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The “Crafting” of Austen: Handicraft, Arts and Crafts, and the
Reception of Austen during the Victorian Period

Natalie Quinn

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The “Crafting” of Austen: Handicraft, Arts and Crafts, and the
Reception of Austen during the Victorian Period

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This thesis addresses the significant but often overlooked relationship between Jane Austen’s works and the body of criticism about them and the two major craft movements of the nineteenth century: the Handicraft Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement. The connections occur at two important moments during that century—first, at the moment of Austen’s career during the Regency/Romantic period, and second, at the Victorian moment of the years surrounding the 1869 publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* about Austen. In both of these moments, critics and reviewers repeatedly respond to Austen’s life and works by using craft-related diction. This diction and the coetaneous nature of the craft and critical movements are indicative of the ongoing struggle throughout the nineteenth century to negotiate, eliminate, or redefine the art versus craft aesthetic binary. During the Regency moment, this negotiation begins to emerge in the heyday of the Handicraft Movement and its love for ornamentation. However, it is not until the years surrounding the publication of Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* that the interdisciplinary ideologies of craft and literary aesthetics burst forth. This period of overlap is short-lived, lasting approximately two decades. Nevertheless, by acknowledging its existence and examining its influence upon the *Memoir* and the criticism surrounding it, we can gain a greater appreciation for the aesthetic context in which the *Memoir* was published and for the image of Austen crafted by Victorian reviewers—an image that would ultimately become the literary inheritance of readers and scholars in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Handicraft Movement, Arts and Crafts Movement

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Introduction

In a letter dated 16-17 December 1816, Jane Austen corresponds with her nephew and eventual biographer, James Edward Austen-Leigh, about the craft of novel writing. This letter is most famous for Austen's description of her writing style as working on a "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory . . . with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour" (qtd. in Jones 198). However, what often goes unrealized is that in the passage immediately preceding the ivory analogy, Austen includes additional ideas about the novel-writing process, and this earlier passage combines with the ivory metaphor to establish an intriguing connection between Austen's writing and dominant modes of craft during the nineteenth century. In her letter, Austen consoles her nephew about the "monstrous!" loss of "two Chapters & a half" (198) from the manuscript of one of his novel drafts. She then playfully adds, "It is well that *I* have not been at Steventon lately, & therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them;—two strong twigs & a half towards a Nest of my own, would have been something" (198). Austen's teasing metaphor equates the writing of a novel with the building of a nest: an endeavor that requires the collection of twigs and bits to form a cohesive whole. However, despite playfully suggesting how tempting it would be to steal twigs from her nephew, Austen subsequently admits that her nephew's "twigs" would be incompatible with her "ivory." The nest metaphor suggests the very materials (twigs, scraps, and domestic detritus) that many "crafters" of her era were using to create decorative items, while the description of her writing as a diminutively scaled "little bit" equates her novels with domestically produced crafts rather than purportedly grander and more ambitious works of "art."

This craft-related diction is hardly coincidental, since Austen's life was contemporaneous with what historians have come to call the Handicraft Movement. The Handicraft Movement was born during the late eighteenth century and was devoted to the amateur artistic pursuits of the leisure classes, whose members created craft items for domestic display using ephemeral and natural

materials—like twigs, bits of paper, and fabric scraps—from in and around their homes. Due to these materials' origins, the scale and creative process of Handicraft items were distinctly diminutive and domestic. These items were created and displayed in the homes of the British bourgeoisie during newly acquired leisure time that resulted from the burgeoning wealth and consumerism of the period. As the middle classes turned to craft activities to fill their leisure time, parlors became “new venue[s] for ornamentation” (Schaffer, “Women’s Work” 3) where parlor occupants could display the luxury goods that their wealth allowed them to acquire and the hand-crafted decorations that their leisure time allowed them to create.

Because participation in craft activities continued to be a means of asserting one’s status and wealth well into the nineteenth century, the Handicraft Movement ultimately lasted approximately sixty years and exerted an influence over the broader cultural aesthetics during that six-decade span. The Handicraft Movement was intrinsically domestic and therefore private; consequently, it had no clear leaders. The trends and fashions of the various craft activities trickled through society by word of mouth and by gradual dissemination from one social circle to another. This dissemination always began in the upper tiers of British society. For example, Mary Delany, who was a friend to the royal family, was the “most famous practitioner” (Schaffer, “Women’s Work” 4) of these leisure-time parlor activities: she “invented paper collages, making intricately detailed and naturalistic flower pictures from thousands of miniscule fragments of colored papers” (4). She also made “wax flowers, shell nosegays, and landscapes made of seaweed and different-colored sand layers,” as did her contemporaries, and all for the purpose of producing “remarkable objects superior to their too-*evanescent* natural models” (4).

While Austen makes no reference to wax flowers or shell nosegays in her 1816 letter to her nephew, she nevertheless wrote this during the height of the Handicraft Movement, and her letter’s craft-related diction demonstrates the movement’s influence upon the spirit of the age. Austen’s

letter and the connections it bears to the crafting spirit of the age articulate an interdisciplinary relationship between craft and literary aesthetics that would last throughout the nineteenth century. During the Arts and Crafts Movement, which was the Handicraft Movement's successor, this relationship would become more evident. The Arts and Crafts Movement emerged in the 1860s, reached its height in the 1880s, and lasted into the pre-war years of the twentieth century. From the Handicraft Movement, the Arts and Crafts Movement inherited an appreciation for the workmanship of human hands and a relationship to changing cultural circumstances. However, this appreciation was founded more heavily upon aesthetic than sentimental value. By the 1840s, Handicraft Movement crafts had become predominantly sentimentalized objects. The writer Elizabeth Stone described handicraft items in 1840 as "tokens of remembrance" that were "fraught with home memories" but were nevertheless "valueless soever in [themselves]" (qtd. in Schaffer, "Women's Work" 8). Arts and Crafts items were dramatically different creations. They were not tokens of remembrance. Rather, their value lay in their quality and functionality: they were made from fine materials and were designed to be both beautiful and useful. Unlike the Handicraft Movement, which embraced the leisure time that trade and industrialization afforded and used that time to create ephemeral decorative items, the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to refine, celebrate, and elevate human workmanship in opposition to mechanically produced works.

In hindsight, then, Austen's 1816 letter speaks to two important moments during the nineteenth century. The first is Austen's moment, the Regency period, during which ideas about the arts and their relation to craft were being examined and redefined. This examination paved the way for the second moment, the later Victorian period, when craft aesthetics become more central.¹ This moment is also significant because the heyday of Arts and Crafts was when interest in Austen and

¹ Austen signals this shift in her letter by suggesting a distinction between her writing and her nephew's manuscript based on the different materials they were using—he, twigs, and she, ivory—and by showing that fine materials could be used in a diminutive and domestic setting to create quality products—in her case, novels.

her works increased. The first full-length biography of Austen, her nephew James Edward Austen Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen: and Other Family Recollections*, was published in 1869. In the years surrounding the publication of the *Memoir*, critics and reviewers writing about Austen, her life, and her work repeatedly drew upon the language and ideologies of Arts and Crafts to generate critical dialogue about Austen. Through their use of Arts and Crafts aesthetics, these critics ultimately connected their primarily literary conversation about Austen's works and life to a larger interdisciplinary discussion about the definitions and degrees of art.

