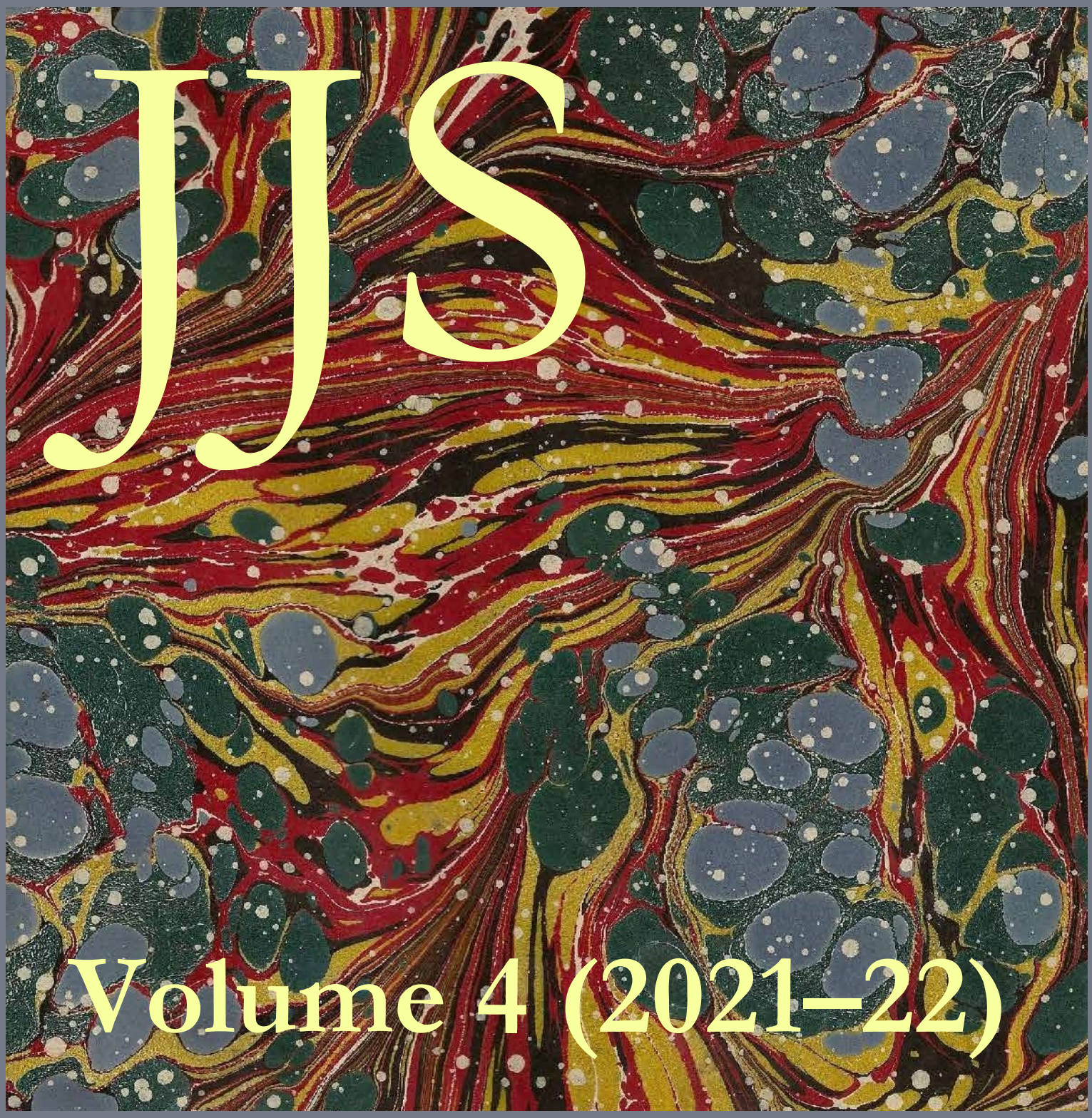
Journal of Juvenilia Studies



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SAMHITA ARNI'S DARING DEBUT: THE *MAHABHARATA* REVISITED IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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SAMHITA Arni tells her readers in her preface to *The Mahabharatha: A Child's View* (1996) that she had started to scribble down her version of the episodes of the great Indian epic when she was only four.[1] Her mother had encouraged this exercise as she saw that her precocious daughter was wading through her story books at an incredible speed and was becoming bored. Arni's mother also thought that, apart from keeping her child busy, the project would also greatly benefit Samhita's writing skills. The young girl took up the challenge with enthusiasm and began to compose her stories; she also began to illustrate them using a ball-point pen.

It is not surprising that such a young child should be so familiar with the stories of the *Mahabharata*. Indian children are brought up on stories from both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* from a very early age, so the characters become role models for boys and girls alike. The episodes of these stories about kings and warriors are regular bedtime stories to the extent that the mythological characters become household names. What is surprising is that Arni should know her *Mahabharata* so well that she could even rewrite her own version. Her mother recognized that these very early drawings were simple, as is to be expected, but were at the same time intensely dramatic. Arni's mother encouraged her to continue with her project, and, when she was eight years, old her mother showed the illustrations and writing to Gita Wolf, a publisher, who immediately realised that the naïve scribbles and drawings contained a riveting retelling of a classic tale and, more importantly, had a great deal of potential. And thus they were published (Geetha and Wolf 7).

This article is divided into four parts. First, I discuss the continuing importance of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in Indian society; second, I explore the nature of literature intended for children in India in order to showcase how Arni's contribution adds to and also differs from this body of work; I then comment on

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four examples of Arni's rewriting of the epic; finally, I outline some of the current ideas in Indian feminism that clearly resonate with her youthful text—a text in which she creates her own scenario that improves upon women's and lower-class people's reality. To exemplify the quality of the work, I include some of the drawings that Arni created to illustrate the episodes she re-told.[2]

Foundational Texts

Interest in and knowledge of the epics by a child like Samhita Arni is in itself by no means unusual. There are countless versions of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* but the original of the former is generally attributed to the sage Valmiki, who is said to have written it between the years 500 and 100 BCE. The *Mahabharata*, considered to be the work of Vyasa, was compiled some time between the third century BCE and the third century CE. The stories of these great Indian epics are still meaningful for contemporary audiences, as Vijay Mishra points out: "They are critiqued, their values challenged, their structures destabilized, even parodied, but they remain foundational nevertheless" (4). This claim is borne out by the continual remakes and reinterpretations of these epics. In contemporary India the censorship laws have been relaxed somewhat in recent years, and viewers can now see controversial or delicate issues explored on television and in the cinema, but the way these dilemmas are addressed and solved remains firmly rooted in the moral code outlined in these traditional texts. As I have argued elsewhere, Indian films depicting social change tend to carry within them a wise solution to the moral dilemmas the protagonists are faced with—based on the outcome of similar dilemmas in the epics—without which the audience would feel it had been somewhat cheated out of a glimmer of the "truth" (see especially pp. 56–60). The popularity of comics has also contributed to these two epics' continuing influence, since from the 1960s Indian publishers such as Amar Chitra Katha have produced large numbers of comics clearly inspired by Hindu mythology and Indian history (Krishnamurti 285).

As a result of such a pervasive presence, the major figures in the epics are still household names, so that even children's bedtime stories often feature their exploits, which are frequently called on to represent "Indian" values. Many of today's urban Indian families aim to bring up their sons and daughters equally, but traditional ideas die hard, so girls still have to be protected, which means forbidding any behaviour that might be construed as socially unacceptable. While boys may go out freely, dress as they wish, and not collaborate with their sisters in household chores, girls are often constrained by strict gender roles, a situation that does little to educate young men or young women about feminism and women's rights. The classics these children are raised on do contain numerous examples of strong women, but many of the best-known female figures are venerated for their stoic resignation to the role that their gender has etched out for them. According to the tenets of Hinduism, "a wife's great

and ongoing *vrata* is thus the *pativrata*, the ascetic dedication to her husband (*pati*). … Orthodox texts encourage Hindu wives to regard their husbands as gods" (Rodrigues 98; original italics). Sita, in the *Ramayana*, exemplifies this regard.

Let me insist, these stories are expected to be exemplary for children. Ram, as an avatar of Lord Vishnu, represents the ideal son, husband, and king—the perfect man in all respects. Similarly, Sita's choices at critical junctures in the story exemplify the ideal woman and wife. Overall, she is a picture of unwavering devotion to her husband, which is demonstrated at several points throughout the story. First, when on the eve of his coronation Ram is exiled to the forest by his father, Sita insists on accompanying Ram and foregoing the luxury of the palace. She insists that a wife should stay with her husband, regardless of the obstacles he might face or the pain she may have to endure in sharing those hardships. Although this could well be construed as an act of defiance, Sita gains nothing beyond her dignity. She loses her position as queen, as wife, and as mother. Even as she wins, she sacrifices herself, and this, as Rashmi Goel argues, is the message for young girls of course.

One of the most frequently quoted stories of the *Ramayana* is the episode of the ordeal by fire that Ram, Sita's husband, subjects her to in order to prove her chastity. She has been abducted by the evil demon Ravana and kept prisoner in his palace for a year, but Ram will not believe that she is still pure despite Sita's assurances. She survives the ordeal by fire as the flames do not touch her, but still Ram is not convinced. Finally, Mother Earth opens up and swallows Sita—her name means *a furrow*—as she takes pity on her and, in a way, punishes Ram for his disbelief.

The best-known female figure in the *Mahabharata,* Draupadi, is also an obedient wife, although in some ways she is quite different from Sita. A much longer work than the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* contains numerous outstanding characters, but possibly the best known are Arjuna and Draupadi. Arjuna is the third of the five Pandavas (all brothers) and one of the major warriors in the Kurukshetra War; he is famous for having been instructed with the knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* by his mentor, Krishna.[3] Arjuna is a brave warrior who becomes even mightier after his dialogue with Krishna. He is also one of the husbands of Draupadi. Draupadi, about whom more will be said later, was born from a fire sacrifice and is a rare example of polyandry in Sanskrit literature (Spivak 183; see also Williams).

