



Brothers of the More Famous Jane: The Literary Aspirations, Achievements, and Influence of James and Henry Austen

MAGGIE LANE

Maggie Lane is the author of several books including *Jane Austen's Family*, *Jane Austen's England*, and *Jane Austen and Names*. She is a regular contributor to the *Annual Report of the Jane Austen Society (UK)* and to *Jane Austen and her Regency World* magazine, of which she is Consultant Editor.

JUST AS FRANK AND CHARLES commonly make a pair in Austenography—the sailor brothers, bringing knowledge of the war and the navy into the quiet domestic life of their sister, to the enrichment of her novels—so James and Henry Austen, though very different from one another in temperament and lifestyle, may be regarded as a pair: a pair of professional men living and working on the margin of the world of letters, with their own literary ambitions, abilities, and achievements. In a family adept at writing letters, charades, and light verse for their own amusement, only James and Henry (besides Jane) attempted serious authorship. In this essay I shall first establish the right of James and Henry to be regarded as literary men, looking at their personalities, their professional lives, and the range of literary texts they have left us. I shall consider to what extent their own ambitions were fulfilled, and examine some of the conflicting emotions roused in them by their sister's success. Her own fraternal feelings, as evinced by her letters, have led biographers to state categorically and repeatedly that Henry was her favorite, James the least favorite of her brothers. I hope to bring forward some evidence to modify this view. Along the way I shall ponder whether James and Henry helped inspire any of her fictional characters, always bearing in mind her own dictum that she was too proud of her creations to admit that they were only Mr. A or Colonel B. And lastly I shall investigate the role of these two brothers in shaping the view of Jane Austen, as a woman and a writer, that has come down to us through the centuries.

On 4 January 1820, a few weeks after the death of her eldest son, James, the eighty-year-old Mrs. Austen wrote a letter to her sister-in-law Mrs. Leigh Perrot in which she enters into a comparison between James and his brother Edward, whom she refers to as Mr. Knight. After describing Edward as “most kind and liberal” Mrs. Austen adds that he

is quite a man of business. That my dear James was not—Classical Knowledge, Literary Taste and the power of Elegant Composition he possessed in the highest degree; to these Mr Knight makes no pretensions. *Both* equally good, amiable and sweet-tempered. (*Papers* 264)

This letter is valuable to students of the Austen family in several ways, not least in that it establishes James as amiable and sweet-tempered, in the eyes of his mother at least, a judgment to bear in mind when we come to consider Jane’s own comments about her eldest brother. Mrs. Austen’s letter also confirms James in the character of scholar and writer, not just in his promising youth, but throughout his life. Of his performance as a clergyman, it will be noticed, Mrs. Austen makes no mention, though it was his clerical role that for thirty years defined his place in the local community and society at large.

Mrs. Leigh Perrot had no need of this character sketch, since she had known James all his life; it was sheer indulgence on Mrs. Austen’s part, for which she may be forgiven, having now lost two of her children, though it is notable that she did not think of mentioning *Jane’s* literary powers. Many circumstances suggest that she was always most deeply attached to James, of all her children. It is quite common of course for proud parents to regard their firstborn as something of a genius in babyhood; and with high levels of parental attention and expectation, firstborns are indeed often high achievers, with a conscientious approach to life. James fits this pattern. He was a very satisfactory son for his scholarly father, having an aptitude for the classical studies that the Reverend George Austen was so well qualified to teach. By the age of fourteen, James had matriculated at Oxford, where he remained, later as Fellow of his college, until 1790—eleven years.

This was the only period of his life when James was resident anywhere other than Hampshire—though Oxford terms allowed him plenty of time back at Steventon. From her earliest consciousness the child Jane must have been aware of her eldest brother as a writer, and of the family admiration that clung to him on that account. The literary form which came naturally to James was poetry. From the beginning to the end of his life he expressed himself in verse, his subjects being mainly the people and places around him, and his style being

reflective and tender. His earliest preserved poem dates from when he was fifteen—Jane being then five. How much of his work he read aloud to the family we cannot know, but there was nothing in his future life to suggest that writing poetry was a secret activity for James, however personal his subject matter. In a more public literary form, between 1782 and 1788—roughly Jane’s seventh to thirteenth years—the Austen household was alive twice a year with amateur theatricals, putting on a succession of plays for which James composed metrical prologues and epilogues. Writing for the entertainment of the family circle must have seemed to Jane a natural part of a lively family life, encouraging her to do the same, though from the outset her instinct was to poke fun.

At this stage in his life James’s prospects were golden. His talents might bring him literary fame. He was heir to his wealthy childless uncle, James Leigh Perrot, with reasonable expectations that he would be living the life of a leisured country gentleman by his middle age. And he had the church meanwhile. His retiring and cerebral nature, coupled with his taste for rural pursuits—he was fanatical about hunting—fitted James ideally for the role of country clergyman. He was guaranteed stepping into his father’s shoes one day at Steventon and meanwhile—or in addition, for he had no scruples about pluralism or absenteeism, only about the more obscure clerical offence of simony—he had first claim on any family living that might be going. As a first son, it was his right to be privileged above his brothers—think Tom Bertram, or at a lower rank in society Charles Hayter in *Persuasion*, the only one of his family to become “a scholar and a gentleman” (74).

James’s eleven years at Oxford meant he overlapped there with a brother six years his junior. Full of confidence and ambition, robust and ebullient where James was sensitive and introspective, Henry was the only other Austen boy not to be denied a university education. Anna Lefroy tells us that her grandfather, George Austen, considered Henry “the most talented of his sons” and that father and son shared “a hopefulness of temper” (*Lefroy MS*, qtd in *Family Record* 52). Doubtless George Austen hoped that a family living would be forthcoming for Henry too, but failing that, such a brilliant boy would make his way in the world somehow, which is exactly what happened, using his contacts to become first a soldier and then a banker.

