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PART I

Life and works

I

Biography

JAN FERGUS

Biographical information on Austen is famously scarce. Most people who read the novels know that she was a clergyman's daughter who grew up in a country parsonage with several brothers and one beloved sister, that she never married and that she died relatively young. They may know that she was born in 1775 (16 December), in tandem with the revolutionary end of the eighteenth century, and did not publish a novel until 1811, six years before her death in a more conservative period.

To give us more than those bare facts, we have few materials. Nothing biographical written before her early death remains, apart from some family letters, including her own that have survived. The greatest number were written to her sister Cassandra, older by three years. Cassandra censored these letters, omitting accounts of illness, unhappiness and apparently Austen's one-night engagement. Although Austen was deeply attached to her family and had as well a number of women friends (generally older), she was closer to Cassandra than to anyone. A great-niece born after Austen's death but who knew Cassandra wrote that 'they were wedded to each other by the resemblance of their circumstances, and in truth there was an exclusiveness in their love such as only exists between husband and wife'.¹ Austen's best friend, Cassandra was also her first critic, reading the novels as she wrote them.

After Austen's death, we must rely for information about her life on her brother Henry's short 'Biographical Notice' published in 1818, and other family materials and reminiscences primarily supplied by nephews and nieces. These established the family legend, reiterated through the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth, that Austen was an ideal unmarried domestic woman, the modest, helpful, unassuming product of a large, happy family that formed the centre of her life.

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Many full-length biographies of Austen, forced to base themselves on such skimpy or censored sources and on what can be gleaned from the novels and the juvenilia, follow the lead of Austen's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. His 1869 *Memoir* offered anecdotal accounts of manners and customs of Austen's period to flesh out and support the family story, and modern biographers too tend to offer social history of Austen's time. But they also include disturbing material that the family legend omits or obscures. They point to distress in Austen's life that was suppressed from the letters, such as her unhappiness at learning she had to leave Steventon, the home of her youth. Alternatively, they focus on family crises and fissures that affected Austen less directly. Austen's second oldest brother was handicapped mentally and farmed out to a neighbouring community. Two other brothers, Frank and Charles, left home early to serve in the navy during the long wars with France; both did well but were often away. Austen herself almost died of typhus at seven, when she and her sister had been sent away to school. A wealthy and unpleasant aunt underwent prosecution for theft. Cassandra's fiancé died of yellow fever in Jamaica. Two of Austen's sisters-in-law died in childbirth. Austen's brother Henry went bankrupt, costing his rich uncle James £10,000 and his wealthy brother Edward £20,000. A cousin's husband was guillotined in France during the Terror. Some biographers, dwelling on such disasters, have gone so far as to embrace an anti-family story: Austen was an embittered, disappointed woman trapped in a thoroughly unpleasant family.

The best way for a biography to avoid being scripted by such polarising views of the family and of Austen herself, and to obtain a more accurate assessment of Austen's life and work, is to examine some aspect of both that the traditions do not emphasise. Considering how important money is in the novels, biographers have paid relatively little attention to the family's and Austen's own finances. Though she did not begin by writing for money, Austen was delighted by her first real earnings: she wrote to her brother Frank to announce that every copy of the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* had been sold: '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. [having sold the copyright of *Pride and*

Prejudice for £110] – which only makes me long for more’ (*L*, 3–6 July 1813). That is, Jane Austen became a professional writer.