There is no one standardised official version of either of the great epic poems. Countless versions do exist with varying degrees of subversiveness—especially many Southern Indian versions. To some, "its myths, ideas, and precepts symbolize hierarchies and horizons of [the] ancient history of India" (Singh 39); others note the fact that, although "the *Mahabharata* condemns many of the appalling things it depicts, … one area where its response is more tepid concerns the treatment meted out to women" (Truschke). Regardless of how these texts are approached, however, there is no doubt about their all-pervasive influence in contemporary India.

Children's Literature and a Homogenized India

In a recent analysis of over fifty writers of children's literature who are either residents of India or living in the diaspora, Michelle Superle identifies two recurring features. The novels she examines reveal a social mission, which in the case of women authors "might be considered a feminist literary project" (16). At the same time, and perhaps contradictorily, these novels also present a very homogenised vision of India and Indian people, a vision that—as Superle points out—"values unity over diversity" (92). In fact, I would argue that this narrative homogenization owes a great deal to the centrality of the great epics in contemporary India, which celebrate a mythical India where everybody knew his or her place. As M. S. Gore reminds us, religion permeates daily social life in India despite the state's avowed secularism, and Aditya Nigam observes the conflation of national identity with Hinduness in children's literature written in India, which logically underscores this sought-after homogeneity.

This essentialized representation of Indianness falls short of being self-orientalization; it has left room for more subversive rewritings of these classic poems, principally narratives that allow female characters to tell their stories relatively unhampered by patriarchal constraints. As Stella Chitralekha Biswas discusses, many contemporary Indian novels for children portray girls who have agency as opposed to the passive girl of colonial fiction. Thus, as Margaret Meek argues, "children's literature plays [a part] in the development of their [the readers'] understanding of both belonging and differentiation" (x). Nevertheless, beneath even fiction written today there lies a value system that underscores traditionally female attributes: "care, cooperation, and interdependence" (Superle 49). Boys, on the other hand, are depicted as individuals and highly competitive (Biswas). Moreover, both genders are encouraged to pay allegiance to the concept of duty, or *dharma*, a value system that can trace its origins back to the great epics.

The quest for both belonging and differentiation that Meek identifies as something that appeals to readers of Indian literature written for children is also characteristic of child writers. In her study of nineteenth-century juvenilia, Christine Alexander notes that, for many of the well-established canonical authors she examines, imitation of adult writing is frequently the goal that they aspire to ("Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia" 19); yet, when these "child narrators turn their gaze onto the adult world," they also tell stories about "a variety of fictional relationships" in order to "test the boundaries of the self" (27). Whereas the authors of the children's books Superle studies tend to "imagine hopeful scenarios which improve upon reality" (7), the child writers whom Alexander studies tend to satirize the adult world (17), but both of these approaches convey an awareness that reality can be improved upon. These similarities between the aspirations of youthful writers and the kind of ideological content of much literature destined for Indian children illuminate the aims and accomplishments of the Indian child writer Samhita Arni.

Arni comes from a wealthy, upper-middle-class Indian family; her father is a diplomat, and the family has lived in a number of different places. At the time Arni

started her own personal *Mahabharata*, her father had been transferred to Karachi. As a diplomat's daughter, she had the use of the consulate library, where the majority of the books were religious; however, it also contained several versions of the two great epics (Arni, "My Version" 10). As an adult, Arni has rewritten the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view in her 2011 graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana*, but she herself has stated that she prefers the *Mahabharata* because, according to her, Vyasa "maintains a more or less impartial account when compared with Valmiki" ("My Version" 10).[4] In fact, when her family asked her why she had chosen the *Mahabharata* rather than the *Ramayana* or any other well-known Sanskrit classic, the young Arni replied that she liked it so much because "it is so evil" (8). This does not mean that she enjoyed the evil for its own sake; rather, she reads the evil actions of the characters critically, seeking to find justification for their deeds. The young Arni was clearly captivated by the stories of bravery and cowardice, cunning and ingenuity, cruelty and justice.

Her final version of the epic turned out to be a medley of various available versions, including Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* (1989), the videos of which had entertained the child for hours on end in the months leading up to her decision to start writing her own version, but she also put her own personal stamp on the version she produced.[5] As mentioned earlier, Arni has rewritten the *Ramayana* as an adult from Sita's perspective in her graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) and indirectly in her crime novel, *The Missing Queen* (2014). However, the latter is perhaps more of a critique of contemporary Indian politics than a feminist rewriting. When reading her juvenile rendering of the *Mahabharata*, by contrast, one cannot fail to be struck by Arni's fearless feminist and egalitarian stance, striking for an Indian girl of eleven, brought up on didactic texts designed to instil societal norms and an acceptable code of conduct in the child reader.

Despite the input she received and the support and encouragement from her family, Arni's naivety in embarking on such a momentous task as a contemporary rewriting of a classical work needs to be remarked on. The *Mahabharata*, which recounts the struggle between the Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas for the kingdom of Bharata (which corresponds to North India), is possibly the world's longest known epic poem, one of its many versions consisting of well over 200,000 lines. Arni has deliberately omitted certain episodes and daringly added new ones without deviating from the overall plot. In the next section of this essay I focus on four significant episodes of Arni's text, in order to highlight the young child's ingenuity, her humanity, and her independent thinking, with regard to social class, rigid or judgemental attitudes, and gender roles.

A Child's View

ONE EXAMPLE of Arni's personal stamp is her version of the story of Ekalavya. Ekalavya dares to ask Drona, the great brahmin warrior, for lessons in archery. The

response was to be expected: "How dare you, a shudra of low birth, come and ask me, a brahmin to teach you archery!" (51). Ekalavya is not put off; he makes himself a clay image of Drona and pretends that the image is teaching him the art of archery.

Figure 1. Ekalavya*, practising archery with the clay idol as guru, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Sambita Arni, p.54. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India,www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

In this way he becomes an expert and is discovered one day by Drona, who challenges him to prove his skill by fighting with his other pupils. Ekalavya beats them all effortlessly. In Arni's own words:

> Drona was angry that somebody was able to defeat Arjuna, his best pupil, so easily. He decided to maim Ekalavya. He said to Ekalavya, "Since I am your guru, I want my fee." "Your wish is my command but I haven't got anything", Ekalavya said softly. Drona said shrewdly, "Then give me your right thumb." Ekalavya turned towards the image and bit his lip. He then turned around and said, "I'll do it." He cut off his thumb and gave it to Drona. Drona was satisfied that Ekalavya would not be able to wield a bow anymore. *He returned to the camp without even saying a word of thanks to Ekalavya.* (54; emphasis mine)

Compare this with one of the many traditional versions of the story, in this case Pratap Chandra Roy's well-known translation:

> Hearing these cruel words of Drona, who had asked of him his thumb as tuition-fee, Ekalavya, ever devoted to truth and desirous also of keeping his promise, with a cheerful face and an unafflicted heart, cut off without ado his thumb, and gave it unto Drona. (Book 1, Section 134: 315)

It is clear that Arni has added the final detail of Drona's insensitivity—his failure to say "a word of thanks"—to emphasize the injustice meted out to the young man. Here is a child writer with the self-reflexive potential to address class and caste prejudices.

Arni similarly critiques class bias when she adds an invention of her own to the plot in order to explain why a character should nurse hatred towards his nephews. Shakuni is one of the villains of the epic, best known for masterminding the infamous Game of Dice between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, which I will return to later. However, in Arni's version, long before this evil deed occurs Shakuni is enraged that his sister Gandhari should be pledged in matrimony to a blind man, especially since all of his brothers were killed in the war of conquest. Shakuni swears to destroy the Kuru dynasty; this is why he consequently plays an instrumental role in fuelling the flames of conflict between the cousins. His father, during his last days, told him to take the bones from his dead body and make a pair of dice that would always obey him. The dice would later be instrumental in Shakuni's plan for revenge on the other branch of the family, the Pandavas. This story does not form part of Vyasa's text.

Thus, with a child's logic, Arni has invented the colourful explanation for Shakuni's wickedness so that the story will make better sense. Without this explanation, Arni must have considered that her readers would not have understood how anyone could be so evil without motivation. This addition to the story also suggests that, according to this child's understanding, the *Mahabharata* needs bringing up to date. The focus of the epic is on good versus evil; Arni's aim, by contrast, is to show that nobody is totally bad, that there must be a reason for so much hatred and violence. This is why she portrays the traditional villains with a certain dose of sympathy. She is willing to delve into their past to find—or invent—the clues that show why they have become so monstrous and unfeeling. Even characters like Duryodhana (the hero Arjuna's chief antagonist) and Drona (Arjuna's archery teacher) are not depicted in black and white terms. Arni captures the ambiguities that real people might display. Traditional retellings of the *Mahabharata* tend to stress the good and evil attributes of the major characters, but Arni's "bad guys," if not exactly rehabilitated, are certainly more *human*.

One of the strong women of the *Mahabharata* is Draupadi, her father's fire-born daughter: she emerged out of a fire sacrifice her father had lit to avenge himself on Drona. Arni disregards this story, however, and instead narrates how Draupadi and her twin brother were born naturally. Draupadi is extraordinarily beautiful, but Arni adds personality. In her telling, Draupadi is

> … dark, with a beautiful complexion. Her large, black eyes looked as if they had two bright stars dissolved in them. Her long, curling eyelashes enhanced the beauty of her eyes. She had a long, slender nose with a small, red mouth. She had well-defined cheekbones with rosy cheeks. Her long, thick hair fell to her knees. She wore elegant clothes and beautiful jewels, and had a queenly beauty about her. *In those eyes of hers, you could see pride in spite of her young age.* (85; emphasis mine)

The addition of this last sentence, which insists on Draupadi's independence and assertiveness, serves to highlight the fact that Arni's Draupadi is clearly more than just a pretty face. Roy's translation describes her as follows:

> Of eyes like lotus-petals and of faultless features endued with youth and intelligence, she is extremely beautiful. And the slender-waisted Draupadi of every feature perfectly faultless, and whose body emitteth a fragrance like unto that of the blue lotus for two full miles around. (Book 1, Section 143: 162)

Although this version grants Draupadi "intelligence," there is no mention of the "queenly … pride" that is central to Arni's description.

