

**JANE AUSTEN AND HER BIOGRAPHERS:
THE WOMAN WRITER AS LITERARY ICON**

BY

LEILA W. MACDONALD RYAN, M.A.

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JANE AUSTEN AND HER BIOGRAPHERS

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Author: Leila W. MacDonald Ryan, B.A. (McMaster University)
M.A. (University of Toronto)
M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor James King

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the biographies of Jane Austen written between 1817 and the present in an attempt to discover how life writers have shaped the reputation of a woman writer. While Austen's art is often compared to Shakespeare's in its ability to delineate 'real' life and character, biographers have tended to deny her the worldly experience which they deem so necessary to the formation of Shakespeare's art. Both these authors present similar problems for life writers in that so little evidence remains of their lives, but the portrayals of them suggest that in the absence of verifiable 'fact', biographers tend to depict their subjects in terms of gender stereotypes. In this construct, the occupation of author demands worldly experience which is by definition denied the female subject. This tension, between the need for experience and the perception of femininity as necessarily innocent, is apparent in biographies of Austen written well into the twentieth-century.

My investigation reveals that the Austen family's concern to maintain their relative's gentility played a significant role in the way she was depicted. When this coincided with the Victorian impulse to portray authors as virtuous examples to their readers, Austen's reputation became frozen into that of a literary icon. Not only did she become the saintly maiden aunt, but my study suggests that biographers and many critics read the novels solely as drawing-room comedies, and in the process often identified the author with her female characters. From

the 1860s onwards some literary critics did challenge this image of sweet perfection, but their views were generally not reflected in the lives of Austen. Biographies written in the twentieth-century have not appreciably altered this situation; only recently, for example, has a biographer chosen to depict Austen as cranky and disillusioned by her lot in life. My conclusion is that the biographers' acceptance of stereotypes of femininity, and their perception that domestic life is impermeable, uneventful, and hence has no influence on the creative process, are particularly detrimental to the portrayal of Austen, both as woman and as artist.

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Introduction

Because literary criticism and literary biography often tend to overlap, in a discussion of the biographies of Jane Austen it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the two. Both deal with reputation, but the former is concerned with critical evaluation of the works and the latter with the life of a woman who wrote. While the nineteenth-century view of 'good works equal good woman' may be no longer prevalent, the relationship between the personality of a writer and her art is still often regarded, both by biographers and their readers, as a necessarily dependent one. Literary critics also have a long history of mining the lives of authors in an effort to understand their work. In the case of famous authors, it is thus not surprising that their literary and biographical reputations tend to become confused with each other, and that a close correspondence between the two is often assumed. For students of Jane Austen this is a particular problem since for at least a century after her death the biographical enterprise was controlled by relatives who were more concerned with respectability and gentility than they were with biographical accuracy. Always in the forefront of this activity was the need to establish Austen as an admirable woman and, in the light of this, the issues of authorship were seen to be of little consequence. Biographers who were not family members were also unduly influenced by the attitude of unquestioning admiration and she thus gained an entrenched reputation as a particularly virtuous woman. In the process, however,

this perception of her became peculiarly distanced from her reputation as author.

Literary critics, on the other hand, were at odds on the subject of Austen from at least the 1860s onwards. While many of them read the novels as autobiographical, their conclusions about her critical reputation ranged from delight in her tiny perfect world, to chagrin at her nastiness. This diversity remains to the present, and while life writers were quick to defend Austen against harsh literary opinion, only very recently have these differences begun to be fully reflected in biographical writing about her. While the obvious distinction must be made between biographical and critical reputations, such a prolonged concern with Austen's perfection points to one of the main issues in Austen biography; instead of depicting her as a woman who wrote, her biographers were repeatedly trapped into recreating her as a model of femininity. Incidental to this portrayal was the fact that she was an author, and consequently the only way to integrate her art with her life was to read the novels as autobiographical.

The difficulty of dealing with creativity when women authors become biographical subjects is not peculiar to Austen. One of the major obstacles to this process lies in the perception that because it is apparently invisible, domestic life, the arena in which many women have been placed, is uneventful and hence not formative for an artist. This area of experience is also seen to be impossible to recreate or to examine; biographers are quite prepared to speculate on military and political interactions, but because of its perceived insignificance, they are unprepared to treat domestic existence in the same depth or with the same

seriousness. There are thus obvious problems with women as biographical subjects when large portions of their life experience is deemed irrelevant; in the case of a woman artist the problem is compounded because this attitude automatically separates her life from her art.

Recently critics have begun to explore these issues in theoretical terms, and to suggest that the division of experience into the public and the private, and the identification of women with the private, is the product of the emerging industrial society of the nineteenth-century. This was the period in which the early family biographies of Austen were being written, and feminist critics are beginning to relate these ideas to the study of her biography. Deborah Kaplan,¹ for example, suggests that in Austen's case the concepts of 'woman' and 'author' are in direct conflict with each other; the latter presumes a level of worldly experience which is precluded by the former. In addition, since life writing by definition deals with public identity, to emphasize the privacy of the woman author's existence promotes her disappearance. Similarly, Margaret Kirkham² concludes that the persistent emphasis on Austen as observer rather than participant in the issues of her day obscures any connections she may have had with enlightenment feminism.

¹ Deborah Kaplan, "The Disappearance of the Woman Writer: Jane Austen and Her Biographers," *Prose Studies* (September, 1984).

² Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983).

In an effort to explore some of these questions, the thesis examines all the relevant biographies of Jane Austen. Chapter one begins with an overview of the biographies and moves on to discuss domesticity as well as the connections between the Austen portraits and her biographers' perceptions of her. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the ways in which biographers have dealt with Austen and Shakespeare, with whom she is so often compared. Chapter two deals with the family biographies of Austen, and Chapter three with those written by non-family members up to 1932. Chapter four spans the works of the forty years between nineteen thirty-eight and nineteen seventy-eight. Chapter five discusses the two most recent biographies by John Halperin and Park Honan.

This study reveals that, in spite of the emphasis on the privacy and domesticity of Austen's world, the issues raised in the theoretical discussions of the domestic have not been reflected in Austen biography. With the best intentions in the world biographers continue to measure her against a standard which assumes the validity of a public life as the single most necessary ingredient for inclusion in the ranks of great author. This means that the biographer is placed in the position of apologizing for his/her subject and rationalizing as to why great art should come out of such confined circumstances. The end result is that exploration of the creative process is sacrificed to recreation of her as a stereotype of 'author' which is implicitly male.

CHAPTER I: Jane Austen's Biography: An Overview

Some Brief Examples

In the broadest sense biography may be defined as the narrative of a life which is lived by one person and written by another.¹ Implicit in this generalization is the assumption that the individuals in question are worth writing about and this decision is based on judgements about eventful lives and/or accomplishments in politics, the military, religion, society, business or the arts. In this framework it is taken for granted that an accurate interweaving of events and accomplishments is basic to the enterprise. The narratives of any one individual life are never identical, however; as the values and concerns of society change, so do styles in biography and the lives of the famous are mined for a variety of purposes when authors pursue different themes and issues. When the field is narrowed to that of literary biography, and when that is defined as including only subjects who are authors, the output is no less diverse. While the myth of the artist as a 'special case' stimulates both the writing and the reading of literary biography, it presents difficulties when the telling of the life implies an attempt to shed light on the workings of the artistic process.

¹ Dennis M. Petrie, *Ultimately Fiction* (West Lafayette Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1981) 5. All further references to this edition will be as 'Petrie' in the body of the text.

Authorship is a private pursuit and since biography by its very nature thrives on public actions, these frequently take precedence over inner matters. It is also a truism that for authors in whom there is great public interest, any 'fact' about the life assumes great value, and in circumstances where few details are known, these may be elaborated and enlarged upon to the point where no argument can weaken their hold on popular affection; they are an essential part of what the reading public 'knows' about its favourites.

Biographers in general, and literary biographers in particular, are frequently moved to challenge these entrenched views and the resultant diversity, rather than leading to chaos, tends to produce fuller portraits. In making a case for these alternate accounts, William McKinley Runyan, for instance, cites the multiple lives that have been written of Shakespeare, Jesus and Lincoln, all of whom have distinct popular *personae* and each of whom has been portrayed in a variety of conflicting versions. On the basis of these examples Runyan concludes that there is nothing in the facts of a life which uniquely determine any single account of it.²

Not all public figures are the beneficiaries of such variety, however. Jane Austen is the perennial victim of the pervasive perception of her as a Victorian 'aunt'. While she is an author about whom relatively few facts are available, a steady stream of biographers, family and otherwise, have chosen her as their

² William McKinley Runyan, "Alternate Accounts of Lives: An Argument for Epistemological Relativism," *Biography* 3:3 (Summer 1980) 209-24.

subject. While Austen's novels qualify her as a 'famous writer' and an appropriate candidate for biography, without exception those who write about her lament the paucity of information and the uneventful nature of her life. The resultant works are, with few exceptions, repetitions of each other, and the received version of her sweetly and effortlessly producing works of genius from under a desk blotter, remains relatively unchallenged.

The sheer number of lives written of Austen is not particularly surprising, but given that critical opinion of her novels has not been unanimously favourable in the one hundred and seventy years since her death, it is noteworthy that her biographies have been so remarkably homogeneous. Since the late nineteenth-century it has been acceptable to suggest that Austen's perspective on the world may not have been narrow, that she flirted and was not a prude, and that moreover her ironic view of the world may have made her at times a feared and awkward companion. Observations of this nature have, however, only served to prove the essential "humanness" of Austen and not to demolish the idealized portrait of her; exceptions to the rule have been consistently viewed as aberrations rather than definitive characteristics, and challenges to these portrayals have only appeared recently. Joan Rees' *Jane Austen: Woman and Writer* (1976), for example, reminds her readers that neither the Austens nor their home lives were pictures of perfection, and she casts doubt on the traditional version of the ideal happiness of the family circle. While she perpetuates the

image of Austen as "Christian Stoic"³ which began with Henry Austen's 1817 "Biographical Notice", Rees insists on her "tough rationality" and calls attention to the "bracing dash of acidity [which] her family preferred to forget". The final word, however, is reserved for the reminder that in spite of the mental toughness and acerbic tongue, what endures is the impression of Jane Austen as a writer who is endowed with a "peculiar charm" (Rees 199,200).

A more critical response to the legend is John Halperin's *The Life of Jane Austen* (1984) which denies his subject the feminine appeal that Rees views as central. In his version Austen is an ironic and detached spectator of life who writes novels to dispel the misery inherent in her status as maiden aunt and poor relation. Halperin suggests also that on Austen's death the family closed ranks and that the personality that they portrayed of her was not the reality: "Surely something was being hidden. Why else call her flawless? Could this life, could any life, have been lived devoid of 'events,' of 'crisis,' of 'attachment'?"⁴

This notion of family conspiracy is rather tantalizing, and it is encouraged by the knowledge that Cassandra, Austen's sister, destroyed and censored many of the letters before passing them on to her niece, Fanny, the mother of Lord Brabourne, who published the first edition of the letters in 1884. While evidence of this nature clearly suggests that family did orchestrate accounts of events and

³ Joan Rees, *Jane Austen: Woman and Writer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) 192. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Rees' in the body of the text.

⁴ John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 5. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Halperin' in the body of the text.

materials in order to idealize the life, these were not the only constraints which shaped the portrait. In each case, beginning with Henry Austen's evangelical portrayal of his sister in 1817, through James Edward's 1870 description of the Victorian 'aunt', to the more scholarly portrayal of her by William and Richard Austen-Leigh in 1913, family interests were never at odds with the accepted norms of nineteenth-century biography. Hence Austen and her family were presented, not necessarily as they really were, but as it was most inspiring for readers (and they themselves) to think they were.⁵ In this respect what they individually produced was not substantially different from works written by authors who were not related to Austen.

Between 1880 and 1913 there were five other lives written of her; by Sarah Tytler, Mrs. Charles Malden, Goldwin Smith, Oscar Fay Adams and Francis Warre Cornish. Without exception, they all relied on the family accounts for details of the life and character, and although the collected edition of Austen's letters was available after 1884, none of them viewed these as containing any evidence which challenged the received notions of her. All this transpired in spite of the fact that the letters, even after Cassandra's foray through them, still contained criticism of family and friends and harsh (sometimes *risqué*) comments

⁵ Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) 148. In his chapter, "How Much Should a Biographer Tell?," Altick notes that a powerful section of critical opinion insisted that much personal detail was irrelevant to the discussion of a writer's life, and that most Victorian biographers sympathized with, and were governed by, "the current passion for privacy" (154, 163). In this light, the Austen urge for gentility, no matter how frustrating its results for future biographers, does not seem as sinister as Halperin contends.

about pregnancy and child-birth.

While the family motives of self-protection and self-aggrandizement are quite readily discernible from their actions, these clearly were not shared by Tytler and company. It was more likely that they were conforming to the biographical fashion of reticence and praise. As well, Malden, Smith and Cornish produced volumes belonging to "Famous Women", "Great Writers" and "English Men of Letters" series respectively, and these formats were designed to extol the virtues of author's lives, not to provide revisionist accounts. Sarah Tytler's motive was not analytical either, since she aimed to set forth Austen and her novels as exemplary models for the behaviour and improvement of contemporary young women. Oscar Fay Adams, too, had few claims to objectivity; an American and an anglophile, he was intent on portraying Austen, the woman, with whom he was quite clearly infatuated.

It was not only her biographers who apparently doted on Jane Austen. According to B.C. Southam, by the 1860s there were signs that she was being elevated to the kind of "cultural shibboleth" that she would become later in the century. Her novels were admired more for their social significance than for their artistic merit, and they became prescribed reading on the grounds that they conformed to polite standards of decency and good-taste. This attitude is exemplified in Southam's discussion of the recommendation of her by the *English Woman's Domestic Magazine* of 1866:

Her humour is of 'a refined and amiable kind', the comedy is 'genteel', the morality is 'elegant', the taste of the author 'delicate' and 'lady-like'. She

is made something of a cult figure, an author not for the general public but for 'minds of the highest culture', for the reader capable of appreciating her 'subtle strokes of character, delicate shafts of satire ... dry wit... fineness of workmanship'.⁶

Assessments such as this were in sharp contrast to those of critics like Julia Kavanagh, a novelist who apparently refused to conform to the popular taste for piety and inspiration in literature. The view she expressed of Austen was not a particularly sunny one, when from the evidence of the novels she concluded:

The impression life produced on Miss Austen was peculiar. She seems to have been struck especially with its small vanities and small falsehoods...She refused to build herself, or to help to build for others, any romantic ideal of love, virtue, or sorrow...If we look under the shrewdness and quiet satire of her stories, we shall find a much keener sense of disappointment than of joy fulfilled. Sometimes we find more than disappointment.⁷

Margaret Oliphant, also a novelist, was even more caustic in her rejection of the notion of Austen's sweet simplicity:

Mr. Austen Leigh, without meaning it, throws out of his dim little lantern a passing gleam of light upon the fine vein of feminine cynicism which pervades his aunt's mind. It is something altogether different from the rude and brutal male quality that bears the same name. It is the soft and silent disbelief of a spectator who has to look at a great many things without showing any outward discomposure, and who has learned to give up any moral classification of social sins, and to place them instead on the level of absurdities.⁸

⁶ B.C.Southam, ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, vol.1* (London: Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1968) 30.

⁷ Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1862) 251-74.

⁸ Margaret Oliphant, "Miss Austen and Miss Mitford," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1870) 107, 294-305.

These observations in no way coincide with the version of Austen found in the 1870 *Memoir* produced in response to an upsurge in interest in her as a novelist, and which confirmed what her public already 'knew' about her from their reading of the novels. That James Edward's rather saccharine version of his aunt's life was not accepted in all quarters is clear, and while it did not provoke an alternate version of the life, it was the impetus for a number of reviews (of which the preceding are examples) which concentrated on her critical faculties and ironic perspective. Not all who made comments of this nature were immune to the notion of Austen's sweetness, however. In his review of the *Memoir* Richard Simpson, the first critic to name irony as the key to Austen's art,⁹ likened her method to that of Shakespeare: "It is clear that she began, as [he] began, with being an ironical censurer of her contemporaries ...she was a critic who developed herself into an artist." In spite of his conclusions about the novels, however, Simpson decides that:

In any case, after all possible deductions, Miss Austen must always have been a woman as charming in mind as she was elegant in person. What defects she had only prevented her being so good as to be good for nothing ... Hers is a magnetic attractiveness which charms while it compels ... Might we not ... borrow from Miss Austen's biographer the title which the affection of a nephew bestows upon her, and recognise her officially as 'dear aunt Jane'?¹⁰

⁹ Southam 31.

¹⁰ Richard Simpson, unsigned review of the *Memoir*, *North British Review* (April 1870) lii 129-52, Southam 241.

This dichotomy between recognition of irony in Austen's novels and insistence upon her gentle charm highlights the perennial problem that exists at the point where literary criticism and biography come together. Most, if not all, of these early biographers were literary critics, and since the main thrust of their activity was author-centred, there is the illusion that comment is directed at the life of the author, when in fact the topic is the artistic product. In a climate, in which, as Altick suggests, personal detail was often viewed as largely irrelevant to the discussion of a writer's life, discussion could validly be centred around attitudes expressed in the fiction. What female critics like Oliphant and Kavanagh had to say was not based on investigative reporting; it was totally derived from what they found in the novels. It was, however, as we see from the examples, expressed in biographical terms. Simpson, too, in formulating his conclusions about Austen's charm and elegance, was clearly content to assume that the art *was* the life. While the early biographers did not examine Austen's life in the light of the ironic attitudes some of their contemporaries found expressed in the novels, they were most happy to equate her with her fictional heroines. In the mildest examples, the life-writers took for granted that the admirable female characters expressed *verbatim* the beliefs that Austen herself held dear. In the most extreme examples she *is* one or all of the heroines to her biographers, and in the case of authors such as Oscar Fay Adams and David Rhydderch she becomes the centre of a fantasy in which she is the love object, and they remedy the lack of her single state by imagining marriage to her.

There was another eventuality which contributed to this identification of an author with her fictional creations, and that was the tendency for late nineteenth-century readers to establish affectionate relationships with authors they enjoyed, and to regard the fictional worlds they entered as real ones. When, for example, the early biographers discuss Austen in terms of attitudes they find in her novels, they do so on the basis that the characters are real people. This was not at all surprising given the pervasive assumption that Austen's main claim to fame was her ability to delineate character. In this Francis Warre Cornish is typical when he reminds his readers that Elizabeth Bennet, for example, is a "real person."¹¹ James Edward, as well, spoke of the characters in the novels as "living neighbours" and "familiar guests" to the firesides of so many families,¹² and it was a not uncommon game for readers to use dialogue from the novels in everyday conversation. Activities such as these were not the purview of the nineteenth-century only; Henry James talked in a 1905 lecture about the "beguiled infatuation, a sentimentalized vision" with "our dear, everybody's dear, Jane,"¹³ and Rudyard Kipling wrote a 1919 story "The Janeites" in which a group of soldiers suffer from this "beguiled infatuation." For these men the cool and

¹¹ Francis Warre Cornish, *Jane Austen* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929) 123. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Cornish' in the body of the text.

¹² James Edward Austen-Leigh, "A Memoir of Jane Austen," in Jane Austen, *Persuasion*. ed. D.W. Harding (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970) 273. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as *Memoir* in the body of the text.

¹³ Henry James, "The Lesson of Balzac," *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Hart-Davies, 1957) 62-3.

regulated world of Austen's novels became more real than the chaos of war which surrounded them. This situation is similar to the one in which her biographers often find themselves. They are seduced by Austen's art into entering her fictional world and viewing it as analogous to her own life. The net effect of this type of activity is not to illuminate Jane Austen as an individual, but to reproduce her as a character who is as much a fictional construct as are the heroines in her novels. The issue of how literary biographers deal with the relationships between the lives and works of their subjects is a delicate one, and the domestic nature of Austen's novels, as well as the paucity of information about her life, only complicates the problem and encourages the fiction.

Jane Austen and Domesticity

While the scarcity of sources is a common complaint of the biographers, another related issue, the apparent lack of 'event' in Austen's life, causes them equal distress. This concern is the product of a view of 'woman' and domesticity that is in direct conflict with the notion of 'author'. By definition this latter is male and involved in a public world of 'event' and literary activity. The births, deaths and marriages of domestic life are deemed private and hence discounted as experience. Since this *milieu* is seen as detached from the world and unalterably serene, it cannot provide the worldly experience that is the essential ingredient for authorship. The Austen Leighs' 1913 life, for example, struggles with this issue; they are at great pains to demonstrate that their relative does

have worldly knowledge, but at the same time they want her to remain a paragon of innocent virtue. It becomes clear that the concepts of 'woman' and 'author' are incompatible with each other; they belong to separate spheres, each of which is defined by gender. The romantic perception assumes that novel writing depends upon a richness of experience, but the notion of 'woman' held by the Austen Leighs denies risks and aggression to women in general, and to unmarried women in particular. The Austen of this stereotype exists in a timeless, serene vacuum which was originally created for her by the family biographers.

This identification of women with the private sphere, and of domestic life as uneventful, was gaining particular force during the period when the family lives were written, and it served to obscure and make invisible whole areas of experience.¹⁴ In this framework it was impossible to discuss what women actually did in their lives, and consequently what it meant to be an author in those circumstances. Deborah Kaplan suggests that these strictures led to an inherent contradiction in many nineteenth-century biographies of domestic women; life-writing by definition deals with subjects who have public identities, but the lives, of which those of Austen are examples, turn these into private identities. In fact they virtually "present and promote the woman writer's disappearance."¹⁵ Kaplan suggests, too, that the label 'Aunt Jane' is a signal of dependency;

¹⁴ For a discussion of the origins of these public and private spheres in industrial society see Eleanor Leacock, "Women in Egalitarian Societies" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Bridenthal and Koonz (Boston:Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 11-35.

¹⁵ Kaplan 132.

Kaplan suggests, too, that the label 'Aunt Jane' is a signal of dependency; deprived of her surname, Austen has "familial and female but no social identity."¹⁶

Associated with this perception of public anonymity is the notion of Austen as an observer and not a participant. She reads about the happenings of war in her brother's letters, and views from afar, for example, the eventful life of her cousin Eliza, Comtesse de Feuillide, whose husband was guillotined during the French revolution in 1794. This insistence on Austen as bystander obscures any reactions she may have had to the current issues of her day, and particularly it denies any associations she may have had with enlightenment feminism.¹⁷ Connections such as this would, if explored, have been a severe challenge to notions of her conformity and placidity. Even one of the most recent biographers, John Halperin, who attempts a revisionist account, does not elaborate on the issue of Austen's feminism. While he discusses the problems of lack of money and difficult family relationships, he resorts to the conclusion that her irony is motivated by her disappointment at remaining unmarried. His description of her as a woman incapable of love places her at odds with the notion of woman as nurturer, but since this concept is unstated and the validity of the notion remains unchallenged, the stereotype of 'woman' is only reinforced. The individual who emerges from Halperin's life of Austen is a nasty old maid

¹⁶ Kaplan 138.

¹⁷ For a discussion of this association see Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1983).

who compensates for life's disappointments by writing novels, but in this construction the categories of 'woman' and 'author' are still mutually exclusive. Austen's failure as 'woman' enables her admission to the rank of 'author'.

On a theoretical basis feminist critics have long argued that the tradition of western culture identifies "the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation."¹⁸ By this definition women are excluded from the making of literature; they are the *creations* of culture, but they may not themselves *create* it. The domestic is relegated to a category outside, and absent from the context of a male world. These concepts of authorship as male, and the domestic as absence, clearly have significant implications for Austen biography. Not only is her claim to fame dependent upon committing a male act, but the stereotype of her reinforces her femininity, and thus denies the possibility of that action. That these notions are incompatible becomes apparent in the early biographies where Austen's authorship is described as incidental to her virtuous life, and it persists into the present when Austen is described as having "a double life", or as being "woman and author"; she is seldom, if ever, described simply as an author, she is most often a "woman author" which suggests that the term 'author' is still indeed gender specific.

¹⁸ Susan Gubar, " 'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," *Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 295.

The Portrait as Domestic Icon

The necessity to portray Austen as a model of femininity was clearly in the family interest but as she had no established reputation of notoriety like Mary Wollstonecraft or George Sand, for example, her legend was safe in a situation in which the prescribed model implied that "good works" equalled "good woman". This urge for perfection extended to painted portraits as well as written ones. There was, however, always the contrary evidence of Cassandra's drawing of her sister which is discussed by Margaret Kirkham who points out the discrepancy between Cassandra's portrait and the 1870 engraving based on the drawing which softens and feminizes it.¹⁹

Beyond this early effort there is every indication that this type of activity was an ongoing family enterprise. As late as 1920 when the portrait attributed to Zoffany, once reputed to be Austen at fifteen, was thought not to be genuine, it was still reproduced by Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh on the grounds that it was as Jane 'likely' was at that age.²⁰ This attempt to reconstruct Austen does not stop with these portraits alone. The way the non-family biographers use them as well is indicative of their ongoing desire to depict her as they want her to be, regardless of evidence to the contrary.

The rather stern looking woman presented in the Cassandra drawing is discarded as evidence by Cornish, for example, on the grounds that although it is

¹⁹ Kirkham 53-60.

²⁰ Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1920).

"the work of one who knew every look of her sister; it is, however, drawn by an amateur, and must not be judged as a finished work of art"(Cornish 23). Clearly he assumed portraits conformed to rules similar to those applicable to biography, and he preferred the "improved" version of the drawing which was based on the recollections of those who remembered Austen from a distance of more than fifty years.

Successive biographers have tampered with this Victorian engraving which first appeared with the *Memoir*. Adams reproduced it with an inscription in handwriting apparently Austen's: "Yrs very affec: J. Austen." Rhydderch added the accoutrements of authorship: draperies, pen, writing-case. Even Halperin uses the 1870 engraving as a frontispiece, and although he acknowledges the probable source of it, he does not comment on the discrepancies between it and Cassandra's version, even though the latter is clearly more in keeping with his image of Austen. R.W. Chapman's collection of the letters includes another portrait by Cassandra; it shows a softly feminine young woman, seated on a grassy bank and with her bonnet strings blowing in a gentle breeze. This, however, is a faceless image since the subject's back is turned to the viewer (a prophetic pose given the difficulties biographers have with her). The motive for including this portrait cannot have been to show what Austen looked like, but it does have the effect of reinforcing the stereotype of her femininity.

Evidence of this type presents a microcosm of the process that is ongoing in the biographies of Jane Austen. In spite of the fact that the reason for writing

about her resides in her importance as an author, the issue of her creative impulse is most often submerged in the necessity to construct her as 'woman'. Instead of being discussed as *creator* she becomes domestic *object* and the anomaly of the maiden lady who lived in retirement, yet produced acknowledged masterpieces of fiction, is explained away by the fact that she was accidentally an author.

An Accidental Artist

The difficulty with all this is that art is no accident, even though there has been a concerted effort on the part of many Austen biographers to make it seem so. Her adoring brother, Henry, insisted that "everything came finished from her pen" ("Notice" 33), and David Rhydderch tells us she arrived in life "intellectually complete:" "such [was] her genius, that we might say, that she wrote from the breast and read before she could walk."²¹ Particularly in the family accounts, Austen's development as a writer is glossed over; she writes entirely from "taste and inclination" and "everything comes finished from her pen" ("Notice" 32-3). James Edward Austen-Leigh, however, does pay some attention to the juvenilia and he suggests that:

During this preparatory period her mind seems to have been working in a very different direction from that into which it ultimately settled...It would seem as if she were first taking note of all the faults to be avoided, and

²¹ David Rhydderch, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Art* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) 91-2. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Rhydderch' in the body of the text.

curiously considering how she ought *not* to write before she attempted to put forth her strength in the right direction. (*Memoir* 48)

While statements like this appear to acknowledge that the making of art is a conscious act, James Edward's attitude about what biography ought to do firmly denies the significance of this idea:

The family, have, rightly I think, declined to let these early works be published ... it would be as unfair to expose this preliminary process to the world, as it would be to display all that goes on behind the curtain of the theatre before it is drawn up. (*Memoir* 48-9)

While the creative process is acknowledged here it is discounted as either irrelevant or as interfering with the finished product. The inescapable conclusion is that the duty of a biographer is to present the mature author as a literary monument in all her splendour. With this attitude as the controlling one, it is small wonder that process was overwhelmingly ignored in favour of the finished product. Most often when the act of writing is discussed at all it is done so in terms of physical or mechanical effort, comparable to skill at spillikins or cup and ball. The inescapable impression is that the novels as well are the product of a type of manual dexterity.

This comforting assumption that writing fiction is a mechanical act conveniently ignores the role that Austen's home life played in her writing as well. The Austens are reported to have been fond of novel reading, and in the custom of the day often read aloud to each other in the evening. Jane Austen's work was apparently first presented in this manner and there is evidence that some collaborative effort was involved, if not with other family members, at least

with her sister Cassandra. The two women shared a dressing-room and their niece, Anna, recalled hearing her aunts read aloud from *Pride and Prejudice*. Apparently she had to be reprimanded because her childish eagerness to report the names of the characters to the rest of the family, threatened to betray what was apparently a secret well kept from their elders (*Memoir* 73). Further evidence of Cassandra's interest in novel writing occurs in Austen's later advice to this same niece when she comments on the latter's work in progress. The Aunt reports that her sister is "well pleased" with a particular character, but that:

Your Aunt C. & I both recommend your making a little alteration in the last scene between Devereux F. and Lady Clanmurray & her Daughter ... Your Aunt C. does not like desultory novels, & is rather fearful yours will be too much so, that there will be too frequent a change from one set of people to another, & that circumstances will be sometimes introduced of apparent consequence, which will lead to nothing.²²

Close friends, as well, apparently were privy to work in progress. In June 1799, for example, Austen wrote jokingly to her sister about Martha Lloyd's interest in *First Impressions* which later became *Pride and Prejudice*:

I would not let Martha read 'First Impressions' again upon any account, and am very glad that I did not leave it in your power. She is very cunning, but I saw through her design; she means to publish it from memory, and one more perusal must enable her to do it. (*Letters* 67)

Comments like this are somewhat at odds with the popular perception of Austen's writing in the family drawing-room and hiding her efforts under the blotter in the presence of visitors. Doubtless she behaved this way on occasion, but the

²² R.W. Chapman, *Jane Austen's Letters* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979) 394-5. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as *Letters* in the body of the text.

entrenched myth of private shyness about her work to all comers, appears to have been an overstatement. She was not quite as secretive about her work as we have been led to believe; she clearly wrote for an audience, one that was made up of her family and closest friends. This apparent sharing of manuscripts also raises the issue of collaborative effort in the production of the novels. Not only does this concept not sit well with the romantic notion of 'author' as solitary, inspired genius, it also tends to diminish the value of the finished product. The scarcity of letters and other evidence makes it difficult to explore this issue fully, but to ignore it completely implies disinterest in a potentially significant area of female creativity.

The problem of the stereotype of the reticent author is that it encourages even present day biographers to ignore the domestic conditions out of which Austen's novels were produced. The implication is that, because this *milieu* is invisible, the art exists independently of it. So pervasive is this conception, that female as well as male biographers succumb to it. Jane Aiken Hodge, herself a novelist, posits a "double life" for Austen in which she successfully acted roles of silly, husband-hunting butterfly and maiden aunt, all the while laughing at the life that necessitated these poses. Moreover, Hodge tells us we must be grateful to Austen's suitors for dying or disappearing: "If Jane Austen had settled down ... to marriage and the inevitable string of babies, her first three novels would certainly

have been lost, and her last three would certainly never have been written."²³

Joan Rees comes to a similar conclusion when she connects the arrival of Austen's niece Anna's first child with the end of her novel writing: "Poor Anna's promising burst of literary activity was at an end, just as her aunt's might have been had she herself married."²⁴ These conclusions are based on the practical assumption that the demands of every-day life preclude authorship for women. While there is some validity to the argument, it was clearly no more entirely the case in Jane Austen's day than it is in our own. Wives and mothers did (and still do) write and publish fiction that was read and admired. If the practical argument is not entirely valid, then, it appears that the notion of 'author' as a gender specific occupation still has some influence on biographers. While the activities of women writers no longer offend against modesty, the pursuit of their craft is still somehow incompatible with marriage and motherhood.

Conclusions of this sort derive from a concept of 'woman' that describes her in terms of her sexual and procreative purpose in life. Her actual and potential abilities are viewed analogously to her fertility; reproductive and creative years appear to run parallel to each other, and either activity is deemed mutually exclusive of the other. While man is perceived as possessing limitless potential for creativity, woman's actual and potential abilities are viewed as

²³ Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972) 81. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Hodge' in the body of the text.

²⁴ Joan Rees, *Jane Austen: Woman and Writer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) 159. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Rees' in the body of the text.

stunted by what society regards as the requirements of her role.²⁵ A variation on this theme is played out by John Halperin. His Austen is a misanthropic spinster for whom artistic endeavour substitutes for the love of a man. She writes, not primarily out of some creative urge, but rather because her purpose in life thwarted, she has excessive energy to devote to scribbling.

Not only does the biological definition of woman's purpose limit her artistic potential, but it also excludes her from having significant life experience. If only that which is public is meaningful, then domestic life, which is by definition private, is irrelevant. Even the most conscientious of Austen's biographers do not question this equation. Park Honan, for example, discusses the female household at Chawton as a good place for uninterrupted work: "In an atmosphere in which others kept at their duties one did not have to apologize for being busy with a manuscript, and with indulgent companions one had a sense of being valued with a respectful tolerance."²⁶ This cloistered existence was not always serene, and Honan informs us of the degree to which the "vigilance of older women" provided Austen with the freedom and security to pursue her art. He does not, however, enquire into the circumstances which made that watchfulness necessary. Honan explores the domestic scene for the conditions it provided for writing, but he seldom views it in terms of events and issues which

²⁵ Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 1979) 99-100.

²⁶ Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987) 352. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Honan' in the body of the text.

contributed to the making of Austen's art.

This attitude to the nature of experience is clear when Honan concentrates on Francis, Jane's brother, who rose to be Admiral of the Fleet. He was a young naval officer on active service during the Napoleonic wars, and his experiences are deemed to be the major example of his sister's connection with the 'real' world. When the biography opens with a Prelude entitled "Frank Austen's Ride," and when the 'events' catalogued are all too often the brother's naval exploits, then the point of the exercise begins to be open to question. To claim that Jane Austen well knew the outside world is legitimate, but the privileging of war and politics over domesticity assumes that vicarious experience contributed more to her art than did her daily life. Honan's vigorous defense of Austen against the charge that she lacked the worldly experience becoming to a 'great author' is an explanation of art at the expense of domestic silence. This discounts implicitly the relevance of the power struggles, the births, marriages and deaths, which are the vital ingredients of art as well as of private life.

Will and Jane

One of the more obvious methods that other Austen biographers use to circumvent the issues related to literary creativity is to liken her to William Shakespeare; once comparisons are made and praise bestowed on both authors, the lady's genius is established and the subject is closed. While these writers are generally delighted to consider the 'artistic' merits of Shakespeare and Austen,

and although they complain loudly about the lack of information available about both subjects, they ignore the similarity of the problems these two literary figures present for their biographers. Neither author lived a sensational or a public life, but biographers are required to produce interesting and readable accounts of them. When this project is complicated by the absence of public records, letters, journals or memoirs, the tendency is for the subject to be depicted in accordance with attributes which are gender-specific. This is no less true for men than it is for women, and the telling of the lives of each becomes dependent upon the life writer's notions of how a typical woman or man of the times in question might have behaved. Biographies of Shakespeare demonstrate this when details of the life are manufactured which depict him alternatively as a rogue or an honest burgher, a roué or a faithful husband. While this may suggest that fashion is fickle in gender stereotypes, it also points out the range of action that is available for the male author. In the case of Jane Austen, however, no such latitude is possible; she is the woman who, for more than a hundred years, was depicted as never having uttered an unkind word.

Austen, however, left more of a personal record than did Shakespeare, and this saintly perception of her is based on readings which tend to ignore the black humour in the letters to her sister Cassandra and others. Even though these reportedly have been censored of all but the most innocuous of details by Cassandra, they still are valuable for the glimpses they give of the personality who wrote them. As well, the Austen clan have been diligent in memorializing their

famous relative, and while their portrayals are incurably idealistic, their accounts are of some use. More than three hundred years of searching have produced no such personal traces of Shakespeare; there are no diaries or letters, only a few authenticated signatures on deeds and conveyances.²⁷ While the passage of time complicates Shakespeare biography it appears to work in favour of Austen scholars. They may be unwitting captives of 'Aunt Jane', but they have two centuries less of myth and misinformation to deal with. Nor have they had to disentangle the mess of forgeries and alterations to documents that sullied eighteenth and nineteenth-century Shakespearean biography.

It is not simply bogus or missing evidence that is significant in this context, however, but the idea of documentary evidence in general. The emphasis in Shakespeare biography on this material highlights a significant issue in biography in general; it also points to a major, and more general problem in the treatment of women as biographical subjects. In the more than three hundred and fifty years since the death of Shakespeare, progress in revealing his life has been measured in terms of unearthing traces of legal and business dealings that he, his family, and immediate contemporaries were involved in during his lifetime. This evidence is used not only to piece together the chronology of the personal life, but as a route into the mind of the subject. This is neither an unusual, nor

²⁷ For information on Shakespeare biography I have relied on Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Schoenbaum' in the body of the text.

necessarily an unprofitable approach for biographers to take, but reliance on this as the superior route to biographical understanding creates obvious difficulties; while William Shakespeare may be elusive in the documentary maze, Jane Austen is nowhere to be found.

Property law, genteel poverty, and social custom ensured that little else but baptism and death were legally recorded of Austen. There is, however, a wryly 'postmodern' twist to the relationship between Austen and her documents: she apparently once fabricated, in her father's parish register, the announcement of a proposed marriage between Henry Frederick Howard Fitzwilliam of London and Jane Austen of Steventon; in the register there is also, in her own hand, an account of a marriage between Jane Austen of Steventon and Arthur William Mortimer of Liverpool (Halperin 51). These playful forgeries comment on the 'truth' of the historical record as it relates to women in much the same way that modern metafiction questions the construct of history as a whole. In the light perhaps, of this, and in the certain knowledge that renewed document hunts in local records and the Public Records Office would confirm that she had no public life, Austen biographers have directed their attentions elsewhere.

