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“Merit beyond any already published”:
Austen and Authorship in the Romantic Age

Rebecca Lee Jensen Ogden

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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Austen and Authorship in the Romantic Age

Rebecca Lee Jensen Ogden

Department of English

Master of Arts

In recent decades there have been many attempts to pull Austen into the fold of high Romantic literature. On one level, these thematic comparisons are useful, for Austen has long been anachronistically treated as separate from the Romantic tradition. In the past, her writings have essentially straddled Romantic classification, labeled either as hangers-on in the satiric eighteenth-century literary tradition or as early artifacts of a kind of proto-Victorianism. To a large extent, scholars have described Austen as a writer departing from, rather than embracing, the literary trends of the Romantic era. Yet, while recent publications depicting a “Romantic Austen” yield impressive insights into the timeliness of her fiction, they haven’t fully addressed Austen’s participation in some of the most crucial literary debates of her time.

Thus, it is my intention in this essay to extend the discussion of Austen as a Romantic to her participation in Romantic-era debates over emergent literary categories of authorship and realism. I argue that we can best contextualize Austen by examining how her model of authorship differs from those that surfaced in literary conversations of the time, particularly those relating to the high Romantic myth of the solitary genius. Likewise, as questions of solitary authorship often overlap with discussions of realism and romance in literature, it is important to reexamine how Austen responds to these categories, particularly in the context of a strictly Romantic engagement with these terms. I find that, though Austen’s writing has long been implicated in the emergence of realism in literature, little has been written to link this impulse to the earlier emergence of Romantic-era categories of authorship and literary creativity. I contend that Austen’s self-projection (as both an author and realist) engages with Romantic-era literary debates over these categories; likewise, I argue that her response to these emergent concerns is more complex and nuanced than has heretofore been accounted for in literary scholarship.

Keywords: Jane Austen, authorship, communal Romanticism, eighteenth century, John Keats, letters, Lord George Byron, Northanger Abbey, novels, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Persuasion, poetry, realism, Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth

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Introduction

On a “nasty day” in early March 1814, Jane Austen began a letter to her sister, Cassandra, apologetically: “Do not be angry with me for beginning another letter to you,” she writes, “I have read the ‘*Corsair*,’ mended my petticoat, and have nothing else to do” (257). Besides her obvious boredom (and the perhaps telling brevity of her passing reference), Austen gives us little insight into her opinion of Byron’s poem. Her assessment of Scott’s *Marmion* is likewise fairly nondescript. In a letter to Cassandra in 1808, she writes: “Ought I to be very much pleased with ‘*Marmion*’? As yet I am not” (197). Of Scott, she goes on to say in 1815, “I do not like him, and do not mean to like ‘*Waverley*’ if I can help it, but fear I must” (277).

Austen’s ambivalence here is as puzzling as it is witty. For some time scholars have struggled to define Austen’s relationship to her contemporaries. And though many have noted the extensive literary allusiveness in her writing, including references to writers now studied as participants in high Romantic creativity (see Murphy), we still have no straightforward commentary from Austen herself regarding whether or how these works influenced her literary philosophies and writing.

Nevertheless, in recent decades there have been many attempts to pull Austen into the fold of high Romantic literature. In *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse*, for instance, Clifford Siskin argues that Austen’s novels explore new modes of self-perception similar to those found in Wordsworth’s poetry (13). More recently, Beth Lau defended the “solitary genius” model in her attempts to depict a “Romantic Austen,” an Austen that, like Romantic poets of her time, “celebrates solitude and individualism” (255).¹ Lau’s work falls on the heels of publications by

¹ Lau particularly sets herself against Victorian Austenites, who often saw Austen’s writing as a celebration of sociability. Richard Simpson, for instance, wrote in 1870 that, in Austen’s novels,

William Galperin, Clara Tuite, Nina Auerbach and William Deresiewicz – all of which argue Austen’s place in the Romantic canon. These scholars often base their discussion on the many thematic similarities between her six novels and the works of her male Romantic contemporaries. These similarities include Austen’s exploration of solitude and individualism, her apparent appreciation for nature, her depictions of intense human emotion, and even her references to incest and perversely prolonged human mourning.²

On one level, these thematic comparisons are useful, for Austen has long been anachronistically treated as separate from the Romantic tradition. In the past, her writings have essentially straddled Romantic classification, labeled either as hangers-on in the satiric eighteenth-century literary tradition or as early artifacts of a kind of proto-Victorianism. To a large extent, scholars have described Austen as a writer departing from, rather than embracing, the literary trends of the Romantic era. Yet, while recent publications depicting a “Romantic Austen” yield impressive insights into the timeliness of her fiction, they haven’t fully addressed Austen’s participation in some of the most crucial literary debates of her time.

Thus, it is my intention in this essay to extend the discussion of Austen as a Romantic to her participation in Romantic-era debates over emergent literary categories of authorship and realism. I argue that we can best contextualize Austen by examining how her model of authorship differs from those that surfaced in literary conversations of the time, particularly those relating to the high Romantic myth of the solitary genius. Likewise, as questions of solitary authorship often overlap with discussions of realism and romance in literature, it is important to

“man is a social being, and [...] apart from society there is not even the individual” (qtd. in Lau 255).

² These are references which, according to Lau and Deresiewicz, link Austen to Byron and Scott.

reexamine how Austen responds to these categories, particularly in the context of a strictly Romantic engagement with these terms. I find that, though Austen's writing has long been implicated in the emergence of realism in literature, little has been written to link this impulse to the earlier emergence of Romantic-era categories of authorship and literary creativity. Like Deresiewicz, I have little interest in "scoring [Austen's] novels ... against some checklist of Romantic attributes" (4), yet I contend that Austen's self-projection (as both an author and realist) engages with Romantic-era literary debates over these categories; likewise, I argue that her response to these emergent concerns is more complex and nuanced than has heretofore been accounted for in literary scholarship.

