ABSTRACT

JANE AUSTEN UNCENSORED: A CRITICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL STUDY OF AUSTEN’S LETTERS FOR THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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A vast amount of literary critical and scholarly work on Jane Austen’s writing, including her juvenilia, has been published. However, insufficient attention has been paid to her extant letters and their significance. This dissertation redresses the imbalance and is the first extensive critical, scholarly discussion of Jane Austen’s correspondence and their pedagogical applications. In order to rectify the disparity, this dissertation examines Jane Austen’s surviving letters to determine how to contextualize them historically and biographically and in relation to her fiction for college composition and undergraduate literature courses. Background information on letter writing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century provides context for Austen’s letter writing, comparing her content and style to common practices. This study also investigates the world of Austen’s letters, focusing on historical and biographical context, and scrutinizing the letters as a source of information about middle-class Regency England; Austen’s family and social circles; and the author herself, including her personality, attitudes toward current events, views on works of literature, and references to her writing and publication processes.

Moreover, Austen’s letters would be beneficial as a theoretical pedagogical tool for teaching not only the novels but the world of her novels through an examination of her letters. Throughout my dissertation, previous work on teaching Austen and teaching with letters (both as a teaching tool and as a writing method) is incorporated, analyzed, and adapted. My own
strategies for teaching Austen incorporate carefully selected excerpts and complete letters (as applicable), her published novels, and media representations and adaptations. The letters have immense value in the college composition classroom, and they help contextualize Austen’s novels with students in the undergraduate college literature classroom. Also addressed is how to incorporate media representations of the author and her fiction as multimodal teaching tools. Recent media adaptations emphasize Austen’s relevance for undergraduate college students and demonstrate why Austen’s works and life continue to be depicted in media. In the end, Austen’s fiction remains popular because of the universality of its themes and the kinship readers feel with its author, and students of both composition and literature would benefit from analyzing Austen’s letters in the college classroom.
JANE AUSTEN UNCENSORED: A CRITICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL STUDY OF AUSTEN’S LETTERS FOR THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

BY

AMANDA SMOTHERS
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DEDICATION

For Arlene, Diane, and Kevin Smothers
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen’s letters are rife with barbed humor like this comment on a neighbor’s stillborn child: “Mrs Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing [sic] to a fright.—I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband” (Letter 10). Overall, Austen wrote roughly 3,000 letters in her lifetime; however, only a scant 161 physical letters exist today. As Deirdre Le Faye mentions, Austen left her personal letters to her sister Cassandra, who subsequently burned almost all of her own letters as well as most of Austen’s, possibly (according to Le Faye and other Austen scholars) because she wanted to censor Austen’s candid comments and criticism, often about family members, neighbors, friends, and health issues. While Le Faye’s account of the reason for the letters’ fate is well-known, Jo Modert, who compiled the only published edition of facsimiles of Austen’s letters, argues that this claim may be inaccurate because it is “based on one statement written by her niece Caroline in 1867 when she prepared her memories of Austen for [James Edward Austen-Leigh]’s Memoir”; in this letter, Caroline wrote that Cassandra “burnt the greater part, (as she told me), 2 or 3 years before her own death” (xxiv-xxv). Modert argues that Caroline’s statement could have been incorrect owing to the discrepancy between this statement and Cassandra’s own

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letter regarding her will, as well as Caroline’s deafness and tinnitus⁴, which could have led to misinterpretation or miscommunication (xxv).

Austen’s dedication to her craft and her successful execution of it are essential points to raise in a literature course because they help justify for students why she is worthy of study in the first place. As Jane Spencer notes in “Narrative Technique: Austen and Her Contemporaries,” Austen “developed an authoritative narrator sharper than [Fanny] Burney’s, a dramatic dialogue pithier than [Maria] Edgeworth’s, and a flexible combination of psychonarration and free indirect discourse that transformed Burney’s, [Ann] Radcliffe’s, and [Charlotte] Smith’s early attempts into a sustained and sympathetic inside view” (194). In fact, Austen had read works by these authors and mentioned them in her letters and novels (she memorably discusses Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic novels in both Northanger Abbey and Emma), which is evidence that she was acutely aware of her literary contemporaries and predecessors.

In spite of Austen’s popularity among scholars, readers, and audiences, and the wealth of value to be gained from studying her novels and letters in college composition and literature classrooms, almost no work has been done on using her correspondence as a pedagogical tool. Several of Austen’s letters make reference to her novels and all of her letters provide evidence of her writing style, wit, criticism, and sarcasm, qualities which can be discerned in her fiction as well, making the letters a valuable resource for context and comparison with her fiction-writing. In addition, the letters are accessible and provide students of composition ample opportunities to examine and assess the private writing of a famous author and apply what they learn to their own writing development.

⁴ According to the OED Online, “A sense of ringing in the ears” (“tinnitus, n.”).
Since there are so few extant letters, I will examine Austen’s surviving letters, assembling the wealth of historical, biographical, and literary details that can be gleaned from Austen’s private correspondence. Devoney Looser points out in “Dealing in Notions and Facts: Jane Austen and History Writing” that there is an outdated view of Austen as “an ahistorical writer” whose “novels were said to demonstrate a lack of interest in history” (216). She argues that “where and how to locate history in Austen’s texts ought to remain vigorously debated, as should most matters of great complexity and of literary and political consequence” (224-25). Looser usefully discusses not only Austen’s novels but her life and letters in establishing the historical aspects of Austen’s writing. Through discovery of information in Austen’s letters, I will propose ways to contextualize the correspondence historically, biographically, and literarily and to use them with college composition and undergraduate literature students.

The connection between Austen’s letters and her fiction is significant to a discussion of using the letters in the college literature classroom. As Miranda Burgess notes in “Sentiment and Sensibility: Austen, Feeling, and Print Culture,” “Austen addressed the connection between sensibility, volition, and print epigrammatically in her letters” while her “novels … discussed it with equal sophistication, but more directly and at length” (my emphasis; 229). Burgess concludes that “[f]or Austen, conversation – the exchange of opinion, especially about books – is the real locus of sensibility: the medium of social life and the source of social order as well, perhaps, as the momentum of social change” (236). Austen engages in this type of conversation in both her correspondence and fiction. This connection between Austen’s novels and letters is again very important in establishing a rationale for why the letters are important resources for the college classroom, especially in literature courses. I want to explore with students how Austen’s
letters could be beneficial as a teaching tool for not only Austen’s novels but the world of her novels through discovery of the “world” through her letters.

In *Why Jane Austen?* Rachel M. Brownstein reiterates the, as she calls it, “idiotic” but “oddly compelling” (63) question: Why do we read Austen’s novels? (Echoing in her first chapter title Lionel Trilling’s 1975 essay “Why We Read Jane Austen”). This question is not only important for justifying (if we even need to) why we teach Austen, but also for explaining why and how we could use her letters in the teaching of Austen. So, why do we read Austen, and why do we teach Austen in the American college classroom? According to Brownstein, Austen’s appeal lies in the “serious promise her novels hold out … of a meritocracy – by suggesting persuasively that true distinction inheres first of all and most importantly in command of language, where the making of distinctions has no end” (67). Brownstein argues that this idea is reflected in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* with Lizzy Bennet who “triumphs as a literary woman” and “reflects the rise of a literary elite” or “clerisy,” and in Austen’s own life as a “country parson’s daughter, no bluestocking, who admired Sam Johnson’s sentences [and] became a great novelist by reading popular novels critically, and learning to complicate the form.” Furthermore, Brownstein posits that Austen readers are invited “to desire and to emulate [Austen’s novels’] intelligence and wit and distinction, to want in on it” (67). In other words, Austen’s audience wants to feel as though they are a privileged class of readers, able to catch on to Austen’s dry humor⁵ and witty social commentary and even imitate it as, I would argue, the

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⁵ A famous example of this humor is evident in the well-known first lines of *Pride and Prejudice*: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters” (Austen 1).
creation of countless works of fan-fiction, sequels, parodies, mash-ups, and adaptations seems to attest.

The discussion of Austen and popular culture is significant in regard to teaching because students are inundated with pop culture media daily. Additionally, there is a divide between scholarly readers of Austen and popular readers. Juliette Wells observes in “New Approaches to Austen and the Popular Reader” that the proliferation of “Austen-inspired” fiction “offers literary scholars an exceptional opportunity to reach across the divide between academic and amateur readers” and that “Austen’s popular social currency, far from threatening or undermining our literary criticism, benefits our work very directly by bringing us students and readers who are curious to learn more and to discover what academic perspectives have to offer them” (88). Along these same lines, I would like to reveal how Austen’s letters can bridge the divide between “popular” Austen readers/viewers, as some students no doubt will be, and a critical, thorough analysis of Austen’s complex novels by revealing Austen’s personal writing and identifying how the voice of her letters is reflected in her literary writing. One way to make the letters accessible to “popular” readers is excerpting them, pulling out the best examples of her acerbic wit, which demonstrate directly and concisely how Austen develops and maintains her unique writing voice in both her correspondence- and literature-writing.

Austen’s avid readers may feel a kinship with the “accessible,” witty, and literary author: laughing at Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins knowingly, and cringing at Emma’s remarks to Miss Bates. Contrary to the back-cover blurb on Seth Grahame-Smith’s mashup Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, which describes the book as “complete with romance, heartbreak, swordfights, cannibalism, and thousands of rotting corpses” and claims that his mashup “transforms a
masterpiece of world literature into something you’d actually want to read,” Austen’s books sell well consistently, even after accounting for educational sales (i.e. students who are “forced” to buy her books for school). According to Nielson BookScan reports, *Pride and Prejudice* sold 110,000 copies in 2002, and nearly tripled to 318,000 copies just a few years later in 2006, one year after the Hollywood film adaptation starring Keira Knightly debuted in theatres (Waldman; Grossman). Clearly scores of people do “actually want to read” Austen’s novels. And, as I can attest, Grahame-Smith’s zombiefied version of *Pride and Prejudice*, while diverting and somewhat novel, ultimately distracts from Austen’s nuanced, drily comedic approach to social criticism, both by making some of the criticism self-consciously and unnecessarily explicit and by failing to add material to Austen’s text without making obvious which passages are Austen’s writing and which are Grahame-Smith’s attempts at mimicry.  

Countless critical works discuss Austen’s continued popularity, as evidenced in her pop culture appearances. As Judy Simons asserts in “Jane Austen and Popular Culture,” “No other English writer inspires the same intellectual rigor and irreverence as Austen. She has become a cultural icon, occupying a unique position in the modern world, her very name embodying a set of values which resonate even with those who have never read a word she wrote” (476). Those who have read what she wrote include members of what Mary Ann O’Farrell dubs “Austenian Subcultures,” the members of which have a tendency to develop “a fantasized friendship with Austen” (478). Austen or “Janeite” subcultures range from national, regional, and local societies to website communities such as the Republic of Pemberley and the “Austen YouTube

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6 I found the film adaptation of the zombie novel more humorous and cohesive than the novel. Mr. Collins is especially funny and oddly endearing, and I appreciated the homage to the iconic BBC version with Mr. Darcy randomly jumping into a pond for a swim.
subculture” (O’Farrell 484-86). These subcultures are interesting in identifying the different ways popular readers read and connect with Austen in contemporary society, whether it is through commodification, popular culture, Regency-themed gatherings, academic conferences, online interactions with fellow “Janeites,” or solitary reading.

College students have different levels of experience with Austen that may encompass one or more of these “subcultures” of Austen readers, so exploring their different approaches to Austen will help to develop effective teaching methods to challenge their preconceptions and encourage them to explore Austen from different angles, including “discovering” her letters and how they complement her fiction. On the other hand, students may also (more likely) not be familiar with Austen or her subcultures, in which case examining subcultures might lead to in-depth discussions of why Austen is popular to different groups of people to the extent that they have their own fan-subgroup. Austen’s continued relevance in popular culture makes her an appropriate, relevant, and provocative author to explore in the college classroom, through her correspondence, fiction, and pop culture media representations and adaptations.

Sales of Austen’s fiction and myriad works of fan fiction attest to the fact that Austen is as popular as ever, if not more so. Innumerable parodies, sequels, adaptations, tributes, pastiches, and spin-offs of Austen’s novels have been produced and continue to be churned out year after year. Recently, the romantic comedy Austenland (2013), based on Shannon Hale’s 2007 novel of the same name, relates the story of a “Janeite,” aptly named Jane, on her disillusioning experiences at a Jane Austen Regency immersion vacation in England. The novel and its film adaptation are self-aware parodies of Austen fanaticism, replete with “I ♥ Darcy” stickers and tote bags, a life-size cardboard cutout of Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy, and a “real-life” Wickham
and Darcy love triangle with the movie’s heroine. Another recent film related to Austen is the BBC adaptation of P.D. James’s murder-mystery sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011). P.D. James’s novel and its film adaptation (2013) focus on a murder on the Pemberley estate six years after the marriage of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. James dates her own novel to 1803, which places the marriage of Lizzy and Mr. Darcy in 1797, the year Austen’s original manuscript for *First Impressions* (*Pride and Prejudice*’s original title) was completed. In addition to Austen tributes and sequels such as *Austenland* and *Death Comes to Pemberley*, an epistolary novella called *Lady Susan*, written by Austen in 1794 and published posthumously, is currently being adapted for the silver screen starring Kate Beckinsale and Chloe Sevigny. The film will be titled *Love and Friendship*, which is the title of a different epistolary story written by Austen (c. 1790) and published in volumes of her *Juvenilia*.

Besides big screen tributes to Austen’s fiction, various web series have popped up within the past few years. On YouTube, the popular and Primetime Emmy-winning web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013) follows a modern-day Lizzie, a vlogging[^8], debt-ridden graduate student, while *Welcome to Sanditon* (2013- ), a YouTube sequel to/spin-off of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, focuses on graphic artist “Gigi Darcy,” who replaces the original heroine of Austen’s unfinished novel (*Sanditon*), connecting the unrelated novel to the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. Another spin-off, *Emma Approved* (2013- ), focuses on entrepreneur matchmaker Emma, her business partner Alex Knightly, and her musically-inclined assistant Harriet[^9]. Also appearing on YouTube but unrelated to the previous three series is the contemporary adaptation

[^8]: Video web-logging (a.k.a. “blogging”). See Merriam-Webster online dictionary entries for “vlog” and “blog.”
[^9]: For further information on all three series, see Pemberley Digital’s website: http://www.pemberleydigital.com/.
of the novel *Mansfield Park* entitled *From Mansfield with Love*, a multimedia vlog series which debuted in December 2014 and was produced by Foot in the Door Theatre.

Not only is Austen fiction showing up in web series: a long-rumored *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* feature-film adaptation premiered in movie theaters February 5, 2016. The film is based on Seth Grahame-Smith’s aforementioned 2009 irreverent mashup of Austen’s novel and zombie adventure fiction, which begins somewhat familiarly:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of living dead. (13)

This “expansion” of Austen’s novel is reported to be approximately 85% Austen and 15% Grahame-Smith (Sikka). As NPR’s Madhulika Sikka cheekily, though not witheringly, states in her discussion of “The Mayhem of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*,” “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a writer in want of a publishing contract is well advised to rip off—excuse me—expand upon anything written by Jane Austen” (n.p.). The tenacity of Austen’s omnipresence in popular culture substantiates Sikka’s statement at the end of her opinion piece: “Every rip-off opens the door to one more person who just might be curious enough to venture back to the source” (n.p.). The fan-fiction, sequels, mashups, pastiches, and adaptations of Austen’s work pique the interest of new audiences who not only read these “rip-offs” but return to the original novels themselves. These recent and forthcoming popular culture appearances by Austen make plain that the author continues to be relevant and find an eager and willing

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10 See the website for details and updates: http://mansfieldseries.wix.com/mansfieldwithlove.

11 See prior note on “vlogging.”

12 A community theatre founded by University of Winchester students (Winchester, Hampshire, UK) (“About”).
audience two centuries after the posthumous publication of her last novels in 1817. Austen is as relevant for American college students today as she has ever been.

Having established Austen’s relevance for students, I will point out that there are intricate connections between what we can read in Austen’s novels and what she reveals to us through her correspondence. In “Jane Austen’s Life and Letters,” Kathryn Sutherland discusses representations of Austen through the editing of her letters by her sister Cassandra, and the editing and publication of her letters by her nephew James Edward Austen Leigh, her niece’s husband Lord Brabourne, and other of Austen’s descendants. Sutherland contends, “Jane Austen’s letters are the key to everything …. The puzzle of the letters stimulates us to articulate just what it is that makes Jane Austen’s fiction so special” (18). Sutherland goes on to declare that Austen’s letters reveal her fiction: “there is no difference of style” (19). As evidence, she points to Austen’s “earliest extant letters, from January 1796, when she was just 20, [which] contain traces of the same arch motivation and expression, the same performative exuberance as the teenage fiction” (her Juvenilia) (19). Furthermore, Sutherland points out that Austen’s letters had “an audience of more than one” (20); she cites some of Austen’s own letters to Cassandra in which Austen indicates that the sisters’ letters were read by the recipient and shared with other family members and close friends: in other words, they were “confidential, but … not exclusive” (21). I would add that Austen’s letters could be regarded as a place where Austen tried to develop her writing craft, making them a valuable resource for understanding her writing process, development, style, and voice.

Sutherland’s point is relevant to teaching using Austen’s letters because it provides a claim which we can investigate in the classroom: there is “no difference of style” between the
letters and fiction. While Sutherland’s claim is provocative, it is not completely accurate stated as an absolute; there are many similarities in her writing voice between the fiction and nonfiction, but claiming that there is “no difference” is somewhat of an exaggeration. In “Omniscience for Atheists: Or, Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator,” William Nelles argues that the author herself is “the model” for her own “infallible narrators” (128). He points to a passage from a letter written to her sister “about the time she begins working on Emma”: “as I must leave off being young, I find many Douceurs in being a sort of Chaperon for I am put on the Sofa near the Fire & can drink as much wine as I like” (qtd. in Nelles 128), and then quotes Austen in a footnote linking her correspondence and fiction, noting that her “letters demonstrate the historical author’s own propensity for mind reading in real life: ‘It was a pleasant Evening, Charles found it remarkably so, but I cannot tell why, unless the absence of Miss Terry—towards whom his conscience reproaches him with now being perfect indifferent—was a relief to him’” (Nelles n14). Nelles argues that Austen is essentially the narrator of her novels (a claim which may make many scholars who stress the separation of narrator and author uncomfortable) in that her narrator is, like Austen, a sort of telepathic storyteller with insights into characters’ innermost thoughts but without omniscience. He uses these excerpts from Austen’s letters to draw connections between Austen’s “narrative” voice in her correspondence and her “narrator” voice in the novels. While I believe Austen’s narrators are more complex and unreliable than Nelles argues, I do agree that there is an important connection between the voice in her letters and her novels.

Offering a different perspective on Austen’s narrators in *Jane Austen’s Narrative Techniques*, Massamaliano Morini contends that Austen’s narrators are generally detached, and
“it is only with the unfolding of the plot that we can infer something about the general ideological (and ethical) framework of the novel …. Though the narrator tends to remain aloof from the facts he/she narrates and the conversational exchanges he/she reports, those facts and those exchanges cast a revealing light on the narrator’s aloofness” (70). Morini echoes this sentiment in “Who Evaluates Whom and What in Austen’s Novels?”: “the moments when he/she [the narrator] demonstrably evaluates the narrative are few and far between” (419). Morini distinguishes himself from Nelles in his separation of Austen and her narrator, arguing,

In the end, we find that we cannot “catch” Jane Austen in her novels, because she is simply not there to be caught …. The presence of “Jane Austen” awakens the reader’s desire to know Jane Austen’s mind, and at the same time it posits access to “the real Jane Austen” as impossible. With a further complicating move, however, even “Jane Austen” goes into hiding behind her reflectors, or in the meanderings of description. The reader can rely on no stable evaluative center, and opacity becomes the rule of the most crystal-clear of narrative creations. (“Who Evaluates…” 426-27)

Morini highlights the complexity of Austen’s narrative style in that “[o]n the one hand, Austen tricks us into believing that certain evaluative comments [by the narrator] are more reliable than others; while on the other, she allows us no stable source of authoritativeness, by proving that a chance word, or a silence, can contain a bigger grain of truth than a long ‘authorized’ speech” (427). In defending Austen’s writing, Morini states that he “does not aim at reinstating a dehistoricized, socially and intellectually harmless reading” of Austen’s novels, but that “[e]ven in the scarcity of textual evidence for Jane Austen’s artistic awareness (a brief passage in NA, some references in her correspondence, the epistolary advice given to her niece Anna), Henry James’s accusation of ‘unconsciousness’ is implicitly refuted” (Narrative 5). While I agree with

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13 Austen’s talent was a “narrow unconscious perfection of form” to James; in other words, Austen’s success in writing was accidental and an amateurish pastime for a domestic spinster rather than deliberate and a skillful craft for a professional author. See Henry James’s letter to George Pellew of 23 June 1883 (James 189).
Morini’s defense of Austen’s writing craft, I would disagree with Morini that evidence is scant for “Austen’s artistic awareness”; the list he provides actually reveals much about Austen’s thoughts about her writing craft (see Ch. 3 for a detailed critical overview of Austen’s references to literature and writing in her letters).

Unfortunately, Morini makes only brief reference to a direct comparison between Austen’s “narrative and epistolary styles” in *Jane Austen’s Narrative Techniques*, relying on a quote from Caroline Austen who characterized the letters as “very well expressed, and 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 an opinion — so that to strangers they could be no transcript of her mind — they would not feel that they knew her any the better for having read them” (qtd. in Morini n6). Morini makes no argument about Austen’s correspondence aside from the inclusion of this quote, the claim within which I endeavor to refute through my detailed discussion of the wealth of opinions and information that can be gleaned from the letters (for details, see Chapters 1-3).

The similarities between Austen’s writing style in the letters and novels is, contrary to what Morini-via-Caroline-Austen would lead us to believe, strikingly similar at points. And although Q. D. Leavis points out valid differences in “vocabulary and idiom” in the letters and the novels and argues, “There is much greater freedom of expression in the correspondence, while the language of the novels … is always restrained …. The vivacity of the novels is controlled, it is art, whereas that of the letters is the careless high-spirits of conversation” (111-12), I would argue that there is enough similarity in the style of writing and attitude to be significant. For instance, Austen wrote in a letter to her niece, “Single Women have a dreadful
propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (Letter 153). This line could easily be misattributed to Emma, as the titular character delivers the following striking discourse on women’s poverty and marriage:

Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls, but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable. (68-69)

While there are some notable differences between Austen’s writing style in her correspondence and novels, such as the absence of a continuous narrative and less reserve in the letters, we do discover the familiar Austen voice when we read both: observant, meticulous, satiric, critical, and drily humorous. These are the elements of Austen’s writing that represent a common thread throughout the fiction and nonfiction.

Overall, my purpose in this dissertation is to make explicit the value of Austen’s personal letters for learning in college courses, particularly composition and literature. By focusing on both critical and pedagogical work on Austen, I hope to demonstrate that more scholarship on teaching Austen’s writing in post-secondary education is necessary and is a great under-tapped research field. Additionally, at least as evidenced in NIU’s English syllabi from the past several years, Austen’s fiction is underrepresented in the college classroom. As pervasive as Austen is in popular culture, she seems not to be as “popular” on college classroom syllabi.

In the end, by reflecting on my own teaching practices and attempting to think outside of the box to generate new ways to teach college composition and literature using Austen’s writing, I aim to demonstrate the importance of reflection and innovation in professional development. Sharing experiences and ideas with other educators, not only on topics of critical importance but of pedagogical consequence as well, provides us opportunities to improve and grow as educators,
helps our peers in higher education benefit from our experience, and challenges us to develop new ways of exploring subject matter. More post-secondary faculty should endeavor to advance Austen scholarship on teaching the author, her fiction, and her correspondence, much like Shakespeare scholars and educators have done.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{LITERATURE REVIEW}

While critical writing on Austen’s novels is abundant, critical \textit{pedagogical} work on teaching Austen is comparatively scarce, and I have uncovered no thorough critical work directly concerning the use of Austen’s \textit{letters} as a college teaching tool, although there are a few references to using Austen’s letters in some teaching-focused literature. Thus, throughout my dissertation, I utilize resources which outline or reference teaching approaches designed for Austen’s work, as well as materials that address using letters and letter-writing in college composition and literature classrooms. Relatively few articles from educational journals have proven beneficial, primarily because most are geared toward elementary and high school education, but also because most resources that are relevant to college teaching are dated. Educational articles that I reference mainly focus on teaching at the college level and cover such topics as improving literacy, teaching English in two-year colleges, letter writing in the college

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} To provide a little context for the number of resources on teaching Austen’s work, she could be compared to another author who is as enduring in popular culture as she is: William Shakespeare. A quick Google search of “How to Teach Jane Austen” yields just about half a million results, whereas a search of “How to Teach Shakespeare” yields nearly 22 million. An NIU Library search (all I-Share Libraries) yields just over 1200 results for Shakespeare and 83 for Austen, and in the MLA International Library database, 839 for Shakespeare and 114 for Austen. Although Shakespeare has thirty-eight plays attributed to his authorship to Austen’s six finished novels and one epistolary novella (\textit{Lady Susan}), in my own experience, Shakespeare classes tend to focus on the more popular, “mainstream” plays (\textit{Romeo and Juliet}, \textit{Julius Caesar}, \textit{Macbeth}, \textit{Hamlet}, \textit{King Lear}, etc.), leaving out most of the histories (save \textit{Richard III} and \textit{Henry V}) as well as numerous less-produced and adapted texts (such as \textit{Pericles}, \textit{The Two Noble Kinsmen}, and \textit{Cymbeline}, among others).}
classroom, using literary letter-writing for improving reading responses in developmental students, teaching English majors, and teaching Austen’s fiction. Additionally, I broach critical literature throughout my dissertation chapters as applicable.

I have discovered several sources that provide useful and relevant frameworks for teaching college composition, including incorporating letter-writing and creating a dialogue of sources in Michael B. Prince’s “Literacy and Genre: Towards a Pedagogy of Mediation” (1989). Prince presents a framework for teaching college composition, many components of which are still used by college composition teachers, such as those just mentioned. Other scholars discuss letter-writing as a learning activity, including Elaine Fredericksen (see “Letter Writing in the College Classroom” (2000)), who also discusses the history of letter-writing as a “pedagogical device” used to “[offer] students an opportunity to practice writing skills” and “opportunities to develop a written voice that is natural rather than affected” (278). Along these same lines, I will point out that Austen’s letters represent her un-affect ed writing voice and reveal her “natural” personality and character, which I argue is reflected in her fiction writing as well. Prince and Fredericksen both validate my own uses of letter writing in composition and literature classrooms and incorporating Austen’s letters in writing and critical thinking tasks.

I would also argue that using letters with developmental writers would be beneficial because they are accessible and letter-writing effectively helps developmental writers succeed in writing courses (see Gregory Shafer’s “Using Letters for Process and Change in the Basic Writing Class” (2000)). Thus, not only is it beneficial to read letters as examples of unaffected, personal writing, but to focus on the process of letter writing, from brainstorming and notes to drafting, critique, and revising, helps students provide substantial (rather than surface or
mechanical) feedback for revision and improvement, which in turn encourages students to focus on these types of higher-order concerns in their own writing. There are unique challenges faced by developmental writers and their composition teachers, and letter-writing can help combat students’ prior negative writing experiences and grow their appreciation and enthusiasm for writing by developing their unique writing voices. This idea is important to my study because not only developmental writers have negative outlooks on writing; many of my own composition students, even talented writers, have entered my classroom predisposed to writing aversion because of past experiences. Writing letters and examining and critiquing others’ letters, including those of famous authors such as Austen, is a way to give students creative and emotional freedom and allow them to become more invested in their writing and hopefully counteract their apathy for or animosity toward writing.

Developmental writers are not the only group to benefit from using letters in the classroom; developmental readers in college can also discover the value of reading and writing letters. In developmental reading courses, using literary letters can engage students as critical readers, aiding them in summary, evaluation, and feedback of written texts (see Frailey, Buck-Rodriguez, and Anders (2009)). In other words, letters can be used in the college classroom as tools for students’ critical literary analysis and reading responses and as opportunities for student-instructor communication. A way to incorporate Austen’s letters in these types of exercises is to have students examine excerpts from her letters in which she comments on her own reading. In this way, students can see how Austen employs reader response and literary critique in her private correspondence. This same method for using letters in the college classroom to foster critical reading responses could be employed for lower-level college
literature classes as well, but it is especially helpful for developmental readers because the brevity of letters is a less intimidating introduction to reading response.

In literature courses, letter writing allows students to express thoughts about themselves and course readings, and increases student comfort with writing about literature and sharing those thoughts with peers. Introductory literature courses especially benefit from letter writing activities because students are not usually English majors or minors, but upper-level literature courses could benefit as well because informal letter-writing allows students to record reading impressions, and advanced literature students have a heavier reading load and read much more in-depth than introductory students, which means they often do not have as many opportunities to share general reading impressions with their peers (see Roger Whitlock (1977)). Using letters to develop students’ reflections on literature is a good place to start in college classrooms, especially lower-level literature courses; however, I would argue for scaffolding letter writing, even in lower-level courses, beginning with more informal, less structured letter assignments (reflections) and moving toward more critical responses leading up to short essay assignments and term papers. Since most students nowadays have never written a formal letter (or even a proper email!), letter writing assignments themselves need to be scaffolded so that students learn how to master letter-writing as a form before moving up to critical response writing. Short guided critical response assignments then lead toward more sophisticated critical analysis in short essay assignments, and those short essay assignments will lead to a culminating assessment: the term paper. In a composition course, the term paper will be an argumentative research essay, whereas in a literature course, the term paper would be an advanced literary analysis.
The research or term paper is often the culminating assessment in college English courses, but it often fails to fulfil its objectives because students need more practice writing literary criticism before the final paper, which is why scaffolding writing is so important in literature courses (see Sherry Lee Linkon (2011)). However, the idea of scaffolding in writing papers is not new to college composition teachers; scaffolding is especially important in essay and research paper writing, the primary culminating assessments of composition courses. My own composition scaffolding incorporates preliminary assignments designed to develop certain writing and critical thinking skills, leading incrementally to the final research paper: thus, writing is a process rather than simply a product. As letter-writing serves an important purpose in composition and lower-level literature course scaffolding, it also can easily be implemented in an upper-level literature course framework. Learning objectives of “self-reflective reading” and “noting details” and “observing anomalies and patterns” are very similar to the outcomes observed by proponents of literary letter-writing assignments (Linkon 89). The added benefit of introducing letter writing early in the process is to help students gain confidence in their own writing voice and gradually develop more critical responses to texts through letter-writing and responses from fellow students and the instructor.

Importantly, Austen’s letters in particular offer opportunities for learning not found by reading letters from just anyone. First and foremost, Austen’s letters were “private” in a way that some other authors’ letters were not (see my discussion of historical letter-writing in Ch. 2). Too, Austen herself was unique in the literary world in that she did not socialize with other famous authors or in lofty literary or social circles, as Charlotte Brontë did after she achieved professional success, for example; Austen’s circle was comparatively intimate, though not
sheltered. Furthermore, Austen’s letters are limited and little is really known about her life, both
facts which increase interest in her life and lead to “filling the gaps” using conjecture and her
own fiction as inspiration. Finally, the letters are the only personal nonfiction writing of Austen
that we have; she kept no journal or pocket diaries in which to record her daily life (like the
Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens). Instead, Austen wrote to her
sister Cassandra in the bulk of the small number of surviving letters, she visited family and
friends instead of socializing with the elite, and she recorded her impressions in her
correspondence instead of a private journal (as far as we know). Add her sustained popularity in
print and media over two hundred years, and the extent of her distinction among her peers
becomes obvious.

Although literary criticism of Austen’s fiction abounds, pedagogical criticism proves
more difficult to uncover. Most criticism on teaching Austen focuses on critical lenses through
which to view the novels with students. They also often seem to imply that there is a “right
reading” of Austen’s novels (see, for instance, Wendy Moffat (1991) for a feminist critical
reading of *Emma*). Ultimately, such conclusions are helpful in encouraging students to consider
different ways to read the novels (i.e. rather than merely for plot), but they can also be limiting
because they focus on one specific critical lens through which to read Austen’s novels. In
addition to Moffat, some other Austen scholars have written essays only cursorily related to
teaching. The texts one would assume to be the most useful in teaching Austen based on title
alone, Marcia McClintock Folsom’s *Approaches to Teaching Austen’s Pride and Prejudice*
(1993), *Approaches to Teaching Emma* (2004), and *Approaches to Teaching Mansfield Park*
(2014), include numerous essays on a variety of topics of interest to Austen scholars and students
covering these texts, but many chapters are only superficially related to teaching, with few explicitly discussing Austen in the classroom (e.g. see Laura Mooneyham White’s consideration of the nuances of class in *Emma*). Few of the essays in these volumes actually discuss the challenges of teaching Austen’s novels in college courses.

By examining Austen’s novels historically and in the context of her letters rather than just through a single critical lens, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the novels based on historical and biographical contexts rather than simply reader response, as students are wont to fall back on. Moreover, contrary to educators’ uneasiness with their students having the “wrong” reactions and responses to the text (see again Moffat), I encourage students’ personal responses to and interpretations of the literature I teach, but I also enjoy seeing my students’ perspectives change when they receive new information that puts the novel in historical and cultural contexts (see Arthur E. Walzer’s (1995) discussion of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory in *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*). Contextualizing Austen’s novels ultimately brings new understanding to the texts, and one of my objectives in introducing Austen’s letters to teaching her novels is to encourage deeper contextual understanding, which is why I also provide historical context when teaching Austen’s letters (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Encouraging reader response is a starting-off point for literary studies if it leads toward more in-depth critical analysis. Few critical sources I have examined provide an analytic model for studying Austen’s novels, and one such rare resource is Vivien Jones’s aptly titled *How to Study a Jane Austen Novel* (1987), which does not merely offer critical interpretations to Austen’s novels for students (for this, see Ian Milligan’s (1988) reductive plot summaries, interpretation, and commentary that encourages passive “learning” over critical thought).
Instead, she outlines the *types* of critical questions students should ask themselves about the novels and models some answers, provides an “analytic model” for “close reading of the text” (21-22), and presents guidelines for developing essays on the novels. Jones’s book is useful not only for students of Austen; those *teaching* her works could also benefit from the strategies she proposes for analyzing the texts by adding these strategies to their teaching of her novels through developing an analytic model and then modeling questions and answers for texts so that students can develop their own critical analytic interpretations.

An essential component to my approaches in teaching Austen is stressing the importance of historical context for understanding Austen’s novels, and I would add that biographical context of the author is also important to teasing out effective interpretations of her novels. One scholar who approaches teaching Austen through historicizing the novels and encouraging students to tease out connections between the literature and its socio-historical/cultural context is Zoreh T. Sullivan. In “Theory for the Untheoretical: Rereading and Reteaching Austen, Brontë, and Conrad,” Sullivan discusses how to teach *Pride and Prejudice* by historicizing and deconstructing it, and how to address the ideological issues in the text (573). Sullivan concludes that historicizing texts in the classroom challenges her students “to recover a reinvigorated sense of connections between literature and the society that produced it” and to read responsibly (579). I would add to this assertion that an essential way to examine these connections with Austen’s writing is to read her correspondence. What better way to understand the immediate family and society that “produced” Austen’s fiction than to read her own thoughts on matters of immediate concern, rather than just examining historical context broadly: for instance, investigating Austen’s personal references to the Napoleonic Wars and military (of which brothers were
members) in addition to learning about the broader implications of the events and their impact on facets of society while reading those of Austen’s novels with central characters who are in the military (notably, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*).

Adding another layer to discussions of Austen’s novels and the culture from which they sprang would be to introduce to students film representations of the novels, examining filmic choices made in the adaptations and exploring how the films are more representative of the time in which they were produced than of Austen’s novels and the society in which she lived. Most scholars discussing Austen and film do not address teaching film and literature (see Troost and Greenfield (2001), Pucci and Thompson (2003), Macdonald and Macdonald (2003), and Wiltshire (2009)). The limits of collections on Austen and media are generally acknowledged by the editors and authors (almost immediately dated); however, these texts are useful in examining adaptation, and they can provide models for reaching students through American pop culture phenomena. Moreover, though many these texts do not explicitly address studying or teaching Austen using film, they do bring up thought-provoking questions that could be presented to students: what is added or emphasized to appeal to modern audiences that may be anachronistic, or omitted or implied in the original novel, and why do Austen adaptations enjoy sustained popularity among filmmakers and moviegoers?

Unfortunately, only one book I could find on Austen and film focused on teaching: Louise Flavin’s *Jane Austen in the Classroom: Viewing the Novel/Reading the Film* (2004). Flavin introduces her approach to teaching Austen’s novels, which involves character analysis and using film adaptations in the classroom. She concentrates on methods for teaching each of Austen’s six finished novels: teaching the novels themselves and then incorporating specific film
adaptations. Flavin’s book usefully explains pedagogical techniques, but it does not mention how Austen’s letters could also be utilized. Building on Flavin’s discussion of comparative Austen literature and film studies, I would add a comparison of Austen’s life as represented in her letters and film depictions of the author. Students would examine how “accurately” film representations of Austen depict the author’s character as exemplified in her letters. Students will study Austen’s letters and analyze biographic film representations before reading her so they can approach her fiction with an image of the author, allowing them to perceive and appreciate the often overlooked but important critical, satirical, and witty passages in her fiction. Reading the letters alongside the novels and biographies or biopics also allows students to perceive how filmmakers conflate the author with her novels. My goal in using film alongside literature (see Ch. 7) is to provide materials that can be adapted for new media, and to anticipate other iterations of Austen in popular culture.

Few sources are useful in directly addressing Austen’s literature, correspondence, and media in conjunction. However, one source comes close. Jodie L. Wyett’s “Jane Austen Then and Now: Teaching Georgian Jane in the Jane-Mania Media Age” contends with teaching Austen while considering media adaptations and incorporating her manuscripts. Wyett rightly argues that “college teachers must take into account the ways in which our students gain exposure to certain literary canons that we too often taken for granted” and that we should “offer students a framework not only for the historical study of Austen’s six published novels and her manuscript works but also for the sustained examination of some of the recent movie adaptations and popular culture spin-offs of her work” (n.p.). I wholeheartedly agree with Wyett that exploring media influences and representations is essential to teaching Austen effectively, and I
would add that studying Austen’s letters is also an important component of discovering her writing style and voice, discerning her perspectives on her own writing and publication process, and addressing students’ possible media influences, which may include inaccurate and romanticized biographical representations of Austen.

One way to demonstrate for students the importance of letters in Austen’s life is to examine the extensive use of letters in her novels. In “Letters and their Role in Revealing Class and Personal Identity in Pride and Prejudice,” Jodi A. Devine covers the epistolary histories of Austen’s novels and the important role that letters play within the novels. For example, Devine argues that “[t]he letters in Pride and Prejudice provide the characters with multiple voices; readers see and hear the actions and the dialogue via the filter of the narrator while the characters’ letters provide insights into their thoughts and emotions” (n.p.). Devine discusses how letters help shape characterization in the novel. Since Austen makes extensive use of fictional letters in her novels to reveal information about her characters, her own letters can be similarly explored and analyzed as representations and revelations of Austen’s character.

Regrettably, Austen’s identity even through her letters has been misrepresented historically. In fact, the Austen family’s correspondence and the editing of Austen’s letters have crafted a narrative of Austen’s life history that does not match reality. This issue is broached, usefully, by Robert L. Mack in “The Austen Family Writing: Gossip, Parody, and Corporate Personality.” Mack discusses the correspondence of numerous of Austen’s family members and how their letters construct a “worthy and coherent narrative of domestic identity” (39). The editing of letters is an important consideration when determining how to use Austen’s letters in the classroom: making students aware that Austen’s letters are limited. One way to address this is
to have students read the edited letters to identify alterations and analyze how those changes craft a particular image of Austen, as compared to the Austen revealed in the unexpurgated letters. Perceptions of Austen are not only tied to these carefully crafted depictions of Austen and her family through selective editing; they are also connected to interpretations of her fiction. For many decades, there persisted the perception of Austen as “an upholder of the norms of her particular age” (Lescinski 3). While Joan. M. Lescinski (1992), for one, concedes that one could teach Austen’s novels “as the conventional happy ending of the early British novel which rewards the morally upright and punishes the dastardly” (6), Austen’s texts are more complicated than that, and deeper analysis lends itself to richer class discussions. Discussions of different interpretations of Austen’s novels demonstrate why it is so important to put them in a socio-historical context and the context of Austen’s own life reflected in her letters: by understanding their context, students can more effectively interpret them (see Ch. 3 for “Biographical Context” in Austen’s letters).

In the end, Austen’s work has been devalued historically and its importance continues to be questioned and deemphasized by readers who cannot discern the subtleties inherent in her novels, and reading Austen’s letters next to her novels could assist scholarly understandings of the intricacies of her fiction. In Searching for Jane Austen, Emily Auerbach presents an excellent argument for and demonstration of why Austen’s unedited letters are a valuable resource for understanding the true personality and life of the author in spite of long-standing misperceptions of Austen as “polite,” “sweet temper[ed],” “modest,” and “humble mind[ed]” (7). I would argue that reading her letters is one way to familiarize students with the author’s personality, which in turn reveals those elements of her personality in her fiction. Auerbach also criticizes biographers
and scholars who have referred to Austen informally as “Jane” (30), which de-emphasizes her literary importance and status as an important writer. She notes that while recent biographers and critics acknowledge Austen as a serious writer, there persists a “widespread cultural bias” against single women writers (32). Auerbach also rightly criticizes those who perpetuate the myth that Austen’s life was “uneventful” because she was unmarried and had no children (29).

In addition to dismissing or pitying Austen because of her “spinsterhood,” readers and biographers are tempted to invent biographical details for her to validate her writerly talent, but reading Austen’s letters will help students view Austen’s life and work with more discernment. Austen is unique in that her life has generated more interest than her contemporaries’ lives (the only other notable British author of the long nineteenth century with a successful mainstream film biopic is John Keats in Bright Star (2009)), which is why her letters are an important (though fragmented) source of information about the author. Another imperative point Auerbach raises concerns adaptations of Austen’s work propagating the romance story depiction of her novels (32). Auerbach’s insights demonstrate why critical work in teaching with Austen’s letters is essential: reading Austen’s uncensored words gives students a truer sense of Austen’s personality and life and illuminates the social criticism, wit, and satire of her novels. By uncensoring Austen through reading and analyzing her letters, our students can truly and fully appreciate her life and works. Ultimately, by focusing on the value of Austen’s letters when applied as models for letter-writing in the composition classroom, employed as a source revealing important cultural, historical, and biographical information in the literature classroom, and used in conjunction with her fiction and media representations and adaptations in the

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15 This contention is all the more intriguing when one considers what Caroline Austen said about the unrelevatory character of Austen’s letters.
literature classroom, I endeavor to build upon Auerbach’s study by demonstrating how her correspondence is a valuable teaching tool when incorporated into lessons on Austen to counteract misperceptions of the author and her fiction.

**METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

I have developed ways to teach using Austen’s letters that are relevant to different types of college classrooms: first-year composition, lower-level literature, and upper-level literature. I consider a wide range of pedagogical concerns and issues, including teaching college composition, incorporating the letter-writing in college composition, teaching literature major classes generally, and teaching and studying Austen’s novels specifically. Although much of my study is theoretical, I also discuss the few opportunities I have taken to implement select lessons and assignments in my own teaching experiences, including first-year Composition I and II (ENGLI 1101 and 1102) at a community college, College of DuPage, and a general education introduction to fiction course (ENGL 110: Experience of Fiction) at Northern Illinois University.

My examples of practical application consists of implementing lessons using Austen’s letters as a teaching tool as appropriate to individual courses in undergraduate composition and literary studies, and I have compiled some anecdotal information on these learning and teaching experiences through observation of student receptiveness, attitudes, and participation and review of course and programmatic learning outcomes. I gauge pedagogical effectiveness of lessons and assignments by explaining desired learning outcomes, and I interpret these results to determine how accurate my hypotheses are regarding the usefulness of Austen’s letters in teaching different types of college English courses.
One limitation of my study is the scarcity of other critical work on implementing Austen’s letters in the college classroom. However, I also consider this a boon to my study because it speaks to the originality of my research. Nevertheless, this lack of critical work restricts my own efforts because I have a limited number of resources with which to compare my own concepts for using Austen’s letters in teaching college composition and literature courses and from which to cull ideas which I could adapt for my own purposes. I do make use of the many helpful resources at my disposal and endeavor to build upon the literature with my own study.

My study’s other limitations include opportunities to implement and assess my ideas for teaching Austen’s letters in a limited number and type of college courses, which include the two course sequence in first-year college composition at a community college and a general education fiction survey course for non-majors at a university. Because of the number and type of courses that have been available to me for field research and implementation, I have no course reactions for upper-division literature classes. A related limitation includes student body populations in the courses in which I implement my teaching methods. Respondents and field research subjects are students in each course in which the strategies are implemented, which is restricted to the courses I am assigned to teach. My community college composition students were completing a required general education course sequence, while my university literature students were enrolled in a general education elective course.

The limitations of my study are unavoidable because of the nature of dissertation research time constraints and the limited opportunities available to me for conducting field research within the doctoral program and adjunct teaching positions, including no opportunities to teach
upper-division literature courses. Looking forward, the limitations outlined here could be overcome in future research by implementing lessons and assessments in similar courses over several semesters, comparing the results of each subsequent semester to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of using Austen’s letters in each course. Moreover, opportunities could arise at a later date to teach a wider variety of literature courses, both lower-level and upper-level, in which Austen’s letters could be utilized. In this case, the results of assessment in those courses could be compared to each other: lower-level compared with lower-level, and upper-level with upper-level.

**Organization**

Throughout my dissertation, I introduce, incorporate, analyze, and adapt previous work on teaching Austen and teaching with letters both as a teaching tool and as a writing method, ultimately developing my own methods for teaching Austen that incorporate carefully selected excerpts and complete letters, her published novels, and recent media representations and adaptations. After this “Introduction” Chapter (Chapter 1), I have crafted six chapters (Chs. 2-7) to discuss the critical and pedagogical value of Austen’s correspondence for college composition and literature courses.

In Chapter 2, I focus on historical context and using Austen’s letters to discover details about Regency England and Austen. First, I discuss the art and practice of letter-writing in Austen’s historical period, and I explain how this information reveals why Austen’s letters are helpful for understanding the historical context in which she was writing. I will examine what Austen’s letters reveal about historical context, and I will address why studying the history of
letter-writing in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries with students will supply them with essential facts about the evolution of letter writing as well as the characteristics of correspondence-writing during Austen’s era. Austen’s letters in particular clarify myriad details of the historical period in which she wrote: Regency England, the military and Napoleonic Wars, economics, primogeniture and patriarchy, women’s issues, business, and socioeconomic status. In addition, the letters divulge remarkable facts about Austen’s opinions of family, friends, and neighbors, and about her own personality and perspectives on issues of concern. By examining these important aspects of her letters, students of Austen’s fiction will better understand these matters in the novels. In the end, the historical information contained in this chapter as well as the biographical details provided in the next chapter are intertwined in Austen’s letters and fiction.

In Chapter 3, I move on from historical context to biographical information contained in the letters. First, I address myriad criticism of the letters themselves, especially the misconception that they reveal little about the author. I argue that the letters are a valuable source of information about Austen’s life and perceptions, and in the rest of the chapter, I explore how Austen’s correspondence reveals her personal and social lives through her references to family, social circles, and herself. Austen’s letters disclose information about copious topics relevant to the author, a wealth of historical and biographical details through which she reveals her character, viewpoints on various points of interest (current events, notable people, courtship, marriage, childbirth, etc.), sometimes harsh or censorious sentiments, and amusing remarks. The biographical context revealed in Austen’s correspondence helps students uncover how Austen’s
life was affected by her socio-historical circumstances. In the end, with Austen’s letters, the biographical and historical are entwined.

In Chapter 4, I focus on Austen’s reading habits and perceptions of literature, as well as her thoughts on writing. I argue that her letters are especially edifying regarding the role of reading and writing in Austen’s life, and this chapter is very much connected to the previous two chapters in its historical and biographical points of interest. Passages of particular import that are examined in this chapter are those that contradict criticism of Austen as not a serious, professional author, instead revealing Austen to be very involved in the publication of her novels, passionate about her work, and opinionated on her writing’s value. Just as her letters reveal historical and biographical context, her references to literature, writing, and publication equally shed light on Austen’s character. I will explore how, through Austen’s letters, students can unearth her opinions on what she was reading and writing, including issues with her novel-writing such as the difficult processes of publishing her work. Students can also see how well-read Austen was through the scope of her reading in various subjects and genres. All of these details reveal to students what were Austen’s literary influences and how she became an author who has rarely been out of print and not since the publication of her nephew’s Memoir of Jane Austen in 1869 (“Jane Austen First Editions”). Ultimately, the details revealed in Chapters 2-4 are important in demonstrating for students why Austen’s writing is worth reading and what wealth of information can be garnered from her letters. While it is feasible to use Austen’s letters without providing historical, biographical, and literary context (as appropriate), incorporating those details found in the letters provides a richer educational experience.
While in Chapters 2-4 I examine historical, biographical, and literary details in Austen’s correspondence, in Chapters 5-7, I focus specifically on how to *teach* using Austen’s letters. Based on my research, no one has developed a comprehensive critical study of Austen’s letters that also discusses how to use the letters as a teaching tool. Aside from annotations in the collections of letters, very few resources examine explicitly and exclusively what information can be found in Austen’s letters. Margaret Anne Doody’s “Jane Austen’s Reading,” for one, provides material about the texts Austen mentions having read in her letters as well as those Doody detects that Austen has mentioned in her novels; however, she makes numerous assumptions about Austen’s reading proclivities and “*how* she read” (173). It seems to me disingenuous to draw definitive conclusions such as the following having read only the approximately 5% of letters Austen wrote in her life (a scant 161 from upwards of 3,000):

“Neither the great works of the Western past nor contemporary nonfiction meant a great deal to her save as they came through novels. She has claims to be considered as a historian and a philosopher, but she did not spend her time studying history or philosophy” (187). In contrast to Doody and many others who speak in absolutes about Austen’s life based on her extant letters or novels, I aim to reveal what we *can* learn from Austen’s letters but also to highlight that while the letters reveal much about “an interesting mind,” they are only a small clue to the mystery of Austen’s character and life.

In Chapter 5, I focus on using Austen’s letters in first-year college composition courses. The intimate nature of Austen’s letters and the development of her writing style over twenty-one years have proven very useful for college composition students who often ask for contextual information while reading the letters. Moreover, while some students have read one or more of
Austen’s novels, a majority of my students have not; however, they do not need to have read her novels to read and understand her letters, which concisely demonstrate Austen’s sharp wit and expert style in a media accessible to composition students and manageable for writing analysis in a composition course. In my first section, I discuss assignments for the first course in the composition sequence (Composition I), which were designed to achieve learning goals developed by College of DuPage. The assignments I present include analyzing Austen’s letters through the lens of Garrison Keillor’s “How to Write a Letter,” using letter-writing as a developmental writing exercise in scaffolding assignments, and assessing Austen’s letters as models for personal blog or journal writing.

The second section of this chapter covers the second course in the composition sequence (Composition II), and assignments in this section are also designed to achieve COD learning goals for the course. The assignments explained in this section include writing a persuasive letter after analyzing examples of Austen’s persuasive letter-writing, addressing counterarguments by assessing how Austen contends with unsolicited advice in her letters, and analyzing and responding to Austen’s letters of advice to family. In both sections, I clarify which learning goals are being achieved and how each assignment tackles these objectives. Furthermore, I discuss which lessons/assignments I have implemented in composition courses and what my experiences with students were during the application of these teaching methods.

In Chapter 6, I discuss how Austen’s correspondence can be utilized in undergraduate literature courses in conjunction with her fiction. This chapter focuses primarily on teaching Austen in the undergraduate college literature classroom. Austen’s letters are invaluable when read in conjunction with the novels and with an eye toward literary analysis, and I will address
methods of incorporating Austen’s letters into lessons on Austen’s novels. My section on lower-level English courses includes three learning sequences: Reader Reaction, Historical Context, and Biographical Context.

The subsequent section, covering upper-level English courses, delves deeper into subject-matter with topics such as historical events, political matters and figures, the Peninsular Wars, class consciousness, and women in the nineteenth century. One example of how Austen’s letters are used in undergraduate literature courses are weekly letter-writing reader-response using Austen’s letters as models, comparing Austen’s commentary on her own novels to student perceptions and analysis. A second lesson involves comparing the treatment of historical details in the letters to similar subjects in the novels (e.g. *Mansfield Park*), which helps address persistent criticism of Austen as unconcerned with the world outside of the domestic sphere, criticism which began with and perseveres because of her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh’s censorship of her letters and purposely inaccurate commentary on her personality and the scope of her interests in *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869).¹⁶

In addition, I will analyze with students class-consciousness in Austen’s novels (e.g. *Emma*) and how excerpts from her letters demonstrate Austen’s own class-consciousness. Moreover, I will have students assess the circumstances of women in early-19th-century society by discussing Austen’s role as a single, dependent, professional woman writer, using her letters and comparing her personal social and family situation and her representations of and commentary on single women of a certain age, called “surplus” or “redundant” women¹⁷ in the

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¹⁶ For details on what changes Austen-Leigh made to Jane Austen’s letters in the *Memoir*, see Emily Auerbach’s “Searching for Jane Austen: Restoring the ‘Fleas’ and ‘Bad Breath’” in *Persuasions* 27.
¹⁷ See W. R. Greg’s “Why are women redundant?” (1862) and Frances Power Cobbe’s response “What shall we do with our old maids?” (1862).
In Chapter 7, I expand on my discussion of using Austen’s letters in college literature courses by examining how the letters help contextualize Austen’s life and novels for students when incorporated with media including biopics (Becoming Jane); filmic adaptations; and “-inspired” productions and publications, focusing on how the letters and media enhance Austen studies. Ultimately, students would read Austen’s novels and letters and subsequently watch film adaptations and/or biopics to analyze how the adaptations represent Austen’s texts and whether the director’s or screenwriter’s filmic objectives eclipse Austen’s writing objectives.