In this thesis, I will argue that as early as during Austen's lifetime, but most especially during the Victorian period, the cultural discourse around Austen was not purely literary. Rather, it was a discourse influenced by cross-disciplinary trends that had a significant impact upon the spirit of the age, informing the aesthetic ideologies of these two moments. I will suggest that recognition of this interdisciplinary discourse and its impact upon these two moments is crucial to a fuller understanding of nineteenth-century criticism about Austen and about Austen-Leigh's 1869 *Memoir*. To highlight the juxtaposition of these moments and their relevant interdisciplinary discourse, I will identify thematic diction and ideas in the articles written about Austen and Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* during the mid- and later-Victorian periods. I will then examine how these themes illustrate a connection between the values expressed in critics' and Austen appreciators' readings and the aesthetics of first the Handicraft and then the Arts and Crafts Movements. I will ultimately show that these ideologies' contemporaneous relationship with the first full-length Austen biography enabled prevailing literary and craft values of the Victorian period to influence the representations of Austen passed on to twentieth-century scholars and readers. These representations paint her on the one hand with a coarse brush, rendering her as a two-dimensional and anachronistically Victorian woman, and on the other hand, with a fine brush, thereby portraying her as an industrious but not

industrial author whose works were fully, not flatly, rendered and whose life was unique for its fusion of art and domesticity.

Crafting the Spirit of the Age: the Handicraft and Arts and Crafts Movements

The late-Victorian critics who wrote about Austen in the years before and after Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* inherited from their Regency predecessors an influential set of descriptors and opinions about Austen. Sir Walter Scott and Archbishop Richard Whately were the original authors of this critical lexicon. Their pieces for the *Quarterly Review* appeared in 1816 and 1821, respectively. In his piece, Scott commends Austen's "depth of knowledge and dexterity of execution" (63) and calls her novels delightfully precise and "finished up to nature" (67). Whately adds his belief that "no author has ever conformed more closely to real life" (95). He also praises Austen's "compactness" (95) of narrative and minuteness of detail (96, 98, 102), attributing the impressive elegance of her works to these qualities. To subsequent critics like Thomas Babington Macaulay, the strengths that Whately and Scott observe in Austen's novels make her the peer of other great English authors. In 1843, while writing for the *Edinburgh Review*, Macaulay enthusiastically associates Austen with Shakespeare, saying that both are writers "of whom England is justly proud" (122).

These early reviews identify some primary reasons for esteeming Austen's writing, and these reasons continue to surface in critical works about Austen throughout the century. Furthermore, the attributes that these Regency reviewers value in Austen's writing—detail, compactness, elegance, and realism—are all attributes that overlap with the dominant modes of craft during the Regency period. Thus, these early articles not only generate a list of reasons for praising Austen but also manage to couch that praise—perhaps inadvertently—in craft terminology. Nevertheless, while the reviews generated during this Regency moment provide early signs of art and craft overlap, it is not until Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*, which repeatedly associates Austen's novels with craft aesthetics, that firm

links are forged between Austen's works and contemporaneous craft movements. In the *Memoir*, when Austen-Leigh calls his aunt's novels "genuine home-made article[s]" (90), his diction acquires significance because he uses this phrase during the decade of the Arts and Crafts Movement's rise to popularity. As early as 1860, this movement had overtaken the Handicraft Movement and had already begun to promote the home- and hand-made as a rejection of industrialization and as a celebration of human creativity. Thus, when Austen-Leigh uses the term "home-made" to describe his aunt's writing at the end of the 1860s, he is seemingly echoing an Arts and Crafts Movement valuation of human rather than industrial production in the very moment when that movement is beginning to gain momentum.

Talia Schaffer's work on the Handicraft Movement opens the way to greater understanding of these movements' aesthetic impact upon Austen and upon nineteenth-century perceptions of her work. In "Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and 'The Cranford Papers'" (2005), Schaffer notes,

Handicrafts constituted a complex reaction to the mid-Victorian economy. Those who participated in the craft system admitted that mass-produced objects were excitingly inventive, swiftly made, prodigious in quantity, and precise in quality. But they mourned that the mass-produced commodity and standardized consumer behavior were so generic, so automatic. The domestic handicraft could articulate this critique by emulating industrial production and consumption while adding emotional meaningfulness. Through crafts, then, the women's sphere produced an alternative, rival version of the dominant economy. (223)

Schaffer assigns interesting and almost contradictory roles to the domestic handicraft by suggesting that it was both a reaction against and an acceptance of the consequences of industrialization.

Industrialization provided the leisure time during which crafters could assert their "mastery" of an aristocratic code that brought the wasting of time and materials into vogue (Schaffer, "Women's

Work” 4). Nevertheless, in this very space of leisure time that industrialization made possible, handicraft makers were striving to reinvest domestic items with the emotional significance that industrial products lacked. Through this duality, the handicraft represented important cultural tensions in the late eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

As the movement progressed, handicraft items became more sentimental and less pragmatic. Regency-period craft became more a mastery over nature and the domestic sphere than a careful manipulation of natural materials. Crafts from the early nineteenth century came to represent “a thrifty, skillful mode of domestic management” (Schaffer, “Women’s Work” 6) and a “need to dominate nature, processing it into mere decoration” (5) that seemed more complicit with the industrial economy’s increasing effects. Most of the handicrafts from these years were “improved” objects from nature, like shells or flowers that were “gilded, shellacked, wrapped in foil, dipped in wax, pierced, glued together, wrapped in fabric, or incorporated” into some larger design (6). By processing and dominating natural objects into decorative items, domestic handicraft makers were actually mirroring the behavior of British industrialization and how it harnessed the forces of nature for humanity’s use.

This gradual shift in the Handicraft Movement’s values opened up a space for a new aesthetic movement that could reinvent the Handicraft Movement’s original anti-industrial sentiments. Led by William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement combined the ideas of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites (all of whom Morris admired and even associated with) and recuperated the early Handicraft ideals to form a new aesthetic philosophy. Morris did not definitively articulate this philosophy until the 1890s, but it nevertheless flourished from the 1860s onward thanks to the construction of Morris’s famously gothic Red House (1860) and the formation of the London design firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company in 1861. This building and firm ushered in the Arts and Crafts Movement and its commitment to the “association of art and labour” (Triggs 7).

Morris would later reflect on the firm's founding by observing, "All the minor arts were in a state of complete degradation especially in England, and accordingly in 1861 with the conceited courage of a young man I set myself to reforming all that" (Stansky 34). Morris described the minor arts as "the lesser arts – the arts, that is, of use," and he attributed their degradation to two phenomena: first, "the withdrawal of the fine artist from the field of handicraft and his attachment to the leisure classes" and second, the sundering of the arts into lesser and greater, causing contempt for the lesser arts among the greater arts and ignorance of the greater arts among the lesser arts (qtd. in Triggs 80). Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement shared with the Handicraft Movement a desire to reinvest household items with value. However, unlike the Handicraft Movement, which embraced amateurism and leisure time enabled by industrialism, the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to restore a sense of professionalism to the lesser arts—the handicrafts and the arts of use—and to fight the effects of industrialism. While the Handicraft Movement was content with the division mentioned above, the Arts and Crafts Movement was committed to bridging the gap between and dispelling the contempt and ignorance belonging to the "lesser" and "greater" arts. Morris felt that the solution to this dilemma of division could not come through sentimentality and amateur decoration performed during leisure time. Rather, he chose to wage "holy warfare against . . . fanciness and ostentation" and automation (34). In lieu of industrial and impersonal efficiency, Morris valued "truth to nature and to material and the importance of the quality of workmanship" (34). He also valued a type of "proto-functionalism," as manifested in his creed, "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" (34-35).

