Many of us have been familiar with at least a couple of Jane Austen’s major novels for the greater part of our adult reading lives. And, to coin that now rather overworked phrase of hers, “it is a truth universally acknowledged” that Austen’s writing in those novels is the very paragon of gentle, understated elegance, whose ironic currents always remain carefully and subtly indirect, ensuring that whatever purpose they may have is carried out with only the very slightest of perturbation to the narrative surface of calm, order and balance. So deeply rooted is this notion of Austen’s fiction in the general view of her literary worth that her novels were even used as therapy in the First World War for post-traumatic shock, as a means of comforting the violently troubled minds of trench-wounded soldiers by reminding them of an ordered, wholesome and more peaceful world. Such a view of Austen is, in fact, fundamentally simplistic and ignores—perhaps even intentionally chooses to ignore—the multiplicity and complexity of ideas battling within her fiction that become apparent once we learn to read between the lines. But to the countless ardent admirers of Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma and Persuasion, this ‘complex’ view of the writer is unfamiliar ground and has little or nothing to do with ‘their’ Jane Austen. For another universally acknowledged truth here is that few other writers in the English language have brought about such a proprietary reaction from the reading public. In our often long and sometimes intimate acquaintance with Austen’s novels, there is a feeling that somehow we know her. But which Jane Austen do we really know? Ardent followers—heirs to that group of admirers known as the ‘Janeites’, a veritable cult that sprang up around her reputation from as early as the 1830s—have always been adroit at putting forward a particular picture of the writer that, by and large, has taken hold with popular imagination. Though it has been modified somewhat according to times and tastes, this picture is of ‘Gentle Jane’, mild-mannered and endearingly homely, incurably romantic though suitably sexless, wholly uninterested in the great affairs of the world at large, and whose placid irony exists merely to guide us gently towards the better path. Above all, it is the picture of an amateur ‘scribbler’ who wrote—albeit brilliantly—for her own domestic pleasure, very decidedly shunning the ambitious perspectives of the professional writer, in keeping with the respectability of her station and the demureness of her gender. The idea that lies at the epicentre of such an image is the word ‘propriety’. With this comes its associated range of synonyms: decorum, respectability, decency, refinement, discretion. Perhaps, rather like those soldiers from the Great War, there is the feeling that we all need a little portion of ‘Gentle Jane’s remedy’ to counteract the brutality and indecency of our modern times... Be that as it may, beyond any other view, and in spite of a number of excellent modern biographies that point to a more intricate scenario, this is the vision of Jane Austen that persists: this refined, discrete, respectable figure is the Austen that we feel we know.

And so it comes as a shock when, as is the case with most readers, we discover the writings of Austen’s early texts (the so-called ‘juvenilia’) perhaps years after reading the later novels. Here we find a dizzyingly subversive force, a wholly unexpected alter ego of the writer we thought we knew so well, gleefully breaking every one of the rules of decorum apparently so delicately upheld in Gentle Jane’s world. Here, the motives of selfless love and principled emotional conduct we see in Mansfield Park’s Fanny Price or Persuasion’s Anne Elliot are
dramatically replaced (we ought really to say ‘preceded’) by the frank and enthusiastic pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. Here, the rules and regulations of social and—above all—filial obligation are torn to shreds and thrown away on winds of such excess and anarchy that even *Pride and Prejudice*’s Lydia Bennet—a sure candidate for the title of Most Scandalous Female in Austen’s mature novels—could only have dreamt of in her wildest moments. Inevitably, we ask ourselves what literary connection, if any, can there possibly be between the younger and older Jane Austen? Why was she so remarkably different in her early narratives from the writer we perceive in her later work? And above all, how come we have never met this refreshingly dissimilar Jane Austen before? These are difficult questions—some of their answers can only be guessed at—and we will return to them a little later. But as an initial means of getting better acquainted with the young Austen, and with her spirited literary creation, we need to begin at the beginning. For one thing is quite clear: the remarkable achievement of Austen’s juvenilia is, from an early age, built upon her equally remarkable acquaintance with English literature, and most particularly that of the century in which she was born. Just how did she gain access to this world of books at a time when all but the most basic ‘education’ was very largely denied to young girls? In short, what do we know about Jane Austen’s early years and how much were these to shape her future as a writer?

