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ISADORA RAVAZOLO COPETTI

**“Dear Aunt Jane”: Memory and Representation in *A Memoir of Jane Austen***

PORTO ALEGRE

2019

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientadora Profa. Dra. Sandra Sirangelo Maggio

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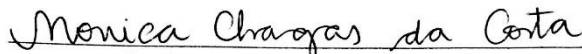
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*It was not, however, what she knew, but what she was, that distinguished her from others.*

James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*

*Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.*

Jane Austen, *Emma*

## RESUMO

*A Memoir of Jane Austen*, publicada em 1870 pelo sobrinho da autora, James Edward Austen-Leigh, é a primeira biografia escrita sobre Jane Austen. Considerando a posição do biógrafo enquanto parente da autora, sendo um cavalheiro, e um homem de seu tempo, não há menção, em sua obra, a assuntos inapropriados ou delicados. Seu livro foi muito bem recebido e contribuiu para forjar a imagem de Austen como uma senhora simpática, gentil e agradável que escreve obras leves e inofensivas. Por quase duzentos anos essa foi a ideia que se teve (e que muitos ainda mantêm) sobre Jane Austen e seus romances. Desde então, outros biógrafos, críticos literários, escritores e pesquisadores se dedicaram ao estudo da obra e da vida da autora, apresentando novos fatos e novas perspectivas a seu respeito. O objetivo da presente monografia é analisar os motivos e as intenções que levaram James Edward Austen-Leigh a escrever esta biografia, considerando a relevância do texto para a criação da imagem pública de Jane Austen e para a recepção de seus romances. O trabalho se divide em duas partes. A primeira trata sobre o gênero biográfico e os diferentes fatores levados em consideração no processo de ficcionalização da vida de uma pessoa. A segunda examina como se dá esse processo no corpus escolhido, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Como apoio teórico, lanço mão de ideias e conceitos sobre o gênero biográfico apresentados por Benito Bisso Schmidt (2014) e Nigel Hamilton (2007); de duas biografias mais recentes, a de Deirdre Le Faye (2002) e a de Janet Todd (2006); e do arsenal teórico-crítico com que contamos hoje sobre estudos de gênero e sobre Jane Austen. Com esta pesquisa, espero contribuir para os estudos da vida e imagem de Jane Austen, especialmente aqueles que exploram as relações entre autor e representação do sujeito e que consideram o contexto de produção e as motivações do autor.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Inglesa. Jane Austen. James Edward Austen-Leigh. Biografia. Crítica literária.

## ABSTRACT

*A Memoir of Jane Austen* is the first biography of that famous author. It was published in 1870 by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. Due to his position as her relative, as a gentleman and as a man of his time, there is nothing inappropriate or indelicate in his book, which was very well received at the time. This book forged the image of Jane Austen as a pleasant, calm and affable lady who writes light and innocuous novels. This idea persisted for almost two hundred years, and even today there are those who subscribe that. Since then, other biographers, literary critics, writers and researchers have studied Austen's life and work, and new facts and perspectives been opened on the subject. The aim of this monograph is to investigate the intentions and the motivations that led James Edward Austen-Leigh to write this first biography; the role played by this book in the creation of the public image of the author; and the way it influenced the course of Austen's critical fortune. The work is divided in two sections. The first, about biography as a genre, considers the different aspects of the process of turning a person's life into fiction. The second examines the way this process is triggered in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. I rely on Benito Bisso Schmidt (2014) and Nigel Hamilton for the theoretical support about biographies. For the contrast with recent biographies I go to Deirdre Le Faye (2002) and Janet Todd (2006). And I count on the qualified critical material we have about the author, especially in the area of gender studies. This research is meant as my contribution to the studies regarding Jane Austen's life and image, especially the ones that explore the connections between author and subject and consider the context of production and the writer's motivations.

**Keywords:** English literature. Jane Austen. James Edward Austen-Leigh. Biography. Literary criticism.



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## INTRODUCTION

As soon as I read the famous first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, I could sense something great unveiling before me. Jane Austen's skillful way of crafting the narrative was so fascinating that in a few weeks I had not only finished the novel, but also read two more. Ever since, I have not been able to detach myself from the ever-expanding universe of everything that concerns Jane Austen. Once I was done with her fiction, I soon became interested in trying to learn more about who she was as person.

After many readings, I discovered I was as drawn to Austen's personal story as I was to her fictional works. Born in December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire, Jane Austen was the seventh child of Reverend George Austen and his wife Cassandra. By the time she was ten years old, Austen was sent to a boarding school along with her older sister, but their stay was abruptly interrupted in the following year when both girls fell ill. With the exception of this episode, little is known about her childhood or early education.

The first records of Jane Austen's literary composition are dated from the period after her return from school. During her teenage years, Austen wrote numerous short stories, comical sketches and essays, created mainly to serve the purpose of entertaining her family. The first draft of a novel would appear only in the 1790's, with the epistolary novel now published under the name *Lady Susan*. Around that same time, the original versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were composed, but would only be published more than 15 years later.

Jane Austen lived in Hampshire until she was 25 years old, when her father suddenly decided to give up his position as Steventon rector to move to Bath along with his wife and two daughters. They lived there for five years until Mr Austen died in 1805, and it was not until 1809 that Mrs. Austen and her two daughters would finally move to Chawton, East Hampshire, where they spent the remaining years of their life. It was in Chawton that Austen composed most of her literary work, as she lived there until the moment of her death in 1817.

Austen was very fond of all her siblings, as well as her parents, but her sister Cassandra was the one with whom she shared the most intimate bond. It is from the correspondence between the two of them that the majority of her biographical information was acquired. Cassandra was also responsible for keeping all the writing material her sister wanted to be preserved after her death, discarding what she did not desire to share with anyone else. Still, of all this information, the public only knew Jane Austen's name until her first biography was written.

First published in 1869<sup>1</sup>, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* is a recollection of Jane Austen's life written by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. Based on Austen's personal correspondence, as well as family and acquaintances' memories and tales, the *Memoir* made it possible for the public to get an unprecedented view of the author behind the novels. The narrative is presented in chronological order, with 14 chapters discussing her life, family, social and geographical context and creation process, as well as her works' early reception and fragments of unfinished projects.

On his text, Austen-Leigh presents the life of his aunt through a very particular perspective, not only writing as a member of her family, but also conveying the values of nineteenth century England. He ensures that all the Austen family tree is described in great detail, as well as the context of the Hampshire county during the Regency era<sup>2</sup>. When the narrative reaches Jane Austen's life, it can be argued that he focuses heavily on some events, but only briefly mentions others.

The literary creation of his aunt is another central theme of the *Memoir*, as James Edward Austen-Leigh constantly alludes to Austen's novels, drawing connections between her life and fiction. Additionally, there is an entire chapter dedicated to her works' praise, with reviews written by authors and critics of the period. His concern with her public image and reputation as a writer is fairly evident throughout the full extent of the narrative, but especially in the excerpts in which his personal opinions can be more prominently perceived.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the text made it possible for the public to get to know Jane Austen as a person, even if more than 50 years after her death. The publication of the *Memoir* not only attracted the public's attention to Austen's life, but also to her fiction, which increased considerably her works' popularity at the time.

Considering my position as a 21st century reader, when I got to the end of the book, I started to wonder about James Edward Austen-Leigh's narrative point of view and the portrayal of Jane Austen created by him in the *Memoir*. From that initial reasoning I drew the questions that now drive the writing of this monograph, which regard Austen-Leigh's position as a writer and the impact of his text in Jane Austen's image and reception.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the editor of *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, Kathryn Sutherland, the first edition of the *Memoir* was published in 1869, even though it is dated from 1870. The second edition, dated from the subsequent year, included further correspondence, family papers, revised biographical information and the addition of some of Austen's unfinished or early fiction, such as the cancelled chapter of *Persuasion* and the novels now known as *Lady Susan*, *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*.

<sup>2</sup> Mentions of the Regency era in this work refer to the period in the history of the United Kingdom that lasted from 1795 to 1837, which includes the last years of King George III's reign, as well as the reign of his sons George IV and William IV.

