JANE AUSTEN'S YOUTHFUL ART OF ANTICLIMAX

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JANE AUSTEN wrote three volumes of juvenilia, entitled *Volume the First*, *Volume the Second*, and *Volume the Third*. Most scholars agree that they were written between the ages of 13 and 18 (1787–1793). These stories are hilarious and outrageous, particularly considering the understated decorum of her later novels. Indeed, as Juliet McMaster writes, "The adjectives applicable to Austen's juvenilia might include irreverent, rollicking, spontaneous, hyperbolic, violent, indecent, indecorous, outrageous; the very opposite of the familiar descriptors of the canonised work of the mature Jane Austen" (70). Margaret Anne Doody contributes to this generally accepted polarisation when she writes that these youthful writings "point in directions in which their author was later not permitted to go" (103). Yet in many ways, these teenage writings nonetheless proleptically define Austen's taste and mission in her mature works. This essay focuses on one aspect of her style in these teenage writings, as well as its afterlife in her later writings. In considering her use of a*nticlimax,* I will also suggest the ways in which this particular stylistic device or figure of speech shapes her greater mission and strategy as a novelist, suggesting continuity rather than discontinuity between the teenage writer and the mature author. In fact, the use of anticlimax is directly related to the critical disputes over Austen's endings and whether or not she is impatient with conclusions in general.[1]

Anticlimax is a figure of speech that consists in an unusually sudden transition in discourse from a significant idea to a trivial or ludicrous one. The suddenness and contrast are key. Anticlimax entails a surprising deviation from what one was led to expect, and thus exposes literary expectations and literary conventions. Austen's use of it tells us about Austen's assessment of the conventions surrounding the novel and novel reading. It also reveals her assumptions regarding her *readers'* constellation of conventions.

In terms of upsetting readers' conventions and expectations, we might first think of the opening of *Northanger Abbey*, where Austen tells us at great length what her

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heroine will *not* be, assuming that the reader has grander expectations of heroism, virtue, and overall perfection from reading novels by the likes of Ann Radcliffe and Frances Burney. *Northanger Abbey* is her novel dedicated to the art of the commonplace, intended for readers acquainted with novels of romance. It is therefore appropriately *replete with anticlimax*—syntactic, dramatic, and other forms.[2]

A reader of Austen, when hearing the word *anticlimax*, might be even more apt to associate the word with Austen's endings, particularly the way she likes to upset expectations for the romantic endings of her novels. This is most pronounced in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, where she screeches to a halt, but present in all her mature novels. In her juvenilia, the young Austen enjoys upsetting all sorts of conventions, and anticlimax is one of her favorite tools for doing so. One small example of dramatic anticlimax comes from "Jack and Alice." Lady Williams wipes her eyes and tearfully remembers the final words spoken by her "worthy Preceptoress" who was "torn from her arms." What was this final deathbed pronouncement? "Kitty, Good night t'ye." Both the diminutive (Kitty rather than Catherine) and the colloquialism (t'ye) enhance the anticlimax—make the statement even more common.

"The Beautiful Cassandra" opens with an exquisite example of anticlimax, in one of the young Austen's favorite forms: *the list*. Often Austen embeds anticlimax within her individual sentences or creates it through several parallel sentences. The list is a favorite way of startling her readers out of complacence. A humorous arrangement of items might list them descending from grandiosity to absurdity. In Austen's case though, the decline tends to be very sudden. Often she uses parallel phrases and triplets to achieve this disruption—she feigns symmetry and balance for the sake of disruption.

