

Jane Austen, *The Later Manuscripts* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen) ed. Janet Todd and Linda Bree (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

The prospect of discovering another work by a favourite author is always a pleasing one, even if the reality when it is actually encountered is sometimes disappointing. With a writer like Jane Austen with only six published novels, who would not wish for some further delights to be unveiled? When Austen died her sister Cassandra was left with the unpublished manuscripts of a number of juvenile writings and later works. After Cassandra's death various members of her family had them in their hands (or perhaps one should say 'on their hands', given their subsequent feeling that the possession entailed a level of somewhat burdensome responsibility). The juvenilia have already appeared as the first volume of the new Cambridge Edition of her works and the later works now appear in this, the eighth volume of the Edition. Apart from a small number of poems and various short prose pieces on prose fiction this volume contains three novels, all of roughly the same length, but only the first complete. *Lady Susan* (76 pages in this edition), an epistolary novel brought to a rather perfunctory conclusion in a third person summary at the end, is complete, while *The Watsons* and *Sanditon* (respectively 58 pages and 73 pages) are wholly written in the third-person mode Austen favoured in the six published novels but are incomplete. *Lady Susan*, probably written some time between 1795 and 1805, and *The Watsons*, for which the editors accept a composition date of approximately 1804, belong to the earlier part of Austen's career. By contrast she was writing *Sanditon* until only a few months before her death on 18 July 1817: the manuscript ends rather sadly with the date, 'March 18', as though Austen, by then well aware of the severity of her illness, is signing off from writing novels.

Works left in manuscript at the author's death, and particularly those which the author did not prepare in final draft form, excite some interesting reactions from the author's (formal or informal) literary trustees and from critics. One common concern is that publication will damage the author's reputation. Austen's family shared this concern, particularly with regard to a lighthearted poem on Winchester races, which she wrote only a week before her death and which evidently struck the family as likely to impair her reputation as a serious author, but also with the three novels. For example, Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen Leigh, when he finally came after some hesitation to publish *Sanditon*, decided to 'fillet the work', to use the editors' apt description (xli), and presented only three character portraits rather the perfectly coherent though incomplete narrative prepared by Austen. Possibly he was worried by Austen's introduction of the rakishly inclined Sir Edward Denham, although, as far as the novel actually progresses, it is indeed only inclination (based on too much reading of novels and an excessive fondness for Burns) rather than action that he exhibits. Similar concerns about possible damage to the author's reputation were then taken up by the reviewers. One of the many excellent aspects of this edition is its tracing of the family's concerns about how to handle the legacy of unpublished work as well as the concerns of reviewers and critics. For instance in 1870 *The Times* praised the Austen family for their initial decision not to publish her manuscripts and proclaimed that 'We have always thought it most culpable in the guardians of literary remains to allow a line to pass into print upon which the writer has not clearly

1

Book Reviews: *The Later Manuscripts* by Jane Austen. Graham Tulloch.
Transnational Literature Volume 1 No 2 May 2009.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

signified his wish' (xxxvii), while E.M. Forster, with the snooty condescension he could so irritatingly display at certain moments, suggested that *Sanditon* was a case of 'listening to a slightly tiresome spinster, who has talked too much in the past to be silent unaided' (lxxxix). Other critics, of course, have been much more generous and approving and the full gamut of reactions is covered in the introduction.

The fear that the publication of works left incomplete, or incompletely revised, by their authors could damage their reputation arouses powerful emotions (as with the recent edition of Walter Scott's previously unpublished manuscripts which I undertook with J.H. Alexander and Judy King and which provoked some discussion of the desirability of their publication¹). Yet on the face of it the apprehension of damage seems somewhat strange. How could the addition of extra, even possibly inferior works detract from the fame of an author whose other works have already been published, accepted and acclaimed? Austen, however, may represent a special case. Her works are so often praised as perfect gems that one can understand why it might be felt that less than perfect works would spoil her reputation. Yet, if we set this fear aside, we can see that these three novels help us understand how Austen came to write so well in her other works. Though entertaining and well written *Lady Susan* helps us see why Austen abandoned the epistolary form in which *Pride and Prejudice* was probably originally cast. Similarly *Sanditon* shows how she was able to write with fresh inspiration once she had found a new kind of setting and a new range of characters: innovation, albeit innovation within certain defined limits, was essential to her work. Furthermore, because the manuscripts of the six major novels have not survived, *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*, which, unlike *Lady Susan*, are not final copies, give us some insight into how Austen revised and improved her work as she wrote. (On the other hand they cannot, as the editors point out, offer any information about the kinds of changes that took place between Austen's final manuscript and the printed text). Indeed it was by contemplating *The Watsons* that Virginia Woolf came to realise that Austen was 'no conjuror' who produced her work without effort but rather that it was through 'pages of preliminary drudgery' that she was able to 'create the atmosphere in which her own peculiar genius could bear fruit' (xliii). In order to allow the readers to appreciate this for themselves the editors have provided a transcription of the manuscript of these two novels. At the same time, to enable those same readers to enjoy the text without the distraction of noting the manuscript's deletions and corrections they have also provided a minimally corrected reading text. Finally the reading experience is enhanced by excellent explanatory notes.

Because *Lady Susan*, though complete, is an advanced apprentice's work and *The Watsons* and *Sanditon* are incomplete this edition cannot offer us the full experience of discovering a lost Austen work. Nevertheless, expertly handled as they are in this new edition, they can offer us at least a taste of what such an experience might be.

Graham Tulloch

¹ Walter Scott, *The Siege of Malta and Bizarro*, ed. J.H. Alexander, Judy King and Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh University Press, 2008).