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FRIVOLITY AND FAINTING IN *LOVE AND FREINDSHIP* AND "THE MYSTERY": REINTERPRETING NONSENSE IN JANE AUSTEN'S JUVENILIA

Amy Vander Heiden

Master's Thesis

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In discussing which of Jane Austen's "betweenities"[1] to publish, Caroline Austen labels the story of "Evelyn" from her aunt's juvenilia[2] as "all nonsense": "I have thought that the story, I beleive [*sic*] in your possession, all nonsense, *might* be used."[3] Obviously, the story was used and published, along with many more works of Jane Austen's early "nonsense," to become the three-volume juvenilia we have today. But, Caroline's conventional thinking—that the story was "all nonsense"—held for a long time in scholarship. Recently, the works of the juvenilia have enjoyed substantial re-readings, with scholars paying special attention to the very nonsense with which Caroline was concerned.[4] Juliet McMaster's groundbreaking *Jane Austen, Young Author* (2016) is the first book-length study of the juvenilia,[5] which devotes significant space to one of Austen's longer, completed works: *Love and Freindship*.[6] McMaster draws attention to the

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I would like to thank Dr. Young-ok An for her patience and feedback on my work.

1. William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: A Family Record.* Revised and enlarged by Deirdre Le Faye, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1989), 250.

2. The term "juvenilia" is a controversial one. Margaret Anne Doody, "Jane Austen, that disconcerting 'child'" in *The Child Writer From Austen to Woolf*, ed. Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) speaks to the term as "an epithet indicating that this work is not required reading, not accountable to standards of criticism, but a mere curiosity, the childish output of one later distinguished for better work" (103). She goes on, however, to treat the juvenilia as worthy of criticism. Kathryn Sutherland and Freya Johnston's 2017 edition of the juvenilia is titled *Teenage Writings.* Here, I prefer the term "juvenilia" to, for example, "teenage writings" because "juvenilia" suggests an acknowledged collective grouping of works produced by a young author, not necessarily one in her teens.

3. Austen-Leigh and Austen Leigh, 249-50. Caroline Austen wrote this letter to James Edward Austen-Leigh.

4. Donna R. White, "Nonsense Elements in Jane Austen's Juvenilia," *Persuasions*, 39, no. 1 (2018), http://jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/volume-39-no-1/white/ defines the genre of *Love and Freindship* as "nonsense," providing criteria for such a designation and examples of syntactical nonsense—everything from contradictions to overstatement. Ellen E. Martin, "The Madness of Jane Austen: Metonymic Style and Literature's Resistance to Interpretation," in *Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan*, ed. J. David Grey (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) highlights the metonymic madness of language in the novella and the absences of "The Mystery."

5. Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen, Young Author* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2016).

6. I maintain Austen's original misspelling of the title.

playful nature of Austen's early writings, especially Austen's manipulation of language. I synthesize and extend examples of such manipulation of language to treat nonsense as frivolity and fainting in both *Love and Freindship* and, a lesser-known playlet, "The Mystery: An Unfinished Comedy."

Though of different genres, "The Mystery" and *Love and Freindship* were written over a similar time period and provide interesting juxtapositions of nonsense in terms of excess and absence. As part of the first volume of the juvenilia, "The Mystery" is a short comedy written between 1787 and 1790—between the ages of eleven and fourteen[7]—and *Love and Freindship* is an epistolary novella[8] dated June 13, 1790.[9] *Love and Freindship* brilliantly parodies the novel of sentiment and sensibility.[10] Specifically, it parodies *Laura and Augustus*, an anonymous three-

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7. Peter Sabor, foreword to *Jane Austen, Young Author,* by Juliet McMaster (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), ix. Though written at a young age, these stories, as Doody emphasizes are about "adult concerns" like "[s]ex, power and money" (112-3). McMaster highlights that Austen, in dealing with adult topics and in writing parody, is different than other youthful writers of her age, such as George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, and Charlotte Brontë, all of whom were very serious and romantic in their juvenilia (7).

8. According to Austen, "A novel in a series of Letters." Donna White contains a comprehensive list of the genre classifications of *Love and Freindship*: scholars have treated it as satire, parody, burlesque, picaresque, or described it as carnivalesque and Rabelaisian. White, as I mentioned, treats Austen's novel as nonsense literature. These descriptors are not mutually exclusive—*Love and Freindship*'s ability to be identified in multiple genres strengthens the work.

9. Jane Austen, *The Works of Jane Austen Volume VI: Minor Works*, ed. R.W. Chapman. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 109. All subsequent references to *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

10. Other scholars, such as A. Walton Litz *Jane Austen, A Study of Her Artistic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) and John Halperin, "Unengaged Laughter: Jane Austen's Juvenilia," in *Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan*, ed. J. David Grey (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), have highlighted the juvenilia's critique of the novel of sentiment or sensibility. Doody argues the juvenilia simply ridicules the conventions of the Novel and eighteenth-century novels (107). In Clara Tuite, *Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), she discusses genre, which she argues "is crucial to any discussion of Austen." Tuite posits Austen's work evolved from "a juvenilia critically and parodically engaged with a particular form of *the* novel—sentiment and sensibility—...to a form which came to be the canonized form of the domestic-realistic novel" (26, 27).

volume epistolary tragedy of 1784 attributed sometimes to Eliza Nugent Bromley.[11] Parody itself, as Tuite explains, functions as a kind of "double voice," which "desires to purge and also to imaginatively possess and reconfigure."[12] Austen, in deliberately imitating the writers of the sentimental novel—such as the author of *Laura and Augustus*—uses language that possesses certain conventions of fiction and exaggerates them to the extent whereby they purge themselves of their own meanings.[13] Austen is not only critically aware of the conventions of genre, but she is also critical of the conventions that pervaded the long eighteenth century, such as those surrounding communication, marriage, and wealth. She plays with these conventions by challenging the boundary between sense and nonsense.

