

Jane Austen and her Readers,  
1786–1945



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Katie Halsey



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# Part One



# INTRODUCTION

I am very strongly haunted by the idea that to those Readers who have preferred P&P. it [Emma] will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP. very inferior in good Sense.<sup>1</sup>

Her exquisite story of 'Persuasion' absolutely haunted me.<sup>2</sup>

This book is about the complex and unequal relationships between texts and readers. These take place in the realm of the imagination, although they have a partial manifestation in the material, in the form of writing. The first part of the book focuses on Jane Austen's negotiations with her reading, her reinterpretations of her period's strictures about reading women and women's reading, and her representations of readers in the novels, letters, juvenilia and fragments. It also discusses aspects of her style that have far-reaching ramifications in the responses of her readers. Part Two considers the textual and historical contexts of her works, and the kinds of relationships that historical readers have had with Austen and her novels. By examining Austen's British readers' views about reading generally, and specifically about reading Austen, as represented in their letters, journals, memoirs, critical writing and autobiographies, we come to a better understanding both of the qualities of Jane Austen's works, and of the practice of reading in Britain in different historical periods.<sup>3</sup> My aim throughout this work is to maintain a dual focus on Jane Austen and her readers, conceiving of the relationship between them as a kind of conversation: a dynamic two-way process wherein readers respond to the novels, but the novels and characters are also brought to life, re-imagined, re-created and re-invented in and through the reading experience in its totality. Unlike Claire Harman's popular biography, *Jane's Fame* (2009), which explores Austen's reception over two centuries, and explicitly sets out to explain 'how Jane Austen conquered the world', thus focussing on the phases and growth of Austen's reputation,<sup>4</sup> my aim is to show not only how the responses of Austen's readers can help to explicate Austen's works, but also how their reactions to Austen's works can illuminate her readers and their social, cultural and literary preoccupations for us.

Discussion of the reception of Austen's works is certainly not new. As early as 1957, Lionel Trilling suggested that 'it is possible to say of Jane Austen, as perhaps we can say of no other writer, that the opinions which are held of her work are almost as interesting, and almost as important to think about, as the work itself'.<sup>5</sup> Brian Southam's two invaluable *Critical Heritage* volumes made many of these 'opinions' more widely available to scholars and researchers from 1968 onwards. The 1990s, with their spate of Austen films and adaptations, and the period of Austen-mania that followed Colin Firth's appearance in the BBC's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, brought Austen's readers and viewers once again to the notice of Austen critics, and initiated a renewed focus on the 'ordinary' reader (i.e. the reader who is not a professional literary critic). Claudia Johnson's ground-breaking article, 'The Divine Miss Jane: Jane Austen, Janeites, and the Discipline of Novel Studies' (1996) made the argument that 'Austen's reception and readership merits substantial consideration' through an analysis of the role played by Austen's readers and critics in the foundation of the discipline of novel studies.<sup>6</sup> Johnson focussed on the figure of the 'Janeite' – someone who celebrates Jane Austen with 'a militantly dotty enthusiasm' and for whom reading Austen is 'the ecstasy of the elect'<sup>7</sup> – and analysed responses to Austen's 'queerness' with particular reference to the Janeite and anti-Janeite controversies of the early twentieth century, arguing that Austen critics had much to gain 'by bringing non-normalizing Austenian readings back into view'.<sup>8</sup> Johnson's chapter on 'Austen cults and cultures' in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (1997) drew on much of the same material to make the claim that the recuperation of ordinary readers' responses to Austen's works 'may help us all'.<sup>9</sup> Deidre Lynch's edited collection, *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (2000), in which Johnson's 'The Divine Miss Jane' was reprinted, emphasized the historical importance of readings of Austen, arguing that 'inquiry into readerships and their readings' is 'productive and politically pertinent'.<sup>10</sup> The collection brought together case studies that ranged from discussions of Austen's earliest readers to analysis of Edward Said's reading of Austen. In the wake of these works, in *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation* (2003), Bharat Tandon argued that 'a history of readings can [...] yield a series of responses to something that the original text might be argued to have been doing'.<sup>11</sup> Annika Bautz's *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott* (2007) to some extent provided 'a history of readings' of Austen's works, though with some important omissions, while Claire Harman's *Jane's Fame* and Emily Auerbach's *Searching for Jane Austen* (2004) popularized the field. In the early years of the twenty-first century, a number of critics, led by John Wiltshire's insightful *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), considered films and adaptations as creative 'readings' of Austen's works.

In this book I do not discuss films, television adaptations, prequels, sequels, spin-offs or other manifestations of creative responses to Austen's works. Nor do I discuss her influence on the literary output of her successors, although I hope that my account of the relationship between Austen's indirect and confidential style, and the questions debated by her female literary successors, will help to expand our notions of the extent of Austen's literary legacy. Johnson's valuable focus on 'non-normalizing' readings of Austen led her to concentrate on the particular qualities of Janeite readings, and to prioritize the readings of early twentieth-century readers; I aim to provide a more extensive historical coverage of Austen's readers from 1786 to 1945, and to consider the contexts of the reading experiences discussed in greater detail. While the material discussed in this book inevitably partially overlaps with that considered in the critical works above (there is, sadly, only a finite number of traceable recorded responses to Austen's writing), I also consider some previously unused (and little used) print sources as well as archival and manuscript material that has never before appeared in the public domain.<sup>12</sup>