In the dedication of "The Beautiful Cassandra," Austen grows eloquent in praise of her only sister and best friend, Cassandra. After a catch-all compliment, she writes three successive triplets (Table 1), with the anticlimax at the end of the third:

> Madam you are a Phoenix. Your taste is refined, your Sentiments are noble, & your Virtues innumerable. Your Person is lovely, your Figure, elegant, & your Form, magestic. Your manners, are polished, your Conversation is rational & your appearance singular. (*Juvenilia* 53)

She capitalises most of her abstract nouns, adding to the Johnsonian neoclassical balance and philosophical import of the sentence, but the dedication is not nearly as serious as its form and sound suggest.[3] I have used colour-coding to indicate the implied reader response and degree of cognitive dissonance created by Austen's juxtapositions. Embedded in her list is a dramatic decline (yellow) and sudden rhetorical cliff (red) at the end of the sentence. Only by rolling off the cliff do we see the humour, and then probably reread the sentence for new meaning as we recover from our fall.

Triplet 1	Taste	refined
	Sentiments	noble
	Virtues	innumerable
Triplet 2	Person	lovely
	Figure	elegant
	Form	magestic [*sic*]
Triplet 3	Manners	polished
	Conversation	rational
	Appearance	singular

Table 1: Triplets in Austen's dedication to "The Beautifull Cassandra," colour-coded to indicate degree of cognitive dissonance.

One of my favorite twists here is the word *rational*: Austen creates a sly cultural critique by indirectly remarking on the rarity of common sense, probably related to the fashion of extreme sensibility. The word *rational* gives us a clue that the elevated thoughts (flattery) are coming to an end. But the word that fully achieves it is *singular*—not just meaning *rare*. It was more often an insult than a compliment in Austen's time. See the definition in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*: "Having something not common to others. It is commonly used in a sense of disapprobation, whether applied to persons or things." After the exuberant, extreme, hyperbolic compliments, the words *rational* and *singular* come as a surprise or let-down. Of course there are other jokes here, such as illogical repetition—do we *need* separate entries in this catalog for person, figure, form, and appearance? (They are distinctions without a difference.) For the reader, the final word of this forty-word encomium is the lever that overturns it: the anticlimax.

We might afterwards consider how nice it is after all to be a phoenix. And does one really want one's form to be majestic? Austen's rhetorical devices and word choice turn an encomium into a silly mix of positive and negative exuberance. In its overall effect it ridicules not her sister, however, but the custom of writing exaggerated tributes to wealthy patrons and illustrious figures at the beginning of published works of literature. This dedication is an interesting foreshadowing of the actual dedication Austen was later forced to write to the Prince Regent in *Emma*.

The gratifying sensation of puncturing excessive grandiosity is far from new. I am reminded of Montaigne's *Essais*, where, in a famous example of anticlimax, he puts royal pretentions in their place with a coarse turn of phrase:

> "If you walk on stilts, you're still walking on your feet. If you sit on the highest throne in the world, you're still sitting on your ass."
> [*Si, avons nous beau monter sur des échasses, car sur des échasses encore faut-il marcher de nos jambes. Et au plus élevé trône du monde, si ne sommes assis que sur notre cul.*] (book 3, chapter 13 [1580])

The end (in two senses at least) of the sentence dramatically punctures aspirations of grandeur along with any stiff sense of decorum. Austen's art is more understated than this in the mature novels, but pretty comparable in the juvenilia.

So far I have described a few aspects of the dramatic effect of anticlimax, but Austen does not only use it for drama and comedy. As she matures, she increasingly uses it for didactic purposes. Some darker didactic uses also appear in the juvenilia. Near the opening of "Henry and Eliza," Austen uses parallel structures with surprise endings to show a more serious commentary on cruelty:

> As Sir George and Lady Harcourt were superintending the Labour's of their Haymakers, rewarding the industry of some by smiles of approbation, & punishing the idleness of others, by a cudgel, they perceived lying closely concealed beneath a thick foliage of a Haycock, a beautiful little Girl… (27)

In this case the triplet is embedded in a dependent clause (Table 2). The anticlimax is sandwiched between two instances of sweet sentimentality: the sweet innocence of the benign "smiles" and happy farmers, as well as the childish delight and pastoral innocence of the ensuing clause. This context makes this example of anticlimax less humorous than shocking, as it shows the darker edges to Austen's satires of human behaviour and abuses of power.

