



Jane Austen's Miniature  
"Novel": Gender, Politics, and  
Form in *The Beautifull  
Cassandra*

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What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?

—to James Edward Austen, 16-17 December 1816

CRITICS FREQUENTLY CITE Jane Austen's famous comparison of her craft to the miniaturist's art in discussing the six "mature" novels; the "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory" upon which Austen works "with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour" sounds throughout Austen criticism "as a trope of modesty or gender" used "to deprecate" (Todd 76; 83). George Henry Lewes, for example, qualified his claim that Austen's novels are praiseworthy for their "ease of nature" and their exquisite mirroring of "the ordinary life of everyday" by asserting that, in comparison to Walter Scott's "frescoes," Austen's works "are but miniatures," "only a bit of ivory after all," and "incapable of ever filling that space in the public eye which was filled by [Scott's] massive and masterly pictures" (qtd. in Todd 82).<sup>1</sup> Janet Todd's article "Ivory Miniatures and the Art of Jane Austen" recuperates Austen's figuring of her craft *not* as "an expression of humility or artistic insecurity," but rather as a reference to the specific technique of painting on ivory" (76-77). Austen's metaphor functions, according to this argument, as "an aesthetic credo" (76) grounded in

the precision, detail, and diligence associated with a form of painting that was widely admired and gained increasing popularity during the Romantic period. Jill Heydt-Stevenson's recent examination of the actual *function* of miniatures in Austen's novels similarly challenges conventional understanding of (in her words) Austen's "iconic—and ironic" metaphor (*Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions* 16). Her analysis of the complicated exchange of miniature portraits, locks of hair, seals, jewelry and other petite objects in *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates how "these tiny articles" reveal a "surprising" new "cosmos," "destabiliz[ing] the cool surface tone of Austen's voice" and "draw[ing] attention to the dangers of rape, ownership of the female body, and sexual usury" (17). Quoting Gaston Bachelard, Heydt-Stevenson illustrates how miniatures in Austen's novel act as "a narrow gate that opens up an entire world" (17).

But while recent criticism has prompted a necessary rethinking of Austen's "miniature" metaphor, scholars have yet to acknowledge that Austen actually experimented in writing "miniature" novels in her earliest fictional writings, known since Chapman's edition as the *Juvenilia*. These remarkable works, written when Austen was between the ages of twelve and seventeen, display a dazzling array of experiments with literary form and genre.<sup>2</sup> They are also filled with rebellious, transgressive heroines who steal, murder, elope, binge, and booze: Alice Johnson in *Jack and Alice* seeks constant solace from her bottle of wine, and is carried home from a local ball "Dead Drunk" (14); in *Henry and Eliza*, Eliza commits a capital offense by stealing a banknote of fifty pounds; the malevolent Sukey Simpson (also in *Jack and Alice*) poisons a rival and is "speedily raised to the Gallows" (29); and, perhaps most shockingly, Anna Parker ("A Letter from a Young Lady, whose feelings being too Strong for her Judgement led her into the commission of Errors which her Heart disapproved") casually relates the remarkable extent of her crimes—which include murdering her parents, committing perjury, and forging legal documents—before boastfully concluding that "there is scarcely a crime that I have not committed" (175).

The *content* of these works caused Austen's collateral heirs considerable anxiety when debating the possibility of their future publication. While preparing the 1870 *Memoir* of his aunt, James Edward Austen-Leigh consulted his sister Caroline over which specimens from the *Juvenilia* might be included in his book. Caroline thought that *Evelyn*, though "all nonsense, *might* be used":

I have always thought it remarkable that the early workings of her mind should have been in burlesque, and comic exaggeration, setting

at nought all rules of probable or possible—when of all her finished and later writings, the exact contrary is the characteristic. The story I mean is clever nonsense but one knows not how it might be taken by the public, tho' something must ever be risked. What I should deprecate is publishing any of the 'betweenities' when the nonsense was passing away, and before her wonderful talent had found it's proper channel. (Le Faye 276-77)

Caroline's particular concern over how these early works (which revel in "burlesque" and "comic exaggeration," defying all rules of the "probable or possible") might be "taken by the public" demonstrates how the family sought to control and manipulate Austen's public image and reception. Determined to settle what Caroline tellingly refers to in another letter as the "vexed question between the Austens and the Public" (Le Faye 276), she and her brother work to ensure that their aunt will be remembered for the later realistic novels and not the so-called "nonsense" that preceded them.<sup>3</sup>