Authorship and the Literary Factory

Though the nature of authorship was widely debated well before Austen's time, the emergence of print culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forced a crisis of definition for readers and writers alike. During this crucial moment in the evolution of the category of authorship, the reading public underwent drastic changes throughout much of Western Europe. As Alvin Kernan explains, print technology made books available to a wide audience of literary consumers, giving the reading public more say in the types of publications available to them (4). This, in turn, motivated writers to respond to the literary demands of the reading public rather than rely on the support of wealthy, aristocratic patrons (5). To the cultural elite, this implicit economic shift was a mark of the dissolving artistic ethos in the literary sphere: literary production went from a trusted system of aristocratically-approved patronage to a commercial model that largely resembled the tradesmanship practiced by the lower classes.

As print technology became increasingly available, established writers turned their critical poniards on the new "Grub-street race" of literary mercenaries (Pope, "The

Dunciad,” line 44). Kernan describes the experience of the writer-for-hire as that of a worker in a “literary factory” where, as novelist Elvin Reardon lamented, the writer earns his keep by “ticking off his stipulated quantum of manuscript each four and twenty hours” (299). These “hack” writers, Alexander Pope warned, were “monstrously dangerous to letters and to all civilized society” (qtd. in Kernan 11). Up until the late eighteenth century, and even beyond, much of literary criticism portrayed “the relentless democratization of literature” as a sign of its “increasing [...] degeneracy” (Beal qtd. in Bennett 46). In his 1790 work “A Defence of Poetry,” Isaac D’Israeli disparages the new poet’s “mere lust of gold” and calls out to all “congenial souls” to “raise / The Poet’s dignity” by choosing to write for some nobler motive than money (lines 234-41).

Wordsworth continued the motion, opposing the so-called “flimsy and shallow writers [...] who find literature, at this day, an employment attended with pecuniary gain” (113, 150). Instead, he insisted that his writing was categorically different from the productions of Grub Street. Most famously, his “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1800) takes up the debate surrounding the evolving social role of the author. This new role, Wordsworth argues, is dictated more by a refined poetic soul than by patronage or classical training. In the “Preface” he writes that the poet “is a man [...] endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (339). In Wordsworth’s authorial model, the poet is born a unique species of man—as Kernan puts it, “a visionary selected for his sacred task by unseen mighty powers,” one whose writing “originates in [...] imagination, genius, [and] sensitivity” and thereby “resists the crudity of machinery [and] money” (288, 284-85). By linking the poet’s

literary production to an inimitable inner genius, Wordsworth attempts to make his own model of authorship not only professionally respectable, but aesthetically authoritative as well.

Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," written in 1821, reiterates many of Wordsworth's assertions about the true nature of the poet's soul. His model echoes Wordsworth's poet "endued with more lively sensibility," as he argues that "those in whom [aesthetic taste] exists in excess are poets" (839). Taste, or a refined perception of the true and beautiful, separates the true poet from the self-taught hack writers of Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, who have "just enough of learning to misquote" (line 66). Lest readers think such potent taste can be cultivated, Shelley turns to a new model of authorial creation. The composition process, he argues, is one of discovery and expression, not mere formal or thematic imitation:

A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure [...] I appeal to the greatest Poets of the present day, whether it be not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study. (846)

Essentially, the "work" of the poet is "no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments" (846). Shelley claims, "the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process" (847). A poet's right to wield this unique imaginative power comes not from fulfilling the writer's daily quota, but from the inexplicable, random moments of refined perceptibility available to poets

alone. Part of the poet's unique *auctoritas* lies in its mysterious and spontaneous unpredictability. As Keats asserted in 1818, if poetry "comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all" (*Letters* 66). This meant that the "work" of the poet little resembled actual labor, but instead was more fitting for members of a leisurely aristocratic class.

Thus, Romantic poets often found themselves necessarily defending their right to inhabit the authorial sphere. They had to negotiate the supposedly corruptive influence of pecuniary gain as they sought to legitimate new aesthetic ideas amidst a literary scene marked by "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (Wordsworth 395). It is obvious that, to the Romantics, an essential component of authorial work is to set oneself apart from the writing world at large, to forge a new inimitable poetic consciousness.

As seen both in Shelley and Wordsworth, perhaps the most ascendant ideology of authorship during the Romantic age was what we now call the "myth of solitary genius" (Stillinger vi). This myth, as Andrew Bennett observes, locates itself "at the centre of the literary institution by insisting on the immediacy and spontaneity of poetic creation," articulating an innate and mysterious poetic perceptibility that defies explanation (62). Like fretful Romantic discussions about hack writers, this discourse had roots in the eighteenth century. As Mark Rose points out, the English copyright act of 1709 initiated a significant "change in the conception of authorship from a sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century emphasis on what the poet does towards a clearer sense of the author as owning a certain property" (qtd. in Bennett 50-51). Because authors had to prove their own originality in order to profit from their works (that is, to establish copyright), a new authorial rhetoric arose to defend the process of literary creation as individually distinctive. Truly authoritative acts of creativity were characterized by their

originality and by the unique, individual genius that followed such personal and intimate bursts of inspiration. As Jeffrey Cox reflects, this solitary genius model has long inspired scholarly work on Romantic-era authorship. “Creation in isolation,” he writes, “with only nature’s song for company, with ‘poetic feeling’ as the lyric’s content, and with no concern about an audience [...] *this is the model of Romantic creativity as exploration of unique subjectivity I was taught*” (329-30, emphasis added).

Yet, however invested Romantic-era poets and succeeding generations of literary critics may have been in notions of solitary genius and spontaneous composition, not all writers of the period subscribed to this model. Indeed, recent scholarship challenges the traditional study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century authorship as one “clearly organized around individual writers, unique geniuses creating fiercely *independent* poetry” (Cox 329, emphasis added). Scholars like Cox, Paul Magnuson, Jack Stillinger, and others have shown that Romantic-era creation was often more the product of artistic collaboration than of intense, isolated navel-gazing.

