



Searching for Jane Austen: Restoring the “Fleas” and “Bad Breath”

EMILY AUERBACH

Emily Auerbach is an award-winning Professor of English at the U.W. Madison, co-host of “University of the Air” for Wisconsin Public Radio, producer of the “Courage to Write” series of documentaries on women writers, director of a 40-event Austen festival in 2001, and author of *Searching for Jane Austen*.

JUST MONTHS AFTER HIS SISTER DIED, Henry Austen published a brief biographical notice included with the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. “Short and easy will be the task of the mere biographer,” raved Henry Austen, concluding that nothing much happened to his sister (3). He shared with readers an account of Jane Austen’s height, graceful carriage, proper deportment, pleasing features, and modest cheeks; he stressed her piety and emphasized her humility. He failed to mention, however, that she wrote saucy adolescent burlesques filled with outrageous heroines who murder their parents and poison their rivals. He also chose not to say that his sister acted in private family theatricals, negotiated with publishers, alluded in her novels to the slave trade and the rebellious Americans, and wrote acerbic letters to her sister, such as one suggesting of a critic of *Pride and Prejudice*, “Kill poor Mrs Sclater if you like it” (9 February 1813).¹

Poor Mrs. Sclater was indeed killed—by relatives who omitted that sentence from biographical accounts and from early editions of Austen’s letters, just one of many examples of whitewashing. Austen’s remark about some neighbors—“I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me”—became “I was as civil to them as *circumstances* would allow me” when it was first printed for the public (contrast the full letter of 20 November 1800 with its censored version in Brabourne 1:243). Neither letter appeared in Henry Austen’s Biographical Notice, presumably because such comments

would have undermined his claim that Jane Austen “never spoke an unkind word to anybody or had anything but sweet thoughts.”

To present a kinder, gentler Jane to the world, Henry Austen carefully quoted from only two letters. In one, Austen seems to apologize for the small scale of her feminine writing, referring to it as a “little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine as to produce little effect after much labour” (16 December 1816). In the other, a dying Austen praises her sister Cassandra’s tender nursing and prays God to bless her family (28 May 1817). Henry Austen admitted that he had removed from this final letter some “gentle animadversion” of no concern to those outside the family. One wonders just how gentle this hostile criticism was and what dying remark about offensive neighbors or obtuse critics may have been lost to us forever. Together Henry and Cassandra Austen carefully destroyed or sprayed verbal perfume on portions of their sister’s letters deemed too offensive for outsiders.

Henry Austen insisted in his Biographical Notice that his amiable sister never sought a public, so of course he omitted letters showing Austen’s keen interest in sales: “You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S.&S. is sold & that it has brought me £140—besides the Copyright, if that shd ever be of any value.—I have now therefore written myself into £250.—which only makes me long for more.—I have something in hand—which I hope on the credit of P.&P. will sell well, tho’ not half so entertaining” (6 July 1813). This gives the lie to Henry Austen’s insistence in his Biographical Notice that his sister was never motivated by hope of profit. As Jan Fergus has documented so incontrovertibly in *Jane Austen: A Literary Life*, Austen sprinkles references to money and readers throughout her letters. Austen “shall . . . try to make all the Money” and “make People . . . pay” for *Pride and Prejudice*, hopes “that many will feel themselves obliged to buy” the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, admits of *Mansfield Park*, “I am very greedy & want to make the most of it,” and comments about readers who borrow rather than buy her books, “tho I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls Pewter too” (25 September 1813, 6 November 1813, 20 November 1814, 30 November 1814).

Although proud of his sister’s writing, Henry Austen labored in his Biographical Notice to present a modest, delicate, saintly woman unconcerned with her artistic reputation. He favored adjectives such as sweet, kind, happy, and tranquil. For example, we learn that his sister had an “extremely sweet” voice and endowments that “sweetened every hour” of her relatives’ lives. Henry Austen credited his ever-saccharine sister with a “perfect placidity of

temper” and flawlessness, ignoring the fact that she wrote in a letter, “pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked” (23 March 1817).