Yet equally shocking as the early works' uncouth subject matter is their narrative *form*. Even a cursory glance at the *Juvenilia* reveals a sustained emphasis on the miniature. Consider, for instance, the lengths of the following works: *Frederic & Elfrida: A Novel* (approximately 8 pages long); *Jack & Alice: A Novel* (18 pages); *Henry and Eliza: A Novel* (7 pages); and *Love and Freindship: a novel in a series of Letters* (34 pages). Austen's precise titles, moreover, clearly specify that, despite their lengths, these works are *novels*, carefully distinguishing them from "tales" or fragments (like the "Memoirs of Mr Clifford: An Unfinished Tale," "Sir William Mountague: an unfinished performance," or "The Generous Curate: a moral Tale, setting forth the Advantages of being Generous and a Curate") and other generic experiments (such as the 11-page *The History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st* ["By a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian"]).<sup>4</sup> We might add, furthermore, that Austen carefully preserved all of the early works in bound volumes titled *Volume the First*, *Volume the Second*, and *Volume the Third*—comically aspiring, as Juliet McMaster points out, "to the status of the standard three-decker novel" (187). These experimental early works with their illuminating paratexts demonstrate the extent to which the young Austen responded, as Margaret Anne Doody suggests, "not only to the narrative elements of eighteenth-century novels but (more excitingly and disconcertingly) to the culture that gave being to the narrative elements themselves" (108).

One of the most provocative examples of this formal experimentation and narrative self-consciousness comes in the little-read work *The Beautifull*

*Cassandra: A Novel in Twelve Chapters*, the very title of which firmly establishes the piece's generic identity (novel), narrative compression (only twelve chapters), and formal completion. This novel, the plot of which focuses on the eponymous heroine's misadventures on the streets of London, takes the miniaturizing tendency of the other pieces I've mentioned to an almost absurd degree, encompassing only 3 pages (or approximately 40 lines) of printed text. At the same time, it joins the rest of the *Juvenilia* in emphasizing aggressive and purportedly "unfeminine" behaviors that conduct books and other prescriptive discourses popular during the eighteenth century sought to regulate and control.<sup>5</sup> In this essay I connect these two features, demonstrating how in *The Beautifull Cassandra* Austen maps a *politics* of social and cultural rebellion onto an equally aggressive interrogation of narrative form and literary genre (or, loosely, *poetics*). By reworking eighteenth-century literary genres (such as the picaresque), by literally "miniaturizing" the novel ("A Novel in Twelve Chapters"), and by depicting a heroine who boldly and unapologetically flaunts gender boundaries, social codes, and even laws, Austen ultimately challenges her era's stifling restrictions on women's bodies and minds at the same time that she questions exactly what constitutes a "novel."