Stillinger’s *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (1991) highlights various works which, up until recently, have been solely attributed to individual authors. Stillinger gives Keats as an early example of a more collaborative mode of composition, noting that “*Isabella*” might more accurately be attributed to “Keats and his helpers” than to Keats alone (26). He cites Richard Woodhouse, a legal and literary adviser to Keats’ publishers as one who made substantial edits and suggestions to improve Keats’ *Isabella* manuscripts, taking great care to “correct and smooth” Keats’ apparently untidy versification (32). This editing, Stillinger argues, was largely a reaction to the many caustic reviews of Keats’ earlier works cropping up in *Blackwood’s* and other literary publications of the time (J.G. Lockhart calls Keats’ poetry

“Cockney rhymes,” full of “loose, nerveless versification”) (32-33). The changes made by Woodhouse and others reflect an almost phobic consideration of literary critique; the most minor substitutions (“olive trees” in place of “forest trees,” for example) appear to be based on touching up Keats’ unschooled, Cockney image (29). The reality of Woodhouse, Keats, his publishers, and potentially others “all pulling together to make the poems presentable” problematizes Keats’ “leaves to a tree” metaphor considerably (45).

The “rain in the store-closet:” Austen’s Own Creative Theory

Though contemporary scholarship has somewhat deflated the solitary genius model, Austen’s own theories on composition reveal that she had little interest in maintaining this kind of ethos. She instead embraced a “communal consolation” in her writing (Shields 140). In this sense, Austen’s theories of composition tend to adhere to the communal model that Magnuson and others have recently begun to identify in Romantic-era acts of literary creativity. Austen likely recognized that, as Cox puts it, “visionary gleams offer only a momentary and limited escape from a creative project fully engaged in the social world of real men and women” (331). Indeed, in Austen’s experience, the process of literary creation was typically grounded in social interaction. In an 1809 letter to Cassandra, Austen reveals that her creative impulses arise out of communal interchange. She explains how the critiques of her niece, Fanny Knight, affect her own creative practice:

I am gratified by [Fanny] having pleasure in what I write, but I wish the knowledge of my being exposed to her discerning criticism may not hurt my style, by inducing too great a solicitude. I begin already to weigh my words and sentences more than I did, and am looking about for a sentiment, an illustration, or a metaphor in every corner of the room. (*Letters* 256)

Here Austen's anxiety over style is located in the "discerning criticism" of a bright relative. Though the Romantic poets often claimed to have creative immunity from the contaminating influence of other writers and thinkers, insisting on the almost sacred originality of their works, their actual experience was perhaps more like Austen's. Magnuson, for example, suggests that Coleridge harbored "fears about amalgamation" in relation to Wordsworth's influence on his writing (3). These fears were so heavy that, in a bout of severe depression, he revealed to William Godwin in 1801, "if I should die, and the Booksellers will give you any thing for my Life, be sure to say—'Wordsworth descended on him [. . .] , by shewing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet'" (qtd. in Magnuson 7).

It may be, as Cox suggests, that literary creation during the Romantic era was largely impelled by collaboration, and that "ignoring the presence of group identities distorts our sense of the period" (332). If this is the case, Austen's authorial model is more aligned with other Romantic acts of creativity than it would otherwise appear. As Shields concedes, "Austen's novels were written and revised in concert with a remarkable communal consolation," a far cry from the traditional depiction of Romantic authorship, but perhaps still representative of the actual creative practices of the age (140-41). Austen's creative process emerges not from unplanned flashes of inspiration in solitude, but in deliberate creative associations with trusted critical minds. Shields further explains the unique communal aspect of Austen's creativity:

This coterie was knowledgeable about what caught her author's eye [...] They knew her successes [...] and her failures [...] They were not a spontaneous, anonymous audience, but an engaged and humanly bonded readership (listening perhaps rather than actually reading) who had traveled every inch of the way with

Jane Austen as she had lived her life and discovered her own writerly process.

They were, in fact, part of that complicated process. (140)

Indeed, Austen was fully comfortable sharing her unfinished work with a close creative audience. Marianne Knight, one of Fanny's younger sisters, later recalled in her diary,

when Aunt Jane came to us at Godmersham she used to bring the manuscript of whatever novel she was writing with her, and would shut herself up with my elder sisters in one of the bedrooms to read them aloud. I and the younger ones used to hear peals of laughter through the door, and thought it very hard that we should be shut out from what was so delightful. (qtd. in Hill 201)

It's clear that, to Austen, creative acts were intensely social, not private.

Austen's creative productivity was impelled by social interaction from a young age. As Auerbach writes, Austen's early works reflect her utter delight in sharing "crass imitations of [the gothic and sentimental bestsellers of the day] with her family and friends" (43). Her creative acts were grounded in her social world. In her dedication to a 12-chapter novella, "The beautiful Cassandra" (1788), Austen shares her hopes that "the following Tale will afford one moment's amusement" to her sister (44). Austen later dedicated a subsequent novel to her brother Charles John Austen, explaining: "Sir, Your generous patronage of the unfinished tale, I have already taken the Liberty of dedicating to you, encourages me to dedicate to you a second, as unfinished as the first" (42). The many nonsensical spoofs that appear throughout Austen's juvenilia are directed at an intimate, *knowing* audience, an audience who would understand the depth of her literary in-jokes and share in the easy identification of "one-dimensional stock characters, overused plots, and hackneyed expressions" found in so many popular novels of the day (Auerbach 68). Austen could not ask for a more ready and willing creative circle than her family,

who were “great novel-readers and not ashamed of being so,” as she wrote to Cassandra in 1798 (26). Austen’s early authorship was driven by the reactions of the Austen family circle; she was obviously comfortable locating acts of creativity in community instead of solely in her own private, individual experience.