In their anxiety to compensate for the lack of concrete 'facts' they have made up for Austen's invisibility by having her live vicariously through the achievements of her sailor brothers, who were both at sea during the Napoleonic wars and whose naval careers took them both to the rank of Admiral. Park Honan, for example, uses Frank Austen's prominence to prove that his sister was

indeed a woman in touch with great events in the world of war and politics. The effect, even in the hands of the most sympathetic of biographers, is to subordinate the life of the sister to that of the brother. She is never a participant in 'meaningful' events, she is the perennial observer. This is quite literally the case of 'any port in a storm'; in light of the perceived closeness of brother and sister, Franks's experience must substitute for that which his sister lacks since worldly knowledge must be established before greatness is granted. Because one of the frequent cavils against Austen is that her world was so narrow as to preclude this special awareness, her biographers are consistently energetic in defending her against this charge. They seldom, however, seriously question the validity of the notion that experience in the world of affairs is a prerequisite for artistic achievement. On the rare occasions when they come close to confronting the issue, they side-step it by insisting that whatever Austen lacked in terms of actual involvement she made up for in intuition, her instinctive knowledge of human nature more than compensating for her narrow existence.

The evidence on Shakespeare, on the other hand, is amenable to establishing that he was actively involved in the businesses of theatre and commerce. That he acted in and wrote plays for performance implies a relationship with the wider world, as do the few documents which record land transactions, partnerships and legal entanglements. Scant though this evidence is, it is sufficient to establish Shakespeare as a man of the world. Of considerable help in this are the masculine myths which grew up around him; these tell of a

man "who killed a calf in high style, robbed a park, and lampooned his prosecutor" (Schoenbaum, 634), as well as one who was a legendary toper who slept it off under a crabapple tree. There is also the matter of his involvement with members of the opposite sex: his marriage to an older woman who produced their first child with indelicate haste; hints of a dalliance with one Mistress Davenant which was rumoured to have produced an illegitimate child. Added to all this there is the vigorous tradition of Shakespeare's life in the taverns, his friendship with Queen Elizabeth, and the hostility between him and Ben Jonson. Modern scholarship may have demolished much of this as myth, but the Bard is never portrayed as a milksop.

While the biographers of both subjects are frequently vexed by problems of accurately illuminating the personal and the private, it is in discussions of sexuality that the areas of difference are most marked. The first depictions of Austen came from the hands of her evangelical brother, Henry, and her Victorian nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, both clergymen. Their personal inclinations and family reticence combined to produce a portrait of chastity and gentility, in which the emphasis was on domesticity at the expense of authorship. Successive biographers have attempted objectivity, but they have been hampered both by the Victorian myth and Cassandra Austen's censorship of the letters. While literary critics have examined Austen's output in terms of its social criticism and feminist attitudes, only recently have biographers come to consider these issues relevant to the life. More important, however, has been the repressive effect of the genteel

stereotype on discussions of Austen's emotional life. The model of 'woman' that this structure imposes precludes the possibility of female sexuality, and this is enhanced by the family legend that the true love of Austen's life died before the romance could fully flower. In this there is an interesting parallel with the death of her sister Cassandra's fiancé; for both sisters the possibility of consummating a relationship existed, but it was deferred, ultimately forever. The essence of femininity here is always only the potential for action, and female chastity is not threatened when sexuality is relevant only for married women.

While the Bardolatry of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries tended to smooth over 'irregularities' in Shakespeare's life, his peccadillos served to confirm his manhood and thus demonstration of his celibacy was never a burning issue. On the contrary, it was possible to portray him at one and the same time as "happily married, passionately involved in an illicit amour, and impeccably moral" (Schoenbaum 311). Versions of Shakespeare's married life vary from depictions of idyllic bliss to miserable domination by a shrewish older woman, and considerations of his sexuality range from denial of homoerotic urges in the sonnets to portrayal of him as a bisexual personality, intent upon repressing his feminine traits by vigorous action. Discussions of Shakespeare's personality are, of course, not restricted to the twentieth-century. Coleridge, for example, though disgusted by suggestions of homoerotic passion in the poetry, posited a type of androgynous perfection for their author:

Although endowed with manly powers, and indeed more than a man, Shakespeare yet has "all the feelings, the sensibility, the purity, innocence and delicacy of an affectionate girl of eighteen." (Schoenbaum 254)

The romantic excess of this statement aside, there is no comparable suggestion that Austen combines both masculine and feminine traits. She is permitted delicacy and innocence, but never strength. When she does not conform to Coleridge's feminine ideal, she becomes the 'formidable poker' of Mary Russell Mitford's nineteenth-century description. While for Shakespeare the life-writers allow the full range of emotional possibilities, they limit Austen to the mundane and the prosaic. The implications of female friendship, in a world where heterosexual love is denied, are totally ignored and domestic life is cleansed of conflict, pain and death.

The pervasive attitude that writing is a masculine activity helps to explain the discrepancy in the treatments of Shakespeare and Austen. This has been augmented in part by social custom; to ignore that our world assigns roles and expectations on the basis of gender would certainly be foolhardy. We can also not discount the influence of biographers who read the life through the works; differences in scope and subject matter are obvious, and the notion of an "Austen's Bawdy," for example, is clearly ridiculous.

However, the treatment of Austen as a female literary icon exceeds the bounds of social or literary constraints. For Austen, all that is available to us is the evidence of the female stereotype. This is so genteel that it denies her the possibility of independent action and thus it renders her powerless. The

adulation that life-writers heap on her has a similarly negative dimension to it. When carried to its logical (or illogical) conclusion, the individual author vanishes into the perfect form of womanhood. Unlike the masculine model which posits involvement and action, the feminine one demands retirement and passivity; at best, this latter construct allows only limited possibilities for female creativity, at worst, it is openly hostile to it.

CHAPTER II: the Family Biographers

The nineteenth and early twentieth-century lives of Jane Austen have a curious sameness about them not only because her biographers chose conventional forms in which to write about her, but more importantly because her reputation was so closely supervised by biographers who were intent on presenting to the public their flawless 'Aunt Jane'. These early biographers were all Austen relatives and from the first "Biographical Notice of the Author" of 1817, through *A Memoir of Jane Austen* published in 1870, to the *Life and Letters* which appeared in 1913, the family were in complete control. A number of other biographical treatments of Austen appeared during this period but they were all totally dependent upon these family versions for their details of the life.

Henry, the fourth Austen brother, composed the "Biographical Notice" in 1817, James Edward Austen-Leigh, son of the eldest brother, James, was author of the 1870 *Memoir* and William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, son and grandson respectively of James Edward Austen-Leigh, collaborated on the 1913 *Life and Letters*. Aside from these primary biographical works, the *Letters of Jane Austen* were published in 1884 by Edward, Lord Brabourne, son of Jane Austen's niece, Fanny, and in 1906 Austen's great-nephew, J.H. Hubback and his daughter, Edith, produced *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers*. Austen family involvement in the production of the life did not cease with the reputedly definitive *Life and Letters* of 1913; Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, daughter of

James Edward, published *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* in 1920, and in 1946 the *Austen Papers 1704-1856* were edited by Richard Arthur-Leigh. Caroline Austen's 1867 memoir *My Aunt Jane Austen* was published by the Jane Austen Society as late as 1952 and Austen family conviction about "the importance of aunts" persists into the present according to an Austen descendant: "As a small child I was taught that because I was related to Jane Austen, I was special. My infant mind was unable to grasp who Jane Austen was, but the sense of being unique remained."¹ One hundred and seventy years after Jane Austen's death her relatives are still involved in what may rightly be called "the family business":

For us, in the Austen family, to maintain the importance of our most important aunt has been the pleasure of successive generations. In fact one might also say that Jane Austen has been to us what the baronetage was to Sir Walter Elliott: "occupation for an idle hour, and& consolation in a distressed one."²

Henry Austen's "Biographical Notice" (1817)

Because of the success of the biographical enterprise of the Austen relatives, it is tempting to conclude that their efforts to shape and neutralize the author's life were merely self-serving. This was clearly an important, but not the only, aspect of the issue. If biography is in any way a phenomenon of its times, then contemporary attitudes and popular expectations about the utility of

¹ Joan Austen-Leigh, "The Austen-Leighs and Jane Austen: or 'I have always maintained the importance of Aunts,'" ed. Janet Todd, *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983) 11.

² Joan Austen-Leigh 11.

"life-writing" cannot be discounted as influences on the decisions that the family took in recording for posterity the life of their famous relative.

The effect of these forces is particularly apparent in the first of the family efforts, the "Biographical Notice of the Author", published with the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey; and Persuasion* (1818). By the time Henry Austen wrote the "Notice" he was an ordained clergyman, and according to his niece, Anna Lefroy, he was Jane's favourite brother:

He was the handsomest of his family and, in the opinion of his own father, also the most talented. There were others who formed a different estimate, and considered his abilities greater in show than in reality; but for the most part he was greatly admired. Brilliant in conversation he was, and, like his father, blessed with a hopefulness of temper which in adapting itself to all circumstances, even the most adverse, seemed to create a perpetual sunshine. The race, however, is not all to the swift, it never has been, and though so highly gifted by nature, my uncle was not prosperous in life.³

Henry was the logical person to produce the first published announcement that Jane Austen was an author. He had transacted the business affairs associated with the novels, and he was evidently proud of his sister's efforts, since while she was alive he was the family member least able to keep her authorship the secret she reportedly wished it to be. Henry's eagerness to broadcast his sister's accomplishments was transformed after her death into a treatment of her life and art that was more hagiographical than biographical, and he set the pattern that other members of the family were to follow.

³ William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965) 49. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as *Life* in the body of the text.

The woman described in the "Notice" is so idealized that she is faceless. The explanation for this absence of an unidentifiable subject is not that her brother had forgotten who she was; on the contrary, Jane Austen died in July, 1817, and Henry wrote his notice in December of that year when his grief at her loss was undoubtedly fresh in his mind. Rather, the effacement of the individual in the "Notice" is the result of a concentration on Jane Austen's spirituality which exaggerates the distance between the author and his subject. In keeping with the idea that the virtuous life would speak for itself, Henry is "the mere biographer" and the "Notice" is unsigned. The idealized presentation of the subject is void of any indication that the author and Jane Austen were near and affectionate relatives, and nowhere is there evidence in the account of the "brilliance" or the "perpetual sunshine" that Henry was reputed to create. Rather, there are grounds to support the family opinion that "he became grandiloquent when wishing to be serious" (*Life* 49).

The saint-like portrayal of Jane Austen, however, is the result of something more than a brother's pomposity and overstatement. Henry Austen was ordained an Anglican priest in December 1816, and he later became "an earnest preacher of the evangelical" (*Life* 333). His earnestness and the evangelical impulse were already at work in the "Notice," which was ostensibly a memorial designed to inform readers about the identity and character of the deceased. Its larger purpose, however, was to present an example of virtue. Henry Austen's decision to portray his sister in this manner was not an idiosyncratic one, nor was early

nineteenth-century concern with this utilitarian aspect of biography restricted to Evangelical clergymen; even biographers who had no sympathy for religious enthusiasm adopted the Evangelical approach to biography.⁴

The influence of the movement upon literature was felt during the last years of the eighteenth-century, and by the early nineteenth-century its effect on biography was so pervasive that a periodical such as the *Annual Review*, not overtly or even consciously an Evangelical publication, espoused critical principles close to Evangelical ones:

The office of the biographer, is indeed distinct from that of the moralist; and to estimate correctly the merit or demerit of each character, is obviously, from the number of circumstances to be taken into account, a very difficult task; yet surely one who professes "to serve the interests of truth and virtue," scarcely performs her duty in omitting to embrace the opportunities of stigmatizing vice, when presented under the seductive garb of tenderness and sentiment ... Some of the anecdotes ... [of this book] ... however amusing in circumstance, and decorous in language, might have been sacrificed with advantage to the *sacred ignorance* and unpolluted purity of female youth, yet unknowing of the very existence of evil. A tendency to set talent over virtue, in the general estimate of character, and an opinion that strong passions are indicative of general abilities, we observed with concern.⁵

Admittedly one example cannot be taken as representative of what was a complex range of critical opinion, but this excerpt from a review of Mary Hays' *Female Biography* (1802) is interesting for the stress it places on the value of virtue over talent. While the dominance of virtue implied that others than the great, women

⁴ Joseph W. Reed, *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century 1801-1838* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) 29.

⁵ Reed 29.

included, were suitable subjects for biography, it also meant that much of what characterized an individual life was obscured in the interests of the model of purity.

In the matter of example the "Biographical Notice of the Author" clearly conforms to the Evangelical pattern. We are told at the outset that Jane Austen's was "a life of usefulness, literature, and religion ... not by any means a life of event." She qualifies as a biographical subject not because of her public achievement but because of exemplary personal virtue which she demonstrated in every aspect of her life:

She never deserved disapprobation, so, ... she never met reproof"... [she noticed] the frailties, foibles, and follies of others ... yet even on the vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness ... [she had] no affectation. Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or forget ... She never uttered either a hasty, a silly, or a severe expression. ("Notice" 29-32)

The physical description of Austen continues in this idealized manner, and it too fails to conjure up the image of an individual. The subject remains a perfect, faceless example: "Her stature was that of true elegance ... Her features were separately good ... Her complexion was of the finest texture ... Her voice was extremely sweet" ("Notice" 31).

Vague generalizations are used to describe the events and activities of life as well. Although we are told when and where Austen was born and died, and who her parents were, there is little or no sense of change or development over time; the child and the adult are one and the same. Childhood disappears under

the burden of adult perfection, literary talent blossoming early under the direction of a father, who is a "profound scholar" with "exquisite taste in every species of literature." It is not surprising "that his daughter Jane should, at a very early age, have become sensible to the charms of style and enthusiastic in the cultivation of her own language" ("Notice" 29). Similarly her critical opinions emerge fully formed:

At a very early age she was enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque; and she seldom changed her opinions either on books or men ... It is difficult to say at what age she was not intimately acquainted with the merits and defects of the best essays and novels in the English language. ("Notice" 33)

The only concession that Henry Austen makes to the developmental process is associated with the novels, some of which are seen as "gradual performances of her previous life" (the life before Chawton). Even here, though, it is not so much development as the production of a perfect product piece by piece, since "in composition she was equally rapid and correct." Even though Austen withheld her novels from publication until "time and many perusals had satisfied her that the charm of recent composition was dissolved" ("Notice" 30), there was never a need for revision:

Everything came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen. It is not hazarding too much to say that she never dispatched a note or letter unworthy of publication. ("Notice" 33)

The cumulative effect of the repetitions of 'never' and 'always' removes Jane Austen from existence in any particular time or place. The "Notice"

effectively deprives her of a personal chronology; existing in the 'always' and the 'never', she lacks the connection with a temporal life. What emerges as dominant is the one trait which transcends time and makes all others unimportant, her Christianity: "She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God ... and her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church" ("Notice" 33).

Paradoxically, it is death not life which is central in the "Biographical Notice". At the beginning of the work we are informed "that the hand which guided the pen is now mouldering in the grave." Later we learn the promise of a long and productive life was interrupted by "the symptoms of a decay deep and incurable," until finally life succumbed to "decaying nature." The stress on bodily decay emphasizes the importance of a spirituality which is confirmed when Jane Austen faces death:

With more than resignation, with a truly elastic cheerfulness ... Neither her love of God, nor of her fellow creatures flagged for a moment. She made a point of receiving the sacrament before excessive bodily weakness might have rendered her perception unequal to her wishes ... Her last voluntary speech conveyed thanks to her medical attendant; and to the final question asked of her, purporting to her wants, she replied, 'I want nothing but death.' ("Notice" 30)

Dying reveals the perfection of Austen's spirit and transforms her life into a model of Christian preparation for immortality. The death-bed scene comes less than half way through the "Notice," the remainder of the piece being devoted to a minimal account of Austen's literary pursuits and her private, uneventful, domestic life. Experiences which occur 'always' and 'never' remove life from a

recognizable time frame, and domestic life has an aura of immortality because it neither begins nor ends, it is eternal. Details of the life which appear as flashbacks are not really such. Although they were never necessarily part of Austen's earthly experience, they serve to confirm the virtue that could only be known conclusively at her death. The spiritual perfection revealed in the domestic life is a posthumous judgement superimposed on the life, and one which robs that life of individual meaning.⁶

While the Evangelical motive for biography tended to efface the details of individual lives, it did coincide with the desire for personal privacy; if the writing of biography was a process of selecting those details of the life that were exemplary, then that which was not exemplary ought not to be revealed. As with the interest in worthy examples, concern for privacy was not confined to clergymen in general, or Henry Austen in particular. The eighteenth-century view of history held that it should deal with dignified subjects in a dignified manner, but in nineteenth-century biography this was translated into a concern for the subject rather than the integrity of the written account of the life. Although in the late eighteenth-century Samuel Johnson attacked the ideal of dignified distance,⁷ and biographers had come to believe that truthfulness was essential and could only be achieved by the preservation and inclusion of minute personal detail, by the early nineteenth century these attitudes were regarded as

⁶ In this section I am indebted to Kaplan's article, "The Disappearance of the Woman Writer."

⁷ Reed 40.

crude. Coleridge, for example stressed that "the spirit of genuine biography" demanded firmness in withstanding "the cravings of worthless curiosity, as distinguished from the thirst after useful knowledge."⁸ Wordsworth, too, voiced similar sentiments: since no biography could capture the "*whole truth*" of a life, the biographer should restrict himself to those details which exemplified the best aspects of the life.⁹ This concern for the reputation of the subject extended to the relatives as well. Nothing should be written of them that would injure them directly, and to injure the one was to injure them all.

These views of privacy clearly influenced the author of the "Biographical Notice," and while they were perhaps not so pervasive as ideas on exemplary biography, they did have a great deal of influence on the use of personal documents in life writing.¹⁰ In its extreme form the emphasis on privacy precluded the use of personal documents, but Henry Austen reproduced extracts from his sister's letters "without apology," and he justified their inclusion on the basis that they were "more truly descriptive of her temper, taste, feelings and principles than any thing which the pen of the biographer can produce" ("Notice" 34). While Henry used personal correspondence to 'prove' the worthiness of his sister, he would not elaborate on "a subject of domestic disappointment" which engendered the comments therein: "Of this the particulars do not concern the

⁸ Rccd 41.

⁹ Rccd 52.

¹⁰ Rccd 53.

general public." The extracts from the letters were not part of the original body of the notice--they were added in a later postscript--but the attitude voiced there about the use of the correspondence is central to the "Notice" as a whole: "the particulars [of the life] do not concern the public." Private and public interests obviously came together on this issue, but they were reinforced by a common distrust of the reader. By early in the nineteenth-century technological advances in printing and a general extension of literacy in the lower classes had combined to expand the reading public. Biographies and novels were popular entertainment, but it was not only the lower classes who enjoyed them. The Austen family, for example, were avid novel readers and the Prince Regent enjoyed Austen's novels sufficiently to encourage her to dedicate *Emma* to him. It is likely this broad audience which is being addressed in the "Biographical Notice" which opens with an appeal to "the public which has not been insensible to the merits of 'Sense and Sensibility', 'Pride and Prejudice', 'Mansfield Park', and 'Emma'." The subject of the "Notice" is "now mouldering in the grave" and as a result the reader is asked to read this "brief account" of her "with a kindlier sentiment than simple curiosity." The individual appeal and the information that the subject's life "was not by any means a life of event" suggest an affinity between the reader and the subject of the biography which prepares the ground for the moral lesson to come. Jane Austen's life was meant to be admired for its obscurity, and her death, which provided the occasion for her public life, was meant to be an additional inspiration. Far from being a "mere biographer,"

Henry Austen was issuing a prescription for the improvement of the readers of his sister's novels. He was also, however, creating the precedent of 'Saint Jane'.

James Edward Austen Leigh's *Memoir* (1869)

The influence of this saintly portrayal is apparent in *A Memoir of Jane Austen* written by James Edward Austen-Leigh more than fifty years later. In contrast to the modified enthusiasm of his uncle to make Jane Austen a public figure, James Edward portrayed himself as approaching his task with reluctance. He was elderly, a Victorian clergyman who purports to have had the task thrust upon him and he uses an epigraph to explain his attitude:

'He knew of no one but himself who was inclined to the work. This is no uncommon motive. A man sees something to be done, knows of no one who will do it but himself, and so is driven to the enterprise.'
Helps' *Life of Columbus*, ch.1.

Whatever his misgivings, James Edward did manage to muster enthusiasm for his project. He did not, however, really explore his subject; rather he remade her in the image of Victorian womanhood, and while he acknowledged the necessity of satisfying the enquiries of a generation of readers who have been born since Jane Austen died, he promised no more details than did his uncle:

Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course. Even her fame may be said to have been posthumous: it did not attain to any vigorous life till after she had ceased to exist (*Memoir* 273).

This perceived lack of "events" to draw on was not an insurmountable obstacle since there was a whole range of other information available that was

acceptable as biographical material. By the time James Edward was writing the life of his aunt the vital role of social and cultural environment in character formation was a commonplace of English thought, and Victorian biographers as a consequence focused much of their attention on these matters.¹¹ The *Memoir* follows the pattern of detailing family background and connections, places of residence and a survey of life and manners in the early eighteenth-century. In spite of the emphasis on viewing his subject in the context of her own times, the author's assumption that the nineteenth-century was an age of progress culminating in the perfection of his own era causes him to concentrate on those aspects of his aunt's life which mirrored Victorian values and to explain away those which did not. The Austen that emerges from this treatment has few characteristics that identify her with her place and time. She is bland and almost faceless.

This smoothing out of the subject begins with the portrait prefixed to the volume. We are told that it is taken from a drawing of Austen by her sister Cassandra. The original portrait was greatly altered by "Mr. Andrews of Maidenhead" whom James Edward commissioned to "improve" the Cassandra sketch so an engraving could be made. The original portrait shows a young woman in a simple muslin dress, unadorned by frills, and seated in a ladderback chair. Unruly curls stick out from beneath a plain cap; the dark eyes are

¹¹ Altick 218

penetrating and the mouth unsmiling. The subject's shoulders are squared and her arms are firmly crossed. The second portrait, which continues to be reproduced as the standard one, softens the face: the harsh lines are gone, the eyes are lightened and no longer stare boldly, and the mouth is gently rather than firmly set. In the Victorian version the gown is attractive and the curls fashionable; cap and neckline sport frills and both are trimmed in "delicate, virginal pale blue."¹² Now Austen's shoulders are softly sloping and her arms are gently crossed.

The contrast between these two versions of the likeness is characteristic of the process that is undertaken in the Victorian biography. The portrait combines with James Edward's physical description of his aunt to give a very idealized picture of her; aside from the ubiquitous cap there is nothing to distinguish her from any Victorian maiden lady of her age and class:

In person she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender, her step light and firm, and her whole appearance expressive of health and animation. In complexion she was a clear brunette with a rich colour; she had full round cheeks, with a mouth and nose small and wellformed, bright hazel eyes, and brown hair forming natural curls around her face. If not so regularly handsome as her sister, yet her countenance had a peculiar charm of its own to the eyes of most beholders. At the time of which I am now writing, she never was seen, either morning or evening, without a cap; I believe that she and her sister were generally thought to have taken to the garb of middle age earlier than their years or their looks required; and that, though remarkably neat in their dress as in all their ways, they were scarcely sufficiently regardful of the fashionable or the becoming. (*Memoir* 330)

¹² Kirkham 29-30.

The details given here quite clearly match those of the 1870 portrait, the harsh lines are smoothed out and the dominant impression is one of sweetness. Jane Austen is not without fault, however. Her interest in fashion is found wanting, and so are her accomplishments when they are compared to "the present standard." She did not draw, but had received some instruction on the pianoforte and sang simple old songs. She did "read French with facility" but her ideas on history were old-fashioned: "Critical enquiry into the usually received statements of the old historians was scarcely begun" (*Memoir* 330-1). Austen's tastes in literature were similarly not those of 1870; she esteemed "Johnson in prose, Crabbe in verse and Cowper in both" (*Memoir* 331). James Edward finds Johnson's style "grandiloquent," and this tendency to find the past wanting in comparison with the present reinforces the superiority of the Victorian model and signals the regret that Jane Austen was born fifty years too soon. It is not surprising that the author concludes his description of his aunt's person and tastes somewhat apologetically: "It was not, however, what she *knew*, but what she *was*" (*Memoir* 332).

The appeal to Austen's inner worth diverts attention from any perceived personal shortcomings, but it is from the reminiscences of Caroline and Anna that the Victorian 'Aunt Jane' really begins to emerge: "Her first charm to children was great sweetness of manner ... she would tell us the most delightful stories ... she was the one to whom we always looked for help" (*Memoir* 332). When the children were older she became their confidant and amused them with her

cleverness. When she died "the chief light in the house was quenched" and her loss "cast a shade over the spirits of the survivors" (*Memoir* 333). It was not only children who felt her enlivening influence:

Her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous led her to play with all the common-places of everyday life, whether as regarded persons or things; but she never played with its serious duties or responsibilities, nor did she ever turn individuals into ridicule. (*Memoir* 333)

She was "on friendly, though not intimate terms" with all her neighbours in the village and "they often served for her amusement: but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip. She was as far as possible from being censorious or satirical. She never abused them" (*Memoir* 333). These attributes are appropriately illustrated with the documentary evidence of letters and poems which speak for their author. The plan of the description is to work from large details to small ones and James Edward concludes with a description of Austen's manual dexterity: she "was successful in everything that she attempted with her fingers." She was expert at spillikens and cup and ball, her handwriting clear and strong, and above all she showed "superior handiwork" in the art of folding and sealing letters. As well she "was considered especially great in satin stitch" and her proficiency in needlework showed that "the same hand which painted so exquisitely with the pen could work as delicately with the needle" (*Memoir* 337-8).

The triviality of these details may seem to have the effect of damning Jane Austen with faint praise, but this was not so for the Victorian biographer. In a

system in which art and life were inextricably intertwined, no detail was too small to mention (as long as it reflected favourably on the subject). Austen's sphere is the domestic, and it is by the rules assigned to that world that she is judged. Literary art and needlework are allotted equal value and this furthers the process of smoothing out the contradictions inherent in the case of a spinster aunt who writes witty novels. It suggests also that woman's writing is the outcome of manual dexterity rather than of intellectual effort. The effect is to domesticate and to contain the writing so that it does not threaten; when female writing is explained as a domestic product, it no more implies critical comment on its world than does needlework or folding envelopes. Austen's novels thus become pretty pictures that are judged by their truth to life.

It is not sufficient merely that the literary art be tamed, the author's spiritual reputation has to be established as well in order for the novels to be inspirational reading. To this end the *Memoir* prizes those qualities most which lie beneath the surface. These are the attributes which are "the strong foundations of sound sense and judgment, rectitude of principle, and delicacy of feeling, qualifying her equally to advise, assist, or amuse." On the subject of Austen's religious principles, James Edward does "not venture to speak:" that is "a subject on which she herself was more inclined to *think* and *act* than to *talk*." Clearly, by her deeds we shall know her, and her nephew is content "to have shown how much of Christian love and humility abounded in her heart, without presuming to lay bare the roots whence those graces grew." While this polite

restraint may have been admirable for its respect of the subject's spiritual privacy, it could also have been a convenient method of avoiding a potentially difficult question. It is not unlikely that early nineteenth-century religious observances were too casual to merit praise from a Victorian clergyman. The reader, however, will not be totally deprived of "some little insight" into this issue, but this will come when "we speak of her death" (*Memoir* 338).

The tone of the discussion of Austen's dying and death is signalled by the chapter heading: "Declining health of Jane Austen - Elasticity of her spirits - Her resignation and humility - Her death." Christian acceptance of her fate is central to the portrait. In her weakened condition her brother Henry's financial troubles of spring 1816 weighed heavily on her, but she eschewed complaint on the grounds that "it has been the appointment of God, however secondary causes may have operated" (*Memoir* 377). James Edward gives further evidence of her resilient spirit by including excerpts from her witty letters to him in the summer and fall of 1816. He demonstrates that Jane Austen's mind clearly did not share in her bodily "decay." As a testimony of the continuance of her critical and creative powers he uses the example of *Persuasion*: the novel was completed in July, 1816, but his aunt was depressed and dissatisfied with the method she had used to reconcile the hero and heroine. She shook off her depression, and overnight came up with the *dénouement* as it now stands. In the second edition of the *Memoir*, and in response to popular request, James Edward included the cancelled chapter as evidence that his aunt could revise brilliantly up to the end.

It is not through her art, however, that Jane Austen's worth is affirmed.

While the emphasis in the *Memoir* is on life rather than death, it is still her manner of dying that confirms her reputation:

We may well believe that she would gladly have lived longer; but she was enabled without dismay or complaint to prepare for death. She was a humble, believing Christian. Her life had been passed in the performance of home duties, and the cultivation of domestic affections, without any self-seeking or craving after applause. She had always sought, as it were by instinct, to promote the happiness of all who came within her influence, and doubtless she had her reward in the peace of mind which was granted her in her last days. Her sweetness of temper never failed. She was ever considerate and grateful to those who attended on her. (*Memoir* 387)

Like her counterpart in the "Notice" this Jane Austen is a posthumous creation.

In both works her non-existence is central: she lives in "the obscurity of her domestic retirement" and hence the nephew has scarcely any materials for a detailed life of his aunt. He will, however, draw her from memory: he has "a distinct recollection of her person and character," and he promises a delineation of the "prolific mind" whence sprung the characters in the novels who "are known as individually and intimately as if they were living neighbours." The novels and the memory of the life are thus interchangeable and the key to the portrait of the aunt becomes the central question as to whether:

The moral rectitude, the correct taste, and the warm affections with which she invested her ideal characters, were really existing in the native source whence those ideas flowed, and were actually exhibited by her in the various relations of her life. (*Memoir* 273).

The answer of course is a resounding 'yes': "there was scarcely a charm in her most delightful characters that was not a true reflection of her own sweet temper

and loving heart" (*Memoir* 273).

Although the recollections that James Edward has of Austen are those of a young man (he was eighteen when she died), he assures his readers that "the impressions made on the young are deep" and that although over fifty years he has forgotten much, he still remembers that 'Aunt Jane' was the delight of her nephews and nieces: "we did not think of her as being clever, still less as being famous; but we valued her as one always kind, sympathising, and amusing" (*Memoir* 274). There is a ring of sincerity and truth in what James Edward says about his early relationship with his aunt. The reader's confidence in this version of the life, however, is undermined by the nephew's sublime faith in the material and moral advances of his own generation. This leads him to assimilate the world of the novels into a Victorian complacency. In this version the works become "all charm and urbane comment on a society in which she felt at ease."¹³ Life and art are blended here into a construct that has a curious circularity: the subject of the *Memoir* is assigned fictional attributes, while the novels become the source of factual information about their author's character.

James Edward, however, was not engaged in an interpretative venture uniquely his own. One of the nineteenth-century's most characteristic literary enterprises was to read an author's work as an autobiographical document. Charles Lamb's biographers, for example, used the Elia essays as "authentic

¹³ D.W. Harding, introd., *Memoir* 267.

evidence" of what he was like; Edmund Gosse mined John Donne's poems for details of the poet's early life, and Shakespearean commentators ransacked his poems and plays for "hidden biography."¹⁴ One of the logical extensions of this belief was the conclusion that the whole work of art contained the "soul" of the poet. William Wordsworth's biographer was operating under this assumption when he insisted that: "His works ... are his Life ... Let them retain their supremacy in this respect; and let no other Life of Wordsworth be composed beside what has thus been written with his own hand."¹⁵ Robert Browning as well was enthusiastic about the intimate connection between life and art:

Therefore, in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him, and we certainly cannot love it without loving him. Both for love's and for understanding's sake we desire to know him, and as readers of his poetry must be readers of his biography also.¹⁶

Not all nineteenth-century critics were as adamant on the subject as Christopher Wordsworth and Robert Browning, but even Edmond Malone, who at the beginning of the century cautioned about the use of literary evidence, conceded that the works might "be safely appealed to, when they strongly enforce the practice of those virtues for which the writer, through life, was eminently

¹⁴ Altick 97-8 passim.

¹⁵ Christopher Wordsworth, introd., *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (Altick 101).

¹⁶ Robert Browning, "An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelly," *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin 1968) 337.

distinguished."¹⁷

Some critics, however, did suggest that writers formed an exception to the biographical rule that men's actions displayed their characters:

In passing from the public to the private life of kings, of statesman and warriors, we have, for the most part, the same qualities and personal character brought into action, and displayed on a larger or a smaller scale, - and can, at all events, make a pretty tolerable guess from one to the other. But we have no means to discover whether the moral Addison was the same scrupulous character in his writings and in his daily habits, but in the anecdotes recorded of him.¹⁸

While such comments are evidence perhaps of a flurry of interest in the psychology of creativity early in the century, this had died out by the time James Edward was writing the *Memoir*. The mid nineteenth-century tendency to regard poets as popular heroes inspired a demand for biography, which came to be a profitable sideline of popular journalism. As well, the growing number of women readers is taken by some critics to account for an increased interest in seeing everyday life portrayed in the arts.¹⁹ In the atmosphere of this dramatic spread of public interest in literary figures, the possibility that writers might be unique biographical subjects was swamped. Journalists supplied profiles of living writers and the debate over the borderline between discretion and impertinence in biography flourished. In this atmosphere it would not have been unnatural for

¹⁷ Edmond Malone, "Some account of the Life and Writings of Dryden," *Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works of John Dryden* (London, 1800) Vol.I, Part I, 469.

¹⁸ Hazlitt?, review of Spence's *Anecdotes*, *Edinburgh Review* XXXIII (1820) 303, in Altick 99..

¹⁹ Altick 151.

the Austen family to fear that the production of the life of their author-relative might fall into unsympathetic hands. A note appended to the first edition of the *Memoir* suggests that this fear might not have been entirely unfounded. After the pages were in type it apparently came to the attention of the author that a Miss Mitford had misrepresented his aunt in her lately-published *Life*. She did not claim to have known Jane Austen herself, but reported that her mother was well acquainted with the Austens and described Jane as "the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers." The editor of Miss Mitford's *Life* observed in a note that the description of Austen was different from "every other account of Jane Austen from whatever quarter," and James Edward proved the falsity of it with evidence that Mrs. Mitford's last contact with the author occurred when Austen was little more than seven years old (*Memoir* 390-1).

In spite of the apparent ease with which he refuted the Mitford portrayal, Austen's nephew took the criticism of his aunt as a personal affront:

Certainly it is so totally at variance with the modest simplicity of character which I have attributed to my aunt, that if it could be supposed to have a semblance of truth, it must be equally injurious to her memory and to my trustworthiness as a biographer. (*Memoir* 390).

There is an ironic twist to the vigorous effort to refute the Mitford opinion, since earlier in the *Memoir* James Edward had praised her literary talents and was at pains to link the two families: "The grandfather of Mary Russell Mitford, Dr. Russell, was Rector of the adjoining parish of Ashe; so that the parents of two

popular female writers must have been intimately acquainted with each other" (*Memoir* 277). Although the author later concludes Jane Austen's powers are of a "Higher order," he praises Miss Mitford for her admirably drawn "likenesses of individual persons" (*Memoir* 375).

While the Mitford slur on Austen was clearly not the impetus for the *Memoir*, that she was mentioned at all in the former's *Life* is an indication that Austen had at least some reputation as a public figure and that there was contemporary speculation about her as an individual. The *Memoir* undertakes to satisfy this curiosity, but it is hampered by family reticence and a paucity of available materials. No member of the family had apparently ever entertained the idea of writing Austen's life and "far from making provision for such a purpose, had actually destroyed many of the letters and papers by which it might have been facilitated" (*Memoir* 389).

When James Edward decided he ought to "lift the veil," he relied mainly on the recollections and letters of his sisters, Anna and Caroline, and letters and papers from the daughters of his uncle, Charles Austen. Not all the Austen relatives he contacted were enthusiastic, but there was unanimity that "something should be said." The family attitude was well expressed by Caroline Austen (James Edward's sister) who referred to the project as "the vexed question between the Austen's and the public."²⁰ She also expressed concern about the

²⁰ R.W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948) 140.

scarcity of material and about the usefulness of her aunt's letters that were available: "They must have been very interesting to those who received them, but they detailed chiefly home and family events and she seldom committed herself even to any opinion, so that to strangers these could be no transcript of her."²¹

Caroline was perhaps less sanguine about the blandness of her aunt than the brother was. She believed the letters to Cassandra had been "open and confidential," but a few years before her death Cassandra burnt the greater part, cut out portions of the remainder and divided them up as legacies to the nieces.²² It was not only the letters that had bits cut out of them, parts of the life were excised as well. Both the "Notice" and the *Memoir*, for example, ignore the existence of the Austen brother, George, who was apparently mentally retarded and subject to 'fits'. He was the second son (1766-1832), but the *Memoir* erases him and refers to Edward as the "second brother." George was never cared for at home and in spite of his long life, details of his life are virtually non-existent. The urge to suppress was not restricted merely to personal details, it extended to the works as well. Both Caroline and her half-sister, Anna Lefroy, thought Jane Austen's early literary pieces would be useful, but Caroline opposed publishing any of the "betweenities"--those writings which were no longer juvenile nonsense, but which did not exhibit the mature talent.²³ James Edward seems to have

²¹ Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 142.

²² Chapman *Facts and Problems* 142.

²³ Chapman *Facts and Problems* 144.

disagreed since he did include the "betweenities" and he persuaded Anna to let him use extracts from the unfinished *Sanditon*.

