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Edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster

Excerpt

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I

JAN FERGUS

The professional woman writer¹

You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S[ense] & S[ensibility] is sold & that it has brought me £140 – besides the Copyright, if that sh^d ever be of any value. – I have now therefore written myself into £250. – which only makes me long for more.

These words of Jane Austen to her brother Frank, written on 3 July 1813 (L 217) after she had published two novels, are those of a professional author who is acutely conscious of her sales (as well as the possible future value of her copyright) and eager to increase her profits. Austen's professionalism here exists in startling contrast to her brother Henry's earliest biographical accounts of her, accounts that helped to create the longstanding myth of Austen as a genteel amateur, the spinster lady author who sketched her novels in moments of leisure. Henry wrote in his first 'Biographical Notice' (printed with *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1818):

Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives . . . She could scarcely believe what she termed her great good fortune when 'Sense and Sensibility' produced a clear profit of about £150. Few so gifted were so truly unpretending. She regarded the above sum as a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing . . . [S]o much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen . . . in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. (P 329–30)

Henry's wish to project an image of a ladylike, unmercenary, unprofessional, private, delicate and domestic author led him to repeat these statements fifteen years later, in the expanded 'Memoirs of Miss Austen' that were printed with Richard Bentley's edition of *Sense and Sensibility*. He then added an anecdote omitted earlier, that Austen refused to meet the writer Germaine de Staël, so as to emphasize Austen's ladylike disdain for publicity.² This distaste did not make her less professional, however. During probably the same visit to London (September 1814) in which she avoided Madame de Staël, she kept a careful eye to business: she was 'in some hope', she wrote, 'of getting Egerton's account [for *Mansfield Park*] before I go away – so we will enjoy ourselves as long as we can' (L 274).

The image that Henry Austen creates – at odds with the evidence that both Austen's letters and her publishing decisions offer of her professionalism – is

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precisely the one that so annoyed Henry James, according to Brian Southam: ‘the myth of the inspired amateur, the homely spinster who put down her knitting needles to take up her pen’.³ That myth, and others like it, have prevented subsequent readers from understanding that, for Austen, being a professional writer was, apart from her family, more important to her than anything else in her life.

Austen wrote when opportunities for women to publish had never been greater, and from her childhood her aim was to see her works in print. She collected her juvenilia in volumes made to resemble published books as closely as possible. She wrote three novels before she was 25, although she did not manage to publish them until much later. Her literary career depended to some extent upon the other women novelists of her time, who created and sustained a market for domestic fiction by women, and whose attitudes towards writing, like Austen’s own, became increasingly professional. Many of Austen’s contemporaries, including Ann Radcliffe, Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth and Amelia Opie, among others, received much greater fame and fortune as novelists in their own time than Austen did. But these novelists are only the most visible of a large mass of women who rushed into print at the end of the eighteenth century. The number of women writers increased dramatically throughout the century, as Judith Phillips Stanton’s research has shown, but exploded at the end, rising by ‘around 50 percent *every decade* starting in the 1760s’.⁴

The cultural context: obstacles to authorship

This publishing explosion occurred despite the presence of many social obstacles to women’s writing. Publishing her own writing could threaten a woman’s reputation as well as her social position. For any woman, the fame of authorship could become infamy, and novels were particularly reprehensible, as their famous defence in *Northanger Abbey* indicates (NA 1:5:30–1). Proper women, as Henry Austen makes clear, were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship of any kind entailed publicity, thrusting oneself before the public eye – thus loss of femininity. These prejudices led many women besides Austen to publish their first novels anonymously, among them Sarah Fielding, Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe; they affixed their names to their works only when their excellent reputations as novelists were established. And writing for profit – professional writing – could be even more disreputable than writing for fame; Henry Austen, in the first passage quoted from him, takes care to assert that at first Austen hoped for neither fame nor profit.