**The Early Years**

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 in the village of Steventon, Hampshire, the seventh of George and Cassandra Austen’s eight children. George Austen, the village rector and a teacher of young men preparing for entrance to Oxford and Cambridge universities, was a graduate of St. John’s College, Oxford University and a sensitive and avid reader of classical and contemporary literature, as well as a scholar of divinity. His wife Cassandra (née Leigh), of sharp mind and vigorous temperament, and gifted, amongst other things, with the ability to produce witty and slightly irreverent poems for the delight of her family, was the daughter of a renowned Master of Balliol College, Oxford. One of Jane’s brothers, also called George, was mentally handicapped and possibly deaf, and was taken care of wholly outside the family as an invalid (a practice that was then considered normal). The other boys, however, went on to achieve considerable success: two of them—Francis and Charles—became admirals in the British navy; Edward was adopted by a wealthy relative (this, too, was not then an usual practice in the case of large families) and inherited a great fortune and property; Henry and James became Anglican clergymen, like their father before them (though Henry came to this via the more worldly calling of banking). But by far the most influential, supportive and loving of Jane’s many siblings was her sister Cassandra, her practically inseparable, lifelong companion and her unconditional admirer. Recalling the two sisters many years later, their niece Anna Lefroy observed that “[t]hey were everything to each other. They seemed to lead a life to themselves within the general family shared only by each other… their full feelings were known only to themselves. They alone fully understood what each had suffered and felt and thought”. Cassandra had become engaged in 1795 to the Reverend Thomas Fowle, but he died in 1797 of yellow fever in St. Domingo, and she never again appeared to entertain any further thoughts of marriage. Very close to one another before this tragedy struck, the two sisters became even more intimate thereafter. But this, of course, is to run ahead of ourselves…
Education in and out of School

As a small child, Jane (as ever, accompanying Cassandra) was sent away for basic schooling to Oxford, then to Southampton and finally to Reading. The sisters returned to Steventon in 1787. For many young girls at the time (Cassandra was now fourteen, Jane was eleven), their formal education would have effectively been considered complete and they would from this point onwards have dedicated themselves to the practice of whatever domestic obligations might be suitable to their future class and rank, as well as to the perfection of the so-called “accomplishments”, a series of skills such as playing an instrument, singing or conversational abilities in French or perhaps Italian, all of which were largely aimed at catching the attention of a would-be husband or his family. In the case of Jane, it is one of the great fortunes of literature that the specific nature and inclinations of the Austen family seems to have disinclined them from an over-conventional application of these accomplishments to their daughters. Indeed, the very unconventionality of the family can be seen by their evident preference for encouraging Jane’s intelligent curiosity rather than condemning her to the pursuit of shallow, meaningless activities. On her return to Steventon, far from assuming that she would have no further use for reading or, perhaps worse still, rather than attempting to limit such reading to approved, morally acceptable authors and subjects, it appears that Jane had an absolutely free reign of her father’s large personal library (stocked with over 500 volumes), and that through this freedom she began her broad and deep acquaintance with the great writers of the English tradition. These of course included Shakespeare, Pope and Sheridan, as well as Samuel Johnson, closer to her own times. In terms of genre, however, although she was also well read in history (Goldsmith’s History of England being a favourite) and familiar, too—when somewhat older—with the essays of Addison, which she strongly disliked, and with travel writers such as George Steuart Mackenzie or Lord Macartney, and although her tastes included an appreciation of poetry (particularly Cowper and Crabbe, with a knowledge of Burns, Scott and Byron coming later), her greatest pleasure was the prose fiction of the eighteenth century. In the quiet of her father’s study, Jane first read her beloved Samuel Richardson and memorised in considerable detail the adventures of Fielding’s Tom Jones or Joseph Andrews. Added to this, there are Sterne, Smollet, Frances Burney, Charlotte Lennox and Charlotte Smith, to name but a few of the more or less contemporary novelists whose works she read again and again, as her remaining adult letters attest. It is not simply the breadth of her reading that is of importance, however. What astounds us, on reading Austen’s early works, is that she has understood fiction with the analytical mind of the practised writer, she has internalised its forms and is capable of brilliantly reproducing these for the purposes of her burlesque. Margaret Ann Doody, critic and editor of Austen’s juvenilia, has rightly observed that “what is … striking is the young Austen’s evident command of the sheer idea of fiction in itself. By the time she writes the earliest works ..., she is entirely aware of thematic patterns and plot structures. [... At 15 or even earlier], she was as familiar with the workings of fiction as a watchmaker with the interior movements and structures of a clock”.

