

WISHING THE JUVENILIA AWAY: JANE AUSTEN'S ADVICE TO CAROLINE

Gillian Dooley

Honorary Associate Professor of English, Flinders University

HAVING delighted in revisiting Jane Austen's teenage writings for a recent presentation, I was taken aback when I came across Caroline Austen's memory of receiving a message from her aunt, Jane Austen, in her last weeks, "to this effect— That if I would take her advice, I should cease writing till I was 16, and that she had herself often wished she had *read* more, and written *less*, in the corresponding years of her own life" (*My Aunt* 174). It is hard for us to share her regret, for most of her juvenilia were written before 1793, the year when Austen turned fifteen. The stories themselves are for later scholars precious evidence of Austen's early development as a writer—Virginia Woolf wrote that they were "Jane Austen practising" (qtd. in Sutherland and Johnston xv). If the stories of "The Beautifull Cassandra" and "Jack and Alice" had not been written, would Austen have developed into the writer that she became? Moreover, the stories are a source of delight in their own right. Austen's family letters show that she shared with her young relatives, as well as her sister, a vivid sense of the ridiculous. As her niece Anna Lefroy wrote in 1864, "Aunt Jane was the general favorite with children; her ways with them being so playful, & her long circumstantial stories so delightful" ("Recollections" 157). This playfulness, throughout her life, could be seen as a continuation of the joyful absurdities in the teenage writings, which surfaced often enough in writing in various manuscript sources from her adult years.

The advice Caroline remembered receiving in 1817 seems inconsistent with what we know of Austen's relations with her and others of her generation who shared her artistic interests, both literary and musical. My aim in this essay is to try to understand the context for Austen's advice to Caroline: its timing in relation to Austen's illness; who might have passed the message on to her; and the circumstances of its publication decades later.

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Fanny

AUSTEN was very close to several of her nieces and nephews. Her correspondence with Fanny Knight, Edward and Elizabeth's oldest child, shows how intimate they were, how delighted she was that they were on such confidential terms, and how much she loved Fanny in all her idiosyncratic charm. Fanny's mother, Elizabeth, had died in 1808, which perhaps increased the intimacy between them. She and Fanny had their own private language that appears in the letters occasionally—starting every word with a “p.” In a letter to her sister Cassandra of 30 April 1811, Austen wrote, “I was never much more put to it, than contriving an answer to Fanny's former message. What is there to be said on the subject? Pery pell?—or pare pey? Or po.—or at the most Pi pope pey pike pit” (186). We do not know what Fanny said, presumably passed on in a letter from Cassandra who was staying at their brother's home in Godmersham, to elicit this comical response from her aunt. Two years earlier, on the day after Fanny's sixteenth birthday, Austen had written to Cassandra at Godmersham about Fanny:

You rejoice me by what you say of Fanny. . . . We thought of & talked of her yesterday with sincere affection. . . . I am gratified by her having pleasure in what I write—but I wish the knowledge of my being exposed to her discerning Criticism, may not hurt my stile, by inducing too great a solicitude. I begin already to weigh my words & sentences more than I did, & am looking about for a sentiment, an illustration or a metaphor in every corner of the room. (169)

I am not sure whether Fanny was yet in the secret of Austen's authorship when this letter was written, and her praise might simply have been for Austen's letters, which Cassandra would have shared with her when they were together. Austen was a very self-aware letter-writer, often comparing her own letters with Cassandra's as to penmanship, content, and style. In any case, Fanny certainly was in the know in 1813, when she read *Pride and Prejudice*—Austen wrote to Cassandra that “Fanny's praise is very gratifying” (205). She and Fanny discussed music and literature, as well as Fanny's love life. However, Fanny does not appear to have been a creative writer.

Anna

AUSTEN'S niece Anna, on the other hand, was. Anna was the daughter of Austen's eldest brother James and his first wife Anne, who died when she was only two. Like Fanny, Anna was born in 1793, but lived much closer to Austen's Hampshire homes than Fanny, who was in Kent with her parents. Austen occasionally writes of Anna in a slightly different, and perhaps more critical, way than she does of her cousin: “She I doubt not has had plenty of the miscellaneous, unsettled sort of happiness

which seems to suit her best”, she wrote in June 1811 (193). A few weeks earlier, she had written, “My Mother & Martha both write with great satisfaction of Anna’s behaviour. She is quite an Anna with variations—but she cannot have reached her last, for that is always the most flourishing and shewy—she is at about her 3d or 4th which are generally simple and pretty” (184). The musical joke bears some examination, and I have discussed it at length elsewhere.¹ However, suffice it to say that Anna herself does not seem to have shared Austen’s musical aptitude. When Anna married, Austen wrote to Fanny that she thought buying a piano was a needless extravagance for the newlyweds, “and as to her playing, it never can be anything” (295).