Trilling perceptively identifies the dangers as well as the benefits of engaging with opinions of Jane Austen's work, pointing out the 'intensely personal and social' nature of the partisanship of Austen's readers, as well as warning against the kind of extravagant admiration of the works that 'seems to stimulate self-congratulation in those that give it, and to carry a reproof of the deficient sensitivity, reasonableness, and even courtesy, of those who withhold their praise.'<sup>13</sup> Critics are, as Trilling rightly points out, like all readers, prone to such 'extravagantly personal' responses to Jane Austen.<sup>14</sup> Trilling describes a body of opinion which holds that 'it is not Jane Austen herself who is to be held responsible for the faults that are attributed to her by her detractors, but rather the people who admire her for the wrong reasons and in the wrong language and thus create a false image of her'.<sup>15</sup> It has been my intention throughout this book to consider the responses of Austen's readers – including her 'detractors' – on their own terms, rather than as 'right' or 'wrong', 'true' or 'false', but no doubt my own prejudices will be apparent to my readers.

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Jane Austen's novels bear the allusive traces of her own reading (which I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3), while her reputation is affected by the appropriations of generations of readers. Her name, like that of many authors, is imbued with an extraordinary resonance. Indeed, it has become a critical truism to note that 'Jane Austen' has, over the last two centuries, come to stand for a number of different, sometimes conflicting positions. Claimed by feminist literary history, by the canonical Great Tradition, and by the mass media,

'Jane Austen' is at once the transgressive 'mother of the novel', a serious moral writer, and the epitome of demurely mob-capped nineteenth-century ladylike domesticity. She is figured simultaneously as both a serious professional writer and an untutored genius. Austen belongs both to a tradition of female writers and to the very different patriarchal canon, and she is appropriated for a number of different movements, literary or otherwise. She is used to represent health and wholesomeness in comparison to the sensation fiction of the 1860s, to epitomize Englishness in the 1920s, to define perfection of style, to typify (however anachronistically) a Victorian ideal of domesticity, to take only a very few examples of how Austen has been and is deployed. She is a writer who enjoys critical acclaim and wide popularity, claimed by high, low and middlebrow culture alike, her novels adapted for television, Hollywood and Bollywood, topping the polls as Britain's favourite writer, and yet still admired within the literary academy. Her six novels have been subjected to every school of analytical or critical discourse, and her juvenile and manuscript works have received substantial attention in recent years. Austen's name therefore has considerable cultural significance.

Jacques Derrida suggests that the proper name in fact represents something quite other from the person who bears that name:

The naïve rendering or common illusion is that you have given your name to X, thus all that returns to X, in a direct or indirect way, in a straight or oblique line, *returns* to you, as a profit for your narcissism. But as you *are* not your name, nor your title, and given that, as the name or the title, X does very well without you or your life, that is, without the place toward which something could *return* – just as that is the definition and the very possibility of every trace, and of all names and all titles, so your narcissism is frustrated *a priori* by that from which it profits or hopes to profit [...] That which bears, has borne, will bear your name seems sufficiently free, powerful, creative and autonomous to live alone and radically to do without you and your name.<sup>16</sup>

Following this line of argument, in 'Spectres of Engels', Willy Maley persuasively suggests that the work of Engels has become subsumed by Marx: "Marx," the proper name of Marx, has attached itself to, and has absorbed, other names and texts apparently independent of Marx "himself".<sup>17</sup> Jane Austen's proper name functions in a similar way: the name 'Jane Austen' is, one might say, haunted by the ghosts of readings past. The peculiar level of investment in claiming Austen for one's own, and some of the results of doing so, are explored in Chapters 6 and 9. For now, it is sufficient to remark the valence of her name, and to suggest that one of the consequences of the nature of Austen's reputation is, as my quotation from Derrida's work

suggests, to complicate the relationship between Austen and her historical readers: images of 'Jane Austen' frequent the thoughts and writings of Jane Austen's readers in complex and conflicting ways.<sup>18</sup> Mary Russell Mitford (in my second epigraph) describes Austen's *Persuasion* haunting her visit to Bath; as we see in Chapters 6 to 9, Mitford was not alone among later generations of readers and writers in feeling Austen's spectral presence both during the actual experience of reading one of her novels and beyond it.

Austen's writing is famously elliptical and spare. I argue in Chapters 2 and 3 that the endings of Austen's novels are undercut and subverted, leaving readers with a potentially uncomfortable or potentially fruitful sense of some kind of omission or lack. As Virginia Woolf noticed, her style 'stimulates us to supply what is not there', because the 'trifle' Austen provides 'expands in the mind' of the reader.<sup>19</sup> In Lacanian terminology, the sparseness of her style forces the reader to make good a 'refusal of satisfaction',<sup>20</sup> as the enigmas of Austen's writing 'expand in the mind' of Austen's readers. Jocelyn Harris argues that Austen herself enjoyed her imaginative engagements with her own reading matter, and I agree (as can be seen in Chapters 2 and 3) with Harris's assessment of Austen's 'confident, even cheerful intertextuality with other authors', and her account of Austen's 'deliberate, powerful and [...] mainly conscious choice to revisit and remake these earlier authors, out of respect, companionship, and even love', a process in which resistant mockery and parody, wild exaggeration and deliberate misapplication of tone and register play a central role.<sup>21</sup> Virginia Woolf acutely identified an essential aspect of Austen's writing – its stubborn and continual refusal to take life and itself entirely seriously – when she wrote (of the *Juvenilia*) about the 'note [...] which sounds distinctly and penetratingly all through the volume', the 'sound of laughter', suggesting that 'the girl of fifteen is laughing, in her corner, at the world'.<sup>22</sup> If we forget the 'light & bright & sparkling'<sup>23</sup> aspects of Austen's work, or, in other words, we fail to notice how very funny she really is, we do the writing itself a very serious disservice.