This essay is concerned not only with the gap between sense and nonsense, but also with nonsense as frivolity and as an actual lack of physical senses. We may begin with a dictionary definition of nonsense: "that which is not sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas."[14] Such absurdity or lack of meaning often carries a negative connotation; thus, nonsense is often defined as "silliness."[15] While I treat nonsense as a silly meaninglessness—as frivolity, which lacks purpose and seriousness—I am particularly interested in how the effect of excess and frivolity is

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11. McMaster, 143. McMaster thoroughly explains the source texts of *Love and Freindship*. She argues Austen's work is also inspired by *The History of Emily Montague* by Frances Brooke, the first Canadian novel written in 1769 (152). More generally, *Love and Freindship* also laughs at Austen's favorite novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (74).

12. Tuite, 63.

13. Orrin Wang, *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), https://muse.jhu.edu/ could turn this parodic dimension on its head, to the extent that *Love and Freindship* could become an illustration of critical sobriety by rejecting Romantic sensations. However, I am more concerned with the verbal and linguistic play Austen engages with between sense and nonsense.

14. "Nonsense, n. and adj," *OED Online,* June 2019, Oxford University Press, https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.stthomas.edu/view/Entry/128094?rskey=lH7UI9&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

15. "Nonsense, n. and adj," *OED Online.*

created and to what end. Further, I would like to explore the other, more literal ramification of nonsense as a "lack of feeling or physical sensation."[16] How do the texts make sense of absence and to what purpose? Thus, I focus on linguistic and physical absences, especially fainting, and connect them to language's inability to make meaning. Austen's nonsense—especially demonstrated in her play with words—calls attention to the linguistic and cultural conventions surrounding communication, marriage, and money. Cued by Derrida's insight, "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique,"[17] I argue Austen's novella and playlet blur the boundary between sense and nonsense to point to the emptiness of restrictive conventions and to reveal the limits of our ability to make sense of reality through language.

Frivolity and Excess

Challenging the boundary between sense and frivolity reveals the empty conventions inherent in communication, marriage, and money in the long eighteenth century. Communication itself is often frivolous in the sense that the words and the corresponding interaction between people are often unreasonable and purposeless. When characters speak merely to speak, their communication lacks any semblance of seriousness or sense. Communication is thus often frivolous. And yet, such frivolity may be inherent in the act of communication. The fifth letter in Austen's novella includes the often-discussed door-knocking scene, which seems to be meaningless[18]—either empty or repetitive or so beyond absurd that the signifiers seem to lose

16. "Nonsense, n. and adj," *OED Online.*

17. Jacques Derrida, "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,*" in *The Critical Tradition,* ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 535.

18. In fact, McMaster calls this a funny "throw-away scene" that is not plausible and does not contribute to the plot or character development but does demonstrate the "total unpracticality of the figures of sensibility" (110). I suggest that the seeming nonsense invites different interpretations.

their original meaning. Laura and her mother and father have a conversation about whether or not the door should be answered:

> My Father started—"What noise is that," (said he.) "It sounds like a loud rapping at the Door"—(replied my Mother.) "it does indeed." (cried I.) "I am of your opinion; (said my Father) it certainly does appear to proceed from some uncommon violence exerted against our unoffending Door." "Yes (exclaimed I) I cannot help thinking it must be somebody who knocks for Admittance."
>
> "That is another point (replied he;) We must not pretend to determine on what motive the person may knock—tho' that someone *does* rap at the Door, I am partly convinced. (79)

The back and forth conjectures between Laura and her mother and father appear frivolous—indeed, by the end of this selection, Laura's father is only "partly convinced" someone is knocking. Their conversation negates and supersedes the scene's meaning: someone is knocking at the door. Instead, the reader forgets about the meaning and becomes lost in the empty words. Social mannerisms are often hollow and characterized by frivolity. Austen's conflation of a simple convention—opening the door—defamiliarizes the pleasantries that are, in fact, arbitrary conventions naturalized to function as the governing rule of social conduct.

This door-knocking scene, as Martin[19] points out, longs to be endowed with interpretive meaning. Gilbert and Gubar assert that this scene, as well as other instances of nonsense in Austen's text, exposes women's confinement and suppression under a patriarchal society.[20] Beyond the thematic and structuralist reading Gilbert and Gubar present, Austen's narrative seems to open up the field of verbal play and pose sensible questions. Are conventions like answering the door and greeting the knocker serious affairs riddled with rules? Why does one knock? Who has the power to knock—to exert a "violence" on the door? What *is* a door? After

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19. Martin explains, "The juvenilia offer intense, isolated scenes that cry out for interpretation, and resist it thoroughly. They invite us into their semblance of symbolism, and then undo whatever remnant of relationship could have given us a clue to the code" (84).

20. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 113.

all, Austen's Laura recounts another five paragraphs of speculative wonderings about whether someone is knocking and, if so, who it could be. The excessive use of language in its circular, doubling way, reveals not only the emptiness of a convention such as opening a door, but also the gap between words and their meaning. Language here does not bring Laura or her parents closer to meaning—their words are mere verbal play. The scene reveals the nonsense—the frivolity—of formal conventions and of communication itself.

Scenes of frivolity in *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" emphasize this silliness of communication by pointing to the characters' inability to communicate. In the novella, Laura and Sophia follow Edward and recently arrested Augustus to town. Laura's attempts to find Edward's location seem silly: "[N]o sooner had we entered Holbourn than letting down one of the Front Glasses I enquired of every decent-looking Person that we passed 'If they had seen my Edward'? But as we drove too rapidly to allow them to answer my repeated Enquires, I gained little, or indeed, no information concerning him" (89). The syntax of the sentence unravels itself: it sets up the desire to converse (Laura first enquires), but quickly folds back on itself (beginning with "But") to leave Laura with "no information concerning him." The effort to communicate—with its circuity—proves empty and frivolous. Laura's inquiry, like the answer, is hollow. The phrase "my Edward" holds no meaning for those beyond Laura and Sophia, yet Laura insists on them. Laura also does not pause to hear a response (from a "decent-looking Person"). Yet, Laura's "repeated Enquires" emphasize an often-blind reliance on language—despite its inadequacy—to make meaning of reality. This scene dramatizes the frivolity of conventional communication. Communication here is fruitless and meaningless, returning Laura to the place where she began and calling our attention to the nonsense at play within language. Similarly, in "The Mystery," the characters' speech is radically reduced to half-sensible phrases and whispers, rendering communication elusive and futile. In the first scene, Corydon enters a garden alone and

