

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Jane Austen's Afterlife, West Indian Madams, and the Literary Porter Family: Two New Letters from Charles Austen

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Jane Austen's beloved naval brother, Charles Austen (1779–1852), had a significant impact on her literary career. We find probable traces of him in the male characters appearing in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818), and he is said to have offered naval vocabulary to help his sister revise the second edition of *Mansfield Park* (1816).¹ In addition to his impact during Jane's lifetime (1775–1817), Charles played a role in sustaining her posthumous celebrity, modest as it was at first. Two previously unpublished brief letters by him—and references to him in other correspondence—offer an opportunity to speculate about his role in supporting his late sister's literary reputation. Transcriptions of these letters are included at the end of this essay; we encourage readers to go to them first and then return to our commentary. The letters definitively establish Charles's friendship with artist, travel writer, and diplomat Sir Robert Ker Porter (1777–1842), as well as his contact with Sir Robert's celebrated novelist sisters, Jane Porter (bap. 1776–1850) and Anna Maria Porter (1778–1832). The Misses Porter, as they were

1. B. C. Southam, "Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers: Francis and Charles in Life and Art," *Persuasions* 25 (2003): 34, 39; S. J. Kindred, "The Influence of Captain Charles Austen's North American Experiences on *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*," *Persuasions* 31 (2009): 115–29; George Holbert Tucker, *A History of Jane Austen's Family*, rev. ed. (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), esp. 180–90.

called, were admirers of Austen's fiction during the period in which her literary reputation was at its lowest ebb.²

These letters establish previously unrecognized connections between the literary Porters and Charles Austen in the late 1820s. We believe, based on the evidence we have gathered, that the friendship between Charles and Sir Robert involved conversations about their famous author-sisters. Charles's letters are also of interest for the glimpse they offer into the men's interactions with two mixed-race freewomen in Bridgetown, Barbados: innkeepers Betsy Austin and Hannah Lewis. The first letter from Charles rhetorically juxtaposes his dealings with Austin and Lewis (who almost certainly functioned as madams as well as hoteliers) with Sir Robert's English author-sisters, Jane and Anna Maria Porter.³ We speculate about the meaning of these side-by-side details, which connect—however elliptically—Jane Austen's afterlife, the once-celebrated sister-novelist Porters, and two now-forgotten female purveyors of colonial prostitution.

We know Charles Austen best as the favorite little brother, the one who bought his sisters topaz crosses with his naval prize money, but he lived on for decades after Jane's death, traveling widely and enjoying professional—if not much financial—success.⁴ He served in the Royal Navy for nearly sixty years, rising to the rank of rear admiral. Recent scholarship has chronicled the various ships on which he sailed, the many misfortunes he experienced while serving overseas, and the connections he made in travels across the British Empire. These connections include his marriage to his Bermuda-raised first wife, Fanny Palmer, and, after her death, a second marriage to her sister, Harriet.⁵ The portrait that emerges from this schol-

2. For a brief and accessible overview of the early admirers of Jane Austen, see Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (London: Canongate, 2009), 81–119. As Harman argues, "If Austen can ever be said to have had a period of obscurity, it was during the 1820s, when her books were out of print, out of demand, and almost out of mind" (99). The Porter sisters' private admiration of Austen extends into this period. See Devoney Looser, "Another Jane: Jane Porter, Austen's Contemporary," in *New Windows on a Woman's World: Essays for Jocelyn Harris*, ed. Colin Gibson and Lisa Marr, 2 vols. (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005), 2:235–48.

3. In this essay, we use first names to refer to Austens and Porters because we consider so many of them together. On Charles's naval career and prize money, see Brian Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy*, 2nd ed. (London: Hambledon, 2005), 136; and Sheila Johnson Kindred, "Charles Austen: Prize Chaser and Prize Taker on the North American Station," *Persuasions* 26 (2004): 188–94.

4. On his financial struggles, see Cassandra Austen to Mrs. Whitaker, January 20, 1832, in *Austen Papers*, ed. R. A. Austen-Leigh (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne [Privately Printed], 1942), 285. Cassandra writes, "I wish [Charles] were richer, but fortune has not yet smiled on him" (285).