As mentioned, Draupadi comes to have not one but five husbands. Her father holds a *swayamvara*—the practice of choosing a husband, from among a list of suitors by a girl of marriageable age—which turns out to be a contest in the skill of archery. Arjuna wins the contest and thus his bride, but when Arjuna and his four brothers return home with Draupadi and one of the brothers shouts out that Arjuna has won a prize, their mother responds before opening the door that he should share his prize with all his brothers. One might think that there are advantages to having five husbands, but in fact the *Mahabharata* focuses on how Draupadi's husbands fail to protect her, especially during the episode of the Game of Dice. In this classic story that everyone remembers so well, Yudhishtira, one of Draupadi's husbands, turns out to be excessively fond of gambling when the villain Shakuni orchestrates a bet using the dice fashioned out of one of his dead father's bones. As Shakuni has foreseen, Yudhishtira loses everything that he gambles, including his own self. He still refuses to give up and decides to stake his own wife. He loses once again. Draupadi is then summoned to the palace, but instead of obeying the summons immediately she sends a message, asking how her husband could have promised her when he no longer owns himself. One of the Kauravas, Dushashana, forcibly brings Draupadi to the court, dragging her by her hair. He even attempts to disrobe her in front of everyone. When the insulted Draupadi calls on Krishna to come to her aid, he protects her honour by providing her with an unending sari. As Dushasana unwraps layers and layers of her sari, it miraculously extends. Draupadi ends up surrounded by lengths of cloth that

protect her modesty. This particular episode highlights the weakness of one—if not of all—of her husbands, who fail in their duty towards her.

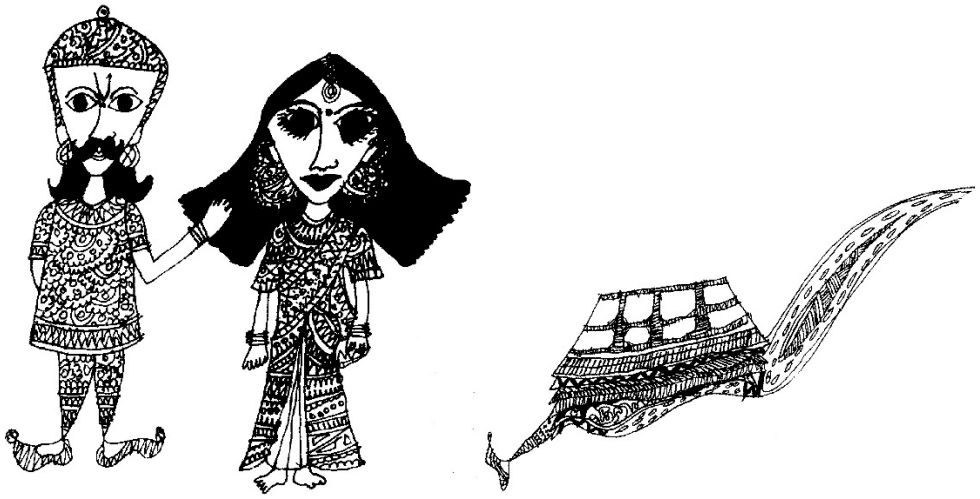

Fig. 2. Yudhishtira and Draupadi *(left);* The pile of saris *(right), from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, pp. 159, 121. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India. www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

Even though she has no choice but to accept the four additional husbands in the first place, which means obeying five men rather than just one, Draupadi's unanswerable question hovers in the air and renders her a more assertive character than Sita.

Roy's version of the text says the following:

> She faintly cried "Wretch! it ill behoveth thee to take me before the assembly. My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire." But Dushasana dragging Draupadi forcibly by her black locks while she was praying piteously unto Krishna and Vishnu who were Narayana and Nara (on earth), said unto her "Whether thy season hath come or not, whether thou art attired in one piece of cloth or entirely naked, when thou hast been won at dice and made our slave, thou art to live amongst our serving-women as thou pleasest." (Book 2, Sect. 47, p. 140)

In Arni's adaptation of this momentous scene, Draupadi's voice is anything but faint:

> Her fiery eyes blazed with anger, and in a silent assembly her voice rang out, "Yudhishtira had no right to pledge me after he pledged himself. See the wrong that has happened here." (119)

Arni has Draupadi address her question to the assembly directly, her voice ringing out as she vociferously reproaches her tormentors by refusing to be considered a dispensable commodity. Arni's Draupadi is far more self-assured and challenging than Vyasa's.

An interesting detail that Arni fails to highlight is that in the Sanskrit version the insult or dishonour is far greater because Draupadi has her period: "My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire." Including this detail can only strengthen the gravity of Draupadi's situation; Arni's omission of it may be due to her young age. Alternatively, however, it is possible that she refuses to use Draupadi's menstruation to reinforce the weakness of her position. Instead, Arni chooses to create a forceful character who, far from "crying piteously in affliction," swears vengeance: "I will never tie up my hair until the day I wash it in Dushasana's blood," screamed Draupadi, enraged" (121).

Fig. 3. Draupadi's Revenge*, for the ignominy she suffered, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, p. 239. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com*, *with permission.*

The final example of Arni's youthful rewriting of the epic that I have selected is the scene from Book 6 in which Arjuna's young son Abhimanyu is killed in battle.

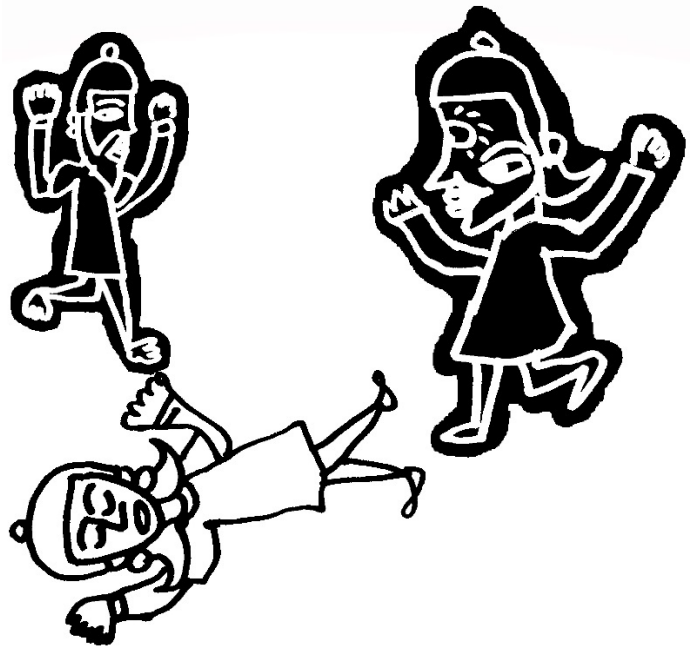

Fig. 4. The Warriors Dance*, after killing Abhimanyu, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, p. 202. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com*, *with permission.*

The original text goes into great detail about the boy's military prowess and the large number of warriors he kills, but Arni chooses to focus on the tragedy of the death of a teenage boy and the callousness of his enemies:

> Just as Abhimanyu was rising, Laxman swung his mace. On one stroke, Abhimanyu was killed. Happy that Abhimanyu was now dead, the warriors danced around the body, just as vultures circle their prey. Six warriors were happy that a sixteen year old boy had died through their efforts. *They felt no remorse or shame. They only rejoiced.* (202, emphasis mine)

In Roy's translation we read the following:

> As he lay dead on the field, the heroic Abhimanyu looked like a wild elephant slain by the hunters. The fallen hero was then surrounded by thy troops [who] were filled with great joy. And they repeatedly uttered leonine shouts. … Beholding Abhimanyu, resplendent as the

> sun or the moon, lying on the ground, thy troops were in transport of joy, while Pandavas were filled with grief. When youthful Abhimanyu, yet in his minority, fell, the Pandava divisions, O king, fled away in the very sight of king Yudhishthira. (Book 6, Section 49, 100)

While many classic versions insist as this one does on the heroism of Abhimanyu and the celebrations of victory by the Kaurava troops, the young Arni instead laments the untimely death of an adolescent boy and criticizes the heartless insensitivity of his enemies.

Contemporary Indian Feminism and Arni's Work

INDIAN women are by no means a homogeneous group with a shared agenda. In her description of the evolution of Indian feminism in the twentieth century, Suruchi Thapar draws attention to the strong dissimilarities among middle-class women owing to differences in their educations, religions, and ages, thus putting paid to any overarching categorization of "the Indian woman." Between social classes, as Shruti Jain points out, the differences are even greater; feminism in the Indian context clearly holds entirely different meanings for rural Indian women and for urban middle-class professional women. The priorities of the former include access to necessities like food, water, healthcare, and education rather than issues like equal pay, sexual harassment, and reclaiming public spaces (Jain 8). Social media merely cater for a small, privileged number of activists (10).