In relation to the Romantic genius mythos, Austen was also unconcerned with representing her work as the product of a mysterious literary muse. Instead, her own model of authorship is careful, deliberate, and precise. This is contrary to how Austen’s creative process has often been depicted. In the decades after publication, Austen’s authorship was long characterized as the product of a quaint, homespun genius; many have treated Austen as one who “does not seem to have taken her works or herself very seriously,” as Lord David Cecil claimed (5). Thomas Macaulay wrote that Austen’s novels were composed “by touches so delicate, that they elude analysis” and “defy the powers of description” (qtd. in Southam 123). Henry James wrote that it was as if Austen “sometimes, over her work basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one may say, into wool gathering, and her dropped stitches [...] were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination” (100). Even some contemporary scholars credit Austen’s impressive literary achievements to “genius, or talent, or creativity; a gift from the gods or genetic good luck,” as Deresiewicz does in *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets* (13). Yet, despite these characterizations, it is obvious that Austen’s writings “bear all the signs of careful workmanship, and of reworking” that serious authorship would require (Doody xvi). Rather than perpetuate myths about Austen’s supposedly unconscious genius, we should understand Austen’s theories of composition more in terms of her deliberate, studied literary craftsmanship, which was thoroughly grounded in her evaluation of

emergent authorial models. It's already clear that Austen cared little for acts of creation in solitude; likewise, Austen rejected the Romantic notion that literary creativity occurs in unplanned bursts of inspiration.

In 1798, long before she was first published, Austen told Cassandra that “an artist cannot do anything slovenly” (20). Eleven years later, in another letter to Cassandra, she lamented, “Could my ideas flow as fast as the rain in the store-closet it would be charming” (256). Here, Austen’s process bears little resemblance to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” It does not follow Shelley’s fading flower metaphor, nor would Austen share Keats’ assertion that composition should come “as naturally as the leaves to a tree” or not at all.

Austen scholars like Auerbach, Margaret Doody, Claudia Johnson, and others have long scrutinized the “unconscious” model of creativity so often attached to Austen. Yet, Deresiewicz and other proponents of the Romantic Austen have failed to contextualize Austen’s writing in these terms. If we are to speak of Austen in the context of her Romantic moment, we cannot ignore this important emergent ideology as we analyze her creative works. Austen’s perception of the creative act diverges not only from the homespun genius model, but from competing Romantic models as well. And so, if Austen’s ideas *didn’t* “flow as fast as the rain in the store-closet,” what shape did her model of creativity take? As she wrote in a letter to James Edward Austen-Leigh in 1816, Austen saw her novels as the products of “much labour,” as carefully-placed strokes on a “little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory,” deliberately drawn with “so fine a brush” (323). This description imagines acts of literary creation as not only demanding, but intentional – a far cry from the unplanned “dropped stitches” James describes. In fact, Austen sees the writing process as in tension with domesticity. As she wrote to Cassandra in 1816, “I often wonder how you can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the house [...]

Composition seems to me impossible with a head full of joints of mutton and doses of rhubarb” (321). And yet Austen kept writing. Literary creation, as Austen sees it, requires deliberate effort. Contrary to Shelley, Austen appeared to be fully comfortable saying “I will compose a novel.” And she grounds the process of writing in the physical, social world.

The Plight of the “Humble Novelist”: Realism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Auerbach calls Austen “the artist who creatively made use of her surroundings; the feisty, irreverent being who, from adolescence to her death at age forty-one, discerned the amusing discrepancy between the ideal and the real” (266). True, Austen artfully dismantled idealized visions of spontaneous composition in solitude. But her critique reaches beyond idealizations of the creative act itself. From an early age, her own authorship was informed by the clever “pillorying” of “every [popular] literary convention Austen could find” (Auerbach 61). She viewed her authorial role as a critical one; Austen felt that authors derive much of their authority from the studied critique of their craft. As Claudia Johnson remarks, the works Austen produced “announce both a superiority of judgment which entitles her to authorship and a determination to level that judgment against predominating literary conventions” (29). Thus, Austen further articulates her own authority through her studied refinement of prevailing literary norms. This involved direct engagement with important literary debates of the day. As many have noted, Austen appears to be most comfortable leveling authorial critique at those who fail to successfully implement qualities of realism in their writing. This is another exercise in deconstructing idealized authorship; in this case, Austen deflates the popular posturing of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors as realists.

The influential thinkers and writers of the literary world had long debated the category of realism (and its apparent doppelgänger, romance) by the time Austen began writing her own

literary spoofs in the late 1700s. As the century progressed, literary definitions were incredibly unstable. This was particularly true of language that emerged alongside new, longer works of prose fiction. In 1715, Pierre-Daniel Huet attempted to trace the history of these longer works, grouping them initially as “Romances.” He categorized these by their instructive and educational intent and suggested they contained “more of Probability” than earlier literary forms (338). In 1742, Henry Fielding called *Joseph Andrews* a “comic Romance,” or, a “Comic Epic-Poem in Prose” (84). Fielding’s preface is characteristic of the realist claims adopted by many early authors of fiction: “every thing is copied from the Book of Nature,” he writes, and thus *Joseph Andrews* avoids the “Ridiculous [...] Affectation” of earlier literary works (86, 85). Around the same time, the category of the “novel” began to appear, though it would take some time for writers to articulate exactly how this new genre was a departure from the romance. For example, the posthumously-released compilation of Penelope Aubin’s writings, *A Collection of Entertaining Histories and Novels* (1749), contains a preface that largely reiterates Huet’s definition of romance, but calls these works novels rather than romances. The “Requisites of a good *Novel*,” the author writes, include moral instruction, entertainment value, and “at least, an Air of *Probability*” (107). Horace Walpole’s 1765 preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, on the other hand, identifies his work as a combination of two distinct “kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability,” he says, “in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success” (128).

By the years of Austen’s youth, however, writers were more confident in explaining the categorical differences between the romance and the novel. This distinction emerged as one essential characteristic: realism. Ian Watt calls this “formal realism, [...] the premise or primary convention that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” (32). As Hugh Blair

explained in 1783, the “principal object” of *novel*-writing (as opposed to romance-writing) was the imitation of real life (346). He went on to categorize several immensely popular works as praiseworthy *novels*, including *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, and *Clarissa* in his list (346). Yet, even as he praised the works of Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson, Blair admitted that “The trivial performances which daily appear in public [...] are most commonly insipid” (346). Others still complained that contemporary fiction offered no satisfaction to the reader seeking realism. Clara Reeve criticized Horace Walpole’s popular *The Castle of Otranto* in the preface to her own gothic knock-off *The Old English Baron* (1778). She complains chiefly of its gross implausibility: “Had the story been kept within the utmost verge of probability,” she says, the novel would have caused intense imaginative delight; as it was, *Otranto* did little more than “excite laughter” (3). Though some continued to place faith in the novelist’s ability to capture the “boldness of reality,” as Joanna Baillie wrote in 1798, many more were just as ready to admit that “Novels,” as Thomas Holcroft wrote in 1780, “have fallen into disrepute” (21, 94). In this context, Fanny Burney’s 1778 remark appears appropriately bleak: “In the republic of letters,” she wrote, “there is no member of such inferior rank, or who is so much disdained by his brethren of the quill, as the humble Novelist” (qtd. in Turner 111).

