

From Samplers to Shakespeare: Jane Austen's Reading

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Making use of new digital resources (such as the recent digitization of the Godmersham Park Library catalogue at readingwithausten.com) and other new scholarship, in this chapter I will re-visit the question of Jane Austen's literary influences in the context of a discussion of her reading practices. Recent scholarship (by Isobel Grundy, Jocelyn Harris, Peter Knox-Shaw, Olivia Murphy, Janine Barchas, Peter Sabor and others) has conclusively proven that Austen's reading was more daring, more demanding, and more eclectic than previous generations of critics had thought. In addition to "the old guides" (Johnson, Cowper, Crabbe, Richardson, Goldsmith, Hume, and Robertson), named by her first biographers (Austen-Leigh 70), we now know that Austen read both deeply and widely in a variety of genres and forms, from socially-sanctioned conduct books and histories to titillating French novels such as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) and the latest scandal-sheets. In this chapter, I will suggest that a careful consideration of material now considered ephemeral or unimportant, can illuminate our thinking about Austen's creative practice in new ways.

Austen was a magpie reader, and everything she read was grist to her creative mill, lending itself to parody, satire and critical re-working. As Jocelyn Harris suggests, Austen's reading energized her creative practice in fundamental and exciting ways (*Art of Memory* x). Austen was, Olivia Murphy puts it, a "riotous and anarchic" parodist ("The Queerness and the Fun" 32), and she was also, as Kathryn Sutherland has persuasively argued, an inveterate recycler, of characters, plots and ideas (*Jane Austen's Textual Lives* 126-7). Drawing on these insights, in this chapter, I will consider how an increased understanding of her wider reading habits both within and outside the family circle should now inform our literary criticism of the novels, juvenilia and unfinished works.

“He can read, & I must get him some books”, wrote Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra, anxious that their manservant James should be “quiet & happy” during the family’s stay at Lyme Regis in January of 1805. Learning that James had already read the first volume of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), she determined to “take care to lend him” the “Pinckards Newspaper” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 14 September 1804, in Le Faye 95). Presumably Jane Austen had in the house a copy of vol. 1 of *Robinson Crusoe* which she could have given or lent to James, but his existing knowledge of the book made this impractical. We must assume that the household had no other books deemed suitable for him, and so the newspaper, already passed on from the Pinckard family, is lent once again, this time to James. Unimportant in itself, this trivial event is nonetheless characteristic both of the importance attached to books (the *must* is telling), and of the frequent difficulty in getting hold of them, in Jane Austen’s household – and indeed in those of many others of the middling sort – in the early years of the nineteenth century. It also shows us how, in the absence of books, newspapers could take on an almost equal importance. It hence offers some insight into the ways in which books and other reading matter circulated within the Austen family and their wider circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

A key point to note is that Jane Austen had different kinds of access to books at different points in her life. Her letters abound with mentions of getting, having, reading, passing on, lending, and borrowing books, as well as her sometimes frustrating and abortive attempts to get hold of the most recent publications. In February, 1807, writing to Cassandra from Southampton for example, she recommended Elizabeth Grant’s *Letters from the Mountains* (1807) as a present for their friend Martha Lloyd, adding “what they are about, nor how many volumes they form I do not know, having never heard of them but from Miss Irvine, who speaks of them as a new & admired work, & as one which has pleased her highly. – I have enquired for the book here, but find it quite unknown” (Jane to Cassandra Austen,

20-22 February 1807, in Le Faye 123). In April of 1811, similarly, she wrote to Cassandra, “We have tried to get Self-Controul [Mary Brunton’s *Self Control*, published 1811], but in vain” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 30 April 1811, in Le Faye 186). Sometime between then and October of 1813 she did manage to get hold it, writing to Cassandra that she was “looking over Self Control again” – a phrase that suggests a re-reading (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 11-12 October 1813, in Le Faye 234). For Austen, a writer keenly and attentively attuned both to the literary market for her own books, and the dangers of competition from authors seen to be doing the same thing, failures to keep up with the latest novels were particularly frustrating.