5. On Fanny Palmer, see Susanne Notman, "The Austen File," *Bermudian*, August 1999, 17–19, 59–61. She spent a portion of her married life on board Charles's ships. On Charles Austen's life and career, see, e.g., Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd ed. (Cam-

arship is of a man who was “lovable, unpunctual, and unlucky.”⁶ Despite his distance from England during a good portion of his adult life, he remained close to his surviving sister, Cassandra. At her death in 1845, Cassandra made Charles her residuary legatee and executor. He was therefore Jane’s de facto second executor. Charles’s daughter—also named Cassandra—became executor of her aunt’s personal effects. The two, Charles and the younger Cassandra, were empowered to dispose of the elder Cassandra’s property, including Jane’s surviving letters and manuscripts. They appear to have done so according to Cassandra’s wishes.⁷ The years in between Jane’s death in 1817 and Cassandra’s in 1845, however, deserve further exploration for hints about Charles’s role in his author-sister’s afterlife.

Charles met Sir Robert while commanding the *Aurora*, stationed in and traveling across the West Indies and South America in the 1820s. Cassandra did not consider this an enviable post, reporting to a friend in 1827, “My youngest Brother Charles is so unfortunate as to have the command of a Frigate in the West Indies.”⁸ Charles’s duties likely involved policing the illegal slave trade and seeking British naval deserters; for his part, Sir Robert was serving as British consul in Caracas, Venezuela.⁹ Some of this information has been documented in print in *Sir Robert Ker Porter’s Caracas Diary, 1825–42: A British Diplomat in a Newborn Nation* (1966). Among the few of the extensive, surviving Porter family papers to have been published, Porter’s *Diary* features a dozen mentions of “Captain Austin.”¹⁰ These refer-

bridge University Press, 2004), esp. 263–65; Clive Caplan, “The Ships of Charles Austen,” *Jane Austen Society Report* (2009): 143–60; Sheila Kindred Johnson, “Finding Fortune and Family: Jane Austen’s Naval Brother Charles in Bermuda,” *Jane Austen Society Report* (2010): 38–48; and Maggie Lane, “A Cornish Exile,” *Jane Austen’s Regency World* 47 (2010): 19–23. On the children born of Charles Austen’s two marriages, in the form of a family tree, and further remarks on his surviving diaries, see J. David Grey, “Our Little Brother,” *Persuasions* 3 (1981): 9–11.

6. On Charles Austen as lovable, unpunctual, and unlucky, see M. H. D., “Captain Charles Austen and Some Others,” *Notes and Queries* 192 (1947): 273–75.

7. Cassandra Austen made most of the important decisions that would shape her sister’s afterlife, famously destroying papers and stipulating which remaining manuscripts would be passed on to which Austen descendants. Charles and his daughter were Cassandra’s executors (the younger Cassandra overseeing her aunt’s “personal effects”), and therefore, they were the second executors of Jane Austen’s papers. See Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 271.

8. Cassandra is lamenting Charles’s not being in England, but the choice of words seems more decided than recording mere absence. See Cassandra Elizabeth Austen to Mrs. Whitaker, February 14, [1827], in Austen-Leigh, *Austen Papers*, 275.

9. T. Seccombe, “Porter, Sir Robert Ker (1777–1842),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22577>. On Charles’s “suppressing the slave trade,” see J. H. and Edith C. Hubback, *Jane Austen’s Sailor Brothers: Being the Adventures of Sir Francis Austen, G.C.B., Admiral of the Fleet and Rear-Admiral Charles Austen* (London: Lane, 1906), 274.

10. Sir Robert Ker Porter, *Sir Robert Ker Porter’s Caracas Diary, 1825–42: A British Diplomat in a Newborn Nation*, ed. Walter Dupouy (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1966), 1227, hereafter cited parenthetically.

ences have been overlooked by scholars, although Brian Southam noted them briefly in *Jane Austen and the Navy* (2000). He records Sir Robert's passing compliments about Charles but says little about the men's friendship and nothing about their literary connections.¹¹

The Porter diaries reveal a bit more about the friendship than Southam reported. Sir Robert, although not a diarist in the introspective, emotive mode, recorded brief factual notes about Charles's comings and goings from Caracas on his repeated visits. "Capt. Austin" is mentioned in Porter's spare prose as Sir Robert's sometime houseguest and regular dinner companion. The published *Diary* demonstrates that Sir Robert respected Charles but does little to describe him personally save for one entry on August 10, 1827, declaring him "the gallant Capt" (279). The references in the Porter diary suggest not only a working relationship but a friendship.