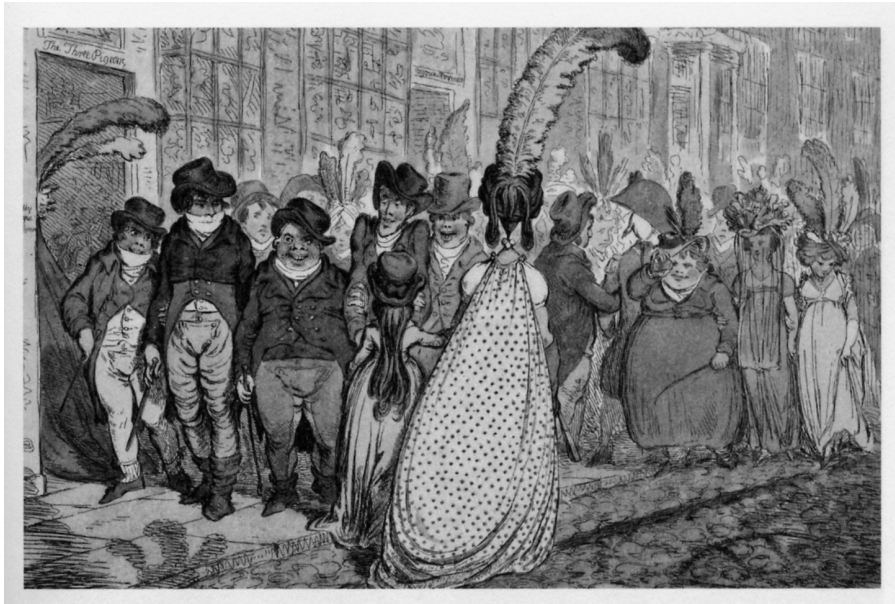


As with most of her early works, in the *The Beautifull Cassandra* Austen playfully skewers generic conventions and forces the reader to re-think customary constructions of the novel. As Mary Waldron notes, "Early in her reading experience Jane Austen became obsessively interested in the form and language of the novel, and in its relationship with its readers; her first experimental writing was dominated by attempts to refashion fiction as she knew it" (16). This "refashion[ing]" plays out visually on the written page as Austen cuts up her novel into twelve compact "chapters"—the longest of which encompasses only five lines of text—in a way that anticipates the kind of formal experimentation, playfulness, and minimalism usually associated with a later, modernist aesthetic. In terms of narrative form and literary tradition, we might say that Austen literally "miniaturizes" the picaresque genre—known for its expansiveness and freewheeling, episodic plot, satirical presentation of diverse social groups and contexts, and emphasis upon scenes of brutality, violence, and criminality<sup>6</sup>—in order to comment upon women's situation in a culture that strictly regulates their movements and freedoms. In other words, Austen transforms the picaresque—a masculine genre traditionally employed

by authors like Le Sage and Cervantes to “deflate romantic or idealized fictional forms” (Abrams 131)—in order to expose, satirize, and thereby “deflate” the gendered conventions and social and political implications that this genre in particular—and the novel more generally—normatively assumes.<sup>7</sup>

Moving into the novel itself, the plot of Austen’s miniaturized play on the picaresque is, as we would expect, centered upon a journey comprised of seemingly disjointed episodes that nonetheless conform to a larger, circular trajectory (or eventual return home). In the opening two chapters, the “lovely & amiable” Cassandra, who has just “attained her 16th year,” steals a bonnet her mother has just finished for an unnamed Countess, “place[s] it on her gentle Head & walk[s] from her Mother’s shop to make her Fortune” (45). Leaving the theft aside for a moment, Cassandra’s conduct right from the beginning shatters the strict notions of female decorum prevalent during Austen’s time. Paula Byrne reminds us, for instance, that “it was not acceptable” and was considered “indecorous” for a young unmarried woman “to walk alone in a public place” (300, 301). The specific location of the shop, identified as Bond Street, further concretizes this argument since, as Stella Margetson notes in her study of Regency-era London, in the eighteenth century “no lady who valued her reputation was to be seen walking down Bond Street or St. James’s Street” without a proper escort (67-68).<sup>8</sup> Cassandra’s determination to venture forth unaccompanied to “make her fortune” could, therefore, quite literally *un-make* her, or threaten her reputation.

Given this possibility, Cassandra’s first encounter on the streets of London is, as we might expect, with a young man—a handsome young Viscount, in fact, who is described as being “no less celebrated for his Accomplishments & Virtues, than for his Elegance & Beauty” (45). But rather than depicting the Viscount as a sexual threat, Austen noticeably effeminizes him, highlighting traits customarily valued in *women* of the period, such as “Elegance,” “Beauty,” and “Accomplishments.” This kind of comic reversal of gender codes is characteristic of the *Juvenilia* at large, and is witnessed, to give one other example, in figures like the coquettish Charles Adams in *Jack & Alice*, an “accomplished & bewitching young Man; of so dazzling a Beauty that none but Eagles could look him in the Face” (13). Rather than functioning as aggressors or potential spoilers of young women’s virtue, characters like Charles Adams and the Viscount are reduced to the comic butts of Austen’s satire, figured as the contested targets of aggressive female attention and courtship, or are simply dismissed or ignored. In the present case, Cassandra merely “curtsey[s] & walk[s] on,” denying the Viscount any kind of verbal engagement, and press-



