

INTIMATIONS OF MATURITY IN JANE AUSTEN'S YOUTHFUL WRITINGS

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MOST OF us who enjoy Jane Austen's juvenilia came to them by way of her classic six novels.¹ And, if we are admirers of the novels, chances are that we have been delighted by this extended knowledge of her work, but also somewhat astonished, not to say gob-smacked, by the huge *difference* between the novels, with all their delicate nuance, their restraint and subtlety, and the juvenilia, with their outrageous characterization, unashamed greed, and over-the-top action. Can they be by the same author? In what follows I explore—as others such as Q. D. Leavis have done before me—some of the ways in which the rowdy items of Austen's juvenilia provide intimations of more serious things to come. I pay close attention to the visual elements in these early writings, since my initial project was to illustrate one of them. In what follows here, then, I write as a literary critic and an illustrator too.

Love and courtship are prominent in the juvenilia as in the novels. We have relished the delicate touch on love matters in the novels: for instance, Anne Elliot's careful assessment of the degrees of attraction between the eager Musgrove girls, Henrietta and Louisa, and the dashing Captain Wentworth, the man Anne still loves:

She could not but think ... that Captain Wentworth was not in love with either. They were more in love with him; yet there it was not love. It was a little fever of admiration; but it may, probably must, end in love with some. (P 82)²

NOTE ABOUT FIGURES: All the graphic illustrations in this essay are by Juliet McMaster, © Juvenilia Press and used with kind permission. Those from *The Beautifull Cassandra* (first published by Sono Nis Press in 1996, and subsequently in a revised edition by the Juvenilia Press in 2022), are scanned from the originals still in the artist's possession. The others are from the Juvenilia Press editions of Jane Austen's *The Three Sisters* (2004) and *Lesley Castle* (1998). All three volumes are acknowledged in the Works Cited.

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We note the fine discrimination between “love” and the “little fever of admiration.” And how careful is that wording, “She could not but think . . .” It conveys Anne’s hesitance to conclude what she knows she *wants* to be the case.

By way of contrast, consider the courtship tactics of Lucy in *Jack & Alice*, when she falls in love with the irresistible Charles Adams: “I could not resist his attractions,” she confesses. “Ah! who can?” moans Alice.

“I was determined to make a bold push, & therefore wrote to him a very kind letter, offering him with great tenderness my hand & heart. To this I received an angry and peremptory refusal, but thinking it might be rather the effect of his modesty than any thing else, I pressed him again on the subject.”

And when he will not answer, Lucy chooses “to take, Silence for Consent” (*Jack & Alice* 16–17).³

Not much fine discrimination here! Can this wild unbridled narrative, with its bold switch of active courtship from the man to the woman, really be by Jane Austen? And yet the comic effect is echoed in proposal scenes in the novels (not surprisingly, in the proposals that are refused): in Mr. Collins’s assumption that Elizabeth’s refusal of his proposal must be simply delaying tactics; later in Mr. Elton’s interpreting Emma’s “interesting silence” as an admission of his attachment (*Emma* 131).

For all the astonishing differences between the novels and the juvenilia, however, attentive readers can recognize in both the mature novels and the juvenilia the unmistakable Jane Austen DNA. So here I want to pursue the continuities rather than the contrasts between the youthful writings and the novels.

I start with a recurring motif: what I call the Bombshell Signature. In *Henry & Eliza*, of *Volume the First*, the heroine, cast out by her adoptive parents, is taken as a companion by the powerful “Dutchess of F.” “She was a widow,” we hear, “& had only one Daughter who was on the point of marriage with a young man of considerable fortune” (*Henry & Eliza* 1). Remind you of anyone?—Lady Catherine, perhaps?⁴ Eliza promptly elopes with the young man of fortune, leaving a note: “MADAM / We are married & gone. HENRY AND ELIZA CECIL” (6).