Henry went up to Oxford in 1788, and in January 1789 the two brothers founded a weekly periodical composed of lively, elegant, polished essays in the fashion of the time, which they named *The Loiterer*. The fact that the first issue came out within a few months of Henry’s arrival in Oxford suggests that he was the driving force behind it, although hitherto James had seemed the only

serious writer in the family, and we have no knowledge of Henry's harboring literary ambitions before Oxford. James certainly contributed the majority of the essays (a few were written by Oxford friends), but both brothers demonstrate what Mrs. Austen calls "the Power of Elegant Composition" and an easy familiarity with late eighteenth-century ideas and language. Although non-fiction comprises the majority of the material, both brothers contributed the occasional short piece of fiction, using stock situations made familiar by Fanny Burney and others: the young lady taken to London and caught up in a whirl of dissipation; the visitor from town who tries to seduce the virtuous daughter of his country hosts. For all their similarities of subject matter and vocabulary with those of Jane Austen's juvenilia, what is most noticeable in comparing her fragments with those of James and Henry is her subversion, exaggeration, and refusal to take anything seriously. For instance, the openings of James's first-person narration in the character of Cecilia and Henry's of Camilla are suitably sober: "I am the eldest Daughter of a Clergyman in the West of England, who contrived to support a wife and six children on the income of two small livings" (292); "My father was a Yeoman who, in addition to a small freehold of his own, rented a large tract of land in the North of Devonshire" (317). Compare those conventional examples with Jane Austen's Laura in *Love and Freindship*: "My Father was a native of Ireland & an inhabitant of Wales; My Mother was the natural Daughter of a Scotch Peer by an italian Opera-girl—I was born in Spain & received my Education at a Convent in France" (*MW* 77). The brothers try their hands at fiction in the usual fashion of young aspiring authors, by way of imitation; the sister, while equally caught up in the novelistic concerns and conventions of the day, immediately finds a voice of her own.

When James left Oxford for good in March 1790, Henry did not continue with the publication. This suggests a typically Henryish enthusiasm for a new project, not backed up by staying power, while James had the greater in-born urge to write but lacked motivation. Certainly, in later years, James would speak slightly of *The Loiterer* to his son, as if it had been a mere sideshow in his path through life. And yet, at the time, it seemed a bid for literary recognition—the foundation of a career for the Austen brothers as men of letters, an announcement of new talent on the scene. The first issue, in asserting that "to keep our talent any longer wrapt in the napkin would be equal injustice to our writings, the world and ourselves" shows no shortage of confidence and ambition, however tongue-in-cheek the tone. It has been suggested that *The Loiterer* was funded, wholly or partially, by the boys' father, in which case it must have had the serious purpose of establishing their literary

careers, for George Austen, with many sons to launch in the world, did not have money to indulge mere vanity and whim.

Sustaining sixty consecutive weekly issues was in fact an enormous achievement. The effort and commitment required in not only producing weekly copy, and thinking up new ideas, but dealing with printers and booksellers, proof-reading, advertising in the local presses, and handling the finances was possibly the hardest concentrated work that James ever undertook. Perhaps in the end it defeated him, and he decided to withdraw into his comfort zone of country anonymity and an easy life (even when he became Rector of Steventon, rather than his father's curate at Deane, he never did half the work his father had done, neither farming nor taking in pupils); while Henry had too many other irons in the fire to continue this rather onerous one without James.

Meanwhile, however, the fact of her brothers being published authors must have had its inspirational effect on the teenaged Jane—showing what might be done, bringing exciting talk of the professional world of letters into the home, demonstrating too her father's encouragement of literary ambition in the family. Though *The Loiterer* was produced in Oxford, articles and issues must often have been discussed or read aloud at Steventon. It has been suggested that Jane in fact wrote one of the letters published in *The Loiterer*, expressing a woman's objections to the lack of a female voice in its pages and signed "Sophia Sentiment." The opinion of biographers is divided, and we shall never know whether this was in fact the first time that Jane Austen saw her words in print, in which case it must have been a heady experience for a girl of fourteen, encouraging her to see her future as a published author like her older siblings. A factor that has recently been brought forward in support of the writing being Jane's is that only the issue in which the Sophia Sentiment letter appeared—issue 9—was advertised in the Reading paper, which circulated in North Hampshire, the other advertisements being confined to Oxford and London. The suggestion is that James and Henry arranged this for their little sister's gratification. We must individually make up our own minds on the evidence, and my own instinct is that Sophia Sentiment was *not* Jane, for though the letter is in humorous mode, it reads rather clunkingly for her. Peter Sabor, who has usefully gathered all the critics' opinions for and against in an appendix to the *Juvenilia* volume from Cambridge University Press (356-62), suggests that the letter may have been inspired by conversation with Jane, rather than written by her. We can imagine Jane teasing her brothers and their responding in this way.

