



“There She Is at Last”: The Byrne Portrait Controversy

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JANE AUSTEN'S FAMILY MEMBERS bequeathed few visual images of the novelist to subsequent generations of her admirers. The only picture whose provenance is clear is also ironic. Drawn by her sister, Cassandra, in 1804, this portrait gives no glimpse of Austen's features, depicting her from the back, seated and bonneted. But around 1810 Cassandra probably produced another drawing, this one of Austen from the front, unsmiling with her arms crossed,¹ and Britain's National Portrait Gallery placed its considerable authority behind claims for this sketch's genuineness by buying it in 1948. The rest—pretified versions of the 1810 drawing commissioned by one of Austen's nephews much later in the nineteenth century—are widely recognized today as idealized Victorian images.² The dearth of reliable representations of Jane Austen has set the stage for impassioned controversies about her appearance and the portraits said to convey it.

The object of the most recent controversy is a small pencil and ink drawing on vellum, which can be called the Byrne portrait.³ This representation and a heated disagreement about its authenticity have attracted widespread attention, due primarily to a BBC documentary about them, broadcast during the Christmas season of 2011.⁴ I will be examining that television special closely because, while it explores whether the Byrne portrait is a genuine depiction of the novelist, it also considers why there has been so much investment in what Austen looked like. This is not to say that *Jane Austen: The Unseen Portrait?* is a particularly good program. Its explicit organization is crude.

Seeking to build dramatic tension, the special's creators gave the investigation of the Byrne portrait the shape of a quest, one that culminates in a mock trial. And yet, along with this overblown structure and the clichéd and hyperbolic narrative leading the television audience through it, the BBC program also intermittently airs quieter, evocative moments. These moments turn the act of seeing into an implicit theme of the program by showing the responses of several variously-trained specialists as they look at the portrait for the first time. Those keen and sensitive observers, particularly the Austen scholars and the staff of her museum house, help us understand why the novelist's admirers want so much not only to know what Austen looked like but also to confirm the existence of the elusive physical object itself, an authentic portrait. At the same time they enable us to see why the Byrne portrait—or any portrait—is unlikely to fulfill those desires.



Early in *Jane Austen: The Unseen Portrait?* we learn how its present owner came to possess the picture. In Spring 2011, Paula Byrne, an acclaimed biographer, received it as a gift from her husband, Jonathan Bate. On the back of the drawing the name “Miss Jane Austin” is quite legible. The picture had already attracted attention. Austen scholar and editor Deirdre Le Faye mentioned it in an article on imaginary portraits of the novelist, published in the *Jane Austen Society Report* in 2007. Le Faye hypothesized that the artist based the picture on the description of her physical appearance that her brother Henry offered in his 1818 “Biographical Notice of the Author.” Without evidence to counter Le Faye’s view—almost nothing was known about the portrait’s provenance—the portrait’s market value remained modest, and Bate was able to buy it at auction for £2,000.⁵

Byrne, at work on her own biography of Jane Austen, says that she felt “this moment of recognition” as soon as she saw the portrait.⁶ But she would need to prove that the image was genuine. We can infer that her collaboration with the BBC offered a mutually satisfying solution, enabling her to get quick access to a group of highly trained professionals who might provide information about the portrait and enabling the BBC to produce a show that, with its focus on Jane Austen, might attract a lot of viewers. She and Martha Kearney, the program’s host, are shown taking the portrait to and getting information from a variety of experts, including fashion and art historians.

We watch as each is shown the portrait. When Hilary Davidson, a curator



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of fashion and decorative arts at the Museum of London, casts her eyes on the portrait for the first time, she gasps, bringing her hand to her mouth; Sir Roy Strong, former director of the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, grumbles at having to put on rubber gloves in order to handle the drawing on the table in front of him: “I mean honestly I’d put these

on for fifteenth-century manuscripts, but for an amateur, crummy, Regency piece of nothing, I mean, come on, this is ridiculous.” Those experts who are thrilled with and those who debunk the image form the backdrop for the variety of reactions voiced by the Austen scholars during the show. The program, however, does not pause to take stock of these diverse responses, preferring to foreground Byrne’s quest for authentication and to exaggerate claims for what her success would mean.