Activity	**Object**	**Reward/Punishment**
Superintending	Labours	—
Rewarding	Industry	smiles
Punishing	Idleness	cudgel

Table 2. Parallel structures with surprise endings in "Henry and Eliza."

We might wonder, where did Austen encounter anticlimax? Mock heroic and anticlimactic conjunctions of high and low are not new, but the name most associated with them is Alexander Pope. The first use of the term "anticlimax" occurs in Pope's pseudonymous essay "Peri Bathous: On the Art of Sinking in Poetry." This essay appeared in the *Miscellanies* Pope wrote with three Johns: Jonathan Swift, John Gay and John Arbuthnot. It was published in 1728 under the name of Martinus Scriblerus. It is also an essay that Austen had access to at the library in Godmersham (South Wall, Column 2, Shelf 4) in the *Collected Works of Alexander Pope* (Sabor).

The interesting thing in this essay is that Scriblerus (i.e., Pope) uses anticlimax as an example of aesthetic *failure.* In particular, he uses it to show how banal modern English poets fall short in comparison to the ancient Romans. Anticlimax is not only surprise but also *disappointment* in his eyes: a sudden descent from something sublime to something ridiculous or common, in contrast to the previous moment of sublime interest. It is a triviality that upsets expectations of grandeur. Pope uses the word to describe incompetent authors who in striving so hard to be passionate or elevated fall into trivial or banal imagery, phrasing, or ideas.

By contrast, Pope's comical poem "The Rape of the Lock*"* (1712) satirises the lofty language of previous epics by routinely engaging in anticlimax. Consider this example:

> Here thou, great **Anna**, whom three realms obey,
> Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea.
> (vol. 1, canto 3, ll. 3–8; original emphasis)

Here, he contrasts the extensive and powerful reign of Queen Anne with her propensity to drink tea just like the rest of her subjects. The strategy of Pope's mock-epic is not to mock the form itself, but to mock his society in its very failure to rise to epic standards, exposing its pettiness by casting it against the grandeur of the traditional epic subjects and the bravery and fortitude of epic heroes. In both the poem and the essay, then, Pope describes a failed attempt at sublimity, a ridiculous failure to sustain it, or, more generally, an anticlimax: "Many Painters who could never hit a Nose or an Eye, have with Felicity copied a Small-Pox, or been admirable at a Toad or a Red-Herring" ("Peri Bathous" vi).

From her earliest writings, we can see Austen purposely toying with reversing expectations. Austen uses anticlimax and its close kin (aposiopesis and omission) to manipulate the responses of her audience. In other words, whether she accomplishes this effect through lists, syntax, or through plot, Austen is a consummate tease. In her short drama called "The Mystery," written in her *Volume the First*, the fifteen- or sixteen-year-old Austen very explicitly and teasingly manipulates readerly anticipation. In the second scene, several characters gather on stage as the dreadful news emerges, and amidst the general lamentation, only one thing is omitted: *the cause.* All the most significant phrases uttered by each character are in "whispers" (*Juvenilia* 72); therefore,

the audience never learns enough to solve the mystery. (The other two scenes are equally unilluminating!) Refining her techniques in her novels, Austen still frequently raises and encourages expectations in the reader only to thwart them, not only at the end of the novels, but also at the end of a scene, or individual sentences—once again revealing not only her function as tease, but also her expert manipulation of readers' (and viewers') responses from an early age.

In addition to "The Beautiful Cassandra" and "Jack and Alice," "Love and Freindship [*sic*]," is a great example of Austen's youthful experimentations with anticlimax. Writing in 1790 at the age of fourteen, Austen frequently uses anticlimactic lists in dialogue to reveal characters' moral and intellectual deficiencies. Laura, for example, sums up Isabel's worldly past in the following sentences:

> Isabel had seen the World. She had passed 2 Years at one of the first Boarding-schools in London; had spent a fortnight in Bath and had supped one night in Southampton. (*Juvenilia* 105)

The anticlimactic ending (Table 3) not only enhances the humour but also reveals Laura's lack of ability to prioritise experiences.[4]

Duration	**Activity**	**Location**
Two years	School	London
Fortnight	Stay ("spent")	Bath
One night	Supper	Southampton

Table 3. Anticlimactic ending of Laura's description of Isabel in "Love and Freindship."

