# Publishing Northanger Abbey

Jane Austen and the Writing Profession

by

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Cover photo by the author: "The empty field where Steventon rectory used to stand. As seen, the house Jane Austen grew up in was not preserved."

This book is dedicated to Susan Allen Ford, editor premier

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#### **Preface**

Research for this book began in 2017, when I discovered some early publisher's advertisements for Jane Austen's earliest novel. Finding some advertisements led to others. The previous two hundred years had turned up two of publisher Benjamin Crosby's advertisements for *Northanger Abbey*, then titled *Susan*; I have found eight more. As Jane Austen said in her preface, the work was not only sold but advertised—but then did not appear.

Part of the pleasure in Austen's novels is their subtle complexity. One can reread them with love, recall many parts clearly, and still take years to notice unexpected elements. Small things or big, they stay hidden until finally, unpredictably, and for no conscious reason popping out from behind the novel's other interests. Austen's 'Advertisement' to *Northanger Abbey* turns out to have been a good hiding place for a blind spot. Like probably most readers, I re-read her baffled statement for years without thinking about it very much. Finally, in 2017, it hit me differently—something along the lines of 'Why would a publisher buy a novel and then just sit on it?' Thinking about the puzzle abstractly does not solve it. The question is not why he *would* but why he *did*, and to answer requires facts, not just reason. Hence the research in *Publishing Northanger Abbey*, which I enjoyed as literary scavenger hunt, but which ended up enlarging my appreciation of Jane Austen, the person, and Austen, the writer.

#### Introduction

Before Jane Austen succeeded in breaking into print with Sense and Sensibility in 1811, her major work was a novel titled Susan. The phase in her life was a calendar period, but it was not just an interval or a last experiment in juvenilia. It centered around what should have been her debut. After Austen turned 25 in December 1800, she spent almost nine years living with Susan, the novel that ultimately became Northanger Abbey—finishing and revising it, trying to get it published, succeeding as she thought, and then coping with disappointment when it did not come out. Ironically, Susan went unpublished not because it didn't sell but because it did—to someone who then decided not to bring it out. This period is generally known as the 'unpublished years', but for Austen, they were not so much the unpublished years as the Susan years. Obscure as the title may seem now, from 1803 through 1809, her writing life revolved around it—her big project during the period, the finished manuscript of a novel, sold and in the hands of publisher Benjamin Crosby. Following the sale, she reconnoitered her publisher of choice; kept up her fiction writing by starting *The Watsons*; kept in touch with current books and periodicals; and ultimately turned to other projects—happily, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice—and to a different publisher.

Although the years between 1800 and 1809 turn out to be surprisingly rich in information, there is no firsthand explanation for why Crosby did not publish *Susan*. Researchers have theorized since the nineteenth century, but the theories remain incomplete and sometimes contradictory. From this perspective, the unpublished years turn into a string of literary-historical mysteries, not on the scale of who killed the princes in the tower, maybe, but consequential for Austen's publishing history and writing process. Why did Crosby buy the manuscript, and why did he snap it up so quickly? Why did he immediately advertise *Susan*? After buying and advertising it, why didn't he bring it out in the next publishing cycle? How did Austen choose Benjamin Crosby in the first place? When he did not bring out the novel, why did she wait six years to write him about it? Why did she write Crosby when she eventually did, on April 5, 1809?

A major objective in writing about Jane Austen's early publishing disappointment is to recognize her strength and perseverance—somewhat undersold by a popular emphasis on Regency style and comic endings, appealing and significant as those are. Another objective is to shed further light on her writing process, which was, of course, affected by the publishing history. Another is to inform readers further about the publishing world around her. Contrary to assumptions, many works by women were produced and marketed in a rather hot Regency and Romantic literary marketplace, and Austen was not somehow out of line in trying and trying hard to get published in her early years. That the attempts failed is a historical fact,

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but the question of *why* they failed involves some analysis not just of her writing but of the writing profession she was trying to enter. Failure may be an orphan, but it still came from somewhere.

