

In Her Own Hand

Volume the First
Volume the Second
Volume the Third

By Jane Austen.

Introduction by Kathryn Sutherland.
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Facsimile.

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Review by Marsha Huff.

Jane Austen began writing fiction as a child of 11 or 12 and continued to compose stories throughout her teenage years. These early compositions, the juvenilia, survive because Austen was serious enough about her work to transcribe it into three small bound notebooks. On the covers she wrote “Volume the First,” “Volume the Second,” and “Volume the Third,” consciously imitating the appearance and format of contemporary novels and assuming for herself the role of author. The three notebooks are now available in handsome facsimile editions, each with an introduction by Professor Kathryn Sutherland, whose scholarship has for several years focused on Austen’s surviving manuscripts. Robert W. Chapman’s transcription of the text is included at the end of each book.

Introducing *Volume the First*, Sutherland says that even the earliest pieces in the notebook demonstrate that Austen was familiar with a range of 18th-century English fiction and had absorbed how it worked through plotting and narrative pattern. Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Jane Austen,” says that the young author “was writing not to draw a laugh from her brothers and sisters, and not for home consumption. She was writing for everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own. In other words, even at that early age Jane Austen was writing.”

And what was she writing? Austen labels many of the compositions “a novel,” which she formally divides into chapters. As Sutherland points out, they are comic imitations or parodies of popular novels, in both theme and paradigm. Sutherland describes “Jack & Alice” in the first notebook as “a catalogue of commonplace

conventions and clumsy narrative contrivances,” for which there were many models in the circulating and subscription libraries patronized by the Austens.

At the same time, the compositions in *Volume the First* demonstrate the young author’s understanding of subtle narrative technique. “Edgar and Emma” opens with an extended conversation, placing the reader directly in the story with minimal explanation. It begins, “‘I cannot imagine,’ said Sir Godfrey to his Lady, ‘why we continue in such deplorable Lodgings as these.’” Austen already knew how to use speech both to delineate character and to advance the plot.

Sutherland says of *Volume the Second* that it “has a good claim to be Jane Austen’s funniest work.” It includes three longer compositions written between the ages of 15 and 16: the epistolary novels “Love and Freindship” and “Lesley Castle” and Austen’s parody of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The History of England* (1771), which she had read in her father’s library. Sutherland notes that while “knockabout humor” dominated the first notebook, the novels in the second represent “a shift towards more extended studies of character and motive.” Near the end of volume two, Austen added a dedication to her newborn niece, Fanny, stating her intention to convey “my Opinions & Admonitions on the conduct of Young Women.” Sutherland says that *Volume the Second* is best appreciated as “a perverse conduct manual,” which she contrasts with Hester Mulso Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, one of the popular late-18th-century books designed to teach correct female behavior. The girls in “Love and Freindship” and “Lesley Castle” exhibit what Sutherland calls “antisocial and extravagant behavior, against the conduct-book models of the schoolroom.” “The History of England” parodies the educational syllabus proposed by authors such as Chapone, who prescribed the study of history and chronology—that is, tables of significant dates and events. Austen instead thumbs

her nose at chronology, declaring in mock scholarly fashion, “N.B. There will be very few Dates in this History.”



Volume the Third contains two unfinished novels: “Evelyn” and “Catharine, or the Bower” (originally named “Kitty, or the Bower”). “Kitty,” Sutherland says, “shares with major published novels of the 1790s an imaginative reference to contemporary political debate that makes it a remarkable debut from a 16-year-old writer.” Through her characters, Austen touches on the criticism of fashionable accomplishments over proper education for women, the limited prospects for girls without fortune, and the exaggerated fears of imminent social collapse flamed by conservative writers in response to the French Revolution.

A facsimile edition provides a perspective that is lost in edited transcriptions of the text. Austen’s clear handwriting races across the pages, conveying a sense of her youthful enthusiasm. The careful arrangements of text, tables of content, and dedications demonstrate her purposeful bookmaking. Cassandra Austen’s drawings are strategically placed throughout “The History of England,” like the circular medallion portraits of monarchs found in Goldsmith’s *History* (which, in the family volumes, the children had colored). Austen’s editorial choices are also evident, as she crossed out and rewrote words and sentences, not merely to correct errors but to improve the composition.

The Bodleian Library owns *Volume the First*. *Volume the Second* and *Volume the Third* are held in the British Library. This beautiful edition places Jane Austen’s three precious notebooks into the hands of the common reader.

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