A Film and Literature course is an obvious vehicle for this type of study; however, it would be appropriate to incorporate media into any literature course with the objective of augmenting discussions and analyses of corresponding written texts. In fact, I have incorporated film adaptation into my introductory literature course at NIU (ENGL 110); students read the texts first and then watched adaptations or selected clips from adaptations and analyzed the differences between the written and filmic versions. I discovered through these exercises that students were very critical of the film adaptations when analyzing them after first having read the novel or short story, and even my introductory students were able to deconstruct the adaptations and point out what was incongruous with the original text. Furthermore, in this chapter, I reference numerous recent media iterations of Austen’s life and work in order to emphasize
again Austen’s continued relevance in popular culture, and I explain how students will examine biopics of Austen in the context of her letters to discern problems inherent in these films and the “biographies” from which they sprang. Printed and filmic biographies are numerous, and they generally rely on speculation to flesh out vague areas of Austen’s life. By examining the myths of Austen’s life perpetuated by biopics, students can challenge preconceptions about Austen and her writing to appreciate it more fully.

Finally, in my conclusion, I briefly discuss opportunities for expanding critical and pedagogical study of Austen and note the implications of my research. First, I synthesize the information I presented throughout my dissertation chapters including a reiteration of the limitations of my study. Next, I discuss the implications of my study, including my objectives and the importance of my inquiry, and I present my conclusions about teaching with Austen’s letters. Finally, I explore briefly how I could overcome my research limitations and expand my study through future investigation and implementation.

Ultimately, my dissertation explores and investigates why Austen’s correspondence is valuable in itself, as well as how it could be of value to college students in composition and literature courses, and I identify areas of deficiency in the literature, specifically the dearth of critical work on Austen pedagogy focusing specifically on the letters. In this study, I explore how to fill these gaps and why these deficiencies should be addressed, demonstrating that Austen’s letters are not merely “a quick succession of busy nothings” (Austen, Mansfield Park 83). As Q.D. Leavis notes in “The Letters” (1944): “The Letters emphasise [sic] the underlying intentions of the novels that have been ignored by literary criticism; that they are not ‘good’ letters, as Mr. Forster and others have decided, is beside the point. Great letter-writers are mostly
great bores. The letters that the literary critic is interested in are those that reveal an interesting mind” (106). As I will show in my critical and pedagogical appraisal of Austen’s correspondence, the letters definitely reveal a woman who was not afraid to speak her mind about anything and everything, even if the sentiments were distasteful, discourteous, or tactless.
CHAPTER 2: THE WORLD OF AUSTEN’S LETTERS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The world of Austen’s correspondence reveals interesting historical context and provides students with opportunities to use the letters as a source of information about Austen and Regency England. One area of Austen’s letters to explore is contextual information on the art and practice of letter-writing, a topic which is essential to understanding why Austen’s letters help students comprehend the historical (and, in the next chapter, biographical) context in which she wrote her correspondence and fiction. In addition to serving as a representation of historical letter-writing, Austen’s correspondence illuminates the historical period during which she lived, and various weighty topics arise for Austen’s readers, especially references to the military, Napoleonic Wars, class issues, financial matters, inheritance concerns, business, employment in multiple senses of the word, women’s issues, and the vital subject of socioeconomic status. As a result, Austen’s letters help students of her fiction understand the novels on more than just a surface level and provide composition students with nonfiction reading materials that are valuable as written materials and sources of historical information, especially as an example of 18th- and 19th-century letter-writing.

Understanding how the military and Napoleonic Wars touched the lives of Austen and her family, for instance, might illuminate the references to the military and military characters in her novels. As well, learning about the limitations of women’s lives and financial circumstances
in Austen’s time through her letters may make readers of, for instance, *Pride and Prejudice* more sympathetic toward Mrs. Bennet’s irksome attempts at matchmaking for her five daughters. Moreover, examining Austen’s challenges as a professional female writer and how she addresses those challenges in her correspondence might help students more effectively contextualize and critically analyze writing. Ultimately, historical and biographical information are entwined in Austen’s letters because she doesn’t provide just historical facts; all of her letters are infused with personality, opinions, and very often, attitude. Thus, this chapter and the next chapter are very closely tied.

Throughout this chapter, I will address the historical information that can be culled from Austen’s correspondence and briefly address how that information could be incorporated into teaching composition and literature courses. I will delve deeper into discussions of teaching the letters in Chapters 5 through 7, where I will also explain the learning objectives achieved by using Austen’s letters as pedagogical tool in college courses. It is important to mention that the historical information I examine in this chapter (as well as the biographical information in the next chapter) has not been compiled in the same way or for the same purpose (pedagogy) before. Much of this information can be obtained from endnote annotations and indexes in collections of Austen’s letters, but those annotations are not searchable or organized by topic, and indexes are generally incomplete subject-wise and difficult to navigate.

The most recent Oxford edition of the letters, for one, includes a Subject Index organized by general topic, but it is difficult to find information because the index entries are at once too specific and too vague and there seems to be no organizational method other than alphabetically by subject titles that seem unnecessarily convoluted and then chronologically by individual
subtopic or reference. For instance, under the subject heading “Love and matrimony: matchmaking, courtship, love, engagements, marriages; adultery, mistresses, divorce; bereavement, re-marriage,” there first appears a very long alphabetical list of people referenced in regard to this subject(s) without page numbers or connections to specific topics under the subject heading (at the beginning of the Subject Index, Le Faye directs readers to the General Index, which inventories people with page numbers). Then a comparatively pithy list of references with page numbers appears. This list includes such varied subtopics as “offer from my friend,” “Lord Craven’s mistress,” “drunken husband,” “servant Anne,” “once for love,” and “George Hatton not marrying Miss Wemyss” (638). In addition, under the subject heading “Social etiquette,” Le Faye includes some confusing subtopics, including “receive his wife,” “vulgar … noisy,” “very glad to meet,” “very happy to meet,” “we shake hands,” “darning stockings,” and “visit to Lady Leven” (645-46). The rest of the index is equally abstruse. Needless to say, the Subject Index is fairly difficult to navigate.

In addition to a problematic indexing system, the Oxford edition poses complications when relying on the supplemental information in the annotations for context. Of course, if one is reading through the letters and needs supplemental information for a passage that includes an endnote, the annotations are helpful. The trouble arises when one does not want to read through the letters to discover more information about certain subjects Austen broaches. The annotations are included in Subject Index page numbers, but the difficulties of navigating the index negatively affect finding those subjects in the annotations. In addition, the index includes only page numbers, and those page numbers correspond to both the letters and the annotations without differentiating between the two in any clear way. Thus, the reader would be directed to the page
number of the reference in the letters and then again to the page number of the corresponding endnote annotation, if there is an annotation associated with that letter reference (which often there is not). In this way, the Index can also be misleading because the reader may believe there are more references to a particular subject than exist in the letters alone. Furthermore, the annotations are illuminating, but there are gaps that could be filled by further annotation and explanation. Ultimately, my contribution to Austen scholarship in this chapter and the next is how I have compiled biographical and historical information collected from Austen’s correspondence in narrative form alongside contextual information and commentary on topics Austen broaches in the letters.

**EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LETTER-WRITING**

In “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as Letter Writer,” from *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, Robert Halsband discusses Montagu’s early-eighteenth-century letters from Turkey, which were *intended for publication*. He notes that Montagu (1689-1762) came to be considered as “one of the great eighteenth-century letter-writers” after the posthumous publication of her *Turkish Embassy Letters* in 1763 (50). Regarding her familiar letters, however, Halsband observes that “Lady Mary’s letters to her sister Lady Mar in the 1720’s are famous for their brilliant, occasionally malicious picture of upper-class English life. Because of her sisterly affection, the letters are intimate and unrestrained” (57). This point should not be lost on the readers of Austen’s letters to her sister Cassandra.

Another parallel between Austen and Montague’s familiar letters is their paradoxical “sympathy and cynicism toward the sentimental” (63). However, Montagu’s most famous letters
are not “familiar letters”; according to Halsband, “the Turkish Embassy [letters] are relatively impersonal and formal,” and he points out that they “are evidently extracts from her journals (now lost) and revisions of actual letters” (65). In sum, he argues that “[t]hese letters … are neither actual nor artificial, but something of both” (66). Furthermore, Halsband makes an important point about Montagu’s writing objectives:

Compared to her unequivocally actual [i.e. familiar] letters, these Embassy ones may seem exhibitionistic and self-conscious; but how well she succeeded in her purpose: to amuse and instruct her correspondents—and ultimate readers! For we, more than two centuries later, are spared moral qualms—if we have any—about whether it is proper to read other people’s private letters. Lady Mary wished these to be published—and thus to be read by a wider circle than friends and family; indeed, to be enjoyed by readers not confined to only one continent and one generation. The Turkish Embassy Letters, then, are a hybrid form in which Lady Mary ‘crossed’ actual, personal letters with a ‘cultivated’ travel-book. (68)

Halsband’s comments about Montagu’s Turkey letters illuminate the stark differences between them and Austen’s correspondence and why a discussion of the history of letters and letter-writing is essential to understand the context of Austen’s writing: unlike Montagu’s Turkish Embassy Letters, Austen’s letters were never intended for publication. While Montagu was writing with a broader audience in mind, Austen was writing for a much smaller circle (though not necessarily of one).

An essential consideration for students of Austen’s letters is the background of familiar correspondence-writing around Austen’s era. In The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century, Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis discuss “Some Generalizations” about familiar letters throughout the eighteenth century, attempting to explain “how the eighteenth century happened to become the great age of the personal letter” (269). They make some very important points about why informal letter-writing became prevalent in the eighteenth century. Anderson and Ehrenpreis reveal that “the composition of informal letters depends on the possibility of a
frequent, candid exchange between writers who trust each other” and that “it took the
development of a convenient, reliable postal service to provide less exalted correspondents with
an equivalent amenity” (269). Furthermore, the authors emphasize the significance of letter-
writing to the British: “They were perhaps more likely to take care that their letters should be
long and worth reading because throughout the century the recipient had to pay the post, and
might be inclined to judge rather critically what he had paid for” (my emphasis; 270). In other
words, letter-writers, and I would include Austen in this group, were perpetually aware of the
length and content of their letters and how they would be received by the addressee due to the
nature of the postal system. The person you were writing to had to pay for your letter, so it had
better be worth paying for.

Familiar letters in the eighteenth century took on a more informal tone and form, which
we can see reflected in Austen’s correspondence. Anderson and Ehrenpreis claim that “from
Cicero [107-43 BCE] on, the whole genre [of letter-writing] may be viewed as an escape from
formality, a release from the sort of rules associated with ‘higher’ kinds of literature” (271).
Furthermore, they argue that “[t]he best familiar letters of the eighteenth century seem
distinguishable from those earlier and later masters in that the writer revealed his own character
through candid accounts of matters other than simply himself” (my emphases; 272). This point is
interesting in light of Mary A. Favret’s declaration in Romantic Correspondence: “As a letter-
writer, the Austen we read keeps herself guarded and proper, giving little away” (138).
Revealingly, instead of examining Austen’s familiar letters, Favret looks at the letters in
Austen’s novels to substantiate her claims about Austen’s own letters, but more on that later.
Austen summarizes the character of letter-writing in her era in an 1801 letter to her sister:

“I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter” (Letter 29). Anderson and Ehrenpreis’s explain “the eighteenth-century writer,” and this explanation seems to align with Austen’s description of “the true art of letter-writing” at least, if not the authors who described themselves thus:

[T]he eighteenth-century writer liked to compare his letters with polite conversation. Only speech and gesture are more direct modes of communication than the letter. But the kind of speaking which writers of the period had in mind, when they compared their own compositions with talking to a friend, was an informed, entertaining exchange carried on between persons belonging to a circle of familiar acquaintances, who shared a common knowledge of literature, history, and what we might clumsily call social institutions. (274)

Further description of the eighteenth century writer reveals that “the most subtle method of revealing one’s own character is through the apparently unprejudiced discussion of things apparently outside oneself. In this art the eighteenth century excelled,” and “[w]hat is often ignored … is that the writer wishes not only to report an event but to be the reporter” (276). That is to say, the content of the news was not as important as the “unique” perspective of the letter-writer and how she conveyed the information distinctively. The authors also point out that “[t]he [eighteenth-century] letter belongs to a human relationship in a way that is rarely seen in either earlier or more recent periods. Just as the writer’s purity of style must act to reveal his character, so the ‘substantive’ nature of the letter must constitute a link between the correspondents” (277). Comparing the letters of the eighteenth century to more recent epistles, the authors lament, “It is remarkable how seldom one reads the letters of a modern writer to find out about something other than the man himself” (277). Ultimately, Anderson and Ehrenpreis contend that by not
writing directly about herself and instead writing about “things apparently outside” of herself, the eighteenth century letter-writer reveals her “own character” more subtly than the writers who had previously and have since written more overtly about themselves.

The art of correspondence writing was considered to be in women’s purview during Austen’s time. In another elucidating text on the history of letter-writing, *Epistolary Histories*, Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven explain that “the form of writing most accessible to and acceptable for women was letter writing” and “[f]emale letters traditionally focused on domestic life or love; they spoke in the private voice appropriate to women whose roles were increasingly circumscribed with the constraints of bourgeois ideology.” However, the authors acknowledge that “women did engage in other modes of correspondence,” providing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* as an example (my emphasis; 2). In their largely summative introduction, Gilroy and Verhoeven mention Austen, pointing out how she “ironically undercut the cultural stereotype that gendered the familiar letter as female” in *Northanger Abbey* through Henry Tilney, who “in conversation with Catherine Morland, first claims that ‘Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female,’ then comments on the deficiencies of female writing, and finally asserts the equal distribution of artistic excellence between the sexes” (2). Interestingly, Gilroy and Verhoeven focus primarily on Austen’s fictional letters and not her personal correspondence.

While Gilroy and Verhoeven point out an interesting potential perspective on letter-writing in Austen’s parodic novel, they overstate their case in their assertion that “Austen critiques gender conventions in Henry’s refusal to marginalize women to the gendered genres of journal and letter writing, and deconstructs the association of fashion and femininity in his ironic
fascination with—indeed fetishization of—dress fabrics (in a long conversation with Mrs. Allen on ‘the subject of muslins’)” (2-3). On the contrary, Tilney’s playful and sarcastic character might serve to *refute* the claim that he is seriously invested or interested in his conversation with Mrs. Allen and not merely displaying his aptitude for social intercourse and courtesy juxtaposed against the unlikely heroine Catherine’s naïveté and social inexperience: in the encounter, Austen’s narrator describes him as “polite enough to *seem* interested in what [Mrs. Allen] said; and *she* kept him on the subject of muslins till the dancing recommenced” (my emphasis; Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 17). Also, Henry’s admonition of women’s letter-writing and his flirtatious teasing of Catherine about her supposed journal-writing when she returns home from the ball do not establish Henry as a champion of women’s writing outside of these two “female” writing genres. One resonant point Gilroy and Verhoeven make is that, in spite of Henry’s criticism of female letters in *Northanger Abbey*, “until quite recently, critical discourse has on the whole *accepted* female epistolary skill as a truth universally acknowledged”—here echoing Austen’s famous first line of *Pride and Prejudice*—“and has subscribed to the fiction of the feminine, private letter” (my emphasis; 3). Austen demonstrates through Henry Tilney that she was cognizant of this persistent narrative surrounding women’s “inherent” domestic writing “skill.”

The “fiction of the feminine, private letter” discussed by Gilroy and Verhoeven is further challenged by Mary A. Favret in “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Business of Letters.” Favret observes that for another famous female author, “Wollstonecraft, the letter is *not* a private document,” noting that “she use[d] the letter form in nearly all the works written in her final years” (my emphasis; 107). Moreover, she claims that Wollstonecraft’s letters reveal “faith in the
educational power of the letter form; and [that] education, in Wollstonecraft’s writings, is always a vital ingredient for social change” (107). Wollstonecraft, like other British writers who influenced by the French Revolution, wrote letters and works aimed at promoting education and reason as the keys to advancing equality between the sexes and developing a rational society.

Favret explains,

As Wollstonecraft’s own letters indicate, letter-writing is a reciprocal encounter …. But that reciprocity, played out between a writer and her public, has a political thrust. Once it leaves the home, once it enters the marketplace, the letter no longer delivers a private individual for scrutiny …. Instead, the letter performs a social act, diffusing the self into the world, making it public property. (132)

By contrast, Austen’s letters, which were distinctly familiar and mostly addressed to her sister, are markedly different than Wollstonecraft’s political and philosophical correspondence. Austen does mention politics and current events, but not to advance a political agenda or advocate for social or political reform, as Wollstonecraft does.

Counter to Wollstonecraft’s social justice-focused correspondence, Austen’s letters provide generally brief and sometimes seemingly insensitive commentary on public affairs. In a letter to her sister from 31 May 1811, Austen interjects a comment about a recent newspaper report on casualties in a Napoleonic War battle (Le Faye, Letters 415n7) in the midst of writing about members of her social circle: “How horrible it is to have so many people killed!—And what a blessing that one cares for none of them!” (Letter 741). Then again, Austen’s blunt reactions are not limited to global matters; her letters are rife with even more harsh, if humorous, commentary, for instance her humorous comment to her sister in a letter from October 1808: “Mrs Tilson’s remembrance gratifies me, & I will use her patterns if I can;—but poor Woman!

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1 All letters are referenced by the number assigned to them in the fourth edition of Deirdre Le Faye’s Jane Austen’s Letters. The letters in Le Faye’s edition are organized chronologically.
how can she be honestly breeding again?” (Letter 56). The value of Austen’s letters in the context of eighteenth-century letter writing is that they demonstrate the difficulties that exist with categorizing Austen; she isn’t quite an eighteenth-century writer but not quite a nineteenth-century writer either. She doesn’t fit neatly into a literary era; she can be taught in eighteenth century literature classes and just as easily be incorporated into nineteenth-century courses; she resists historical literary categorization. Her letters are also enigmatic; they are written in the purported style of the eighteenth-century letter (i.e. natural and conversational), but many eighteenth-century letter-writers only claimed to write naturally and conversationally while they actually wrote letters that were carefully constructed and intended for wide, even public, consumption, and during the period of the French Revolution, letter-writing became increasingly political and didactic, as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Where does that leave Austen’s correspondence? Austen, as opposed to the aforementioned examples of female letter-writers, wrote truly privately. Her letters were not intended to be published. Thus, they cannot expect to conform to a style of letter-writing that was used primarily by eighteenth-century writers (and hangers-on) who intended or aspired to have their letters published and who had large or varied social circles and correspondents, for example Montagu and Wollstonecraft (as already mentioned), along with Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, and Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, among numerous others. Understanding the historical development and evolution of epistolary writing, especially throughout the eighteenth-century, is relevant to not only placing Austen’s letters in their historical context and comparing her writing to her literary forebears’ and contemporaries’, but also understanding Austen’s literature, in
which letters and letter-writing figure prominently, and utilizing Austen’s letters effectively in the college literature classroom.

Historical background information on letter-writing leading up to and through Austen’s time can be used in literature courses to understand how letter-writing evolved from a highly stylized art form to less formal personal correspondence. The historical context of letter-writing as a practice should be considered and discussed because Austen’s letters were unique within that historical context. As Deirdre Le Faye notes in her “Preface to the Fourth Edition” of Jane Austen’s Letters, “Unlike most writers of her day, Jane Austen’s letters have crept out almost silently into public view over the course of nearly 200 years, from 1818 until 1995” (ix). Le Faye also points out the extreme value of Austen’s letters for multiple academic disciplines:

Literary critics hunt through them for the most minute details of Jane’s opinions, actions, family and friends, as source material for biographies, and for studies on the composition of the novels; social historians immediately turn to them to find her precise and accurate information on contemporary manners, style, and cost of living; and local historians look for specific references to the places where she lived or visited in order to cast some reflected glory upon their particular territories. In recent years, film and television directors have also taken to picking out sentences from the letters to try and give verisimilitude to their scripts for romanticized biographies or adaptations of the novels. (xii)

Additionally, Le Faye points out that recent biographical research on Austen has further illuminated references in her letters, which “shows the social awareness, the knowledge she gained from others and from her reading, and her interest in national events which in turn are reflected in the novels” (xvi). Examining a historical overview of letter-writing allows for a deeper understanding of Austen’s letters as personal and candid expressions of her life, work, and personality. Comparing Austen’s letters to examples of contemporary writers’ correspondence effectively demonstrates how revealing and genuine Austen’s letters are,
especially the letters addressed to her sister, and how valuable they are as resources of historical information.

THE LETTERS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Not only does examining the history of *letter-writing* provide essential context for Austen’s letters, but Austen’s letters themselves provide important historical information. The historical details revealed through Austen’s correspondence can explain many aspects of Austen’s historical context, including information on Regency England; references to the military, including Austen’s own brothers and the Napoleonic Wars; class and social status concerns; various aspects of economics including the precarious financial situations of unmarried women; several other women’s issues, including those concerning courtship, marriage, motherhood, and employment; and income’s ties to social status.

Numerous of Austen’s letters provide insight into some aspect of history and society. For example, one of Austen’s first surviving letters to her sister Cassandra, from September 18 of 1796, includes information on her brother Frank’s military career (Letter 7), and later on January 21-2 of 1801, she discusses his naval promotion (Letter 32). Just over a decade later in a letter to her friend Martha Lloyd on September 2, 1814, Austen contemplates the War of 1812 and her brother Henry’s “not cheerful” belief that war and ruin for Britain were imminent (Letter 106). In fact, several of Austen’s letters include references to the military or war, both in general and related to her military brothers. References to her brothers’ involvement in the military and the Peninsular War are numerous. In May of 1801, Austen discusses her younger brother Charles’s naval career, including the orders his ship has received “for taking Troops to Egypt,” which
Austen states she “should not like at all if [she] did not trust to Charles’ being removed from her somehow or other before she sails” (Letter 38). On June 23rd of 1814, Austen again wrote to her sister about both of her military brothers: Frank’s naval review and personal business delaying his visit to Austen and Henry’s attendance at a ball at White’s Club (London) that was held to celebrate the end of the Peninsular War (Letter 102; Le Faye, Letters 438n3).

In addition to references to her brothers, Austen also communicated news to her sister about the military and issues of war. In November of 1800, Austen relayed a story of interest to her sister about the son of a neighborhood family, Earle Harwood, who injured himself: “[a]bout ten days ago, in cocking a pistol in the guard-room at Marcou, he accidentally shot himself through the Thigh” (Letter 25). Austen also mentions another acquaintance in her letter from mid-January 1801, in which she mistakes an acquaintance as the “Major Byng” who was killed in battle (Letter 25; Le Faye, Letters 388n4). Yet another reference to an acquaintance appears in a letter from mid-October 1813 where Austen discusses the unfulfilled possibility of Mary Jane Fowle visiting her brother, Tom, on his naval ship (Letter 92). Austen relayed information to her sister Cassandra whenever news arose of those with whom they were acquainted who were also involved in the military.

Along with discussing people involved in the military, Austen mentions the Peninsular War many times. For example, in a letter from January of 1809, Austen references the death of General Sir John Moore in Spain at the Battle of Corunna (Letter 66; Le Faye, Letters 556). An additional remark on the Peninsular War appears in her letter from May 31, 1811 where she briefly mentions the casualties of the Peninsular War (Letter 74). Also, in a letter from early March of 1814, Austen briefly comments on her militia brother Henry’s employee, Mr. Barlowe,
who informed her “that Peace was generally expected” in the war (Letter 97). Another military reference appears on June 14, 1814, when Austen wrote to her sister about “the Emperor,” Alexander I of Russia, who she notes is rumored to be travelling to or from Portsmouth soon (Letter 101). In fact, Alexander did travel to Portsmouth where a Naval Review was held in honor of himself and the King on June 25 (Le Faye, Letters 437n4). Austen’s references to the military and war provide interesting information about how the military and the Napoleonic Wars affected the people at home and how they received information about military affairs.

Aside from the military and war, Austen includes allusions to money and social status in her letters. There are seemingly countless references to financial matters, including the costs of food, material goods, and rent, as well as income and fiscal issues such as debt, bankruptcy, and disinheritance. Of the numerous references to prices of material goods, Austen discusses the costs of textiles such as flannel (Letter 10), a muslin veil (Letter 21), cambric (Letter 28), and clothes and fabrics (Letters 70 & 88). Austen also touches upon the cost of hair-dressing, at one point explaining to Cassandra that the hairdresser charged her less than the other ladies for his services:

M’ Hall walked off this morn§ to Ospringe, with no inconsiderable Booty. He charged Elizth 5s for every time of dressing her hair, & 5s for every lesson to Sace, allowing nothing for the pleasures of his visit here, for meat drink & Lodging, the benefit of Country air, & the charms of M’s Salkeld’s & M’s Save’s society.—Towards me he was considerate, as I had hoped for, from my relationship to you, charging me only 2s6d for cutting my hair, tho’ it was as thoroughly dress’d after being cut for Eastwell, as it had been for the Ashford Assembly.—He certainly respects either our Youth or our poverty. (Letter 45)

Too, Austen mentions the prices of sheep (Letter 12) and horses (Letter 22). Twice she discusses the price of a pianoforte (Letters 63 & 114), and she mentions the cost of music (Letter 88). Many references to the prices of food are included in her correspondence (Letters 90 & 92),
including food prices in Bath (Letters 35 & 146) and her hope that her Mother’s baker’s bill will reflect the “fall in Bread” (Letter 95). At one point, Austen also brings up a Mrs. Martin who is starting a circulating library, to which Austen notes she will subscribe (Letter 14).

Other than the cost of goods, Austen discusses budgeting and economy and their (negative) effect on her social circle, as well as her own consideration (and then dismissal) of the cost of ice cream and wine. Twenty-three-year-old Austen laments budgeting, commenting on “poor & economical” people in referencing a ball she plans to attend that will have “nobody worth dancing with, & nobody worth talking to,” and praises Kent as being “the only place for happiness, Everybody is rich there” (Letter 14). Ten years later, Austen again references “Vulgar Economy” in reference to her eating ice cream and drinking French wine without consideration of cost (Letter 55). Austen also considers a new neighbor who lives handsomely and contrasts the family’s financial situation with her own (Letter 49). By contrast, Austen jokes with her sister about the ease with which the former wrote a letter of acceptance for an invitation: “…I wrote without much effort; for I was rich—& the Rich are always respectable, whatever be their stile [sic] of writing” (Letter 53). Speaking of writing, Austen mentions money in relation to correspondence in October 1813: “I begin to perceive that you will have this Letter tomorrow. It is throwing a Letter away to send it by a visitor, there is never convenient time for reading it—& Visitor can tell most things as well.—I had thought with delight of saving you the postage—but Money is Dirt” (Letter 94). We perhaps can tell from Austen’s many references to money that it was, understandably, ever a consideration for the single, dependent female author.

Along similar lines to economy, Austen also broaches the subject of debt. Of the Hardwood family, Austen twice mentions the debts of the clan, whose patriarch had squandered
his family’s money and left his wife and sister dependent on his son (Letters 80 and 82; Le Faye, 
*Letters* 421n4). Another financial liability Austen remarks on is the situation of Jemima Brydges 
who had to leave Canterbury because of her debts (Letter 91). In addition, Austen refers to the 
bankruptcy of a widow, Mrs. Martin—possibly Mary Martin, Maidenhead Inn’s landlady (Le 
Faye, *Letters* 553). Other financial situations Austen discusses are related to her own family: the 
disinheriance of her cousin Margaret Beckford after her elopement to Colonel Orde (Letter 73), 
and two references to Austen’s uncle James Leigh-Perrot’s will (Letters 157 & 159). The 
discussions of monetary issues in Austen’s letters are interesting and enlightening because they 
are largely domestic, providing insight into household finances.

Related to issues of money and social status are Austen’s topical concerns for women’s 
income and employment as well as the affairs of single dependent women in her letters. She 
mentions her aunt and her brother Edward’s widowed adoptive mother, Mrs. Knight, in a letter 
from January of 1799; she points out that Mrs. Knight’s seemingly generous act of giving up 
Godmersham Estate to Edward was not as altruistic as it seemed: Mrs. Knight had taken an 
income for herself out of the estate of £2000 per year (Letter 17; Le Faye, *Letters* 380n8). 
Austen refers to her mother’s finances as well, noting “the comforting state of her … finances” 
(Letter 49). However, the most attention is paid to Martha Lloyd’s financial business, which 
Austen relayed to her sister on Martha’s behalf. Austen mentions Martha’s business in at least

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2 The equivalent of around $200,000 per year in 2014 according to “Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical 
Conversion of Currency,” Eric Nye, Dept. of English, University of Wyoming: 
http://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm.

However, according to Measuring Worth, the income value of £2000 would vary depending on the type of wealth 
being measured: “historic standard of living value of that income or wealth is £171,400.00,” “economic status value 
of that income or wealth is £2,398,000.00,” and “economic power value of that income or wealth is £9,702,000.00.” 
See Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, “Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a UK Pound 
five letters, with topics such as paying bills (Letter 63), money she had won in the national lottery (1/16 of £20,000) (Letter 84), concerns about money she needed to be paid to travel with the Cravens to Bath (Letter 102) and relief when it had been paid at last (Letter 106), and payments Austen had made on Martha’s account (Letter 128). Martha, like Austen, remained single for much of her life and lived with the Austen women at Chawton, sharing the household duties; she did not marry until the age of sixty-two to Austen’s brother Frank, who was by that time Sir Frances, making Martha Lady Austen (Le Faye, Letters 550).

Additionally, Austen makes a few references to money and marital status, including a letter to her niece Fanny Knight in which she gives Fanny courtship advice and tells her to think of “want of money” (among many other reasons) when considering marriage to Mr. John Plumptre (Letter 151). Austen also discusses single women and money in another letter to Fanny, lamenting that “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very good argument in favour of Matrimony” (Letter 153). In fact, Austen’s own experience demonstrates the dangers of “spinsterhood”; after her own father’s death, she was left to rely on her brothers financially until her death, and luckily her brothers were able to do so. Austen’s discussions of women’s finances are important because they demonstrate that most women were in a precarious state with regards to money, especially those who remained unmarried and who did not have a sufficient inheritance or income with which to support themselves.

The subject of money in Austen’s letters is incorporated into teaching Austen in several chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter 5, I use a letter in which Austen references money received for the purchase of Northanger Abbey. In the corresponding lesson, students analyze Austen’s professional letter writing over time, and as the issue of money was important to
Austen, who had no money of her own at the time she wrote to Crosby, it could be incorporated into the discussion of how high the stakes were for Austen to convince the publishers to print her novel or release it so she could have it published elsewhere.

In addition, money factors into using Austen’s letters in the course of teaching college literature courses in Chapter 6. While analyzing *Northanger Abbey* students would read a letter from Austen to one of her brothers in which she mentions the sales of her novels and her anonymity in her published works. Other ways to incorporate discussions of money in the literature classroom with the correspondence are outlined in footnotes and include particular opportunities to discuss money matters while reading *Sense and Sensibility* or *Emma*, for example. The subject of matrimony and money is also discussed in Chapter 7 discussions about teaching *Pride and Prejudice* and the film adaptation *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

Aside from the military and money, an oft-talked-about subject for Austen was a specific social activity particularly enjoyed by women of marriageable age: the ball or social dance. In her very first surviving letter from January of 1796, she mentions “an exceeding good ball” she attended at Manydown the previous night and two other balls besides (Letter 1). She mentions another ball at Manydown a few days later, and references a ball there in late-December 1808 (“a Child’s Ball”) and early-January 1809 (“smaller thing than I expected”) (Letters 63 & 65). In addition to the Manydown balls, Austen references balls in Bath, Lyme Regis, and Southampton, among many other locations. On May 5, 1801, she writes to her sister about an upcoming ball in Bath (Letter 35); then, on May 12th, relays the events of the ball in the Upper Rooms (Letter 36). In 1804, Austen describes a ball in Lyme Regis to her sister, including her want of a partner for the first two dances (Letter 39). Several of Austen’s letters mention assemblies in Southampton
between 1808 and 1809. A ball in December 1808 evokes for Austen melancholy at the “many dozen young Women standing by without partners” and nostalgia at being in “the same room in which [she and Cassandra] danced 15 years ago” (Letter 62).

The following month, Austen anticipates another ball in Southampton, which points out an important drawback of Regency decorum: Martha Lloyd and Austen had to find “help” in the form of accompaniment to the ball when her brother Edward and Captain Earle Harwood “failed” them (Letter 65). A few days later, in her next surviving letter to her sister, Austen relays the events of the ball to Cassandra (Letter 66). Austen also refers to different types of dances danced at the balls she attended, including country dances (Letters 5 & 63), boulangères (what she calls “boulangeries”; Letter 5), quadrilles, and cotillions (Letter 151). Austen’s references to social dances are plentiful and provide information on which dances were fashionable, the frequency with which balls were held, and some of the social rules of dances, matters of the letters which also become useful when examining these same topics in Austen’s fiction.

Social balls figure prominently in several lessons from Chapters 6 and 7, both in teaching Austen’s novels and in analyzing media in the college literature classroom. In Chapter 6, I mention several options for discussing references to social dances in the letters alongside Austen’s novels in my footnotes to teaching lower-level undergraduate literature courses. In these notes, I connect the topic of the ball in Austen’s letters to Catherine’s experiences at balls in Bath in Northanger Abbey and to the various balls of Pride and Prejudice. In Chapter 7, I discuss the connections between Austen’s letters, her novels, and media, mentioning the social ball in analyses of Pride and Prejudice, Becoming Jane, Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, and
Austenland. The social ball figures prominently in several of Austen’s novels, and her letters are rife with references to and details about balls she had attended, so there is a plethora of information to be analyzed regarding this topic in literature courses.

Peripherally related to the topic of the social dance or ball, courtship and marriage are also discussed by Austen in numerous letters, with quite a few references to adultery actually. Austen references two servants, Anne who “has just given her mistress warning; she is going to be married” in October of 1808 (Letter 60), and Jenny, a former servant at Steventon, whose marriage she references in a letter to her sister in January of 1809 (Letter 67). A humorous topic of conversation regarding marriage in Austen’s letters includes witnessing the hijinks of Mr. and Mrs. Badcock and “the probable intoxication of both” at a ball in the Upper Rooms at Bath, with Mrs. Badcock chasing “her drunken Husband” around (Letter 36). One of Austen’s favorite topics, however, seems to be the scandal of adultery, which she mentions numerous times in her letters. In 1799, she comments on “Maria Montresor’s Lover” (Letter 17); in 1801, she brings up Lord Craven’s live-in mistress (Letter 30); later that same year, she describes a woman at a ball she identifies as the “Adulteress” (Letter 36); in 1807, she makes brief mention of Lord Lucan’s mistress; and in 1808, she examines Mrs. Powlett’s affair with Lord Sackville (Letter 53). Additionally, Austen addresses the issue of marital infidelity and divorce in a letter to her niece Fanny from 1817 in which she discusses the (all-too-true) history of these issues in the Paget family (Letter 153).

Adultery could be discussed in the literature classroom alongside several novels. In Chapter 6, I mention a few instances of adultery that could be explored in comparison to the letters. One such example is the relationship between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram in
Mansfield Park. Another novel that could be discussed alongside Austen’s references to sexual impropriety is Pride and Prejudice. Lydia’s elopement with Mr. Wickham in the novel presents challenges to the reputations of Lydia’s family members and jeopardizes the marriageability of her sisters, so it would be interesting to examine this case alongside Austen’s letters which comment on the topic. In Chapter 7’s discussion of social propriety and the film Austenland, I also discuss how Austen’s correspondence references to an infamous adulteress could be broached in an analysis of the film and novel Pride and Prejudice. Because women’s reputations were so important to their social status in Austen’s era, issues surrounding sexual conduct figure prominently in several of the novels, which provides students of Austen’s literature with ample material to analyze regarding this topic.

Connected to courtship and marriage, motherhood and children are also topics of discussion in Austen’s correspondence. She broaches a multitude of subjects on these topics in her letters, including maternal death at childbirth, the number of children women have, children’s temperament and behavior, disciplining children, and the best time to become a mother. Austen refers to the deaths of two women in a letter from November of 1798: “Mrs. Coulthard and Anne … are both dead, and both died in childbed” (Letter 11). She also notes that her pregnant sister-in-law, Mary, has not been informed of the news, and later in the same letter (written the next day), she mentions that Mary has given birth to her son. It is no wonder that Mary wasn’t informed of two acquaintances who had died in childbirth when she was near to giving birth herself. Another close call, with Austen’s niece Anna (James’s daughter), was relayed to her other niece Fanny in 1817: “Anna has had a bad cold, looks pale, & we fear something else” (my
emphasis; Letter 153). Since Anna did not give birth to her third child until May of 1818, it is probable that she suffered a miscarriage after this letter was written (Le Faye, *Letters* 463n3).

Another subject Austen broaches is the large number of children in the Deedes family. When her brother James visited them, he was “struck” by how many children were at home: “their own Eleven” and “the three little Bridgeses” (Letter 55). Eleven children in a family may have been unusual, especially considering maternal death during childbirth, and fourteen children total in a house at once certainly seems astonishing. In March of 1817, Austen gave sage advice to her twenty-four-year-old niece Fanny about marriage and children:

> [Do not] be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last; you will in the course of the next two or three years, meet with somebody more generally unexceptionable than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as ever He did, & who will so completely attach you, that you will feel you never really loved before.—And then, by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while Mrs Wm Hammond is growing old by confinements and nursing. (Letter 153)

Unfortunately, Austen died four months later and was unable to see her favorite niece marry, and Fanny *did* marry three years after Austen’s death.³ Austen’s advice served Fanny well; she married a Baronet with six children—and gave birth to nine of her own! Concerning maternal death in childbirth, unlike her mother who died giving birth to her eleventh child, Fanny survived her *nine* experiences in childbearing and lived to the ripe old age of 89 (Lundy).

In addition to discussing numbers of children in households and giving advice to her niece on marriage and childbearing, Austen makes many references to children’s temperaments, generally complaining about them! In the same letter to Fanny of March 1817, she discusses her

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³ For more information on Fanny Austen Knight (Knatchbull), see “Fanny Knight” by Joan Austen-Leigh (http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/generated/opno2/austen-leigh.pdf).
niece Anna’s daughters, exclaiming, “How soon, the difference of temper in Children appears!” (Letter 153). She notes the disparity in Anna’s two daughters: “Jemima has a very irritable bad Temper … and Julia a very sweet one, always pleased & happy.” She also shows her expertise in childrearing by telling Fanny that she hopes Anna gives Jemima’s temperament “the early & steady attention it must require.” Though she had no children of her own, by this time Austen had over twenty nieces and nephews. Austen also discusses punishment for children several times in her letters. In a letter from 1796, Austen notes that her nephew Edward was breeched (began wearing trousers) “and was whipped, into the Bargain” (Letter 5). Austen again mentions whipping in a letter to her Aunt Cassandra in 1813 (Letter 93), and she tells her niece Anna that she hopes “little Charles” (who she thinks is undisciplined) “gets a wholesome thump, or two, whenever is necessary” (Letter 117).

Austen also reflects on cross children, spoiled children, very noisy children, children who are less wearisome, and (conversely) well-behaved children and healthy, nice children. On the subject of cross children, Austen remarks in a letter from 1813 that she will be happy to see her brother Charles, who she notes will be as happy as he can be “with a cross Child or some such care pressing on him”; in the next sentence, Austen notes that she also looks forward to seeing her niece Cassy, “did [she] not fear [Cassy] w’d disappoint [her] by some immediate disagreeableness” (Letter 92). A few weeks later, Austen compliments George and Harriot Moore who “do not spoil their Boy” (Letter 94). To her niece Caroline in 1817, Austen explains that she has been visiting her brother Frank and his family “& though the Children are sometimes very noisy & not under such Order as they ought and easily might, [she] cannot help liking & even loving them” (Letter 149). From Austen’s letters, we can tell that children were perhaps as
boisterous and “troublesome” and “undisciplined” as adults often complain they are today. This information makes Austen’s era more accessible and relatable to contemporary readers who may otherwise be intimidated by “classic” or “canonical” literature because they don’t know how they can relate to characters in novels written two hundred years ago; they had many of the same issues and concerns that we do today, and childrearing is an important one.

Besides bothersome children, Austen makes a few references to “less troublesome” children, including a mention in 1808 of her sister-in-law Mary finding “the Children less troublesome than she expected” (Letter 53). In 1816, Austen notes that the children were “well-behaved” during their “day at Alton” (Letter 145). Finally, Austen writes to Alethea Bigg in 1817 of her niece Anna’s children: the “eldest child just now runs alone, which is a great convenience with a second in arms, & they are both healthy nice children” (Letter 150(C)).

While children are not central characters in most of Austen’s novels, there are ways to discuss Austen’s references to children and motherhood in her letters when teaching the novels. For instance, when discussing Northanger Abbey, students could evaluate Catherine’s unusually large family and Austen’s description of them commentary that Mrs. Morland did not die in childbirth as one would expect after having birthed so many children. Passages of the novel referencing children could be examined alongside the numerous remarks on children in Austen’s letters. The case of the Morland children could be contrasted to the very different Price family in Mansfield Park as well. Ultimately, the topic of motherhood and children could be broached in college literature class discussions of the novels as well as adaptations of the novels. Do adaptations include children mentioned in the novels? If so, how are they portrayed? If not, what effect does their omission have on the film’s representation of the novel? Do adaptations
introduce children who do not figure prominently in the novels? What purpose do they serve in the adaptation? Which of Austen’s letters regarding children and motherhood speak to the issues broached surrounding these topics in the novels and media? How do they illuminate Austen’s perspectives on the realities of motherhood?

As is evidenced by these myriad examples of historical information, the author’s correspondence is a valuable source for information that can help elucidate such topics as the military, everyday life, class and social status, economics, and many issues of concern to women. Students in particular will benefit from the wealth of historical context gleaned from Austen’s letters, especially when compared to her treatment of those topics in her fiction.

CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, Austen’s correspondence bestows us with a wealth of historical material, and the history of letter-writing, particularly in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, furnishes us with valuable knowledge about how letter-writing evolved and the characteristics of correspondence before and during Austen’s own practice. The history of the art of letter writing also gives context and justification for why examining Austen’s letters aids in understanding the historical contexts of the period in which she wrote her fiction. Furthermore, the historical information in Austen’s correspondence even reveals valuable and fascinating details about Austen’s family, friends, neighbors, and most importantly, the author herself. Through her correspondence, she subtly discloses aspects of her personality interwoven with perspectives on important issues both domestic and public. In the end, Austen’s letters afford insight into multiple aspects of society and history, but they also provide an abundance of
information on the author and those close to her. All of these details are valuable to students of Austen because they elucidate the importance of Austen’s correspondence and how her letters connect to and shed light on her fiction. Ultimately, the importance of the historical details Austen’s correspondence is inextricably entwined with the significance of biographical revelations in the letters, and in the next chapter, I will delve into a topic closely connected to the teaching the historical context of Austen’s letters: using biographical material revealed in Austen’s correspondence as a teaching tool.
CHAPTER 3: THE WORLD OF AUSTEN’S LETTERS: BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will again explore the world of Austen’s letters, now focusing on biographical context and using the letters as a source of information about Austen’s life and perceptions. The crucial subject that will be explored in this chapter is how Austen’s letters illuminate the author’s personal and social lives. Austen generally wrote about her family, social circles, and herself. Most of the letters disclose information about one or more of the following topics relevant to Austen: her perceptions about her family and members of her social circles; her personality and sense of humor; her thoughts and feelings about current events; her censorious views on family, friends, and acquaintances; and her perspectives on courtship and marriage. Historical and biographical information are entwined in Austen’s letters because she doesn’t provide just historical facts; all of her letters are infused with personality, opinions, and often attitude.

It is important to consider the environment in which Austen was writing her fiction and correspondence to understand the challenges she faced and clarify comments she makes in her letters. In Jan Fergus’s discussion of “The Literary Marketplace” (Blackwell Companion 41-50), she points out that “Austen’s mind and language [in her letters] seem to have been particularly attuned to marketing after the disappointing failure to earn money from Emma – yet in her continued work on Sanditon despite increasing ill health we can see evidence of her determination to make the most of her talent in the literary marketplace” (50). Fergus zeroes in
on Austen’s letters as a source of information about her dedication to her profession, but they also reveal connections between the author and her fiction.

This relationship between Austen’s life and fiction is explored by Jane Fergus in “The Professional Woman Writer” (*Cambridge Companion*). Fergus points out that “Austen’s professionalism here [in her letters] exists in startling contrast to her brother Henry’s earliest biographical accounts of her, accounts that helped to create the longstanding myth of Austen as genteel amateur, the spinster lady author who sketched her novels in moments of leisure” (my emphasis; 1). Fergus explains that it was “Henry’s wish to project an image of a ladylike, unmercenary, unprofessional, private, delicate and domestic author” and that “[t]he image that Henry Austen creates” is “at odds with the evidence that both Austen’s letters and her publishing decisions offer of her professionalism” (1). Fergus also explains a possible reason why Henry created this persona for Austen: “Publishing her own writing could threaten a woman’s reputation as well as her social position. For any woman, the fame of authorship could become infamy, and novels were particularly reprehensible, as their famous defence [sic] in *Northanger Abbey* indicates.” Additionally, “Proper women, as Henry Austen makes clear, were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship of any kind entailed publicity, thrusting oneself before the public eye – thus loss of femininity” (2). It is no wonder, then, that Henry emphasized Austen’s femininity: to preserve her reputation. The idea of professional writing as historically unfeminine would be interesting to explore with general education literature students as well as English majors.

Throughout this chapter, I will address the biographical information that can be gleaned from Austen’s correspondence and touch on how that information could be incorporated into
teaching using Austen’s letters. I will delve deeper into discussions of teaching with the letters in Chapters 5 through 7, where I will also detail the learning objectives that will be achieved with the lessons and assessments I explore. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the biographical information I examine in this chapter has not been compiled in the same way or for the same purpose, and while this information can be discovered from endnote annotations and indexes in collections of Austen’s letters, those annotations and indexes are generally less than comprehensive and problematic to traverse.

AUSTEN IN CONTEXT: CRITICISM OF THE LETTERS

Austen was a product of her time, regardless of whether she challenged the status quo by remaining unmarried, practicing her writing craft regularly, and becoming a professional published writer who was involved in her own career at a time when women needed a male intermediary to conduct their financial business, In fact, Austen relied on her father and brothers but wasn’t shy about writing to publishers herself. Many of the issues of historical interest in Austen’s correspondence are also of biographical interest in that they reveal the attitude of the writer toward her subject. In A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf describes her literary forebear favorably as

a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote … and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare. If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. (68)
Woolf brings up an extremely important, complex, and perplexing observation of Austen (and Shakespeare) in this passage: Austen is somehow both enigmatic and knowable through her writing. Austen’s fiction-writing certainly demonstrates this paradox, but does her letter-writing? I will argue that not only does Austen’s correspondence reveal important historical information as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, but if you examine it closely, it reveals the character and sometimes scandalous viewpoints of the author. These controversial perspectives will provide students of Austen’s letters chances to discuss what these comments say about their author, how they contribute to our understanding of her personality, and why these comments are controversial considering the historical and biographical context.

Not everyone agrees about whether Austen’s letters reveal anything at all stimulating about the author. In “Jane Austen and the Look of the Letters” from *Romantic Correspondence*, Mary A. Favret makes some generalizations and assumptions about Austen’s letters and how she believes they reveal little about the author, contrary to Anderson and Ehrenpreis’s contention that eighteenth-century letter-writers revealed more about themselves by not talking about themselves overtly, a perspective with which I would agree. In contrast, Favret claims, “Diligent and almost dutiful about her correspondence, Austen wrote letters which, ever since their publication, have required repeated apologies from her admirers” (133). By way of explanation, Favret argues that Austen’s letters signal a shift away from the eighteenth-century letter-writers, who were affective (and for the most part, they were). She states,

> The collected letters of Jane Austen should alert us to a shift away from the eighteenth-century fiction of the letter and warn us of invisible barriers to reading. The evident lack of affective sensibility, contemplation or personal exposure in these letters contradict some of our assumptions about the familiar letter. (133)
While Austen’s letters do shift away from eighteenth century affectation—that is, purporting to be natural, conversational, and unaffected, or at least less affected than seventeenth-century letter-writers—her letters are actually unaffected, natural, and conversational. Further, Favret compares Austen to other female letter-writers of around the same time period: “Jane Austen’s unyielding letters are not an isolated phenomenon. This lack of personal revelation correlates with a similar lack in the later letters of Helen Maria Williams, and with the protected ‘inner self’ of Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Sweden*” (134). The issue with Favret’s comparison of Austen’s letters to Wollstonecraft’s is that the latter’s had a very different function: to effect social and political reform. Austen’s letters, by contrast, were intended for private consumption.

Another of Favret’s lamentations is that Cassandra destroyed most of her sister’s letters, supposedly because they revealed too much about the author (a debated theory based on Caroline Austen’s imperfect recollection). She wonders if Austen actually revealed much about herself in the missing letters: “Or perhaps there was little to excise; maybe the lessons taught to the professional woman writer and the epistolary heroine had filtered into everyday correspondence. In other words, Austen may not have written the revealing letters we seek—at least not after the 1790s” (134). It may be true that Austen’s destroyed letters reveal no more of the author’s personality than the letters that already exist, but the extant letters reveal more than Favret suggests, just not as plainly or overtly as she would prefer. Moreover, the affectation in the traditional familiar letter of the eighteenth-century would seem to suggest that they reveal less of those authors than Favret appears to believe; if they are affectations, do they really reveal the character of the author any more than Austen’s conversational, candid letters do?
Another issue of Austen’s letters that Favret raises is Austen’s references to cost, length, and penmanship: “We find … darting out from so many of her letters, frequent references to length, penmanship and general presentation of letters. We might infer that the letter-writer revealed as much in the appearance as in the content of the missive—and perhaps more” (135). However, Favret argues that “[t]he letter was, not surprisingly, a very material object for Jane Austen. With the cost of a note determined by the number of sheets it covered, and with postal charges rising dramatically, correspondents set a high value on the ability to pack loads of information onto a single page and to write neatly, with a small hand” (135). In other words, the cost of written correspondence in Austen’s era resulted in the expectations of letter-writers and recipients for utilizing the letter effectively and with cost-consciousness. She also notes an important point about who paid for the letter, stating, “A double-letter was a rare luxury among Austen’s circle: it would not necessarily find an enthusiastic recipient, since most letters were paid for at their destination” (135-6). Thus, it behooved the letter-writer to make effective use of the single sheet.

The ultimate problem Favret sees with Austen’s letters is that they seem to be “reports” more than a “window to the soul” of the author. Favret notes that “[t]he ultimate value of a letter … was realized in circulation, as relatives and friends passed around particularly deserving correspondence” (136). It is important to note that this type of private circulation among friends and family is much different than the public circulation of publication (as many other authors intended for their letters). Favret concludes from the content of Austen’s letters, seemingly without regard for the way Austen related these events, that

From reading Jane Austen’s personal epistles, we begin to suspect that for her, and for her correspondents as well, letters did not offer a window to the soul or
access to the body. As a record of social engagements, as a news-sheet, as a medium for caricature, and as a familial duty, the letter, in Austen’s hand, took on the tone of a village newspaper, rife with gossip and local color. (136)

In other words, for Favret, Austen’s “familiar letter functions more as a mirror of the surrounding community than as a lens through which one scrutinized the writer” (136). While Austen’s letters do provide a wealth of information about the goings-on of her neighbors, friends, and family, they also provide information about the author herself.

Many aspects of Austen’s private correspondence indicate Austen’s personality, preferences, and attitude, including what information she includes, what she omits, what she lingers on, and how she relays the information she delivers. In the first series of *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf defends Austen’s writing against narrow-minded criticism:

> Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial …. Think away the surface animation, the likeness to life, and there remains, to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite discrimination of human values. Dismiss this too from the mind and one can dwell with extreme satisfaction upon the more abstract art which … so varies the emotions and proportions the parts that it is possible to enjoy it, as one enjoys poetry, for itself … (138-39)

Woolf’s assessment of Austen’s subtlety and nuance can also be applied to her correspondence: there is deeper feeling than what is visible on the surface and the reader is left to unravel it. As with the fiction, Austen makes us work for meaning. Austen’s letters deserve at least as much attention to what is below the surface as her novels, at least before making generalizations about the supposed banality of her letters, criticism which has historically been made about the novels themselves, incidentally.
Contrary to Favret’s censure of Austen’s letters as functional and un-revelatory of Austen’s character, numerous scholars have begun to examine what they have to offer. In *Reading and Writing Ourselves into Being: The Literacy of Certain Nineteenth-Century Young Woman*, Claire White Putala explains that “there is, for the most part, consensus on the importance of letters both as a gendered and gendering vehicle in the lives of 19th- (and 18th-) century women.” Moreover, she clarifies the content of women’s correspondence in Austen’s era “as resting on the ‘particulars’ of daily experience even if, in the special case of Jane Austen, there is a degree of ambivalence regarding these details” (149). Additionally, Putala points out that “[a]s a genre, the domestic letters of women have been given relatively short shrift, often edited to root out the redundancies …. They were also criticized for being merely functional (Brown, 1989) and simplistic” (149). Putala includes an interesting excerpt from a 1988 essay by Deborah Kaplan in which Kaplan assesses “the stylistic features of Jane Austen’s letters”:

News is indicated in her letters to Cassandra not by extended narratives, by stories, but by short, informative bursts of prose. News is also demarcated by sudden and rapid changes of direction, usually without preparatory transitions. Although not every letter employs them, the majority use dashes frequently to take the place of descriptions and transitions. They reinforce the bulletin-like quality of the discourse and enable sudden shifts that obey no principles of ordering, except, occasionally, chronological sequencing. (qtd in Putala 167)

Putala then points out the structure and style of Austen’s letter-writing, i.e. that the “gaps and leaps” are “equivalencies of the ‘logic’ of conversation.” She quotes Kaplan to support this characterization of Austen’s correspondence: “The letters evoke writer and reader especially vividly, asserting the primacy of a verbal communication, face-to-face gossip upon which these letters are modeled”” (167). In fact, Austen comments on letter-writing in a letter to Cassandra in January of 1801, which Kaplan also deemed indicative of the foundation of her personal letter-writing style: “I have now attained the true art of letter writing, which we are always told, is to
express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter” (Letter 29). Based on this excerpt, I would argue that (if she is in earnest) Austen writes her letters as if she is having a conversation with the recipient, which is how eighteenth-century letter writers envisioned the objective of their letter-writing style.

