


It is no less important to remark upon the final two chapters of Mercer's book, which consider posthumous editing as a form of collaboration (chapter 4) and the spectral influence of Percy Shelley over Mary's later novels (chapter 5) as further evidence of the inextricability of the Shelleys' creative bonds. After Percy drowned in July of 1822, Mary continued the work of posthumously collecting, editing and publishing his work. This is, of course, an argument of definition, one that has serious implications over the larger umbrella of literary studies. Does Mercer demonstrate that Percy's poetry after his death constitutes what we normally think of as collaboration? I'm not so convinced, but neither would I rule it out. I am most compelled by Mary's own considerations, the language of which indicates a collaborative enthusiasm; she speaks as if Percy were still alive. So, the following claim by Mercer deserves careful scrutiny:

I argue that the term 'collaboration' still applies to the Shelleys' relationship after PBS's demise because MWS's editing produced the first full edition of PBS's works: both of the Shelleys' creative input contributed to the posthumous texts as MWS's role included taking fragmentary, sometimes almost incomprehensible manuscript drafts and providing a version fit for publication. (p. 139).

The merit of this argument rests in Mary's own attitude toward her continued collusion with her husband, even after his passing.

To believe Mary's personal belief in her ongoing collaborative relationship with the now-deceased Percy has enormous implications and potentialities for the study of literature. Mercer here enters a serious debate that extends beyond the Shelleys and the Romantics, one that questions the very definition of collaboration. This wonderfully rhetorical gesture begs further study and evaluation. 

Stephen J. Pallas

Stony Brook University

<https://doi.org/10.18573/romtext.113>>

This review is © 2022 The Author and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar credited with authorship. For full copyright information, see page 2.

Date of acceptance: 25 March 2021.



Kathryn Sutherland (ed.), *Jane Austen: The Chawton Letters* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2017), 128pp. ISBN 978-1-8512-4474-4; £14.99 / \$25 (hb).

IN THIS SUMPTUOUSLY PRINTED SELECTION OF AUSTEN'S LETTERS, Sutherland has encapsulated Austen's gifts as a correspondent. Few match her qualifications to edit such a volume. Scholars of Austen and bibliography are


likely to be familiar with her book *Jane Austen's Textual Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2005), a masterclass is the essential role played by bibliography in literary studies and reception. Sutherland was also project director and principal investigator for *Jane Austen's Fictional Manuscripts*, a digital (and later print) edition of the extant manuscripts of the juvenilia and unfinished works like *Sanditon* and *Lady Susan*. Readers and fans of Austen, however, will recognise Sutherland as a fellow enthusiast. She has written online and in the popular press on the appreciation of Austen, and sharp readers may even recognise her as the editor of several paperbacks, including *Mansfield Park* (Penguin, 2003) and *Teenage Writings* (Oxford World's Classics, 2017).

A selection of letters annotated by Sutherland will have a great deal to interest scholars, though naturally this *libellus* cannot replace the comprehensive collection in Deirdre Le Faye's fourth edition of *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford University Press, 2011). But this elegant little book, characterised on its cover as 'a delightful keepsake of correspondence for one of the world's best loved writers', will be read and re-read with perhaps even keener interest by fans and aficionados. Its incisive annotations display a few of the many delights found in the full correspondence of Austen. The book is beautiful not only for the prose style of the letters themselves and for Sutherland's adroit commentary, but also for its facsimile reproductions of the letters in Austen's manuscript handwriting. The regularity of her hand slowly uncovers the fluidity of her expression—in the sections reproduced here, there are very few words or phrases crossed out, and similarly few later additions. Austen's flow of ideas is here as deliberate, straightforward and measured as her handwriting.

The thirteen letters included in this volume were composed on a variety of different occasions, and allow readers to observe the many purposes served by familiar letters in Austen's time. Among the eleven by Austen herself, seven are to her sister Cassandra, her most intimate confidante. In these letters, the reserve of the novels, where her voice is omnipresent yet nearly inscrutable, a *deus absconditus* discerned only in the effect, never the cause—disappears, and Austen can be observed at her most unguarded. Two are epistles in verse, poems written to congratulate: her brother Henry, posted overseas, on the birth of his son, and her friend Catherine Bigg, on her marriage. Two are to James Stanier Clarke, domestic chaplain and librarian to the Prince Regent, including one that was written but never posted. With a reply of Stanier's own, these three letters form a group that includes her famous (but not sent) description of her art. In reply to his presumptive suggestion that she write a historical romance on the House of Saxe-Coburg, with the implied imprimatur of the Prince Regent himself, Austen declines. She insists on writing 'such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in', and defends the integrity of her artistic vision with ironic humility: 'I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem [...] No—I must keep to my own style & go on ^in my own way;—and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other' (pp. 118–19). The final letter

is from Cassandra to Austen's beloved niece Fanny Knight, where she relates the details of her sister's funeral with moving pathos. Cassandra is grateful in detail for the comforts of family and religion, but the letter itself must be consulted in order to conceive the irreplaceable loss that Cassandra felt.

In the letters to Cassandra included here, readers can observe the author juggling the seemingly mundane and trivial duties of communicating 'mere' news with the demands of a muse that identified the essential disclosure that the 'merest' of news might convey. In both the introduction and commentary, Sutherland compares Austen's letter to Cassandra, dated 29 January 1813, with the loquacious chatter of Miss Bates in *Emma*. The talkative spinster becomes a cipher for Austen herself, in Sutherland's reading, and this re-evaluation of Miss Bates's status asks readers to reevaluate the novel itself in light of Austen's correspondence. Sutherland's circumspect notation of the parallels allows the reader to speculate about the manner by which Austen transformed experience into art. But it also encourages speculation about the extent to which Austen deprecated herself in these fictional representations of her own epistolary practice. The web of these parallels and equivocations between the novels and the letters merely complicates the act of interpretation required by such intertextual reading.

The editorial work and notes by Sutherland helps the reader to gather these various textures of language into something like an Austenian voice. At the same time, however, these notes paradoxically scatter these traces of her voice across characters and narratives that can seem self-contradictory and even incoherent. The close parallels between Austen's letters and Miss Bates from *Emma* provide a perfect example—such parallels can even seem to disrupt the image of Austen derived from the novels alone. Perhaps the signal achievement of Sutherland's volume is not the encompassing of seemingly incompatible modes of speech and writing into a single authorial mode, but prompting us to recognise that Austen worked in human expression, where context can make trivial things serious and even profound. 

Christopher Vilmar

Salisbury University, Maryland

<https://doi.org/10.18573/romtext.114>>

This review is © 2022 The Author and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar credited with authorship. For full copyright information, see page 2.

Date of acceptance: 13 November 2021.