Our view of Jane Austen, Martha Kearney declares early in the program, has been determined by the few available visual images that have descended to us from the nineteenth century and have created our vision of “Dear Aunt Jane living a quiet, genteel retirement.” But the Byrne portrait just might “overturn” this vision. Byrne believes, says Kearney, that “it could revolutionize our view of one of Britain’s greatest writers.” And that’s not all: “if Paula’s right, her portrait would be one of the literary revelations of the century.” Kearney also encourages viewers to feel suspense by announcing what’s to come. Byrne will take what she has learned from her meetings with various experts and present the evidence for her portrait’s authenticity “to three of the world’s leading authorities on Austen” (this, at least, is not an exaggeration)—Deirdre Le Faye, Claudia L. Johnson, and Kathryn Sutherland.⁷ They will be asked to render a verdict. But making her case will be no easy task, Kearney warns: “Paula faces an uphill struggle if she’s to convince the world that her portrait is the true face of Jane Austen.”

What is the evidence that her quest affords? From the fashion and art historians, Byrne, Kearney, and the television audience following their progress learn that neither the dress of the woman in the portrait nor the vellum and ink used would rule out Austen’s later years, the second decade of the nineteenth century, as the period of the drawing’s execution. Fashion expert Hilary Davidson’s excitement over the portrait stems in large part from her ability to tie the style of the figure’s dress, quite specifically, to the years 1814 to 1816. Moreover, she thinks it would be hard for someone drawing at a later period to fake the style of the clothing in the picture. Byrne and Kearney learn as well about generic features of portraits: typical poses, props, and settings. These too do nothing to rule out Austen as the actual subject of the drawing and, in fact, may be related to her life and experience. The portrait contains a cat, an animal known to signify spinsterhood. The view out of the window behind the desk at which the woman sits shows St. Margaret’s Church and the edge of Westminster Abbey, and between 1813 and 1815, Austen paid long visits to her brother Henry, who lived in London’s West End.

Two of the art historians explain why they know that the portrait was done by an amateur, though someone who did have some lessons from a professional artist: the head doesn't sit on the body particularly well, and the right arm is too long. They find another indication of amateurism in the inclusion of a column and drapery, implying a bit of grandeur in an otherwise bourgeois scene. Byrne and Kearney also consult with David Anley, an expert in forensic facial recognition, who is usually employed in criminal cases. He compares the facial features of Byrne's portrait to the features in pictures of Austen's brothers and concludes that the noses are all similar and may constitute a shared "family trait."



Between excerpts of their consultations with these experts, the two women talk over Byrne's portrait and solicit opinions of it from Austen critics and biographers and the curator and manager of Jane Austen's House Museum. It is these moments, along with the courtroom-like finale, that reveal what is at stake in the controversy over this portrait, conveying, sometimes explicitly but oftentimes less overtly, the needs that an authenticated portrait of the novelist would satisfy. Early in the program Claire Tomalin, another Austen biographer, observes that "people long to find portraits of writers they admire. We all long to find them and the longing to have one and the longing to feel that 'there she is at last' is very understandable." The camera cuts away before she can explain her remarks, an editing choice that no doubt served the narrative that shapes the program but is also indicative of the program's missed opportunities. The thoughts of researchers and the Jane Austen's House Museum personnel who have spent years thinking about Jane Austen are too often reduced to sound bites. So with all of their televised (and sometimes unfortunately truncated) reactions in mind, I want to tease out what the desires expressed by "there she is at last" may be.