However, eighteenth-century writers’ letters were often more carefully crafted (i.e. affected) than Austen’s letters which seem to take to heart the advice to make letters conversational, “the true art of letter writing.” Putala also argues that Austen and female letter-writers after her had a particular way of delivering the information their recipients were expecting (“news”), toward which Austen at least was ambivalent, as evidenced by “hyperbole and irony … put into service as commentary” (200). Austen used hyperbole and irony as ways to insert humor into her conveyance of “news” to her sister, and the conversational tone of the letters is not the only thing that Austen makes apparent in her correspondence.

THE LETTERS: BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Austen’s letters reveal numerous things about various aspects of her life and her opinions on topical issues, and they are particularly edifying regarding her thoughts on and news about family and social circles, her personality and sense of humor, her feelings about current events, her critical opinions of people she knew, her perspectives on courtship and marriage, and her views on money. Biographical details culled from Austen’s letters can be very useful to students of Austen’s work, as I will address in detail throughout my discussions of teaching Austen in Chapters 5-7.
One topic Austen broaches numerous times is her family and social circles. In a letter to her brother Frank, Austen writes poignantly about her father’s death:

I have melancholy news to relate, & sincerely feel for your feelings under the shock of it.—I wish I could better prepare You for it.—But having said so much, Your mind will already forestall the sort of Event which I have to communicate.—Our dear Father has closed his virtuous & happy life, in a death almost as free from suffering as his Children could have wished. (Letter 40)

Austen writes to her brother about the progression of their father’s final illness and “his last gasp” at “about twenty minutes after Ten.” Unfortunately, it became necessary for Austen to write another letter to her brother the next day when her sister received a letter from him that indicated he would be at a different port (and so the letter she had sent the previous day would not reach him in a timely manner).

The second letter includes a bit of new information about the arrival of their brother James and the date of the funeral: “on Saturday, at Walcot Church” (Letter 41). She also comments on her father’s corpse, which she had not done in the previous letter: “The Serenity of the Corpse is most delightful!—It preserves the sweet, benevolent smile which always distinguished him.” Her final letter to her brother Frank on the subject of their father’s death was sent a week later; it is a brief letter that notes that their mother found “a small astronomical Instrument” among their father’s possessions which their mother “hopes [Frank] will accept for [their father’s] sake” (Letter 42). She closes this very brief letter (“I have not time for more”) by noting the intrinsic worth of the items for Frank: “We hope these are articles that may be useful to you, but we are sure they will be valuable.” These letters to Frank are of biographical significance because they are the only letters that survive from the time that her father died (21 January 1805); the letter prior was from September 1804 (Letter 39) and the letter after her third letter to Frank (from January 29) was written in early April 1805 (Letter 43).
While her father’s death offered occasion for poignant letters that provide insight into Austen’s reaction to this momentous event, she also writes on everyday life and visits from friends and family in several letters. In June 1808, she discusses visits to family and friends, mentioning her niece Mary Jane (Frank’s daughter), as well as an upcoming journey to Cassandra in Southampton with her brother Edward and his son Edward Jr. (Letter 53). In October 1808, Austen jokes in a letter to her sister Cassandra about her brother Edward’s “30th” birthday—he was actually turning 41 (Le Faye 403n7)—and mentions her mother and announces the impending arrival of Martha: “yesterday brought us notice of it, & the Spruce Beer is brewed in consequence” (Letter 57). In her next letter, she takes a more serious tone when she offers condolences to her brother Edward through Cassandra on his wife Elizabeth’s sudden death (Letter 58). She also expresses relief that Cassandra is with Edward and his daughter Fanny: “You will be everything to her, you will give her all the Consolation that human aid can give.” However, she laments that her nephews are not with her: “I should have loved to have them with me at such a time.” She continues her sentiments on Elizabeth’s death in her next letter to her sister, discussing the upcoming funeral and mourning attire, but the most moving part of her letter is the brief comment on her niece who has just lost her mother: “Poor Child! One must hope the impression will be strong, & yet one’s heart aches for a dejected Mind of eight years old” (Letter 59). She also comments that she expects Cassandra has viewed “the Corpse” and asks, “How does it appear?” It was customary during this period that family view the corpse before the coffin was closed for the funeral, which very few mourners would attend (also customarily) (Le Faye 404n1).
While some of Austen’s letters that mention family are heavy—loss is inevitable when your family is as large as hers was—she also has lighthearted moments, such as in a letter from March 1817 in which she relays to her niece Caroline that her “Uncles Henry & Frank” will dine with Austen; she also mentions her niece Mary Jane (Letter 154). Austen also writes to her niece Fanny in a letter from March 1817, bringing up several family members and neighbors (Letter 155). Austen again discusses illnesses (her niece and brother’s in-laws) and death (of her Uncle James, her mother’s brother) in a letter from April 1817 to her brother Charles (Letter 157), and in a letter to her nephew Edward from May 1817 she mentions her aunt Cassandra, uncle Henry, and her brother’s friend William, as well as her nephew Charles (Letter 160). This letter would be the last full letter of hers to survive (though assuredly not the last to be written) before her death a few short months later.

Austen’s references to family matters in the letters could be introduced in teaching Austen’s novels by examining the family relationships in the fiction. For instance, one could compare Austen’s family dynamics and attitudes toward family members to the Bennet family in Pride and Prejudice. In addition, one could examine the close relationship between Austen and her sister Cassandra and compare it to how she depicts sisterly connections in the novels: Elinor and Marianne in Sense and Sensibility, Elizabeth and Jane in Pride and Prejudice, Fanny and Susan or Maria and Julia in Mansfield Park, and Anne, Elizabeth, and Mary in Persuasion. Students could also examine other sibling relationships in the novels: George and John Knightly or Isabella and Emma in Emma, and Henry and Eleanor Tilney or Isabella and John Thorpe in Northanger Abbey. Students could extend their analysis of sibling relationships to proxy sibling relationships in the novels as well: Elizabeth and Charlotte in P&P, Fanny and her cousins or
Mary Crawford in *MP*, Anne and Lady Russell in *P*, and Catherine and Isabella in *NA*. Class discussion questions on sibling relationships would reveal much about the importance Austen places on those relationships in her own life (letters) and the novels. What can we tell about Austen and Cassandra’s relationship through the letters? What can we tell about Austen’s relationships with her other siblings (brothers)? How is Austen’s close relationship with Cassandra mirrored in the relationships between sisters in the novels? Which sisterly relationships stand in stark contrast to Austen and Cassandra’s? How are other sibling relationships portrayed in the novels? What might Austen’s depictions of the sibling relationships and familial ties imply about the role and importance of family in society?

In addition to family, friends, and acquaintances, Austen reveals a lot about her own personality and her somewhat dark sense of humor in her correspondence. Numerous letters reveal Austen’s character; in an early surviving letter, dated 23 August 1796, she humorously writes to her sister, “Here I am once more in this Scene of Dissipation & vice, and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted” (Letter 3). Later in this brief letter, she jokes that her brothers “Edward & Frank are both gone out to seek their fortunes; the latter is to return soon & help us seek ours. The former we shall never see again.” In a letter from December 1798, Austen begins by telling her sister, “Your letter came quite as soon as I expected, and so your letters always do, because I have made it a rule not to expect them till they come, in which I think I consult the ease of us both” (Letter 14). In January 1799, Austen quips that “Elizabeth is very cruel about my writing Music;—& as a punishment for her, I should insist upon always writing out all hers for her in future, if I were not punishing myself at the same time” (Letter 17). Austen also jokes about a potential dance partner at a ball she attended: “There was one Gentleman, an
officer of the Cheshire, a very good looking young Man, who I was told wanted very much to be introduced to me;—but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, we never could bring it about.” Later in the same letter, Austen expresses mock-indignation to her sister for a lack of concern: “You express so little anxiety about my being murdered under Ash Park Copse by M’s Hubert’s servant, that I have a great mind not to tell you whether I was or not, & shall only say that I did not return home that night or the next, as Martha kindly made room for me in her bed, which was the shut-up one in the new Nursery.” Austen’s sarcasm in these letters gives readers a glimpse of her personality, but sarcasm is not the only kind of humor she uses to relay information to her correspondents.

Austen introduces humor in some other correspondence by pointing out that she has little to say that is interesting. In a letter from May 1799, Austen writes amusingly about her lack of weighty subject-matter to relay to Cassandra: “I have got so many things to say, so many things equally unimportant, that I know not on which to decide at present, & shall therefore go & eat with the Children” (Letter 19). Another flippant comment on her own letter-writing comes in January 1801; she begins thus: “Expect a most agreeable Letter; for not being overburdened with subject—(having nothing at all to say)—I shall have no check to my Genius from beginning to end” (Letter 32). Another humorous, self-conscious comment appears in a letter from 1813, in which Austen mentions a walk she took with a Miss Papillon: “I had a very agreeable [sic] walk; if she had not, more Shame for her, for I was quite as entertaining as she was” (Letter 78). These examples of Austen’s humor are relatively mild compared to some more critical wit in other letters.
An entertaining but harsh comment appears in September 1804 when Austen discusses prospective dance partners at a ball she attended, noting that she was not asked to dance the first two dances but danced with Mr. Crawford and could have danced with Mr. Granville “or with a new, odd looking Man who had been eyeing me for some time, & at last without any introduction asked me if I meant to dance again” (Letter 39). She goes on to speculate about this man: “I think he must be Irish by his ease, & because I imagine him to belong to the Honoble Barnwalls, who are the son & son’s wife of an Irish Viscount—bold, queerlooking [sic] people, just fit to be Quality at Lyme.” Another comment on the characters of others that reveals Austen’s humor is made in a February 1807 letter. She writes, “Unluckily … I see nothing to be glad of, unless I make it a matter of Joy that Mrs Wylmot has another son & that Lord Lucan has taken a Mistress, both of which Events are of course joyful to the Actors” (Letter 50). As is evidenced by these examples of her humor, Austen reveals through her correspondence that she was observant of others’ foibles as well as her own and had a sometimes dark and often critical wit.

In literature courses, students could examine these humorous, if often insensitive, comments on and descriptions of others’ faults. For instance, in discussions of Pride and Prejudice, students could analyze the descriptions of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet\(^1\) and compare

\(^{1}\)“Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three ad twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develope [sic]. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and sharing news” (3).

“Had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr. Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on, in any of those
criticisms of and observations on these two character to those of Austen’s acquaintances and family in the letters. How do Austen’s shrewd scrutiny of others’ characters and behaviors in the letters translate to how well she demonstrates character development in the novels? Where can we discern similar tones in characterization and description of novel characters in Austen’s letters? What are the differences between the extent of Austen’s criticism in the letters and the novels? In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet asks Elizabeth, “For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and to laugh at them in our turn?” (278); how could we demonstrate this statement as a philosophy of Austen’s by examining her treatment of friends and acquaintances in her letters and of the characters in her novels?

Besides aspects of her personality and her sense of humor, Austen’s letters also expose her attitudes about current events and news, such as the Battle of Corunna and the Portuguese Regent: “The St' Albans perhaps may soon be off to help bring home what may remain by this time of our poor Army, whose state seems dreadfully critical. — The Regency seems to have been heard of only here, my most political Correspondants [sic] make no mention of it. Unlucky, that I should have wasted so much reflection on the subject!” (Letter 64). The HMS St. Albans was under Austen’s brother Frank’s command and “took charge of the disembarkation of the

pleasures which too often console the unfortunate for their folly or their vice. He was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments. To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. This is not the sort of happiness which a man would in general owe to his wife; but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given.

Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook; and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. But she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife” (180-81).
remnants of Sir John Moore’s forces,” according to Le Faye’s endnote (Letters 407n1). Austen mentions a specific fatality of the Battle of Corunna in two subsequent letters as well: “This is greivous [sic] news from Spain.—It is well that D’ Moore was spared the knowledge of such a son’s death” (Letter 66), the “son” referring to General Sir John Moore (Letters 409n13), and “I wish Sir John had united something of the Christian and 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” (Letter 67). In a letter from May 1811, Austen mentions two events: the festivities of King George III’s birthday (see 415n3) and the Peninsular War Battle of Albuera (see 415n7), about which she exclaims, “How horrible it is to have so many people killed!—And what a blessing that one cares for none of them!” (Letter 74). Austen often commented on casualties of the war ambivalently, lamenting the loss of life but extolling the fact that she was not personally connected to any of the dead.

Another current event Austen comments on, in a letter from February 1813 addressed to Martha Lloyd, is the publication of a letter written by the Princess of Wales (Caroline) to her estranged husband, Prince George²:

I suppose all the World is sitting in Judgement [sic] upon the Princess of Wales’s Letter. Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband—but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself ‘attached & affectionate’ to a Man whom she must detest—& the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad.—I do not know what to do about it;—but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first. (Letter 82)

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² For a brief and accessible account of the strained marriage of the Princess and Prince of Wales (later King George IV), see “Princess Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821)” from Regency History (http://www.regencyhistory.net/2011/11/princess-caroline-of-brunswick-1768.html). For a more colorful account, see “Caroline of Brunswick: Injured Queen of England” by Laura Boyle (http://www.janeausten.co.uk/caroline-of-brunswick-injured-queen-of-england/).
Austen was not alone in her distaste for the Prince Regent (crowned King in 1820), who was widely unpopular and subject to ridicule and censure: after his death in 1830, *The Times* bluntly stated, “There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow-creatures than this deceased king …. If George IV ever had a friend – a devoted friend – in any rank of life, we protest that the name of him or her has not yet reached us” (“1830”). In light of this critical perspective from a reputable newspaper, Austen’s sentiments about the Prince Regent and her disapprobation of the Princess’s feigned affection and regard for her husband seem to be in line with public opinion.

In addition to discussing current events, Austen sometimes censured people she knew, especially in letters to her sister, Cassandra. Austen’s criticism was often directed at acquaintances, especially in the context of social events she had attended and circumstances surrounding courtships and marriages. In a letter from December 1798, Austen tells her sister, “I do not want People to be very agreeable [sic], as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal” (Letter 15). Another letter to Cassandra from the same month includes a critique of a potential dance partner at a ball Austen attended: “One of my gayest actions was sitting down two Dances in preference to having Lord Bolton’s eldest son for my Partner, who danced too ill to be endured” (Letter 17). Another letter, from November 1800, includes Austen’s unkind descriptions of attendees at a ball: “There were very few Beauties, & such as there were, were not very handsome” (Letter 27). Specific descriptions of ladies and gentlemen at the event included people who “did not look well,” one who had a “fat neck,” “the remains of the vulgar, broad featured girl who danced at Enham eight years ago,” “a queer animal with a white neck,” and someone with “a good deal of nose.” She also laments having to compliment the looks of
woman and comments on her husband’s appearance as well: “M’r Warren, I was constrained to think a very fine young woman, which I much regret. She has got rid of some part of her child, & danced away with great activity, looking by no means very large.—Her husband is ugly enough; uglier even than his cousin John; but he does not look so very old.” The final critique concerns “Miss Debary, Susan & Sally”: “I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me.” In these passages, Austen exhibits little restraint in expressing whatever critical observation she makes of those around her, from terrible dancing skills to ugly facial features to weight to bad breath.

A few months later in May 1801, Austen again discusses people she has observed at a ball, in particular an adulteress: “She is not so pretty as I expected; her face has the same defect of baldness as her sister’s, & her features not so handsome—she was highly rouged, & looked rather quietly & contentedly silly than anything else” (Letter 36). In the same letter, Austen references “another stupid party”: “I cannot anyhow continue to find people agreable [sic];—I respect M’r Chamberlayne for doing her hair well, but cannot feel a more tender sentiment.—Miss Langley is like any other short girl with a broad nose & wide mouth, fashionable dress, & exposed bosom.” A less unkind but still critical observation appears in a letter from early 1813, in which Austen tells her sister, “Our party on Wednesday was not unagreable [sic], tho’ as usual we wanted a better Master of the House, one less anxious and fidgety [sic], & more conversible [sic]” (Letter 78). Again, Austen expressed her characteristic irreverence in describing the appearances and mannerisms of others.

Austen did not limit her criticism to acquaintances at social events, however; she also remarked on individuals who were recently married. In a letter to Cassandra from February 1807,
Austen discusses a recent marriage, criticizing the match: “Miss Jackson is married to young Mr. Gunthorpe, & is to be very unhappy. He swears, drinks, is cross, jealous, selfish & Brutal;—the match makes her family miserable, & has occasioned his being disinherited” (Letter 50). She also discusses the marriage of Harriot Bridges (26 at the age of her marriage) to Revd. George Moore (ten years her senior) in a letter from June 1808: “Well!—& what do I think of Mr. Moore?—I will not pretend in one meeting to dislike him, whatever Mary may say; but I can honestly assure her that I saw nothing in him to admire.—His manners, as you have always said, are gentlemanlike—but by no means winning” (Letter 53). Later in this letter, Austen comments further on Mr. Moore’s character: “His manners to her [Harriot] want Tenderness—& he was a little violent at last about the impossibility of her going to Eastwell.” Another critical comment Austen makes in this lengthy letter regards her unsympathetic attitude toward a man’s death and his wife’s reaction: “Mr. Waller is dead, I see;—I cannot grieve [sic] about it, nor perhaps can his Widow very much.” In a letter from early the following year (1809), Austen comments on a bride instead of a groom: “What an alarming bride Mrs. Coln Tilson must have been! Such a parade is one of the most immodest peices [sic] of Modesty that one can imagine. To attract notice could have been her only wish.—It augurs ill for his family—it announces not great sense; & therefore ensures boundless Influence” (Letter 65). These comments on spouses could be compared to different couples in the novels in literature courses. For instance, students could examine these critiques against couples such as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice or John and Fanny Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility.
Austen’s criticism also extended to visitors and family. Even Austen’s mother was not above the author’s reproach. In an early letter, from January 1799, Austen mentions their mother in a letter to her sister:

It began to occur to me before you mentioned it that I had been somewhat silent as to my mother’s health for some time, but I thought you could have no difficulty in deriving its exact state—you, who have guessed so much stranger things. She is tolerably well—better upon the whole than she was some weeks ago. She would tell you herself that she has a very dreadful cold in her head at present; but I have not much compassion for colds in the head without fever or sore throat. (Letter 18)

Although Austen criticizes family and close friends, her censure is generally directed at annoyances with those in her extended social and familial circles. In December 1808, she tells Cassandra, “Miss Curling is actually at Portsmouth—which I was always in hopes would not happen.—I wish her no worse however than a long & happy abode there. Here, she w’d probably be dull, & I am sure she w’d be troublesome” (Letter 62). Later that month, she relays an unpleasant visit: “Miss Murden has been sitting with us this morn—& as yet she seems very well pleased with her situation. The worst part of her being in Southampton will be the necessity of our walking with her now & then, for she talks so loud that one is quite ashamed…” (Letter 65). This description calls to mind Miss Bates in Emma, whose garrulous prolixity irks her acquaintances.

Other than offering criticism of people she knew, Austen brings up her serious perspectives on courtship and marriage in numerous letters. A letter to Cassandra from November 1808 offers her practical reaction to an intended marriage:

Your news of Edw Bridges was quite news, for I have had no letter from Wrotham.—I wish him happy with all my heart, & hope his choice may turn out according to his own expectations, & beyond those of his Family—And I dare say it will. Marriage is a great Improver—& in a similar situation Harriet [Foote] may
be as amiable as Eleanor.—As to Money, that will come You may be sure, because they cannot do without it. (Letter 61)

In addition to the news of this potential marriage, Austen discusses in this same letter a secret marriage that has happened recently:

Before I can tell you of it, you will have heard that Miss Sawbridge is married. It took place I beleive [sic] on Thursday, Mrs Fowle has for some time been in the secret, but the Neighbourhood in general were quite unsuspicious. Mr Maxwell was Tutor to the young Gregorys—consequently they must be one of the happiest Couple in the World, & either of them worthy of Envy—for she must be excessively in love, & he mounts from nothing, to a comfortable Home.

Austen’s view of the clandestine marriage is characteristically judgmental; she notes that they are enviable because Miss Sawbridge must have been very in love with Mr. Maxwell in order to marry him, a poor tutor, and Mr. Maxwell must be extremely happy to have elevated his socioeconomic status by marrying Miss Sawbridge. Another practical but cynical reaction to a marriage appears in a letter from the next month (December 1808). In this letter, Austen discusses a widow’s second marriage:

Lady Sondes’ match surprises, but does not offend me;—had her first marriage been of affection, or had there been a grown-up single daughter, I should not have forgiven her—but I consider everybody as having the right to marry once in their Lives for Love, if they can—& provided she will now leave off having bad headaches & being pathetic, I can allow her, I can wish her to be happy. (Letter 63)

Based on her reactions to marriages and intentions to marry in her letters, Austen seems to have had a matter-of-fact and suspicious view of marriage, especially when the circumstances of the marriage involve secrecy or lie outside of social or moral expectations. Her reference to Lady Sondes’ remarriage demonstrates that she is not offended by her marriage for love because her first marriage was not a love match. However, Austen places many contingencies on her “acceptance” of the match; the implication is that if Sondes’s first marriage had been for love, her second marriage would have been offensive. Additionally, Austen’s reaction is not out of
character in its criticism; she includes unfavorable character traits that she hopes the marriage will remedy in Lady Sondes: “bad head-aches & being pathetic.” Marriages appear in all of Austen’s novels (too many to list them all) and some second marriages also appear, for instance Mr. Weston to Miss Taylor in *Emma*. Thus, Austen’s comments on and criticisms of certain marriages in the letters could be juxtaposed against the success of marriages in the novels (or lack thereof).

Unique insight into Austen’s views of marriage and courtship are demonstrated in her letters to her niece Fanny. In several letters, Austen advises her favorite niece on matters of the heart. In November 1814, Austen comments on Fanny’s change of heart over a suitor: “What strange creatures we are!—It seems as if your being secure of him [John Pemberton Plumptre] (as you say yourself) had made you Indifferent” (Letter 109). Furthermore, she tells her niece that she has made a common error that persists today: “Oh! dear Fanny, Your mistake has been one that thousands of women fall into. He was the *first* young Man who attached himself to you. That was the charm, & most powerful it is.” Austen goes on to tell Fanny that she thinks Mr. Plumptre would be a good match for her and that Fanny would make him happy as his wife, but then she shifts gears, playing devil’s advocate:

And now, my dear Fanny, having written so much on one side of the question, I shall turn round & entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection; and if his deficiencies of Manner &c &c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once.—Things are now in such a state, that you must resolve upon one or the other, either to allow him to go on as he has done, or whenever you are together behave with a coldness which may convince him that he has been deceiving himself.—I have no doubt of his suffering a good deal for a time, a great deal, when he feels that he must give you up;—but it is no creed of mine, as you must be well aware, that such sort of Disappointments kill anybody. (Letter 109)
Her letters to her niece show how practical Austen was regarding marriage, but they also indicate that Austen was not as cynical or critical as she may appear in other letters, especially with reference to other marriages.

In November of 1814, Austen again advises Fanny on marriage, bringing up the valid point that Fanny is still young and inexperienced and that she should not commit herself to Plumptre if she is not confident that she loves him:

> When I consider how few young Men you have yet seen much of—how capable you are (yes, I do still think you very capable) of being really in love—and how full of temptation the next 6 or 7 years of your Life will probably be—(it is the very period of Life for the strongest attachments to be formed)—I cannot wish you with your present very cool feelings to devote yourself in honour to him. It is very true that you may never attach to another Man, his equal altogether, but if that other Man has the power of attaching you more, he will be in your eyes the most perfect. (Letter 114)

In addition to telling Fanny that she will meet other men and perhaps fall in love, she concedes that Fanny may not find someone who is Plumptre’s “equal altogether,” but Austen also explains that this may not matter if she is more attached to someone else because her *attachment* will make him “the most perfect.”

Finally, Austen addresses Fanny’s concerns that she will appear fickle if she behaves coolly toward Plumptre after having encouraged his attentions: “The unpleasantness of appearing fickle is certainly great—but if you want Punishment for past Illusions, there it is—and nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without Love, bound to one, & preferring another. That is Punishment which you do not deserve” (Letter 114). Austen’s advice shows her insight into marriage, especially her contention that it is best to marry with love and that obligation based on previous encouragement and outward perception of indecisiveness should not be considerations when deciding to marry someone. When teaching the novels alongside these
letters to Fanny, students could consider the nonstarter that is Elizabeth and Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. In rejecting Mr. Collins’s proposal of marriage, Elizabeth points out the same central idea Austen broaches in these letters: affection as paramount in marriage.

Another letter to Fanny over two years later in February 1817 also examines Fanny’s love life. Fanny again seeks her aunt’s consult and expresses her own contradictory personality, which her aunt comments on good-naturedly, telling Fanny,

> You are the Paragon of all that is Silly & Sensible, common-place & eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking & Interesting.—Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, the Capprizios [sic] of your Taste, the Contradictions of your Feelings?—You are so odd!—& all the time, so perfectly natural—so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else!—It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think what a pleasure it is to me, to have such thorough pictures of your Heart. (Letter 151)

Austen anticipates what it will be like when Fanny is married (which she never lived to see):

> “Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreable [sic] in your single state, too agreable as a Neice [sic]. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections.” Austen expresses further resistance to the idea: “I only do not like you sh’d marry anybody. And yet I do wish you to marry very much, because I know you will never be happy till you are …” Aside from her comments on Fanny’s capricious attitude toward potential suitors and her wishes for Fanny to remain single, she returns to the topic of two years earlier: Mr. John Plumptre, who has become engaged. Austen writes, “Why should you be living in dread of his marryin somebody else?—(Yet, how natural!)—You did not chuse [sic] to have him yourself; why not allow him to take comfort where he can?—In your conscience you know that he could not bear a comparison with a more animated Character.” She goes on to express her concern for her niece’s lamentation and tries to comfort her by recalling his faults: “My dearest Fanny, I cannot bear You should be unhappy about him. Think of his
Principles, think of his Father’s objection, of want of Money, of a coarse Mother, of Brothers & Sisters like Horses, of Sheets sewn across &c. But I am doing no good—no, all that I urge against him will rather make you take his part more, sweet perverse Fanny” (Letter 151). Ultimately, Austen knows, very perceptively, that her efforts to assuage Fanny’s feelings of jealousy are futile.

The final letter addressing marriage addressed to her niece was written in March 1817, just four months before Austen died. She highlights a serious issue at play with women’s role in the marriage game: “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony, but I need not dwell on such arguments with you, pretty Dear, you do not want inclination” (Letter 153). Austen brings the conversation back to Fanny, however, urging her to take her time in getting married:

Well, I shall say, as I have often said before, Do not be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last; you will in the course of the next two or three years, meet with somebody more generally unexceptionable than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as He ever did, & who will so completely attach you, that you will feel you never really loved before.

Austen’s advice to her niece offers a unique perspective because her other comments on marriage and courtship seem to be more cynical and paint a different picture of the author than these letters do. In her letters to Fanny, she reveals her perspectives on marriage beyond the criticism and biting humor of other letters on the subject. Regarding her favorite niece and marriage, Austen is thoughtful but playful, practical but idealistic, and above all perceptive yet optimistic. Attachment is marriage is a central theme in many of Austen’s novels, which makes these letters perfect for studying alongside, for instance, Pride and Prejudice (Mr. Collins and Charlotte, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and Lydia and Mr. Wickham), Sense and Sensibility (Marianne
and Willoughby, and Edward and Lucy Steele), and *Mansfield Park* (Maria and Mr. Rushworth, and Mr. and Mrs. Price (for a look at a love marriage that *doesn’t* turn out as intended)).

**CONCLUSION**

Austen’s letters provide a wealth of both historical *and* biographical information. Through her correspondence, she reveals her character, viewpoints on current events and notable people, sometimes harsh sentiments about people she knew or was acquainted with, amusing asides and comments that revealed her sense of humor, and perspectives on courtship and marriage. The benefits of examining Austen’s letters with biographical context in mind are many. First of all, the historical context is intricately entwined with the biographical context because so much of what Austen discusses about her personal views on any of the topics discussed in this chapter and compiled together and explained as they are in no other source needs to be contextualized biographically *and* historically in order to appreciate fully the information she reveals about herself and life in Regency England.

In the end, Austen’s letters provide abundant information for students on the daily lives of the English gentry, but it did not *only* do that. Her letters show how Austen was affected by her time, how her life was a product of the historical limitations imposed upon women but also how she overcame some of those obstacles to become a world-renowned author whose works are still read nearly two centuries after her untimely death. For Austen’s letters, history and biography are inextricable, as they are in her novels. The different ways Austen broaches historical and biographical topics in her letters shed light on those same issues in the novels, which makes the letters invaluable for students of literature. In the next chapter, this idea will be
explored more specifically in regard to what Austen herself read and what she thought about others’ works as well as her own novels and publication processes.
CHAPTER 4: THE WORLD OF AUSTEN’S LETTERS: READING AND WRITING

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will once more delve into the world of Austen’s letters, this time concentrating on using the letters as a source of information about Austen’s reading habits and perceptions of works of literature, including her own. Her letters are particularly elucidating in regard to the role of reading and writing in Austen’s life, as much as those concerning historical and biographical information, though all of these topics of interest are interwoven in Austen’s correspondence. Of especial interest in Austen’s discussions of writing, for instance, are her letters to publishers, which reveal her passion for her work and her strong opinions about the worth of her writing and how publication should be handled. I have used these letters in particular in college composition courses to discuss writing audience and persuasion. Thus, just as her letters reveal historical and biographical information about the author while revealing her personality and strong opinions, her discussions of literature and publication are equally illuminating of Austen’s character and attitude for college composition and literature students.

Understanding Austen’s responses to reading and writing proves very useful for teaching college students in composition and literature courses, and would also be valuable to students in other applicable courses, such as a literary criticism class. Austen’s comments on her own writing can be beneficial for students who are exploring writing process, in composition courses
but also in literature courses when preparing for literary analysis essays. A critical study of Austen’s letters focusing on her reading and writing is important in demonstrating for students that no writing is done in a vacuum. Writers read. They evaluate what they read, and they evaluate their own writing. Writing is a process in which the writer must continually improve, even the professional, published writer.

THE LETTERS: JANE AUSTEN AND READING

Besides the copious other subjects Austen broaches in her correspondence, which I have discussed at length in the previous two chapters, Austen’s perspectives on and references to works of literature and her views on writing appear in numerous letters throughout her life. Austen’s letters indicate that she was well-read and that she read a variety of literary genres, including travel literature, biographies, published letters, novels, poetry, and political, military, and religious/didactic texts. While Austen also references plays and playwrights, since some of these may have been theatrical performances she attended instead of plays she had read, I will omit them for the purposes of this chapter. In some instances, Austen mentioned the texts she read in passing, but in others she offered her opinions of texts and authors, and quotations from and allusions to works are peppered throughout her letters. Austen’s references to literature and her opinions on these works reveal her literary tastes and provide further insight into her personality.

While others have compiled Austen reading lists, each has their flaws. The BBC compiled a brief list in 2013, “Jane Austen: What Books were on Her Reading List?,” listing a few authors Austen seemingly admired, but their list is not comprehensive and includes very
few specific references to Austen’s letters to explain what she had to say about these works (two brief excerpts appear at the end of the article). A comprehensive list of Austen’s reading appears in The Republic of Pemberley’s online database in an Index of Literary Illusions (“Allusions to Books and Authors in Jane Austen’s Writings”), but the website is very basic and somewhat difficult to navigate, and their alphabetical (by literary title) index includes references in the novels.

One critical example documenting some of what Austen read is William Baker’s *Critical Companion to Jane Austen: A Literary Reference to her Life and Work*. In “Part III: Related Entries,” there are references to authors mentioned by Austen embedded within a broader list of references to people and terminology, and each entry includes its own “Bibliography.” Baker includes works referenced and alluded to in the novels, whereas I focus solely on the works mentioned in the letters. Another effective critical example is Gillian Dow and Katie Halsey’s “Jane Austen’s Reading: The Chawton Years,” which provides a list of some (not all) of authors Austen read (without references), as well as a brief explanation of the Chawton House Library exhibition’s (July 2009) focus on Austen’s reading while at Chawton along with a detailed list of works in the exhibit. The only drawback to this study is that it only focuses on the Chawton years (1809-1817) and includes works referenced in Austen’s Chawton novels as well as the letters.

One very useful resource for students of Austen or other authors who want to discover what those authors read is the UK Reading Experiences Database, *ukRED: The Experience of Reading in Britain, from 1450 to 1945*. Through this website, one can search records that document reading in the UK. A search for “Listings for Reader: Jane Austen” yields 84 results
from a variety of sources, including Austen’s letters and critical works. This is a helpful source and provides excerpts from the source texts which mention Austen’s reading, but does not provide any commentary or explanation of the works referenced, and it is not comprehensive.

There is more scholarship mentioning Austen’s comments on her own writing or theories about writing, but little in relation to teaching those novels. For instance, in Baker’s *Critical Companion*, “Part 2: Works A to Z” includes a comprehensive list of Austen’s writing, and within these entries, Baker includes select references to the works in Austen’s letters. Ultimately, my study is different than prior studies on Austen’s reading and references to writing in that I list the works referenced in all of Austen’s extant letters and more focused in that I concentrate only on those works mentioned or alluded to in the letters to the exclusion of those mentioned in the novels or elsewhere. I also provide quotes from the letters for almost every reference to Austen’s reading that I cover in this chapter.

Austen refers to several works of travel literature and biographies. One such work is Joseph Baretti’s (1719-89) *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy* (1768). In her letter to Cassandra from February 1807, she states, “We are reading Baretti’s other book, & find him dreadfully abusive of poor M’ Sharpe. I can no longer take his part against you, as I did nine years ago” (Letter 51). Two other famous works Austen references are James Boswell’s (1740-95) *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* and his *Life of Johnson*. In a letter from 1798, Austen mentions these works as well as those of William Cowper (1731-1800): “We have got Boswell’s ‘Tour to the Hebrides’, and are to have his ‘Life of Johnson’; and, as some money will yet

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1 See, for instance, Katie Gemmill’s “Jane Austen as Critic: A Study of Her Novelistic Theory and Practice,” “Jane Austen as Editor: Letters on Fiction and the Cancelled Chapters of *Persuasion*” and “Ventriloquized Opinions of *Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park*, and *Emma: Jane Austen’s Critical Voice.*” See also, Annette B. Hopkins’s “Jane Austen the Critic.”
remain in Burdon’s hands, it is to be laid out in the purchase of Cowper’s works” (Letter 12).

Austen also quotes a letter of Samuel Johnson from Boswell’s *Life* when commenting on her own letter-writing: “There, I flatter myself I have constructed you a Smartish Letter, considering my want of Materials. But like my dear D’ Johnson I beleive [sic] I have dealt more in Notions than Facts” (Letter 50). That Austen would mention Johnson is apt considering she has described “a writer of impeccable Johnsonian credentials” (Sutherland, “Jane Austen on Screen” 220).

Another biographical text that Austen mentions is Robert Southey’s (1774-1843) *Life of Nelson* (1813); she tells Cassandra in October 1813, “Southey’s Life of Nelson;—I am tired of Lives of Nelson, being that I never read any. I will read this however, if Frank is mentioned in it” (Letter 91). Incidentally, according to Le Faye’s note on this reference, Southey did not mention Frank Austen in this text, although “Nelson himself wrote very favourably of FWA” (*Letters* 430n15).

In addition to travel journals and biographies, Austen read published collections of letters, including the well-known *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson* (1788) by Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741-1831). Austen references Piozzi’s letters in two letters of her own. To her sister Cassandra in June 1799, Austen says, “So much for M’s Piozzi.—I had some thoughts of writing the whole of my letter in her stile, but I beleive [sic] I shall not” (Letter 21). Nearly a decade later in December 1808, Austen writes,

> Many thanks my dear Cassandra, to you & M’ Deedes, for your joint & agreeable [sic] composition, which took me by surprise this morning. He has certainly great merit as a Writer, he does ample justice to his subject, & without being diffuse, is clear & correct;—& tho’ I do not mean to compare his Epistolary powers with yours, or to give him the same portion of my Gratitude, he certainly has a very pleasing way of winding up a whole, & speeding Truth into the World.—“But all this, as my dear M’s Piozzi says, is flight & fancy & nonsense—for my Master has his great Casks to mind, & I have my little Children”—It is you however in this instance, that have the little Children—& I that have the great cask,—for we are brewing Spruce Beer again;—but my meaning really is, that I am extremely
foolish in writing all this unnecessary stuff, when I have so many matters to write about, that my paper will hardly hold it all. (Letter 62)

In this letter, Austen comments on the epistolary writing of Mr. Deedes as well as Cassandra, but also reveals a self-consciousness of what she is writing about, using a quote from Piozzi to demonstrate both the purposelessness of her commentary on their letter-writing as well as her indication that she has more important things to relay to Cassandra in this letter, thus providing a segue to her next topic.

In addition to Mrs. Piozzi’s letters, Austen references Sir Walter Scott’s (1771-1832) *Paul’s Letters to his Kinsfolk* (1816) in a letter to her publisher John Murray from November 1815. In this letter, she requests that he lend an *advanced* copy of the new work to her: “We have heard much of Scott’s account of Paris;—if it be not incompatible with other arrangements, would you favour us with it—supposing you have already opened?—You may depend upon its’ being in careful hands” (Letter 126). Scott’s text was published by John Murray, Austen’s own publisher. Le Faye gives a publication date of 1815 for *Paul’s Letters* (*Letters* 451n2), perhaps because Austen’s letter is dated from late 1815(?). However, both an Edinburgh University Library entry in *The Walter Scott Digital Archive* (“Paul’s Letters to His Kinsfolk”) discussing the composition and critical reception of the work\(^2\) and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Robert Douglas, “a good friend of Walter Scott,” date the work to 1816 (Carnall), January 25 to be exact, according to the Edinburgh University Library. This seems to suggest that Austen was asking her and Scott’s common publisher to lend her a copy of the *unpublished* work, which makes her appeal and promise that the work will be “in careful hands” more comprehensible.

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\(^2\) See http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/works/prose/kinsfolk.html for background information on the text.
Another collection of letters by a fictional author that Austen did not seem to appreciate was Robert Southey’s (1774-1843) *Letters from England, by Dom Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (1807), a description of English life written from the perspective of a fabricated Spanish traveler. Austen is critical of Southey’s work in a letter to Cassandra from October 1808: “We have got the 2d vol. of Espriella’s Letters, & I read it aloud by candlelight. The Man describes well, but is horribly anti-english. He deserves to be the foreigner he assumes” (Letter 56). Another seemingly negative comment on a volume of letters appears in Austen’s letter from January 1813. Here she refers to Mrs. Anne Grant’s (1755-1838) *Letters from the Mountains, being the real correspondence of a lady between the years 1773 and 1807* (1807), which she has just received. Austen tells Cassandra, “Yesterday moreover brought us M’rs Grant’s Letters, with M’r White’s Comp’s. —But I have disposed of them, Comp’s & all, for the first fortnight to Miss Papillon—& among so many readers or retainers of Books as we have in Chawton, I dare say there will be no difficulty in getting rid of them for another fortnight if necessary” (Letter 78). While this may appear to indicate that Austen did not want to read Grant’s letters, the meaning of her “disposal” of the volume may not be so clear-cut. Earlier in this same letter, Austen notes that she has just begun reading another work and that her mother has also started reading a different text; thus, she may be simply indicating the need to dispense with a volume that she does not have *time* to read at the moment.

In addition to travel literature, biographies, and volumes of letters (genuine and invented), Austen was a prolific reader of novels. Her correspondence is full of references to novels she had read, was reading, or anticipated reading. One such novel was Eaton Stannard Barrett’s (1786-1820) *The Heroine* (1813), a parodic novel that Austen likens to Ann Radcliffe’s
(1764-1823) Gothic novels. Austen gives her impressions of the novel to Cassandra in a letter from March 1814: “I finished the Heroine last night & was very much amused by it. I wonder James did not like it better. It diverted me exceedingly” (Letter 97). Later in this letter, Austen continues her evaluation of the novel after having made more progress in reading it: “We have drank tea & I have torn through the 3d vol. of the Heroine, & do not think it falls off.—It is a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style.” Students of Austen’s own Gothic parody Northanger Abbey will appreciate her comments on The Heroine. An extension of teaching Northanger Abbey could include a unit on the Gothic novel. When I have taught Northanger Abbey in the past, I first included a small unit on Gothic literature during which I provided students with background information on the genre and provided them with excerpts of Gothic novels Austen had read, including a few by Radcliffe. While we were reading Austen’s novel, I challenged students to compare the Gothic passages of Northanger Abbey to passages in these novels and analyze how Austen subverts the genre by disappointing expectations in her scenes. In future courses, I could also incorporate Barrett’s Gothic satire, share with students Austen’s comments on Barrett’s novel, and have students compare Barrett’s satire to Austen’s parody.

While Austen appreciated Barrett’s novel, not all novels received her approbation, including Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis’s (1746-1830) Alphon sine (transl. 1807), a sentimental novel centering on adultery, imprisonment, education, and redemption. In a letter from early January 1807, Austen explains her shift in reading material from Alphon sine to a re-reading of Charlotte Lennox’s (1720-1804) The Female Quixote (1752):

‘Alphon sine’ did not do. We were disgusted in twenty pages, as, independent of a bad translation, it has indecencies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure; and we
changed it for the ‘Female Quixotte’, which now makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remembered it. Mrs. F.A., to whom it is new, enjoys it as one could wish; the other Mary, I believe, has little pleasure from that or any other book. (Letter 49)

That Austen should enjoy a parody of Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote is no surprise considering she wrote her own parodic novel, Northanger Abbey. In fact, literature students could read excerpts from Lennox’s novel alongside Austen’s parody to analyze how the former’s parody may have inspired the latter’s. Students would also read Austen’s comments on The Female Quixote and assess whether they agree with her approbation of the work.

Another novel that did not meet Austen’s standards was Clarentine (1798), by Frances (Fanny) Burney’s younger sister Sarah Harriet Burney (1770-1844). Upon re-reading the novel in February 1807, Austen reveals to Cassandra, “We are reading Clarentine, & are surprised to find how foolish it is. I remember liking it much less on a 2d reading than at the 1st & it does not bear a 3d at all. It is full of unnatural conduct & forced difficulties, without striking merit of any kind” (Letter 50). As these last two examples demonstrate, Austen and her family did not resign themselves to a single reading of a novel; they often re-read works, sometimes (as with The Female Quixote) as an alternative to continuing to read books they found insufferable. Although sometimes the second reading did not hold up to the pleasure of the first, as was the case with Clarentine.

In addition to Charlotte Lennox and Sarah Harriet Burney, Austen read many other novels by women writers, including Lady Morgan Sydney Owenson (1783-1859). In one of her letters to Cassandra from January 1809, Austen mentions both Woman, or, Ida of Athens (1809) and The Wild Irish Girl (1806):

We have got Ida of Athens by Miss Owenson; which must be very clever, because it was written as the Authoress says, in three months.—We have only read the
Preface yet; but her Irish Girl does not make me expect much.—If the warmth of her Language could affect the Body, it might be worth reading in this weather. (Letter 65)

While Austen was not optimistic for Owenson’s new novel based on reading the previous one, she did anticipate another female author’s work: Mary Brunton’s (1778-1818) *Self-Control* (1810). In April 1811, she complains to her sister, “We have tried to get Self-controul, but in vain.—I should like to know what her Estimate is but am always half afraid of finding a clever novel too clever—and of finding my own story & my own people all forestalled” (Letter 72).

While Austen may have been nervously awaiting *Self Control*, her fear that it would humble her own work seems to have been unfounded, in her estimation.

While no letters survive in which Austen documents her initial impressions of the novel upon its first reading, she does explain her reaction two years later after a subsequent reading. In October 1813, she revisits the novel: “I am looking over Self Control again, & my opinion is confirmed of its’ being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura’s passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does” (Letter 91). Austen is referring to Laura tying herself to a canoe and sending herself down a waterfall to fake her own death and escape her captor and would-be rapist, who then commits suicide. Austen criticizes the work again in November 1814 in a letter to Anna Lefroy: “I will redeem my credit with him³, by writing a close Imitation of ‘Self-control’ as soon as I can;—I will improve upon it;—my Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way, & never stop till she reaches Gravesent” (Letter 111). In discussing

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³ The “him” to whom she refers is unclear because his name is cut out of the letter when mentioned in the previous sentence and the letter is incomplete (cut excerpt).
these letters with students, I would broach the subject of plausibility in Austen’s own novels. I could also include the excerpt from *Self Control* that Austen references to give student a better idea of why Austen criticizes it. Which aspects of the passage from *Self Control* seem improbable? Which situations in Austen’s novels might seem implausible? To what degree and to what end does most fiction necessarily include elements of improbability or expediency?

Aside from reading many female authors’ works, as well as lesser-known (at least today) texts, Austen read many famous, canonical works by her contemporaries, including at least two of Sir Walter Scott’s (1771-1832) novels, which are mentioned directly in Austen’s letters. One of these novels is *Waverley* (1814), of which Austen laments, “Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones.—It is not fair.—He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths.—I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley if I can help it—but I fear I must” (Letter 108). The other novel of Scott’s that Austen mentions is *The Antiquary* (1816). In a letter to her nephew James Edward (author of the *Memoirs*), she playfully uses Scott’s novel as a source of potential inspiration:

> Uncle Henry writes very superior Sermons.—You & I must try to get hold of one or two, & put them into our Novels;—it would be a fine help to a volume; & we could make our Heroine read it aloud of a Sunday Evening, just as well as Isabella Wardour in the Antiquary is made to read the History of the Hartz Demon in the ruins of St’ Ruth—tho’ I believe, upon recollection, Lovell is the Reader. (Letter 146)

This letter easily could be introduced to students alongside Austen’s novels in literature courses. Austen’s tongue-in-cheek suggestion here is not far off of what she has already mockingly accomplished in *Pride and Prejudice* by having Mr. Collins proselytize to the Bennet sisters,
reading to them from James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766). According to Jocelyn Harris, Austen is correct in her remembrance of the novel: “This highly specific reference, in which Isabella is asked to read the Gothic story then passes the task to Lovel (137), suggests that Austen read the novel with attention” (111). In reality, Austen and Scott had mutual respect for each other’s work. Scott read *Pride and Prejudice* several times, as well as Austen’s other novels, and wrote a favorable review of *Emma* for *The Quarterly Review*, which I will discuss in a later section on Austen’s references to her own publications. However, their respect was not without criticism on either side, as Austen’s comments on his novels and his critiques in the *Emma* review demonstrate. Incidentally, Austen read not only Scott’s novels, but also his poetry, which I will discuss later in this chapter as well.

Besides commenting directly on her reading habits, Austen also referred to novels she had obviously read by quoting them or referring to characters. The earliest instance of this type of literary allusion appears in the very first extant letter, written to Cassandra in January 1796 when Austen was barely twenty years old. Austen mentions Henry Fielding’s (1707-54) *Tom Jones* (1749) thusly:

After I had written the above, we received a visit from Mr. Tom Lefroy and his cousin George. The latter is really very well-behaved now; and as for the other, he

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4 “Mr. Collins readily assented [to reading aloud], and a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels.—Kitty stared at him, and Lydia exclaimed.—Other books were produced, and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce’s Sermons. Lydia gaped as he opened the volume, and before he had, with very monotonous solemnity, read three pages, she interrupted him with, ‘Do you know, mama, that my uncle Philips talks of turning away Richard, and if he does, Colonel Forster will hire him. My aunt told me so herself on Saturday. I shall walk to Meryton to-morrow to hear more about it, and to ask when Mr. Denny comes back from town.’ Lydia was bid by her two eldest sisters to hold her tongue; but Mr. Collins, much offended, laid aside his book, and said, ‘I have often observed how little young ladies are interested in books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess;—for certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction. But I will no longer importune my young cousin’” (Austen, *P&P* 51-52).

5 For a critical assessment of Scott’s review of *Emma*, see Peter Sabor’s “‘Finished up to nature’: Walter Scott’s Review of *Emma*” from *Persuasions* 13 (1991).
has but one fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove—it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light. He is a very great admirer of Tom Jones, and therefore wears the same coloured clothes, I imagine, which he did when he was wounded. (Letter 1)

Austen is referring to the following passages from *Tom Jones*:

> As soon as the sergeant was departed, Jones rose from his bed, and dressed himself entirely, putting on even his coat, which, as its colour was white, showed very visibly the streams of blood which had flowed down it …. It is not easy to conceive a much more tremendous figure than he now exhibited. He had on, as we have said, a light-coloured coat, covered with streams of blood. (Fielding 406-7)

Thirteen-year-old George Lefroy was Tom’s cousin (Le Faye, *Letters* 545). Of course, the Tom Lefroy mentioned is the same young man made famous by the fictitious depiction of his courtship with Austen in the largely historically inaccurate biopic *Becoming Jane*; their conjectured romance remains fodder for critical debate. I discuss how to use letters about Lefroy when teaching Austen’s novels and introducing media in Chapter 7, and an additional discussion to engage students in would be to examine Austen’s comparison of him to Tom Jones.

Two years later, in October 1798, Austen mentions in passing a historical novel by her mother’s cousin (*Letters* 375n4), Mrs. Cassandra (Leigh) Cooke (1744-1826), titled *Battleridge, an Historical Tale Founded on Facts* (1799). She tells Cassandra, “Your letter was chaperoned here by one from M‘s Cooke, in which she says that Battleridge is not to come out before January; & she is so little satisfied with Cawthorn’s dilatoriness that she never means to employ him again” (Letter 10). In fact, Cooke’s novel was not published until July 1799, and it remained her only published novel (Brown, Clements, and Grundy). In addition, Cooke’s novel never saw a second edition or reprint and only exists in e-book format, microfilm, and its original edition in rare book library collections.
An author who had demonstrable influence on Austen’s own novels is also mentioned multiple times: Fanny Burney (1752-1840). In June 1799, Austen references Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) amusedly: “We had a Miss North & a Mr Gould of our party;—the latter walked home with me after Tea;—he is a very Young Man, just entered Oxford, wears Spectacles, & has heard that Evelina was written by Dr Johnson” (Letter 20). Austen alludes to *Evelina* in three other letters, including the following exclamation from February 1807: “What a Contretemps!—in the Language of France; What an unluckiness! in that of Mde Duval” (Letter 50). Again, in November 1815, Austen references Madame Duval: “Sweet amiable Frank! why does he have a cold too? Like Capt. Mirvan to Mde Duval, ‘I wish it well over with him’” (Letter 128). Her last reference to *Evelina* appears in a letter to her niece Anna in July 1814, in which Austen gives Anna advice on her novel: “And I do not like a Lover’s speaking in the 3d person; it is too much like the formal part of Lord Orville, & I think is not natural. If you think differently however, you need not mind me” (Letter 103). These references and the novel *Evelina* would be interesting materials to analyze alongside *Pride and Prejudice* to explore how Burney’s fiction influenced Austen’s.

Another of Burney’s novels that Austen admired was *Camilla* (1796), which she mentions in a letter from September 1796:

To-morrow I shall be just like Camilla in Mr. Dubster’s summer-house; for my Lionel will have taken away the ladder by which I came here, or at least by which I intended to get away, and here I must stay till his return. My situation, however, is somewhat preferable to hers, for I am very happy here, though I shall be glad to get home by the end of the month. (Letter 4)

In her next extant letter, Austen again alludes to *Camilla*: “Give my Love to Mary Harrison, & tell her I wish whenever she is attached to a young Man, some respectable Dr Marchmont may keep them apart for five Volumes” (Letter 5). A final allusion to the novel comes in January
1799; she tells Cassandra, “Our own particular little brother got a place in the coach last night, and is now, I suppose, in town” (Letter 18). The reference here is “[a] joking misquotation” (Letters 381n7) of the following passage from Camilla: “At length, endeavouring to compose himself, [Sir Hugh] sat down, and said, ‘So you are come, sir, to take away from me my own particular little niece? which is a hard thing upon an uncle, intending her to live with him’” (Burney 533). Another of Burney’s novels that figures into Austen’s literary allusions is Cecilia (1782). Austen mentions this novel once, in January 1809, telling Cassandra, “Take care of your precious self, do not work too hard, remember that Aunt Cassandras are quite as scarce as Miss Beverleys” (Letter 66). Beverley is the title character’s last name. In addition, Austen briefly refers to Burney’s last written novel, The Wanderer, or, Female Difficulties (1814), when discussing reactions to her own novel Pride and Prejudice in a letter to Cassandra from September 1813: “Poor D' Isham is obliged to admire P. & P—& to send me word that he is sure he shall not like M'de Darblay’s new Novel half so well.—M's C. invented it all of course” (Letter 89). This is the only reference to Fanny Burney’s last novel in Austen’s letters.

Aside from Fanny Burney, Austen alluded to many famous novels by notable novelists. One of those novels was Jonathan Swift’s (1667–1745) Gulliver’s Travels (1726), which Austen references in a letter from June 1799: “He [Edward] made an important purchase Yesterday; no less so than a pair of Coach Horses; his friend Mr Evelyn found them out & recommended them, & if the judgement [sic] 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” (Letter 22). The Oxford English Dictionary’s first entry for the word “yahoo, n.” identifies it as: “A name invented by Swift in Gulliver's Travels for an imaginary race of brutes having the form of men;
hence *transf.* and *allusively,* a human being of a degraded or bestial type” (“yahoo,” n.). The *OED* also provides a reference for the first use of the word in *Gulliver’s Travels*: “1726 Swift *Gulliver* II. iv. ii. 23 The Fore-feet of the Yahoo differed from my Hands in nothing else, but the Length of the Nails, the Coarseness and Brownness of the Palms, and the Hairiness on the Backs.” Another notable author that Austen references is William Godwin (1756-1836). In describing visitors in May 1801, Austen tells Cassandra, “The Pickfords are in Bath & have called here.—She is the most elegant looking Woman I have seen since I left Martha—He is as raffish in his appearance as I would wish every Disciple of Godwin to be” (Letter 37). In her note to the reference, Le Faye states that Austen “was probably acquainted with his Caleb Williams (1794) and *St Leon* (1799)” (391n6), though Austen never mentions Godwin again in the surviving letters.