After their cooperation on *The Loiterer*, James's and Henry's paths diverged, and their literary ambitions were submerged beneath the business of earning a living. If George Austen was disappointed, he retained sufficient optimism and confidence in the brilliance of his family to write on Jane's behalf to a publisher in 1797, though this too came to nothing. James's eldest child, Anna Austen Lefroy, has recorded the fact that the manuscript that George Austen was all ready to despatch—"First Impressions," forerunner of course of *Pride and Prejudice*—was read aloud at Deane, so James must have been well aware that for his sister writing fiction had been no mere childish occupation. That brother and sister shared a taste in novels is clear from a remark made much later, in 1814, when Jane Austen was reading *The Heroine* by Eaton Stannard Barrett. She told Cassandra in a letter that she had finished it the night before "& was very much amused by it. I wonder James did not like it better. It diverted me exceedingly" (2 March 1814). Had James often not liked what Jane found amusing, such a comment would not have been worth making. Moreover, some lines from James's last poem, written in 1819, have a familiar ring to them: "Nor would I from my list of books exclude / With taste fastidious and affected, works / Of fiction—tale or novel or romance / Which most who read ungratefully deny" (*Poems* 106). This sentiment echoes Jane Austen's own famous defence of the novelists' art in Chapter Five of *Northanger Abbey*: "Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much derided. From pride, ignorance or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers" (37). *Northanger Abbey* had been published two years before James wrote his poem, a case, surely, of the older brother echoing the younger sister.

As the end of the century approached, Jane was the only persevering writer in the family. James had either ceased to write poetry for a while, or did not think well enough of his efforts to preserve them, for there is a long gap in his extant output between 1789 and 1805. As David Selwyn, recent editor of James's poetry, remarks, "It is possible of course that on remarrying he destroyed anything that referred to his first marriage; but that would not explain why there is nothing from the eight years following his second" (xiv). A possible explanation is that James was silent during a period of adjusting to the disappointments of his second marriage, particularly his wife's lack of bookishness, but that he eventually learned to make the best of his situation, helped by his delight in the two children she brought him. Like Jane, he seems to have had a fallow, perhaps depressed period, though his lasted longer.

In 1803 came Henry Austen's first known involvement in the commercial aspect of his sister's literary life. This was to be Henry's chief contribution to the glory of English literature, though it began faltering enough when the publisher Crosby failed to produce the novel for which he had paid, through Henry, the pitiful (even for those days) sum of £10. Although the Reverend George Austen was still alive in 1803, Henry had by now assumed the mantle of the family's London representative and man of business. I can imagine the super-optimistic Henry wresting his sister's business dealings from his father's hands—and of course, had publication actually resulted, Jane Austen would have been pleased enough with her first £10, however much she might subsequently have “long[ed] for more” (6 July 1813).

After a lull of seven or eight years, during which Jane was perhaps feeling too demoralized or too financially insecure to authorize Henry to act for her a second time, he had more success with another contact, Thomas Egerton, the man who had handled the distribution of *The Loiterer* from issue No. 5. Despite specializing in military history, Egerton was induced to bring out *Sense and Sensibility*, by a Lady, in 1811. Jan Fergus, in *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* has fully described the conditions of publication on the commission system, whereby the risk was all the author's, not the publisher's. In the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, it seems probable that the sum of about £180 had to be paid upfront for printing and advertising—in which case Henry surely advanced the money, for such a sum massively exceeded Jane Austen's slender means. Sales of about 420 copies were needed to break even. In the “Biographical Notice” of 1818, Henry tells us “she actually made a reserve from her very moderate income to meet the expected loss” (140). She had no such reserve; Henry was both concealing her poverty and lauding her modesty, but we can read between the lines her fear of debt and of increasing the huge obligations she already felt to her brothers. The appearance of Jane Austen's first novel owed everything, in my opinion, to the force of Henry's confidence and calculations as well as to his cash and his contacts.

From this point Henry was totally involved in Jane Austen's publishing life. When *Pride and Prejudice* came to be published by Egerton just over a year later, it was on a different system, and the author accepted just £110 for the copyright, less than the £140 profit she had actually made on *Sense and Sensibility*. In a letter to her friend Martha Lloyd, Jane Austen says that she accepted this offer to save Henry trouble—perhaps he was particularly busy with his own affairs just at this time, or had no ready money to advance—but it was a poor offer for what she knew to be a superior second work. Henry's

business acumen is brought into doubt, but brother and sister learnt the lesson and reverted to the commission system for *Mansfield Park*, which brought her a profit of £310, probably twice what Egerton would have paid for the copyright. Henry made another miscalculation when having approached the more prestigious publishing house of John Murray—itself a wise move, prompted perhaps by the large advances Murray was rumored to make—he responded to Murray’s offer of £450 for the copyrights of the new novel, *Emma*, together with those of *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility* still in their author’s possession, “The terms you offer are so very inferior to what we had expected, that I am apprehensive of having made some great Error in my Arithmetical Calculation” (typical Henry-speak, this—he also used the expression “the Quantum of your commendation” [20 October 1815]). Jan Fergus points out that as it happens, Jane Austen would have done better to accept this offer.

Henry’s occasional blunders notwithstanding, Jane Austen was undoubtedly helped by having a man—Henry—to open and conduct business on her behalf, and moreover a brother whose home was in London, so convenient for her whenever she needed to be in town to correct proofs or hurry printers. Jane Austen was certainly singularly fortunate in having an array of brothers whose homes and lifestyles among them gave her access to so much that she needed in terms of subject matter and experience—not, of course, that she would ever have thought of them like this. Her brothers did not exist to be useful to her—it just so happened that they were. Her letters reveal that once she had broken through into publishing and gained the confidence of making money, she quickly attained a shrewd understanding of the book business and the ways of businessmen, and that she was perfectly equal to dealing with John Murray when Henry fell ill and she had to write her own business letters and even negotiate with Murray face to face. Murray’s own biographer makes the interesting point that Jane Austen writes to Murray “inviting *him* to call, like the tradesman she considered him to be” (Carpenter 88). Her letters to Cassandra at this time display some relish at being part of the working world. But as a woman, perhaps I should say as a gentlewoman, she had not been able to initiate the process. Despite the fact that his judgment was not infallible, there can be no doubt that she felt an immense debt of gratitude to Henry for his efforts, in addition to whatever financial advance he had made on her behalf (“I shall owe dear Henry a great deal of Money for Printing &c.,” she wrote to Cassandra about the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* [3 November 1813]), and that these reasons, in addition to his own destitution in 1817 when she made her will, led to the bequest of £50 to this one only among her

brothers. She may well have reflected that she would have had virtually no money at all of her own to leave to Cassandra, had it not been for Henry.