I think we should take seriously the word "there" in Tomalin's phrase because an authentic portrait really does signal presence. For a portrait to be genuine as opposed to imaginary, its subject had to have been in the room, so that the artist could capture her likeness. A relic as well as a record, the portrait not only depicts but also is material culture from a moment in her life. It tells us that she was "there."⁸

But there's more to this desire for presence than the wish to commune with a person of great accomplishments, a famous general, say, or a notable

politician. We admire Jane Austen as the creator of novels we love, but she is also for most readers the source of their meanings. As French literary critic Roland Barthes observed, “The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (143). The word—“confiding”—points to the intimacy that we may come to feel with the author as we read and enjoy her books and in Austen’s case some 160 extant letters she wrote primarily to family members and friends. Readers want their confidante to materialize and for her person to be the embodiment of the voice we hear and meanings we discover in reading her writings. As Ann Channon, the manager of Jane Austen’s House Museum, states, “She is so important. We wouldn’t all be reading the books we’re reading without this woman.” And she goes on to say, “It would be nice to put the books to the face.”

If we haven’t quite had the face or if we have so far been putting the books to the wrong face, still, most of the critics and professionals on the program who know Austen’s works well reveal that they already have a developed sense of her identity and that it would make a new portrait not a *revelation* but a *confirmation* of what they have hitherto envisioned. We can hear in Tomalin’s “at last” something finally appearing, perhaps after a delay. But we can also hear an expectation being met. The “moment of recognition” that Byrne herself says that she felt on seeing the portrait indicates that she held a prior idea of what the author looked like or perhaps should look like based on her experience with Austen’s writings. “It’s exactly the view of Jane Austen that I have,” she says about her portrait. Her Austen is a “feisty, professional woman writer who doesn’t write twee little novels, sort of frocks and smocks.” The quaint Jane Austen, Byrne says, “makes me cross actually because that is not the Jane Austen that I know and love.” Claudia Johnson’s impression of Austen as “a bold, amusing, lively, fun-loving person,” who was “very proud of being a novelist,” is not that far from Byrne’s view. That the portrait is at odds with Deirdre Le Faye’s image of the novelist, however, is made clear more than once during the broadcast.

The most dramatic claim of the program’s narrative, then, that the Byrne portrait may “revolutionize” our view of the author, should give us pause, for it suggests that Austen’s readers have never had anything to go on but Cassandra’s drawings and the engraving commissioned by her nephew J. E. Austen-Leigh. To assert, as the show’s narrative does many times, that the Byrne portrait could and should replace these works and would thereby have a powerful impact is to assume what the program itself does not actually

demonstrate, that readers derive a sense of what Austen looked like *only* from visual representations. The program reveals instead that Austen's novels and letters and even her family members' reminiscences and scholars' biographies and literary criticism enable readers to develop impressions—call them fantasies—of what she looked like.

Still, the possibility of another genuine portrait sparks excitement among the BBC program's Austen scholars and the staff at Jane Austen's House Museum, many of whom reveal a desire for the physical object itself as much as for its particular visual representation. And the meaning of that desire too deserves more consideration than the show explicitly devotes to it. To be the subject of a portrait, they suggest, is what Austen *deserved*. It is to be considered worthy of representation. Someone wants an image of you and is willing to pay for it (we learn from one of the program's art historians that in the early nineteenth century the best portrait artists charged about thirty guineas for a miniature and about three hundred guineas for an oil painting). Moreover, for the subject, consenting to pose is an acknowledgment of self-worth. That is partly why her sister Cassandra's sketch of Jane Austen, scowling with her arms crossed, may disappoint: in its refusal of a pose, the figure mocks both the genre of the portrait and herself. Yet all but one of Austen's brothers sat for their portraits. For Paula Byrne, this may be a sign of gender inequity within Austen's family: "It strikes me as rather . . . rather sad that the family did not think she was sufficiently important enough to merit her own miniature, her own portrait. These were the brothers. They were the important ones." Ann Channon sees the injustice from a different vantage point: "Every other authoress before and after probably has a portrait and Jane hasn't." An authentic portrait with its subject posed, pen in hand and a sheaf of paper before her, could rectify the injustice, for it would convey that she is valued for—and values herself for—her writing.



The program's trial-like last segment opens with Byrne's arrival at Chawton House Library (accompanied by the second movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony), where she will present to Johnson, Le Faye, and Sutherland what she and Kearney have learned from the experts they consulted. She discusses only a little of this information, and that's understandable, since conveying those experts' conclusions in detail would be repetitious for the television program's viewing audience. But because we don't know what information

the panelists have been given off-screen, we can't determine on what evidence some of their judgments are based. The makers of *Jane Austen: The Unseen Portrait?* obviously selected for inclusion in this segment those parts of their discussion about which the participants disagreed and had lively exchanges.