In addition to mentioning authors and novels, Austen also uses eighteenth-century literary references to describe people she knew, particularly a servant named James. Austen makes an allusion to Laurence Sterne’s (1713-68) *Tristram Shandy* (1760-5) in a letter from Sept. 1804, stating that “James is the delight of our lives; he is quite an Uncle Toby’s annuity to us” (Letter 39). According to Valerie Grosvenor Myer, “In the book the narrator’s Uncle Toby has £120 a year besides his army half-pay. James’s wages would have been at most £20 a year so the implication is that he did the work of half a dozen” (111). This is the only time Austen references Sterne in the surviving letters. However, Austen again makes a literary reference regarding *James* when she refers to Daniel Defoe’s (1661-1731) *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): “Jenny & James are walked to Charmouth this afternoon;—I am glad to have such an amusement for him—as I am very anxious for his being at once quiet & happy.—He can read, & I must get him some
books. Unfortunately, he has read the 1st vol. of Robinson Crusoe” (Letter 39). Another notable author to whom Austen alludes is Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), whose work she also uses to describe James. Austen includes a sketch likening him to James Selby in *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) in the same letter from September 1804 (incidentally, the only letter that survives from this year): “He [James] has the laudable thirst I fancy for Travelling, which in poor James Selby was so much reprobated; & part of his [James’s] disappointment in not going with his Master, arose from his wish of seeing London” (Letter 39). An interesting point to broach with students regarding this reference to Richardson is that Austen wrote a comedic dramatization.

An additional reference to Richardson’s novel, this time not in reference to James, appears in September 1813: “Miss Hare had some pretty caps, and is to make me one like one of them, only white sattin [sic] instead of blue. It will be white sattin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear, like Harriot Byron’s feather” (Letter 87). The final allusion to this novel surfaces in a letter written the following month: “Like Harriot Byron I ask, what am I to do with my Gratitude?—I can do nothing but thank you & go on” (Letter 91). All of these references describe details from Richardson’s novel, from James Selby’s sneered-at desire to travel and become like Sir Charles Grandison to Harriot Byron’s feathered cap and her exclamations of gratitude. Austen was definitely familiar with and admiring of Richardson’s novel, so much so that she attempted to write a dramatization of the novel (aptly titled *Sir Charles Grandison*), which remained unpublished and solely in manuscript form until 1981 (Butler, “Jane Austen’s Latest” 9). Literature students could read Austen’s play alongside letters in which she references the novel.
Other than the many male authors Austen alludes to in her letters, two other female novelists appear, including Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849), of whom she expresses praise. In February 1813, she mentions her briefly, stating that “The Clements are at home & are reduced to read. They have got Miss Edgeworth” (Letter 81). Then, in a letter to her niece Anna from September 1814, she declares, “I have made up my mind to like no Novels really, but Miss Edgeworth’s, Yours & my own” (Letter 108). An additional reference to Edgeworth appears in a letter to her sister from August 1814, in which she teases Cassandra about her refusal to read *Patronage* (1814): “It was one of my vanities, like your not reading *Patronage*” (Letter 105).

Students reading *Northanger Abbey* would be interested to read Austen’s references to Edgeworth, whose novel *Belinda* she mentions in her narrator’s famous defense of “the novel” alongside Burney’s *Camilla* and *Cecilia* (*NA* 24).

The other female author Austen mentions, but *disparagingly*, is Mrs. Jane West (1758-1852), whose *Alicia de Lacey, an Historical Romance* (1814), she resists reading in September 1814: “I am quite determined however not to be pleased with M’rs West’s Alicia de Lacy, should I ever meet with it, which I hope I may not.—I think I can be stout against any thing written by M’rs West” (Letter 108). A revealing reference to West appears in September 1816. In this letter to Cassandra, Austen discusses the difficulties of balancing domestic duties with her writing career:

> I enjoyed Edward’s company very much, as I said before, & yet I was not sorry when friday came. It had been a busy week, & I wanted a few days quiet, & exemption from the Thought & contrivances which any sort of company gives.—I often wonder how you can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House;—And how good M’re West could have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb. (Letter 145)
Austen’s difficulty finding balance between responsibilities and writing and wondering how Mrs. West was able accomplish both tasks demonstrates a common and relatable concern about work-life balance: how does one find time to manage a household and remain productive in one’s occupation? Based on this letter, it appears that even after having written six novels and published three (by this time, she had finished *Persuasion*, but it would not be published until after her death in 1817), she was still balancing on this now-ubiquitous tightrope.

Austen not only mentioned novels and novelists in her letters, she made numerous references to poetry as well. One epic poem that receives Austen’s *censure* is Sir Walter Scott’s *Marmion* (1808). She asks and then answers her own question about whether or not she should like the poem in a letter to Cassandra from June 1808: “Ought I to be very much pleased with Marmion?—as yet I am *not.*—James reads it aloud in the Even⁸—the short Even⁸—beginning about 10, & broken by supper” (my emphasis; Letter 53). Several months later, in January 1809, Austen passes off her volume of the epic to someone else: “Charles’s rug will be finished today, & sent tomorrow to Frank, to be consigned by him to Mr Turner’s care—and I am going to send Marmion out with it;—very generous in me, I think” (Letter 64). This is not the last of *Marmion*, however. In January 1813, Austen very loosely quotes the poem when discussing her recently published *Pride and Prejudice*: “‘I do not write for such dull Elves’/‘As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves’” (Letter 79). As Le Faye notes in her endnote to this reference, Scott’s line is “I do not rhyme to that dull elf/Who cannot image to himself” (*Letters* 420n5).

Aside from *Marmion*, Austen discusses two other of Scott’s poems, *Lady of the Lake* (1810) and *The Field of Waterloo* (1815). In June 1811, Austen mentions *Lady of the Lake*, telling Cassandra, “We began Pease on Sunday, but our gatherings are very small—not at all like
the Gathering in the Lady of the Lake” (Letter 75). In two letters to John Murray in November 1815, Austen mentions *Waterloo*: “My Brother begs his Compts & best Thanks for your polite attention in supplying him with a Copy of Waterloo” (Letter 124), and “My Brother returns Waterloo, with many thanks for the Loan of it” (Letter 126). Austen does not mention having read *Waterloo* herself, but she may have availed herself of the newly published work while it was in her family’s possession, as she had read other of Scott’s works.

Two preeminent poets that Austen mentions in her letters are John Milton (1608-74) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744). In October 1813, Austen describes a visitor to her sister:

M’ Lushington goes tomorrow.—Now I must speak of him—& I like him very much. I am sure he is clever & a Man of Taste. He got a vol. of Milton last night & spoke of it with Warmth.—He is quite an M.P.—very smiling, with an exceeding good address, & readiness of Language.—I am rather in love with him.—I dare say he is ambitious & Insincere. (Letter 92)

Austen references Milton again in a letter to her niece Anna in September 1814: “Your Aunt C. quite enters into the exquisiteness of that name. Newton Priors is really a Nonpareil.—Milton wd have given his eyes to have thought of it” (Letter 107). As for Pope, Austen (mis)quotes his *Essay on Man* (1733) in a letter in October 1813: “‘Whatever is, is best.’—There has been one infallible Pope in the World” (Letter 94). Pope’s thrice-repeated line is “Whatever is, is right” (Pope 12, 39, and 47). Austen also quotes James Beattie’s (1735-1803) “The Hermit” (1766), in September 1813. Austen writes, “‘T’is Night & the Landscape is lovely no more’, but to make amends for that, our visit to the Tyldens is over …. There was nothing entertaining, or out of the common way” (Letter 89). In this passage, Austen quotes this bleak line from Beattie’s poem to highlight the drabness of the visit to the Tyldens and how its having ended is recompense for the darkness obscuring the landscape.
Multiple references are made to William Cowper (1731-1800) in Austen’s letters. In December 1798, Austen states, “My father reads Cowper to us in the evening, to which I listen when I can” (Letter 14). In February 1807, she references The Task, “A Winter Walk at Noon” (398n5), telling her sister, “The Shrubs which border the gravel walk he says are only sweetbriar & roses, & the latter of an indifferent sort;—we mean to get a few of a better kind therefore, & at my own particular desire he procures us some Syringas. I could not do without a Syringa, for the sake of Cowper’s Line” (Letter 50). As she quotes Beattie, she also quotes Cowper’s Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk (Letters 428n24) in September 1813: “I am now alone in the Library, Mistress of all I survey—at least I may say so & repeat the whole poem if I like it, without offence to anybody” (Letter 89). Finally, she references Cowper’s “Epitaph on a Hare” along with Boswell’s Life of Johnson (433n11) in November 1813: “I am glad William’s [HTA’s manservant] going is voluntary, & on no worse grounds. An inclination for the Country is a venial fault.—He has more of Cowper than of Johnson in him, fonder of Tame Hares & Blank verse than of the full tide of human Existence at Charing Cross” (Letter 95).

Austen’s references to poets were sometimes humorous, as in the case of her mention of Reverend George Crabbe’s (1754-1832) The Borough (1810) in October 1813: “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” (Letter 93). Another brief mention of Crabbe appears the following month: “Miss Lee I found very conversible [sic]; she admires Crabbe as she ought” (Letter 96). Additionally, Austen seems
amused by the reaction of Mrs. Digweed to James (1775-1839) and Horatio Smith’s (1779-1849) satirical *Rejected Addresses, or, the New Theatrum Poetarum* (1812):

I began talking to her a little about them & expressed my hope of their having amused her. Her answer was, ‘Oh! dear, yes, very much;—very droll indeed;—the opening of the House!—& the striking up of the Fiddles!’—What she meant, poor Woman, who shall say?—I sought no farther.——The Papillons have now got the Book & like it very much; their neice [sic] Eleanor has recommended it most warmly to them.—She looks like a rejected Addresser. (Letter 78)

Humorous final comment aside, Austen seems to be diverted by Mrs. Digweed’s assessment of the poem, which actually indicates, according to Le Faye, that Digweed remembered one of the poems in the work *better* than Austen (*Letters* 419n10).

Two other famous poets that Austen read were Robert Southey (1774-1843) and Lord Byron (1788-1824). Of Southey’s *The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo* (1816), Austen says to Alethea Bigg in January 1817,

We have been reading the ‘Poet’s Pilgrimage at Waterloo’, & generally with much approbation. Nothing will please all the world, you know; but parts of it suit me better than much that has been written before. The opening—the Proem I beleive [sic] he calls it—is very beautiful. Poor Man! One cannot but grieve for the loss of the Son so fondly described. Has he at all recovered it? What do M’ & M’s Hill know of his present state? (Letter 150(C))

This is one of the only times Austen expresses sentiment toward a poetical work, even inquiring after the author through Southey’s uncle, Reverend Herbert Hill, who was married to one of Austen’s friends, Catherine (Bigg) Hill (Le Faye, *Letters* 497).

However, of Lord Byron’s *The Corsair* (1814), Austen was not forthcoming with her reaction, which may in itself be indicative of her attitude toward the popular (and profitable) poem. In March 1814, she entreats Cassandra, “Do not be angry with me for beginning another Letter to you. I have read the Corsair, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do” (Letter 98). As Rachel Brownstein notes, Austen mentions Byron once more in her writing: in her novel
Persuasion. At one point, the heroine, Anne Elliot, is discussing famous poets with “rather silly Captain Bentwick.” Brownstein posits,

When the lovelorn captain repeats “with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and look[s] so entirely as if he meant to be understood,” and Anne ventures “to hope did not always read only poetry,” and recommends “a larger allowance of prose in his daily study,” the reader suspects Lord Byron is being laughed at (P, 100). (175)

These two examples, from the letter and the novel, seem to indicate that while Austen had read Byron, she was possibly also dismissive of his popularity, or perhaps the immense amount of money he received for The Corsair compared to what Austen received for her sold-out first edition of Sense and Sensibility the previous year. Brownstein notes that Byron received 10,000 guineas for The Corsair, which sold 10,000 copies, while Austen received only £140 for her first published novel S&S (175), which sold all 500-750 copies of its first edition through 1813 (Copeland xxvii). Hence, Byron received £1.1s (21s) per copy, and Austen earned 3s-5s per copy. Austen’s profits would be an interesting topic to broach with students, considering that she did not make much money from her publications while they continue to make millions of dollars for others through publication and adaptation.

Other than biographies, letters, novels, and poetry, Austen read several works of political and military interest as well as some didactic literature. In a letter from January 1813, Austen mentions numerous works of political and military interest, including Sir John Carr’s (1772-1832) Descriptive Travels in the Southern and Eastern Parts of Spain and the Balearic Isles in the Year 1809 (1811), Sir Charles William Pasley’s (1780-1861) Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire (1810), Thomas Clarkson’s (1760-1846) History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade (1808), and Claudius Buchanan’s (1766-1815) Christian Researches in Asia (1811). To Cassandra, she writes,
We are quite run over with Books. she [Austen’s mother] has got Sir John Carr’s Travels in Spain from Miss B. & I am reading a Society-Octavo, an Essay on the Military Police & Institutions of the British Empire, by Capt. Pasley of the Engineers, a book which I protested against at first, but which upon trial I find delightfully written & highly entertaining. I am as much in love with the Author as I ever was with Clarkson or Buchanan, or even the two M’ Smiths of the city. The first soldier I ever sighed for; but he does write with extraordinary force & spirit.

Later in the same letter, Austen comments on a book society which “The Miss Sibleys” are hoping to launch, inspired by Austen’s own. She gloats about the “superiority” of her book society “over the Steventon & Manydown Society,” stating that she “ha[s] always foreseen & felt” the preeminence. Furthermore, she boasts,

No emulation of the kind was ever inspired by their proceedings; no such wish of the Miss Sibleys was ever heard, in the course of the many years of that Society’s existence;—And what are their Biglands & their Barrows, their Macartneys & Mackenzies, to Capt. Pasley’s Essay on the Military Police of the British Empire, & the rejected Addresses? (Letter 78)

Austen’s criticism of the “rival” book society and their choice of reading material is lain to rest in this letter but appears again in a letter written to Cassandra the following month.

In February 1813, Austen again mentions the book society, explaining that she was asked “for information as to the Oath taking in former times of Bell Book & Candle—but ha[s] none to give.” She posits to Cassandra that the latter “may be able to learn something of its Origin & Meaning at Manydown” (Letter 81). Austen again takes the opportunity to abuse the book society, joking about their choice of reading material: “Ladies who read those enormous great stupid thick Quarto Volumes, which one always sees in the Breakfast parlour there, must be acquainted with everything in the World.—I detest a Quarto.—Capt. Pasley’s Book is too good for their Society. They will not understand a Man who condenses his Thoughts into an Octavo.” Here, Austen is criticizing the pretentiousness of the ladies of the book society. As Kathryn
Sutherland records in her “Explanatory Notes” for James-Edward Austen-Leigh’s Memoir, “A quarto is printed so as to produce four leaves to each sheet of paper and is therefore usually larger and more splendid than an octavo. The quarto is a size often reserved … for a scholarly and less portable work” (239n85). Therefore, Austen is criticizing the book society’s choice of scholarly material over other works. In the classroom, this censure could be read alongside Austen’s defense of the novel in Northanger Abbey in which she decries criticism of novel-reading over more “substantial” reading material:

And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens,—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 …. Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the Spectator, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name; though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste: the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation which no longer concern anyone living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it. (NA 23-24)

Finally, Austen makes one last comment against the society before moving on to other topics, stating, “I do not mean however to put Mrs H. out of conceit with her Society; if she is satisfied—well;—if she thinks others satisfied—still better;—I say nothing of the complaints which reach me from all quarters” (my emphases; Letter 81).

Book societies and political and military works aside, Austen’s discussion of didactic and ethical or religious works is also quite interesting and demonstrates Austen’s breadth of reading materials. In August 1805, Austen remarks on Thomas Gisborne’s (1758-1846) An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex (1797), writing to Cassandra, “I almost forgot to thank you for your
letter. I am glad you recommended ‘Gisborne’, for having begun, I am pleased with it, and I had quite determined not to read it’ (Letter 47). In January 1809, Austen discusses another work, but in place of the approbation she bestowed upon Gisborne is resistance to reading Hannah More’s Cœlebs in Search of a Wife (1809). As a response to a letter from Cassandra, she says, “You have by no means raised my curiosity after Caleb;—My disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals.—Of course I shall be delighted when I read it, like other people—but till I do, I dislike it” (Letter 66). She mentions More’s ethical novel again in her next letter, obviously in response to Cassandra pointing out her misspelling of “Cœlebs.” Austen replies,

I am not at all ashamed about the name of the Novel, having been guilty of no insult towards your handwriting; the Diphthong [sic] I always saw, but knowing how fond you were of adding a vowel wherever you could, I attributed it to that alone—& 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, unpretending sound; but in Cœlebs, there is pedantry & affectation.—Is it written only to Classical Scholars? (Letter 67)

Austen’s resistance to reading More’s Evangelical text is not surprising considering her mockery of what Josephine Ross calls “pompous sermonizing” (105), for example the ridiculous yet avaricious Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice or the hypocritical and arrogant Mr. Elton in Emma, both of whom could be analyzed alongside these references to More’s work.

The last reference Austen makes to More’s works is a brief mention of Practical Piety (1811) in May 1811. Continuing a letter to Cassandra after visiting with spinster Miss Harriot Webb, Austen comments on the woman’s appearance and reading material, noting that Miss Webb “is short & not quite straight, & cannot pronounce an R any better than her Sisters—but she has dark hair, a complexion to suit, & I think has the pleasantest countenance & manner of the three—the most natural.—She appears very well pleased with her new Home—& they are all
reading with delight M"s H. More’s recent publication” (Letter 74). Irene Collins contends that Austen “regarded it as typical of the Miss Webbs, a trio of spinster ladies at Chawton whom she found particularly tiresome, that she should have found them” enjoying More’s Evangelical tract (145, 147). Again, this reference could be explored in the literature classroom in discussions and analyses of Austen’s depictions of the clergy in her novels.

The works mentioned in this section are by no means an exhaustive list of works mentioned by Austen in her letters, but they are a large representative sample of the most substantial references and they illustrate just how well-read Austen was. Josephine Ross argues, and I agree, that “What Austen does, emphatically, believe in is the importance of wide reading, for women in particular” (106). Ross quotes Mr. Darcy from Pride and Prejudice, who avows that for a woman to be truly accomplished, “she must add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (qtd. in Ross). Ross also points out that “[a]ll Austen’s heroines, either consciously or intuitively, support this view” (106). In fact, the most famous defense of the novel comes from Austen herself through the narratorial aside in Volume I, Chapter V of Northanger Abbey:

Yes, novels;—for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding …. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? (23)

She goes on to extol the virtues of novels: “Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers” (23). Toward the end of her long defense, Austen utters the familiar exclamatory retort:
‘Oh! it is only a novel!’ replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, 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. (24)

Whatever were her individual perceptions of the innumerable literary works she had read, Austen certainly believed in the power and art of vociferous reading in general and The Novel in particular. This defense of the novel alongside excerpts from her letters in which she demonstrates the breadth of her own reading would provide students of Austen’s fiction many opportunities to explore Austen’s literary influences, reactions to other authors, and attitudes toward the novel as compared to other forms of writing.

**The Letters: Jane Austen’s Writing**

Not only does Austen discuss other authors’ works and her views on writing and literature, she also writes often about her own writing and publications. A discussion of Austen’s references to her own work is important because it reveals her publication process, her reactions to her own novels as well as to others’ reactions to her writing, and acknowledgements of some of her shortcomings. In addition to mentioning her novels, Austen includes several verses she composed for family members to whom she was writing, which provide an interesting view into Austen’s poetical style. In July 1806, Austen writes a poem to Fanny about the arrival of Captain & Mrs. Frank Austen at Godmersham Park after their marriage in July 1806 (Letter 48(C))⁶. In

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⁶ “See they come, post haste from Thanet, Lovely couple, side by side; They’ve left behind them Richard Kennet With the Parents of the Bride!”
January 1809, she writes a poem for Cassandra to pass on to her nephew Edward (Letter 65), and in her next letter, she again mentions the verses she wrote to Edward and his lack of a response through Cassandra (Letter 66). In July 1809, Austen writes a poem to her brother Frank on the birth of his son (Letter 69), and in April 1811, she writes verses to “Edward & his Daughter” in a letter to Cassandra (Letter 72). Finally, in November 1812, Austen makes

Canterbury they have passed through;  
Next succeeded Stamford-bridge;  
Chilham village they came fast through;  
Now they’ve mounted yonder ridge.  

Down the hill they’re swift proceeding  
Now they skirt the Park around;  
Lo! The Cattle sweetly feeding  
Scamper, startled at the sound!  

Run, my Brothers, to the Pier gate!  
Throw it open, very wide!  
Let it not be said that we’re late  
In welcoming my Uncle’s Bride!  

To the house the chaise advances;  
Now it stops—They’re here, they’re here!  
How d’ye do, my Uncle Francis?  
How does do your Lady dear?  

7 “Alas! poor Brag, thou boastful Game!  
What now avails thine empty name?—  
Where now thy more distinguish’d fame?  
—My day is o’er, & Thine the same.—  
For thou like me art thrown aside,  
At Godmersham, this Christmas Tide;  
And now across the Table wide, Each  
Game save Brag or Spec: is tried.”—  
“Such is the mild Ejaculation,  
Of tender hearted Speculation.”

8 This lengthy poem begins, “My dearest Frank, I wish you joy/Of Mary’s safety with a Boy./Whose birth has given little pain/Compared with that of Mary Jane.”

9 “Between Session & Session”  
“The first Prepossession”  
“May rouse up the Nation”  
“And the Villainous Bill”  
“May be forced to lie Still”  
“Against Wicked Men’s will.”
mention of humorous verses written to her sister Cassandra about a woman who married an elderly curate (Letter 77). Aside from these few examples of Austen’s poetical verses in the letters, her other works are limited to commentary rather than excerpts. There are references to her novels throughout the extant letters, so I will organize her comments by novel chronologically by date of first publication.

Austen’s first published novel was Sense and Sensibility (1811), and she makes numerous references to this novel between April 1811 and March 1817. In April 1811, she discusses corrections of proofs and the progress of the printers toward publication:

No indeed, I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child; & I am much obliged to you for your enquiries. I have had two sheets to correct, but the last only brings us to W.s first appearance. M“K. regrets in the most flattering manner that she must wait till May, but I have scarcely a hope of its being out in June.—Henry does not neglect it; he has hurried the Printer, & says he will see him again today.—It will not stand still during his absence, it will be sent to Eliza. (Letter 71)

In another letter to her sister, from January 1813, Austen compares the length of S&S with the length of Pride and Prejudice, noting that the latter work’s second volume is shorter than that of her first publication (Letter 79). Austen was not only concerned with her novel’s publication delays; she was also deeply concerned with sales. To her brother Frank, in July of that year, she relays exciting news about the sales of S&S, exclaiming, “You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S.&S. is sold & that it has brought me £140—besides the Copyright, if that shd ever be of any value. I have now therefore written myself into £250.—which only makes me long for more” (Letter 86). She mentions her novel again in her next letter (Letter 87), and yet again in another letter to Frank from September 1813, informing him that “There is to be a 2d Edition of

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10 See Le Faye, Letters 418n7 for a transcription of the verses as well as provenance.
S.&S. Egerton advises it” (Letter 90). In her subsequent letter, addressed to Cassandra and written in October 1813, Austen discusses the second edition of *S&S* and expresses her hopes for good sales (Letter 91).

Austen deliberates on her first novel again in November 1813 and states, “I hope Mrs. Fletcher will indulge herself with *S & S*” (Letter 95). Her next letter revisits the novel, and she expresses her concerns about the sales of the second edition, informing Cassandra, “Since I wrote last, my 2d Edit. has stared me in the face.—Mary tells me that Eliza means to buy it. I wish she may. It can hardly depend upon any more Fyfield Estates.11—I cannot help hoping that many will feel themselves obliged to buy it” (Letter 96). Finally, in a letter to her niece Caroline, Austen mentions receiving money for the second edition: “I have just rec’d nearly twenty pounds myself on the 2d Edit: of *S & S*—12 which gives me this fine flow of Literary Ardour” (Letter 154). Austen’s excitement over receiving money for both editions of the novel is particularly important considering how the novel was published—at the author’s expense, plus sales commission to the publisher (Fergus, “The professional…” 9). Austen was anxious that she would at least break even with sales from her novel and was pleasantly surprised when she covered costs and made a modest profit.

Austen’s second published novel was not released until 1813, but her first references to the novel were under its original title: *First Impressions*. As early as January 1799 the novel appeared in letters to Cassandra. In January, twenty-three-year-old Austen writes, “I do not wonder at your wanting to read first impressions again, so seldom as you have gone through it, &

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11 According to Le Faye’s note, “The Fowle family had owned an estate at Fyfield … since the end of the seventeenth century; in 1812 this was offered for sale by Revd Fulwar-Craven Fowle” (433n8).
12 The star refers to Austen’s own endnote identifying the work as *Sense and Sensibility*. 
that so long ago” (Letter 17), and in a letter from June, she jokingly states, “I would not let
Martha read First Impressions again upon any account, & am very glad that I did not leave it in
your power.—She is very cunning, but I see through her design;—she means to publish it from
Memory, & one more perusal must enable her to do it” (Letter 21). These are the only two
references to the novel under its original name, and she does not refer to the novel again until
January 1813 when it had been published and was days away from being available for sale to the
public.

On the publication of Pride and Prejudice, Austen writes excitedly, “I want to tell you
that I have got my own darling Child from London;—on Wednesday I received one Copy, sent
down by Falknor, with three lines from Henry to say he had given another to Charles & sent a 3d
by the Coach to Godmersham” (Letter 79). A few lines later, Austen explains to Cassandra that
“Miss Benn dined with us on the very day of the Books coming, & in the even§ we set fairly at it
& read half the 1st vol. to her—prefacing that having intelligence from Henry that such a work
w%d soon appear we had desired him to send it whenever it came out—& I beleive [sic] it passed
with her unsuspected.” The secret of the author’s identity was seemingly intact. Austen also
records Miss Benn’s reaction to the novel: “She was amused, poor soul! that she c%d not help you
know, with two such people to lead the way; but she really does seem to admire Elizabeth.”
Austen then assesses the heroine herself: “I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature
as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do
not know” (Letter 79). Moreover, Austen comments on the appearance of the text, loosely
quoting Walter Scott’s Marmion: “There are a few Typical errors—& a ‘said he’ or a ‘said she’
would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear—but ‘I do not write for such dull
Elves’/“As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves”” (Letter 79). Austen’s excitement for the publication of her second novel is clear.

While Miss Benn seems to have approved of this first sitting of the novel, Austen is less satisfied with her reaction to the second, blaming it on her mother’s reading style. Austen discusses Benn’s reaction in her next letter to Cassandra, nothing that “our 2d evening’s reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I beleive [sic] something must be attributed to my Mother’s too rapid way of getting on—& tho’ she perfectly understands the Characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought” (Letter 80). Next, Austen contemplates her own tongue-in-cheek reaction to the novel:

Upon the whole however I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough.—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 Buonaparté—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile.—I doubt your quite agreeing with me here—I know your starched Notions. (Letter 80)

Aside from taking an opportunity mock Scott’s writing in her letter, Austen also supplies serious commentary on a printing error, pointing out that “[t]he greatest blunder in the Printing that I have met with is in Page 220—Vol. 3. where two speeches are made into one. There might as well have been no suppers at Longbourn, but I suppose it was the remains of M”s Bennet’s old Meryton habit” (Letter 80). While the blunder is noticeable to the writer, Austen clearly takes this error in stride.

In addition to expressing her own reaction to her second publication, Austen was keenly interested in others’ reactions and approbation. In February 1813, she shares her gratitude for the reactions of Cassandra and niece Fanny: “I am exceedingly pleased that you can say what you
do, after having gone thro' the whole work—& Fanny’s praise is very gratifying;—my hopes were tolerably strong of her, but nothing like a certainty. Her liking Darcy & Elizth is enough. She might hate all the others, if she would” (Letter 81). Another reaction to the novel occurs in a letter from September 1813. Austen expresses her appreciation of additional praise: “I long to have M't H’s opinion of P&P. His admiring my Elizabeth so much is particularly welcome to me” (Letter 87). Again, in the same month, Austen communicates one reaction that she perceives as forced: “Poor D' Isham is obliged to admire P.&P—& to send me word that he is sure he shall not like M'de Darblay’s new Novel half so well” (Letter 89). While Austen did want to receive admiration, as any author would, it is important to remember that she published the novel (as well as all of the novels she published in her lifetime) anonymously. Although, her brother Henry seemed to have trouble keeping it a secret and the rumor had begun to spread, as is evidenced by this comment from Dr. Isham.

The desire to keep her identity a secret from all but her family becomes clearer in several letters to siblings. In September of 1813, Austen laments Henry’s over-excited revelation of the author’s identity: “Lady Robert is delighted with P.&P—and really was so as I understand before she knew who wrote it—for, of course, she knows now.—He told her with as much satisfaction as if it were my wish. He did not tell me this, but he told Fanny” (Letter 87). Austen again laments Henry’s loose lips in a letter to brother Frank from the same month:

Henry heard P. & P. warmly praised in Scotland, by Lady Rob1 Kerr & another Lady; * what does he do in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love, but immediately tell them who wrote it!—A Thing once set going in that way—one knows how it spreads!—and he, dear Creature, has set it going so much more than once. I know it is all done from affection & partiality—but at the same time, let me here again express to you & Mary my sense of the superior kindness which you have shewn on the occasion, in doing what I wished.—I am trying to harden
myself.—After all, what a trifle it is in all its Bearings, to the really important points of one’s existence even in this World! (Letter 90)

Henry’s excitement over the publication of the novel and acting against the wishes of his sister by continually revealing her as the author were not malicious but certainly against Austen’s desire for anonymity.

It should come as no surprise that Henry is the one who identified his sister as the author of all her published novels for the first time in writing when he arranged for the publication of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, neither of which were published under the names that Austen had given to them (Le Faye, The World 278). Susan and then Catherine were Austen’s titles for Northanger Abbey, and The Elliots was possibly her title for Persuasion, although Austen herself never mentions a title for the novel in her correspondence (Le Faye, A Family Record 238). A final reference to Pride and Prejudice materializes in a letter to Anna Austen in August 1814 in which Austen advises her niece on her novel-writing, at one point guiding her to eliminate a postscript that might seem imitative of Pride and Prejudice (Letter 104). In fact, Austen often gave writing advice to her niece, an aspiring writer, though Anna never published the novel her aunt critiqued. However, she did publish two children’s books and a novella.13

Austen’s third published novel appeared soon after Pride and Prejudice in 1814. While she was writing the novel, Austen appealed to her siblings for information and approval. In November 1812 and January 1813, Austen asked questions to Cassandra in research for Mansfield Park regarding ordination and hedgerows (Letters 78 & 79), and in July 1813, she appeals to Frank for permission to use the names of his ships in her novel: “I have something in

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hand—which I hope on the credit of P.&P. will sell well, tho’ not half so entertaining. And by
the bye—shall you object to my mentioning the Elephant in it, & two or three other of your old
Ships?—I have done it, but it shall not stay, to make you angry.—They are only just mentioned”
(Letter 86). Frank’s response must have pointed out that using these names might lead readers to
identify her as the author, to which she replies,

> I thank you very warmly for your kind consent to my application [re: names of
ships] & the kind hint which followed it.—I was previously aware of what I sh’d
be laying myself open to—but the truth is that the Secret has spread so far as to be
scarcely the Shadow of a secret now—& that I beleive [sic] whenever the 3d
appears, I shall not even attempt to tell Lies about it.—I shall rather try to make
all the Money than the Mystery I can of it.—People shall pay for their Knowledge
if I can make them. (Letter 90)

By this time, Austen has resigned herself to the fact that knowledge of her writing career has
“spread,” conceivably in large part due to Henry’s disclosures.

On the subject of Henry, Austen relays his reactions to MP in March 1814, expressing
that his

> approbation hitherto is even equal to my wishes; he says it is very different from
the other two, but does not appear to think it at all inferior. He has only married
Mrs R. I am afraid he has gone through the most entertaining part.—He took to
Lady B. & Mrs N. most kindly, & gives great praise to the drawing of the
Characters. He understands them all, likes Fanny & I think foresees how it will all
be. (Letter 97)

Later in her letter to Cassandra, Austen updates Henry’s evaluation of the novel: “Henry is going
on with Mansfield Park; he admires H. Crawford—I mean properly—as a clever, pleasant
Man.—I tell you all the Good I can, as I know how much you will enjoy it” (Letter 97). Henry’s
reactions to this third publication arise in several more letters to Cassandra. In her next letter,
Austen states that “Henry has this moment said that he likes my M.P. better & better; he is in the
3d vol.—I beleive [sic] now he has changed his mind as to foreseeing the end;—he said
yesterday at least, that he defied anybody to say whether H.C. would be reformed, or would forget Fanny in a fortnight” (Letter 98). In her subsequent letter, Austen again apprises Cassandra of Henry’s response: “Henry has finished Mansfield Park, & his approbation has not lessened. He found the last half of the last volume extremely interesting” (Letter 99). At this point, Austen’s novel had not yet been published, and in a letter to her brother Frank in March 1814, she hopes that “Perhaps before the end of April, Mansfield Park by the author of S & S.—P. & P. may be in the World.—Keep the name to yourself. I sh’d not like to have it known beforehand” (Letter 100).

The reactions of individuals outside of her immediate family were also of interest to Austen in her letters. In June 1814, she relays new responses to the recently published novel: “In addition to their standing claims on me, they admire Mansfield Park exceedingly. Mr Cooke says ‘it is the most sensible Novel he ever read’—and the manner in which I treat the Clergy, delights them very much” (Letter 101). In her next letter, she discloses that “Miss D has a great idea of being Fanny Price, she & her youngest sister together, who is named Fanny” (Letter 102). In November 1815, Austen tells Cassandra that “Mr H. is reading Mansfield Park for the first time & prefers it to P&P” (Letter 128), and in April 1816, Austen writes to John Murray, mentioning the omission of Mansfield Park in Sir Walter Scott’s anonymous review of Emma in the Quarterly Review (Letter 139).

While reactions to the novel were of interest to its author, they did not distract Austen from the business side of writing, discussing revisions (“corrections”) to Mansfield Park and rationales for the emendations in a letter to her niece Anna from July 1814 (Letter 104), and disclosing the sales and possible second edition of the work in a letter to her niece Fanny in
November 1814. She tells Fanny, “You will be glad to hear that the first Edit: of M.P. is all sold.—Your Uncle Henry is rather wanting me to come to Town, to settle about a 2d Edit:—but as I could not very conveniently leave home now, I have written him my Will & pleasure, & unless he still urges it, shall not go.—I am very greedy & want to make the most of it” (Letter 109). In another letter to Fanny from the same month, obviously is a reaction to Fanny’s response to the previous letter, Austen writes, “Thank you—but it is not settled yet whether I do hazard a 2d Edition. We are to see Egerton today, when it will probably be determined—People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at; but tho’ I praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls Pewter too” (Letter 114). A final reference to the second edition of *MP* appears in a letter to John Murray from December 1815; Austen states, “I return you, with very many Thanks, the Books you have so obligingly supplied me with.—I am very sensible I assure you of the attention you have paid to my Convenience & amusement.—I return also, Mansfield Park, as ready for a 2d Edit: I beleive [sic], as I can make it” (Letter 130). In this same month, Austen’s fourth novel, the last to be printed for public consumption in her lifetime, was published by Murray: *Emma*.

The publication of *Emma* (1815) is particularly interesting because it is the subject given the most attention by the author in her letters. She reveals more about her publication process on this novel than she does the previous three. In October 1815, Austen writes to Cassandra that “Mr Murray’s Letter is come; he is a Rogue of course, but a civil one. He offers £450—but wants to have the Copyright of MP. & S&S included. It will end in my publishing for myself I dare say.—He sends more praise however than I expected. It is an amusing Letter” (Letter 121).
Incidentally, Austen’s premonition that she would self-publish her novel (as she did with S&S and MP) was accurate.

In a letter to Murray himself in November 1815, Austen discusses her brother Henry’s illness and considers the manuscript of her forthcoming novel (Letter 124), and in another letter less than two weeks later, she appeals to Murray for his assistance in hurrying the printers so her novel can be published, even mentioning that the novel is dedicated to the Prince Regent:

My Brother’s note last Monday has been so fruitless, that I am afraid there can be little chance of my writing to any good effect; but yet I am so very much disappointed & vexed by the delays of the Printers that I cannot help begging to know whether there is no hope of their being quickened.—Instead of the Work being ready by the end of the present month, it will hardly, at the rate we now proceed, be finished by the end of the next, and as I expect to leave London early in Dec’, it is of consequence that no more time should be lost.—Is it likely that the Printers will be influenced to greater Dispatch & Punctuality by knowing that the Work is to be dedicated, by Permission, to the Prince Regent?—If you can make that circumstance operate, I shall be very glad. (Letter 126)

Referencing this letter, Austen explains to Cassandra, “I did mention the P.R.- in my note to M’ Murray, it brought me a fine compliment in return; whether it has done any other good I do not know, but Henry thought it worth trying” (Letter 128). Austen goes on to discuss the progress of the printers with Emma, complaining that “The Printers continue to supply me very well, I am advanced in vol. 3. to my arra-root, upon which peculiar style of spelling, there is a modest qu’ry? in the Margin.—I will not forget Anna’s arrow-root.” She also expresses concern about the dedication to the Prince Regent, entreating Cassandra, “I hope you have told Martha of my first resolution of letting nobody know that I might dedicate &c—for fear of being obliged to do it—& that she is thoroughly convinced of my being influenced now by nothing but the most mercenary motives” (Letter 128). Austen’s novel was ultimately dedicated to the Prince Regent who received an advance copy.
In December 1815, Austen, relieved that *Emma* would be published that month, writes to Murray, “As I find that *Emma* is advertized [sic] for publication as early as Saturday next, I think it best to lose no time in settling all that remains to be settled on the subject, & adopt this method of doing so, as involving the smallest tax on your time” (Letter 130). This letter also includes Austen’s directions for the publication of *Emma*, including leaving the terms of the bookselling to Murray, “entreating [him] to be guided in every such arrangement by [his] own experience of what is most likely to clear off the Edition rapidly”; providing guidelines for the title page; and directing that a bound copy be sent to the Prince Regent. Austen also references a list of others to whom the finished novel should be sent (unbound).

In another letter of the same date addressed to James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent’s Librarian, Austen informs her correspondent that an advance copy of the novel will be sent to the Prince Regent three days before it comes out and thanks him “for the very high praise you bestow on my other Novels—I am too vain to wish to convince you that you have praised them beyond their Merit” (Letter 132(D)). She also reveals a concern to Clarke, explaining that her “greatest anxiety at present is that this 4th work shd not disgrace what was good in the others.” Austen continues, expressing her apprehensions about the reception of the current novel compared to the preceding three: “But on this point I will do myself the justice to declare that whatever may be my wishes for its’ success, I am very strongly haunted by the idea that to those Readers who have preferred P&P. it will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP. very inferior in good Sense” (Letter 132(D)). Austen’s anxieties about the reception of her latest novel and how it will stand up to comparisons of her others seems like a genuine and
understandable concern. However sincere these sentiments are, Austen was not as earnest in her response to Clarke’s ample suggestions for writing material, neither in this letter nor in her next.

In the rest of her letter, Austen discusses Clarke’s (uninvited) suggestion to write a novel around a clergyman, rejecting the idea with affected humility:

A Classical Education, or at any rate, a very extensive acquaintance with English Literature, Ancient & Modern, appears to me quite Indispensable for the person who w’d do any justice to your Clergyman—And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress. (Letter 132(D))

Emily Auerbach describes this passage best and captures the intention and spirit of Austen, calling her reply to Clarke “a masterpiece of creative tact and shrewd self-deprecation” (Searching 12). Additionally, Auerbach posits, “One suspects that Clarke took Austen’s feminine-sounding apology … at face value, probably assuming she was right that only a highly educated, classically trained Man could do justice to such a highly-educated, literate being as himself” (13). Auerbach also points out that in his Memoir, Austen-Leigh took this response at face value himself, or at least wanted to convince readers of the self-deprecating, feminine nature of his aunt. Responding to Austen-Leigh’s assertion—“How unequal the author of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ felt herself to delineating an enthusiastic clergyman.”—Auerbach asks two rhetorical questions: “Unequal or unwilling? Do we not hear the sound of Austen’s laughter behind this letter?” (13). If one has any difficulty discerning the author’s laughter in this response to Clarke, it may be more apparent in her next.

In April 1816, Austen responds to yet another letter from Clarke in which he offers even more unsolicited suggestions for a new novel. Her letter begins with the appropriate sentiment for kind words about Emma: “I am honoured by the Prince’s thanks, & very much obliged to
yourself for the kind manner in which You mention the Work” (Letter 138(D)). Then, Austen addresses Clarke’s further writing suggestions:

You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of Composition which might recommend me at present, & I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem.—I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for 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 in my own Way; And though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (Letter 138(D))

Austen’s assertions offer no false self-deprecation, as her previous response did. Instead, she squelches any further suggestions from Clarke by pointing out the ridiculousness of his recommendation for volume appropriate to dedicate to Prince Leopold. In addition to expressing that she could not take her subject-matter seriously—or if she was forced to, would hang herself—she deftly points out that she is a successful writer who does not need Clarke’s advice: “though I may never succeed again…” Austen also reveals confidence in her skill and fidelity to her style of writing. There are no more surviving letters between the two parties, so perhaps Clarke finally accepted Austen’s resolution.

While there are no more letters between Clarke and Austen, she does mention Clarke’s last letter to her publisher. She writes to Murray on the same day she wrote her last response to Clarke (1 April 1816), addressing Clarke’s letter as well as Walter Scott’s anonymous review of Emma in the Quarterly Review. Of the review, Austen declares that “[t]he Authoress of Emma has no reason I think to complain of her treatment in it—except in the total omission of

14 See Letter 138(A) from James Stanier Clarke.
Mansfield Park.—I cannot but be sorry that so clever a Man as the Reveiwer [sic] of *Emma* should consider it as unworthy of being noticed” (Letter 139). Austen’s treatment in Scott’s review was positive. At one point, Scott writes,

> We, therefore, bestow no mean compliment upon the author of *Emma*, when we say that, keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters that occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners and sentiments, greatly above our own. In this class she stands almost alone… (216)

After addressing the positive review, Austen broaches Clarke’s letter: “You will be pleased to hear that I have received the Prince’s Thanks for the handsome Copy I sent him of *Emma*. Whatever he may think of my share of the Work, Yours seems to have been quite right” (Letter 139). Austen’s account of the Prince Regent’s thanks through Clarke reveals more than the “appreciation” she expressed in her response to Clarke: no mention was made of the content of the novel (her work), only of the appearance of it (binding), which was Murray’s “achievement” not Austen’s.

There are four more references to *Emma* in Austen’s letters, including a letter to the Countess of Morley on 31 December 1815, in which Austen thanks her for her approbation of the novel, requesting that the Countess “[a]ccept my Thanks for the honour of your note & for your kind disposition in favour of Emma” (Letter 134). As Austen did in her letter to Clarke, she also discloses apprehensions about her novel’s future success:

> In my present state of doubt as to her reception in the World, it is particularly gratifying to receive so early an assurance of your Ladyship’s approbation. It encourages me to depend on the same share of general good opinion which Emma’s Predecessors have experience, & to beleive [sic] that I have not yet—as almost every Writer of Fancy does sooner or later—overwritten myself. (Letter 134)
As opposed to her letter to Clarke, in this letter she explains that the Countess’s reaction to the novel has “taught her to hope” (in the words of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Darcy) that her novel would be received well because the Countess expressed her warm compliments.\(^\text{15}\) Aside from this letter to the Countess, Austen wrote two brief notes to Anna Lefroy and Catherine Ann Prowting on lending copies of the novel for their perusal (Letters 135 and 136), and she wrote one last letter in February 1817 to Fanny that briefly mentions *Emma*: “Scandal & Gossip;—yes I dare say you are well stocked; but I am very fond of M’s C. Cage, for reasons good. Thank you for mentioning her praise of Emma &c.” (Letter 151). This was the very last mention of the novel in Austen’s extant letters as she died just a few short months after the letter was composed.

*Emma* was Austen’s final novel to be published while she was alive. However, she had two other completed novels, which her brother Henry published in a single volume in December 1817 (though they are dated 1818). Austen mentions *Northanger Abbey* in two letters. Her first letter, from April 1809, regarding *Northanger Abbey*, which she titled *Susan*, was addressed to its original intended publisher, Benjamin Crosby & Co., who neglected the manuscript after Austen’s father arranged for its sale six years prior. Austen enquires about the manuscript, telling the publishers that she will supply them with another copy if they have mislaid it. She closes the letter with a firm request: “Should no notice be taken of this Address, I shall feel myself at liberty to secure the publication of my work, by applying elsewhere.” Her letter is signed “MAD.—” (Letter 68(D)). Austen *did* receive a reply from the publishers who informed her that they were *not* bound to publish the work and that they would stop the sale of the manuscript to anyone else. However, they *were* willing to sell the manuscript back to her “for the same as we

\(^{15}\) However, as Le Faye notes, “in her letters to her sister-in-law Mrs George Villiers she spoke of it less than enthusiastically, rating it below *P&P* and *MP*” (*Letters* 556).
paid for it” (Letter 68(A)). In fact, Austen’s brother Henry re-purchased the manuscript in 1816, and Austen indicates that she made further revisions to the novel, which she has renamed *Catherine*, in a letter to Fanny in March 1817, in which she also mentions *Persuasion*. She informs Fanny that “Miss Catherine is put upon the Shelve [sic] for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out; but I have a something ready for Publication, which may perhaps appear about a twelvemonth hence. It is short, about the length of Catherine.—This is for yourself alone” (Letter 153). While she had put *Northanger Abbey* away, Austen had finished her last complete novel, which her brother would name *Persuasion*. Only one other letter mentions Austen’s last completed novel. In another letter to Fanny from March 1817, Austen makes her last reference to the novel, writing, “Do not be surprised at finding Uncle Henry acquainted with my having another ready for publication. I could not say No when he asked me, but he knows nothing more of it.—You will not like it, so you need not be impatient. You may perhaps like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for me” (Letter 155).

After completing *Persuasion*, Austen began work on another novel, posthumously titled (by James-Edward Austen-Leigh) *Sanditon*, which she composed in 1817. No mention is made of the novel in her letters, but she does foreshadow the main character’s name indirectly in a letter to Cassandra from October 1813: “I admire the Sagacity & Taste of Charlotte Williams. Those large dark eyes always judge well.—I will compliment her, by naming a Heroine after her” (Letter 91). The heroine of *Sanditon* is Charlotte Heywood. Austen succumbed to the illness which prevented her from finishing her most innovative novel on 18 July 1817, just four months

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16 See Claudia L Johnson’s “Introduction” to *Northanger Abbey* (Austen xxvi).
17 Austen’s original title for the novel was *The Brothers*. According to Johnson, Austen began composition on 27 January 1817 and put down her pen on 18 March because her illness prevented her from continuing (Austen, *Northanger* xxxi).
after putting down her novel-writing pen. Austen’s last letters that mention her fiction reveal much more about the author than just the fact that she was writing these novels; they demonstrate her dedication to her craft, even in spite of grave illness.

Austen’s letters on her own writing have a wealth of uses in college English courses. In Chapter 5, I discuss how to use Austen’s letters to publishers Crosby and Murry and to James Stanier Clarke in college composition courses. In addition to the usefulness of Austen’s letters on writing and publication for composition students, her discussions of her novels are valuable sources of information for students of her literature. Her comments on each novel could be examined and discussed while reading those novels in college literature courses. For instance, students could discuss difficulties in Austen’s publication processes and how her publishing trials shed light on her dedication as a professional author. Additionally, students could discuss Austen’s assessment of her novels as well as the opinions of others and examine that feedback in relation to students’ own analysis of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Austen’s letters afford insight into her frame of reference as a writer, including what she was reading, her opinions on works of literature, and her references to her own fiction writing. Through Austen’s letters, she reveals her opinions about works of literature and others’ writing, as well as issues with her own novel-writing, including publication concerns and processes. Examining Austen’s letters for information on reading and writing practices will help demonstrate to students of literature and composition how well-read Austen was, the breadth of
subjects and genres that Austen read, and Austen’s perceptions of her own writing, as well as the reactions of others to her work and her concerns about how her novels were being published.

The advantages to students mining Austen’s letters for information on what she read, what she thought about what she read, and what she wrote are multifold. Austen had very strong opinions about literature (even works she had not yet read!) and was devoted to her writing craft. Her letters indicate what she was reading, which may provide students with insight into her literary influences. Furthermore, they demonstrate her concerns about her own writing as well as how others perceived her novels, which illuminates for students Austen’s own perceptions of the merits and shortcomings of her fiction and reveals what she thought about outside perspectives on her writing. Working collectively with the historical and biographical information disclosed in the letters, references to Austen’s reading and writing processes reveal to literature students who Austen was and how she became the author of novels worthy of being read and reread over two centuries. Novels are not the only texts written by Austen that deserve recognition; her letters are a valuable resource for students of Austen’s fiction, but they are also beneficial tools for examining prose writing in the composition classroom. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate the many ways Austen’s letters could be employed in the college composition classroom to help students progress in their own writing skills by reading and analyzing the personal and professional letters of a famous author.
CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING THE LETTERS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

INTRODUCTION

In the preceding three chapters, I examined the historical, biographical, and literary information revealed through Austen’s letters. In this chapter, I will discuss the “Uses of Austen” in the composition classroom. In the composition classroom, the historical, biographical, and literary information I have covered thus far is valuable in demonstrating to students the importance of Austen’s writing and justifying why we are examining Austen’s letters as examples of letter writing. It is entirely possible to use Austen’s letters in the college classroom without providing historical, biographical, and literary contexts and still accomplish learning goals. However, a richer educational experience can be created by incorporating background information on the letters and by explaining important historical, biographical, and literary information as necessary. I have found that students actually want to know this information and ask questions about it in the classroom, which has led to some very interesting and enlightening classroom discussions, and an example of these types of discussions will be discussed later in this chapter.

Using Austen’s letters in composition courses may seem peculiar, but I have found that the intimate nature of Austen’s letters (as I mentioned in my Introduction chapter, they were written for her family and close friends and not for publication) as well as the development of her writing style exhibited over the twenty-one years of Austen’s life that the letters cover make them extremely useful for writers in the first-year composition sequence. Some students have
read Austen’s novels, many more students have not, but they need not have read her novels to learn from her correspondence. Her letters display the same acerbic wit and skillful style as the novels, and the shorter length makes them more accessible for composition students and more manageable for writing analysis.

While Austen’s letters will be more obviously valuable as teaching resources in the college literature classroom, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, her letters are also very useful in the introductory college composition classroom. I have had the opportunity to use Austen’s letters in both courses of the first-year composition sequence at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. I used two of Austen’s letters with my Composition I classes in the Fall 2014 semester and another two of her letters with my Composition II classes in the Spring 2015 semester. In this chapter, I will delve into the value of Austen’s letters in the one-year college composition sequence. Austen’s correspondence can be very useful when read in cooperation with other nonfiction composition texts to develop writing skills across different writing genres (including letter-writing), cultivate an individual writing voice, motivate developing writers, and develop and reinforce aspects of writing and critical thinking processes, including analysis, critique, generating ideas, audience awareness, drafting, peer review, and revision.

In my first section, I will discuss assignments to implement for the first composition course in the sequence (hereafter referred to as Composition I). The assignments in this section are designed to achieve the learning goals outlined in College of DuPage’s departmentally-developed course description. Assignments presented and explained in this section include reading another author’s writing alongside Austen’s letters and analyzing the letters in light of letter-writing advice. The next assignment focuses on using letter-writing as a developmental
writing task before moving on to more advanced writing assignments. This goal is accomplished by using Austen’s shorter letters as writing examples. The final writing assignment described in the Composition I section involves treating Austen’s letters as comparable to personal blogs or journals and assessing Austen’s letters as modern blog-writing examples. For each assignment in this section, I explain which learning goals are being achieved and how each assignment addresses its intended goals.

The second section of this chapter contends with using Austen’s letters in the second course of the composition sequence, Composition II. Like the assignments in my section on Composition I, the assignments in this section are also designed to achieve the learning goals outlined in College of DuPage’s departmentally-developed course description. Assignments described and rationalized in this section include a lesson on writing a letter of appeal. In this assignment, students are provided with two of Austen’s letters as examples of persuasive writing. Students analyze the effectiveness of Austen’s letters in achieving her goals and use each letter as examples for students’ advanced letter-writing assignment. The second assignment explored in this section involves addressing counterarguments. Students read several of Austen’s letters that contend with unsolicited advice and analyze how she addresses the writers’ comments on her writing. Students use this analysis as preparatory to addressing counterarguments in longer essay assignments. The third assignment introduced in this section challenges students to analyze and respond critically and creatively to Austen’s letters that include writing advice to family members. As in my section for Composition I, for each assignment in the section on Composition II, I clarify which learning goals are being achieved through these assignments and how each assignment tackles these objectives.
My objective in this chapter is to demonstrate how Austen’s letters can be used in the composition classroom with the goal of improving student analysis of written works and developing students’ own writing. I treat writing as a process, with letter writing as early component of that process. Moreover, I challenge students to analyze Austen’s letters and identify important writing elements, including purpose, writing objective, tone, audience, thesis, structure, organization, and content development. I also require students to examine correspondence over a period of time so they can scrutinize Austen’s progress as a letter writer and translate this analysis to student awareness of their own writing process and progress throughout the composition sequence. Finally, I believe there is tremendous value in reading and critiquing the writing of a well-established and treasured author to demonstrate writing development and the fallibility of all writers, even famous published authors, in part to assuage student apprehensions about writing.