Austen's niece Marianne Knight remembered 'how Aunt Jane would sit quietly working beside the fire in the library, saying nothing for a good while, and then would suddenly burst out laughing, jump up and run across the room to a table where pens and paper were lying, write something down and then come back to the fire and go on quietly working as before'.<sup>24</sup> She also remembered the 'peals of laughter' from behind her Aunt Jane's closed door as Jane, Cassandra and Marianne's older sister Fanny read the novels aloud. Marianne thought it 'very hard that we should be shut out from what was so delightful'.<sup>25</sup> I firmly believe that acknowledging laughter as one of Austen's creative impulses is essential to an understanding of her rich and complex relationship with her literary predecessors, and recognizing the 'peals

of laughter' and the 'delight' generated by reading Austen helps to explicate some of the responses of her readers. In Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 I discuss both the energies generated by resistance and the pleasures of appropriation. My focus on the joy of the intertextual obviously owes much to the theoretical paradigms of Roland Barthes, and my interest in the resistant and oppositional is both narratological (for which the dominant models are to be found in the work of M. M. Bakhtin) and feminist. In acknowledging these theoretical debts I take this opportunity to point out my own acts of readerly appropriation, and acknowledge the ways in which I, like any reader, may be influenced by my own reading.

Throughout this book, I work with two paradigms of readers. The first is the hypothetical reader, derived from the reader-response theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Michel de Certeau and Roland Barthes, and the feminist renegotiations of such theory by Judith Fetterley, Shoshana Felman, Jocelyn Harris, Kathy Mezei, Lynne Pearce, Sara Mills, Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart among others. The second is the historical reader, represented here through the published and private writings of readers from 1786 (when Austen first started to show her juvenile writings to her family, and hence responses to the works began) to 1945 (when the end of the Second World War ushered in an era of new media, such as radio and television, and print began to lose currency as the primary means of mass communication). The responses of Austen's readers from 1945 to the present day are outside the scope of the current volume.<sup>26</sup> The model for analysis of the historical reader is to be found in the work of book-historical scholars, such as Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, Jonathan Rose, David Vincent, Simon Eliot, Anthony Grafton, Mary Hammond, Andrew Murphy and Kate Flint. That there is a tension inherent in using these two models concurrently is immediately apparent: actual historical readers rarely (if ever) react in the ways that hypothetical readers can be made to do, so reader-response and historicist criticism seldom work comfortably together. It is my belief that the conflict generated by my choice to use both paradigms is not only interesting in itself on a meta-critical level, but more crucially that such tension points to a battle that occurs in the very process of reading Austen's texts. This is the clash between the ideal reader presupposed in her writing – a reader who is a function of the text – and the actual reader who may or may not be prepared to meet the demands made of the ideal reader, and whose responses are outside textual control. An actual reader may, of course, choose complicity with the narrative voice, becoming to some extent an ideal reader, or may choose to be, to borrow Judith Fetterley's phrase, a 'resisting reader', whose resistance is to the coercion of narrative or stylistic structures and who maintains

a difference and distance from the ideal reader.<sup>27</sup> Examples of both compliant and resisting readers are discussed in Chapters 6 to 9.

Readers do not, however, resist or obey only the structures within texts. Nobody reads in a cultural vacuum, and reading can never be innocent of the influences of social, political and economic structures, both those of the moment and the past, as I discuss in the second part of the book. I have designated readers who resist the external pressures of their social and cultural *milieux* as 'oppositional' readers, to differentiate them from the 'resisting' readers described above. Chapters 4 and 5 provide some specific textual and critical background to the responses of Austen's readers, and in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, I endeavour to place the reactions of Austen's readers in some of their historical and cultural contexts, explicating the particular kinds of responses enabled by certain contexts and cultures. This book does not aim to cover all possible contexts for the reading experience, concentrating instead on the material qualities of the text and nineteenth-century theories about the nature and purpose of reading. My primary focus is on gender, and so I do not discuss in any detail, for example, geographical, political, religious or financial contexts, and there is little strictly economic or class-based analysis, though it is probable that all these approaches would illuminate the material considered here in important and different ways. This material has been selected from a wide survey of all known extant responses to Austen's work,<sup>28</sup> and has been chosen because it represents both the most common and the most suggestive and interesting kinds of response, but it must be acknowledged that any history of reading or response is, almost by definition, partial. It is impossible for any researcher in the field of the history of reading to ignore the fact that the act of reading is very rarely recorded (for many, reading was, and is, too ordinary an action to merit writing about), and even if recorded, the evidence may not survive (written and printed materials are vulnerable, destroyed not only by accidents such as fire and flood, but also sometimes by deliberate choice). Scholars are dependent on the survival of records of reading that are skewed in terms of gender (more records written by men than women exist), social class (the belongings of the rich, including manuscripts of their letters and diaries, tend to survive better than those of the poor, while autobiographies and biographies tend to be written by and about extraordinary, rather than ordinary people), and historical period (material of a more recent date is more plentiful, simply because of the destructive effects of time). In addition, the acts of reading that are recorded tend to be those that arouse intense emotion or one kind or another, while the vast majority of reading experiences must in fact be quite the opposite. Rarely does a reader (unless under compulsion) bother to record what may be the most common response of all to a text: boredom. But however partial the history, however self-selecting the responses

of her readers, they nonetheless have a story to tell about the nature of Austen's appeal and the enduring value of her works.