Nor should we underestimate the enjoyment of a shared sense of purpose between brother and sister in their successive dealings with publishers and printers, which must surely have enhanced Jane Austen's pleasure in her years of achievement. She had Cassandra to talk to in the early stages of the literary process, and Henry at its triumphant end. A sequence of letters to Cassandra in March 1814 depicts her delight in being with him as he read *Mansfield Park* for the first time. "Henry's approbation hitherto is even equal to my wishes," she reported to Cassandra after the first portion; "he says it is very different from the other two, but does not appear to think it at all inferior. He has only married Mrs. R. I am afraid he has gone through the most entertaining part.—He took to Lady B. & M^{rs} N. most kindly, & gives great praise to the drawing of the Characters. He understands them all, likes Fanny & I think foresees how it all will be" (2 March 1814). Later in the same letter, "Henry is going on with *Mansfield Park*; he admires H. Crawford—I mean properly, as a clever, pleasant Man." And a couple of days later, "Henry has this moment said that he likes my M.P. better & better;—he is in the 3^d vol.—I believe *now* he has changed his mind as to foreseeing the end;—he said yesterday at least, that he defied anybody to say whether H. C. would be reformed, or would forget Fanny in a fortnight" (5 March 1814). The author of *Mansfield Park* could not have wished for a more intelligently engaged reader of her novel.

"Properly, as a clever, pleasant Man." In other words, Henry Austen admired Henry Crawford in a personal as well as a literary sense. This response is interesting because the two Henrys, one real and one fictional, have much in common. Henry Crawford might have a moral failure at his heart, something Jane Austen would never have ascribed to her beloved brother, but Mr. Crawford's social ease, confidence in his powers of pleasing, and verbal fluency do surely echo Henry Austen's, as do his wide-ranging and genuine, if fleeting, enthusiasms for different modes of life. However, I would not wish to go further than to suggest that when Jane Austen indulges herself with creating a clever, amusing male character, she turns naturally to the name of Henry. The other notable example is Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*. Even more witty than Henry Crawford, Henry Tilney is without serious moral blemish, if rather too much of a tease—rather too pleased with himself, in fact. Both fictional Henrys have a taste for literature—Henry Tilney for novels, Henry Crawford for Shakespeare.

We do not know what either Henry or James Austen made of the disap-

proval of amateur theatricals in *Mansfield Park*—they who had been such enthusiastic participators in the plays at Steventon twenty years or more before. Had the spirit of the times changed, and they with it, or was context everything in making such judgments? Henry, who may have acted in *Lovers' Vows* himself with some of his London friends, according to an ingenious attribution by Deirdre Le Faye (*Letters*, 429 n 8), was, following the death of his first wife, on the way to becoming the pious evangelical of his middle and old age—and if there was one thing evangelicals abhorred it was acting. James, who was never of the evangelical persuasion, certainly made no mention of this passage in his opinion of *Mansfield Park* recorded by Jane Austen, under the appellation of “My Eldest Brother”: “a warm admirer of it in general—Delighted with the Portsmouth scene” (*MW* 432). Here was a definite interest in common. James’s last poem, “The Economy of Rural Life,” expresses pity for those who cannot live in the country; the following lines could describe the living conditions of the Prices of Portsmouth: “Their tiny garden, or the dead blank wall / Which bounds their small paved court where never yet / Intruded sunbeam. . . . Hence they who toil in dusky office pent / For six long days; upon the seventh emerge / And take their weekly portion of fresh air / With double relish.” Further on in the poem he speaks of exchanging sunshine and air for “the gross / And smoky atmosphere—the dustiest street / Of the most dusty Town” as Fanny Price herself does (*Poems* 100-01). I suggest that James was inspired by his sister’s imaginative powers almost to the point of borrowing her visualization and vocabulary.

If Henry Austen contributed to the drawing of Henry Crawford, however superficially, I believe there are *two* portraits of James in *Mansfield Park*: an admired James and a disappointing James; James as he had been in his youth, and James in middle age. Edmund Bertram is like the youthful James, a kind mentor to Fanny in her reading as James’s son tells us he had been to Jane, a home-loving man with a deeply held morality that sometimes cut across his own desires. Dr. Grant, irritable and careless of how much he makes others in his household suffer, though a scholar and a gentleman and a good writer of sermons, is all too like this infamous glimpse of James in a letter from Jane on 9 February 1807, when he and his wife had been paying a visit to his mother at Southampton:

I am sorry & angry that his Visits should not give one more pleasure; the company of so good & so clever a Man ought to be gratifying in itself;—but his Chat seems all forced, his Opinions on many points too much copied from his Wife’s, & his time here is spent I

think in walking about the House & banging the Doors, or ringing the Bell for a glass of Water.