Nevertheless, one consistency for women of both classes is that, despite the rise of digital or cyberfeminism, traditional myths about Indian womanhood die hard. Sita's ordeal by fire continues to be glorified rather than condemned, and viewers of the television version of the *Mahabharata* (a series that ran from 1988 to 1990) paid far more attention to the number and quality of Draupadi's saris than to the shame and disgrace of her experience (Nabar 118). For a large majority of Indians, Sita is still their favourite (mythical) woman. As we have seen, she symbolises sacrifice, a woman's greatest virtue according to patriarchal traditions. She lends dignity to suffering and makes forbearance a heroic quality, which makes her a role model for Indian women for whom justice remains a dream, equality an absurdity, and suffering an everyday reality.[6]

It could be argued that the influence of the myths is an insidious one, serving to strengthen the fears and illusions that are used to govern women and instil docility. In fact, there is a fundamental parity between the perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and any present-day reluctance to admit change that might upset the androcentric, patriarchal set-up. Hira Bansode's poem "The Slave," originally written in Marathi, provides a perfect example of the lasting effect

enshrined in the value system of the great epics. Ahilya was a woman seduced by the god Indra, who disguised himself as her husband:

> To prove she was a pativrata
> Ahilya [had] to sacrifice herself
> to Indra's sexual desire,
> and Draupadi was divided up
> among five men,
> the woman of that country
> still remains a slave … (qtd. in Nabar 118)

Just as Bansode's poem does, Samhita Arni's juvenile text points to the need to rethink these myths, and I claim that that hers is one of the valid contemporary readings of the classics that indicate both the timeless quality and the essential orality of these texts: without the ongoing telling and re-telling or oral texts, they can too easily be fossilized and rendered irrelevant for modern times.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also reinvented myth in that, since the mid-1980s, they have cast Ram as a strong, martial lord in order to encourage militancy among Hindus. In her own reinvention of the classics, Arni questions the heroic BJP interpretation, with its ingrained habits of patriarchy and male chauvinism (Udayakumar 17–18). Her male heroes, including Arjuna and Yudhishtira, become faulty, more human than they are in the classic versions of the *Mahabharata*, but no less admirable. Even her villains show a realistic, almost justifiable side to their actions, which renders them more relevant to contemporary society. Her Draupadi is another kind of role model, who poses questions about the law and the orthodoxy of religion. In Arni's telling, she is the mythological archetype of the assertive woman who questions the duties of love and honour.

Youthful writing may well be dismissed as being immature, just as Alexander describes ("Defining" 71), but Arni's early rewriting of such a key figure in the popular imaginary as Draupadi shows her participation in her culture's ongoing reinterpretation of its dominant myths; it also shows the path her future creative work will take. One of the female arch-villains of the *Ramayana* is Surpanakha, sister of the demon king Ravana, who abducted Sita. Surpanakha makes advances to Lakshman, Ram's brother, who not only rejects her advances but slices her nose off as punishment for such apparently unfeminine behaviour. Valmiki's epic thus casts Surpanakha into the role of evil temptress who gets her just deserts. However, a modern version of the events by Samhita Arni, in her 2013 adult crime novel, *The Missing Queen*—an updated version of the *Ramayana*, as the action takes place in the late 1990s—allows Surpanakha to tell her version of the events:

> How can I describe that moment? I fell in love in that instant—he was the most beautiful creature I ever saw. So beautiful, I was smitten.

> I went up to him and I offered myself to him. He smiled and began to banter with me. I thought it was all flirtation—he was coy all the while, suggesting that he wasn't good enough for the likes of me. … finally, I thought it was time for action. So I reached out for him, to press my lips against his. Before I knew it, something flashed between us. … Malice in his eyes, I raised my hands to my face and saw my fingers, wet with blood. (66)

Surpanakha appears to incarnate the deviant female, who becomes a regular character in mainstream—read patriarchal—crime fiction. Among her *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, Heather Worthington states that

> … the association of deviant femininity and crime has remained a constant feature of the genre. Inherent in this association are patriarchally fostered masculine anxieties about the feminine, particularly female agency, which is seen as a transgression of traditional gender boundaries and is often represented as criminal in early crime narratives. (41)

As Worthington reminds us, modern crime novels generally reflect a much older view of "deviant femininity," according to which, "when a woman does take to crime, her criminality is accentuated; she is doubly deviant, not only acting in defiance of the (patriarchal) law but also rejecting her proper feminine role" (42). Thus Surpanakha's overt sexuality has long been read as unnatural and highly transgressive. Arni, however, sees fit to allow her to be understood as a woman with desires and needs.

Likewise, Arni's graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), gives a voice to the self-effacing heroine so she can assert her point of view and finally challenge the patriarchal norms. Canonical *Ramayana* narratives silence Sita, so Arni's version, like many other feminist *Sitayanas*,[7] is a refreshing call for solidarity with oppressed women and other ignored and overlooked members of society who do not conform with the ideal of Indianness (Beena G. 48; Krishnamurti 291).

One of the criticisms levelled against child writers is their lack of originality, as they tend to imitate the style and content of established older writers. Yet imitation is not necessarily unoriginal. As Alexander points out, it "involves reworking, writing in the style of someone else […] until we develop our own style" ("Defining" 77). In Arni's case, it would be unfair to accuse her of merely imitating the classics, as she does her best to turn many of the best-known episodes upside down. Moreover, both feminist and political critiques—which are present in Arni's adult writing—already feature in Arni's juvenile work; as Alexander states, "the concept of juvenilia carries with it an implication of later writings" (88). Arni's Draupadi is a powerful feminist

role model, and her debut novel, published when she was only eleven years old, is a challenging dialogue between ancient ideals and twenty-first century social and political issues.

NOTES

[1] Transliteration of texts from languages written in the Devanagari script may vary from author to author. Arni spells her title *Mahabharatha*, whereas the accepted spelling in Latin script is *Mahabharata*. In the original Sanskrit the final *t* is unaspirated, so strictly speaking Arni's spelling is incorrect.

[2] I am grateful to Samhita Arni for permission to reproduce the drawings that are included in this article.

[3] The *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of the Lord) is one of the basic texts of Hinduism. Composed as a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, it reveals that all humans and aspects of existence are a unified extension of the Divine that can only be acknowledged once *maya* or the illusion of the material world has been overcome. See Joshua L. Mark, "*Bhagavad Gita*," *World History Encyclopedia*, 15 June 2020, https://www.worldhistory.org/Bhagavad_Gita/.

[4] Henceforth all references to *The Mahabharatha: A Child's View* will be cited with the page numbers only.

[5] Peter Brook's five-hour film can be viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhqkRGISQr8.

[6] Even if myths form the identity of Indian women, it is just as true, as Graham argues, that countries frequently resort to inventing those myths "that embody values and characteristics [they think] laudable" (105). It is undeniable that mythology serves the purpose of homogenising a nation and these homogenisation projects ultimately underpin a society organized along patriarchal lines. Indian feminism nowadays seeks to challenge the maintenance of gender-blind institutions of state, caste, class, community and region, but the family and marriage remain the stronghold of male dominance in part due to the perpetuation and veneration of the portrayal of women in the epics. The Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, and Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system.

[7] *Sitayana* is the title of a feminist version of the *Ramayana* by Indian American author Amit Majmudar (Penguin Random House India, 2019), but I am using the term to refer to any version that places Sita centre stage and questions Ram's actions.

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Effusions Witty and Romantic: Teenage Writings of Jane Austen and Anna Maria Porter

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Studies of juvenilia, such as they have been, have tended to proceed vertically—that is, the early work is examined in relation to the "mature" work of the same author. But when I founded the Juvenilia Press, back in 1994, I realized that youthful writings, if they are to be defined in some way as a genre of their own, need to be studied horizontally too—that is, in relation *to each other*. And when I retired as General Editor, and the distinguished Brontë scholar Christine Alexander took over the Press, we sought to extend the comparative work by co-editing a collection for Cambridge University Press that we called *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (2005). This was part of the work of discovering what these young authors share, and what general characteristics belong to this little-studied body of writings. In her review of the collection in the *TLS,* Dinah Birch recognized that the book's "larger intention is nothing less than the definition of a new genre within the literary academy" (3). This work has been enlarged in recent years by Laurie Langbauer's ground-breaking study of on childhood writings;[1] and the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies* bravely carries it on. My present purpose, then, is to examine in some detail the early writings of two near contemporaries, Jane Austen and Anna Maria Porter, in relation to each other—not to establish "influence," but to explore the often-contrasting paths that each was choosing.

In a fascinating paper, "Sisters (and Brothers) in the Arts: Austens, Porters, Founders and Beyond,"[2] Devoney Looser has explored the possible connections between Cassandra and Jane Austen and the Porter sisters Jane and Anna Maria. The Porters came to know and admire Austen's works, especially *Emma*. In a letter of 1820, as Looser records, Maria wrote to her sister after a dinner party, "I longed for

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Miss Austin's [*sic*] now buried pen (alas that it is) to have immortalised the whole company!" (Jane Porter Papers).

I consider it unlikely, though, that the young Jane Austen and Maria Porter knew each other's early work. Austen's was not published until the twentieth century; and though Porter achieved publication of the first volume of *Artless Tales* by subscription, no member of the Austen family appears in the subscription list. Austen herself did subscribe to Frances Burney's *Camilla* in 1796 (it must have been a great extravagance for her); but Burney was a favourite author, and one she was willing to make sacrifices to read.[3] Though there are fascinating parallels in their lives, my present business is with Austen's and Porter's youthful texts.

These two girl authors were roughly the same age. Both were born in December, Jane Austen three years earlier than Maria Porter: so that their ages in any given year are younger than the year would suggest. Austen's life (1775–1817) is well known. Porter's (1778–1832)[4] involved more travel, more and earlier publication, fuller connections with the literary world.

Both were what we would now call middle-class: Austen's father was a clergyman in Hampshire, Porter's an army surgeon, who died when she was still an infant. Both young authors came from large families, predominantly of boys; each had a beloved elder sister with shared interests: Cassandra Austen (1773–1845) collaborated with Jane as the illustrator of the parodic *History of England*, written at fifteen; Maria's sister Jane Porter (1775–1850) was a prolific author, and indeed became better known than her younger sister, publishing historical novels such as *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810). Both families were short of cash. Austen's father supplemented the income from his living by farming and by taking in boys as students who studied with him alongside his sons; and Porter's mother, when she was widowed, had to fend for her family of five by her own exertions, and she moved often (the Porters had strong and lasting connections in Durham). For the better education of her three boys and two girls, she moved from Maria's birthplace Salisbury, to Edinburgh, where they came to know young Walter Scott ("Anna Maria Porter"). Both families were literarily inclined.