In the first chapter, I intend to investigate James Edward Austen-Leigh's biographical motivations, considering his narrative choices, the facts presented (and omitted) and his approach to the biographic genre. To do so, I first introduce the biographical genre, bringing in the theoretical support from Schmidt (2014) in what concerns the ethical motivations behind biographies, and the historical overview developed by Hamilton (2007), focusing mainly in his ideas about the biographical genre during the Victorian era.

Afterwards, I move on to the analysis of Austen-Leigh's point of view, illustrating the debate with quotes from his text. It is important to remark that this monograph is based upon my reading of *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, although I have consulted several sources on Jane Austen's life and fiction. The works written by Le Faye (2002), Southam (1987), Sutherland (2002) and Todd (2006) have been of exceptional help, providing new insights and endorsing well-established views.

Finally, on the second chapter, I present my thoughts on the problem of Jane Austen's representation in the *Memoir*, considering the manner in which she is portrayed and how the image created by James Edward Austen-Leigh impacts her reputation as a writer and public figure. The critical works mentioned above have also been helpful in this section of the text, as they explore Austen's life in light of biographical information not yet divulged by the time the *Memoir* was published.

It may also be relevant to point out that in this work the words memory and representation relate to James Edward Austen-Leigh's choices regarding Jane Austen's life and the way she is portrayed in the narrative, respectively. It is not my intention to explore these concepts thoroughly, but I have chosen them because I believe they represent both aspects of my analysis: Austen-Leigh's role as a writer and the image of Jane Austen created in his text.

## **1. BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: THE BIOGRAPHICAL POINT OF VIEW IN A *MEMOIR OF JANE AUSTEN***

The current section is dedicated to the study of the biographical point of view in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, taking into account the author's position as a writer and the intentions that prompted the composition process of the text. A brief outline of the biographical genre is also presented, addressing primarily the ethical debate that is associated with the genre and the context of production of the work analysed, that is nineteenth century England.

### **1.1 Biography: a historic genre**

When I decided to write this monograph about *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, I could not help wondering about the relevance of a biography to my area of study. Throughout my entire academic path, I had not read a biography until I started to work with James Edward Austen-Leigh's text. Some of my concern subsided as soon as my research on the biographical genre expanded, since theoretical sources on the theme mention that biography is a rather unexplored topic in academic studies.

In *Biography: A Brief History* (2007), biographer and scholar Nigel Hamilton claims that biography holds a paradoxical position in the Western civilization: although it is currently the most popular non-fiction genre<sup>3</sup>, produced and broadcasted in an numerous variety of media, it is not acknowledge as such by the academia, as universities do not have any major works developed on the subject. In this scenario, where scientific production on the theme is rather meager, I decided I would focus on two main texts: the book aforementioned and an article by history professor and researcher Benito Bisso Schmidt.

Hamilton (2007) writes a highly detailed characterisation of the biographical genre, exploring topics related to the production and reception of biographies in different historical periods. For the purpose of this text, I selected the first chapter, where he briefly discusses biography's main issues today, and the chapter in which he examines the context of

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of genre used in this work is the one developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. He argues that language is performed in many difference utterances, by individuals in different areas of human activity. Each context in which language is performed, through the individual utterances, develops its own relatively stable type of these utterances, and this is what the author considers a speech genre.

biography during the Victorian<sup>4</sup> period. Schmidt (2014), on the other hand, focuses on the ethical implications of biographies, by exploring the historical approach to the debate, while presenting a concise overview of the genre.

In the first chapter of his book, Hamilton (2007) mentions an aspect of biography that is pertinent to this research: the biographer's intentions. He defends that "Every work of biography or autobiography had, after all, its agenda, conscious or unconscious, laudatory or critical, whether recording an individual's actions or his reflections." (HAMILTON, 2007, p. 27). In this passage, what the author brings is the idea that biographies are always prompted by biographers' need of conveying a specific message through their approach to the biographee's narrative.

This aspect is further analysed by Schmidt (2014) in his article, as he delves into the issue of ethics and biographies. He argues that since the Ancient period and in spite of its transformations and differences among authors, the biographical genre has always been prompted by an ethical motivation, defined in the excerpt below:

to make, through the example of biographed characters, a second degree reflection on the norms; to introduce and reinforce the boundaries of what is permitted and what is prohibited; and, most importantly, to constitute a subject who is forced or at least prone to do his duty, to do good, according to the dominant meanings assigned to such terms during each period of time and in each society. (SCHMIDT, 2014, p. 114)

In Ancient times, biography was a very popular genre. The texts were written considering the contrast between vices and virtues, emphasising the later. After a period of sparse production in the Medieval age, the second rising of the genre took place in the Renaissance, when new authors started to broaden their writing scope, now including women, artists and people from other cultures. Yet, the idea of focusing on the biographee's virtues as a way of setting an example was the main purpose of most writers.

During the Modern era, the moralising element in biographies was still present, but as the values have changed, so has the genre: the tension between ethics and individuality resulted in texts crafted around a hero figure. When discussing this period, Schmidt (2014) states that

On one hand, in line with the movement of individualization that permeates Western societies, modern biographies emphasize the unique qualities of the hero, including his ability to transgress social norms in favor of ideas that will only take place in the future. On the other hand, they show how this hero embodies values

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<sup>4</sup> Mentions of the Victorian era in this work refer to the period of Queen Victoria's reign in the United Kingdom, which lasted for most of the nineteenth century, from 1837 to 1901. *Memoir of Jane Austen* was published in 1870, in the period commonly called mid-Victorianism.

and collective qualities of a small group (nobility, for example, in the case of chivalric biographies), of the Nation, or even of all Humanity) (SCHMIDT, 2014, p. 112)

From the eighteenth century onwards, the figure of the hero found itself in decline as society's values shifted to a more reason guided mindset. The 19th century provoked a major transformation in the biographical genre in the historical point of view, as a debate about the role of the individual in history emerged. The narratives of the period were no longer about one person's good actions, but attempted to endorse moralisation on a collective level.

At the same time, the biographical genre was becoming more popular in the Victorian society, growing as the levels of literacy among the population increased. It was around this period that the first professional biographers appeared, possibly to fulfill the demand of new works by the public. According to Hamilton (2007), the writing style of Victorian biographies matched its society's morals, only describing successful, intellectual people with flawless personalities. He also mentions that "Professional biographers packed their biographical work with "useful" information that had a moral purpose, in the Plutarchian tradition—deliberately or unconsciously using facts and sterling human examples to purvey a Victorian instructional and moral agenda" (HAMILTON, 2007, p. 126), which shows that the ethic motivation was still present.

It was in this context that *A Memoir of Jane Austen* was written and published, in a period when the biographical genre was reflecting the continuous transformations of the English society. Following the striking exuberance of romantics' autobiographies and memoirs, such as Lord Byron's *Detached Notes* and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, the typical Victorian biography shifted from an unfiltered authentic narrative to an assortment of a person's achievements and merits, avoiding even the slight mention of any unflattering event or personality trait.

Hamilton (2007) attributes that transition to financial motives, as many biographers were hired to write a boastful depiction of one's life. He also indicates that Victorian's rather fastidious public "(...) policed by upper- and middle-class magistrates and arbiters of decency and morality, demanded—and for the most part received—spotless reputations." (HAMILTON, 2007, p. 114). Although James Edward Austen-Leigh did not receive any monetary incentive to write his aunt's biography, he may have been interested in the possible outcome of the *Memoir's* success, and he was certainly aware of Victorian morals and values when he composed his work.

It is also relevant to point out the lexical and style choices in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*.

The word memoir has been frequently used, since the rise of the biographical genre, to designate an autobiographical narrative, presenting a subjective and self-centred view of a person's life. The more I read Austen-Leigh's text, the more I was convinced that it was far from being considered a traditional biography, as the ones written by professional biographers in the 19th century, but it does not fit the conventional definition of a memoir either.