High-Change in Bond Street, ou La Politesse du Grande Monde, by James Gilray (1796).  
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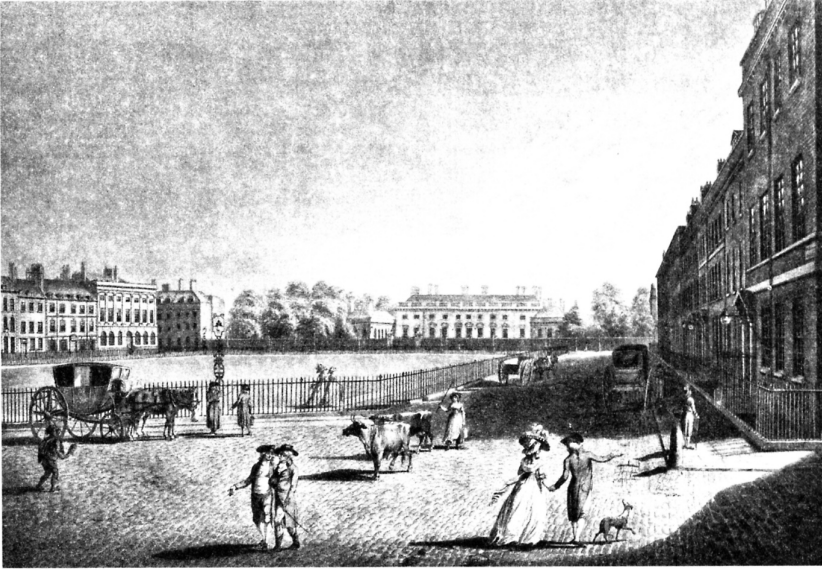
ing on in her search for adventure. But if Cassandra proves herself indifferent to male attentions, what exactly might she be after?

By the fourth chapter we find a potential answer to this question. Here the exhilarating freedoms of unhindered and unsupervised mobility take a destructive edge as Cassandra turns to violence, theft, and other defiant acts that contribute to the sustained topos of aggressive female rebellion in the face of systemic cultural repression that is characteristic of the *Juvenilia* at large.<sup>9</sup> Thus Cassandra “proceed[s] to a Pastry-cooks,” where she “devour[s]” six ices, refuses to pay for them, and then attacks the cook, “knock[ing]” him down and calmly “walk[ing] away” (45). Cassandra doesn’t eat, but *devours* the frozen treats she steals, depicting the kind of appetitive frenzy witnessed in other early heroines (such as Charlotte Lutterell and her “Devouring Plan” in *Lesley Castle* [114]) and suggesting a form of compensatory response to the suppression of bodily drives and “appetites” advocated in conduct books and other forms of prescriptive literature written for young women readers.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Cassandra’s theft introduces another defining element of the *Juvenilia*, for throughout these works young heroines sabotage the male-driven economy by stealing commodities, services, and sums of money large

enough to send them to the gallows. After her theft at the pastry cook's, Cassandra "ascend[*s*] a Hackney Coach" and orders it to suburban Hampstead, where "she was no sooner arrived than she ordered the Coachman to turn round & drive her back again" (45). Cassandra ups the ante here: it was considered improper and even scandalous for a woman to travel alone on public coaches, thus explaining why General Tilney "acted neither honourably nor feelingly—neither as a gentleman nor as a parent" in banishing Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey* and forcing her to travel seventy miles in a coach "alone, unattended" (*NA* 234, 226; qtd. in Byrne 301). But Cassandra does more than just breach social rules governing female decorum and mobility, for returning to "the same spot of the same Street she had sate out from," she bilks the coachman of his pay and, "plac[*ing*] her bonnet on his head," runs away (45, 46). By forcing the coachman to drive to Hampstead only to return again to the *exact same spot* from which he departed, Cassandra wastes his time, energy, and resources in a way that reduces his employment to a parody of its normative function. And by placing her bonnet on his head before running off, Cassandra emasculates the man, thumbing her nose at all notions of female decorum, gender expectations, and deportment. As Peter Sabor notes, theft is "often accompanied [in the early works] by preening self-congratulation, combined with contempt for the victim" (lxiii). Cassandra's "contempt" for the coachman is further registered by the fact that she leaves him stolen goods—a bonnet she had pilfered from her mother. While the bonnet would have been abundant recompense for the coach ride in terms of strict monetary value (setting aside, of course, its status as stolen property), in terms of *symbolic* value Cassandra's cheeky gesture here is priceless.