Before Austen’s birth in 1775, literature had become firmly fixed in the marketplace, to the dismay of many. Alvin Kernan has succinctly summarized the change: ‘An older system of polite or courtly letters – primarily oral,

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aristocratic, amateur, authoritarian, court-centered – was swept away at this time and gradually replaced by a new print-based, market-centered, democratic literary system.⁵ The public replaced the patron as a source of income. But the older aristocratic attitudes that saw print and payment as vulgar were surprisingly persistent among elite women and some men. Most male writers, however, were happy to be paid for their writing, and once they established themselves in this new literary marketplace, as reviewers, essayists, and so forth, with few exceptions they tended to discourage competition from women writers. They transferred (with renewed energy) much of the old aristocratic disdain for all print to hack writers – the male denizens of Grub Street – and to women who wrote. Women were attacked for having the temerity to write without having the necessary learning and taste. Only desperate financial need, preferably to support aged parents, a sick husband or destitute children, could (according to literary men) excuse a woman's exposing herself in print to obtain money. Accordingly, women's prefaces often apologize for writing by alluding to distresses of this sort, causing reviewers frequently to condescend kindly to their work, though increasingly they bemoaned the number and grammar of 'female scribblers'.

A woman might also face legal obstacles to authorship if she were married. Married women had no legal existence. They could not own property or sign contracts. Although Charlotte Smith began to publish in order to support herself and her children after her feckless husband was imprisoned for debt, a contract for her novel *Desmond* (1792) survives signed not by her but by Benjamin Smith, who was at the time residing in Scotland under an alias.⁶ The publishing records for Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) list William Radcliffe, her husband, as the work's author; he apparently received £40 for the second edition (1792).⁷ Comparable restrictions survived in France within living memory: 'it was not until 1965 that married women were legally permitted to publish a work or to engage in any profession without the consent of their husbands'.⁸ Unmarried women in the eighteenth century did not face these restrictions, but they generally lived under their fathers' authority, and fathers (like Frances Burney's) might tend to disapprove of their daughters risking their modesty, their reputations and possibly their marriageability by publishing. By contrast, Austen's father tried to help her publish *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, writing to a possible publisher himself.

The process of publishing

The obstacles to women's writing make their success in publishing novels all the more remarkable. Admittedly, it was much easier then for authors to have

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novels published, nationally distributed and reviewed in the major review journals than it is now. When Austen gave advice to her niece Anna Austen on a novel in progress, she assumed that the novel would be not only finished but published. Although today few would be likely to encourage young unpublished writers to expect to see their novels in print, Austen did not hesitate. In her own circle of family and friends, in fact, Austen knew several published authors, many of them women, including her much older friend Anne Lefroy, whose 1804 obituary mentions that she had published poetry when quite young.⁹ Austen's mother's first cousin Cassandra Cooke produced *Battleridge: An Historical Tale, Founded on Facts* (2 vols., 1799). Other slightly more distant Leigh cousins published during Austen's childhood: James Henry Leigh's poem *The New Rosciad* appeared in 1785, and Cassandra, Lady Hawke's novel *Julia de Gramont* came out in 1788. In the next year, Austen's brothers James and Henry, along with other friends, began publishing their weekly periodical essays, *The Loiterer*; the collected essays were brought out in 1790. All these books were reviewed in major review journals.¹⁰

This family access to print must have encouraged the youthful Austen, and helps to account for the way that her advice to her niece takes printing for granted, reflecting the greater availability of publication in her lifetime. All writers, known or unknown, who wished to obtain payment for a novel had four options for publishing: (a) by subscription; (b) by profit-sharing; (c) by selling copyright; and (d) on 'commission', a system whereby the author was responsible for paying all the expenses of publication while the publisher distributed the copies and took a commission on all sold. Austen most frequently employed this last form, also known as publishing for oneself. The closest equivalent we have to this method is to employ a 'vanity press' – that is, to pay for printing one's own works – or to self-publish on the Internet. Such 'published' works are neither reviewed by the media nor sold in shops. By contrast, in Austen's lifetime a book published on commission was perfectly respectable, as likely as any other book to be reviewed and sold.

Publication by subscription

Subscription was declining somewhat, for it was a cumbersome and demeaning business, and not always remunerative. Subscribers paid for a projected book, preferably in advance. A list of their names would be printed in the work when it appeared. An author solicited subscribers (usually by publishing proposals), kept records and collected money – or asked friends to do so, rather a heavy tax on friendship because subscribers generally were reluctant to part with cash. Admittedly, Frances Burney

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made £1,000 – a tremendous sum – by selling subscriptions to *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth* (1796); ‘Miss J. Austen, Steventon’ is listed as a subscriber in the first volume. Burney also received £1,000 in copyright money for *Camilla*.¹¹ But her success in combining these two forms of publication was possible only because her reputation was pre-eminent. The Hookham records show how unlikely such rewards were for other women. A Mrs Clutterbuck attempted to get subscribers through Hookham and Carpenter for a projected ‘Beauties of St. Pierre’ in June and July, 1798; she got five and had Hookham return the money (G/127).