This is precisely the conversation Austen responds to in her early forays into prose fiction. Austen recognized the depleted auctoritas of the “humble Novelist,” particularly those novelists whose characters and events drifted from the “verge of plausibility.” She saw that authorship, particularly novel-writing, was weighed down by the baggage of failed experimentation with realism in prose. As an aspiring author, Austen's writings exploded the shortcomings of other writers; her juvenilia are often critical of the absurd practice of claiming realism where nothing “of nature or probability” could be found (*Letters* 213).

Love and Freindship, written when Austen was just fourteen, exhibits a mature awareness of the failure of best-selling authors to implement realism in their prose. Each scene in this clever novelette spoofs literary improbability as a way to express Austen's own authority in the literary world. While novelists continued to assume literary authority through their idealized versions of realist fiction, Austen exposes the illegitimacy of such authority in her satiric caricatures. In one scene Laura and Sophia, the protagonist and her bosom friend, react to a touching reunion by "fainting alternately on a sofa." Of course, Sophia was introduced just sentences earlier when she and Laura (though they had never before met) "flew into each other's arms and, after having exchanged vows of mutual friendship for the rest of [their] lives, instantly unfolded to each other the most inward secrets of [their] hearts" (521). And, just moments later, after Laura's ever-growing party of sentimental acquaintances learn that one of their comrades' debts will soon be called in, they again react with appropriate emotion: "Ah! what could we do but what we did! We sighed and fainted on the sofa" (523). Despite such scenes, Austen's satire was not simply a collection of literary in-jokes; her early writing was also a deliberate effort to redefine the role of the author. To Austen, the author could not simply idealize the novel for its realist potential; the author needed to actually deliver such realism herself.

Still, it must have eventually occurred to Austen that, though "pillorying literary conventions" provided ample amusement at the hearthside, it did little in itself to improve the collective merit of novels themselves (Auerbach 61). An unabashed novel-reader herself, Austen recognized (like Baillie and others) the unrealized potential of this genre to capture the nature and spirit of the human condition. Thus, she began a campaign to reform fiction from within, sometimes taking other writers to task. As she began to write with the intent to publish, however, Austen recognized the need for more subdued literary critique in her writing. As a careful critic

of literature herself, Austen observed that heavy didacticism derailed realism in fiction. Austen spoofed moral heavy-handedness in *Love and Freindship*. Sophia proclaims: “Beware of swoons dear Laura [...] Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint.” It is after this “fatal swoon” that Sophia simply drops dead (88).

Yet, Austen also recognized that literary critique could be just as intrusive as heavy didacticism in works of realistic fiction. Though her youthful critiques often pointed to artistic sins rather than moral ones, Austen saw that the didactic nature of heavy satire also impaired the implementation of realism in fiction. While Doody claims that Austen “could not laugh so loudly in her later works” because she “had to become genteel and act like a lady,”(xxxviii) Austen’s choice to move away from exaggerated satire did not merely reflect a need for dignified self-restraint. Instead, such a change marked Austen’s authorial maturation, a recognition that realism should not be compromised by any intrusively artificial device, no matter how comic. As Tuite explains, Austen’s “mature fictions” reject “not only the stigma of sentiment and romance, but also the stigma of a too-obvious pedagogy” of literary norms (55). Thus, in order to effectively critique her craft from within, Austen needed to relinquish some of her loud laughter to more subtle, yet ultimately more realistic, authorial criticism in her fiction.

The “Labour” of the Author: Realism in *Northanger Abbey*

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen sets up the novel as a vehicle for critiquing literary realism, entering one of the most prominent literary debates of her time. The novel, she writes in *Northanger Abbey*’s fifth chapter, is “only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (31). Yet, Austen also recognized that such claims made earlier novels appear somewhat ludicrous; her early spoofs shed light on the

implausibility of the popular realist fiction of her day. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen balances her vigorous justification of novel-writing without compromising the realism of her fiction.

At first, Austen's defense of the novelist bears striking resemblance to Romantic authorial rhetoric. In the same moment in the text, Austen writes: "there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them" (31). Like Wordsworth and Shelley, Austen draws on the language of "genius" and "taste" to describe the work of the novelist. Yet, it is in the "work" of writing that Austen distinguishes her own acts of creativity. Rather than simply announce the innate aesthetic attunement of the author's soul, like the Romantic poets, Austen articulates more practical descriptions of her craft, grounding her authorial theory in real, lived experience. She calls the act of creation "labour" and speaks of the novelist's "capacity" to produce quality literature. The requisite "labour" of writing was, of course, a connotation the Romantic poets sought to avoid in defense of their craft; any linkage to such a term implied association with the low art of the literary factory. Likewise, "capacity" connotes self-guided improvement. This, of course, democratizes the act of literary creation; if creative capacity can be improved through "labour," what right did established authors have to announce the superiority of their works over the worker in the literary factory? The image Austen creates is not that of a dying ember or a fading flower, it is a "performance": studied, deliberate, and practiced.

Yet, Austen was careful to prevent marketplace rhetoric from unseating her own authorial philosophies. Thus, Austen fleshes out her definition of authorship by adding another stipulation to the author's role. It is essential to understand Austen's theories of authorship, not simply in terms of her more labor-based approach to literary composition, but also in her perpetual

insistence that authors first ground their writing in realism. The result is a more subtle reflection on literary conventions, one that is not so overwhelmed by satire that it loses its own probability, as the juvenilia often did.