Very rarely does she discuss buying books, though on one notable occasion she mentions selling them, when, on the move from Steventon, her own books were sold along with her father’s “above 500 Volumes” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 14-16 January 1801, in Le Faye 74). Austen records her glee at selling “Dodsley’s Poems” [Robert Dodsley’s *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes by Several Hands* (1758)] for ten shillings: “Ten shillings for Dodsley’s Poems however please me to the quick, & I do not care how often I sell them for as much.” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 21-22 May 1801, in Le Faye 88).¹ David Gilson notes that all but one of the twenty books he was able to trace as having actually belonged to Jane Austen date from the Steventon period, which suggests that this was the last time in her life that book ownership was financially practicable for her (Gilson 431). Austen’s letters incessantly record the economical expedients she practiced (willingly or otherwise) in every area of her life, and it is clear that her access to reading matter was similarly curtailed and limited by what she called “Vulgar Economy” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 30 June-1 July 1808, in Le Faye 139), particularly after her father’s death in January 1805. As a child, as

¹ See also letters of 14-16 January 1801 (Le Faye 74) and 12-13 May 1801 (Le Faye 84), where Austen discusses the arrangements for the dispersal of the books.

Gilson rightly says, “her first recourse would have been to her father’s library” (Gilson 431), but after the dispersal of his books, and her own, she almost never again had such free and unfettered access to printed matter, although her life was punctuated by periods of intense and enjoyable cultural richness. Austen’s letters vividly document her pleasure in having the freedom of her brother Edward’s library at Godmersham Park during her visits there, as well as the whirlwind of trips to theatres and exhibitions she enjoyed on visits to her brother Henry in London. It is easy, too, to imagine her delight when, in 1815, the “civil rogue”, John Murray, offered to lend her “any book of his”, and followed this up with a series of loans of his latest publications (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 24 November 1815, in Le Faye 298).

What might otherwise seem extraordinarily eclectic reading choices begin to make more sense within a broader understanding of both the richness, and the poverty, of Austen’s cultural *milieux* at different stages of her life. As Peter Knox-Shaw brilliantly shows, in his *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (2004), Jane Austen grew up an atmosphere of philosophical enquiry, rigorous critical thinking, and literary openness. George Austen, Knox-Shaw argues, “was of the sect that delighted in the many new – and still opening – fields of inquiry that were giving greater definition to the created world” (8). The young Jane Austen received an education that was no less rigorous for being informal, in the traditions of critical enquiry promoted by the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Smith, Ferguson, and Robertson.² Steventon Rectory was also a place where Austen’s brothers brought back the latest scientific, philosophical and literary ideas from Oxford, and where the family together engaged in putting on plays, for which James Austen wrote prologues that are notable for their acute social and literary commentary. The choice of plays

² Michele Cohen has recently argued vigorously for the rigour and breadth of a so-called “domestic” education; see her “The pedagogy of conversation in the home: ‘familiar conversation’ as a pedagogical tool in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England”. *Oxford Review of Education* 41 (2015), 447-63, and “‘To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise’: Girls’ Education in Enlightenment Britain”. *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, edited by S. Knott and B. Taylor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 224-42.

is remarkable for its broad-mindedness, including the “exceptionally risqué” *The Chances*, by John Fletcher, in the Duke of Buckingham’s 1682 adaptation; Henry Fielding’s hilarious parody *Tom Thumb* (1730), Susanna Centlivre’s proto-feminist *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714), and others of a similar ilk (Knox-Shaw, 28). Knox-Shaw suggests that the habits of mind inculcated by this progressive and critically-informed upbringing stayed with Austen for the rest of her life. Her reading of the liberal historians in particular, he suggests, gave her a lifelong scepticism of dogma, prejudice and the claims of party or politicians. These mental habits of dispassionate critical enquiry and humane scepticism, Knox-Shaw argues, allow Austen to keep in simultaneous play a number of conflicting moral and political positions in her novels, giving her work its “taut contrapuntal flavour” (128).

Knox-Shaw is undoubtedly correct, and his account of Austen’s literary influences during her youth does an extremely valuable service both in highlighting the continuing importance of the Enlightenment – particularly in its Anglo-Scottish incarnations – on Austen’s thinking and writing, and in emphasizing the breadth of her reading and the essentially exploratory nature of her engagement with literary texts. Austen’s letters record her reading a hodgepodge of material, across a very wide variety of genres, subjects, and political positions. She read both the Whiggish *Morning Chronicle* and the Tory *Quarterly Review*. She was “in love with” the very different writers George Crabbe, Charles Pasley, Thomas Clarkson, and Claudius Buchanan. She read both the Radical (and proto-feminist) Helen Maria Williams, and the Anti-Jacobin patriotic conservative Jane West. She owned the Godwinian Robert Bage’s *Hermesprong; or, Man as he is not* (1796), despite expressing her sense of Godwin’s followers as disreputable elsewhere in her letters: “*He* is as raffish in his appearance as I would wish every Disciple of Godwin to be” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 21-22 May 1801, in *Le Faye* 89). Alongside her reading of respectable (indeed required) novelists such as Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney, Austen recorded her voracious

reading of the latest sentimental, Gothic and melodramatic novels, such as Sydney Owenson's *Ida of Athens* (1800), Francis Lathom's *The Midnight Bell* (1798), and Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1814), which she "tore through" in two evenings (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 2-3 March 1814, in *Le Faye* 255-6). As well as Evangelical writings by Hannah More, her cousin Edward Cooper and Mary Brunton, Austen read the juridical sermons of Thomas Sherlock, conduct books by Thomas Gisborne and James Fordyce, and poetry by the scandalous Byron and Burns as well as the morally irreproachable Cowper.