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Jane Austen herself was a resisting reader. In her criticism of the internal structures of Mary Brunton's *Self Control* (1810), for example, she wrote in a letter to Cassandra, 'I am looking over *Self Control* again, & my opinion is confirmed of its' [*sic*] being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does. —'<sup>29</sup> Although she approves of its morality, recognizing it to be an 'excellently-meant' work, she resists the improbability of its plotting. Her resistance is thus seen to be to the structures of the text itself, rather than to external factors surrounding it. We should also note that Austen comments again on the absurdity of Laura's adventures in a letter to her niece Anna Lefroy, in which she teasingly suggests that she will write 'a close Imitation of "*Self-control*" as soon as I can; — I will improve upon it; — my Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way, & never stop till she reaches Gravesent [*sic*]. —',<sup>30</sup> and again in her parodic 'Plan of a Novel according to hints from various quarters', which bears a strong resemblance to these comments to Anna.<sup>31</sup> Austen thus turns the improbability of Brunton's plotting to ironic purposes of her own.

Austen was also an appropriative reader, as when she takes on Samuel Richardson. 'Dear me!' she exclaims. 'What is to become of me! Such a long letter! — Two & forty lines in the 2<sup>d</sup> page. — Like Harriot Byron I ask, what am I to do with my Gratitude? —'.<sup>32</sup> Here, she bathetically borrows Harriet's phrase in order to subvert it, turning the seriousness of Harriet's 'Gratitude' to Sir Charles Grandison into her exaggerated thanks for Cassandra's letter. In so doing, she unerringly points out that there is something exaggerated, or excessive, about the 'Gratitude' of the original text, although she simultaneously enacts the tenderness inherent in both Harriet's feelings for Sir Charles and her own for Cassandra. Such intertextual teasing is common between the sisters, and, like Austen's criticism of *Self Control*, shows Austen's amused ability to resist and appropriate for her own purposes what she perceived as ridiculous or unnatural in the writing of others. As we see in Chapters 2 and 3, such acts of resistance and appropriation are characteristic of Austen's reading and writing practices.

In her reading and writing, though not in her life, Austen frequently resisted or opposed social and literary conventions too, mocking the

prevailing conventions that suggested reading novels was either dangerous or intellectually unacceptable, and commenting wryly on the ‘pretension’ and ‘self-consequence’ of those who were ashamed of reading them:

I have received a very civil note from M<sup>rs</sup> Martin requesting my name as a Subscriber to her Library [...] As an inducement to subscribe M<sup>rs</sup> 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; – but it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her Subscribers.<sup>33</sup>

She defines her position as a reader in opposition to one of the cultural stereotypes discussed in Chapter 5: that of the reader described in Walter Scott’s review of *Emma* for the *Quarterly Review*, for whom ‘a novel is frequently “bread eaten in secret”’,<sup>34</sup> who is ashamed of her secret and depraved taste. Both resistance and opposition are for Austen not painful, but amusing. Defiance, it seems, is pleasurable. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor Dashwood, faced with Robert Ferrars’ inanities and nonsense, ‘agreed to it all, for she did not think he deserved the compliment of rational opposition’.<sup>35</sup> ‘Rational opposition’ truly is a ‘compliment’ in Austen’s novels and letters, a compliment that extends to her attitude towards her literary predecessors. Many of Austen’s readers pay her a similar courtesy. Rational opposition to Austen’s novels is often more interesting than wholehearted devotion; Chapters 6 to 9 explore the complicated ways in which the qualities of resistance, opposition and appropriation I have identified as characteristic of Austen’s reading and writing are translated into others’ comments about her.

At the heart of all of Austen’s novels is the question of what it means to be an intelligent woman in a patriarchal world, which is also importantly at stake in the women readers’ responses to Austen discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Tellingly, one of Jane Austen’s earliest readers, Miss Isabella Herries, disliked *Emma* on the grounds that she ‘objected to my exposing the sex in the character of the Heroine’.<sup>36</sup> All Jane Austen’s heroines face situations in which their own intellectual and/or sexual energies come into direct conflict with the power structures that limit their life choices. Energy is thus thwarted, and forced to take a different course – either sublimation or the formation of potentially disabling somatic symptoms. Chapter 2 discusses the situation of Fanny Price in detail, but other examples would include the diversion of Emma Woodhouse’s intelligence and energy into the fantasy world of the ‘imaginist’<sup>37</sup> and matchmaker; the low-level depression of Anne Elliot, who, is constantly struggling against ‘a great tendency to lowness’;<sup>38</sup> and Marianne Dashwood’s dramatic illness when her desires are thwarted. It is no coincidence