This is the most negative thing that Jane Austen ever wrote about any of her family—or at least, that Cassandra allowed to stand when she cut up the letters—and it has colored all subsequent portraits of James. There is no gainsaying that this is what Jane Austen felt, and that her brother's behavior violated one of her imperatives for the life well lived, namely consideration of those around you by means of forbearance and self-restraint. The irony is that he shared this view. "In pity to your family and friends," he writes in his long, last poem, "Let them not see you doze before the fire / In gloomy idleness, or pace the room / With restless irritation, & throw damp / On the domestic circle. Do your part / To make home pleasant" (107). Perhaps he felt he needed this reminder himself.

Were it not for this one sentence of Jane Austen's, our opinion of James would be quite different. His mother and children loved him; his longstanding servants were attached to him. Maybe his wife did rule him, and he gave in to her for a quiet life—we cannot know. Certainly James valued a quiet life; and certainly he had touches of melancholy in his nature that the other Austens did not share. For all the advantages of being born the eldest son, as he reached his early middle age, James had reason to feel a disappointed man. His brother Edward, adopted by distant rich relations, unlike James did not have to earn his living while waiting for *his* inheritance. Edward's good fortune, remarkable in a third son in those days of primogeniture, was beneficial to the whole family as the years went on, and there is no suggestion that James begrudged him, but he may well have had to struggle with the notion that a younger brother was a landed gentleman with a higher status and better income than his own. It was James's fate in every area of life to be overtaken by a younger sibling: in social status by Edward, in romantic pursuit by Henry (they had both courted their sophisticated cousin Eliza, who chose to marry Henry), and in literary success by his sister Jane.

I believe two other characters owe something to James Austen—and they are both called James. James Morland, in *Northanger Abbey*, is the typical elder brother looked up to by his young sister. For all his university education, James Morland has no judgment when it comes to women; he is naively dazzled by female charms. Thus James Austen fancied himself in love several times before both his marriages, probably on very little foundation. Certainly the two women in his life that we know most about, Eliza de Feuillide and Mary Lloyd, could hardly have been more different. It seems chance whom he

actually married—whoever responded to his ardor. This tendency to fall in love easily is depicted by Jane Austen with greater profundity in her portrait of *Persuasion's* James Benwick, of whom she tells us, “He had an affectionate heart. He must love somebody” (167). This is pure James Austen. James Benwick shares *many* traits with James Austen: the tendency to melancholy and self-pity, the quick transfer of his passion from a dead or rejecting woman to the next woman who shows him sympathy, the combination of gentleness with physical bravery, which perplexes Charles Musgrove but which reflects James Austen’s prowess in the hunting field, and above all the absorption in poetry. Captain Benwick seems to me a mellow, amused, affectionate portrait of the youngish James Austen, a portrait that the difference in profession would have helped disguise from himself, a return to amity on Jane Austen’s part as in her calm maturity and depth of understanding she fondly acknowledges the virtues and failings of her eldest brother.

James had resumed writing poetry in 1805, perhaps having come to appreciate the better qualities of his wife, with a celebration of the month of April which contained her birthday; another of his poems celebrates their fifteenth wedding anniversary, in which he expresses gratitude for the way in which she has alleviated his various sufferings and bouts of illness. He compares her ministrations to the “sunshine” which mingled with the “snow” on their January wedding day, the snow representing the illnesses and hardships of life, which everybody must expect to encounter. The writing instinct was too strong in him to remain silent longer; as he said himself in that first issue of *The Loiterer*, “of all chymical mixtures, ink is the most dangerous, and he who has once dipped his fingers in it. . . .”

Many of his most delightful poems are addressed to his two younger children, Edward and Caroline. (There is nothing to his eldest child, Anna.) Few of them are quite free from his habitual tendency to improve the moment by a little preaching, but two poems written as if by Caroline’s naughty cat Tyger would delight any seven-year-old, and show the other side of James’s nature as a father—tender, amusing, and playful as well as deeply concerned with the moral growth of his children. Another favorite of mine is his poem to his son Edward on the occasion of their planting a lime tree together at Steventon—a tree that is still there, though the house is long gone. James’s theme on this occasion is that the tree will remind him of his son while Edward is away at school; and later, when James and Mary are dead, and Edward comes to visit the then Rector, his cousin William Knight, Edward will be reminded of his parents. In this poem James expresses the hope that in

his relationship with his son he has been able to blend “the parent, tutor & the friend” (54).

That James’s family were used to his habit of poetry is clear from a letter to Caroline who was away at school in Winchester, aged thirteen, in the autumn of 1818: “Do not expect a long Poem, or any Poem upon Autumn, when you come home—I have written quite enough in all conscience—about fading Woods and grey skies. I do not feel as if the present more than usually delightful Season, would extract a line from me. I suppose as I grow old, I grow dull & stupid” (xv). Nevertheless, as he sank towards death a year later, he was engaged on an extremely long poem in blank verse, summing up much of what he has thought and felt about life. “The seasons and the scenery around / Have been my best instructors; I have loved / To muse and meditate . . .” (99).

There is no evidence that James ever sought recognition as a poet. Whether he was afraid of exposing his talents to public scrutiny or genuinely scorned fame as being a worldly consideration, we can only speculate. As Claire Harman shrewdly suggests, perhaps he was most comfortable in cultivating the persona of unrecognized genius (24). Or perhaps for him writing poetry was an end in itself, a means of celebrating what he loved and understanding how he felt.