The books known to have been owned by Austen are of a similarly heterogeneous nature. The anonymous *Fables Choisies* and *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, along with Arnaud Berquin's *L'ami de l'adolescence* and *L'Ami des enfans* are standard children's books of the period, the latter known to have been read also by Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney (Gilson 439). John Bell's *Travels from St Petersburg in Russia, to diverse parts of Asia* (1764) suggests an early taste for literature about other cultures and nations, later reflected in her reading of Joseph Baretti's *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy* (1768), Helen Maria Williams's *A Narrative of the Events which have lately taken place in France* (1815), and Lord Macartney's *Embassy to China* (1807), among others. The presence of both a 6-volume David Hume's *History of England* (1759-62) and Oliver Goldsmith's 4-volume *The history of England, from the earliest times to the death of George II* (1771), the latter heavily and often critically annotated in Jane Austen's hand, bear witness to her reading of history, and the analytical spirit with which she approached it. Austen's bookshelf also contained various novels: Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796), to which Jane Austen was a subscriber, and Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), the work claimed by her brother Henry and nephew James-Edward to be her favourite. The outlier among her novel collection, at least in terms of its politics, is the aforementioned *Hermsprong; or, Man as he is not*. Poetry is represented by the *Works of*

James Thomson (1773), the *Poems and Plays* of William Hayley (1785), and Ariosto's well-known epic *Orlando Furioso*, in a translation by John Hoole (5 vols, 1783). Austen also owned Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of literature* (1791), a small volume of trivia containing a cornucopia of anecdotes, stories, character sketches and notes on literary themes, and one volume of Addison and Steele's *Spectator* (1744), a work she would later denigrate in *Northanger Abbey's* famous defence of the novel. The sole work of natural history was Goldsmith's *An history of the earth, and animated nature*, in 8 volumes (1774), and she also owned the *Works* of the French salonnière and progressive educationalist Anne Therèse, Marquise de Lambert. It is perhaps not surprising that the parson's daughter also owned *A companion to the altar: shewing the nature & necessity of a sacramental preparation in order to our worthy receiving the Holy Communion, to which are added Prayers and meditations* (1793), or that such a walker as Jane Austen should have been the family member to inherit Richard Warner's *Excursions from Bath* (1801) on her father's death in 1805.

No records of George Austen's library remain, with the exception of one book, sold at auction in 1974 which contained his bookplate (Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1788)), and the *Excursions from Bath* noted above, also containing his bookplate.

Reconstructing his library of 500 books is, therefore, impossible, but we can hypothesise that in contained, at the very least, the standard works of the Classical authors that he would have needed to teach the young men who attended his small school, and the sermons of Thomas Sherlock, Hugh Blair and others. No eighteenth-century gentleman's library would have been complete without a copy of the *Spectator*, and probably the *Rambler* and *Idler* too. It would almost certainly have contained Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Buffon's *Natural History*, and the histories of Edward Gibbon, Charles Rollin, David Hume, and William Robertson, alongside Shakespeare's plays, and the poetry of Pope, Dryden,

Akenside, Gray and Collins. The novels of Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney, and Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* might well also have featured. Beyond that, we probably should not speculate further, although it is tempting to think that copies of Voltaire, Rousseau and the other major deists might also have been on the shelves. Certainly, a copy of Voltaire's *The History of Charles XII King of Sweden* was signed by either James or Jane Austen, and is, according to Gilson, still in the possession of the family (434). While a library of 500 volumes is neither particularly large nor unusual in the period, it clearly provided sufficient seed for a fertile mind to harvest, since Austen's juvenilia, collected together in three fair-copy manuscript notebooks, show a deep familiarity not only with novels, from the melodramatic to the didactic, but also with a large variety of other genres. These short works distil and satirise plays, poetry, sentimental novels, travelogues, conduct books, epistolary novels, regional novels, didactic novels, and histories, among others, giving particular attention to the works of the most popular novelist of her period, Samuel Richardson. According to the extant documentary record, then, Austen's access to books in her youth was both unfettered and relatively extensive.