The lack of materials for the *Memoir* was complicated by the fact that not all the letters known to exist were available to the author. Lady Knatchbull (Fanny Knight, daughter of Edward Austen Knight, the aforementioned "second brother") had a collection but was elderly and had lost her memory so could not be consulted, and neither her sister nor her daughter could apparently find them.²⁴ These ninety-six letters, mostly to Cassandra, were published after Fanny's death in the first collection of letters, edited by her son Edward, Lord Brabourne in 1884. There is some evidence too that even if Fanny could have been appealed to she might not have thought highly enough of her aunt's refinement to have wanted details of her life broadcast to a Victorian public. Late in her life she wrote to her sister on the subject:

Yes my love it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so *refined* as she ought to have been for her *talent* and if she had lived 50 years later she would have been in many respects more suitable to our more refined tastes. They were not rich, and the people with whom they chiefly mixed, were not at all high bred ... and *they* of course though superior in *mental powers and cultivation* were on the same level so far as *refinement* goes - but I think in later life their intercourse with Mrs. Knight (who was very fond of and kind to them) improved them both and Aunt Jane was too clever not to put aside all possible signs of "common-ness" ... Both the aunts were brought up in the most complete ignorance of the world and its ways (I mean as to fashions &c) and if it had not been for papa's marriage which brought them into Kent, and the kindness of Mrs. Knight, who used often to have one or the other of the sisters staying with her, they would have been, though not less agreeable in themselves, very

²⁴ Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 141.

much below par as to good society and its ways.²⁵

Whether Fanny was able to co-operate or not in the project of the *Memoir*, she would not have been entirely displeased at the outcome. Like his cousin, James Edward was not unaware that there were differences between his aunt's time and his own, but his sanguine view of the march of progress led him to smooth these out and to portray the Austens if not as models of, at least as the model precursors of, Victorian gentility. While he comments complacently on the changes "gradually effected in the manners and habits of society," he acknowledges what he perceives as the roughness of the earlier time:

In those days it was not unusual to set men to work with shovel and pickaxe to fill up ruts and holes in roads seldom used by carriages, on such special occasions as a funeral or a wedding. Ignorance and coarseness of language also were still lingering even upon higher levels of society than might have been expected to retain such mists. (*Memoir* 277-8)

Not only the laity were crude, according to James Edward. He acknowledges the opinion of a current writer about the inferiority of the clergy two centuries earlier, but he pleads that the rural clergy would not be seen as inferior if they were compared not to the "higher section of country gentlemen," but to that "lower section with whom they usually associated," the smaller landed proprietors, each of whom was "the aristocrat of his own parish:"

There was probably a greater difference in manners and refinement between this class and that immediately above them than could now be found between any two persons who rank as gentlemen. For in the progress of civilisation, though all orders may make some progress, yet it is

²⁵ *Comhill* No.973, 1947-8. Letter From Lady Knatchbull to her sister.

most perceptible in the lower. (*Memoir 278*)

The *Memoir* informs its readers that this process of 'levelling up' is a principle which is always at work when a society is making any progress, but it is not merely a matter of the lower orders pulling themselves up by their bootstraps:

I believe that a century ago the improvement in most county parishes began with the clergy; and that in those days a rector who chanced to be a gentleman and a scholar found himself superior to his chief parishioners in information and manners, and became a sort of centre of refinement and politeness. (*Memoir 279*)

It is clear that this description is of Jane Austen's father. At a stroke of the pen he becomes not only the "centre of refinement and politeness," but a participant in the progress of the lower orders. As well, he is portrayed as the head of an ideal Victorian family, "never troubled by disagreements," strongly affectionate and firmly united (*Memoir 283*). In Mrs. Austen is found the germ of much of the ability which was concentrated in Jane, and she unites "strong common sense with a lively imagination." She also endures the "continual pain" of her later years with patience and cheerfulness (*Memoir 279*). The five acknowledged sons are personable and intelligent and, with the possible exception of Henry, who was partner in a firm of London bankers which went bankrupt in 1816, successful. The daughters, Cassandra and Jane, share a "sisterly affection [that] could scarcely be exceeded," and while the former has the merit of always having her temper "under command," the latter has "the *happiness* of a temper that never require[s] to be commanded" (*Memoir 282*). Life is idyllic, "unbroken by death, and seldom visited by sorrow." The parsonage in which the Austens

live is large enough to hold pupils and a growing family. Although less elegantly furnished than most ordinary Victorian dwellings it is considered to be above the average of parsonages. As well, the family has "some peculiar advantages beyond those of ordinary rectories." Steventon is a family living and since Mr. Knight, the patron who is also the proprietor of nearly the whole parish, does not live there, the Austen family enjoys "some of the considerations usually awarded to landed proprietors" (*Memoir* 288).

Family is portrayed as "so much" to Jane Austen and the rest of the world "so little", but even though her social circle is small, those she associates with are "persons of good taste and cultivated" (*Memoir* 279, 283). These early associations benefit the author by keeping her "entirely free from the vulgarity, which is so offensive in some novels, of dwelling on the outward appendages of wealth or rank as if they were things to which the writer was unaccustomed." As well, they prevent her from dealing with persons of truly low station--the only low characters are "people of bad taste and underbred manners, such as are actually found sometimes mingling with better society" (*Memoir* 282).

Jane Austen's novels are the largest block of material available to her biographer and he discusses them in the *Memoir*, but only those particulars are noticed "which could be illustrated by the circumstances of her own life." He purports to view her writings as products of their own time and place, and he pleads his age as the qualification that renders him a competent judge of "the fidelity with which they represent the opinions and manners of the class of society

in which the author lived early in the century." The works are deemed faithful to their time because:

They make no attempt to raise the standard of human life, but merely represent it as it was. They certainly were not written to support any theory or inculcate any particular moral, except indeed the great moral which is to be equally gathered from an observation of the course of actual life - namely, the superiority of high over low principles, and of greatness over littleness of mind. These writings are like photographs, in which no feature is softened; no ideal expression is introduced, all is the unadorned reflection of the natural object; and the value of such a faithful likeness must increase as time gradually works more and more changes in the face of society itself. (*Memoir* 373)

The example that he uses to illustrate his point is taken from Austen's portraits of the clergy. While she was the daughter and sister of respectable, conscientious clergyman, her heroes, Edmund Bertram and Henry Tilney, have inadequate ideas about their church duties:

Such, however, were the opinions and practice then prevalent among respectable and conscientious clergymen before their minds had been stirred, first by the Evangelical, and afterwards by the High Church movement which this century has witnessed. (*Memoir* 373)

This turns the novels into objects of antiquarian interest which depict situations illustrative of eternal truths. Since the author of the *Memoir* sees the works as a reflection of the life, the implication clearly is that the life was exemplary. James Edward's certainty about the uneventful tranquillity of his aunt's routine and his complacent belief in progress lead him to erase ironic implications as accidents of history and consequently he reads the novels as romantic comedies drawn by a passive and non-judgmental observer.

While the nephew is confident in his own literary judgment, he does not

rely entirely on his own assessment of the novels. He is, however, highly selective about the opinions he values: "Into this list of the admirers of my Aunt's works, I admit those only whose eminence will be universally acknowledged" (*Memoir* 367). Included in this group is Robert Southey who is quoted for his views on both the works and the life:

Her novels are more true to nature, and have, for my sympathies, passages of finer feeling than any others of this age. She was a person of whom I have heard so well and think so highly, that I regret not having had an opportunity of testifying to her the respect which I felt for her. (*Memoir* 367).

James Edward is also anxious to establish an Austen connection with Southey, and he observes that since Jane Austen's close friend was married to Southey's uncle, Southey "had probably heard from his own family connections of the charm of her private character" (*Memoir* 367). The reader is told that S.T. Coleridge too "would sometimes burst out into high encomiums of Miss Austen's novels as being 'in their way, perfectly genuine and individual productions'" (*Memoir* 367). The ubiquitous Miss Mitford turns up in this company as well when James Edwards recalls her saying to him: "I would almost cut off one of my hands, if it would enable me to write like your aunt with the other" (*Memoir* 367). The eminent novelist, Sir Walter Scott, did not apparently offer up his hand but he was no less of an enthusiast:

The young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big Bow-Wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary common-place things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment

is denied to me. (*Memoir* 370)

The *Memoir* does not confine its examination of opinions on Austen's novels solely to British critics: "It was not, however, quite impossible for a foreigner to appreciate these works." Mons. Guizot, we are told, writes that he finds the characters in German and French novels too artificial but that he delights in reading English novels: "particularly those written by women ... Miss Austen, Miss Ferrier, &c., form a school which in the excellence and profusion of its productions resembles the cloud of dramatic poets of the great Athenian age" (*Memoir* 368). Not quite so foreign, but equally enthusiastic about Jane Austen's talents was the American, Josiah Quincey, who requested an autograph or a few lines in Jane Austen's handwriting. He thought transatlantic admiration might be superfluous "since high critical authority has pronounced the delineations of character in the works of Jane Austen second only to those of Shakespeare" (*Memoir* 371).

It is the praise of Lord Macaulay, however, of which James Edward appears most proud:

The admiration felt by Lord Macaulay would probably have taken a very practical form, if his life had been prolonged. I have the authority of his sister, Lady Trevelyan, for stating that he had intended to undertake the task upon which I have ventured. He purposed to write a memoir of Miss Austen, with criticisms on her works, to prefix it to a new edition of her novels, and from the proceeds of the sale to erect a monument to her memory in Winchester Cathedral. Oh! that such an idea had been realised! That portion of the plan in which Lord Macaulay's success would have been most certain might have been almost sufficient for his object. A memoir written by him would have been a monument. (*Memoir* 369).

The rapture here is an indication both of respect for the Great Man and of the importance of biography to literary fame. Although Lord Macaulay did not live to create his monument of Jane Austen, James Edward did, and it appears to have had an immediate effect on his aunt's popularity. While her literary reputation had grown over the course of the century, she was still largely a critic's novelist in 1870: "highly spoken of and little read."²⁶ Down to this date fewer than fifty articles mention her at any length, and of only six is she the main subject. The *Memoir* seems to have changed this. After its publication, and in the space of two years, there was more periodical criticism of Austen's novels than had appeared in the previous half-century. James Edward's 'Aunt Jane', whom he idealized to the point where she became a literary monument, cast her Victorian shadow on criticism of the novels and perceptions of the life for the next century.

William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh:

Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters: A Family Portrait (1913).

This image of perfection was an influential presence when William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh (son and nephew respectively of James Edward) wrote *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*. The authors acknowledged their debt to the *Memoir* and did not intend to supersede it, rather their aim was to

²⁶ B.C. Southam, *The Critical Heritage*, vol.1. 2.

supplement it in the form of a "complete chronological record" drawing on the new material which had become available after 1870 (*Life* vi). Since that date Lord Brabourne had published *Jane Austen's Letters* (1884) and J.H. Hubback and his daughter Edith had written *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers* (1906).

The Austen-Leighs drew on these, family documents and two other sources: Oscar Fay Adam's *The Story of Jane Austen's Life* (1890) and Constance Hill's *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Friends* (1902). Their approach was scholarly and they included an annotated bibliography which spanned the period from the 1811 first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* to a 1913 criticism and appreciation of the novels. The Preface acknowledges the *Memoir* as the only first-hand account of Austen, but the authors point out that while it rests on the authority of "personal recollections," these were given from the limited points of view of a nephew and two nieces who knew their aunt best late in her life, when she was not well and lived in seclusion: "they were not likely to be the recipients of her inmost confidences on the events and sentiments of her youth" (*Life* vi-vii). The Austen-Leighs undertake to complete the account of the novelist's life by providing details of her active social life and of the emotional and romantic side of her nature. They are also particularly anxious to refute the notion that the life was uneventful:

Quiet it certainly was; but the quiet life of a member of a large family in the England of that date was compatible with a good deal of stirring incident, happening, if not to herself, at all events to those who were nearest to her, and who commanded her deepest sympathies. (*Life* vii)

The authors of the *Life* quite clearly do not intend to be unduly influenced by the pressures of the earlier virtuous example or the retiring 'Aunt Jane'.

This aim of scholarly detachment, however, is initially undermined by the portrait (the full length one which appeared with the Brabourne letters) appended to the *Life*. The subject here is a young girl of about fifteen; she has limpid dark eyes, round cheeks and a gently smiling mouth. She wears a high waisted, softly flowing gown and carries a folded parasol. While the portrait, believed to be by Zoffany, had an excellent pedigree, according to R.W. Chapman it could not be of Jane Austen since the costume dates it as about 1805, when Jane Austen was thirty, and the girl in the picture is half that age.²⁷ The significance of the portrait, however, does not principally rest on the identity of the sitter; more important than an exact likeness is the visual confirmation of the gentle femininity which is the organizing principle of the *Life*.

This insistence by the biographers on the perfect femininity of their subject creates a tension in the *Life* since they are equally committed to the notion of a connection between art and experience.²⁸ The authors are consequently reluctant to risk their unmarried relative's respectability with accounts of strong views or aggressive behaviour. When they faithfully report an opinion which is at odds with their own perception of their subject, they are relieved to be able to explain it away. An incident from the Austen visit to Kent in 1788 is a case in point.

²⁷ Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 213.

²⁸ Kaplan, 139.

Philadelphia Walters (a cousin), on meeting Jane and Cassandra for the first time, wrote that she preferred the eldest "who is generally reckoned a most striking resemblance of me ... I never found myself so much disposed to be vain as I can't help thinking her very pretty." She also praised the elder sister for keeping up conversation "in a very sensible and pleasing manner." Jane, however, is "not at all pretty" and is later described as "whimsical and affected" (*Life* 59). The authors contrast this to another description of Jane from the same period: Sir Egerton Brydges remembered her as "fair and handsome, slight and elegant, but with cheeks a little too full" (*Life* 60). As honest scholars the Austen-Leighs point out that, while the latter description is the more pleasing, it was doubtless coloured by the author's subsequent fame. They confess that the former carries the weight of "an unvarnished contemporary criticism - the impression made by Jane on a girl a few years older than herself" (*Life* 60).

It is with great relief then that the Austen-Leighs console themselves with the idea that "fortunately, neither looks nor manners are stereotyped at the age of twelve" (*Life* 60), and they refute the unfavourable impression of Austen with comments from a 1791 letter of her cousin Eliza. In this later version the sisters are "perfect Beauties" who gain "hearts by dozens"; they are "two of the prettiest girls in England" (*Life* 61). The authors date the Zoffany portrait from this era too, and while they admit there is no evidence by which they can judge the likeness of the picture to Austen as a girl, the authenticated *provenance* of the work gives them "good reason to hope that we possess in this picture an authentic

portrait of the author" (*Life* 63).

Unsettling aspects of Jane Austen's work are dealt with in a similarly optimistic fashion. The authors of the *Life* note that it was with some reluctance that the author of the *Memoir* yielded "to many solicitations asking him to include *Lady Susan* in his second edition" (*Life* 80).²⁹ This piece, composed perhaps as early as 1793-4, is a short sketch of an immoral character told in a series of letters. While they concur with other critics in the opinion that the work was "scarcely one on which a literary reputation could be founded", the Austen-Leighs consider it of great interest "as a stage in the development of the author" (*Life* 80), and they comment on the way in which other characters serve mainly to highlight the one who is "full-length" and "highly finished" (*Life* 80-1). The perceived problem with *Lady Susan*, however, is that she is a "wholly sinister figure" and the authors consider it "remarkable that an inexperienced girl should have had independence and boldness enough to draw at full length a woman of the type of *Lady Susan*" (*Life* 81).

For biographers who attest to a belief in the connection between art and experience the implications of this study are obviously alarming and perhaps this is why they do not pursue the matter. Ignoring the problem, they are comforted by the "equally remarkable" evidence that "the purity of her imagination and the

²⁹ The Austen-Leighs are protective of James Edward in this matter and they emphasize that he had no intention that *Lady Susan* should be the title of a separate volume. This, however, is exactly what happened; whether by accident or by design of the printer, the second edition of the *Memoir* appeared with the title of *Lady Susan* on its cover.

delicacy of her taste should have prevented her from ever repeating the experiment" (*Life* 81). The line that follows this further evades the issue and diminishes the significance of the central figure in *Lady Susan*: "But if Jane Austen never again wrote a story in letters, no one was ever more successful in using them for exhibitions of character" (*Life* 81). The implication is that the epistolary exercise is the central question, and in consequence the matter of the genesis of a worldly and totally immoral character is bypassed.

While the Austen-Leighs are prepared to make the connection between art and life, they are selective about the experiences they will read into Austen's novels, and this shapes the portrayal of their subject. They are, for example, pleased to mention the family acquaintance with Warren Hastings, and as an extension of this to tell of the adventures of Philadelphia Hancock (sister of Austen's father) in India. The connection is made between this aunt and a passage in an early unpublished sketch which deals with the journey to India of a young woman of little fortune: "When Jane wrote this she may have been thinking of her father's sister, Philadelphia, whose fate is described not very incorrectly, though with a certain amount of exaggeration in this passage" (*Life* 32). A similar connection could have been made between the maternal grandmother of the Lloyd family and Lady Susan, but the authors did not pursue this. The Lloyds were close friends of the Austens and the Austen-Leighs do mention the infamous Lady Craven, but only in passing: she was "a beautiful and fashionable but utterly neglectful mother" (*Life* 69). While it is possible that this latter

connection may only have become apparent to later critics, the evidence does suggest that the authors of the *Life* preferred not to deal with the unpleasant prospect that their relative had some knowledge of, and some interest in, the nature of evil.

The Austen-Leighs are similarly reluctant to allow Jane Austen any critical comment in her letters. While they follow the 'Life and Letters' model, omitting some letters and combining and editing others, unlike some of their contemporaries they do not seriously tamper with content. They do, however, omit many passages which deal with complaints about relatives and friends and the case of Mary Austen, wife of their brother James is a case in point. Early in the letters her busy-body nature is referred to: "It will be an amusement to Mary to superintend their household management, & abuse them for expense" (*Letters* 111-12). In a similar vein: "Mary will drive her sister to Ithorp to find all the festivity she can in contriving for everybody's comfort, & being thwarted or teized by almost everybody's temper" (*Letters* 106). Mary also seems to have had an adverse effect on the relationship between her husband and his sister:

I am sorry & angry that his Visits should not give one more pleasure; the company of so good & so clever a Man ought to be gratifying in itself; - but his Chat seems all forced, his Opinions on many points too much copied from his Wife's. (*Letters* 181)

As well, Mary's strong and frequently adverse assessments of others seem to have been a recurrent source of family irritation: "How can Mrs. J. Austen be so provokingly ill-judging? - I should have expected better from her professed if not

from her real regard for my mother" (*Letters* 329). These excerpts are but a sample of the comments of this nature which are omitted, and all of which are from letters which are included in the *Life*. The reason for these selective omissions is not difficult to understand since the subject of the remarks was grandmother and great-grandmother to the Austen-Leighs. While the authors' personal motives may be readily understood, it is somewhat more difficult to accept their actions as biographers, since the cumulative effect of omissions of this type is to distort both the nature of the subject and her life with her family. If the letters are any evidence, family relationships were not always smooth and Jane Austen was not a passive observer.

It is not only her comments on family members that are deleted from Austen's letters, as is evidenced by the removal of her remarks on the death of an acquaintance: "The neighbours have quite recovered from the death of Mrs. Rider - so much so, that I think they are rather rejoiced at it now; her things were so very dear !" (*Letters* 114). She is similarly wry about an encounter with a gentleman in a buggy "who, on minute examination turned out to be Dr. Hall - and Dr. Hall in such very deep mourning that either his mother, his wife, or himself must be dead" (*Letters* 60). The misfortunes of friends are a source of amusement as well: "the Wylmots being robbed must be an amusing thing to their acquaintance, & I hope it is as much their pleasure as it seems their avocation to be subjects of general Entertainment" (*Letters* 114-15).

The majority of comments like the above are missing from the *Life*, and

also conspicuous by their absence are the more joking remarks about adultery and the caustic comments on pregnancy. Mistresses and drunkenness are apparently acceptable topics as long as they are observed at a distance, and remarks about these are included. Any hint of more than a surface knowledge, however, is inadmissible and the portion of the following that is enclosed in square brackets is omitted: "I then got Mr. Evelyn to talk to, and Miss T. to look at; and I am proud to say that [I have a very good eye at an adultress, for] tho' repeatedly assured that another in the same party was the *she* I fixed upon the right one from the first" (*Life* 167). Austen's sly comment on male anatomy, which was occasioned by a visit to a girl's school, is similarly deleted: "if it had not been for some naked cupids over the Mantlepiece, which must be a fine study for Girls, one should have never have smelt instruction" (*Letters* 309). The *Life* does quote her slightly risqué joke about the planned household servants for Bath: "We plan having a steady Cook, & a young giddy Housemaid, with a sedate, middle-aged Man, who is to undertake the double office of Husband to the former & sweetheart to the latter" (*Life* 156). Missing, however, is the next line: "No Children of course to be allowed on either side" (*Letters* 99-100).

Generally the comments on pregnancy are more serious than this, but they are consistently ignored as well. One of the more obvious ones deals with Austen's brother Edward's wife, who ultimately bore ten children:

I am happy to hear of Mrs. Knight's amendment, whatever might be her complaint. I cannot think so ill of her however in spite of your insinuations, as to suspect her of having lain-in. - I do not think she would

be betrayed beyond an *Accident* at the utmost. (*Letters* 114)

Similarly, in response to greetings passed on from a Mrs. Tilson, Austen comments: "poor woman! how can she be hor.estly breeding again?" (*Letters* 210). She voices an even harsher opinion about her niece Anna's childbearing: "Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty. - I am very sorry for her ... I am quite tired of so many children" (*Letters* 488). When the Austen-Leighs ignore adultery and pregnancy they may be simply responding to contemporary sensibilities, but their effort so narrows the confines of Austen's life that it becomes virtually devoid of meaningful experience.

Not only are deletions made, but even when references to such topics as marital infidelity and reproduction are left in the reader has been prewarned against taking them at face value:

The correspondence was between sisters who knew, each of them what the other was thinking, and could feel sure that nothing one might say would be misapprehended by the other; and the sort of freemasonry which results from such a situation adds to the difficulty of perfect comprehension by outsiders. Jane, too, was a mistress of subtle irony: the inveterate playfulness which is constantly cropping up in her books appears also in her letters. Secure in her correspondent, she could pass criticisms, impute motives, and imagine circumstances which would have been very far from her nature had she thought it possible that any less perfectly informed third person would see them. (*Life* 82-3)

The warning about the nature of the private correspondence between sisters is of course a salutary one, but the authors commitment to viewing irony as mere playfulness and their subject as "the most considerate and least censorious of mortals" leads them into complacency:

We may be sure, therefore, that when she seems to imply that her mother's ailments were imaginary, or that Mrs. Knight's generosity to Edward was insignificant, or that Mrs. Knight herself was about to contract a second marriage, she is no more serious than when she describes herself as having taken too much wine, as a hardened flirt, or as a selfish housekeeper ordering only those things which she herself preferred. (*Life* 83)

The implications in all this are that Austen never means what she says, and the correspondence with her sister requires expert interpretation. However, when the Austen-Leighs do undertake to explain matters their commentary is often at odds with what seems to be said in the letters. The correspondence between Jane Austen and her niece, Fanny, is a case in point. In their efforts to depict Austen as the self-effacing and sympathetic 'Aunt Jane', the authors suggest that "No formal opinion was expressed or formal advice given" in these letters (*Life* 342). This appears to be contrary to the evidence, since while Austen initially voices doubt as to whether she can help Fanny decide about the strength of her affection for her suitor, she goes on to express a strong opinion: "I have no scruple in saying that you cannot be in love." After waxing enthusiastic about the good qualities of the suitor she makes an about face and offers advice:

I shall turn around and entreat you not to commit yourself further, and not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection. (*Life* 344)

Austen is equally firm in the advice she gives to her niece, Anna, who was also writing a novel. While she is considerate of Anna's feelings, she does not hesitate to write over the manuscript: "Lyme will not do ... I have put Starcross instead ... I have also scratched out the introduction between Lord Portman and

his brother and Mr. Griffin. A country surgeon ... would not be introduced to men of their rank" (*Life* 355). Even though Austen has put aside *Emma* to read her niece's work, the tone throughout these letters is not that of self-effacing femininity; the relationship is clearly that between an aunt and her niece, but it is also one between authors. As the Austen-Leighs suggest, Austen is respectful of her niece's opinion; she is not, however, reticent about taking a stand. She gives both her own and Cassandra's views on the novel in an authoritative fashion, anticipating that their criticisms may well be more than Anna will like (*Life* 354-7).

While they purport to portray Austen as a woman who is not inexperienced in society, the Austen-Leighs consistently deny her the opportunity to voice the conclusions she draws from what she observes in the world around her. The *Life* is consequently subject to the tension between conflicting portraits: on the one hand that of the aunt who dwells in uneventful domesticity, and on the other that of an author who experiences worldly 'events'.

The irony in all this is that Austen's strongest opinions are reserved for the domestic scene. These statements must be avoided, however, because to confront them would be to question the portrayal of that world as serene and devoid of incident. Because of the persistent perception of the domestic as protected from the harsh reality which confronts those in the real world, experience can not be acknowledged for what it is; war and politics are 'events', birth and adultery are not.

These preconceptions cause difficulties for the Austen-Leighs since although they uphold the notion that experience in life is important, their adherence to a narrow view of what is appropriately feminine activity forces them into the position where only a vicarious life is possible. In lieu of allowing their subject worldly adventure, the biographers do the next best thing: she participates at one remove in the "stirring incidents" which surround those "nearest to her" (*Life* vii). The Napoleonic wars, for example, are brought close to home by the inclusion of frequent references to the sailor brothers who are making their careers in naval battles.³⁰ Not only war is experienced at arms length; crime and prison are too, and the biographers devote a whole chapter to the arrest and detainment in August, 1799 of Austen's wealthy aunt, Mrs. Leigh-Perrot, on an apparently trumped-up charge of stealing a card of lace from a shop in Bath. According to the Austen-Leighs the shopkeeper in question was in financial difficulties and hoped to profit from blackmail. The lady's husband insisted on her innocence and accompanied his wife into her more than seven-month period of detention before trial, first at the local gaol and later in the gaoler's house at Ilchester. In order to show their support and sympathy Mr. and Mrs. Austen offered that one or both of their daughters would accompany their aunt in prison. Mrs. Leigh Perrot reportedly refused the kindness on the grounds that she could not procure them accommodation in the house with her, and could not let those

³⁰ Both brothers rose in their professions: Charles became a Rear Admiral, Francis was knighted and ultimately became Admiral of the Fleet.

"elegant young women be ... inmates in a prison, nor be subjected to the inconveniences which [she was] obliged to put up with" (*Life* 134). The Austen-Leighs view the offer as a "momentous decision" on the part of the parents and suggest that it was doubtless taken with the daughters' good will. The emphasis here is on the close proximity to stirring events, and mercifully "Cassandra and Jane just escaped a residence in gaol and contact with criminals" (*Life* 135).

The more complex aspect of the experience is avoided in the Austen-Leigh's version. A shortage of money appears to have been an ongoing problem for the Austens and even though James Leigh Perrot was Mrs. Austen's brother, he was not generous with financial assistance. Rightly or wrongly the Austen sisters seem to have blamed their aunt for this parsimony. There is evidence of Mrs. Perrot's closeness with money in the letters; at times, in spite of her affluence, she was apparently reluctant to pay her debts: "My Aunt is in a great hurry to pay me for my cap, but cannot find in her heart to give me good money (*Letters* 154-5). Although the Austen sisters' attitude to her changed in later years, they regarded her for a time at least as a whining and self-centred woman: "My aunt has a very bad cough; do not forget to have heard *that* when you come" (*Letters* 132), and later:

She ... looks about with great diligence & success for Inconvenience and Evil ... In spite of all my Mother's long and intimate knowledge of the Writer she was not up to the expectation of a letter such as this; the discontentedness of it shocked & surprised her--but I see nothing in it of Nature--tho' a sad nature. (*Letters* 232)

None of these opinions of the aunt is included in the *Life* and while admittedly these remarks come a few years after the incident of the stolen lace, the sentiment in them renders the Leigh Perrot affair more complicated than a near brush with criminality. Doubtless the family would rally to the aid of an aunt who was besieged, but the support of the nieces might not have been as wholehearted as the Austen-Leighs suggest. As with the omissions of unfavourable references to Mary Austen, it appears that family sensibilities were at work here, since in 1808 the Leigh Perrots settled an annual income of one hundred pounds on their grandfather and great-grandfather, James Austen (Mary's husband and Jane's eldest brother). The biographers include reference to this in the *Life* but they delete the sister's reaction to her brother's good fortune: "My Expectations for my Mother do not rise with this event" (*Letters* 61). Deletions of this nature reinforce the perception that Austen's life was devoid of tension, and they do so at the expense of an honest appraisal of the toll that being poor relatives took on the Austen women. Family reticence may have prevented emphasis of the issue, but to delete all mention of it distorts the life.

While the Austen-Leighs will not allow disharmony in Jane Austen's life, they will allow romance, since a love affair seems to be essential for establishing that she did have an emotional side to her nature. There is hence a special chapter on "Romance" placed in the specific time frame of 1795-1802. It is as though these matters occur outside the normal sphere of feminine domestic life and have the status of 'incident' or 'event'. The biographers begin this chapter

with James Edward's refutation of Mrs. Mitford's charge that Jane Austen was a frivolous husband hunter, and while they add to the defense that two years later a cousin accused her of being 'prim', their final assessment is:

It is probable on growing up she, like other girls, enjoyed admiration, and it is certain that she attracted a great deal of it; but she says so much to her elder sister and mentor about one particular flirtation that we may be sure that it was neither a serious nor a frequent occupation with her. (*Life* 84)

The account of this first 'romance' begins with a November, 1798 letter to Cassandra in which Austen reports on a note from the admirer (Mr. Blackall) to her friend and mentor, Mrs. Lefroy. What the gentleman writes is formal and proper:

I am very sorry to hear of Mrs. Austen's illness. It would give me particular pleasure to have an opportunity of improving my acquaintance with that family with a hope of creating to myself a nearer interest. But at present I cannot indulge any expectation of it. (*Life* 85)

Austen's response to this, however, is quite caustic:

It will all go exceedingly well, and decline away in a very reasonable manner ... it is ... most probable that our indifference will soon be mutual, unless his regard, which appeared to spring from knowing nothing of me at first, is best supported by never seeing me. (*Life* 85)

The biographers observe that though Austen was interested to hear of Mr. Blackall he "Had evidently not touched her heart" (*Life* 85). Their summation seems rather an understatement, for Austen's reaction implies that Mr. Blackall was as much a figure of fun as a serious suitor. This attitude is confirmed by her response to the news of his marriage fourteen years later:

I should very much like to know what sort of a woman she is. He was a piece of perfection - noisy perfection - himself, which I always recollect

with regard ... I could wish Miss Lewis to be of a silent turn and rather ignorant, but naturally intelligent and wishing to learn, fond of cold veal pies, green tea in the afternoon, and a green window-blind at night. (*Life* 86)

The Austen-Leighs, who normally give a strictly chronological account, have altered the order here to begin their section on Austen's emotional life with a frivolous encounter which sets the tone for what is to come. From the outset the author is portrayed as a woman who does not take these episodes seriously. In their discussion of an earlier romantic involvement with the nephew of the aforementioned Mrs. Lefroy, the biographers admit that this affair was more serious, but they hasten to assure the reader that it was "not *very* serious" (*Life* 87). This young man is alluded to in the November, 1798 letter previously quoted, and more than two years after the event Jane Austen is still sensitive about it. She notes that Mrs. Lefroy did not mention her nephew to her and she was "too proud to make any enquiries" (*Life* 85). This seems to belie the assumption that the romance meant little to her. Her last comment on the matter is, however, determinedly bright: "At length the day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, and when you receive this it will be over. My tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea." The Austen-Leighs applaud this remark as evidence of sophistication: "Truly the 'prim' little girl of twelve had made considerable progress by the time she was twenty!" (*Life* 88). They conclude that Lefroy's lack of means meant that Austen never seriously considered the possibility of a proposal. She had, however, obviously made a lasting impression

on this suitor since "when he was an old man he told a young relation that 'he had been in love with Jane Austen, but it was a boy's love'." As for the lady's feelings, "the opinion in the family seems to have been that it was a disappointment, but not a severe one. Had it been severe, either Jane would not have joked about it, or Cassandra would have destroyed the letters" (*Life* 89).

While these first two encounters have real names and faces attached to them, Austen's "one real romance" has more the air of fiction. This love affair, involving a suitor who remains unidentified, ended almost before it began with the sudden tragic death of the young man. Cassandra, whose fiancé also died suddenly, is the "unimpeachable authority" for the details which were passed through Caroline Austen (sister of James Edward). The Austen-Leighs claim to give all the details, and while this is the romance about which the least is known, they conclude that it impinges most closely on the life: it "probably affected the flow of her spirits, and helped to disincline her for literary composition, for some time after its occurrence" (*Life* 89). Once the few facts are given we are told that:

The rest must be left to imagination; but of two things we may be sure: the man whom Cassandra deemed worthy of her sister can have been no ordinary person, and the similarity in the ending of romance in the case of both sisters must have added a strong link of sympathy to the chain of love which bound their lives together. (*Life* 90-1)

This affair is not the last of the near misses at matrimony. One more incident is revealed "which, though full of discomfort and inconvenience for the actors, yet lacks the note of tragedy contained in the last" (*Life* 92). Jane Austen

apparently accepted an offer of marriage from a Mr. Harris Bigg-Wither in November, 1802; she repented of her action immediately and withdrew her acceptance the next day. Family opinion was that Austen decided that the advantages of fortune notwithstanding, she was not prepared to trust that love would grow after marriage. The biographers confess to being unsure whether this event came after the real romance, but if it did they conjecture that "Jane had hardly as yet regained her wonted balance of mind and calmness of judgment." For the Austen-Leighs Austen's romantic life is over with the Bigg-Wither episode. After 1802 she acquiesces "cheerfully in the gradual disappearance of youth ... She was to spend the remainder of her life in the centre of family interests, and by degrees to become engrossed in the exciting business of authorship" (*Life* 94).

The Jane Austen who is involved in these romances seems on the surface to approximate the worldly woman her biographers purport to want her to be. She is pursued by one suitor and rejects him wittily, with the next her common sense prevails over her emotions, she experiences tragedy with the third, and with the fourth she demonstrates that she prefers spinsterhood to a marriage of convenience. Her involvement in these 'romances', however, is only slightly less vicarious than her participation in the Napoleonic wars since all of the incidents involve the withdrawal from, or the refusal of, romantic experience. Austen escapes untouched from her entanglements with Blackall, Lefroy and Bigg-Wither, and in the case of the 'most serious' lover, death prevents entanglement.

As in the case of family strife and financial difficulties, Jane Austen's biographers smooth out the tensions. It is a necessity that Austen be desirable to the opposite sex in order that she be proven feminine, but there is no suggestion that she must have reciprocated the interest. She thus remains more of a spectator than a participant in her romances.

These four episodes were not, however, the sum total of Jane Austen's encounters with the opposite sex. There is ample evidence in the letters that she had an active, if sporadic, social life which was not totally confined to the company of her own family and other women. She grew up in a household of brothers and apparently enjoyed and was comfortable in male company. Her correspondence with Cassandra comments on a variety of potential and/or imaginary suitors, but with some consistency her remarks on male acquaintances are removed from the letters in the *Life*. For example in December, 1798 she reports: "this morning has been made very gay to us, by visits from our two lively Neighbours Mr. Holder & Mr. John Harwood" (*Letters* 38). More playful remarks about one Edward Taylor are similarly deleted: "we went by Bifrons, and I contemplated with a melancholy pleasure the abode of him, on whom I once fondly doted."³¹ Some five years later when the gentleman marries, Austen responds to the news in similar fashion: "I hope it is true that Edward Taylor is to marry his cousin Charlotte. Those beautiful dark Eyes will then adorn another

³¹ *Austen Papers, 1704-1856*, ed. R.A. Austen-Leigh (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne, 1942) 75.

Generation at least in all their purity" (*Letters* 87). Individually these deletions are not of great significance, but their cumulative effect is to confine Austen's romantic interests to a limited time span, and to restrict her interest in male acquaintances to members of her own family.

Given the biographers' perception of tragic love as an appropriate qualification for authorship, it is fitting that a chapter entitled "Authorship and Correspondence, 1796-1798," follows the one on Romance. This period according to the biographers marks the first of two seasons of active authorship:

Periods of unequal length, and divided from each other by eight or ten nearly barren years. This unfruitful time has been accounted for in several different ways; as arising from personal griefs, literary disappointment, or want of a settled home. These disturbing causes all existed, and it is probable that each contributed its share to her unwillingness to write; but at present she enjoyed hope and happiness, the vigour and cheerfulness of youth among congenial companions, and a home as yet unvisited by any acute sorrows. (*Life* 95-6)

The Austen-Leighs do acknowledge here that Austen's life was not always idyllic, but since they make only passing allusion to difficult times there is little sense that these were lived experiences, rather they appear as an almost fictional anguish which is the necessary preliminary to successful authorship. Once the biographers establish their author's credibility they are careful not to overstate her genius: "It has been usual to dwell on the precocity of intellect shown in the composition of the first two of these works by a young and inexperienced girl, and no doubt there is much justice in the observation" (*Life* 96).