Having thus deposited her bonnet, Cassandra proceeds on her journey and walks the streets of London alone and without any kind of head-covering, boldly exposing her body in a way that would have shocked polite passers-by and, in late eighteenth-century London, potentially marked her as "available" to more than just the roving male "gaze." As Althea Mackenzie points out, in the eighteenth century (and until around the mid-1790s at least) "women of every level of society would have worn a hat, bonnet or cap at all times during the day, whether indoors or out" (5). If hats and head coverings, moreover, allow women to "wield control" over how they use them to "frame" their own "reception in the world," as Heydt-Stevenson argues in a discussion of Frances Burney's novels ("Changing her gown" 4), then what kind of a statement, what kind of public "reception," is Cassandra trying to "frame" by abandoning her bonnet and parading through the streets of London both uncovered *and* un-



View of Bloomsbury Square, after Edward Dayes. *London* (1787). © Trustees of the British Museum.

chaperoned? By discarding her hat, Cassandra clears an intimate, fetishized space (encompassing head, hair, neck, and so on) for the masculine gaze at the same time that she manipulates her public reception in a profoundly—even aggressively—erotic fashion. Cassandra, we might say, *struts* through the streets of London, enjoying the titillating thrill that her “nakedness” temporarily makes possible and jettisoning her society’s rigid notions of female propriety. Yet as her encounter with the eligible young nobleman earlier in the novel demonstrates, Cassandra appears more interested in wreaking havoc upon the opposite sex and pursuing her own desires than in following the normative script for young female protagonists and searching for a husband.

The typically unfazed Cassandra is startled out of her composure, however, when she encounters a prior acquaintance: “Thro’ many a street she then proceeded & met in none the least Adventure till on turning a Corner of Bloomsbury Square, she met Maria. . . . Cassandra started & Maria seemed surprised; they trembled, blushed, turned pale & passed each other in a mutual silence” (46). This mysterious encounter between two solitary women traversing the streets of London is one of the more enigmatic moments in the text: their “trembl[ing]” and “blush[ing]” nod towards typical bodily responses



associated with the literature of sensibility—the conventions of which Austen so successfully burlesques in *Love and Freindship* and other early works. They of course also register embarrassment, and Cassandra's dis-ease seems to stem from the fact that she has been caught in her rambles by an acquaintance. But we are denied any discourse as the two girls "pass[ ] . . . in a mutual silence," leaving us to wonder exactly what each girl suspects or knows of the other. Have they both been caught indulging in secret pleasures? Has this kind of meeting happened before? Regardless, both Cassandra and Maria—the only other named character in the novel—pass by in *mutual* silence, their shared gesture suggesting, perhaps, feminine solidarity in the pursuit of personal desires.

The final encounter in the novel provides an ironic counter-image of Cassandra's freedoms as she is "accosted" by "her freind the Widow, who squeezing out her little Head thro' her less window, asked her how she did?" (46). But Cassandra refuses to speak: she "curtsey[s]" and moves on, framing herself yet again as a visual spectacle and communicating solely, it seems, by a series of "curtseys"—a physical gesture that, like the male bow, emphasizes surface and display over interior and depth. But what kind of friend, exactly, is the widow? Her "squeezing" of her "little Head thro' her less window" is the kind of enigmatic detail we have come to expect in this miniature "novel": at once concrete and abstract, suggestive and evasive. The parallel emphasis on the smallness of both the widow's head and her window (with the word "widow" actually contained within "window") seems significant; Peter Sabor suggests that "the smallness of the window is a sign of the widow's indigence": she is presumably in an "inexpensive upper-storey room, which would have narrower, lower windows than one on a lower storey" (409 n.15). Her indigence would help contribute to the diversity of social levels and milieus typically encountered by the picaresque hero (or in this case, heroine); but more importantly, I think, the widow presents a powerful contrasting image to Cassandra's figure of unhindered mobility and aggressive subjectivity. That is to say, the widow, seemingly stuck within the confines of her small window, symbolizes the restraints (physical, intellectual, social, and economic) placed upon women in Austen's time—restraints that Cassandra comically flaunts and that the young Jane Austen herself challenges by writing a female mock-picaresque.