As one of the purposes of this work is to understand James Edward Austen-Leigh's narrative point of view, I take as deliberate his choice of calling his text a memoir, and by doing so I raise some questions about his intentions as an author. In the next section, I discuss Austen-Leigh's motivations when writing *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, as well as his narrative and style choices and whether his position as a family member shaped the depiction of his aunt throughout the book.

## **1.2 “To all this I am a living witness”: James Edward Austen-Leigh and the narrative perspective**

On the first page of *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, James Edward Austen-Leigh<sup>5</sup> openly states that his narrative is built upon his own recollections and limited materials about Jane Austen, such as her own letters and descriptions written by relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. Then, he ensures his reader that the life story of his aunt was one worth telling and, as no one else seemed inclined to do so, he decided to write it himself. The text ends on the same note, with Austen-Leigh restating that the main source of the *Memoir* is his own memory, as many letters were destroyed by the family in an attempt of preserving the events of Jane Austen's life they considered should remain private. He also affirms that his motive for writing the text was simply the fact that he felt it had to be written and knew no one else that could do it.

On these fragments of the text, it is already possible to observe two important aspects of the narrative: the lack of biographical sources and Austen-Leigh's viewpoint. In the following paragraphs I explore his intentions as a writer, considering the events described and their subsequent comments, the narrative and style choices and the possible outcome of

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<sup>5</sup> James Edward Austen-Leigh was born in 1798, and spent most of his childhood in the Steventon rectory, after George Austen moved to Bath and his eldest son James, James Edward's father, took his position as the rector. Like his father and grandfather, he too decided to become a clergyman. After the death of his great-aunt Jane Leigh Perrot, he inherited her estate, Scarlets, and took the name 'Leigh' in addition to Austen. In 1869 he started to write the *Memoir*, with the help of his sisters and cousins.



the book's publication. I also consider the biographical motivations that prompted his writing process, determining the ethical aspects of it.

Divided in 14 chapters, including the cancelled chapter of *Persuasion*, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* is James Edward Austen Leigh's reading of his aunt and her life. To write his text, Austen-Leigh collected the letters exchanged between Jane Austen and her family and friends that were in possession of his sisters and cousins, but some of them could not be gathered until years after the publication of the *Memoir*. Kathryn Sutherland, the editor of *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, affirms, in the introduction of the edition that "The details of the life of no other famous individual are so exclusively determined through family as are those of Jane Austen" (SUTHERLAND, 2002, p.21).

The family ties, however, are not the only aspect that grant the *Memoir* its subjective tone. In addition to the use of the first person singular pronoun throughout the narrative, Austen-Leigh, presents his aunt's in such a personal way that the book does not fit completely the 21st century reader definition of a biography. In that sense, the choice of calling his work a memoir, a word mostly applied to autobiographies, is perfectly coherent, but also a hint of his intentions as a writer.

Right in the beginning of the text, I could surely affirm that *A Memoir of Jane Austen* was very different from all the other biographies of Jane Austen that I had read. I believe it is important to acknowledge that biographies are always written through their author's point of view, which makes it inconceivable for any work of the biographical genre to be unbiased. At the same time, Austen-Leigh's point of view was an especially biased one, as he was related to Jane Austen, and even so their relationship was not a close one, he was acquainted with her on an intimate level.

As I moved forward in the narrative, I was able to notice the emphatic way in which Austen-Leigh expressed his ideas, often merging them with his aunt's. This aspect is particularly evident when he discusses her fiction: there are many comments about Austen's composition habits in the text, but Austen-Leigh seems deeply concerned in presenting his own opinions about the novels, including an entire chapter titled "Observation on the novels". In this chapter, when discussing his aunt's published works, he affirms:

They certainly were not written to support any theory or inculcate any particular moral, except indeed the great moral which is to be equally gathered from an observation of the course of actual life—namely, the superiority of high over low principles, and of greatness over littleness of mind. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 124)

Here, it is not only possible to observe an attempt of imbedding his interpretation into Austen's fiction, but also an inclination to displaying his moral values.

The same mindset can be observed in another episode, this time concerning the novel Austen was writing during the period she lived in Bath. The novel, named *The Watsons* by Austen-Leigh himself, was never finished, but its twelve chapters were published in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. The reasons that drove Jane Austen to stop the composition of this work are unknown, but when debating the matter Austen-Leigh declares that his aunt might have regretted putting her heroine in an unfavourable position of poverty and obscurity, which led her to abandon the text.

Todd (2006) presents a different view of the issue, arguing that:

There are several possible reasons for her quitting. Since it occurred at about the time when she must have realised that 'Susan', like 'First Impressions' before it, was not going to be published, she might have felt demoralised. But, considering her later clear belief in the value of her writings, this is perhaps insufficient cause. (...) A further possibility, entwined with this social anxiety, is that Jane Austen abandoned *The Watsons* when her life turned upside down with her father's death (the father in the novel was also a cleric). The new financial and social precariousness may have upset the writing of a novel with a heroine in similarly reduced circumstances but younger in age. (TODD, 2006, p. 7-8)

James Edward Austen-Leigh was not able to retrieve most of his aunt's correspondence from the period she lived in Bath<sup>6</sup>, so I understand that he never learnt what Jane Austen might have felt after her frustrated attempts of publishing her works, or the mourning she definitely went through after her father's death. At the same time, when he suggests that she gave up an already advanced piece of fiction because she realised the protagonist's status in society was too low, he elevates his own assumptions into a conceivable hypothesis.

In addition to the blend of ideas, Austen-Leigh constantly associates events of his aunt's life or personality with her fiction. In the first chapter, he declares that her character's charms were merely a reflection of her own kindness and pliable temper, which is at the same time a praising of her works and a patronising statement, even if subconsciously, as he implies that she was able to create enjoyable characters only because she was enjoyable herself. The excessive praise of her works, along with his personal opinions and the

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<sup>6</sup> Cassandra Austen had been in possession of her sister's letters after Austen's death, but before her own death, she distributed them among her nieces and nephews. The letters exchanged during the years they lived in Bath were given to Fanny Knight, the oldest niece, who was already of advanced age when her cousin James-Edward decided to write the *Memoir*. According to her daughter, she was not able to locate any of the letters or comment on their content, but after her death all the letters were gathered, and later on published.

connections between her life and her fiction, are present throughout the *Memoir*, every time her works are mentioned.

Besides that, many pages are dedicated to an detailed description of the Austen family, including relatives that passed away long before his aunt was born. Also, because he is talking about the little village of Steventon in the turning of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he recounts the geographical and social scenery of the period, as well as the habits and customs of the English rural gentry<sup>7</sup>. He then proceeds to detail Jane Austen's childhood as much as he is able to, considering the lack of records from this period. Her brothers and sister are also included in the narrative, with special attention to the close bond Jane and her sister Cassandra shared. Austen-Leigh points out that they had a very close relationship, which can be verified by the numerous letters they exchanged during the following years.

After the description of Austen's family and her early years, the author states that "It cannot be doubted that all this had its influence on the author in the construction of her stories, in which a family party usually supplies the narrow stage, while the interest is made to revolve round a few actors." (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 15) With this quote, he once again displays an interest in correlating his aunt's writings with the events of her life. As far as I am from implying that Jane Austen's life may not have influenced her work, I have to address Austen-Leigh's insistence on the matter, suggesting a possible reason for it to occur.

By the time the *Memoir* was published, the public was already acquainted with Jane Austen's six novels<sup>8</sup>, but still knew very little about their author's life. Considering the lack of written records about Austen, Austen-Leigh might have connected the novels with her life so frequently because they are, in a way, a written proof of what he is trying to convey. By affirming that his aunt's fiction is based on her life, or that their characters are a result of her own congenial temper, he gives the public a reliable source to support his claims.

When it comes to reliability, maybe the most controversial of Austen-Leigh choices refers to his aunt's romantic interests. He plainly states "Of Jane herself I know of no such definite tale of love to relate." (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 24), which is contradicted on the

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<sup>7</sup> Mentions of rural gentry in this work refer to people from high social classes, usually landowners, that did not belong to the aristocracy, which means they did not have any title of nobility. Although George Austen was not owner of any properties, the Austen family could be considered a part of the rural gentry, since George Austen was the rector of the Steventon rectory and after his death, his son Edward, who was adopted by the wealthy Knight relatives, became the owner of Godmersham Park, Chawton Manor, and Steventon.