proclaims, "But Hush! I am interrupted. [*Exit* CORYDON]" (55). Corydon's exclamation to "But Hush!" seems purposeless and silly. The "But" suggests a contrast, the opposite of the previous or subsequent words, yet nothing precedes Corydon's first line. "Hush" suggests, again, that someone was talking, yet no one else is present before him in the scene. Similarly, his statement, "I am interrupted" suggests he is in the middle of an act, perhaps of speech, yet the audience is not privy to the interrupted or the intended speech. In effect, Corydon anticipates interrupting himself. Unlike Laura, whose excessive speech renders communication frivolous, Corydon's lack of speech points to a purposelessness of communication. Corydon's silly first—and only—line is marked by an inherent absence of meaning, suggesting language itself is often ill-equipped to convey what we really mean.

Other instances of frivolity in "The Mystery" also emphasize a radical reduction of communication to suggest the arbitrary nature of language. In the two-page playlet, the "plot" of the story is moved along by ellipses and whispers. For example, Fanny says, "Then t'was to no purpose that I..." and Daphne responds, "None upon Earth" (56). Fanny's "purpose"—whatever "it" was—had no result, no effect. In the end, it lacked any meaning or significance. We could say the same for this scene: though the characters seem to suggest a meaning, the audience is left guessing about the "purpose" and the "it" and never understands the reason for these short, small interchanges. If the language of *Love and Freindship* is an excess of words that is ultimately nonsense, language in "The Mystery" is a restriction of language that is equally nonsensical. Thus, both an effusion and a severe shrinking of language point to the same frivolity inherent in communication. So, when Fanny proclaims, "Well! now I know everything about it, I'll go away," the audience recognizes this as another piece of nonsense because *we* certainly do not know everything—or anything—about it (56). In fact, in "The Mystery," all the communication of any (implied) significance is communicated by whispers: Mrs. Humbug whispers, Fanny

whispers, Mrs. Humbug and Fanny whisper, and Colonel Elliott whispers to a sleeping Sir Edward Spangle (56-7). The social conventions of gossip or chitchat are reduced to whispers. The minimalist performance of this mystery or the secret that the audience never learns suggest that the meaning, ultimately, does not really matter. The audience does not know what is being whispered—the actors do not either. The utter reduction of the implied words into whispers suggests language itself has no sense. In "The Mystery," though communication is implied in these whispers, the exaggeration through condensation suggests that conventions surrounding communication are arbitrary and ultimately nonsensical.

Just as scenes of nonsense in *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" undermine the boundary between sense and nonsense in communication, the form of both works folds in on themselves to suggest frivolity. The epistolary form of *Love and Freindship* relies on communication via the conventions of letter writing, yet it frustrates two embedded aspects of letter-writing: immediacy and reciprocity. In the eighteenth century, the epistolary form's "virtue" "was its immediacy."[21] However, Laura's letters are "chopped into arbitrary chunks, letter by letter" and written when Laura is 55, "three decades after the event."[22] This delayed correspondence defeats the purpose of the immediacy of letter-writing. Epistolary writers often included action about the writing of the letters within their plots.[23] However, in *Love and Freindship*, though at the outset we learn Laura is writing to her friend Isabel's daughter Marianne as a "useful Lesson" of what not to do,[24] the letter-writing quickly devolves into one-

21. McMaster, 74.
22. McMaster, 74.
23. McMaster, 74.
24. Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Jane Austen Bowls a Googly: The Juvenilia," *Style*, 51 no. 1 (2017), 7 *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sty.2017.0000 says the picaresque novel proclaims, "[I]f you want to be bad and lead a miserable life, do what Laura did." In making Laura a negative example, *Love and Freindship* flips the typical, moral female protagonist of the novel. Doody

sided narration (77). There is no response from Marianne, the supposed recipient. Are Laura's letters received? Does Marianne learn from Laura's misfortunes and stick to the path of sense and reason? Does it matter? McMaster emphasizes, "Austen laughs at a convention that is so constantly concerned with the *process* of communication that communication itself languishes."[25] Laura's one-sided communication is frivolous—though there is no correspondence, no acknowledged recipient, Laura still writes for the sake of writing. The ambiguity and indifference with which the letters are sent emphasize language's inherent difficulty in meeting these conventions of letter writing. Austen's selected genre unravels itself by upending the conventions of the epistolary genre.

Likewise, the form of "The Mystery" challenges the very idea of the text as a mystery, revealing that literary mysteries are merely constructs of language.[26] In mysteries, the reader acts as detective, trying to unravel some awful secret that will unwind and startle the fates of the characters. Austen's playlet laughs at such conventions by labeling this mystery as "An Unfinished Comedy." Yet, in the dedication to the Reverend George Austen, she says, "I humbly solicit your Patronage to the following Comedy, which tho' an unfinished one, is I flatter myself as *complete* a *Mystery* as any of its kind" (55). Austen points to the nonsense of mysteries: to withhold information from the audience to keep them continually guessing. In suggesting her comedy is complete in its incompletion, she points to the contrived nature of mysteries. "The Mystery" suggests that nothing is truly beneath the mystery except a play of words. The language creates the ambiguity—words simultaneously construct and hide a meaning that is not

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emphasizes that Laura's one-sided narrative is a direct response to novels with moral-social traps—and Laura is not punished for failing to adhere to moral and social codes (117).