PEDAGOGY

Several critical sources, along with my own years of experience teaching college composition, have helped me develop the ideas for incorporating Austen’s letters in the college classroom in this chapter. In “The Monday Letter Writing Assignment” (1977), Roger Whitlock explains how he uses letter writing in the college literature classroom, but his idea could be translated to the college composition classroom as well. Whitlock explains that he has students write “weekly informal letter[s] to the class” about literature they have read for the course (354). Whitlock brings up an interesting point about the letters he has received as part of this weekly assignment: “Most formal student essays sound pretty much alike. But the letters I was reading each week did
not, and I saw how different—in fact, unique—my students actually were in terms of their backgrounds and styles, their problems and needs, desires and talents” (356). I too would argue that writing informal letters that are intended for an audience of classmates and that concern current course materials is a valuable way to implement letters in the classroom and give students more freedom to present their own perspectives on course materials, and I may implement Whitlock’s weekly letter assignment in future composition courses. When used in conjunction with my assignments, it could prove to be a useful supplementary assignment to track students’ attitudes about course material and concepts and progress as critical thinkers and writers, and it would give students an informal outlet for their thoughts and ideas and make them privy to their classmates’ ideas and concerns. One of my assignments is similar to Whitlock’s letter assignment; this assignment, which I will describe in my Composition I section, is a blog assignment designed to record students’ reflections on their own writing throughout the semester.

Developmental writing students and first-year composition students alike would benefit from “Using Letters for Process and Change in the Basic Writing Class” (2000). Gregory Shafer explains how letter writing can be used as a tool to help developmental writing students become better writers and ease their anxieties surrounding writing. His rationale works for writers in traditional college composition classes as well; many students in the two-course composition sequence have anxieties about writing, especially longer writing tasks such as the research paper. As Shafer notes, incorporating letter writing in composition courses helps ease students into longer writing assignments with letter writing serving as “an auspicious way to introduce students to writing that transcend[s] skill instruction” (287). In my experience, students improve
and become more comfortable as writers by actually writing (*and reading*) and receiving constructive feedback from peers and myself, as opposed to through what Shafer calls “skill instruction.” Intriguingly, Shafer takes writing as a process one step further by introducing the concept of letter writing *itself* as a process, progressing from brainstorming and note-taking to drafting, revising, and editing. He also introduces an effective way to model students’ critiquing skills by using a letter *he* wrote for students to critique, emphasizing substantial feedback for improvement over surface feedback, such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar issues. The goal of this session was to help students focus on higher-order revision concerns in their own letter writing, but I believe the learning experience could translate to intermediate and advanced writing assignments as well, for instance peer reviews for longer essay assignments.

Several of my own assignments are designed to fit within the concept of writing as a process. In Composition I, the first assignment sequence I describe uses Austen’s letters in conjunction with writings by another author; this series of assignments uses letter-writing as a process. The second assignment I cover in my Composition I section also uses letter writing as a process, but this assignment differs from the first in that I use analyses of Austen’s letters as preliminary assignments in preparation for longer writing tasks, such as essays. A third assignment related to Shafer’s concept of letter writing as a process is my persuasive letter writing assignment sequence, which I detail in my Composition II section. This assignment positions letter writing as a process from analyzing Austen’s persuasive letters to brainstorming and then drafting students’ own persuasive letters.

In his conclusion, Shafer explains that the letter-writing process could be expanded beyond the classroom to open the students up to the possibility of writing for a public audience.
through letters to the editor and letters to newspaper columnists. The ultimate outcome of letter writing in the classroom was that it helped students become more engaged with their writing and “recognize why clarity is needed and how … to make that clarity a reality” (291). Shafer brings up many key points about the challenges composition students face and how incorporating letter writing in composition courses can help reverse students’ adverse attitudes toward writing and help them develop natural and individual writing voices. This concept is integral to my discussion of using letters in composition courses because many of my own composition students, even talented writers, are susceptible to writing apathy or antipathy because of negative writing experiences or prior writing instruction. Two assignments I will cover that allow students to become engaged in their own writing while writing for a public audience are the Composition I online writing assignment and the Composition II persuasive letter assignment, which I mentioned previously. By examining and critiquing Austen’s letters in Composition I and II, students can move beyond their indifference toward or aversion to writing, and through writing letters directly for an audience, students have the freedom to write about what they are interested in and will become more invested in their own writing.

Aside from making composition students more engaged writers who actually participate in and possibly even enjoy the writing process, incorporating letters in the composition classroom operates as a vital step in the writing process or sequence, as Shafer explains. Michael B. Prince also addresses this idea and takes it a step further, exploring the idea of writing letters as a social form of writing in “Literacy and Genre: Towards a Pedagogy of Mediation” (1989). Here, Prince contends with sequencing assignments in the composition classroom. He argues that cultural knowledge is promoted through the use of letters in the composition classroom, and he
cites eighteenth-century thinkers like as Hume and Johnson who favored accessible written genres, such as the letter, to make “literate culture” more accessible (731). Prince goes on to discuss *The Moralists*, in which Shaftesbury explores “the social nature of identity” through shared writing genres (like the letter): writing as an act is inherently solitary, but in interactive writing genres, feelings of isolation can be thwarted by the knowledge of an unseen “other,” the correspondent (734). By discussing Shaftesbury, Prince raises the intriguing point that writing, a potentially isolating activity, can increase social and cultural literacy through interactive writing genres, namely the letter.

In his “Conclusion,” Prince outlines a sequence of composition assignments, beginning with a series of letter-writing assignments corresponding to letters by such historical figures as Dorothy Wordsworth and Vincent Van Gogh, followed by a dialogue assignment focusing on two authors who present different viewpoints on a single issue. This assignment is similar to my own Dialogue of Sources script and essay assignments, which I implement in both Composition I and II. Assignments that I have employed do not include using letters as sources, but they do progress from letter-writing assignments appearing in this chapter, such as my last Composition II assignments, which ask students to respond to Austen’s letters of advice. My own assignments that lead up to longer essays, such as the Dialogue of Sources, aligns with Prince’s description of a writing sequence comprising written dialogues based on letters leading up to an argumentative essay (746). Ultimately, Prince outlines useful guidelines for teaching college composition using letter writing as a major step in the writing sequence. Similarly, I would contend that letter-writing as well as analyzing the letters of Austen would provide students with necessary writing tools and experience to prepare them for subsequent writing tasks.
In addition to serving as an integral step in the writing sequence, letter writing and analysis aid students’ development of their own writing voice and help them identify the elements of effective writing in others’ writing, including Austen’s letters. In “Letter Writing in the College Classroom” (2000), Elaine Fredericksen explains that letter-writing is a valuable learning practice with a “wide range of applications in the writing classroom.” She argues that letter-writing is a teaching tool that enriches the teacher-student relationship and that it provides needed exercise for students’ writing skills. Interestingly enough, she makes the point that writing letters helps students “develop a written voice that is natural rather than affected” (278), which is the point I make about Austen’s letters: they represent Austen’s natural writing voice, revealing her personality and character.

Among the suggestions Frederickson offers for letter-writing opportunities in the college classroom are a series of assignment for ESL students, including a one-page letter to the instructor explaining what the student wants to get out of the class, a formal letter to U.S. immigration authorities requesting an extension for the student’s visa or asking for information about naturalization, a financial assistance or job application letter, a letter to the editor commenting on issues relevant to their cultural situation, and a letter to the student newspaper about policies related to foreign students (279-80). Moreover, she outlines how to use letters in composition and literature courses; these assignments include letters to editors, exchanges with other students, requests for information, complaint letters, application letters for jobs, and letters to authors or characters to examine and create logical arguments and interact with works of literature (281). Finally, she discusses portfolio reflection letters, which serve as cover letters of self-assessment to reevaluate the student’s body of written work throughout the semester and to
evaluate their writing progress, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses (281-83), a way I have also used letters in final portfolio assignments. Similarly to Prince, Fredericksen emphasizes the “social nature” of letter-writing and advocates the use of letter-writing to help students develop their own unique writing voice and recognize the value of their ideas (283). Ultimately, all of her letter-writing ideas could translate to the introductory college composition classroom, and as you will see throughout the rest of this chapter, all of the justifications for implementing letter-writing in the college classroom outlined the aforementioned pedagogical resources have proven useful in developing my own assignments and rationales for letter-writing assignments.

Teaching college composition using literary readings or “models”¹ may be perceived as going against the grain of current composition practices and theory. In fact, the debate over the place of literature in the composition classroom has raged for decades (and rages on). One need only look to academic journals for articles such as Miles McRimmon’s “Across the Great Divide: Anxieties of Acculturation in College English” (2006), Janet Moser’s “In Search of Another Way: Using Proust to Teach First-Year Composition” (2008), Dara Rossman Regaignon’s “Traction: Transferring Analysis across the Curriculum” (2009), and Jeffrey Howard’s “Students as Storytellers: Teaching Rhetorical Strategies through Folktales” (2015), or books like Linda Bergmann and Edith Baker’s Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education (2006) or Judith Anderson and Christine Farris’s Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction: First-Year English, Humanities Core Courses, Seminar (2007), and Laura Brady’s “Review” of these two books, “Retelling the Composition-Literature Story” (2008).

¹ I use the word “model” here in quotes because I do not use Austen’s letters as writing models in the sense that students should copy Austen’s style or content (i.e. using Austen’s letters as writing templates). Instead, I use Austen’s letters as examples of genres and types of writing that students will compose on their own and have students analyze her writing much as they would analyze a reading from a composition reader or textbook.
McCrimmon discusses the debate between those who implement literature texts in composition courses and those who argue against their use: “Composition faculty fear losing disciplinary focus, control, and prestige, while literature faculty are relieved to be rid of a culture of service they deem to be beneath them” (122). He argues that “A first-year composition course that asks students to read and write the widest possible discursive array of complicated and problematic texts [including literature] is surely the best hedge against a superficial understanding of the demands of the college experience” (122). Regaignon also contends with using literature in teaching composition. She discusses the importance of teaching analysis in first-year composition. She emphasizes teaching students to analyze by having them read in opposition to the text and also in agreement with the text, which she contends keeps students from devolving into summary in their “analysis” writing. Regaignon also connects this analytic process to literary studies, where it initiated, and other disciplines.

Providing specific examples of using literature in composition studies, Moser contends that “rhetorically challenging literature” such as Proust’s novels, help students “in acquiring the habits of reading and re-reading, and of writing, revisiting, and revising, which are essential to well-written prose” (57). She also argues, appropriately,

> The introduction of difficult prose or poetry to relatively inexperienced readers teaches students to explore, rather than to capitulate to the texts’ difficulties, raising the level of expectations in the classroom, setting a standard that, when it works, rewards both student and instructor. The practice in close reading, traditional in most advanced electives, is equally valuable to students who are beginning their college careers. This careful attention to the writing of others should, by extension, become an intimate part of the students’ own composing process, of their view of writing as an open-ended project, one in which revision is as essential as the first thoughts that shape the essay. (66)

Similarly, Howard outlines his method for using folklore texts with teaching composition. He argues that using folklores helps students writing objective, and in the end, “students will not
only learn to ‘rethink’ and ‘reinterpret’ the narratives they think they know, but they will also incorporate them in other domains of inquiry” (177).

Brady discusses the issue of the literature and composition divide in her review of two book of essays representing different perspectives on the subject. Brady reviews Bergmann and Baker’s book as well as Anderson and Farris’s book, comparing the two texts’ treatment of the contentious issue: “These two collections suggest that the debate has shifted to larger questions about public discourse, citizenship, disciplinarity in general, and—even more broadly—the purposes of education” (71). Brady notes that both books raise questions about composition specifically and higher education in general: “Does first-year composition prepare students for academic writing and (eventually) disciplinary writing” (73), the interdisciplinarity argument of the non-literature composition position, “or does it prepare them to be citizens of the university community and (eventually) the world,” the position of the integrated literature and composition position. Brady also argues that one way these two texts add to the composition-literature debate is by “describing reading and writing as integrated rhetorical processes” (my emphasis; 81). Clearly, the debate about segregating versus desegregating composition and literature persists. One example of the integration of composition and literature occurs in accelerated learning programs for developmental students that are shifting to an integration of developmental reading and writing as more effectively pedagogically (for instance, Elgin Community College, for whom I teach, is planning to integrate these currently separate courses).

While I agree that the composition professor must not turn writing courses into thinly-veiled literature courses in which the professor is lecturing more on literature than the students are writing and analyzing it, I am on the side of those who still argue that literature does have a
place in the composition classroom. Many composition instructors use non-fiction literature to
teach writing genres and improve students’ writing skills through reading and analyzing the
written work of others; otherwise, why would so many composition readers be on the market?
Most, if not all, of my composition colleagues assign students to read non-fiction and/or fiction
in the composition classroom, not so the instructors can teach literature but so they can teach
writing and critical analysis. As William Faulkner advised would-be writers, “Read, read, read.
Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who
works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it is good,
you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out the window” (55).

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION I

In my experience at several institutions of higher education, general education college
composition courses follow a two-course sequence, generally taken by students in their first year
of college. At College of DuPage, for instance, the first class in the two-course one-year
composition sequence is aptly titled Composition I (ENGLI 1101). According to the course
description, composed by the English department and required to be included in all syllabi for
the course, Composition I “introduces students to college-level writing as a process of
developing and supporting a thesis in an organized essay.” Another aim of the course is to
develop students’ critical thinking and reading skills and “appropriate writing style and voice as
well as the conventions of standard English.” Applicable course objectives include “apply[ing] a
process approach to writing,” “analyze[ing] and respond[ing] critically and creatively to the ideas
and strategies in the writing of others through reading a variety of texts, including academic
discourse,” “construct[ing] effective prose,” and “develop[ing] the writing process to include other writers’ discourse.” These objectives apply to writing letters in the college composition classroom because the assignments outlined in this section demonstrate that letter writing is a part of the writing sequence requiring students to compose successful prose. Moreover, the course objectives apply to studying and analyzing Austen’s letters as one of “a variety of texts” students analyze and respond to.

In addition to the course objectives, germane items on the required “Topical Outline” of the introductory composition course include “consideration of audience and occasion,” “critical thinking,” “analysis of audience,” “analysis of the writer’s meaning,” “analysis of style,” “analysis of the writing occasion/purpose,” and summary, paraphrase, quotation, and attribution of other writers’ discourse. These topics are accomplished and covered through letter-writing as a step of process writing and the critique of Austen’s letters as a learning tool for identifying these topics in others’ writing and applying it to students’ writing through their own letter assignments. These learning goals and topical items will be addressed in relation to individual lessons and assignments outlined and explained in this section. I have included the learning goals and topical outline for this course because I believe it is necessary to have learning goals in mind when constructing lessons and assignments to ensure that the trajectory of my courses aligns with the skills and objectives students are supposed to be developing throughout the course. Ultimately, an assessment should assess whether or not students meet certain outcomes, which ideally align with the prescribed course objectives.

The first letter-writing assignment I will describe was developed for my Composition I course in the Fall of 2014; this assignment involved reading short letters by Austen in
conjunction with Garrison Keillor’s “How to Write a Letter” and “Postcards” and analyzing Austen’s letters based on Keillor’s advice on how to write a letter. First, students read Keillor’s essay “Postcards” and analyze and discuss his advice: what is relevant today, what is dated, what is applicable to a composition course. Students then generate a list of the elements of an “effective” postcard according to Keillor. Students examine a brief letter by Austen as a “postcard” and analyze it through the lens of Keillor’s essay. Several of Austen’s letters would work for the purposes of this assignment, including the following letter to her Aunt Caroline from December 1814 (Letter 115) that discusses the latter’s fiction writing:

My dear Caroline
I wish I could finish Stories as fast as you can.—I am much obliged to you for the sight of Olivia, & think you have done for her very well; but the good for nothing Father, who was the real author of all her Faults & Sufferings, should not escape unpunished.—I hope he hung himself, or took the sur-name of Bone or underwent some direful penance or other.—

Yours affectly
J. Austen

Another brief Austen letter that could be used for this assignment is a letter from 1816 to her niece Anna Lefroy (Letter 147(C)), which would be ideal because it needs no context:

My dear Anna
Your Grandmama is very much obliged to you for the Turkey, but cannot help grieving that you should not keep it for yourselves. Such Highmindedness is almost more than she can bear.—She will be very glad of better weather that she may see you again & so we shall all.

Yours affecately
J. Austen

Most of Austen’s letters are rather lengthy, especially the letters she wrote to her sister Cassandra, so these two letters are the best examples of very brief letters she wrote to family members that could serve as substitutes for postcards. After analyzing Austen’s letters using

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2 Affectionately
Keillor’s guidelines for and examples of writing a postcard, students write their own “postcard” based on both Keillor’s advice and their analysis of Austen’s “postcard”-proxy letter(s). Not surprisingly, most of my students in the class I used this assignment had never written a postcard prior.

Following this assignment, students read Keillor’s essay “How to Write a Letter” and analyze and discuss his advice along the same lines as their analysis of his other essay: what is relevant today, what is dated, and what is applicable to a composition course. Then, students generate a list of the elements of an “effective” letter, according to Keillor. Next, students write a letter based on Keillor’s advice. After writing their own letters, students read two of Austen’s letters: a November 1814 letter to her niece Fanny (Letter 114) and another letter to Fanny dated March 1817 (Letter 155). Both of these letters cover a range of topics and show Austen shifting between different subjects and events in longer letters. Some context is necessary for certain sections of these two letters; for example, Austen’s continuation of a prior discussion on Fanny’s ambivalence over a suitor on the second page of Letter 114 would need context. After reading each of these letters, students discuss and analyze them, identifying purpose, tone, subject-matter, form, and audience, and then assess Austen’s letter through Keillor’s advice on how to write a letter. Does it “follow” the guidelines? Which aspects of the letter do? Which aspects of the letter do not? How effective is the letter in light of Keillor’s essay perspective on letter writing? Next, students write a second letter of their own in light of this analysis of Austen’s letter-writing, using their analysis of what is effective and ineffective in Austen’s writing to improve their own writing. Finally, students compare their first and second letters, assessing
them in light of Keillor’s advice and Austen’s letters, and tracking their process and progress from letter one to letter two.

These two projects analyzing Austen’s letters are then tied together in a comparison of Keillor’s two essays in which students establish the differences between the two writing genres: postcards and letters. As a class, students generate a Venn diagram showing the commonalities and differences between these two genres of writing. Finally, I facilitate a class discussion on how writers must adapt their writing style, purpose, tone, and content to different writing genres and how to connect this idea to their writing for Composition I. Throughout the course of reading Austen’s letters and completing these assignments, I provide necessary historical, biographical, and literary contexts so that students understand what Austen is writing about in order to successfully assess her letters.

When I implemented this writing and analysis sequence in Composition I at College of DuPage, my lessons looked slightly different than I just outlined. One significant difference is the letter writing process. In my course, I had students write one letter at the end of their reading and analysis of Keillor’s essays and Austen’s letters. For future courses, I would change this to two letters, one after analyzing Keillor’s letter-writing essay and one after analyzing Austen’s letters in light of Keillor’s guidelines, because adding another letter-writing assignment would augment the idea that writing is a process and highlight the difference between what students learn from reading about writing and what students learn from analyzing others’ writing.

Another difference between how I implemented this lesson previously and how I would change it for future courses is in the addition of two short letters by Austen to analyze in light of Keillor’s essay on writing postcards; I added this analysis component again because I wanted to add
another step in the writing sequence, giving students the opportunity to analyze and write brief, postcard-length works followed by longer letters leading up to intermediate and advanced essay-length writing tasks. In addition, some of Austen’s letters can be quite lengthy and contain a multitude of topics, so it would be beneficial for students first to read shorter letters that are easier to tackle than Austen’s more intricate, dense letters. Ultimately, the letter-writing assignment I executed was successful in helping students write informal letters of their own, but in hindsight I could see where improvements to this unit were necessary, because constant self-assessment and revision are both important facets of my personal pedagogy, and I have adjusted the assignments accordingly.

These two connected assignments achieve several learning goals for Composition I, including developing critical thinking and reading skills by having students read in multiple writing genres, which leads to students responding critically to writing through their analysis of each work and responding creatively by analyzing Keillor and Austen’s writing with their own prose assignments in these genres in mind. Through their analyses of Keillor’s essays and Austen’s letters, students must identify audience and occasion in others’ writing and analyze these two authors’ meaning and writing style and purpose. By analyzing other author’s work, students were able to apply what they learned to their own writing as a process, especially with the two-letter writing assignment. This process approach to writing does not end with this sequence, however; this personal postcard and letter writing section prefaces our unit on personal narrative essay writing and gives students the opportunity to write shorter personal works before the ensuing essay-length assignments. Austen’s letters are particularly useful for this unit because Austen is a popular and established writer of fiction. Even if students have not read her
fiction, they are familiar with her work through one or more of the numerous media adaptations that have been produced. Thus, Austen’s continuing presence in popular culture makes her a singular and recognizable literary figure for the general education college student; they are familiar enough with her to make reading her letters more engaging than letters written by another author might be.

In addition to analyzing Austen’s letters through the lens of another author, students can use letter-writing as a developmental writing exercise before longer writing tasks (e.g. essays or researched papers) by analyzing Austen’s shorter letters for writing content, structure, length, etc. One example of this which I have not yet implemented in a composition course would involve students analyzing the structure, content, length, and subject-matter of an excerpt from one of Austen’s personal letters to her brother Charles from April 1817 (Letter 157) in which she discusses her ultimately fatal illness:

My dearest Charles
Many thanks for your affectionate Letter. I was in your debt before, but I have really been too unwell the last fortnight to write anything that was not absolutely necessary. I have been suffering from a Bilious attack, attended with a good deal of fever.—A few days ago my complaint appeared removed, but I am ashamed to say that the shock of my Uncle’s Will brought on a relapse, & I was so ill on friday & thought myself so likely to be worse that I could not but press for Cassandra’s returning with Frank after the Funeral last night, which she of course did, & either her return, or my having seen M’ Curtis, or my Disorder’s chusing [sic] to go away, have made me better this morning. I live upstairs for the present & am coddled. I am the only of the Legatees who has been so silly, but a weak Body must excuse weak Nerves …. It is impossible to be surprised at Miss Palmer’s being ill, but we are truly sorry, & hope it may not continue. We congratulate you on M’rs P’s recovery.—As for your poor little Harriet, I dare not be sanguine for her. … God bless you all. Conclude me to be going on well, if you hear nothing to the contrary.—Yours Ever truely [sic]

J.A.
Little background information is necessary for this letter other than some basic context on Austen’s medical condition, her uncle’s death, and some terminology (for instance, “legatee”) with which students may be unfamiliar. After reading this letter, students analyze Austen’s purpose or writing objective, tone, audience, form, level of formality, subject-matter, and content development. During their analysis, students construct a format for familiar letter writing and “rules” based on Austen’s letters. Then, students write their own personal letters based on the guidelines they developed as a class.

Following their analysis of Austen’s personal letters, students would then analyze the structure, content, and development of one of her professional letters. As several letters in Austen’s correspondence with her publisher John Murray exist, one of these professional letters would serve this exercise well. One such letter (Letter 130) was written in December 1815 upon the imminent publication of *Emma*:

Dear Sir

As I find that *Emma* is advertised [sic] for publication as early as Saturday next, I think it best to lose no time in settling all that remains to be settled on the subject, & adopt this method of doing so, as involving the smallest tax on your time.— In the first place, I beg you to understand that I leave the terms on which the Trade should be supplied with the work, entirely to your Judgement [sic], entreat you to be guided in every such arrangement by your own experience of what is most likely to clear off the Edition rapidly. I shall be satisfied with whatever you feel to be best.— The Title page must be, *Emma*, Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H. The Prince Regent.—And it is my particular wish that one Set should be completed & sent to H.R.H. two or three days before the Work is generally public—It should be sent under Cover to the Rev: J.S. Clarke, Librarian, Carlton House.—I shall subjoin a list of those persons, to whom I must trouble you to forward also a Set each, when the Work is out;—all unbound, with *From the Authoress*, in the first page.— I return to you, with very many Thanks, the Books you have so obligingly supplied me with—I am very sensible I assure you of the attention you have paid to my Convenience & amusement.—I return also, Mansfield Park, as ready for a 2d Edit: I beleive [sic], as I can make it.— I am in Hans Place till the 16th.—From that day, inclusive, my direction will be, Chawton, Alton, Hants.
I remain dear Sir
Yr faithful HumServ\textsuperscript{3}
J. Austen

I wish you would have the goodness to send a line by the Bearer, stating the day on which the set will be ready for the Prince Regent.—

This letter to Murray will need very little context aside from who Murray is and what the timelines of publication were for the novels mentioned. The follow-up to this letter also proves useful in this exercise because it demonstrates Austen’s attitude toward and approach to handling corrections by her publisher:

Dear Sir
I am much obliged by yours, and very happy to feel everything arranged to our mutual satisfaction. As to my direction about the title-page, it was arising from my ignorance only, and from my having never noticed the proper place for a dedication. I thank you for putting me right. Any deviation from what is usually done in such cases is the last thing I should wish for. I feel happy in having a friend to save me from the ill effect of my own blunder.

Yours, dear Sir, &c,
J. Austen

As with the previous assignment analyzing Austen’s personal letter to her brother Charles, students analyze the following elements of her professional letters to Murray: writing purpose/objective, tone, audience, format, level of formality, subject-matter, and content development. During their analysis, students draft guidelines for professional letter writing. Finally, students write their own professional or business letters based on the guidelines they developed as a class. To tie these two assignments together, students would compare Austen’s personal and professional letters. Students analyze the differences between Austen’s letters and between the different guidelines they developed for writing different kinds of letters, personal versus professional. Then, students reflect on their own letter-writing and compare their own

\textsuperscript{3} Your faithful Humble Servant
personal and professional letters. Finally, students discuss writing for different audiences and levels of formality within the same writing genre. While I have never used this assignment sequence in my composition courses, I believe it would be an effective option to substitute for the lesson I did use with Garrison Keillor’s essays, and I would recommend either sequence for other composition instructors seeking to incorporate letter-writing and analysis as an early step in writing scaffolding.

This assignment sequence achieves numerous learning goals for Composition I, which include developing critical thinking and reading skills, applying a process approach to writing, analyzing and responding critically and creatively to others’ writing, constructing effective prose, considering audience and occasion, analyzing audience, and analyzing an author’s meaning, writing style, and writing purpose. These letter analysis and writing assignments help students develop critical thinking and reading skills by scrutinizing Austen’s letters for important writing components. Students must then apply a process approach to writing by developing guidelines for writing based on their analyses of Austen’s letters and constructing their own personal and professional letters based on these principles. Within their analysis, students must respond to Austen’s writing critically, and through their own letters, students respond to writing creatively by scrutinizing her letters to construct their own effective prose. Students discover more about audience and occasion through this assignment sequence by analyzing Austen’s letters for different audiences, establishing the differences between writing for a personal audience (in Austen’s case, a close family member) and a professional audience (for Austen, her publisher), and then applying that knowledge to the development of the students’ personal and professional letters.
Obviously, a major component of these assignments connected to all of these learning goals is the students’ analyses of Austen’s letters. Through their analyses of Austen’s letters for meaning, style, and purpose, students are able to better analyze to their own written work by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of another’s writing and assessing whether those letters accomplish the goals of letter-writing for different audiences. Beyond letter-writing, the writing analysis and student composition components of this assignment sequence will be applied to various writing genres. The writing elements analyzed by students in these assignments—purpose, objective, tone, audience, format, level of formality, subject-matter, and content development—apply to non-fiction essays and research papers as well.

Above and beyond analyzing Austen’s letters through the lens of another author and using letter writing and analysis as an exercise leading to more complex writing and analysis, students can use Austen’s letters creatively by analyzing excerpts as a different writing genre: the blog⁴. In this next assignment, students use Austen’s letters as the equivalent of personal blogs and assess the usefulness of Austen’s letters as examples of blog writing. In order for students to visualize Austen’s letters as blog entries, I have created a blog in the voice of Austen, using excerpts from her letters as blog entries. Students read this series of excerpts from Austen’s letters, which I have reformatted as blog entries and published on Blogger for student access,

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⁴ For a recent discussion of blogging in the college classroom, see Emily Wender’s “Blogging in the Literature Survey Course: Making Relevance, Not Waiting for It” (2013). While blogging may not be as novel or “cutting-edge” as it was even ten years ago, it is still a good basic way to get students to write for a public audience in a way that allows students to introduce some creativity and individuality to their writing. Twitter could be used as well, but it is limited to 140 characters per post (microblogging). Other alternative writing and media platforms that could be used are Tumblr, oneword, and Google+. Blogging just happens to be the easiest way to consolidate more lengthy writing tasks with the option for classmates to comment directly on each other’s writing over time. With Blogger or Google Sites, students can alter their privacy so that only those with the URL can view their sites, which makes it ideal for classroom use (especially for students who do not want to write for a completely public audience).
entitled *A Quick Succession of Busy Nothings*\(^5\) (Smothers). The following are two examples of entries on my Austen blog, all postings of which are focused on Austen’s experiences and thoughts on her novels as they were being published.

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\(^5\) The title is derived from the following often incorrectly quoted sentence in *Mansfield Park*:

Dinner was soon followed by tea and coffee, a ten miles’ drive home allowed no waste of hours; and from the time of their sitting down to table, it was a quick succession of busy nothings till the carriage came to the door, and Mrs. Norris, having fidgeted about, and obtained a few pheasants’ eggs and a cream cheese from the housekeeper, and made abundance of civil speeches to Mrs. Rushworth, was ready to lead the way. (Austen 83)

This quote is often misattributed to Fanny and quoted as “Life seems but a quick succession of busy nothings” on various user-generated quotation sites (such as ThinkExist, GoodReads, BrainyQuote, etc.).

For my full Jane Austen blog, see http://janesbusynothings.blogspot.com/.

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Figure 1: “Northanger Abbey on the shelf.”

All of the blog entries are dated (month and day) of the original letters from which they are excerpted. If entries are from multiple letters, one of the dates was chosen. The year of the blog entries corresponds to the year in which Austen wrote the entries with two hundred years added on (e.g. 1813 becomes 2013) because Blogger does not allow dating entries earlier than 1970.

In this blogging unit, students first read blog examples and ideas for creating and writing blogs. Next, students analyze and critique Austen’s “blog entries,” determining whether Austen’s letter excerpts are effective as blog entries and whether they generate reader interest. Additionally, students determine what they can learn from Austen’s writing that they could apply to their own, for instance how they could employ what Austen accomplishes effectively in her “blog” and how they could avoid the ineffective aspects of Austen’s “blog.” After students analyze Austen’s “blog” and develop guidelines for effective blog-writing based on the Austen blog and other
published blogs, students would design and create their own blog on Blogger, write blog entries on their own writing progress, and maintain their blog for the rest of the semester. Students’ blog entries can focus on any aspect of their writing in Composition I, including their progress throughout the semester, reactions to and reflections on assigned writing tasks, thoughts about in-class discussions and assignments, and struggles with any aspect of the writing process.

In my previous teaching experiences using blogs in the composition classroom, I assigned students to read the novel *Julie & Julia* and corresponding blog entries written by its author, Julie Powell. After reading the novel and blog entries, students analyzed the differences between the same stories written for two different genres. This previous blog-writing experience helped me to formulate my Austen-focused blog assignment. My aim with this unit involving Austen’s letters is to apply the same principle to letter-writing and blog-writing as I previously applied to narrative-writing and blog-writing. Thus, this unit would follow my previously outlined assignments involving analyses of Austen’s letters as letters. Once students have read and analyze entire letters, they would compare Austen’s words excerpted, reformatted, and presented as blog entries to their previous analyses of her in-tact letters, one objective being to compare the conventions of different writing genres.

The blog assignment could also be used contemplatively in a final reflection assignment for Composition I. I often assign students a final reflection to be completed during the last week of class or during the final exam period that challenges them to think critically about their writing progress over the course of the semester. Students could use their blogs as one way to assess their writing development by using their blogs to track their responses to and attitudes toward writing assignments and by analyzing their writing progress through the entries
themselves, tracking their growth throughout the tenure of their blog-writing experience. When past students blogged after reading Julie Powell’s writing, they eventually turned their blog topic into an essay assignment (i.e. blog-to-narrative). For future students who would blog after reading Austen’s writing, the goal would be to construct a letter based on their blog writing reflection topics (i.e. blog-to-letter). This blog assignment sequence would be another possible option for instructors seeking to incorporate Austen’s letters in the composition classroom in a creative way.

This blogging assignment achieves several learning goals, including developing critical thinking and reading skills, a process approach to writing, critical and creative responses to others’ writing, effective prose, audience and writing occasion consideration, audience analysis, and analysis of an author’s meaning, writing style, and writing purpose. Continuing from the letter analysis assignments, the blogging unit further develops composition students’ critical thinking and reading skills by challenging them to read, analyze, interpret, and explain Austen’s writing in the context of its writing genre with the objective of writing in that genre. In executing the blog-writing assignment after their analysis, students apply a process approach to writing by employing in-class pre-writing activities to generate content ideas for their blog-writing project and to think about audience, style, and purpose considerations; during-writing activities that include composition and self-editing; and post-writing activities involving revision and reflection. Moreover, students continue to develop their skills in analyzing and responding critically and creatively to others’ writing through their analysis of and critical responses to Austen’s writing and the ideas in Mason’s blog-writing book, as well as critical and creative peer responses to each other’s blog entries throughout the semester.
The writing and response processes required of students also develop their abilities to construct effective prose and to employ considerations of audience and writing occasion in composing their blog entries and peer replies. Students learn that audience analysis is an integral part of the writing process because their blogs have the potential to draw broader audiences than their other course writing assignments; therefore, they must anticipate and address the needs of their intended audience through this new writing genre. Finally, students gain experience in analyzing author’s meaning, writing style, and writing purpose not only by analyzing Austen and Mason’s texts, but through self-assessment and peer assessment activities.

The usefulness of Austen’s letters in the Composition I classroom extend beyond the assignments I have included here, which are jumping-off points for introducing her correspondence to composition students in order to improve their writing. There are many more ways to use Austen’s letters constructively and creatively in this first course in the first-year college composition sequence. However, the assignments I have described here demonstrate how useful and compelling Austen’s letters can be when utilized appropriately and tied to course outcomes and learning goals. As I have stated already, connecting assignments to learning outcomes legitimizes the assignments by demonstrating why they are applicable to a Composition I course and how they develop the skills necessary to complete Composition I successfully and proceed to the second course in the sequence, Composition II. In addition to using Austen’s letters innovatively in Composition I, I believe that the two-course composition sequence would benefit from weaving the common thread of Austen’s letters throughout both writing courses. Although it would be impractical to implement all of the assignments introduced here, one assignment sequence could be chosen for Composition I based on the rest of the course
assignments and which sequence would work best in a particular class. In the next section, I will delve into the uses of Austen’s correspondence in Composition II, where students can continue to develop their skills in analysis, writing, and response with more advanced writing assignments using Austen’s letters.

**First-Year Composition II**

As I stated at the beginning of my discussion of Composition I, general education college composition courses generally follow a two-course sequence that is normally undertaken by students in their first year of college. At College of DuPage, the second course in the two-course one-year composition sequence is titled Composition II (ENGLI 1102). According to the course description, provided by the English department and required to be included in all syllabi for the course, Composition II focuses on further developing students’ “experience in reading, thinking, and writing critically by writing essays that demonstrate ability to analyze and evaluate the ideas of others and integrate them into their own writing.” Pertinent course objectives for Composition II include “apply[ing] a process approach to writing that incorporates independent research,” “develop[ing] and support[ing] a thesis in an essay incorporating research,” “analyz[ing] and respond[ing] critically and creatively to the ideas and strategies in the writing of others through reading a variety of texts, including academic discourse,” and “us[ing] discourse appropriate for an academic audience.” These course objectives apply to studying, analyzing, and writing letters in the Composition II classroom because the assignments I will describe in this section establish that the study, analysis, and writing of letters is integral to developing students’ academic writing skills. Furthermore, these course objectives apply to studying and analyzing Austen’s letters as
representative of one genre of the “variety of texts” students will read and analyze throughout the semester.

In addition to the course objectives for Composition II, relevant items on the “Topical Outline” for the course include “inventing/prewriting,” “considering audience and occasion,” “thinking critically,” “thinking creatively,” “discovering a subject and purpose,” “considering audience and purpose,” “developing a perspective and/or position,” and “analyzing and responding critically and creatively to written discourse, which includes analyzing audience, analyzing the writer’s meaning, analyzing style, [and] analyzing the writing occasion/purpose.” These course topics are addressed through treating letter-writing as one step in the writing process, while analyzing Austen’s letters serves as a learning tool aiding students in identifying course topics in others’ writing and assisting students in applying these topics to their own writing. The learning goals and topical outline will be tackled in this section by relating each individual lesson and assignment sequence outlined henceforth to its corresponding course outcome. I am addressing learning goals and the course’s topical outline because I believe that learning goals are an important consideration while crafting lesson plans and assignments so that I can ensure that my courses align with the skills that students should be acquiring and developing throughout Composition II. In the end, assessments should be evaluating whether students meet the prescribed course outcomes.

My first assignment using Austen’s letters as a learning tool for Composition II ultimately involves students writing a persuasive letter to a public official. In the first step of this unit, students read and analyze Austen’s letter of appeal “To Benjamin Crosby & Co” (Letter
68(D)) in April 1809 about her as-yet-unpublished novel *Northanger Abbey*, which the publishers had purchased the rights to but never published:

Gentlemen

In the Spring of the year 1803 a MS. Novel in 2 vol. entitled Susan was sold to you by a Gentleman of the name Seymour, & the purchase money £10. Rec’d at the same time. Six years have passed, & this work of which I avow myself the Authoress, has never to the best of my knowledge, appeared in print, tho’ an early publication was stipulated for at the time of Sale. I can only account for such an extraordinary circumstance by supposing the MS by some carelessness to have been lost; & if that was the case, am willing to supply You with another Copy if you are disposed to avail Yourselves of it, & will engage for no farther delay when it comes into Your hands.—It will not be in my power from particular circumstances to command this Copy before the Month of August, but then, if you accept my proposal, you may depend upon receiving it. Be so good as to send me a Line in answer, as soon as possible, as my stay in this place will not exceed a few days. Should no notice be taken of this Address, I shall feel myself at liberty to secure the publication of my work, by applying elsewhere. I am Gentlemen &c &c

MAD.—

After reading the letter as a class, students identify Austen’s writing purpose and objective, thesis, audience, and tone. In light of this examination, students analyze the effectiveness of her letter in regard to achieving her purpose, clearly stating her objective, and maintaining an appropriate writing tone for her intended audience. Ultimately, students will compose advanced writing assignments after having examined Austen’s persuasive writing. I chose this particular letter of Austen’s because it is an early example of a letter to a professional audience and it demonstrates a clear writing objective and tone.

When I had students analyze this letter in the second week of class in the spring semester of 2015 at College of DuPage, students showed how adept they were at identifying and analyzing the elements of writing. Through my guidance and questions challenging them to think more deeply about Austen’s letter, students demonstrated growth in analytic skills that they were able
to translate to their letter-writing assignment. Students also revealed curiosity to learn more about the background of and context surrounding the letter, especially whether Austen was successful in her appeals to Benjamin Crosby & Co. to have them publish her manuscript or release it to her, de facto, for publication elsewhere. Before telling students what the result of Austen’s letter-writing endeavor was, I polled them to see whether they believed she was successful. The classes were split between believing she succeeded or failed in getting her novel published. After gauging student interest in the topic, I shared with them Richard Crosby’s prompt response letter to Austen (Letter 68(A)):

Madam
We have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 5th inst. It is true that at the time mentioned we purchased of Mr Seymour a MS. novel entitled Susan and paid him for it the sum of 10£ for which we have his stamped receipt as a full consideration, but there was not any time stipulated for its publication, neither are we bound to publish it. Should you or anyone else we shall take proceedings to stop the sale. The MS. shall be yours for the same as we paid for it.

For B. Crosby & Co
I am yours etc.
Richard Crosby

After reading Crosby’s response, I asked students why they thought her letter was unsuccessful in obtaining her objective. Students correctly identified the issues in Austen’s letter, including but not limited to tone, audience consideration, and content, which may have contributed to the publishers’ response.

The next assignment in this sequence calls for employing another of Austen’s letters of appeal, this time a letter to another publisher John Murray (Letter 126) from November 1815 regarding the printing of her novel Emma:

Sir

My Brother’s note last Monday has been so fruitless, that I am afraid there can be little chance of my writing to any good effect; but yet I am so very much
disappointed & vexed by the delays of the Printers that I cannot help begging to
know whether there is no hope of their being quickened.—Instead of the Work
being ready by the end of the present month, it will hardly, at the rate we now
proceed, be finished by the end of the next, and as I expect to leave London early
in Decr, it is of consequence that no more time should be lost.—Is it likely that the
Printers will be influenced to greater Dispatch & Punctuality by knowing that the
Work is to be dedicated, by Permission, to the Prince Regent?—If you can make
that circumstance operate, I shall be very glad ….

I remain, Sir,
Yr ob. Hum Serv
J. Austen

As with the last letter, students identify Austen’s writing purpose and objective, thesis, audience,
and tone, and students analyze the effectiveness of this letter in achieving her purpose, clearly
stating her objective, and maintaining appropriate writing tone and content for her intended
audience. Students can then transfer what they learn from this critical analysis of Austen’s
correspondence in their own advanced letter-writing assignment to a public official intended to
effect local change.

I chose this letter to follow Austen’s letter to Crosby because it is another example of a
professional letter to a publisher. Moreover, Austen wrote her letter to Murray over six years
after the Crosby letter, and examining these two letters chronologically allows students to draw
conclusions about Austen’s progression as a writer over time. Austen’s writing objective and
tone in her letter to Murray markedly differ from those in her prior letter, and the context
surrounding this letter, which students also expressed interest in during class discussion, was also
dissimilar. By the time Austen wrote this letter to Murray, she had already had three novels
published (Emma was the fourth), whereas she was unpublished at the time she wrote to Crosby

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6 As these last three sentences of the letter are not necessary for the purposes of this assignment, I omit them when
presenting the letter to students: “—My Brother returns Waterloo, with many thanks for the Loan of it.—We have
heard much of Scott’s account of Paris;—if it be not incompatible with other arrangements, would you favour us
with it—supposing you have any set already opened?—You may depend upon its’ being in careful hands.”
in 1809. The outcome of Austen’s letter to Murray also differed from the unsuccessful correspondence with Crosby; Austen tells her sister Cassandra in her next extant letter that her appeal to Murray was satisfactory: “I had a most civil [note] in reply from M’ M. He is so very polite indeed, that it is quite overcoming.—The Printers have been waiting for Paper—the blame is thrown upon the Stationer—but he gives his word that I shall have no farther cause for dissatisfaction” (Letter 127). After my students analyzed Austen’s letter to Murray, they were able to point out the aspects of Austen’s letter that resulted in a favorable response to her appeal, namely the professional and deferential tone, content, and writing objective.

After analyzing these two letters written by Austen six years apart, students compared the letters and analyzed which letter is more effective as a persuasive letter, citing the reasons for their determination. In this comparison and analysis, students examined the form and progress of each letter, especially regarding tone, approach, and writing style. In addition, students used this analysis to draw conclusions about how to appeal to an audience by tracing Austen’s development from the earlier letter to the later letter in considering audience and adapting her tone to achieve her writing objective. Students used this comparative analysis to write their own persuasive letter, assessing what to take away from their examination of these letters that they applied to the culminating assignment: “Letter to a Public Official.”

When I implemented these lessons and assignments in my Composition II course in the Spring of 2015, I experienced positive results with my students. They were responsive to the letters and assignments and were not hesitant to ask questions for clarification or elaboration. For instance, one student asked what the abbreviations meant (e.g. “MS”), while another student was interested to know whether Austen was able either to get her book published or publish it
elsewhere. Because of students’ interest in the outcome of this letter, I shared with them Crosby’s reply, which I had not intended to be part of the lesson. Some students were surprised by the response; generally, these were students who thought Austen had a good consideration of audience at first. Then, we discussed why Austen’s letter may not have considered her audience well. That’s when I introduced the second letter, which better demonstrated how to appeal to an audience in a persuasive letter or letter of appeal. After discussing and picking apart Austen’s letter to Crosby, students were better able to discern the differences between her earlier and later letters and deduce why the first letter was unsuccessful while the second was successful.

If I were to use this assignment again, I could anticipate student questions by also including either footnotes or a separate fact and definition sheet to aid in student comprehension. As I mentioned, one question students asked was what “MS” meant; I then explained that it was an abbreviation for “manuscript.” This led to a student questioning what a “manuscript” was, and I clarified that a manuscript was a handwritten document, specifically one that was submitted to a publisher for publication. While students may benefit from a handout that anticipates these kinds of questions, one hesitation I would have with using a handout of terminology, definitions, and context would be that I have found class discussions to be enriching and to lead to deeper discussions and analysis of the letters. Anticipating students’ questions by handing them the answers preemptively deprives them of the chance to inquire and explore. Instead, I do anticipate student questions but only insofar as preparing myself to answer them as they arise during class discussions, and I could prepare a handout to distribute toward the end of our discussion to talk about any issues the students did not raise organically in class.
In the end, I did notice a difference between student performance on the culminating letter-writing assignment among students who were *present* during the analysis of Austen’s letters and students who were *absent* during this process. Students who were present were better able to apply the writing elements they analyzed in Austen’s writing: audience consideration, tone, format, objective, and style. For instance, they were better able to put themselves in the shoes of the recipient to determine what strategies would work best to persuade that person or group (e.g. not making threats, not insulting the audience, and not adopting an aggressive or passive-aggressive tone). I would absolutely use these assignments in future Composition II courses because they engaged students in class discussions, helped develop students’ critical thinking skills, and improved students’ writing skills through analysis and application of course concepts.

This lesson sequence and culminating assessment achieves numerous learning goals for Composition II, including helping students apply a process approach to writing, develop and support a thesis, analyze and respond critically and creatively to ideas and strategies in others’ writing, use discourse appropriate for an academic audience, consider audience and occasion, think critically and creatively, discover a subject and purpose, develop a perspective or position on a topic, and analyze and respond to discourse. First of all, students applied a process approach to writing in this sequence by developing and writing guidelines for professional persuasive letter writing based on their analyses of Austen’s letters. Another part of the writing process was generating ideas for their own letters, and students accomplished this by completing short in-class assignments that challenged them to come up with local issues about which they could write to a public official. I required the issues to be local (neighborhood, town/city, school, state)
because I wanted to challenge students to identify problems they wanted to solve that affected them directly, similarly to what Austen did in her letters to her publishers. After students chose an issue they wanted to address, they developed and supported a thesis that attempted to persuade their audience, a public official, to take specific action to remedy the problem. I also strongly encouraged students to do research on the issue and possible solutions before crafting their letter, although they were not required to cite outside sources for this assignment. I also encouraged students to send their letters to the public official or for publication in a newspaper opinion section if they wanted to do so, though I do not know if any of them followed through as this was not a requirement.

Moreover, students demonstrated their ability to analyze and respond critically and creatively to others’ ideas and strategies through their analysis of Austen’s letters and their crafting of a persuasive letter on an issue that directly affected them, which itself required them to anticipate and address their audience’s potential concerns and objections. Students also continued learning about why considering audience and writing occasion is integral to the writing process. In order for public officials to consider students’ perspectives, they must write letters that appeal to their audiences and clearly explain why they are writing, what the issues are, and why their audiences need to take action. This letter-writing process also challenged students to think critically and creatively to develop possible solutions to the problem they addressed, as Austen did in her letters to publishers Crosby (for Austen to produce another copy of the manuscript for publication by Crosby or to publish it elsewhere) and Murray (for Murray to mention the dedication to the Prince Regent to expedite printing). Ultimately, students learned how to discover a subject and writing purpose as well as to develop a perspective and position on
an issue for their final letter-writing assignment. They developed their skills in analyzing and responding to discourse, including analyzing an author’s meaning, audience, writing style, and writing purpose, through their examination of Austen’s two professional letters.

Aside from analyzing Austen’s letters to her publishers as examples of persuasive writing for students crafting persuasive letters to public officials, students can analyze Austen’s letters with the objective of learning how to address counterarguments. In this next assignment sequence, which I have not yet implemented, students would read and analyze Austen’s correspondence with James Stanier Clarke, which includes his suggestions for what she should write about next (after *Emma*). Students would analyze Austen’s responses to Clarke in this sequence of letters and use their analysis to develop guidelines for responding to condescension or unsolicited advice.

First, I would give students background information on who Clarke was and why Austen was corresponding with him about *Emma*; as I mentioned in my fourth chapter, Clarke was a clergyman and the Prince Regent’s librarian and facilitated the Regent’s permission for Austen to dedicate *Emma* to the Regent. Austen wrote a letter to Clarke in November 1815 clarifying whether she had the Prince Regent’s permission for the dedication (Letter 125(D)). Clarke responded to Austen the next day affirming the Prince Regent’s permission and offering his first suggestion for a new writing subject:

> Accept my sincere thanks for the pleasure your Volumes have given me: in the perusal of them I felt a great inclination to write & say so. And 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 should 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 La Fontaine 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. Pray dear Madam
think of these things. (my emphasis; Letter 125(A))

Austen responded to Clarke’s suggestions to write a novel about a clergyman in a letter written
in the following month, December 1815:

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 16. 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 & Philosophy of which I know nothing—or at least be
occasionally abundant in quotations & allusions which a Woman, who like me,
knows only her own Mother-tongue & 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 & Modern, appears to me
quite Indispensable for the person who w’d do any justice to your Clergyman—
And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most
unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress. (Letter
132(D))

As I explained in Chapter 4, even what evidence exists in the few extant letters (not even
including the literary references in her fiction) reveals that Austen was indeed well-read.
Therefore, her tactic in this letter is to convince Clarke that she is unqualified to write the type of
novel he requested, probably hoping that her affected ignorance would terminate the subject.
Instead of ending the conversation and discouraging Clarke’s suggestions, Austen’s letter, full of
feigned self-deprecation, prompted Clarke to write a response in which he offered further
suggestions for how Austen could write a novel about a clergyman, in spite of her protestations:

Pray continue to write, & make all your friends send Sketches to help you—and
Memoires pour server—as the French term it. 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 can then bring forward like Le Sage many interesting Scenes of Character & Interest. But forgive me, I cannot write you without wishing to elicit your Genius;—& I fear I cannot do that, without trespassing on your Patience and Good Nature. (Letter 132(A))

Clarke then adds a line about his own publishing endeavors, which may account for his interest in Austen’s writing career: “I have desired M’. Murray to procure, if he can, two little Works I ventured to publish from being at Sea—Sermons which I wrote & preached on the Ocean—& the Edition which I published of Falconers Shipwreck.” While no response exists in Austen’s extant letters, Clarke again wrote to Austen in March 1816, offering yet another writing proposal: “Perhaps when you again appear in print you may chuse to dedicate your Volumes to Prince Leopold: any Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg, would just now be very interesting” (Letter 138(A)).

The last piece of correspondence between Clarke and Austen that survives is the following definitive response to his recommendations, written on April Fools’ Day in 1816:

You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of Composition which might recommend me at present, & I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem.—I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for 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 again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (Letter 138(D))

After reading Clarke’s doggedly persistent letters and Austen’s progressively assertive responses, students would carry out a close analysis of this series of excerpts from Austen and Clarke’s brief correspondence. Through their analysis, students would identify the writing objective for each excerpt, assess each author’s consideration of audience, pinpoint the tone of
each, and scrutinize how each author responds to her/his correspondent. Following this activity, students would evaluate Austen’s responses to Clarke’s continued suggestions regarding her writing, determining whether Austen’s responses were clear and effective. Then, students would develop parameters for responding to unsolicited advice based on their analysis of Austen and Clarke’s letters.

As the next step in this assignment sequence, students would read a sample letter offering them unsolicited advice for what topic they should cover when they write their next essay. Students would then write a letter in response using what they learned through analysis of Austen’s letters and the parameters they developed as guidelines for how to respond. After students had written their letters, they would share their responses with classmates and note how their responses are similar to and different from their peers’ replies to the same sample letter. Subsequently, we would expand this discussion of how to respond to unsolicited advice to responding to contrary perspectives in writing.

One extension of this assignment involves connecting these ideas for responding to other authors with different perspectives to addressing counterarguments in researched papers. As a part of the research writing process, students would be assigned a topic and tasked with choosing one of two opposing opinion pieces on the topic to which to respond. Students would be required to choose the writing piece that presents the viewpoint they disagree with to practice responding to opposing viewpoints and counterarguments. Eventually, students would apply this exercise in addressing other perspectives in writing when they develop their own topic and argument for a research paper assignment, which would require them to anticipate, research, and respond to counterarguments.
This progression of assignments involves numerous learning objectives, including analyzing and responding to discourse, thinking critically and creatively, applying a process approach to writing, inventing and prewriting, developing and supporting a thesis, analyzing and responding critically and creatively to ideas and strategies in others’ writing, using discourse appropriate for an academic audience, considering audience and occasion, discovering a subject and purpose, developing a perspective and position, and eventually incorporating research. Students would analyze and respond to discourse by identifying Austen and Clarke’s meaning, audience, style, and writing purpose in their analysis of the letters. Their analysis would also require them to think critically about Austen and Clarke’s letters, and students’ responses to the sample letter giving them unsolicited advice would challenge them to think critically and creatively in their replies.

Furthermore, students would gain more experience with the process approach to writing through these writing exercises that act as preparatory assignments for the research writing process, during which they would need to participate in inventing and prewriting exercises leading up to drafting the research paper. Students would be challenged to develop and support a thesis in their writing assignments for this unit; without a clear grasp of their own position, they would not be able to adequately respond to others’ perspectives. They would further develop their thesis-development skills in the research paper process. Throughout this unit, students would develop their skills in using language appropriate for an academic audience through their consideration of audience and occasion in Austen and Clarke’s letters as well as students’ own response letters and essays responding to counterarguments in an outside source. Eventually, students would be guided in finding a subject and writing purpose and developing a perspective
and position on an issue when they craft their responses to outside sources that represent opposing viewpoints, and they would apply this exercise to responding to counterarguments by incorporating relevant and balanced research in their research papers. While I have not used this assignment sequence in my composition classes before, I would absolutely keep this as an option for how to introduce students to response writing, audience appeal, and addressing counterarguments in a creative and interesting way.