Austen’s attitude towards Anna’s knowledge of writing was not so dismissive. Anna recalled, in her memoir of 1864, how they discussed, and sometimes made elaborate fun of, published novels of the day:

It was my great amusement during one summer visit at Chawton to procure Novels from a circulating Library at Alton, & after running over to relate the stories to Aunt Jane. I may say it was her amusement also Greatly we both enjoyed it, one piece of absurdity leading to another, till Aunt Cassandra fatigued with her own share of the laughter would exclaim “How *can* you both be so foolish?” & beg us to leave off. One of these novels, written by a Mrs Hunter of Norwich, was an exceedingly lengthy affair. (Lefroy 159)

The novel in question was *Lady Maclairn, the Victim of Villainy* by Rachel Hunter (1806). In 1812 Anna wrote a letter to her aunt, which does not survive, in imitation of Hunter’s style, signing it “Mrs Hunter.” Austen responded with exquisite satire:

If Mrs Hunter could understand all Miss Jane Austen’s interest in the subject she would certainly have the kindness to publish at least 4 vols more about the Flint family. ... Miss Jane Austen cannot close this small epitome of the miniature abridgement of her thanks and admiration without expressing her sincere hope (195)

Despite their shared merriment at such absurdities, it seems that Anna was not yet in on the secret of her aunt’s authorship, although *Sense and Sensibility* had been published the previous year. Austen read her own novels aloud to the family well before they were published, and her siblings knew they were hers. Anna recounts being told in later years

that one of her earliest novels (*Pride & Prejudice*) was read aloud (in M.S. of course) in the Parsonage at Dean, whilst I was in the room, & not expected to listen.—Listen however I did, with so much interest,

& and with so much talk afterwards about “Jane & Elizabeth” that it was resolved, for prudence sake, to read no more of the story aloud in my hearing. (Lefroy 158)

It is not certain from whom the secret was to be kept. Annette Upfal and Christine Alexander believe that it was the Austen parents who were not to know,² but it seems unlikely, as George Austen wrote to the publisher Thomas Cadell in November 1797 offering to send him a “manuscript novel” which is thought to be *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*. In the *Family Record*, the explanation offered is that “As Jane used family Christian names for several of her characters, it could well have puzzled and shocked the Austens’ neighbours if Anna had babbled out that Jane loved Mr Bingley but Elizabeth had been snubbed at a dance by Mr Darcy” (W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh 93).

Anna was four years old in 1797, and she had been the dedicatee of one of Austen’s early offerings, three short pieces collectively titled “Detached Pieces,” a few weeks after she was born. But in the letter to Cassandra of February 1813 when Austen was responding to Fanny’s praise of *Pride and Prejudice*, she wrote, “Yes, I believe I *shall* tell Anna”—and in context, it does seem to be *this* secret that she was finally ready to share with her niece. Whether this revelation was an impetus for Anna to start writing we do not know, but Austen’s surviving letters to Anna regarding her own novel begin the following year, in July 1814, when Anna was twenty-one.³ The letters show Austen’s delight and encouragement: she offers some corrections to “probability” and etiquette, and praises the character delineation (267). The correspondence continues, with useful and expert advice:

The description of Dr Griffin & Lady Helena’s unhappiness is very good, just what was likely to be.—I am curious to know what the end of *them* will be. The name of Newton-Priors is really invaluable! I never met with anything superior to it. One could live on the name of Newton-Priors for a twelvemonth.—Indeed, I *do* think you get on very fast. I wish other people of my acquaintance could compose as rapidly. (284)

This sly hint about her own slow writing progress, along with the level of detailed and serious advice she gives, shows that Austen was engaged in providing Anna with genuinely collegial mentoring.

Later that year, Anna married Ben Lefroy, and once her children began arriving we hear no more of her novel in the letters. According to her daughter, she had no time to write and then, after Austen’s death, lost heart and destroyed her manuscript—although there is a record of her continuing for a while during 1818 (Le Faye 433–34n).