One of the philosophical fundamentals for Morris's company and for the Arts and Crafts Movement was the acquisition of understanding through experience. In Morris's firm, "The designer . . . was not a superior artist sitting aloof in an office, but a worker who understood from experience every craft for which he designed" (Faulkner vi). In other words, there was an intellectually engaging

element of craft and workmanship that helped to elevate craft to the level of art in its own right. Morris claimed this intellectual dimension of design for his firm and its members by asserting, “Our art is the work of a small minority composed of educated persons, fully conscious of their aim of producing beauty, and distinguished from the great body of workmen by the possession of that aim” (Morris, “Preface” viii). Morris believed there was a revolutionary power in the furniture, textiles, and other decorative items designed and produced by his firm. These products were more “wholesome” and less cluttered than other Victorian interior décor because their creators cared more for the details of craftsmanship than for showy ornamentation. This un-Victorian privileging of artistry over ostentation made Morris and his “conscientious and committed craftsman” (Burdick 65) revolutionary. Morris hoped to produce “wholesome household art” that would be available to “people of all circumstances” (65). Through this art and the breadth of its distribution, he believed that the firm would subtly change society by prompting people to find purer and simpler pleasure in art and its potential to “enrich everyday living” (65).

Morris’s efforts to enrich life by elevating household art led to a greater appreciation for the subtle artistry of the man-made. Unlike the practitioners of handicraft activities during the Romantic period, Morris wanted to work *with* rather than dominate or process natural materials, creating from them artistically-crafted, high-quality decorative and furniture items that could undermine the consumption of mass-produced items. These efforts and their attendant appreciation for human craftsmanship became the Arts and Crafts Movement’s hallmarks. Furthermore, at the same time that the movement sought to elevate crafts to the level of art, leading critics of and participants in the literary arts (like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell) were expressing similar dissatisfaction with industrialism and showing the same appreciation for fine craftsmanship. As the leading minds of domestic design and literary criticism responded to the same cultural and social phenomena, they constructed similar systems of aesthetic values that became interdisciplinary ideologies. Morris and

his fellows were, by and large, writers who shifted their focus to design. Consequently, they and their literary counterparts lived and functioned within overlapping spheres of influence. Some of them—like the Thackeray family of novelists, the artists John Everett Millais and Ford Madox Brown, and the eponymous firm members P. P. Marshall and Charles Faulkner—lived in the same London neighborhoods. Others—like George Eliot and G. H. Lewes or Sir Frederick and Lady Juliet Pollock—cohabitated. These individuals and other leading Victorian figures read and contributed to the same critical periodicals, like *Blackwood's*, *Fraser's*, the *North British Review*, and even the *London Times*. Thus, while their interactions may not have been sustained or intentional, contact nevertheless existed between the literary and aesthetic leaders of the Victorian period, and it can be assumed that although they may not have mixed socially, they were aware of one another intellectually.

Reviewing Austen in the Arts and Crafts Age

It was amid all these developments in the world of craft and aesthetics that the first great wave of Austen scholarship was born. And this newfound desire to think carefully about Austen's accomplishment was only accelerated by the publication of Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* in 1869. In addition to praising Austen's realism, detail, and daily-life descriptions, the new engagements with her works also demonstrated a pattern of valuing the "domestic" and the "home-made" or even handcrafted nature of her novels in ways that clearly coincided with Arts and Crafts language and sentiments. Just as Morris praised his craftsmen for their conscientious commitment to experience-based design, Victorian critics praise Austen for being similarly purposeful and methodical in her literary artistry. These critics also note how her novels are constrained within her own realm of experience—the world of English gentry life that spanned the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Some reviewers, like Leslie Stephen in 1876, fault Austen for excluding from her books "the harsh hideous facts with which ninety-nine out of a hundred of our fellow-

creatures are constantly struggling” (175). Stephen sees Austen’s narrow slice of society as a fundamental flaw in her writing; however, most other Victorian critics who notice this element of her novels are quick to defend this choice. For example, Richard Simpson suggests that the “four or five families” variety of society was “the only society [Austen] knew” (241), and other critics join him in acknowledging that, narrow though her societal range may have been, Austen was the indisputable master of it. About twenty years after Simpson, Elbert Hubbard, the leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the United States, weighed in on this debate. In 1897, Hubbard visited Steventon and noted, “Jane Austen lived in a little village. She felt the narrowness of her life” (345). This fact, according to Hubbard,² makes her authorial accomplishment even more remarkable because the narrowness notwithstanding, Austen “produced great art” (354), even “high art,” from “commonplace events and . . . every-day materials” (351).

Ultimately, as Hubbard’s 1897 assessment demonstrates, critics coetaneous to the Arts and Crafts Movement were more impressed by the depth of Austen’s skill than they were concerned about her social limitations. Their prioritizing of skill as well as the diction they employ to express their admiration combine to demonstrate how literary criticism during this time experiences the effects of the spirit of the age created by the dominant modes of craft during the nineteenth century. The Handicraft and Arts and Crafts Movements’ values are the “underlying and formative structures” (qtd. in Filmer 204)³ that can elucidate the ideas informing Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* and conceptions of Austen during the mid-Victorian period. However, these structures are not purely

² As the leader of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, Hubbard was a proponent of the craft-as-high-art ideology. Consequently, in his chapter about Austen, Hubbard portrays her work and life as a harmonious unity of high art and craft.

³ I have elsewhere deemed these structures “the spirit of the age.” In influence and impact, this spirit resembles what Raymond Williams has described as “structures of feeling”—systems that represent “a simultaneous realization of and response to . . . underlying and formative structures” (qtd. in Filmer 204). This realization and response combine to produce unprecedented sets of ideas or principles that subsequently manifest themselves in cultural outlets like literature and the arts. According to Paul Filmer, examining these sets of unprecedented and underlying ideas is “the appropriate methodological key to the critical elucidation of the artistic practices by which specific artworks are related sociologically to general social processes” (201). By suggesting that there are sociological connections between a society’s artworks and a society’s other component parts, Filmer allows for society members’ experiences to affect that society’s art.

aesthetic: throughout the *Memoir* and the Austen criticism in the years adjacent to its publication, the “general social processes” (Filmer 201) regarding Victorian constructs of femininity also contribute to the feelings that represent the spirit of the age.

In analyzing mid-to-late Victorian reviews of Austen and the discourse surrounding Austen-Leigh’s biography, we see frequent invocations of the key principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Whether consciously or not, critics repeatedly traced six key principles of Arts and Crafts aesthetics operating in Austen’s novels: 1) a deep concern with the “natural”; 2) a dedication to quality and conscientiousness in workmanship; 3) an emphasis on personal experience; 4) a self-consciousness about aesthetics; 5) a sense of beauty and artistry; and 6) a commitment to detail in design and observation. While these principles may not have been entirely unique to the Arts and Crafts Movement, the movement was nevertheless the first to claim them and articulate them as part of a unified aesthetic philosophy. I will trace the presence of these principles within the Victorian criticism about Austen by dividing that criticism into two groups: reviews and articles that precede the Austen-Leigh *Memoir* and the reviews and articles that follow the *Memoir*’s publication.