Besides analyzing Austen’s letters to her publishers and a professional acquaintance, an assignment that addresses learning outcomes while allowing students to use their creativity in responding to Austen would entail reading and responding to letters in which Austen herself gives advice (this time solicited) to her nieces. In the first assignment, students would read excerpts of a letter from Austen to her niece Fanny written in November 1814. At first, Austen expresses her surprise at Fanny’s change of heart about a suitor:

I was certainly a good deal surprised at first—as I had no suspicion of any change in your feelings, and I have no scruple in saying that you cannot be in Love. My dear Fanny, I am ready to laugh at the idea—and yet it is no laughing matter to have had you so mistaken as to your own feelings—And with all my heart I wish I had cautioned you on that point when first you spoke to me;—but tho’ I did not think you then so much in love as you thought yourself, I did consider you as being attached in a degree—quite sufficiently for happiness, as I had no doubt it would increase with opportunity.—And from the time of our being in London together, I thought you really very much in love—But you certainly are not at all—there is no concealing it.—What strange creatures we are!—It seems as if your being secure of him (as you say yourself) had made you Indifferent. (Letter 109)

Then, Austen expresses her concerns about Fanny’s change of heart: “I am surprised that the change in your feelings should be so great.—He is, just what he ever was, only more evidently & uniformly devoted to you. This is all the difference.—How shall we account for it?” Austen explains to Fanny that she is experiencing what many women experience: “Your mistake has
been one that thousands of women fall into. He was the first young Man who attached himself to you. That was the charm, & most powerful it is.—Among the multitudes however that make the same mistake with Yourself, there can be few indeed who have so little reason to regret it.”

Austen then gives her advice to Fanny:

His situation in life, family, friends, & above all his Character—his uncommonly amiable mind, strict principles, just notions, good habits—all that you know so well how to value, All that really is of the first importance—everything of this nature pleads his case most strongly.—You have no doubt of his having superior Abilities—he has proved it at the University—he is I dare say such a Scholar as your agreeable [sic], idle Brothers would ill bear a comparison with.—Oh! my dear Fanny, the more I write about him, the warmer my feelings become, the more strongly I feel the sterling worth of such a young Man & the desirableness of your growing in love with him again. I recommend this most thoroughly.—There are such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thousand, as the Creature You & I should think perfection, where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart & Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own County.—Think of all this Fanny. M’J.P.—has advantages which do not often meet in one person. His only fault indeed seems Modesty. If he were less modest, he would be more agreable, speak louder & look Impudenter;—and is not it a fine Character, of which Modesty is the only defect? (Letter 109)

Austen continues to list what Fanny may consider the “defects” of her suitor and provides counterarguments for each.

Finally, Austen turns the tables and offers Fanny the following advice, in spite of her approbation of Fanny marrying the gentleman:

And now, my dear Fanny, having written so much on one side of the question, I shall turn round & entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection; and if his deficiencies of Manner &c &c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once.—Things are now in such a state, that you must resolve upon one or the other, either allow him to go on as he has done, or whenever you are together behave with a coldness which may convince him that he has been deceiving himself.—I have no doubt of his suffering a good deal for a time, a great deal, when he feels that he must give you up;—but it is no creed of
mine, as you must be well aware, that such sort of Disappointments kill anybody.

(Letter 109)

In addition to reading and analyzing excerpts from this letter to Fanny, Austen’s continued advice to Fanny in a subsequent letter could also be examined to provide more for students to respond to:

I am at present more impressed with the possible Evil that may arise to You from engaging yourself to him—in word or mind—than with anything else.—When I consider how few young Men you have yet seen much of—how capable you are (yes, I do still think you very capable) of being really in love—and how full of temptation the next 6 or 7 years of your Life will probably be—it is the very period of Life for the strongest attachments to be formed—I cannot wish you with your present very cool feelings to devote yourself in honour to him. It is very true that you never may attach another Man, his equal altogether, but if that other Man has the power of attaching you more, he will be in your eyes the most perfect…. The unpleasantness of appearing fickle is certainly great—but if you think you want Punishment for past Illusions, there it is—and nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without Love, bound to one, & preferring another. That is a Punishment which you do not deserve. (Letter 114)

Students would be presented with the excerpts from these letters and the context that Austen is giving relationship advice to her niece Fanny who has changed her mind about a man she was interested in. Then, students would read and analyze the letter excerpts, focusing on audience and Austen’s meaning, writing style, and writing occasion and purpose. In their analysis, students should also identify each piece of advice Austen gives to Fanny regarding her predicament. Next, students could use their creativity and critical thinking skills to construct a response as if it were their aunt giving them love advice. In their letter responses, students would address each point Austen makes in her letters and provide reactions to Austen’s advice. Once they completed their responses, students would exchange letters and critique each other’s writing and consideration of audience, meaning, style, and writing occasion and purpose. Students would then write a critical response to their partner’s letter.
As an alternative to writing a personal letter of response to Austen’s love advice for Fanny, students could examine excerpts from letters Austen wrote to another niece, Anna (Austen) Lefroy, in which Austen offers writing advice. I would provide students with background information on Austen’s letters to Anna which examine Anna’s writing-in-progress. Students would read and analyze excerpts from five letters written to Anna between July and September of 1814. In all of the letters, Austen provides extensive feedback on Anna’s manuscript chapters. Since there is so much feedback in these letters, I would only provide students with excerpts to give them an effective idea of Austen’s writing criticism that could be applied more broadly to writing beyond her Anna’s.

In the first excerpts students would analyze from a letter of July 1814, Austen gives feedback and offers corrections on Anna’s manuscript novel. Austen comments that “Cecilia continues to be interesting inspite [sic] of her being so amiable” and that she likes the character “D. Forester very much—a great deal better than if he had been very Good or very Bad” (Letter 103). Austen also notes that she “felt tempted to make” some “verbal corrections,” mainly “presume[ing] to alter” “a speech of S'l Julians to Lady Helena.” Austen explains that, “As Lady H. is Cecilia’s superior, it w'd not be correct to talk of her being introduced; Cecilia must be the person introduced.” Austen gives an additional note that draws a connection between Anna’s novel and a character in Fanny Burney’s Evelina: “I do not like a Lover’s speaking in the 3d person; it is too much like the formal part of Lord Orville, & I think is not natural. If you think differently however, you need not mind me.” The excerpts from this letter are valuable for composition students because they address several different writing concerns: character development, status and social conventions, and emulation (or plagiarism).
A second letter that students would assess was written in August 1814. In excerpts, Austen first compliments Anna on several of her characters, but then she warns Anna that her “corrections have not been more important than before” (Letter 104). One such alteration is that Anna should express “the sense” of her story “in fewer words.” Furthermore, Austen notes that she “scratched out Sir Tho: from walking with the other Men to the Stables &c the very day after his breaking his arm” because in spite of the fact that Anna’s “Papa” (Austen’s eldest brother James) “did walk out immediately after his arm was set, I think it can be so little usual as to appear unnatural in a book—& it does not seem to be material that Sir Tho: should go with them.” Other corrections Austen makes are “scratch[ing] out the Introduction between Lord P. & his Brother, & Mr Griffin” because “[a] Country Surgeon … would not be introduced to Men of their rank,” and explaining that “when Mr Portman is first brought in, he w’d not be introduced as the Honble—That distinction is never mentioned at such times.” Austen also cautions her niece about an aspect of her novel that may seem familiar to Austen’s own work: “I do think you had better omit Lady Helena’s postscript;—to those who are acquainted with P. & P it will seem an Imitation.” Additionally, Austen comments on a passage with possible impropriety, advising Anne to “mak[e] a little alteration in the last scene between Devereux F. & Lady Clanmurray & her Daughter” because “they press him too much—more than sensible Women or well-bred Women would do. Lady C. at least, should have discretion enough to be sooner satisfied with his determination of not going with them.” This letter, as the last, includes valuable feedback on broad writing concerns, such as conciseness, believability, and social conventions and status.

The third letter from which students would examine excerpts was written in September 1814. In this letter, Austen warns Anna that she “ha[s] a good many criticisms to make—more
than [Anna] will like” (Letter 107). As with several of her other comments in previous letters, Austen discusses a matter of propriety:

We are not satisfied with Mrs F.’s settling herself at Tenant & near Neighbour to such a Man as Sir T.H. without having some other inducement to go there; she ought to have some friend living thereabouts to tempt her. A woman, going with two girls just growing up, into a Neighbourhood where she knows nobody but one Man, of not very good character, is an awkwardness which so prudent a woman as Mrs F. would not be likely to fall into. Remember, she is very prudent;—you must not let her act inconsistently.—Give her a friend, & let that friend be invited to meet her at the Priory, & we shall have no objection to her dining there as she does; but otherwise, a woman in her situation would hardly go there, before she had been visited by other Families.

Later in this same letter, Austen gives Anna a few more notes on staying consistent with characters:

Mrs F. is not careful enough of Susan’s health;—Susan ought not to be walking out so soon after Heavy rains, taking long walks in the dirt. An anxious Mother would not suffer it.—I like your Susan very much indeed, she is a sweet Creature, her playfulness of fancy is very delightful. I like her as she is now exceedingly, but I am not so well satisfied with her behavior to George R. At first she seemed all over attachment & feeling, & afterwards to have none at all …. She seems to have changed her Character.

In addition to commenting on consistency and propriety, Austen advises Anna that her “descriptions are often more minute than would be liked” and “give too many particulars of right hand & left.” As with the previous two letters, Austen discusses several areas of concern relevant to writing students, namely considering consistency, character development, and conciseness.

In the final letter for this exercise, which was written in September 1814, Austen gives her niece a few noteworthy pieces of advice, first about a clichéd turn of phrase and then about making a character more interesting. Austen tells Anna that “Devereux Forester’s being ruined by his Vanity is extremely good; but I wish you would not let him plunge into a ‘vortex of Dissipation’.

I do not object to the Thing, but I cannot bear the expression; it is such thorough novel slang—
and so old, that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened” (Letter 108). Of another character, Egerton, Austen asks Anna what she could do “to increase the interest for him.” Austen expresses her hope that her niece could plot “some family occurrence to draw out his good qualities more,” for example “some distress among Brothers or Sisters to releive [sic] by the sale of his Curacy” or “something to [take tear] him mysteriously away.” Before offering further suggestions for making Egerton more interesting, Austen adds that she “would not seriously recommend anything Improbable, but if you c[d] invent something spirited for him, it w[d] have a good effect.” In this letter, Austen again discusses relevant writing issues, including avoiding clichés, developing characters, and grabbing the audience’s attention and holding their interest.

Although Anna never finished this novel, Austen provided clear and interesting feedback on numerous aspects of her fiction. Throughout these few letters to Anna, Austen demonstrates her own ideas about what constitutes effective and engaging writing, which composition students could assess. Subsequent to reading these letter excerpts, students would analyze them, considering Austen’s audience, content, style, writing occasion, and purpose. In addition, students would create a breakdown of Austenian writing advice based on the feedback she gave to Anna and use this breakdown to construct essay-writing guidelines. After developing these guidelines, students would analyze which rules could apply to the kinds of writing composition they have been assigned. Next, students would construct a response letter to Austen’s writing advice as if she had written to them. Students would then exchange responses and critique each other’s writing and how well they address the following writing elements: audience, meaning, style, writing occasion, and purpose. For the final assignment in this sequence, students would
write a response to their partners’ letters in which they give them advice for improving their writing based on the peer reviews.

This series of assignments involves several learning goals, including applying a process approach to writing, developing and supporting a thesis in an essay that incorporates sources, analyzing and responding critically and creatively to ideas and strategies in others’ writing, using academically-appropriate discourse, considering audience and occasion, thinking critically and creatively, discovering a subject and writing purpose, developing a perspective or position on a topic, and analyzing and responding to discourse. Students would exercise a process approach to writing through their written analysis of components of Austen’s letters, most importantly content, audience, and purpose, which would act as a pre-writing step in preparation for their response assignments. Students would apply what they learn during this analysis to their own “responses” to Austen’s advice, in which they would need to develop a “thesis” in response to Austen’s guidance within their analysis and critical response to Austen’s letters. Their responses would be both critical and creative in nature because they must put themselves in the position of the recipient, develop their own perspectives on the advice, and respond as though the advice were meant for them while considering their own audience (Austen herself), purpose, and writing occasion. Then, students would extend the process by evaluating each other’s writing and proposing steps to improve it, which would accomplish the objective of writing appropriately for an academic audience. The writing process for this unit would conclude with a revision of the original response letter based on these peer evaluations.

As a whole, these assignments are treated as preparatory assignments for the Dialogue of Sources, Critical Analysis Essay and Research Paper, and therefore represent a fragment of the
essay writing process. After completing this series of assignments revolving around Austen’s letters of advice to one or both of her nieces, there would be a class discussion on the process of responding to Austen’s advice and its application to the Dialogue of Sources, Critical Analysis Essay, and Research Paper assessments. Through this assignment, students would practice responding to sources, in this case Austen, by identifying essential writing elements, analyzing the text of a source, and then responding to the points that source makes, whether those responses are in agreement or disagreement with the source. This assignment would lead to a Dialogue of Sources in which students create a script (dialogue) in which sources respond to one another and the student acts as a moderator leading the discussion. The Critical Analysis assignment would require students to synthesize information from sources that present different viewpoints on an issue and analyze how the authors of those sources use rhetorical strategies to craft their arguments and how effective their arguments are in light of this analysis. Furthermore, students would apply what they learned about responding to sources in their major Research Paper assignment, which also would require them to craft their own effective writing in which they demonstrate how to incorporate sources, analyze and respond critically and creatively to ideas and strategies in others’ writing, use academically-appropriate discourse, consider audience and writing occasion, think critically and creatively, discover a subject and writing purpose, develop a perspective or position on a topic, and analyze and respond to discourse.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the assignments I have outlined in this chapter demonstrate how versatile Austen’s letters for college teaching and learning. Austen has many “uses,” and they are not limited to her
fiction or the literature classroom. In the composition classroom, Austen’s correspondence can be utilized in myriad ways and for various purposes. The letters can be examined and analyzed independently as examples of a specific writing genre or in conjunction with historical, biographical, and literary information (which I discussed in my previous three chapters) to demonstrate the value of Austen’s writing and why her correspondence can be an important learning tool for composition students. While using Austen’s letters in the composition classroom may seem like an odd choice, they have proven to be very useful, and even students who have never heard of Austen before or read any of her fiction have expressed interest in the historical, biographical, and literary contexts surrounding the letters we examined in class.

Austen is far from the only historical writer whose personal and professional correspondence has survived and been published, and it would be possible to apply the assignments and ideas for using Austen’s letters in the college composition classroom (and, in the next chapter, the college literature classroom) to other famous authors’ letters, Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë, for instance. Austen, however, is unique. As Sutherland notes in “Jane Austen’s Life and Letters,” “In the absence of diaries, which were either destroyed or never existed, the letters are the only evidence we have of a personal Jane Austen speaking/writing in her own voice, unmediated by fictional form” (13). Unlike many of her literary contemporaries and heritors, Austen’s personal life remains elusive; we have very few details and a lot of speculation. Sutherland cautions, “It is worth remembering that we have more fiction than life because it helps put into perspective just what is recoverable and what is conjecture …. Frustratingly, these vital details are almost pure conjecture” (26). It is precisely this lack of information that makes Austen’s letters so compelling. As Auerbach testifies in
Searching for Jane Austen, “Paradoxically, Jane Austen nowadays seems everywhere and yet still hard to find” (3). This mysteriousness, the inability to really know Austen’s life, is precisely why her letters are excellent tools for the composition classroom. Students are able to read into them, analyze them, and use them: there is still a lot to be discovered through and learned from the letters, and my students have proven that they are eager to do so. Austen’s letters are a puzzle that we cannot quite solve, which only makes them more intriguing.

All things considered, Austen’s letters “work” in composition courses because they cover a wide range of writing occasions and writing purposes, are addressed to different audiences (both personal and professional), and demonstrate the writer’s progression over time. When used purposefully, Austen’s correspondence is an effective tool that can be used to improve students’ critical thinking skills and develop students’ own writing. As with any other teaching tool, the instrument is only as effective as the person who wields it, and Austen’s letters are no exception. The assignments I have presented in this chapter were crafted carefully with the objective of achieving the learning goals specific to composition courses while also demonstrating the value of reading and critiquing Austen’s nonfiction writing and examining her writing development, connecting it to students’ own writing process. In classes in which I have used Austen’s letters, students have been receptive and participatory, asking questions about Austen’s life based on what they were reading in her letters. As I have mentioned, students have asked about whether Austen was successful in her efforts at securing the publication of Northanger Abbey after she appealed to the publisher who bought her manuscript several years prior, and for the most part, after their analysis, students guess correctly that Austen’s appeal was not successful. Compared to the letter assignments students have submitted in classes where we did not analyze Austen’s
letters, the formal student letters in my “Austen classes” have revealed more effective persuasive writing.

While the composition classroom may not be the most evident setting for Austen’s letters, it is definitely a useful setting. Another, more obvious, environment in which to examine Austen’s letters is the literature classroom. Austen’s correspondence is valuable for literature courses for the same reason that they are intriguing in the composition classroom: they offer a glimpse into the mind of an author whose biography is elusive. As I will explain in my final chapter, the letters reveal a great deal and provide valuable biographical, historical, and literary context when read alongside Austen’s novels in the undergraduate college literature classroom. As I have done in this chapter for the composition classroom, I will present methods of incorporating Austen’s letters into course lessons in the literature classroom. In the next chapter, however, I will also incorporate those letters into discussions and analyses of Austen’s fiction as well as media representations of the author and her novels. My goal in the next chapter is to justify the use of Austen’s letters in appropriate college courses by establishing their efficacy and value in achieving specific English program learning outcomes.
CHAPTER 6: EXPLORING THE LETTERS IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 5, I explored how Austen’s correspondence could be utilized meaningfully in the college composition classroom. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Austen’s letters are valuable when read in conjunction with her novels and with an eye toward literary analysis. This chapter focuses on teaching Austen in the undergraduate college literature classroom, and I will also discuss my own experiences with teaching Austen in a general education literature course (English 110: Experience of Fiction) at Northern Illinois University, comparing using Austen’s letters in the classroom to my experiences teaching without using the letters as a teaching tool the prior semester. I will address course outcomes; methods of incorporating Austen’s letters into lessons on literary studies and Austen’s novels; my brief observations and comparisons of my use of the letters with teaching to previous lessons on Northanger Abbey without referencing the letters; and student participation observed during class lessons and discussions.

Within the brisk inventory of observations and news Austen relayed to her correspondents, readers can discern the familiar Austen writing style of her fiction. For instance, Carol Houlihan Flynn compares “The Letters” (Cambridge Companion), in which Austen “chronicles her ‘little matters,’” to Miss Bates in Emma: “Austen exploits with mundane precision the sheer tedium not only of committing oneself to practicing ‘the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness and forbearance’, but of being obliged to record them in closely
written letters for the inspection of others.” Flynn points out one particular line in one of Austen’s letters, “‘There is no reason to suppose that Miss Morgan is dead after all.’ [L 24],” remarking that “Samuel Beckett could have written such a line. Or Swift. Or closer to home, Austen’s own parasyntactic, always obliging Miss Bates, who sees and reports every thing with a flat, undistinguished, decidedly unbecoming zeal” (100). Austen’s apparent mimicry of Miss Bates, according to Flynn, “reveal[s] a profound consciousness of the artificial and vacant nature of most discourse, which flies off through half sentences because there is nothing substantial to hold it down” (101-02). Flynn contends that “Letters provide an excellent vehicle for such formidable observation. Silent and reserved, the correspondent can record household faults with impunity. It is, in fact, the letter-writer’s duty to describe the ‘minute’ details of everyday life before her, however offensive they might appear” (107). Flynn brings up an important point about the nature of Austen’s letters; the minute details, commentary, and often glib or sarcastic attitude toward serious subjects in Austen’s letters bolsters Flynn’s view of Austen’s correspondent-voice as subversively manipulative of the obligatory act of writing letters that detail the minutiae of everyday life. However, Austen’s letters are not merely concerned with chronicling “little matters”; throughout the this chapter, I will discuss the other details Austen’s letters reveal about historical and biographical contexts and how to use these letters to enrich reading and analysis of Austen’s novels for college students of literature.

Numerous critical sources, together with my own experience teaching college literature, have aided me in developing my concepts for incorporating Austen’s letters in the college literature classroom. As I outlined the sources that informed this study in my Introduction’s brief “Literature Review,” I won’t rehash that same information in this chapter. One issue I have
found with certain pedagogical sources that concern teaching Austen (or literature in general) is that they are thinly veiled literary criticism (e.g. Moffat’s exploration of the “pedagogical problem” with *Emma*: “students found the novel compelling for the wrong reasons” (45)). By examining *Emma* and Austen’s other novels historically and in the context of the letters rather than solely through a certain critical lens, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the novels based on historical and biographical contexts instead of only reader response, which is a good starting-off point but not the endgame.

One example of how contextualizing Austen’s novels sheds light on Austen herself is Walzer’s discussion of how Austen mentions Blair¹ in *Northanger Abbey* and demonstrates technical rhetoric² in a conversation between Darcy and Lizzy in *Pride and Prejudice* (693). Walzer’s article is useful in illustrating how contextualizing Austen’s novels, in this case by examining them in light of historically relevant rhetorical theories, brings new understanding to the texts. This aligns with one of my objectives in introducing Austen’s letters while teaching her novels: to encourage deeper contextual understanding by providing historical and biographical context in teaching Austen. While Walzer’s example excludes Austen’s letters from the analysis, the assignments and lessons I will cover in this chapter aim to incorporate them and rely on them for important contextual information. What I would want to avoid in teaching Austen’s letters and novels is giving students my own interpretation rather than allowing them to analyze the text and arrive at answers themselves. Moreover, I would emphasize the importance of historical and biographical context for understanding Austen’s novels by reading Austen’s letters. Context via

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¹ Hugh Blair (1718-1800)
the letters is important to teasing out effective interpretations of Austen’s novels, especially since so many students “read” them as “love stories.” The importance of putting Austen’s novels in the context of both the socio-historical period in which they were written and Austen’s own life reflected in her letters cannot be overstated: by understanding their context, students can more effectively interpret the fiction texts.

There are many college courses in which Austen’s letters could be utilized, particularly introductory and advanced literature courses. One challenge with general education literature course students (i.e. those in developmental and introductory literature courses) is that often they can be disinterested in reading and analyzing literature, particularly when they are intimidated by the process. In the first assignment sequence for my lower-level course section, I will address this issue by allowing students to read Austen’s own reactions to literature she read with the objective of making students more comfortable sharing their own perspectives. The benefit of introducing letter writing early in the writing process is to help students gain confidence in their own writing voice and gradually develop more critical responses to literary texts through letter-writing and responses from fellow students and the instructor.

My objective in this chapter is to demonstrate how Austen’s letters can be used in the undergraduate literature classroom to improve student analysis of written works and increase their comprehension of context and history while developing critical thinking skills. I consider historical context to be critical in teaching Austen’s novels because deeper analysis of the themes and ideas in her fiction necessitate contextual information. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will discuss various ways of incorporating Austen’s letters in the literature classroom as
standalone texts and supplements to Austen’s fiction in undergraduate lower- and upper-level English literature courses.

Lastly, I will demonstrate that there is value in reading and critiquing both Austen’s letters and fiction to explore complicated themes, dig beneath the surface of the “marriage plot,” and discover how Austen’s correspondence is connected to her novels. I will outline plans for a multitude of lessons and potential assignments that utilize Austen’s letters and her published novels. My section on Undergraduate Lower-Level English Literature Courses will cover three learning sequences that integrate Austen’s correspondence and fiction, focusing on Reader Reaction, Historical Context, and Biographical Context. In the final section, contending with Undergraduate Upper-Level English Literature Courses, I will develop learning and assessment sequences that delve deeper into historical and biographical subject-matter. I will cover topics such as historical events, political matters and figures, the peninsular war, class consciousness, and women in the nineteenth century.

One topic broached in the Lower-Level English Literature section is how to interweave Austen’s letters and novels with the goal of encouraging reader reaction from students who may be hesitant to express perspectives on literature. The learning sequence I outline in this section involves using one of Austen’s letters that demonstrates reader reaction (to Gothic-parody novel *The Heroine*) and letters that demonstrate self-assessment (of *Pride and Prejudice*). Another goal for this learning sequence is for students to learn to cope with writing feedback and begin to assess their own writing. The next learning sequence I discuss in this section covers historical details in the novels and similar references in letters. The example I use in this section is Austen’s treatment of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* as it relates to her opinions on marriage in
the letters. Moreover, students will examine biographical information (including Austen’s opinions) that correlates to events in the novels: in this sequence, the question of publication and Austen’s authorial anonymity as related to Northanger Abbey. Throughout these learning sequences, students will gain experience in writing for a literature course when I scaffold course writing assignments, moving from reader reaction assignments to analytic writing tasks.

Topics I will broach in Upper-Level English Literature section learning sequences include war, historical events and figures, class consciousness, and nineteenth-century women’s issues. Upper-level literature sequences will also include biographical connections between the correspondence and fiction. Naturally, advanced students of literature would be expected to delve deeper into these historical and biographical topics than introductory students would. In this section, lessons would comprise the role of the military in Austen’s novels as opposed to references in her letters, the history of letter writing as context for Austen’s letters and the letters in her novels, and the interconnectedness of class, socioeconomic status, and women’s issues as represented throughout Austen’s correspondence and novels.

Alongside the lessons and assignments explored in this chapter for both lower- and upper-level literature courses, I associate course outcomes derived from Northern Illinois University (NIU) general education and baccalaureate objectives and English Department Major objectives to those lesson sequences. I chose to use NIU program objectives because I have taught literature courses at NIU, served on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee to revise the language of English Major Objectives, and participated in course assessment with the Committee for my own literature course using an “English Course Assessment Report.” Ultimately, my first-hand familiarity with NIU’s curricular objectives have enabled me to
incorporate these experiences with literature course development, curriculum, and assessment into the development of my own teaching strategies for literature courses in this chapter.

UNDERGRADUATE LOWER-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE COURSES

Students are required to take general education courses as a part of a liberal arts education. At Northern Illinois University, students can choose a certain number of courses from different areas of distribution, a.k.a. “Knowledge Domains.” The lower-level courses available for general education credit in English are English 110: Transformative Fictions, 115: British Identities, British Literature, 116: American Identities, American Literature. The first two of these courses are appropriate for assigning Austen’s novels. The ENGL 110 course description in the 2015/16 Undergraduate Catalog (online) reads, “How can reading fiction transform our understanding of reality? Explore novels, short stories, and plays to see how writers convince us to enter the worlds and believe in the characters they create. Survey with selected authors.” The ENGL 115 course is described thus: “Discover Britain’s literary traditions and cultures through novels, poetry, drama, non-fiction, and short stories that have captivated readers from early times to now. Historical survey with selected authors.”

Course and Departmental Outcomes for literature courses identified in this chapter are based on Northern Illinois University’s Undergraduate Catalog and General Education webpage. The “Learning Goals for General Education Courses” found in NIU’s “General Education Outcomes” section of the 2015/16 Undergraduate Catalog outlines the general “Goals in Knowledge Domain Requirements,” specifying that the domains (“Creativity and Critical Analysis; Nature and Technology; Society and Culture”) have four goals. The first goal is to
“help students attain a sound liberal education and acquire sufficient general knowledge and intellectual versatility to become productive and resourceful members of society.” The second learning goal is to “explore human thought and relations in order to understand and respect cultural heritage.” The third is to “provide an understanding of the scientific method and the application of scientific facts and principles pertaining to the natural and technological worlds.” The fourth and last goal is to “examine the role of knowledge in promoting human welfare.” These general learning goals apply broadly to the three Knowledge Domains; however, each domain has its own specific set of goals. The goals in “Creativity and Critical Analysis” Knowledge Domain (under which English courses fall) are for students to “(1) become acquainted with methods for analyzing primary sources and critically evaluating the ideas, events, traditions, and belief systems that have shaped human experience and expression; (2) explore fundamental modes of aesthetic and creative expression; and (3) understand and evaluate the diversity of humanity's most notable cultural achievements from artistic, historical, linguistic, literary, and philosophical perspectives.”

In addition to the general education goals specified in the Undergraduate Catalog, NIU outlines their “Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes” in the “Undergraduate Academic Programs” section of the Catalog under the heading “The Baccalaureate Experience.” These outcomes include several that are applicable to general education English courses. Outcomes are outlined thus:

- Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies
- Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives
- Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world
- Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought
- Communicate clearly and effectively
• Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals
• Use and combine appropriate quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems
• Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to one's major or particular fields of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes.

These learning goals and outcomes will be addressed in relation to individual lessons and assignment sequences outlined and explained in this section. I have included the general education domain learning goals and baccalaureate learning outcomes for lower-level English general education courses because I believe it is necessary to have learning goals in mind when constructing lessons and assignments to ensure that the trajectory of my courses aligns with the skills and objectives students are supposed to develop through the course. Ultimately, an assessment should assess whether or not students meet certain outcomes, which ideally align with the stipulated course and programmatic objectives.

The first learning sequence I will discuss that incorporates Austen’s letters in lower-level college literature courses is reader response. Uses of Austen’s letters in the lower-level college literature classroom include weekly letter-writing on literature readings using Austen’s letters as a starting point for discussing literature comparative to students’ experiences. Appropriate letters for this type of assignment would be those in which Austen refers to her own reading practices. Additionally, excerpts from Austen’s letters in which she discusses her own publications will be useful while students read the novels she mentions because they provide helpful insight into Austen’s perspectives on her own writing and can act as a catalyst for discussing Austen’s views and her novels as well as student reactions to Austen’s novels.
In Chapter 4, I delved into the references to literature in Austen’s letters. This assignment would apply that information to teaching using the letters\(^3\). For instance, students could read Austen’s letter on Eaton Stannard Barrett’s (1786-1820) *The Heroine* (1813), a Gothic parody novel. Austen gives her impressions of the novel to Cassandra thus: “I finished the Heroine last night & was very much amused by it. I wonder James did not like it better. It diverted me exceedingly …. We have drank tea & I have torn through the 3\(^{d}\) vol. of the Heroine, & do not think it falls off.—It is a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style” (Letter 97).

After reading these letter excerpts, students would discuss Austen’s informal reading response. I would prompt students to consider several discussion questions. What does Austen comment on regarding the novel? What is her initial reaction to the novel? What is her opinion of the novel as she continues to read? Considering that Austen uses a comparison to another author’s writing in her reaction to Barrett’s, why would you liken a work you are reading and reflecting on to another author’s work? What purpose might this comparison serve? Pitfalls to avoid in this (and all) discussions on Austen’s writing would be asking questions that are too vague or not encouraging students to read into Austen’s reading responses. For instance, when discussing Austen’s initial reaction to the novel, students might just respond that she liked it. Follow-up questions are important in these cases: How can you tell that she liked it? What does the phrase “torn through” imply about Austen’s interest in the novel as she was reading?

Moving into Austen’s fiction, we would read and evaluate those of Austen’s letters which contain information about her own work, particularly opinions and feedback she received on her

\(^3\) For Austen’s impressions of literature, students can examine Letters 49, 50, 62, 91, 97, and 150(C), all of which include Austen’s impressions of and reactions to literature she was reading or had read.
novels which she then relayed to her correspondent (usually her sister)\textsuperscript{4}. In addition to reading and discussing the letters, students would read the novel(s) receiving commentary in Austen’s correspondence and assess the feedback she received, considering what evidence they can find in the novels either to support or contradict this commentary. One novel which Austen discusses in depth in her letters is \textit{Pride and Prejudice}. One piece of feedback Austen shares is positive: “[Miss Benn] was amused, poor soul! that she c\textsuperscript{d} not help you know, with two such people to lead the way; but she really does seem to admire Elizabeth” (Letter 79). Austen also assesses her heroine: “I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do not know” (Letter 79). In addition, Austen comments on the appearance of the text: “There are a few Typical errors—and a ‘said he’ or a ‘said she’ would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear” (Letter 79). Next, Austen contemplates her own tongue-in-cheek “reaction” to the novel:

\begin{quote}
Upon the whole however I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough.—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 Buonaparté—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile.—I doubt your quite agreeing with me here—I know your starched Notions. (Letter 80)
\end{quote}

Also in this letter, Austen comments on a printing error, pointing out that “[t]he greatest blunder in the Printing that I have met with is in Page 220—Vol. 3. where two speeches are made into

\textsuperscript{4} Several letters would be useful for this assignment, including 79, 90, 97, 98, 99, and 128. Another interesting avenue for using Austen’s letters about literature in the novels is to read Austen’s discussions of her own work, including revisions or changes she was making to her novels during the publication process. Austen writes about her fiction in Letters 71, 78, 79, 80, 90, 104, 128, 132(D), 153, and 155, among others.
one. There might as well have been no suppers at Longbourn, but I suppose it was the remains of Mrs Bennet’s old Meryton habit” (Letter 80).

After reading and analyzing the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, students would read these letter excerpts and discuss the kinds of assessments Austen makes and receives on her novel. I would ask to students to consider several questions about Austen’s letters and how they relate to the novel: What is your assessment of Elizabeth as a character, based on our analysis of the novel? Why do or don’t you agree with Austen’s statement that she is “as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print”? Which sections of the novel prove Austen’s assessment that “a ‘said he’ or a ‘said she’ would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear”? Austen jokes that her novel is not solemn enough; if she were to make the alterations she facetiously outlines in the longer excerpt from Letter 80, what kind of novel would *Pride and Prejudice* become? Which novel would you prefer and why?

After discussing Austen’s letters dealing with reader reaction and self-assessment, the letters would be woven into an assignment scaffold for the general education literature course. After reading and discussing Austen’s letter(s) on literature she had read, students would begin composing weekly letters on literature readings using our dialogue on Austen’s impressions of literature in her correspondence as a starting point for discussing literature comparative to students’ own reading reactions. The next step in responding to literature would be a more formal literary analysis, with appropriate expectations for an introductory course. The formal literary analysis would follow students’ analysis of one of Austen’s novels and our class discussion of Austen’s letter(s) that address criticisms (by herself and others) of her own writing. To incorporate even more of the writing process, students would complete self- and peer-
analyses of their literary analysis essays, which would follow logically from our inquiry into Austen’s correspondence comments regarding her and others’ assessments of her novels. Then, students would revise their essays and reflect on those revisions, as Austen does for her novels in her letters.

This assignment sequence achieves several learning goals of “Creativity and Critical Analysis,” including analyzing primary sources and critically evaluating the ideas that have shaped human experience and expression, as well as understanding and evaluating cultural achievements from a literary perspective. Moreover, these assignments help students move toward baccalaureate learning outcomes. Students will gain experience in demonstrating critical, creative, and independent thought; communicating clearly and effectively in classroom discussions and written assignments; collaborating with others in class discussions to understand and analyze Austen’s writing and apply their analysis to their own written assignments; and using qualitative reasoning skills to address literary analysis questions.

In addition to these introductory methods of exploring Austen’s letters in the lower-level college literature classroom, there are many ways to delve deeper into Austen’s letters and fiction that are appropriate for a general education course. The next two sequences address using Austen’s letters to provide students with historical and biographical contexts for her novels. Students in lower-level literature courses may not even know who Austen is, much less anything about the contexts in which she was writing. Harold Bloom equates Austen with Shakespeare in Jane Austen, which may be a good starting-off point for discussing her power as a writer with non-majors, as they almost assuredly will have encountered the Bard’s work (or at least have heard of him):
Ultimately, Austen’s heroines … are grand normative sensibilities, descendants of *As You Like It*’s wonderful Rosalind. Psychic health and good will are not qualities at all easy to represent in literature, let alone represent with depth, intensity, and aesthetic rightness. Jane Austen deeply shares in Shakespeare’s rare power of achieving such representation, and she remains the most Shakespearean novelist in the language. (10)

Bloom also addresses the “smaller matters” of value in Austen’s fiction, “such as ways of mailing letters, modes of travel, and forms of address (for example Elinor Dashwood, an oldest daughter, is addressed as ‘Miss Dashwood,’ the younger Marianne Dashwood as ‘Miss Marianne’), to larger concerns of rank, inheritance, educational philosophies, and roles for women.” Too, Bloom points out the importance of studying Austen: “[her] novels open myriad opportunities for examining historical and social issues” (13). I would like to expand on this significant point by adding Austen’s correspondence to the list as texts that “open myriad opportunities for examining historical and social issues” in themselves and in tandem with the novels.

One glaring issue with teaching Austen is contending with students who are averse to Austen’s writing. In “Teaching to the Resistance: What to Do When Students Dislike Austen,” Olivera Jokic addresses what to do when students are disinterested in Austen’s fiction because they are unable to relate to the novels as representative of their understanding of “society.” Jokic points out, “Because Austen’s characters are socially, not just historically, too far removed to inspire identification or sympathy, students refuse to be socialized into the critical discourse required to read the novel as critique” (n.p.). Jokic’s students dislike Austen’s novels, in particular *Persuasion*, essentially because they cannot see them as socio-historical criticism. Instead, they view the novels as *upholding* social conventions that impose limitations on women’s prospects. Her students’ aversion to Austen’s novels allows Jokic to explore the novels
in ways that challenge accepted critical scholarship about how the texts “should be” interpreted. I agree that we should not expect students to blindly accept scholarly analyses of Austen’s literature. Rather, we should listen to why our students disagree and engage them in a discussion about why they dislike Austen’s literature. Students in higher education are multicultural and thus interpret literature differently based on their cultural background. Thus, traditional Western interpretations of Austen’s novels may not signify for non-Western students.

Addressing context in Austen’s novels is essential because issues may arise if students do not understand it. For instance, students may be more tempted or apt to interpret the novels as “chick lit” or romances. In researching Austen’s novels for a literature course, students may run across books in the library like *Flirting with Pride and Prejudice: Fresh Perspectives on the Original Chick-Lit Masterpiece* that perpetuate the misconception that Austen’s novels fall under the stigmatized genre “chick lit.” The issue with texts like these, besides the possibly objectionable and unironic title, can be summed up by the following quote from “High Class Problems” by novelist Laura Caldwell, who by her own admission had never read the book before she agreed to write the essay: “After reading thousands of pages of, or about, *Pride and Prejudice*, after seeing the movie and studying the *CliffsNotes* [1], I consider myself an expert on the novel, and therefore, on Jane Austen’s handling of the problems of the Bennet girls—their high-class problems” (my emphases; 24). The “high-class problems” Caldwell mentions refer to the marriage plot as opposed to, for instance, the plight of the servant class. This perception that *Pride and Prejudice* is a “chick lit” romance whose primary concern is romantic marriage ignores how complex the novel is, especially its social criticism, which is why it is essential to challenge students to see beyond this surface reading of Austen’s fiction.
Aside from using Austen’s letters as vehicles for reader response in the lower-level literature course, I would employ the correspondence to introduce historical information and enrich students’ readings of her novels. In Chapters 2 and 3, I covered the historical and biographical information that can be extracted from Austen’s correspondence, and that same information can be applied to lessons on each of Austen’s novels. While studying *Pride and Prejudice*, I would challenge my students to look beyond the marriage plot to discern how Austen manipulates it in order to comment on social issues concerning women. What is Elizabeth giving up by marrying? What would Elizabeth’s fate be if she did not marry? What does it mean when Elizabeth marries Mr. Darcy? Will they actually be “equals” in their marriage, as modern Western readers would assume (or hope) based on our own cultural experience and biases? If we examine the historical context of the novel, we realize that they cannot be equals in their marriage. A simple fact is that Elizabeth would be dependent on Darcy, socially and financially.

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5 In discussions on *Pride and Prejudice*, students could learn about military officers, including Austen’s military brothers, from Letters 7, 32, 38, 102, and 106 and the Peninsular War from Letters 25, 66, 74, 92, 97, and 101, while reading references the militia in Meryton, Mr. Wickham, and Colonel Fitzwilliam in the novel. While reading *Sense and Sensibility*, class discussions could turn to connections between marriage and money for each of the couples in the novel and Austen’s own reflections on the subject in Letters 151 and 153. For *Mansfield Park*, adultery is an intriguing topic involving Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford in the novel and Austen writes in several letters about the controversial subject, namely in Letters 17, 30, 36, 53, and 153. While analyzing the novel *Emma*, students can explore the “mystery” of Jane Fairfax’s pianoforte while noting what Austen’s says about how much the instrument costs in Letters 63, 88, and 114, and they can examine the many instances of money dictating marriageability in reference to characters from Harriet Smith to Mr. Elton to Miss Bates to Emma Woodhouse herself all while comparing this subject to how Austen discusses it in Letters 151 and 153. In *Persuasion*, fiscal responsibility, debt, and bankruptcy5 are all important topics of the novel, and Austen discusses these issues at length in her letters as well. Students could read any number of letters Austen writes on these subjects, including Letters 14, 49, 53, 55, 73, 80, 82, 91, 94, 157, and 159. Finally, *Northanger Abbey* contends with the issues of children and motherhood, which Austen writes about in Letters 11, 55, and 153. Furthermore, much time is devoted to describing Catherine’s experience at Bath’s social balls in the novel, and Austen describes attending numerous balls through the years in Letters 1, 5, 35, 36, 39, 62, 63, 65, 66, and 151. Each of these topics could be explored both in class discussions and in-class writing reflections and assignments drawing connections between Austen’s letters and fiction. Marriage and finances, adultery, children and motherhood, the military, debt and bankruptcy, and social events all have their contemporary counterparts.
Austen’s letters also address marriage and spinsterhood. One passage on marriage comes in a letter to her niece Fanny:

[Do not] be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last; you will in the course of the next two or three years, meet with somebody more generally unexceptionable than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as ever He did, & who will so completely attach you, that you will feel you never really loved before.—And then, by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while Mrs Wm Hammond is growing old by confinements and nursing. (Letter 153)

In the same letter, Austen points out that “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very good argument in favour of Matrimony” (Letter 153). An earlier letter to her niece has echoes of *Pride and Prejudice* in its sentiments toward marriage and love: “The unpleasantness of appearing fickle is certainly great—but if you want Punishment for past Illusions, there it is—and nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without Love, bound to one, & preferring another. That is Punishment which you do not deserve” (Letter 114).

After having read and analyzed the novel, students would discuss these letter excerpts discussing marriage and examine how these sentiments may be reflected in the novel. How does Austen’s advice to Fanny to wait a few years before marrying and starting a family connect with her depiction of the Bennet family, particularly Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s relationship? Which character(s) in the novel would seem to share Austen’s perspectives on matrimony as represented in these letter excerpts? How does Austen’s quip about single women and poverty reflect real concerns of certain characters in the novel (e.g. Mrs. Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet)? What parallels can we discern in Austen’s discussion of fickleness and marriage without love in the novel? Which characters resist “being bound without love” and which
embrace it? What reasons do these characters have for making such divergent decisions about marriage? How does each character fare with his/her decision?

My goal in this literary analysis discussion is to have students chip away at the surface of the novel’s plot to explore and analyze underlying meanings, themes, motifs, and symbols. By analyzing Austen’s letters and the novel together, students will be able to discern connections between the fiction and non-fiction texts, and determine whether Austen’s novel represents her perspectives on the marriage as communicated in the letters. Students would build up to more complex literary analysis assignments, such as formal essays. A formal essay assignment might challenge students to apply their analysis of marriage and *Pride and Prejudice* to another of Austen’s novels, using the same letters to draw connections between Austen’s perspectives and those of her characters. Students could also include a comparative study of the second novel and *Pride and Prejudice*, analyzing the similarities and differences in how they represent the complex issues surrounding marriage and how Austen’s correspondence can connect the two fiction texts by highlighting common ground.

Incorporating Austen’s letters in the general education literature classroom in this way, through class discussion and literary analysis writing, will accomplish several learning goals of the “Creativity and Critical Analysis” Knowledge Domain. These include analyzing primary sources and critically evaluating the ideas that have shaped human experience and expression, exploring modes of creative expression, and understanding and evaluating cultural achievements from a literary perspective. Using the letters to highlight historical (and biographical) details and issues in the novels will also help students move toward baccalaureate learning outcomes. Students will be challenged to demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought in class
discussions and analyses of the texts; to communicate clearly and effectively in classroom
discussions and written tasks that ask them to draw connections between Austen’s
correspondence and issues in the fiction; to collaborate with others in class discussions by
analyzing Austen’s letters and novels; and to use qualitative reasoning skills to address literary
questions.

My third method of using Austen’s correspondence in the lower-level college literature
classroom entails using the letters to introduce biographical information about the author to
enhance students’ novel reading and analysis. In Chapter 3, I covered the biographical
information that can be derived from Austen’s correspondence. This information also can be
applied to discussions of Austen’s novels. In classes that involve biographical context, we will
discuss both references to the novels in Austen’s letters as well as biographical information that

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6 We could also consider Austen’s publication concerns in a unit on Sense and Sensibility alongside Letters 71, 86, 90, 91, 96, and 154. We could also compare Austen’s advice to her niece Fanny about her love life in Letters 109 and 114 to Marianne and Elinor’s differing approaches to romance. While reading Pride and Prejudice, we could examine Austen’s publication concerns for this novel in Letters 21, 79, 80, 87, and 90. Additionally, we could look at other biographical information, such as Austen’s experiences at social balls in Letters 27, 36, and 78 or Austen’s perception of single women as having the “dreadful propensity for being poor” in Letter 153. Austen’s concerns about the publication of Mansfield Park would be explored through Letters 86, 90, 100, 104, 109, 114, 130, and 139, while biographical topics such as the suitability of certain marriages in Letters 50, 53, and 65 could be paralleled with numerous relationships in the novel, or we could look at Austen’s opinion of marriage without love in Letter 114.

As with Austen’s other novels, the publication of Emma was of serious concern to the author, which she reveals in Letters 121, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132(D), 134, and 139. Biographical areas of interest are Austen’s references to her mother’s hypochondria in Letter 18, annoying acquaintances in Letters 62 and 65, a secret marriage in Letter 61, and her opinions about the Prince Regent in Letter 82 (to whom she dedicated the novel). Students could examine parallels between Austen’s mother and Emma’s father, her annoying acquaintances and Miss Bates, or the secret marriage she comments on and the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Students could also explore Austen’s dedication of the novel to the Prince Regent and her unflattering comments about him in her letter.

The publication concerns of Persuasion are not well documented because of Austen’s final illness, but two letters reference the novel: Letters 153 and 155. Examining Persuasion alongside Austen’s letters, however, yields more fruit. Austen reveals references to the military and how it touched her life and the lives of those she knew in Letters 64, 66, 67, and 74; a marriage match being considered a second choice in terms of the bride in Letter 61; and the subject of second marriages in Letter 63. All of these topics are broached in her last novel.
correlates to events in the novels\(^7\), although I will be careful to emphasize that correlation does not denote a biographical basis for the novels.

While reading *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, we could discuss a concern Austen had about publishing, namely her anonymity. While going over background information on Austen and this novel in my English 110 class at NIU, students asked questions about why Austen never published her name with her novels in her lifetime, so I introduced a letter that Austen wrote to

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\(^7\) Critic Regulus Allen uses excerpts from Austen’s letters to examine the role of the game Speculation in *Mansfield Park*, pointing out the instances that Austen mentions playing the game with her nephews and hearing that the game “was supplanted by the card game Brag” with her sister (98) in “Speculation in *Mansfield Park*” (*Approaches to Teaching Austen’s Mansfield Park*). Allen’s use of Austen’s correspondence as a jumping off point for analysis of the game in *Mansfield Park* is both creative and useful. In fact, she teaches her classes how to play Speculation and has them play in class while challenging them to analyze the nuances of the card game and tie their conclusions to game playing in the novel (99-101). Allen’s essay provides an effective example of how to use Austen’s letters in the classroom in an imaginative but meaningful way. All of these assignments that use Austen’s letters to teach her novels exhibit that the letters provide different, creative ways of analyzing the fiction. It is my goal to introduce the same level of creativity and usefulness in outlining my own lesson and assignment plans that these authors demonstrate in their own.

In *Approaches to Teaching Austen’s Pride and Prejudice*, Deborah Kaplan mentions Austen’s correspondence in “*Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Austen’s Female Friendships”:

I show that although the novel offers a sustained treatment of female friendship, it does not ‘reflect’ its author’s experience of same-sex bonds …. as we encounter it in the most important evidence we have about Austen – her letters. These interlinked instructional aims are fostered by pairing *Pride and Prejudice* with Austen’s letters. Although I generally have to set aside extra time for introducing Austen’s letters … I think these works merit it. A comparison of the novel with the letters enables students to see that the politics of female bonds, as conveyed by one woman, could vary, depending on her social context and the choice of literary form. In the novel female friendships perpetuate a male-centered worldview. But in the letters they sometimes provide opportunities for subtle challenges to the status quo by nurturing the development of a woman-centered consciousness. (81)

Kaplan’s approach to teaching *Pride and Prejudice* reflects what I attempt to do by emphasizing the use of the letters in the classroom: to use the letters meaningfully and appropriately as stand-alone texts as well as complementary works to be read in conjunction with Austen’s novels. The most helpful aspect of Kaplan’s discussion is how she has students deconstruct the letters to discover their personal and “social functions” (84) and compare the way Austen communicates with her female correspondents to the way Austen’s female characters communicate in *Pride and Prejudice* (85). Kaplan concludes that this “juxtaposition” enables students to probe still-pervasive mimetic assumptions and invites them to see the letters as a textual mediation of the life with its own stylistic imperatives. Finally, because it makes available more of the emotional and political diversity of women’s bonds, the pairing renders possible a richer understanding of and appreciation for female friendship in Austen’s culture than students can develop from reading *Pride and Prejudice* by itself. (87-88)

Kaplan is one of the very few scholars who has addressed incorporating Austen’s letters in the literature classroom. Her essay is extremely useful to my own study because it demonstrates that Austen’s letters are useful in literature courses and can be helpful in understanding issues raised while reading Austen’s novels.
her brother Frank about the anonymity of her authorship and how their brother Henry had divulged her secret numerous times:

Henry heard P. & P. warmly praised in Scotland, by Lady Robt Kerr & another Lady; * what does he do in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love, but immediately tell them who wrote it!—A Thing once set going in that way—one knows how it spreads!—and he, dear Creature, has set it going so much more than once. I know it is all done from affection & partiality—but at the same time, let me here again express to you & Mary my sense of the superior kindness which you have shewn on the occasion, in doing what I wished.—I am trying to harden myself.—After all, what a trifle it is in all its Bearings, to the really important points of one’s existence even in this World! (my emphasis; Letter 90)

Also in this letter to her brother, Austen resigns herself to her authorship being known, noting that “the truth is that the Secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the Shadow of a secret now—& that I beleive [sic] whenever the 3d appears, I shall not even attempt to tell Lies about it.—I shall rather try to make all the Money than the Mystery I can of it.—People shall pay for their Knowledge if I can make them” (Letter 90). These letters could lead to discussions about why Austen may have wanted to remain anonymous and what her reactions to being “outed” might reveal about her personality.

Regarding *Northanger Abbey*, I informed my students that Austen’s brother Henry arranged for the posthumous publication of this novel and *Persuasion* and that he identifies Austen by name as the author in print for the very first time. Considering this information, I would encourage students to discuss why Henry may have revealed Austen’s identity when she never published it in her lifetime. Another discussion question I could pose is how this question of authorship and anonymity is connected to elements of *Northanger Abbey*. For instance, how might the narrator’s defense of the novel (*NA 23*) be at odds with Austen’s desire to remain anonymous as the author of her own novels (except to those closest to her)? Or, conversely, how
might this narratorial interjection explain Austen’s resistance to publisher her name as author of the novels?

In addition to the issue of Austen’s anonymity as a published author, I would address the publication history of *Northanger Abbey*. I would have students read the letters to/from *Northanger Abbey*’s original bookseller Benjamin Crosby & Co. (Letters 68(D) and 68(A)) and provide background information on the publication history of the novel. The publication of *Northanger Abbey* took many years in spite of Austen having sold the manuscript because the original booksellers didn’t publish it. In fact, as I have mentioned, it was never published while Austen lived. The letter exchange between Austen and Crosby is merely one example of the author’s personality and active involvement in the publication of her novels. Students would analyze these two letters and explain what they may reveal about the novel. For instance, how is the tone of Austen’s letter to Crosby reflected in the aforementioned narrator’s defense of the novel? What is the difference between the author and the narrator? Also, why do readers need to be able to separate the author from her narratorial intrusions throughout the novel? Conversely, how can we discern similarities in the narrator’s interjections in the novel and Austen’s personality in her letters, particularly the one to Crosby?

After analyzing the biographical information in Austen’s letters and how they provide more information about the novel, students will write a short essay assignment. In this assignment, students would have options for analysis topics. One option would be to analyze Austen’s parody of Gothic novels. In the first week of our unit on Gothic literature, we will have read three excerpts from Gothic novels (*The Castle of Otranto*, *The Romance of the Forest*, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). We will also have discussed the characteristics of a Gothic
novel. In their unit assessment, students would write an essay in which they choose at least two sections (“scenes”) of *Northanger Abbey* and compare them to at least two Gothic novel excerpts from *The Castle of Otranto* and either *The Romance of the Forest* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Students would assess the similarities and differences between the sections of Austen’s novel and the excerpts from Walpole (*Otranto*) and Radcliffe’s (*Romance* and *Udolpho*) novels. One question students would need to consider would concern how Austen parodies the characteristics of Gothic novels. Students would also be required to address Austen’s sense of urgency about publishing the novel in her letter to Crosby and how it might relate, at least in part, to timeliness and her subject-matter. In order to answer this question, students would need to do some research on their own about the rise and fall in popularity of Gothic literature.