The newly unearthed letters expand our picture of this friendship. The letter from Charles to Sir Robert held in the Porter Papers at the University of Kansas's Kenneth Spencer Research Library is a convivial one. Dated April 11, 1828, it refers to previous conversations, common acquaintances, and correspondence.¹² We consider this letter in concert with material from Charles's unpublished journals, before turning to a second unpublished letter from Charles to Sir Robert's sister Jane, held in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library.¹³ This second letter connects to the first, demonstrating Charles's apparent willingness to advance a relationship with the Porter sisters, who were professed admirers of his late sister's novels.

The April 11, 1828, letter from Charles to Sir Robert was written from Charles's ship, the *Aurora*, in Barbados. It begins, "My Dear Sir Robert," and in it Charles thanks his correspondent for his "friendly letter" of February 29, 1828—a letter that does not seem to have survived. Charles indicates that after receiving Sir Robert's letter, he "immediately put Miss Betsey Austin in requisition for the Pickles but she proved false and therefore I send two Bottles of the manufactory of Miss Hanah Lewis which I hope will prove good." In the subsequent sentence, Charles shifts the subject from Austin and Lewis to Sir Robert's sister, the celebrated Jane Porter. Jane had published two bestselling historical novels in *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), and her sister Anna Maria had published widely in several genres. At least one of Anna Maria Porter's novels was read by

11. See Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy*, 176–77.

12. Charles Austen to Sir Robert Ker Porter, April 11, 1828, box 17, folder 66, item 109, Porter Family Collection (MS 28), Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

13. Charles Austen to Jane Porter, November 29, 1828, Jane Porter Papers, cited by permission of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Charles, as we describe below. Charles's letter to Sir Robert communicates that he has West Indian goods to present to the Porter sisters when he next returns to England, although expressing a concern that this visit will have to be "at some distance." He does not think he will be relieved of his duties to take a leave of absence and so suspects he will "most likely have the pleasure of shaking [Sir Robert] by the hand again at Caracas before I quit the station" in the West Indies. The letter closes with his willingness to deliver anything desired to their mutual military and diplomatic acquaintance.

Many aspects of this letter deserve comment. The most fascinating detail is the reference to Betsy Austin and Hannah Lewis.¹⁴ Austin (no relation to Austen) and Lewis were successful freewomen of mixed race who ran competing lodging and entertainment establishments in Barbados, serving as "important players on the Bridgetown social scene."¹⁵ The two women were prominent figures in the 1820s and '30s, referred to by visitors as "great arch-rivals."¹⁶ Austin would become the more famous of the two, featuring as a character in Frederick Marryat's novel *Peter Simple* (1834). Author Richard Robert Madden (1798–1866) offers this disquieting description of them: "There are two hotels at Bridgetown, at either of which an intelligent traveller may pick up a few notions of colonial characteristics, and pay very exorbitantly for his entertainment, both mental and corporeal. If he wants a specimen of Creole dignity, he must go to the hotel of Miss Betsy Austin; if he wishes for a sample of the indolent tranquility of a large brown lady, he must take up his quarters at the house of Miss Hannah Lewis. Either will afford him a very tolerable specimen of the species she belongs to."¹⁷ Charles knew—and Sir Robert likely knew—both Austin and Lewis personally. Sir Robert's reputed "requisition" of pickles intimates prior knowledge of their wares, and Charles's jovial tone about acquiring them indicates shared familiarity.

Charles's unpublished private journals, on loan to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, further document the fact that, when on shore in Barbados, he frequented these hotels, known by their proprietors' names. His entries for 1827–28 include frequent mentions of Lewis and

14. Miss Eliza Howard Austin, also known as Miss Betsy Austin, died in Bridgetown, Barbados, in 1848, still serving as the proprietor of the Clarence Hotel. See "Birth, Deaths, Marriages," *Manchester Times*, January 2, 1849.

15. Tara Inniss, *Ins and Outs of Barbados Special Edition* (St. Thomas: Barbados Hotel & Tourism Association, 2012), 295.

16. R. R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies, During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship: with Incidental Notices on the State of Society, Prospects, and Natural Resources of Jamaica and Other Islands*, 2 vols. (London, 1835), 1:17. Madden describes the hotels and their respective proprietors in "Letter III. Scenes in Barbadoes. To Charles Mathews, Esq. Jamaica, Dec. 1, 1833," 1:14–29.

17. *Ibid.*, 1:16.