<sup>8</sup> During her life, Jane Austen only published four of her six complete novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816). Both *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818) were published after her death. The first novel written by Jane Austen, the short epistolary tale *Lady Susan* was published as a part of *Memoir of Jane Austen*, along with her unfinished novels *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*. Her early minor works and letters would only be published in the 20th century.

same page when he mentions that Jane Austen had received a marriage proposal from a decent, polite and well-connected gentleman, but declined because she was not infatuated with him. He cunningly omits, though, the circumstances of such event. Contemporary scholar and biographer Deirdre Le Faye, in her book *Jane Austen: The World of her Novels*, describes it with in more detail:

In the winter of 1802, certainly, while she and Cassandra were on a visit to their brother James back in the family rectory at Steventon, Jane received a proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither, the plain and awkward younger brother of some girlhood friends of hers, and heir to a pleasant country estate near Basingstoke. Perhaps from feelings of friendship or gratitude, she accepted his proposal in the evening; but by the next morning had evidently decided that worldly benefits would not outweigh the disadvantages of a loveless marriage, and so retracted her consent. (LE FAYE, 2002, p. 29)

Austen-Leigh refrains from disclosing the fact that his aunt had accepted the proposal and only then refused it in the following day. He also hides the name of the gentleman, presumably to avoid any conflicts with his relatives. One of the reasons for this omission might have been an intention of not focusing on his aunt's personal life, considering that she died unmarried, being financially supported by her father and then her brothers during her entire life.

The most significant omission, however, is related to the nature of Jane Austen's relationship with Thomas Lefroy, a neighbour's nephew that was visiting the village of Ashe, in Hampshire at the same time as Austen. Austen-Leigh, when talking about their acquaintance, comments that Thomas Lefroy was still alive by the time the *Memoir* was published, and declares that:

One must look back more than seventy years to reach the time when these two bright young persons were, for a short time, intimately acquainted with each other, and then separated on their several courses, never to meet again; both destined to attain some distinction in their different ways (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 46)

He does not mention any intimate connection Thomas Lefroy and his aunt may have had, while other authors, such as Deirdre Le Faye (2002), affirm that there were flirtation between the two, but as their financial situation was not favourable, the Lefroy family intervened and stopped the possible union before it could happen.

Recently, and especially after the success of the 2007 film *Becoming Jane*<sup>9</sup>, the public

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<sup>9</sup> *Becoming Jane* is a 2007 British film based on the 2003 biography *Becoming Jane Austen*, by John Hunter Spence. Both works mix biographical information with fiction, creating a narrative heavily based on the plot

have started associating Austen's rumoured affair with Thomas Lefroy with her books, implying that their relationship inspired her to write her novels. Ever since the publication of the *Memoir*, the readers of Austen's work have started to draw connections between her life and the fictional world she created. In the introduction of *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage vol. 1: 1811 - 1870*, Southam (1979) debates the impact of *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, and declares:

The *Memoir* draws an engaging portrait of 'dear Aunt Jane', the authoress of charming love-stories spiced with humour. This picture fed a growing interest in the author's life and times and encouraged a cult of appreciation in which biographical details and literary commentary were easily and uncritically mingled. (SOUTHAM, 1979, p. 2)

Reading Southam's comment on the issue, it is possible to observe that the *Memoir* gave readers the liberty of creating their own version of Jane Austen, based both on trustworthy biographical information and on her own fiction.

When the narrative reaches the moment of Austen's first publication, Austen-Leigh directs his focus once again to the image of his aunt as a writer. It is in this point that he mentions her writing habits, giving a surprisingly vivid description of Jane Austen's composition process:

She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was coming (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 83)

Disregarding the reliability debate, this passage was memorable enough to be quoted by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* some decades later, as she comments on the fact that Jane Austen had to write on the general sitting-room of the house, where she was prone to all sort of interruptions, and even so she managed to write what Woolf considers to be good books<sup>10</sup>.

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and characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, claiming that it was Jane Austen's affair with Thomas Lefroy that inspired the novel. Although it was not a critical success, the film earned approximately \$37 million, a great amount for an independent production.

<sup>10</sup> The original quote where Virginia Woolf mentions this passage in *A Room of One's Own* is: "Without boasting or giving pain to the opposite sex, one may say that *Pride and Prejudice* is a good book. At any rate, one would not have been ashamed to have been caught in the act of writing *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet Jane Austen was glad that a hinge creaked, so that she might hide her manuscript before anyone came in. To Jane Austen there was something discreditable in writing *Pride and Prejudice*. And, I wondered, would *Pride and Prejudice* have been a better novel if Jane Austen had not thought it necessary to hide her manuscript from visitors?" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 67)

In another passage, he argues that his aunt wrote for her own amusement, doing it only when she was not engaged in helping with the domestic affairs or taking care of her mother, nephews and nieces. In the eighteenth century, women were still very far from achieving financial and social independence, so their only practical role in society was being a wife and taking care of their homes and children. When explaining the historical context of Jane Austen's life, Todd (2006) states:

In much the same period, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft was complaining about the restricted lives of women. The only real 'work' that society seemed to sanction was the gaining of a husband and, when genteel, reasonably educated girls remained single, they were regarded as a drain on their families, used primarily to help nurture and nurse their married relatives. (TODD, 2006, p. 3)

Considering the ideas presented by Todd, I could understand that Austen-Leigh was representing the views of his time when he decided to portray his aunt as a domestic<sup>11</sup>, appeased figure, that created stories as a pastime and not as a meaningful occupation. Writing was encouraged by her family, as long as it did not interfere with her duties, but considering that Austen had to be supported by her father for most of her life, it was reasonable of her to try to profit from her fiction, as the financial situation of the Austen family was not the most favourable one. The way she is portrayed by her nephew, however, shows a different Austen, one who had no ambition or aspiration of success.

At the same time, it is extremely visible that Austen-Leigh intended to demonstrate his aunt's accomplishment by including in the *Memoir* an entire chapter dedicated to the praise of her works. He mentions Lord Macaulay's appreciative opinions and the famous passage from Sir Walter Scott's diary in which he displays a deep admiration for *Pride and Prejudice*. When he acknowledges less favourable notices, though, he demonstrates his own inability of grasping the complexity of Austen's narrative skills. He complains about one of the first reviews published about his aunt's novels, claiming that the author's views are restricted and adds that "Nor is he fair when, in 'Pride and Prejudice,' he represents Elizabeth's change of sentiments towards Darcy as caused by the sight of his house and grounds." (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 114).

It is quite evident that the author of the review was not able to understand Jane

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<sup>11</sup> In this work, the word domestic refers to the duties and expectations of a genteel woman, such as Jane Austen, in what concerns the social role of the woman in the family and society. It is very different from the contemporary idea of domesticity, that represents an opposition to formal labour and is related to household chores.

Austen's satire<sup>12</sup> in the passage cited, and I believe Austen-Leigh shared the same impressions. In other moments in the text, he insists that his aunt was not a satirical person and that she was unable of censoring anyone. I must acknowledge, though, that this view might have been the one all readers of Jane Austen when her works were first published. According to Southam (1987), the first critical piece to address Austen's irony, in fact, was only written in 1870, the same year Austen-Leigh published the *Memoir*:

In 1870 there also appeared a totally different view, in an essay by the Shakespearian scholar Richard Simpson. Simpson's Jane Austen is a genius, in outlook essentially critical, limited in her scope, yet remarkable for the power of irony with which she searches the conduct and values of her society. Simpson's view had no antecedents and no immediate following. It awakened no response in Victorian thought and for many years this understanding of the novelist's controlling irony played no part in the discussion of her art. (SOUTHAM, 1987, p. 2)

Although the satirical quality of Austen's works was not instantly distinct as it is nowadays, perhaps an ironic reading of Austen's fiction would go against Austen-Leigh's image of his aunt: an unmarried, docile woman who wrote to entertain herself and her family.