And then there was the bookish atmosphere of the Austen household, in which literary works were always under discussion or were even, in the case of certain dramatic pieces, actually performed by family and friends in the many amateur productions that the Austen family put on. Evenings were spent reading aloud from
favourite writers. Jane’s brothers Henry and James, students at Oxford in the late 1780s and early 1790s where they edited *The Loiterer*, a literary periodical strongly influenced by Johnson’s *The Rambler*, brought the discussion of contemporary writing directly to the family fireside (in fact, Jane may even at one point have contributed to her brother’s journal). Furthermore, in an age when the novel was still frequently viewed with moral suspicion, the Austens—as Jane herself observed with relish—were an unabashed novel-devouring family, enthusiastically reading, re-reading and commenting on those works that caught their attention. In this literary environment, Austen’s fledging attempts at writing would have received their first public airing: we should not underestimate the nature of the support that this would have received here. Her parents were both lovers of the well-written word and must certainly have recognised and appreciated their young daughter’s satirical skills; her brothers were great readers and, through their conversation and writings, were in effect actively encouraging Jane’s stylistic playfulness. And then there was the bedrock of Cassandra’s love and affection, an invaluable component in Jane’s building-up of the necessary confidence to set before the public (even such a reduced and partial one as this) her very own contributions to English letters. Clearly, there are worse ways of starting out on the long and difficult road to a literary career.

**The Early Writings**

These texts were composed between about 1787 and mid 1793 (between the ages of 12 and 17) and subsequently transcribed by Jane herself into three notebooks mock-seriously entitled *Volume the First, Volume the Second* and *Volume the Third*. They are amongst some of Austen’s very few extant writings. Over the many, many decades of critical response to her work, it is only fairly recently that a majority of Austen specialists have started to give greater centrality to the validity of these pieces in themselves; hitherto, if they were not dismissed outright as energetic but trivial sketches, the tendency (though with some important exceptions) was to focus on their value as ‘rehearsal’ for the adult works, or else to see them primarily as biographical material, useful for reflecting the apparent preoccupations of the young Austen, but of little other real merit. This has now begun to change, and the juvenilia works are gradually being seen as a significant part of the overall Austen corpus. Vestiges of the earlier critical dismissal remain, however, and we will return to this point in a moment.

What is the nature of these works? As might be expected, they develop in length and complexity with the passage of time, ranging from (mostly earlier) page-long daftness to (mostly later) far lengthier and more narratively sustained undertakings. But on the whole, critics generally agree that the body of Austen’s work termed the ‘juvenilia’ can be characterised by its markedly rebellious character, mercilessly burlesquing the style, form and content of the popular fiction of the times (which reinforces the fact of Austen’s great familiarity with such writing), and peopled with characters who happily circumvent accepted codes of social behaviour, often violently, immorally or irreverently so. These works are essentially set within a Kingdom of Misrule, and in effect act as a challenge to the presiding authority of adult hegemony that holds in the real world at large. In this sense, they are truly ‘carnivalesque’, to use the term applied to them by the Canadian scholar, Juliet McMaster: exaggerated in their action, unpredictable in their outcomes, seemingly random in their focus, yet always infused by a revolutionary undercurrent of subversion that either threatens to spill over at any moment, as Mary Stanhope’s dowry negotiations reveal in *The Three Sisters*, or else which, volcano-like, actually explodes in a sea of
mischief and misdeed, as *Love and Friendship* so histrionically shows us. A more artistically empowering way of looking at them is to see these texts as ‘expressionistic’ (as Margaret Anne Doody has), curiously akin to the style of Borges or Italo Calvino, intentionally eschewing the more conventional expectations of narrative form so as to give the fullest possible rein to the imaginative possibilities of this anarchic terrain. And if this were all that could be said of the early works, it would be considerable; but it is not the whole picture, by any means. For though it is clearly the case that much—indeed, most—of the juvenilia fits this pattern, other valuable developments are taking place within Austen’s writing, most particularly in the later texts, of which *The Three Sisters* is a particularly good example. Basically, these developments point to Austen’s growing understanding of the need to attenuate her literary excess in favour of narrative plausibility, which naturally includes creating more credible, justifiable plot lines, as well as delineating characters of a more fully rounded nature, as opposed to the almost surrealistic *dramatis personae* in much of the early-to-mid juvenilia. In this sense, *The Three Sisters* in particular—although still much given to lapses into farce and burlesque—begins to feature sustained passages of far greater realism, far more serious treatment of thematic concern and, crucially, a more clearly identifiable narrative perspective that seeks to shape and influence the greater purpose of the story being told. Indeed, with this text, we begin to glimpse the possibility that Austen is now pitching her writing to a public potentially far larger than that gathered around her living-room hearth. But more of this later. Because, before talking about the works themselves in any greater detail, there is a formal issue—one that is central to several of the juvenilia pieces, including *Love and Friendship* and the *Three Sisters*, the works that are our main concern here—which warrants some discussion, notably because it is a major problem in the broader critical acceptance of Austen’s early writing. This is the question of epistolarity.

