Introduction
Austen and the Economy of Art

Jane Austen has always been known for her economy of art. The author who described herself as composing on "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory [...] with so fine a Brush" (*L*, p. 337) has been praised, as well as criticized, for the circumscribed focus of her plots, the precision of her writing style, for her miniaturism. Nineteenth-century readers compared her fiction with Flemish painting and with instruments of reduction, the microscope that examines tiny details, and the sieve, filtering away all extraneous matter.[1] Austen's fiction yielded "no redundancy or waste".[2] By contrast, critical writing today emphasizes the expansiveness of Austen's view. Austen's scene no longer solely consists of the marriages of the English gentry; rather it reverberates with national and global politics: with banking, wars, scandal, slavery. Nevertheless, Austen's skill remains in the minimalism of her approach, her intimations and taxing hints. Her art is one fundamentally characterized by exactitude and compression.

This book does not study Austen's economy thematically. Rather it takes as its subject a series of technical principles that shaped her fiction and its content, and that galvanized the representational powers of fiction. From the beginning of Austen's writing life, in the stories that she wrote as a teenager, matters relating to the size and scale of fiction preoccupied her and these matters constitute in no small part the brilliance of her early writing. The radical contractions of Austen's early fiction provide clues to her technical accomplishments later on. There are many surprising formal continuities between the drive to brevity of the juvenile writing and

[1] On the last of these, see R. H. Hutton, unsigned review, 'The Charm of Miss Austen', *Spectator* (1890), in B. C. Southam (ed.), *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage 1870–1940*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 196.

[2] Unsigned articles, 'Miss Austen', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July, August, 1866), in B. C. Southam (ed.), *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), vol. 1, p. 206. Further references to *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage* are by volume number.

Austen's lengthened-out published fiction. Austen made concision a rationale for her novels and both Austen's private and public writing provide a strong body of evidence to support this.

There are very few extant comments made by Austen about her own novels. There are, however, two series of letters which are especially revealing as to Austen's own technical practices. The first series comprises parts of two letters that Austen wrote to her sister, Cassandra, on the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813.[3] These two letters give unique access to Austen's thoughts about one of her completed novels on first seeing it in print and offer a raw account of the formal and stylistic decisions that she had made. These letters to Cassandra are celebrated for Austen's palpable excitement and pride on the arrival of this "my own darling Child", a novel that she playfully claims to be "too light & bright & sparkling". Yet Austen also comments on much more practical matters: the exclusion of a narrative superstructure when writing dialogue, the value or otherwise of matter extraneous to the story, the novel's length (how it is shorter than *Sense and Sensibility*) and the respective length of individual volumes following the process of 'lopping and cropping' that she had undertaken in preparation for publication. Cassandra Austen, after her sister's death, noted that *Pride and Prejudice* was published "with alterations & contractions".[4] How striking it is that on reading through *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen turns over different aspects of the novel's formal "contractions" and even betrays anxieties about her choices. At the same time, she delights in what she characterizes as the "Epigrammatism of the general stile".

The second series of letters to reveal Austen's compositional practices are the five letters written by Austen to her niece Anna Austen over the summer and autumn of 1814 concerning the novel that Anna was writing, 'Which is the Heroine?'. Austen wrote to Anna with her and Cassandra's opinions of the novel-in-progress, along with her own views regarding principles of success in fiction. At this point, Austen was an established author of three published novels, with the composition of *Emma* under way.

[3] Friday 29 January and Thursday 4 February 1813; (*L*, pp. 210–12).

[4] Cassandra's memorandum is held in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. It is transcribed in Kathryn Sutherland, 'Chronology of Composition and Publication', in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 12–22, p. 16. Sutherland comments on the memorandum being possibly drawn up soon after Austen's death, perhaps towards the end of 1817, to help Henry Austen prepare his 'Biographical Notice' of Jane Austen accompanying the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*; in James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 219, note 44.

These letters have been called Austen's "art of fiction"[5] and this is an art that is alert to the superfluous, in terms of inconsequential circumstances and "wandering" plot, but also at the level of the sentence. Austen repeatedly criticizes overly descriptive or detailed writing. Prosiness and minuteness are singled out as errors. Instead, Austen firmly recommends revising and paring back. "[H]ere & there," writes Austen carefully to Anna, "we have thought the sense might be expressed in fewer words" (*L*, p. 280; 10–18 August 1814). Reading a later instalment, she recommends that Anna look back over her writing so as to "curtail" and 'scratch out' that which is "prosy & nothing to the purpose" (*L*, p. 288; 9–18 September 1814). In the same letter, Austen writes: "You describe a sweet place, but your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked. You give too many particulars of right hand & left.—" (*L*, p. 287).