The second productive period is the one associated with Chawton where the Austen sisters, their mother and Mary Lloyd lived from 1809 (Mr. Austen died in January, 1805): "Into this period were to be crowded a large portion of her most important literary work, and all the contemporary recognition which she was destined to enjoy." The biographers stress the importance of family, and particularly of Cassandra, "from whom she had no secrets, and with whom disagreement was impossible" (*Life* 235). Satisfying and happy as this world was, Jane Austen inhabited another world as well: "her own separate and peculiar world, peopled by the creations of her own bright imagination, which by degrees became more and more real to her as she found others accepting and admiring them." In the peace and tranquillity of Chawton "she found happy leisure, repose of mind, and absence of distraction, such as any sustained creative effort demands" (*Life* 236). This very romantic notion of the nature of literary creativity is reinforced as the Austen-Leigh's describe an artist who is simple perfection: "She was absolutely free from any artistic self-consciousness, from any eccentricity of either temper or manner." To reinforce this perception of her the biographers quote the *Memoir*:

Hers was a mind well balanced on a basis of good sense, sweetened by an affectionate heart, and regulated by fixed principles; so that she was to be distinguished from many other amiable and sensible women only by that peculiar genius which shines out clearly ... in her works. (*Life* 237)

They add that her tastes were as normal as her nature and as in the *Memoir* her musical activities are discussed. Again, however, it is her handiwork that is most

important:

She was extraordinarily neat-handed in anything which she attempted. Her hand-writing was both strong and pretty; her hemming and stitching ... 'might have put a sewing-machine to shame'; and at games, like spillikins or cup-and-ball, she was invincible. (*Life* 238-9)

In spite of their stress on the importance of these domestic activities, the biographers apologize that they may "not seem to imply so wide a mental outlook as we wish to see in a distinguished author." It appears from this that the writer of novels is meant to have interests that exceed the confines of domestic life, but the Austen-Leighs (as did James Edward) excuse their author on the grounds that she probably "never was in company with any person whose talents or celebrity equalled her own." She also lived in a small family circle whose members, while "intelligent and refined", were:

Not especially remarkable for learning or original thought ... but she saw what she did see so very clearly, that she probably would have been capable of looking more deeply into the heart of things, had any impulse induced her to try. (*Life* 239)

Domestic tranquillity is assumed to nurture a limited talent which outside experience might have enlarged.

In keeping with this picture, the Austen-Leighs stress there was "absolute unanimity" as to Austen's charm and loveableness. There was also apparently about her "a certain critical aloofness which belonged to her family, and which was hardly to be avoided by so clever a person as herself." This critical spirit, though, "was evidently a quality of which she endeavoured to rid herself as of a fault." Austen here is denied an attribute which seems appropriate to an author;

a critical spirit is not, however, a characteristic suitable to gentle femininity. The biographers do not force her to be always happy, however; they admit that at times she was "very grave", and that "there was undoubtedly, a quiet intensity of nature in Jane for which some critics have given her credit" (*Life* 240). It seems clear that Austen may be allowed strong emotion (and perhaps even critical thought) as long as it does not end in articulation or overt action.

Always in the background of the discussions of Austen as a writer is the need to refute adverse opinion of her; there is the constant effort to prove that she did have the qualities expected of an esteemed author. As much as dealing with the critics here, the biographers appear to be dealing with their own perception of 'author' which is grounded in a largely male model that demands worldly knowledge. Because, however, the Austen-Leigh's definition of femininity precludes experience they deny their subject what they perceive to be the essential ingredient for authorship.

Family sensibilities as well entered into the smoothing out of Jane Austen; not only did the myth of 'Aunt Jane' have to be preserved, but the family pedigree had to be established since in the opinion of her biographers, family was central to her creative processes. It is no accident, then, that the life is framed by chapters on relatives and that the work is subtitled "A Family Record." The ambiguity in this description emphasizes the tensions inherent in family involvement in the *Life*: it is a family record in the sense that family sources are used to document the life, but it is also a family portrait which affords the

Austen-Leighs the opportunity of basking in the reflections of both their ancestors and their 'aunt'.

It would be misleading to attribute all the omissions in the *Life* to family pressures, since the debate over how much a biographer should tell had gone on throughout the nineteenth-century, and the aim of literary biography generally was not to establish the image of authors as they really were, but as it was most inspiring for readers to think they were.³² By mid-century the critical doctrine that poet and person were inseparable, and that the latter should be exempt from public scrutiny, reinforced the pressure for reticence in literary biography.³³ Thomas Carlyle, however, fulminated loudly against this excessive discretion: "How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles' sword of *Respectability* hangs over the poor English life-writer ... and reduces him to the verge of paralysis."³⁴

Fittingly it was a life of Carlyle that apparently brought to a head all the old arguments about the limits of biographical candour. After Carlyle's death, and acting in accordance with his friend's request for honesty, J.A Froude published a biography which exposed the great man's failings and his violent

³² Altick 148.

³³ Altick 154.

³⁴ *Westminster Review*, XXVIII(1838) 299, in Altick 155.

domestic life. His was not the only life to attempt honesty, but Froude was vilified and denounced as a traitor to his mentor's memory, and while he was not without his supporters, his fate was a warning to other biographers who aspired to candour. The debate thereafter was more timid, but the attack on frankness was still going on in 1911: "When a beautiful soul has created a masterpiece, and paid his debt to the world, we might allow his light to shine throughout time undimmed and undisturbed by the miasma of malignant and malicious gossip."³⁵

It was in this atmosphere that the Austen-Leighs wrote the *Life* in 1913, and it was not surprising that their treatment of Jane Austen did not question the portrait of self-effacing femininity that they inherited. The biographers choice of the life and letters format signalled that they believed their subject to be a distinguished one, but in this case, as in the other family accounts biographical convention and personal interests worked in concert to obscure the likeness of Jane Austen. The end product is less a life than a document designed to be an inspiration to readers and a credit to Austens.

³⁵ Frederick Graves, "The Rakers," *Westminster Review*, CLXXVI(1911) 686, Altick 244.

CHAPTER III: Sarah Tytler to David Rhydderch: 1880-1932.

The previous chapter examined family biographies of Jane Austen and suggested that they exercised a pervasive control over public perceptions of their author-relative. This influence combined with Victorian reticence was hardly conducive to independent speculation about Austen's life, and successive authors not only relied on family works for factual details but quoted extensively from them in support of the perfection of her character. In the 1890s independent biographers added creative genius to the qualities that Austen possessed and this too diminished the incentive to re-examine the life, since by definition the possessor of this attribute had extraordinary powers of insight and expression which precluded conventional analysis. Also, by late in the century much of the earlier hero (heroine?) worship of authors had abated to the point where in many instances writers, ancient or modern, who populated the book-loving home with cherished characters were viewed instead as honorary members of the household.¹ Robert Burns was one of the most adored; numerous societies were formed to venerate him and in 1859, for example, 872 meetings were held to commemorate the centenary of his birth. As well, "every moment of the man's life, every spot

¹ Altick 136.

life, every spot his eyes lighted on, every woman he ever paid his decent respects to or seduced, every hand he clasped, was investigated, recorded, interpreted, perpetuated in paintings and engravings."² Dickens' admirers were similarly enthusiastic; after his public readings well-bred women clambered for souvenirs of his person, and he is reported to have thrived on what he described as "the personal (I might almost say affectionate) relations" which existed between him and his public.³ Shakespeare, too, was not immune from public enthusiasm and he was addressed alternatively as "darling Willie, dear William, beloved Will."⁴ 'Aunt Jane' was a comfortable addition to this company, and the possibility of producing alternative views of her was further thwarted by the affectionate esteem in which she was held by her readers.

Sarah Tytler (1880)

Sarah Tytler wrote the earliest book-length treatment of Jane Austen by an author who was not a relative. It appeared in 1880 and was entitled *Jane Austen and Her Works*. This author's avowed intention was to present to "an over-wrought, and in some respects over-read, generation of young people the most characteristic of Jane Austen's novels, together with her life." The work consists of a biographical introduction followed by criticism and a summary of the

² Altick 120.

³ Walter Dexter, ed., *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Bloomsbury: Nonsuch Press, 1938) 3:12, 52.

⁴ Altick 136.

novels, and this format is justified on the basis that "the tales and the life are calculated to reflect light on each other ... [and] that the arrangement of the tales ... as the author wrote them ... is an advantage, in permitting the growth of the author's mind and taste to be recognized."⁵ From the opening pages, it is apparent that Jane Austen is of interest not only because her novels delight and instruct all her readers, but also because she is a feminine role model for the women and girls of 1880:

Women may well be proud of the woman who has been held, on high authority, second only to Shakespeare in the comprehension of the springs which move the heart.

Girls may well be proud of the girl, who strange to say, wrote two of her masterpieces, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* before she had completed her twenty-third year. When other girls were practising their music and working at their embroidery, having their youthful gaities and youthful dreams, Jane Austen, who was fair to see and charming to listen to, who practised her music, sewed at her worsted-work, joined in gatherings of young people, and had her morning visions with the best, possessed in addition the power, and found the time, to accomplish those wonders of fiction which, for their subtle reproduction of character, and exquisite weaving of a web so like that of the common lot, have been the instruction and solace--not of companion girls alone, but of statesmen and historians, philosophers and poets, down to the present day.

Both men and women may be proud of the woman who did this great thing, yet who never forfeited a tittle of her womanliness; who was essentially as good, true, and dear, as devoted to home, as cherished in its narrow circle, as the most obscure of her sisters, who are nothing to the world while they are everything to their own people. (Tytler 1-2)

The tone of this excerpt speaks for itself: the writing of novels is "great thing," but clearly "womanliness" is of even greater value. While Miss Tytler evidences

⁵ *Jane Austen and Her Works* (Folcroft Library Editions, 1976) vii. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Tytler' in the body of the text.

concerns which on occasion appear feminist, these are overshadowed by her conviction about the salutary effects to be gained by women from their reading of Jane Austen. In commenting on the list of the author's "distinguished admirers," she is disturbed that only one woman's name is given, that of Miss Mitford:

We must hope, for the honour of intellectual and literary women, that many more names might have been added ... Let it never be said, for women's own sakes, that it is among women ... that Jane Austen begins to be no longer read and revered. (Tytler 49)

In similar fashion to the way in which the "Notice" of 1817 uses Austen's manner of dying as the example of her Christian virtue, this version of the life uses her last days as the springboard for a discussion of her as a model of feminine domesticity:

Surely to be thus prized and mourned by her nearest and dearest was beautiful and good ... and doubtless, to be so cherished was the meet reward of Jane Austen's faithful performance of the home duties from which no literary career, how ever arduous and distinguished, absolved her, and of her unswerving loyalty to the domestic affections which form the inner citadel of all true natures. For charity or love must always begin at home, and reign paramount there, wherever it may end, though the extremities of the earth may own its sway. (Tytler 40-1)

Clearly this biographer has not embarked on a new version of the life, and her reliance on the "Notice" and the *Memoir* is not surprising since Lord Brabourne's collection of the letters was not published until 1884.

Miss Tytler's status as an independent observer, however, is at least minimally established by her insistence that Austen's character was not totally free from defects--a prospect which the family biographers did not allow themselves to entertain. Her discussion of the closeness of the Austen family and

the smallness of their social circle, for example, focuses on the detrimental effects this likely had on Austen:

Good as Jane Austen was, there is a certain spirit of exclusiveness, intolerance, condescension, and what may be classed as refined family selfishness, in the attitude which she, the happy member of a large and united family, distinguished by many estimable qualities, assumed to the world without. She was independent of it to a large extent for social intercourse; and she told it candidly, and just a little haughtily--forgetting, for the most part, the wants of less favoured individuals--that she needed nothing from it. (Tytler 15)

The narrowness of Jane Austen's world is criticized again in connection with the anecdote about her refusal of an invitation from an aristocratic couple with whom she was not acquainted. Ostensibly the occasion was designed to bring her together with Madame de Stael, but she is said to have declined to attend on the grounds "that to no house where she was not asked as Jane Austen would she go as the author of *Pride and Prejudice*" (Tytler 31). While Miss Tytler acknowledges that this story is often told as an example of the author's independence, she views it quite differently:

Even the most honest and honourable independence has its becoming limits. That of Jane Austen, ultra self-sufficing, fastidious, tinged with hautiness, is just a trifle repellent out of that small circle in which she was always at home. (Tytler 32)

Miss Tytler also suggests that seeing her neighbours' foibles as she did, Austen would very likely have been unable to conceal this, particularly as a young girl:

Fondly loved and remembered as Jane Austen has been, with much reason, among her own people, in their considerable ramifications, I cannot imagine her as greatly liked, or even regarded with anything save some amount of prejudice, out of the immediate circle of her friends, and in general society. (Tytler 15)

To Austen's nephew, James Edward's claim that she was on friendly, though not intimate terms, with her humbler neighbours, and "they often served for her amusement, but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip," Miss Tytler responds that this may be a nice distinction, but one "hardly likely to be understood by the neighbours over whose affairs she laughed" (Tytler 18-9).

The inescapable conclusion to be reached from all this is that the benevolence of 'Aunt Jane' was not generally much appreciated beyond the narrow confines of her family circle. This does not, however, appear to affect seriously this biographer's perception of her as a model of "womanliness." It is, after all, the domestic sphere that is significant here and not relationships in the world at large. As well, to be amused by one's fellow creatures is not a major fault, and Miss Tytler accepts it of Austen on the grounds that she put her observations to good moral use in her novels.

In common with many critics, Miss Tytler frequently makes clear connections of this sort between the novels and Austen's life. While she does not suggest a simplistic one to one correspondence, she comments, for example, on the similarities between the details of gifts made in *Mansfield Park* and Charles Austen's present of gold chains and topaz crosses to his sisters. She also describes Jane Austen in terms of her heroines:

In person Jane Austen seems to have borne considerable resemblance to her two favourite heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse. Jane too was tall and slender, a brunette, with a rich colour--altogether the picture of health which Emma Woodhouse was said to be. (Tytler 10)

Mrs. Malden (1889)

Mrs. Charles Malden's *Jane Austen* makes similar connections when she likens the fictional Bennet sisters to the Austens: "Jane and Elizabeth Bennet are as Cassandra and Jane Austen were to one another."⁶ These analogies are made, however, to point out the life-like natures of the fictions, not to suggest that they are drawn strictly from life. For Mrs. Malden the genius of Austen lies in the believability of her fictions; Elizabeth Bennet, for example, is described as "a very rare type of character ... uncommon in every respect and yet thoroughly lifelike" (Malden 84). Austen merits high praise because she draws "life-like pictures of human beings who are immortal in their truth to nature" (Malden 224).

This study of Austen is one volume in a "Famous Women" biographical series, and understandably the focus is on her as both woman and author. The intent is to make Austen (and women in general) more widely appreciated. Jane Austen, as a representative of her sex, is to be admired for living a "sweet, peaceful, womanly life," free from the "whims and caprices" of genius; she entirely carried out the saying of her great sister writer, "*D'abord je suis femme, puis je suis artiste*" (Malden 2).⁷ The format is again that of introductory chapters of biographical material, summary and criticism of the novels, and a final chapter on

⁶ Mrs. Charles Malden, *Jane Austen* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889) 89. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Malden' in the body of the text.

⁷ Presumably the reference here is to Mme de Staël.

illness and death. As always there is comment on the scarcity of material available for a biographer and the conclusion is that "her writings were, in fact, her life; and an attempt to give anything beyond the very briefest sketch of her career must resolve itself into a criticism of those writings" (Malden, Preface).

While it is significant for Mrs. Malden that Austen's fictions are true to life, it is of even greater importance that they are the works of a woman author. The suggestion is not made, however, that being a woman endows Austen with special powers of insight, rather her talents are likened to those of male authors such as Shakespeare. In common with the family biographers, this author emphasizes Austen's physical attractiveness and her apparent refusal of opportunities to marry. Mrs. Malden, though, disagrees with James Edward and Lord Brabourne that Austen's heart was never won, and she accepts the story of the sudden death of the unknown suitor Jane reportedly met while staying at the seaside in Devonshire in 1801. Mrs. Malden does see evidence in the novels of the progression of their author from girlishness to maturity, and with this in mind she concludes that Austen wrote of romance from experience as well as genius, and she views the novels as expressions of their author's emotional development. *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, for example, are described as the most mature, "the motives and actions of the *dramatis personae* are more complex ... the feelings expressed, too, are more womanly and less girlish" (Malden 107). The highest praise, however, is reserved for *Persuasion* which is written "in the tone of a woman who looks back on her own early romance with sorrowful tenderness,

and permits to her imaginary story the happy finale which she had not experienced herself" (Malden 194).

Francis Warre Cornish (1913)

Not only did Jane Austen's life and works become part of a "Famous Women" series, they were also deemed worthy of inclusion in the "English Men of Letters" one as well. Francis Warre Cornish's *Jane Austen* takes a more historical approach than does Mrs. Malden, and views Austen's life and her works as the products of their own times. While he describes eighteenth-century country life as narrow, Cornish accepts it as the source of the novels and consoles himself with the idea that after all "Jane Austen was sent into the world not to compare century with century but to show how true to itself human nature is."⁸ Again this biographer is dependent on family sources and he is clearly convinced by them, although he attempts objectivity. Of the *Memoir* he concludes that while it is "somewhat coloured by affection, that is the right temper for a biographer; and especially in this case, where the subject of the biography is a satirist, and consequently exposed to unkindly interpretation; and Mr. Austen Leigh's direct testimony to the lovable character of his aunt outweighs much irresponsible guessing." For the 1913 *Life and Letters* he has the highest praise: "The result of the excellent work of Mr. William and Mr. Richard Austen Leigh is to confirm

⁸ Francis Warre Cornish, *Jane Austen* (London: MacMillan, 1929). All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Cornish' in the body of the text.

and deepen the impression conveyed by the novels, the letters, and the *Memoir*. We could not wish it otherwise" (Cornish 5).

Cornish's treatment of the portraits of Jane Austen is particularly indicative of the selective method he adopts in order to support a favourable impression of her. He describes Cassandra's drawing of Jane as not altogether a pleasing one, and while he admits "it is the work of one who knew every look of her sister," he explains away the harshness on the grounds the sketch is "drawn by an amateur and must not be judged as a finished work of art" (Cornish 23). He is much more pleased by the best known portrait of Austen which is prefixed to the *Memoir* and "was adapted, with the help of advice from members of the family who had known her well, from a drawing made by Cassandra" (Cornish 22). Cornish does not mention that these revisions of 1870 could only have been done on the basis of distant memory since Austen by then had been dead for fifty-three years. Similarly, while he acknowledges the doubtful authenticity of the Zoffany portrait, he, along with the Austen Leighs, prefers it as a portrayal of Austen: it "is full of promise of character, and might resemble Jane at eighteen" (Cornish 23).

In spite of this obvious partiality, Cornish does not subscribe to the notion that Jane Austen was without faults; perfect propriety is, after all, "a gift reserved for the uninteresting" (Cornish 25). He takes account of the Mitford reports that as a young woman Austen was "the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly," and that in later years she was "perpendicular, precise,

taciturn, a poker of whom every one [was] afraid" (Cornish 23). After considering these apparently contradictory views, Cornish comes down on the side of moderation and concludes that while the 'butterfly' and the 'poker' do not sit well together, "in a case like this it is better to presume that there is some foundation for what is written, and it is not to be supposed that Jane comported herself on all occasions in a perfectly average and matter-of-fact manner, whether for excess or defect" (Cornish 24). In keeping with this approach Cornish prefers to discount the evidence of Henry Austen and his niece, Caroline, that Austen never in her life said a sharp thing:

I cannot accept so colourless a portrait. I cannot believe that Jane, who wrote so many sharp things, never said one; and her criticism, whether expressed or not, must always have been felt. There never lived a human being with a keener sense of the ridiculous or a greater power of expressing it in satirical language. But a satirist is not always a misanthropist. Satirists may be laughing, weeping, or snarling philosophers, and there is no doubt to which class Jane Austen belonged. (Cornish 26)

Cornish, as well, accepts the evidence that Jane Austen experienced a severe disappointment in love, and he concedes the possibility that this indisposed her to writing between 1798 and 1811. He also suggests that her inactivity may have been the result of the insensitivity of publishers as well as feminine diffidence at a time when authorship was not conceded to women.

In the midst of domestic interruption, however, Jane Austen did write and it is by what she wrote that Cornish knows her. While in his view the letters are "the only contemporary biography extant" (Cornish 56-7), they are few and mainly

serve to confirm the impression he has of her from her novels:

The picture that I get from reading Jane Austen's letters, which is borne out by the general tenor of her novels, is a portrait of a woman of extraordinary observation, sagacity, and penetration, and of coolness and rectitude of judgment hardly less uncommon; no optimist, and yet disposed to take a tolerant view of humanity and its aspirations and meannesses, its successes and failures ... She believes in free-will as against necessity, in the power of character to change circumstances, not in the tyranny of external and internal forces and agents. (Cornish 70-1)

Such a conclusion suggests that this biographer subscribes enthusiastically to the notion that the true nature of an author is undoubtedly expressed in her work. The expression of belief in "free-will" and the "power of character" is also peculiarly appropriate to 1913 "English *Men of Letters*."

Goldwin Smith (1890)

While critics such as Francis Warre Cornish gain their knowledge of Austen from her novels, they do so based on their analysis of the themes and attitudes they find in them. Other biographers, however, often directly attributed to Jane Austen the best of the qualities with which she endowed her fictional creations. Readers of the novels, as well, went further and conjured up imaginary relationships which appear to have been as intense with Austen as a person as they were with the characters in her novels, and because of the scarcity of information about her life, biographers turned increasingly to the novels for evidence to support their perceptions of her. This activity was assisted by a critical approach which ignored the fictional nature of the characters; Cornish for

example says of Elizabeth Bennet: "as Mr. Bradley reminds us, she is a real person, and we must see her as well as hear her speak" (Cornish 123). Given the subject matter of Austen's fiction, too, it was not surprising that both these authors and the general public frequently failed to make the distinction between Jane and her heroines. James Edward Austen-Leigh too assured his readers "that there was scarcely a charm in her most delightful characters that was not a true reflection of her own sweet temper and loving heart." He also completed the circle by speaking of the Dashwoods and Bennets, the Bertrams and Woodhouses, the Thorpes and Musgroves as those "who have been admitted as familiar guests to the firesides of so many families, and are known there as individually and intimately as if they were living neighbours" (*Memoir* 273). Jane Austen too spoke of her characters as having lives outside the novels; she updated her family on their doings and even playfully discussed portraits of them:

I was very well pleased ... with a small portrait of Mrs. Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs. Darcy;--perhaps however, I may find her in the Great Exhibition which we shall go to, if we have time ... We have been both to the Exhibition & Sir J. Reynolds,'--and I am disappointed, for there was nothing like Mrs. D. at either. I can only imagine that Mr. D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye.
(*Letters* 309-310, 312)

One Lady Gordon was perhaps the foundress of a tradition when she first described Jane Austen's fictional world as a real one: "You fancy yourself as one of the family." It was not uncommon also for readers to know the works almost by heart; Lord Macaulay and his sisters, for example, are reported, much to the

confusion of bystanders, to have used the dialogue of the novels in their everyday conversations.⁹ This situation in which readers playfully lived the novels as well as reading them, coupled with the assumptions regarding the symbiotic relationship between the novelist and her characters, created a climate in which Austen took on the status of a fiction endowed with the best characteristics of the women in her novels. Under these circumstances, the connections that were created between Austen's art and her life precluded any assessment of her which was not born out by very conventional readings of the novels in which contradictions were smoothed out and the possibility of ironic intention downplayed:

There is no hidden meaning in her; no philosophy beneath the surface for profound scrutiny to bring to light; nothing calling in any way for elaborate interpretation...Jane Austen's characters typify nothing for their doings and sayings are familiar and commonplace.¹⁰

The preceding is a quotation from Goldwin Smith, one of Austen's more dispassionate early biographers; he insists that she was "almost as impersonal as Shakespeare, and any attempt to extract her own history from her novels must be precarious in the highest degree" (Smith 20). While he recognizes the pitfalls of attempting to read the events of the life from the novels, Smith is quite willing to take the opinions expressed therein as identical with Austen's own. He consequently accepts the received notions and presents her as a fictional ideal in

⁹ Chapman, *Facts and Problems* 147.

¹⁰ Goldwin Smith, *Life of Jane Austen* (London: Walter Scott, 1890) 185. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Smith' in the body of the text.

his *Life of Jane Austen* which was produced in 1890 for the "Great Writers" series. Smith emphasizes her place in literary history by situating her in "a group of female novelists of manners, of which the other most prominent figures are Miss Burney, Miss Edgeworth, and Miss Ferrier" (Smith 11). He concludes, however, that Austen's importance lies not in her relations to other writers or schools of writers but in her "gift of creative power." This stress on genius reinforces her status as a "Great Author," but it becomes paradoxical when we are assured that Austen's powers are limited to "making the familiar and commonplace intensely interesting and amusing" (Smith 185). Genius is granted but it is so narrowly defined that it is almost explained out of existence.

Because the novels are taken to be perfect reflections of both life and the opinions of their author, incidents therein that are at odds with the genial image of 'Aunt Jane' are dismissed as mere aberrations. In *Emma*, for example, Smith notes that there is "a flash of something like Radical sympathy with the oppressed governess." He hastily assures his readers, however, that "no other glimmering of the "Revolt of Woman" appears in Jane Austen's works. The gospel of Mary Godwin had no more found its way than that of her father to Steventon Rectory or Chawton Cottage" (Smith 48). Smith is the first, and one of the few biographers, to raise the issue of feminism, but he dismisses it comfortably and he similarly explains away Austen's critical judgements:

Jane Austen's morality is pure ... She is far indeed from any idea of making sentimental capital ... by tampering with the moral law. If she often playfully exposes insincerity and self-deception, if she sometimes, especially in the freshness of her youth, says things which verge on

cynicism, she is never really cynical, nor does she ever shake our faith in virtue. (Smith 55)

It is in the interests of this perfection that Smith insists of *Lady Susan* that "there is nothing that we can see in this production giving promise of the later work;" he even suspects "that the plot may have been borrowed, and that, in the unattractive web, the woof alone may be Jane Austen's; the warp may have been the work of another hand" (Smith 182). He is similarly confident that the work is a "mere exercise" and that Austen would never have chosen to publish it: "It would be vain to ask that "Lady Susan" should not be included in future editions of Jane Austen's works; but such, if she could be heard, would certainly be the prayer of her shade" (Smith 183).

Goldwin Smith is so certain of his conception of Jane Austen that he does not hesitate to explain her impulse to write: "she was moved ... not by desire of money ... or of fame ... but by the sense of her gifts, by the pleasure of exerting them, by the desire of amusing herself ... by genuine interest in character and life" (Smith 26). His debt to the family sources in this is obvious, and it is reasonable to conclude that these form the basis of his ideas. Smith regrets the paucity of information about the life, but he clearly views the works as being of prime importance in defining it. Like many of his contemporaries he inclines to the notion that biography should express the best aspects of the subject, and that additional information might very well only disappoint the reader. Given this attitude, Smith concludes that "the works are the only biography" (Smith 12).

While it appears clear that this is meant to imply that by the quality of her works we shall know Austen to be a "Great Author," and even though he has acknowledged the perils of reading the life from the works, he still succumbs to the habit of portraying his subject in terms of the fiction. In the biography there is a confusion of moral and aesthetic values which is a reversal of the assumption "good woman, therefore good art." The governing idea is now "good art, therefore good woman." Smith's method is apparent when he discusses Austen in relation to *Persuasion*, the last of the novels, written when "the hand of death was upon her." He quotes what is written of Lady Elliot: "she had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children to attach her to life and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called upon to quit them," and then concludes "that she would feel the value of life, and yet quit it with resignation, is what we should expect of a character like Jane Austen" (Smith 167).

It would be dishonest to emphasize this observation to the exclusion of the numerous occasions when Smith does make a distinction between Austen and her fictions, but it is indicative of the difficulty he has in separating the two. When the novels are taken as examples to support a portrait of Austen which in part originates in those same sources, then the investigation of the life becomes a circular process which ensnares even the biographer whose aim is to be objective. In this Smith is not only bound by ideas of the perfection of Jane Austen, but also by the "Great Authors" format in which his biography is written. The latter consists of one short chapter of personal history and eight chapters in which

discussions of the novels are occasionally interspersed with references to the life. It is not surprising, given this structure and Smith's acceptance of the works as autobiographical that the novels frequently do become the life in his account of Austen.

Oscar Fay Adams (1891)

While Goldwin Smith seriously considers the importance of the separation between fact and fiction, for Oscar Fay Adams the distinction appears less clear. He does accept family authority for dates and Austen's personal appearance, but he sees details of subordinate characters in the letters and insists that for what "she really was" we must turn to her correspondence and her books.¹¹ Adams sees a great similarity between the novels and the letters in that both share the recognition of the importance of small details and events. Like the family biographers he warns against taking the letters too literally: they may seem "a trifle unsympathetic occasionally," but their author knew her sister "most thoroughly" and therefore did not pause "to throw in the lines required to soften them." Her only object was to amuse Cassandra "who, she well knew, would mentally supply these same modifying touches while she read" (Adams 170).

This caveat notwithstanding, Adams ignores offending passages and makes extensive use of the letters to support his contention that Austen was sociable and

¹¹ Oscar Fay Adams, *The Story of Jane Austen's Life* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1891) 234. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Adams' in the body of the text.

fun-loving. He turns, however, to the novels to substantiate the deeper and more emotional side of her nature. Into descriptions of Lyme Regis from *Persuasion*, for example, he reads Austen's own pleasure in nature and the autumn scene: "when she makes Anne Elliot say of Lyme, 'So much novelty and beauty ... my impressions of the place are very agreeable,' she is declaring her own liking" (Adams 88). When Adams notes that the only extended description of place in the novels is also of Lyme, he comes to a similar conclusion: "It is an exception one is glad to have made, for the glimpse it affords of the author's own habits and preferences" (Adams 244).

If Austen is to be rehabilitated as a woman, however, her warm response to nature is not enough. She must demonstrate her capacity to be emotionally involved with those around her, and hence from the relationship between Fanny and William Price in *Mansfield Park* Adams deduces evidence of Austen's deep affection for her sailor brothers:

What an exquisite ideal of such affection she places before us in the love of Fanny Price for her brother William! There is no room for doubting that in describing it she was recalling some happy moments with her brother Charles or Francis returning from one or other of their voyages. (Adams 247)

Adams similarly finds evidence of Austen's consideration for the feelings of others in Mr. Knightly's rebuke to the heroine of *Emma* for her ill-treatment of Miss Bates. His method is not, however, to suggest that any one of the fictional women *is* Jane Austen, rather he mines each one of them for characteristics which he deems her to have:

I do not mean to say that Catherine Morland is in any sense a counterpart of Jane Austen; I mean simply that there are occasional resemblances between the novelist and her creation, which have a flavour that to my mind is distinctly autobiographic ... She was doubtless thinking of herself when she declares that Catherine "had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility, without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient.

She had not the tinge of romance which led her pleasing young heroine into such awkward situations; but she certainly possessed the healthy temperament which made admiration not unwelcome to Catherine, while at the same time by no means indispensable to her happiness. (Adams 235)

However much Adams believes that Catherine Morland resembles Austen, "the likeness to herself at this period appears more strongly in Elizabeth Bennet:"

The native good sense which was usually at Catherine's command in emergencies was a distinguishing characteristic of Jane Austen; but the vivacity and animation which Elizabeth possessed in a much greater degree than her sister heroine were quite as essential a part of their author's being, as every letter of hers bears indubitable evidence. (Adams 236)

Adams is clearly not unaware of the pitfalls of reading the life into the art, and he acknowledges that the extent of Austen's debt to living persons is a matter for individual conjecture. He admits too that the family view about Austen never using actual personalities in her books is true respecting her figures as separate wholes, but when he reads the letters he finds details there which he "cannot help thinking form the outline of a number of the subordinate creations in her pages" (Adams 236). As to the principal figures he is "by no means so sure, with the exception of the important ones already mentioned" (Adams 236). In spite of frequent disclaimers of this nature, what Adams says and what he does are two different matters. Try as he might, he cannot escape the trap of the reader who

views the women in the novels as live persons, and it is a short step from there to the conclusion that they resemble the real Jane Austen.

This autobiographical reading culminates in what Adams has to say of the heroine of *Persuasion*, the novel he considers the "ripest development" of Austen's powers:

She has not infused into the character of Anne Elliot, its heroine, all of her own strength of purpose or vivacity of manner; but when Anne Elliot is giving utterance to her deepest convictions it is Jane Austen herself who is speaking, the woman who is passing into the serenity of middle life, into the maturity and insight of chastened feeling. (Adams 255)

The impression given by passages of this nature is that the biographer has more than a scholarly relationship with his subject, and that he is clearly intent upon presenting her as a sensitive and caring woman. This is confirmed when he acknowledges that although his work appears on the heels of the lives by Mrs. Malden and Goldwin Smith, his contribution is justified on the basis that it will concentrate on the woman, rather than on the novelist as the others have done. He will "place her before the world as the winsome, delightful woman that she really was, and thus ... dispel the unattractive, not to say forbidding, mental picture that so many have formed of her." Whatever popular currency this impression of Austen may have had, it does not appear to have been the result of what her biographers said of her. Rather, it may have been gleaned from the more extreme critics like Charlotte Brontë, for example, who described Austen as dealing with the surface and lacking emotion:

She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a

speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition; too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet ... she no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman.¹²

Adams of course does not refer to this particular criticism of Austen, which was written forty years earlier in a private letter. Rather he appears to be responding to much milder opinions when he queries the origin of the popular view of her as "starched" and "precise," and comes to the simplistic conclusion that the answer lies in the portrait of Austen wearing a cap: "for in the average mind of the present, caps and rigidity of deportment are indissolubly associated." He is also comforted by the certainty that "a second look at the ... animated features beneath the cap ... will go far to correct this conception; and a reading of her letters can hardly fail to shatter the stiffly outlined image" (Adams 46).

The portrait and the letters alone, however, are not apparently sufficient evidence and Adams journeys to all the localities familiar to Jane Austen in order to recapture her life.¹³ In the process his own emotional responses to place

¹² T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington eds., *The Brontës: Their Friendships, Lives, and Correspondence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932) Vol. III, 99.

¹³ This concern with place still persists and is not confined merely to biographers. A detailed discussion of this issue is found in Donald Greene's "The Original of Pemberly," in which he mounts a convincing argument not only for Jane Austen's having visited Chatsworth, but also for her knowledge of the wider world. (*Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 1:1 (October 1988) 1-23).

become an integral part of the biography. He is an American, and his delight in the old world is that of an admiring visitor, but his interest in setting is more than merely geographical or historical; it is apparent that he seeks actually to rediscover Jane Austen in her familiar haunts:

It is late afternoon in Winchester. The shadows are gathering in the gloomy transepts of the cathedral and lengthening across the quiet greensward of the Close. The great clock that overhangs the High Street strikes six; and a moment later the quarter chimes from the Guildhall send forth the slow music of their notes, and the hour is struck more slowly still ... Just in this same way may the hour have sounded in the ears of Jane Austen seventy-two years ago this 17th of July, 1889. It was the last hour the bells of the ancient city she had loved so much were ever to tell to her, the last which she was ever to heed, for a little later she had done with time. (Adams 9-10)

Not only is this passage melodramatic, but the presence of the biographer is so obvious that it is intrusive. It is his own reaction to place that governs the view of Winchester, and a similar approach is taken to all the locations Jane Austen lived in or visited. Steventon, where she was born, is described as it looks in 1889, "and then, with some minor changes in the disposition of gardens and hedgerows, we have the Steventon which Jane Austen's eyes looked upon a hundred years ago" (Adams 18). With each change of place, the author becomes more intimately involved in the scene, and after describing a grand gala Austen attended in Bath, he reports:

Ninety years have come and gone since that delightful evening; and still on gala nights the Bathonians stroll out through Pulteney Street to experience a similar pleasure in the same locality. On the ninetieth anniversary of Jane's second evening at Sydney Gardens, a soft, moonless June night, I rambled through the shaded pathways ... my thoughts turning with little effort to the brilliant young woman who had found in those same leafy lantern-lit alleys the pleasures of that long-past gala night surpassing her

expectations. (Adams 70)

It is apparent that while Adams concerns himself with an intimate knowledge of place, he is also anxious about an exact recreation of events, so the proper time is important as well. It is no coincidence, then, that the biography opens with a description of Winchester that is set almost seventy-two years to the minute after her death. Adams returns to Winchester and the scene of Austen's dying near the end of the work, only this time he describes the room where she died and his own involvement is more obvious:

It is a small room, lighted only by the bow-window, and connecting by a passageway with other apartments in the rear ... It was a pleasant corner of the beautiful old city,--not an absolutely still one ... but a peaceful spot nevertheless, with just enough life in it to please one whose hold on existence, but not her kindly interest in many of its aspects, was fast loosening. As we sat in the little room with curious time-worn paper on the walls ... the seventy-two years since the Austens were there seemed to fade into the past, and show us the patient gentle invalid on the sofa in the corner ... It was transitory enough, like most illusions; but as we walked thoughtfully back ... we talked, as was natural, of little else than the gifted woman in whose very presence we had seemed to be that summer day. (Adams 211-212)

The nostalgic charm of Adams' approach is evident here and he more than fulfils the obligations of a biographer to be familiar with the places in which his subject lived. Austen family members too were interested in place as well as pedigree, and other writers have taken a similarly geographic interest in Austen. Constance Hill, for example, in *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Friends* (1902), gives readers what she terms a first-person account of a journey through "Austen-land." While this work does not claim to be biography, the purpose of it appears similar

when the author hopes that "by seeing her nature reflected ... in those around her, and by finding out gradually the place she held in their midst, that we learn to know her better."¹⁴ What Hill makes is "a pilgrimage in the footprints of a favourite writer" in the hopes of being able to "put back the finger of Time for more than a hundred years and to step ... into Miss Austen's presence."¹⁵ The motive for this attempt is a sense of friendship with the novelist: reading her allows one to "hold communion sweet" with her mind and with her heart.¹⁶

It is this same impulse which seems to prompt Oscar Fay Adams when he uses the device of place as the means to step into Austen's presence:

On a fair June morning of 1889 I climbed the steep steps leading up to Camden Crescent, the Camden Road of Jane's day and of "Persuasion", and ascending a flight of steps at its farther end, reached the yet steeper path up Beacon Hill ... Nearly a century has passed since that evening walk of which Jane Austen wrote, but nothing of the charm which she found in the lovely valley has vanished with the years; and as the village looked to her eyes in 1779, so it appeared unchanged to mine so long after. (Adams 72)

Not only does Adams attempt to view the world through Austen's eyes, at times he hears her voice:

Who would not like to have sat some eighty years ago in the great drawing-room, with its high, dark wainscot reaching nearly to the ceiling, its large, hospitable, generous-looking fireplace, its broad range of mullioned Tudor windows looking upon a perfect lawn, and sitting there have seen Jane Austen at her brother's piano, and listened to her singing? Who would not have enjoyed an experience like this? Though eighty years have fled, the beautiful room remains much as when she used to visit it,

¹⁴ Constance Hill, *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Friends* (London: John Lane, 1902) vi-vii.