After the family's move to Bath in 1801, the dispersal of George Austen's books and Jane's own, and their subsequent moves between lodgings in Bath and then Southampton, Austen's access to books was much more dependent on temporary accommodations; namely circulating and subscription libraries and the country-house libraries of her friends and relatives. Evidence for Austen's membership and use of such libraries is limited, but it is clear that she continued to read the latest publications whenever she could, and that she took advantage of whatever means she had at her disposal to get hold of books. The reading society formed at Chawton, for example, seems to have been one such conduit for books, while lengthy visits to friends and relatives such as the Lefroys at Ashe, the Leighs at Adlestrop and Stoneleigh Abbey, the Coopers at Harpsden and Hamstall Ridware, the Cookes

at Great Bookham, the Lloyds at Ibthorpe, the Fowles at Kintbury, and the Bigg-Withers at Manydown, were good opportunities to rove through others' book collections. Austen writes, for example, of the "thick Quarto Volumes, which one always sees in the Breakfast parlour" at Manydown (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 9 February 1813, in Le Faye 204). The most important of these collections, though, was undoubtedly her brother Edward Austen Knight's library at Godmersham Park (of the *c.*200 directly traceable allusions in Austen's novels and letters, 64 of these (32%, or nearly 1/3) were held in the Godmersham Library collection).³ Austen's letters from London while staying with her brother Henry clearly show her taking full advantage of the theatrical performances available in the capital, and her visits to London provided her with an opportunity to keep up with newly-published books, particularly in the last three years of her life, when she was able to take up John Murray's offer, and often borrowed books from him. But she never again had continued free and unfettered access to a collection that she could treat as her own, and it is notable that throughout her lifetime, many of Austen's allusions hark back to the books of her youth. The final, unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, for example, returns to Richardson for its sustained critique of Georgian gender stereotypes. In that novel, Sir Edward Denham longs to be a rake "in the line of the Lovelaces" – a direct allusion to Richardson's rake-villain, Lovelace, in *Clarissa* (1748) – and plans to abduct Clara Brereton, carrying her off to "some solitary house" in "the neighbourhood of Tombuctoo" (*Later Manuscripts*, 184), just as Lovelace carries off *Clarissa*, and, indeed, in another of Richardson's novels, as Mr. B. abducts Pamela and incarcerates her in his Bedfordshire estate.

The reading tastes formed in Austen's youth were thus important throughout her life, and already do much to dispel any remaining sense of Austen as intellectually isolated from

³ While this statistic is not in itself proof that Austen was drawing her allusions from the copies of books held in the Godmersham Library, it is suggestive of the extent to which she took advantage of this collection.

the great political and philosophical debates of her time.⁴ But books are not the only sources of reading matter, of course, and recent scholarship by Janine Barchas and Jocelyn Harris persuasively argues that Austen was also keenly interested in the “celebrities, scandals and controversies” of her own day, and that “these were just as significant for her creativity” as the books she read (Harris, *Satire, Celebrity and Politics*, xvii). I would suggest that this was even more the case once she no longer had such easy access to actual books, when ephemeral materials such as newspapers, magazines and pamphlets became increasingly important to her. Austen’s reading of the kind of ephemeral materials in which celebrity news appears is harder to trace, and thus to document, than her reading of books, but scattered references in the letters do note the habitual reading of newspapers (as in the case of the Pinckards’ newspaper with which I began this chapter), as well as occasionally alluding to periodicals and magazines. Most of the evidence for such reading rests, however, on the internal evidence provided by allusions and references in the novels, juvenilia and unfinished works. As early as 1923, R.W. Chapman identified a number of allusions and references to newspapers, periodicals, newspapers and ephemeral works in the novels and minor works.⁵ These included *The Agricultural Reports* in *Emma*, *The Morning Post* and the *Kentish Gazette* in *Sanditon*, along with *The Mirror*, *Rambler* and *Spectator* (*Northanger Abbey*) and the *Idler* and *Quarterly Review* (*Mansfield Park*). Chapman also identified a number of songs

⁴ There is a long and important tradition of Austen criticism, dating back to her brother Henry’s “Biographical Notice”, appended to the posthumous first edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (1818), and developed and perpetuated in her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869), which presents her as fundamentally uninterested in politics. “The politics of the day occupied very little of her attention”, asserted Austen-Leigh in 1869, and this became a critical orthodoxy for successive biographers, critics and readers until Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* decisively shifted the grounds of debate in 1987 (Austen-Leigh 71). Similarly, both Henry and James Edward suggested that Jane’s reading had been extremely limited and circumscribed, naming only Goldsmith, Hume, Robertson, Fielding, Richardson, Johnson, Crabbe, Cowper, Johnson and Scott. Such a list pays no attention at all not only to the wide reading in philosophy, natural history, politics and travel documented in her letters to Cassandra, but also to what seems to have been the majority of Austen’s reading of books – the female-authored novel. They certainly make no reference to her interest in scandal and satire.