The first reviewers who wrote about Austen’s work during the mid-Victorian period signal at least some familiarity with the initial, Regency-era reviews of her novels. In fact, their responses to Austen’s work seem to consciously build upon these earlier critical pieces. These critics (whose articles appeared in various publications prior to the 1869 *Memoir*) agree with Regency assessments of Austen and her novels, appreciatively endorsing Austen’s works for their realism, detail, and overall elegance. However, among these readers, Charlotte Brontë stands out as a notable mid-century dissenter. Unlike her fellow reviewers, who reiterate Regency-era praise for Austen, Brontë expresses a dislike for Austen and does so in handicraft terms. In 1848, after reading a *Fraser’s Magazine* article by George Henry Lewes in which he praised Austen, Brontë wrote a letter to Lewes, asking, “Why do you like Miss Austen so very much?” (126). She goes on in this letter to fault

Austen for being “only shrewd and observant” rather than “sagacious and profound” (127). Two years later, in a letter to her publisher friend W. S. Williams, Brontë concedes that Austen describes the lives of the English gentry “curiously well,” with “a minute delicacy” and “a smooth elegance” (128). However, Brontë argues that these talents cannot compensate for Austen’s being merely “real” and “sensible” (127) rather than artistic, and a “complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman” (128). Brontë asserts that Austen’s lack of passion indicates a lack of authenticity: consequently, Austen does not deserve to be called “a great artist” (127). This assertion demonstrates the artistic divisions Morris criticized. Brontë clearly subscribes to the idea of lesser and greater arts, and she seems to suggest that Austen was an artist from the “lesser” category or perhaps not even a literary artist but rather a literary crafter. Furthermore, by suggesting that Austen is a lady rather than a woman, she associates Austen with the ladylike pursuits of crafting—pursuits that emphasize detailed delicacy and elegance.

Despite her opinion that Austen is a lesser artist, Brontë nevertheless corroborates earlier praise for the novels by admitting that Austen’s works are elegant and delicate. Furthermore, Brontë does not dissuade Lewes from esteeming Austen and her novels. In 1859, over ten years after Brontë demanded that he justify appreciating Austen, Lewes wrote “The Novels of Jane Austen” for *Blackwood’s*. In this piece, he commends Austen’s masterful “representation of character” and calls this skill “the highest department of art”—a pronouncement that flies in the face of Brontë’s analysis. Lewes sees in Austen’s novels not only high art but also skillful management. He praises Austen for practicing an “economy of art,” in which her engaging stories and characters are functions of daily life’s commonplace activities and relationships. While Lewes’s praise for Austen bears thematic similarities (realism and compositional skill) to the praise from Regency-period critics, the true significance of his article lies in how his assessments of Austen blend praise for her artistry with praise for her careful regulation of the quotidian or even domestic aspects of her plots and

characterization. Though crafted from means uniformly “furnished from every-day life” (102), her books are nevertheless timeless examples of “indestructible excellence” (100). This blending indicates the earliest stirrings of Arts and Crafts ideologies in which high art and domestic art (crafts) would begin to approach and even mingle with one another. It also demonstrates a departure from Brontë’s critical methodology: while Brontë tried to restrict Austen to the category of lesser artist, Lewes shows how Austen cannot be pigeonholed into a single classification. He allows for contact between categories and suggests that the contact evident in Austen’s novels makes Austen’s “art” great. The contact between these two “departments” of art would increase, and their connections would strengthen, throughout the 1860s. This increasing strength, would, in turn, infuse the decades from the 1860s onward with Arts and Crafts aesthetic values. By utilizing the vocabulary of preceding critics and by allowing ideas about high art and the art of the quotidian to coexist in his article, Lewes paves the way for critics who would write about Austen in the years preceding and following the publication of Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir*.

On the heels of Lewes and Brontë’s debates, the critics who wrote about Austen during the 1850s and 1860s repeatedly described her works in terms of the major values from the Arts and Crafts world. The influence of these values is evident in the thematic vocabulary and opinions contained within these critics’ assessments of Austen’s work and life. Between Lewes’s article and Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir*, three more publications significantly address the subjects of Austen’s life and writing while exhibiting traits informed by a contemporaneous aesthetic spirit. The first is an 1860 *Fraser’s* article, “British Novelists—Richardson, Miss Austen, Scott,” by W. F. Pollock, which calls Austen’s work “delicate” and praises the quotidian depictions of “comfortable English upper life” (167) in her novels. Pollock also observes that Austen’s novels are “simple but well constructed” (167). This first piece of praise perpetuates his predecessors’ ideas about the delicacy of Austen’s work, while the second compliment to Austen shows an admiration for the structural integrity of her

literary craft—its simplicity and its durability—in terms that could apply as easily to a building or furniture item as to a book. The interdisciplinary applicability of Pollock’s latter comment particularly demonstrates an overlap of craft and art because the comment allows ideas about artistic composition and building craftsmanship to coexist in the same literary analysis.⁴

Like Pollock, Julia Kavanagh, who wrote about Austen two years later, shows interest in Austen’s delicacy as well as in her knack for effectively assembling a narrative. In her 1862 book *English Women of Letters*, Kavanagh devotes a whole chapter to Austen. She says that of the “three great redeeming qualities” (delicacy, tenderness, and sympathy) that women writers and their works possess, delicacy is Austen’s “great attribute” (176). Kavanagh uses “delicate” as a descriptor on multiple occasions, and her repetition of the adjective recalls Brontë’s repetition of “elegant”; however, unlike Brontë, who uses that adjective disdainfully, Kavanagh selects “delicate” to express her personal admiration for the author. Her use of “delicate” also resembles Pollock’s use of the word, as do her comments about Austen’s writing process. Like Pollock, Kavanagh relies on building metaphors to describe how Austen crafted her novels: she says, “Out of materials so slender, . . . [Austen] could fashion a story” (195) and “make so much out of so little” (197).⁵ Kavanagh’s observations attribute skill and resourcefulness to Austen, and these attributions demonstrate the heightening awareness of materials and quality that was taking place during and influencing the spirit of the 1860s.

The final significant review that predates Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* is a set of two unsigned articles published in 1866 in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. Like Pollock and Kavanagh, these

⁴ Pollock introduces the possibility of craftsmanship on a larger, even an architectural, scale by describing Austen’s novels as “well constructed.” Although the Arts and Crafts Movement was less concerned with architecture than with interior spaces, architecture played a key role in its beginnings thanks to Morris’s Red House—a simple but well-constructed building that housed the earliest of the Arts and Crafts products.

⁵ Kavanagh’s description of materials so slender recalls Whately’s surprise at Austen’s being able to write such entertaining novels in spite of “the exhaustion of the *mines* from which *materials* for entertainment had been hitherto extracted” (88, emphasis added).

articles' authors perpetuate the praise for Austen's realism and for her authorial artistry. They commend her "life-like portraits of people like those you meet every day" and note how these portraits result from "subtle strokes of character" and "delicate shafts of satire" (201). The idea of Austen's painting subtle strokes of character recalls Lewes's ideas about Austen and art.

Additionally, like Kavanagh and Pollock's pieces, these pieces make claims about the "fineness of workmanship" (201) of Austen's novels, which claims suggest a more general standard of craftsmanship applicable in disciplines other than literature. These articles reuse the favorite adjective of previous reviewers ("delicate"), asserting that the "delicate, lady-like taste which she must have possessed" enabled her to write so well (212). This overlapping of standards is yet another indicator of the aesthetic spirit of the age. These two pieces from *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* provide additional examples of how Victorian critics inherit from earlier nineteenth-century reviewers a set of terms and concepts that they then apply to Austen. Furthermore, in these pieces and articles like them from the pre-*Memoir* years, we see how these terms and concepts become indicators of broader aesthetic trends that influence the *Memoir's* reception.