Austin, and he sometimes visits both establishments in the course of one day.¹⁸ Charles's journals record his activities, detail the people he meets in work-related duties, and describe those with whom he dines and drinks. He makes a habit of recording the attractiveness of the English and American women he encounters, and he carefully records his faraway family's birthdays and anniversaries as well as the divine services he attends. He catalogs letters sent and received, the weather, his bedtime, how he has slept, and his dreams. While in Bridgetown, the journals show, Charles clearly favored the hotel of Hannah Lewis over that of Betsy Austin. He spells Lewis's name in several variants—Hannah and Hanah, as well as Louis and Lewis—but he does regular business with her hotel. In February and March of 1827, he mentions having taken tea there (February 4, 1827) and going there to meet men who stay with her. Austen's most regular activity is dressing at Hannah Lewis's, which he mentions doing at least six times (January 29, 1827; February 20, 1827; March 26, 1827; March 29, 1827; March 31, 1827; and April 3, 1827 [AUS/121]). Sometimes he simply records going to her hotel, as he does visits to the reading rooms and calls on colleagues (January 26, 1827; February 15, 1827 [AUS/121]). Once, on a hot day, he records going to her "Inn" "to rest" (January 23, 1827 [AUS/121]). Still other visits seem implied, although Lewis's hotel is not named specifically.

His interactions with Betsy Austin are recorded with greater detail, most of it uncomplimentary. When she holds one of her famous "dignity balls"—which Frederick Marryat described years later in his novel *Peter Simple* as a "ball given by the most consequential . . . colored people," "generally well attended by the officers both on shore and afloat"—Charles records that the young men go ashore to Miss Austin's to attend but that he went "up to my cabin and wrote to my wife" (January 15, 1827 [AUS/121]).¹⁹ He writes of going to Betsy Austin's where another man, Mr. Murray, hosted a luncheon, and their party waited a full hour for it, "which Miss Betsy regretted exceedingly as it was the first time the Commodore had been at her Quarters" (March 29, 1827 [AUS/121]). Later, Charles tells of her high-pressure sales tactics, when a group of British men and women went to a neighboring shop with a Mrs. Hill to buy some shells. When Austin saw them, she made her "entré and prevailed on the party to enter her house" and ultimately sold them her shells instead (April 2, 1827 [AUS/121]). Charles's stories of Austin and his regular habit of dressing at Lewis's suggest he preferred Lewis, offering another way to read his mention of

18. Charles Austen's Private Journals, NMM AUS/121, National Maritime Museum (on loan from a private lender). Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text are to the NMM and are indicated by AUS, followed by the item number.

19. [Frederick Marryat], *Peter Simple*, 3 vols. (London, 1834), 2:193. Tickets for Miss Austin's balls were expensive, reputed to be "half a joe, or eight dollars each" (2:193).

both women in his letter to Sir Robert. Charles's comment that Austin "proved false" could be read as a jibe against her for failing to have pickles at the ready or as a general comment on her business practices.

The use of the phrase "proved false" may also indicate a moment of levity and shared humor between the men. Where things get more complicated is in discerning the precise valence of Charles's humor. Both Austin and Lewis—in addition to being businesswomen running inns—owned slaves who would, as a matter of course, have served as prostitutes. Several historians, including Hilary McD. Beckles, have noted that black prostitution was more common in Bridgetown during slavery than in any other part of the British West Indies.²⁰ Prostitutes were sent to "go on board ships of war for the purpose of selling sex for money" and "were leased out to visiting 'gentlemen,' ships' captains, and other clients for 'a specified period'" (142–43). They operated out of inns and taverns, most of which were run by mixed-race freewomen who had begun their own careers as kept mistresses, having earned enough money that way to buy their freedom. European men who hired female laborers of any kind in Barbados did so with the "general expectation" that "sexual benefits were included" (143). Beckles notes that in hotels, prostitution was "big business," as proprietors provided "black and coloured prostitutes—mostly slaves" for the customers (144). She writes that as late as 1837, most hotels and taverns in Bridgetown were "considered 'houses of debauchery'" (145).²¹ Austin and Lewis almost certainly sold more than pickles and rooms.

Adding to the challenge of interpreting Austin's "proving false" is the fact that, in the context of these Bridgetown hotels, pickles carried associative meanings that could imply a ribald joke. Austin's and Lewis's most famous predecessor, Rachael Pringle Polgreen (1753–91), was visibly linked to pickles in a sexualized image by Thomas Rowlandson. His *Rachel Pringle of Barbadoes* (1796) depicts his subject as a large woman sitting in front of her hotel, legs parted and breasts heaving, in front of three figures: a white male customer, a black woman, and a lusting white male onlooker. Behind

20. See Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (London: Zed, 1989), 142, hereafter cited parenthetically. On the economics of prostitution for slave women in the colonial context, see Beckles, "Property Rights in Pleasure: The Marketing of Slave Women's Sexuality in the West Indies," in *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy: In Honour of Richard Sheridan*, ed. Roderick A. McDonald (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 1996), 169–87.