that Marianne's desire for Willoughby is represented as both literary and sexual, beginning with a shared taste for Shakespeare and compounded by Willoughby's physical attractiveness. It could be argued too that, although Elizabeth Bennet's behaviour frequently pushes the bounds of propriety to their limits, her flyting flirtation with Darcy provides a (just) legitimate use of the quality of intelligence within the marriage market, and thus allows Elizabeth the unusual freedom of directing her intellectual energies into a course congenial to her. We should note, however, that Elizabeth's 'pert' and 'vulgar' behaviour did not win her favour with many early readers, revealing the extent to which her behaviour courts risk. Lady Jane Davy, for example, remarked on the 'unrelieved' depiction of 'vulgar minds and manners' in *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>39</sup> and even Mary Russell Mitford, one of Austen's greatest apologists, deplored 'the entire want of taste which could produce so pert, so worldly a heroine as the beloved of such a man as Darcy'.<sup>40</sup>

John Wiltshire has beautifully demonstrated the way in which repression of desires manifests itself in somatic symptoms in Austen's novels.<sup>41</sup> Marianne Dashwood's is a case in point, as is that of *Sanditon*'s Parker sisters, whose thwarted energies are diverted into Diana's 'activity run mad' and Susan's absurd invalidism.<sup>42</sup> Austen makes her point explicitly in *Sanditon*, contrasting the legitimacy of masculine energy with the limited possibilities available to women. She writes of the Parker siblings:

It was impossible for Charlotte not to suspect a good deal of fancy in such an extraordinary state of health. Disorders and recoveries so very much out of the common way, seemed more like the amusement of eager minds in want of employment than of actual afflictions and relief [*sic*]. The Parkers, were no doubt a family of imagination and quick feelings – and while the eldest brother found vent for his superfluity of sensation as a projector, the sisters were perhaps driven to dissipate theirs in the invention of odd complaints. The *whole* of their mental vivacity was evidently not so employed; part was laid out in a zeal for being useful.<sup>43</sup>

In this account, 'quick feelings' and 'mental vivacity' are useful to a male property speculator, but are diverted into hypochondria and overly officious altruism in the ladies of his family. All of Austen's heroines and many of her lesser female characters possess, to a greater or lesser degree, 'eager minds in want of employment', and the plots of the novels frequently turn on the consequences. Suppressed or sublimated energies pervade the plots of the novels, and maintaining propriety of demeanour in company when inwardly struggling with mental anguish is incumbent, at one time or another, on all of her heroines.

The displacement of energy that functions on the level of plot is also felt in Austen's style. Although Virginia Woolf thought that 'the chief miracle' of Austen's writing was that she (Woolf) 'could not find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest',<sup>44</sup> a number of critics, from Margaret Oliphant in 1870,<sup>45</sup> Mary Poovey in 1984,<sup>46</sup> to D. A. Miller in 2003<sup>47</sup> and Janet Todd in 2006,<sup>48</sup> have identified the conflicting energies that pulse beneath the surface of Austen's seemingly smooth and unruffled prose style. In his influential essay of 1940, D. W. Harding coined the phrase 'regulated hatred' to describe the presence of unruly energy in Austen's prose style,<sup>49</sup> and critical work making use of Bakhtin's models of dialogism and heteroglossia continues to focus on disruptive energies in the text.<sup>50</sup> In Chapter 3 I discuss some of the ways in which Austen's style contains the presence of potentially destructive but eventually liberating energies, making use of Poovey's formulation of the conflict of the 'proper lady'. In *Persuasion*, Austen describes Anne's 'smiles reined in and spirits dancing in private rapture' as she finally manages a *tête-à-tête* with Wentworth after receiving his letter.<sup>51</sup> Both 'reining in' and 'private rapture' are, I argue, essential to Austen's prose style.

In suggesting that Austen's style bears the hallmarks of a concern to be, in Poovey's phrase, a 'proper lady' in spite of being a professional woman writer, it is not my intention to ignore or devalue the recent important critical work that has re-examined the early nineteenth-century literary marketplace, and shown that the range of opportunities for women in that marketplace was far greater than previously supposed.<sup>52</sup> It is evident both from such scholarship and from primary sources such as letters and diaries that late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century women confidently wrote and published substantial quantities of poetry, drama and both fictional and non-fictional prose, and that a large and often sympathetic readership (of which Austen was herself a part) for their productions existed. Nor do I want to perpetuate the surprisingly long-lived and influential (although inaccurate) myth, begun by Henry Austen in his 'Biographical Notice', that Jane Austen 'became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives'<sup>53</sup> – in other words that she was not serious about her literary endeavours. Q. D. Leavis forcefully made the point that Jane Austen was not an inspired amateur as early as 1942,<sup>54</sup> and the most cursory reading of Austen's letters reveals the interest she took in the reception of her books, and her desire for both literary acclaim and money. She writes to Cassandra that she is 'never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child'.<sup>55</sup> She longs for the public to like her Elizabeth Bennet: 'I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know'.<sup>56</sup> She is concerned that Emma Woodhouse is

a heroine 'whom no one but myself will much like'.<sup>57</sup> She cheerfully declares herself 'too vain to wish to convince you that you have praised them [her novels] beyond their Merit',<sup>58</sup> but is 'very strongly haunted by the idea that to those Readers who have preferred P&P. it [*Emma*] will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP. very inferior in good Sense'.<sup>59</sup> She writes of the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*: 'I cannot help hoping that *many* will feel themselves obliged to buy it. I shall not mind imagining it a disagreeable [*sic*] Duty to them, so as they do it',<sup>60</sup> and complains to Fanny Knight that 'people are more ready to borrow & praise [*Mansfield Park*], than to buy – which I cannot wonder at; – but tho' I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter* too'.<sup>61</sup> It is clear that Austen wanted both 'praise' and 'pewter'. Nonetheless, it seems to me true that the plots of Austen's novels, although subverted, do strongly adhere to codes of ladylike propriety, while the stylistic features of her writing enact the pleasures of resistance to these very codes. This is most in evidence in my discussion of Austen's directed indirections of style in Chapter 3.

