



## The Poetry of Jane Austen and the Austen Family

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Even readers long familiar with Jane Austen's novels may be surprised to learn that she also wrote poems. Certainly she knew and loved poetry: the evidence of that is clear from the way she makes regular and significant reference to poets in her letters and fiction—from her favorites William Cowper, George Crabbe, and Samuel Johnson, to Alexander Pope and her contemporaries Walter Scott and Lord Byron. Yet she wrote her own poetry too, and though scarcely rising above the level of accomplished light verse, it does contain the same ironic wit, the same sense of slyly observed detail so characteristic of her novels.

Some of the songs and lyrics in David Selwyn's slim collection clearly belong to the category of "juvenalia," slight pieces included in the notebooks she kept when she was thirteen years old; but there are more substantial efforts too, and one poem, lines on the Winchester races, was composed only three days before she died. So the writing of poetry was a persistent if not a principal feature of her life as a writer. It was actually her brother James who was regarded as the Austen family poet, his over forty poems ranging from witty occasional verse to serious nature poetry. Jane's mother, however, was probably the most important influence on the poetry writing that was a part of each of the various Austen households.

A gifted and delightful versifier, Mrs. Austen used poetry to reflect on the minutiae of her daily life, from attendance at balls to recipes for puddings, from making mischief to making riddles. The contributions of other family members—brothers and sister, nieces and nephews—largely follow suit. The riddles and charades collected here suggest that poetry was frequently written as part of a parlor game in which all lent their modest but charming talents.

Selwyn makes the point that since no manuscript of any of her major novels has survived, these poems, taken from autograph manuscripts, are of special value. Most readers, however, will more likely appreciate the predictable good sense and good humor of this Austen anthology than the particulars of textual provenance.

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