25. McMaster, 74.

26. Though mystery as a genre is often traced to Edgar Allan Poe's fiction beginning in 1841, Austen still toys with what constitutes a "mystery" in this late eighteenth-century text.

and was not actually present at all. Mrs. Humbug asks Fanny, "You understand me my Love?" (56). Of course, the audience as the intended recipients of this dialogue (in addition to Fanny), does not understand Mrs. Humbug at all. They understand nothing of the mystery, nor of the relationship—beyond filial links—between any of the characters. The play's conscious withholding of information suggests the constructed nature of mysteries and laughs at the audience's honest attempts to understand the nonsensical communication between the characters.

Unraveling more instances of frivolity in *Love and Freindship,* with reference to "The Mystery," points to the slippery boundary between sense and nonsense. Austen's characters in *Love and Freindship* are engaged in all kinds of frivolous nonsense—mostly as critiques of the sentimental. As McMaster points out, "Each treasured position of the sentimentalist is identified, exaggerated, and pursued to the point where it becomes a reversal of itself."[27] The two "reversals" I want to highlight are the conventions surrounding courtship, including the characters' refusal of their parents' wishes in marriage, and the idea of being free spirits, manifested in an extravagance with money. Marriage and money are two conventional standards by which we live and interact. Austen's text empties out the meanings of both conventions through her play with language.

The novella uses the excessive speech of Laura and Sophia to point to the emptiness and artificiality of language and the accompanying actions surrounding courtship. Laura and Sophia convince Macdonald's daughter Janetta to throw off her betrothed Graham and marry a fortune-hunter. Through their assertions, explanations, enumerations, and assurances, they verbally transfer Janetta's "violent" love from Graham to Captain M'Kenzie (94). Their excessive

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27. McMaster, 127. Different sites of criticism of the novel of sensibility include the excesses of sensibility, such as sighing, swooning, and effusions of friendship; the birth-mystery plot; amnesia; plot conveniences; love at first sight; self-admiration; romantic jargon; embedded life-histories; freedom of choice; rejecting the code of fathers; and glorying in the beauties of nature.

demand for the display of romantic fervor by a suitor emphasizes the artificiality of courtship. They ask Janetta if Captain M'Kenzie has declared his affection for her, and she responds:

> "So far from having ever declared it, I have no reason to imagine that he has ever felt any for me." said Janetta. "That he certainly adores you (replied Sophia) there can be no doubt—. The Attachment must be reciprocal—. Did he never gaze on you with Admiration—tenderly press your hand—drop an involuntary tear—& leave the room abruptly?" "Never (replied She)… "Indeed my Love (said I) you must be mistaken—: for it is absolutely impossible that he should ever have left you but with Confusion, Despair, & Precipitation—. Consider but for a moment Janetta, & you must be convinced how absurd it is to suppose that he could ever make a Bow, or behave like any other Person." (94)

Through Sophia and Laura's excessive speech, Janetta is easily convinced of the fabricated feelings of M'Kenzie. McMaster points out Austen's critique of the novel of sensibility in this scene, with Janetta's conversion from sense to sensibility.[28] Perhaps another way of reading it is the textual foregrounding of the emptiness of language. Words like "certainly," "must," and "absolutely impossible" indicate the hollowness of conventional signifiers employed in this courtship setting. Such words are frivolous because they lack their meaning—there is nothing "certain" about M'Kenzie's adoration, the attachment between the two does not exist, and it is entirely possible M'Kenzie has behaved "like any other person." The women use language to fabricate desire out of nothing. Sophia's proclamation that "he certainly adores" Janetta, they have a "reciprocal" attachment, and he "gazes" on Janetta with "Admiration" all seem empty. The exaggeration suggests a lack of meaning beneath the words and, by extension, beneath the conventional declarations of romance. In fact, the conjuration of affection seems beyond words—Austen uses six dashes in this excerpt that interrupt the women's speech. Words are thus inadequate for the expression of an attachment that does not exist. Similarly, the elopement of M'Kenzie and Janetta to Gretna Green is an "empty" gesture—often couples in England ran

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28. McMaster, 129.

away to Scotland to be married; here, M'Kenzie and Janetta are already in Scotland.[29] Their actions, like the words Laura and Sophia use to conjure affection, are frivolous. Excessive speech makes visible the emptiness of the meaning surrounding courtship rituals.

If Laura and Sophia's language is effusive, the communication between the characters in "The Mystery" is frivolously restricted so that the mystery might center on a marriage plot but could easily be about something else entirely. Such ambiguity suggests the inherent ambiguity and frivolity of propriety. The "*Dramatis Personae*" is divided into "Men" and "Women," suggesting a potential tension between the genders (55). As mentioned, the relationships between the characters are concealed, yet this division and an allusion to "propriety" might suggest courtship. Old Humbug advises Young Humbug, "It is for that reason I wish you to follow my advice. Are you convinced of its propriety?" (56). The "Old" instructs the "Young" to abide by propriety, yet the nature of such propriety or the "reason" for following the advice is hidden. Presumed courtship, instead of being excessive and effusive as in *Love and Freindship*, is characterized here by a restriction of language and deference for the parental authority that is equally silly because it is mysterious. Shortly afterward, Daphne tells us, "Oh! Fanny t'is all over" (56). Though the audience is not aware of what had begun, much less what is over, Daphne's proclamation could imply the sudden and elusive reasons for beginning and ending a romance. While this interpretation is speculative, "The Mystery" suggests the speculative nature of courtship itself, its often convoluted motives, and the ambiguous nature of language.