If there are sublimated energies in Austen's writing, it is also manifestly true that such energies resurface in writing about Austen, although her readers do not always recognize the relationships between them. I have chosen in Chapters 6 to 9 to focus most intensely on the private and critical writing of Austen's readers, because I believe that by doing so we may expand our notion of literary influence to include some important (and hitherto often ignored) ways in which readers interact with texts. The correspondence between Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (analysed in Chapter 7), for example, clearly demonstrates the negotiations with Austen's name and reputation that allow both writers to come to a stronger sense of their own beliefs and priorities as readers and writers. The comments of Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson (discussed in Chapter 8) reflect the ways in which reading can relate to questions of national identity and gender. The responses of the Macaulay, Darwin and Kipling families all point to the role played by shared reading in the construction of familial ties and relationships. It is also important to note that many of the implicit or explicit debates, discussions and problems that remain unresolved in Austen's novels – the challenges that Austen lays down to her readers and the questions she invites them to answer – are taken up by those who read her.

This book thus considers the contributions of Jane Austen's novels to important late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about the nature, purpose and value of women's reading, examining the use Austen made of her own reading, her discussions of reading women within the novels, and aspects of her stylistic practice that have important implications for a hypothetical reader. Austen's novels are discussed within the context of nineteenth-century

anxieties about reading women and women's reading, with particular reference to the influence of the conservative conduct literature of the mid- to late-eighteenth century. Austen's style, which itself enacts the dictates of propriety, actually encourages a type of reading – 'hard reading'<sup>62</sup> – that questions the conservative ideologies that conduct books endeavour to perpetuate, and that the marriage plots of Austen's novels appear to support. Austen's readers respond to the hidden energies of the texts with energies of their own, invoking in their own conversations with and about Austen, a number of important arguments. Among these are debates about the role of the critic, the moral value of fiction, the development of the novel, the future of the professional woman writer, the importance of familial or domestic affection, the status of manners and the heart, and questions about what it means to read well. Like ghosts, these issues, even when they are not directly being addressed, hover in the background of my chosen readers' discussions of Austen. *Revenants* indeed, they return unexpectedly, inflecting conversations and discourses with their presence.



# Chapter 1

## JANE AUSTEN'S READING IN CONTEXT

### **Jane Austen's Reading**

As a child and young woman, living with her family in Steventon Rectory, Jane Austen had access to her father's library of some five hundred volumes, many of which she read, along with books borrowed from friends, neighbours and wider family members. After the family's move to Bath, when her father's library was sold, and the family's second move to Southampton after the death of the Reverend George Austen, Jane Austen borrowed books from the circulating libraries of Bath and Southampton, and enjoyed borrowing and reading books from the private libraries of friends and relations during her sometimes lengthy visits to them. In particular, Austen seems to have relished her brother Edward Knight's library at Godmersham Park, and to have taken full advantage of his collection.<sup>1</sup> While they were in Bath and Southampton, Henry Austen sent his mother and sisters works from London, and they also sometimes received newspapers and periodicals from the same source, and, rather like the Dashwood family in *Sense and Sensibility*, from friends and neighbours. When Jane, Cassandra, Mrs Austen and Martha Lloyd made their home in Chawton, in 1809, the Austens formed part of the Chawton Book Society,<sup>2</sup> and Jane continued to borrow books from both public and private libraries. In the last three years of her life, once she belonged to the prestigious John Murray stable of authors, she received the latest publications as loans from her publisher. Over the course of her life, therefore, Austen had different kinds of access to books and other printed matter, but, in common with her mother, sister and most other Georgian women on a limited income, she very rarely bought books, and when she did, they tended to be as gifts for other people. Those bought or given to her during her youth were sold with her father's books before the move to Bath in 1801, and the frequent purchase of books was simply too expensive for the Austen women during their years in Bath, Southampton and Chawton.<sup>3</sup>

