The Making of Jane Austen

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Dear Jane

Christian Spinster, Feminist Flirt, and Shadow Actress

In her Broadway hit *Pride and Prejudice* (1935), Helen Jerome dramatized Darcy to emphasize heterosexual desires roiling beneath the surface of the hero. Jerome's characterization provided one way to answer nagging questions about Jane Austen herself. It came at a time when readers and critics were confused about how to make sense of an author who had been presented to the public by critics as a sheltered Christian spinster but whose fiction vividly depicted romantic love. Some suspected that the author of *Pride and Prejudice* must have been Elizabeth-like—that she'd had a real-life, Darcy-like lost love, an experience on which she drew in writing her fiction. Others wondered what Austen could have known of desire, never having married. Examining what made Austen tick as a woman became a matter of robust speculation. Was she, as D. H. Lawrence would have us believe, a "thoroughly unpleasant" "old maid"?[1] Were the passions "perfectly unknown" to her, as Charlotte Brontë charged?[2] It was a literary historical detective story to investigate, with Austen's letters and her fiction used as clues. For many, it remains an intriguing mystery, whether unsolved or unsolvable.

Jane Austen's sexuality had become subject to debate among critics by the mid-twentieth century. "Because Austen's heterosexuality was not guaranteed by marriage," as Claudia L. Johnson argues, "doubts about her sexuality have been played out in different historical moments as asexuality, as frigidity, and as lesbianism." Johnson calls this ambiguity "queerness," noting that it "has been used to account for her fiction since the get-go."[3] Austen's indeterminate sexuality or queerness gained wide public notice in 1995 when the *London Review of Books* advertised a review with the headline "Was Jane Austen Gay?" Terry Castle's review (also titled "Sister, Sister") suggests that the novelist's close relationship with her only sister, Cassandra, had an

"unconscious homoerotic dimension."[4] The *London Review of Books*' sensational headline and Castle's review kicked up a lot of dust, not to mention a fair amount of conservative Janeite ire.

Newspapers and television stations worldwide picked up the story. Castle explained to audiences the difference between "homoerotic" and "homosexual," as well the fact that editors, not authors, write headlines. She describes the response to her piece as "incredibly homophobic," which seems, with the hindsight of two decades, entirely right. "People have reacted as though I'd desecrated the temple or something," Castle writes. "Many people still consider it a terrible slur if you suggest that a person like Jane Austen might have had homosexual feelings."[5] One would hope that we're in a different place today with such suggestions, even if we find ourselves no closer to answers about Austen's sexual desires or practices—or lack of them. What we do know now that we didn't know twenty years ago is that the first two women to play Jane and Cassandra Austen on the professional stage in the 1930s were lovers.

In November 1932, famed theater director and actor Eva Le Gallienne (1899–1991) mounted a now little-known play, *Dear Jane*, a fictional stage treatment of the life of Jane Austen. *Dear Jane* featured the stage's earliest actor speaking as Jane Austen and was the author's first biographical dramatization.[6] Performed in 1922 in Boston with an unknown cast, *Dear Jane* made its New York debut a decade later at the innovative Civic Repertory Theatre. The Civic Rep was a theater designed to bring classics to the masses, known for its low-priced seats and high-quality performances. The theater's visionary founder and director, English-born Le Gallienne, was considered such a national treasure that her face had appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1929.[7] As director of *Dear Jane*, Le Gallienne cast as her Jane Austen the beautiful actress Josephine Hutchinson (c. 1898–1998). Le G (as she was called) cast herself in the role of Cassandra Austen.[8] Audiences at the time would have understood this as a highly interesting set of stage sisters. Le Gallienne and Hutchinson had already been publicly outed as a lesbian couple.

The relationship of the two actors was made into titillating newspaper fodder in the coverage of Hutchinson's divorce in 1930. Her estranged husband was Robert Bell, the theater-obsessed nephew of inventor Alexander Graham Bell.[9] Robert Bell, the first of Hutchinson's three husbands, alleged her extreme cruelty in his petition, something most biographers agree was a "necessary fiction concocted to gain the divorce" from his wife (Sheehy 198).

The newspapers had a field day. The *New York Daily News*, scandalmongering, ran the headline "Bell Divorces Actress, Eva Le Gallienne's Shadow."[10] "Shadow" was then a code word for lesbian, originating from the controversial play *The Captive* (1926). In the coverage of Hutchinson's divorce proceedings, Le Gallienne is said to have spent time with Hutchinson "morning, noon, and night," ruining the marriage to Bell. Worldly readers of the time would have understood precisely what was being implied.