Austen stepped into the role of professional woman writer pioneered by women writers she admired, like Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith and Maria Edgeworth, all of whom published just a couple of generations after women managed to support themselves by writing: Aphra Behn (?1640–89) is usually cited as the first. Austen was trying to succeed, then, by taking advantage of a relatively new and still not fully respectable opportunity for making money that Behn and her successors created for women. Its lack of respectability, at least for those conscious as the Austens were of occupying a position at the margins of gentility, is evident in Austen’s refusal to allow her name to be printed as the author of novels published during her life. In other words, what her economic position made necessary – some attempt to earn money – her class position made problematic: to be associated with commerce threatened genteel status. Austen’s texts express some of the anxieties and complications of these conditions of her life as a woman in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Jane Austen was born to parents best described as on the fringes of the gentry. Thanks to the custom of primogeniture, which decreed that land would be passed on undivided to the eldest son or sometimes to a daughter, the gentry were always producing daughters, younger sons and more distant relations who were effectively disinherited, on the fringes, as Austen’s novels often witness. Jane Austen’s parents George Austen and Cassandra Leigh were in just this position: they had little money and no land themselves. But they did have family and friends with enough property and interest to help them or their children. George’s distant relatives educated him for the clergy, and his second cousin Thomas Knight gave him two livings valued at £210 by the time of Jane Austen’s birth, along with land to farm. He also took in pupils in her youth, and once he retired in 1801, his income had reached almost £600 a year. His childless benefactor Thomas Knight also adopted George Austen’s third son Edward as his heir for Godmersham Park in Kent and Chawton Manor in Hampshire. Edward Austen Knight eventually enjoyed an income greater than Mr Darcy’s, nearly £15,000 a year, but he was not at first remarkably generous to his mother and

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sisters after his father's death in 1805 left them virtually homeless. Still, his initial pledge of £100 a year did almost double his mother's income, and eventually he housed her and his sisters in the cottage at Chawton that has become the Jane Austen museum.

Cassandra Leigh, Jane Austen's mother, had aristocratic connections but only a small fortune that produced an income of £122 a year once her husband died. The real money in her family passed her by and went to male relatives – brother, son and grandson. Cassandra Leigh's childless brother James Leigh-Perrot both married and inherited property, including at last a life interest in the huge ancestral Leigh property of Stoneleigh Abbey. He employed some of his fortune in providing clerical livings and supplementary cash for his namesake James, Jane Austen's oldest brother; the property eventually went to James's son James Edward, Austen's biographer. When her uncle's death in 1817 disclosed that he had left nothing in his will to his sister, Mrs Austen, by then a widow on a small income, Jane Austen – already terminally ill – was deeply distressed and suffered a relapse of her illness.

Austen's youthful writing shows an increasing awareness of the economic realities of life for women on the fringes of the gentry, realities that channel money and land to men, bypassing women like her mother or herself. At first, in her earliest work, class position is often comically dwelt on or elevated: the father of 'Beautiful Cassandra' is 'of noble Birth, being the near relation of the Dutchess of —'s Butler'. But money tends to be ignored or easily obtained, as when Sophia in 'Love and Freindship' filches bank-notes from her uncle's escritoire or is provided with an annuity of £400 a year by her husband's family. Austen wrote this brilliant burlesque of sentimental fiction at fourteen, by which time she had obviously read voraciously in contemporary fiction. Despite altogether two years of formal schooling away from home with her sister, her education was largely self-directed, like Elizabeth Bennet's. Her juvenilia, begun as a family amusement at twelve or even earlier, are preoccupied with comic representations of female power and possibility, as many feminist critical analyses have shown. When Austen began to abandon burlesque, however, money and status became serious issues. Catharine Percival (of 'Catharine, or The Bower', written when Austen was sixteen) associates with the local gentry, but her status is dubious, for though 'As an heiress she was certainly of

consequence . . . her Birth gave her no other claim to it, for her Father had been a Merchant.' In situation Catharine is the opposite of Jane Austen, but her two friends the Wynnes are like Jane Austen's own friends the Lloyds or indeed like herself in the future: daughters of a clergyman whose death reduced them 'to a state of absolute dependance on some relations'.