In addition to that, Austen-Leigh's overall style is quite excessive, especially in what concerns the praising of his aunt's works. The first review of the *Memoir*, published in the year of its publication and brought up by Southam (1987) in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage vol. 2: 1870 - 1940*, addresses the matter, stating that,

It is of some interest to know how stupid was the audience to whose ears Miss Austen made her first appeal, — how little they could understand the delicate truth and humour of her pictures. But to tell us that many worthy persons have since enjoyed her writings thoroughly, is like telling us that many have felt the warmth of summer. Specific testimony of that kind implies that the fact attested needs attestation, —that it is not matter of common notoriety and universal recognition, which, as regards Miss Austen's merits, we are happy to say that it is. (SOUTHAM, 1987, p.161-162)

He also mentions that by putting so much effort into displaying how admired she was, Austen-Leigh might not have understood the true quality of Jane Austen's work, which I believe could be argued taking into account his opinions on her fiction in the text.

The Victorian public, whose knowledge about Jane Austen's personal life was limited, may not been able to notice Austen-Leigh's narrative strategies to create a pleasing

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<sup>12</sup>Austen's use of satire refers to the Horatian satire, named after the Roman satirist Horace. This type of satire criticises social vices in a gentler and milder way, making use of irony and sarcasm to achieve its humour quality. In Austen's works, this literary device can be noticed, among other occasions, when her characters beliefs and behaviour collide with the moral and social rules of the society.

image of his aunt. The 21st century reader, on the other hand, has had many years of biographies, critical compilations, films and documentaries about Jane Austen, thus being more likely to perceive his intentions in what concerns Jane Austen's image. Still, it was for the Victorian public that Austen-Leigh wrote, which becomes rather evident when his approach to the biographical genre is analysed.

According to Schmidt (2014), every biographical work has an ethical motive, usually associated with the moral system of its period. When Austen-Leigh chooses not to disclose the entire version of the events concerning Jane Austen's romantic connections, or when he portrays his aunt as someone who wrote for her own pleasure, he reveals an inclination to conceive his narrative based upon the values that guide the Victorian society, presenting, in that way, one of the ethical motivations in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. By recounting in detail the events of her life, Austen-Leigh would be exposing his aunt to the judgment, and likely disapproval, of the public, but when he depicts Austen as a loving, sensible and cordial aunt, he creates a figure that embodies the values cherished by the English society in the nineteenth century.

On that same note, when he discusses her fiction, he directs his line of argumentation to the aspects he considers interesting or superior, imposing his moral values to support his reading of the novels. Southam (1987) supports this claim when he affirms "His aunt is rendered to Victorian taste. Her life is mirrored in her art—at least, in its most favourable aspect." (SOUTHAM, 1987, p.4). The idea that Austen-Leigh created an overly honorable image when he depicts his aunt is analogue to the idea that he presented a subjective interpretation of her works, based exclusively on his personal beliefs and ulterior motives.

On the following chapter, I explore the issue of the portrayal of Jane Austen in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, taking into account not only the image created by Austen-Leigh through his biographical point of view, but also its influence on the reception of her works. I selected excerpts from the original text to be analysed, contrasting them with Jane Austen's own views, which can be observed in her letters, and ideas developed by contemporary scholars and biographers.



## 2. "DEAR AUNT JANE": THE CRAFTING OF AN ENDURING IMAGE

In order to analyse the image of Jane Austen created by James Edward Austen-Leigh in his text, the present section debates the representation of the author throughout the narrative and how this portrayal contributes to Austen's rise not only as a writer, but also as a cultural icon. To do so, I consider the excerpts in which the author's personality, behaviour, relationships, physical appearance and writing and publication process are described, contrasting the views presented by Austen-Leigh with the ones developed by contemporary scholars. Austen's letters, as presented in the *Memoir*<sup>13</sup>, are also used as a source of biographical information.

### 2.1 "Kind, sympathising and amusing": The portrayal of Jane Austen in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*

James Edward Austen-Leigh implies, on the very first page of his *Memoir*, that his aunt lived a mostly righteous and peaceful life, declaring that "Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course." (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 4). All through the narrative, she is always described as a delightful, polished and sensible figure, someone with sweet temper, great disposition and lovely manners. She does not express sorrow, resentment or apathy, not even in the darkest moments of her existence.

Based on his own memories, along with the few written records he could gather and his sisters' and relatives' accounts, *Memoir of Jane Austen* is a narrative with a distinct objective: representing Jane Austen following the principles and values Austen-Leigh himself considered adequate. According to Sutherland (2002), Austen-Leigh's memoir of his aunt is not just a family production, it is the production of a particular family view of Jane Austen, and against it might be set other, different family recollections and therefore different Aunt Janes<sup>14</sup> (SUTHERLAND, 2002, p. 29), so it is important to acknowledge the subjective nature of the text.

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<sup>13</sup> Some of Austen's letters published in the *Memoir* have been censored and edited. Their unaltered versions would only be published years later, among with the letters kept by other family members.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the following years, other biographies and materials concerning Jane Austen were published by members of the Austen family, but Austen-Leigh's remained the first and most famous work published by a family member.

It is not surprising, then, when one of the first descriptions of his aunt in the narrative is one in which Austen-Leigh claims he, his sisters and his cousins “(...) did not think of her as being clever, still less as being famous; but we valued her as one always kind, sympathising, and amusing” (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p.5). The domestic qualities and temperament of Jane Austen, as well as her dedication to her family and home are stressed on different occasions on the narrative, hinting at Austen-Leigh’s tendency of creating an image of his aunt that matched the Victorian morals.

At this point of the discussion, it may be relevant to bring up the gender issue, as I believe it has a significant role in the debate. We should not lose sight of the fact that Jane Austen, despite her amusing personality, was a woman, and a woman in the nineteenth century had to meet the expectations entrusted upon her. Austen-Leigh ensures his reader that his aunt was well versed in all sorts of domestic affairs by stating that she could speak French, had reading habits that included history, politics and literature, was able of playing the piano and that “ (she) was successful in everything that she attempted with her fingers.” (AUSTEN-LEIGH, p. 81, 2010), referring to her handwriting and needlework.

And even when he claims that she was not highly accomplished, as she could not draw as well as her sister, he still emphasises Austen’s domestic abilities so heartily that he seems to shape her image to fit into Caroline Bingley’s and Mr Darcy’s description of an accomplished lady in *Pride and Prejudice*:

No one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.” (...) All this she must possess,” added Darcy, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading. (AUSTEN, 2003, p. 32)

Followed by a witty remark from Elizabeth Bennet in which she claims she knows no lady that can fit into this description, the quote is a great example of the kind of satire used by Jane Austen, who mocks society’s expectations upon 19th century genteel women by contrasting the character’s views, clearly specifying how those expectations are unattainable.

Austen-Leigh, in his inability of grasping his aunt’s literary prowess, ended up depicting her in a manner similar to the one she mocked, displaying inconsistency between what he perceived and what can be observed in Austen’s own records. I was able to notice

that same lack of understanding (or excess of vigilance, as he may have chosen to present his aunt in a certain way intentionally) in what concerns her sardonic nature when he describes her relationship with friends and acquaintances,

With all her neighbours in the village she was on friendly, though not on intimate, terms. She took a kindly interest in all their proceedings, and liked to hear about them. They often served for her amusement; but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip. She was as far as possible from being censorious or satirical (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 76)

In this passage, he attenuates her tendency to gossip, which can be contradicted by her own letters, as she was always describing in detail the events of the neighbourhood, but he also argues that she was not satirical. The statement can be easily proved wrong by a quote presented in the *Memoir* itself.

On a letter to a niece who was attempting to write a novel, Austen comments on her writing by saying:

Devereux Forrester being ruined by his vanity is very 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 that he opened. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p.80)

Adam certainly never opened a book in the Garden of Eden, and even if he had done it, it would not have been a novel, as the literary genre only started to appear much later on. By creating this short metaphor, Jane Austen is able to show how easily her humour was expressed, but also how subtle it was, which could make it difficult for readers to understand immediately.