The fury of the “Dutchess” on receipt of this note knows no bounds. She sends after them “300 armed Men, with orders not to return without their Bodies, dead or alive” (6). And once she lays hands on Eliza, she throws her into her own private “snug little Newgate” (8). Surely this vengeance of the aristocrat deprived of her daughter’s affianced husband is echoed in Lady Catherine’s nighttime journey in a chaise and four, to bully Elizabeth into refusing Darcy. Given the more realistic mode of the novel, the threats are commensurate: “You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by every one connected with him.” Elizabeth’s cool response matches Eliza’s resourceful escape out of the Dutchess’s Newgate: “These are heavy

misfortunes. ... But the wife of Mr. Darcy ... could upon the whole, have no cause to repine” (*Pride and Prejudice* 355).

Elizabeth and Darcy do not actually leave a note to tell Lady Catherine that “We are married and gone,” with the bombshell signatures; but the plot parallels with the early *Henry & Eliza* suggest that when Austen writes “Mr. Darcy’s letter to Lady Catherine [on his engagement], was in a different style” (383), she may have amused herself with a fleeting memory of her early tale. In the novel it is Lydia who would like to do the bombshell thing: her family will learn of her marriage, she chortles, “when I write to them, and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke that will be!” (291). The same joke has come a long way.

In *Lesley Castle* comes another bombshell. Charlotte Lutterell asks her London friend Susan about rumours that Sir George Lesley may be considering marriage. She receives the reply,

“Sir George is certainly married; I was myself present at the Ceremony, which you will not be surprised at, when I subscribe myself your

Affectionate Susan Lesley.” (*Lesley Castle* 11)

This is the letter that Charlotte forwards to Sir George’s daughter!

Lucy Steele, of *Sense and Sensibility*, does not quite pull off the bombshell signature; but she does her malicious best. She tells the Dashwood servant Thomas that she has “changed her name,” and gives her compliments and those of “Mr Ferrars” to the Dashwoods. Clearly she has instructed her newly-wed husband, *Robert Ferrars*, to lean back in the carriage, so that Elinor will assume she has married *Edward*. The joke from the juvenilia continues to serve Austen well.

There is no bombshell signature in *The Beautifull Cassandra*. (Perhaps the literacy of Cassandra the milliner’s daughter and the bonnet she elopes with is in question.) But when Cassandra the milliner’s daughter takes off with the bonnet “bespoke by the Countess,” it is again clearly one in the eye for the possessive aristocrat.

To move from the signature motif to other tempting links between the juvenilia and the novels: I cannot resist lingering a while with *The Beautifull Cassandra*, since my project in turning that engaging story by a twelve-year-old into a picture book for children, with the characters turned into small animals *à la* Beatrix Potter, was what first got me hooked on juvenilia; and not just Jane Austen’s, but youthful writings in general. Of that enterprise was born the Juvenilia Press.

I had long been a closet illustrator, making picture books for and with my kids. But when I fell in love with *The Beautifull Cassandra*, at that JASNA AGM organized by Jack Grey in 1987, I made the decision to go professional if I could. (See “Founding the Juvenilia Press,” elsewhere in this issue.) I took time off all other entertainments to make my pictures. Then I went to market with them.



Figures 1 and 2. Cassandra Falling in Love; Ice Creams, from *The Beautiful Cassandra*.

When you illustrate a work you have to think very hard about it; and I found that in working on this story by a twelve-year-old, I had *learned* things about her development. If it works for me, why not for students? I got them “editing” youthful works by Austen, and Brontë, and Alcott, and other budding authors. And the Juvenilia Press was born.



Figure 3. Rides to Hampstead, from *The Beautiful Cassandra*.

Austen’s resourceful and beautiful Cassandra, as we know, is hardly a model daughter. She goes on a day’s binge of conspicuous consumption: falls in love with somebody else’s bonnet and elopes with it (Fig. 1); guzzles six ice creams in a row and won’t pay for them (Fig. 2): and takes a gratuitous trip to Hampstead and back

(Fig. 3). But she is never punished or made to feel guilty, but rather welcomed home by a loving mother (Fig. 4); and her last words are, “This is a day well spent” (Fig. 5).