21. For further descriptions of many Bridgetown hotels and hoteliers, most of them female, and including contemporaries' assessments of Austin and Lewis, see Neville Connell, "Hotel Keepers and Hotels in Barbados," *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 33 (1970): 162–85. A shortened version of this essay was published as "Hotel Keepers and Hotels," in *Chapters in Barbados History*, 1st ser., ed. P. F. Campbell (St. Ann's Garrison: Barbados Museum & Historical Society, 1986), 106–22.

all four figures is a sign reading, "Pawpaw sweetmeats & Pickles of all sorts by Rachel PP." As Maria J. Fuentes puts it, in an article on Pringle Polgreen, "the language of the consumption of 'Sweetmeats & Pickles' worked to both mask and advertise the sexually overt activities within the tavern."²² Pickles and sweetmeats were, for Rowlandson, comic sexual double entendre. It is possible, particularly after the circulation of the Rowlandson lithograph, that they functioned that way, too, for proprietors and guests.

We do not seek to settle the question of what a pickle signified in this context for Charles or Sir Robert, but it is important to note the proximity of the sentence referring to Austin and Lewis to the next sentence about Jane Porter. Charles shifts the subject of his letter from conducting business with mixed-race West Indian women to sending colonial goods to white English female authors. He expresses a desire to meet Jane and to bring her some of his recently acquired—in this case, not brothel-purchased but slaveholding estate-grown—pepper. He writes, "I have lots of bottles of Cayenne by me . . . one of which I shall be most happy to present to your worthy sister on my way to town from Portsmouth when that happy period arrives." These two sentences associatively link the two groups of women through male hospitality and friendship, suggesting the global reach of businesswomen's selling goods, services, and fiction writing.

In the end, Charles did not neglect his promise to contact Sir Robert's sister. The second letter transcribed in the appendix to this essay is from Charles to Jane Porter, dated November 29, 1828. It, too, is written from Charles's ship, then docked in St. Helen's Road, an English anchorage for the British Navy. St. Helen's Road was important for its proximity to the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth and for the quality of desirable spring water nearby. The female Porter trio (Jane, Anna Maria, and their mother, Mrs. Jane Blenkinsop Porter) lived sixty miles away, in Esher, Surrey. They rented a cottage situated on the Portsmouth Road, the major artery connecting Portsmouth and London, some thirteen miles farther on from Esher. For those traveling from the port town to the metropolis, the Porter

22. Marisa J. Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive," *Gender and History* 22 (2010): 571. An earlier essay on Pringle Polgreen notes that another famous Bridgetown businesswoman made a practice of rowing out to visiting ships to sell fruit pickles and hot sauce and take in washing. He does not remark on the possibility that she, too, was involved in the sex trade. See Algernon Aspinall, "Rachel Pringle of Barbados," *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 9 (1942): 112–19. Jerome Handler, who discusses Pringle, Austin, Lewis, and others, describes how customers were solicited at the Bridgetown harbor with a Negro woman as helmsman, to deliver their cards of recommendation and politely invite men to the shore. Handler cites sources suggesting that Hannah Lewis was considered "very respectable" with "notions of propriety," whereas the other hotels in town were "a standing reproach to the morals of the colony" (Jerome Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedman in the Slave Society of Barbados* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974], 136).

cottage would have been directly en route. Yet Charles acknowledges in both letters that his arranging a meeting with the Porter women must remain uncertain.

Charles's second letter follows up on several themes from the first. He acknowledges to Jane his pleasure that "the tin case entrusted to me by my friend Sir Robert had reached you," a statement that implies a previous correspondence and indicates the delivery of promised goods. The tin case may have contained the aforementioned pepper, but more likely it held Sir Robert's painting of General Páez (José Antonio Páez Herrera [1790–1873]), which Charles records in his journal was given to him by Sir Robert for safe transport back to England (July 5, 1828 [AUS/127]). Charles is concerned about the safe arrival of the tin case, but he turns down Jane's invitation to visit Esher, expressing his ostensible regret. He tells her that he is "under orders for Plymouth to be paid off," where his crew would be compensated and the ship decommissioned and refitted. These duties meant that he could not immediately present his letter of introduction from Sir Robert to her, although he says he still intends to visit on his way back from London. He writes that he will keep the letter "till I can put it into your hands knowing it to be solely to that effect!" although "when I shall be able to do so is somewhat uncertain."

