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ENG 535: Studies in Jane Austen

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A Partial Jane Austen Exhibit: Letters Among the Leigh Family

Leigh, Thomas. Letter to Theophilus Leigh. 3 Sept. 1748. Leigh Family Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. Manuscript.

PART I: HEADNOTE, INTRODUCING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THOMAS LEIGH’S LETTER

Known for her unforgettable characters and for her creativity, Jane Austen (1775-1817) has had loyal fans around the world for over a century and has a well-deserved place not only in the British literary cannon but in the cannon of the world’s greatest literature ever. An anonymous review published in 1815 explains that Austen’s fiction pioneered a new form of fiction with its attention to the details of everyday life: “The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader” (“Review” 197; Rodham). Literary critic and fiction writer herself, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) portrays Austen as one of the world’s best authors, comparable to Shakespeare (1564-1616). Woolf writes that “Jane Austen pervades every word she wrote” (1752).

Austen’s nephew and primary author of the 1870 *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, James Edward Austen-Leigh (1798-1874) deserves recognition for helping to keep his aunt’s memory alive after her premature death and for helping her works, such as the once-unpublished *Lady Susan*, receive due acclaim (Butler par. 4-5, 9, 44, 78-79; Le Faye 732, 750). Without the loyalty he felt toward his aunt, we could easily know far less about Austen and not have some of her

cherished fiction. As a testament to this family loyalty, “Leigh” was an 1837 addition to his last name (Le Faye 750).

According to *Voyant Tools*, Jane Austen’s fiction includes more than 800,000 words, which most famously includes her *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), and *Persuasion* (1818) but also her shorter works, the incomplete *Sanditon*, and the *Juvenilia* collection (works written from roughly 1787-1793).

Popular screen adaptations of her works in the 1990s elevated Austen to cult status (Butler par. 83). Prominent Austen scholar Devoney Looser explains how contemporary adaptations sometimes embrace camp and even include zombies and the X-rated. Looser is also an example of creative and inspiring adaptations, as she is also known through her roller-derby-playing-alter-ego, “Stone Cold Jane.”

A person of Austen’s well-deserved stature tends to awaken and sustain curiosity in fans and in researchers alike. People want to know the origins of such intellect and creativity, and in our genealogy-oriented society, people want to explore familial history, too. This exhibit highlights an Austen-Leigh family letter and uses it to further contextualize Austen’s world.

According to renowned Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye (1933-2020), Austen’s family on the paternal side has documented roots going back to the sixteenth century and on the maternal side, back to the twelfth century (Caines; Dunning; Le Faye 1-2). We should take special note to remember that due to extreme poverty, to illiteracy, or to human trafficking (i.e., chattel enslavement), the possibility of tracing lineage with such certainty is not automatic or common. Most humans leave little or no trace of their existence and upon death, are soon forever forgotten.