Jane Austen’s nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, continued the verbal softening and censorship of Jane Austen’s letters in his 1870 *Memoir*. As the first full-scale biography of Austen, Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* exercised a powerful influence on later Austen biographies, critical studies, and encyclopedia entries. We are still feeling the effects of the Jane Austen myth constructed in 1870 for public consumption.

In the very first sentence of his *Memoir*, Austen-Leigh refers to his “dear Aunt Jane.” Noting that her nephews and nieces “did not think of her as being clever” but valued her “as one always kind, sympathetic, and amusing,” Austen-Leigh praises his maiden aunt’s charming, delightful personality, “sweet temper and loving heart,” “cheerful contented disposition,” “humble mind,” and “modest simplicity.” Austen-Leigh emphasizes those qualities considered ladylike, such as Aunt Jane’s enjoyment of the piano or her devotion to nursing the sick. Like his Uncle Henry, Austen-Leigh liberally sprinkles the word “sweet” throughout his biographical account. Reading Austen-Leigh’s comment that Aunt Jane’s “sweetness of temper never failed,” detective novelist P. D. James begs to differ: “On the contrary, it failed frequently, and if it hadn’t we would not have had the six great novels” (79).

Austen-Leigh must have broken out in a sweat about what to do with his supposedly docile aunt’s iconoclastic minor writings, those rowdy spoofs and satiric fragments about young women who toss rivals out the window, raise armies, and get “dead Drunk.” In his 1870 *Memoir*, Austen-Leigh praises the family decision not to publish these puerile, nonsensical early stories and chooses to print only one example: an early sketch called “The Mystery” that features mostly male characters speaking in acceptable ways. This fragment gives no hint of the outrageous heroines and audacious scenes contained in most other youthful pieces. As Juliet McMaster observed in private correspondence, Austen-Leigh made a “misguided and eccentric choice” in publishing only “The Mystery” from the three-volume collection of youthful effusions.

Austen-Leigh faced further difficulties when he came to his aunt’s letters. Cassandra had burned many, but apparently not enough. As cousin Caroline warned, “There is nothing in these letters which I have seen that would be acceptable to the public” (Caroline Austen 9). Austen-Leigh carefully deletes unacceptable letters and parts of letters and prefaces this section of his *Memoir* with a patronizing apology for his aunt’s triviality:

A wish has sometimes been expressed that some of Jane Austen's letters should be published. Some entire letters, and many extracts, will be given in this memoir; but the reader must be warned not to expect too much from them. . . . There is in them no notice of politics or public events; scarcely any discussions on literature. . . . They may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the tree in which it is placed; curiously constructed out of the simplest matters.

This image of a little nest supports his earlier claim in the *Memoir* that his simple aunt “never touched upon politics, law, or medicine” and only concerned herself with “the performance of home duties, and the cultivation of domestic affections.”

The first Aunt Jane letter Austen-Leigh shares contains no ellipsis dots, tricking readers into thinking they are encountering it in its entirety. But compare the beginning of Austen-Leigh's version with the uncensored letter:

Censored Austen-Leigh version:

My dear Cassandra,

I thank you for so speedy a return to my last two, and particularly thank you for your anecdote of Charlotte Graham and her cousin, Harriet Bailey, which has very much amused both my mother and myself.

Uncensored letter, with censored sentence in boldface:

My dear Cassandra,

Having just finished the first volume of *les Veillees du Chateau*, I think it a good opportunity for beginning a letter to you while my mind is stored with Ideas worth transmitting—I thank you for so speedy a return to my last two, and particularly thank you for your anecdote of Charlotte Graham & her cousin Harriet Bailey, which has very much amused both my mother & myself. (8 November 1800)

How else do we explain Austen-Leigh's deletion of the first sentence than to say he did not want Aunt Jane to allude to literary works (*Tales of the Castle* by Madame du Genlis) or to be caught boasting of her intellect (“my mind is stored with Ideas”)? Better to open with a harmless aunt thanking her sister and enjoying sharing anecdotes with her mother. Austen-Leigh also omits from this first letter sharp comments such as “the party . . . was in general a very ungentee one, and there was hardly a pretty girl in the room.” Gone is

a boast (“I said two or three amusing things”). Also deleted are references to a Turkish ship, the French, and Cyprus. In effect, Austen-Leigh creates a brilliant Catch-22. After removing references to politics and literature from the letters, he then observes that his songbird-like aunt takes “no notice of politics or public events” and avoids “discussions of literature.”