The inequities of patriarchal inheritance pervade Austen's first published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811; drafted from November 1797, from a 1795 novel in letters, 'Elinor and Marianne') and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; drafted as 'First Impressions', October 1796–August 1797). The early versions of those works, written in her late teens and early twenties, certainly also reflect a preoccupation with the reality and threat of disinheritance of daughters that Ruth Perry's work has revealed as characteristic of eighteenth-century novels in general, and Austen's in particular.² When in the 1790s Jane Austen was drafting her first novels, she also began to go to balls, to mix somewhat with the surrounding gentry, to make visits to richer relatives, and the insecurities and ambiguities of her class position as well as her economic future must have been as evident to her as they become to the Dashwoods, disinherited in favour of a great-great-nephew by the owner of Norland, or to Elizabeth Bennet, who will be poverty-stricken at her father's death unless she marries. Female gentility is unstable without marriage or money, as shown by *Emma's* Miss Bates, who lost the Vicarage that Mr Elton occupies when her own father died.

Marriage was a woman's 'pleasantest preservative from want' (*P&P*, 1:22), as the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* notes of Charlotte Lucas's predicament. And marriage was a possibility for Austen in her twenties though her lack of fortune made it unlikely. Her sister entered into an engagement by 1795 with a young clergyman unprovided with a living, though he expected one eventually from a patron. The patron did not know of his engagement and took him to an unhealthy climate, where he died in 1797, leaving his fiancée Cassandra his fortune of £1,000. During Cassandra's engagement, Jane Austen at twenty flirted with Tom Lefroy, the nephew of her good friend Anne Lefroy, who sent him away when to her the flirtation looked serious: Tom could not afford to marry a penniless woman. Austen was at the time drafting *Pride and Prejudice*, and it may be that some of the relish Elizabeth

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Bennet shows for the flattering attentions of Wickham reflects her own pleasure in Tom's company and their brief mutual infatuation.

Jane Austen lost her beloved birthplace early in 1801, when her father resigned his living to his son and moved to Bath; tradition says that she fainted when she learned of his intention. Like Anne Elliot, then, she was to live in rented lodgings in Bath, and (like her also) she did not care for Bath, leaving after her father's death 'with what happy feelings of Escape!' (*L*, 30 June–1 July 1808). Family tradition also says that after this move, but before her father's death, Jane fell in love with a clergyman whom she met on a trip, who shortly died. What is certain is that at nearly twenty-seven, she was asked in marriage by a gentleman more than five years younger than herself, a brother of some close women friends whom she was visiting, and heir to a good estate in her beloved county of Hampshire: Harris Bigg-Wither. She accepted him then took back her consent the next morning and cut her visit short, returning to Bath. It is a remarkable incident, for she knew that, in refusing him, she was unlikely ever to have a home of her own. Her father was over seventy, and comparative poverty threatened. But as she later wrote to a niece, 'Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection' (*L*, 18–20 November 1814).

What we know about Jane Austen afterwards comes primarily from the letters, which include interesting details about the publication of her novels from 1811 on but largely chronicle her close connections to family and friends. Particularly from 1809, when she settled in Chawton, the life that can be narrated is her professional life.

The possibility of earning money from writing must have become increasingly important to Austen in the 1790s as the threat of loss of her home loomed, more so once it actually occurred in 1801. Her father spearheaded her first unsuccessful attempt at publication in 1797, writing to the publisher to offer 'First Impressions', the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*. It was still conventional for male relatives of a woman writer to negotiate with publishers, though later on Austen would do so herself, attempting to increase her profits through an association with John Murray. The failure to find a publisher in the 1790s did not discourage Austen. She drafted *Northanger Abbey* in 1798–9 before her move to Bath in 1801 and

revised it there, selling the copyright to Benjamin Crosby in 1803 under the title 'Susan'.