Incorporating Austen’s letters in the lower-level literature classroom using these discussion and writing topics accomplishes quite a few learning goals for the “Creativity and Critical Analysis” Knowledge Domain, including analyzing primary sources (the letters and novels) and critically evaluating the ideas that have shaped human experience and expression, exploring modes of creative expression, and understanding and evaluating cultural achievements from a literary perspective (the novels). Using the letters to highlight biographical details and connect them to events and ideas in Austen’s novels will also help students move toward baccalaureate learning outcomes. Students will be challenged to demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought in class discussions and analyses of the texts. Students will also learn to communicate clearly and effectively in classroom discussions and in-class written tasks that ask them to draw connections between Austen’s correspondence and events and ideas in the novels. In addition, students will collaborate with others in class discussions during which they analyze
Austen’s letters and novels, and they will use qualitative reasoning skills to address literary questions related to the novels and how they are connected to her correspondence.

**Undergraduate Upper-Level English Literature Courses**

In addition to the lower-level courses in which Austen’s letters and fiction could be taught, there is the potential for several upper-level English courses that would benefit from examining Austen’s correspondence alongside her novels: ENGL 413: The Romantic Period, ENGL 414: The Victorian Age, and ENGL 470: The English Novel to 1900. Unfortunately, a perusal of past syllabi in the NIU Undergraduate English office reveals that in ENGL 413 and 414, Austen is rarely taught. Her novels do not fit neatly into either the Romantic or Victorian period. There is the potential for teaching Austen in ENGL 400: Literary Topics, ENGL 310: Uncensored Classics, or ENGL 363: Literature and Film. Regardless of which course Austen is taught in, since my focus is using Austen’s letters in the upper-level literature course, I will concentrate on English Major Departmental Outcomes because their purpose is to provide learning goals that all English courses taken by Majors should collectively aim to achieve.

According to Departmental Outcomes, English Majors should, throughout their studies, achieve competency in the following areas:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the foundational principles of linguistics, including an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of language
- Demonstrate knowledge of Basic English Grammar and be able to analyze the basic structures and functions of language in general and the English language in particular
- Demonstrate a basic knowledge of the history of literature in English and its wider cultural and social contexts
- Apply general knowledge of critical and theoretical approaches to literature
• Analyze a broad range of literary texts, both those in which they have received instruction and those which may be new to them
• Write effectively in a variety of print and electronic genres. Such ability includes formulating topics, thinking critically about topics, analyzing audience, conducting necessary research, and producing finished work that meets good editorial standards
• Integrate the above knowledge and skills to attain a level of literate competency sufficient for productive employment. Such competency includes thorough citation of sources, informed participation in discussion, ethical persuasive practices, responsible collaboration, tolerance for linguistic differences, and accurate representation of texts.

I will address these learning goals and outcomes in relation to individual sequences outlined and explained in this section. I include English Major Outcomes to act as guidelines for developing upper-level English literature courses because I believe it is necessary to keep learning goals in mind when constructing lessons and assignments to ensure that the trajectory of my course aligns with the skills and objectives students should develop throughout the course and the major program. Ultimately, an assessment should measure whether or not students meet outcomes, and for upper-level English courses, these assessments should align with specified programmatic objectives for English Majors.

The first strategy I will outline for incorporating Austen’s letters in upper-level college literature courses focuses on historical events, political topics and figures, and the Peninsular Wars. In upper-level literature classes, we can practice more complex literary analysis and explore topics of contextualization more comprehensively than in lower-level general education courses. One way to use Austen’s letters in an upper-level literature course involves reading the letters that address historical and political topics in depth. Excerpts from these letters are beneficial as bases for discussions on the historical context in which Austen wrote her novels. One way to incorporate the letters into discussions of fiction is to have students weigh how
Austen addresses current events in her novels against perspectives on similar topics in her letters. This comparison of historical subjects in both the novels and correspondence would also counteract previous criticism that Austen lacked concern for affairs of national and global significance in favor of focusing solely on domestic interests. Prompting and perpetuating this criticism was her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh’s purposeful censorship and alteration of Austen’s letters in *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869). In the edition, he provides inaccurate “observations” on the (he argues) “limited” scope of his aunt’s interests and personality, as well as disparaging remarks on the letters themselves as being of no import or interest outside of their family circle.

In my discussion of historical context in lower-level literature courses, I examined how the letters would illuminate facets of Austen’s fiction. Historical context in the letters and novels would be of interest in upper-level literature courses with the distinction of differentiating for the English Major. Each of Austen’s novels offers a wealth of insight into matters of historical importance. An important way to introduce Austen’s letters in the upper-level literature classroom is by discussing the history of letter-writing itself. As I explained in Chapter 2, a historical overview of letter-writing allows for a deeper understanding of Austen’s letters as personal and frank expressions of her life, work, and personality. Examining Austen’s letters with English Majors is a unique opportunity to delve into the value of personal letters written in Austen’s era. Students will discover how revealing and genuine Austen’s letters are, especially those written to Cassandra, and how they are useful resources of historical and biographical information. The history of letter-writing throughout the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries provides students with information about the evolution of letter-writing and the
characteristics of correspondence while Austen was writing. Furthermore, discussing the history of the art of letter writing contextualizes and justifies why examining Austen’s letters would augment an understanding of the context in which she wrote her novels, many of which also place importance on letters between characters. Since Austen’s letters reveal many features of Austen’s historical period, including the military and Peninsular Wars, discussions about the history of letter-writing would be apropos to discussions of Austen’s letters in particular and how they can be connected to issues in her fiction.

One specific way to delve deeper into historical context in Austen’s letters and novels is to examine her references to the military since all of Austen’s novels include military characters. In Sense and Sensibility, Colonel Brandon woos a younger, resistant Marianne. Pride and Prejudice has numerous references to military officers, including militiamen Mr. Wickham and his friend Denny, Colonel Fitzwilliam (Mr. Darcy’s cousin), and Colonel Forester. Mansfield Park revolves around a poor Marine Lieutenant’s daughter, Fanny Price. In Emma, Jane Fairfax’s benefactor and guardian is Colonel Campbell. Catherine Morland’s love interest in Northanger Abbey has family connections to the military: his strict father is General Tilney and his womanizing brother is Captain Frederick Tilney. Finally, Persuasion contains the most military references of all of Austen’s novels, and several notable characters are affiliated with the military: Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, Captain Harville, and Captain Benwick.

Alongside each of Austen’s novels, students could read about military concerns, including Austen’s military brothers8 and the Peninsular War9 while reading references the militia in Meryton, Mr. Wickham, and Colonel Fitzwilliam in Pride and Prejudice, for example. Austen

8 See Letters 7, 32, 38, 102, and 106.
9 See Letters 25, 66, 74, 92, 97, and 101.
also references the military and how it touched her life and the lives of those she knew. The relevance of the military for Austen personally and her treatment of the subject in the fiction would make for interesting and thought-provoking class discussions and analyses. In one letter, Austen comments on the Battle of Corunna and the Portuguese Regent:

The S’t Albans perhaps may soon be off to help bring home what may remain by this time of our poor Army, whose state seems dreadfully critical.—The Regency seems to have been heard of only here, my most political Correspondants [sic] make no mention of it. Unlucky, that I should have wasted so much reflection on the subject! (Letter 64)

Incidentally, Austen’s brother frank commanded the HMS St. Albans (Letters 407n1). In two subsequent letters, Austen mentions a death in the Battle of Corunna: “This is greivous [sic] news from Spain.—It is well that D’ Moore was spared the knowledge of such a son’s death” (Letter 66).

Austen’s ambivalent commentary on casualties of the war include bemoaning the casualties of battle and her brother’s ship having to collect the surviving army and rueing that none of her correspondents has heard the rumors about the Regent of Portugal related to British training of Portuguese military forces (see Letters 407n2), with Austen complaining that she “wasted” time “reflect[ing] on the subject” because she had no one with which to discuss it. This commentary of Austen’s may provide students with an interesting lens through which to view her treatment of the military in Pride and Prejudice. Because the military is present in but not the focus of the novel, students would have to work a little harder to draw connections between the letters and fiction. Why are there so many military characters and references to militia in Pride and Prejudice? How does Austen resist stereotyping the military in the novel? What types of

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10 See Letters 64, 66, 67, and 74.
characters are representative of the military? How do Austen’s references to the war and military
in her correspondence exhibit whether and how much the wars affected English domestic life?
How can we connect this to the representation of domestic country life in *Pride and Prejudice*?

After analyzing one of Austen’s novels and correspondence that references military
issues in class discussion, students would complete a written assessment demonstrating their
ability to analyze and synthesize written texts. In this writing assignment, students would again
draw connections between Austen’s discussion of war and the military in another letter to her
treatment of the subject in the novel. In the first letter excerpt students would use for this
assignment, Austen briefly bemoans the Battle of Albuera: “How horrible it is to have so many
people killed!—And what a blessing that one cares for none of them!” (Letter 74). In another
letter students will examine, Austen writes, “I wish Sir John had united something of the
Christian and 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” (Letter 67).
An important question students will need to consider in their analysis is how might Austen’s
comments on war deaths and expressions of relief over no one close to her dying explain why
war and fighting are somewhat removed from her novel?

Using Austen’s letters in the upper-level English literature classroom to illuminate
particular historical topics and issues will accomplish several English Departmental Outcomes
for Majors. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of language
by examining letter writing in Austen’s era and how language was used by Austen in different
contexts and for different audiences. In addition, students will demonstrate knowledge of English
Grammar by completing writing assignments on discussion topics. Students will also
demonstrate a basic knowledge of English literary history by examining Austen’s novels, and students will examine the wider cultural and social contexts of Austen’s non-fiction and fiction writing. Moreover, students will be able to apply knowledge of critical approaches to Austen’s literature in their literary analysis discussions and written assignments and will analyze a range of literary texts, including Austen’s fiction and correspondence alongside other materials that will provide context. Students will complete written assignments that improve their ability to formulate topics in literary analysis, analyze the audience of Austen’s written work, build consideration of their own writing audience, conduct research on literary topics to support their analyses, and produce polished written assignments, including a research paper that properly cites sources and represents texts accurately.

In addition to exploring the military and history of letter writing as they relate to Austen’s writing, students in upper-level English courses will delve into specific historical considerations such as class-consciousness in Austen’s era. While examining the subject of class consciousness, students would read excerpts from Austen’s letters in which she exhibits her own consciousness of status and economics. We could also add an examination of women’s issues in the nineteenth century to our discussion of class; women’s issues were closely tied to socio-economic status in many of Austen’s novels and in the lives of women during Austen’s lifetime. Discussions would also lead to Austen’s role as a single and dependent but professional woman writer. Ultimately, Austen’s letters provide important insight into the author’s own socio-economic situation as well as the different statuses of family members and those in her social circle. These issues—social status, economics, and women’s concerns—are all intricately connected to historical context and
Austen’s life history. Exploring these topics in Austen’s letters will enrich students’ readings of her novels because so many of her novels address these issues as well.

In *Approaches to Teaching Emma* (2004), Laura Mooneyham White’s “The Experience of Class, *Emma*, and the American College Student” addresses the nuances of *class* in the novel and how undergraduates have a limited understanding of class in Austen’s time because of how drastically *perceptions* of class consciousness and concepts have changed since the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (although, in practice, those boundaries are still very much present in contemporary Wester society). Ultimately, modern American students lack comprehension of the nuances of class difference, the impermeability of class boundaries, mobility, and social barriers, and the concept of “class as a social reality” in Austen’s novel(s). In the classroom, I would have students read this piece of criticism and discuss whether they agree with it.

Furthermore, I would point out to students that the nuances of class are readily apparent in Austen’s *letters* as well; for example, note Austen’s consciousness of class difference and socioeconomic status in this letter to her sister Cassandra dated 8 January 1807:

We found only Mrs. Lance at home, and whether she boasts any offspring besides a grand pianoforte did not appear. She was *civil* and chatty enough, and offered to introduce us to some acquaintance in Southampton, which we gratefully declined. I suppose they must be *acting by the orders* of Mr. Lance of Netherton in this *civility*, as there seems *no other reason* for their coming near us. They will not come often, I dare say. They *live in a handsome style and are rich*, and she *seemed to like to be rich*, and we gave her to understand that we were *far from being so*; she will soon feel therefore that we are *not worth her acquaintance*. (My emphases; Letter 49)
Austen’s account of her encounter with Mrs. Lance of Southampton evokes the interactions between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Lizzy is a gentleman’s daughter, but she is *not* rich, which Mr. Collins leads Lady Catherine to believe when he is hoping to impress her with his intended wife. Lady Catherine is congenial to Lizzy on the latter’s first visit to Rosings with newly-married Mr. Collins and Charlotte. At least, insofar as Lady Catherine is capable of being polite, she disparages Lizzy and her sister’s neglected education and lack of accomplishment but does not show her any *especial* displeasure. However, Lady Catherine is horrified, and vocally and violently opposed, when she learns of Lizzy’s poor financial prospects in light of rumors that her *wealthy* nephew Mr. Darcy intends to propose marriage to Lizzy. Incensing Lady Catherine’s pride even more is that she considers Darcy as (unofficially) betrothed to his cousin Anne de Bourgh, Lady Catherine’s own sickly daughter.

An exploration of the parallels between Austen’s ultimately unfounded suspicions of wealthy Mrs. Lance’s imminent behavior and attitude toward the Austen family and Lady Catherine’s civility toward Lizzy until she learns of her undesirable socioeconomic status and potential marriage into her very wealthy, prominent family could illuminate and reinforce class discussions about why social class and customs are so important and complex in Regency

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11 All of Austen’s novels address class in some way. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen explores class and civility through the strained relationship between the wealthy and arrogant General Tilney and the poor and naïve Catherine Morland, and Austen addresses the same topic in Letter 49. In *Mansfield Park*, a major issue is class, poverty, and children: Fanny is sent to live with relatives because of her parents’ poverty, and the contrast between her and her siblings is palpable when she returns, changed by her experiences with her affluent relations. Austen addresses similar issues in Letters 11, 153, 55, 58, 59, and 149. In both *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen examines class and marriage. *Persuasion’s* Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are initially torn apart by differences in financial status, and *Sense and Sensibility’s* Marianne and Willoughby are separated by both parties’ constrained financial situations, which Willoughby is loath to accept and so marries another, wealthier woman. Austen also explores marriage and financial status in Letters 151, 153, 50, 53, 65, and 114. Finally, *Emma* contends with the issue of class difference and its effect on friendship. Emma and Harriet are acutely affected by this issue; Emma’s high social and financial status prevent her and Harriet from enjoying equality in their friendship, and Harriet’s low status eventually relaxes their bond once both suitably married. In Letters 109, 114, and 153, Austen also discusses the issue of friendship and how it is affected by finances.
England and by extension in Austen’s novels. In class discussions, students would draw connections between the insecurities and prejudices Austen exposes in her letter and how she represents characters of different socioeconomic statuses in her novels (e.g. Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, per the previously mentioned example).

While socioeconomic status is a major issue in Austen’s novels and correspondence, the specific plight of women in the nineteenth century is also at the forefront. Continuing with the discussion of socioeconomic status, I would examine with students how Austen’s novels provide several representations of single women past their “prime” age of marriageability (“spinsters”) who in the Victorian era would be termed “redundant” women. Some examples from the novels include 27-year-old Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*, 27-year-old Anne Eliot in *Persuasion*, and middle-aged Miss Bates in *Emma*. Through these characters, as well as the other female characters in Austen’s novels, students would examine nineteenth-century women’s roles in society. Furthermore, students would perhaps better understand Austen’s depictions of women, including those who are unmarried and likely to remain so, as Austen herself did.

Each of Austen’s novels focuses on a female protagonist and observes numerous women characters of various ages, socioeconomic statuses, and personalities. In *Emma*, Austen

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12 In both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, Austen tackles women’s “sensibility” and imprudent romantic attachments. *Sense and Sensibility*’s Marianne Dashwood attaches herself to the rakish Willoughby, and *Emma*’s Harriet Smith becomes attached to two men above her social station, Mr. Elton (at Emma’s prodding) and Mr. Knightly (to Emma’s dismay). The following of Austen’s letters also broach the topic of unwise romantic attachments: Letters 50, 53, 65, and 114. Finally, Austen appraises the fates of three female characters who participate in romantic affairs and are disgraced (or close to it). Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park* must leave the country because of her extramarital affair and consequent divorce. Isabelle Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* engages in inappropriate and unreserved flirtation with Frederick Tilney which leads to the dissolution of her engagement to James Morland. Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* elopes with Mr. Wickham who only consents to marry her when he is compensated financially; otherwise, Lydia and her family would have suffered even more disgrace. Austen correspondingly discusses the issues of adultery and disgrace in Letters 17, 30, 36, 53, and 153.
juxtaposes the poverty-stricken spinster Miss Bates against the young, marriageable, wealthy Emma. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen explores the character of a woman who is practical and unromantic: Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte’s practicality stems from her “advanced” age (27) and singlehood. She marries Mr. Collins because she has no other prospects or even the hope of another prospect and does not want to become a burden on her family. A similar issue is broached in *Persuasion*, where arguments for duty and prudence in marriage lead Anne Elliot to be persuaded to break off her engagement to Wentworth because of his lack of social standing and wealth. The plight of the single woman is also addressed by Austen in a letter in which she laments single women’s susceptibility to poverty: “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony …” (Letter 153).

Austen also addresses the issue of marriage in several other of her letters. In one letter, she discusses a doomed marriage: “Miss Jackson is married to young Mr Gunthorpe, & is to be very unhappy. He swears, drinks, is cross, jealous, selfish & Brutal;—the match makes her family miserable, & has occasioned his being disinherited” (Letter 50). Austen also discusses the marriage of 26-year-old Harriot Bridges to Revd. George Moore, ten years her senior: “[W]hat do I think of Mr Moore?—I will not pretend in one meeting to dislike him, whatever Mary may say; but I can honestly assure her that I saw nothing in him to admire. —His manners, as you have always said, are gentlemanlike—but by no means winning” (Letter 53). Austen elaborates, “His manners to her [Harriot] want Tenderness.” Austen comments on another marriage, offering an indifferent reaction to a husband’s death: “Mr Waller is dead, I see;—I cannot grieve [sic] about it, nor perhaps can his Widow very much” (Letter 53). In another letter, Austen comments on a bride: “What an alarming bride Mrs Coln Tilson must have been! Such a parade is one of the
most immodest peices [sic] of Modesty that one can imagine. To attract notice could have been her only wish.—It augurs ill for his family—it announces not great sense; & therefore ensures boundless Influence” (Letter 65). The common thread through these remarks is Austen’s identification of incompatible marriages: one or the other spouse is perceived as unsuitable at best and barbarous at worst. This problem is readily apparent in all of Austen’s novels through unsuitable marriages (e.g. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Wickham and Lydia in P&P; Eliza Williams and Colonel Brandon’s brother in S&S) and imprudent proposals and attachments (e.g. Mr. Elton’s proclamations to Emma and Harriet’s attachments to Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightly in Emma).

Finally, Austen anticipates her favorite niece’s future marriage: “Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreable [sic] in your single state, too agreable as a Neice [sic]. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections” (Letter 151). Furthermore, Austen tells Fanny, “I only do not like you sh’d marry anybody. And yet I do wish you to marry very much, because I know you will never be happy till you are …” (Letter 151). Austen’s remarks to Fanny show her perceptions of how marriage changes the married woman’s personality and her relationships. Austen wants Fanny to remain single so she and Austen remain close and so that Fanny’s lively personality and mind do not “settle down” because of marriage and motherhood. Bearing in mind the harsh comments on other marriages in the aforementioned letters, Austen may also fear that Fanny will marry someone who is unworthy of her.

While the topic of women, socioeconomic status, and marriage in Austen’s novels and letters could be applied to any individual work, this topic would also work well as a late-
semester lesson sequence that engages multiple of Austen’s novels. Discussion questions could comprise several of Austen’s novels, asking students to draw connections between the novels themselves and also between the novels and Austen’s letters. The culminating writing assignment would be a term paper in which students would examine one issue related to women, socioeconomic status, and marriage that appears in multiple novels we would have read throughout the semester. Then, students would cull through Austen’s letters to find her personal commentary on that particular issue or issues related to it. Additionally, students would need to sift through criticism related to Austen’s novels and the issues on which they have chosen to focus. The term paper would ultimately involve literary analysis and synthesis of primary and secondary texts and would allow students to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the semester (or unit) about the relationship between Austen’s correspondence and fiction writing.

While examining issues related to women, class, and socioeconomic status in Austen’s novels and letters through discussion and written analysis, students would achieve numerous learning outcomes for English Majors. Students would show their knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of language by examining and analyzing Austen’s letters and fiction and participating in class discussions by presenting informed viewpoints on conversation topics. They would also use English grammar in their informal and formal written assignments and analyze the English language as Austen uses it in her written work. Moreover, students would gain knowledge of English literary history and its cultural and social contexts within the historical period that Austen lived and wrote. In their written work, students would apply a critical approach to analyzing Austen’s literature and correspondence, and write effectively by formulating essay topics about which they would think critically, considering their own audience
and analyzing Austen’s audience, conducting pertinent research on their own topics of analysis, and producing a finished essay document that meets course writing standards and accurately represents Austen’s nonfiction and fiction texts.

CONCLUSION

Innumerable applications for Austen’s letters can be discovered and developed for use in undergraduate college literature classrooms ranging from illuminating information about Austen to revealing the correlation between the issues she addresses in her novels as they touched her own experience to uncovering historical context for the novels in unique and personal ways. Throughout this chapter, I presented and examined copious examples of how Austen’s correspondence can be drawn upon for lower- and upper-level undergraduate literature courses. Topics have encompassed using Austen’s letters to model reader reaction, handle writing feedback, self-assess writing, and scaffold literature course writing; to examine historical details in the novels and similar references in letters with varying degrees of depth; to explore references Austen makes to her novels within her letters; to study biographical information that correlates to events in novels; and to highlight issues such as class consciousness and women’s issues in the nineteenth century.

I believe there is a great deal of value in exploring and analyzing the nonfiction, personal writing of Austen in conjunction with her more familiar fiction because the former helps illuminate the latter. Studying Austen particularly benefits from reading selections of her correspondence alongside her novels because as personal and private windows into Austen’s life and historical era, her letters afford students the opportunity to glimpse into the mind of the
author to try to make connections between her fiction and nonfiction writing. The fraction of Austen’s letters that have survived do not give students or scholars a complete picture of the author, which makes them all the more intriguing. Collectively, the letters are like a puzzle with ninety percent of the pieces missing: they provide just enough of the picture to make you want to know more and speculate on the gaps that will probably never be filled.

The topics I have outlined in this chapter, as with the assignments detailed in Chapter 5, demonstrate how versatile Austen’s letters for college teaching and learning. In the literature classroom, Austen’s letters provide a range of information to supplement study of the novels. The letters can be studied independently as examples of reading response, literature critique, and self-assessment, or they can be examined for historical, biographical, and literary information (topics of the letters detailed in Chapters 2 through 4 of this dissertation) alongside the novels to demonstrate the significance of Austen’s writing and how her letters complement her fiction. Using Austen’s letters in the literature classroom has proven to be beneficial, and even students who have never heard of Austen nor read her fiction prior to their reading assignments in my literature classes have expressed interest in the historical, biographical, and literary contexts surrounding the novels. The letters we have examined in class provided noteworthy material that enhanced the study of the literature. The topics and themes I have explored in this chapter were designed to achieve learning goals specific to general education and major English courses while also demonstrating the value of reading and analyzing Austen’s fiction writing and examining historical and biographical contexts. When I have presented Austen’s letters in literature courses, students have been receptive and engaged with the information they provide, including asking questions about details in the novels which I was able to illuminate with details in the letters.
The literature classroom is a more obvious environment for studying Austen’s letters than the composition classroom, but in this chapter and the last, I have presented details to support my contention that Austen’s letters are versatile teaching and learning tools. Ultimately, Austen’s correspondence is worthwhile in literature courses for similar reasons as in composition courses: they offer our only view into the mind of an author whose biography is obscure and for whom we have only the letters and fiction as products of the author’s own pen.

In addition to examining Austen’s correspondence and fiction, the literature classroom benefits from introducing media that corresponds to primary written texts students are assigned to read. The relevance of Austen’s correspondence as it connects to media is similar to their relevance to the literature: Austen’s elusive biography has given fodder to film representations of the author’s life. As I have explained and will continued to explore in my final chapter, the letters are very revealing, bestowing upon the readers worthwhile biographical, historical, and literary context. In the next chapter, I will investigate how to incorporate Austen’s letters and fiction into discussions and analyses of media representations of the author and her novels in college literature courses.
CHAPTER 7: MEDIA AND THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, I explored how Austen’s letters could be incorporated meaningfully into discussions of her novels in the college literature classroom. In this final chapter, I will delve further into Austen’s letters to examine their value in helping contextualize Austen’s life and novels with undergraduate literature students of literature. I will address methods of incorporating Austen’s letters into lessons on the author’s life and work alongside media representations. I will outline potential discussion and writing topics that utilize Austen’s letters and novels in conjunction with various types of media. Generally, I will outline topics that examine Austen biopics, recent adaptations, and “-inspired” media with a focus on how the letters and media enhance Austen studies.

Throughout this chapter, I evaluate Austen’s correspondence in relation to media representations of the author and her fiction. These media depictions include “biographical” film Becoming Jane (2007), adaptations and inspired films Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2016) and Austenland (2013), Marvel’s graphic novel Pride and Prejudice (2009), and Pemberley Digital’s web series The Lizzie Bennet Diaries (2012-13). The focus of this section is portrayals of Austen’s novels and the author herself in media with the objective of analyzing these representations with literature students after having conducted literary analysis with the source
novels themselves. After having read and analyzed the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, students would examine the aforementioned media depictions of the novel, analyzing how Austen’s fiction is represented and whether Austen’s writing objectives are achieved or obstructed by the screenwriter’s/adaptor’s objectives. In addition, students would read Austen’s letters and watch the biopic to analyze which elements of Austen’s life depicted in the film are based on her life and which are based on her fiction (especially *Pride and Prejudice*). By including relatively recent media adaptations, I endeavor to emphasize Austen’s relevance for contemporary undergraduate college students and to demonstrate why Austen’s works and life continue to be depicted in the media and are commercially successful and popular with audiences.

While a Film and Literature class, such as NIU’s English 363, would be an obvious setting for discussions of media depictions of Austen’s biography and literature, any literature course *could* incorporate media to augment discussions and analyses of written fiction and nonfiction texts, and I have incorporated film in my own undergraduate literature survey courses with success. In the “Introduction: The Jane Austen Phenomenon: Remaking the Past at the Millennium” to *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture* (2003), Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson address the strange case of Austen, whose “novels have never been out of print” but who has experienced what could be called “a revival that some have termed ‘Austenmania’” (1). Aside from pointing out the Austen media “revival,” the essays throughout volume raise a couple of important questions that could be presented to students about representations of Austen’s novels and life in popular culture: what is added, changed, or emphasized to appeal to modern audiences that may be anachronistic or omitted or *implied* in the
original novel, and why do Austen adaptations enjoy sustained popularity among filmmakers and moviegoers?

The limits of any volume on media and literature are definitely true of those examined in relation to Austen and her novels: they focus on a specific set of adaptations at a specific moment in time. Unfortunately, the problem with any discussion of Austen and media is that Austen is persistently pervasive in popular culture: the adaptations, pastiches, spin-offs, etc. continue to be produced and her popularity does not seem to be waning. Thus, as soon as a volume on cinematic or media representations of Austen and her fiction is published, it becomes outdated when numerous new media iterations of Austen’s work and life are produced soon thereafter. As a result, my aim is to justify Austen’s relevance for American college students by examining her prevalence in popular culture and develop a rationale for introducing Austen in media in conjunction with her letters and fiction.

However, I do not want to limit my teaching plans by advocating only for certain genres of media (such as film). Instead, my goal is to provide materials that can be adapted for new media, such as the numerous Austen-inspired web series, the recent Hallmark Channel movie Unleashing Mr. Darcy (January 2016), and the recent Pride and Prejudice and Zombies adaptation (February 2016). My challenge in this chapter is to try to look ahead to other possible ways in which Austen can be woven into popular culture and how these media representations could be incorporated in the college classroom. If the Pride and Prejudice and Zombies film is financially successful, perhaps Ben H. Winters’s Austen mashup Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters (2009) or Vera Nazarian’s Mansfield Park and Mummies (2009) will be adapted for film. There are already several published graphic novels of Austen’s novels: Pride and Prejudice
(Marvel, 2013, adapted by Nancy Butler; Campfire Graphic Novels, 2013, adapted by Laurence Sach), *Sense and Sensibility* (Marvel Illustrated, 2011, adapted by Nancy Butler), and *Emma* (Marvel Classics, 2012, adapted by Nancy Butler), as well as a graphic novel based on the mashup novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Del Rey, 2010). Ultimately, by focusing on the value of Austen’s letters when used in conjunction with her fiction and media representations and employed as a source revealing important cultural, historical, and biographical information, I will work to demonstrate for students how Austen’s correspondence is a valuable teaching tool alongside fiction and media, thus demonstrating Austen’s relevant to and for students today.

One valid concern arises when considering whether to incorporate film in a literature course. In *Emma Adapted: Jane Austen’s Heroine from Book to Film* (2007), Marc DiPaolo ties together considerations of adaptation and pedagogy, addressing the teaching dilemma of whether to use adaptation alongside written texts. He reasons, “The hope is that the films will enrich student readings of Austen, but the fear is that the striking visual presentations will distract students from developing an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the artistry and subtleties of the original texts” (my emphases; 149). I have struggled with the same quandary in my own teaching. DiPaolo concludes that in his experiences teaching the novel and the film, “film adaptations can be valuable pedagogical tools if used properly,” but he cautions, “[e]ach time I show a film adaptation to my students, I have the nagging doubt that the film is doing the students’ work for them, and it is actually harming their understanding of the novel” (149). This “nagging doubt” is one that can plague a professor of literature; however, I would argue that whether or not we show or assign our students to watch film adaptations of the novels we are analyzing in class, many of them will choose to watch the adaptations on their own anyway.
As for the concern that film provides “students the opportunity to avoid reading the novel at all” (149-50), I would argue that students will take that tack when viewing the film outside of the professor’s guidance. By using film in the classroom or at least anticipating that adaptations will be accessed by students, I can counteract the temptation of students to rely too heavily on a film or television version of the novel for interpretation. Moreover, as DiPaolo points out, “it is just as possible that readers will find a film adaptation that challenges their preconceived notions of how to interpret the book” thereby insisting that the student reader consider “an alternative vision of the story” (my emphasis; 151). Furthermore, instead of allowing students to align with interpretations of the novel based on an adaptation, the professor should press students to pick apart the filmic choices and scrutinize the film as intensely as they first analyzed the novel.

While there are too many media adaptations and inspired media to discuss individually, an inventory of the most recent and forthcoming media demonstrates the pervasiveness of Austen’s popularity. Focusing teaching materials on media produced recently and which is forthcoming would help further emphasize Austen’s continued popular culture presence. For contemporary students, because of the proliferation of Austen media, one could focus solely on media from the past several years, including feature films such as From Prada to Nada (2011), which is a modern adaptation of Sense and Sensibility; Austenland (2013), which loosely follows the plot of Pride and Prejudice; or Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (February 2016). In addition, one could introduce YouTube series such as The Lizzie Bennet Diaries (2012-13), From Mansfield with Love (2014), and Emma Approved (2013-present) to analyses of the corresponding novels.
While analyzing media adaptations with students, I would encourage students to draw connections between Austen’s novels (which we would have read and analyzed already) and the media. This will be challenging and rewarding, especially applied to recent *looser* adaptations of Austen’s novels, such as *Austenland*, which is an homage to Austen and a self-aware modern mirror of *Pride and Prejudice*; or Emmy-winning web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, which is formatted as a vlog (episodic video blog) presented by Lizzie Bennet, a twenty-something graduate student chronicling her life and loosely following the novel’s events. More challenging, however, will be drawing connections between Austen’s opinions of her texts (letters), which I discussed in detail in Chapter 4, with representations of those texts on film as an extension of my lessons incorporating her correspondence in discussions of Austen’s novels in the literature classroom, which I outlined in Chapter 6.

**TEACHING THE NOVEL: *Pride and Prejudice***

Before I address incorporating media into literary studies, I need to establish how I would first teach the novel. All of the media I will elaborate on in this chapter can be studied in relation to a single novel, which I will discuss in this section: *Pride and Prejudice*. When I taught English 110 at NIU in Fall 2014, this was one of the novels I assigned. As students progressed through the novel, I posed the following discussion questions on a variety of matters in the novel. I gave students a few minutes to think and answer each set of questions in writing, and then I led the class in discussion.

Ch. 1-23

*Netherfield Park is Let at Last*
• In the very first sentences of the novel, Austen sets the tone for the story:

   It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (Austen 1)

   Explain this quote. Based on your reading of the first 1/3 of the novel, what do you think this quote really means? What is the attitude of the narrator toward the ideas in this passage? Why do you say so? Which of the characters seems to share the narrator’s perspective? How can you tell?

**Opposites Attract**

• Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy seem to be complete opposites, especially evidenced in their behavior at the ball in Meryton (the first ball of the novel). The townspeople believe Bingley is very likeable, while they immediately take a dislike to Darcy because he doesn’t dance with anyone but Caroline and Mrs. Hurst. Why do you think Bingley and Darcy are friends? Do you think they are as different as they seem at the beginning of the novel?

• Lizzy is an unconventional female character for the late-18th/early-19th century. What are some of the things she does and says that Darcy and Bingley’s sisters criticize her for? What is the surprising effect that her behavior has on Darcy’s opinion of her?

**The Entail and Marriage Proposals**

• While the Bennets are not poor and live comfortably, Mr. Bennet’s estate is entailed. Thus, the futures of his daughters and wife rest upon his daughters making financially suitable marriage matches. How does this necessity drive the actions of Mrs. Bennet? Does it make her character more understandable? Why or why not? How does her behavior in public thwart her own objectives for her daughters?

• Mr. Collins, the heir of the Bennet estate, visits in Chapters 18-23. Why would Mr. Collins and Lizzy be a terrible match? Why does Lizzy’s mother insist she marry him, and what reasons does Lizzy give for refusing? Why does Lizzy show good sense in refusing his proposal? Conversely, why does she show bad sense in rejecting him?

• Ultimately, in Ch. 22, we learn that Mr. Collins has made a second proposal in three days—to Lizzy’s best friend Charlotte. Why is Lizzy so shocked at Charlotte’s acceptance? Why should she not be surprised? How does Charlotte’s acceptance demonstrate the real-world considerations that women had to consider regarding marriage (as opposed to “romantic” considerations)? Did Charlotte’s engagement surprise you? Why or why not?

Ch. 24-46
**Double-Standard**

- In Chapter 27, Lizzy finds out that Wickham has turned his attentions to a wealthy Miss King. The narrator notes that “her vanity was satisfied with believing that she would have been his only choice, had fortune permitted it” (Austen 102). The narrator points out Lizzy’s double-standard: “nothing … could be more natural” (102) than Wickham wanting to secure financial independence, but Charlotte’s choice to marry Mr. Collins for “worldly advantage” was previously described as a “humiliating picture” which “sunk [Charlotte] in her esteem” (87).

Discuss this double-standard exposed in Lizzy’s behavior and attitude toward these two comparable situations. Why might she have a different opinion of Wickham and Charlotte’s similar circumstances at this point? How does this double-standard create separation between the narrator’s perspective and Lizzy’s?

**You’re Poor and Your Family’s Vulgar… Marry Me**

- Lizzy gives several valid reasons for rejecting Mr. Darcy’s marriage proposal in chapter 34. Discuss the reasons she gives for refusing him. Explain which reasons were just and which were based on unsubstantiated prejudices.

- How does Mr. Darcy react (both in the moment and later) to Lizzy’s criticism of his proposal and his behavior since the beginning of their acquaintance? While Lizzy believes him to be full of pride, what different aspects of his character are revealed after he proposes (unsuccessfully) to Lizzy?

**Pemberley**

- At Pemberley, Elizabeth begins to imagine what it would have been like had she accepted Mr. Darcy’s proposal. What happens to change her opinion of Darcy during her time with her uncle and aunt, the Gardiners? Which positive events and revelations begin to chip away at her pride and former prejudices? What do the Gardiners think of Mr. Darcy? Why do or don’t the Gardiners seem to be good judges of character?

**Elopement**

- In Chapter 46, Elizabeth receives a letter from her sister Jane who informs her that Lydia has run away with Wickham and there is no word from them about their marriage. Thus, they have been away alone together without being married. What events and lapses in judgment have led to this disastrous consequence? Which characters have contributed to Lydia’s downfall? Why might Wickham have targeted Lydia? How could Lydia’s mistake negatively affect the rest of her family?

Ch. 47-61

**Lydia’s Marriage**
• Lydia elopes with Wickham and they ultimately get married, but not before a long period of uncertainty and turmoil for the Bennet family. Mrs. Bennet blames Mrs. Forester for Lydia’s elopement. How is her criticism justified? What factors does Mrs. Bennet not consider in her blame-game? How does her attitude change when Lydia finally marries Wickham?

• Discuss Lydia’s attitude when she arrives at Longbourn (the Bennet home) after her marriage. How does her attitude reflect her character and her age? Also, what are her family members’ varied reactions to her and Wickham visiting after the scandalous circumstances surrounding their marriage?

• What potential consequences of Lydia’s elopement for the other Bennet sisters are discussed in the novel? How does Lydia’s behavior reflect poorly on her parents? On her sisters?

_Darcy’s Redemption_

• What is revealed about Darcy’s involvement in Lydia’s marriage? What is Lizzy’s reaction to this revelation, and what reason does Darcy give her for why he helped?

• How does Darcy remedy his former meddling in Bingley and Jane’s budding romance? Why does he change his mind about a match between Bingley and Jane? What about Bingley and Jane’s characters make them a suitable match?

_Weddings and Beyond_

• Lady Catherine pays Lizzy a surprise visit in chapter 56. What is the reason for her visit? What objections does she raise and how does Lizzy respond? How does this visit further demonstrate Elizabeth’ strong character? Darcy’s character?

• Elizabeth and Darcy are finally engaged and married (as are Jane and Bingley) at the end of the novel. Considering the time period (late-18th/early-19th century), do you think their marriage is as advantageous of a conclusion for Elizabeth as it seems? Why or why not?

• In spite of the marriages of Lizzy and her sister Jane at the end of the novel, do you think this novel is a “romance,” as many film adaptations have presented it? Why or why not? What information or events in the last chapter counteract this romanticization of the novel? What in the rest of the novel resists this interpretation?

After analyzing the novel with students in class, I assigned a short essay. A possible topic for a short essay assessment on the novel concerns parenthood:

> There are many instances of inadequate parenting or troubling parental figures in the novel _Pride and Prejudice_. Especially intriguing is the parenting of the Bennet sisters by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.
Discuss the parenting style of Mr. Bennet. What does he seem to do right in his parenting of his daughters? What does he do wrong? Is he an effective parent or an ineffective parent? Cite specific examples from the text to support your assessment of Mr. Bennet’s parenting skills (or lack thereof).

Then, discuss the parenting of Mrs. Bennet. What does she seem to do right in her parenting of her daughters? What does she do wrong? Is she an effective or an ineffective parent? Cite specific examples from the text to support your evaluation of Mrs. Bennet’s parenting.

Ultimately, you will be comparing and contrasting the very different parenting styles of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. You will also want to explain what aspects of both of their parenting led to the individual fates of their daughters (choose at least three of the five daughters to discuss). Do not merely summarize the plot.

As I discussed how to incorporate Austen’s letters into discussions of her novels in literature courses in Chapter 6, I will not reiterate them here. Furthermore, most of the topics broached in the discussion questions I have mentioned in this section correspond to topics broached in teaching literature and the letters in that chapter.

Only after reading the novel critically, analyzing it, and discussing our analyses as a class would I introduce media in the literature classroom. When I taught English 110, I showed students the 2005 Pride and Prejudice adaptation as well as the Austen-inspired film Austenland (which I will discuss in detail in my next section). While students viewed the films in class, I had them answer active viewing questions on a worksheet to keep them engaged with the adaptation and encourage them to make connections to the novel. I left time at the end of each class to discuss the questions on the active viewing worksheets and gauge students’ critical thinking and textual analysis. For future literature courses in which I incorporated media, I would use the same strategies for active learning and class discussion. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss specific media that I could incorporate in a literature course unit on Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, including Becoming Jane, Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, and Austenland. I will
also discuss media beyond film that could also be introduced in lessons on the novel, for instance the graphic novel of *Pride and Prejudice* (Marvel) or the web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (Pemberley Digital).

The assignments outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 and the discussion of why and how to incorporate media in the literature classroom in this chapter establish the significance of using Austen’s letters alone and alongside her fiction and media for college teaching and learning. In the literature classroom, Austen’s letters supplement the study of her novels, and by adding media to these studies, students are encouraged to think critically to discover why Austen’s literature is still popular and why there is so much media inspired by her life and fiction. It also forces students to analyze media more critically by examining Austen’s letters and fiction together and comparing them to biopics, which borrow from the latter to fill in gaps in the former.

In *Jane Austen in the Classroom: Viewing the Novel/Reading the Film*, Louise Flavin explains her own approaches to teaching Austen’s novels: emphasizing character analysis and film adaptation. Flavin focuses on her method for teaching each of Austen’s six finished novels: teaching the works themselves and then incorporating specific film adaptations of each novel. Flavin’s book is useful in explaining pedagogical techniques, offering questions for discussion and analysis for Austen adaptations in general as well as for each of the novels separated into sections on “Viewing the Novel” and “Reading the Film,” and discussing the themes, issues, and ideas in each novel. However, she makes no mention of how Austen’s letters could also be utilized. Aside from Flavin’s neglect of Austen’s letters, biography, and biopics, the questions she poses for specific film adaptations could be reworked for newer or alternate versions and, as
with any teaching guide, should not be substituted for thorough preparation and lesson planning by the course instructor.

Building on Flavin’s discussion of comparative Austen literature and film studies, I would add a comparison of Austen’s life as represented in her own words (i.e. the letters) and film depictions of Austen; e.g. how “accurately” film representations of Austen, such as *Becoming Jane* or *Miss Austen Regrets*, both based on books of the same titles which could be incorporated into comparative study as well (but which I will not discuss in this chapter), depict the author’s character as exemplified in her letters. Students will examine Austen’s letters and analyze film representations of the author before reading her novels or in the midst of reading multiple novels so they can approach her fiction with a clearer picture of the author, allowing them to perceive and appreciate the often overlooked but extremely important critical, satirical, and witty passages in her fiction. In the end, we must address film in the classroom because it is inextricable from Austen studies; if media is changing how we “know” Austen, we must address media when teaching Austen.

**Biographical Representations, or “Biopics”**

In addition to the context that can be culled from Austen’s letters to help students better understand and appreciate the nuances of her *novels*, which I will address in the next section, historical and biographical information in the letters can illuminate the problems inherent in biopics about Austen. Published Austen biographies are plentiful and often rely on speculation to fill in the gaps of Austen’s life. Because these fictional depictions of Austen’s life are readily available, students will be entering the classroom with popular culture references both regarding
Austen’s life and interpreting her fiction, especially taking into consideration the planned biopic *Jane by the Sea*, which will be a romantic comedy film focusing on relationships and events in Austen’s life as inspiration for her novels, melding scenes from life and fiction (Lee n.p.). The myths surrounding Austen’s life perpetuated by so-called “biopics” must be addressed in order to dispel students’ preconceptions about her life and work and so they can appreciate more fully Austen’s writing.

Fictionalization in Austen biography is rampant. In *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), John Wiltshire rightly points out the fact that “we actually know much less about Jane Austen than her biographers would have us believe” (35). One issue that biographies attempt to ameliorate is the lack of a satisfactory love story in Austen’s own life. If we were to acknowledge that Austen may never have given or received romantic love, we may be forced to also acknowledge that one does not need to have *experienced* love to *invent* it convincingly in fiction (and perhaps, in real life). It is more comforting to imagine that Austen’s novels are inspired by the personal and private experiences of the author, which is what biopics like *Becoming Jane* rely on. Austen biopics are so concerned with Austen’s love life and making her life “more interesting” by inventing a romantic component or explaining away her singlehood that they reinforce the notion that a woman’s life is somehow unfulfilled if she has not been, as *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Bennet would say, “crossed in love a little now and then” (Austen, *P&P* 106).

Media products of this fascination with Austen’s love life could be explored in very interesting ways in the college classroom, as I will explore shortly. That a film produced in the twenty-first century would perpetuates the stereotype of the spinster author and women in general—the need for romantic love to achieve personal fulfilment and romantic relationships
superseding the importance of hard work and professional achievement—instead of focusing on the triumph of a famous author’s literary accomplishments speaks to the discomfort our society still feels toward women who remain single and focus on career. Thus, exploring the issues raised by “biographical” depictions of Austen may open up a larger dialogue about gender in Austen’s novels and life and how much (or little) has changed in what women are expected to emphasize in their lives in contemporary society.

It would be interesting to see what students have to say about the insistence of biographers to present Austen’s heroines as representations or reflections of the author. Why do biographers and filmmakers insist on filling in the gaps in Austen’s biography with her fiction? Why do they most often choose to draw parallels between the author and Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliott as opposed to her other heroines, Fanny Price, Emma Woodhouse, Elinor Dashwood, or Catherine Moreland? Why do Austen biopics emphasize love stories with little to no biographical evidence in lieu of focusing on the author’s other important relationships, for example with her sister or father, and activities such as her writing without seeming to dismiss her professional drive as a consolation prize or her talent and hard work as influenced and cultivated by men such as Tom Lefroy. In analyses of biopics alongside Austen’s letters and fiction, I would challenge students to arrive at answers to these questions and others while examining what is “truth” and what is “fiction” in Austen “biography.”

The desire to conjecture about Austen’s elusive personal life is not unique to this author, however. An interesting comparison can be drawn between depictions of Austen and William Shakespeare. This parallel is explored by Deborah Cartmell in *Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice: A Close Study of the Relationship between Text and Film*, in which she relates the
“need” to know about Shakespeare’s life to the desire to fill in the blanks of Austen’s. Cartmell also raises the issue of reading into Austen’s fiction for clues to her life, “a taboo up until recently in English studies, but a practice which is undeniably present in adaptations of Austen’s work” (109). Cartmell points out similarities in the treatment of Shakespeare and Austen’s biographies in *Becoming Jane* and *Shakespeare in Love* and concludes that “the biopic – and it is certainly true of *Becoming Jane* – exemplifies [André] Bazin’s point about authority in that ultimately the author is shown to be purely a work of fiction. This reading of the novel as veiled autobiography, doesn’t seem to want to go away” (122).

The issue of integrating an author’s life with their fiction can be explored in the classroom by examining Austen’s letters, film biographies, and novels together. For instance, students could study *Pride and Prejudice* and then read Austen’s three very early letters that mention Tom Lefroy from Jan 9-10, 1796, Jan 14-15, 1796, and Nov 17-18, 1798 (Letters 1, 2, and 11). Then, students could watch *Becoming Jane* and analyze the details that can and cannot be extracted from Austen’s letters and the parallels between the film and the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. As an extension of this lesson, students could subsequently view the more biographically accurate *Miss Austen Regrets* while reading Austen’s letters to her sister and her niece Fanny during the time the events of the film took place to compare Austen’s accounts with the film’s version of the story. Moreover, students could analyze the latter film’s characterization of the author and which events and details are added to the story based on the letters to fill it out and create dramatic tension. Students could also compare the characterizations of the author in each film.
After having read and analyzed *Pride and Prejudice*, I would introduce the film *Becoming Jane* (2007). The most obvious topic for discussion and analysis would be the focus of the film: the fictionalized romance between Austen and Tom Lefroy. In the film, Jane initially dislikes Tom because he falls asleep while she is reading her writing aloud to company and she overhears him criticizing her. This is reminiscent of the ball scene in *Pride and Prejudice* during which Lizzy and Darcy meet at a ball and Lizzy overhears Darcy criticizing her (“not handsome enough to tempt me” (7)). Eventually, Jane overcomes her pride and prejudice against Tom and they fall in love as he encourages her literary endeavors and she inspires him to be a better man. In the film, Jane’s love affair with Tom inspires her to write *First Impressions* (i.e. *Pride and Prejudice*). A rich male relative and benefactor, along the lines of *P&P*’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh, expresses disapproval of Jane because she is not wealthy. Instead of Tom fighting to marry Jane and risking disinherittance, he breaks off their relationship and becomes engaged to someone else. Jane too becomes engaged to another, who she does not love, but Tom, overcome with love, changes his mind and entreats her to elope with him. Jane agrees, but on the way conveniently finds a letter revealing that Tom supports his family financially and their elopement would jeopardize his ability to do so. In light of this information, Jane calls off the engagement and returns home, without the consequent besmirkment of her and her family’s reputations that Lydia faced. Decades later, after she has published her famous novels, Jane runs into Tom and his daughter, who incidentally loves her novels. The daughter’s name is revealed to be…Jane.

While viewing the film in class, students will answer active viewing questions during each class period in which we watch film. Although I have not taught this film in my literature classes before, I have developed the following questions to enhance students’ consideration of
the film and to help students make connections between the film and the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*:

**Day 1**

1. What are some parallels you can already discern between the characters in the film and Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*? Which characters of Austen’s novel seem to be mirrored in various characters in the film?

2. Which plot elements mirror the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*? How closely does the plot of Austen’s “life” in the film seem to align with Austen’s fiction (namely *P&P*)?

3. What are some events of the film that you might not expect in a film depicting Regency life in general and Austen’s life in particular? Do these events serve some sort of purpose in the film? If so, what purpose(s) do they serve?

**Day 2**

1. Letter writing between Austen and her sister Cassandra is depicted in the film. Considering that Austen likely wrote around 3,000 letters in her lifetime (roughly three letters per week throughout her adult life), does letter-writing feature prominently enough in the film from your perspective?

2. For the last half of the film, what are other parallels between *Becoming Jane* and *Pride and Prejudice*? How does Austen’s writing of the novel figure into the biopic? What does this denote about the parallels in the film and Austen’s novel?

3. In his review of the film (2007), Roger Ebert lamented:

   My quarrel involves what this film thinks Jane is ‘becoming’: A woman, or a novelist? The action centers on a passionate romance between Jane at about 20 and a handsome, penniless young lawyer named Tom Lefroy (James McAvoy). What intimacies or decisions they arrive at, I will leave for you to discover, but surely few of Jane’s contemporaries would have allowed themselves to be so bold. Jane, in any event, discovers love. And in the movie’s sly construction, she also discovers a great deal of the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, beginning with Mr. Lefroy as the original for Mr. Darcy. She even happily chances on what will become the novel’s opening words: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

   Based on your analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and viewing of *Becoming Jane*, why do or don’t you agree with Ebert’s criticism? Provide specific examples to support your response to this review.

After each day of viewing, students would come together in small groups or as a whole class to discuss their answers to the viewing questions. After watching the film, we would then read
certain of Austen’s letters. Since the film is primarily concerned with Tom Lefroy, we would focus on the three letters in which Austen mentions him. Necessarily, these letters would be excerpted to focus our reading because Austen discusses many other events and people in the letters than Lefroy.

The first letter students would read is the very first extant letter, dated 9-10 January 1796. In this letter, Austen speaks of Lefroy extensively and playfully to her sister Cassandra:

Mr. Tom Lefroy’s birthday was yesterday, so that you are very near of an age … You scold me so much in the nice long letter which I have this moment received from you, that I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. I can expose myself, however, only once more, because he leaves the country soon after next Friday, on which day we are to have a dance at Ashe after all. He is a very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man, I assure you. But as to our having ever met, except at the three last balls, I cannot say much; for he is so excessively laughed at about me at Ashe, that he is ashamed of coming to Steventon, and ran away when we called on Mrs. Lefroy a few days ago. We left Warren at Dean Gate, in our way home last night, and he is now on his road to town. He left his love, &c., to you, and I will deliver it when we meet. Henry goes to Harden to-day in his way to his Master’s degree. We shall feel the loss of these two most agreeable young men exceedingly, and shall have nothing to console us till the arrival of the Coopers on Tuesday …. I wish Charles had been at Manydown, because he would have given you some description of my friend, and I think you must be impatient to hear something about him …. After I had written the above, we received a visit from Mr. Tom Lefroy and his cousin George. The latter is really very well behaved now; and as for the other, he has but one fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove—it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light. He is a very great admirer of Tom Jones, and therefore wears the same coloured clothes, I imagine, which he did when he was wounded. (Letter 1)

This first letter includes the most information about Lefroy written by Austen. She mentions his birthday, their flirtation and dancing, and his appearance, and anticipates his departure from the county.
In the second extant letter, also written to Cassandra, Austen yet again mentions Lefroy, although not as much as in the last letter. Comments about Lefroy in this letter, dated 14-15 January 1796, comprise the following passages:

I look forward with great impatience to it [Ashe ball], as I rather expect to receive an offer from my friend in the course of the evening. I shall refuse him, however, unless he promises to give away his white Coat …. Tell Mary that I make over Mr. Heartley & all his Estate to her for her sole use and Benefit in future, & not only him, but all my other Admirers into the bargain wherever she can find them, even the kiss which C. Powlett wanted to give me, as I mean to confine myself in future to Mr. Tom Lefroy, for whom I donot [sic] care sixpence. Assure her also as a last & indubitable proof of Warren’s indifference to me, that he actually drew that Gentleman’s picture for me, & delivered it to me without a Sigh …. At length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will be over—— My tears flow as I write, at the melancholy idea …. There is a report that Tom is going to be married to a Litchfield Lass. (Letter 2)

In this teasing letter, Austen playfully discusses her plans to dance with Lefroy. Finally, students would read the last surviving letter that mentions Lefroy, which is dated 17-18 November 1798:

Mrs. Lefroy did come last Wednesday, and the Harwoods came likewise, but very considerately paid their visit before Mrs. Lefroy’s arrival, with whom, in spite of interruptions both from my father and James, I was enough alone to hear all that was interesting, which you will easily credit when I tell you that of her nephew she said nothing at all, and of her friend very little. She did not once mention the name of the former to me, and I was too proud to make any enquiries; but on my father’s afterward asking where he was, I learnt that he was gone back to London in his way to Ireland, where he is called to the Bar and means to practise [sic]. (Letter 11)

In this letter, Austen receives an update on her Irish friend, now a lawyer. No more mention is made of Lefroy in Austen’s extant correspondence. However, late in life Lefroy was asked about Austen. Supposedly, Thomas Edward Preston Lefroy related a conversation he had with his uncle (Tom Lefroy) to James Edward Austen-Leigh in a letter from August 1870: “my late venerable uncle … said in so many words that he was in love with her [Austen], although he qualified his confession by saying it was a boyish love. As this occurred in a friendly & private
conversation, I feel some doubt whether I ought to make it public” (Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* 278). Was this reference to “boyish love” a recollection of true sentiment or the reflection of a desire to be more closely connected to the by then famous author’s memory? Because no written evidence exists directly from Lefroy’s pen, the world will probably never know.