Publication by profit-sharing

Profit-sharing became frequent only in the early nineteenth century. Publishers who chose this form of publication paid for printing and advertising, repaid themselves as the books were sold, and shared any profit realized over and above the costs. If the sale did not cover expenses, the firm absorbed the loss. Publishers generally offered profit-sharing to untried authors whose market they could not predict. In some cases, sharing profits could be more remunerative than publishing for oneself or selling copyright. If Austen had published all the editions of her works that appeared during her lifetime by profit-sharing, she would have made more money than she actually did.¹² Obviously, an author who published for himself took all the profits, not just half, but in practice this meant only about 50 per cent more money.

Sale of copyright

To most eighteenth-century British authors eager to dispose of their property, sale of limited copyright for a fee was by far the most prestigious and desirable option available, if they could find a purchaser. The fee offered a clear sum of money, generally payable within a year of publication, and it removed the writer comfortably and decorously from the marketplace as none of the other options did, for the publisher was obliged to pay the sum agreed upon, however poorly the work sold. If sales were good and further editions were printed, a publisher who had purchased copyright might send the author an additional payment. Established authors, unwilling to leave themselves at the mercy of publishers’ generosity, might contract for additional payments once a specified number of copies or editions were printed or sold, as Radcliffe had probably done when she sold the copyright of *The Romance of the Forest* for an unnamed sum to Hookham and Carpenter.

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Publishing on commission

Austen's most frequent mode of publication was at her own risk, or 'on commission' as it was called. The author was ultimately responsible for the cost of paper, printing and advertising; the publisher kept accounts, distributed the books to the trade and charged a 10 per cent commission on each copy sold – a kind of royalty in reverse. If not enough copies were sold to cover costs, the author had to make up the difference. Austen herself assumed that this method required an initial outlay of capital: she wrote to her sister on the appearance of the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* that 'I suppose in the meantime I shall owe dear Henry a great deal of Money for Printing &c' (*L* 250). But surviving publishers' records indicate that as a rule the publisher seems to have paid for production of a book, charging the expenses off against receipts some months later, after the work had sold. Even Hookham and Carpenter, fashionable booksellers but a relatively small publishing firm, operated this way. When Miss Mary Barker published 750 copies of her three-volume novel *A Welsh Story* in June 1798, Hookham carried the cost of about £61 for paper, not quite £50 for composing, printing and correcting, and £6 for advertising. Less than half the copies were disposed of by the end of September, so that the author owed the firm over £48 (*G*/138). This mode of publication could be more remunerative to an author than selling copyright, but clearly the risks were great – to publishers also, if they financed the outlay. Hookham and Carpenter may never have recovered the money owed to them by Mary Barker. Her debt of £48 includes the commission gained on selling 180 copies, only about £5. If the work had sold out, their total profit on commission would have been less than £25 – a small sum for which to risk nearly £120.

Money and the market

Probably the major reason for the explosion of women into print towards the end of the eighteenth century was their need for money. Publishing was one of the few means by which a woman of the middling or upper classes could earn cash. Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins' account of her first venture into print makes this motive clear: 'Some few years previous to this time [Samuel Johnson's death in 1784], being in want of a sum of money for a whim of girlish patronage, and having no *honest* means of raising it, I wrote a downright novel.'¹³ Hawkins sold her novel to Thomas Hookham,¹⁴ probably for no more than £10 or £20 – sufficient for 'a whim of girlish patronage' but not for full support. With few exceptions, as Edward Copeland's research has

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shown,¹⁵ women could not live on their earnings from publishing novels alone; these funds had to supplement other sources of income.

One reason for most women's very limited income from publishing was that the novel-reading public at this time was small and, through the 1790s, audiences at least in the provinces were predominantly male – a problem for women writers, since male purchasers preferred male-authored novels while female buyers preferred female-authored ones.¹⁶ Through the 1790s, novels by unknown writers would be published in editions of just 750, 500 or (later) 1,000 copies, while proven novelists might sell 2,000 or 3,000 in one or more editions. Walter Scott's novels, beginning with the publication of *Waverley* in 1814, were the first to be regularly published in much larger numbers.¹⁷ The largest known edition for an Austen novel was 2,000, for *Emma* (1816), and it failed to sell out. The limited market for novels was partly dictated by their cost. All Austen's novels were printed on hand presses similar in principle to those used by Gutenberg three hundred years earlier. These techniques and especially the great expense of handmade paper kept the price of books high,¹⁸ making small editions more economical than large ones unless a strong and steady demand were assured. It was much cheaper to print a small edition of 750 copies and to recompose and reprint if it sold out than to risk a large edition of 2,000 or 3,000 that might ultimately be sold as waste paper. The paper for even a small edition, like the 750 copies of Mary Barker's *Welsh Story*, absorbed more than half the costs.