⁵ R.W. Chapman’s indexes to his edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* and the *Minor Works* have been collated and are now available on www.pemberley.com, supplemented with citations from *A Jane Austen Dictionary* by George L. Apperson.

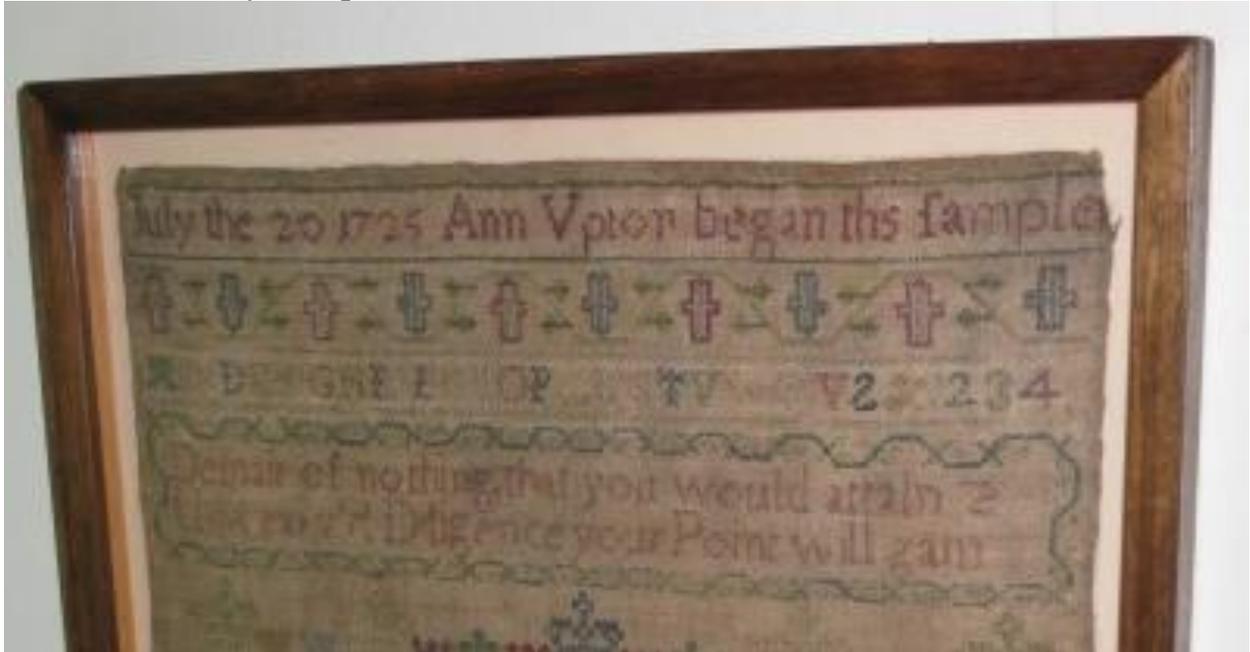
and riddles, including Mr Woodhouse's poorly-remembered "Kitty a Fair but Frozen Maid" (by Garrick) and *Robin Adair* (both in *Emma*), and "The Je ne s'ai Quoi", quoted in *Mansfield Park*.

An allusion that Chapman was unable to trace in *Northanger Abbey* ("by unwearied diligence they gained" (*Northanger Abbey*, 13) is identified by the editors of the Cambridge Edition as coming from "a couplet from a popular old schoolbook, *A Guide to the English Tongue*" (*Northanger Abbey*, 303), but it could equally well have been known to Austen because it was a relatively well-known verse commonly stitched by young girls on samplers. Deirdre Le Faye first hypothesized that this was the case in *Notes & Queries* in 1999, and I have identified five such samplers, dating from 1721 to 1814, with only small variants from the verse suggested by Le Faye.⁶ One such appears in Figure 1. It seems to me more likely that Austen had a sampler, rather than an "old schoolbook", in mind, given the emphasis on dress, fashion and needlework in the paragraph within which this appears, as well as the preceding one. These are the paragraphs which pithily establish Mrs Allen's character ("Dress was her passion" (*Northanger Abbey*, 12)), comment on both Catherine and her chaperone's clothing in some detail, and note wryly that Mrs Allan has "more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protégée" (*Northanger Abbey*, 13). If it is indeed the case that Austen had a sampler in mind when she made the allusion, it is doubly appropriate, since the allusion would then underscore the juxtaposition of a serious moral

