



James Stanier Clarke's Portrait of Jane Austen

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WHILE RESEARCHING my 2005 AGM Plenary Session talk at the British Library, I stumbled upon Richard James Wheeler's book about James Stanier Clarke's portrait of Jane Austen. Waiting for my book delivery, I typed "Jane Austen" into the library's computer catalogue and after scrolling down 400+ titles, I encountered his book on the Clarke portrait. Throughout his life, Richard Wheeler indulged his main avocation: books. His love of books led him serendipitously to the bookstore where he found Clarke's *Friendship Book*.¹

Admirers of Jane Austen are familiar with Cassandra Austen's small pencil and water-color sketch of her sister's face and its Victorian copies (*Record*, plate VIII, and accompanying illustrations between 128 and 129). Literary and art historians deem the Cassandra portrait, in the possession of London's National Portrait Gallery since 1948, as the only known authentic likeness of Jane Austen's face taken when she was an adult. But another portrait of the adult Jane Austen, also a sketch in pencil and watercolors and also small (6 inches by 4 inches), exists: the work of the Rev. James Stanier Clarke, Domestic Chaplain and Librarian to the Prince of Wales (later, George IV).

Clarke is known to Austenites for escorting the author through Carlton House, the Prince Regent's London residence, on Monday, 13 November 1815,

when she went to see the Prince's Library, and then engaging her in an epistolary exchange in which he urged her "to delineate in some future Work the Habits of Life and Character and enthusiasm of a Clergyman—who should pass his time between the metropolis & the Country . . . Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature—no man's Enemy but his own" (16 November 1815). If he had also described himself as a fine sketch artist, he might have been regarded by Austen biographers with greater seriousness, rather than as the comical man who was loath to give up having Jane Austen feature him in a romantic novel.

Richard Wheeler's finding the Clarke portrait of Jane Austen is almost the stuff of a romantic novel—or at least the stuff of a novel about a lover of antique books. In 1955, a second-hand book dealer in Canterbury, Kent, found at the estate sale of a proverbial "little old lady" a small slip case containing an album bound in eighteenth-century green morocco leather decorated with gild. The gilded words *Sacred To Friendship* (hereafter called *Friendship Book*) appeared on the upper part of the spine; on the lower were the gilded initials "J.S.C." (Wheeler 6). Richard Wheeler came upon this book in the estate sale visitor's secondhand bookstore.

Within the covers, he found the paper watermarked, authenticating it as eighteenth-century paper. And on those pages, he discovered more than one hundred drawings, verses, and autographs by such celebrities as poet William Cowper, painter George Romney, novelists Charlotte Smith and Anna Seward, and actors Richard Brinsley Sheridan and John Kemble. Crayon and water-color sketches of two unnamed women appear in the book. The Tate Gallery assisted Wheeler in identifying one subject as Princess Caroline Amelia Elizabeth of Brunswick: the likeness of the sketch to any number of portraits of the twenty-six-year-old German Princess is stunning. It also serves to show the artist's ability to capture in a quickly drawn sketch a true likeness of his royal subject. In March 1795, Clarke was a Royal Navy chaplain serving on board H.M.S. *Jupiter*, which was taking the Princess to England to be married to her cousin, the future George IV (Wheeler 20). Thus, Clarke would have certainly seen the royal passenger, particularly at the Services over which he presided as chaplain, enabling him to sketch a small portrait from memory. Unlike Emma Woodhouse, he did not need his subject to pose.

Near the signatures of Anna Seward and Charlotte Smith, novelists Clarke had admired, is the sketched full-length portrait of another woman, also undated and unidentified, measuring 6¹/₄" x 3³/₄". That it is near the autographs of female novelists he liked suggests the subject herself may be a

novelist. That Clarke admired Austen's talents is indubitable: as her favorite nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, wrote in his *Memoir* of his aunt, "Jane found in him not only a very courteous gentleman, but also a warm admirer of her talents" (92).

The portrait is actually in two parts. Clarke seems to have sketched in pencil the woman's face and neck first. Then, he drew a full-length picture of his subject, from hat to shoes, on another sheet of paper. He positioned the face and neck appropriately on the full-length figure and glued it in place. Clarke then cut out the completed figure and glued it to a watermarked page in the *Friendship Book*. He painted the entire figure in white, black, red, and brown watercolors with some pencil used for the face.

Richard Wheeler made the connection between the second woman depicted in Clarke's album with Jane Austen only after seeing a photo of Cassandra's sketch of her sister and its familiar Victorian round-eyed copy that Andrews made for the frontispiece of the *Memoir* and then reading in *A Family Record* what Mrs. Elizabeth "Lizzy" Austen Rice (Edward Austen Knight's daughter, born 1800) had written to her cousin, James Edward, after seeing the frontispiece picture of their Aunt Jane in his *Memoir*: "I remember her so well & loved her so much . . . how well the portrait has been lithographed! I think it very like only the eyes are too large, not for beauty but for likeness" (254). As Wheeler reports, when he observed "the similarities with the face of the lady in Clarke's *Friendship Book*," his attention was "jolted" (8).

This is one of those "Good God!" moments that Emma experiences when Mrs. Weston tells her of Frank and Jane's engagement (395)! But rather than bending reality to conform to his imaginings as Emma does, Wheeler set to work as a literary and portrait detective to see if he could authenticate the portrait's subject as Jane Austen.