Charles provides a reason for his inability to make good on his promise to Sir Robert to visit Esher: his own family had been stricken with scarlet fever. This is a fact that his unpublished journal confirms (AUS/130). Their illness and recovery keeps him in Gosport, although he vows to visit the Porter women in the future. It is possible that Charles's motivations to visit may not have gone beyond a sense of obligation to a male friend. When military men were situated far from Great Britain for long periods of time—and when letters from the West Indies and South America took a month or more to arrive—those returning home saw it as their duty to visit the loved ones of their colleagues to offer firsthand reports of their well-being. Charles may have felt himself so obliged.

It is interesting nevertheless to speculate about Charles's literary motivations. His sister Jane was familiar with the writings of at least one of the Porter sisters. Two decades earlier, in an 1808 letter, she reports that Anna Maria's novel *The Lake of Killarney* (1804) was being read by her nephew, Edward. Jane Austen mentions his being "intent over the 'Lake of Killarney,' twisting himself about in one of our great chairs."²³ Her quip may

23. Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, October 24–25, 1808, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, 4th ed., ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford University Press, 2011), 157. The Edward Austen who is referenced is likely James-Edward Austen-Leigh, the son of James and Mary Austen. On possible Edwards, see Jane Austen, *Later Manuscripts*, ed. Janet Todd and Linda Bree (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 702 n. 7.

mock the taste of the reader rather than endorse it, but the fact that Anna Maria's novel was mentioned at all, several years after its publication, indicates that it had some staying power among the well-read Austen family. From the Porters' side, admiration for Jane Austen's novels, both before and after her death in 1817, was unequivocal. It seems likely that Charles would have known that fact.

In letters to her brother Sir Robert, Anna Maria admits explicitly literary reasons for wanting to meet Captain Austen. In a letter of September 30 (likely from 1828), Anna Maria writes to Robert, "I long too for Capt Austen."²⁴ She wrote again to her brother on November 20, 1828, that they hoped Captain Austen would "visit us some time next month."²⁵ An August 3 [1828?] letter from Anna Maria to Sir Robert most clearly lays out the reasons for desiring the connection.²⁶ Anna Maria writes that she and Jane want to meet Captain Austen not only because they would enjoy conversation with a friend who has recently seen the brother who is dear to them but also because he is brother to Miss Austen, whose death is lamented. The connection to Jane Austen, Anna Maria writes, increases their desire, since of all of their country's novelists (with the exception of Sir Walter Scott), no novelist surpasses her in capturing truth or painting characters. This assessment appears several years before Austen's works were republished in Henry Colburn's *Standard Novels* series in the early 1830s—and before Jane Austen was widely seen as Scott's rival for the title of "Shakespeare of the novel."²⁷ It is a prescient judgment on the Porters' side. It seems likely that Sir Robert would have shared his sister's assessment with Charles.

We have no way of knowing how often their published author-sisters came up in their conversations—whether their unusual familial parallels provided them with a sense of shared experience or similar sensibility. Such a conversation must have happened at least once. When Charles was visiting Sir Robert in Venezuela in April 1827, he records in his diary that he has

24. Anna Maria Porter to Robert Ker Porter, September 30, [1828], POR 1029, Jane Porter Papers, quoted by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

25. Anna Maria Porter to Robert Ker Porter, November 20, 1828, POR 1027, Jane Porter Papers, quoted by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

26. Anna Maria Porter to Robert Ker Porter, August 3, [1830], RP 1584, Box 29, 942A (photocopy on deposit), British Library. Although the British Library speculates that this item is from 1830, our research would suggest its date to be 1828. This letter is kept in the form of a reserved photocopy (RP) at the British Library, having been sold to a buyer outside of the United Kingdom. The letter's owner is unidentified, and is not the British Library, so it is not directly quoted here.

27. On Austen labeled the "Shakespeare of the novel," see the "Austen and Shakespeare" section in Joan Klingel Ray, ed., *Jane Austen's Popular and Critical Reputation: A Documentary Volume*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 365 (Detroit: Gale Cengage, 2012), 33–61.

begun reading *Honor O'Hara* (1826), Anna Maria Porter's recently published novel of manners. Charles writes on April 20, 1827, "After breakfast I returned to a large dining room adjoining my Bed room where I wrote this diary and read Honor O Hara a novel by Miss Porter (Sir Robts Sister) till noon when I dressed for presentation to Genl Bolivar" (AUS/121).²⁸ Charles read the second volume on May 2, 1827, another chapter before dressing on May 3, and then, on May 4, after having enjoyed bread and cheese at Sir Robert's house, "Went into my bed room where I continued reading Honor O'Hara till past Midnight when I finished her, turned in & slept well" (AUS/122). As was his custom, Charles does not assess what he reads, only notes that he has read it.