Remembering Austen in the Arts and Crafts Age: Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*

Thanks to Lewes, Brontë, and the aforementioned reviewers writing during the 1860s, Jane Austen was still a topic of critical conversation even fifty years after her death. During this moment of the late 1860s and early 1870s, changes to British legislation (specifically, the 1870 Education Act) effected changes in how society rated the importance of literature. One significant facet of the Education Act was the idea of "literature as a (shared) national heritage" (Lynch, "Cult" 113). By preserving this shared literary heritage, legislators also managed to preserve the aesthetic values housed in the selected writings and books. While scholars have debated the value and accuracy of the *Memoir*, they have never fully appreciated its significance as an indicator of the cultural and

aesthetic environment in which Austen came to be constructed during the Victorian period. Like the criticism preceding and following it, the *Memoir* bears significant signs of having been influenced by interdisciplinary Arts and Crafts aesthetics. What I would like to argue in this section is that like the criticism of its time the *Memoir* exhibits the effects of Arts and Crafts values. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that rather than dismiss the *Memoir* for some of its more dubious portrayals of Austen (as critics and scholars seem most wont to do), we should read the *Memoir* in an Arts and Crafts context. In so doing, we can glean from it subtle clues about the Victorian reception of Austen and the subsequent construction of her authorial persona in the very moment when she and her work were entering the British literary canon.

Because the *Memoir* satisfied the Victorian interest in private stories and also introduced Austen to a new generation of readers, Nicola Trott has called its publication “the first major event in [Austen’s] posthumous life” (92). In many ways the biography elaborates upon the ideas that Austen’s brother Henry incorporated into the 1817 “Biographical Notice.” Like his uncle, Austen-Leigh portrays his aunt as “quiet, domesticated, [and] middle-aged” (Le Faye, “Memoirs” 52). However, while Henry references Austen’s domestic routines to underscore her uneventful existence (3),⁶ Austen-Leigh emphasizes domesticity as a means of appreciating the Arts and Crafts values of her novels. Admittedly, Austen-Leigh describes Austen’s life as being “isolated” from contemporary writers. He writes, “It was probable that she never was in company with any person whose talents or whose celebrity equalled [sic] her own; so that her powers never could have been sharpened by

⁶ Many scholars blame Austen’s relatives, who were her earliest biographers, for overzealously and inaccurately canonizing Austen’s character long before her works entered the literary canon. Emily Auerbach is one of the scholars who confront the credibility of Austen’s relatives’ claims about the details of Austen’s biography. In *Searching for Jane Austen*, Auerbach declares, “Austen’s relatives worked hard to sweeten her image, weaken her words, and soften her bite” (3). She then adds, “From the time of her death to the present, there has been a steady stream of biographers who have expressed the notion that Jane Austen had no real life at all, that she was a sweet spinster whose span of time was without significant event” (4). This final suggestion that Austen’s life was uneventful derives from Henry’s “Biographical Notice”: in the opening paragraph, he describes his sister’s life as one of “usefulness, literature, and religion” but “not by any means a life of event” (3).

collision with superior intellects, nor her imagination aided by their casual suggestions. Whatever she produced was a genuine home-made article” (90). Austen-Leigh ascribes a purity and authenticity to his aunt’s work and attributes these traits to Austen’s having stayed in and written from a socially secluded domestic circle. This description of creating objects in a domestic setting lends a distinctly craft-oriented connotation to Austen-Leigh’s portrayal of his aunt and her writing. Unfortunately, some scholars have interpreted this emphasis upon domesticity as bowdlerization (Harris 521) and have even accused Austen’s relatives—especially Austen-Leigh—of consigning Austen to a “domestic martyrdom” (Lynch “Introduction” 18). Marilyn Butler has said that through their biographical efforts, Austen’s family “isolat[es], provincialis[es], and domesticat[es] this sophisticated writer” (qtd. in Heydt-Stevenson 314). These critics seem to suggest that domesticity and artistic sophistication are mutually exclusive. However, what I would like to argue is that throughout the *Memoir* Austen-Leigh portrays these qualities as coexisting in his aunt’s life and work.

In expressing their dissatisfaction with the Austen family’s portrayals of their most famous family member, these critics miss an important opportunity to identify the significance of domesticity—particularly in relation to aesthetics—during the Victorian period. The connections that Henry, Austen-Leigh, and others make between Austen’s writing and domesticity may, in fact, be less about martyrdom and limitation and more about points of interdisciplinary overlap. Influential aesthetic thinkers of the Victorian period (who were also connected to the Arts and Crafts Movement) had a unique opinion of domesticity. For example, John Ruskin, from whom William Morris drew much of his inspiration for the Arts and Crafts Movement, asserted, “All good architecture rose out of domestic work” (Triggs 18). In fact, Ruskin even declared that the primary aim of his highly influential study *The Stones of Venice* was to demonstrate how “national faith” and “domestic virtue” were essential to the rise of exceptional architecture (Triggs 7-8). Ruskin was also the forerunner of the idea that the best artistic work was “free hand-work” (27). Later, Morris would

create his Red House in order to test and demonstrate his own theories about the interaction of aesthetics with the domestic environment (18) and would emphasize this notion of the hand-made in his own design firm. In fact, the domestic sphere—“the battlefields of bedroom and dining room, on the walls and floors of English homes”—was where Morris chose to wage his “holy warfare” against obsequious ornamentation (Burdick 65). Consequently, while overtones of domesticity in criticism about Austen and in Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* do exist, it is erroneous to suggest that their presence detracts from effective critical appreciation of Austen. The prevailing craft and aesthetic ideologies of the Victorian period indicate that the connotations of domesticity were more complex than many modern scholars have acknowledged them to be. Bearing these connotations and complexities in mind, we are better equipped to appreciate the significance of Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir*. It is essential that we assess the *Memoir* and the reviews it elicited with the intent of understanding what may have precipitated the attitudes and ideas that they express before we can consider these texts’ consequences—both positive and negative. This type of assessment yields evidence of both continuity and change within the dominant interdisciplinary ideologies during the Victorian 1860s and 1870s, and this deeper understanding of these ideological structures can yield a deeper understanding of Austen at the moment of her entrance into the literary canon.

From Austen-Leigh’s biography of his aunt, I will draw three significant vignettes that exhibit these more complex connotations for the notion of domesticity and that consequently indicate the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement’s interdisciplinary aesthetic values. In the second chapter, “Changes of Customs,” Austen-Leigh takes the time to explain cottage industry activities that were popular during Austen’s lifetime, focusing especially on spinning. He writes how spinning was originally a cottage or domestic industry for the lower classes but became a leisure activity for more genteel women as time passed (37-38). Austen-Leigh then recollects that there were two “elegant little [spinning] wheels” in the Austen family’s home, and he labels spinning “the most

primitive of female accomplishments” (38). After recollecting that this was an accomplishment that his aunt may have learned in the tradition of the aristocracy of ancient cultures, Austen-Leigh then reflects, “But, at last, this time-honoured domestic manufacture is quite extinct amongst us—crushed by the power of steam, overborne by a countless host of spinning jennies” (38). Austen-Leigh’s lamentation turns polemical when one closely examines his diction. His esteem for spinning by hand is clear: it is a “time-honoured” activity. This praise echoes Ruskin’s (and by extension, Morris’s) sentiments about the best work being work that is wrought by hand. Furthermore, Austen-Leigh’s assertion that mechanization has crushed and overborne this domestic art indicates that Austen-Leigh appreciates the same variety of careful craftsmanship that reviewers like Kavanagh and Pollock commend during the 1860s. With this brief reflection about the cultural context in which his aunt lived, Austen-Leigh exhibits an appreciation for the kind of workmanship that spurns modern, mechanical manufacture in favor of “time-honoured” and “free hand” production.