I naturally acknowledge the different contexts of these episodes, but still there is no mention of the quick-witted and humorous aspect of Jane Austen’s personality in the entire *Memoir*. It was already possible to observe her satirical quality on her letters, even on the prosaic ones, since her personality shaped her view of people and events. In her letters to her sister, she would often express her opinions on what she was reading and her comments frequently bared a humorous tone.

As discussed in the previous chapter, representing Jane Austen as sarcastic and astute would probably go against the image Austen-Leigh was attempting to forge in his text. In fact, Jane Austen’s depiction in the *Memoir* is the one of a docile, composed and cordial motherlike figure. Testimonies from Austen’s nieces are constantly brought up to validate his claims, as the one in which one of his sisters affirms that “Aunt Jane was the general

favourite with children; her ways with them being so playful, and her long circumstantial stories so delightful.” (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 75).

On the account of Austen’s image in the *Memoir*, Southam (1987) declares:

Nothing could be more charming and unpretentious than the *Memoir* portrait. A labour of duty, it is also a labour of love and draws a touching and human picture of ‘dear “Aunt Jane”’ —a homely spinster, an amateur, who avoided literary society, whose writing was squeezed in between the household chores and the task of looking after an invalid mother and the joy of being a lovable, available, entertaining, maiden-aunt to a widening circle of young nephews and nieces. (SOUTHAM, 1987, p. 3)

The portrayal of Austen as a domestic, collected and amenable lady, according to Southam (1987), reflects not only Austen-Leigh’s view on her personality, but also her approach to her works. Austen’s family was supportive of her writing, which could not said to be common in the early nineteenth century considering her position as a genteel woman. In 1797, her father offered the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, still with its original title *First Impressions*, to a publisher, but he showed no interest in the manuscript. This setback did not step her from composing, and in 1803 she managed to sell her parodic take on the gothic genre, *Northanger Abbey* (then named *Susan*), to a publisher. Unexpectedly, the book was never published while she lived, and the public would only be able to read the novel after her death in 1817.

Eventually she did manage to publish her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, in 1811, decades after its first draft was composed. It is unfortunate that the original manuscript from the novel was destroyed, but it is argued that Austen reviewed it, and all her finished novels, thoroughly, which shows she was truly concerned with her writing and looked forward to perfecting her works. Todd (2006) argues that “She was not a writer achieving perfection at once but one who needed to try, accept or change, score out and rewrite. Her critical and editorial abilities equalled her creative; her judgement matched her inspiration” (TODD, 2006, p. 10), upholding the idea of Austen being invested in the improvement of her fiction.

This view contrasts the one created by Austen-Leigh in the *Memoir*, in which he claims that his aunt wrote for her own amusement, in the common sitting room where she was prone to all sort of interruptions, and that she did not mind when she was disturbed by her nieces and nephews whilst writing. Southam (1987) once again brings significant insights on the subject by suggesting that,

All we now know about Jane Austen’s method of writing, her craftsmanship, her careful revision of the manuscripts and the attention she gave to her proofs,

confirms Austen-Leigh's 'dear Aunt Jane' as an endearing fiction. (...) he also set out to maintain the illusion of Aunt Jane's ladylike amateurism. This was coupled with the idea that the family held first place in her life and that writing was simply a polite accomplishment that she permitted herself at odd moments when time and opportunity offered. (SOUTHAM, 1987, p. 4)

Austen-Leigh's ideas regarding his aunt's intentions and approach to her works are easily contradicted by Jane Austen herself, in letters published on the text of the *Memoir*. On a letter to the publisher of her latest novel, *Emma*, Austen complains about the delay on the publishing, expressing both disappointment and impatience and stressing that the problem should be dealt with promptly. Austen's words reveal an unequivocal concern with the book, insisting that it was made available to the public as soon as possible. After reading this letter, and all those in which she addresses the the writing and publication of her books, I can certainly affirm that Jane Austen was deeply invested in achieving literary success, aspiring for critical praise and monetary return.

It is quite evident that Austen-Leigh believes otherwise, as he claims that

She wrote for her own amusement. 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 150l. from the sale of 'Sense and Sensibility,' she considered it a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010 p. 112)

In addition to the amateur writer view, it is possible to observe Austen-Leigh's position in what regards money. This is one of the only moments he mentions any financial aspect of Austen's life, presenting an intriguing view of the subject. After George Austen's death, Mrs. Austen and her two daughters shared an annual income of £210 and depended on the young male Austens, having moved from Bath to Southampton and then to Chawton cottage mainly because of financial reasons. So when Austen-Leigh states that money was not necessary, he may be trying to mask their unfavourable situation, as Jane Austen was most certainly glad that she was able to profit, though not much, from her works.

It is interesting, however, that along with the perspective of Jane Austen as an amateur writer, Austen-Leigh focuses on the praise her work received. He recounts emphatically the exchange of letters between his aunt and the Prince's librarian Mr. Clarke, and it is in this correspondence that he indicates that she should dedicate *Emma* to Prince George. Being an admirer of her works, the Prince insisted that Jane Austen would visit the library in Carlton House, and it was there that the acquaintance with his librarian was forged. Austen-Leigh

transcribes all the letters, and it is on one of them that it is possible to observe how critical of her own work Austen was, as she openly declares that she does not consider *Emma* to be as good as the previous novels.

Mr. Clarke also suggests some prompts for an upcoming novel, asking Austen to write a piece focused on a clergyman's life, to what she responds by humbly declaring herself incapable of doing so and stating that she would rather keep to her own style. I believe that by saying so, Austen was only being polite. Her literary skills could have proved themselves suitable should she desired to attend Mr. Clarke's request, but as it was not the case, she claimed inability as a polite way of declining his ideas.

Austen-Leigh, when recounting this exchange of letters, however, does not comment on their content, trusting the reader with their own interpretation of his aunt's words. Quite the opposite can be observed when he mentions the praise her work received. With the exception of a few unenthusiastic comments, the reviews presented in the *Memoir* are mostly flattering, and I dare say even excessive, as he brings an excessive amount of opinions. The image of the domestic writer is kept, as he does not address her concern with the publication of her works or their reception, but he also wants to ensure his reader that she was a somehow decent writer, admired and read by important persons.

With an entire chapter dedicated exclusively to the praise of her works, one could expect the same thorough approach when it comes to her biographical details. Which is, unfortunately, not the case. Some facts concerning Austen's life would only be revealed with the publication of her letters, years after the *Memoir*, but some others were purposely omitted, attenuated or altered to fit the image of his aunt Austen-Leigh wanted to broadcast. To the contemporary reader of Jane Austen, the most prominent omission was the full extent of her relationship with Thomas Lefroy, only briefly mentioned and with no indication of any romantic connection.

The only record available of their interactions consists of Austen's correspondence with her sister Cassandra, but considering her satirical nature, it is not possible to determine without room for doubt the nature of her feelings, as she describes them in her usual spirituous way. When dealing with lack of continuous information, it is the biographer's (or reader's) job to speculate, so most of Austen's contemporary biographers agree that there was flirtatious behaviour between Austen and Lefroy.

Austen-Leigh, on the other hand, chooses to declare that he is not aware of any romantic connections his aunt may have developed during her life, and by doing so, presents her as morally exemplary and perfectly congenial. This was not the only event deliberately

omitted from the *Memoir*: the existence of her brother George, who was sent away to be taken care of because he born with a disease that made him handicapped, was never mentioned, as well as the trial of her aunt Jane Leigh-Perrot for theft.

The omissions do not refer only to events, though, as the portrayal of Jane Austen is based on amusing traits only, even when she becomes ill. Austen-Leigh does not mention the suffering or the pain his aunt was certainly going through on the last stages of her life, choosing instead to select all the letters in which she displayed great disposition and optimism, even in the most tortuous moments of her illness. Her last words, however, contradict this representation, as she expresses a desire for death, something only a person undergoing unbearable pain would declare.