James Edward

ANNA'S younger half-brother, James Edward (known in the family, confusingly, as Edward, like his uncle and his cousin, Fanny's brother) was nearly eighteen when he first read his novel to Austen in September 1816. She recounts, "Edward is writing a novel—we have all heard what he has written—it is extremely clever, written with great ease and spirit—if he can carry it on in the same way it will be a firstrate work & in a style, I think, to be popular" (319). However, James Edward seems not to have sought much more than his aunt's approval and encouragement in a general way for his writing, and the tone she takes with him is of a jokey camaraderie rather than the mentorship she provided to Anna. In December that year she wrote to James Edward: "Uncle Henry writes very superior Sermons. You and I must try to get hold of one or two, & put them in our novels;—it would be a fine help to a volume; & we could make our Heroine read it aloud of a Sunday evening" (323).

She then makes a joke about a couple of chapters of his novel which have gone missing: "it is well that *I* have not been at Steventon lately, & therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them—two strong twigs and a half towards a Nest of my own, would have been something." But then follows one of the most famous passages from her letters: "What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?" (323). James Edward's manuscript novel does not survive, although enough of his poetry survives to have been published by the Jane Austen Society in 2006 in a volume titled *Fugitive Pieces: Trifles Light as Air*, edited by David Selwyn. During his lifetime, his only literary publications appear to have been the *Memoir of Jane Austen*, published in 1870, and *Recollections of the Early Days of the Vine Hunt and of its Founder William John Chute*, published under a pseudonym in 1865. He followed his father into the Anglican ministry, being ordained in 1824, and for the last 22 years of his life was the Vicar of Bray, near Windsor (Joan Austen-Leigh, 149–50).

Caroline

WRITING fiction seem to have run in the James and Mary Austen household. In the letter of September 1816 to Cassandra in which she first mentioned Edward's novel, Austen wrote, "tell Caroline that it is hardly fair on her and myself, to have him take up the novel line" (319). She had been corresponding with Caroline about her stories for nearly two years by this time—since Caroline was nine years old.

Caroline, James's third and youngest child, seven years younger than James Edward and twelve years younger than Anna, seems uniquely to have shared both Austen's musical and literary interests. Most of the letters Austen wrote to her include an affectionately jocular greeting from the Pianoforte, or some remark about how much practice she should be doing. The two also compared notes on their reading:

“You seem to be quite my own niece in your feelings towards Mde de Genlis. I do not think I could even now, at my sedate time of Life, read *Olimpe et Theophile* without being in a rage,” she wrote in March 1816. This story is included in a volume titled *Les Veilles du Chateau*, which Austen nevertheless tells Caroline she has lent to “Aunt Frank” (her brother Frank’s wife, Mary) for Mary Jane (aged nearly nine) to read (310).

The correspondence shows that Caroline, who was only twelve when Austen died, sent her stories in progress to her beloved aunt, and Austen gave her generous and helpful feedback, encouraging her to keep writing and to share more. When she wrote in March 1816, Caroline was not yet eleven: “I have been much entertained by your story of Carolina & her aged Father, it made me laugh heartily, & I am particularly glad to find you so much alive upon any topic of such absurdity, as the usual description of a Heroine’s father” (317). Austen’s last letter to Caroline is dated 26 March 1817, less than four months before she died at Winchester, and two months before she travelled there to stay and seek medical treatment. Along with advice on piano practice, she provides commentary on some characters from Caroline’s latest story: “I like Frederick & Caroline better than I did, but must still prefer Edgar & Julia” (338).

It is in her 1867 memoir, *My Aunt Jane Austen*, that Caroline relates Austen’s advice, mentioned in my introduction:

I had taken early to writing verses and stories, and I am sorry to think *how* I troubled her with reading them. She was very kind about it, and always had some praise to bestow, but at last she warned me against spending too much time upon them—She said—how well I recollect it! That she *knew* writing stories was a great amusement, and *she* thought a harmless one—tho’ many people, she was aware, thought otherwise—but that at *my* Age it would be bad for me to be much taken up with my own compositions—Later still—it was after she got to Winchester, she sent me a message to this effect—That if I would take her advice, I should cease writing till I was 16, and that she had herself often wished she had *read* more, and written *less*, in the corresponding years of her own life. (174)

Given that Austen left Chawton for Winchester in late May 2017, and in her letter of late March was still making encouraging comments on Caroline’s fictional characters, it is a little difficult to understand the chronology of the increasingly discouraging remarks that Caroline recalls in this passage. Perhaps, as I speculate below, they were not Austen’s own opinion but prompted by Caroline’s parents.

The Younger Generation and Austen as Author

FANNY, as we have seen, was in the secret of Austen's authorship fairly early on, and Anna was told probably when *Pride & Prejudice* was published in 1813. Austen's complaint in 1816 about Edward's authorship being "hardly fair" to Caroline and herself implies strongly that Caroline and Edward were both aware by then that Austen was a published author. And her letter to Caroline of 14 March 1817 boasting of receiving "nearly twenty pounds ... on the 2nd edit: of S&S" (334) leaves no doubt.