When Byrne reports the findings of Hilary Davidson, for example, who dated the portrait subject's dress to around 1815, Le Faye treats that information as evidence against the portrait being a rendering of Jane Austen. Women of the novelist's rank and means, Le Faye maintains, would not have dressed in the latest fashions. They kept and altered dresses for some years before discarding them. So in 1815, Austen would have been wearing a slightly older-style dress, perhaps somewhat retailed. Sutherland disagrees, however, reminding the others that at that period Austen had "more money than at any other time in her life" and was able to shop in Bond Street when she came to London. Behind this debate are two different visions of the novelist: one stressing the constricted lives of unmarried women of the lesser gentry, the other emphasizing the financial and social freedoms that Austen as a publishing novelist may have experienced, albeit for just a few years prior to her death in 1817.

When Byrne engages her panelists in a discussion of the portrait's facial features, calling attention to the faces in portraits of other family members as well as in Cassandra's rendering of her sister, another difference of opinion emerges. Anley's computer-assisted analysis of the portraits is not mentioned, and it would be helpful to know whether the ensuing discussion is influenced by his report. But in any case, when asked whether she sees a family resemblance among all these representations, Le Faye does not hesitate in saying no. Sutherland counters just as emphatically: "I do. I think the planes of the face, I think the eyebrows, the relationship between the eyebrows, the shape of the eyes, and the length of the nose." And Johnson is struck by similarities between the Byrne face and the one in Cassandra's drawing: "These noses are not dissimilar. There's something else and that is the decided asymmetry of the eyes." For Sutherland and Johnson, the other portraits provide important because empirical evidence. "When I look at that portrait," Sutherland concludes towards the end of this segment, "I see an image that looks like Jane Austen . . . not because it looks like Jane Austen that I carry around in my head or my heart but it looks like other images I've seen of Jane Austen, authenticated images, i.e., the National Portrait Gallery cartoon." Johnson concurs: "When you compare this picture with other members of Austen's family, the case gets stronger."

The final dispute concerns the "big question" that Byrne puts to the

group: “Why didn’t members of her family know about the existence of this portrait?” Byrne is shown immediately linking this question to one about the artist’s identity. Although she has since backed away from this attribution,⁹ she proposes Hampshire neighbor Eliza Chute as the artist. Chute had connections to St. Margaret’s Church, depicted in the portrait: she was married in it and, when in London, lived nearby. To Le Faye’s objection that Jane Austen didn’t know Eliza Chute well, Johnson observes, “It actually would make more sense if they didn’t know each other that well because then this [the portrait] could become lost—to the Austens.” Although Le Faye continues to maintain that the portrait is imaginary, Sutherland agrees with Johnson: “I’m quite taken with the idea that it could be an amateur who knew Jane Austen and didn’t necessarily move closely in the circle of the family, like Eliza Chute.”

For the panelists as well as for Byrne, the amateur status of the artist is a clue to her or his identity. But viewers of the program are aware that for the art historians interviewed earlier, “amateur” has other implications. The panelists do not address them, and we are left wondering whether they have been fully apprised of the art historians’ assessments. Although Roy Strong’s evident distaste for what he sees in the picture is the most negative appraisal, none of the art historians think the portrait evinces either striking talent or great skill. That the person who made the drawing had some training with a professional artist is the best that can be said of his or her execution. So how good can the likeness to Jane Austen be? If the subject’s arm is too long, why isn’t her nose? It might, unlike the arm, be anatomically possible without resembling the novelist’s actual nose. Moreover, her facial features are compared to the facial features of her brothers, who appear in paintings by artists who also had varying degrees of competence. How reliable are *their* portraits? How good a likeness is the drawing Cassandra made of her sister?