Figures 4 and 5. Loving Mother; “Day well spent,” from *The Beautifull Cassandra*.

It is not all fun and triumph, however. And Cassandra gets into serious trouble. After the joyride to Hampstead, we hear, “the Coachman demanded his Pay” (Fig. 6); and he won’t take No for an answer. Up to now she has had things her own way. But this is the very nadir of Cassandra’s adventures, her descent into the underworld of this epic saga. In vain she desperately “searched all her pockets over again & again” to pay the peremptory coachman his fare; her head is bowed, her bonnet is ruined, her tail—that expressive member—is downcast and flaccid.

Let me remind you of a parallel case in *Northanger Abbey*, the novel with the most youthful heroine. When General Tilney discovers Catherine is not as good a catch for his son as he had thought her, he expels her from paradise. She is to catch the early morning coach homewards. Fortunately, Eleanor Tilney realizes Catherine “might not be provided with money enough for the expenses of her journey.” And, sure enough, “it proved to be exactly the case.” Catherine and Eleanor ponder the awful possibility of her being “turned from the house without even the means of getting home” (229). That is Cassandra’s case too. The adult Austen expects her reader to shudder. And indeed there is a much *worse* fictional precedent.

In Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* of 1782, a novel that I believe young Jane already knew well, a demanding hackney-coachman forms the climax of the action. Cecilia is in desperate pursuit of Delvile, the man she loves, who she believes is on his way to a duel with a rival. When the coachman refuses to go further, she tries to continue on foot; “but the coachman ... protested she should not stir till he was paid. ... In the utmost agony of mind, ... she put her hand in her pocket,” ready to “pay him any thing” (895). Others get involved. “Let me go! Let me pass! ... detain me at your peril,” she cries in desperation. And presently, “confusion, heat and fatigue, all

assaulting her at once ... her reason suddenly, yet totally," fails (896), and she goes mad, and is presently incarcerated as a lunatic.



Figures 6 and 7. Peremptory Coachman; Plonking Bonnet, from *The Beautifull Cassandra*.

Some fictional precedent! But Cassandra, in a comparable dilemma? Not without reason does she bear the name of a classical heroine. Does she sink in madness like Cecilia? No! Threatened with the Underworld of Debt and Despair, like Odysseus she resourcefully throws a sop to Cerberus: she plonks the now worthless bonnet on the head of the “peremptory” coachman, and takes to her heels (Fig. 7). (Note how efficiently she bundles her tail over her arm, to prevent capture by that trailing handle.) Now unburdened, she gets the hell out of hell.

I like the feminist aspect to these parallels. Burney’s Cecilia, though one might expect that as an heiress she would have clout, is more victimized than empowered by her inheritance: she becomes victim to fortune-hunters. Unpretentious Catherine Morland, though unjustly used by General Tilney, manages her challenging journey well, and proves to her mother that she is no longer “a sad little shatter-brained creature” (*Northanger* 234). The beautifull Cassandra, however, pulls off more independence than either her predecessor or her successor: she not only deals resourcefully with the peremptory coachman; she subsequently walks through London unescorted—against all the rules—and without any head covering—outrageous!

At the end of her adventures, Cassandra returns to the “paternal roof in Bond Street” (Fig. 8). *Paternal* roof? But it is Cassandra’s *mother*, the milliner, we gather, who is the bread-winner in this family. The dad is a would-be aristocratic lay-about, proud of being “the near relation of the Dutchess of Blank’s butler.”⁵ I decided to draw him picking his teeth, to connect him with that connoisseur of toothpicks, Robert Ferrars.

There is development *within* Austen’s juvenilia too. And I want to linger on two works of what might be called the “middle period” of her early writings, *The Three Sisters* and *Lesley Castle*. The many short works, in different genres, of *Volume the First* feature characters who are single-mindedly in pursuit of what they want, with no self-analysis and no qualms. But in these two works—both epistolary, both unfinished—we have stirrings of conscience among the protagonists, and stirrings of satire among the spectators. And *between* the two works, also, there is interesting artistic development.