Austen-Leigh’s interest in fine workmanship and his tendency to associate such workmanship with his aunt manifests itself throughout the *Memoir*. In the fifth chapter, “Character and Tastes,” Austen-Leigh declares that his aunt “was successful in everything that she attempted with her fingers” (77). He proclaims her handwriting “clear,” “strong,” and “legible”—so much so that “happy would the compositors for the press be if they had always so legible a manuscript to work from” (77). Having praised his aunt’s fine handwriting, Austen-Leigh then intimates, “But the writing was not the only part of her letters which showed superior handiwork”: his aunt excelled in the art of folding and sealing letters (77). The potential double meaning of these sentences deserves closer attention. While Austen-Leigh is most likely referencing his aunt’s penmanship, his use of “writing” may also refer to the content of the text that she wrote so legibly. Furthermore, he describes paper folding and sealing as an art unto itself. Austen-Leigh’s flatteringly warm descriptions of his aunt’s manuscripts and letters—both their content and their physical form—

suggest that Austen had a certain consciousness about the quality of her craftsmanship, even in its private and unpublished formats like personal letters and novel drafts. Austen-Leigh's emphasis on the superiority of his aunt's craftsmanship recalls what earlier critics say in their assessments of her work, further demonstrating the influence of the spirit of the age on the aesthetic and evaluative standards Austen-Leigh and his contemporaries were employing.

These two vignettes not only indicate a common aesthetic mentality but also possess an interesting connection to a third excerpt from the *Memoir*. At the beginning of the seventh chapter, Austen-Leigh delivers an interesting soliloquy (to which I have already alluded) about his aunt's isolation from other writers of her day and her consequently self-sufficient imagination. He says that she lived "in entire seclusion from the literary world," bereft of any personal interaction with contemporary authors (90). The absence of such beneficial interaction leads Austen-Leigh to conclude that each of his aunt's works "was a genuine home-made article" (90). In this passage Austen-Leigh emphasizes his aunt's authenticity and firmly grounds Austen and her writing in a domestic setting. This portrayal situates Austen and her works in the very place—according to Arts and Crafts thinkers like Ruskin and Morris—from which artistic sophistication and aesthetic virtue spring. Austen-Leigh's assertions about his aunt's authenticity reinforce others' claims that her realism is both unprecedented and unsurpassed, while his emphasis on her domestic ties does for the *Memoir* what terms like "delicate" and "lady-like" do for the previously discussed pieces from the 1860s: these terms and concepts lend a distinct sense of Arts and Crafts ideology to Austen's "home-made" stories and to her life story.

Crafting New Constructions of Austen after the *Memoir*

As critics responded to Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* throughout the early years of the 1870s, they used their reviews of the *Memoir* as a platform for talking about Austen's work, and often in terms

that continued to associate her with the aesthetic values of both high art and crafts. The first reviewer to write about Austen in the wake of the *Memoir* was R.W. Hutton, who in the *Spectator* of December 1869 argues that those who encountered Austen prior to the *Memoir* lacked the biographical insight to fully appreciate or comprehend “the delicate truth and humour of her pictures” (161). Like so many before him, Hutton highlights the fineness of structure in Austen’s works. He also defends Austen against naysayers who criticized the very limited section of society featured in her novels. Resorting again to Austen appreciators’ favorite adjective, Hutton notes how Austen wrote “with greater perfection and fineness and delicacy of touch than almost any other English writer with whom we are acquainted” (163-64). There are two significant Arts and Crafts principles implicit in Hutton’s analysis of Austen. Hutton implies that Austen chose her “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village” (*Austen Letters* 176) on purpose, and that her portrayals of that slice reached perfection. The deliberation inherent in that choice and its consequent perfection call to mind Morris’s ideas about conscious cultivation of skill wherein an artist must choose how to use and to develop his or her talents. Furthermore, by defending Austen’s chosen subject matter, Hutton helps develop the idea of art based on experience. Having read the *Memoir*, Hutton would be aware of Austen-Leigh’s previously discussed assertion that his aunt led a relatively uneventful and private life. It is therefore unsurprising that he defends Austen’s depictions of the relatively uneventful and private (domestic) lives of her genteel characters. By asserting that Austen drew from personal experience to develop her authorial art, Hutton uses diction that, as in pre-*Memoir* pieces, connects Austen to Arts and Crafts aesthetics.

The next major response to Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* is Margaret Oliphant’s 1870 *Blackwood’s* article “Miss Austen and Miss Mitford.” Unlike Hutton and other reviewers of the *Memoir*, Oliphant seems less accepting of Austen-Leigh’s representations of his famous aunt. She shrewdly observes that Austen’s character “is not the simple character it appears at first glance, but one full of subtle

power, keenness, finesse, and self-restraint” (216). She goes on to say that these characteristics are common among “women of a high cultivation” but are likely to go “unappreciated or misunderstood” when those women are not surrounded by equals (216). Oliphant’s description of “women of high cultivation” echoes Austen-Leigh’s postulation that his aunt “never was in company with any person whose talents or whose celebrity equalled [sic] her own” (90). However, Oliphant finds a more nuanced interpretation of this biographical detail than Austen-Leigh does. While Hutton alludes to cultivating consciously one’s artistic talents (a key Arts and Crafts prerogative), Oliphant discusses this cultivation explicitly and claims cultivation as a contributor to Austen’s authorial skill. She suggests that Austen made “conscientious” (216) choices about the characters and plots of her novels.

At other points in the piece, Oliphant reaffirms prevailing critical opinions about Austen’s talents for realism, characterization, and detail, and her special emphasis on this final strength incorporates an Arts and Crafts principle. She calls Austen’s detail “delicate”: the Bennet family of *Pride and Prejudice* is “drawn with an equally fine and delicate touch,” and *Persuasion* is also “full of delicate touches” (225). These delicate touches illustrate in Austen’s work what Morris would have identified as a commitment to detail in design. Early in her piece, Oliphant attributes this delicacy to another strength of Austen’s: a commitment to detailed observation. This artistic virtue is a companion to the previously mentioned Arts and Crafts trait, and Oliphant describes the quality by using the analogy of statuary. She notes that Austen could “see her brother clearly all round as if he were a statue, identifying all its absurdities” (217). By Oliphant’s description, Austen’s attention to detail as an observer and as a creator enables her authorial success. This description is Oliphant’s final contribution to her article’s Arts and Crafts-inflected interpretation of the *Memoir*. The traits Oliphant attributes to Austen and to her work exemplify the Arts and Crafts principle of deliberate, thoughtful creation according to one’s own experiences and utilizing one’s own skills, and

Oliphant's description of Austen's work as analogous to a form of high art (sculpture) makes an argument for Austen's literary art being analogous to high art.