It would be only more than fifty years after her death that all these events would be discussed, which explains, to a certain extent, the divergence between Austen-Leigh's point of view and the one expressed by Jane Austen herself and interpreted by contemporary readers and scholars. There is no denying, though, on the purposeful nature of Austen's representation in the text. The final image the reader is provided with when he reaches the end of *Memoir of Jane Austen* is the one of a virtuous and pleasant figure, who was content with her position within society and dedicated some of her time to composing fiction.

Austen-Leigh's portrayal of a dear aunt is the one that conducts the narrative, as she is never described as someone who would spend hours revising and editing her own works, even though a most concrete evidence of this behaviour is published along with the *Memoir*. Jane Austen had such high standards towards her own work that, being unhappy with the ending she had wrote for *Persuasion*, she decided to rewrite the entire last chapter. All this labour was done in the last months of her life, when her decease was already in an advanced stage. Southam (1979) supports this claim by confirming that,

She was keenly interested in the reception of her books. The story of her writing career is that of an author determined to reach a larger audience than her own family and friends. She was prepared to spend years on the writing and revision of the early novels, and to pay for their publication. (SOUTHAM, 1979, p.5)

In one of the last pages of the book, Austen-Leigh gives a description that can sum up his aunt's depiction in the entire narrative: "Her life had been passed in the performance of home duties, and the cultivation of domestic affections, without any self-seeking or craving after applause." (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 141). Although I am not able to deny that Jane Austen indeed performed home duties and nurtured a deep affection for her family, I cannot say that she did not wished for praise, as she was certainly concerned with her works

reception. And I believe she would be truly amazed to learn how widely appreciated she is today.

In the next section, I explore the impact of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in the author's reputation and image, considering her portrayal in the narrative and subsequent rise as a cultural icon. Special attention is dedicated to the matter of Austen's portraits, as they are visual representations of different viewpoints.

## 2.2 "Few of her readers knew even her name": *A Memoir of Jane Austen* and the birth of a cultural icon

In one passage, James Edward Austen-Leigh is arguing that his aunt did not establish connections with any literary circles during her life when he recounts an interesting episode,

A few years ago, a gentleman visiting Winchester Cathedral desired to be shown Miss Austen's grave. The verger, as he pointed it out, asked, 'Pray, sir, can you tell me whether there was anything particular about that lady; so many people want to know where she was buried?' During her life the ignorance of the verger was shared by most people; few knew that 'there was anything particular about that lady. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 95)

So how could an author mostly unknown to the public become not only one of the most prominent names of western literature, but also a cultural symbol of England? I could not affirm that Jane Austen was an anonymous, obscure writer before *Memoir*, but she definitely enjoyed an increase of her popularity after its publication.

With a portrayal as flattering as the one presented in Austen-Leigh's memoir, the public's sudden interest in Jane Austen's life and work seems plausible. Southam (1879) comments on the effect of the publication of *Memoir* by observing that,

Welcomed by her admirers, the *Memoir* also had the immediate effect of awakening public interest in an author virtually forgotten. This is not to say that overnight Jane Austen became widely read. But she instantly became an author widely written about, for the biography provided human interest and material for a flood of appreciative essays and reviews, many of them written by devoted readers keen to share their enthusiasm with the world at large (SOUTHAM, 1987, p. 2)

As Southam (1987) comments, the initial interest of the public was certainly propelled by mere curiosity: up until 1870, Jane Austen's novels had been already published for years, but still very little was known about her life. At the same time, I believe that



Austen-Leigh's representation of his aunt contributed to her renewed acclamation, provided that her image was carefully forged as not to unsettle the Victorians' sensibilities.

Opening the chapter in which he discusses Jane Austen's slow rise to success, Austen-Leigh declares that "Seldom has any literary reputation been of such slow growth as that of Jane Austen. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p.110). Aside from being a woman writer in the nineteenth century, Jane Austen had no literary connections, as her life revolved around her family and the writing of her novels, which she had published anonymously in the first moment.

Austen-Leigh is very emphatic in arguing that his aunt was not a part of the literary world,

Jane Austen lived in entire seclusion from the literary world: neither by correspondence, nor by personal intercourse was she known to any contemporary authors. It is probable that she never was in company with any person whose talents or whose celebrity equalled her own; so that her powers never could have been sharpened by collision with superior intellects, nor her imagination aided by their casual suggestions. Whatever she produced was a genuine home-made article. Even during the last two or three years of her life, when her works were rising in the estimation of the public, they did not enlarge the circle of her acquaintance. Few of her readers knew even her name, and none knew more of her than her name. I doubt whether it would be possible to mention any other author of note, whose personal obscurity was so complete. (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 94)

Later on, he mentions that even Charlotte Brontë, granted that it was years after Austen's death, had her share of acclamation in literary circles, so it was not a matter of being a woman. His aunt was truly secluded from intellectual groups, the discussion of her writings was restricted to her family and her only editor was herself. She did enjoy moderate success in the last few years of her life, but it was only after the publication of the *Memoir* that her reputation as one of the most read and studied authors of western literature started to be consolidated.

Todd (2006) comments on the matter, stating that,

There is no complete and easy answer as to why Jane Austen, a novelist who enjoyed a modicum of success during her lifetime, nowadays has such a wide appeal, while the most popular writers of her period – those whom she herself admired – Samuel Richardson, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Walter Scott, are rarely read for pleasure. It seems that Austen's fiction – like Sir Walter Elliot's face – has aged well 'amidst the wreck' of her contemporaries. (TODD, 2006, p. 132)

It is true that there is no indisputable explanation to Austen's prevailing ascendancy as a literary phenomenon, but it is undeniable that the portrayal presented in the *Memoir* contributed to her rise as a widely read author.

The description of Austen's physical attributes given by Austen-Leigh matches the description of her personality and temper. Although he was very young when she passed away, Austen-Leigh describes his aunt in detail,

In person she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender, her step light and firm, and her whole appearance expressive of health and animation. In complexion she was a clear brunette with a rich colour; she had full round cheeks, with mouth and nose small and well formed, bright hazel eyes, and brown hair forming natural curls close round her face. If not so regularly handsome as her sister, yet her countenance had a peculiar charm of its own to the eyes of most beholders (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2010, p. 71)

This description given by Austen-Leigh is one of the few records of Austen's physical appearance, and many contemporary scholars believe it was faithful to her image. Deirdre Le Faye (2002) presents a similar depiction, probably based on Austen-Leigh's one,

by the time she reached the age of seventeen, in 1792, and made her debut into Hampshire society, she had grown tall and slender, and had her father's colouring of chestnut-brown hair and bright hazel eyes, with a clear complexion and pink cheeks; the neighbourhood considered that, though not a regular beauty, she was nevertheless a very pretty girl. (LE FAYE, 2002, p. 21)

The shortage of reliable sources on Austen's looks is mainly due to the lack of visual representations of the author, as the only image of Jane Austen made during her life was a watercolour sketch painted by her sister Cassandra around 1810. During the Regency Period it was very common for families to pay for commissioned artists to paint their portraits, and a few of Austen's brothers had their likeness reproduced in paintings, but Jane was only represented through Cassandra's artistic skills.

For *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, James Edward Austen-Leigh hired a portraitist and asked for a new version of her aunt's portrait, based on the sketch painted by Cassandra. On the original unfinished drawing, Jane Austen is represented in simple clothes, with her arms crossed and a sober expression. On the portrait commissioned by James Edward, Austen is brighter, fuller and happier, with more elegant clothes and a more inviting posture. Her features are exaggerated and softened at the same time, creating an image that resembles a Victorian porcelain doll.