Fig. 8. Parental Roof, from *The Beautiful Cassandra*.

As Katharine Sutherland has shown, *The Three Sisters*, though it appears in *Volume the First*, actually belongs chronologically with the items in *Volume the Second* (213). It is easy to consider *The Three Sisters* as an ur-version of *Pride and Prejudice*—which we know is the story of *five* sisters. The suitor, the loathsome Mr. Watts, who has nothing to recommend him but his fortune, is courting the oldest sister, Mary. But like Mr. Collins he is perfectly ready, if the oldest is not available, to switch from Mary to Sophy, and if necessary from Sophy to Georgiana.

The Three Sisters was a challenge to illustrate, since so much of the action is postulated rather than enacted: particularly the central proposition, Mary’s marriage to the disgusting Mr. Watts. Will it happen, or not? To deal with this, I invented a system of “Thinks” balloons, as in comics. When Mary delivers her list of goodies

that she expects at marriage, I show the carriages, horses, servants, etc. as items in her speech balloon (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Mary's Desiderata, from The Three Sisters.

When Mr. Watts plays “eeny-meeny-miney-mo” among among the sisters, I show the girls as dummies on display for him in a shop window (Fig. 10). And please note that while Mary's balloon is all curves, Mr. Watts's vision appears in a manly squared-off balloon.



Figure 10. Watts and Dummies, from The Three Sisters.

The speculation I had most fun with was Mary’s wishful thinking that a brother—if she had one—would challenge a defecting Mr. Watts to a duel. (Mrs. Bennet, you will remember, has a similar vision of Mr. Bennet’s challenging Wickham.) I could show a handsome brother, a Mr. Watts stripped of his wig, his knees knocking in terror (Fig. 11). But Mary’s gratifying vision is dispersed when she is reminded that Mr. Watts would simply “run away first” (6) – and he nimbly takes his wig with him (Fig. 12). As a lifelong fencer, I was glad to get a chance to illustrate a duel, even one that doesn’t happen.



Figures 11 and 12. Duel 1 and Duel 2, from *The Three Sisters*.

Mary’s unashamed greed for marriage settlements matches the cheerful self-seeking of other characters in the juvenilia, such as Lucy of *Jack and Alice*, or Sir William Mountague, who hardly pauses after one fiancée dies before he proposes to another. Mary Stanhope gabbles, “I am to have a new Carriage ... a new saddle horse, ... and an infinite number of ... jewels” (11). She and her mother both seem like ancestors of Mrs. Bennet, who like them is broadly drawn. “Oh, my sweetest Lizzie!” Mrs. Bennet gushes when she hears of Elizabeth’s engagement to Darcy, “what pin-money, what carriages, what jewels, you will have!” (*Pride and Prejudice* 378).

Unbridled greed is the norm in the juvenilia. But Mary’s sisters Sophy and Georgiana suddenly surprise us by being self-aware, and having qualms about claiming they will marry Mr. Watts if Mary does not. “Yet after all my Heart cannot acquit me & Sophy is even more scrupulous,” Georgiana writes (11). (What, moral scruple in the juvenilia? This is a new thing.) And here too we meet a spectator, Mr. Brudenell, who casts a satirical eye on Mary’s boasting (as Mr. Bennet might): “Mr.

Brudenell ... even encouraged her by his Questions & Remarks, for it was evident that his only Aim was to laugh at her” (22). “This is surely an intimation of Mr. Bennet’s delight in drawing out absurdities, as when he asks Collins about his fawning compliments to Lay Catherine: “May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?” (*Pride and Prejudice* 68).

In the use of epistolary narration, however, *The Three Sisters* has its failings. Time and place are not fully realized. We have only two letter-writers, and each writes her letters to an off-stage correspondent who does not respond; so there is no interaction among them. Their voices characterize the two letter-writers (especially Mary); and to some extent they characterize others (especially Mr. Watts). But as a developing narrative it is rather thin. One can see reasons for Austen’s abandoning it. It stands out, however, as a forerunner of *Pride and Prejudice*, and for its achievement of a degree of self-awareness by two of its characters.