¹⁵ Hill, v, viii.

¹⁶ Hill viii.

her music is still upon the piano, and very pleasant it is to remember that here she sat and sang, and that moreover her voice was sweet. (Adams 231)

Adams' involvement with Austen does not stop at external details, he provides an intimate account of her emotional life as well. On reading in the letters of the pleasure Jane reports on receiving an affectionate greeting from her brother Edward, Adams is "irresistibly" reminded of George Elliot's "pathetic" confession in one of her letters: "I like not only to be loved, but to be told that I am loved," and he likens the authors to each other in their desires for "expressions of tenderness." Adams stresses of the Austen family too that "they loved one another very dearly, these brothers and sisters, and they were not ashamed to own the fact" (Adams 120). There is a glimpse also of the "gentle, obliging disposition" of 'Aunt Jane' who was reputedly so popular among her nieces and nephews. She is "the animated, handsome woman whose nearly thirty years did not oppress her with a weight of dignity so great as to prevent her enjoyment of a children's game, and who was always ready to leave her own employment in order to please an importunate small nephew by joining him in his" (Adams 101). According to Adams, Austen was a paragon of sensitivity; her consideration for children stemmed not only from "her own strong natural love" for them, but also from "an intuitive perception of each child's individuality, which enabled her to ... win their hearts by respecting their separate personalities" (Adams 118).

Adams' interest in Austen's emotional life, however, does not extend

beyond a casual interest in any romantic involvements she may have had. While he discusses the episode of Thomas Lefroy at some length, he comes to the conclusion that "her fancy was certainly attracted ... that she loved we may not assume" (Adams 46-7). Although Adams believes that the friendly interest in Lefroy might have led to love, he is certain that Austen was too busy for sentimental regrets, and "most assuredly" she was never disposed to sentiment anyway. Of other possible romantic interests there is no mention.

While Adams may not have been interested in Austen's marriage prospects, he is intent on showing she was not prim, and he capitalizes on her reaction to not seeing Mrs. Siddons perform in *King John*: "I should particularly have liked seeing her in Constance, and could swear at her with little effort for disappointing me:"

The spectacle of Jane Austen meditating an outburst of profanity, even in jest, differs materially from the sedate portrait in browns and greys which some of her admirers have painted of her, and to my thinking is not the less attractive, because the more human, of the two. (Adams 150)

He delights as well in demonstrating that Austen shone in social situations.

There is much in the letters that Adams quotes about her enjoyment of dancing, and he takes this pleasure as proof positive against the criticisms of her: "Did primness ever before condescend to dance twenty dances in one evening even of the statelier measures of our great-grandmothers?" (Adams 60). He also emphasizes her delight in society and her attractive appearance. Of her sojourn in Bath he reports:

Her handsome face and winsome manners brought her much attention wherever she went; and her wit and vivacity made her conversation eagerly listened to. She was not in the least deceived as to the nature of the admiration she received, for she could very clearly discern the boundary line between flattery and sincerity; but she could not help knowing that she was attractive, and she took an honest pleasure in the fact. (Adams 99)

There is the distinct suggestion in this that the author imagines himself part of the admiring crowd, and the impression is strengthened later when he comments on Austen's report that a Mr. W.K. referred to her as "A very pleasing-looking young woman:"

[This] seems decidedly tame, and makes one impatient with the "Mr. W.K." who had nothing more enthusiastic than this in his vocabulary to say of her. But I am bound to believe that the seven other gentlemen who gathered about her that evening found themselves abundantly able to utter warmer words of praise than these, although the object of it all was not so fortunate as to hear them. (Adams 152)

There is an apparent progression in the biography in Adam's involvement with his subject. From the portrait at the front of the book---it is signed, "yours very affectionately, Jane Austen," in a facsimile of Austen's handwriting--the reader suspects the relationship to be personal, but with Austen as a girl and a young woman he is admiring as always, but suitably detached. With the mature woman his relationship is quite different. In describing her he shows what amounts to reverence: within her range "she has no equal, and her inferiors approach her only in the same degree that the lesser lights of 'the spacious times of great Elizabeth' approached the great sun of their day and of all days since" (Adams 255). At the end of the biography Adams discusses his performance as "a labour of devotion, reverence and love." True to the last to his belief that the

author speaks through her heroines he fittingly gives Anne Elliot the last word: "I know of no better colophon than the tender, earnest words in which Jane Austen, almost in her last days, expressed her conceptions of the love of man and woman:"

God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow-creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as--if I may be allowed the expression--so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one; you need not covet it) is that of loving longest when existence or when hope is gone. (Adams 256)

This may be a simple tribute to the unselfish love that Austen purportedly had for all those she knew. However, the choice of these lines as a conclusion is puzzling since the emphasis here is on the nature of love between man and woman, and in the biography this has been virtually ignored. While Adams is at pains to present Austen as a handsome and desirable woman, there is the uncomfortable sense that he allows her no serious suitor but himself. If this is indeed the case, then Anne Elliot's words can only leave the reader with the impression that Adams has what amounts to a romantic attachment to the dead author, and that in fact he usurps to himself the privilege of "loving longest when existence or when hope is gone."

David Rhydderch (1932)

Adams was not the only biographer who discussed Jane Austen in terms of romantic attachment. David Rhydderch outdoes him and considers her as an ideal marriage partner. While it may be reasonable to view this approach as somewhat light-hearted, it is significant for what it says about the relationship that exists between this author and his subject. Not surprisingly he confesses openly that his bias is a favouring one: "we have an eye only to her virtues, with which we are so obsessed perhaps that it blinds us to her shortcomings."¹⁷ More than this, however, Rhydderch describes himself as Austen's votary: "we compare Jane Austen with no other. We love her for herself alone. We have worshipped at other shrines, but at none so truly as this" (Rhydderch 117). The extremity of his liking for his subject is unquestionable and while the reader may not take the expression of "love" literally, the cumulative effect of statements like this turns the marriage issue into something more than mere jest.

What makes Austen available for matrimony is that she remains single, and she did not marry, according to Rhydderch, because her "fancy gave her little time to indulge in such thoughts" (Rhydderch 59). While the domestic details of her life were necessary and useful, "the serious business of her life was writing novels" (Rhydderch 184). He discounts the nieces' evidence of tragic romance, dismisses Tom Lefroy and Mr. Blackall as serious suitors, and concludes that: "In

¹⁷ David Rhydderch, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Art* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) 109. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Rhydderch' in the body of the text.

her life you will find no plot, no intrigue, no romance, no tragedy; no peg upon which to hang even the rumour of scandal" (Rhydderch 89). This does not seem to mean that Austen did not enjoy herself, nor that in her youth she did not ever consider the possibility of marriage. To support this, Rhydderch describes the Mitford assessment of her as something of a compliment:

[There is] nothing derogatory to the character of a young novelist in being called 'the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly.' We are sure that Jane, did she know this, would have been secretly delighted to think that others of her sex thought her so ephemeral a charmer. (Rhydderch 106)

Like Adams who preceded him, this biographer wants his subject to appear as a desirable woman, and he too seeks to avoid the logical outcome of her charms. He does not, however, totally ignore the physical side of love in the biography; he describes the Austen brothers, who produced so many children, as "quiverful," and he acknowledges Austen's humorous shafts directed at "lying in" and "troublesome embryos." Rhydderch also suggests that although Austen remained single she was "fruitful," her books were her "darling children"(Rhydderch 23). He insists, however, that her experience of life was limited to her family. He is convinced that she was never really in love, and moreover that she had never been kissed. Rhydderch is consequently delighted that the novels are silent on the subject of kisses: "there is not one 'ephemeral intoxication of a kiss'," since "she could not enthuse on the doubtful bliss of what she had never tasted" (Rhydderch 186, 188). He is certain too that:

A mere kiss ... was too prosaic, too vulgar. As loudness and coarseness were considered by the consequential Emma to be bad manners, we are

sure that kissing to Jane Austen was disgusting. It was something to be assumed, not to be spoken of. (Rhydderch 188-9)

This attitude, however, does not imply that she was a prude; Rhydderch asserts that she did not find life faultless, but she did find it wholesome, and therefore "she just peeped into the crevices of depravity and stayed neither too long nor too close" (Rhydderch 204).

To suggest that displays of affection fall into this category does seem extreme, but to Rhydderch they are obviously distasteful. He is comfortable with Austen because she is discreet in her novels: "To love and be loved have no gross physical meaning, sensuality there is none, or lewdness with its familiar garrulity. Shocks there are, and mild sensations not a few, but there is nothing shocking" (Rhydderch 204). In the works, however, Rhydderch insists "there is passion enough for the discerning" (Rhydderch 117), and he goes on to reveal that, while at first impression Austen's descriptions are all so chaste, on second consideration it becomes apparent that she sees all she wants to see and more, and writes less than she knows. His final conclusion is that she knew full well "that the curious reader would surmise her knowledge of the whole in knowing so much; and really what did she not know?" (Rhydderch 204). That there is an ambivalence to innocence, however, in this version of the life, is clear. Passion is present, but it is hidden; and Austen, though innocent, has profound knowledge which is the product of intuition rather than experience.

The delicacy that Austen demonstrates in physical matters is an essential ingredient of her femininity, and Rhydderch sees this transposed into her heroines who "are the most feminine in fiction." He also suggests that given that women predominate in the novels, "we might guess that a world of matrimony would be in store for us" (Rhydderch 206). We are clearly not disappointed in this expectation and the male/female relationships that develop in the fiction are model ones according to Rhydderch. The heroes, though "apparently cold to touch," warm as acquaintance grows and:

If affection is love refined, one knows of nothing so pure and free from guile, so void of boisterous passions as the love of these men. It is of such love that most women dream of in life though they seldom admire it in books. It is such love that most women share in life, though what they admire in books is but a dream. (Rhydderch 212-3)

Rhydderch provides just such a relationship for Austen when he decides, along with Kipling, that Captain Wentworth was the man she loved. Not only is Austen thus made to be enamoured of her creation, but her biographer clearly has matrimony on his mind when he discusses the heroines as individual portraits, compares them with each other in terms of "merit," and decides that:

Given the choice of a wife, Elizabeth Bennet would head our list; failing which, Anne would be our preference, then Elinor perhaps, though Emma would suit us just as well. Indeed we love them all so much that it would serve our purpose equally as well if we reversed the process. In our hearts, however, we will take Jane Austen, and possess them all. (Rhydderch 208)

Rhydderch is not alone in his fantasy and he quotes George Saintsbury on the subject as well:

In the novels of the last hundred years, there are vast numbers of young ladies with whom it might be a pleasure to fall in love; there are at least five with whom no man of taste and spirit can help doing so. I should have been most in love with Beatrix Esmond and Argemone Lavington. For occasional companionship I should have preferred Diana Vernon and Barbara Grant. But to live with and to marry, not one of the four can come into competition with Elizabeth Bennet. (Rhydderch 208)

Statements like these are obviously variations on the kind of game played by Lord Macaulay and his sisters when they transposed Austen's fictional characters into everyday conversations. This, however, takes on a more serious tone when engaged in by a biographer who views Austen's life and works as "inseparable and all important. In both the woman stands out pre-eminent" (Rhydderch 89). While Rhydderch admits that "the trouble with Jane as a letter writer is that you really do not know when she is serious" (Rhydderch 32), he is comfortable affirming that the letters "teem with all the commonplace trivialities which Addison analysed as the contents of a coquette's heart. The artist is shrouded beneath the happiest of naive domesticities. Every line bespeaks the genius woman" (Rhydderch 89). He also believes that the correspondence reveals "the essential Jane," but he insists that "to know the works of Jane Austen, is to know the lady herself ... and the letters give us those glimpses of reality that confirm our prior surmises. Her works, though fashioned for fiction, are chronicles from life, to us equally as real" (Rhydderch 88). Again, as with Adams, we have a kind of tautology: examples from life support a portrait largely based on fiction which is believed to be drawn from that life. This is further complicated by the biographer who emphasises the femininity of his fictional

Jane, and at the same time views her as an object of romantic interest. While this may originate as literary playfulness, the reader begins to question the nature of the game when the love object has never been kissed and embraces are described as depravity.

Although Rhydderch is insistent about reading the novels as reflections of reality, he is equally convinced that Austen's talent does not depend on what she read or whom she knew: "such is her genius, that we might say, she wrote from the breast and read before she could walk ... Jane seems to have arrived intellectually complete" (Rhydderch 91-2).

In keeping with this concept of the natural aspects of her ability, Rhydderch's guiding metaphor in the biography is a horticultural one. Austen's is "an art which ripens with the maturing sun, yet never pales;" her characters "all reap what they have sown as sure as bloom follows bud;" and each of her plots is "like a Dutch garden in cultivated spruceness, free from weeds, wildness, or superfluity" (Rhydderch 138, 127, 131). That Austen's development as an artist did not depend on worldly knowledge is expressed in the language of nature as well: "the mind of man does not blossom according to the seed implanted" (Rhydderch 93-4). The years in Bath also are described as:

A kind of interregnum; years of suspended progress with no apparent growth; yet viewed as an artist she grew in those days like corn in the night. Casting aside the dross of youth and innocent revelry, she was ripening in the school of experience into mellowness. (Rhydderch 480)

Austen's scant literary output during the years in Bath and Southampton is explained in similar terms:

Her genius was ill-suited to her present nomadic life, so tender a plant to flourish needs must have peace and a shady corner, and thrive best when left alone and undisturbed in some quiet nook, screened from the burning sun and bitter blasts. Some years were yet to elapse before the season of mellow fruitfulness of Chawton. (Rhydderch 51)

These last peaceful years thus become "the most important in her life. Her long maturing genius ripened apace and blossomed with freshness" (Rhydderch 58).

Metaphors of this type are not uncommonly used to describe the development of an artist, but they are so prevalent in this biography that they have the effect of turning Austen into an plant-like abstraction; Rhydderch's view of her as a composite of the heroines in the novels makes her into a fiction as well. Hence when he insists that Austen is a woman and feminine, it is not the historical Austen he appears to refer to, but a fictional construct which is the product of both the heroines in the novels and the ever present nature metaphor. He abhors the discussion of physicality to the point where he denies her in real life even a semblance of the relationships that she allows her characters. Rhydderch will, however, permit Austen to love the fictional Captain Wentworth, and he will love her himself.

One of the key attractions that Austen has for her biographer is her innocence. It is his perception that her genius is 'natural', however, that makes this quality possible. This becomes clear in Rhydderch's defense of her against the charge of being ill-read:

Art and nature upset most interesting inferences. The wasp is a ferocious insect, and the placid Empusa an ascetic, though the first lives on honey and the second thrives on flesh ... George Sand, *le demi-monde*, the polyandrist, gave us one or two delicate masterpieces, and Jane Austen the vestal, in one¹⁸ drew the lineaments of a wanton woman more insidious than *Madam Bovary*, with none of her redeeming graces ... The mind of man ... is a crucible that sometimes extracts poison from nectar, and sometimes sweets from carrion. In art it is the crucible that matters, not the appetite or what it feeds on. The character of a man's writing has not more to do with his reading than his temperament can be gauged from what he feeds on. (Rhydderch 93-4)

George Sand is mentioned again in connection with Austen, but this time in a less pejorative sense, and to support Rhydderch's contention that both through experience and intuition "Jane Austen certainly knew her men, black and white, inside out" (Rhydderch 210). To support the view that men and women "differ in nought but the accident of sex", he calls upon Sand: " 'My son was myself, said George Sand, 'therefore much more woman than my daughter, who is an imperfect man'" (Rhydderch 209). Presumably the appeal here is to the essential nature of individuals, but the ambiguity is obvious and it raises a question about the biographer as well: does he understand Austen because he *is* her, or because she is an imperfect man?

The matter becomes only slightly clearer when Rhydderch resorts to Tiresias to help him refute the charge that Austen was unable to draw male characters: "We sometimes think, that like Tiresias, one can be a man, and have recollection of being a woman, or, if you will, the contrary" (Rhydderch 210). His

¹⁸ *Lady Susan*

defense of Austen is spirited and he goes so far as to deny the possibility of being able to tell by their works whether authors are male or female: "There is really nothing esoteric in the soul of man or woman that each could not surmise from the other. Is there anything in the works of George Eliot to prove that the writer was a Mary Ann? Would anyone surmise from *Jane Eyre* that Currer Bell was a Charlotte?" (Rhydderch 209).

The reader can only suppose that the foregoing is the critic speaking and not the biographer, since elsewhere Rhydderch is at pains to demonstrate "that in every line of the novelist we see the woman Jane" (Rhydderch 24). He is also anxious to define Austen's writing as essentially feminine:

She combines beauty with endurance, economy with quality, warmth with strength, humour with grace, cleanliness with simplicity, charm with dignity. All, however, would have no purpose were they not imbued with the delicate trceries of her feminine fancies. (Rhydderch 143-4)

In Austen Rhydderch finds an "oasis, a balm," of all writers she is pre-eminently comforting:

In all her work she is charmingly feminine. We do not mean effeminate, far from that: she has bone and muscle and a subtle sinewiness of mind, yet that elusive quality of female daintiness, the touchstone of something gossamer in her composition, that defies any cold manly analysis. (Rhydderch 118)

This is hardly consistent with the earlier view that there is no discernible difference between male and female writing, but it is characteristic of Rhydderch's emphasis on Austen's femininity.

While this 'feminine' attribute is never clearly defined by Rhydderch, it appears to combine aspects of nurturing, wisdom and vulnerability. It is also most often associated with innocence. In the letters Austen "unbends herself with such innocent naiveté" (Rhydderch 103), and in the novels "she portrays the life she knew as a whole as is tolerable to the most innocent" (Rhydderch 118-9). When he discusses her personal freedom as being no less than that of any modern girl, Rhydderch connects her activities with those of her heroines: "what the author did, the heroines must do likewise" (Rhydderch 214). Unlike modern women, however:

Not one of her heroines is tainted with the merest suspicion of immodesty. They were proof against the very shadow of that 'leprosy of animal passion' which John Ruskin found idealised in George Elliot. Their purity inferred, there was indeed no occasion for fear; they lived apparently in a penguinary of innocence. (Rhydderch 215)

Austen too was apparently protected from worldly contamination by the purity of her nature. While she fashioned the outline of *Lady Susan*, for example, it was impossible for her to continue because the end result would be something so monstrous "that her delicacy shrank from such an ordeal" (Rhydderch 48). Similarly her avoidance of worldliness is emphasized when the reader is told that she "shrank with virgin modesty from publicity" (Rhydderch 149). Given the connections that Rhydderch consistently makes between art and life, the reader must assume that Austen also inhabited the "penguinary," and that this accounts not only for her discretion in the novels, but also for her charm as a woman. She knows, but does not tell, and is protected from vulgar kisses by her innocence.

The stress on the purity of the heroines, and by association, Austen, is somewhat at odds with the most pervasive metaphor in the biography, which is one of fruitfulness. Like the Austen-Leighs, Rhydderch subscribes to the view that an essential characteristic for a great author is wisdom, but he too wants Austen to achieve this without loss of innocence. His motive is clearly not one of family interest, in fact he is one of the first biographers to be openly critical of Austen's relatives for their treatment of her. He rails against "the crass stupidity and doubting inertia" of the immediate Austen progeny "to the genius of their aunt until fanned to flame by the admiration of others." Rhydderch is mollified somewhat by the grand-nieces/nephews who "have handsomely made up for their parent's apparent lukewarmness" (Rhydderch 56). He, however, discounts their versions of Austen's romances, and of the Lefroy matter he concludes:

Shorn of the embroideries woven around this episode by her nieces, who show far greater warmth about their aunt's fame, as the dimness of their memories fades almost to vanishing point, we find no tragic halo surrounding any part of her life as to warrant any such conclusions, as some 'deep silent sorrow,' or any 'paralysis of invention', in any period of Jane Austen's existence. There may have been occasions for bitterness, but none for tragedy. (Rhydderch 34)

While he does not in any way wish to detract from "the natural panegyrics of her family," he does not at all agree that Austen was the placid figure they surmised her to be:

Who, knowing so little of her real self, have read her works in a spirit reflected from the prevalent insipidities that surround the apparently colourless existence of a country clergyman's daughters ... as they found [the novels] tame and flat, they concluded Jane herself was equally so. (Rhydderch 102)

Rhydderch agrees with George Saintsbury that Austen's "insatiable and ruthless delight in roasting and cutting up a fool' [was] superior to Addison's, in that it was more restrained and well mannered. That 'Jane never said a sharp thing' we really cannot believe; we know better." From the letters Rhydderch is "glad to find that Jane could be a rebel. Her sturdy independence is apparent." There is a strict limit, however, to the freedom he will allow her: "A few sharp things, she may have written, but an uncharitable act we are sure she was incapable of doing" (Rhydderch 102,103).

In spite of his idealization of Austen, Rhydderch's detachment from the family versions of the life allow him to raise issues that previous biographers avoided. He acknowledges the existence of George, the brother who had fits, and he deals with the issues of finances and family conflict. For example, he discusses the roots of the apparent differences with brother James and his wife Mary, and finds truth in the criticisms of the latter. He also explores the relationship with the Leigh Perrots and in keeping with his practice of reading life into art, he refers to Aunt Perrot as "the aunt, by the way, in whom along with Mary, Jane saw many of the traits she attributes to 'Aunt Norris' " (Rhydderch 43).

Rhydderch also, like Adams, alludes to Austen's possibly feminist motives:

Was there some moral idea behind her creation of Lady Susan? Did she conceive in theory what George Sand carried into practice; from what Henry James thought possible in the latter, 'as a sense of the duty of avenging on the unscrupulous race of men their immemorial selfish success with the plastic race of women? Did she wish--above all to turn the tables--to show how the sex that had always ground the other in the volitional mill was on occasion capable of being ground'? (Rhydderch 124)

These questions are asked about the possible "moral idea" behind Austen's creation of *Lady Susan*, but Rhydderch pursues the subject no further. He is, however, intent on making authorship the central fact of Austen's existence, and he believes all of her life's experiences were channelled into her art: "to a novelist every experience, however distressing, is grist to the creative mill" (Rhydderch 38). He disagrees with the family view that writing was incidental for Austen: "her voluntary apprenticeship in the profession of letters was an earnest of her unwavering resolve for the career of writing" (Rhydderch 25). In spite of untoward disappointments that Austen experienced, Rhydderch claims that her "abiding faith in her growing powers gave added zest to each endeavour for fame and for mending the family fortune" (Rhydderch 60). He also takes seriously her pressing desire for "pewter:" "With the subdued glow of genius burning like a vestal flame within her, she would be more than human, if in her heart she did not yearn for a little more of that worldly wealth and fame that was her just due" (Rhydderch 101). This is a different picture from that of the modest 'Aunt Jane', who wrote surreptitiously and published incidentally.

It is not only perceptions about Austen's attitudes to her work that Rhydderch seeks to alter, he also wishes to remove any illusions about her physical beauty. As a frontispiece he includes a version of the 1870 'improved' portrait, and from it he deduces that Jane "was no beauty:"

She looks out upon us as a prim, prudish, pert little Miss, in kiss-curls and a cap, short sleeves and yoke, with large benignant eyes, a roguish smile

and dainty chin ... her nephew said, 'her countenance had a peculiar charm of its own.' This is the portrait of Jane Austen we love to visualise. (Rhydderch 99)

The portrait that Rhydderch includes is not identical with the 1870 version.

Added to it are background draperies and a table holding books and an inkwell with pen--presumably the accoutrements of authorship. While the facial features are similar, the woman pictured appears older, and her expression is grave.

Austen's figure is curvaceous and shown to the knees, and her arm rests lightly on what appears to be a writing case; on her left hand she wears a ring that resembles a wedding band. Much of this detail could have been added by a fanciful engraver, but it is curiously in harmony with Rhydderch's portrayal of Austen as a writer, as well as with his fanciful discussion of her as a marriage partner.

Rhydderch's interest in Austen extends beyond the personal, he is nostalgic for her world as well: "Can we to-day really boast of anything so very superior? ... It is this very atmosphere that the wisest and best among us to-day are striving to capture" (Rhydderch 184). In the final chapter entitled "A Pilgrimage," he turns back the clock and follows Austen's footsteps in the familiar landscapes of Steventon, Bath and Chawton. In the manner of Adams he imagines himself in her presence and looks forward to the day when, from her stained glass window in Winchester, the 'Divine Jane' will look down upon us "like patience on a monument smiling at fame" (Rhydderch 240). The biography ends with the Kipling poem:

Jane went to Paradise
 That was only fair.
 Good Sir Walter met her first,
 And led her to the stair.

Henry and Tobias,
 And Miguel of Spain,
 Stood with Shakespeare at the top
 To welcome Jane.

This is, in fact, only the first verse of a longer poem appended to Kipling's 1919 story "The Janeites;" it is entitled "Jane's Marriage" and continues as follows:

Then the Three Archangels
 Offered out of hand,
 Anything in Heaven's gift
 That she might command.
 Azrael's eyes upon her,
 Raphael's wings above,
 Michael's sword against her heart,
 Jane said: 'Love'.

Instantly the under-
 Standing Seraphim
 Laid their fingers on their lips
 And went to look for him.
 Stole across the Zodiac,
 Harnesses Charle's Wain
 And whispered round the Nebulae
 'Who loved Jane?'

In a private limbo
 Where none had thought to look,
 Sat a Hampshire gentleman
 Reading of a book,
 It was called *Persuasion*
 And it told the plain
 Story of the love between
 Him and Jane.

He heard the question
 Circle Heaven through--
 Closed the book and answered:

'I did--and do!
 Quietly but speedily
 (As Captain Wentworth moved)
 Entered into Paradise
 The man Jane Loved!'¹⁹

The connections between the Kipling poem and Rhydderch's biography are clear; both respond enthusiastically to the notion that Austen's fondest desire was for conjugal love, and they grant that wish with the person of Captain Wentworth. Rhydderch goes one step further, however, and insinuates himself into the Austen-Wentworth-Elliot romantic triangle. Similarly, more than forty years earlier Oscar Fay Adams indulged himself in a fanciful romantic involvement with Jane Austen. Both authors clearly demonstrate intense cases of Kipling's "Janeite" syndrome, but they are also conditioned by powerful preconceptions of 'woman' which are pervasive and undeclared. Both equate 'female' with 'feminine' and, while Adams wants Austen to be a lady, but not a prude, Rhydderch is victim of a "paradox of modesty"²⁰ in which female sexuality must be simultaneously concealed and revealed. Not surprisingly these authors perpetuate the family stereotype of Austen as a paragon of female virtue who loved in domestic retirement, and in keeping with this model, they disregard the relevance of domestic experience and deem her life to have been devoid of event. In the place of this they posit for her a fictional world akin to that in the novels, and

¹⁹ Rudyard Kipling, "Jane's Marriage," *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919) 31:190-1.

²⁰ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 23.

they offer themselves as suitors to redress the perceived wrong of her single state.

While these biographers are intent on reinforcing the concept of Austen as 'woman'; there is also no clearer affirmation of her as a literary monument than the inclusion of the Kipling poem. Although Rhydderch does acknowledge a variety of issues including the possibility of feminist motives and the effects of family conflict, none of these is discussed in sufficient detail to render his portrait of Jane Austen as anything but that of an ideally feminine author. It follows only naturally that "the quality of truthfulness as reflected in her mirror shines on the primrose path of homely existence" (Rhydderch 205). As well, so convinced is Rhydderch that the novels are a viable source of biographical information that he perpetuates the view of Austen that defines her in terms of her heroines:

Man creates nothing but after his own image, and that is stereotyped. Art is merely assimilation. Jane Austen did not create her characters any more than Turner did his skies; both were the result of long years of patient observation ... Grounded on her beautiful self, so did Jane Austen give us Elizabeth, Anne, Fanny, Elinor, Emma, and Catherine, varying their characters with the happiest tints of those most dear to her.
(Rhydderch 150-1)

It is this optimism that is the key to Rhydderch's view of the greatness of Austen; in her writing "everything is sweetness and light," and he endows her personally with these qualities as well. His Austen is so feminine, so innocent and wise, that she has the unruffled serenity of patience on a monument.

The intense personal relationship that Rhydderch has with his subject

appears to have less to do with fashion in biography than with an attitude about the connection that exists between life and literature. Oscar Fay Adams, after all, wrote with a similar emotional intensity forty years earlier. Both these authors have in common an approach which accepts fictional characters as real people, and from there it seems to be a short step to the point where Austen comes to be identified with her heroines. They, as other biographers, are greatly influenced by the family versions of the life which portray 'Aunt Jane' as either a virtuous example or a model of femininity, and consequently their fictional Austen is endowed only with the best characteristics of her heroines. The figure that emerges as the result of this method is quite understandably a stereotype of feminine perfection. Authors who dealt with Austen's life for biographical series were captives of preconceptions too, since subjects worthy of inclusion in "Famous Women," "Great Writers," and "English Men of Letters" were by definition exemplary. The general format of these works required the inclusion of summaries and criticism of the novels, and this tended to outweigh biographical material. Sarah Tytler, who did not write for a series, did hope to improve young people by the example of Jane Austen's life and her works; she consequently included summaries of the novels as well. Thus both through the inclination of authors and the influence of publishers, Austen became a composite of her heroines, and her life literally did become the works. While all of these biographies may have resulted in the portrait of a more lively Jane Austen, it was one only slightly less perfect than the family versions. More importantly for the

state of Austen biography, however, they participate in a literary tautology in which examples from the life support a portrait based on fiction which is believed to be drawn from that life. The end result is life-writing which reveals little about Jane Austen, and more about her biographers than we want to know. In addition, the practice leads to the confirmation of the imaginary 'woman' at the expense of the artist.

CHAPTER IV: Elizabeth Jenkins to David Cecil: 1938-1978

Mary Lascelles (1939)

The preconceptions held by Victorian biographers and the writers of series devoted to the greats of English literature did not disappear with the nineteenth-century. The Austen Leigh's influential biography appeared in 1913 and David Rhydderch's paean to Jane Austen in 1932. Coincidentally the publication of the latter occurred in the same year as that of R.W. Chapman's edition of Jane Austen's letters, and while this authoritative work was a valuable tool, its professionalism was not immediately matched by Austen biographers. Clearly, date of publication is an unreliable indicator for the demise of the Victorian versions of Austen's life. David Cecil's *A Portrait of Jane Austen*,¹ for example, appeared in 1978 although it has more in common with its nineteenth-century predecessors than does, for example, the biographical portion of Mary Lascelles *Jane Austen and her Art*,² published in 1939. The latter acknowledges her obvious debt to the family biographers, but she goes beyond mere repetition of the details of the life of the perfect 'Aunt' to consider the woman subject as artist. While this is dealt with as a preamble to a work of criticism dealing with the novels, it appears as a significant departure in Austen biography, particularly when it is

¹ David Cecil, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (London: Constable, 1978). All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Cecil' in the body of the text.

² Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Lascelles' in the body of the text.

juxtaposed with the work of Rhydderch of only a few years earlier. The full-length biographies which come after the work of Lascelles all too frequently do not fulfil her promise, however. Some of them confront the issue of creativity, but even for these biographers, concepts of ideal womanhood interfere with their perceptions of the artist.

Mary Lascelles is not aggressively revisionist in her approach to Austen, and not surprisingly she voices some of the familiar platitudes about the fair sex. The epigraph to chapter one, for example, is from Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" and tells us that her subject is moderate: "She was ful mesurable, as wommen be." The choice of a quotation from Chaucer to describe a woman, however temperate she may be, suggests a host of possibilities, sexual and otherwise, none of which sit comfortably with the stereotype of the Victorian 'Aunt'. It is apparent from the outset that Lascelles does not blindly accept her subject's perfection, and she acknowledges in her preface that there is a common charge that Austen was "disagreeable." She, however, counters that the charges are based on a few ill-natured or satiric passages, and suggests that he "who has never suffered the shame of recollecting equivalent words of his own is much to be envied, whether for the goodness of his disposition or the badness of his memory" (Lascelles vi).

In keeping with this approach, Lascelles suggests that the "silence" in writing that Austen apparently experienced between 1804 and 1809 was either caused by depression or was perhaps the cause of it. As well, she concludes this unhappiness was not without cause: Austen's good friend, Mrs. Lefroy, died in

December, 1804, and her father a month later; "*First Impressions* had been refused unread and *Susan* was buried, she wanted the encouragement of recognition outside her own family" (Lascelles 19). It was not Austen's way:

To shut her eyes while she swallowed something disagreeable; to herself and therefore to Cassandra, she would admit, lightly, that there was an unresolved discord such as she might have described in the words which she was to use, later, of stage illusion: 'I fancy I want something more than can be.'" (Lascelles 20)

According to Lascelles, this inner turmoil was not surprising: "the artist ... usually pays for his privilege by some sort of partial insomnia ... in Jane Austen it was the critical faculty that would not be quieted" (Lascelles 21). In this analysis the novels are an attempt to reconcile the war within, and Lascelles resorts to the K. Metcalfe introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* (1912) to describe the process:

A rational woman, exceptional in intellect, unique in wit, found herself in circumstances which were always meagre, and at times irrational; and endowed with fastidiousness on the one hand and enjoyment on the other, she employed her experience creatively in the service of Comedy. The novels are a vent. (Lascelles 21)

This explanation of the artist attempts to connect the life and the art in a more coherent fashion than previous biographers had done. While not all of them agree on the length of time that Austen did not write, many of them do conclude there was a barren period. They attribute this to personal unhappiness, but they do not, like Lascelles, remind their readers that the method of reconciliation was a slow process, one which Austen did not learn all at once: "the novels ... were to bring about a more and more satisfying reconciliation between jarring impulses; but during a silence, when nothing fictitious was being written, these impulses

would still be at war" (Lascelles 22).

As interesting as this discussion of creativity, is the chapter "Reading and Response." Here Lascelles makes the case that, influenced principally by Johnson and Cowper, Austen's art evolves into a sophisticated burlesque of the novel. The Dr. Johnson she responds to, however, is not the 'dear' one of the letters to Mrs. Thrale, but rather "the anxious censor of his generation's morals;" the Cowper is not the man of *The Task*, but the "less easy, less charming" one of the formal satires. Throughout this section Lascelles argues not only that Austen's art is a reasoned response to the intellectual life of her time, but that consideration of the novels as mere domestic trivia has deprived their author of her rightful place in the literary pantheon. Ever the lady, Lascelles is never strident, but in the conclusion to the biographical chapter she reaffirms the consistent development of Austen's art and points directly to the disadvantage of the female artist: "[Hers] is a vision so constantly held and consistently presented that, if she had been born a man then, or a woman in this more indulgent age, it might almost have been called Thought, and have leant its name to this chapter" (Lascelles 83). The irony of this statement is unmistakable.

Elizabeth Jenkins (1938)

Elizabeth Jenkin's *Jane Austen: A Biography*³ was published the year before Mary Lascelle's work, and while it inquires into the world of women it assumes a male model of authorship. In common with James Edward, Jenkins is nostalgic for what she considers to be the lost 'beauty' of the eighteenth-century, but unlike him she does not take the stereotypical perfection of her subject for granted. In this she is the first to enter into a considered discussion of what it meant to be female in the time of Austen. Like her predecessors she accepts the family version of the details of the life, and she also is traditional in comparing Austen to Shakespeare in her ability to create character: she is "in touch with something that encompasses us but that the rest of us do not see" (Jenkins 64). Unlike many previous biographers, however, Jenkins does not deduce a personal history for Austen from the novels. To do so "is completely to misunderstand the type of mind she represents" (Jenkins 63). Jenkins puts credence in the story of the mysterious lover of summer 1801, but in her hands the discussion evolves into an examination of the whole issue of marriage as it relates to Jane Austen. She concludes that Austen fell in love wholeheartedly but that she recovered her peace of mind "because she meant to recover it." According to Jenkins this experience of taking control greatly affected Austen's development: "it acted as a pointer towards realms of undiscovered country." She concludes also that this did

³ Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen: A Biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961). All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Jenkins' in the body of the text.

not mean Austen rejected marriage out of hand; if she had met another man "as sympathetic with herself," there is no reason to suppose that she would not have loved and married him (Jenkins 93-4). Regarding Austen's acceptance and then immediate refusal of Harrison Bigg-Wither's marriage proposal in 1802, Jenkins concludes: "it was not that she did not want to marry, or that she undervalued the comfort, the importance, the security of being a married woman ... but when it came ... to marrying for an establishment, to marrying without love, she could not do it" (Jenkins 104). Similarly, Jenkins decides it was Austen's considered opinion:

Not only that a happy marriage was the best thing for everybody ... but that the great majority of woman were concerned in getting themselves married as the most important accomplishment in their career. The people whom she approved of: women like Emma Watson and Elizabeth Bennet, did not regard an eligible marriage as the first object of existence, though a very desirable one. (Jenkins 113)

Even though Jenkins does not consider the novels as reliable sources of biographical information, it is apparent from the above that she does rely on them for verification of Austen's opinions on marriage, and she compares the situations of the characters in the novels with those of twentieth-century women:

Should we be justified in saying that the majority of women to-day are less interested in their actual or possible relations with men and their practical futures as seen in terms of successful marriage, than they were a hundred years ago?

We say that to-day the lot of spinsters is less hard to bear because of the innumerable opportunities now open to them; that, in fact the lot of the spinster has ceased to be a hard one; so it has--if she thinks so ... There must always have been unmarried women, even those with the normal attitude to marriage, who, like Jane Austen, could lead a full and happy life, loving and beloved. (Jenkins 113-4)

Throughout the discussion there is no suggestion that Austen was an embittered old maid, or even that her single state was a central concern in her life. Jenkins emphasizes that, while the married state may have been socially and personally the preferred one, to be unmarried did not condemn women to a life devoted to miserable disappointment over lost opportunities. The suggestion is that, whatever society's views may be on the matter, it is the individual's attitude to her state which governs her happiness or unhappiness.