Reconstructing Austen's reading is therefore both difficult and inevitably patchy, since the most obvious source available to the historian of reading – an individual's library – does not exist in Austen's case. We cannot therefore depend on marginal notes or annotations to her books to tell us what she thought, nor even look for evidence of heavy use, such as dog-eared pages and dirty marks, or, conversely, marks of disuse, such as uncut pages. The Austens, in fact, extremely rarely wrote in their books – the outstanding exceptions are James Austen's copy of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* in four volumes (1771), in which Jane Austen wrote more than a hundred marginal notes that document her championship of the Stuart dynasty, and, to a much lesser extent, Jane Austen's copies of Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts*, in which both she and her niece Anna wrote marginalia, and Burney's *Camilla*, in which Austen commented on the ending. The marginalia in both the *History of England* and the *Elegant Extracts* primarily demonstrate Jane Austen's disagreements with received versions of history, reminiscent of Catherine Morland's view of history in *Northanger Abbey* as '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'.<sup>4</sup> Austen seems, in particular, to have objected to the depiction of the characters of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I in Goldsmith's *History* and the extracts from Hume's and Robertson's *Histories* in the *Elegant Extracts*. Beyond these exceptions, however, in general the surviving copies of Austen family books in the Knight Collection at Chawton House Library tell us little about their readers.<sup>5</sup> Austen did not leave a diary or journal, and unlike many women of her period and class, she does not seem to have kept a commonplace book or album of quotations. We are therefore dependent on the limited marginalia, Austen's surviving letters (a very incomplete record), the quotations, allusions or parodies of literary works found in her novels, juvenilia and unfinished works, and the recorded memories of Austen's nieces and nephews for evidence about what she read, and, sometimes, how she read it.

It is possible to conclude from the existing evidence that Jane Austen read both intensively and extensively, knowing some books almost by heart through repeated re-readings, but also reading a wide and eclectic variety of texts. From the Goldsmith annotations, which show Austen frequently disagreeing with Goldsmith's view of history, and revealing her own sympathies with the Stuart dynasty, we can see that she engaged intensely and sometimes fiercely with authors and arguments that she disliked. Like most readers, she read different books at different times in her life, but returned to old favourites regularly, and responded in various ways to what she read. She read for different reasons, and with varying levels of attention, although, as Isobel Grundy rightly points out, she read like a potential author from a very early age, looking for what she could use, 'not by quietly absorbing and reflecting it, but by actively engaging,

rewriting, often mocking it'.<sup>6</sup> As a child and young woman, Jane Austen's access to books was restricted by financial and geographical constraints, but she was also unusually free to choose her own reading matter. George Austen's library was small, but all of his books were available to his children, and, uncommonly in the period, their choice of reading does not seem to have been censored. From childhood, therefore, Jane Austen was used to making her own judgements and decisions about what (and how) she read, albeit within a limited compass.

When her elder brothers went up to university, they returned for the holidays with new books and ideas, many of which they shared with the family members still at home. Family tradition records, for example, that Austen's elder brother James 'had a large share in directing Jane's reading and forming her taste'.<sup>7</sup> At Steventon, books were read both alone and together, aloud and silently. As Paula Byrne demonstrates, the family participated in amateur theatricals, gaining a deep and shared familiarity with certain plays and poetical prologues, including those written by James Austen. Jane Austen, Byrne argues, was 'actively engaged' in the amateur theatricals, not only at Steventon, but also in Kent, Southampton and Winchester.<sup>8</sup> All of the members of the Austen family, like Mrs Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, re-read their favourite books very frequently. Growing up in a family where books were read together and shared around, Jane Austen was used to sharing her thoughts about books with her parents, sister and brothers, and also, crucially, to assuming a shared knowledge and understanding of literary works. This early experience of reading in a small and close-knit community, in which literary allusions were common currency, almost guaranteed to be recognized and understood, and in which certain books were known by heart, was to affect both Austen's later reading practices and her writing style, in profound and important ways. Throughout her life, Austen habitually read with her sister, mother, and any other guests to their various households. Austen's niece Caroline, for example, remembered that Jane Austen 'was considered to read aloud remarkably well' and recalled her reading of Burney's *Evelina* (1778): 'once I knew her to take up a volume of *Evelina* and read a few pages of Mr. Smith and the Brangtons and I thought it was like a play'.<sup>9</sup> Patricia Howell Michaelson notes that Austen 'almost certainly wrote her novels anticipating that they would be read aloud', and analyses the ways in which such elocutionary effects as emphases, pauses, tone of voice and gestures are represented in Austen's writing.<sup>10</sup> Austen certainly did read her own works aloud to a small and sympathetic audience at various stages of their composition, including after their publication. In addition to Marianne Knight's account of hearing the novels read aloud behind closed doors, scattered references in the letters alert us to the practice of reading Jane's novels aloud in the family circle. As soon as *Pride and Prejudice* was published, for example, the Austens

read it with their guest, Miss Benn: 'Miss Benn dined with us on the very day of the Books coming, & in the eveng we set fairly at it & read half the 1st vol. to her – prefacing that having intelligence from Henry that such a work wd soon appear we had desired him to send it whenever it came out.– She was amused, poor soul! *that* she cd not help, you know, with two such people to lead the way'.<sup>11</sup>