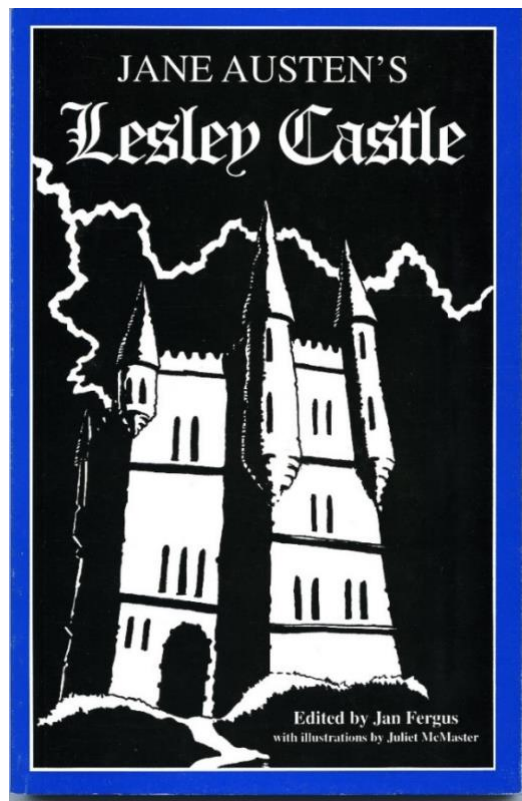


Figure 13. Cover, *Lesley Castle*.

The Juvenilia Press edition of *Lesley Castle* was sponsored by JASNA, back in 1998, to go with its AGM on *Northanger Abbey*—so I could emphasise the Gothic element. Please note the gothic script for the title, and the bolts of lightning (Fig. 13). But I could also provide a daytime picture, with an attendant Scotsman complete with

bagpipes (Fig. 14). (Lady Lesley may “hate everything Scotch” (22)—but I don’t.) My model was Craigievar Castle in Aberdeenshire (Fig. 15).



Figures 14 and 15. Lesley Castle, Daytime, from *Lesley Castle*; *Craigievar Castle, Aberdeenshire*, photo by Richard Slessor (Wikimedia Commons).

Lesley Castle shows a leap of development in epistolary narration. As Jan Fergus points out in her introduction to the Juvenilia Press edition, Austen “exploits epistolarity wonderfully in *Lesley Castle*” (viii). More than in *The Three Sisters* we have specificity in time (January to April 1792, probably the year Austen was writing) and in place too: the Castle; Charlotte’s home Glenford, Bristol; and two venues in London, Grosvenor Street and Portman Square. (I could design letterheads—and I did.) And the interaction *between* the correspondents is intricate and amusing.

As *The Three Sisters* provides intimations of *Pride and Prejudice*, so *Lesley Castle* has certain vibrations of *Sense and Sensibility*. The Lutterell sisters, Eloisa and Charlotte, are very broad versions of Marianne and Elinor. Eloisa is all tears and sensibility; Charlotte’s very down-to-earth preoccupation is cooking. We all remember her reaction to Eloisa’s report of the fatal riding accident that has befallen her fiancé: “Good God! ... You don’t say so! why what in the name of Heaven will become of all the Victuals?” (*Lesley Castle* 8) (Fig. 16). And presently, she and her mother settle down to eat their way through the wedding food, while Eloisa succumbs to “dreadful convulsions” (Fig. 17).

The different correspondents have their own recognizable styles and expressions—even to consistent eccentricities of punctuation, as Jan Fergus has shown (xiv). In Margaret Lesley of *Lesley Castle*, as with Laura of *Love and Freindship*, Austen parodies the convention of the perfect heroine by having this heroine describe *her own* perfections, and her sister’s: “We are handsome my dear Charlotte, very handsome and the greatest of our Perfections is, that we are entirely insensible of them ourselves” (5). The first-person claim to this particular virtue comes out rather differently from Mr. Knightley’s comment on Emma’s beauty: “I love to look at her; and I will add this praise.... Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it” (E 39). *Not* like Margaret Lesley!