While Jenkins is perceptive in her analysis of marriage and spinsterhood, she is less adventurous in her attitudes to women authors. She begins well enough by commenting on Austen's "unprofessional existence" as a writer: "hers were not conditions in which any but a mind of exceptional strength could have exerted itself to full advantage." The domestic interruptions occasioned by having to write in the parlour of a household visited by a stream of nieces and nephews did her no injury, however, and we are told "she put the sheet under the blotting-paper with a smile" (Jenkins 143-4). Jenkins is equally optimistic and oblivious to her author's need to revise, and in this she echoes the family version of authorship: "it was characteristic of Jane Austen's singular integrity of mind that she seems never to have put down anything of which she would afterwards be ashamed" (Jenkins 149).

While she may accept this commonplace of literary perfection, unlike her predecessors, Jenkins does not attribute Austen's reclusiveness solely to feminine modesty. She concludes that Austen chose to remain aloof out of "a profound

instinct for self-preservation," she made the conscious effort "never to relinquish the vantage ground of the ordinary human being" (Jenkins 253). Although this appears to suggest an androgenous view of authorship, in her discussion of Austen's portrayal of male characters Jenkins reveals that she accepts the tradition of measuring women writers against a masculine standard. Her defense of Austen's male characters, however, is defensive but spirited: she insists that they are "men as they appear to women; and that they are so is no reflection upon her powers. Man's aspect as he appears to women is after all as important, neither more nor less, as his aspect as he appears to men". In spite of this apparent concession to equality, however, the male author emerges as the standard in Jenkins account of the portrayal of Mr. Bennet: "he might have been drawn by a man, except that it is difficult to think of a man who could have drawn him so well" (Jenkins 165). This praise of Austen's 'powers' thus dissolves into an apology for her male characters which is based on the very criteria that Jenkins purports to defend them against.

Jane Aiken Hodge (1972), Joan Rees (1976), David Cecil (1978)

For nearly four decades after Jenkins, biographers were silent on the subject of Jane Austen, but the bicentennial of her birth in 1975 sparked new interest in her as a subject. In the decade of the nineteen-seventies three new biographies appeared: Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (1972); Joan Rees, *Jane Austen: Woman and Writer* (1976); David Cecil, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (1978). These authors have in common a concern to reconcile their

subject's apparently mundane existence with her literary genius. Hodge, as is apparent from her title, solves the problem by positing a double life for Austen in which woman and author function in separate spheres. Rees explains Austen's literary output by the amount of idle time that women of her class had on their hands, and she tells her readers that the route to knowledge of the writer is through the novels. Cecil, on the other hand, stresses that Austen and her art are inseparable, but he accomplishes this unity by allowing her a field of competence so narrow that she becomes a special case.

Jane Aiken Hodge's treatment of Austen deals with the restrictive nature of her world as well, but unlike Cecil, she does not conclude that Austen easily accepted the limitations imposed on her life. According to Hodge, while the family may have superimposed their vision of the "legendary dear aunt" on the other figure of the author, "one must always distinguish between the two ladies."⁴ Although she generally accepts the family's optimistic vision of themselves, Hodge from the outset questions their version of her subject; she does not, however, discard it, rather she runs it in tandem with an emotional and intellectual inner life which she constructs to explain Austen's "extraordinary ironic moral vision that has been compared with justice to Chaucer's" (Hodge 13).

In the society that Hodge describes Austen as inhabiting, the only respectable way for a woman to earn a living is to marry, and because matrimony

⁴ Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London: Hodden and Stoughton, 1972) 13. All further references to this edition will be in parentheses as 'Hodge' in the body of the text.

is the only future, accomplishments, not academic education, are what matter. Against the modern criticism of Austen "as a born old maid, who peered myopically at a limited world through blinkers," Hodge uses the evidence of the *Juvenilia*. She suggests detractors must have forgotten about, for example, the Johnsons (in *Jack and Alice*) who "were a family of love, and though a little addicted to the bottle and the dice, had many good qualities," and who ended a lively evening at the gaming table by being carried home "dead drunk." Lucy, in the same piece is caught in a "man-trap on her beloved's estate," and ends by being poisoned by a jealous rival at age seventeen" (Hodge 38). Hodge deems even this small sample sufficient evidence that the young author was very far from being an inexperienced mouse. Not only was Austen worldly wise at an early age according to Hodge, but she underwent emotional trauma as well. *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* are viewed as having been "written during a grave crisis of [her] life, and very probably [they] helped her through it" (Hodge 41). Within the same year, for example, Austen's cousin Eliza's husband was guillotined by the revolution in France; the new widow apparently conducted a disillusioning flirtation with Austen's favourite brother, Henry (whom she later married); and Austen's brother James' wife died, leaving a two year old daughter to be cared for by his sisters.

In addition to these well documented traumas, Hodge suggests that Cassandra Austen's love for (and engagement to) Thomas Fowle provoked a jealous reaction in her sister, Jane: "It would have been a very human reaction

...she would have found herself taking second place in her sister's affections. It must have been very lonely" (Hodge 43). The combination of these stresses, according to Hodge, led to *Lady Susan* (1795), a work in which the heroine combines traits of cousin Eliza and the notorious Lady Craven, "whose brutal neglect of her children had been an eighteenth-century scandal" (Hodge 37). Unlike the other novels, this one is "no shared family joke, but a private investigation of evil" (Hodge 45). It is with this work that Hodge concludes that Austen has successfully embarked on her double life, and the ubiquitous Mrs. Mitford's opinion is used as evidence:

Her Victorian relatives were to defend Jane Austen with touching vehemence against old Mrs. Mitford's remark that she was "the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers" ... I like to think that this report may have been superficially correct, though basically false ... we can see that what was intended as criticism was in fact high praise. It shows how successfully Jane Austen had embarked on her double life ... [she] had decided to conform. And ... she was naturally the prettiest and silliest of them all. (Hodge 46)

This notion of frantic silliness has a serious aspect to it that Hodge does not emphasize, but she does approach the subject again when she raises the issue of marriage and the Austen sisters. She points out that, while George Austen senior successfully managed to launch his sons into the world, this effort left no room for saving from the active family budget. Consequently there was little or no possibility of dowries for his daughters; Thomas Fowle, Cassandra's suitor, died in the West Indies in 1797, so they both remained to be married off. While more than one eligible gentleman had apparently shown interest in Jane Austen,

these initial attractions had not been pursued to the point of marriage proposals. It appears perhaps that by this date the 'butterfly' act, if it ever had been performed, was proving ineffective. Hodge confirms this when she points out that dowries might have compensated for the sometimes negative effect the sisters had on their contemporaries: suitors might have persisted "if there had only been some money to offset that dangerous hint of mockery" (Hodge 60). As well, Hodge suggests that in the face of these worldly disappointments the laughter generated by the novels was an enormous comfort. In this view the works of fiction are not merely therapy, however; they also mirror the changing attitudes of the sisters. *Northanger Abbey*, for example, marks a change in direction: "the days of wish-fulfilment books about two sisters are over" (Hodge 62).

The change of theme has an effect on the choice of protagonists in the novels as well, according to Hodge. While in *First Impressions* (*Pride and Prejudice*) Austen had "poured her intelligence into her heroine," in *Northanger Abbey* she reverses the process and Henry Tilney's is "the intelligent, educated mind." The issue of how well (or badly) Austen deals with her male characters is a favourite one for critics, and biographers up to this point defend Austen against charges of incompetence in this area by pointing out that she grew up in a household of brothers and male friends and, contrary to popular misconception, was not at all unfamiliar with the opposite sex. Hodge is the first to broaden the discussion to include a problem that she sees as concerning writers in general, and women writers in particular:

Heroes, of course, are obviously a problem for a female author, as heroines are for a male one. In fact, the authoress's position is the more difficult, since, in society as at present constituted, the male is expected to be the protagonist. (Hodge 64)

In answer to the problem of Austen's depiction of male characters, Hodge presents Henry Tilney as the ideal example:

She gave him her own intelligence and opinions, and then, incorrigibly laughed at him for them ... [he] is one of the liveliest and most convincing men ever created by a woman, and it is no wonder if many (male) critics think him thrown away on his Catherine. (Hodge 64)

In Hodge's opinion Henry Tilney is the only one of the male characters that Austen put anything of herself into, and in her view his portrayal is closely related to Austen's perception of her own place in society: she "first created him in her early twenties, when she was still unreconciled to the problems of the intelligent woman in a world dominated by men" (Hodge 64). In this respect it is significant that it is in *Northanger Abbey* that Austen sings the mock praises of ignorance: "A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can" (Hodge 64). What Hodge ignores in her analysis is that, while this may single out women for special attention, given the punctuation, the remark refers more broadly to intelligent persons of both sexes. To suggest that it was only women who need hide their intelligence does not do justice to Austen's argument about the nature of society in general, nor does it take into account the not infrequent criticism of her family's relationships with the outside world; their amused attitude to their fellows was presumed to be grounded in their conviction of intellectual superiority to them.

This perception was doubtless one of the essential ingredients of the "gentle mockery" of suitors which Hodge reports as detrimental to Austen's marriage prospects. Her reputedly acerbic manner was not apparently sufficient to drive off all comers, however, and Hodge emphasizes the mutually strong attachment that quickly blossomed between the novelist and the unidentified suitor who, according to Cassandra, died an untimely death. Hodge considers this latter event to have been fortunate:

We must, selfishly be grateful to the young man for dying, or disappearing, whichever he did. If Jane Austen had settled down ... to marriage and the inevitable string of babies, her first three novels would probably have been lost, and her last three would certainly never have been written. (Hodge 81)

This ill-fated relationship was not Austen's final brush with matrimony, but after the acceptance and immediate refusal of the Harris Bigg Wither proposal in the winter of 1802, Hodge suggests that Austen reconciled herself to remaining single. In spite of this there was reportedly another offer of marriage in 1808, and Hodge uses this as evidence that Austen "cannot have settled quite so firmly into the appearance and manner of spinsterhood as the family's later recollections suggest" (Hodge 103). Regardless of this continuing evidence of her appeal to the opposite sex, Hodge concludes that the decision to refuse her suitor (or suitors) meant that Austen:

Was condemning herself to a lifetime as a second-class citizen, an object of contemptuous humour, an old maid. She was also condemning herself to write *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, and we must be grateful to her and to Cassandra, who undoubtedly made it possible. If there had been no Cassandra, I imagine there would have been no sleepless night, and a large family of extremely intelligent little Bigg Withers. (Hodge 83)

This description of the fate of unmarried women is not unfamiliar, but what is unusual is that Hodge likens the relationship between the sisters to that of marriage: "as Mrs. Austen perceptively said, [Jane] and Cassandra 'were wedded to each other.' It was a happy marriage and a productive one." In this analysis the novels become the progeny of this metaphorical union with the evidence that, on receiving her first copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen enthused "I have got my own darling child from London" (Hodge 82). Hodge points out as well that the notion of books as children is not peculiar to Austen:

Her metaphor of the sucking child is one that must have occurred, at one time or another, to most female authors. A first book is very much like a first child, but with the advantage that when it appears the hard work is over. And when one considers that *Sense and Sensibility* had been in embryo ... for well over ten years, one can understand how its proud author must have felt as she corrected sheet after sheet of proofs. (Hodge 126)

The situation as it is portrayed here sets up a double life which is the mirror image of 'real' life; the basic structure is the same, but the constituent parts are different. The love of a sister substitutes for the love of a man, and the works of art take the place of children. In this analysis the single state becomes a major, if not the essential condition, for the woman author's practice of her art.

This double life does not insulate Jane Austen from all life's problems, however, and Hodge accuses her of being heartless at times. Austen's comment on the death in battle of Sir John Moore is an oft cited example of this: "I wish Sir John had united something of the Christian with the hero in his death. Thank

Heaven! we have had no one to care for particularly among the Troops--no one in fact nearer to us than Sir John himself" (*Letters* 261-2). Similarly lacking in apparent sensitivity is her remark about Mrs. Hall of Sherborne who "was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (*Letters* 24). Hodge suggests that in the former instance Austen's imagination may have failed her or, alternatively, that she did not want to know what it meant to die on the field of battle since at any moment such a fate could befall one of her sailor brothers. In Hodge's view, both these outbursts have larger implications as statements about the way Austen was selective in her emotional responses: "when she could not afford to feel sympathy, she did not let herself imagine too deeply" (Hodge 110). This selectivity, however, apparently did not entirely protect Austen from emotional stress, and Hodge describes the years in which she reportedly did not write in terms of the pattern that Elliot Jaques describes in *Work, Creativity, Social Justice*. This theory posits that artists, more than ordinary individuals, have an emotional crisis in middle years and also have a higher than average mortality rate at this time of life. Hodge suggests that for Austen this crisis came early (in 1808), and that "for her, the problem of the artist was compounded by that of the woman. As a woman of her time she could be said to be a failure. She was poor, unmarried, and could look forward, apparently, to nothing but decline and fall" (Hodge 111). According to Hodge the writer's block and the crisis of these early middle years was not permanent; by 1811 Austen was writing again. This

return of creativity did not mean, however, that her life was unalterably serene. Hodge acknowledges the ongoing irritation with her brother James' wife, Mary, as well as tensions between the family and Aunt Jane Leigh Perrot. Most damaging of all, according to Hodge, was the daughters' relationship with their mother: financial considerations and social constraints bound Jane and Cassandra to Mrs. Austen, and Hodge regrets "that she and her daughters had, somewhere, somehow, parted company in spirit, if not, unfortunately, in fact" (Hodge 113).

The double life that Hodge sets up for Austen is akin to this departure "in spirit" from her mother. While the external social niceties are observed, the real life goes on within, and behind closed doors. With Cassandra as husband and her books as children, writing becomes the most important activity in Austen's life. Hodge consequently rejects, as the later embroidery of nieces, the notion that Austen when disturbed shyly hid her writing under the blotter; on the contrary she insists that Austen planned her days to take advantage of the quiet times. As additional proof of the ridiculous nature of the blotter suggestion, Hodge points to the logistics of hiding a whole novel during the times when Austen was revising *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice*. More importantly, however, Hodge suggests that to a considerable degree Austen lived through her work: "there is something touching about the way Jane Austen uses 'my' for her heroines. To a great extent, they were her life" (Hodge 127). Not only does Austen live vicariously through this construct, but Hodge suggests that the novels may have provided catharsis on a personal level. Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*, for

example, thus may be seen as the representative of all that Jane Austen found intolerable in "the host of bustling, unintelligent women to whom she was exposed throughout her life" (Hodge 140).

This personal aspect of the novels aside, Hodge does not assume that the novelist likes all her heroines. Even though the author of the *Memoir* quotes Austen as describing Emma as a "heroine whom no one but myself will much like," Hodge suspects that for much of the book even Austen does not like her. The grounds for this, according to Hodge, are that *Emma* is her least feminine novel and, not surprisingly, the one often preferred by men. In this discussion Hodge avoids what is perhaps the key issue; that Emma has money and this gives her real power (ie. male power). Hodge, however, disagrees with Lionel Trilling who says that in the portrait of Emma there is 'an air of confession': "that in drawing her, Jane Austen was taking account of something offensive that she and others had observed in her own earlier manner and conduct." On the contrary, Hodge considers that Emma is "a heroine with whom her creator refuses to identify herself ... [she] is practically everything that Jane Austen was not" (Hodge 171). In response to Trilling's remark that "Emma has 'a moral life as a man has a moral life ... women in fiction only rarely have the peculiar reality of the moral life that self-love bestows. Most commonly they exist in a moonlike way, shining by the reflected moral light of men,'" Hodge replies: "as is so often when Jane Austen is the subject, the criticism tells us as much about the critic as about the book, but it is none the less perceptive for that" (Hodge 170). This is also a

fitting epigraph for Hodge's own work on Austen. While she acknowledges that, as a woman writer Jane Austen may have encountered special obstacles, Hodge suggests that she escaped into a double life in order to function creatively. In this analysis it is impossible for woman and artist to coexist in real life, and in the double life Austen is provided with what she principally lacks in her other life, a husband and children.

The title of Joan Rees' biography of Austen, *Woman and Writer*, suggests that this author too views her subject as a split personality. She, however, concentrates on the influence of family and gender on Austen and in the process she creates a personality dominated by these pressures. Like Henry Austen in his "Biographical Notice," Rees begins with an account of Austen's burial and from the outset she emphasizes that the "extent to which both the life of Jane Austen, and the record of that life were shaped by her family" cannot be overestimated; all that we know of her has been passed through the "medium of the family filter."⁵ Rees notes the idealized nature of the early accounts and, while she acknowledges that the later family versions are livelier, she concludes that they too portray an improbably perfect aunt. She questions, as well, the contention that "no intruder ever noticed any signs of impatience or irritability in the writer" when Austen was required to put aside her work for domestic duties (Rees 15). As a concrete example of the family's management of the evidence in favour of

⁵ Joan Rees, *Jane Austen: Woman and Writer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) 13. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Rees' in the body of the text.

the genteel and ever obliging stereotype, Rees points to the softening of Cassandra's sketch of her sister for the 1870 *Memoir*. She concludes that the main problem underlying this action, as well as that of the unreliability of the family sources, is that the Austens did not see their relative as an 'author' until long after her death. Their original memorial to Austen, for example, points simply to "the benevolence of her heart, the sweetness of her temper, and the extraordinary endowments of her mind." Fifty-five years later a second tablet was added, dedicated "To Jane Austen known to many by her writings." At this time, according to Rees, Victorian sensibilities added their support to the portrait of gentility, and lest the original message be lost, this inscription ends with a quotation from Proverbs: "She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness" (Rees 14).

Rees' sensitivity to family dynamics leads her to conclude their influence was as pervasive in life as it was after death, and she suggests that it may not be wrong to read some personal feeling into Emma's remark to Mr. Knightly on the subject: "nobody who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be" (Rees 17). In addition, Rees suggests it is worth considering other evidence from the novels on this subject; with the possible exception of Catherine Morland, the family backgrounds of Austen's heroines are hardly ideal, and while she demonstrates an acute awareness of the generation gap, she invariably comes out on the side of youth. Although it is apparent that Austen throughout her life was immersed in, and

cared for her own family, "her family portraits cannot fail to raise doubts about her happiness within this situation" (Rees 196).

While family influence may have defined Austen's own position within the intimate circle, according to Rees gender was an equally significant factor in shaping her as a writer. She points, for example, to the *Juvenilia* where Austen at age sixteen facetiously describes the author (herself) of the *History of England* as "partial, prejudiced and ignorant." Only a few years later, as further evidence of Austen's early awareness of the bias of documents, Catharine in *Northanger Abbey* finds history tiresome on the grounds that it deals with "the quarrels of Popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all" (Rees 19). Just as almost no role in history was allowed for them, Rees notes that for middle-class women in particular, there were few money making opportunities available to them outside the dependency of marriage, the dreaded role of governess, and the more sophisticated branches of prostitution. She points out as well that leisure was a problem, and she quotes Virginia Woolf on Florence Nightingale to make her point:

Half occupied, always interrupted, with much leisure but little time to themselves and no money of their own, these armies of listless women were either driven to find solace and occupation in religion, or, if that failed, they took, as Miss Nightingale said, to that perpetual daydreaming which is so dangerous. (Rees 48)

According to Rees, some of the novels which appeared both before and after the beginning of the nineteenth-century were indeed "a methodizing of daydreams".

Many of these, however, she views as competent responses to the demands of the

novel readers of the day, as well as evidence that women were gaining entry into the profession of writing. Rees points out that, in spite of the examples of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, when Jane Austen first began to write, "professional women writers were still regarded with suspicion" (Rees 49). Although all that Austen published in her lifetime appeared anonymously, Rees concludes that she belongs in this company, and that she always wrote with publication in mind. As confirmation of this, Rees notes that the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* marked a turning point for Austen. From this time on:

There is a feeling of buoyancy, confidence and excitement that until her illness was to last throughout the short, successful span of the life of ... the published writer. At last she was doing what she had always known she must, and without the slightest craving for a fashionable triumph or entry into the London literary scene, she radiates the contentment of one who is beginning to fulfil her destiny. (Rees 127)

Because of her commitment to her art Austen is established "for her age as an emancipated woman, and far from 'methodizing daydreams', she made her own quiet revolution in the novel, and must be considered the first great woman writer in the English language" (Rees 49).

That Rees considers it necessary to define Austen as the "first great *woman* writer" is an indication of her recognition of authorship as a predominantly male occupation. Her apparent acceptance of marriage as the necessary condition for female adulthood, suggests that her concept of 'woman' is defined from a male perspective as well. Rees, for example, describes Austen as declining from a daughter and sister into an aunt, and while she notes that "for

some reason, the designation of spinster is usually faintly disparaging," she admits "there is no evidence that Jane Austen ever pitied herself as a single woman" (Rees 54). In similar fashion to Hodge, Rees finds evidence that Austen experienced a severe emotional disturbance in her later twenties, and she associates this with "some still unresolved and unrequited love" (Rees 80). Of Cassandra's account of the tragic death of Austen's clergyman suitor, Rees judges "it may well have been true, or it may have been Cassandra's way--without revealing any biographical particulars-of emphasising what it is hard to doubt, that her talented sister had herself been in love." Rees also accepts this shadowy lover as a plausible explanation for Austen's apparent loss of the will to write, and she points to the significance of the unfinished novel, *The Watsons*, as an indicator of the "unsettled, unsatisfactory state" Austen found herself in at the time:

Without recognition for her gifts and achievements, she was still unmarried, unfulfilled, without her own home, with her life entirely governed by the wishes of her parents. No wonder that at the age of twenty-seven, she began to write a realistic and ironic study of women's place in society. (Rees 92)

According to Rees, Austen's unhappiness with her lot was not permanent; her sense of loyalty to her own sex was growing, and not limited to her immediate circle as is evidenced later by her response to the Prince Regent's differences with his wife, Caroline: "poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her husband" (Rees 135). While Austen grew up in a household of men, and was apparently comfortable with

their company, Rees finds evidence in the novels of Austen's deep suspicion of masculine charm. It was thus not too difficult for her to find contentment with the family of women who moved to their comfortable home in Chawton in 1809; close and intimate friendships with Martha Lloyd and Cassandra appear to have compensated for married happiness with a man she loved:

She was deeply aware of the value of loving and harmonious personal relationships in enabling individuals to adjust to the demands of society and an often hostile world. It was this perception which, in spite of her concurrent and ruthless examination of its defects, gave such symbolic force to her use of marriage ... as the ultimate goal for the heroines of all her works. As far as she herself was concerned, emotionally she was well under control. It also seems likely that sexually her physical responses were naturally cool. (Rees 124-5)

Unlike Hodge, Rees does not describe the relationship between Jane and Cassandra as a metaphorical marriage, but she does imply that heterosexual marriage is the preferable personal relationship for women in society. As well, Rees suggests that Austen's 'coolness' to the charms of the opposite sex facilitated her acceptance of spinsterhood. In her discussion of Austen's niece Anna's novel, however, Rees reveals that she too views marriage and authorship as occupations which are likely incompatible: "poor Anna's promising burst of literary activity was at an end, just as her aunt's might have been had she herself married" (Rees 159).

As do the other biographers, Rees feels the need to respond to the traditional criticism of Austen's subject matter as limited; she counters conventionally that to know her own limitations is an author's greatest strength.

Because Austen did not write about war and revolution did not mean she was ignorant of them or not concerned, and Rees considers it not irrelevant that both the novel and the film of *Pride and Prejudice* were immensely popular during World War II. She cites V.S. Pritchett on the perception that Austen's world was small and cosy: "this has always seemed to me untrue. I think of her as a war novelist, formed very much by the Napoleonic wars, knowing directly of prize money, the shortage of men, the economic crisis and change in the value of capital" (Rees 51).

This assessment of Austen as a war novelist is entirely at odds with David Cecil's *A Portrait of Jane Austen*. From the outset he reveals himself to be entranced both with the femininity of his subject, and what he imagines the eighteenth-century to have been. He is also captive of a particularly genteel version of the female stereotype. In his foreword Cecil disclaims his work as straight biographical narrative of Austen's life, rather he will "reconstruct and depict her living personality and ... explore its relation to her art" (Cecil 6). His aim is to set her in the context of her own period and her own society, and his method is based on the presumption that "we are all largely creatures of the world we happen to have been born into and our outlook is conditioned by its assumptions and beliefs and conventions and customs." According to Cecil this is "outstandingly true of Jane Austen who was the very voice and typical representative of her world ... To be lifelike, a portrait of her must also be a portrait of the society of which she was a member" (Cecil 6).

In keeping with his convictions, Cecil begins with a prologue entitled "The World," in which he outlines a romantic and nostalgic view of eighteenth-century life. This Jane Austen has more in common with Johnson than with Wordsworth and Coleridge, and was "in most respects startlingly unlike most authoresses of genius. In particular she differed from them in that she was at ease in the world she was born into;" united in her were both the "realism" and the "good sense" of the eighteenth-century (Cecil 10). It is clear that the Johnson Austen resembles here is the serene classicist rather than the rigorous moralist. In common with previous biographers, Cecil goes on to tell his readers that the 'facts' tell us little about Austen, but after all "she was born at a period and in a class whose life ... was likely to be uneventful, especially for women. Certainly nothing dramatic seems to have happened to Jane Austen" (Cecil 9). Cecil points out that Austen's novels are not personal revelations; she is not a "self-inspired" author but an objective one, and it was the world outside that stimulated her creative impulse. In this context the anonymity of her authorship is significant: "it was a testimony to her sense of her art as something apart from her private self" (Cecil 9).

There is a suggestion in this of the kind of double life that Jane Hodge proposed, but the model of woman that Cecil constructs to inhabit "The World" of Austen makes the situation considerably more complicated. In his view women in the early eighteenth-century were "influential," even "formidable", in high society "in virtue of what are generally looked upon as masculine qualities: masterfulness, aggressiveness, force of personality." By the later century (Austen's

time), "growing refinement of feeling and taste led to women exercising influence by their characteristically feminine qualities and talents: intimacy, imaginative sympathy, graceful manners." Not surprisingly Cecil relates this change in the role of women to his analysis of society as a whole at the end of the eighteenth-century: "always, in so far as a society cultivates social pleasures and sets store by the private life, women grow powerful. Women rule private life as men rule public" (Cecil 19). Austen family life is seen as a microcosm of this system. Its corporate personality is:

At once affectionate and unsentimental, satirical and good tempered, orthodox and highly intelligent ... Within the framework of common characteristics, variations showed themselves. Difference of sex accounts for some of these. The sons took naturally to male pleasures and pursuits, the daughters to female ones.

This was an ideal world in which there was no important gulf between male and female, "nor was there any question of one sex looking down on the other" (Cecil 36-7).

Cecil is selective in his appraisal of Austen's time as well as of her family, and his conclusion regarding peace and harmony between the sexes chooses to ignore family tensions in the same way that he discards the significance of Austen's handicapped brother, George: he "does not come into the story; he was mentally defective and from an early age spent his life away from home" (Cecil 29). George did, in spite of his handicap, live to the age of seventy-two and was supported by the family throughout his lifetime; given their limited finances, this was likely a hardship. There is also evidence in the letters that Jane Austen

knew sign language and the suggestion is that she communicated with her elder brother by this means. While most biographers choose to ignore this second son on the grounds of lack of evidence, few do so in such a cavalier fashion as Cecil does. His overbearing nostalgia for the times in which Austen lived prompts him to make bland and generalized assumptions both about society and interpersonal relationships. Cecil's attempt to erase George from the Austen family tree is of the same order as his analysis of the growth of female influence on the eighteenth-century ideal: "by the end of the century, it had modified noticeably to present itself in a version refined, subtilized, and with the coarser, harder strain ... at best softened and at worst decently concealed" (Cecil 19). Details which disturb the idyllic picture are ignored or are "decently" hidden. Nothing is allowed to intrude on the ideal society which Cecil's Austen inhabits; above all, her society combines "good sense, good manners, cultivated intelligence, rational piety and a spirited sense of fun" (Cecil 19).

This is a recognizably amiable world but it is not quite the unpretentious one that most biographers conjure up for Jane Austen. While Cecil acknowledges that there were differences in privilege between the aristocracy and the gentry, he stresses that Austen, as a child of the latter, was a member of the hereditary ruling class of England. In his view it is a mistake to speak of her as coming from the middle class, and so to lump her together with George Eliot and Dickens: "in fact their families would not have been on visiting terms with Jane Austen's" (Cecil 24). In his effort to come close to Austen, Cecil is anxious to

recreate her family as one acceptable in the circles of his own noble lineage. Unlike the majority of biographers who point to the financial difficulties of the Austens, he portrays them as a "relatively prosperous family" (Cecil 109). He impresses on his readers that they had connections who were landowners, and that Mrs. Austen was related to the aristocracy by blood: "they cultivated the same pleasures, used the same phrases and, when they did happen to meet [the aristocracy], conversed on equal terms and in the same tone." To confirm the flattering picture, Cecil focuses on the evidence of the letters: "the tone of Jane Austen's own letters is strikingly like that of the clever aristocratic lady letter-writers of her time" (Cecil 25).

Not only was Jane Austen, at least by association an aristocrat, according to Cecil; "she was born an artist, a being endowed by nature with the instinct and capacity to express her creative impulse and her sense of life in the form of a work of art" (Cecil 42). In Cecil's view Austen is a "great artist" and as such her relationship to her art must be the central feature of any portrait of her. It is in this area, Cecil complains, that the biographer suffers most cruelly from lack of information; consequently he must "rely on a few scattered hints and his own guesses" (Cecil 42). Accordingly he glosses over discussion of Austen's young years with the assurance that "she is one of the few persons of genius who, so far as we know, managed to reach the age of eighteen without having felt noticeably lonely or rebellious or misunderstood" (Cecil 44). He finds Philadelphia Walter's harsh picture of the adolescent Austen unconvincing; he attributes the description

to the latter's shyness and points out that the former reveals herself as "silly and prejudiced" in her letters, and in short is "blindly biased" against her cousin (Cecil 64).

Although Cecil assumes Mr. Austen felt less qualified to educate daughters than sons, he is confident that under the influence of her father and his good library, Jane Austen did receive a good education. As testimony to her modesty about her attainments, though, Cecil quotes a segment from her letter to Dr. Clark, chaplain to the Prince of Wales: "I think I can boast myself ... with all possible vanity the most unlearned and uninformed being that ever dared to be an authoress." He reads this as Austen's declaration of being "shockingly uneducated," and he concludes the statement shows "a misleading modesty" (Cecil 45-6). Missing from this analysis is any suggestion of the irony implicit in Austen's statement. The exchange of letters between Austen and Dr. Clark was initiated on the occasion of the Prince's offer that she might dedicate any of her future work to him without the necessity of solicitation on her part. Dr. Clark took advantage of the exchange to press Austen into having an English clergyman as the central figure in her next novel:

I also dear Madam wished to be allowed to ask you, to delineate in some future Work the Habits of Life and Character and enthusiasm of a clergyman--who should pass his time between the Metropolis & the Country--who would be something like Beatties Minstrel

Silent when glad, affectionate tho' shy
And now his look was most demurely sad
& now he laughed aloud yet none knew why--

Neither Goldsmith--nor LaFontaine in his Tableau de Famille--have in my

mind quite delineated an English Clergyman, at least of the present day--
Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature--no man's enemy but his own.
(Letters 430)

Austen's refusal of this project is gentle, but firm:

I am quite honoured by your thinking me capable of drawing such a clergyman as you gave the sketch of in your note of Nov. 16th. But I assure you I am *not*. The comic part of the character I might be equal to, but not the good, the enthusiastic, the literary. Such a man's conversation must at times be on subjects of science and philosophy, of which I know nothing; or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations and allusions which a woman who, like me, knows only her mother tongue, and has read very little in that, would be totally without the power of giving. A classical education, or at any rate a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient and modern, appears to me to be quite indispensable for the person who would do any justice to your clergyman; and I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress. (Letters 448)

One refusal was not enough and Dr. Clark persisted in his desire for a clergyman protagonist:

Do let us have an English clergyman after *your* fancy--much novelty may be introduced--shew dear Madam what good would be done if Tythes were taken away entirely, and describe him burying his own mother--as I did--because the High Priest of the Parish in which she died--did not pay her remains the respect he ought to do. I have never recovered the shock. Carry your clergyman to Sea as the Friend of some distinguished Naval Character: about a Court--you may then bring forward (sic) like LeSage many interesting Scenes of Character & Interest. (Letters 445)

Apparently recognizing that the clergyman hero was a lost cause, the indefatigable Dr. Clark, who had just been appointed chaplain to the Prince of Cobourg, suggested that she might choose to dedicate a work to Prince Leopold and, in addition, that "any historical romance, illustrative of the august House of Cobourg, would just now be interesting" (Letters 451). Austen refused on the

grounds that she "could no more write a romance than an epic poem" (Letters 452).

These excerpts, as well as the remaining content of Dr. Clark's letters, reveal him as a man who was, even according to Cecil, "obsequious, pretentious, inept, with a Collins-like reverence for the nobility and without a ray of humour" (Cecil 177). In fairness, this earnest clergyman was not the only one to make suggestions about characters and plot to Jane Austen; her reaction to these was to draw up an outline for an imaginary novel in which she included all of them. The main character in this work is Dr. Clark's virtuous clergyman and the tithe question is dealt with. Given this response, the evidence of the letters, and Cecil's own analysis of Dr. Clark, Austen's remark on the inadequacy of her education must be read more as irony than "misleading modesty." Not to acknowledge this possibility is to convince the reader that evidence which is at odds with a portrait of aristocratic femininity is "at best softened and at worst decently concealed" by Cecil.

In spite of his avowed aim to depict Jane Austen's "living personality," Cecil's avoidance of the harsher side of his subject suggests that his preconceptions of 'woman' preclude that possibility. His discussion of the attractiveness of the Austen sisters, for example, reveals that he views them only in the context of a male world and from the perspective of a male gaze: they are described as "noticeably pretty girls; and, what was of more importance, pretty in the style admired by the gentlemen of the period" (Cecil 65).

While Cecil dismisses the Mitford report of Austen's silly husband hunting as "sharp words" supported by little evidence, he prefers not to regard it as wholly worthless: "I like to think there was a time in Jane Austen's life when she could be called a butterfly. I know of no other woman writer of the first rank who has been similarly described." He deals with the issue of Austen's intelligence in similar fashion: "lucky for her" her genius did not show, "no more than now did most young men feel at home with female geniuses" (Cecil 67).

Cecil concludes that while Austen has no illusions on this subject she is not embittered by experience, and she is amused rather than annoyed by male fatuity; after all "she knew enough men, in particular her own father and brothers, who fully appreciated her feminine intelligence." This suggests not only that brains did not bother some men, but also that female intelligence is of value only when rated so by male judgement. Also, in this analysis Austen's appeal is heavily dependent on her perceived femininity, and a vital ingredient of this is her contentment with her own lot: "she had no quarrel with the orthodox feminine world she was born into; never complained that it was limited or evinced the slightest wish to break away from it." Women are permitted 'thought' in this world, but only within the narrow confines of "the orthodox feminine world" (Cecil 68). The woman writer may perform admirably within this context, but her necessary femininity acts as a hobble, forever confining her to the social pleasures and the private life over which Cecil gives her power.

Not only does Cecil construct discreetly separate worlds for men and

women, he also, like Hodge, posits a double life for Jane Austen: she "seems to have found it easy to lead two independent lives," those of author and social butterfly. As in previous instances, Cecil finds that no friction exists between these activities; this Austen is an artist as well as a woman, but she finds fulfilment mainly in her art. Because of this, Cecil suggests her reaction to social activities was different than other girls: "for them the ultimate interest lay in the possibilities they offered for love and marriage." For Austen, however, these events stimulated her creative juices: "no doubt she could be attracted by young men and must have had occasional thoughts of marriage," but ultimately she was detached from the world of her contemporaries. She was an artist, "a contemplative, absorbedly and amusedly concerned to observe and reflect on its inhabitants as nourishment for what was ... the vital principle of her existence" (Cecil 67-8).

In Cecil's view it is thus art, and not life, which stimulates Jane Austen. He does, however, conclude that she approves of marriage: "Jane Austen, it seems, would not have sympathized with the modern and feminist view that wives are an oppressed race" (Cecil 119). In addition, he acknowledges the possibility of the occasional romantic interlude for her: he attaches some seriousness to the flirtation with Thomas I efroy, and he considers the unnamed love of summer 1801 "an event of extreme, perhaps crucial, importance in Jane Austen's history" (Cecil 96). According to Cecil this encounter led her to discover "the truth that she was to state so poignantly in ... *Persuasion*: namely that women have a sad

ability to go on loving when hope is gone. [Her] nature, though not passionate, was the opposite of shallow" (Cecil 98). In common with Adams and Rhydderch, Cecil allows his Austen suitors whose greatest merits are that they either die or disappear. There is thus evidence of her desirability, but she is "not passionate" and remains untouched. It is with an obvious sigh of relief that Cecil reports that the move to Chawton marked a turning point after which "nothing more was to happen to Jane Austen the woman" (Cecil 130); the implication is clearly that the only significant event in a woman's life is the prospect of marriage.

Once marriage is dismissed from Austen's mind, life is over for her as a woman, and the remaining history for Cecil becomes that of the artist. Austen is still, however, "normal and feminine in so many ways, [and] it is unlikely that [she] was without some maternal instinct" (Cecil 141). Just as she is not passionate, this instinct is not a very strong one, and in Cecil's opinion it is likely that her nephews and nieces fulfilled any desire for children that she might have had. He stresses, however, that Austen did not need children to make her happy; her books were her children, and this is the "master key" to understanding Austen's character and life story:

She differed from most women. The creative impulse which in them fulfilled itself as wife and mother in her fulfilled itself as an artist ... more and more the artist in her began to dominate and at last took over to become the centre and motive force of her existence. (Cecil 141)

In this analysis it is apparent that, like Hodge, Cecil considers the single state to be the necessary condition for Austen's art. In spite of this emphasis on

the dominance of the artist, Cecil now reverses his position that Austen's art existed apart from her private self, and insists that woman and artist are inseparable. He also acknowledges that the former was not absolutely perfect; on occasion she was "a trifle unreasonable and captious", and her "obsessive secrecy about her writing [was] the nearest thing to an eccentricity in an otherwise well-balanced character" (Cecil 118,142). Just as her faults are small, however, so is her world. While Cecil gives Austen high praise for her realistic pictures of social and domestic life which deal with "fundamental and unchanging elements in human character", he takes literally the remark about the little bit of ivory (Cecil 147). In spite of the fact that in her novels "universal characters are presented in a universal context", Cecil concludes that Austen "realized too well the limitations within which her genius operated to consider venturing beyond them" (Cecil 149,187).