Anna Maria's *Honor O'Hara* was not her most famous work of fiction, but it was a significant one for Sir Robert to have given Charles to read. Charles could not have failed to see the novel's similarities to *Pride and Prejudice*. The sprightly, intelligent, rebellious, outdoorsy (albeit orphaned) heroine at first turns down a proposal from her worthy, reticent suitor. She endures mistreatment at the hands of a Mrs. Bennet-like vulgar guardian and contends with a Lady Catherine de Bourgh-like snob who tries to paint her as an opportunistic upstart of low birth. In *Honor O'Hara*, the heroine must come to recognize and repent of her "criminal pride" in order to end up with the hero. When, in her prefatory notice, Anna Maria claims that after the repeated urging of friends she is attempting a lighter style of composition than has been her wont, in a setting in the not-too-distant past, it is possible that she had Jane Austen in mind.²⁹

It is also possible that Sir Robert, in selecting a novel to put before Charles, chose this title for particular reasons. It may be that it was chosen because it was the most recent of the sisters' publications or because Charles had already read their other titles. During the period 1826–28, Charles read the novels of Sir Walter Scott, as well as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Benjamin D'Israeli's *Vivien Grey* (1826), Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and a novel he had received from a fellow officer, Lady Charlotte Bury's *Alla Giornata* (1826). Charles shows a decided preference for just-published fiction, and he seems to read it very quickly, sometimes within the course of a day or two. This is interesting, because it is clear that Charles continued to be well read in contemporary novels a decade after his sister's death. Sir Robert and Charles must have discussed recently published fiction—and how they came to be interested in it through their sisters' authorship—in order for a copy of *Honor O'Hara* to have ended up in Charles's hands.

28. This was an important day in Charles's naval service, being "presented" to "the Liberator," General Simon Bolivar, in the presence of Sir Robert, among others. On Charles's service to Bolivar, see Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy*, 176–77.

29. Anna Maria Porter, *Honor O'Hara: A Novel*, 3 vols. (London, 1826), 1:v–vi.

So far we have been unable to confirm whether Charles actually visited the Porter women. He may never have had a chance to make use of his letter of introduction to discuss Anna Maria's novel or to hear the Porters' high opinion of his late sister's fiction. When Charles's family recovered from scarlet fever, he did make a round of visits in and near London, just as he told Jane in his letter that he would. His journal reveals that on January 17, 1829, he traveled to another town on the Portsmouth Road: the home of his sister Cassandra in Chawton, thirty-five miles from Esher. He then made naval visits in London. From there he went, on January 30, 1829, to Burwood House, the home of widower Sir Thomas Williams, a vice admiral whose first marriage was to the Austens' cousin Jane Cooper. Burwood House was approximately twenty miles from Esher. These were both family visits for Charles, with Burwood House also in part a professional trip. One suspects that, had he wanted to, Charles could have visited the Porter women in those early months of 1829, as he had promised Sir Robert and led Jane to believe he would do.

Subsequent events, however, may have prevented him from making good on his early intentions. Sir Robert took leave from his Venezuelan post from May 7, 1829, to June 8, 1830, returning to England (*Diary*, lxxiv). For his part, he did visit Charles's wife toward the end of this period, on April 30, 1830, at her home in Gosport. This was a convenient stop for anyone traveling through Portsmouth, situated as it is to the west of the Portsmouth Harbor and just across from the city and the naval dockyard.³⁰ Sir Robert complains in his diary that week that he is frustrated by the time not spent with his own family at Esher (*Diary*, 465–66). Then in June 1830, he returned to Caracas. Not long afterward, Charles returned to England under unfortunate circumstances. In late 1830, aboard his new ship, HMS *Winchester*, he received a chest injury when he fell from the mast in a gale; he returned to Gosport to convalesce.³¹ The following year, in 1831, the Porter matriarch, Mrs. Jane Blenkinsop Porter, died. In 1832, Anna Maria followed her to the grave. There was no longer a Porter household in Esher to visit. Jane began a peripatetic life of staying with friends and family.