Whereas Jane Austen's early writings remained unpublished in her lifetime, and *Sense and Sensibility*, her first published novel, did not emerge until 1811, Maria Porter managed to burst into print with the first volume of *Artless Tales* in 1793, when she was only fourteen, and swung into a second in 1795 and 1796; and her first novel, *Walsh Colville,* followed in 1797, while she was still a teenager. Later came more historical romances, including *The Lake of Killarney* (1804), which Austen mentioned in her letters.

Perhaps a defining difference in the two young authors' publishing productivity (and such claims must be speculative) arose from the fact that Maria Porter's widowed mother, with five children to support, had to exert herself, and probably her children too, in the business of making a living. The first volume of *Artless Tales* was published by subscription; and one can imagine that the children and all their contacts would

have been involved in assembling the 466 subscribers—including many who subscribed for more volumes than one.[5] No doubt fourteen-year-old Maria Porter would have been proud to contribute to the family income by her literary efforts.

To turn from matters biographical to the texts of these two young authors: children who write are by definition children who *read*. And because of their (so far) brief life experience, their reading looms larger for them than it does for most adult writers, and becomes their best extension of experience. Young Austen and Porter were both avid readers: from their early writings we can gather considerable information about their reading. Austen's "Love and Freindship," for instance, "a novel in a series of letters," bounces off Eliza Nugent Bromley's *Laura and Augustus* of 1774, which is also subtitled "in a series of letters,"[6] and also off Bromley's next novel, *Sir Charles Bentinck*.[7] Parody of fashionable fiction of the day continued to be prominent in her juvenilia. In her second series of *Artless Tales* (1795–96), Porter outlines the reading habits of her different heroines. The eponymous Elinor of the first tale, for instance, reads widely: "the best classical authors of her own country, France and Italy, she read in their own languages, but the Grecian and the Roman, she only perused by translations" (*AT* II 5). Porter is specific, that is, about her heroine's achievement of the highest standard of expectation set for the fully accomplished young woman. Another of her heroines is seen reading Milton's "Il Penseroso"; and, with this in mind, it is interesting to know that she and her sister were respectively known as "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso."[8]

Another characteristic that Austen and Porter share with many other young writers who have preserved their early works is a certain professional ambition. They delight in books and their format, and they show an awakened consciousness of their medium. Austen collected her early writings in those three famous manuscript books, and called them *Volume the First*, … *Second*, and … *Third*, as though they amounted to the standard three-decker novel. In her comic formal dedications, she conspicuously observed the conventions of publication, even while sending them up. I like to believe that the original works—"Frederic and Elfrida," "Edgar and Emma," "Jack and Alice," and the rest—were themselves little books, perhaps like the Brontës' tiny booklets, which she gave away to the dedicatee. (None has survived, so we have no physical evidence for this wishful thinking; but in calling the versions in the three volumes of early writings "fair copies," we already postulate some earlier version.) In her dedication to "Catharine, or The Bower" she playfully claims that the previous works dedicated to her sister, "'The beautifull Cassandra' and 'The History of England' … have obtained a place in every library in the Kingdom, and run through threescore editions" (*Minor Works* 192).

Young Maria Porter even got real about publication. At the tender age of fourteen she already managed actually to publish her first series of *Artless Tales*. This is unusual: most juvenilia have to wait at least until their author's maturity, or even death, before publication, as in the cases of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. And this volume of *Artless Tales* is very rare—even standard depositories like the British

Library and the Bodleian don't have copies. Our Juvenilia Press edition is the first time it has been reprinted. No doubt the young author had help from her family; but between them they managed to assemble that substantial subscription list; and Porter got to write a *real* dedicatory epistle to the actual Earl of Bristol—in which she begs for his "liberality and benevolence" in perusing the work of "a very young Authoress" (*AT* I, 2).

Another characteristic of girls' early writing—and this one Jane Austen does *not* share—is a preference for romance, glamour, magic, perfectly beautiful heroines and perfectly dastardly villains. The "write what you know" principle doesn't appeal, and, if they practise it at all, it is thrust upon them. Young Louisa May Alcott loved lurid adventure and melodrama, but was constrained to write *Little Women*, straight from her own experience, before she achieved success. Charlotte Brontë revelled in the torrid clime of Africa, where her Glasstown and Angria are located, before she turned to chronicling the inner life of a teacher and governess in England like herself. And fourteen-year-old Porter, in her first tale of "Sir Alfred," pulls out all the romantic stops. It is set in Jerusalem during the Crusades. Her hero is a knight who jousts with the villain for the hand of his beloved. A heavenly messenger, the sylph Celestial, sends him on a quest to liberate a couple who have fallen into the hands of Lurina in the Castle of Delight. And there are shades of Spenserian allegory as he too is tested for resistance to this eighteenth-century version of the Bower of Bliss. The writing too is luscious and highly literary. For instance:

> At the upper end of the saloon was a canopy of carved silver, in which was set close every precious stone that drinks the blaze; the crimson ruby, the varying diamond, the purple amethyst were strown beside the azure sapphire, the golden topaz, and emerald vivid verd…. Underneath it was a throne of the rainbow opal, and on it sat a female with every soft and winning beauty in her aspect. The brilliant dye of the carnation, its luxuriant white and red, mingled on her face … (*AT* I 19)

Well, you get the picture … This highly decorative and literary tale is hardly "artless." The subsequent tales similarly present romantic and heroic extremes, including hereditary rivalries, clan warfare, warriors and witches and wizards.

Of the two familiar traditions of narrative, romance and the realistic novel, the child writer is often steered from the former to the latter, and goes through a trajectory of graduating from fantasy to realism. In Porter's first series of *Artless Tales*, we see the devoted commitment to romance.

Young Austen, however, was an exception to this rule. She made it her business, from very early on, to scorn high romance. From the outset the novel of sensibility—one form that romance took in the late eighteenth century—was the butt of her satire. When in "Love and Freindship" the heroine Laura claims to have "a Sensibility too

tremblingly alive to every affliction" (*MW* 78), we know that this is a joke. Like Porter with her high-flown description of Lurina's bejewelled Bower, Austen too can string precious stones together:

> "Diamonds such as never were seen, [Pearls as large as those of the Princess Badroulbadour in the 4th volume of the Arabian Nights and Rubies, Emeralds, Topazes, Sapphires, Amethysts, Turkeystones, Agate, Beads, Bangles & Garnets] and Pearls, Rubies, Emeralds and Beads out of number…" ("The Three Sisters," *MW* 65)

But in this case, instead of being decorative prose from the narrator, the list of jewels is part of an outrageous set of desiderata that Mary Stanhope expects her fiancé to provide at their marriage. The part in square brackets was deleted. Austen realized it was over the top, even in a satirical speech about a greedy bride in search of a hugely expensive trousseau.

While other young writers, such as George Eliot and Daisy Ashford, piously imitate their chosen models, Austen outrageously parodies them. Clearly this has much to do with her own native mindset and sense of humour. But I also attribute it partly to her living in a houseful of her father's boy pupils, and among her brothers—who were often the dedicatees of her early works. Irreverence, overstatement, and violence are expected of boys, almost required.

I cannot resist a modern example: Little Calvin, of the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, tells his father what sort of fairy tale he would like to hear. "I'd like to see the three bears eat the three little pigs, and then the bears join up with the big bad wolf and eat Goldilocks and Little Red Riding Hood." "What about Hansel and Gretel?" his father asks mildly. "The witch eats them, and then the wolf eats the witch," responds Calvin promptly (Waterston 80). Calvin may be only a character in a comic strip, but I could back him up with the writings of real boys. Philip Larkin's *Phippy's Schooldays*, a take-off of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, is a rampaging chronicle of beatings and bashings, and guffaws at the pains of the luckless hero. "His howls are drowned in a chorus of lusty hurrahs as the crew hurl him into the shallow mud and water which boarders 'Thy glassy wave' of the Thames, immortalized by Gray" (5). Boys are apt to require toughness from their sisters too. Little Daisy Ashford, nine-year-old author of the famous *The Young Visiters*, actually gave up writing when she found that her older half-brothers roared with laughter at her tender love scenes.[9]

Jane Austen's juvenilia are filled with Calvin-like violence and rowdy irreverence. Characters get "carried home, dead drunk" (*MW 14*), caught in man-traps, murdered, and hanged (22)—and all that happens in "Jack and Alice" alone! In her own mode Austen is as extreme as Porter. Though she doesn't deal in magic and the supernatural, credibility, to put it mildly, is not a major concern. Everything is over the top. Sir William Mountague falls madly in love with no less than seven different young ladies in the course of a few weeks (*MW* 40–42); Mary Stanhope, in gabbling

her demands for her trousseau, which include servants and horses and coaches, has to stop for want of breath to go on (*MW* 65). Lord St. Clair of "Love & Freindship" discovers *four* long-lost grandchildren in as many minutes. The writing is extreme even if it is not romantic. And like other young writers Austen learns to tone down the excesses, exchange slapstick for satire, satire for irony, and wild improbable action for the disciplined probability and strict limitation to the familiar for which the six novels made her famous.

Neither young writer is remarkable for the prized virginal innocence on sexual matters. (A correspondent of the *Saturday Review* refused to believe that *The Young Visiters* could have been written by a nine-year-old, on the grounds that children "rarely … afford us any opportunity for the laugh in which mankind forfeited the happy simplicity of Eden."[10]) Austen's Laura of "Love and Freindship" cheerfully begins her narrative for her friend's daughter Marianne, "My Mother was the natural Daughter of a Scotch peer by an Italian opera-girl" (*MW* 77)—and later we meet that Scotch peer, Lord St. Clair, and learn the opera girl's name: another "Lurina"! (*MW* 91).