If the playfulness of the Tyger poems shows a happier side to James’s nature, so does a charming action of his in 1812, shortly after the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*. He not only wrote a poem in praise of the moral as well as the literary qualities of its author—gratifying enough in itself for Jane Austen to receive—but for her additional amusement, he copied it out in a disguised hand and posted it anonymously in Alton on one of his visits to Chawton:

*To Miss Jane Austen the reputed Author of
Sense and Sensibility a Novel lately publish’d*

On such Subjects no Wonder that she shou’d write well,
In whom so united those qualities dwell;
Where “dear Sensibility,” Sterne’s darling Maid,
With Sense so attemper’d is finely pourtray’d.
Fair Elinor’s Self in that Mind is exprest,
And the feelings of Marianne live in that Breast.
Oh then, gentle Lady! continue to write,
And the Sense of your Readers t’ muse & delight.

A Friend. (39)

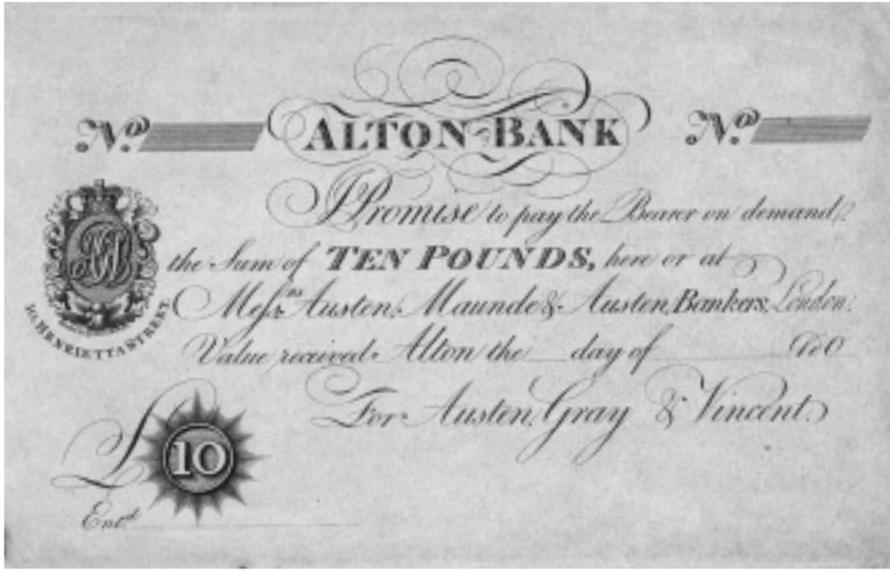
If this was characteristic of James’s response to his sister’s success during her

lifetime, she must have been gratified. Brother and sister were on easy terms at this time. In November of the same year, as we know from a letter to Martha, James “suggested . . . a great improvement” in four lines of comic verse Jane had composed, and she jokingly refers to that version as “the Steventon Edition” (30 November 1812), giving a pleasing picture of brother and sister collaborating, or making free with one another’s lighter pieces of writing. On a more serious level, the newly published author was certainly pleased that James and his wife respected her wish for anonymity, even to the point of concealing the secret of her authorship from their own children initially. Henry’s response was more difficult for her to handle. Alone among the brothers, he could not help boasting. But Jane found it difficult to criticize him. As she wrote to Frank, in what can only be described as affectionate exasperation,

Henry heard P. & P. warmly praised in Scotland, by Lady Rob^t Kerr & another Lady;—& what does he do in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love, but immediately tell them who wrote it!—A Thing once set going in that way—one knows how it spreads!—and he, dear Creature, has set it going so much more than once. I know it is all done from affection & partiality—but at the same time, let me here again express to you & Mary my sense of the *superior* kindness which you have shewn on the occasion, in doing what I wished. (25 September 1813)

Henry’s betrayal of his sister’s secret “much more than once” suggests that he relished the reflected glory so overpoweringly that he could not deny himself this pleasure even in full knowledge of her wishes.

Jane Austen does not record Henry’s response to *Emma* in her “Opinions,” presumably because as with *Mansfield Park* they had discussed it fully in person at his London home, but she briefly gives the verdict of “M^r & M^{rs} J. A.”: “did not like it so well as either of the 3 others. Language different from the others; not so easily read” (*MW* 436). An instance, perhaps, of that assumption of his wife’s opinions, of which Jane had accused James in 1807. (His favorable opinion of *Mansfield Park*, it will be remembered, had appeared under that of “My Eldest Brother,” not “M^r & M^{rs} J. A.”) From such a literary personage as James, one would like to know more specifically in what ways he thought the language of *Emma* different. Not many readers would agree with him in thinking *Emma* less easy to read than *Mansfield Park*—but it certainly proceeds with a lighter touch, which perhaps did not appeal to the now ailing James, whose favorite novelist had become Walter Scott. James writes admiringly of Scott’s power of creating in his readers a “fearful feeling of delight”



An unissued banknote from Henry Austen's bank (1806-1815). © Trustees of the British Museum.

and “sensation undefined / Of awe-inspiring pleasure” (106), a sentiment that makes him sound like Catherine Morland in his old age!

Henry was, albeit inadvertently, responsible for one final but considerable and sorry effect on his sister's literary output. As Tony Corley suggests, had Henry been more prudent as a banker, almost certainly a greater masterpiece would have been left to us. His bankruptcy, preceded by months of worry, came as Jane Austen was working on the novel we know as *Persuasion*—Henry's title for it in fact, since she left it untitled and of course unpublished, though ostensibly completed, at her death. Financial anxiety for Henry and others in the family impoverished in the crash of his bank almost certainly exacerbated her own decline in health, and together led to a failure to do justice to her original conception. This she knew in her heart, which explains her decision not to send the manuscript off to Murray. *Persuasion* is full of beauties, in its characterization, language, and atmosphere—but it is short compared with the other novels of her maturity, and the latter part of the book is skimmed. Captain Benwick, for example, though a fully rounded character, is given no direct speech. Even worse is Mrs. Smith's story of Mr. Elliot's villainy, convincing to nobody, and the sketchy way he and Mrs. Clay are disposed of. Compared with *Emma*, in synopsis there is a greater variety of scene, and at least an

equal variety of character to work on. *Persuasion* as conceived had the potential to be as luxurious and long a read at least as *Emma*, and indeed it starts off with slow-burning promise of riches to come. With its depth of feeling, I think it must have pleased James more than *Emma* though neither he nor Henry read it until after their sister's death. It is rather remarkable, in fact, that Henry did not even know she was working on a new novel until after it was finished. Perhaps he was too wrapped up in his own concerns for Jane to mention it.