Finally returning in the last chapter, after an absence of nearly seven hours, to her "paternal roof in Bond Street" (46), Cassandra is "pressed to her

Mother's bosom by that worthy Woman" (47). Here, in the last sentence of the novel, she finally speaks, but only to herself: "Cassandra smiled & whispered to herself "This is a day well spent" (44). While Cassandra, as we have seen, doesn't "spend" any money in the course of her adventures, and achieves her desires via theft, violence, and cunning, the novel's suggestive last words intimate the kind of pleasure that results from physical exertion and freedom of mobility, as well as a psychological sense of triumph and even self-congratulation. Cassandra *gets away with it*, and Austen avoids the kind of patent moralizing we might come to expect in similar tales of female transgression. If conduct books and prescriptive discourses from Austen's era pressed young girls to "learn how to control and, if possible, eradicate [their] desires, especially those for independence, close female friendship, personal wealth and involvement in power" (*Sermons* xiv), as Janet Todd argues in a different context, then Austen's work ridicules this notion while at the same time demonstrating how these kinds of regulatory discourses actually provoke the very behaviors they condemn, lending young women an exhilarating, almost sexual degree of excitement at the prospect of "spending," like Cassandra, their time and energies in such forbidden, taboo enjoyments.<sup>11</sup>



In *The Beautifull Cassandra* and the other early works, we find Austen rethinking the conventions and governing assumptions that structure the various formal and generic incarnations of the novel, while simultaneously, as Claudia Johnson suggests, "seek[ing] out and bring[ing] to light the agendas that inherited forms conceal by violating those forms" (48). Just as she cuts up the traditional novel by writing a three-page, almost impressionistic miniature, and appropriates and burlesques conventions associated with the picaresque or male adventure tale by filling her work with almost cartoonish acts of female violence and rebellion, so too does Austen's savage irony cut deep into the heart of patriarchal discourse, exposing the repressive and, in her eyes, extreme "agendas" flowing beneath. By riddling her early works with aggressive, unapologetic heroines whose criminal activities subvert and assault the patriarchal structures governing late eighteenth-century women's experience of "the real," Austen exposes the absurd situation of women's lives in such a culture and forces the reader to link her heroines' gleefully outlandish, even manic behaviors (whether drinking, binging, stealing, or even physical violence) with the so-

cial, political, and aesthetic “agendas” that, in fact, create them.

#### NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the 2009 annual meeting of the *International Conference on Romanticism* in New York City. I would like to thank my fellow panelists, Rachel Brownstein and James Thompson, for helpful questions and comments, and especially Jill Heydt-Stevenson for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

1. Lewes’s comments on Austen appear in articles published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 87 (March 1860) and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (July 1859).

2. As Peterson notes, “If it has long been a critical commonplace that Austen transformed the genre of the novel forever, it is today increasingly recognized that she decided on the necessity of doing so from a very early age.”

3. On the family’s (and particularly James Edward Austen-Leigh’s) “whitewashing” of Austen’s image and extensive “censorship” of her letters and other materials, see Auerbach.

4. I italicize novel titles to distinguish them from other generic forms and experiments (tales, letters, and so on); as a completed “history,” I italicize the title to Austen’s *History of England* as well.

5. For instance, one of the more popular and widely reprinted conduct books of the period, John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774; reprinted in Todd’s edition of *Sermons*), highlights female “wit” as “the most dangerous talent” a young woman can possess (14); recommends girls not to be “anxious to share the full extent of [their] knowledge” (15); and confesses, “When a woman speaks of her great strength, her extraordinary appetite, [or] her ability to bear excessive fatigue, we recoil at the description” (23). Austen lends to her early heroines, in other words, *precisely* the traits that Gregory and other prescriptive authors find so repulsive in young women.

6. I borrow here from Gladfelder’s definition of the picaresque (34).

7. Monteiro also notes how the adventures of Austen’s earliest heroines “resemble the exploits of the picaresque hero more than the romantic melodramas of the sentimental heroine” (129).

8. By analyzing a number of prints by Gillray, Rowlandson, Cruikshank, and others, Rachel Brownstein has pointed out customary associations of Bond Street with sexual license, spectatorship, and the marriage market during this period, suggesting that these associations inform Austen’s later choice of this locale for Willoughby’s hideout in *Sense and Sensibility*—a connection Austen’s contemporaries would have noticed but that contemporary readers might miss.

9. For a similar argument, see Heydt-Stevenson (“Pleasure”). Though I follow her reading of the function of theft and criminality in the *Juvenilia*, I extend Heydt-Stevenson’s analysis by linking content to form in the case of *The Beautifull Cassandra*.

10. For a fascinating reading of consumption and excess as compensatory response in these works, see Heydt-Stevenson (“Pleasure”).

11. See also Heydt-Stevenson, "Pleasure," para. 29.

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