In the same month that Oliphant's article appeared in *Blackwood's*, an article on Austen by Lady Juliet Pollock⁷ appeared in *St. Paul's Magazine*. Like Oliphant, Juliet Pollock writes in response to the *Memoir's* publication. However, unlike Oliphant's review, Pollock's piece readily accepts as absolute fact all of Austen-Leigh's recollections about and descriptions of his aunt. For example, she says that Austen lived a "blameless life"—the kind of life that she laments as being "rare among women of genius" (237). However, this blameless life notwithstanding, Pollock finds fault with Austen, and her faultfinding indicates the resurgence of the stratification of art into greater and lesser—a stratification that Arts and Crafts values opposed. Pollock asserts that there is "a danger in reading too much of Miss Austen" because doing so can "starv[e] the higher imaginative faculties" (235). She does not clarify what those faculties are, but her meaning is nevertheless clear: novels are well and good, but they do not elevate the mind as other aesthetic pursuits might and are therefore inferior in some way. Pollock does go on to praise Austen's skill, taking particular note of her "power of restraint" (227)—a power that echoes the self-consciousness and conscientious creation Morris urged in his Arts and Crafts comrades. Furthermore, despite the starvation mentioned above, Pollock is willing to admit that there is something artistic about Austen's gift for writing. She concedes, "In the art, which turns fiction into truth, no *writer* has ever excelled her" (227, emphasis added). Pollock's diction in this concession is interesting: the creation of convincingly realistic fiction is an art, but the practitioners of that art are *writers* rather than artists. Through these subtle

⁷Lady Juliet was the wife of Lord W. F. Pollock, who wrote the *Fraser's* essay on Austen in 1860. Her article originally appeared as an unsigned piece. Some scholars speculated that Anthony Trollope, then editor of *St. Paul's*, might have written it, but the article expresses views dramatically different from Trollope's opinions. Later scholars realized that Lady Pollock had written the article when they discovered a reference to it in Lord Pollock's personal memoir. In *Personal Remembrances of Sir Frederick Pollock*, he includes the text of a letter to his father, wherein he writes, "You will receive in a day or two by book post three magazines for March . . . This is a remarkable conjunction in the literary firmament. These three magazines each contain an article from this house. [Juliet] has one in *St. Paul's* on Miss Austen and her novels, prompted by the recent life of her" (198-9).

distinctions and word choices, Pollock's article exemplifies a tension between Arts and Crafts ideals and a rejection of those ideals in favor of a more stratified aesthetic viewpoint. The presence of that tension in her article also foreshadows this tension's presence in subsequent Austen criticism.

A month after the Pollock and Oliphant articles, Richard Simpson temporarily resolved some of the aesthetic tensions introduced into the Austen conversation by Pollock's piece with his April 1870 article for the *North British Review*. Like the articles from March, this review unites a Victorian affinity for Austen-Leigh's portrayals of "dear aunt Jane" (256) and a by now well-established appreciation for the artistry and virtues of Austen's novels. However, Simpson talks of Austen and "higher faculties" more comfortably and explicitly than Pollock. In a comparison that echoes Macaulay's descriptions of Austen, Simpson calls her "a prose Shakespeare" (243), commending her capacity for portraying "the ordinary relations of life" (247) and for "reconcil[ing] the 'tarpaulin phrase' with the requirements of art and civility" (264). Simpson employs noteworthy diction when paying these compliments. First, there is his verb choice: "reconciling." Simpson suggests that Austen did not domineer or overpower "tarpaulin" language—that there was no hierarchy inherent in her diction. Rather, she accommodated various types of words to create a cohesive whole. And what exactly was the "tarpaulin phrase"? Throughout the nineteenth century, "tarpaulin" carried with it connotations of rough sailors and mariners because a tarpaulin was a waterproof covering used by seamen to protect items from getting wet (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Thus, when Austen reconciled the tarpaulin phrase, she did not force it to sound more civil and artistic: rather she identified its most artistic and genteel features and then cultivated that intrinsic beauty. Simpson goes on to say that in Austen's novels, characters are "malleable and ductile masses of gold" (251) shaped by their author without having the quality and beauty of their original material compromised. The ability to maintain a material's integrity while coaxing it into its most beautiful form resembles the ability to balance beauty and artistry—an ability William Morris desired for his

craftsmen. As a skilled literary artist and craftswoman, Austen (in Simpson's estimation) possessed this desirable gift, and Simpson's open admiration for Austen's abilities demonstrate that he felt no discomfort about the ways that art and craft coexisted in Austen's work.

In other sections of Simpson's article, the idea of coexistence continues to be central to his praise for Austen. In addition to observing how Austen used her sense of beauty to highlight the inherent beauty of more commonplace language, Simpson suggests that she used her keen intellect to cultivate her own skills. He praises Austen as "a critic who developed herself into an artist" (243). His evidence for this cultivation is the "poised" nature of her writing (248) and her ability to portray "the ordinary relations of life" (247). Simpson also asserts that as an artist, Austen abode by the (Arts and Crafts) principle of art based on personal experience. He writes that Austen "never aspired higher than to paint a system of four or five families revolving around a centre of attraction" because this type of social system was "the only society she knew" (241). Simpson's diction in this assertion indicates his conviction that Austen was an artist: she consciously limited herself to a small social system, and she *painted* that social system fully aware of her aim to depict daily life realistically, usefully, and beautifully.

The final significant review that appeared in the immediate wake of the *Memoir* was Anne Isabella Thackeray's 1871 article for *Cornhill Magazine*. Thackeray's piece signals a slight departure from and reshuffling of the ideas that had informed earlier critical pieces relevant to Austen and to her nephew's biography. These earlier pieces focus primarily upon Austen's skills as an author and literary artist and the corroborating evidence for these facts provided by the *Memoir*. In contrast, Thackeray's piece, while it does acknowledge Austen's skills, anachronistically projects Victorian ideas about womanhood onto Austen and her works. Within the article there are a few noteworthy passages that indicate the continued presence of interdisciplinary aesthetics. However, the article ultimately does to Austen what Handicraft Movement participants did to their scraps and shells: just

as these crafters shellacked and “improved upon” their materials with various types of ornamentation, Thackeray coats Austen and her writing in an anachronistic film of conservative Victorian femininity. She ultimately characterizes Austen as “unconscious, modest, hidden at home in heart,” living a “sweet womanly life, with the wisdom of the serpent indeed and the harmlessness of a dove” (170).

Although Thackeray’s article maintains this tone of saccharine appreciation throughout, it nevertheless contains a passage that once again connects Austen to nineteenth-century modes of craft and crafting aesthetics. This passage deserves particular attention because it begs comparison with something that Austen herself wrote. Referring to Austen as “Aunt Jane,” Thackeray writes that she “built her nest, did this good woman, . . . out of shreds, and ends, and scraps of daily duty, patiently put together; and it was from this nest that she sang the song, bright and brilliant, with quaint thrills and unexpected cadences, that reaches us even here through fifty years” (168). We cannot ignore this nest analogy because it echoes Austen’s description from her 1816 letter to Austen-Leigh where she suggests that writing a novel is like building a nest. In her article Thackeray is essentially using the same analogy. However, instead of bits of manuscript being the twigs or construction materials, Thackeray suggests that experiences—be they ever so mundane—are the materials whereby an author can form the nest from which she can sing her novel-song.

As I previously pointed out, Austen’s description of her nephew’s novel alludes to the materials typical of Handicraft Movement products: twigs are the very kind of scrap or bit that a Handicraft Movement participant would have incorporated into her creations. In Thackeray’s description, these same bits-and-pieces materials resurface. However, Thackeray says that their result is “a whole, completed and coherent, beautiful even without the song” (169). For Thackeray, Austen’s novels are a happy but not necessary addition to the nest of Austen’s life: her life was complete without them but rendered more “beautiful” by them—and all because she wrote them

while drawing on her foundation of daily experience. Thus, in Thackeray's review there is a mix of Handicraft and Arts and Craft values, just as there was a mix in Austen's letter (her nephew's twigs and her own ivory). Thackeray, like Austen, describes the use of Handicraft materials (scraps and ephemeral detritus), but these materials perform the Arts and Crafts function of providing experience on which to base creation.