Of course, the keen, comic punch of Austen's satiric writing has delighted readers for decades; it is no surprise that *Northanger Abbey* has featured in many discussions of Austen's expertise (Auerbach 70). That Austen's novel depicts a social world riddled with literary inadequacies has been something of a commonplace in Austen scholarship. Some have interpreted the novel as a complete rejection of the literary excesses of other writers, a derision of gothic and sentimental novels as "'horrid' perversions of probability" (Benedict li). Others have argued that *Northanger Abbey* pays homage to the thriving literary forms of the day, celebrating the growing popularity of the novel and its unrealized potential. Both interpretive camps have focused on Austen's literary targets (Radcliffe appears again and again in their readings). However, less has been said to implicate Austen's satiric impulse with her views on authorship itself. I argue that Austen's satire is not only based on the thematic concerns of popular literature, but also on the notions of authorship it represents. By aiming her criticism at other authors, Austen announces the superiority of her literary judgment over that of her contemporaries (Johnson 29). In this way, *Northanger Abbey* is an effective treatise on the components of successful authorship during a time when the definition of this concept was particularly unstable.

Austen recognizes that one defining aspect of novel-writing (if executed successfully) that stabilizes an author's position of authority in the literary sphere is precise, natural human language. In a letter to her niece Anna Lefroy, written in 1814, Austen reacted to a scene from one of Anna's manuscripts-in-progress: "I do not like a lover speaking in the 3rd person," she

wrote, “I think it not natural” (267). Likewise, in *Northanger Abbey* Austen provides us with a running commentary on stilted and ill-fitting language. This commentary is centered on a critique of authorial practice; while many authors (novelists and poets alike) often claimed direct insight into authentic human experience, Austen explored the possibility that such claims were not representative of actual authorial practice. In one of their very telling discussion of novels, Catherine expresses some relief as Henry Tilney praises her beloved *Udolpho*: “now I shall never be ashamed of liking Udolpho myself. I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly.” To this, Tilney responds: “It is *amazingly*; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do—for they read nearly as many as women” (108). Catherine first used the word “amazingly” in its slang form – as a means of hyperbolizing the negative feelings of men toward novels (Benedict and Le Faye 329). Tilney takes the more authentic, original meaning of the word and applies it more successfully in his response.

But Tilney’s linguistic jibing does not stop here. Later he teases Catherine further for not choosing a better adjective to describe the novel: “But now really, do not you think Udolpho the nicest book in the world?” Tilney responds: “The nicest;—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding” (109). As Barbara Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye point out, Johnson defines “nice” in his dictionary as “accurate in judgement to a minute exactness; superfluously exact [...] often used to express a culpable delicacy” (330). Here Catherine has used an ill-fitting word in her description, one that is not naturally conducive to the gothic style of her beloved book, but instead parrots the casually-applied adjectives of her linguistically careless society.

This conversation reflects Austen’s sincere consideration of what might be the “best chosen language” for her works. Unlike Catherine, Austen chooses to avoid the linguistic habits

of other authors. Her wording is both relevant and exact – something she insists is essential to the authority of the novelist. Throughout the novel Austen draws the reader’s attention to her deliberate avoidance of familiar novel-writing tropes. Tilney’s recognition of Catherine’s inattentiveness to precise language reflects a need for higher literary standards in the novel market. If an untrained reader of novels is given to imprecise colloquialisms, then the novel itself must not offer much in the way of useful literary instruction, and therefore falls short in educating its readers in matters of taste and language. If authors impose higher aesthetic standards on their works, they easily sidestep the literary pitfalls of popular fiction. Austen herself makes one obvious departure from popular novel-writing tropes in her brief introduction of Mrs. Thorpe, Mrs. Allen’s old schoolmate and Isabella’s widowed mother. After a scant one-paragraph description of the whole Thorpe family, Austen explains:

This brief account of the family is intended to supersede the necessity of a long and minute detail from Mrs. Thorpe herself, of her past adventures and sufferings, which might otherwise be expected to occupy three or four following chapters; in which the worthlessness of lords and attorneys might be set forth, and conversations, which had passed twenty years before, be minutely repeated. (27)

Here Austen comically spurns a habit of eighteenth-century novel writing. As Benedict and Le Faye write, the trend was to “[interpolate] long autobiographies or backstories by all the characters as they were introduced, and sometimes elaborate and irrelevant digressions as well” (309). Austen’s better-known contemporary Maria Edgeworth was indeed famous for “plaguing” the reader with long passages on “chemistry, mechanics, or political economy” in her novels. In a letter written comparing Austen’s *Mansfield Park* to Edgeworth’s works in 1814, the Earl of

Dudley opines that these topics “are all excellent things in their way, but vile, cold-hearted trash in a novel” (qtd. in Benedict and Le Faye 310).

Austen considered such digressions as unnatural intrusions in a novel; these were aesthetic failings that could easily undercut one’s authorship. Just after *Pride and Prejudice* was published, Austen wrote this ironic review to Cassandra: “The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade;—it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte” (203). Austen appears confident that omissions of this kind are a conscious artistic choice. Such precision lends the author more legitimacy; she chooses to avoid idealized (albeit popular) versions of realism in favor of what is both actually real and relevant to the real. To Austen, the lengthy digressions of other novelists were poorly placed – much like Catherine’s careless wording – ill-fitting in realistic depictions of human life and detrimental to an author’s position of authority.

Austen also recognized that such ill-fitting language could alienate readers who would otherwise be deeply invested in realistic fiction. In 1809 Austen responded to Cassandra’s recommendation of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, which Hannah More published that same year. At first, Austen seems to think the title of the work is a misspelling on Cassandra’s part, calling the book “Caleb” in her reply. After receiving Cassandra’s assurance that “Coeleb” was the correct spelling, she writes: “knowing how fond you were of adding a vowel wherever you could, I attributed it to that alone, and the knowledge of the truth does the book no service; the only merit it could have was in the name of Caleb, which has an honest, un-pretending sound, but in Coelebs there is pedantry and affectation. Is it written only to classical scholars?” (18-19).