She continued for some Hours in the most dreadful Convulsions.

Figures 16 and 17. Charlotte at the Wedding Feast; Charlotte Eating, Eloisa in Convulsions, from *Lesley Castle*.

A special benefit for the illustrator of *Lesley Castle* is the ample information provided on bodies and complexions. Moreover, as in the novels, these correspondents have plenty to say *about* each other, as well as to *write to* each other. The author shares her job of characterizing. These interactions notably thicken the interest, making the characters more three-dimensional. Charlotte is friends with both the Lesley sisters and their new step-mother Lady Lesley, and can comment on the relations between them. “You are both downright jealous of each others Beauty,” Charlotte writes to the step-daughter (27) (Fig. 18). Diminutive Lady Lesley pours scorn her step-daughters’ “tremendous, knock-me-down figures” (25); Margaret Lesley despises her step-mother as an “insignificant Dwarf” (19). I had fun with their

getting together in the “dismal old Weather-beaten Castle” (20). Margaret Lesley tends to gush over her little niece Louisa; but in keeping with other satirical elements, I decided to make Louisa a cheeky brat. Watch her stick out her tongue and make a rude gesture. (And please don’t miss the mouse, which casts a very Gothic shadow.)



Figures 18 and 19. Lady Lesley and Lesley Sisters in the Castle; Lady Lesley and William, from *Lesley Castle*.

In *Lesley Castle*, more than in the earlier juvenilia, we have shrewd ironic commentary on one character by another. Charlotte enjoys the competing commentary of the different Lesleys on each other. And Lady Lesley’s brother William, proceeding to fall for Matilda Lesley, can pull off some satire on his sister’s rouging. When she complains “They are so horribly pale,” he responds, “Well, . . . if they *have* but little colour, at least, it is all their own” (26) (Fig. 19). This is vigorous give-and-take: not so elegantly nuanced as in the novels, but wonderfully boisterous and inventive. Young William’s attraction to Matilda offers one promising romance. Her sister Margaret complains of the excessive admiration she receives in London. (“How often have I wished that I possessed as little personal Beauty as you do” she writes to Charlotte). But presently this willowy beauty too succumbs to the manly attractions of one Mr. Cleveland: “His elegant Manners and Delightful Bow at once confirmed my attachment,” she confesses (36). One bow and she’s a goner!—and I show her promptly dropping a come-hither handkerchief (Fig. 20). “Even so quickly

may one catch the plague?” Margaret might say with Shakespeare’s Olivia (*Twelfth Night* act 1, sc. 3). We are on the way to the characteristic three-match plot of the novels.



Figure 20. Margaret Lesley Meets Cleveland, from *Lesley Castle*.

Here are riches of human interaction—such as we are to see more of, though more refined in quality, in the fictional works yet to come. To adapt Milton: I long to “Call back her that left half-told / The story of the Lesleys bold.”⁶ How I wish that Austen would return to complete this rich and vigorous epistolary tale, and *The Three Sisters* too. *Lesley Castle* promised to be a broad and boisterous comedy, alongside those elegant and ever-re-readable six novels.

NOTES

¹ This paper was invited for the Jane Austen Summer Program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, which in 2023 was specialized to the juvenilia.

² I use the Oxford edition of Jane Austen’s novels, edited by R. W. Chapman, third edition.

³ For Austen’s juvenilia I use the Juvenilia Press editions.

⁴ Joseph Weisenfarth has also explored this connections between *Henry & Eliza* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

⁵ “Blank” was my editorial addition. Jane Austen’s manuscript has only a dash.

⁶ The poet of Milton's "Il Penseroso" wants to "Call up him that left half told / The story of Cambuscan bold" (lines 109–110)—that is, to bring back Chaucer to complete the unfinished Squire's tale in *The Canterbury Tales*.

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