Throughout, the limits imposed on Austen by Cecil's version of femininity are obvious; she is "naturally in sympathy" with the point of view of her world and this makes life easier for her both as woman and as writer. Cecil points out that since Austen's primary aim is to delight the readers of her novels, she feels no need to insist. Although his Austen has a "tough, sharp-sighted intelligence" with no illusions about human nature, she is also born with "a good temper and an affectionate heart" (Cecil 153). The latter balances the former and creates a harmony which is essential to the feminine nature of her art since "writers who feel themselves at odds with the world they live in tend to be tiresomely

aggressive" (Cecil 150). Cecil's Austen is reserved and discreet but although "she took such pains to keep them apart, the woman and the author were unmistakably one and the same person". Given this conclusion, it follows naturally for Cecil that "the modesty and good sense that led [Austen] to accept the limitations imposed on her life led her also to accept the limitations imposed on her by the nature of her talent" (Cecil 153).

In spite of the fact that Cecil's avowed intention is to deal with the woman in relationship to her art, it appears vital for him that this is done in the context of the Victorian Jane Austen. While he does not call her 'Aunt Jane,' his praise of James Edward's memoir as "a charming little work of art, gracefully written and vividly evoking her personality" reveals that he nostalgically perceives her as the nephew did; this is also suggested in the Prologue where Cecil tells of the beginnings of his fascination with Austen. He first encountered her novels on a visit to an eighteenth-century country house:

There in its drawing room, with portraits of powdered and beruffled ladies and gentlemen staring down at me from the faded silk of the walls and the tall windows open onto stretches of parkland ... my mother opened *Pride and Prejudice* and began to read it aloud to me ..by the time she was finished, I was wholly under the spell of the author. This happened well over sixty years ago and the spell is still working. (Cecil 8)

In a very real sense Cecil's biography is dedicated to the re-enactment of this spell; the memory of the mother, and the bringing to life of the imaginary woman who first brought the enchantment into being.

Cecil's opinions on Austen's art, formed some years later than this first reading, are as long lasting as the 'spell' she cast over him. In the Foreword he apologizes that what he has to say about her work is much the same as what was said in his Leslie Stephen Lecture on her novels: "I repeat much of what I said in that lecture and sometimes in the same words. My excuse for this is that my view of Jane Austen's art have changed little since 1935" (Cecil 7). This admission, coupled with the sweet nostalgia of the description of Cecil's introduction to Austen suggest more than the average enthusiasm of a biographer for his subject, and like Adams and Rhydderch he has an intensely personal relationship with the aristocratic women he creates. Crucial to this relationship is that some things must always remain hidden, and significantly it is the creative process which is subjected to this treatment. In his praise of James Edward's memoir, Cecil notes that because Austen was at pains throughout her life to hide her literary activities from the world, her nephew had to content himself with drawing only the woman. Although Cecil begins by wanting to "reconstruct and depict [Austen's] living personality and to explore its relationship to her art," he concludes by wanting his last words in the biography to be ones that would have pleased Austen. He notes approvingly that James Edward recognized that woman and artist were one and quotes the nephew's words in summation of his aunt: "We did not think of her as being clever, still less as being famous: but we valued her as one always kind, sympathising, and amusing." Cecil is convinced these words would have pleased Austen: "they keep her secret, shed no unwanted light on the hidden workings of

her genius, and they praise her as she would have been glad to be praised" (Cecil 6,203). What is portrayed in this analysis is not the woman in relation to her art, but a female stereotype which is at odds with the art which calls it into existence. The emphasis on the hidden nature of artistic activity has the effect of detaching the novels from their author, with the result that in Cecil's 'portrait' of Jane Austen his vision of aristocratic femininity holds the field.

Mary Lascelles and Elizabeth Jenkins are the first two biographical writers to focus on Jane Austen primarily as an author. Lascelles is a literary critic and she situates her subject in the intellectual context of the times in which she lived; her Austen, for example, is direct heir to the moralism of Johnson and the satire of Cowper. In addition, the life and the art are intimately connected when Lascelles views the writing of the novels as an attempt 'to reconcile the war within'. While neither considers it the central issue, both biographers discuss marriage; Lascelles is mainly concerned with Austen's always 'meagre' circumstances and Jenkins defines these as directly related to spinsterhood. The latter also indulges in an extensive discussion of what it meant to be a woman in Austen's day; she compares these 'restrictive' conditions to the twentieth-century situation and suggests that regardless of circumstances in life, then as now it is individual attitudes which govern happiness. This conclusion allows Jenkins to accept the family version of Austen's perfection, but to update it to the point

where self-preservation, and not modesty, becomes the explanation for Austen's aloofness.

The three biographies of the nineteen-seventies continue the attempt to address the issues which persistently plague those who choose Jane Austen as their subject. Like Jenkins and Lascelles they confront the problem of the Victorian stereotype advocated by her adoring family. Hodge's perception of a restrictive society, for example, leads her to posit a double life for Austen; in this construct marriage is the only option for a woman, and a giddy exterior is evidence of success in managing the double life. In common with Lascelles, Hodge suggests Austen writes novels in an attempt to reconcile emotional trauma, but unlike her she concludes that Austen's single state was a necessary condition for her art. Rees also is certain that marriage is a disability for the female author and, in an attempt to dispel the family version of Austen, she focuses on the many sources of tension which they chose to overlook. Rees, like the others, is concerned with woman's role in society, and her conclusion is that family and gender were the two issues that dominated Austen's personality. Cecil's Austen, on the other hand, reverts to the genteel stereotype of the family version. In spite of his avowed intention of focusing on the writer, he is enchanted with the woman to the degree that he belongs in the company of the enthusiasts, Adams and Rhydderch. More than a biography, this is a paean to an eighteenth-century ideal.

Collectively these biographies highlight the issues of family and gender as

they pertain to the life of Jane Austen. While all the biographers admit their subject is elusive, they aim to replace the hackneyed traditional image of her with that of the 'real' woman who was responsible for great works of fiction. What emerges from all the accounts, however, are portrayals which in their own ways are as limiting as those which they seek to supplant. In the case of Austen, marriage remains inimical to her art and, in addition, the male concept of author remains unchallenged.

CHAPTER V: John Halperin and Park Honan

John Halperin (1984)

The two most recent biographies of Austen are diligent in their attempts to come to terms with the problems which have plagued their predecessors. Park Honan is anxious to redress the notion of the narrowness of Austen's experience, and his *Jane Austen* (1987) expands her world to include war and politics. John Halperin's *The Life of Jane Austen* (1984), on the other hand, responds to reports of Austen's perfection by operating on the assumption that the family closed ranks on the subject of their famous relative because there was something to hide, that "perhaps ... hers was a personality entirely different from that promulgated by family legend."¹ Since, as the result of footnote:1 their efforts, the Austen of popular perception is a paragon of virtue, Halperin's Austen of necessity is the opposite of the genteel ideal, and he considers her novels as legitimate sources of autobiographical evidence which support his portrait of their bitter and disappointed author.

According to Halperin, David Cecil's contribution on Austen is the "most overrated" of "those studies of the novelist which have at least made the biographical attempt" (Halperin x). In common with Cecil, though, Halperin

¹ John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 6. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Halperin' in the body of the text.

professes interest in the "relation between the artist and the work produced rather than either by itself" (Halperin xi). It is not surprising, however, that although the publication of these two biographies is separated by only six years, their authors' perceptions of their subject and the age in which she lived are radically different. In Halperin's analysis of the end of the eighteenth-century, reason, taste and elegance are overshadowed by turmoil: "if it was a dancing age, the later eighteenth-century was also a fighting age--an age of war, of war after war; an age of upheaval, and great inflation; of pluralism and hunting parsons; of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)" (Halperin 13). Halperin also pays tribute to the practical realism of the times, and like Cecil he points to the Austen family's aristocratic connections. His aim, however, is to establish Jane Austen's conservatism rather than her gentility, and he points out that the class to which she belonged was at the height of its power and prestige. On this basis, he concludes, it is logical that her plots are conservative ones:

We must not be surprised; nor should we be surprised if her books sometimes rebuke individualistic female initiatives and imply, as they all do, that the consummation of a woman's life lies in marriage to a commanding man. Hers was a conservative class, and hers a conservative nature. (Halperin 21)

While such a comment about Austen's conservatism is likely not entirely ill-founded, the bland assumption that this is sufficient explanation of the plots of Austen's novels is indicative of the plan of attack that Halperin applies to his subject. His basic conclusion is that "the ritual closing-of-ranks among the family" means that "surely something was being hidden:"

Why else call her flawless? Could this life, could any life, have been lived devoid of 'events,' of 'crisis,' of 'attachment'? Could this woman who never said an unkind or even a sharp thing and to whom nothing ever happened be the same woman whose ironic moral vision the world has celebrated for a century and a half? (Halperin 5)

Halperin insists that Austen's personality was entirely different from that promulgated by family legend. While he considers that to call her "England's finest hater" is undoubtedly going too far, he is determined to erase the family creation of the "monstrous figure of sweetness" (Halperin 6-7).

In the service of this task, Halperin quotes Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* on the unsatisfactory nature of the human race, and, he concludes, the words seem "to be spoken directly from the novelist's heart and mind:"

There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense. (Halperin 76)

The main sources of evidence Halperin uses against the family stereotype of perfection are Austen's letters and, as in the example above, her novels; in both these he finds ample proof that the author was the exact antithesis of the loving and serene aunt her family would have her be. Since there are no letters before 1796, he finds the *Juvenilia*, probably composed by Austen between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, to be the "surest guide to *her*" as an adolescent (Halperin 36). Halperin reads these earliest works as "startling in their hostility and cold detachment," and he cites Marvin Mudrick's argument that Austen favoured irony because the form allowed her to remain detached from herself and others, as well

as from personal commitment. He agrees also with Mudrick that the *Juvenilia* display many of the personality traits which are present in all of the works (Halperin 37).

In Halperin's view the letters are as revealing as the *Juvenilia*, but while he defends their merits as "*family documents*" against critics like Harold Nicolson who labelled them "old-maidish and disagreeable," and E.M. Forster who claimed he heard "the whinnying of harpies" in them (Halperin 59-60), he finds the general tone of the letters often sneering and bad-tempered. Admittedly there are portions of some letters which must be labelled nasty by even the most partial of readers, but the evidence suggests that Halperin on occasion tends to misread jest or irony as malice. Austen's comments to Cassandra about one of her favourite poets, George Crabbe, are a case in point. According to her nephew, James Edward, she thoroughly enjoyed Crabbe's poetry," and would sometimes say, in jest, that, if she ever married at all, she could fancy being Mrs. Crabbe; looking on the author quite as an abstract idea, and ignorant and regardless what manner of man he might be" (Memoir 89-90). Apparently the poet was in London at the same time as Austen in September 1813, and on one occasion she notes "I have not yet seen Mr. Crabbe." Later in the same letter she elaborates on her disappointment at "seeing nothing" of him at the theatre: "I felt sure of him when I saw the boxes fitted up with crimson velvet" (Letters 319, 323).

Chapman concludes that the connection here is to Crabbe's "The Gentleman Farmer" where "In full festoons the crimson curtains fell." This

parallel suggests that the remarks about Crabbe have the air of the similar situation in which Austen's own readers take her fictional characters and transpose them into real-life situations; in this case, however, the poet is the fiction, and the proposed meeting a fantasy in which both sisters participate. Given Austen's apparent resistance to literary encounters, it is unlikely she would have sought such an occasion. She might well have wished to "see" the poet, but never to "meet" him.

The issue of Crabbe and marriage comes up again in the letters when Austen takes note of the death of his wife:

No; I have never seen the death of Mrs. Crabbe. I have only just been making out from one of his prefaces that he probably was married. It is almost ridiculous. Poor woman! I will comfort *him* as well as I can, but I do not undertake to be good to her children. She had better not leave any. (Letters 358)

Halperin quotes the substance of the passage, with the significant omission of "Poor woman!," and he concludes that "once again a startling heartlessness is betrayed here" (Halperin 230). In the light of the ongoing game between Cassandra and Jane about the latter's marriage to Crabbe, the accusation of "startling heartlessness" is likely an overstatement of the case.

In much the same fashion Halperin appears to misread the letters regarding the relationship between Austen and the apothecary, twenty-nine year old Charles Thomas Haden, who attended her brother, Henry, during his illness in 1815. Halperin notes the frequency with which Haden dines with the Austens and the obvious pleasure that Jane reports to Cassandra as a result of these

occasions. As well he suggests:

She takes some trouble to deal with a misapprehension of, and a suggestion of disapproval from Cassandra. The favoured Mr. Haden is not just an apothecary: 'he is a Haden, nothing but a Haden, a sort of wonderful nondescript creature on two legs, something between a Man & an Angel--but without the least spice of an Apothecary.--He is perhaps the only Person *not* an Apothecary hereabouts.' (Halperin 285)

Halperin concludes that "this sounds like a woman in love. She must have known that the younger man would find a younger wife." In addition he suggests that the bitterness of the early chapters of *Persuasion*, being written at this time, "take their tone in part from the novelist's certainty ... that time has passed her by, the bloom of youth being too far gone ever again to attract a man" (Halperin 285). While on the surface this appears a plausible argument, the problem with it is that Halperin omits mention of the presence in the household of Austen's twenty-two year old niece, Fanny. As well he ignores the evidence of the letter which immediately precedes the one he quotes from in support of Austen's amorous feelings for the apothecary. Here Austen recounts, "then came dinner & Mr. Haden who brought good Manners & clever conversation;" after dinner additional guests arrived:

And for the rest of the evening the Drawing-room was thus arranged, on the Sopha-side the two Ladies Henry & myself making the best of it, on the opposite side Fanny and Mr. Haden in two chairs (I *believe* at least they had *two* chairs) talking together uninterrupted.--Fancy the scene! And what is to be fancied next?--Why that Mr. H. dines here again tomorrow. (Letters 437)

Clearly Austen enjoys Mr. Haden's company, but it is much more probable that her defense of him to Cassandra is on her niece's behalf, rather than her own; it

is also likely that, given the exuberant and playful tone of that defense, the words are Fanny's and not her aunt's. For Halperin to ignore the presence of Fanny, and to use partial evidence as proof of Austen's thwarted desire for a younger man is misleading.

Halperin expands this assumption about Austen's feelings for a younger man in "Jane Austen's Lovers," the title chapter in his recent *Jane Austen's Lovers* (1988). In this essay the thrust of the argument is that, contrary to popular perception, Austen had a number of men in her life.² Haden is one of several "attachments" that Halperin discusses and he insists "it is clear from the correspondence that the novelist was infatuated with her brother's physician."³

Halperin is expansive on the issue:

That Haden did not reciprocate her feelings, and that she ultimately recognized this and resigned herself, reluctantly, to friendship rather than love ... the letters nonetheless give us a picture of Jane Austen, by now a veteran of potentially romantic encounters, being knocked over by the advent of this sexy new playmate. (*Lovers* 23)

On the subject of Haden dining at Hans Place, he again quotes the letters:

"Tomorrow Mr. Haden is to dine with us.--There's happiness!--We really grow so fond of Mr. Haden that I do not know what to expect" (*Lovers* 23). Halperin makes much of Austen's desire to have Haden to herself, and throughout his

² Like Halperin, Constance Pilgrim is interested in Jane Austen's lovers. In *Dear Jane: A Biographical Study of Jane Austen* (London: William Kimber, 1971) she identifies Austen's unknown love of 1801 as Captain John Wordsworth, William Wordsworth's sailor brother.

³ John Halperin, "Jane Austen's Lovers," *Jane Austen's Lovers and Other Studies in Fiction and History from Austen to Le Carré*, ed. John Halperin (London: Macmillan, 1988) 23. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses as 'Lovers' in the body of the text.

discussion diligently ignores the presence of Fanny. All this in spite of the fact that Austen consistently refers to the delight in the apothecary's company in terms of 'we' and 'us,' and that farther down the page of the same letter that extols the virtues of Mr. Haden, she reports: "Fanny has heard all that I have said to you about herself & Mr. H." (Letters 438). Disregarding the implications of this remark, Halperin notes that whatever Austen might have been "expecting" of Haden, as so often with the men she had hoped might fall in love with her, he married another soon afterwards.

The issue of Mr. Haden appears to be not the only case in which Halperin miscasts a gentleman as an object of Austen's amorous intentions. One Mr. Evelyn is similarly implicated, apparently on the grounds that he promised a phaeton ride. In this case the first mention of the gentleman is in a letter of June 11, 1799: "Edward renewed his acquaintance lately with Mr. Evelyn ... yesterday Mrs. Evelyn called on us, and her manners were so pleasing that we liked the idea of going very much" (Letters 68); in 1799, at least, it appears that Mr. Evelyn already has a wife. As well, Austen later comments rather unfavourably about him regarding his advice to her brother, Edward, on the purchase of coach horses: "His friend Mr. Evelyn found them out & recommended them, & if the judgement of a Yahoo can ever be depended on, I suppose it may now, for I beleive (sic) Mr. Evelyn has all his life thought more of Horses than of anything else" (Letters 70). In 1801 in Bath Mr. Evelyn comes up again:

I assure you in spite of what I might chuse to insinuate in a former letter, that I have seen very little of Mr. Evelyn since my coming here; I met him this morning for only the 4th time, & as to my anecdote about Sidney Gardens, I made the most of the story because it came in to advantage, but in fact he only asked me whether I were to be at Sidney Gardens in the evening or not.--There is now something like an engagement between us & the Phaeton, which to confess my frailty I have a great desire to go out in;--whether it will come to anything must remain with him.--I really beleive (sic) he is very harmless; people do not seem afraid of him here, and he gets Groundsel for his birds & all that.--My Aunt will never be easy until she visits them;--she has been repeatedly trying to fancy a necessity for it now on our accounts, but she meets with no encouragement. (Letters 136)

Given that Mr. Evelyn is now sixty-seven, that Cassandra needs to be assured that he is "harmless," and that his wife appears to be alive (the aunt wants to visit "them"), it is highly unlikely that Austen ever viewed him as a potential suitor. In spite of this Halperin forges ahead with this theory when he comments on the above letter: "the novelist seems to have her fingers crossed. The day after writing this she was taken out by Mr. Evelyn for a ride in his phaeton; but the gentleman, simply making good on a promise, offered no other declaration. That was that" (*Lovers* 16).

In both the cases of Mr. Haden and Mr. Evelyn it appears that Halperin ignores the evidence which suggests that Austen did not entertain notions of amorous attachments to either gentleman. While errors of this nature suggest carelessness in the biographer, the use to which Halperin puts his evidence implies that he is amassing a case to support the theory that repeated rejections by the opposite sex produced frustrations in Austen which found their outlet in the novels. In this analysis, marriage is the central issue; for a woman to remain

single means, not that she has made a choice, but that she has been rejected. According to Halperin, this perceived failure in the marriage market led Austen to become bitter and mistrustful of all men. He finds this expressed, for example, in the unfinished novel, 'The Watsons,' where women are at the mercy of men who "are depicted for the most part as inconstant, unpredictable, capricious, vain, and materialistic." Although the men are a sorry lot, "it nonetheless remains 'a hard thing for a woman to stand against the flattering ways of a Man' ... especially when he can provide all the things a woman lacks in life" (Halperin 139). Similarly, in the letters Halperin notes that Austen is bitter toward men, and he cites her comments on her attraction to Stephen Rumbold Lushington, a Member of Parliament:

He speaks well, she tells Cassandra, and is fond of Milton. 'I am rather in love with him.--I dare say he is ambitious & Insincere.' This may appear innocuous--unless one reads it to mean, not unreasonably, that the men Jane Austen has been 'in love with' have had a tendency, as she sees it, to give her up due to excessive ambition (the desire for influential wives) or because they had never meant anything by their intentions in the first place--about which she, trusting fool, was taken in. Certainly, however read, it appears a bitter comment. (Halperin 228-9)

The cause and effect relationship that Halperin finds between spinsterhood and misery hinges on the conviction that marriage was deemed a necessity by all women of Austen's age and class. He begins his discussion on this subject with the assertion that in the early nineteenth-century:

Educated women without money of their own had to marry if they wanted to avoid being teachers or governesses ... A suitable match for a woman

meant what was called in those days 'equality of fortune.' Still, taste and style and learning and intelligence and a sense of humour were valued. (Halperin 13)

This is not an extreme statement, nor is it unreasonable to suggest that as a young woman Austen often had romance on her mind. What is remarkable, however, are the lengths to which Halperin extends this argument from such apparently reasonable beginnings. By the time Austen is in her twentieth year he suggests:

An unkind observer might have thought her practically on the shelf ... Her sister was already engaged. But where was the man for her? For a young lady in her position, marriage had to be the ultimate object of social life; there is no evidence that Jane Austen ever questioned this. (Halperin 53)

In addition, Halperin points to the "terror of spinsterhood ... To remain a spinster was to admit failure--to be patronised by other women and ridiculed by men ... It is impossible to believe that Jane Austen could have ever expected to remain a spinster or chosen such a fate willingly" (Halperin 53-4). This obsession with marriage causes Halperin to wonder whether Austen had already "given up" when she was wearing dowdy caps to cover her hair in 1798; he reads her comment that there will be "nobody worth dancing with, and nobody worth talking to" at an upcoming ball, as "a note of sexual desperation, surely" (Halperin 82). In keeping with his conclusion that the novels are autobiographical, Halperin finds *Northanger Abbey*:

The work of a caustic disappointed woman. In Catherine's early failures with men, we may perceive the novelist's ... No one had inspired passion in her, nor had she inspired passion in anyone ... Jane Austen's 'peace' was

surely on the brink of destruction, in her early twenties, as a result of loneliness, of sexual longing. (Halperin 110)

Not unreasonably Halperin notes that Austen perceived that clever women were at a disadvantage in the marriage market; he also concludes that probably Austen despaired at finding a man clever enough to value her own intelligence. In addition, she must have felt "trapped and helpless in the country rectory, shut away from eminent contemporaries and discerning men of the marrying kind" (Halperin 113). On the subject of Austen's insistence on the importance of money in marriage, Halperin notes that in *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor advises Edward to humble himself to his dreadful mother in order that they may avoid penury: "the excuse is that marriage, especially marriage on a competence, justifies almost anything. One wonders how desperate Jane Austen really was" (Halperin 94).

In spite of his insistence that spinsterhood implies despair, and is also putative evidence of rejection by men, Halperin does acknowledge that Austen did have suitors whom she rejected. He discusses the Bigg Wither episode among others, and suggests that Fanny's abrupt refusal of Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park* is a reflection of this incident. In addition Halperin also sees the novel as giving "glimpses into the novelist's resentful perspective during the years leading up to her literary success and recognition." *Mansfield Park* is viewed as evidence that Jane Austen had found marriage " 'a manoeuvring business' and had eschewed it, thus being required to accord precedence, as a matter of form, to

married women, no matter who they were" (Halperin 242). While Halperin acknowledges the element of choice in Austen's remaining single, he stresses that by the time she was thirty-nine the novelist "had given a good deal of thought to the question of love--and been disappointed" (Halperin 263). He finds *Emma* to be the most autobiographical of the novels when it states Emma's position on marriage: " 'it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her' " (Halperin 272). Halperin points out that Jane, like Emma, was not ready, and that when in book after book the former grumbles that men are not interested in well-informed minds, only in the superficial, this smacks both of disillusionment and special pleading. He likens Jane and Emma in another respect as well, that of being unwilling to change their present positions for a marriage without love. Halperin concludes that in 1813-14 Austen is a published author with money of her own at last; like Emma she no longer needs the 'fortune,' 'employment' or 'consequence' obtained from marriage.

There is, however, another, and more important dimension of this comparison with Emma who says that she has never been in love, that it is neither her way nor her nature:

If any of this is even remotely autobiographical, we may be excused for thinking that Jane Austen might never have been in love--that it was not her 'way,' or in her 'nature,' as the passage has it to be in love with anyone. She may have been a woman incapable of love. (Halperin 272)

In Halperin's analysis Jane, like Emma, lacks "tenderness of heart," and if Emma is "at all like her author, one may reasonably conclude that Jane Austen's maternal and amorous instincts were tepid, at least in her thirties" (Halperin 273). In this respect he echoes C.P. Snow who suggests Austen "didn't really know what sexual feeling was." Again in keeping with his conviction that the novels are autobiographical, Halperin notes the "bitterness" of the opening chapters of *Persuasion*; of Anne Eliot's delayed marriage he comments that this is the "final realisation of the desired state ... which eluded the novelist to the end of her days, but which could hardly have long been far from the centre of her attention, or out of her thoughts" (Halperin 15,300).

Not only is Halperin consistent in his contention that spinsterhood was the central issue in Austen's life, but he concludes, moreover, that it contributed to her melancholy disposition. By the time of *Mansfield Park* she knows she will never play a marriage scene, and it is too painful for her to invent one; detachment now has "become less a peril to be avoided than a state of existence with which to become reconciled." Like Fanny in the novel who, when depressed, found that employment dispelled melancholy, "so Jane Austen found 'employment' in writing, and kept on writing to 'dispel melancholy' " (Halperin 250). In spite of this rather simplistic explanation of why Austen wrote her novels, Halperin does pay tribute to the extent to which her writing for publication was a courageous act, and he cites Joan Rees on the subject of her making "her own quiet revolution in the novel" (Halperin 69). He also describes

Austen's defense of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* as her "private declaration of independence, her determination to write--no matter what ... It was a remarkable and a very brave thing for an unmarried, undowried, and utterly unknown lady to say in the year 1799" (Halperin 115). Given what has gone before, we may assume that the adjectives describing the lady here are listed in descending order of importance.

Halperin's sensitivity to Austen's courage in writing is echoed in his discussions of her sibling and parental relationships. In keeping with his determination to show that "clearly the Rectory at Steventon was no Garden of Eden," he finds autobiographical echoes in 'Catherine' of the *Juvenilia*, who is said to have "too much good Sense to be proud of her family, and too much good Nature to live at variance with anyone" (Halperin 49, 45). Halperin also demonstrates that while Austen apparently had love and good feelings for her father, she was ambivalent toward her mother. He uses the absence of surviving letters between mother and daughter to suggest that the two were not the best of friends. Halperin suggests, as well, that the bad parents in the novels stand for Mrs. Austen, and he emphasises the autobiographical nature of Fanny's bitter reflection on her mother in *Mansfield Park*: "Mothers certainly have not yet got quite the right way of managing their daughters ... To be neglected before one's time, must be very vexatious ...[it is] entirely the mother's fault" (Halperin 238).

In querying the mother-daughter relationship, Halperin connects Mrs. Austen with sibling rivalry as well; if the mother favoured Cassandra over her

"this would account for much of Jane's adolescent bitterness" (Halperin 63). He points to the underlying theme of sibling rivalry in the novels and to the undercurrent of competitiveness in the letters: "sibling rivalry need not be less powerful in the thirties than in the teens" (Halperin 162). On the subject of the brothers, Halperin decides that Henry was 'cold' and hence Jane was attracted to him. He also points out (incorrectly) that since the brothers did not name any of their daughters after her, "the obvious conclusion is that some of Jane Austen's brothers, despite her strong attachment to them, did not feel so strongly attached to her." As well, in Halperin's view this illuminates "exactly how 'difficult' a character the novelist really was" (Halperin 218,219). In *Persuasion* he finds much sibling rivalry and alienation, and again the 'bad parents' theme: "the vividness of the language may invite us to wonder, yet again, how happy--and how traumatic--Jane Austen's childhood really was" (Halperin 306). Halperin finds that she showed resentment at her mother's apparent lack of feeling and points out that "it is an interesting psychological fact that people who have difficulty feeling are often the quickest to detect and denounce this identical failing in others" (Halperin 163). Here, as on other occasions, Halperin does not hesitate to state personal opinion as 'fact.'

It is, however, on the issue of Austen's relationships with children that Halperin is most harshly critical of her. He notes she links little children with dirt and litter, and suggests that her fondness for children did not increase as she grew older: "It is clear that the novelist did not especially like children ... In

principle, in theory, she was all kindness; in practice something less" (Halperin 128,168). He gives Austen's apparently rough treatment of her brother Charles' daughter, Cassandra, as concrete example, and quotes Austen to her niece, Anna, on the subject of young women in fiction: "One does not care for girls till they are grown up" (Letters 402). As well, he finds "there is no sign that she yearned for motherhood" and he cites Cecil on the subject: "Here it was that she differed from most women. The creative impulse which in them fulfilled itself as wife and mother in her fulfilled itself as artist" (Halperin 189). In his anxiety to dispel the myth that Austen loved children Halperin uses Brigid Brophy's opinion that the novelist held it against babies that they were not rational, and that "more bitterly still, she held it against mothers that they showed an irrational adoration of their babies."

In support of Austen's aversion to mothers and children, Halperin quotes Elinor, from *Sense and Sensibility*, who dislikes unruly children: " 'a fond mother ... in pursuit of praise for her children' is 'the most rapacious of human beings,' and 'the most credulous ... she will swallow anything' " (Halperin 89). As well he notes Christopher Ricks' argument that it is a glaring omission that a very great novelist of family life should not " 'show what a dutiful and loving relation between adult and child' might be like" (Halperin 227). In *Mansfield Park*, Halperin points out that when Fanny's brothers run around and slam doors her temples ache and she is said to be stunned by the noise. He suggests that "the account of the effects on a sensitive nature of noise and chaos cannot be wholly

invented" and that this "gives us a magnificent picture of the novelist's personality in her late thirties" (Halperin 240-1). Given that the evidence tells us that Austen spent two months trying to revise *Mansfield Park* at Godmersham, the home of her brother Edward, where there was a constant stream of visitors and an oversupply of children, comments on the disruptive and exhausting nature of the latter seem more to be statements of fact than declarations of outright hostility. Halperin, however, chooses to read this as a sign of yearning for a childless adulthood.

Laudable as the effort is for the biographer to pierce through the veil of Austen's gentility, Halperin's treatment of her tends to reinforce the stereotype rather than diminish it. His carelessness of detail gives the reader the impression that he has approached the subject with a preconceived notion of her nastiness, and that he mines the novels and the letters merely for the material that will support his case. Halperin's assumption that the family had something to hide about their novelist relative is a point well taken, but not to consider alternatives other than melancholy or bad temper seems less than thorough.

Margaret Kirkham, for example,⁴ suggests that the family were concerned to suppress the correspondence and cleanse the life of any connection the novelist might have had with "the feminist controversy" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries. Kirkham points out that Henry Austen, who well

⁴ Margaret Kirkham, "The Austen Portraits and the Received Biography," *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983) 29-38.

remembered the bitterness of those earlier debates, composed a portrait of his sister which stressed her contentment and uneventful life; this was designed to guard the reputation of the family by convincing her public that she was too unremarkable a person to have anything controversial to say. While Halperin mentions Mary Wollstonecraft as an indication of the turmoil of the times, he does not discuss the feminist explanation which, however, raises interesting questions about the nature of Austen's perceived ill-humour. If, as Kirkham notes, the "feminist controversy" resulted in virulent attacks on women writers who did not demonstrate appropriately submissive attitudes, then Austen's comments on men, marriage, and the family imply a philosophical perspective and a subtlety which are ignored when they are dismissed as mere crankiness.

When Halperin reads such statements as totally autobiographical, he is co-opted by the frustrated old maid, who is exactly the reverse of the genteel Jane. Implicit in his argument is the assumption that every woman of Austen's day desired marriage above all else. He also holds to a rigid concept of womanhood which insists that youth and beauty are the essential attractions for wedded bliss, that a 'real' woman automatically loves children and never utters an unkind word. The irony of this is that Halperin's efforts are so single-mindedly directed to proving Austen displayed none of these characteristics, that he inadvertently reinforces the stereotype. His consistent overstatement of the case for nastiness thus becomes a telling reminder of the saintly Victorian 'Aunt.'

Park Honan (1987)

Park Honan, Austen's most recent biographer, attempts to explain the role of a dependent woman, but his main effort is directed at redressing notions of her ignorance of war and politics. To this end he opens his biography with a Prelude titled "Frank Austen's Ride." Frank was only twenty months older than his sister, Jane, and "left a detailed record of his naval training," which, along with other sources, Honan uses as a device "to reconstruct a picture of England outside Steventon in Jane Austen's childhood" (Honan 1). Later Honan includes lengthy descriptions of Frank's difficulties at sea, as well as his naval experiences at the time of Trafalgar. Not only were Frank and Jane siblings, but between 1806 and 1809 the Austen women lived with him and his wife at Southampton, and when apart they were regular correspondents. On these grounds Honan quite logically concludes that Austen must have shared in this naval knowledge and, by extension, known the 'naval mind.'

In similar vein, Honan finds that Austen has quite an intimate knowledge of political patronage. With realistic awareness George Austen apparently petitioned influential acquaintances to advance his sons' naval careers, and in addition took the risk of using Warren Hasting's influence for Frank when Hastings was on trial for "high crimes and misdemeanours." Later in his career as a result of this connection, and because East India Company directors influenced naval promotions, Frank carried out "a mission beyond naval orders [and] ... was to become involved in profitable shipments of silver" (Honan 68).

Honan points out that not only must Jane Austen have been at least minimally aware of these matters, but also that she betrays her attitude to them in her novels. He suggests that in *Mansfield Park*, for example, she condemns both patronage and the "moral ambiguity of a family's distant overseas wealth" (Honan 243). Honan concludes that the Austen's sympathy with Hastings was sustained throughout his lengthy trial, and also that "the trial's political overtones were to affect English novel-writing and Jane Austen's art indirectly:"

Since the keynote of Warren Hastings's accusers was their emphasis on morality, ethics and above-board politics and responsibility, and since his defenders cited his probity and ethics, the spirit of the times favoured the 'ethical search'. People *talked* about ethics. And during the seven years of the trial Jane was encouraged to give more and more 'sense', depth and moral point to her own juvenile joke-writing. (Honan 50)

The Whig-Tory clash so central to the Hastings affair was also, according to Honan, evident at Oxford when Jane's brothers were in attendance at St. John's College:

Supporting the King, the clerical fellows at this college were in effect quietly Tory and outwardly unpolitical--they felt that newspapers, political gossip at the coffee houses, lounging, loitering and the reading of novels at Oxford all contributed to a lack of esteem for the Crown and helped focus the minds of students on the cheap, loud hullabaloo of a Whiggish Parliament. (Honan 58)

According to Honan the Austens completely agreed with these sentiments, and Jane herself had strong political opinions: in her view "The Whigs with their emotional rhetoric ... moral ignorance, inelegance and simple belief in the individual's liberty are always ludicrously wrong. The Tory who believes in King, country and a responsible and influential clergy is right" (Honan 58). As evidence

of their opinions, James and Henry, in January 1789, began publication of *The Loiterer* which ran for sixty issues until March 1790. They contributed more than half the essays to the periodical which satirized newspapers, the oafish 'modern Oxford Man,' democratic extremes, and in addition trumpeted Tory views on the revolutions in America and France. In Honan's view *The Loiterer* "was a lively, absorbing school" for Jane at thirteen, and perhaps "because the early stories were about men, and lacked female viewpoints," she appears to have sent James a letter signed 'Sophia Sentiment', which he printed. After deceptively effusing that her "heart beat with joy" when she first read the publication, the writer goes on to say, however, that she thinks it is the "stupidest work of the kind" she ever saw: "not one sentimental story about love and honour ... No love, and no lady." According to Honan, "the surest evidence that Jane Austen wrote this letter is that her brothers soon changed their plan. They wrote less and less about Oxford, and more and more about love and the blisses and torments of marriage-which they knew rather little about" (Honan 60-1).

Not only does material such as this suggest that Austen was indeed more worldly-wise than her previous biographers give her credit for her, but it is also confirmation of a rather precocious adolescence. Jane's 'difference', according to Honan, partly arose from the sisters being educated away from home for a time, but principally from the influence of her father and brothers: "few girls in England had better tutors ... than Jane Austen, and none conceived of higher demands relating to female intelligence, sensibility and awareness" (Honan 79).

The picture that Honan paints is of a woman who at an early age had knowledge of Europe through her cousin, Eliza, and her brothers, James and Edward. Her family was involved with the West and East Indies, the Hastings trial and politics, and she "knew as much literature as any sixteen year old then or since." It is on these grounds that Honan suggests Austen was perceived as "a rather odd fish;" other young people in Hampshire "could resent a girl who seemed too full of Oxford and fancy French ideas" (Honan 79). Similarly, in later life Honan does not allow Austen to withdraw from the world at Chawton which, according to him, is not a sleepy country village, but because of the coincidence of stage coach routes, "near a great current of outward motion." Hampshire does not escape this flurry of activity either; it is of "strategic importance" to the capital and ports, and hence Jane lives "not in rural solitude but at the edge of pulsing activity" (Honan 261).

While the world that Jane Austen inhabited may not have been as secluded as previous biographers had insisted it was, according to Honan it was also perhaps not as secure as they had portrayed it. While the Austens were "country gentry," they "hovered at the gentry's lower fringes." Financial need led to taking the broadest possible view of family, and the net was cast to include cousins, great-aunts, nephews and ancestors. Honan suggests that Mrs. Austen's certainty regarding the value of her aristocratic connections and sense of Leigh ancestry probably made Jane well aware of family, but she also may have felt "the smart of being portionless and a financial burden to others very painfully, in view

of [her] knowledge of much richer, socially distinguished forbears" (Honan 147-8). In the light of the ongoing problem of money, Mr. Austen attempted to substitute education and accomplishments for dowries, but in Honan's view "genteel women, without money, seldom married well and usually dwindled into poorly paid servitude or dependency on relatives if they did not marry at all" (Honan 92). The latter was, in effect, the fate of the Austen women since, after George Austen died in 1805, they were largely dependent on the charity of the brothers. Honan concludes, as well, that probably as early as 1793 Jane Austen "took the slight step of deciding to write for profit" (Honan 93). Although financial reward for her efforts was some time in coming, it was not viewed as an unmixed blessing by her family; according to him, "it might be assumed that their circumstances had obliged her to try to support herself by earning money" (Honan 353). In the same vein he suggests that the memorial text on her grave at Winchester does not mention her fiction, because to do so "might have implied she had to write for profit and that her brothers had failed to support her" (Honan 406).