Austen's own mastery of realistic human language is perhaps best described by Catherine's unwitting "satire on modern language"; she exclaims: "Me?—yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible" (135). As Catherine feels ill-prepared to mimic the speech of those around her, Austen likewise reveals her own unwillingness to seriously reproduce the unnatural literary language of her peers. In doing so, she articulates important new standards of authorship that stand up to the literary scrutiny of the many anti-novelists of her age.

"Principally in Poetry": Responding to Romantic Articulations of Authorship

Yet, such articulations do not naturally bring Austen into the context of traditional Romantic authorship. It is in her final novel, *Persuasion*, that Austen can be best observed defending her authorial practice against what was by then considered the highly Romantic model of solitary genius. Auerbach argues that in *Persuasion* Austen shows us that "she herself could have written tremulous romantic poetry," but, as with *Northanger Abbey*, she resists the popular literary choices of contemporary authors and instead offers us a compositional model more grounded in the real (261). Thus, the pairing of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in its first posthumous publication, whether intentional or simply fortuitous, illuminates similarities between the idealized authorship of the early gothic and sentimental novelists of the 1700s and that of high Romantic writers. In *Persuasion*, Austen explores the possibility that popular poets, like novelists of decades earlier, actually diverge from the idealized authorial practices they so often claim.

In this context we can actively understand *Persuasion* as a fellow treatise on real versus idealized authorship. Thus, in the vein of the classic Austen burlesque, she casts *Persuasion*'s Captain Benwick as her sputtering Romantic, exhibiting in him an almost Byronic effusiveness. He is described as having "the appearance of feelings glad to burst their usual restraints" after the

death of his fiancé (84). Wentworth later describes poor Benwick as something like the brooding Byronic hero, calling him “deeply afflicted,” and considering “his disposition as of the sort which must suffer heavily, uniting very strong feelings with quiet, serious, and retiring manners” (81). Our narrator further explains that he has both “a pleasing face and a melancholy air, just as he *ought* to have” (82, emphasis added). The inclusion of this last “ought” phrase implies that, like the sentimental and gothic clichés of the late eighteenth century, Benwick’s whimpering is perhaps something of a literary caricature itself. He is darkly sentimental and perpetually solitary; readers are meant to recognize him as a highly Romantic protagonist, despite the fact that the language of Romanticism as a literary movement would not surface until the middle of the nineteenth century (Butler 7-8).

If these cues are too subtle, Austen later makes more direct connections between Benwick’s brooding and the literature from which such behavior appears to be derived. We are told that Benwick has “considerable taste in reading, though principally in poetry,” and he and Anne go on to compare opinions “as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*” (84). Austen’s reference to Byron’s *Giaour* here is telling. The *Giaour* relates the lamentable tale of a mourning lover who, like Benwick, appears paralyzed by his grief – disconnected from his surroundings in a state of perpetual bereavement:

never at our vesper prayer,
Nor e’er before confession chair
Kneels he, nor recks he when arise
Incense or anthem to the skies,

But broods within his cell alone,

His faith and race alike unknown (lines 802-07)

Like the Giaour, Benwick is often separated from his society; he is described as having “all the appearance of being oppressed by the presence of so many strangers,” and often “drew back from conversation” (84). Even in familiar settings, such as dinner with the two other naval captains, it is “Anne’s lot to be placed rather apart with Captain Benwick,” suggesting that, but for Anne, Benwick would likely brood alone and unattended amidst his peers—the spitting image of a brooding Byronic figure (84).

As Susan Allen Ford notes, Benwick’s behavior has often been interpreted as “an easy swipe at the indulgences of High Romanticism” (73). Admittedly, Austen appears to level criticism at readers of such poetry rather than the authors themselves. Anne discloses that “she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly” (85).

Yet, it also seems likely that Benwick’s language and behavior appear as part of another satiric episode in Austen’s clever line of literary spoofs and authorial critiques. Beyond simply warning “deeply afflicted” readers to be wary of the poet’s “tenderest songs,” Austen is once again responding to the unstable literary definitions of her age (84). Benwick figures as the self-identified “poetic soul” and so faces scrutiny leveled not only toward readers, but authors as well. Austen’s response to the “poetic soul” in *Persuasion* allows her to articulate a model of authorship that diverges from the idealized models of her later (Romantic) contemporaries.

De-romanticizing Scott and Byron: Austen's Critique of Idealized Authorship

As the popular works of Walpole and Radcliffe dominated literary conversation in the late eighteenth century, Scott and Byron controlled those of the early nineteenth. As one reviewer in *Blackwood's* remarked: "Mr. Scott gave to the world a series of brilliant romances, and turned into this new-made channel all who ever in their lives read and relished fictitious compositions. All the poets, good and bad, forthwith wrote metrical romances" (qtd. in Ford 75). Though, according to this reviewer, *Marmion* "converted tens of thousands," Austen, as earlier noted, was not "very much pleased" with it at all. Other critics, like Francis Jeffrey from the *Edinburgh Review*, had more descriptive critiques of the work in question: "To write a modern romance of chivalry," he says, "seems to be much such a fantasy as to build a modern abbey, or an English pagoda" (qtd. in Ford 75).

It's likely that Austen perceived the same unnatural features in the authorial practices of Scott and Byron that Jeffrey here describes. It is difficult, in Austen's estimation, to present such archaic subject matter and language with a straight face. By the time she wrote *Persuasion*, she recognized that an author's position of authority is just as fragile in the present literary age as it was in the late 1700s. Her passing comment on "how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced" echoes her earlier critique of More's *Coeleb*, the title being one full of "pedantry and affectation" (84). This also reiterates her earlier assessment of Edgeworth's unnatural intrusions, suggesting that there are ample congruities between the now-dated literary conventions of the sentimental romance and those found in Scott's immensely popular metrical chivalric romances.

It appears that Benwick's "tenderest songs" of mourning mimic the unnatural language employed by these immensely popular verse authors. In the novel, all of Benwick's expressions of grief are recited rather than expressed in his own natural language: "he shewed himself so

intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness” (84). This description indeed does not laugh as loudly as Austen’s juvenilia; as Auerbach notes, Austen “delivers her impassioned apologia indirectly” (259). Still, we get the sense that Benwick’s suffering is overblown, perhaps even theatrical. Austen recognized that the language employed by the modern poet was unnatural when adopted by persons of the actual reading class. It was perhaps just as unnatural for a mourning naval captain to speak in verse as it was for a lover to speak in the third person. Yet, Scott and, earlier, Wordsworth both insisted that their poetry accurately represented real human experience by copying the language of the “lower orders” (Scott, *Prefaces* 11).