Despite his own illness James Austen rode several times to Winchester to see his younger sister on her deathbed in the early summer months of 1817. By the time of the funeral he was too ill to make the journey, but soon afterwards he wrote his famous lines on his sister, comparing her favorably with the great and the good who lie in Winchester Cathedral. What modern critics have chiefly picked up on is his insistence that her literary gifts did not prevent her doing her duty in the home. Her family, he writes, "Saw her ready still to share / The labours of domestic care / As if their prejudice to shame; / Who jealous of fair female fame / Maintain, that literary taste / In woman's mind is much displaced; / Inflames their vanity and pride, / And draws from useful work aside" (87).

To many modern readers the lines imply some inner struggle, concerned with fame, literature, and gender, which James finds hard to resolve as he nears the end of his own life. Before jumping to the conclusion that James was straightforwardly jealous of his sister's success or disapproved of female writing, we must remember that after the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* James had urged Jane to "continue to write" and that he seems to have been quite happy for his own two daughters to attempt writing novels. In his book *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* Peter Knox-Shaw claims that in his poem James gives a more realistic and rounded view of Jane Austen than Henry was to do in his "Biographical Notice" and that "[w]hether the image of a pious Austen would have persisted so long had her character been introduced to the public by James, remains an empty speculation" (172). He is presumably comparing Henry's remark, "Though the frailties, foibles and follies of others could not escape her immediate detection, yet even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness" (139), with James's corresponding lines, "Though quick and keen her mental eye / Poor Nature's foibles to espy / And seemed for ever on the watch / Some traits of ridicule to catch" (87). However, I am not convinced of there being sufficient difference to justify such speculation—the remainder of James's poem paints a portrait of his sister very simi-

lar to Henry's. In fact, a second extant copy of this poem is thought to be in Henry's hand, suggesting that the brothers were at one on this subject.

James might have been the senior man of letters within the family, but Henry was the more active and public one, partly owing to James's debility, and partly to Henry's own pushiness. I believe it was Henry's doing that Jane was buried in Winchester Cathedral. Surely Jane's own wishes, and Cassandra's also, would have been for her to lie in the quiet churchyard of Chawton, where Cassandra could visit as often as she chose, and where the sisters might one day be reunited. A Winchester burial cut off both those possibilities. But it would have suited Henry's notions of importance, and he, with a cheerful confidence in his own rightness, would have felt equal to pulling the requisite clerical strings. So Henry it almost certainly was who composed his sister's epitaph, famously omitting any mention of her novels in the many lines describing her Christian virtues. James's poem and Henry's epitaph paint the same picture of a female paragon, but while James is wrestling with a personal response, and for family consumption only, Henry is aware of writing for the public and for posterity.

James himself, we know from a letter to his wife to be opened after his death, wished to be buried quietly at his beloved Steventon, with as little fuss as possible. Would he have wanted something similar for Jane, but lacked the energy to withstand Henry? And I can't help also raising the question: Cassandra was equally a virtuous Christian lady, but her gravestone wording is minimal, so why praise one but not the other? Cassandra also died away from home—on a visit to her brother Admiral Sir Francis Austen at Portsdown—but *her* body was returned to Chawton. I see Henry's "spirit of activity" as making the difference in all these arrangements.

The literary text of Henry Austen with which we are all most familiar is the "Biographical Notice," which he placed as a preface to the posthumously-published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, establishing in smooth and accomplished prose the image of a sweet Christian lady to whom writing came effortlessly, who never said an unkind word, and who cared for neither fame nor money. Modern readers treat this characterization with some skepticism. Today we are so familiar with knowing the private lives of authors, and so avid for every scrap of information on Jane Austen in particular, that it is easy to regard the provision of a biographical preface as almost inevitable. But was it in fact to be expected that anything be written at all? Anonymous novelists must have been dying all the time, all unmarked as far as I know by anything of this nature. Henry admits even while doing the opposite that "no accumulation of

fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen" (140). He seems to have had no qualms in revealing details of his sister's life, which however innocuous, everything we know about her suggests she would have preferred remain private. If Cassandra, in the rawness of her grief, had such qualms, Henry was quite capable of talking them away.

Henry's initiative was no doubt a loving attempt to promote his sister's personal and literary reputation—but was it also a symptom of his own lust for celebrity? With this essay he saw his own words published for the first time since the *Loiterer* days, decades before. He reactivated his writing gene, which was to flourish in the sermons of his later life. The "Biographical Notice" gave him the opportunity to laud not only his sister but his father—the Austens as a clan, in effect. In many letters of his later life Henry likes to slip in the fact that one brother was a landowner, another an Admiral; he takes it upon himself to puff the social standing of the whole family.