After reading these three excerpted letters, students would discuss the letters themselves and then as they relate to the novel. What do we learn about Lefroy from these letter excerpts? What do we learn about Austen and her interest in Lefroy? Where can we discern the playfulness exhibited in Austen’s letter writing reflected in her fiction writing? What are the differences between the writing style of the correspondence and the style of her fiction? What similarities can we detect? How does Austen’s fiction writing, published when she was nearly forty, show her maturity as a writer as compared to these letters, composed when Austen was twenty years old? Subsequent to discussing the letters and the novel, we would examine the letters in relation to the film. Because the film focuses on the love story, students should examine the primary source of information about Austen and Lefroy’s “relationship”: Austen’s early letters. What details from the letters are present in the biopic? Which elements of the film do not have counterpoints in the letter or the novel? What is Austen’s tone in each letter? What might her tone imply about the gravity or triviality of the content? Based on these excerpts, why does or doesn’t it seem plausible that Austen and Lefroy’s relationship was as serious as it is depicted in the film?

A culminating assessment for this unit on the novel/film/letters could be a researched essay wherein students examine other elements of the biopic than Tom Lefroy, finding
information in other of Austen’s letters that illuminate those biographical details and connecting the apparently fictionalized sections to Austen’s novel(s). For this assignment, students would also look for literary criticism that addresses their chosen focus in the biopic, the novel, and/or the letters. Ideally, students’ theses for this essay would focus on the student’s argument about how the three texts (film/novel/correspondence) are interconnected and interdependent. This assessment would allow students to apply the types of analyses we completed incrementally as a class to a theme of the student’s choosing. Satisfactory completion of this assessment would demonstrate student comprehension and development of skills in critical thinking and analysis and fulfill numerous English Major outcomes: demonstrating basic knowledge of the history of literature in English and its wider cultural and social contexts, applying general knowledge of critical and theoretical approaches to literature, analyzing a broad range of literary texts in which they have received instruction and those which may be new to them, and writing effectively in a variety of print and electronic genres, including formulating topics, thinking critically about topics, analyzing audience, conducting necessary research, and producing finished work that meets good editorial standards.

As students will discover by researching for their culminating assessment, Austen criticism is rife with comments on filmic representations of Austen, including Kathryn Sutherland’s “Jane Austen on Screen” (Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen). Sutherland points out that “Film is not novel; yet its promotional energy and interpretive agency are now impossible to disentangle from an understanding of Austen’s novels” (219). I believe that we need to address film when discussing Austen’s novels because, as Sutherland points out, the “impact on readers’ expectations of the novels themselves can neither be precisely gauged nor
firmly and confidently denied” (219). The consequence of this “rebranding” is that “Jane Austen is not what she once was: a writer of impeccable Johnsonian credentials, barbed wit and complex morality; now she is savvy, sexy and very modern” (220). This enmeshing of film and the novel goes beyond just these two media, however. Like other scholars, Sutherland addresses the issue of films adapted from Austen’s novels that purport to be biography: “Becoming Jane (2007) [is] an extremely loose adaptation of elements from Pride and Prejudice masquerading as a biopic of Austen’s early life.”

The influx of Austen adaptations in recent years is an important consideration in the classroom because, Sutherland notes, “For the majority of her younger readers film is either the primary textual encounter or its interpretive filter; under the aegis of film she is again accessible” (222). I believe that if we understand what media representations students may have encountered, we can anticipate students’ potential biases or interpretive impressions based on the media representation of either Austen’s life or her work. In addition to their critical value, I would argue that the letters have pedagogical value precisely because of what Sutherland characterizes as Austen’s “wit,” “malice,” alternating “bitter[ness]” and amenability, and “self-aware[ness].” The letters allow students to reconsider their preconceptions about Austen’s character and her fiction, presumptions that media representations tend to reinforce.

One of Becoming Jane’s producers, Douglas Rae, is quoted in The Telegraph article “Not So Plain Jane,” stating that the filmmakers determined “to use the love story as the basis of the film … and the significance, in our interpretation, of that love story towards her career.” Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye was also interviewed about the biopic. When asked “whether any of it is true,” Le Faye states, “It’s nonsense … You might as well say Lady Hamilton was a vestal
A virgin living in a convent” (qtd. in Williams). Furthermore, “Le Faye maintains it was all short-lived,” and while she acknowledges that Austen had “obviously been flirting with him” and that after he left she “regret[ed] his absence … that is all there is to it.” Le Faye adds humorously that saying Lefroy motivated Austen to write, is “like saying Shakespeare murdered people to give him enough information to write Macbeth. Poppycock.”

In the end, Austen’s life is intriguing because her novels are still popular. As Julian North explains in “Jane Austen’s Life on Page and Screen” (Uses of Austen: Jane’s Afterlives), “Literary biography and biopic are generically inclined to raise questions about the life/works relationship that, particularly in the case of the young, female writer, will problematize the representation of love and genius as either a natural confluence or an inevitable opposition” (my emphasis; 111). However, he makes the important observation that even if Austen had “married happily and continued to write novels that ended in happy marriages, biographers would doubtless still have looked for ways in which to question the harmony of her experience and her fiction.” Yet because “all her heroines find their man, but Jane Austen did not … the unresolved conversation between life and works will continue” (111). In other words, the focus of Austen’s life is her potential romantic entanglements, but if she had been married, the focus would be on a different aspect of her life about which biographers could speculate. Everyone loves a good mystery.

AUSTEN’S NOVELS AND FILM

Along with biographical media representations, literary adaptations can help students better understand and appreciate the nuances of Austen’s novels, while ideas presented in the letters
alongside analysis of the novels can illuminate the problems inherent in media adaptations of Austen’s fiction. Austen adaptations abound and they habitually rely on oversimplification of plot at the expense of the nuance and complex themes Austen weaves through her novels. Due to the sheer number and popularity of adaptations of Austen’s fiction, it is worthwhile to examine adaptation in classroom discussions of Austen’s letters and fiction because, as I have already mentioned, many students will be entering the classroom with popular culture references both involving Austen’s life and interpreting her fiction. That is what film adaptations are, after all: interpretations. The reduction of Austen’s novels to simplified marriage plots with little in the way of socio-historical criticism in recent adaptations should be tackled in the classroom so we can move beyond Jane Austen Abridged and tease out the multidimensionality of Austen’s works.

Because there are so many popular media representations of Austen and her fiction, classroom discussions of the novel must address readily available interpretations through adaptation. In the The Cinematic Jane Austen, John Wiltshire points out that “the critic of Jane Austen films cannot simply take them on their merits as films. The mere presence of two or more treatments of the same novel impels the viewer towards comparison, and comparison of the films impels the viewer towards the source text” (170). As I explored in the last section, Austen’s life has been adapted, interpreted, and supplemented in media to such an extent that reading Austen’s letters and exploring what they reveal about the author from her own perspective would help put those biopics in context and challenge students to reconsider what they thought they knew about Austen and how she wrote. Similarly, films inspired by Austen’s fiction would benefit from thorough analysis taking into consideration Austen’s correspondence and the source text (novel).
One reason to analyze adaptation alongside Austen’s letters and novels is that, as Cartmell points out, “it has long been the norm to read Austen adaptations … as attempts to preserve the status quo” (my emphasis; 25). Cartmell also deconstructs the idea of fidelity to the text, presenting a thought-provoking argument: the idea of the ‘‘source text’’ is itself problematic” because it indicates that a particular “adaptation is a reworking of a single, given text with no other influences and that the source is, from beginning to end, ‘original,’ having no literary or other influences” (25-6). The problem with this idea is that “original” texts were not written in a vacuum; authors have been influenced by the literature that preceded or coincided with their own. One has only to read Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* to note the similarities between that text and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, for example.

The idea of the elusive “source text” applies to adaptation because purists are often very concerned with “fidelity” to the original text. In fact, Cartmell states, “Those involved in television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, at least up until the late 20th century have continually expressed a commitment to fidelity, aiming to achieve what Austen herself describes as ‘a striking resemblance’ to the original.” Sue Parrill echoes the issue with textual fidelity in *Jane Austen on Film and Television*, pointing out that some fans of Austen’s fiction “feel that since the film is not exactly the same as the book, it is not only inferior, but amounts to criminal trespass” (my emphases; 7). While it may be tempting as an academic to dismiss pop culture representations and interpretations of Austen, it serves students better to address Austen in pop culture, both to explore how Austen is interpreted in different ways and to examine why Austen is still relevant two hundred years after her death. Connected to the idea that scholarship needs to
incorporate considerations of popular culture is the scholar/professor’s dilemma in addressing adaptations of Austen’s work that we may consider reductive.

An interesting conclusion Cartmell makes about “this quest for authenticity” is that “it’s doomed to failure” because when we consider “the adaptations in hindsight, what is striking is what they give away about their own periods, rather than what is revealed about Austen’s, whether it be in the cut of the costume, the make-up, the quality of the production, or the particular slant taken on the novel” (my emphases; 59). In addition, Cartmell references many different adaptations, for both television and film, including “loose adaptations,” of Pride and Prejudice and how they are a product of the eras and societies in which they were produced (94). Her discussion of these adaptations would be a valuable introduction to analyzing more current adaptations of Austen’s work in the literature classroom.

One of the most recent adaptations of Austen’s work may provoke the ire Austen purists: Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2016). In this film based on Austen’s novel, Regency England is combatting a zombie outbreak. The Bennet sisters have become skilled zombie slayers with martial arts and weaponry expertise, but there are still the familiar plot lines from Austen’s original novel with the added element of action as characters fight the zombie apocalypse while carrying on with their familial and social lives. The basic plot line of the adaptation is the same as the original, and the zombie apocalypse does not interfere with happy endings for most of the major characters. Although, the characters do experience exceptional added peril in their everyday activities and travels; a hoard of zombies could be right around any corner yearning for brains. There is also the addition of a very physical fight scene with Lizzy and Mr. Darcy immediately following his first failed proposal. Moreover, several characters are given new roles
in the brave new world of the zombie apocalypse: Darcy’s aunt, Lady Catherine, is transformed into an infamous zombie-slayer, while Mr. Wickham is revealed to be (plot twist!) a zombie advocate/leader. One theme the adaptation contends with that is also present in the novel is the concept of female agency. In this film, there is more agency for the female characters and they are expected to be fierce fighters in addition to having other attributes of an “accomplished lady.” However, the women are still financially dependent; Charlotte Lucas, for instance, must marry Mr. Collins or risk being a burden on her family, and the Bennet sisters must still marry because of the entail on their father’s estate.


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1 In the novel version of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Charlotte actually becomes one of the infected and slowly (and somewhat comically) deteriorates throughout the novel as she becomes a zombie. She marries Mr. Collins in the book to save her family from having to watch her deteriorate and take care of her decomposing mind and body. In the film, this Charlotte-zombie plot element has been eliminated.
After students read and analyze *Pride and Prejudice*, we would watch *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and analyze it as an adaptation. While watching the film in class, as with my lesson on *Becoming Jane*, my students would answer active viewing questions to keep them engaged with the film and connecting it to Austen’s original text. The following questions have been adapted from questions I developed for another adaptation in my Fall 2014 English 110 course at NIU.

**Day 1**

1. In our discussions of adaptation, we considered what it means to be “faithful” to a work of literature in a film adaptation: to capture it literally or to capture its spirit. Do you think this film adaptation remains “faithful” to Austen’s novel? In what ways? Do you think there are limits to how much something can or should be changed when adapting a classic work of literature, such as *Pride and Prejudice*? What are your thoughts on *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*?

2. Characterization is the process by which a writer or filmmaker reveals the personality of the character. Choose one of the characters in the section we are viewing of the film adaptation to focus on. How is Austen’s characterization of the character different than the filmmaker’s characterization? Discuss the similarities and differences in how each representation of the character speaks, thinks, acts, looks, and affects others in the novel and the most recent film adaptation. Is this character how you pictured him/her based on Austen’s representation in the novel (or vice versa if you had seen the film prior to reading the novel)? Why or why not?

3. How did the audio/sound [voices/speech, theme music, background music, scene transition music, background noise, sound effects, voiceover] in *Pride and Prejudice* advance the story that the filmmakers were trying to tell? Explain how they achieved the intended effect. You can focus on sound overall, but choose a couple of specific examples to discuss to support your claims.

**Day 2**

1. Aside from the introduction of zombies to Regency England, which aspects of the film are unrealistic based on our discussions of the time period in which the film and the novel are set and the contents of Austen’s novel itself? Why do you think the filmmaker included these anachronistic (inappropriate to the time period in which they occur) elements to the film? What purpose do they serve for contemporary (today’s) film audiences?
2. What appears to be the resolution (the point when the story’s primary dramatic complication is worked out, i.e. resolved) to Austen’s novel? What is the effect of the ending of Austen’s novel?

What is the resolution to this film adaptation? What is the effect of the ending of the film adaptation? Why does the film adaptation end this way (before the mid-credits scene)? How does the ending of the film appeal to contemporary film audiences?

3. What is the effect of adding a mid-credits scene to the ending of the film? What happens in the mid-credits scene? How does this scene challenge romantic/comedic film conventions? How is this scene reflective of the way many films today (especially Marvel Universe films) are structured? What does a mid-credits scene imply about the film’s initial ending? How does the mid-credits scene open up the film for sequel possibilities?

After watching and discussing the film adaptation, I would have students read Austen’s correspondence and discuss it in relation to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and Austen’s novel. One topic we could broach is the subject of social balls, which Austen discussed often in her letters. As I outlined in Chapter 2, Austen mentions balls in numerous letters. Applicable excerpts include excerpts from an early letter in which Austen relays the hijinks of Mr. and Mrs. Badcock and “the probable intoxication of both” at a ball in the Upper Rooms at Bath, with Mrs. Badcock chasing “her drunken Husband” around (Letter 36), a letter written in 1804, in which Austen describes a ball in Lyme Regis to her sister, including her want of a partner for the first two dances (Letter 39); a letter from December 1808, in which Austen laments that “many dozen young Women standing by without partners” and nostalgia at being in “the same room in which [she and Cassandra] danced 15 years ago” (Letter 62); and a letter from January 1809, in which Austen highlights a significant drawback of Regency social rules: Martha Lloyd and Austen had to find someone to accompany them to a ball when her brother Edward and Captain Earle Harwood “failed” them (Letter 65).

Austen’s references to social dances are plentiful and provide information on which dances were fashionable, the frequency with which balls were held, and some of the social rules
of dances, matters of the letters which also become useful when examining these same topics in Austen’s fiction. Discussion questions could include: What connections can we see between how balls are described in the letters and the novel? What are some concerns women had when attending a ball that Austen explains in her letters, and where can we see those concerns arise in the novel? How do these issues also arise for female characters at the balls in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*? While the story about Mrs. Badcock and her husband may be humorous, what are the social implications of an episode like this in Regency society? What connections can we make between Mrs. Badcock’s behavior and Mrs. Bennet’s at the balls in both the novel and the film?

Another topic we could explore with *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is the subject of matrimony and money. Two letters we could use in this discussion mention money in relation to marriage. In the first letter we would examine, Austen tries to console her niece after a man she rejected years prior married someone else: “My dearest Fanny, I cannot bear You should be unhappy about him. Think of his Principles, think of his Father’s objection, of want of Money, of a coarse Mother, of Brothers & Sisters like Horses, of Sheets sewn across &c.” (Letter 151). Austen tells Fanny that she should keep in mind all of the negative aspects of a match between herself and this man, including “want of Money.” Interestingly, she also points to “a coarse Mother,” which could very well apply to reservations about marrying the Bennet sisters with abrasive Mrs. Bennet as their mother.

In the second letter I would have my students read, Austen discusses single women and poverty:

> Poor M° C. Milles, that she should die on a wrong day at last, after being about it so long!—It was unlucky that the Goodnestone Party could not meet you, & I
hope her friendly, obliging, social Spirit, which delighted in drawing People together, was not conscious of the division & disappointment she was occasioning. I am sorry & surprised that you speak of her as having little to leave, & must feel for Miss Milles, though she is Molly, if a material loss of Income is to attend her other loss.—Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony, but I need not dwell on such arguments with you, pretty Dear, you do not want inclination.

(Letter 153)

In this letter, Austen expresses condolences over the death of an acquaintance and regrets that Milles’s daughter has been left impoverished by her mother’s death. Austen articulates that single women tend toward poverty, and this fact makes marriage an appealing option. These two letters raise a number of interesting questions for discussion. To which characters in Austen’s novel do these remarks about money and marriage in her letters apply? Which characters in Austen’s novel challenge these ideas about money and marriage? How important are these considerations in the film? What is emphasized over marriage and money in the film? How are these issues still significant in spite of the changed environment of the film as compared to the novel?

Another film inspired by *Pride and Prejudice* that could be analyzed in a literature course is *Austenland* (2013). This film focuses on a modern-day woman, Jane Hayes (Keri Russell), who is obsessed with *Pride and Prejudice* to the point that her entire apartment is decorated in BBC *P&P* memorabilia which includes a life-size cut-out of Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy. Jane cannot sustain a relationship because her boyfriends cannot deal with her fixation, and also, none of them are her “Mr. Darcy.” She spends her entire life savings on a Jane Austen destination immersion vacation at an English estate where the guests and employees live (for the most part) as though they are in Austen’s era, clothing and technology-banning included (though they are
bestowed with modern conveniences of a fully functioning bathroom). There she is renamed “Jane Erstwhile” and essentially lives out the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane immediately meets a Wickham-style character, “servant” Martin (Bret McKenzie) who she believes is not a part of the “acting” like the other male employees. She also meets her Mr. Darcy, Mr. Henry Nobley (JJ Field), who is initially off-putting and aloof but eventually falls in love with and wins Jane’s heart. Believing their romance is part of the act, the “love story” she was promised when she paid, Jane leaves Nobley behind to pursue Martin.

Unfortunately, Jane learns Martin is an actor playing his part as her intended suitor, and her disillusionment is complete. Jane returns home at the end of her vacation having grown up and realizing she wants “something real”; her maturation leads her to clear away her memorabilia, including the letters above her bed spelling out “DARCY WAS HERE.” While Jane is making tea after this decluttering, Nobley shows up unexpectedly and reveals his feelings for her were real (and that of course, he was only “filling in” for an actor and is really a History Professor), and they all lived happily ever after. The film is rife with *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired characters: a Caroline Bingley character Lady Amelia Heartwright, Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s counterpart Mrs. Wattlesbrook, and a much more lively Charlotte Lucas/Lydia/Mrs. Bennet amalgam in Elizabeth Charming (Jennifer Coolidge) who also ends up with an unsuitable man (in this version, the gay actor playing Colonel Andrews).

This film would be apropos for a literature course because it addresses the idea of “Austenmania” and Austen fanaticism. Essentially, the film thinly criticizes idealizing fictional representations of life and love and living vicariously through those fictional worlds at the expense of real life. For those unfamiliar with the fanaticism of Austen fans, parallels could be
drawn with the fanaticism of any flavor-of-the-moment popular culture phenomenon, be it novel, film, or television show; *Twilight*’s “Twihards” and *Harry Potter*’s “Pottermania” spring to mind. As with *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, students would read Austen’s novel (again, *Pride and Prejudice*) and analyze it before watching this film. During the film, students would again consider active viewing questions. I also used the following viewing questions when I taught *Pride and Prejudice* and showed this film for my English 110 students.

**Day 1**

1. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s mother, Mrs. Bennet, is known for her determination to marry off her daughters and for her frequent social blunders. How does Miss Elizabeth Charming (Jennifer Coolidge) bear a resemblance to Mrs. Bennet? What are some of Charming’s humorous blunders and verbal mistakes?

2. Compare Jane “Erstwhile” to Elizabeth Bennet. How are they similar on the surface? How are they ultimately much different as characters? What lessons does Jane learn throughout her experience at Austenland? How do these lessons compare to Elizabeth Bennet’s growth throughout the novel *Pride and Prejudice*?

3. Identify two elements of the first half of the film *Austenland* that are meant to parody *Pride and Prejudice*. What is being parodied? How well do you think these parodies work in the context of the film? What purpose are these parodies serving in *Austenland*?

4. Stephenie Meyer (author of the *Twilight* series) served as a producer on the film *Austenland*. What do you think about her creative involvement in the film? Can you see her influence in the finished product? How might this have been a very different film with a different creative team (for instance, a different author, director, or producer you are a fan of)?

**Day 2**

1. Identify two elements of the second half of the film *Austenland* that are meant to parody *Pride and Prejudice*. What is being parodied? How well do you think these parodies work in the context of the film? What purpose are these parodies serving in *Austenland*?

2. What aspects of Regency life are difficult for Jane to adapt to at Austenland? How do these facts of life in Austen’s era contribute to Jane’s growth as a character? Why are they disillusioning for Jane?

3. Most of the stories and novels we have read this semester deal with the idea of “identity.” How does the film *Austenland* grapple with this universal theme? Why is identity so important in the film? Which characters’ identities either change as a result of the events
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of the film or are revealed throughout the film as being different than they appeared at first? Why are these identity changes and revelations essential to the plot line and Jane’s growth as a character?

4. What might Jane Austen think of Austenland (the place) if she were alive today? Could she have anticipated how influential her novels would become, even for twenty-first-century audiences? Do you think she would ever have imagined a devotee like Jane Hayes?

Subsequent to our discussion of the novel and the film, we would examine excerpts from letters in which Austen makes critical judgments of strangers and acquaintances. These excerpts will be particularly interesting after having watched Jane try to navigate the rules of Regency society and propriety in Austenland.

In a letter from December 1798, Austen critiques a potential dance partner at a ball: “One of my gayest actions was sitting down two Dances in preference to having Lord Bolton’s eldest son for my Partner, who danced too ill to be endured” (Letter 17). In 1800, Austen criticizes the appearances of those attending at a ball: “There were very few Beauties, & such as there were, were not very handsome” (Letter 27). Specific commends describe someone who “did not look well,” one who had a “fat neck,” “the remains of the vulgar, broad featured girl who danced at Enham eight years ago,” “a queer animal with a white neck,” and someone with “a good deal of nose.” She also bemoans having to compliment someone: “M’s Warren, I was constrained to think a very fine young woman, which I much regret. She has got rid of some part of her child, & danced away with great activity, looking by no means very large.—Her husband is ugly enough; uglier even than his cousin John; but he does not look so very old.” Of “Miss Debary, Susan & Sally,” Austen explains, “I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me” (Letter 27). In May 1801, Austen describes an Adulteress: “She is not so pretty as I expected; her face has the same defect of baldness as her sister’s, & her features not so handsome—she was highly
rouged, & looked rather quietly & contentedly silly than anything else” (Letter 36). This is by no means an exhaustive list of insults Austen hurls at individuals in her letters.

These insults are particularly interesting because they are private criticisms, never intended to be spoken in public. Because of this circumstance, the letters will help dispel students’ potential misperceptions of Austen as “polite.” After reading these excerpts, I would discuss with students how they challenge the image of the author’s works that Jane holds in *Austenland*. Which character in *Austenland* has a personality that seems compatible with Austen’s personality and tone as represented in these excerpts? Why would you say so? Where can we discern some of this critical tone in Austen’s novel? What would the effect be if Austen adopted as overtly harsh an approach to describing characters in her novel as she does the acquaintances in her letters?

Other letter excerpts that could be used in conjunction with the film *Austenland* address marriage: In 1808, Austen reacts practically to an engagement and surprised at a secret marriage:

> Your news of Edw Bridges was quite news, for I have had no letter from Wrotham.—I wish him happy with all my heart, & hope his choice may turn out according to his own expectations, & beyond those of his Family—And I dare say it will. Marriage is a great Improver—& in a similar situation Harriet [Foote] may be as amiable as Eleanor.—As to Money, that will come You may be sure, because they cannot do without it …. Before I can tell you of it, you will have heard that Miss Sawbridge is married. It took place I believe [sic] on Thursday, M's Fowle has for some time been in the secret, but the Neighbourhood in general were quite unsuspicious. M' Maxwell was Tutor to the young Gregorys—consequently they must be one of the happiest Couple in the World, & either of them worthy of Envy—for she must be excessively in love, & he mounts from nothing, to a comfortable Home. (Letter 61)

In Austen’s judgmental account of the elopement, she comments on the fortunate nature of the match: Miss S. must be very much in love to marry the poor tutor, and Mr. M. must be thrilled to improve his situation by marrying above his station. This cynicism of the relationship stands in
contrast to how she handles the topic in *Pride and Prejudice* when Wickham tells Lizzy that he must marry for money because he has none and she accepts it as a prudent decision. Here is one strong example of the divide between author and protagonist. Based on these reactions to marriages, we could perceive Austen as matter-of-fact and suspicious of marriage, especially elopements.

After reading these letter excerpts, students would connect these attitudes toward marriage to the topic of courtship and marriage in the novel and film. Discussion questions would discuss the differences between her practical and comparatively positive reaction in the first excerpt and her cynical and sarcastic tone in the second excerpt. How can we connect the practical view of marriage Austen expresses in the first excerpt to *Pride and Prejudice*? How is this kind of practicality challenged and/or reinforced in *Austenland*? Where can we see parallels between the cynicism toward marriages of those in different social classes in the second excerpt from Austen’s letters and the novel? How does this idea connect to depictions of class and courtship in the film?

An essay assessment on Austen’s novel, letters, and film could focus on the idea of loose adaptation and ask students to discover films that seem to be inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*. Many movies, especially romantic comedies, include the familiar *Pride and Prejudice* plot line: boy and girl meet, they dislike each other, they get to know each other, they fall in love, obstacle/conflict arises, conflict resolved, happily ever after. Students would choose a relatively recent movie (not *Pride and Prejudice*) that follows this basic plot line and compare it to the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. What parallels can you draw between this movie and the novel? How does the filmmaker make the story his/her own? How does the film use the familiar plot line to
appeal to modern audiences? How does the story compare to Austen’s novel in terms of social criticism and limitations imposed on women’s freedom? Students would be informed not to merely summarize the plot of either the movie or the novel. They would need to compare specific aspects of the novel to corresponding aspects of the film and analyse how the filmmaker appropriates Austen’s familiar plot and adapts it to appeal to modern audiences. Furthermore, students would develop a thesis that makes an argument about how the film loosely adapts Austen’s novel and whether it involves the same level of social commentary as the source text.

Using media in literature classes in conjunction with Austen’s fiction and letters is a natural extension of the lessons and assignments I outlined in Chapter 6. As I stated in that chapter, through the lesson and assignments I developed, students would demonstrate knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of language by examining and analyzing Austen’s letters and fiction and participating in class discussions by presenting informed viewpoints on conversation topics. This extends to the incorporation of media in these lessons and assignments. Furthermore, students would become active viewers by watching inspired media critically, answering viewing questions about the films while watching and responding to discussion and essay prompts asking them to connect media to their reading of the fiction (novel) and non-fiction (correspondence). In answering written questions for discussion and in formal essay-writing, students would also be analyzing Austen’s written work and how that writing has been adapted for modern audiences. Students would also be required to further analyze the letters we discussed in class in light of their newly chosen film adaptation.

Additionally, by examining recent Austen media in the context of contemporary popular culture and comparing it to Austen’s writing in a historical context, students would be acquiring
knowledge of English literary history and its cultural and social contexts from the historical period in which Austen lived and wrote to students’ own living era. Through written work, students would analyze critically adaptations of Austen’s literature in conjunction with her fiction and correspondence. They would also be required to write effectively and critically, formulating in-class responses and developing essay topics that consider their own reading audience, analyze Austen’s audience as well as popular contemporary audiences for media adaptations, conduct relevant research on their analysis topics, and produce a finished essay document meeting writing standards and accurately representing Austen’s nonfiction and fiction texts and related contemporary media.

An important point to reiterate is that media adaptations are a product of the era in which they were produced. *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, presents some interesting ideas about Austen adaptations and discusses the “proliferation of Jane Austen adaptations” from the 1970s through the 1990s (1). Troost and Greenfield make the astute observation that while the film adaptations of the 90s were appealing to audiences, they “may suffer from being so fully attuned in their texture to [their] present tastes and imaginations that this texture will not always appeal easily to future audiences.” They also note that adaptations of Austen’s fiction reveal more about the “moment in time” in which they were released “than about Austen’s writing” (11). What these adaptations reveal, in essence, is what the filmmakers interpret as important in Austen’s texts; filmmakers choose what to emphasize and what to omit.

In “Misrepresenting Jane Austen’s Ladies: Revising Texts (and History) to Sell Films,” Rebecca Dickson declares that if one “element from Austen’s novel” is changed in a film
adaptation, the “screenplay writer may lose a vital portion of the novel’s meaning.” She argues that “[t]he strength of recent Austen adaptations” such as BBC’s 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* “is that, for the most part, they follow her texts carefully” (45). I would argue, however, that even the most faithful film adaptation cannot present Austen’s texts as they would be read; there will always be omissions, interpretations, and additions to the text in its translation to film. In college literature courses, emphasis should be placed on analyzing adaptations, and one aspect of that analysis is examining filmic choices and exploring why they were made, particularly considering the period in which they were produced. Essentially, what about the year or decade in which the media was released may account for the way the novel or Austen’s life was interpreted and presented, and what about these choices would appeal to a popular audience?

Elaborating on the idea that Austen adaptations reflect the audience’s taste rather than the spirit of the novels is Deborah Kaplan in “Mass Marketing Jane Austen: Men, Women, and Courtship in Two Film Adaptations,” who argues, “To put Austen novels on film by means of corporations (Columbia Pictures and Miramax) that produce what is now a global popular culture informed by American tastes is to enter a medium shaped by powerful generic conventions of romance.” Kaplan takes this contention further by claiming that “the films’ romantic emphasis also functions as a critique of Austen’s writing.” Austen’s novels, as Kaplan points out, are “[t]old by a third-person narrator intimate with the consciousness of the female characters and usually at a distance from the mental lives and daily activities of men” (my emphasis), and therefore, “Austen’s novels, so the films suggest, underrepresent men.” As a reaction to this implied “deficiency” in the novels, “The films redress that imbalance by amplifying and glamorizing Austen’s heroes.” Kaplan contends that “doing so prevents them
from capturing the nuances of Austen’s male characters as well as the teasing ambiguities of the novelist’s representations of women and courtship” (180). Her point about Austen films is especially important in a discussion of textual fidelity. Even the much-lauded 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* adds to Austen’s text, presenting several scenes that focus on Mr. Darcy’s private life, including the infamous wet shirt and bathtub scenes, and the wedding scene at the end during which Elizabeth and Darcy share an anachronistic and extra-textual public kiss in their wedding carriage.

Connected to the idea of contemporary influences in media adaptations is the idea of Austen’s own cultural influences. Amanda Collins raises an interesting point in “Jane Austen, Film, and the Pitfalls of Postmodern Nostalgia” about what gets lost in Austen’s novels in popular culture: “I must admit my own tendency to see Jane Austen’s novels as records of her responses to the cultural and historical happenings of her lifetime, and I believe it would be a shame to erase her commentary from the adaptations of her works for the screen.” Collins explains the positive aspect of adaptation thus: “Each time one of her novels is brought to the forefront of twentieth-century popular culture, the renewed interest in her work and times seems to reveal a general desire to learn more about the past.” There is a caveat to this “desire to learn,” however, which Collins argues “is a desire to learn about *the past as it relates to the present*, and as a result the films are judged not on the basis of their historical realism but on their ability to mold history into a form which is reminiscent of the present” (my emphasis; 88). This issue is an important one for teaching Austen in media and echoes other scholars who have noted that adaptations tend to reveal more about the era in which they were produced rather than Austen’s. Picking out aspects of adaptations that privilege the filmmakers’ era rather than Austen’s may be
more difficult with newer adaptations but could be easier with older adaptations because of the cultural distance of time. However, that should not discourage us from the difficult task of attempting to analyze contemporary influences on recent Austen-inspired media in the college literature classroom, and that media can move beyond film.

CONCLUSION: FILM AND BEYOND

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter in conjunction with the current chapter, there are many ways to use Austen’s letters in undergraduate college literature courses. In the last chapter, I explained that Austen’s letters provide students with useful information about Austen’s life and personality, show connections between issues addressed in the novel and her personal writing, and reveal interesting historical and biographical information that enriches reading her novels. The addition of media to Austen studies using her correspondence and fiction further enriches students’ scholarship by adding issues involving audience, adaptation, and film choices to students’ examination of the novels and Austen in a historical context.

Throughout this chapter, my aim has been to justify using media alongside analysis of Austen’s letters and novels in the college literature classroom. Rather than detailing specific separate assignments that involve media, I have chosen instead to focus on supplementing literature with media and qualifying how media enhances Austen’s literature and validates her relevance to undergraduate students of literature. All of my assignments from Chapter 6 could benefit from the addition of media, including reader reaction assignments, peer- and self-assessment writing, examination of historical context in the novels and letters as compared to media adaptations, exploration of Austen’s references to her novels and biographical information
revealed in the letters and biopics compared to gaps filled with the novels, and analyses of class consciousness and women’s issues in the early 1800s represented in Austen’s correspondence and fiction versus how similar issues are handled (or ignored) in media adaptations. Ultimately, the goal in using media in the literature classroom is to engage students and anticipate students’ exposure to adaptation outside of the classroom. Because of Austen’s continued popularity, it is crucial to evaluate topics in film and literature, especially concerning Austen biopics, recent adaptations, and inspired media, and to determine how Austen’s letters and Austen-inspired media enhance the study of the novel.

Like I detailed in my conclusion to Chapter 6, analyzing Austen’s nonfiction personal correspondence alongside her fiction is very valuable as a way to provide students with a private window into Austen’s life and immediate historical-biographical context. Reading her letters reveals for students what we really know about the author’s life, which is very valuable when discussing biography and biopics and why there is a temptation to “read into” Austen’s novels to fill in the gaps around what is verifiable in her life history. While students will not gain a complete picture of Austen because it simply does not exist, they will be able to more effectively evaluate media and critically analyze media that is “based on” biographical information. The goal, of course, is that students will extend these critical thinking skills to their everyday lives and become productive and engaged citizens.

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Austen is not the only writer whose personal and professional correspondence endures in published form and in the media. While it would be possible to apply the assignments and ideas for using Austen’s letters in the college literature classroom to other famous authors’ letters and media, Austen’s correspondence provides students
with a unique opportunity to discover what Austen’s letters reveal about her literature and the
author’s self. In contrast to many of her literary brothers and sisters (aside from Shakespeare, as I
mentioned earlier in this chapter), Austen’s biography contains few verifiable facts and much
conjecture. However, the dearth of information about her life makes Austen’s correspondence all
the more captivating, and that inscrutability makes Austen’s letters worthwhile learning
resources for both composition and literature courses. Austen’s letters are successful tools in
literature courses in particular because, as I have demonstrated throughout this and the previous
chapter, they give students information about Austen’s life and her perspectives on a wide
variety of issues, historical events and concerns, and writing and literature.

The assignments I presented in the previous chapter and my explanation of how to
incorporate media into college literature courses were designed to achieve learning goals in
general education and major English courses, but they also display the value of reading and
analyzing Austen’s writing and examining historical and biographical contexts through Austen’s
letters, analyzing those same elements in media adaptation. Like I mentioned previously, my
literature students have been receptive and engaged with the information Austen’s letters
provide, which is evidenced by their eagerness to learn more about details in the novels which
are connected, directly or indirectly, to minutiae in Austen’s correspondence.

Ultimately, Sutherland brings up an essential idea about adaptation that applies to this
chapter: “Any interpretive act involves choice of features to emphasize and in so doing becomes
an opinionated statement on the constitution of the text from which it begins – we are rarely
dealing facts” (my emphases; “Jane Austen on Screen” 224). In other words, any adaptation of a
text for screen involves an opinionated translation of sorts; the text is filtered through the
perspective and biases of all the people involved in reproducing it. For Sutherland, powerful
filmic images leave a strong impression on the public’s “recognition of Jane Austen as a
romantic novelist”: “ambivalent” aspects of the heroine’s experience in the novel are
oversimplified and made explicit on film and “the male protagonist’s attractions are inevitably
overspecified” (225). Sutherland also discusses the importance of Austen’s letters in her
consideration of the biopic Miss Austen Regrets, contending that “Austen’s letters have received
far less critical attention than the novels, yet they fizz with wit and malice, alternately obliging
and bitter on the demands of relationships, unflinchingly self-aware on the subject of her own
ageing and delighted or oppressed by domestic trivia” (228).

A vital observation that Emily Auerbach makes in Searching for Jane Austen concerns
Austen adaptations, which “may at times perpetuate [a] stereotype, reducing Austen’s profound,
complex novels into ‘chick flicks’ filled with gushing romance” (32). This and previously
mentioned points raised by Auerbach and other scholars demonstrate why critical work in using
Austen’s letters alongside media in teaching is so necessary: the so-called distortion of Austen’s
character and novels could be thwarted by reading her own uncensored words, giving students a
truer sense of Austen’s personality and life and further illuminating the character, social
criticism, wit, and satire of her novels. Ultimately, I agree with Auerbach’s argument that “we
must break free of dear Aunt Jane—and of two centuries of putdowns and touchups. We must
strip off those ruffles and ringlets, restore those deleted fleas and bowels, and meet Jane Austen’s
sharp, uncompromising gaze head on” (40). By un-censoring Austen through reading and
analyzing her letters while scrutinizing depictions of the author and her novels in popular culture,
we can help our students truly and fully appreciate Austen’s life and works.
Austen’s novels and biography appear in myriad types of media, including graphic novels, web series, virtual fan communities, theatre, digital fan fiction, children’s abridged editions and picture books. Additionally, the novels and biography could appear in other types of media, including television series (drama/comedy/sit-com), video and computer games, virtual worlds (life simulation game), popular music, dance, and/or animation. Two burgeoning examples of Austen in media are graphic novels and web series. The graphic novel is particularly intriguing as both a visual and literary medium. When it represents Austen’s novels, it is a unique form of adaptation. On the other hand, web series bring Austen’s novels to life while modernizing them for modern audiences, which adds a layer of relevance to students. Media other than film pose unique challenges because it may be more difficult to determine how to incorporate other media with the novels and letters. However, this chapter’s study of Austen, media, and correspondence could be expanded further to incorporate different types of media. Regardless of the kind of media paired with Austen’s novels, it is the novels themselves that should remain the emphasis of literary study.

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the intrinsic value of Austen’s letters as well as their practical application in different types of college English classrooms. In the next section, the “Conclusion,” I will offer a recapitulation and synthesis of my main points from throughout this dissertation as well as final thoughts on the potential for expanding critical study and development of Austen pedagogy. This final section will also outline briefly my plans for future teaching research and development.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

SYNTHESIS

The purpose of my dissertation study has been to examine critically Austen’s surviving correspondence in order to contextualize it historically and biographically and to explain how her letters are valuable learning resources for college composition and undergraduate literature courses. I analyzed the topical information that can be gleaned from her letters in Chapters 2-4, focusing on historical information (Chapter 2), biographical information (Chapter 3), and literature references (Chapter 4). A thorough overview of the types of information that can be discovered throughout Austen’s correspondence was necessary to substantiate how and why those letters could and should be used as a theoretical pedagogical tool in college English courses, which I explored in depth in Chapters 5-7. In my last three chapters (5-7), I explained in detail how Austen’s letters can be utilized practically in various college courses. These explanations were supported with (limited) anecdotal evidence from my own teaching, when appropriate, as well as ample critical evidence from essays, articles, and books covering pedagogy and Austen scholarship (exclusive and inclusive of each other).

The scholarship I covered throughout this dissertation addresses a range of concerns and topics, both pedagogical and critical. Pedagogical sources cover methods for composition teaching, incorporating letter-writing in composition courses, literature major course development, and approaches to teaching Austen’s fiction. On the other hand, critical sources
comprise information on biographical details, critical scholarship of Austen literature, discussions of Austen in media, material covering Austen’s correspondence, and background information on historical letter-writing.

My limited applications of teaching materials in my own classrooms provided supplemental, anecdotal data on my teaching ideas primarily through my own observation of student receptiveness, attitudes, and class participation, as well as summaries of student success on assignments and discussion questions designed to promote critical thinking in both composition and literature courses. Ultimately, my use of Austen’s letters in college classrooms has demonstrated how useful Austen’s correspondence is as a teaching and learning tool for composition courses as an example of critical and persuasive nonfiction writing and for literature courses as a source of historical, biographical, and literary information on its own and in conjunction with Austen’s fiction.

As I mentioned in my “Introduction,” my study’s limitations include restricted opportunities to implement and assess pedagogical methods in a limited number and type of college courses, which include the two course sequence in first-year college composition at College of DuPage (COD) and a general education fiction survey course for non-majors at Northern Illinois University (NIU). Because of the number and type of courses that have been available to me for field research and implementation, I have no course data for upper-division lesson plans and teaching methods, as I was not afforded the opportunity to teach these courses at NIU and COD (and community colleges in general) do not offer upper-division courses.

Another limitation of my study includes the lack of opportunity to incorporate lessons into courses with different student populations. Composition lessons were only implemented in
one class for each course (Composition 1 and Composition 2) at COD, and certain literature lessons were implemented in two introduction to fiction general education courses at NIU. College composition students were completing a general education writing sequence requirement, and university literature students were completing an elective general education course. Therefore, I was unable to introduce my lessons and assignments to English majors whose focus of study was literature.

A final limitation for my dissertation study is the scarcity of critical work and documentation of using Austen’s letters in college composition and literature courses. This lack of critical-pedagogical scholarship has restricted my own work to an extent because it limited the number of resources which directly addressed my dissertation topic and with which I could compare my own ideas on teaching Austen’s letters and fiction together. In addition, several resources that purported to cover teaching Austen were effectually critical works on the fiction with little more than a cursory mention of teaching strategies. There were a limited number of helpful teaching sources on Austen’s fiction, but scant resources that discussed incorporating her letters in college literature courses and no resources discussing using her letters in composition courses.

While these limitations were unavoidable due to time constraints, limited opportunities for conducting classroom research and applying teaching ideas in lower- and upper-division literature courses within the doctoral program, and the availability of published pedagogical work on Austen in higher education, I have applied selected lessons as appropriate for the classes I was assigned to teach at COD and NIU, and those experiences have reinforced my conviction that Austen’s letters are engaging and useful in both college composition courses and college
literature courses and that even students who have never read Austen find her nonfiction writing accessible and valuable as a learning tool.

**IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS**

The overarching purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of Austen’s correspondence as a tool for teaching and learning in college English courses. My rationale for focusing my study on both critical and pedagogical work on Austen’s letters is that I believe more scholarly work needs to be completed on Austen and teaching in higher-education. The limitations of scholarship marrying the two demonstrates that this is a fertile field for future research. In addition to the work I have presented in this dissertation, I could extend and expand my critical study in the future to further this goal and promote pedagogical exploration of Austen’s letters in the college classroom, which has been underrepresented in educational work on Austen thus far.

After immersing myself in Austen’s correspondence and scholarly work related to Austen and teaching, it has become clear that Austen’s value to college students is underrepresented in the literature and in the classroom (if NIU English Department syllabi are representative of college literature curriculum). Reflecting on teaching practices is one of the best ways to improve and grow as an educator, and sharing those reflections in scholarly work helps others to benefit from our experience, which is why I believe more college and university faculty should devote effort toward furthering this goal for Austen studies.

To reiterate Brownstein’s question which I posed in my “Introduction”: Why Jane Austen? I have endeavored to answer this question throughout my dissertation to substantiate my
argument that Austen’s letters are worthy of use in college composition and literature and also to
demonstrate why Austen is still relevant for contemporary college students. So why should we
read and teach Austen in college courses? In the end, Austen’s fiction persists in popularity
because of the universality of its themes and the kinship readers feel with its author. The
countless works of fan-fiction, sequels, parodies, mash-ups, and adaptations for print, television,
film, the web, and theatre attest to Austen’s unremitting esteem and fans’ desire to emulate her
and garner a piece of her acclaim for themselves.

Additionally, Austen’s novels themselves continue to be read voraciously. While
Grahame-Smith claims that Pride and Prejudice and Zombies “transforms a masterpiece of
world literature into something you’d actually want to read,” Austen’s books have actually
consistently sold well, and sales generally spike after film adaptations are released,
demonstrating that people exposed to these adaptations ultimately look to the source text rather
than solely consuming its pop culture descendants. All of the fan-fiction, sequels, mashups,
pastiches, and adaptations of Austen’s work arouse new interest in Austen’s own novels.
Austen’s significance persists, continually finding eager and willing audiences two hundred
years after the publication of her novels. Austen is as relevant as ever for contemporary
American college students.

Looking ahead, the restrictions on my study could be overcome in future research. In
order to expand my study and include more comprehensive data from applying my theoretical
lesson plans and assignments, I would need to implement them in composition and various
literature courses over multiple semesters to compare how well they work with different groups
of students and in different courses, for example general education (lower-division) literature
courses versus English major (upper-division) literature courses. Doing so would allow me to paint a more complete picture of how effective using Austen’s letters would be in each type of college course and to revise and adjust lessons and assignments to make them more effective. Although, as with any assignment or lesson plan, there will be variation between different classes of students even in the same course. Hopefully, more opportunities will arise for me to teach a wider variety of literature courses, especially those taken by English majors, which would allow me to delve deeper into critical analyses of Austen’s work. Taking into account the limitations I have outlined, my study can be improved with further time and teaching opportunities, and perfection is nearly impossible in teaching, which requires continuous growth and adjustment on the part of the educator, but as Austen wrote to her niece Fanny, “[P]ictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked” (Letter 155).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES (ALPHABETICAL)


Northern Illinois University. 2015-2016 *Undergraduate Catalog*. Web.


APPENDIX A

COURSE ASSESSMENT REPORT
Course Assessment Report

1. Instructor of Record:
2. Semester:
3. Course catalog title:
4. How many sections?
5. Please identify English Student Learning Outcome that this report addresses (listed below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Learning Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Linguistics. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the foundational principles of linguistics, including an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Grammar. Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic English grammar and be able to analyze the basic structures and functions of language in general and the English language in particular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Literary History. Students will demonstrate a basic knowledge of the history of literature in English and its wider cultural and social contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Literary Criticism and Theory. Students will apply general knowledge of critical and theoretical approaches to literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Textual Analysis. Students will analyze a broad range of literary and nonfiction texts, both those in which they have received instruction and those which may be new to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Writing. Students will write effectively in a variety of print and electronic genres. Such ability includes formulating topics, thinking critically about topics, analyzing audience, conducting necessary research, and producing finished work that meets good editorial standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Professional Competence. Students will integrate the above knowledge and skills to attain a level of literate competency sufficient for productive employment and advanced study. Such competency includes thorough citation of sources, informed participation in discussion, ethical persuasive practices, responsible collaboration, tolerance for linguistic differences, and accurate representation of texts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Briefly describe the assignment/exam/activity that elicited the student learning outcome you identified above.

7. Percentage breakdown: Exceeds, Meets, or Does Not Meet SLO Expectations (Plus Brief Explanation)
   - Exceeds Expectations (___%)
     A-level students: (# /total # students) Provide brief description of strengths.
   - Meets Expectations (___%)
     B-level students (___%) (# /total # students) Provide brief description of strengths/weaknesses.
     C-level students (___%): (# / total # students) Provide brief description of strengths/weaknesses.
   - Does Not Meet Expectations (___%)
     D-level students or lower: ___% (# /total # students) Provide brief description of strengths/weaknesses.

8. Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes your students also met (double-click on checkbox)
   - Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies
   - Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives
   - Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world
   - Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought
   - Communicate clearly and effectively
   - Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals
   - Use and combine appropriate qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems
   - Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to one’s major or particular fields of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes
APPENDIX B

COURSE AND PROGRAM OBJECTIVES
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
“GENERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES” (FROM THE NIU 2015/2016 UNDERGRADUATE CATALOG)

Goals in Knowledge Domain Requirements:

The three General Education Knowledge Domains are areas of human endeavor (Creativity and Critical Analysis; Nature and Technology; Society and Culture) and will:

1) help students attain a sound liberal education and acquire sufficient general knowledge and intellectual versatility to become productive and resourceful members of society,
2) explore human thought and relations in order to understand and respect cultural heritage,
3) provide an understanding of the scientific method and the application of scientific facts and principles pertaining to the natural and technological worlds, and
4) examine the role of knowledge in promoting human welfare.

Goals in “Creativity and Critical Analysis” Knowledge Domain:
Courses in Creativity and Critical Analysis will challenge students to develop the skills involved in critical reflection and creative expression. Students will:

1) become acquainted with methods for analyzing primary sources and critically evaluating the ideas, events, traditions, and belief systems that have shaped human experience and expression;
2) explore fundamental modes of aesthetic and creative expression; and
3) understand and evaluate the diversity of humanity’s most notable cultural achievements from artistic, historical, linguistic, literary, and philosophical perspectives.

BACCALAUREATE “LEARNING OUTCOMES” (FROM NIU GENERAL EDUCATION WEBPAGE)

- Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies
- Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives
- Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world
- Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought
- Communicate clearly and effectively
- Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals
- Use and combine appropriate quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems
- Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to one’s major or particular fields of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes.
1) Students will demonstrate knowledge of the foundational principles of linguistics, including an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of language.

2) Students will demonstrate knowledge of Basic English Grammar and be able to analyze the basic structures and functions of language in general and the English language in particular.

3) Students will demonstrate a basic knowledge of the history of literature in English and its wider cultural and social contexts.

4) Students will apply general knowledge of critical and theoretical approaches to literature.

5) Students will analyze a broad range of literary texts, both those in which they have received instruction and those which may be new to them.

6) Students will write effectively in a variety of print and electronic genres. Such ability includes formulating topics, thinking critically about topics, analyzing audience, conducting necessary research, and producing finished work that meets good editorial standards.

7) Students will integrate the above knowledge and skills to attain a level of literate competency sufficient for productive employment. Such competency includes thorough citation of sources, informed participation in discussion, ethical persuasive practices, responsible collaboration, tolerance for linguistic differences, and accurate representation of texts.
COLLEGE OF DUPAGE

ENGLISH 1101: COMPOSITION 1

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of the course the student should be able to do the following:

1. Apply a process approach to writing
2. Develop and support a thesis
3. Apply strategies for organizing texts
4. Analyze and respond critically and creatively to the ideas and strategies in the writing of others through reading a variety of texts, including academic discourse
5. Construct effective prose
6. Develop the writing process to include other writers' discourse
7. Use methods of research and citation at an introductory level

Topical Outline:

1. Strategies for approaching writing as a process, which include
   a. Invention/prewriting
   b. Consideration of audience and occasion
   c. Critical thinking
   d. Creative thinking
   e. Drafting (individually and/or collectively)
   f. Revising, editing, and proofreading (individually, by peer review, etc.)
2. Strategies for developing and supporting a thesis, which include
   a. Discovery of a subject and purpose
   b. Consideration of audience and purpose
   c. Development of a perspective and/or position
   d. Discovery and use of supporting evidence
3. Strategies for organizing a text, which include
   a. Development
   b. Paragraphing
   c. Coherence
   d. Unity
   e. Document design
4. Strategies for comprehending, analyzing, and responding critically and creatively to written discourse, which include
   a. Analysis of audience
   b. Analysis of the writer's meaning
   c. Analysis of style
   d. Analysis of the writing occasion/purpose
5. Strategies for crafting effective prose, which include
   a. Conventions of Standard Written American English
b. Style appropriate to audience and purpose
6. Strategies for extending the writing process to incorporate other writers' discourse, which include
   a. Summary
   b. Paraphrase
   c. Quotation
   d. Attribution
7. Introductory strategies for developing an effective research process, which may include
   a. Development of effective search strategies
   b. Evaluation of source material
   c. Subordination of source material to the writer's purpose
   d. Observance of conventions of accepted documentation formats

ENGLISH 1102: COMPOSITION 2

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of the course the student should be able to do the following:

1. Apply a process approach to writing that incorporates independent research
2. Develop and support a thesis in an essay incorporating research
3. Apply strategies for organizing texts
4. Analyze and respond critically and creatively to the ideas and strategies in the writing of others through reading a variety of texts, including academic discourse
5. Use discourse appropriate for an academic audience
6. Create more advanced, independent research projects and observe the conventions of documentation and citation

Topical Outline:

1. Approaching writing as a process in an essay incorporating independent research, which includes
   a. Inventing/prewriting
   b. Considering audience and occasion
   c. Thinking critically
   d. Thinking creatively
   e. Drafting (individually and/or collectively)
   f. Revising, editing, and proofreading (individually, by peer review, etc.)
2. Developing and supporting a thesis in an essay incorporating research, which includes
   a. Discovering a subject and purpose
   b. Considering audience and purpose
   c. Developing a perspective and/or position
   d. Discovering and using supporting evidence
3. Organizing text in an essay incorporating research, which includes
   a. Development
b. Paragraphing  
c. Coherence  
d. Unity  
e. Document design  

4. Analyzing and responding critically and creatively to written discourse, which includes  
a. Analyzing audience  
b. Analyzing the writer's meaning  
c. Analyzing style  
d. Analyzing the writing occasion/purpose  

5. Using discourse appropriate for an academic audience in an essay incorporating research, which includes  
a. Using Standard Written American English  
b. Using clear academic style  
c. Developing an effective research process, which includes  
   1. Search strategies  
   2. Evaluation of source material  
   3. Subordination of source material to the writer's purpose  
   4. Avoidance of plagiarism  
   5. Observance of conventions of accepted documentation formats