This pattern continues throughout the *Memoir*. “The politics of the day occupied very little of her attention,” Austen-Leigh concludes, but he fails to tell readers that he has carefully excised her remarks about sloops and frigates, the East Indies, Nova Scotia, and a 44-gun ship called the *Expedition*. Austen-Leigh also needed to support his claim that his aunt knew nothing of medicine, so he cuts sentences referring to bones, fractures, bile, and emetics. To keep his aunt from sounding too intellectual or bookish, he takes the razor to her allusions to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Samuel Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and other literary works. Better a reference to a petticoat than a novel, apparently.

Better blandness than wit. Austen-Leigh includes his cousin’s remark that their Aunt Jane “was as far as possible from being censorious or satirical . . . nor did she ever turn individuals into ridicule.” To bolster this claim, he of course had to withhold astringent comments from the letters such as the following:

Mrs Hall of Sherborn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she was expected, owing to a fright.— I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband.

I expect a very stupid Ball, there will be nobody worth dancing with, & nobody worth talking to.

Mr Waller is dead, I see;—I cannot greive about it, nor perhaps can his Widow very much.

Just how sweet is a woman who can joke about a stillborn child? As Virginia Woolf noted, Austen must have been “alarming to find at home.”

Almost every page of the *Memoir* contains an omission or alteration, usually without any indication that this is occurring. Austen-Leigh leaves in references to sacred crosses but not to secular fireworks. He suppresses sentences in which his aunt calls a rector “a wretch,” attacks “the ignorant class of school mistresses,” and describes a house as possessing “all the comforts of little Children, dirt, and litter.” Austen’s competitive quip about novelist Sir Walter Scott (“I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley”) becomes lobotomized into “I do not mean to like Waverley.” Readers of the *Memoir* also miss hearing her snipe about an unwelcome visitor, “Wyndham Knatchbull is

to be asked for Sunday, & if he is cruel enough to consent, somebody must be contrived to meet him.” Victorian sensibilities perhaps explain why Austen-Leigh deleted his aunt’s reference to “some naked Cupids over the Mantle-piece, which must be a fine study for Girls” or altered a letter to a niece who had visited:

Austen-Leigh’s censored version: Give my Love to little Cass. I hope she found my bed comfortable last night.

Austen’s original: Give my love to little Cassandra, I hope she found my Bed comfortable last night & **has not filled it with fleas.**

Austen-Leigh’s hatchet job robs Austen of her sparkle.

Austen-Leigh works hard through his censorship of the letters to contain Austen’s genius and put it in its place. Aunt Jane writes harmless domestic novels for her own amusement “without any self-seeking or craving after applause,” Austen-Leigh writes, and she accepts obscurity because “so lowly did she esteem her own claims.” Not surprisingly, he does not include lines from letters such as her quip, “I write only for Fame” (14 January 1796).

Austen-Leigh may have meant well but he clearly had an agenda: he wanted posterity to regard his aunt as feminine and angelic—one too refined to have mentioned naked bodies and fleas; too otherworldly to have thought of money; too modest to have felt superior to others. To create this image, he and other relatives censored her spark—her vivacious bite and self-confident dash—and presented a drab, humble paragon of propriety. Since the *Memoir* has been called a book that “can never be superseded,” “the basis of all subsequent biographies of Jane Austen,” and “still the place to begin” in the twenty-first century, these changes are important.² Books, articles, and newsletter columns about Austen in our own time (including some I wrote a few years ago!) continue to misquote her letters because they use Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* as a reputable source or overlook subtle and therefore insidious changes in wording. Austen-Leigh’s portrayal of an inoffensive and uninteresting maiden aunt became gospel.