Conclusion

Despite her more gendered efforts at characterizing Austen, Thackeray nevertheless draws from interdisciplinary aesthetic principles to craft an anachronistically Victorian Austen, and she does so at the very moment when the "crafting" of Austen is becoming a main critical objective. Thackeray's depiction leans more toward the domestic martyrdom that twentieth- and twenty-first century critics have lambasted and spurned. One of these later critics, Jocelyn Harris, has suggested that most nineteenth-century portrayals of Austen, like Thackeray's, turn "the sharp-faced woman of Cassandra's portrait into the dreamy doe-eyed girl of the *Memoir* and Victorian ideology" (521). Although Thackeray was merely responding to and expressing her own interpretation of the biographical information in Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*, the Victorian ideology that Harris denounces is also present in Thackeray's piece. Nevertheless, while the *Memoir*'s portrayals of "Aunt Jane" may seem dreamy and doe-eyed and may cause others (like Thackeray) to describe Austen as such, the interdisciplinary implications of the aesthetic values incorporated into the *Memoir* render it, on the whole, far more complex.

Lamentably, while scholars today still passionately debate the extent of the *Memoir*'s influence, they assign it significance for reasons unrelated to the craft versus art debate. For example, Deidre Lynch has noted how the biography was the vehicle by which Austen achieved

popularity (“Cult” 119).⁸ Other scholars are more skeptical. Barbara M. Benedict acknowledges that Austen’s works were considered “popular fiction” during the Regency period (63) but notes how later Austen enthusiasts, including Austen-Leigh and Henry James, repeatedly portrayed her as “elite” (83). But even James’s endorsement of Austen came with qualifications. By asserting Austen’s “elite” status, James promoted her popularity, and this endorsement of her work, particularly during the 1880s, played an influential role in her critical and national canonization (122). However, the qualifications for his praise of Austen came as James tried to distance himself from her and to position her fiction in a different class of fiction than his own.

In an 1883 letter to George Pellew responding to Pellew’s dissertation about Austen, James observes that Austen’s characters Emma Woodhouse and Anne Eliot each possess a “small gentility” and lead a “front parlour existence” (180). This early hint of diminutive domesticity in the 1883 letter becomes one of James’s major means by which he distinguished his own work from Austen’s. By 1905, when James composed his lecture “The Lessons of Balzac,” that separation was clear. Describing Austen, James follows in Thackeray’s footsteps and uses avian imagery. Austen’s writing process is so simple and predictable that it is as commonplace as a “brown thrush” singing in a garden (60). He then declares,

The key to Jane Austen’s fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her facility, in fact of her unconsciousness: as if, at the most, for difficulty, for embarrassment, she sometimes, over her work-basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one may say, into wool-gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of

⁸ Lynch says the *Memoir* “transformed Jane Austen into a popular author” in two senses: “popular” because it garnered her more attention and appreciators and “popular” because the biography’s publication so close to the 1870 Education Act rendered Austen one of the authors whose texts could be considered “classic” novels worth connecting to the “demands of civic life” (119).

these precious moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination. (63)

James here continues the tradition of connecting Austen to modes of craft. He describes her work-basket and mentions leisure activities like sewing in order to suggest that Austen's novels were happy accidents and by-products of her craft pursuits, taking place in the domestic setting of a drawing-room and comprising various "little" actions: touches, glimpses, and master-strokes. This setting and description recall the Handicraft Movement's primary venue (parlors), aims (domestic ornamentation), and products (*little* items).

Coming as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century, James's remarks further illustrate how from the Regency moment onward there was a significant and generally under-recognized connection between the aesthetic values discussed in Austen criticism and the aesthetic values resulting from the negotiation of the art versus craft binary. The period coinciding with the Arts and Crafts Movement's heyday in the 1860s and 1870s is an especially significant moment because it is the period during which Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* was published and reviewed. During these two decades, there was a brief period when the Arts and Crafts Movement's more egalitarian aesthetics—with their rejection of artistic hierarchy and their insistence on craft as another variety of great art—overtook more traditional aesthetic standards in literary evaluation. However, this period was short-lived, and more traditional notions experienced a resurgence so that by 1905, when James delivered his lecture on Balzac, Austen was relegated to the ranks of accidental crafters rather than recognized as a great and conscientious literary artist. Ultimately, Austen is, by James's evaluation, the fortunate beneficiary of forces "independent" of her "applied faculties" as a writer (63).

Through his Balzac lecture and its comments on Austen, James brings Austen criticism full-circle in its relationship with dominant modes of nineteenth-century craft. Just as the early reviewers like Scott and Whately first connected Austen to the Handicraft Movement during the Regency

period, James reiterates a similar perception of craft nearly a century later. However, between these two critical moments lies the significant moment of Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*. All three of these moments deal with the negotiation of the arts versus craft binary and with the validity of a hierarchy in art. Recognizing and contextualizing this negotiation is crucial to a full appreciation of Austen criticism in each of these moments. James ultimately associates Austen more heavily with craft than with art—and makes the distinction of art being higher than craft—because he is positioning himself as an artist and distancing himself from Austen, an author whom many labeled as James's direct literary ancestor. In contrast, the Regency critics, while also more inclined to separate art and craft, wrote their reviews of Austen just as leading aesthetic minds were beginning to question the validity of this long-held division. This questioning and reevaluation gave way to a dissolution—at least in Morris's eyes—of the art versus craft binary. Consequently, by the time that Victorian reviewers were writing about Austen and the *Memoir* in the years contemporaneous with the Arts and Crafts Movement, the aesthetic values of art and craft were able to coexist harmoniously in their literary dialogue.

Nevertheless, as James's 1905 lecture demonstrates, the binary's dissolution was not a long-lived phenomenon. By the 1880s and 1890s, the Arts and Crafts Movement was being overtaken by other aesthetic ideologies like Aestheticism. Furthermore, the movement's leaders had directed their attention elsewhere: Morris was more concerned with politics and social reform than with art in the final decades of the nineteenth century, and he wrote the preface to the 1890 *Arts and Crafts Essays* collection as a former leader of rather than as an active member in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. These shifts in the aesthetic and cultural tides of the late Victorian period were the natural result of the passage of time. However, with these changes the original aesthetic context of the *Memoir* and the nuanced meanings of Austen-Leigh's Arts and Crafts-influenced diction were lost.

What I have tried to argue for throughout this paper is a greater awareness of that lost aesthetic context. Even though the *Memoir* contains a variety of stories and representations that appear suspiciously inconsistent with other biographical information about Austen, the *Memoir* can still yield intriguing facts about the Victorian reception of Austen—especially when placed in an Arts and Crafts context. Indeed, recognizing the relationship between craft and the constructions of Austen that emerge in the bodies of criticism generated during these two significant nineteenth-century moments—the Regency moment close to her actual lifetime and career and the Victorian moment of the years surrounding the *Memoir's* publication—results in a whole new way to appreciate and “read” Austen and her reception. A correlation between aesthetic esteem (or lack thereof) for craft and the aesthetic standards used to evaluate Austen *does* exist in nineteenth-century criticism, and understanding that correlation can enable us to better understand how Austen, disputed biographical details notwithstanding, was crafted into a figure whose works have been passed from period to period as admittedly “small thin classics” but classics nonetheless (Ward 187).

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