Austen knew from her own experience the importance of identifying and reducing passages that "are more minute than will be liked". This is an overt if overlooked topic in a number of her extant letters, where she reflects on the problem of detail: how much to include and how much is sufficient to interest. The paradox of a formal economy in any kind of writing is the abundance that can accompany restriction of scene and subject, as the details that constitute that scene come more vividly into view. Austen was attracted to the minute and enjoyed in her correspondence the protracted details of the everyday, but she was alert to the dangers of excess. This book will argue that her fiction explored and navigated this dynamic in many different ways. More particularly, Austen had overt stylistic strategies – the subjects of each of the chapters that follow – that prioritized concision and exclusion, and by their means she found a new denotative capacity for detail, which had a profound impact upon the English novel.

The Economy of Art: Austen's Reception

A number of early critics of Austen's work identified a principle of exclusion governing her fiction and recognized a consequent dilatory effect. What was new about Austen's work was the absence of excitable incident and plot, but this was an omission that was filled by a new emphasis on character.[6] The writer of the first article of a series on 'Female Novelists' in

[5] Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 248.

[6] In 1862, Julia Kavanagh surmised that "Miss Austen knew that she excelled in character, and probably guessed that she might not excel in adventure". Julia Kavanagh, 'Miss Austen's Six Novels', in *English Women of Letters* (1862), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 183.

the *New Monthly Magazine* of 1852 conveyed the relation between reduction and growth within their own style, dismissing in one short, simple sentence Austen's minimizing of plot, to build instead in an amplifying manner towards Austen's attention to "processes", "evolution" and the "gradually wrought" within her new form of fiction:

> Plot she has little or none. If you only enjoy a labyrinthine *nexus* of events, an imbroglio of accidents, an atmosphere of mystery, you will probably toss aside her volumes as 'desperately slow'. Yet, in the careful, artist-like management of her story, in the skillful evolution of its processes, in the tactics of a gradually-wrought *dénoument*, in the truthful and natural adaptation of means to ends, she is almost, if not quite, unrivalled. Nothing can be more judicious than her use of suggestions and intimations of what is to follow.[7]

The microscope was the best analogy for Austen's capacity both to limit her field and enlarge the characters within it: "The field of view may be in some sense a small one; but like that of a good microscope in able hands, there is abundance of light, and the minutest markings of character are beautifully shown in it".[8] According to R. H. Hutton in 1869, Austen's is a dizzying play of scale, a "minifying instead of a magnifying medium" that reduces the scale of life, "while really multiplying its humours".[9]

But for others, Austen was too minute and, in consequence, overwhelmingly diffuse. Richard Whately, in one of the earliest appreciations of Austen's fiction, describes how her "minuteness of detail has […] been found fault with".[10] William Charles Macready in 1836 complained that *Mansfield Park*

> has the prevailing fault of the pleasant authoress's books; it deals too much in descriptions of the various states of mind, into which her characters are thrown, and amplifies into a page a search for motives which a stroke of the pen might give with greater power and interest.[11]

[7] Unsigned article, the first in a series on the 'Female Novelists', *New Monthly Magazine* (May 1852), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, pp. 137–8.

[8] W. F. Pollock, from 'British Novelists – Richardson, Miss Austen, Scott', *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1860), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 168.

[9] Hutton, 'The Charm of Miss Austen', in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, pp. 195, 196. See the description of Austen's "microscopic observation of foibles", from an unsigned review of Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*, *Edinburgh Review* (July 1839), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 121. George Saintsbury suggested that "for all the 'miniature'" in Austen's delineation of the pettiness and selfishness of men, "there is something gigantic"; from 'Preface' to *Pride and Prejudice*, illustrated by Hugh Thompson and published by George Allen (1894), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 217.

[10] Richard Whately, unsigned review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, *Quarterly Review* (January 1821), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 98.

[11] William Charles Macready, diary entry, 9 July 1836, in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 118.