**The Epistolary Mode**

An epistolary novel is one written in the form of correspondence (letters, diary entries, and so on). The first such work to achieve renown in English was the 1678 translation from French of *Les Lettres portugaises*, entitled *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*. This was soon followed, in 1683, by Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, which set the fashion for a great number of epistolary novels of forbidden or unrequited love. As a genre in English, the epistolary’s popularity was sealed by Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), which were phenomenally successful, in spite of the rather pedantic moral didacticism that underpins both works. On the whole, however, the epistolary is most closely associated with women writers (indeed, it is sometimes seen as a specifically female genre, although this view is by no means unchallenged, since access to other forms of literary representation was less open to women), and its traditional concerns—the ambit of the sentiments; the narrative intrigues of a love affair; confessions of desire; passionate, intimate outpourings that can only be expressed in writing to the chosen correspondent—have consequently also been seen as almost exclusively female. Its popularity, however, was not to last; throughout the eighteenth century, English epistolary novels gradually lost ground to novels written in the third-person, the mode that has come to dominate novelistic fiction. Quite how and why the epistolary was so fully replaced is the subject of considerable critical debate. At a time of increasing narrative realism, it may be that the nature of the writing itself was thought simply incredible. Richardson’s *Pamela*, for example, is forever penning voluminous letters to her parents in the most implausible of situations, a
fact not overlooked by Henry Fielding’s *Shameela* (1741), that wickedly effective—and highly esteemed—parody, and certainly an element in the genre’s erosion. By the time Austen began her early writings, it also seems to have been the case that public taste for the highly sentimental novels of an earlier time, often written in the epistolary, had waned considerably, in no small part because of the growing popularity of Gothic fiction. Additionally, only slightly later, in the 1790s that saw England defining an increasingly conservative response to the French Revolution, the genre eventually became identified with what was viewed as the illicit, self-gratifying excess of Jacobin ideology, and so fell into almost terminal disrepute, as epistolary writers were, in effect, disciplined into less ‘subversive’ areas of interest.8

This has had consequences on critical assessment of the epistolary. Basically, accounts of the development of the novel (in English, above all other studies this means Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*) have looked at what happened to the epistolary and, applying Darwin-like logic, have tended to assume that (i) the mode was evolutionarily unsuccessful since the variety that adapted and thrived was third-person narrative and (ii) that it was therefore an inferior literary form.9 As a result, the epistolary is almost always given a marginal role in the history of the novel, an interesting but ultimately fruitless branch on the tree of literature. But is this actually the case? Recently, critical question marks have been raised (most notably by women scholars)10 about the conventional view of epistolary demise. For one thing—since, as we have noted, many epistolary writers were women—highlighting third-person narrative to the detriment of the epistolary means seriously undermining the enormous contribution of these women writers to English literature. Furthermore, the ‘developmental’ theory does not appear to give sufficient importance to the fact that the reaction in the 1790s against the correspondence novel was no artistic reaction: it was socio-political censorship, very much aimed at monitoring—especially women—writers’ output. And, even accepting that the third-person, omnipresent narrator can do things and go places that a first-person narrator simply cannot, all of this still overlooks the huge literary advantages that the epistolary offers, namely, its capacity to provide direct, intimate and psychological insight into the character of the epistolary participants, and to allow the reader the sensation of close participation. Seen in this way, it appears unreasonable to cast the genre in such a second-rate light, but such has been the epistolary’s fate. Which actually brings us back to the issue of the juvenilia, because viewing the epistolary as a lesser form of novel writing basically mirrors the way that Austen’s early writings have traditionally been critically dismissed as insignificant. Indeed, when we take the two things together, works that are epistolary and juvenilia, it becomes easier to understand the difficulty that these texts have had, historically, in seeing the light of day: stylistically at variance with the mature works of almost universal renown, written in a literary form that has systematically been marginalised and, to boot, texts that belong to an adolescent phase in the writer’s life, the juvenilia have long lingered in the shadow of Austen’s ‘Big Six’ novels.