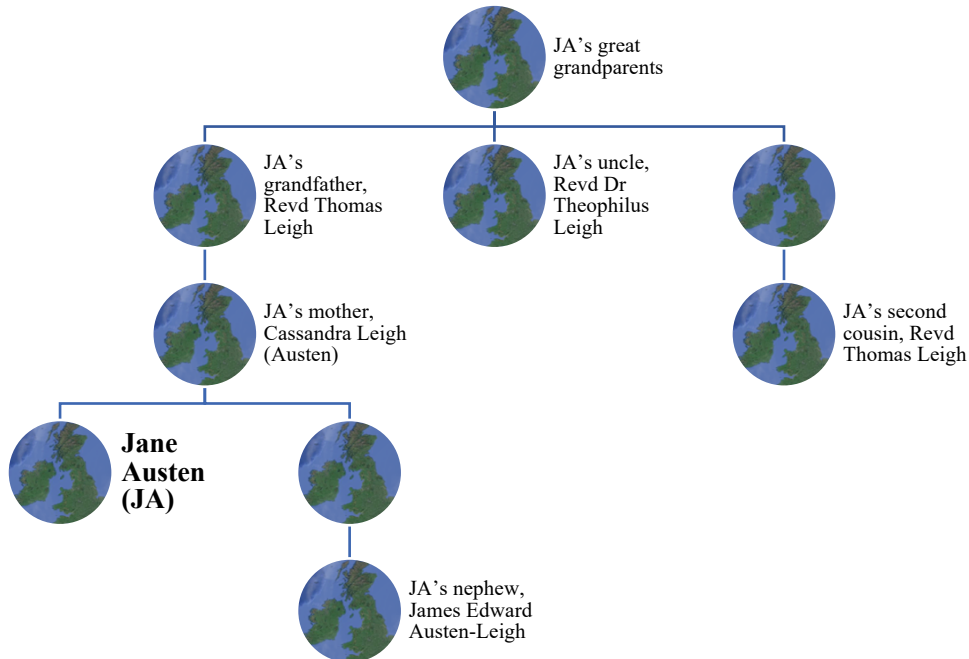


Fig. 1.1. Vastly abridged and simplified family tree designed to help illustrate Jane Austen's biological relationships (maternal) to the specific people discussed in this exhibit.

Extant records include a collection of fifty-three as-yet unpublished letters dated from 1686-1866 and stored at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, that provide snapshots of how one set of Austen's maternal ancestors lived—the Leighs. Austen's mother was Cassandra Leigh (1739-1827). Cassandra's father was Revd Thomas Leigh (1696-1764), and Cassandra's uncle was Revd Dr. Theophilus Leigh (1693-1785), who is of special interest in this exhibit (Le Faye 14, 732-35).

While prudence is necessary—these letters written for private correspondence were never intended for our prying eyes—we can nonetheless glean interesting and valuable information, including from the seemingly mundane, about Austen's world. For almost half a century, researchers have especially appreciated personal letters as a valid genre with the potential to convey the inner workings of relationships, information that can then be extrapolated to larger trajectories (Pearsall par. 2). Austen herself wrote many letters but only 161 are known to

survive, many of her letters having been burned by her sister (Looser xiv). Of note, in addition to these letters, some of Austen's music books also survive (Sanborn).

The below letter is a specific example of how such artifacts are important for their specific information but also for how they speak to larger historical realities. Revd Thomas Leigh (1734-1813) wrote Theophilus, his uncle, on September 3, 1748, from Evesham when he was only thirteen or fourteen years old—Thomas being a second cousin of Austen's and Theophilus being Austen's great uncle (Le Faye 734-35). Evesham is about 100 miles or 160 kilometers north-northwest of Austen's birthplace, Steventon in England (*Google Earth*.

In this fascinating private correspondence, Thomas writes to his uncle, in the politest of language, wishing him and his well, providing brief family updates, and asking for assistance acquiring books, some of which we might recognize as being among those deemed classics of Western civilization. This is the only available letter Thomas sent his uncle and one of only three available letters Thomas ever wrote. There is no record of any reply from his uncle; although, Theophilus did send Thomas a letter in June 1774.



Fig. 1.2. Contemporary map using a red pen-point to show the approximate location of England's Evesham.

When looking at the transcription, readers should note that different times and different places sometimes have diverging conventions and expectations to follow when writing. For example, “y^e” should be interpreted as “the” and “M^r” as “master.” Words that might appear misspelled to the eyes of able-bodied, polished writers of English in 2022 are likely then-acceptable variants or are words where time has made the handwriting difficult to discern (Bree et al. 13; “Paleography”). And capitalization is used more creatively and more often, typically for emphasis, than conventions currently allow in such formal writing.

For many readers today, with letters mostly belonging to bygone eras, one might do well to pause before reading it and to specifically remember that this letter was handwritten with ink and on paper (specifically, lined sheets measuring roughly 6” x 7”) and received as a handwritten letter. Readers should take time to imagine how different, not better or worse but different, Thomas’s letter might be, say, as a typed letter or as a text message.