Le Gallienne and Hutchinson were a couple for five years, acting and living together.[11] Friends worried that, in the wake of Hutchinson's divorce, negative publicity about the two women's intimacy would end both their working and personal associations. As one source later put it, "I remember how stunned everyone was in the 1920s when Le Gallienne's affair with Josephine Hutchinson hit the headlines. People thought it was simply frightful and I wondered how they would have the courage to go on with their careers or simply to go on. But they did."[12] Hutchinson herself later declared their years as a couple "good and normal and healthy," noting, "There was never any shame connected with our relationship" (Sheehy 167). *Dear Jane* would turn out to be an important moment for them as a couple. Playing the Austen sisters offered a first chance to act out private devotion to each other as adult characters on the public stage.

It was also an important moment in the history of Jane Austen's legacy. *Dear Jane* puts forward a portrait of the author that veers sharply away from the stereotype of the perfectly pious Christian spinster. The play offers audiences the novelist as feminist flirt, testing and throwing over her male suitors. She actively chooses a writing life at the side of her beloved sister. The play carried further potential meanings for Civic Rep audiences, if they knew the putative sisters were also an offstage couple. The production opened on November 14, 1932, and ran for just eleven performances. Theatrically, it was deemed a failure.[13] Since then, it has been almost entirely forgotten. *Dear Jane* "often appears as a bibliographic entry in books and papers about adaptations of Austen," as recent critics Russell Clark and Williams Phillips note, "yet no one seems to have read or seen it, or to be familiar with its contents."[14] The previously unpublished play survives in typescript, allowing us to examine its themes and effects.[15]

Dear Jane was written by Eleanor Holmes Hinkley (1891–1971), a playwright based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who was the beloved first cousin of poet T. S. Eliot. Hinkley attended Radcliffe College and eventually joined Professor George Baker's famous 47 Workshop of playwrights. By then

she'd gained a reputation for hosting energetic private theatricals. For Hinkley, Jane Austen was both a literary and a dramatic interest. On February 17, 1913, in one of her theatrical salons, Hinkley staged her stand-alone *Emma* scene, "An Afternoon with Mr. Woodhouse." T. S. Eliot himself is said to have played the valetudinarian Mr. Woodhouse—a literary historical fact better known in Eliot than in Austen studies. Adding to the significance of that day is that the amateur actor who played Mrs. Elton was Hinkley's talented classmate, Emily Hale. Eliot was already falling in love with her.[16] It's hard to say which of these details is most arresting: T. S. Eliot as a Mr. Woodhouse, or a Mr. Woodhouse of any kind falling in love with a Mrs. Elton.[17] Hinkley's *Emma* scene was apparently never published. But for Hinkley, it would be the character of Austen herself, rather than those in her novels, that would prove the more enduring dramatic interest. It was also Hinkley's greatest stage success. *Dear Jane* was the one piece of writing mentioned in her brief obituary.[18]

Hinkley's *Dear Jane* was registered for copyright in 1919.[19] A notice of its first performance dates to 1922. The *Cambridge Tribune* trumpets the headline, "LOCAL PLAYWRIGHT LAUNCHES SUCCESS: Eleanor Holmes Hinkley's Romantic Comedy, 'Dear Jane,' Given Twice." The newspaper declares that the play was performed at Boston's National Theatre (a 3,500-seat venue), where it was "unanimously voted a delightful success by all who had the pleasure of witnessing it." *Dear Jane*, it was said, "was built up from an idealization of Jane Austen's early life, and the famous authoress was depicted in a series of youthful adventures and love affairs, calling out a range of acting talent, scenic setting and costuming, constituting, with the text, a very fine entertainment. The comedy . . . might almost be one of Jane Austen's own novels boiled down to fit the stage."[20] Further details of the performances are difficult to trace.

When Le Gallienne bought the rights to produce *Dear Jane* early in 1932, she was under the mistaken impression that Hinkley's was a "new" play. Le G wrote excitedly to her mother to report that she'd acquired it: "I have bought a new play—a charming comedy written by an American woman called Miss Hinkley—about Jane Austen. The play is called 'Dear Jane'—a good title I think, and is quite *delightful*—gay & amusing & of course a period full of character—1798. Jo [Josephine Hutchinson] is to play 'Jane Austen' a part ideal for her, she is very pleased about it. I am to play her elder sister 'Cassandra' an important and difficult part."[21] Le G was said to have chosen the play "mainly because the role of Jane Austen provided a good vehicle for Josephine Hutchin-

son."[22] Hutchinson was just as excited at the prospect, because the part of Jane Austen would be among her first playing an adult role; she'd previously been cast most often as a young girl. Her notable roles at the Civic Rep were Wendy in *Peter Pan* (with Le G playing Peter Pan) and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* (with Le G as the White Queen). Playing Jane Austen as a woman in her twenties excited Hutchinson as a new professional challenge. Hutchinson expressed this in her own letter to Le G's mother:

> Eva told you, of course, about "Dear Jane." I am really excited and pleased about it as I haven't been for years. I will be able to open in a grown-up part! I don't think I have ever discussed my work with you at any length, but one of the things that has been worrying me is that a whole side of me has never been exercised . . . I may be rotten in it, but it won't be because I haven't tried. I had never read Austen and if for nothing else I am grateful for being introduced to her. I have finished "Sense and Sensibility" and am almost finished with "Pride and Prejudice." All the way through I have seen Eva as "Elizabeth." If it were ever dramatized it would be a lovely part for her.[23]

Although both Hutchinson and Le G were drawn to Austen, neither seems to have been aware of the dynamic amateur history of dramatizing her works in homes and schools, in the earlier suffrage movement, or on the professional stage in England.

Le Gallienne was well versed in—and well known for staging work by—dramatists such as Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Chekhov. That Le G chose to stage *Dear Jane*, a "new" original play by an American woman, may seem a curious choice, but Le Gallienne had previously given living playwrights the opportunity to showcase work before her large audiences. Most significant among them was Susan Glaspell, whose play *Alison's House* (1930) debuted at the Civic Rep. Inspired by the life and work of Emily Dickinson, *Alison's House* would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize. Perhaps Le G saw in *Dear Jane* a chance to repeat that formula. It was not to be. Of the thirty-four plays Le Gallienne staged at the Civic Rep between 1926 and 1932, *Dear Jane* had the second-lowest number of performances (Cooper 305–06). Despite its "stylishness" and Hutchinson's "winsome gaiety," the play proved neither a critical nor a popular success (21).

The play opens with an intriguing scene, in a pub on December 16, 1775, Jane Austen's birthdate. Gathered there are four of the eighteenth century's most famed intellectual, artistic, and theatrical men—Dr. Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and David Garrick. They sit at a table

at the Cheshire Cheese, gossiping and arguing about women's talents. Johnson beats the table with his coffee spoon, absentmindedly and impatiently. The men describe their opinions of the actor Sarah Siddons, the novelist Frances Burney, and even Johnson's late wife. It leads them to the collective conclusion that "there breathes no female alive who is, or ever shall be capable of true creation."[24] This proclamation sets up the story that follows: a female genius was born in Britain at the precise moment these male luminaries declared it impossible.

Next *Dear Jane* fast-forwards to 1798, introducing the now-adult Jane Austen as an unapologetic feminist flirt. She's declared an embarrassment by her imperious, moralizing, and sexist brother James, who wants to rein her in and marry her off. Three suitors present themselves in succession: charismatic rake Tom Lefroy, stolid childhood friend James Digweed, and handsome baronet Sir John Evelyn. (Evelyn was the only one of the three men not closely connected to the Austens in life.) Over the course of the play, Cassandra tries to help Jane judge each of the suitors, to decide which one among them to marry. Along the way, the Austens are visited by educational philosopher and author Richard Lovell Edgeworth (father of famed novelist Maria Edgeworth), as well as the mother of novelist Mary Russell Mitford. Both offer further commentary on marriage. Edgeworth comically suggests that perhaps he ought to marry Jane Austen himself, despite then being married to his fourth wife.

First, Jane considers and rejects Lefroy. She discovers him cavorting with a shopgirl and declares to Cassandra that although Tom is a dear, delicious man, he is fickle as the wind. Jane next rejects Digweed. He proposes, but she decides that he's inviting her to slavery and calling it romance. In confidence to Cassandra, Jane compares Digweed's treatment of her to her fictional character Mr. Collins's of Elizabeth Bennet. The last and most promising of Jane's suitors, Sir John Evelyn, seems her best match, intelligent, handsome, and passionate, not to mention rich and titled. But he, too, is rejected by Jane. She discovers that he's not really listening when she describes the plot of her novel *First Impressions*. (Jane tells him that it's Cassandra who wants her to rename it *Pride and Prejudice*.) Jane admits, "Sir John, I write," to which he replies that he loves her and not her novel (6-12). Sir John kisses her ardently, but he brushes aside the part of her she most values. After the kiss, Jane looks into his eyes "and saw he did not know me" (6-18). She tells Cassandra that she could not marry and be a stranger to her husband (6-20).

By the end of the play, Jane has rejected three eligible men—one like Wickham, one like Collins, and one a defective Darcy—in order to go on to write her genius fiction and prove the opening scene's famous pub conversationalists wrong. But another thematic thread runs throughout the play: Cassandra and Jane's close relationship. The two are almost always on the stage together. When Digweed comes to propose to Jane, he mistakenly believes her to be alone. Realizing Cassandra is there in the room, he tells the sisters that he thinks of the two of them as one. There are other moments, too, telegraphing their future together. When Cassandra declares she's leaving, Jane says to her, "You go, my better half?" (2-19). Digweed may imagine Jane and Cassandra as interchangeable women, but Jane's joking words imply that the sisters already see themselves as like a married couple. Hutchinson's Jane referring on stage, in character, to Le Gallienne's Cassandra, her real-life lover, as her "better half" cannot have been lost on the most knowing viewers or on the actors themselves for its momentousness.

