

“Of which I avow myself
the Authoress . . . J. Austen”:
The Jane Austen–Richard Crosby
Correspondence

ARTHUR M. AXELRAD

Department of English, California State University, Long Beach, CA 90840

When R. W. Chapman prepared letter number 67 for publication in 1932, he was perhaps swayed by the cautionary words of William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh that it was “said not to be in Jane’s hand” (230) to reject his own earlier estimate in the *Times Literary Supplement* (27) that it is holographic:

All the documents are in Jane Austen’s autograph unless the contrary is stated or implied. The headings, when printed in italics are her own.

11—*Copy of a Letter to Messrs. Crosbie and Co.*, April 5, 1809

Thus it is described in the first and all subsequent printings of the *Letters* as “Contemporary copy, not by J.A.” (xxv) and “Not autograph” (268).

Unfortunately, Chapman also followed the Austen-Leighs in misreading one of the words of the manuscript, preserving the awkward and somewhat unidiomatic “of which I am myself the Authoress.” The correct reading, the more assertive and well-rounded—and very Austenian—“of which I avow myself the Authoress,” is very clear in the original manuscript (British Library Add. MSS. 41253B, folio 12; Modert, F-197).

Jane Austen could not have found this uncharacteristically blunt and humorless letter easy to write. Hence we should not be surprised that this copy, which is clean and neatly executed, is not a first attempt. Indeed, at least one earlier draft exists, immediately under this inked version. In the faintest imaginable pencil, barely visible to the naked eye but less illegible with the assistance of a fibre-optic light cable and ultraviolet light (abetted by an occasional leap of faith), we find an earlier text, essentially the same as the one in ink but more scattered, as though the phrases are being tasted and tested for best effect. At times the inked words are directly over the pencilled originals, at others preceding or following. Ironically, the word “avow” is clearer in this earlier draft, so it is regrettable that Chapman did not observe the underlying pencilled original. This preliminary version appears to be slightly shorter than the inked draft, with only fragments of the extraordinary closing sentence, which perhaps was not yet fully formed.

Aside from illustrating Jane Austen’s desire to create a finished product even for a short business letter, this earlier and possibly truncated pencilled version might appear to be less interesting than its successor, except for one important detail: it is signed “J. Austen,” in a form identical to that used to close other extant letters. The frank avowal of authorship was originally to be supported by an open statement of her true identity, rather than the silly

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Madam

I have to acknowledge the receipt of
 your letter of the 5th Inst. & to be sure that
 at the time mentioned we purchased
 of Mr Seymour a MS. now entitled
Susan and paid him for it the
 sum of 10s for which we have his
 stamped receipt at a full considera-
 tion, but there was not any bene-
 stipulated for its publication, neither
 are we bound to publish it. Should
 you or any one else wish all the
 proceedings to stop the sale
 thereof. We are very sorry for the
 same as we paid for it.

London
 Apr 8 1809

Your obedient
 Servant
 Richard Croft

Richard Croft
 Post Office
 Southampton

M.A.D. and its expansion into the fictional Mrs. Ashton Dennis. We can only surmise as to the fate of *Northanger Abbey* if she had signed the letter as initially planned. In any event, this signature established beyond question that R. W. Chapman should not have changed his mind, that Jo Modert was justifiably exasperated that he "for some reason insisted [that it] was not autograph" (xii), and that the British Library is vindicated in claiming possession of an "Autograph copy of a letter from Jane Austen" (285).

And the response, which was one of the very few letters to Jane Austen that she preserved? Although the text has been published many times, only a view of the original fully reveals why Jane Austen temporarily retreated from further correspondence with her erstwhile London publisher. With special permission of the British Library, Mr. Richard Crosby, who was clearly ready to exchange threat for threat (but with the law on his side!) and presumably did not need a series of drafts to make himself perfectly lucid, is now revealed in all his arrogant and intimidating forcefulness.

I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of the staff of the British Library, and especially that of Mrs. Carol Mescall, Head of Photographic Services Administration, who granted permission for the reproduction in this article of Mr. Richard Crosby's letter.

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