The unpublished years in Austen's life have often been treated as a period in which the author was taken up with family affairs, and she did indeed have serious family matters to deal with—relationships and household, family moves and travel, and the death of her father, which threw the women of the family into near-poverty. But Austen also spent the period writing and engaged in the business of marketing her work—deeply, intently engaged. That she already considered herself a member of the writing profession is evident from her letters and her works—especially *Northanger Abbey*, her youthful statement on writing novels. The details of her business dealings involve the publisher who bought *Susan* and then sat on it.

The subject here is Jane Austen's early difficulty in getting Northanger Abbey published. The years from 1800 to 1809—between the sight-unseen rejection of Pride and Prejudice (as "First Impressions") in the 1790s and Sense and Sensibility in 1811—have been obscured in research focused more on Austen's private life than on her profession as a writer, largely because—unhappily they were the years when she could not get published. Yet she had her manuscript accepted almost instantly. Furthermore, Crosby was much more committed to the novel than has traditionally been recognized. Previous research on Northanger Abbey has not turned up the extent of his commitment. He may have bought the novel for a mere ten pounds, but evidence now reveals that he advertised it in at least ten places from spring through summer 1803 first in two of his own books, then in at least eight newspapers. Crosby then decided not to publish the novel, even as the firm published less distinguished or more superficial works, other novels by less-than-famous female authors, and other novels with gothic-sounding titles. To try to investigate the subsequent change of heart, one must acknowledge it as a definitive change.

Eventually, Austen realized that her early novel, which she re-titled *Catherine*, was not going to be published. Part of the aftermath was *Mansfield Park*, a much darker work that revisits the main elements of *Northanger Abbey* much more grimly. In this view, *Mansfield Park* was partly Austen's do-over; moving past early disappointment, Austen did not reject her own early work but went on to re-engage with it. Understandably negative, *Mansfield Park* has always bothered critics, although it was so admired by the household of the Prince Regent that Austen was requested to dedicate her next novel to him.

Austen meanwhile suffered her novel's going unpublished, and after waiting six years to try to nudge Crosby into moving forward, moved forward herself. The swift upswing and the long decline formed her first decade as a professional writer. Literary research has sometimes taken for granted the perseverance which

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enabled Jane Austen to surmount neglect and disappointment. But Austen was not born a global icon. The unpublished years have been treated as unimportant, but in hindsight, it is almost miraculous that she survived them professionally. To examine them sheds light on her later writing life.

The focus is one innovation in this book. No single study goes into equal depth on the publication history of *Susan/ Catherine/ Northanger Abbey*, which Austen tried persistently to get published—re-titling the novel at least once, revising it at least twice, and at the end of her life agreeing to have it come out posthumously. One of the Emma Woodhouse-like mysteries of literary scholarship is why even Austen scholars and fans have sometimes treated *Northanger Abbey* as unimportant. To Austen herself, it remained important from the time she began it to the end of her life.

A related emphasis is the use of contemporaneous primary sources. One surprise has been how much the struggles of Jane Austen's unpublished years are documented in print sources, if sometimes indirectly. While I gratefully use excellent secondary works, my research on *Northanger Abbey* began with primary material including material not previously or closely read in connection with Austen. In my view, Austen's choice of publisher was partly influenced by seemingly unrelated issues including the trial of her aunt, Jane Leigh Perrot, and the Austen family's opposition to the slave trade.

Another surprise has been the extent to which earlier historical errors have influenced research and scholarship on Austen, especially on *Northanger Abbey*, even recently. Robert William Chapman, who edited the novels, said that the "previous history" of *Northanger Abbey* was "obscure." In a succinct paragraph, however, Chapman went on to detail the sale to Benjamin Crosby, to quote part of Austen's own Advertisement (preface) for the novel, and to footnote Crosby's listing for *Susan*—enough material to suggest that the history behind *Northanger Abbey* may have been not so much obscure as dismissed.