Even highly trained and skilled artists don’t produce unmediated portraits (and photographers, for that matter, don’t either). The rendering provided depends on not only the abilities of the artist but also the relationship of the creator to his or her sitter. Artists convey interpretations of their subjects, and our appreciation of a portrait may depend on whether we share the artist’s view of the subject. Portraits are also mediated by the aesthetic and social conventions of this genre, including conventions about resemblance itself. As art historian Richard Brilliant observes, “the degree of likeness required of a portrait may vary greatly, affected by changing views about what constitutes ‘resemblance’ and whether it can ever be measured on an objective basis” (26). So we need to be aware that even if the artist of the Byrne portrait is identified,

indeed, even if the portrait can thereby be authenticated, we will never know how well it captures Jane Austen's appearance.

Moreover, if a portrait testifies to the worth of its subject, what does an amateur's rendering convey? If Austen posed for an acquaintance, would this necessarily indicate that she sought public recognition for her writing or that the acquaintance thought she ought to have it? She might, for example, have consented as a favor to someone she knew who simply wanted to practice drawing on vellum and who, Austen believed, was unlikely to display or even keep the drawing afterwards. Even the pose, conveying a woman writing, a woman who's "taking on the world," as Byrne describes the figure, might be less meaningful if Austen had assumed that the drawing would be discarded.

If Austen posed for a close female friend or relation—someone like Martha Lloyd or her niece Fanny Knight—she or that close companion may well have desired to memorialize the novelist's achievements, but the portrait would still not be evidence of the self-approval or admiration that Byrne and others would like to claim for her. In *Jane Austen among Women*, the book I published twenty years ago, I suggested, based on reading the letters of Austen and several of her female friends and family members, that women in Austen's social circle were willing to voice sentiments to one another, including pride in their own accomplishments, that they would not have expressed to most of their male kin and acquaintances or to a wider public. If Byrne's portrait is a product of the women's culture that I described in my book, it tells us no more than the delightfully confident remarks about her novels that Austen made in letters to Cassandra or her niece Fanny. Although she refused opportunities to be known to the public as the author of her novels, she let her confidantes know that she was proud of what she had written and glad for any praise that she heard.¹⁰ In this case, then, although Byrne's portrait might document Austen's self-confidence and the portrait artist's appreciation for her writing, the drawing would have been engendered and meant to stay within a small, private circle of intimate female friendships.

But let's say, for a moment, that the portrait was commissioned, the circumstance that would more surely convey self-esteem and the desire for wider recognition or others' respect for her writing. Suppose that one day in 1815, while staying with her brother Henry in town, Austen put on her newest dress and went out to sit for her portrait. Whether she or someone else paid for the portrait, its quality reveals that very little money was spent on it. That hypothetical occasion could certainly suggest a woman "comfortable in her

own skin”—Byrne’s words again. But the ineptness of the drawing renders the occasion a good deal less triumphant.

When the three Austen scholars are asked to register a final opinion about the figure in Byrne’s drawing—is it Jane Austen?—Le Faye, holding steadfast, says no.¹¹ Sutherland and Johnson, while acknowledging “huge questions” that have yet to be answered about the portrait, remain open to the possibility that it is. “This is a very intriguing candidate,” Johnson concludes, “and I want to know more about it.” And why not encourage Byrne’s hopes for her picture? If some of the evidence that she has gathered is not particularly persuasive, none of it so far rules out the drawing as an authentic portrait of the novelist. But we also need to lower our expectations about that prospect. If the portrait is genuine, it would certainly fulfill the role of relic, testifying to Austen’s presence in or around 1815, when she sat before someone who was carefully putting graphite and ink on vellum. But because an amateur made the drawing, it cannot provide the justice for Austen that a portrait by an accomplished artist would achieve. This portrait-as-object does not evince Austen’s self-esteem or her family’s or contemporary readers’ high regard. Finally, the portrait cannot tell us what Jane Austen looked like, though the problems of determining resemblance are not limited to amateur portraits.