It is perhaps unsurprising that an actor and actor-manager such as Macready would have been displeased with Austen's elaboration of states of mind instead of character in action or in speech. But unusually, at this early stage of Austen criticism, Macready pinpoints Austen's amplifications as not depicting character broadly, but excavating characters' interiority and the workings of the mind. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called Austen's fiction "a kind of Bowditch's Laplace in the romantic astronomy", referring to Pierre Laplace's five-volume edition of *Mécanique Céleste* (1799–1805) with its extensive notes and commentaries.[12] Far from being "a small, thin classic" as Mary Augusta Ward would have it,[13] Austen's work swells for Longfellow into encyclopedic tomes, incapable of leaving anything to the imagination. Like Longfellow, Virginia Woolf described Austen as refusing to leave gaps: she "stuffs up every chink and cranny of the fabric until each novel is a little living world".[14]

It was George Henry Lewes who coined the phrase "economy of art" for Jane Austen's fiction, in 1859 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and in doing so he established the developing orthodoxy that Austen's brilliance lay in her artistic concentration. Lewes's essay sought to extend Austen's reputation beyond a coterie readership and he promoted Austen as an unequalled practitioner of minimalism in fiction:

> no novelist has approached her in what we may style the 'economy of art,' by which is meant the easy adaptation of means to ends, with no aid from extraneous or superfluous elements.[15]

Having endorsed in previous publications Macaulay's view of Austen as comparable with Shakespeare, in 1859 Lewes claimed that Austen was unsurpassed even by Shakespeare in dramatic presentation. That is, Austen rejects the easy option of description and instead leaves her characters to present themselves through speech. Criticism of Austen often pointed to omission. Lewes's is an example: he lists the "absence of breadth, picturesqueness, and passion"[16] in her fiction and dwells on what she fails to describe,

[12] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, from his journal entry, 23 May 1839, in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 117.
[13] Mary Augusta Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 51 (December 1884), 84–91, p. 91.
[14] Virginia Woolf, unsigned review of W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*, and Sybil G. Brinton, *Old Friends and New Faces*, *Times Literary Supplement* (8 May 1913), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 244.
[15] George Henry Lewes, unsigned article, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1859), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 152.
[16] Ibid., p. 160.

whether it be the physical appearance of her characters or details of scenery. But this results in the unrivalled economy of her writing, "the truest representation, effected by the *least expenditure* of means". The following year, Lewes returned to Austen in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, once again to praise her "principles of Economy and Selection", "nothing is dragged in, nothing is superfluous".[17]

Lewes began admiring Jane Austen in print from the early 1850s and over the next decade his appreciation of Austen's formal restraint developed into a thesis of economy to be applied more broadly to literature. In 1859, he asserted how "almost all defects in works of art arise from neglect of this economy" and how "[i]n novel-writing, as in mechanics, every obstruction is a loss of power; every superfluous page diminishes the artistic pleasure of the whole".[18] The sharpening of the economic metaphor in Lewes's literary criticism was indebted to Herbert Spencer's 1852 essay 'The Philosophy of Style' and would result in Lewes's own 1865 *Principles of Success in Literature*, first published as a series of essays in the *Fortnightly Review*. Using the analogy of the "mechanical apparatus", Herbert Spencer argued that stylistic accomplishment made the least claims on the resources of the reader.[19] Writing should aim in its syntax and figurative language at efficiency, brevity and ease of comprehension, and minimize "friction" and "inertia".[20] Spencer was mainly attempting to rectify obscurity of meaning due to poor expression, but he nonetheless advocated more generally ease of interpretation as a merit of reading. That Austen claimed with respect to *Pride and Prejudice*, "I do not write for such dull Elves" / "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves" (*L*, p. 210), is one counter to Spencer's desire for saving a reader's effort, as Austen clearly demanded, indeed by means of economy and omission, an intellectual endeavour from her audience. In *The Principles of Success in Literature*, Lewes modulated Spencer's philosophy by querying any rigid sustainability of literary economy, even as he established it as the first of his fives laws on which such success depends.

