blames the author for the ideas she's gained from an incomplete, inattentive reading. Jane doesn't intend to 'desert' Radcliffe, to expose her to ridicule. She's attempting to do the opposite.



Jane indicates what Catherine hasn't read. But she also tells us what she has.

In the first chapter she names two of the texts which Catherine learned by heart as a child. We're told that Catherine has read Samuel Richardson's 1750s novel *Sir Charles Grandison* at home (or that she has heard it read aloud); it's a novel her mother likes. We know that she's read 'poetry and plays, and things of that sort' and does not 'dislike travels'. We know that she's read some history, though she doesn't care for it: 'it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome.'

Among Catherine's earliest introductions to reading were *The Beggar's Petition* and *The Hare and Many Friends*, a version of one of Aesop's fables. *The Hare and Many Friends*, with its combination of anthropomorphism and danger, and its suggestion of moral failings in the older generation, seems to have appealed quite strongly to Catherine who,

we're told, learned it 'as quickly as any child in England'. *The Beggar's Petition*, though, is, to the modern mind, a very odd choice of reading (and of learning by heart) for a small child. It deals with uncomfortable subjects: war, enclosure, abuse of power, the kind of subjects which – wrongly – we consider distant from Jane's novels.

Sir Charles Grandison features a young heiress kidnapped by the villainous (and extravagantly-named) Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. She's eventually rescued by the heroic Sir Charles Grandison, dully virtuous except in the small matter of his engagement to a mentally unstable Italian Catholic. Catherine's history reading seems to have been concentrated largely in the middle ages, perhaps stretching as far as the Tudors. We can't be certain which plays and poems she's read, but we're told specifically which ones she can quote (or misquote) from: *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, by Alexander Pope; Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*; James Thompson's *The Seasons*; and three Shakespeare plays – *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Twelfth Night*.

It's just as much these texts that Catherine is 'judging from' as her incomplete, uncomprehending reading of *Udolpho*. The wider literary climate, the texts which are accepted reading, do as much to influence Catherine's ideas as Mrs Radcliffe does.

When Catherine is first beginning to give way to her extravagant suspicions of General Tilney, she compares him to Montoni, but also to the people she's read about in history books: 'many instances of beings equally hardened in guilt might [...] be produced. She could remember dozens who had persevered in every possible vice, murdering whomsoever they chose, without any feeling of humanity or remorse; till a violent death, or a religious retirement closed their black career.' *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, with its 'ghost' and corpse left unburied, practically qualifies as Gothic. We're informed that Catherine has 'read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure might be introduced, and a suppositious funeral carried on'. If she ever ventured further in her Shakespeare, she would have encountered plenty of 'suppositious funerals', plenty of characters

whose deaths are faked – Juliet, Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Hermione in *A Winter's Tale*, who, towards the end of the play, appears disguised as a statue of herself. Catherine may have read Lewis Theobald's *The Fatal Secret*, an eighteenth-century reworking of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with a happy ending in which the Duchess is hidden safely away, and her would-be murderous brother deceived by 'a waxen image'. Both history and drama will have furnished her with husbands who succeed in murdering their wives – Othello, Iago, Henry VIII.

There are plenty of cultural sources for Catherine's wilder imaginings besides Gothic novels.

And actually, Archbishop Whateley, an early reviewer of *Northanger Abbey*, makes almost exactly this point in his review of the book, that it's foolish for parents to ban novels while allowing uncontrolled access to other forms of literature:

[...] we are acquainted with a careful mother whose daughters, while they never in their lives read a novel of any kind, are permitted to peruse, without reserve, any plays that happen to fall in their way; and with another, from whom no lessons, however excellent, of wisdom and piety, contained in a prose-fiction, can obtain quarter; but who, on the other hand, is no less indiscriminately indulgent to her children in the article of tales in verse, of whatever character [...]

Catherine's 'indulgence' in *Udolpho* is only the match to a pile of literary and cultural fuel; what burns, what drives her behaviour, are half-remembered episodes from English history, Shakespeare's plays, anti-Catholicism. The chest and cabinet she nerves herself to throw open, searching for secrets, glance towards the novel in which William Godwin – perhaps the most radical of the 1790s radicals – laid bare the state of 'things as they are'. There are stronger, more deeply-rooted forces drawing Catherine towards Mrs Tilney's bedroom than a few pages of a novel, or a copper-plate illustration.

We've been skirting round these bedroom scenes for quite long enough; it's time to get to grips with them.