Although the protection of her family was apparently essential for the creation of Austen's art, Honan points out that she was not recognized by her family as an 'artist'; no one was deemed equal in their eyes to James, the poet. In addition, there was the added problem that fiction was not considered an 'art'. In spite of the fact that the Austens confessed their enjoyment in reading novels, James and Henry had joined in the 1790's debate against them as whiggish and

corrupting. James' attack continued in his later poems and, according to Honan, these declarations ensured that Jane Austen's fictions were not held for more than they "*were*" by her family. In spite of this, however, Honan suggests that it was family who enabled her to write, and the vigilance of the older women protected her; she was "not only shielded by Cassandra and Martha [Lloyd] but actively helped by their critical opinions and at least by Cassandra's willingness to argue over details in a story" (Honan 351). For the women, the admiration of the public confirmed "the rightness and worth of her labours" (Honan 352).

Unlike the early biographers, Honan insists that the composition of the novels was gradual: "though genius is genius, it is not miraculous." He notes, too, that she was especially stimulated by James and Henry and wrote to please them: "a writer is as good as the people he or she tries to please," and in Honan's view, her family gave her incentive to polish, experiment and dare to obtain the finest results. Henry Austen was enthusiastic about the novels; he dealt with his sister's publishers and supported her efforts. To the end, however, James was uneasy about her work; his memorial poem, "Venta", for example, argues that "Jane Austen was lovable despite her fiction:"

But to her family alone
 Her real, genuine worth was known,
 They saw her ready still to share
 The labours of domestic care,
 As if *their* prejudice to shame
 Who, jealous of fair female fame,
 Maintain that literary taste
 In womans mind is much misplaced,
 Inflames their vanity & pride,

And draws from useful work aside.
Such wert thou Sister! (Honan 406)

Since, according to Honan, James approved (if he did not write) the text of the original memorial at Winchester, this attitude is logically another part of the explanation as to why no mention of authorship was made on the tablet.

It is also through this rather difficult and complex brother, James, that Honan explores Jane Austen's personality; he concludes that the troubles in his "shy creative personality" cast light on her own (Honan 232). James' anti-Whig sentiments were exacerbated by the actions of the Whig ministry which attacked and financially crippled his late wife's estate, leaving him under financial pressure and endangering their only daughter's dowry. According to Honan, he made up for his unhappiness by keeping his second wife, Mary Lloyd, "in thrall to his scholarly wit and understanding, and mildly tortured a wife who otherwise dictated to him" (Honan 233).

Previous biographers have pointed out that Jane was consistently irritated by the ill-educated Mary and resented her control over James. It is Honan's view that this was likely only one dimension of a considerably more complicated relationship. In addition, he suggests that Austen "found the tension between James and his second wife interesting, touching and in a way comic," and that she perhaps extracted enough from the relationship to help her create the Bennets of *Pride and Prejudice* (Honan 233).

Honan's attitude to the Austens revolves around the notion that the tensions inherent in family relationships were a significant ingredient of Jane's creative impulse. For example, he suggests that, while she may have looked upon leaving Bath as a welcome 'escape' from polite social discomfort, the Austen women's household with Frank and his wife, Martha, at Southampton was a "claustrophobic menage." In these conditions, "the more dutiful [Jane] tried to be the more her resentment grew;" her comic writing "offered a resolution for her conflicts and the surest way in which she ever set herself right" (Honan 239). Honan explains the early burlesques, for example, as Jane's device to "ensure her freedom within the loving group of Austens, and to reconcile herself to attitudes she did not like without taking positions her family might oppose" (Honan 70). The key point in this argument is that "Jane was to struggle to find methods of reconciliation and to learn her craft slowly under tension" (Honan 94).

In common with Halperin, Honan recognizes a measure of bitterness in Austen, but he does not view her art merely as compensation for disappointment in love. Rather, his Austen experiences a flawed society and takes a chance with her pen "as a means of resolving her disillusionment or bitterness." There is a price to pay for this route, however, and Honan suggests that the decision to write meant that Austen "divorced herself from full human comfort." She lived within her family, but also outside it while she looked for material, and "if her fictive worlds were awkward or did not work out believably her own well-being would be threatened" (Honan 94). In Honan's view there is no 'double Life'

possible for Austen, she is a writer so addicted to her work that:

She would train herself to make whole fictional worlds which, as she grew older, would have to compensate for her edgy, uncomfortable feelings about real people ... The smart, witty remarks of her letters do not always conceal her exasperated, growing frustration with the adult world of Hampshire in wartime--or her wish not simply to ignore what she disliked. She would trust in her pen to preserve her equanimity. (Honan 93-4)

As a young woman Austen needed to impress James and Henry, and she knew they admired elegance and brevity; not surprisingly, the voice she finds to address the public is bright and polished, but Honan concludes that in the long term "so much concern for effect and divorce from spontaneity endangered her resilience, her ability to respond naturally to anything" (Honan 94). This is an analysis in which the relationship between life and art is intimate and the reciprocal influences powerful. The suggested "divorce from spontaneity" also helps provide some understanding of the apparently incompatible giddy 'butterfly' and the formidable 'poker' of the Mitford reports.

Honan's sensitivity to the complexities of the life/art relationship extends into his discussions of what the physical act of writing means to Austen. He builds on the notion of her need for privacy and accepts the legend of the creaking door which announced the arrival of unwelcome intruders. As well, he points out that she wrote on small pieces of paper (ordinary size sheets cut in half); these she apparently prepared with elaborate care, and later held them together with tidy home-stitching. In Honan's view the narrow cramped space "helped her focus upon phrasing and cadence," and the stitching of the parts

together gave her "a sense of her novel coming physically into being" (Honan 352). Earlier in the discussion Honan draws on feminist studies of the role that needlework played in the lives of women of Austen's day, and he suggests the "it was distinctly work that women did and one of the few ways in which their creativity might flourish without being questioned or considered too aggressive, forward or unladylike" (Honan 265). Although it appears to be implicit in his argument, Honan does not, however, explore the possibility of a relationship between novel writing and needlework.

On the subject of Austen's relationships with men, Honan accepts the notion that for women of Austen's day it was important to marry well, and he points to the significance of social class and money as determinants of good marriages for young women. Unlike Halperin, however, he does not view this issue as the central one of Austen's life, but he does acknowledge that:

Fear in the presence of poverty and increasing age ... touched on one of the deepest reasons why Jane so unguardedly had accepted Harris [Bigg Withers] ... Marriage can be a cure for economic insecurity. For herself marriage was not essential, but she had considered it, hoped for it, planned it without a partner in view, and for one night had gambled on it as a fitting choice. Her 'vexing' humiliation told her she had been wrong. (Honan 205)

Honan concludes, also, that Austen had indeed been in love with Thomas Lefroy, and he finds in *Pride and Prejudice* a reference to the effect of that love when Elizabeth reflects that women do not forget men as soon as men forget women: "this is our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us" (Honan 108). Not only did

this love have a lingering effect on Austen but, according to Honan, it taught her the price a woman pays for autonomy, and about the real anguish connected with public display of one's feelings: she "believed in love, but in 1796 might have found it hard to say why she had behaved so abominably, so selfishly and so wilfully in public that her dearest and kindest friend at Ashe had to send her young man away" (Honan 111). As for the mysterious lover of summer 1801, Honan notes that "all accounts derive from Cassandra ... she later told the tale in so many versions that what mainly emerges ... is her own gratified concern with the tragic lover, who showed the best taste by loving very briefly." He suggests, as well, that the suitor's death appealed to Cassandra because she never forgot her own tragic loss of Tom Fowle, but also that there is no reason to believe the event left Jane Austen "mentally paralysed and totally distraught." Fanny Lefroy, "as the most industrious family recorder," says the gentleman's death deepened Jane Austen's bond with her sister; as their mother said, "they were wedded to each other" (Honan 186).

In common with Halperin, Honan believes Austen was in love with the apothecary, Haden. Honan, however, treats the attraction much more lightly than does Halperin, and he suggests that her enjoyment of the world in London was a function of the knowledge that she could retreat from it; she sought society there "while falling (facetiously, quickly and imaginatively) in and out of love well enough" (Honan 365). Honan acknowledges, too, that Austen was "delighted to have Fanny in London to flirt with Mr. Haden, who was clearly losing his mind"

(Honan 368). Whether or not Austen was ever seriously attracted to the apothecary, he was obviously a charming and witty companion, and Honan uses the encounter with him to explore what Austen means when she says she is "in love." He suggests that this is a phrase "very chiefly framed for her sister's benefit ... Life is to be wrung, squeezed fully; if events yield little, imagination must work them up" (Honan 366-7). While Halperin reads the Haden incident in terms of desperation and disappointment, Honan views it as evidence that Austen was ready to 'imagine' a relationship and to love lightly. In the latter analysis, marriage is not the issue, but perhaps sensual pleasure is; Jane enjoys the encounter as much as she revels in the balmy weather: " 'I enjoy it,' she says, 'all over me, from top to toe, from right to left, Longitudinally, Perpendicularly, Diagonally' " (Honan 366).

Honan tackles the issue of Mr. Evelyn, too. Not surprisingly, however, he comes to quite different conclusions than Halperin; he, for example, suggests that the fearsome aspect of the gentleman is related to his reputation as an adulterer. In Honan's view the carriage ride is an incident not worth observing except that it shows how Austen's "quiet independence allowed her to enjoy the company of an interesting man whose adultery was his concern, not hers" (Honan 174). The picture that Honan paints here is quite the opposite of Victorian gentility; he points out that Austen called 'lust' and 'adultery' by their proper names, and in *Mansfield Park* she has Mary Crawford, niece of the adulterous Admiral

Crawford, refer in a casual and vulgar way to the crime of sodomy (Honan 160).⁵

In addition, Honan suggests that what exasperated her about Nelson was not his adultery, but rather:

A craze which elevated him for the populace. If young women admire heroes whatever the heroes do, women are belittled. And the female who is cast as admirer, applauder and mindless adorer loses what little initiative there is available to women in society. (Honan 164)

There is the suggestion here that Austen was becoming increasingly at odds with the role that a changing society allowed for women:

The harmless *Lady's Magazine's* plates were being replaced by suave chic weekly hints about how fragile and classic muslins are to cling to the female form to make it a helpless prize... Genteel men and women were moving, in effect, farther apart, to be weighed for their inherent value on two separate scales. More and more as Jane Austen turned twenty-five, a woman became a fragile thing to admire, an automaton with no really accredited will, and a prize for the successful naval man or industrialist. (Honan 165)

In Honan's view Austen was an advocate of women, but he does not see her as a disciple of radicalism. He emphasises that it is important, however, to understand that "she was quite sophisticated enough to read Whigs and Radicals without fret, to learn from them, to extract brightly what she wished." Her Oxford brothers had prepared her to absorb the styles and leading ideas of writers alien to the Austen's political views, and she lived in "an open, amused,

⁵ In support of Jane's knowledge of the 'unnatural crime', Honan points out that sailors on Frank's ship, the *London*, were lashed for sodomy; he also suggests that "the age of elegance was not squeamish, and degradations of the lower decks were common talk in London." The passage from *Mansfield Park* is the one in which Mary Crawford tells Edmund Bertram that 'Certainly, my home at my uncle's brought me acquainted with a circle of admirals. Of *Rears*, and *Vices*, I saw enough. Now do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat.' (Honan 160).

easy intellectual atmosphere gaily raiding the enemy as she wished." That she had access to this type of material is evidenced by the knowledge that her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Austen,⁶ owned the radical Mary Hays' multi-volume *Female Biography*. It is therefore "not surprising to find echoes of Wollstonecraft and Godwin in *Persuasion*, for example" (Honan 211-12). Somewhat in common with Wollstonecraft, Austen was critical of the sorry state of female education, and Honan suggests that her objections to adultery and divorce were rooted in her view that they struck at women; "she hated the Prince Regent for humiliating his wife with a false charge of adultery, and she kept her animus against betrayers of women and women who let themselves be used" (Honan 343). Honan points out, however, that 'feminist' is an anachronism when used to describe Austen; the expression was not used prior to 1850,⁷ and at any rate the perception that Austen had was something simpler, "the view that since women are just as intelligent as men, every aspect of their status in society is important" (Honan 39).

Whether or not Austen's views on women were as radical as Margaret Kirkham suggests, Honan acknowledges that not for long was she prepared to accept her brothers' views without question. He suggests, for example, that Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* was instrumental in beginning to free Austen from James' and Henry's male viewpoints. He notes that while Richardson says

⁶ Wife of Edward Austen (Knight) and mother of his eleven children.

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed'n, 1989) lists the first printed use of 'feminist' as from the *Daily News* in 1894: "What our Paris correspondent describes as a 'Feminist' group is being formed in the French Chamber of Deputies." (Vol V, 826).

little about economic constraints on women or their lack of legal rights as Wollstonecraft does, he is "at least concerned with the male use of language to keep women subservient, and he makes Harriet complain that women only encourage men to misuse words" (Honan 39).

Honan points out also that, at Christmas 1787, the Austens presented Susannah Centlivre's "sexually overt" comedy, *The Wonder*, in which their enchanting cousin, Eliza acted (and flirted) with Henry and James. In the play Donna Isabella says of women that the custom of her country enslaves them in turn to their fathers, husbands and brothers. James, in response to this, apparently composed an epilogue which was spoken by Eliza:

[Tyrant men] called themselves Creation's mighty Lords,
 But thank our happier stars, those days are o'er;
 And woman holds a second place no more ...
 These men all wise, these Lords of the Creation!
 To our superior rule themselves submit,
 Slaves to our charms, and vassals to our wit.

Honan wonders, though, if the girls believed that it was true that "woman holds a second place no more" (Honan 52). At the very least, he suggests, her brothers' silly flirting with Eliza had shown Jane that they were not paragons. Still, however, according to Honan, she recognized that men have adventures while women are interruptible people, whose lives are often disappointingly anticlimactic. What Honan does not do is connect James' epilogue to the "feminist controversy" that Margaret Kirkham suggests was at its height during these years. If, as Honan insists, the Tory Austens were not sympathetic with the

radical ideas of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, then to state the issue of women's equality in this way had ironic intent, a defensive edge, or was perhaps merely an amusing way of 'throwing down the gauntlet' to women in the audience.

Whatever the case, for an Oxford man to compose this statement in 1797 was likely not a politically neutral act.

Austen's awareness of the deficiencies in the world of women apparently did not prevent her from clinging to her family. Because of this attachment, Honan concludes she had neither the need nor the desire to meet novelists, and "the high patronage needed by her brothers had no parallel in her requirements ... it is implicit but clear in many of her letters that she viewed herself as a person dependent on her family's approval not of her stories but of herself, and of no consequence without them." In Honan's view she understood that "she could not *be* Frank, or offend James with pretensions, and she was properly less than Cassandra" (Honan 184). Her modesty meant that family and Cassandra became a human screen behind which Austen chose to live, sheltered and protected. Honan suggests that, while she apparently yearned for intimate friends, she took a certain satisfaction in her own moods and feared the pressure of human contacts: "I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal" (Honan 126).

In spite of her attachment to family, Austen did have a few friends outside their immediate circle. Alethea Bigg, for example, and Mrs. Lefroy, twenty-six years older than Jane, who saw in her "a kindred spirit, a person of deep and

excitable feeling ... At Ashe rectory a girl was not brushed aside; she was urged to feel, reflect, probe into human affairs without fear of being gauche, silly or puerile" (Honan 40-1). This world of women that Honan describes around Austen is very much a society unto itself, and while he is primarily concerned with this as an enabling element in the creation of Austen's art, only in passing does he allude to the complexities of female friendship. Martha Lloyd, for example, who lived with the Austen women for years,⁸ is merely described as devoutly Christian and having a gentle temper which "had the asset of letting people near her live their own lives, by allowing silence and self-possession in a household" (Honan 250-1). The implications of 'silence' and privacy are not discussed, although Honan does mention Jane Austen's attachment to her friend:

[She] enjoyed watching Martha's elegant form and movements and did not praise her gracefulness to Cassandra idly, so that there was no more than a slight trace of guilt in her joy over Martha's person ... Observers from a harder age might see lesbianism in Jane Austen's delight in her friend, but it seems too fierce to attach labels to the mass of persons who can find both sexes attractive. (Twentieth-century sexual categories are too crude to be of much use in understanding male or female friendships in Jane Austen's day--and perhaps in our day too.) (Honan 251)

Other biographers before Honan have noted the closeness of female friendships in the Austen household, but none has as openly raised the issue of homosexuality. The discussion begins and ends with these comments, however; Honan does not explore the broader, general issue of the nature of female friendship, and the implications of this for the life that went on behind the

⁸ Martha also later in life became Frank's second wife.

'screen' of family protection.

While it is clear that Honan is sensitive to the relationships between Austen and her brothers, he appears to be less interested in the nature of her interactions with women, even though he does credit 'pump-handle' stubborn Mrs. Austen with playing a significant role in the family solidarity that sheltered Jane. In spite of their often uneasy relationship, Honan suggests that Mrs. Austen, "who disliked 'blind fondness' and was not shrivelled up with gratitude, not silly or self-indulgent," acted as "a prod, a gossip, a fellow spy, and with security at home [Jane was] free to avoid what was tame, bland, expected, false, ladylike. Her mother's hard, unsentimental clarity and Cassandra's common sense ... lighted her way." When he discusses the importance of Cassandra, Honan suggests, "Jane had deliberately used and flattered her, learned from her and pried into her mind and nearly monopolized her heart." Of the mother and sister Honan notes Jane "had not defied *them*, but gathered them in, 'thankful for praise, open to remark, and submissive to criticism'" (Honan 402).

These assessments come in the final pages of the biography, but throughout Honan devotes considerably less ink to the activities of the mother and sister than he does to those of the brothers. The tone is set at the outset, when we are introduced to Jane's world through the account of Frank's naval experiences. Although Honan's treatment of Jane Austen aims to explain the genteel stereotype, and at times to separate her from the opinions of her brothers, we still see her always in the context of male values and a male world.

For example, when he discusses Austen and the war, Honan suggests that she wrote her best work during this period. He notes also that her perception that England was "fighting a just cause against French pretensions and viciousness did not lessen the rigour of her thinking. She portrayed the war from a woman's viewpoint, but she was conscious of the male view" (Honan 187-8). Although other interpretations are possible, at first reading this appears as an alignment of intellectual rigour with the 'male view'. Similarly, Honan's observation that Jane always viewed James and Henry as her "first audience" and his conclusion that "a writer is as good as the people he or she tries to please," suggest that to match the standard set by her brothers is high achievement for Austen. Although Honan emphasizes the importance of women as audience and protectors for Jane, they are invisible when it comes to discussion of the quality of her work.

This emphasis on the male standard creates a situation in which Honan, like earlier biographers, provides Austen with vicarious worldly experience in order to establish her credentials as 'author'. As well, the emphasis on her being hidden behind a screen of women and family reinforces the notion of domesticity as the timeless serene vacuum invented by the family biographers. Paradoxically, however, this oasis exists in a society which Honan describes as one in chaotic transition, one in which economic and social confusions were abetted by war. He notes that from Godmersham in Kent Austen has "a serene, firm perch from which to judge an odd moment in English social life when the new acquisitive, bourgeois society in England was challenging an old agrarian society depending

on inherited titles and family names" (Honan 132). While this description of the times provides a vivid context for the life, Jane Austen is always characteristically 'at the edge of' or 'near' significant events, never involved in them. This is not surprising since Honan describes women's lives of the time as 'interruptible', and 'anticlimactic'; the implicit comparison is always to male lives which are purposeful and adventurous.

While Honan raises the relevant issues of female friendship and women's work, because he does not explore them in any detail, the weight of the argument rests on Austen's relationships with the male world. This is clear in his discussion of the relationship between Austen's submissiveness and her dependency:

If she was ever quite so 'submissive' as Henry thought, she had learned this from her dependency--that no one is self-sufficient, and so our behaviour with those close to us and the influence a woman may exert in her relationships is a prime field for realistic fiction. The influence of women in every aspect of society is implicit in Jane Austen's focus on a small arena in her domestic comedies of manners; she had been artful, for example, in showing how a woman may lead a man from ill-conceived, false or mistaken behaviour into better judgement and a more sensitive relationship. (Honan 402-3)

Women's influence is allowed "in every aspect of society," but appears to have significance for Honan mainly as it relates to male behaviour.

The one specifically female activity that Honan directs his attention to is stitchery. He acknowledges it, in passing, as a creative outlet, but he does not explore the possible connection between this handiwork and women's production of novels. In Austen's case the two activities are quite clearly analogous: both take place almost exclusively in the company of women, and both involve

meticulous handiwork. More importantly, however, the writing in this instance is polished to the degree that, like stitchery, it is not considered "too aggressive, forward or unladylike." Since in the nineteenth-century biographies of Austen, novel writing was made conventional and respectable by describing it as a physical effort akin to stitchery, a feminist analysis might conclude that, in the context of the same patriarchal society, both these occupations are subversive acts. Early in the biography Honan raises the issue that disagreement with her brothers was a potential problem for Jane; could a loyal sister deny that they saw life clearly after all, and if she did disagree how far could she count on them having respect for her (Honan 65)? If novel writing and stitchery are connected as a means of reconciling such conflicts as these in a creative act, then 'author' begins the move away from being defined in strictly male terms; because Honan does not pursue issues of this nature, this end is not accomplished. For all his sympathy with Austen, the nod to stitchery here is symptomatic of a perspective which tends to promote the 'disappearance' of the woman writer behind the screen of her family. We now suspect she may be there, but she remains hidden in an unexplored world.

Taken together, the biographies of Halperin and Honan demonstrate the persistence of the entrenched notions about Jane Austen's sweet, self-sacrificing nature and her innocence of worldly affairs. Each life sets out to revise

established opinion, but neither produces a figure which convincingly banishes the modest feminine stereotype; oddly, the energetic efforts of both biographers appear more to reinforce these ideas than to dispel them. The obstacle for both biographers appears to be their acceptance of the world of fathers, brothers and husbands as the norm. Halperin does this overtly when he assumes that Austen was a frustrated and cantankerous woman who wrote out of a persistent disappointment at not having a husband. In this analysis women are relevant only in terms of their relationships to men. Halperin views the unmarried state as the supreme disadvantage, in his view for Austen to be husbandless branded her as a non-person; therein lies the anger at her lot in life which he concludes is the motivating force behind her art.

Honan is much more sympathetic to Austen, but he too is at great pains to explain her art as the product of social tension. In his analysis, however, marriage is not the central issue, but family is; the necessity for Austen to express and to resolve opinions which conflicted with those of her brothers, led her to produce an art which was highly polished. This effort at art turns Austen into a detached observer who buys this privilege at the price of the inability to interact emotionally with others. While his Austen is a nicer woman than that created by Halperin, both are incapable of love, and in both cases this disability is connected with the production of art. As well, in spite of his efforts to humanize her, Honan still tends to describe Austen in terms which are almost exclusively male centred; for example, as a woman intimately aware of the conditions of war and

politics. While this interest is not unreasonable, given the society in which Austen lived, when a biographer of the nineteen-eighties does not question the criteria which make this effort to prove worldliness a continuing necessity, he implies acceptance of a notion of 'author' which is also subscribed to by Halperin, and which is stereotypically male. Within this framework, the female author's ignorance of the 'real' world is disproven by displaying the knowledge and experience of the men with whom she comes in contact. In Honan's analysis, even though he acknowledges the influence of women, Austen the artist is formed by her interaction with the important men in her life; in Halperin's she is the miserable creation of the condition of lacking a man. By emphasis and by omission these conclusions erase the influence of the domestic world as a legitimate force in the creation of Austen's art.

CONCLUSION

The number and variety of the lives written of Jane Austen confirm her enduring popularity as a literary figure, but they are also a comment on the stylish winds that perpetually fan the biographical flame. Self-aggrandizement is seldom out of fashion, and Austen family accounts of their relative have, from the beginning, concerned themselves with reinforcing the gentility of their famous relative's genius. Although the non-family biographers have less obvious self-interest, their general infatuation with their subject most often has been at odds with a critical approach. This, coupled with the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for biography as a 'good example', and the reading of Austen's works as polite confirmations of decency and good taste meant that her reputation became frozen into the "cultural shibboleth" that B.C. Southam suggests it was in the latter nineteenth-century. Absolute perfection thereafter gradually lost its appeal and by the turn of the century Austen was beginning to be allowed some minor imperfections in order to make her 'interesting'. As well, there was growing concern with reconciling the art with the life; in the light of modern psychology, 'genius' and 'accident' became inadequate explanations of art, and biographers adopted notions of a 'double life' in which Austen functioned on two planes, the humdrum and the creative. The fashion, however, which has been most persistent in the biographies of Austen has been the explanation of art in terms of procreation. Her unmarried state is seen as enabling her to write, and in this

construct the novels are her 'children' and she is 'wedded' to her sister, Cassandra.

While most biographers at least attempt to supply a social and political context for Austen, styles in this change as well. James Edward, for example, takes the Victorian position of charting the route of social progress from his aunt's time to his own. In this he seeks to explain away or excuse that which is coarse or *risqué* in Austen. He resurrects her as a model of Victorian womanhood and emphasizes the gentility of the family in times that he perceives as less 'civilized' than his own. Almost seventy years later Elizabeth Jenkins describes Austen's era as one in which uncompromising elegance and good taste jostle with misery and squalor. She also contrasts the present industrial city unfavourably with its eighteenth-century predecessor and, like James Edward, she is nostalgic for Austen's time; he pines for the lost virtues of simple country life, she (in common with David Cecil) for the "spirit of beauty which has vanished from the earth" (Jenkins 7). While these earlier uses of historical and social context all contain the element of longing for a lost and better past, Park Honan's most recent contribution generally lacks this emotional ingredient. He describes the Regency period and the Napoleonic wars, for example, in some detail in order to show their influence on Austen's novels. The effort with the Regency is the more successful of the two, presumably because there is no brother involved as intermediary; Jane herself *lives* the times as well as observing them.

Aside from the necessity of establishing context, the varying degrees of the

biographers' nostalgic preoccupation with the eighteenth-century directly affect their renditions of the life. Their enchantment with Austen leads to the desire to portray her age as golden, and their perception of lost times as idyllic presumes an ideal subject to inhabit them. The popularity of the 'life and times' mode of rendering the life of an author is the most obvious manifestation of this. The unexamined conviction that the domestic world of the Austens was a latter-day Eden also tends to reinforce perceptions of a golden age. While from the nineteen-thirties biographers acknowledged that Austen's life was not free of tension, the tendency has been to describe these almost totally as internal and intellectual. Frictions with Aunt Perrot and James' wife, Mary, for example, are read as minor irritations, and the enforced closeness and frequent lack of privacy and independence in the living conditions of the Austen women are not considered as stressful. This is one area in which fashion has altered little, and perhaps partly because of the perceived difficulty in reconstructing the conditions of domestic life, this experience tends to be discounted as formative for the artist. Given this, biographers, by implication if not by design, are at great pains to provide Austen with the knowledge of war and politics which is deemed essential to the making of the artist.

In spite of changes in biographical 'fashion', that creature of perfection, the feminine author, remains firmly seated atop the accounts of the life. Because of family protection, and perhaps because her politeness and conformity were the dominant features of her first wave of popularity in the eighteen-sixties, Austen

came into the twentieth-century with a Victorian reputation as unblemished as it was bland. She had become, in fact, a literary icon which was overwhelmingly genteel and which convincingly demonstrated that the feminine ideal could produce great art, albeit in its own narrow sphere. In the nineteen-thirties, for example, David Rhydderch railed against the brashness of his female contemporaries and held Austen up to them as the exemplar of a world in which 'women were women'. Even the most progressive of biographers innocently falls prey to the icon on occasion. Park Honan, for example, in commenting on Frank Austen's late in life reaction to "the too bold manners of American women," says that "perhaps anyone raised with Jane was unlikely to find the feminine ideal in upstate New York" (Honan 295). While clearly there are ironic overtones to this statement, the connection is still all too readily made between Austen and this persistent "feminine ideal."

There is also a sinister aspect to the existence of this icon. Honan, for example, points out that the key to Austen's survival in the family was her learned subservience, and it is also apparent from the above that this is the basis of the feminine model. When Honan describes this behaviour as a vital ingredient in the screen which protected Austen from the world outside, he overlooks the potentially aggressive nature of submissiveness, and in so doing simply adds a more contemporary flavour to the explanation of the Victorian 'Aunt'. In this, the fashion in Austen biography is slow to change, and the symbol of perfection still tends to so distance Austen from the world that she is rendered

incapable of significant interaction with it.

While the persistence of the myth may have served to dampen the curiosity of biographers, literary critics were not always so optimistic about the nature of Jane Austen. In spite of the fact that many biographers were critics, the most incisive criticism was not reflected in the biographies. This lack of influence occurred in spite of the fact that it was the 1870 *Memoir* which awakened public interest in her; up until then her reputation had been largely a private one among literary persons. When the *Memoir* was extensively reviewed, Austen's novels were widely written about and her perfection was quickly challenged. Prior to the publication, for example, Julia Kavanagh had rejected notions of her sweet simplicity, and in 1870 Margaret Oliphant pointed to the disappointment and cynicism she found in the novels. While the latter praised Austen's art, she also suggested that "it was just as if 'The family were half-ashamed to have it known that she was not just a young lady like the others, doing her embroidery'."¹ Supporters of the genteel Austen countered vehemently that she taught homely womanly virtue and her novels were an antidote to the unwholesomeness of modern life. The patronizing note was never far from the surface of much of what was written, and Goldwin Smith's 'Wonderful little woman' is characteristic of that praise. In spite of voices to the contrary, however, the eulogistic model held sway in criticism and in biography up to the

¹ B.C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* Vol.II (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 5.

end of the century.

Twentieth-century critics have not been idle, and they go somewhat further than their predecessors to construct two extreme images of Jane Austen with "a young lady of 'tearing high spirits' and a 'temper that needed no control' at one side and the absolutely dark and angry figure ... at the other" (Honan 414). D.W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick, for example, portray her as a woman who was consistently hostile to society,² and W.H. Auden is shocked by her frank discussions of the amorous effects of 'brass'. In common with Victorian feminists who found a kindred spirit in Austen, Rebecca West's 1932 reconstruction of the failure of the first purchaser of *Northanger Abbey* to publish it emphasizes feminism in the novel: "it declares that the position of woman as society dictated it was humiliating, dangerous, and founded on lying propositions."³ In this century critics have variously 'loved' Jane Austen, found her to be the "feminine Peter Pan of letters," or been offended that a mere "slip of a girl" has merited so much praise.⁴ While, as Basil Southam points out, the critical enterprise became more professional after Mary Lascelles' *Jane Austen and Her Art* (1939), it is apparent that from 1870 to the present, opinion has been divided on Austen, and the variety of critical assessments of her abilities date back to this time.

² D.W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred," *Scrutiny* 7 (March 1940) 346-62. Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as defense and discovery* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952).

³ Rebecca West, Preface, *Northanger Abbey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) in B.C. Southam, ed. *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 295.

⁴ Southam, *The Critical Heritage* Vol.II, 101,105.

As if fashion in this were cyclical, these views have perennially been swamped by waves of adulation, and as each one appears it is greeted as having no antecedents. In reaction to the emphasis on Austen's liberality, Marilyn Butler in the nineteen-seventies, for example, called for a re-examination of Austen's reputation as the heir of Richardson's psychological novel, and suggested that she is in fact a deeply conservative author who defends the ethical side of the mind as opposed to the intuitive.⁵ Most recently feminist critics have attempted to moderate the image of the genteel Austen: Margaret Kirkham portrays her as an enlightenment feminist, and Mary Evans concludes that the presumption of her association with conservatism misinterprets the central themes of her fiction. In this latter version Austen writes from a position of insecurity, and her opposition to the "equation of moral worth with wealth, and to the extension of patriarchal authority" represent a liberal tradition, not a conservative one.⁶ Concurrent with this stream of criticism are the contemporary 'Janeites', who do not find Austen faultless, but for whom appreciation of her is frequently the test of literary 'taste'; as Virginia Woolf warned in 1924, a slight on her genius is still resented as "an insult offered to the chastity of their aunts."⁷

Given the continuing variety of critical opinion on Austen, it is not surprising that there is no obvious one-to-one correspondence between biography

⁵ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁶ Mary Evans, *Jane Austen and the State* (London: Tavistock, 1987) 2-4.

⁷ Southam, *The Critical Heritage* Vol.II, 104.

and criticism; this does not suggest, however, that biographers have been entirely unresponsive to what literary critics were saying. With the exception of Halperin, they are generally entranced by their subject, and they consistently react to unfavourable opinion of Austen by defending her against the charges of narrowness, inexperience and nastiness. In addition, the most recent biographers are eager to mine literary critics for arguments to bolster their own views of Austen. Halperin cites Mudrick and Harding on her nastiness, and Honan, among others, proves her worldliness by using V.S. Pritchett to prove she was a war novelist. In spite of this current activity, biographers were generally slow to respond to the complexities that conscientious critics found in Austen, and not until Mary Lascelles in 1939, were they apparently interested in presenting their subject as a writer, rather than an exemplary woman. Also, perhaps because biographical criticism was the operative method and the emphasis on Austen's genius lay in her ability to delineate character, they most often took the route of reading the novels in varying degrees as autobiographical; hence they did little more than equate her with the heroines in the novels. When this enterprise was coupled with an emphasis on the novels as handbooks of female virtue, there was no Austen possible but the saintly aunt. While it was quite common for Austen to be compared to Shakespeare for her ability to delineate character, the social purpose assigned to the novels at the end of the nineteenth-century confined both the writer and her art to the limited compass of the domestic sphere.

Partly because of this perceived withdrawal from the world, one of the

constant problems that biographers have with Austen is that her life apparently lacked 'event'. This is clearly a practical dilemma in terms of writing a readable life, but more importantly it reflects the attitude that demonstrable life experience not only defines the individual, but it is essential to an 'author'. Even when invention is deemed legitimate in art, there is still the situation in which writing is viewed as an overflow from life,⁸ and hence where there is no visible 'life' there can be no art. This necessary dependence between life and art put women at a distinct disadvantage in an age like Austen's, when they were advised to acquire knowledge indirectly in order to protect their virtue. As a result, women authors were conditioned to speak of their authorial experience as somehow detached from themselves. Catherine Maria Sedgewick (1835), for example, described it as "accidental, extraneous and independent of my inner self," and Mary Shelley, years later, said of *Frankenstein*: "it will be confined to such topics as have connection with my authorship alone, I can scarcely accuse myself of a personal intrusion."⁹ Very recently, too, David Cecil describes Austen's desire for anonymity as "a testimony of her sense of her art as something apart from her private self" (Cecil 9).

This detachment of the 'author' from herself raises the question of the relevance of the notion of a coherent individual subject when it comes to the lives of women writers. Feminist critics, for example, point out that our culture

⁸ Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (New York: Taplinger, 1984) 23.

⁹ Poovey 40.

constitutes women as objects rather than subjects and, in a discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, Patricia Waugh takes the argument further and suggests that those marginalized in society by gender, race or class have never experienced a sense of full subjectivity. Instead, long before post-structuralists and post-modernists assembled their cases, the self-concept of these groups was constructed through impersonal and social relations of power, rather than it being a reflection of an inner 'essence'.¹⁰ According to Waugh this process is often evident in women's writing where there is no concerted urge to define an isolated individual ego, but there is instead an attempt to "discover a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity in relationships."¹¹ This line of argument helps clarify some of the difficulties inherent in the practice of writing biographies of women.

One of the basic premises of the writing of lives is that biographers (both male and female) seek to render the inner 'essences' of their subjects. Coupled with this is the notion that one's actions in the world are a reflection of one's inner being. When one tries to fit a woman writer into this mold, there are instant difficulties. The biographer is searching for an individual 'essence' which unlocks the subject's existence, but this concept conceivably is alien to the way in which the subject of the life understood herself.

In the case of Jane Austen, most biographers begin this process by

¹⁰ Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989) 3.

¹¹ Waugh 10.

pointing out the nature of the relationship between Austen and her brothers; only Park Honan, however, discusses the ways in which she sought to portray herself in order to be acceptable to them. Because the corresponding relationships among the women in the household are dealt with mainly in their protective dimension, the dominant models to which Austen aspires to conform are not female. She cannot *become* her brothers, but because she learns her art divorced from the influence of women, the individual feminine 'essence' that biographers discover is one that is constructed on a male model.

The difficulty inherent in writing the life of Jane Austen, or of any other woman writer, lies not only in coming to terms with this issue of individuality, but also in the condition of a society which has an absence of institutions that link the private and the public spheres.¹² Thus by definition domestic relationships remain separate and while they provide no institutional opportunities for power, women traditionally are granted control in this, their own proper sphere. Although most, if not all, of the biographers subscribe to the notion that Austen lived in this milieu and that it was a restrictive environment, none of them seriously considers the possibility of her art as an assertion of the power denied her in daily existence. Nor do they suggest that the women in her life were more than peripherally influential in the creative process. This avoidance of the whole realm of female experience lies partly in the life writers'

¹² In this section I am indebted in part to Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) and to Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as style in the Worlds of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

perceptions of its insignificance as a formative influence, and partly in its apparent impermeability to investigation and discussion. Female biographers have, for obvious reasons, some insight into the condition of the woman writer, but like their male counterparts they too resort to metaphors like the 'double life' to circumvent the problem. This only compounds it, and further legitimizes the split between worlds respectively defined as active and procreative. Ultimately under these conditions, Austen is seen to write, but she no longer 'feels'. Thus in the present as in the past the domestic world remains 'invisible' and consequently the 'individual essence' of the woman author is elusive or non-existent.

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