Austen's exaggerated language of the novella's characters' "choices" in marriage helps reveal the restrictive conventions surrounding marriage. Edward, one of the party who knocks at Laura's door, quickly becomes Laura's husband, though he does so in order to defy his father's wishes. Such brazen rejection of propriety and Edward's impulsivity in marrying Laura are

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29. McMaster, 134.

irrational and unconventional. He treats the institutions of family and marriage with frivolity. As Edward recounts his "sufferings," he explains, "'My Father, seduced by the false glare of Fortune and the Deluding Pomp of Title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. No never exclaimed I. Lady Dorothea is lovely and Engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your Wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my Father'" (81). Edward's repetition of "no never" is frivolous in its double negation, drawing attention to his arbitrary position on marriage. In a matter of minutes, Edward meets Laura and requests her hand in marriage solely to defy his father, even though he "prefer[s] no woman" to Dorothea. Edward is so pleased with himself that he later proclaims to his father, "'But, Sir, I glory in the Act—. It is my greatest boast that I have incurred the displeasure of my Father!'" (85). Edward's proud declaration reveals the absurdity of an unquestioning submission to a father's will. This abrupt, "senseless" rebellion could be as powerful as Wollstonecraftean reasoned denunciation of parental authority. Other couples in the novella also escape the "Shackles of Parental Authority" (87). Laura's friend Sophia and her husband Augustus engage in a "Clandestine Marriage" to escape their "Cruel and Mercenary Parents" (87). Additionally, one of the principal reasons for convincing Janetta to reject her chosen suitor Graham is "her duty to disobey her Father": "The very circumstances of his being her father's choice too, was so much in his disfavour, that had he been deserving her, in every other respect yet *that* of itself ought to have been a sufficient reason in the Eyes of Janetta for rejecting him" (93). Graham must be rejected, according to Laura, because he is Janetta's father's preference. *Love and Freindship* abounds with this seeming frivolity of rejecting parents' wishes for defiance's sake. Of course, in reality, children of the eighteenth century (and today) are supposed to listen to their parents. Austen's purposeful nonsense begs the questions, What if young men and women didn't follow their parents' wishes? Indeed, why *should* children follow the wishes of their parents

when they will have to live with the chosen partners in marriage? Austen writes within the convention of marriage, yet explodes it, to critique this lack of choice.

In these nonsensical parent/child and marriage scenes, the easily transferrable proclamations of affection onto different people also reflect the arbitrary nature of language—its ability to easily slide from one word to another. In so doing, the text reveals that language is often unfit to express desire. For Edward, Laura will do just as well as Lady Dorothea; for Janetta, Captain M'Kenzie easily replaces Graham. The only (nonsense) meaning the replacement spouses have is contained in their *not* being their parents' preference. The characters' contradictory choices reveal a searching for a desire they cannot identify. They point to the idea that we often know not what we desire and that we have difficulty expressing what we *do* want. Such an elusive desire is itself frivolous because there is no direction, no object of the desire. The thing that the couples desire—independence? rebellion? love?—is not at the center of their actions. For example, the speed with which the nonsensical marriage[30] between Edward and Laura takes place points to a constant displacement of desire. The changing of Edward's name also reiterates the slippery nature of language's ability to name desire. Initially, Laura introduces Edward's surname as Lindsay, but immediately adds, "for particular reasons however I shall conceal it under that of Talbot" (80). Edward, like his ambivalent decision, is himself a

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30. The "marriage" is not even legally valid because Laura's father who weds them is not ordained: "We were immediately united by my Father, who tho' he had never taken orders had been bred to the Church" (82). Again, Austen plays with the reader's preconceptions and calls into question the conventions that make up the institution of marriage. Doody points out this "marriage," too, which "is not technically quite the thing itself" (116). Other characters in *Love and Freindship* do not even pretend to be married. Philander and Gustavus, Laura and Sophia's cousins, explain how their mothers were never married: "'Our mothers could neither of them exactly ascertain who were our fathers....This is however of little consequence, for as our mothers were certainly never married to either of them, it reflects no Dishonour on our Blood which is of a most ancient & unpolluted kind'" (Austen 106-7). Of course, the cousins' statement is ironic, claiming the marriages would have dishonored their blood instead of made them legitimate children.

linguistically displaced and blurred character.[31] The frivolous nature by which characters transfer their affections not only calls attention to the artificiality of marriage conventions, but also points to the inability of language to name our desires.

In addition to nonsense in marriage, *Love and Freindship*'s characters' frivolity with money helps challenge notions of desire in terms of wealth and calls into question the very nature of wealth. In the novella, characters obtain money through sporadic inheritance from family members or by stealing. After casually mentioning the "trifling" death of her parents, Laura explains her empty inheritance from her mother and father: "But alas! the House had never been their own and their Fortune had only been an Annuity on their own Lives" (90). Fortunately for Laura, at the end of the novella, Sir Edward gives her four hundred pounds a year, though she wishes it were because of her "refined & Amiable" qualities (108). Laura's wistful sentiment points to the notion that people like to think they deserve, or even earn, their money. The landed gentry and upper middle class of the long eighteenth century often did not earn their money in the sense that they *worked* for it—they inherited it. The concept of inheritances or yearly salaries doled out over time reinforces the abstract nature of money. The ease with which money comes and goes in the novella reiterates this slippery nature of wealth. In an inn-yard, Laura and Sophia spontaneously meet with Laura's beneficent grandfather who, in about four minutes, hands his newly-discovered four broke grandchildren[32] fifty pounds each: "'Then I will provide for you all without farther delay—Here are 4 Banknotes of 50 £ each—Take them & remember I have done

31. White points this out as an example of nonsense as contradiction: "Since neither name is mentioned in the rest of the miniature novel, Laura does in a sense conceal both names after she has revealed them." Edward's two other names, both subsequently hidden, suggest identity too is slippery and elusive. Such similar sounding names as Augustus and Augusta (Edward's sister) also reinforce the playful nature of the juvenilia and highlight the ambiguity of names. The foolish Augustus is two letters away from the serious Augusta.

32. McMaster highlights how this scene laughs at the birth-mystery plot of sentimental novels (86, 126).

the Duty of a Grandfather—'" (92). Shortly afterward, Laura and Sophia are robbed by their two cousins, leaving them with as little money as they started with. This nonsense of having the money come and go as easily as the grandfather's appearance points to the ease with which money—itself arbitrary—is imbued with value and is lost.