Of course, acquiring books was also a difficult endeavor compared to our own time. Public libraries did not exist. And books were among the most expensive of items: The equivalent cost in today’s money would range from at least hundreds if not to thousands of dollars for a single volume (Elliott 353-84; *Measuring Worth*). For instance, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* cost consumers 18 shillings in 1813, which is roughly equivalent to £700 or \$900 as of 2020 (Doll par. 4; Fung par. 5; *Measuring Worth*).

For students of Austen, Thomas’s letter helps consider her and her work against a larger backdrop: She clearly came from people who were also exceptionally privileged and educated. Austen and her Leigh ancestors had time to exercise the mind, and their writings show profound and fully internalized learning. Her maternal descendants and relatives include those who also had sophisticated reading and writing abilities; had the prerequisite leisure time and the capital to

truly embrace such, as Thomas even discusses his own creative pursuits and his parent's travel; and had long traditions of being Oxford University scholars and being clerics (Butler par. 1). Specifically, Theophilus had an esteemed position as head of Oxford University's Balliol College—which has been in continuous operation since the late thirteenth century—for fifty-nine years, from 1726-1785, a term longer than anyone else ("History"; *Oxford University Calendar* 29-30; Salter and Lobel 82-95). Theophilus's position is roughly equivalent to an Associate Vice President or Dean of a university college in the present-day United States; although, with less bureaucratic and fundraising responsibilities and with more time for producing scholarship.

While Thomas's letter and the other Leigh letters in the collection contain no mention—directly or indirectly—of Austen herself, they are still significant. For one thing, they help humanize her, which is important given her larger-than-life status: By considering implications, these letters help remind us that Austen had relatives and had a life beyond her writings. Austen and her family had everyday, sometimes "boring" lives, similar to her fictional character.

We should finally take time to appreciate the similar hopes, fears, and values embodied by Thomas's letter and by characters in Austen's fiction. Common threads include valuing and wanting to maintain strong family networks, seeing education as important, demonstrating learned backgrounds casually and unconsciously in everyday conversations, being extremely polite, and desiring self-betterment.

Further, giving and receiving books and talking about books makes for memorable occurrences in Austen's fiction, especially in *Northanger Abbey*, which is a commentary about the novel itself. Additionally, while Emma of *Emma* has not read since she was twelve and has only made reading lists, according to her eventual husband, Mr. George Knightley, Thomas specifically lists some of what he has read and wants to read. Perhaps, Thomas was similar to

Charlotte of *Sanditon* who is “sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement, but not at all unreasonably influenced by them” (Bree, et al. 349). And finally, Lady Susan of *Lady Susan* regularly requests favors, but always has unstated or understated motives rooted in her personal economic and political survival, whereas Thomas seems to just be asking his uncle for books without other personal agendas.

PART II: THOMAS LEIGH'S LETTER

Evesham - Sept. y^e 3 1748Honoured S:^r

I write these few Lines to you, first of all to enquire after your health, which I hope is pretty well established, & then to beg a favour of you, which is S:^r to procure for me a book, Called Carmina Quadrudelsemalia[?], published by y^e: Christ Church Students; I believe it is almost out of print, the Book sellers in Evesham & about this country cannot furnish me with it, or else I would not trouble you;— the books I read in school, are Horace, Virgil, Tully's Orations, Pliny's Epistles, & a few more of the same sort, As for greek authors Homer & Xenophon are the Cheif; Besides This, I make Themes & verses, so therefore that I may be, the **[page 2 starts]** ~~Be the~~ Better acquainted with Epigrams & those kind of verses, I should be highly obliged to you, if you could supple me with y^e foregoing book;— My Father &^r: Walker, & Cousin Chamberlain stoped here in their return, from Herefordsheire, & having spent a day very agreeably, set forward, for Adlestrop.— M^r Rawlins is well, & desires his compliments to you; pray would give my Brothers, & my duty to my Aunt, & delivery y^e Enclosed to my Cousin;— Therefore having no more to say, I must beg leave to conclude,

by assuring you that I am,

(with all respect)