One of the central characters in David Lodge's series of campus novels is an American academic, Morris Zapp. Zapp works on Jane Austen. He aims to produce a completely exhaustive study of Jane's novels. His teaching is supposedly 'designed to shock ... students out of a sloppily reverent attitude to literature'. But it becomes clear that he in fact just likes to shock. In one tutorial he reads aloud to his students 'the moment in *Persuasion* when Captain Wentworth lifted the little brat Walter off Anne Elliot's shoulders', dwelling on all the vaguely suggestive words before demanding, 'If that isn't an *orgasm*, what is it?'

The students are 'flabbergasted', and so is the reader. The more complicated bit of the joke is that this isn't total nonsense. As we've seen, Jane isn't a prude; nor were her contemporaries, the people she expected to read her work. But Zapp's picked the wrong book. Of all Jane's novels it's not *Persuasion* but *Northanger Abbey* which comes closest to sexual explicitness.

Despite what the film adaptations would have you believe, we don't often see Jane's heroines in their nightgowns or their underwear. In *Northanger Abbey*, we do. Its three bedroom scenes are charged – entirely deliberately – with an erotic thrill. You don't have to be Morris Zapp to find them sexy.

In the first, the half-dressed Catherine flings open the lid of a chest to find 'a white cotton counterpane, properly folded'. A counterpane is a bed-cover – usually embroidered, often with quilt-work. It's removed when the bed is in use. Jane invites us, here, to see the bed behind Catherine, ready for her to slip into, that night.

In the second scene, it is night. Catherine, we are to assume, has changed into nightwear. She is 'beginning to think of stepping into bed, when, on giving a parting glance round the room, she was struck by the appearance of a high, old-fashioned black cabinet'. What she finds

in the cabinet is a far cry from the ‘diamonds’ which Henry laughingly promised: petty accounts, a bill for treating a horse, and laundry lists, for a man, a list of a man’s clothes – ‘shirts, stockings, cravats, and waistcoats’ – a list which conjures up the image of a naked male body.

And the passage which describes how she comes to find it is probably the sexiest thing you’ll read in Jane’s novels:

[...] she applied herself to the key, and after moving it in every possible way for some instants with the determined celerity of hope’s last effort, the door suddenly yielded to her hand: her heart leaped with exultation at such a victory, and having thrown open each folding door [...] a double range of small drawers appeared in view, with some larger drawers above and below them; and in the centre, a small door, closed also with a lock and key, secured in all probability a cavity of importance.

Catherine’s heart beat quick, but her courage did not fail her. With a cheek flushed by hope, and an eye straining with curiosity, her fingers grasped the handle of a drawer and drew it forth. [...] The place in the middle alone remained now unexplored [...] It was some time however before she could unfasten the door, the same difficulty occurring in the management of this inner lock as of the outer; but at length it did open; and not vain, as hitherto, was her search; her quick eyes directly fell on a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment, and her feelings at that moment were indescribable. Her heart fluttered, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale. She seized, with an unsteady hand, the precious manuscript [...]

Let’s not mince words here. With all those folds and cavities, the key, the fingers, the fluttering and trembling, this looks a lot like a thinly veiled description of female masturbation.

And that’s not so extraordinary. Jane’s society viewed it as common knowledge that girls, as well as boys, indulged in the ‘secret and destructive vice’. Youthful female self-pleasuring was something to be worried

about. A series of newspaper advertisements for Balm of Gilead, that late-eighteenth-century panacea for everything to do with your bits, mentions that the youth 'of both sexes' engaged in the practice.

The third bedroom scene is about sex too.

Catherine dreams of one day, perhaps, becoming 'Mrs Tilney'. Part of her motivation for wanting to see Mrs Tilney's room must be to imagine herself into the role of a married woman, to try out what it's like to venture across that threshold. Indeed, Eleanor Tilney's eagerness to show her mother's room to Catherine hints at a not-unrelated desire to bring her prospective sister-in-law into proximity with the 'mother' she will never have a chance to know.

The first object to strike Catherine's eye, when she finally does enter the room, is the bed. It's 'arranged as unoccupied', with a counterpane (and perhaps bed-hangings) of 'dimity' – white cotton, with a pattern worked into the weave. The counterpane is similar, perhaps even identical, to the 'white cotton counterpane' which was removed from the bed in Catherine's room and placed into the chest. Mrs Tilney's room is flooded with daylight, the modern 'Bath stove' is 'bright'. The wardrobes are made from 'mahogany', a wood which wasn't much used in furniture-making until the eighteenth century; the chairs are 'neatly painted'. The bed, too, one imagines, is modern. It's not without history, though. This is the bed – one presumes – in which Mrs Tilney gave birth, and 'lay in' with her babies, perhaps where she breast-fed them. This is the bed in which she conceived her children. The counterpane hasn't always lain smooth and flat. The bed-linen hasn't always been white and unsullied.