In describing the 'Law of Economy', Lewes employs Spencer's mechanistic notion of the undesirability of any "friction" in the process of reading, so as to exclude the retarding effect of the "superfluous". Lewes does

[17] George Henry Lewes, unsigned article, 'A Word about *Tom Jones*', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1860), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 175.
[18] Lewes, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, pp. 153, 162.
[19] Herbert Spencer, 'The Philosophy of Style', in *Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996; first published in the *Westminster Review*, October 1852), vol. 2, pp. 333–69, p. 335.
[20] Ibid., p. 336.

not refer to Austen by name in *The Principles of Success in Literature*, however, his repeated emphasis on Austen's eschewal of the "superfluous" in previous writing fed into his theory. But Lewes here registers the difficulty of an absolute exclusion of "superfluity": "[e]conomy is rejection of whatever is superfluous; it is not Miserliness" and in a paradoxical turn "redundancy" can be salvaged in the name of clarity:

> Perhaps the very redundancy which he [the author] lops away might have aided the reader to see the thought more clearly, because it would have kept the thought a little longer before his mind, and thus prevented him from hurrying on to the next while this one was still imperfectly conceived.[21]

In fact, the "best economy" allowed in places for "liberal expenditure" when "dictated by a generous impulse, not by a prodigal carelessness or ostentatious vanity". The economical writer judiciously permits expansion, even something like repetition, so as to aid a reader towards a vividly delineated apprehension and by consequence to allow variation in pace and cognitive progress.

In many places, Austen's private writing about fiction seems strikingly close to Lewes's theories of economy in *The Principles of Success in Literature*. Her comments cohere with Lewes's focus on the importance of revision,[22] 'striking out' and 'lopping' (Lewes) or 'scratching out', 'lopping and cropping' (Austen) anything which "will not carry away any of the constituent elements of the thought" (Lewes) or is "nothing to the purpose" (Austen). Austen's literary criticism also seems to correlate with Lewes's fundamental dislike of redundancy, as redundancy diverts attention towards "collateral detail". Under the 'Law of Simplicity', Lewes recommends that for a successful narrative structure "parts of novels should have organic relations". He continues:

> Push the licence to excess, and stitch together a volume of unrelated chapters, – a patchwork of descriptions, dialogues, and incidents, – no one will call that a novel; and the less the work has of this unorganised character the greater will be its value, not only in the eyes of critics, but in its effect on the emotions of the reader.[23]

Austen rejected precisely such "unrelated chapters" when she joked with Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* "wants to be stretched out here &

[21] George Henry Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*, with an introduction by Geoffrey Tillotson (Farnborough, Hants: Gregg International Publishers, 1969; first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, May–November 1865), p. 70.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 74.

there with a long Chapter […] about something unconnected with the story" (*L*, p. 212). Yet we can see Austen in her letters, especially her early letters, also drawing attention to the dilemma of what in fact constitutes the extraneous and reflecting upon the management of what deserves elaboration or otherwise.

Jane Austen's Letters: "That Choosing Instinct"

In 1885, Mary Augusta Ward published a hostile review of Lord Brabourne's edition of his great-aunt Jane Austen's letters. The review, 'Style and Miss Austen', is, following Lewes, the next major assessment by a well-known literary figure of Austen's economical style. Ward contrasted Brabourne's edition unfavourably with Austen's "determining quality" of "self-restraint".[24] The very act of publishing two volumes of personal letters containing the common events of day-to-day life was contrary to the "virtue of literary reticence".[25] Regarding the editorial matter, Ward claimed that Jane Austen herself would have been bored by the inappropriate lists of family pedigrees.[26] Ward also noted the lightness of tone characterizing Austen's letters as muted by the effect of the introductory chapters with their long lists of names and "wandering" criticism.[27]

In 'Style and Miss Austen', Ward, as much as Lewes, saw economy as a universal standard by which to judge the worth of a literary work and whether it is a "classic".[28] The terms of praise employed by Ward are "concentration" and "condensation", and she viewed Austen's genius as a confirmation of a historical process of ongoing literary refinement and distillation:

> The progress of literary expression during the last two hundred years has on the whole […] been a progress towards concentration. Literature tends more and more to become a kind of shorthand. The great writers of this generation take more for granted than the great writers of the last, and the struggle to avoid commonplace and repetition becomes more and more diffused. The mind of the modern writer is on the whole most anxiously concerned with this perpetual necessity for omission, for compression. It will never describe if it can suggest, or argue if it can imply. […]

[24] Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', p. 91.
[25] Ibid, p. 84.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, p. 85.
[28] Ward writes of Susan Ferrier: "Miss Ferrier is scarcely read now […] and will gradually drop more and more out of reading. And it is very easy to understand why, if one does but approach her books with these qualities of expansion and contraction which go to make up a classic in one's mind. She has little or no faculty of choice, nothing is refused that presents itself"; ibid., p. 90.