your most obedient Nephew,

to Command,

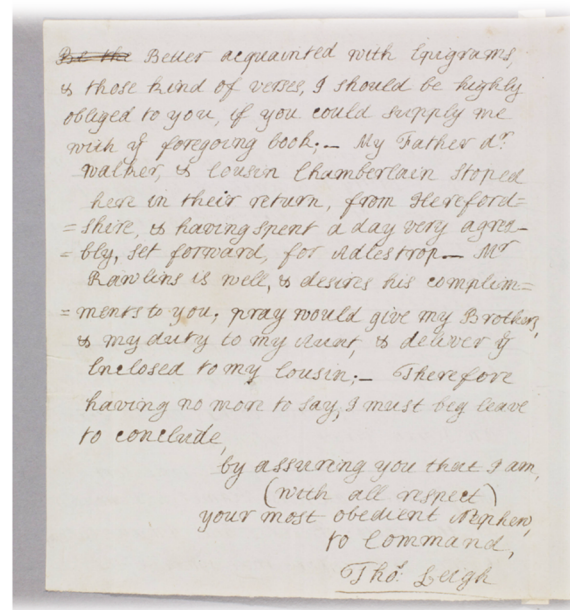
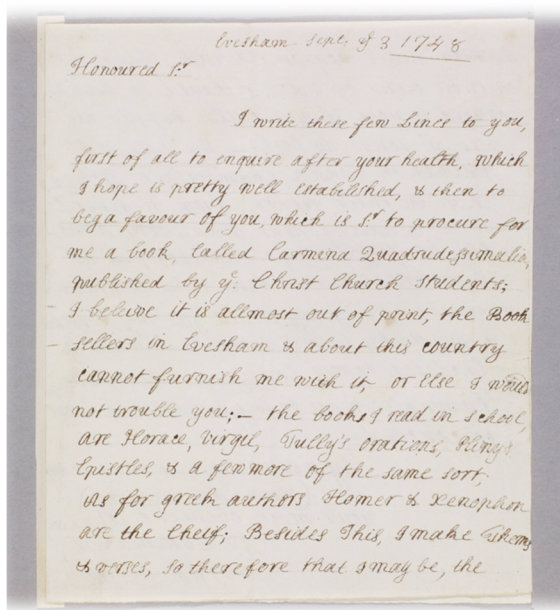
Tho:^s Leigh

Fig. 1.3. Thomas Leigh's photographed letter, but in its original handwritten form.

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Revision Reflection

Dear Devoney,

I greatly enjoyed this exercise the first time, and I enjoyed it just as much having the opportunity to revise and expand. The project was already long (including everything was 1,776 words), I know, but I found plenty to add (2,294 words now, including everything but this revision reflection) and polish!

Throughout the headnote, but especially in the beginning, I added more details and more examples—such as Woolf’s thoughts about Austen and the fascinating existence of “Stone Cold Jane” (☺)—and, really going on the theme of this being an exhibit for the public, listed Austen’s novels. Other added examples include those from *Emma* and *Sanditon* toward the end. I also moved the section about Austen’s nephew closer to the beginning to better connect him to the overall headnote—it really was in an awkward place being at the end last time. I added a few more references throughout.

Other changes are more minor. I often added a few words in places to provide a bit more context or a more direct explanation. For example, I realized in the original version I never made it explicit that Austen was British and lived in England outside the included map. I clarified a few sentences and found some punctuation to clarify, too. In one place, I had an extra “and” in a sentence. In the actual transcription, I corrected the two errors you pointed out.

I think these additions and changes improve this project by providing more clarity and more details. I think this headnote gives inexperienced individuals a better idea of who Austen was and why this Leigh family letter matters.

I always aim to see writing as a never-ending process. There is always room to make arguments and ideas clearer and to have more exactly precise and exactly accurate prose. I try to think about each work and ask myself “is this word *exactly* accurate for what I am wanting to say.” With these revisions, I hope to have a headnote and transcription that accomplish such refinements and that is more accessible to a public audience. I aim to have writing that people can read and process without having to figure out what the sentence is aiming to communicate.

The opportunity to revise after time away from a project is such a valuable experience. The time away helps see work with fresh eyes and new thoughts.

Thank you,
AJP