The differences between the two images are striking. According to Southam (1987),

For the frontispiece, Mr Andrews, the local portraitist at Maidenhead, was encouraged to turn Cassandra's sketch into a vignette of picture-card prettiness. Cassandra drew a face sharp and watchful, with large unmelting eyes and pursed lips. Andrews's Jane Austen is a plump-faced anybody. (SOUTHAM, 1987, p. 4)

Austen-Leigh himself argues that Cassandra drew well, so how can the portrait of the *Memoir* be so different from the one she created? The commissioned image is coherent with the description of Jane Austen that can be observed in the narrative, delightful and lovely. Cassandra's, on the other hand, may represent the way in which she viewed her sister. Considering their intimate bond, one could argue that Cassandra's sketch is Jane Austen being represented by the person who knew her the most during her life, so it may be the most accurate representation of Austen we will ever be able to get.

**Figure 1:** Jane Austen's sketch by Cassandra Austen. Circa 1810.



Source: National Portrait Gallery.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 2:** Altered version of Cassandra Austen's sketch, commissioned by James Edward Austen-Leigh for the publication of *A Memoir of Jane Austen*



Source: *A Memoir of Jane Austen*

The fact that James Edward Austen-Leigh hired a commissioned artist to draw a portrait of his aunt is already an indication of his efforts in creating an image of her that would be appealing to the public. The way in which she is portrayed, though, confirms that he is not reluctant when it comes to altering what he deems inadequate or unflattering.

<sup>15</sup> Available from: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00230/Jane-Austen>. Access on: 23 Nov. 2019.

Considering the two images, it is possible to argue that the *Memoir* portrait is a faithful representation of Austen-Leigh's views on Jane Austen.

However, the portrait in the *Memoir* represents not only Austen-Leigh's views on his aunt, but also his tendency of editing and shaping biographical information into something more suitable for the intended public. He did it so effectively in his text that the image of Jane Austen we all subconsciously share today is in great part the image Austen-Leigh created. And it was based on this portrayal of Austen - both visual and psychological - that her reputation as a cultural icon was crafted.

The popularity of Jane Austen only increased after that, as the public was either keen to read the fiction from the author described by Austen-Leigh or wanted to get to know the person behind the author of the already famous novels. Her spotless reputation, as forged in the *Memoir*, granted her acclamation from conservative audiences, considering her writing never got in the way of her domestic affairs and her family was still the priority in her life.

At the same time, her image of amateur writer made it possible for her novels to be included on the program of universities and schools, in a period when literature written by women was still frowned upon or not considered good enough to be studied and read by those who dedicated their time to it. Because the Austen depicted in the *Memoir* wrote for her own amusement, and her fiction does not broach any controversial topics, her works were considered harmless, yet respectable, and ended up making their way into the academic world.

It is not very often that an author manages to achieve this status, of being a part of the general public taste and the subject of academic studies. And as Todd (2006) commented above, still there is no unequivocal explanation to why such phenomenon may have happened. The fact is Jane Austen went from being an author whose books enjoyed moderate success and could easily have gone into oblivion, to a writer instantly recognisable for her face, quotes from her work and even her first name.

Today there is an ongoing flux of content being produced on Jane Austen in the academia, but mostly outside from it. Countless derivative works about her life and fiction are produced every year, including books, films, plays, games, *fanfiction* and visual art. For someone who spent most of her life confined to her home or short trips to the south of England, her legacy has overcome every boundary set upon her life and turned her into a true icon of English culture and literature.

It would not be possible for contemporary writers, cinematographers and artists to create their versions of Jane Austen or her works if Austen-Leigh had not disclosed to the

public the information he was able to get. Numerous events were omitted, many others were never learnt because he could not access them, but his efforts must be acknowledge as it was through them that it was possible for me - and all the world - to get to know Jane Austen and understand the person behind the works.

## CONCLUSION

*A Memoir of Jane Austen* was, undeniably, a labour of love, but one that permanently influenced Jane Austen's reputation in one specific direction. It was the first biography of the author, aside from the short biographical notice written by her brother, and it was responsible not only for creating the image of Austen we collectively share today, but also for renewing the public's interest in her works. Through James Edward Austen-Leigh's point of view, Jane Austen was introduced to the world as a most caring and amusing aunt, who wrote delightful stories based on what she observed and experienced in England's rural gentry's society.

My objective with this reading of Austen-Leigh's text was to understand his intentions when writing *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, exploring the biographical point of view and his position as a writer. At the same time, I directed the study to the image of Jane Austen created in the narrative, addressing the way in which she is portrayed and the repercussion of such representation in her reputation both as an author and as a cultural icon.

The primordial intention is stated by Austen-Leigh himself: he felt like his aunt's story should be shared and found no one else inclined to execute the task, thus he took the responsibility of doing so. It is relevant to point out, though, that his *Memoir*, is a very particular view of his aunt's life, one that was carefully crafted to amuse, and not upset, the public to which it was directed.

On that account, another biographical intention can be observed: the ethical motivation. Every work of biography, regardless of its length, subject or historical period, has an underlying motivation of setting an example of the morals and values of the society in which it is inserted through the image of the person being analysed. By choosing to represent his aunt as an honoured, delightful, domestic figure, who wrote as a pastime and dedicated her life to family, Austen-Leigh created a true personification of Victorian values.

James Edward Austen-Leigh takes deliberate choices when he decides to omit, alter or attenuate facts, and he only does so as not to upset Victorian sensibilities. The image of his aunt created by him, in that sense, is delightful both in appearance and in personality, as she dedicates most of her time to domestic and family affairs. Writing, in spite of being encouraged by her family, is described as a pastime by Austen-Leigh, considering the 19th century standards on women and work.

He specifically emphasises Austen's portrayal as a domestic, amateurish writer who did not seek success or praise. Her own letters, however, show a contrasting view, as she

shows concern on what regards her works' publication and success. Even though she did not think of her work as worthy of the praise it received, she welcomed both the critical acclamation and the financial return it provided.

It was through Austen-Leigh's point of view that Jane Austen was presented to the public for the first time, and it was that representation that changed permanently her image and reception. The publication of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* marked the period when the reception of her fiction started to change, with sudden interest arising on her life and works. Suddenly, and much thanks to Austen-Leigh's efforts, Austen's works gained a new meaning, as people were then able to associate the events of her life with the ones described in the novels.

It was also through the *Memoir* that the public had access to original pieces of fiction written by Jane Austen, such as the cancelled chapter of *Persuasion*, the epistolary novel *Lady Susan*, the twelve chapters of the unfinished *The Watsons* and Austen-Leigh's testimony of the novel Jane Austen was writing in the months leading to her death, *Sanditon*. Some of her letters, although edited, were also published in the *Memoir* for the first time. All this material has shown itself very useful for the ones interested in Austen's works, as they broaden the possibilities of reading and studies beyond the six renowned novels.

Her depiction in the portrait published along with the text is the most flattering image, a woman with soft, round and amenable features, sitting peacefully in an adorned chair with fashionable clothes and a friendly smile. It represents a great contrast from the original image, drawn by Jane Austen's sister Cassandra. There she appears more unhappy and less pleasing, with her arms crossed and her clothes simple and plain. But it was Austen-Leigh's portrayal that resisted the test of time, and it became so instantly recognisable that it is now on England's official currency, on the back of the ten pound bill.

The publication of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* changed permanently the destiny of an author who could have easily gone into oblivion, considering that until 1870 Jane Austen's works were mostly read by critics, and even their opinions were starting to get stagnated on the same topics. The *Memoir* engaged the interest of a wider public, creating a new upsurge of admirers who paired the biographical information of the text with Austen's fiction, drawing connections and creating new meanings.

The popularity Jane Austen enjoyed after the publication of the *Memoir* made it possible for her legacy to be carried on for centuries, placing her at a definitive place in the western literary canon. For the past 200 years, she has been widely read and praised both by the general public and the academic world, a position rarely occupied by an author, let alone

a woman. Today, a new image of Jane Austen is created every day, as works based on her life and fiction are constantly being produced.

All this would not be possible if James Edward Austen-Leigh had not decided to gather all the information he could and present his aunt to the public. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, even with its numerous flaws, omissions and never-ending description of Austen relatives who had no connection with Jane Austen in any way, still gifted us with the access to one of the most brilliant minds this world has even seen. And if today I can look up for Jane Austen, it was because one day Austen-Leigh decided to pick up a pen and share his aunt with the world.



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