Money in the novella is tangible in the form of bank notes, yet the incessant stealing of it points to wealth's changing value. Laura explains how Augustus and Sophia have been living after eloping: "they had been amply supported by a considerable sum of Money which Augustus had gracefully purloined from his Unworthy father's Escritoire, a few days before his union with Sophia" (88). The euphemism "gracefully purloined" plays with the severity of Augustus' crime. Sophia and Laura echo Augustus' example when they steal from Sophia's cousin Macdonald's desk (96). Although Sophia and Laura dabble in thievery, the experienced embezzlers are their cousins Gustavus and Philander. Though they rob Laura and Sophia, Gustavus and Philander's pilfering began earlier. In recounting their back-story to Laura, they explain how they knew their mothers kept nine hundred pounds in a drawer. Naturally, they stole the money:[33]

> Whether it was from this circumstance, of its being easily taken, or from a wish of being independent, or from an excess of Sensibility (for which we were always remarkable) I cannot now determine, but certain it is that when we had reached our 15th year, we took the Nine Hundred Pounds & ran away. Having obtained this prize we were determined to manage it with economy & not to spend it either with folly or Extravagance. (107)[34]

Their mothers subsequently "both starved to Death" (107). The lack of seriousness with which Gustavus and Philander—and Laura, our narrator—treat the theft and, essentially, murders of their mothers seems like nonsense. Austen signals this nonsense by attributing Gustavus and Philander's robbery to whatever motives the reader chooses—the ease of the theft, the desire to

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33. White uses this scene as an example of numbers and nonsense: "Not only should nine hundred pounds last much longer than the intended two months, but finding pleasure in getting rid of the money as fast as possible rather than trying to make it last is incongruous."

34. They spend the money with folly and extravagance (on, for example, silver buckles) in seven weeks and a day, "6 Days sooner than we had intended" (107).

be independent, or an overabundance of sensibility. Yet, Austen simultaneously plays out this nonsense to catastrophic effect—matricide. Such participation in nonsense reveals the hollowness beneath the characters' desires and language's inability to articulate it. For Gustavus and Philander and Sophia and Laura, stealing is a behavior to obtain their desires, but neither party knows what they actually want. Gustavus and Philander even admit they "cannot now determine" their motivation for stealing. Similarly, Sophia and Laura lack a definite purpose for robbery, and when they are turned out, they merely wander down the road (97). Their stealing helps unravel money. Bank notes—paper—have no intrinsic value; society agrees upon an arbitrary value that will allow the user of money to trade, say, a 5 £ note for an object or experience. There is no inherent value in the bank note, just as there is no inherent value in the object or experience. Society agrees upon a value for money, but it changes as time, governments, and leaders' whims do.[35] The constant stealing in *Love and Freindship* points to the fact that money does not *belong* to someone; it is constantly moving and changing. It has spontaneous, fleeting value, just like nonsense does.

Austen simultaneously acknowledges and mocks the conventions surrounding money through this frivolity of stealing paper money. For example, one must pay one's bills. Sophia and Augustus spend extravagantly and foolishly accumulate debt: "But they, Exalted Creatures! scorned to reflect a moment on their pecuniary Distresses & would have blushed at the idea of paying their Debts" (88). As a result, "[t]he beautifull Augustus was arrested and we were all undone" (88). Bills, debt, and prison highlight the very real consequences of the failure to

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35. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 105-6 even explains that novelists knew "money had meaning" and turned "it into a literary subject" (105-6). Specifically, he attests to the agreed-upon value of money during the long eighteenth century: "The characters in [Austen's] novels consider themselves free from need only if they dispose of incomes of 500 to 1,000 pounds a year."

participate in the conventional economic system. Thus, even though money and its attached value are arbitrarily constructed, failure to buy in to the system has very tangible consequences. The characters' treatment of money throughout *Love and Freindship* is nonsense—they acquire it willy-nilly, spend it just as quickly, and steal it whenever they can. Yet, the participation in such foolish behavior reveals the emptiness beneath characters' desires and the slippery nature of money and its assigned linguistic and societal value. *Love and Freindship*'s frivolous treatment of money calls attention to the empty meaning beneath the convention at the same time it reveals our dependency on language to try to make sense of reality. Austen's novella, through its blurring of sense and nonsense, upends the conventions surrounding verbal communication, courtship rituals, marriage, and monetary value.

Fainting and Non-Sense

We have traced the unraveling of meaning, especially that which upholds the conventions of communication, marriage, and money, through the textual play with nonsense as frivolity. But, what if we treat nonsense as absence—as a lack of the senses? Looking at the tension between sense and nonsense in "The Mystery" and *Love and Freindship* with a focus on absences—especially the absence of speech—reveals the difficulty of communication, especially when it relies on an evasive system of language.

The absences in "The Mystery" suggest we long to make meaning even when there are no words. In fact, the absences in the playlet suggest more meaning than the words do, and that suggestion holds all the import. For example, Mrs. Humbug says, "And what is to become of?..." and, "And is he to?..." (56). The ellipses hold the hidden words and their attached meaning. The three dots of the ellipsis are suggestive of words; they imply signification and sense, yet there is none. Though they invite the reader to fill in the pause with interpretation, the play does not

include enough clues to accurately cue the reader as to the meaning *of* each ellipsis. The audience is left with additional questions suggested by the ellipses instead of confirmed meanings. Thus, the ellipsis represents both a lack of meaning and a desire to make meaning of an absence of speech. Martin argues "The Mystery" is representative of metonymic wordplay: '"The Mystery: an unfinished comedy,' as the title suggests, is the purest example of free-floating signs of meaning. The whispers and interruptions constituting its dialogue are emblems of our ignorance, and the playlet as a whole is an extended metonymy of the idea of an indiscernible idea."[36] I want to suggest "The Mystery" illustrates the field of play between the presence and the absence of meaning; or, that "indiscernible idea" holds all the meaning that remains mysterious.