Whether Charles met Jane or Anna Maria or not, the Porter sisters' explicitly literary desires to cultivate his friendship are significant. So, too, is Sir Robert's effort to make Charles familiar with the fiction of one of his tal-

30. Although Gosport was not used as a setting in her novels, Portsmouth itself, of course, is featured in *Mansfield Park* as the place from which Fanny Price hails and later briefly returns to her ungentee family. Her coarse marine lieutenant father supports his large family there on half pay.

31. Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 264. Clive Caplan succinctly remarks that it is unknown why the "51-year-old flag captain needed to climb a mast, and in a gale at that. After all, he did have 450 men to do it for him" ("Ships of Charles Austen," 154).

ented sisters. These epistolary and personal connections between the two families provide a glimpse into the ways that Jane Austen's literary afterlife was sustained and enhanced through her family's contacts with celebrated author contemporaries prior to the late nineteenth-century rediscovery and widespread reevaluation of her fiction. Furthermore, the two letters demonstrate what many of us would assume as a matter of course: that cosmopolitan Englishmen would discuss their interactions with celebrated West Indian madams in the same breath as they did their celebrated literary sisters. One wonders whether the brothers' familiarity with each category of female professional had any impact on their behavior or opinions when interacting in either circle.

APPENDIX

I. Letter from Charles Austen to Sir Robert Ker Porter, April 11, 1828, Barbados

My Dear Sir Robert

Many thanks for your friendly letter of the 29th Feb^y. I immediately put Miss Betsey Austin in requisition for the Pickles but she proved false and therefore I send two Bottles of the manufactory of Miss Hanah Lewis which I hope will prove good. I have lots of Bottles of Cayenne by me presented by a friend in this place made on his own Estate one of which I shall (1-2) be most happy to present to your worthy sister in my way to town from Portsmouth when that happy period arrives, but ~~of~~ which I fear is at some distance as I hear of nothing coming to relieve me. So I shall most likely have the pleasure of shaking you by the hand again at Caracas before I quit the station and of course shall have much pleasure in taking any thing for Mr. Cockburn;³² not a line from

32. Sir Alexander Cockburn was based in Bogota, where he was envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Colombia. He was the father of the famous judge Sir Alexander James Edward Cockburn (1802-80) and brother of Admiral Sir George Cockburn. See Porter, *Diary*, 87 n. 99.

him as yet! The Mail Boat
is about to start so adieu (2–3)
May health and success
attend you. Ever my Dear Sir
very faithfully yours
Charles [Jn?] Austen

Be pleased to remember me to
Mr Lievesly³³—
The Stopfords³⁴ & c.
HMS *Aurora*
Barbados 11th April
1828

II. Letter from Charles Austen to Jane Porter, November 29, 1828, Portsmouth

HMS *Aurora* 29 Novr 1828 St. Helens Roads

My Dear Madam

I was very happy to hear the tin case entrusted to me by my friend Sir Robert had reached you safely and at the same time much gratified by your friendly invitation to your Cottage, tho: I should certainly have paid my respects to your family trio there had I not been so favoured having promised your Brother to do so; and having a letter of introduction from him to you, which I will still keep till I can put it into your hands knowing it to be solely to that Effect! When I shall be able to do so is somewhat uncertain, being under orders for Plymouth to be paid off, and as we are now wind-bound I fear I shall hardly get back to my family before Christmas. I must however go to town soon afterwards and will certainly pay my respects to you in my way down. I found my children mostly down with the Scarlet Fever and Mrs. Austen much worn with fatigue and anxiety, you will therefore

33. Mr. Morris Lievesley was Robert Ker Porter's secretary, "a Jew, who lodged at the embassy, accompanied [Porter] on his promenades, and with whom he held long and very cordial relations" (*ibid.*, lxii).

34. Colonel Edward Stopford was "one of several British officers who, after rendering distinguished military services to the cause of independence, remained in Venezuela alternating private activities with official positions" (*ibid.*, 23 n. 7). One of those activities was founding and editing *El Colombiano*, a bilingual newspaper (Spanish and English).

readily imagine my being order'd to Plymouth
was a most untoward circumstance, however
the westerly wind has happily enabled me to see
them all convalescent. I will only add that when
I parted with your Brother early in July he was
perfectly well and with my best respects to your
Mother and Sister subscribe myself

Dear Madam

your very faithful sev^t

Charles [Jn?] Austen

PS the state of my family will I hope

plead my excuse for not thanking

you earlier for your kind favour

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