Is country-bred Catherine, the fourth of ten children, ignorant of how babies come into the world? Surely not. She must have seen her own mother lying in, a new brother or sister in her arms, squashed and shrieking, the bloodied sheets being bundled downstairs. The Morlands' country vicarage may be far less Gothic than an abbey, but it's had its own, temporary torture chamber at times, and Catherine will have heard the screams.

For those who wonder, endlessly, why Jane never married, there's a reason right here. Mrs Tilney's room – the only marital bedroom Jane ever shows us in detail – is associated, indelibly, with death. Not only is this the room in which, as we're told, Mrs Tilney died, it's a room haunted by the ghosts of literature, by the dead Marchioness' suite at the Chateau-le-Blanc; by Blue Beard's chamber, filled with the corpses of his dead wives.

It's haunted not just by dead women, but by women who've been murdered by their husbands.

Catherine, shamed at being caught outside Mrs Tilney's room, humiliated by the scolding she receives from Henry, disowns her suspicions of General Tilney. As we've seen, she blames Gothic novels alone for sending her imagination haywire, and not any of the more enduring cultural patterns and ideas she has been exposed to:

Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented. But in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist.

What Catherine's surely forgetting here is that a husband doesn't need sleeping potions to effectively immobilise his wife, and nor does he necessarily require poison to kill her. Rhubarb was used as a purgative and, in high enough doses, could affect a pregnancy. Pregnant women are still warned against drinking herbal teas containing rhubarb leaves. Is it coincidence that, of all the products a 'druggist' might sell, Jane

chooses to mention rhubarb, that she reminds us of pregnancy, and the possibility that it might be unwanted, in this sentence, in the context of husbands killing their wives?

Henry asserts that his mother died from what he calls 'bilious fever', a 'malady ... from which she had often suffered ... its cause therefore constitutional'. It's a catch-all term; used to cover everything from cholera and yellow fever to common-or-garden stomach upsets. Jane's mother and several of her brothers suffered periodically from bilious complaints. An acquaintance, a young woman called Marianne Mapleton, died of her bilious fever.

But 'bilious' symptoms are vomiting, abdominal pain, constipation and diarrhoea; these are also signs of pregnancy, and of the early stages of labour or of miscarriage. Mrs Tilney, at the time of her death, would still have been of child-bearing age. The 'physician' who first attends her is 'one in whom she had always placed great confidence' – one who helped her in her earlier confinements, perhaps. Two others are called in; to do what? Mrs Tilney clearly isn't suffering from cholera or yellow fever, because her sons are permitted to see her. The treatment for the less dramatic bilious fevers was to bleed the patient and wait. But in cases of pregnancy and labour there were different approaches and treatments to try. We ought to consider the possibility that Jane's first readers might well have considered – that what Henry is unwittingly describing here is a miscarriage or disastrously mismanaged early labour, that Mrs Tilney's 'constitutional' tendency to biliousness is in fact a series of pregnancies and miscarriages.

Why, after all, does General Tilney 'not love' his wife's 'favourite walk'? Why is he unwilling to allow his daughter to show Catherine into his wife's room? Does he have a guilty conscience? Well, yes, perhaps.

This, in the end, is the mystery, the terrifying secret at the heart of *Northanger Abbey*. If we laughed at the hilarious notion of Catherine's mother dying during one of her ten pregnancies and labours, then this is where we should stop laughing; sex can kill you. All of Jane's heroines – all of the women in her novels who marry – are taking a

terrifying risk. They're placing their lives, potentially, in the hands of their husbands.

Catherine, Jane tells us, abandons the 'alarms of romance' for the 'anxieties of common life'. It's probably going to be a while before she'll be able to enjoy the 'alarms of romance' again, but we can only hope that she carries on reading novels, that she keeps up a library subscription. There may come a time when the anxieties of common life – pregnancy, childbirth – begin to seem far more threatening than the nightmares conjured up by Mrs Radcliffe. Catherine might learn to value a library more for the medicines it sells – the Balm of Gilead, the 'female pills' that promise to 'restore' the menstrual cycle – than for mere novels.