Similarly, in *Love and Freindship*, language is often inadequate to convey meaning. Laura's silence demonstrates the blurred boundary between meaning and its absence. After being thrown out of Macdonald hall, Sophia calls on Laura to distract her from her thoughts of her husband Augustus: '"Why do you not speak my Laura?' (said she after a short pause) 'I cannot support this silence—you must not leave me to my own reflections; they ever recur to Augustus'" (98). After having already pointed out the elms, Laura points to the sky, distressing Sophia by reminding her of Augustus' "blue sattin [*sic*] Waistcoat striped with white" (98).[37] Sophia demonstrates the metonymic nature of language—its tendency to be continually displaced onto some other signifier and the linguistic premise underlying such displacement. The elms and the sky inexplicably remind her of Augustus. Laura is speechless: "What could I do? ...I had not the power to start any other topic, justly fearing that it might in some unforseen [*sic*] manner again awaken all her sensibility by directing her thoughts to her Husband.—Yet to be

36. Martin, 91-2.
37. See McMaster for Austen's inside joke surrounding the blue waistcoat (170).

silent would be cruel; She had intreated me to talk" (98). While this scene critiques the heroine of sensibility, it also highlights the limitations of language. Laura is stuck in a paradox of expression, unable to use words and unable to remain silent. Speech would "awaken" Sophia's sensibilities, while silence "would be cruel." By suggesting that *anything* Laura could say would be associated with Augustus, this scene underscores the arbitrary links between words and their intended meanings. There is nothing inherent in the elms or the sky to suggest Augustus, yet Sophia reads Augustus there. Additionally, Laura's silence in this scene suggests that even a lack of language is fraught with meaning for Sophia. Her conundrum reflects the nature of communication—we desire to speak, yet we cannot rely on language's ability to hold the intended meaning.

The ultimate absence of language and, by extension, lack of cognition is fainting. Literal nonsense, then, is a lack of the senses, a lack of consciousness. Fainting, judged as veritably frivolous in novels of sentiment, functions as a kind of double nonsense, one that is both silly and without the five senses. Fainting is an absence one step removed from, say, sleeping because it implies an unconsciousness. For example, in "The Mystery," Sir Edward Spangle is "*reclined in an elegant Attitude on a Sofa, fast asleep*" when Colonel Elliott resolves to whisper him the secret despite Spangle's slumber (57). Even though Spangle will not hear the Colonel, Spangle is still conscious—the Colonel must contemplate the reception of the secret. Sleep is, after all, a suspension of consciousness. Like an ellipsis, the mind and body are in a temporarily dormant state where some brain activity, such as dreaming, occurs. By contrast, fainting is a negation of consciousness. Often, in *Love and Freindship*'s scenes where Laura and Sophia can neither be silent nor talk, they faint. Fainting as nonsense is especially important to analyze not only for its linguistic implications, but also for its narrative function in connection with readers. Wynne highlights how the novel of sensibility functioned as "a direct attack upon the nerves" of the

readers—they were to feel the thrills and "direct physical responses" to the text.[38] Readers of, for example, Ann Radcliffe were to experience actual physical sensations. In parodying the novel of sensibility by playing with fainting, Austen purposefully invokes sensations from her readers, too—not of shock, but of laughter. In *Love and Freindship*, Austen plays with the gap between consciousness and fainting to demonstrate fainting is a conscious, linguistic choice for Laura and Sophia. On the other hand, reading fainting as an actual act of unconsciousness shows language's inability to convey meaning.

Fainting is a loss of consciousness, usually due to an insufficient supply of oxygen to the brain. The "fainting" scenes of *Love and Freindship*, however, are of a different, controlled sort. The heroines seem to choose to faint, suggesting fainting is a linguistic—instead of physical—reaction. Scholars point out that the fainting in the novella is a critique of the oft-fainting heroine of sentimental novels.[39] McMaster argues the fainting scenes expose the assumption that "fainting fits are matters of stylistic choice," as if fainting were a "deliberate decision" instead of a bodily function.[40] For example, shortly after Laura and Sophia meet, they witness their husbands embrace in friendship. They cite an emotional overload and faint: "It was too pathetic for the feelings of Sophia and myself—we fainted Alternately on a Sofa" (86). The ability to take turns fainting on the sofa reveals Laura and Sophia's "stylistic choice" instead of a bodily reaction to external and internal stimuli. In mocking the fainting heroine of sentimental novels, Austen's Laura and Sophia control their fainting, making it an act of consciousness. Similarly,

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38. Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7.

For a literalized analysis of fainting, one might consult Haptic Studies, which engages with the physical sensations of literature and audience.

39. G.K. Chesterton in preface to *Love and Freindship* by Jane Austen (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1922) explains the work is "a satire on the fable of the fainting lady" (viii). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Laura and Sophia's fainting spells criticize romantic fiction that promotes the weak and overly passionate woman (118).

40. McMaster 28, 149.

after their newly discovered grandfather relieves them from their financial woes and hastily departs, Laura and Sophia "instantly fainted in each other's arms" (92). Here, too, because they make the effort to faint "in each other's arms," the scene points to the choice to faint rather than the uncontrolled bodily response. In fact, the word "instantly" is an exaggeration that suggests its opposite. Another instance of this control over fainting occurs after Augustus is arrested and Edward departs to condole with him. The women await Edward's return; Laura explains they could not support this "Blow to our Gentle Sensibility": "—we could only faint—" (89). In reducing Laura and Sophia's options to "only" fainting, the text suggests the women make a conscious decision to faint. The dashes that frame the decision draw attention to the narrative manipulation of a supposed physical response. *Love and Freindship* challenges the idea that fainting is a physiological response by linguistically manipulating Laura and Sophia's fainting spells. In so doing, Austen mocks the oft-fainting heroine of the novel of sensibility.