James Raven in this volume describes the four publishing options available to Austen: sale of copyright, profit-sharing, subscription, and publication for oneself (on commission). Faced with these options, Austen became increasingly professional in her decisions. Her acceptance of £10 in 1803 for *Northanger Abbey* was the choice of a novice, eager to appear in print at no risk to herself. After Crosby failed to bring out 'Susan', Austen apparently began *The Watsons* – that is, she continued to write. Her father's death in 1805 probably caused her to abandon that project, and some four years later, she wrote to Crosby to ask (in vain) for publication or a return of the manuscript. Then, settled in Chawton in 1809, in the cottage that her brother Edward had finally made available, she exercised a different option: revising *Sense and Sensibility* and publishing it on commission through the London publisher Thomas Egerton. Her brother Henry wrote in his 'Biographical Notice' that she reserved a sum to pay costs if the novel did not sell enough copies to cover the expense of printing it. Where she got this sum is doubtful. Her allowance during her father's lifetime had been only £20 a year for clothes, charities, washing, the expenses of receiving letters, everything. Possibly she set aside money from a legacy of £50 that she had received in 1806, but in any case, she had clearly decided by 1811 to invest in herself, in her own professional success.

Austen risked about £180 by my calculations for printing 750 copies of *Sense and Sensibility*, a small edition but about right for an unknown author in 1811. When it sold out, as we know from the letter to Frank previously quoted, she had earned £140 after the expenses were paid (including Egerton's commission). Unfortunately, before she learned in 1813 how profitable this first novel would be, she had accepted Egerton's offer of £110 for the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice*: '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*, 29–30 November 1812). *Pride and Prejudice* was Austen's most popular novel in her lifetime, reaching three editions, but her sale of the copyright meant it was her least profitable novel to herself. I calculate that Egerton himself made a profit of more than £450 on just the first two editions.

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Austen never sold copyright again. She had learned something from this experience. After the success of *Pride and Prejudice*, Egerton certainly offered to buy the copyright of her next novel, *Mansfield Park*, but Austen brought the work out herself, on commission. The edition of (probably) 1,250 copies sold out in six months and yielded the greatest profit she received from any novel published during her lifetime: more than £310. Egerton delayed in bringing out a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, however, and partly as a result Austen turned to John Murray, a more reputable and fashionable publisher: Lord Byron and Walter Scott were among his authors. She negotiated with him first through her brother and then directly when she was dissatisfied. She finally rejected his offer of £450 for the copyrights of *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*. In fact, Murray's offer, though not generous, was about right and represents the remaining value of those copyrights to Jane Austen and her heirs. When Murray brought out *Emma* (1816; actually December 1815) and the second edition of *Mansfield Park* (1816), Austen lost so much money from the latter that she received in her lifetime only about £39 for *Emma*, generally regarded as her greatest work and published in her largest edition, 2,000 copies. She had written it quickly. In the same year that she saw *Mansfield Park* through the press, she began *Emma* on 21 January 1814, and finished it on 29 March 1815. She was clearly at the height of her genius. *Mansfield Park* had occupied her almost twice as long, from February 1811 to June 1813 according to her own memorandum.

Before her dealings with Murray, Austen had invested the profits of her first three published novels in £600 worth of 'Navy Fives', which brought her £30 a year that she allowed to accumulate after her brother Henry's bank failed in 1816. This income was not enough to support a gentlewoman independently. She was saving for the future, I believe for future publication. Though she had finished *Persuasion* in August 1816 (having begun it the previous August), she wrote in March 1817 of its appearing a year later, and at the same time of *Northanger Abbey*, which she had reclaimed from Crosby earlier, being 'upon the Shelve for the present' (L, 13 March 1817). It seems likely that she had decided to invest again in herself, to underwrite the publication of these two novels on commission, and was setting money aside as she had earlier

in case *Sense and Sensibility* failed. And despite failing health, she began a new novel in early 1817, *Sanditon*. But there was not a future. She died on 18 July.

Despite her increasingly professional publishing choices, Austen's six novels earned only about £1,625 through 1832, including profits from the two published posthumously by Cassandra, her executor and principal legatee. This sum compares unfavourably to the earnings of other contemporary women writers, Maria Edgeworth (more than £11,000) or Frances Burney (more than £4,000). Yet we can see in Jane Austen's continuing to write until four months before her death, and in what I take to be her intentions for future publication, possibly the most poignant evidence of her professionalism.

NOTES

1. [Fanny Caroline Lefroy], 'Is it Just?', *Temple Bar* 67 (February, 1883), 282.
2. See, for example, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).