The three siblings (Anna, James Edward, and Caroline) probably grew up hearing and reading the juvenilia, in any case: Sutherland and Johnston write, "All three notebooks show signs of heavy wear, which suggests that they were passed around and frequently read" (xiii). Sutherland and Johnston also note that *Volume the Third* of the juvenilia, "became, in time ... a shared space ... for family writing as well as reading" (xxi), with continuations by both Anna and Edward during their own teenage years and perhaps later. That the stories remained part of the family consciousness is shown by Austen's reference to "Love and Freindship" in a letter to Cassandra from August 1814: she describes a coach trip to London that "put me in mind of my own Coach between Edinburgh and Sterling" (270). So why would Austen repudiate this early writing?

The Memoirs

AS CHRISTINE Alexander writes, "When her juvenilia eventually appeared in print ..., it became evident that the family's objection to the content of the writing rather than to its style had been the main stumbling block to early publication" (79). To the mid-Victorian audience, the drunkenness in "Jack and Alice," and the stories about "illegitimacy, deformity and death" and outrageously transgressive behaviour, were not considered amusing, and especially unsuitable in a young writer (Alexander 80).

In his memoir, James Edward spends several pages discussing the juvenilia, which he describes positively as evidence of "the first stirrings of talent within her, and the absorbing interest of original composition" (39). In the second edition of 1871, he includes the text of "The Mystery," but follows it immediately with the passage from Caroline's memoir that I have quoted above, introducing it as "her own mature opinion of the desirableness" of early writing. His tone is more deprecating than in the first edition, as he explains the juvenilia in various ways:

It would seem as if she were first taking note of all the faults to be avoided, and curiously considering how she ought *not* to write before she attempted to put forth her strength in the right direction. ... it would be unfair to expose this preliminary process to the world, as it would be to display all that goes on behind the curtain of the theatre before it is drawn up. (*Memoir* 43)

Caroline had expressed a similar view of the juvenilia when she wrote to him in 1869: “I have always thought it remarkable that the early workings of her mind should have been in burlesque, and comic exaggeration, setting at nought all rules of probable or possible—when of all her finished and later writings, the exact contrary is the characteristic” (Letter 3 p. 186). However, Caroline was also opposed to publishing Austen’s very last composition, a comic poem about the Winchester races written three days before her death:

Tho’ there are no reasons *ethical* or orthodox against the publication of these stanzas, there are reasons of taste ... if she had lived she would probably soon have torn them up. ... The joke about the dead Saint, & Winchester races, all jumbled up together, would read badly as amongst the few details given, of the closing scene—If I were to meet with it in any other biography, it would jar at once on my feelings. (Letter 6 p. 190)

As Sutherland writes in her introduction to James Edward’s *Memoir*, more controversial facts than the existence and nature of the juvenilia, such as the existence of the handicapped brother George and Aunt Leigh Perrot’s trial for shoplifting, were entirely elided from his text (Sutherland xxxiii). However, taste was also an important matter for biographers of the Victorian era to consider, along with the family’s honour. Sutherland includes in her edition an extract from a letter written by Fanny—by that time Lady Knatchbull—to her younger sister in 1869: “Yes my love it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so *refined* as she ought to have been from her *talent* & if she had lived 50 years later she would have been in many respects more suitable to *our* more refined tastes” (qtd. in Sutherland xxiv). Similarly, James Edward was careful in his *Memoir* to explain that times had changed in the fifty years since his aunt’s death: he describes “how much gentlemen ... did for themselves in those times”: looking after their own horses, brushing their own clothes, and even cleaning their own guns (35). He reassures us, however, that the ladies at Steventon in Austen’s youth “had nothing to do with the mysteries of the stew-pot or the preserving pan; but it is probable that their way of life differed a little from ours” (35–36). He also congratulates his country, and by implication, himself, for the striking improvement in the morality and standards of the clergy: “no one in these days can think that either Edmund Bertram or Henry Tilney had adequate ideas of the duties of a parish minister” (116).