However, let us consider fainting as an actual loss of consciousness and an absence of language. What if Laura and Sophia are uncontrollably losing their physical senses when they faint? The fainting scenes, then, point to language's inability to convey the heroines' feelings or emotions. Fainting symbolizes a lack between the words and their meaning. In the novella, after Augustus is arrested for failing to pay his bills, Laura and Sophia faint: "Ah! what could we do but what we did! We sighed & fainted on the Sofa" (88). Actions and words are insufficient to convey their emotions; they devolve into absence. Similarly, when Augustus and Edward's carriage is overturned and the men are "weltering in their blood," the women think both are dead and know what to do: "nothing could remain to be done but what we were about" (99). Sophia "shreiked [*sic*] & fainted on the Ground—I screamed and instantly ran mad—. We remained thus mutually deprived of our Senses some minutes, & on regaining them were deprived of them again—" (99). An insensibility, an absence of meaning, is Laura and Sophia's form of

expression in the face of emotional duress. The many dashes that riddle these fainting scenes signal these absences of meaning. Language and expression are successfully cut off. Where the ellipsis functions as a suspension of meaning in "The Mystery," the dash here is a negation of significance. The reader and characters are able to think through the three dots of an ellipsis; they remain conscious. On the other hand, the dash cuts off thought and expression, leaving a visible blank space. It is clear one can recover from the ellipsis, but it is much more uncertain whether characters will or will not survive the dash. Fainting, then, suggests an absence of meaning is inherent in language but is also potentially perilous.

Love and Freindship plays out the distinction between a blind reliance on language and a submission to fainting. After Edward dies, Sophia continues "fainting every moment," while Laura raves "in a frantic, incoherent manner" about Edward and nonsense: "Talk not to me of Phaetons...—Give me a violin—. I'll play to him & sooth him in his melancholy Hours—Beware ye gentle Nymphs of Cupid's Thunderbolts, avoid the piercing Shafts of Jupiter—Look at the Grove of Firs—I see a Leg of Mutton—They told me Edward was not Dead; but they deceived me—they took him for a Cucumber—" (100). Scholars have pointed out the metonymic nature of this raving.[41] Laura's nonsensical ramblings demonstrate her desire to make meaning despite language's inability, especially in crisis, to make sense. Sophia, on the other hand, dies because of her fainting: '"[B]eware of fainting-fits...Though at the time they may be refreshing & Agreeable yet beleive [*sic*] me they will in the end, if too often repeated & at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution....One fatal swoon has cost me my Life....Beware of swoons Dear Laura....Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—'" (102). According to Sophia, the failure to use language (and run mad) costs Sophia her life. This proclamation or,

41. For one interpretation of each of these nonsense displacements, see Martin, 84.

"the moral"[42] of the novella, demonstrates the necessity of using language at the same time that it is inadequate to convey what we mean. Sophia cannot use language as expression while unconscious, yet Laura's ramblings are nonsense—they hold little meaning. Fainting as a loss of consciousness represents an absence between words and their intended meanings. Treating fainting as a literal loss of the senses highlights the necessity of using language, despite its inadequacy, rather than losing or renouncing it altogether.

Conclusion

Though Caroline Austen, other relatives, and various publishers have, at times, dismissed works in Austen's juvenilia as "all nonsense," the unfettered nonsense present in *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" is precisely an example of the "different capacities" worthy of critical study in the juvenilia.[43] Such play with language in the form of nonsense was clearly valuable to Austen in her identity as author. She is not "Aunt Jane"[44] in the juvenilia; instead, she allows the English language free rein to craft laugh-out-loud parody. In parodying works she read, she internalizes and repossesses the language and conventions of the sentimental novel and other genres; she is brilliantly aware of language's own conventions and restrictions. In blurring the boundary between sense and nonsense, she not only rejects becoming a "romantic" writer, but also critiques the language of fiction. *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" purposefully and blatantly fold in on themselves to call attention to the way language makes and negates sense.

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42. McMaster, 150.

43. Doody emphasizes, "Arguably, [the stories] exhibit different capacities at work than those evident in her six complete novels" (103).

44. Devoney Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017) spends time tracing Austen's "making" as Aunt Jane from James Edward Austen-Leigh's "nice" depiction to Constance and Ellen Hill's reshaping of the aunt as an agent of change (7, 9). Austen in the juvenilia is much closer to a "wild" Aunt Jane.

Appreciating the layers of nonsense in Austen's juvenilia adds a richness and texture to the later novels.[45] Reveling in the laugh-out-loud critique of the novel of sensibility that *Love and Freindship* offers helps draw attention to the less-obvious satire present in the novels. Reading the novels with an eye to the juvenilia draws a focus to the nonsense of, for example, Mr. Collins or Dr. Perry or Sir Walter Elliot. The novella and "The Mystery" represent Austen's commitment to entertainment for herself and her family.[46] Today, Austen's early works continue to receive increased attention from scholars, Jane Austen fans, and the entertainment media.[47] Here, reinterpreting nonsense in multiple ways in *Love and Freindship* and "The Mystery" undermines different conventions and language itself. Chesterton says of *Love and Freindship*: "There is almost everywhere a certain neatness in the nonsense."[48] My point is there is almost always a certain sense—that rings too true—in the nonsense. We cannot have one without the other. In fact, Sophia and Laura might tell us to embrace this nonsense: we can only "run mad as often as [we] chuse" and play with language.

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45. Scholars demonstrate the influence the juvenilia has on later works. McMaster devotes an entire chapter to the juvenilia's echoes in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example. Gilbert and Gubar argue "the incidents and characters" appear in later novels (121). Similarly, Litz points to the "germs" present in the juvenilia that spring up in later works (24). Interestingly and uniquely, Tuite argues there is not a "neat and clear-cut sense of the distinction between the juvenilia and the mature novels" (27).

46. McMaster explains her audience was her family circle (169). Yet, her audience is also "smart reading people like herself, young or old" (McMaster 84). White also emphasizes Austen's awareness of her audience: "Austen was well aware of [her audience's] expectations regarding sentimental novels, mysteries, histories, and sundry other genres, and she took great delight in confounding those expectations, many of which are shared by modern readers."

47. "Jane Austen's Juvenilia: Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution" is the theme of the Jane Austen Society of North America's annual meeting in 2020. The 2016 film *Love & Friendship*, though actually an interpretation of *Lady Susan*, received wide attention.

48. Chesterton, xi.

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