Barker's book, unlike those of Austen's brothers and cousins, does not seem to have been reviewed.¹⁹ Reviews were thought then as now to increase sales, though they may have had less influence upon purchases by individuals than upon purchases made by book clubs and book societies, which frequently subscribed to review journals.²⁰ On the whole, Austen received few reviews – during her lifetime, two for *Sense and Sensibility*, three for *Pride and Prejudice*, none for *Mansfield Park* and ten for *Emma* (although two of these were written in German). Most were short and reasonably favourable. The longest, on *Emma*, was written by Walter Scott at her publisher John Murray's urging: 'Have you any fancy to dash off an article on "Emma"? It wants incident and romance, does it not? None of the author's other novels have been noticed [by Murray's own periodical, the *Quarterly Review*], and surely "Pride and Prejudice" merits high commendation.'²¹ Murray sent Austen a copy of the review, and her response survives – a surprising one: 'I return you the Quarterly Reveiw with many Thanks. The Authoress of *Emma* has no reason I think to complain of her treatment in it – except in the total omission of *Mansfield Park*. – I cannot but be sorry that so clever a Man as the Reveiwer of *Emma*, should consider it as unworthy of being noticed' (L 313). Austen's response is professional. She regrets Scott's failure to

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mention *Mansfield Park*, no doubt because the novel had never been reviewed and, more important, because she may have known that sales of the second edition had already stalled by the time she wrote.

Austen's publishing career

When Austen arrived in her final home at Chawton on 7 July 1809, she was 34 and unpublished, a condition that she was determined to alter. Her earlier attempts to publish *First Impressions* and *Susan*, versions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, had failed. Cadell and Davies, respectable publishers, had refused George Austen's offer on 1 November 1797 of the manuscript of *First Impressions*. Austen had sold the manuscript of *Susan* to the London publisher B. Crosby and Company and had received £10 for it by 'the Spring of the year 1803', according to her angry letter to the firm on 5 April 1809 (*L* 174). She adopted the pseudonym 'M^{rs} Ashton Dennis' for this enquiry to Crosby about the delay in publishing *Susan*; this name allowed her to sign herself 'MAD.' Her letter makes clear her determination to publish.

Sense and Sensibility

At this point, Austen had three completed manuscripts available to her: *Susan* (although to publish it, she would have to return Crosby's £10), *First Impressions* and *Sense and Sensibility*. She chose shrewdly to work on *Sense and Sensibility*. Its emphasis upon the importance as well as the costs of self-command made it her most orthodox novel both aesthetically and morally. *Susan* or *Northanger Abbey* constituted a bold experiment in burlesque over which Crosby had clearly vacillated, thinking it a profitable speculation at first, and then a poor risk. The manuscript version of *Pride and Prejudice* contained an extremely unorthodox heroine, and Austen may have feared either similar vacillation from another publisher, if she succeeded in selling the copyright, or a more ambivalent reception from reviewers and the reading public than *Sense and Sensibility* was likely to obtain. Mary Russell Mitford wrote to a friend in December 1814, for instance, deploring 'the entire want of taste which could produce so pert, so worldly a heroine as the beloved of such a man as Darcy'.²² Austen may have approached the publisher Thomas Egerton early in 1811 through Henry. Egerton had sold James' and Henry's *The Loiterer* in his Whitehall shop more than twenty years earlier and may have liked the novel well enough to feel that he would gain prestige by being associated with it. Perhaps more important, he must have felt that he could trust Henry Austen, at this time a banker, to settle the bill for costs.