Having provided this background, he portrays his aunt as “successful in everything that she attempted with her fingers,” her character possessing “strong foundations of sound sense and judgment, rectitude of principle, and delicacy of feeling” (*Memoir* 77, 79); her “writings are like photographs ... all is the unadorned reflection of the natural object” (*Memoir* 116). As Sutherland points out, however,

the unpublished manuscripts speak ... of long apprenticeship, experiment and abandonment, rewriting and cancellation, and even of a restless and sardonic spirit. They provide unassailable evidence to upset some of Austen-Leigh's chief statements about Jane Austen the author; considered by the light of these irreverent works her steady moral sense looks more ambiguous, her photographic naturalism ... less trustworthy. ... The manuscript pieces, both early and late, show a rawer, edgier, social talent (of the major Romantic-period writers she is the least "natural"), and reveal that the artlessness of the finished works is the result of laboured revision, of painful inner struggle, rather than unconscious perfection. (xvi)

Given her brother's idealised version of her life and work, one could dismiss Caroline's account of the advice she received from Austen as a retrospective repudiation of the juvenilia in a similar vein.

Nevertheless, it is hard to discount the authenticity of Caroline's memory—"how well I recollect it!"—of receiving the advice directly from her aunt not "to be much taken up with my own compositions," and then of receiving, later in 1817, a message from Winchester positively advising her to cease writing until she was sixteen (*My Aunt* 174). She does not say who conveyed the message—one of her parents, perhaps. At that stage, of course, Austen was approaching her early death, and Caroline was twelve years old.

Conclusion

HOW MIGHT we then explain the disconcerting fact that Austen disowned her youthful writings at this late stage of her life? As is natural in times of serious illness, her mood was not uniformly accepting and cheerful. In a letter to Fanny of April 1817 she wrote, "I was languid & dull & very bad company when I wrote the above," going on to say she was now feeling better and more herself (*Letters* 336). Was it a low moment when she gave Caroline that advice? Anna recalled that "Her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous inclined her to play with the trifling commonplaces of every day life, whether as regarded people or things; but she never played with it's serious duties or responsibilities—when grave she was *very* grave" ("Recollections" 160). We can witness this sudden and complete gravity in the letters she wrote on hearing of the death of her sister-in-law Elizabeth at Godmersham in October 1808, following the birth of her eleventh child.

Austen continued to show a mixture of seriousness and irreverence even as the end of her own life approached. The poem she wrote three days before her death about the Winchester races shows that her sense of humour had not failed her. On 27 May 1817, three days after she travelled to Winchester, she wrote to James Edward:

“Mr Lyford says he will cure me, & if he fails I shall draw up a Memorial & lay it before the Dean & Chapter, & have no doubt of redress from that Pious, Learned & disinterested Body.” But in the same letter, she laments that she could not feel worthy of the love and care of her family (342). James Edward’s characterisation of the advice to Caroline as Austen’s “mature opinion” of her own teenage writing (*Memoir* 42) is not borne out by the fact that she shared the volumes with him and his sister Anna during their own teenage years, and that as late as August 1814, in her late 30s and a published author, she referred to “Love and Freindship” in a letter to Cassandra (270). It is also inconsistent with the fact that the volumes themselves were preserved first by herself and then by Cassandra, and passed on to the next generation on her death.

In light of such conflicting evidence, it is tempting to speculate about the sincerity of this advice, which, after all, Caroline received at second hand. Was Austen prompted by Caroline’s parents to say something to discourage her from spending so much time writing, perhaps neglecting her lessons or other duties? They might have been among the “many people” whom, Caroline said, “she was aware, thought” that writing stories was *not* a harmless amusement (*My Aunt* 174). Did Austen add that she regretted that she had done the same in her childhood in order to reinforce the message, or might that have been an embellishment on the part of James or Mary? I do not believe we can ever know. But we can be relieved that the three precious volumes written before Austen’s sixteenth birthday survive, and in an age less inhibited by notions of good taste and decorum we are able to read and assess them for ourselves. And we can allow ourselves to believe that Austen did not absolutely reject her juvenilia in her later years; nor did she waste much time in idle regret at having created them.

NOTES

¹ See Gillian Dooley, “Anna with Variations,” *Jane Austen’s Regency World*, no. 110, Mar/April 2021, pp. 44–47.

² Upfal and Alexander base this opinion on the memories of Anna Lefroy’s daughter, Fanny-Caroline: “A niece, Anna Lefroy, who lived as a small child at the rectory, ‘could remember ... hearing *Pride and Prejudice* [First Impressions] read aloud by Jane to her sister’ (F. C. Lefroy). Anna’s chatter in the family rooms downstairs about Jane and Elizabeth began to ‘provoke enquiry, for the story was still a secret from the elders.’” It seems safer to rely on Anna’s own memoir, published in Sutherland’s edition, than the memory, now at third-hand, from her daughter.

³ All of the extant letters from Jane Austen to Anna may be found Deirdre Le Faye’s edition of Jane Austen’s letters, cited below.

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