In 1833, now aged sixty, he was given the opportunity to rewrite his piece when his sister's novels were reprinted after being out of print for a decade or so. Much of what he had written before he allowed to stand, though he took out his former tentative comparisons with Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, whose reputations were now on the wane. Ever keen to make the most of any connection with the aristocracy, Henry tells the story of "a nobleman, personally unknown to her, . . . who had good reasons for considering her to be the authoress" of *Mansfield Park* (that is, Henry himself had told him), being "desirous of her joining a literary circle at his house" in town (149). Most significantly he takes the opportunity to be even more fulsome on the subject of religion: "Jane Austen's hopes of immortality were built upon the Rock of ages," and so forth, is a wholly new passage (153).

Henry's newfound piety was, I think, genuine. Knox-Shaw demonstrates how Henry's theology marked him out as an evangelical, in contrast to both James and Jane Austen. Though in 1816, shortly after Henry's ordination, Jane wrote fondly of his "superior sermons" (16 December), in fact Henry's religious writings are doctrinally close to those of their cousin Edward Cooper, whose sermons Jane Austen had been deploring only three months earlier ("fuller of Regeneration & Conversion than ever" [9 September 1816]). The year after her death Henry gave a series of lectures, which he published in 1820 under the title *Lectures upon Some Important Passages in the Book of Genesis*, the drift of which was that the Bible needs no mediation, that its narrative is to be taken as literal fact, and that religion should rest purely on revelation. This belief is exactly the opposite of that of James, who had advocated the use of the

Prayer Book as mediation in a sermon that survives because Jane herself had copied it out. As Knox-Shaw points out, with their wholesale rejection of science, Henry's *Lectures* are "a far cry from his enlightened *Loiterer* days" (172). Henry married as his second wife a woman who herself published *An Epitome of the Old Testament* in 1831—what *would* fun-loving Eliza have made of the pair of them? In 1829 Henry published a sermon given at St. Andrew's Church, Clifton, which is turgid and unreadable today but which must have impressed his listeners, for it was published, as the title page informs us, "at the Request of many of the Congregation."

Henry combined with this piety a marked tendency to be self-serving and social-climbing, which it is odd that Jane Austen never noticed. She does seem to have had a blind spot about this brother. After all, he had obliged her, against her own instincts, to send a copy of *Emma* to the Countess Morley, whose husband he was cultivating, involving her in an insincere follow-up correspondence that was undoubtedly uncongenial to her; as early as 1795, he was writing sycophantically to Warren Hastings (*Papers* 153); and his bank had crashed partly because in his eagerness to ingratiate himself with the aristocracy, he had offered a loan of £6,000 without proper surety to Earl Moira, who had defrauded him by scampering abroad.

In notifying distant relations of Jane's death, Henry came into correspondence with James Henry Leigh, patron of the living of Cubbington in Warwickshire, which had been held by James since his first marriage, though it seems likely he had never even visited there. If James's plurality and absenteeism are shocking in such a moral man, the letter which Henry wrote begging for the living and hinting at the imminent death of his brother is equally shocking, couched in terms that could have come from the pen of Mr. Collins (see Bearman 22-23). Henry Austen's verbose and pompous style, which jumps out from every one of his letters that have come down to us, was surely not what Jane Austen meant when she said on receipt of a letter from Henry that he "cannot help being amusing." Or was it?

It is given to few people to be discussed and debated long after those who knew them have died. James and Henry Austen were fascinating, complex men. Although neither achieved anything by which they would be remembered had it not been for their relationship with their little sister, their abilities and interest in literature certainly helped shape who she was and what she wrote.

WORKS CITED

- Austen, Henry. "Biographical Notice of the Author" (1818) and "Memoir of Jane Austen" (1833). *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*. Ed. Kathryn Sutherland. Oxford: OUP, 2002. 135-54.
- _____. *Ye Know not what Manner of Spirit Ye are of: A Sermon*. Bristol: W. Browne, 1829.
- Austen, James. *The Complete Poems of James Austen, Jane Austen's Eldest Brother*. Ed. David Selwyn. Chawton: Jane Austen Society, 2003.
- _____. *et al. The Loiterer 1789-90*. Ed. Robert Mack. Lampeter: Mellen, 2006.
- Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1995.
- _____. *Juvenilia*. Ed. Peter Sabor. Cambridge: CUP, 2006.
- _____. *The Works of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933-69.
- Austen Papers, 1704-1856*. Ed. R. A. Austen-Leigh. Colchester: Ballantine, 1942.
- Austen-Leigh, William, and R. A. Austen-Leigh. *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record*. 1913. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. London: British Library, 1989.
- Bearman, Robert. "Henry Austen and the Cubbington Living." *Persuasions* 10 (1988): 22-26.
- Caplan, Clive. "Lord Moira's Debt and Henry Austen's Appeal." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (2005): 447-60.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Seven Lives of John Murray*. London: Murray, 2009.
- Collins, Irene. "Too Much Zeal for the Bible Society: Jane Austen, Her Family, and the Religious Quarrels of Her Time." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (2001): 21-36.
- Corley, T. A. B. "Jane Austen and Her Brother Henry's Bank Failure 1815-16." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1998): 139-50.
- Fergus, Jan. *Jane Austen: A Literary Life*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.
- Harman, Claire. *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009.
- Jarvis, William. "Jane Austen and the Countess of Morley: A Footnote." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1987): 79.
- _____. "A Note on the Rev. James Austen." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1981): 179-81.
- _____. "Some Information about Jane Austen's Clerical Connections." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1976): 11-17.
- Kaplan, Deborah. "Henry Austen and John Rawston Papillon." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1987): 60-64.
- Knox-Shaw, Peter. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- Midgely, Winifred. "The Revd. Henry and Mrs. Eleanor Austen." *Jane Austen Society Annual Report* (1978): 86-91.