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Once Egerton had agreed to publish the novel on commission, he sent it to the printer Charles Roworth, perhaps in February or March 1811. Roworth took his time: Austen wrote near the end of April that 'M^{rs} K[night] regrets in the most flattering manner that she must wait *till* May [for *Sense and Sensibility*], but I have scarcely a hope of its being out in June. – Henry does not neglect it; he *has* hurried the Printer' (*L* 182). The delay was much worse than Austen anticipated; the novel was not advertised until the end of October. She experienced some delay from printers on *every* novel that she published for herself, though none was as lengthy as this. By contrast, Egerton was later able to issue *Pride and Prejudice* within a few months of purchasing it, doubtless because his own profit was at stake. He would earn less than £36 by publishing *Sense and Sensibility* on commission in an edition of 750 copies, by my calculations, whereas Austen herself made £140, as she wrote to her brother Frank (217). It was not worth Egerton's while to hurry the printers.

Although he stood to gain little by agreeing to publish *Sense and Sensibility* on commission, Egerton ran no risk; only the author did. Austen was, according to her brother Henry's 'Biographical Notice', 'so persuaded ... that its sale would not repay the expense of publication, that she actually made a reserve from her very moderate income to meet the expected loss' (*P* 329). At this time, the expenses of publishing 750 copies of the novel would come to about £155, and advertisements would ordinarily take another £24 or so.²³ The novel retailed at 15s., but the books were accounted for to the author at the trade price of 9s. 6d. If every copy were sold, receipts at the trade price would be over £356, leaving a maximum profit of about £140 after deducting expenses of £179 and Egerton's 10 per cent commission on the sales.

Austen was risking, then, about £180 on the chance of earning £140. In fact, however, her risk was substantially less. The buyer's market for novels was small, but sales to circulating libraries were fairly certain. A novel normally would have to sell between one-half and two-thirds of an edition to become profitable. For example, within five months of being issued in February 1810, Maria Benson's *The Wife. A Novel* had sold 275 of the 500 copies printed, and in two more years another 49, realizing £7.64 to split with Longman, who had agreed to share profits with the author.²⁴ If only 275 copies of *Sense and Sensibility* had sold, Austen would have had £130, less Egerton's 10 per cent, to offset her expenses of £179; that is, she would have owed about £62. If the other 475 copies had been remaindered at the same price that Benson's novel was in 1813 (1s. 6d. each), Austen would have received another £32 or so. At worst, then, her loss was unlikely to be more than £30. Although she probably was unable to 'reserve' such a sum from her

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own 'moderate income' (her dress allowance had been £21 a year (*L* 31, 32)), she could perhaps set aside about half. And every additional copy of her novel that was sold at the full trade price of 9s. 6d. would reduce this possible debt. She would break even once 419 copies were bought, even allowing for Egerton's commission. Had Austen known earlier that even at worst her losses were likely to be manageable, she might have published sooner – perhaps when she inherited £50 in 1807. Fortunately, by 1811 Austen was prepared to invest money in herself, in her own authorship.

Pride and Prejudice

Egerton had almost certainly accepted *Sense and Sensibility* by February 1811. This acceptance evidently made Austen optimistic enough about the possibilities of publication to begin her most ambitious novel to date, *Mansfield Park*. According to Cassandra's memorandum, this novel was begun 'somewhere about Feb^y 1811 – Finished soon after June 1813'.²⁵ No other novel took Austen so long to write. Probably part of the time was spent revising *First Impressions* into *Pride and Prejudice*. She perhaps began this revision when she discovered that *Sense and Sensibility* had sold well enough to break even; this point was quite likely to be reached within six months of issue, in May 1812. By the following November, Austen had completed her revisions to *Pride and Prejudice*, made a fair copy, and sold the manuscript to Egerton for £110, as she wrote to Martha Lloyd: 'Its' being sold will I hope be a great saving of Trouble to Henry, & therefore must be welcome to me. – The Money is to be paid at the end of the twelvemonth.' Austen had been disappointed by Egerton's offer: 'I would rather have had £150, but we could not both be pleased, & I am not at all surprised that he should not chuse to hazard so much' (*L* 197). The offer was rather niggardly. By my calculations, Egerton made a profit of more than £450 on just the first two editions. Austen's unfortunate decision to part with the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* was made, however, before she could predict that the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* would sell out and bring her £140.

Issued at the end of January 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* was Austen's most popular novel, both with the public and with her family and friends. By the spring of 1813, three favourable reviews had appeared (compared to two for *Sense and Sensibility*). Before May 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* had become the 'fashionable novel', according to Anne Isabella Milbanke, who was to marry Lord Byron.²⁶ Its popularity eventually meant the end of Austen's anonymity. By the following September, her authorship was pretty well known, as she wrote to her brother Frank: 'the truth is that the Secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the Shadow of a secret now – & that I beleive whenever the