She goes on to quote Isabel's deathbed warning to her, clearly based on her aforementioned experience of "the World" (Table 4):

> Beware my Laura (she would often say) Beware of the insipid Vanities and idle Dissipations of the Metropolis of England; Beware of the unmeaning Luxuries of Bath & of the Stinking fish of Southampton. (*LF* 5)

The repetition of the word "Beware" places equal weight on the elements in her series, and reveals the indelicate mind that cannot distinguish between the relative importance of two years of a fine education and one night's inferior supper: lumping stinking fish with serious moral issues, in other words, again shows Laura's (and Isabel's) humorous inability to discriminate.

Duration	Activity	Location	Danger
Two years	School	London	insipid Vanities and idle Dissipations
Fortnight	Stay ("spent")	Bath	unmeaning Luxuries
One night	Supper	Southampton	Stinking fish

Table 4: Isabel's deathbed warning to Laura in "Love and Freindship."

Sense and Sensibility offers an another instance of this technique, except it emanates from the mouth of the narrator near the very end of the novel: "They [Elinor and Edward] had, in fact, nothing to wish for but the marriage of Colonel Brandon and Marianne, and rather better pasturage for their cows" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 374–75). Here, the anticlimax does not so much indicate mistaken priorities or intellectual weakness on the part of the characters, but rather serves to jostle the reader's sense of involvement in the resolution of the novel, chasten the reader who may be beginning to engage in a rapturously romantic enjoyment of the incipient happy ending (according to the younger Marianne's aesthetic sensibility), and remind the reader of the imperfections and mundane considerations of quotidian existence (see Brodey, "Making Sense").

A final example from the juvenilia may shed light on why the young Austen is attracted to anticlimax. Remember, in relation to plot, anticlimax happens when an event causes disappointment because it is less exciting than what was expected or because it happens immediately after a much more exciting event. "The Beautiful Cassandra" is a "novel in twelve Chapters" (*Juvenilia* 53). Each chapter imitates an aspect of popular novels of adventure that Austen's audiences might have come to expect. The difference is that the teenage Austen's chapters are only one or two sentences long and repeatedly exhibit anticlimax. Austen economically overturns readers' expectations in relation to things like rank, romance, and the heroic quest, as the following outline shows:

> Chapter 1: Rank
> Cassandra was the Daughter and only Daughter of a celebrated Milliner in Bond Street. Her father was of noble Birth, being the near relation of the Duchess of —-'s Butler. (*Juvenilia* 54)

> Chapter 3: Romance
> The first person she met, was the Viscount of ——— a young Man, no less celebrated for his Accomplishments & Virtues, than for his Elegance & Beauty. She curtseyed & walked on. (*Juvenilia* 54)

> Chapter 5: The Heroic Quest
> She next ascended a Hackney Coach & ordered it to Hampstead, where She was no sooner arrived than she ordered the Coachman to turn around & drive her back again. *(Juvenilia* 55)

Cassandra defies expectations of rank, shows no interest in the stereotypical romance (preferring ice cream to men), and is oblivious of typical duties like paying for merchandise and services. She is a refreshingly *free* young girl, a predecessor of both Lady Susan and Elizabeth Bennet. And she is rewarded with a "day well spent."

As "The Beautiful Cassandra" demonstrates, Austen's use of anticlimax is often also *anti-romantic*. She uses it to liberate her characters—and vicariously her reader—from many societal expectations as well as literary conventions. I would also argue that, as she worked throughout her mature career within the confines of the marriage plot, anticlimax was a handy tool for expressing her disdain for defining a woman's life according to romance.