The Austens, as a family, were all also used to reading each other's work in manuscript. More information has survived about Jane's manuscripts than those of any other family member, but she was not the only writer in the family. James Austen wrote plays, poetry and *belles lettres*, Mrs Austen wrote light verse, George, Henry and James Austen all wrote sermons, Cassandra Austen wrote charades and verses, and a later generation of nephews and nieces wrote novels. We know that Jane read (and admired) Cassandra's charades,<sup>12</sup> and Henry's sermons.<sup>13</sup> We can surmise that she read the essays James, Henry and their cousin Edward Cooper wrote for James's periodical *The Loiterer* from the fact that she contributed a letter, signed 'Sophia Sentiment' to the periodical in answer to a previous paper.<sup>14</sup> We know that every member of the family who chose to participate in the Austen amateur theatricals read the plays that James wrote for performance at Steventon. We can assume that even if they did not *read* their father's sermons, the members of the Austen family certainly heard them in Steventon Church. And we know that later in their lives, Jane, Cassandra and Mrs Austen read the embryonic novels of Caroline, Anna and James Edward Austen in manuscript form, and that Jane probably helped Anna by writing out the latter's playlet of 'Sir Charles Grandison'.<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen's family and friends also read *her* novels at all points of their composition, from first drafts to published novels, as recorded in her letters and the opinions she collected of *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*. Martha Lloyd, we should remember, had read 'First Impressions' so often that Jane Austen joked in 1799 that 'one more perusal' would enable her to 'publish it from Memory'.<sup>16</sup> There is, therefore, sufficient evidence to say that the Austens, as a reading community, were both producers and consumers, and that part of what bound them together was the shared experience of reading, enjoying, and criticizing each other's works. Reading and writing were communal activities within a close-knit family, and criticism of literary works took place against a common set of shared reading experiences.

Jane Austen's manuscript notebooks, written between 1787 (when she was 12) and 1792 (when she was seventeen), show her assumptions about the kind of reading community who would read her works – one which would share her concerns and point of view – and occasionally they also show the ways in which that reading community actually responded to the works. The three manuscript notebooks are titled *Volume the First*, *Volume the*

*Second* and *Volume the Third*, and they adhere closely to the conventions of presentation of the fiction and plays that Austen knew – with dedications, chapter headings, where appropriate, *dramatis personae* at the beginning of plays, and so on. They copy, as far as is possible, the typographical conventions of published works. The juvenile effusions in the volumes are all, without exception, parodies of particular works, authors or genres that we know to have been read by the young Austens together. These individual works include the aforementioned Goldsmith's *History of England*, Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote* (1752), Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4), and Berquin's *L'Ami de l'Enfance* (1782–3); genres include the novel of sentiment, the conduct book, the dramatic comedy, the epistolary novel and the history.

By its nature, parody assumes prior knowledge of the work being parodied, and to some extent, it creates a readership which shares the author's sentiments about the works, authors or genres being parodied. That is, after all, the aim of parody – it points out the weaknesses, absurdities and follies of the original, and implicitly asks the reader to align him or herself with the parodist's stance. The internal evidence, in the shape of the dedications to the works, suggests that all of the members of the Austen family, including more distant relatives such as Jane Cooper and Eliza de Feuillide, and their close friends, such as Martha and Mary Lloyd, were expected to read the notebooks. We know that at least two members of Austen's family recognized the parodic nature of the works, as they responded in creative kind. Henry Austen added a very brief parody of another kind of genre – the banker's draft – after one of her dedications. The dedication reads:

To Henry Thomas Austen Esqre –  
Sir

I am now availing myself of the Liberty you have frequently honoured me with of dedicating one of my Novels to you. That it is unfinished, I greive [*sic*]; yet fear that from me, it will always remain so; that as far as it is carried, it Should be so trifling and unworthy of you, is

Another concern to your obliged humble.

Servant

The Author<sup>17</sup>

Henry Austen – a future banker – wrote in response:

Messrs Demand and Co – please to pay Jane Austen Spinster the sum of one hundred guineas on account of your Humbl. Servant.

H. T. Austen

£105.0.0.<sup>18</sup>

In these *jeux d'esprit* of a loving brother and sister, we can see the Austen siblings simultaneously acting out and parodying the productions of their future professions, whilst using their shared expertise in parody, learned through resistant and oppositional reading, to amuse one another. Cassandra Austen, the sibling to whom Jane was always closest, also recognized and participated in the spirit of parody of Jane's notebooks. The second item in *Volume the Second* is *The History of England*, written 'by a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian' and dedicated to 'Miss Austen, daughter of the Revd George Austen'.<sup>19</sup> Cassandra is, however, not only the dedicatee of the work; she produced thirteen illustrations which strongly underline the satirical tone of the text, and reflect its political bias (Mary, Queen of Scots is depicted as soft, round and smiling, while Elizabeth I has a gaunt, hook-nosed and unsmiling visage), thus suggesting that she, like Henry, was a reader with attitudes and interests in common with the author. Austen's first assumption about her reading community, at least as evidenced by the notebooks, is that her readers would immediately recognize her works as parodies of particular originals, and that they would share her satirical perceptions of those originals.

The second assumption that Jane Austen appears to have made was that her readers would recognize the relevance of characters and situations to their own lives. All but a small number of her short pieces are dedicated to a friend or family member, and her mock-grandiloquent dedications are carefully designed, not only to ape the more florid specimens that she and her family knew from published works, but also to reflect the character of the work to follow, and the character and situation of the dedicatee. To her young niece, Fanny, she dedicated 'The female philosopher – A Letter', with a mock-serious dedication that sets it up as a parody of the conduct book in letters, made popular in the 1770s and 80s by writers such as Hester Chapone and John Bennett:

My dear Neice [*sic*]

As I am prevented by the great distance between Rowling and Steventon from superintending Your Education Myself, the care of which will probably devolve on your Father and Mother, I think it is my particular Duty to prevent your feeling as much as possible the want of my personal instructions, by addressing to You on paper my Opinions and Admonitions on the conduct of Young Women, which you will find expressed in the following pages. I am my dear Neice,

Your affectionate Aunt

The Author