Collating the seven known descriptions of Jane Austen, written by those who knew her, Wheeler found no "inconsistencies" with the face shown in the Clarke sketch. These passages are Henry Austen's description of his sister in the "Biographical Notice" that prefaces *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (5); Anna Austen Lefroy's letter to her half-brother James Edward when he was preparing the *Memoir* (*Record* 75); James Edward's description of his Aunt Jane in the *Memoir* (Chapter V, 70); James Edward's sister Caroline's recollections printed in *My Aunt Jane Austen* (5); the albeit brief description of the novelist recorded by Sir Egerton Brydges, brother of Madame Lefroy, in his 1834 *Autobiography* and reprinted in *A Family Record* (124); Charlotte-Maria Middleton Beckford's critique of the *Memoir's* frontispiece portrait based on her



† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the on-line edition of this essay.
– C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager

childhood memories of seeing Jane Austen at Chawton (*Record* 254); and Mrs. Mozley's letter to her sister, reporting the recollections of the Rev. Mr. Fulwar Fowle, brother of Cassandra Austen's deceased fiancé, Tom Fowle, in which Jane Austen is described as "pretty—certainly pretty—bright & a good deal of color in her face—like a doll" (*Record* 246).

The next step was to match the clothing worn by the figure with descriptions of clothes and accessories that Jane Austen mentions to her sister in her letters. The similarities are remarkable. For example, the picture shows the figure in a white gauze gown, mostly covered by a black cape, but the gown's décolleté neckline, dotted with black trim, is visible; its long sleeves are tucked into gloves that extend to the elbow. On 9 March 1814, Jane Austen wrote from London to Cassandra: "I wear my gauze gown today, long sleeves & all . . . I have no reason to suppose long sleeves are allowable.—I have lowered the bosom especially at the corners, & plaited black stain ribbon around the top." It appears that Jane Austen, herself, was as concerned about long sleeves as Mrs. Bennet is in *Pride and Prejudice* (140)!

In her previous letter to Cassandra, she also speaks of trimming her gown: "I have determined to trim my lilac sarsenet [a fine, smooth material] with black sattin (sic) ribbon. . . . Ribbon trimmings are all the fashion at Bath, & I dare say the fashions of the two places [i.e., Bath and London] are alike enough in that point, to content *me*" (8 March 1814).

If the lady in the picture looks dressed up, keep in mind that when Jane Austen visited Carlton House, she would have surely worn her best, dressiest clothes.

But the most convincing evidence that Clarke's portrait is, indeed, of Jane Austen, comes from two scientific sources. Richard Wheeler notes that the sketch possibly shows "a chilling augury" of her fatal illness, Addison's disease. Clara Lowry, M.D., an endocrinologist at St. Thomas's Hospital, London, who examined a photo of the Clarke portrait, observed:

[T]here is an area of pigmentation below the lower lip in the centre of the face and there is an irregular area of pigmentation underneath the chin centrally as well. Her pigment can therefore be said to be very patchy. . . . [T]he patient with Addison's disease will have a particularly striking pattern of areas with no pigmentation adjacent to areas of excessive pigmentation. I think it is just possible that this is what we are looking at in Jane Austen. (Letter, July 25, 1995)

At the JASNA Annual General Meeting in Wisconsin for 2005, two physicians, Cheryl Kinney, M.D. and Cynthia Lopez, M.D. confirmed Dr.

Zachary Cope's 1964 diagnosis of Addison's disease, using not only the symptoms described in her letters, but also Regency and modern medical knowledge. In so doing, Dr. Lopez discounted Hodgkins Disease as the cause of Austen's death (Upfal).

Studies by physiognomist Alfred Linney of the Department of Medical Physics and Bioengineering, University College, London, observed that the Cassandra and Clarke portraits show women with similar hairstyles and face shapes. He further noted resemblances between the faces in the two pictures to Jane Austen's brothers and father of whom we have portraits—especially the so-called Greek noses shared by the Rev. George Austen and the novelist's brothers James and Henry. Most convincingly, he determined that the two female faces share the same vertical facial measurements and proportions from eye to nose to mouth to chin (Wheeler 36-37).

Dr. Linney's findings regarding vertical facial measurements were corroborated using an Electronic Facial Identification Test, practiced by many police departments: the horizontal pixel lines for the faces in the Cassandra and Clarke portraits were identical. The forensic scientist who carried out the tests concluded, albeit with scientific defensive rhetoric, that "there is a strong probability that they are one and the same persons" (Wheeler 39). Another authority, Richard Neave, a medical artist at the University of Manchester who has worked on the reconstruction of ancient Egyptian skulls for the British Museum, cautiously determined that "Cassandra's picture reflects many of the strong family likenesses . . . Clarke's drawing is much idealized. As far as the face is concerned, it can be said to be of a type . . . 'a pretty doll like face'" (Wheeler 41). Ironically, he unknowingly echoed the description provided by the Rev. Fulwar Fowle, who described Jane Austen's face as "pretty . . . like a doll" (*Record* 246).

Karen Joy Fowler begins her novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* saying, "Each of us has a private Austen" (1). Likewise, each of us has a mental image of the physical Jane. As far as the Austen world knows, she never sat for a formal portrait as an adult. But the authors of this article believe that the woman painted in James Stanier Clarke's *Friendship Book* is, indeed, Jane Austen. Granted, London's National Portrait Gallery is unwilling to authenticate the Clarke portrait as Jane Austen. We speculate, however, that the Gallery's acceptance of R.W. Chapman's suggestion that no one but Jane Austen could be the subject of the silhouette labeled "L'aimable Jane" in a second volume of *Mansfield Park* is founded more on faith than on the scientific investigation on which Richard Wheeler bases his conclusions (214).

NOTE

1. Through e-mail, Professor Joan Ray, Richard James Wheeler, and his son Simon Wheeler have created their own friendship based on their shared fascination with Clarke's portrait.

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