

Brian Southam

Lost Life and Letters of Jane Austen

*Article published in Classics Number 4, Oxford University Press,
May/June 1967*

Jane Austen is one of the great novelists of love, for the understanding with which she explores both the social and inner emotional drama of the young woman approaching marriage – in the adolescent passion of Marianne Dashwood, the conquered hauteur of Elizabeth Bennet, the silent (and sometimes prim) devotion of Fanny Price, the wilful fantasies of Emma Woodhouse, the patient grief of Anne Elliot. These heroines are drawn with such insight and realism that some of Jane Austen's contemporary readers suspected that she was writing from her observation of people immediately around her. One friend of the family was convinced that Marianne and Elinor Dashwood were portraits of Jane and her sister Cassandra, and a reviewer asserted that the love-story of Fanny Price was the work of 'a female writing from recollection'.

Today, these views may strike us as being rather naïve. We know that the writer's imagination seizes upon all kinds of raw material – upon people and events before him, upon characters and plots from literature, upon fact and fancy alike – in the creation of a fictional world and its persons. The transformation of this raw material into the work of art, the novel itself, is complex and mysterious and the attempts to trace this process in Jane Austen's method of composition have been unconvincing.

Nonetheless, a very natural curiosity prompts us to speculate about Jane Austen's own experience of love and whether it found its way into the writing of the novels. Here we are faced with the strange and intriguing fact that virtually nothing is known about this aspect of Jane Austen's life; and this despite the detailed chronicling of her character in two biographies by members of the family and a collected edition of all the surviving letters. Working from these sources and from the quantity of unpublished documents, even Dr Chapman, with his unrivalled knowledge of the Austen world, was able to compile only a tentative and summary account of her significant acquaintances with men. On this point the family records are vague and confusing.

What defeated Dr Chapman, and continues to baffle the researcher, was the success of the Austen family in preserving a veil of secrecy. Proud of her achievement as a novelist, they regarded her private life as a strictly family possession, to be made public only with caution and reserve. This problem faced even her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh when he was preparing the *Memoir*, the first biography, published in 1870. He received sharp reminders from his relatives about what should and should not be said. He was warned by his sister Caroline against 'raking up that old story concerning Tom Lefroy, a young man Jane Austen was acquainted with in 1795 and 1796, when she was 20 and he 23. Caroline was also against any

mention ('or at least that the reference should be so vague, as to give no clue to the place or person') of the proposal made to Jane Austen on 2 December 1802, accepted, but refused the next day after an overnight change of mind – not, apparently, a change of heart.

Most fascinating of all are the various (and in several respects contradictory) accounts of the one relationship, ending tragically, in which Jane Austen seems to have been seriously involved. The substance of this episode is that in 1801 or 1802, while on holiday with Cassandra and her parents in the West country (although one account places the events in Switzerland!), Jane Austen met and fell in love with a naval officer who arranged to call later on the family at their Hampshire home. Instead, there came a letter announcing his death. These glimpses of a hidden life are tantalizing. They seem to substantiate what every reader of Jane Austen must have silently felt – that somewhere in Jane Austen's life the agony of Anne Elliot's years of waiting for Captain Wentworth had been endured by the author herself, but, as we see it, without the happy reconciliation she was able to bestow upon her heroine.

How is it that there are such serious gaps in our knowledge? The answer can be given quite simply. Succeeding generations of the Austen family appear to have set about a systematic destruction of Jane Austen's papers, a horrifying course whose example was set by Cassandra herself in burning the very letters which would have revealed most about the important emotional relationships in her sister's life. One family record tells us that Cassandra was 'so much impressed by the sacredness' of their correspondence 'that she destroyed all the letters in which special emotion had been shown, and felt sure she had left only what no-one would care to publish'.

Her niece Caroline was allowed to see some of these letters of 'special emotion' before they were destroyed by Cassandra in the early 1840's; she describes them as 'open and confidential'. And even those letters which Cassandra preserved to distribute as keepsakes amongst the nephews and nieces were carefully censored with a pair of scissors.

Of a total of one hundred and fifty-five letters which have survived to this day, covering a period of twenty years between 1796 and 1816 as many as ninety-four were written to Cassandra. So when we take account of Caroline's words that the 'greater part' of that correspondence was burnt, the total of lost material reaches staggering proportions. The losses elsewhere are equally serious. Jane Austen wrote 'frequently to her niece Caroline; yet only nine letters survive. She wrote 'very fully to her brothers while they were at sea'; yet only six survive, all to Francis, none to Charles. There are no letters to her favourite brother, Henry. Looked at chronologically, the picture is much the same. No letters before 1796. No letters in 1797, 1802, 1803, 1806, 1810, and a very thin scattering of letters elsewhere. And of the letters to Jane Austen, only six are known to exist.

The implications of all this have, of course, nothing whatsoever to do with literary criticism. Jane Austen's novels are free-standing works of art. They are fully comprehensible to the reader who comes completely ignorant of their author. Biographical information or the lack of it can make no difference to their success or failure with individual readers. On the other hand, who would deny that our attachment to favourite books, as to favourite paintings or pieces of music, is enhanced by our knowledge of the artist himself? It is the addition to the work of a further dimension of meaning; admittedly, not an essential dimension; one which literary criticism can and often does proceed without; but a dimension which the ordinary reader enjoys and explores at his will. In recent years we have seen some notable literary biographies – of Wordsworth, Dickens, Byron, D.H. Lawrence, Proust, James Joyce amongst others – which

enable us to place and author's works in the context of his life and times. Whether this service can ever be performed for Jane Austen is rather less than an open question. Victorian fire-places saw the destruction of the documents which could have helped us to understand how much of Jane Austen's profound experience is contained in the lives of her heroines in love.