⁶For example, in the Fitzwilliam Collection in Cambridge, one such sampler is in the G.W.L. Glaisher collection, Object Number: T.122-1928. The inscription reads "AS YOU EXPEct That men should DeaL BY YOU / SO Deal BY Them And Give Each man His Due / Better It Is To GAIn Great Reputation Then to / Be RICH For That never Wants VexatioN / Constraint in ALL Things makes The Pleasur / Less Sweet is The love That COMeS With / Willingness / DesPair OF NOthing That YOU WOULD Attain / Unwearied DILIGENCE YOUR POInt WILL Gain / Experience Best Is Gained Without Much Cost Read Men And / Books Then Practise What Thou Knowest / They That Are Proud And Other men Disdain Do Often Meet / With Hate And Scorn Again. Mary Wheeler Her Work Done in ninth / Year Of Her Age 1721". Le Faye suggests the alternative "Despair of nothing that you would obtain/ Unwearied diligence your point will gain/Great blessings ever wait on virtuous deeds/ An tho" a late a sure reward succeeds (Le Faye, *Family Record*), p.60. Another, pictured in Figure 1, in the Bristol Museums and Archives collections, reads "Despair of nothing, that you would attain / Unweari'd Diglignce your Point will gain". Thanks to Jennie Batchelor for helping me to identify these samplers.

register (“care”, “safety”, and “unwearied diligence”) with a concern with the frivolous and the domestic, manifested here through needlework.

Figure 1: Detail of Sampler by Ann Upton, 1725, given by Miss Agnes Fry, 1949 © Bristol Culture, by kind permission of Bristol Museums and Archives.



In addition to Chapman’s identifications of Austen’s allusions to ephemeral materials, Edward Copeland first noticed references to the *Lady’s Magazine* in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Jennie Batchelor has recently conclusively demonstrated that in fact a large variety of plots, names and textual echoes from the *Lady’s Magazine* appear, recycled and reworked, in a number of Austen’s novels.⁷ Jocelyn Harris makes an excellent case for Austen’s interest in public controversies such as the Regency Crisis, the war with France, the slave trade and the court-martial of Sir Home Popham, as well as for her fascination with celebrities, naming Lord Byron, Captain Cook, Lord Nelson, stage stars Dorothy Jordan, Sarah Siddons and Edmund Kean, and “new-minted celebrity William Shakespeare” as of particular consequence to Austen (*Satire, Celebrity and Politics*, xviii). Harris also identifies allusions to “women who were briefly the talk of the town, heiress Catherine Tylney-Long and Sara

⁷ See Copeland 153-71, and Batchelor, *The Lady’s Magazine (1770-1832) and the Making of Literary History* (Forthcoming). I am very grateful to Jennie Batchelor for allowing me to read her work in MS.

Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus”, and reminds us of Austen’s mockery of the dissipation of the Prince Regent and the “feckless folly” of Prince William (*Satire, Celebrity and Politics*, xviii). It is clear that Austen followed the long-running and distasteful domestic battle between the Prince Regent and Caroline of Brunswick, writing in a letter of 16 February 1813, “Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband” (Jane Austen to Martha Lloyd, 16 February 1813, in Le Faye 208). Harris suggests that Austen followed this, and other controversies, primarily through the “reports, highlights, compilations, abridgement, and extracts” found in “newspapers and magazines” (*Satire, Celebrity and Politics*, 75). She also draws on a large number of pamphlets, occasional poetry, reports of theatrical performances, broadsheets and advertisements to show Austen’s engagement with the whole of the print culture of her time.

News also appears, of course, not only in textual, but in visual form, and Harris also reminds us of the pervasive culture of visual satire of Austen’s period. We know that Austen attended art exhibitions whenever she could, famously looking for a picture of Elizabeth Bennet in the 1814 exhibition of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s paintings, but she would also have been faced with satirical images of newsworthy events every time she passed the window of a print-shop in any of the towns that she visited. As Rachel Brownstein has noted, print shop windows “counted among the entertaining spectacles of London” and suggests, as in Figure 1, that they were “a species of street theatre that drew heterogeneous urban audiences” (Brownstein, 90).

Figure 2: The Caricature Shop. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University



Such a phenomenon was not limited to London; the print shops in Winchester, Southampton, Bath, Lyme Regis and Cheltenham – all towns Austen is known to have visited – doubtless had a similar function, while circulating libraries and bookshops also often carried prints as well as books, as shown in Figure 2. Austen could therefore hardly have avoided seeing political and celebrity news, even had she wished to do so. As a writer keenly interested in satire in her own practice, it seems probable that she enjoyed seeing satirical prints, and made the most of opportunities to do so.