In contrast with Austen's breezy recognition of extramarital liaisons, Porter lingers over female seduction and male virtue. In "The Noble Courtezan" she shows Olivia's seductive practices on the virtuous Raphael d'Urbino: she feigns a swoon, and falls "half lifeless, into his arms."

> "What can I do?" cried he in alarm. … She raised her eyes in tender languishment to his, then closed them again, and dropped her snowy head upon his neck. What a trial for *d'Urbino*! … In sinking into his arms, her handkerchief fell aside, and discovered a breast, whiter than the bosom of Venus. (*AT* I 43)

Presently she exclaims, "I will consent to be yours by the laws of love alone." And the virtuous Raphael is suitably shocked. Neither young Austen nor young Porter, that is, recognized any rule about steering clear of sexual matters.

Both Austen and Porter are already fledged writers in their delight in language and its powers. Austen eschews the elaborate description that Porter rejoices in; but she too is already stretching her wings in her juvenilia, and developing her powers. One sees her evolving artistry best in her dialogue, and especially in her control of register.

Here the stunningly handsome Charles Adams of "Jack and Alice" responds to Mr. Johnson's invitation to marry his daughter Alice:

> "I look upon myself to be Sir a perfect Beauty—where would you see a finer figure or a more charming face …. My temper is even, my virtues innumerable my self unparalelled. Since such Sir is my character, what do you mean by wishing me to marry your Daughter?

> Let me give you a short sketch of yourself & of her. I look upon you Sir to be a very good sort of Man in the main; a drunken old Dog to be sure, but that's nothing to me. Your Daughter sir, is neither sufficiently beautifull, sufficiently amiable, sufficiently witty, nor sufficiently rich for me—. I expect nothing more in my wife than my wife will find in me—Perfection." (*MW* 25–26).

Charles Adams uses the fine flow of rhetoric, with its parallel structures and flurry of abstract nouns, for his own perfections. When he turns to the notable *im*perfections of Mr. and Miss Johnson, the register drops with a thunk to the demotic and colloquial: "a drunken old Dog to be sure."

Fourteen-year-old Porter is not capable of this range. More congenial to her pen is the high-flown rhetoric of romance: "By yon orient globe of heaven," cries Inchkeith in "The Cottage in the Glen," "I swear that I adore you; that thou are dearer to me than wealth, or power, or even my life" (*AT* I 88). She writes the kind of dialogue that Austen parodies. Of such rhetoric her down-to-earth parent asks his son, "Where Edward in the name of wonder did you pick up this unmeaning Gibberish? You have been studying Novels I suspect" (*MW* 81).

Young Austen, sceptical and ironic, is heading towards the Novel; Porter lingers largely with Romance. And though modern taste mainly approves Austen's choice, Porter's commitment to romance has its own charm and courage. Her heroines are no mere shrinking violets. They choose forbidden lovers, rescue them, sometimes don armour and fight for them.

Two years after the first series of *Artless Tales*, Porter published a second series with the same title.[11] And this time she added a subtitle, *Romantic Effusions of the Heart.* The emphasis has shifted away from the adventure, magic, and far-away-and-long-ago settings of the first series to the intricacies of love and desire in the courtship situation. Geographical settings in the first series were mediaeval Jerusalem, Renaissance Italy, France, and the Scottish Highlands before Culloden. Settings in the second are confined to England, with only brief excursions to the Isle of Wight, Paris, and Spain. And the time is close to the present. We haven't yet got down to those three or four families in a country village that Austen chose to specialize in; but we have moved in that direction.

The love stories are genuinely complex, with a concentration on the courtship process, the fit of personality, the comparative rank and status and financial situation of the principals, and issues of filial disobedience—aspects also familiar in Austen's novels. Some incidents are worthy of Hardy. The scene where some urban dandies go slumming in the country, and one joins a rustic dance and is taken with the beauty of a rural partner (*AT* II 88 ff.) could have been snatched by Hardy for the beginning of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Porter's dialogue gathers more range and humour as her events come closer to home. Here the hero's frivolous companions, who have considerable influence over

him, congratulate him on taking the country girl as his mistress and bringing her to town:

> "*We* were fools enough to think, *you* were fool enough to marry her, and shut yourself up in the country; turn domestic and renounce the *bon-ton*. Oh, dam me, what a sight it would have been; *George Cecil* turned farmer: In a flaped [*sic*] hat, mended breeches, white waistcoat, worsted stockings, thick shoes; drinking ale, eating mutton …. O! curse me, what a picture!" (*AT* II 122-3)

One can relish the specificity of this parody of love in a cottage, and still register the painful irony that the hero has indeed married the woman that his friends take for his mistress.

The sacred subject of love is not always treated with bated breath. The narrator is capable of some Rosalind-like high spirits. Of George Cecil we hear,

> His company was agreeable although he was a lover; for he was not one of those youths, who bind their brows with willow; wear a rueful face, and a dejected heart, as if love were made up of tears and woe.—No, the presence of *Arethusa* lighted him up to greater animation; he was then the soul of festivity, and courtesy. (*AT* II 101)

And when we read of "that mind, which is 'tremblingly alive' to every animated sentiment," it is refreshing to find that "tremblingly alive" comes in quotation marks. Shades of "Love and Freindship," and its mockery of outworn formulas.

As Porter's dialogue gathers range and pace, her humour increases. The comedy, as often in the eighteenth-century novel, is typically attached to the servant. When the heroine Arethusa decides to follow her exiled husband to France, Lucy squeaks, "Lord have mercy! not among the French, and the *Gullotines*, I hope"—a contemporary reference apt enough in 1796 (*AT* II 144). Arethusa decides they will go dressed as men, and Lucy throws herself into the business enthusiastically, and keeps going to the tailor's to change her outfit:

> At length she fixed on a spotted coat, a worked waistcoat, and a pair of tight pantaloons—giving this reason for wearing the latter,—"I was always allowed to have a genteel leg, and I don't want to hide it now, I assure you." (*AT* II 146)

If Porter was in the process of adapting her romances towards familiar landscapes, contemporary events, and the inner life, with an admixture of wit and humour, Austen was adapting too. *Catharine, or the Bower* reads more like her novels than her juvenilia. Kitty's scatty friend Camilla looks back to the absurdities of Alice Johnson and the

juvenilia. "I wish there were no such things as teeth in the world," says Camilla in sympathy, when Kitty has toothache. "They are nothing but plagues to one, and I dare say that People might easily invent something to eat with instead of them" (*MW* 209). But Kitty herself looks forward to Catherine Morland and the other self-aware heroines of the novels.

Both young authors turn their attention to the intricacies of courtship. Both present explorations of the awakening of sexuality. And, interestingly, both focus on a trope of some secret space where the young heroine discovers her desire. In *Catharine* Kitty is "firmly persuaded that her Bower alone could restore her to herself" (*MW* 193). Jeffrey Herrle notes that in the course of the narrative the Bower "becomes a sexualized place, where girlhood and womanhood converge" (ix). It is there that she has her disturbing encounter with the vivacious Edward Stanley, who kisses her hand "passionately," and leaves her in a flutter (*MW* 231).

In the second series of *Artless Tales* there are cognate spaces, where each heroine has her awakening. Elinor resorts to "a clump of holly, that formed with their rough branches a rude sort of grove" (14); here she warbles a song of her own composition in which she wishes that her Richard would "seek this rustic grove, / And sooth me" (15). Miranda haunts "The antique remains of a ruined *Abbey* … where from the twilight, until the moon silvered the heavens" (58) she wanders with a devoted male friend; and it is here that she discovers that she loves him. The third heroine, Arethusa, wanders in "a deep dell, down which the river rushed from the wood. In this dell, stood the ruin of an antique church" (94). She is briefly scared, but soon rescued by the man she now knows she loves.

Such secret and sexualized spaces were characteristic of the Gothic novel too: Catherine Morland is much excited at the notion of visiting an Abbey. But it is curious to find such a recurring trope in two girl authors who are in many ways so different. We find it too in Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, and in the nunnery deep in the forest in Brontë's *Shirley*—not to mention in many a pornographic novel where the whole landscape can become sexualized.

For the girl writer the shared trope seems to mark a certain stage in creative as in sexual development: to turn to inner experience and the self, rather than derived literary romances and parodies of them. Girls as young as nine-year-old Daisy Ashford delight in writing love stories, as in spying on lovers and reading about them. Adolescent Jane Austen and Anna Maria Porter are perhaps reaching towards some contiguous stage of comprehension and creative endeavour, discovering new resources in themselves for experience and human understanding.

Maria Porter may have been "L'Allegro" in relation to her sister Jane Porter's "Il Penseroso"; but as child writer she would surely cede the "L'Allegro" title to the light fantastic Jane Austen. Nevertheless, contrasts though they are, we see them converging.

Austen's father labelled her juvenilia "Effusions of Fancy by a very young Lady." "Effusion" is not necessarily a pejorative term. Porter's subtitle for her second series

of *Artless Tales* was "*Romantic Effusions of the Heart.*" And the defining "Fancy" for the one and Romance for the other are appropriate enough. One may consider an "effusion" to be either a generous outpouring on the one hand, or an embarrassing gushing forth on the other; and the same might be said of juvenilia. Me, I consider juvenilia to be the generous outpouring. Jane Austen, too, takes delight in fictional outpouring, as in her famous defence of the novel in Chapter Five of *Northanger Abbey*: "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda; in short, only some work in which the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language." For Jane Austen the *liveliest* effusions are not "romantic" ones, but rather those "of wit and humour."

NOTES

[1] See, especially, Langbauer's *The Juvenile Tradition: Young Writers and Prolepsis, 1750–1835* (Oxford UP, 2016).