Despite its narrative’s exaggerated claims and contrived drama, *Jane Austen: The Unseen Portrait?* offers valuable evidence about our experience with authors’ portraits. Kearney claims that the Byrne drawing could “revolutionize” our view of the novelist, but the BBC documentary actually demonstrates the difficulty of achieving the consensus on which such a revolution would depend. We may look at the same portrait, but we all see differently. If for Byrne the portrait shows a “professional woman writer at the height of her creative powers,”¹² Le Faye perceives the subject as “solemn, almost sanctimonious, very consciously posed” with an “I am the great writer attitude.” It’s a pose she strongly rejects: “no I couldn’t accept that as being her.” So the portrait debates will continue, and the desire for a reliable likeness will remain out of reach. But why is that so bad? We bring to our looking different kinds of training, reading experiences, and the impressions we form from that reading. And that means that anyone interested in what Jane Austen looked like probably already knows.

NOTES

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1. Doubts have been raised about the provenance of the 1810 sketch in recent years, usually to suggest that we know no more about it than about other portraits that have been proposed and disputed as authentic representations of Jane Austen. See, for example, Johnson's *Jane Austen: Cult and Cultures*, in which she raises questions about the attribution of this second sketch to Cassandra Austen, though she does not go so far as to deny it (30–34).

2. In 1869, at the request of J. E. Austen-Leigh, the novelist's nephew, artist James Andrews created a prettified version in watercolors of Cassandra's 1810 drawing. That became the basis for an engraving, which made some further adjustments to the face, posture, and clothing and which appeared in Austen-Leigh's 1870 memoir of his aunt.

3. The most important previous controversy broke out in the *Times Literary Supplement* when Johnson championed the Rice portrait as a genuine representation of Austen ("Fair Maid"). Her article fueled a fierce argument that continued in the *TLS*'s letters to the editor columns in that and subsequent years. For the letters, see issues dated 20 and 27 March 1998, 3 and 17 April 1998, 18 December 1998, 8 January 1999, 15 October 1999, 3 and 24 May 2002, 2 August 2002, 4 May 2007. The controversy recently erupted again when digital analysis of a photograph of the painting before it was restored revealed writing on the back—the names Jane Austen and Ozias Humphrey, thought to be the portrait's painter. See Ed Butler's "Jane Austen: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl" and The Rice Portrait of Jane Austen website, which provides a letter from Jacob Simon, former head curator of the National Portrait Gallery, and a response to his view that the discovered writing is not significant.

4. The debate has been carried forward so far in Austen blogs, such as Austenonly; newspaper accounts of the BBC program; Byrne's *TLS* commentary (13 April 2012); and a letter in response in the *TLS* issue of 27 April 2012.

5. The program does acknowledge that a genuine portrait of the novelist would sell for a good deal more, between £100,000 and £1,000,000, but the program's focus is elsewhere, on the non-economic ways in which such a find would matter. Skeptical bloggers and newspaper reporters have also noted that Byrne stands to gain financially even if the portrait cannot be authenticated since the public attention that the portrait has attracted is also good publicity for the biography of Austen that she is currently completing.

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted statements come from *Jane Austen: The Unseen Portrait?*

7. Deirdre Le Faye has succeeded R. W. Chapman as the most important editor of Austen's letters and of various other Austen family papers, including the biography written by two Austen descendants, W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh (which she revised and published as *Jane Austen: A Family Record*). Claudia L. Johnson and Kathryn Sutherland have produced some of the best and most important literary studies on the novelist. And all have published significant and influential commentary about the putative portraits of the novelist.

8. For an account of nineteenth-century British views of portraits and the desire for communion between viewer and the portrait's subject, see Paul Barlow's "Facing the Past and Present" (226–28). Barlow's essay includes a useful explanation of the National Portrait Gallery's difficulties building a collection composed only of authenticated portraits.

9. Byrne has more recently turned her attention to the family of the Reverend Edward Smedley

because they lived in a house in London during the Regency period that may have offered a good view of Westminster Abbey and St. Margaret's Church. So the view out the window, shown in the portrait, would be literal rather than symbolic. See "Who was Miss Jane Austen?" in *TLS*.

10. See, for example, Austen's letter of 29 January 1813.

11. For Le Faye's complete argument against the authenticity of the Byrne portrait, see "Black Ink," which she published after the BBC program aired.

12. Byrne used this description in a radio interview on BBC's *Today*.

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