

Spotlight on the Juvenilia

Jane Austen, Young Author

By Juliet McMaster.

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30 B/W illustrations. Paperback. \$49.95.

Review by Marsha Huff.

Juliet McMaster begins her new book with a challenge: “I argue that if you don’t know Jane Austen’s juvenilia, you can’t claim to know Jane Austen.” In *Jane Austen, Young Author*, McMaster sets out to enlighten those who don’t know the juvenilia and to provide original insights for those who think they do. As Peter Sabor says in the Foreword, “the spotlight is on the early work itself, not merely as the precursor of the six published novels . . . but as a major achievement in its own right.”

For more than twenty years, McMaster’s scholarship has focused on Austen’s juvenilia. The Juvenilia Press, which she founded at the University of Alberta, Canada, began editing and publishing the young author’s stories in the mid-1990s. This book-length study, the first of its kind, is well timed, as JASNA members look ahead to the 2020 AGM in Cleveland, Ohio, with the theme “Jane Austen’s Juvenilia: Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution.”

Those familiar with Austen’s early work know that it is not only artful but also hilarious, especially when read aloud, as she would have shared it with her first audience—her family. McMaster’s summation is not exaggerated: “Here is a cornucopia of sharply defined characters, vivid and unbridled action, over-the-top absurdity, and crackling and wittily apt dialogue.” Austen wrote the works that comprise the juvenilia between 1787 and 1793, from ages 11 to 17. She copied and preserved them in three bound notebooks, which she labeled “Volume the First,” “Volume the Second,” and “Volume the Third,” consciously imitating the format of contemporary novels and assuming for herself the role of author.

As a framework, McMaster identifies two strands coexisting in the juvenilia

and the later novels: the ethic of energy, which predominates in the satire of the juvenilia, and the ethic of sympathy, which underlies the novels. The characters in the earliest juvenilia are entirely self-seeking, driven to satisfy their own desires whatever the cost to family and friends. In this category McMaster analyzes Laura and Sophia, the protagonists of “Love and Freindship,” who selfishly wreak havoc wherever they go. By the time 16-year-old Austen wrote “Catharine, or the Bower,” she had begun to infuse her work with the ethic of sympathy, creating a heroine who, McMaster says, is “morally scrupulous.” In the mature novels, a minor character, such as Lucy Steele or John Thorpe, occasionally harkens back to the self-serving types in the juvenilia.

McMaster presents Jane Austen as a fully self-conscious artist experimenting with literary forms of the day—“novels” in letters, “novels” with an omniscient author, and comic plays. She understood the structure of each genre and its conventions. Novels are divided into chapters, plays into acts and scenes. In epistolary narratives, each correspondent tells her story in a distinct voice. “A Collection of Letters,” for example, consists of five letters that McMaster analyzes as “experiments in catching the voices and tone” of each character.

In a discussion of the hyperbole central to Austen’s satire, McMaster says, “it is Rabelaisian, carnivalesque.” Even as a child, Austen had read widely in contemporary fiction; she delighted in parodying the tropes she found there and in taking them to extremes. McMaster identifies one of Austen’s “most gleeful recurring jokes” as gender reversal. In “Henry and Eliza,” for example, the heroine is an adventuress, like Tom Jones, who purloins banknotes, steals other girls’ fiancés, and is thrown into prison. The most desirable man in “Jack and Alice” is a feminized male—“amiable, accomplished and bewitching—while the heroine is “addicted to the Bottle and the Dice.” Going against the grain of contemporary

conduct books, the juvenilia assumes that girls can be as naughty and as adventurous as boys.

The chapter on teaching “Love and Freindship”—which McMaster calls “the most complete and accomplished single piece” in the juvenilia—is a must-read for understanding Austen’s artistry. McMaster explains the composition’s relationship to 18th-century fiction and, in particular, the cult of sensibility. In a sustained analysis of the text, she identifies the prevailing ideas and values that 14-year-old Austen understood and adroitly parodied.

She also studies Austen’s early mastery of dialogue to establish character. In “Lesley Castle,” for example, Charlotte Lutterell’s obsession with cooking is conveyed in both action and words. She describes the face of her distressed sister as “White as a Whipt syllabub,” and she longs to visit Vauxhall “to see whether the cold Beef there is cut so thin as it is reported.” Teenage Austen was on her way to the creation of Mrs. Allen’s single-minded focus on dress in *Northanger Abbey* and Mr. Woodhouse’s preoccupation with food and health in *Emma*.

The book includes a delightful illustrated chapter on McMaster’s drawings for the Juvenilia Press and for *The Beautifull Cassandra*. Her lively illustrations interpret Austen’s work with the satiric humor and frenetic activity on which the stories hinge.

Jane Austen, Young Author provides both an indispensable introduction and a sophisticated exploration of the *Juvenilia*.

Marsha Huff is a past president of JASNA and was co-coordinator of the 2005 AGM in Milwaukee, “Jane Austen’s Letters in Fact and Fiction.” The AGM commissioned from the Juvenilia Press an edition of Austen’s early epistolary novel Lady Susan.

