Catching Young Writers in the Act of Becoming

Sarah Schaefer Walton
Assistant Professor and Director of Digital Humanities, Marshall University

I AM GUILTY of often overlooking age when considering literary production. Only recently have I recognised that many canonical works, from *Lady Susan* to *Frankenstein*'s early drafts, were written by authors barely out of adolescence. I suspect many people share this oversight—though perhaps not the readers of this journal. I attribute my own blindness partly to my traditional undergraduate education: I was told to choose Chaucer or Milton, take two semesters of Shakespeare, and read through the Norton Anthology. In this extremely canonical context, I rarely heard discussion of authors' ages, except for one memorable moment—learning that T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was written in college, which made me feel profoundly inadequate.

The names and titles we studied were presented with retrospective cohesiveness—the canon in post-production, literary reputations intact. This retrospective wholeness was so entrenched in my thinking that I failed to notice when the subject of my own dissertation was, in fact, a teenager when he began the work that led to his significant Victorian guidebook series. The diary entries and letters I argue are crucial for understanding the origins of John Murray's *Handbooks for Travellers* are juvenilia. This realisation came as a surprise: I only recognised it when pressed for a topic for the recent symposium on "Discovering, Working in, and Creating Collections." I suddenly thought, "Wait—John Murray was nineteen when he kept that travel journal." Even after knowing what to look for, even when deeply immersed in a subject and an author's biography, I had missed what was directly in front of me. My insistence on viewing things through the lens of what a person or career became meant that I overlooked something that invites a fundamentally new way of thinking about writerly identity and the formation of literary trends or genres.

While preparing for the symposium in Chapel Hill, I was struck by Kathryn Sutherland's brief introduction to Austen's juvenilia for the British Library. She

Journal of Juvenilia Studies 7.2 (2026), pp. 97–99. DOI: 10.29173/jjs169

defines juvenilia as "works produced by an author or an artist in their youth." In practice, this definition might serve as both an answer to and a subversion of teleological views of literary history. While we cannot read anything by Austen without knowing *Emma* is coming, and while it remains valuable to trace her developing humour and approach to dialogue through her juvenilia, there are only so many Jane Austens. The field risks seeming niche if we lean too heavily into Sutherland's definition, which begins with the end, with established authors and artists.

Studying juvenilia offers an opportunity to complicate what we understand to be an individual's production or legacy. It introduces temporality into something necessarily retrospective, making us think of people who are long dead as being young, as existing in a present or active tense—as becoming, not as what they became.

There seem to be many reasons to justify such a framework for studying youthful writing, especially in 2026 when people seem increasingly unwilling to engage with history. I will focus on one possibly mundane but pressing reason: most of us have been subject to conversations on the question, "How do we save the English major?" At my institution, creative writing classes and literature courses about graphic novels fill easily, but include the word "Victorian" and enrollment becomes a challenge. This reflects cultural problems beyond our control, but it nevertheless demands more thoughtful consideration of what is happening in our classrooms.

My students are often first-generation college students from Appalachia who have elected to major in English against considerable odds. Many gravitate toward creative writing as an outlet, a mechanism for working through contemporary challenges and personal experiences. They approach this major as an opportunity to find their voice, to use writing as a method of self-expression and self-improvement.

If I enter a classroom full of these students and insist on the importance of Tennyson, or discuss how absolutely essential Austen is to everything (and I believe that she is), I simultaneously invoke a set of values and assumptions that they do not necessarily share or have not had access to, while reinforcing the notion that valuable, worthwhile writing happens elsewhere: elsewhere in time, elsewhere in the world, and elsewhere in one's lifetime. The thing worth knowing about, studying, and discussing is *Emma*, or "The Lotus Eaters." How intimidating! Much like hearing T. S. Eliot wrote "Prufrock" in college, while I was in college.

Here lies one significant potential of juvenilia studies: turning students' attention to moments of becoming so they can see themselves in distant times and places, and recognise their work as worthy of study. No one will believe you take their work seriously if you do not take equivalent texts seriously. If we consistently discuss *Emma* rather than *Lady Susan*, why would a nineteen-year-old see their own writing as anything but pre-*Emma* at best? And if we only showcase moments of youthful genius—the "Prufrocks"—what still-interesting but possibly less accessible texts are being cast in shadow?

Moreover, if we miss juvenilia when they appear directly before us—as I often do—we miss opportunities for reframing the canon. How often do we actually foreground youthful writers' work without asking: are these pieces juvenilia? This represents a problem of reframing both how we discuss known youthful writing and how we assess which textual characteristics deserve highlighting.

Ultimately, I posit that juvenilia studies offer an opportunity for greater empathy, which we desperately need. Understanding the past as having something in common with ourselves—having students see themselves in Austen, Tennyson, and Louisa May Alcott—creates meaningful connections across time and experience.

In thinking about defining this field, my recommendation would be: Do not limit it. Bring it into the classroom, into Intro to British Literature, graduate seminars, and creative writing classes that fulfill general education requirements. It is a field with potential for growth because it resists canonical stuffiness through its intrinsic focus on temporality: it emphasises action, experimentation, and the present. Young people's writing, which is all around us, is all about becoming.