[2] This paper was a plenary address at the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America in Chicago in October of 2021, and will be published in the Jane Austen journal, *Persuasions*, vol. 43. It is part of Looser's forthcoming biography, *Sister Novelists: The Trailblazing Porter Sisters, Who Paved the Way for Austen and the Brontës* (2022). I am grateful to the editor of *Persuasions*, Susan Allen Ford, for permission to quote from the typescript.

[3] See "Miss J. Austen, Steventon," in the subscription list in the first volume of Frances Burney, *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth*, vol. 1 (London: T. Payne, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796; 5 vols.), p. iv.

[4] Anna Maria Porter's birth date, recorded in both the *Orlando Project* and the Juvenilia Press edition of *Artless Tales* as 1780, has been revised in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, on new evidence, to 1778.

[5] See Lesley Peterson, "The Subscription List for *Artless Tales*," in *AT* I, p.123.

[6] See my article, "From *Laura and Augustus* to *Love and Freindship*."

[7] See Lesley Peterson, "Young Jane Austen and the Circulation-Library Novel," *Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, vol. 3, no.2, September 2021, pp. 94–125.

[8] See S. C. Hall, *Retrospect*, p. 287. Quoted in *AT* I, p. 18n72.

[9] See Daisy Ashford's "Preface" to *Daisy Ashford: Her Book* (Chatto and Windus, 1920).

[10] Letter of 16 August 1919, p. 150. See Mather xi.

[11] The edition of the second series of *Artless Tales* that I have examined is dated 1796, and the author says in her Preface that she has "but just completed my sixteenth year" [n.p.]. But we also have a reference of 1795 for this same set of tales, so it seems it achieved a swift reprinting.

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AT I	Porter, Anna Maria. *Artless Tales*. 1793. Edited by Leslie Robertson, Juliet McMaster, Lesley Peterson, and others, Juvenilia Press, 2003.
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Reviews

Margaret Atwood. *Early Writings*. Edited by Nora Stovel and Donna Couto with Conrad Scott, Juvenilia Press, 2020.

viii + 70 pages. Paperback, AUD 15.00.
ISBN: 978-0-7334-3916-2.

This is not the first book of Margaret Atwood's early writing that the Juvenilia Press has been fortunate enough to publish. Like its earlier title by her (*A Quiet Game*, 1997), it raises most of the fascinating, insoluble questions that arise in the course of scholarly presentation and evaluation of literary work by children. Is this treatment too solemn, heavy-handed even, for two-page stories by kids? Do we wish to gaze at decorations in schoolbooks drawn by future artists, or listen to the first tune picked out with two fingers by a budding composer?

These Juvenilia Press editors, latest in a line that has included students and recent students of several generations as well as established scholars, have done a fine job both in providing enjoyment for their readers and in showing why such enjoyment is valuable. They never treat their child-author with condescension, but have aligned themselves with her own attitudes: a palpable delight in mastering her craft, and a self-mocking irony in, for instance, the inscription reproduced on the volume's cover: "Copyrighted P.A. 1955 (Ahem!)"

This volume makes its readers grateful: to Atwood's mother, for keeping these souvenirs of childhood and packing them safely away; to Atwood herself for generously allowing them to sally forth onto the public stage; to the university structure which underpins such institutions as the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. These verses, stories, and dramas were kept for discovery, for loving and scrupulous transcription, and for explication with care and a light touch. The editors have hunted up all kinds of sources—printed books, manuscripts, material from the internet and from the CBC—besides providing information on such recondite topics as Camp

Hurontario and the muskie or muskellunge (a predatory fish). All this mediates for the reader the child and young person's delight in the gritty detail of her world.

It was love at first sight between me and this book. Since my appreciation of and gratitude to Atwood are chiefly for her later works, I expected to concentrate on the potential relationship of these early ones to those. Do Rhyming Cats prefigure her Angel Catbird? Does her interest in Nylon, Orlon, and Dacron foretell her interest in later scientific inventions, like synthetic meat and genetic modifying? That kind of thing.

The way these writings prefigure the future is indeed fascinating. But I was soon seduced by the child Peggy's writing for its own sake. Juvenile it may be, as its author says in her preface, but always quirky, always fun. I love the audible delight in words and wordplay, the mimicry, the agile shifting between one genre or model and another, and the voice-shifting that goes with it. The preface also says, "when I ran out of plagiarized material, I made up the rest," and Atwood adds that she cannot see anything in her early work that connects to the later. But the grown-up author here seems unfair to the child. The young writer had never heard of plagiarism, but was just tuning up, and the skills she was acquiring here were to be put to good use later on.

The happy meaninglessness of nursery rhymes picked up somewhere in her environment ("ABC / Fallen down D, / The cats in the cupboard / And cant see me") leads on to mastery of more self-important modes of meaninglessness ("Oh come, sweet death! … Farewell, cruel world.") Here the meaning lies in the incongruity of context: what is borrowed is reshaped by irony, and what is foreshadowed is the mature Atwood's virtuoso handling of names, slogans, and catch-phrases.

As the book moves from verse to prose, we see Peggy mastering another mode. "Annie the Ant" is a story that has everything (including a happy ending, a rare event in the adult Atwood). Annie's individual exploits (hunting down the bug, impossibly saving the bunny from the eagle) take place against a plausible, almost naturalistic background of scurrying hordes of ants: driving off the enemy Flicker, performing underground rescue. A world in a grain of sand, indeed.

Some of the tiniest details in this book are telling enough to be worthy of the mature artist—like the word "customary" in "The Lone Figure." In this nightmare vision written for a friend with appendicitis, the old man who's waited twenty years in hospital to have his appendix out is imprisoned in a room with a small barred window and "the customary pile of moth-eaten straw." With that one word "customary," the teenage writer both aligns herself with and distances herself from a whole genealogy of fictional prisoners, horror stories of the tortured and the lunatic.

But of course the whole setting of "The Lone Figure" is comedic. And comic inventiveness breaks in again in the dramatic works that close the volume, with the non-human characters Orlon, Nylon, and Dacron, and the parody songs in "Synthesis" ("the only Home Economics opera ever performed") and in the summer

camp operetta "Moonblossom Smith" ("it was nothing if not demented"). The Gilbert and Sullivan spoofs are among the best in a crowded field, but the prize surely goes to "I'm just a girl who can't say yes." This has all the brio and catchiness of Rogers and Hammerstein's original, and to the daring of the original's cheeky endorsement of female desire, it opposes the daring of feminist defiance.

The outrageousness of each is inoffensive even to those who think differently, because it is such fun. Yet for a reader interested in prefiguring, Atwood's stalwart record as a feminist—and the whole #MeToo movement with it—is foreshadowed in "When a caveman says goodnight to me / I always step a coupla paces back."

From bright child to savvy teenager in forty-two pages. Thank you, Peggy Atwood.

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Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal, vol. 42, 2020.

255 pages. Paperback, USD 30.00. ISSN: 0821–0314.

Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line, Vol. 41, No. 1, Winter 2020. jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol-41-no-1/.

Free online publication. ISSN: 1559–7520.

IN HER keynote presentation at the 2020 JASNA (Jane Austen Society of North America) AGM, reproduced as an essay in *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, Juliet McMaster prescribes a dose of the juvenilia for non-Janeites, who have eschewed Jane Austen's novels in the past. Such readers considered Austen to be too straightlaced. Beginning with "The Beautifull Cassandra," McMaster points out that Austen clearly breaks many social mores of her culture through her juvenile writing. Dedicated readers of Austen's juvenilia know the delights that await them each time they turn to her juvenilia – whether as a dose of relief from the pandemic, or as a wonderful treasure trove that reveals the developing skills of the teenage writer.

I have selected for this review six essays about literary juvenilia, all based on papers presented at the 2020 JASNA AGM, found in one or the other of JASNA's

two peer-reviewed journals: *Persuasions On-Line,* vol. 41, no. 1; and *Persuasions,* vol. 42. (The former is a digital publication available online free of charge; the latter is a print publication that was mailed in Spring 2021 to members of JASNA but can also be purchased from JASNA for $30 plus shipping.) I review four essays from *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, including two keynote presentations, as well as two essays from *Persuasions* 42 that I suggest are essential reading for two kinds of readers: those who are pursuing studies in literary juvenilia and those who find themselves drawn to juvenile writing because they enjoy seeing the world through the viewpoint of a child who is learning to express herself, spelling mistakes and all.

Editor Susan Allen Ford begins *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1 with thoughtful memorials for two long-time members of the Jane Austen community: founding member Lorraine Hathaway and preeminent Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye, followed by two main sections and a shorter, miscellany section. The first section, "AGM: 2020: A Virtual Event," includes nine essays on the JASNA AGM 2020 theme of "Jane Austen's Juvenilia: Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution." Readers of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies* (*JJS*) will be delighted by these informative and engaging essays that look at history, art, music, fashion, and film in relation to the juvenilia. The second section, "'Staying at Home' with Jane Austen: Reading and Writing during a Pandemic," adds dimension to the volume by encouraging readers who are experiencing a pandemic to consider the restricted social world of Jane Austen. "Miscellany" follows, offering a variety of essays that include Deirdre Le Faye's perspectives on the authenticity of the Rice portrait, which some claim shows Jane Austen in her childhood.

Two keynote presentations on juvenilia at the conference, both published in *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 41, no. 1, complement each other. "'Here's Looking at You, Kid!' The Visual in Jane Austen's Juvenilia" invites readers to view Jane Austen's juvenile stories through the visual lens of Juliet McMaster. We learn that McMaster takes her cue from the limited supply of words regarding appearances in Austen's stories. She reveals her creative process, recounting how she develops the satirical illustrations we have come to enjoy in many Juvenilia Press volumes. The on-line format of McMaster's paper offers readers the opportunity to enjoy her illustrations via large, brightly coloured screen images—a nice treat. She provides a fascinating account of how her interest in illustrating a picture book for children culminated in the founding of the Juvenilia Press, which has published nineteen scholarly editions of Austen's juvenilia since 1994.