Figure 3: Beauty in Search of Knowledge. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.



Janine Barchas suggests that visual materials of all kinds were indeed important to Austen's artistic practice, presenting incontestable evidence of Austen's use of maps and travel guides to plot her novels. She also gives an excellent example of Austen's use of such material for comic purposes, contending that Austen's allusion to Blaize Castle in *Northanger Abbey* depends for its comedy on the widespread knowledge, hilariously shared by none of the characters, that it was a sham – a faux-Gothic folly built by Thomas Farr in 1766, and represented as such in the many guides to Bath produced in the period. Austen's

ownership of Richard Warner's *Excursions from Bath* (1801) takes on new importance in this context.

In the light of the accumulated evidence for Austen's reading of ephemeral materials, it is worth remembering Simon Eliot's contention that, in the nineteenth century:

the book was not the predominant form of text and, more than likely, was not therefore the thing most commonly or widely read. By 1907, as the first Census of Production makes clear, books in terms of net value were worth some 14 % of the total value of print production (and that included manuscript books and ledgers). The two areas of largest value were, in ascending order, jobbing printing and periodical printing. The most common reading experience, by the mid-nineteenth century at latest, would most likely be the advertising poster, all the tickets, handbills and forms generated by an industrial society, and the daily or weekly paper. Most of this reading was, of course, never recorded or commented upon for it was too much a part of the fabric of everyday life to be noticed. (Eliot, para 10)⁸

Such reading is, as Eliot rightly notes, unlikely to be recorded in diaries or letters, but it does become part of the mental world that the reader inhabits. If we are to understand Austen's allusive writing practice properly, therefore, we must think seriously about the ways in which allusions to such ephemeral reading intersect with those to books in Austen's works.

Jane Austen was, as Kathryn Sutherland has argued in another context, a writer who recycled, transposed and re-used incidents and themes between and within her novels (*Jane Austen's Textual Lives*, 126-7). Her recycling of news, gossip, and celebrity scandal is as present, we now know, in the novels, as it is obvious in the letters. But Austen is more, of

⁸ Although Eliot is primarily focussed on the later nineteenth century, as his terminus date of 1907 suggests, his contention holds mainly true for the Regency period as well.

course, than the re-teller of second-hand scandals, and the question with which most Austen critics are preoccupied is therefore less with what she read than the astonishingly innovative ways in which she used it. It would be easy to assume a more sustained and serious engagement with works we now consider to be important and canonical, and a more light-hearted or frivolous engagement with ephemera. But such a conclusion is not supported by the evidence. Austen often treats literary heavyweights with dismissive casualness, making Pope, for example, the subject of a light-hearted pun (““Whatever is, is best.” – There has been one infallible Pope in the World” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 26 October 1813, in *Le Faye* 244), and likening her own verses comically to those of “Homer & Virgil, Ovid & Propria que Maribus” (Jane to Cassandra Austen, 24 January 1809, in *Le Faye* 170). She helped to condense Richardson’s monumental five-volume novel *Sir Charles Grandison* into a playful skit for the entertainment of nieces and nephews, and ruthlessly mocked the character of Sir Charles himself in the early “Jack and Alice”.⁹ Her famous defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* also gives such reading short shrift, rejecting Milton, Pope, Prior, Sterne and the *Spectator* in favour of the female-authored novel. Conversely, she is perfectly prepared to use works with little to no cultural capital attached to make a serious point, as we saw in her use of the quotation from the sampler in *Northanger Abbey*. In this total disregard for reputation or status, we see a levelling impulse not usually attributed to Austen, in particular by those critics who consider her to be a conservative or anti-Jacobin novelist.¹⁰

As I’ve argued elsewhere, however, Austen is a complex and subversive writer, and she is probably never more complex and subversive than in her use of allusion (Halsey, “The

⁹ The manuscript of Austen’s version of *Sir Charles Grandison* is held at Chawton House Library. Family tradition holds that the manuscript was dictated to Jane Austen by her niece Anna, and that it was designed to be acted in front of the family, who knew the original well. “Jack and Alice” appears in *Volume the First* of the manuscript juvenilia.

¹⁰ Marilyn Butler first articulated this position in her seminal *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1987), a work that remains influential even while much recent criticism either explicitly or implicitly challenges her interpretation of Austen’s political position.