> It was her possession of the qualities of condensation that made Jane Austen what she was. Condensation in literary matters means an exquisite power of choice and discrimination – a capacity for isolating from the vast mass of detail which goes to make up human life just those details and no others which will produce a desired effect and blend into one clear and harmonious whole.[29]

There is a great deal of truth in this for Austen's fiction, including Austen's place in a broad formal trajectory towards compression. Novel writers of Austen's generation were rethinking the heritage of Samuel Richardson whose profuseness played a central part in his innovative transformation of English fiction, as he sought to capture human life through such a "vast mass of detail" or in his own words, the "minute". Jane Austen's brother Henry noted her admiration for Richardson, but her dissension from his prolixity.[30]

George Henry Lewes accounted for Austen's economy largely in terms of what she chose not to describe. Mary Augusta Ward dwelt upon Austen's concentration in matters of language. Austen's style indicates "the perpetual effort to be content with one word rather than two, the perpetual impulse to clip and prune rather than expand and lengthen".[31] A process of revision is acknowledged here ("clip and prune"), but Ward repeatedly envisages Austen's powers of condensation as a "gift" or an "instinct", the insights of which are spontaneous: Austen "seizes at once upon the most effective image or detail and realises at a glance how it will strike a reader".[32] Ward writes in the tradition established by Henry Austen, that his sister's compositions arrived fully formed. For Ward, the best of Austen's letters show "the perfect spontaneity of the writer".[33]

Ward felt that the most revealing letters in Brabourne's edition were the girlish ones that record flirting with Tom Lefroy and others. These come closest to the vitality of *Northanger Abbey* and remind us of the spirit of Catherine Morland, giving "glimpses, as it were, into the workshop which produced the novels".[34] But there are other letters, many of which were included in Brabourne's edition, that not only give glimpses of the workshop (which Ward conceives of as the subjects and tones of the later fiction), but

[29] Ibid., p. 89.
[30] Henry Austen, 'Biographical Notice of the Author' (1818), in Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 141.
[31] Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', p. 90.
[32] Ibid., pp. 90, 91.
[33] Ibid., p. 85.
[34] Ibid., p. 86.

that reflect on the abilities and tasks of the worker. Austen thinks through the matter of selection, tempering Ward's view that condensation was a spontaneous and innate talent. Austen herself did not always feel that she had the gift of a "choosing instinct".[35] But she was mindful of its importance.

What often comes to the surface of Austen's letters are reflections regarding the distribution and delivery of the writer's material: that is, the dynamics between the letter's content, the quantity or extent of that content and the stylistic means of conveying it. She muses on her desire for detail and she jokes about being boring. The much reprinted letter-writing manual *The Complete Letter-Writer* advises tradesmen to be concise in letters of business, while the writer of familiar letters is instructed to range widely through a variety of subjects. There is no guidance, however, about managing the line between enjoyable detail and prolixity.[36] Austen, by contrast, frequently comments on it. Writing a good letter to a known correspondent is inevitably different from writing a good novel, yet the processes of embracing or fending off material, engaging or boring a reader are germane to both.

The letter that Ward uses as an immediate example of the workshop of Austen's fiction, written in 1796 when Austen was twenty, is certainly familiar to a reader of the novels in its subjects of flirting, marriage and gossip, but also in its satirical register and knowing self-contradictions. But that very letter opens with the revealing address to Cassandra:

> My dear Cassandra,
>
> I shall be extremely anxious to hear the Event of your Ball, & shall hope to receive so long & minute an account of every particular that I shall be tired of reading it. (*L*, pp. 7–8; 5 September 1796)[37]

This comment, however playful, reveals a consciousness about the proportion of detail to interest and the reader's remuneration or reward for the time spent reading. What readers might think they desire through curiosity might soon be satiated. This is a subject that recurs in Austen's letters and indeed her fiction. In fact, the opening of this letter is strikingly close to the debate between Catharine and Camilla Stanley in Austen's unfinished manuscript 'Catharine, or the Bower', composed a few years

[35] Ibid., p. 91.
[36] *The Complete Letter-Writer; or, Polite English Secretary.* […] *The Twelfth Edition, Improved* (London: for Stanley Crowder; and Benjamin Collins, in Salisbury, 1768), pp. 35, 32.
[37] This letter is included in *Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. with an introduction and critical remarks by Edward, Lord Brabourne (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1884), vol. 1, p. 138. Further references to this edition are listed as 'Brabourne'.