In "Juvenile Songs and Lessons: Music Culture in Jane Austen's Teenage Years," Gillian Dooley enhances readers' sensory experience of Jane Austen's juvenilia, by providing excerpts of musical pieces that the young author copied out in her own handwriting and played. Dooley discusses musical aspects of the culture surrounding the young Jane Austen and shows how Austen incorporates music into specific juvenile stories. Both McMaster and Dooley discuss a range of Austen's early writings from her three volumes of juvenilia: "The Beautifull Cassandra," "Frederic and

Elfrida," "Jack and Alice," "Lesley Castle," "Henry and Eliza," and "The Three Sisters," as well as "Lady Susan." A theme common to both keynote presentations is that of the teenage Austen using her writing to send up the restrictions of her culture's prescribed social behaviours for women, beginning with the exploits of her first character: the beautiful Cassandra.

Among the many noteworthy offerings in *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, two essays about Austen's "Catharine, or the Bower," one by Elaine Bander and one by Ryoko Doi, stand out for me personally. As a graduate student in McMaster's class at the University of Alberta, I was privileged to be a member of the editing team that produced the 1996 Juvenilia Press edition of Austen's *Catharine, or the Bower*, and I invite *JJS* readers who are interested in discovering the ongoing benefits of such an experience to access the JP website, at https://bit.ly/JP_Reflections (stable shortened URL).

Bander explores interesting connections between Austen's "Catharine" and the novels of Charlotte Smith; she presents a detailed account of possible interpretations of Catharine's bower. Bander also points out that Austen's "Catharine" is closer to a conventional courtship novel than it is to the burlesque-style novels of Charlotte Smith. (Readers who wish to pursue further connections between Austen and Charlotte Smith will be enlightened by Susan Allen Ford's contribution to *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 41, no. 2 entitled "Mrs. Smith, Charlotte Smith, and West Indian Property in *Persuasion*: A Note," in which Ford references additional work by Bander on this subject.) Doi takes on both "Catharine" and "The History of England" to present an engaging argument that Austen recasts Mary, Queen of Scots as her fictional Catharine. *JJS* readers will enjoy Doi's complex piece that is filled with references to these two, later juvenile works of Jane Austen.

Persuasions 42 contains essays by Christine Alexander and Lesley Peterson that I recommend as essential reading. Alexander provides an opportunity for those readers already involved in literary juvenilia to better understand the development of this area of research. She also makes it possible for readers to uncover why they are charmed, amused, or astonished by their enjoyment of literary juvenilia—the appeal lies in more than our surprise and amusement at the early spelling mistakes of later famous authors. Alexander defines what literary juvenilia is and what it is not. She makes clear that juvenile writers create literature that contributes to the culture in which they write; they do not simply consume cultural ideas from texts that are written by adults, for them. Equipped with this important clarification, readers are better able to benefit from Alexander's examples of literary juvenilia. These examples are sometimes endearing and sometimes startling, as they illustrate how cultural restrictions impel young authors, including Jane Austen, to create stories in which characters act out the resentments of their young authors. For instance, seven-year-old Iris Vaughan, who receives a reprimand for speaking too honestly in a social setting, writes down what she thinks. Some of us might have experienced the surprise of finding out that forthright honesty in the wrong social setting can lead to a penalty. More than smiling

at the spelling mistakes of blossoming writers, twenty-first-century readers of Alexander's essay will recognize that their attraction to literary juvenilia may be due to their having some of the same concerns with social constraints today that children and young writers had in the past.

Alexander notes that in recent decades we have seen the development of a literary canon that includes juvenile writing, writing by women, and the emergence of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, of which Lesley Peterson is an editor. Peterson herself lights up *Persuasions* 42 with her in-depth study of the rollicking world of Jane Austen's juvenilia, centred on the exaggerated ravings of characters in both "Love and Freindship" and "Lesley Castle." Peterson presents evidence that Jane Austen adapts Eliza Nugent Bromley's conventional depictions of raves and swoons for her own purposes. Differentiating between sentimental and unsentimental raving, Peterson reveals how young Jane Austen displays her extensive knowledge of the conventions of such influences as sentimental novels and the plays of Sheridan and Shakespeare. This essay allows readers to gain new perspectives on behaviours that seem totally out of control. Peterson shows us that such behaviours are carefully constructed by the young Austen. I particularly enjoy Peterson's dissection of Austen's descriptions of food and its sensual delights, which exposes an amusing and perhaps surprising instance of meaty double entendre. Certainly, rereading "Love and Freindship" and "Lesley Castle" will not be the same after reading this engaging discussion.

As adult readers of literary juvenilia, we have come to appreciate the special qualities of those young, talented writers who are admired by generations of readers beyond their own time. For some of us, our love of Jane Austen has led to our discovery of other young authors who—like many of us—began writing as children, to express how things should be, rather than complying with restrictive cultural conventions. The essays in these two volumes of *Persuasions* demonstrate how meaningful literary juvenilia can be for readers who were booklovers and prolific writers themselves as children. They also assert the consequence of literary juvenilia as a body of literature, as a genre in its own right, and in doing so elevate the importance of this under-recognized category of literature.

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Dara McAnulty. *Diary of a Young Naturalist*. Little Toller Books, 2020.

v + 219 pages. Hardback, GBP 16. ISBN: 9781908213792.

THIS DEBUT publication by Dara McAnulty, teenage autistic author, naturalist and conservationist, chronicles a period in his life when the family moves from one side of Northern Ireland to another and the beginnings of his now established career. Challenges faced along the way include bullying, a change of school, and the nuances of autism, which though they sharpen his sensitivity to stress and anxiety, also heighten his awareness and engagement with the natural world. His story, which revolves around his connection to wildlife, is nestled in the constant warmth and reassurance of a family unit that has "roots" beyond brick and mortar, binding them "like mycelium networks" (8).

The diary covers one year, from spring equinox to spring equinox, and ends on the cusp of his fifteenth birthday. Dara's observations on natural history and the ways in which he weaves them into the narrative and relates them to his emotional experience and development are vivid and compelling. The writing is mature and perceptive, and through moments of reflection and a range of original similes drawn from nature itself we gain the sense that the author is completely immersed in the natural world. A goshawk chick in a nest "looks like an autumn forest rolled in the first snows of winter" (71).

More than simply a coming-of-age narrative, the book depicts the anxiety and excitement of a youth finding his voice, not only as a writer but as an environmental campaigner in a modern world that seems either oblivious to the degraded state of nature or complacent about it. We learn how Dara begins to engage others at school through forming an eco-group, and how his participation in a school strike for climate, started by teenager Greta Thunberg, inspires new determination and hope. When he works as a presenter with Chris Packham on BioBlitz, assessing and recording wildlife in nature reserves in the UK, he recognises that his tendency to "work alone" is superseded by his passion for the subject. Although having to cope with comments on social media afterwards elicits "intense feelings of doubt" (97–98), he wisely reasons that "human narcissism and insecurity" must not be allowed to obscure the "urgency of supporting collapsing ecosystems and protecting wildlife" (98).

The book will appeal to adults as much as it will to Dara's own peer group. He points out that children need a healthy natural world, with "access to the wilder places" (19), and a society that recognises the need to act to protect it. He restates the urgent environmental challenges facing our species that anyone who is familiar with the disastrous trajectory of global warming will understand, and how this crisis affects him personally:

> The natural world – which includes us—is facing such enormous challenges that it's easy to become overwhelmed and depressed. But we must fix them, and if I'm no longer here, alive, I can't be part of the solution. What is it that's holding me back? Anxiety? Depression? Autism? These are the shackles. Surely, I can break free. … The only thing I am really bound to is nature as we all are. (115)

The diary format is particularly well suited to the fragmented, sometimes impulsive, teenage streams of consciousness. It offers a window onto the loneliness and challenges of autistic experience, but also its energetic wonder and brilliance. The neurodiverse mind pays attention to the natural world, in particular to small or microscopic things that are often overlooked, like a woodlouse with her "butter-yellow eggs" (196). Throughout the book the author evokes the tension he experiences between the stress of daily school life and the "unfettered joy" he feels in wild places (25). He describes how ideas and words become "trapped in my chest," and asks, even if they are heard and read, "will anything change?" (21). When depression and anxiety set in, Dara is adept at seeing the value of small, ordinary moments. On watching two buzzards fly together in courtship he muses, "Some things are so right in this world. I need to hold on to all these moments, to stop myself eroding" (197).

Through meeting like-minded people during conservation work, the author begins to find his feet. During the tagging and monitoring of goshawks, eagles, hen harriers, buzzards, and red kites, which is part of a project designed to protect these birds from persecution, he discovers acceptance and understanding:

> Without realising, I start talking to the people around me … I feel at ease. This is so rare. They aren't teasing or confusing me. I ask questions which are given detailed, intelligent answers, and it feels as if I've been dipped in a golden light. This is what I want to do. This is what I want to be, surrounded by kindred spirits, doing useful things with care, knowledge and clarity. (71)

Yet the book is by no means a rose-tinted view on life. The author's struggle is real and perilous: "as I lay on the sand, listening to the waves, I promised not to lose myself again. I must stop thinking about taking my own life" (99).

The issues raised in this book extend far beyond the natural world: they convey the crucial importance of being nurtured and heard, rather than bypassed and overlooked. Rathlin Island—one of the author's favourite places—symbolises well the isolation and beauty of the individual. It reminds us of the need in the writing and publishing professions, and in society more widely, to support and cherish the unique individual voices and perspectives of young, developing writers. In the prose, it is

possible to detect at times the presence of Robert Macfarlane, who is acknowledged at the end of the book as having given literary advice, support, and encouragement—who "championed my words and my voice."

Diary of a Young Naturalist, which Dara started writing when he was fourteen, has won four literary awards, including the 2020 Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing and the British Book Awards Narrative Non-fiction Book of the Year. Dara is also the youngest ever author to be longlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize, the UK's most prestigious award for non-fiction.

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