James Edward Austen-Leigh's earlier memoir of his aunt Jane suggests how history could have come to be disregarded. When *Susan* failed to be published, Austen-Leigh wrote of his aunt that "I do not think that she was herself much mortified by the want of early success." Although Austen had been writing since her childhood—and had presented herself, in parodies, as an author even then—her nephew concluded that "She wrote for her own amusement." Understandably reluctant to accept that she had suffered, he likewise downplayed the material cost of early failure.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Robert William Chapman, "Introductory Note," Northanger Abbey (Oxford: OUP, 1969), xi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: Bentley, 1871), 130.

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Money, though acceptable, was not necessary for the moderate expenses of her quiet home. Above all, she was blessed with a cheerful contented disposition, and an humble mind; and so lowly did she esteem her own claims, that when she received 150*l*. from the sale of 'Sense and Sensibility,' she considered it a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing.

More accurately, Austen-Leigh went on to acknowledge that Austen knew the quality of her work and often evaluated that of other writers, as in her letters.

However well-intended, a representation of Jane Austen as indifferent to the success of her works will block understanding of her publishing history, her writing process, and her novels—especially of *Northanger Abbey*, the one she had the most difficulty getting published. Setting aside any psychological question about how much of this response was projection—it wasn't Austen who was indifferent—this book approaches Austen from a different perspective. Some of the largest errors in traditional criticism were a previous notion of Austen as unconcerned about publication, success, and income from her writing; previous assumptions—with more kernel of truth—that her unpublished years were too taken up by family matters to allow her to write; and previous dismissal of *Northanger Abbey* as lightweight, negligible, or dated. A better understanding in all three areas has developed in recent years; the aim of this study is to contribute further in each, in appreciation of Jane Austen's debut novel.

#### Chapter 1

### Advertising Susan:

### Why Wasn't Jane Austen Published Earlier?

In April 1803, Jane Austen submitted a novel to the active, energetic publishing firm of Benjamin Crosby in London. She was 27 years old. The manuscript was titled *Susan*, ultimately to come out as *Northanger Abbey*. As with the novels that became *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the author had written the first drafts of *Susan* in the 1790s and had returned to revise it several years later. Remarkably, she chose to rewrite *Susan* first—before *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the most popular novels ever to be produced in English. If all had gone well, *Susan* would have been her debut novel. Among other things, it was her statement on writing novels, and in 1803, it would have been quite the calling card. Austen had no way to know that her fizzy, audacious, gothic-spoofing takedown of superficial learning and stale writing would take almost 15 years to arrive in print.

The good news in April 1803 was that Crosby's firm snapped up the anonymous novel immediately. Not for Jane Austen, it would seem, the stereotypical situation of the beginner novelist, accumulating piles of rejection letters behind her as the ranks of unapproached publishers thinned ahead. Austen was suddenly in the position of having sold an early literary effort within days—possibly within hours—after her brother's business agent conveyed it to the publisher. The firm must also have paid promptly; there is no record of how Jane received the 10-pound windfall, but her family recollected the sale, with no history of grievance over payment. A relative later mistakenly but understandably recalled the price as 20 pounds.

Proof of sale comes from more than just family tradition. Moving quickly, Benjamin Crosby soon began to advertise *Susan*, first in a book that he sent to press within weeks, possibly within days. He then continued advertising it through the summer. The title appeared in the back-page lists of two books published by Crosby and then in several weekly newspapers, in conspicuous ads placed by Crosby. Clearly the publisher *meant* to publish *Susan* in 1803; he not only invested 10 pounds in it, he advertised it in at least half a dozen places.

But in an unexpected turn of events, that was Austen's last bit of publishing good news for almost eight years. Crosby now owned the novel, but he did not bring it out. Several months went by, first while he listed *Susan* as "in the press" in books and newspapers, then while he continued to advertise the books in which he had listed *Susan*. Years went by, and Crosby continued to publish

# PAGES MISSING FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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