Books Sir Edward Denham Doesn't Read", 54). A number of critics, from Kenneth Moler in 1968 to Olivia Murphy in 2013, have considered Austen's literary allusions in intelligent and illuminating ways. But few – with the notable exceptions of Barchas and Harris – have wished to consider what we might call her *non-literary* allusions – those moments when Austen reaches out to the wider print culture of her day – in any depth. If we are to think seriously about the intellectual world that Austen inhabited, though, further consideration not just of the Enlightenment tradition that she inherited, but also of the kinds of reading not normally considered to be important or influential – songs, ballads, newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, walking guides, and so on – is vital. We also need to take seriously Austen's interest in the visual and material, remembering that maps, prints, paintings – including landscapes and cityscapes – portraits, samplers, and even dress fabrics are also texts of various kinds, lending themselves to interpretation and, in Austen's case, re-use for literary purposes.

In Chapter 9 of *Emma* (1815), with Emma's help, Harriet Smith engages in "collecting and transcribing all the riddles of every sort that she could meet with, into a thin quarto of hot-pressed paper, made up by her friend, and ornamented with cyphers and trophies" (*Emma*, 74). Canvassing their particular friends and relatives for riddles and charades, Harriet and Emma of course end up eliciting Mr Elton's riddle on "Courtship", intended by him for Emma herself, but assigned by Emma to Harriet, and interpreted by her as describing his intentions towards Harriet: "Very well, Mr. Elton, very well indeed. I have read worse charades. *Courtship* – a very good hint. I give you credit for it. This is feeling your way. This is saying very plainly – 'Pray, Miss Smith, give me leave to pay my addresses to you. Approve my charade and my intentions in the same glance.'" (*Emma*, 76). Harriet fails to comprehend any part of the charade, but as soon as Emma has finished interpreting it for Harriet's benefit, she muses complacently to her: "There does seem to be a something in

the air of Hartfield which gives love exactly the right direction, and sends it into the very channel where it ought to flow. ‘The course of true love never did run smooth – ’ A Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage” (*Emma*, 80). Emma is, of course, wrong in assuming that her “Hartfield edition” would counteract Shakespeare’s lines, since the remainder of the novel nicely demonstrates precisely the opposite, with continual difficulties and obstacles appearing in the way of the various “true love” matches that the novel eventually brings about. This episode is important in a variety of different ways, but my point here is simply to show how Austen treats Mr Elton’s flimsy charade and the line from Shakespeare as exactly equivalent in terms of their cultural authority.¹¹ In both cases, Emma imposes her own (incorrect) interpretation upon the lines, blithely assuming that her explanation must be the true one. What is important here is that *both* texts serve precisely the same purpose in exposing Emma’s “imaginist” tendencies, her egotism, and her inability to differentiate between facts and fiction (*Emma*, 362). Sandwiched between Mr Elton’s charade, and Garrick’s “Kitty, a fair but frozen maid”, mis-remembered and misquoted by Mr Woodhouse when he enters three pages later, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* becomes just another text to plunder to bolster Emma’s own erroneous worldview.

From Shakespeare to samplers, Austen’s magpie versatility – her ability to take what she needed from diverse sources irrespective of their provenance, and to turn it into delicate ironic social commentary – is in my view at the heart of her artistic technique. As Olivia Murphy suggests in her account of Austen’s creative practice, “it is through her critical reading that Austen produced her creative contribution to the novel” (*Jane Austen the Reader*, 29). Murphy suggests that Austen learned her craft as a novelist though mocking the

¹¹ It is important to remember that by 1815, Shakespeare was acknowledged as the National Bard, feted by Garrick in his famous Stratford Jubilee of 1769, and, according to Kate Rumbold, “invested with an enduring emotional and moral authority” through the quotations found in contemporary novels (Rumbold, 50). Indeed, Austen elsewhere acknowledges Shakespeare’s authority, describing him as “part of an Englishman’s constitution”, and suggesting that “we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions” (*Mansfield Park*, 390-1).

language and conventions that she knew best – those of the sentimental novel – and her technique did not fundamentally change, although it was honed and perfected in the writing of the six mature novels and unfinished works. Murphy’s elegant analysis of the ways in which Austen dissected and then reassembled the conventions of the sentimental novel to create her own unique form illuminates both Austen’s technique and its effects. It is my contention here that analysis of Austen’s interactions with the conventions of sensationalist newspaper articles, political pamphlets, and magazine stories (as a beginning) sheds similar new light on some old topics, such as Austen’s irony, her politics, and her proto-feminism. If we take seriously my suggestion, borne out in the example from *Emma*, that Austen’s allusive practice allocates a similar weight of cultural authority to both lasting and ephemeral materials, we must then consider its implications. Austen starts to appear to us as an even trickier, more ironic, and more subversive writer than we had previously thought.

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