This brings us to one of the key differences between Pope's treatment of anticlimax and Austen's. Both authors excel at using anticlimax and its kindred mock-heroic tone. Pope's mock-heroic treatment in "The Rape of the Lock" underscores the ridiculousness of a society in which values have lost all proportion, and where the trivial is handled with the gravity and solemnity that ought to be accorded only to truly important issues. The society on display in this poem is one that fails to distinguish between things that matter and things that do not. The poem mocks the men it portrays by showing them as unworthy of a form that suited a more heroic culture. Thus the mock-epic resembles the epic in that its central concerns are serious and often moral, but the fact that the approach must now be satirical rather than earnest is symptomatic of how far the culture has (supposedly) fallen.

The "Rape of the Lock" is perhaps the most outstanding example in the English language of the genre of mock-epic. The epic had long been considered one of the most serious of literary forms; in the classical period, the epic treated the lofty subject matter of love and war, and, more recently, via Milton, the intricacies of the Christian faith. Yet Pope describes it as a failure in his own day—the product of modern poets who are attempting to be sublime and fall far short. Even in "The Rape of the Lock," Pope uses mock-epic to criticise his society's frivolity. The difference is that Pope mocks modern poets and modern frivolities. The mock-heroic form and anticlimax are both means of satire and demonstrating shortcomings. Austen's use of these things is also didactic, but inherently liberating.

Austen's use of anticlimax is key to her revision of heroism. Men traditionally own the heroic, grand epic poem with its sublime or martial climax, so why cannot women own anticlimax? Yet this is not a form of compromise. Is it not as heroic in its own way? And might the commonplace be better suited to the novel than its masculinised counterpart? Austen's rhetorical devices celebrate what I like to call "parlour heroism" and the art of the commonplace. Cassandra experiences a "day

well spent," but her success is not the object of mockery. If there is a critique in this story in miniature, it is of us. We readers are expecting more than Austen gives us.

For Pope, anti-climax is a vehicle for revealing failed attempts at writing significant (sublime) works or leading significant lives. Austen instead redefines what is significant. She celebrates the understated but hard-earned victories available to unmarried women in her day. Examples include Elinor Dashwood's "exertions" in the drawing room conversations with the Ferrars, Steele, Jennings, and Middleton families (*Sense and Sensibility* 154, 211); Elizabeth Bennet's efforts to "unite civility and truth in a few short sentences" (*Pride and Prejudice* 239); Fanny Price's courage to tell Sir Thomas that he is mistaken, while he hovers over her in his looming authority (*Mansfield Park* 363); and Anne Elliot's voyages from "commonwealth" to "commonwealth" across the distance of only three miles (*Persuasion* 45–46). In *Sense and Sensibility*, the narrator repeats "exertions" to emphasise the challenge and difficulty of Elinor's parlour heroism (e.g., 8, 150, 407); the narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* describes one of humanity's central challenges; and in *Persuasion*, Anne's heroism metaphorically spans continents.

Even when she uses anticlimax and the mock heroic, Austen celebrates the seemingly insignificant or ordinary (read: the female and domestic) as heroic. Her art of anticlimax shows us the beauty and significance of overlooked things. More than anything else, though, what Austen overturns through anticlimax is an unfairly gendered and grandiose expectation of both life and the novel.

NOTES

[1] This issue of the motivation of her curtailed endings and her reluctance to show proposal and marriage scenes has generated a great deal of debate. I summarise these strands in chapter 1 of *Jane Austen and the Price of Happiness* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2024).

[2] Anticlimax is closely related to mock-heroic, mock-epic, bathos, elision, apophasis, and aposiopesis, for example. All of these techniques involve what Ann Toner calls "referential paradox" or "the dynamic of denying and disclosing" (83).

[3] Toner gives an excellent summary of the historical associations between Austen and Dr. Johnson, calling her use of triplets "Johnsonese" in particular (126–27).

[4] Austen's form of irony here, which reappears in *Pride and Prejudice* and elsewhere, is using parallelism and structure to reveal subjectivity and lack of rational or objective thought.

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