In addition to suppressing references to politics, literature, medicine, and money, Austen-Leigh chose not to include letters and portions of letters that would have demonstrated Jane Austen’s dedication to her craft and her satisfaction with singlehood. “An artist cannot do anything slovenly,” she observed as early as 17 November 1798, and before any of her novels appeared in print she had already referred to herself as a self-conscious writer: “I begin already to weigh my words & sentences more than I did, & am looking about

for a sentiment, an illustration or a metaphor in every corner of the room" (24 January 1809). She "lop't & crop't" her works (29 January 1813), carefully noted changes in editions, recorded reactions to her novels, and continued to write until just days before her death. Yet relatives suppressed even her final literary production: an irreverent poem about an angry saint. That is why we must search for Jane Austen.

Those who picture Austen bemoaning her barren womb, bewailing her single state, and pining away should read her letter to a niece (not included in Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*):

My Dear Fanny,

You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my Life.

Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent!—

. . . Such a lovely display of what Imagination does. . . . —Oh!

What a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreeable

in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice. I shall hate you when

your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal &

maternal affections. (20 February 1817)

Although jokingly exaggerated ("I shall hate you"), this suppressed letter conveys Austen's sense that "conjugal and maternal duties" could be viewed as burdens, not rewards. Though single and childless, Jane Austen seems to have found abundant recompense in her life. In her letters she refers to her books as her children and to her heroines as "my Elinor," "my Emma," and "my Fanny." Even before her first novel found a publisher, Austen writes with a sense of contentment to her sister Cassandra after revisiting a ballroom: "It was the same room in which we danced 15 years ago!—I thought it all over— & inspite of the shame of being so much older, felt with thankfulness that I was quite as happy now as then" (9 December 1808). On her own at a London art museum, she certainly does not seem to feel lonely: "I liked my solitary elegance very much, & was ready to laugh all the time, at my being where I was" (24 May 1813).

Composition and publication seem to have brought Austen great pleasure. Just months before the publication of her first novel, she writes to her sister about her work on the proofs, her brother Henry's help, and her awareness of the monetary side of publishing: "No indeed, I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child; & I am much obliged to you for your enquiries. I have had two sheets to correct . . . The *Incomes* remain as they were, but I will get them altered if I can" (25 April 1811). How different this professional, ambitious, busy woman

writer is from her relatives' manufactured image of a "dear Aunt Jane" who scribbled humbly as a recreation with no thought of earning money.

Why is it important to remind ourselves about the extensive censorship of Jane Austen's letters? It epitomizes the decades of whitewashing and pigeonholing, sweetening and softening that transformed Jane Austen into a writer too often regarded even in the twenty-first century as the author of "girlie books" and the inspirer of "chick flicks."³ The most recent Jane Austen seminar I taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison consisted of 39 females and 1 male student who apologetically explained, "My mother made me take this class." In any search for Jane Austen, we must break free of dear Aunt Jane and of two centuries of attempts to put her down, touch her up, and shut her up. We must strip off those ruffles and ringlets added to her portrait, restore the deleted fleas and bad breath to her letters, and meet Jane Austen's sharp, uncompromising gaze head on.

NOTES

1. Portions of this AGM presentation and a fuller treatment of the topic of censorship and distortion can be found in my full-length study entitled *Searching for Jane Austen*.
2. Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 2:9; Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (London: British Library, 1989), 255; Carol Shields, *Jane Austen: A Penguin Life* (N.Y.: Viking, 2001), 183.
3. Acclaimed film director Ang Lee admitted in a Wisconsin Public Radio interview in 2000, "I know her novels exist and they're there but I consider them girlie stuff and never want to read them." See the final chapter of *Searching for Jane Austen*: "Finding Jane Austen Today."

WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, Emily. *Searching for Jane Austen*. Madison, WI: UWP, 2004.
- Austen, Caroline. *My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir*. Jane Austen Society, 1952 reprint of 1867 edition.
- Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*. Ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1988.
- _____. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. Oxford: OUP, 1997.
- Austen-Leigh, James Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. 1871. Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Clarendon, 1926.
- Brabourne, Lord Edward, ed. *Letters of Jane Austen*. London: Bentley & Son, 1884.
- Fergus, Jan. *Jane Austen: A Literary Life*. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- James, P. D. *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*. N.Y.: Knopf, 2000.