But epistolary form and juvenilia works do not, in themselves, entirely account for the lack of critical interest that has traditionally been shown in Austen’s early writings. Other issues are present here… Of course it would be naïve—and wholly unsustainable—to put forward the idea that these texts come anywhere near the same artistic heights as the later novels. They don’t. They obviously can’t: a direct comparison between the two is ludicrously unfair. Yet even a single reading of a text such as *The Three Sisters* or *Love and Freindship* shows these writings to be of an outstanding quality for such a young writer. Certainly, there is a small number of excellent
(and fairly recent) monographic studies on the juvenilia, but these tend to be rather specialised analyses. The rest, if not silence, is certainly *sotto voce*: why? Is it that the Austen emerging from these works is simply too vigorous, too dynamic and too earthy to reconcile with the portrait of propriety that would later be attributed to the novelist? Is it that, once we have glimpsed this alternative Austen, the carefully constructed picture of Gentle Jane, built up over many decades (not least by the Austen family itself later in the 1800s, earnestly putting forward a version of their famous relative that would be in keeping with the moral climate of the Victorians, and simultaneously maintain her book sales at a healthy level), is no longer so entirely tenable? For, once the possibility of a less saintly Jane has been established—as it most definitely is in these early works—then this knowledge undermines and deconstructs the later persona, revealing that to be, if not a falsehood, then certainly far more complex, contradictory and not entirely ‘proper’. This therefore had to be suppressed, not by silence but by something far worse: the early writer and her early works were trivialised, dismissed as insignificant (if amusing) and swiftly passed over. For decades afterwards, the critics bought into this idea, focussed almost exclusively on the major works and left the juvenilia on the shelf of ‘minor curiosities’. Just how little things had changed until very recently can be seen by comparing the comments on an early text made by Edward Austen Leigh in 1870 (“scarcely [a tale] on which a literary reputation could have been founded: but though like some plants, it may be too slight to stand alone, it may, perhaps, be supported by the strength of her more firmly rooted works”)11 with those of Lord David Cecil in 1978 on the juvenilia as a whole (“trifling enough ... squibs and skits of the light literature of the day”).12 In short, we have heard so little about this ‘other’ Jane Austen precisely because she threatens the diligently composed falsehood of the Gentle Jane, and forces us to recognise that the temperate, placid world of her major fiction may well contain darker, more troublesome elements, just as the adult writer ‘contained’ the seditious adolescent.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Tucker, p. 149.
3 Cassandra destroyed an undetermined number of her sister’s letters after Jane’s death.
“As an inducement to subscribe [to a new library] Mrs. Martin tells us that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of Literature &c. &c.—She might have spared this pretension to our family, who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (Letter 14, December 18 1798).

“Other than 150 letter and several autograph fragments, only a few works in her hand survive: a fair copy of *Lady Susan* (possibly 1793-94); an unfinished working draft of *The Watsons* (1803-04); a fair copy of *Plan of a Novel* (ca. 1815); two cancelled concluding chapters of *Persuasion* (July 1816); and unfinished first draft of *Sandition* (January-March 1817); and three transcript volumes of the juvenilia*. (Marshall, 107). *Volume the First* is in Oxford University’s Bodleian Library [MS. Don.e.7]; *Volume the Second* is currently privately owned by Ms Rosemary Mowll; *Volume the Third* is in the British Library [Loan MS. 52].

“…the exclusive identification of women and letters reaffirms essentialist concepts of gender and sexuality, as well as replicating an artificial division of human experience into separate and gendered public and private spheres. Such a confusion of classificatory principles can only further obscure our understanding of the interrelation of genre and gender, and our awareness of the cultural construction of both”. (Heckendorn Cook, 24)

“…the sentimental novel, and especially the epistolary novel, paradigmatically represented by Rousseau’s ambiguous plot of illicit passion in *Julie*, came to be seen as a marker of a dangerous, individual excess, a potentially revolutionary energy that had to be expelled or marginalised in the formation of a new national identity and political consensus”. (Gilroy & Verhoeven, 5).

This is in marked contrast to the interest in epistolarity shown by literary theory, which has particularly studied its polyphonic qualities, the uncertain identity and relationship of writer and reader, and the manner in which the genre symbolises—in its composition, content, purpose and reception—the very essence of literary communication.

Such as Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, Mary Favret, Gilbert & Gubar, Patricia Meyer Spacks, etc.

Austen-Leigh (201), referring to *Lady Susan*, a text that is frequently viewed as the final juvenilia work, although in fact it was probably started when Austen was 19, thus strictly postdating the period. But given that this novella is more artistically complete than any of Austen’s preceding works, the comment simply reinforces the sustained attempts to marginalise the early writings.

Cecil, 59.