Some critics praised the linguistic choices of these authors as authentic, real, and intensely affecting. In an unsigned review of Byron’s *The Bride of Abydos and the Corsair*, Jeffrey argues that Byron’s verse satisfies a “growing appetite” for “strong and natural emotion,” which he argues is the “true characteristic of this age.” He goes on: “The passion itself must now be portrayed – and all its fearful workings displayed in detail before us. The minds of the great agents must be unmasked for us – and all the anatomy of their throbbing bosoms laid open to our gaze” (56-57). Such works, he argues, gratify the public’s lust for emotional realism. Austen recognized that, though writers like Scott and Byron were implicated in the emergence of a new emotional realism in literature, such posturing was actually somewhat ill-fitting considering the authorial choices they so often made in their verse. As we find later in the novel, Benwick’s extended suffering is a far cry from “strong and natural” emotional realism so praised in Jeffrey’s review. The real readiness of Benwick’s heart to love again “was a point which Anne

had not been able to avoid suspecting before” (135). In fact, “Captain Benwick was *not* inconsolable,” for he soon diverts his affection to Louisa Musgrove, someone whom Wentworth readily admits is inferior to Benwick’s previous attachment (148). His poetic excess is misleading; in reality, individuals are naturally inclined to “rally again,” particularly those who are, like Benwick, young and unattached (82, emphasis added). Thus, Austen shows that, in order to maintain a position of authority amidst the literary debates of her age, the writer must satisfy the reader seeking realism. She recognized that England’s reading public was struggling to identify voices of literary authority amidst the flood of new genres and categories in literature, and she provided her audience not only with keen critiques of the many literary failures of authors of her age, but she also produced works that, as one of her juvenile dedications pronounces, possess “Merit beyond any already published” (192).

“Catching” Austen: Using Authorship to Contextualize Austen in the Romantic Era

In a riff off of Virginia Woolf’s famous quote that “of all the great writers [Austen] is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness,” Auerbach reflects, “Paradoxically, Jane Austen nowadays seems everywhere yet still hard to find” (3). It’s not surprising to see the elusive authoress appear in recent Romantic scholarship. But such attempts to historicize Austen’s greatness project a Romantic image that is inconsistent with her own creative practice. We can only hope to “catch” Austen in her own self-styled image – the image of “THE AUTHOR,” as she signs much of her juvenilia. In truth, Austen’s writing is about writing itself – it is about the somewhat precocious act of assuming authority in authorship at a time when authorship itself was unstable. This moment extends beyond the rise of the novel and mingles with Romantic articulations of this new category, and Austen carefully responds to prominent assertions within these debates.

Literary history has long associated the long eighteenth century with the negotiation, interpretation, and definition of authorship, yet Austen has never been seriously treated as part of this literary project. Instead, her writing has been regarded as a touchstone of literary realism and novelistic excellence against a backdrop of novelists struggling to know their genre, but her novels have yet to be fully explored as treatises on authorial acts themselves. She was aware of different creative models and boldly deviated from idealized authorial philosophies. Her authorial philosophies were grounded in realistic processes and subjects. Austen de-romanticizes writing and strikes out the popular authorial choices of novelists and poets, producing a clear image of what is real in authorship and fiction. She is the practical writer's writer; she rejected what Scott called the "Big bow-wow strain" of composition and substituted something far less mystical in its place.

Though she never fully embraced the creative mystique of Romantic authorship, some might point to her famous correspondence with James Stanier Clarke as evidence that Austen did at least partially subscribe to the individual genius model. In these letters Austen gives us one of her most transparent definitions of her own authorship. Clarke, of course, like many enthusiastic literary fans, could not keep his own creative suggestions to himself and implored Austen "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 – [...] Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature – no man's Enemy but his own*" (430). Austen kindly (tactfully) refused the suggestion, claiming "The comic part of the Character I might be equal to, but not the Good, the Enthusiastic, the Literary" (443). She then apologizes, claiming that such subjects are good matter for fiction written by classically-trained men, and explains, "I may boast myself to be,

with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress” (443).

But Clarke persists, proposing not only the bubbly clergyman once again, but also a new “Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg” (452). Here, though Austen’s articulation of authorial work creeps closer to Romantic models than anywhere else, Austen still resists the more Romantic impulse to attribute creative work to forces outside her own control. In her second refusal, she explains:

I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable of me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter. – No – I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way; And though I may never succeed in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (312)

Austen is conscious that authorship is defined by no one else other than the author. Though she insists that she cannot do anything but stick to her own creative standards, it is Austen who is in control of these standards. She does not subscribe to creative models that would project authorship as anything besides deliberate and practicable. Austen consciously rejects the presumptive grandeur of other authorial models and defines her authorship in opposition to those offered by her peers. She treats her content and language as natural extensions of human experience, free from the defensive authorial rhetoric so commonly attached to works by popular poets and novelists of her time.

Austen’s demystification of writing and fiction are essential to any attempt to write Austen into the Romantic period. She views authorship as something more tangible and

conscious than her Romantic-era peers; this separates her genius from the crowd of other poets and prose writers. Scott lamented as much in his memoirs, and claimed that Austen's "exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting [...] is denied to me" (qtd. in Galperin 74). Her gravitation toward the real distinguishes her authorship in a way that complicates the act of academically Romanticizing Austen. For Austen, the author is not one who, like Keats' knight, sits "alone and palely loitering," while the "sedge has withered from the lake" because the muse has not yet arrived (899). Instead, we catch Austen's authorship in the dying image of the authoress herself, continuing to write "whilst she could hold a pen, and with a pencil when a pen was become too laborious" (4). Austen's authorship is found in the laborious exercise of creative control – it is impossible to hope to catch her in the act of greatness anywhere else.

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