The character of Cassandra, too, is shown as Jane's stalwart partner, asking Jane to investigate her views toward matrimony. Cassandra nudges Jane to examine her feelings for her suitors, to determine whether she is in love. At one point, Cassandra asks Jane whether she is fickle. Jane says, "I always love you Cassy, do I not?" (2-18). Cassandra, "embracing her tenderly," cries, "Dear Jane!" echoing both surviving real-life letters and the play's title. The two women hold each other on stage, in character, as Jane and Cassandra. As their onstage banter continues, Cassandra asks Jane whether she means to marry sometime, to which Jane replies, "Do I look like a spinster?" (2-24). There's no moment in the play that better highlights Hinkley's subtle work to reimagine marriage and to recast prevailing notions of single women. It's an even more fascinating line when understood as delivered by a recent divorcée to her female lover.

The success of that line on the stage depended on Hutchinson's not "looking like" the negative stereotype of a spinster. She was a stunning young woman, described as "slim and long-legged, five feet five inches tall, with amber eyes in a heart-shaped face and a cloud of reddish-gold hair" (Sheehy 155). Her character didn't resemble a stereotypical spinster. But what was the difference in "looks" and demeanor between a spinster and a stereotypical lesbian, in Austen's day or in the then-present? Both actor and character in *Dear Jane* would seem to be working to undo prejudices. Adding to the multilayered reading possible here is the fact that Hutchinson's personality offstage was said to be very like Jane Austen's, "as defined by Eleanor Hinkley,"

with the part's "swiftly changing humors" giving Hutchinson the "chance to demonstrate the suppleness and finish she had acquired" as an actor (Cooper 119–20). Audiences, however, did not seem to connect readily. A Civic Rep stage manager thought that *Dear Jane* failed not because of the actors' talents or suitability for the roles but because the script "read much better than it played" (151). Perhaps audiences also had a hard time making sense of how to judge a flirtatious, intentionally single Jane Austen, not to mention one played by a winsome actor.

Figure 6.1. Josephine Hutchinson, publicity still from *Dear Jane* (New York, 1932).

It's even possible that Hutchinson and Le Gallienne meant for audiences to envision their relationship on the stage through *Dear Jane*'s sisters. The play ends with Jane declaring, "Cassy, we must leave tonight!" They run away together from Sir John Evelyn's Pemberley-like home, where both are staying as his guests. Jane breaks down and drops to her knees beside Cassy, crying, declaring that she cannot marry without love. Cassy emphatically responds, "No!" Then the two sisters, after having trouble opening a massive bolted door, bust it open and bust out together. Jane declares her "old quill pen" to be her destiny, and the audience sees, as a last tableau, the couple creeping past a window—shadows of themselves. They head off, as anyone who knew Austen's life story would have known, to an unmarried future together. The play's final scene, as it's described, also mirrors a marriage proposal. It produces a no rather than a yes, yet it's also a love scene. It involves a declaration to a loved one (about not being in love elsewhere) and a dropping down on one's knees. It provides a twist on the couple riding off into the sunset happily ever after, substituting a running off into the darkness. In this play, Hutchinson and Le Gallienne played a same-sex couple mock-eloping before an audience, in the guise of Jane and Cassandra Austen.

The play's theme, its "celebration of female creativity and independence," would have "appealed to Le Gallienne," according to biographer Helen Sheehy, but at the time "it was not a popular view." This is a play better suited to a less anxious and more open time than Depression-era America, as "independent women threatened male status and power." Sheehy makes another claim that's important to understanding the shift from Le Gallienne's and Hinkley's Jane in 1919, 1922, or 1932 to Helen Jerome's and Keith-Johnston's Darcy in 1935. One critic in the *New York Telegram* in 1932 complains that the era's "playwrights . . . are giving all the character and strength to the women's roles and transforming the men's roles into pallid shadows." It's an interesting twist on the word "shadow," as Sheehy remarks (219). *Dear Jane,* play and production, was everything that this reactionary critic fears. It was a female-run, female-dominated, female-independence-promoting, disposing-with-men sort of a play. That was true from the play's direction and opening scene on down.[25]

Other reviewers suggest discomfort with the gender-bending nature of *Dear Jane*. In one review, Hutchinson's Jane is preferred to Le Gallienne's Cassandra. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* concludes that Hutchinson was "so delightful a picture that you can't very well forget her" but that "almost constantly beside her in a fairly colorless subdued role, is Eva Le Gallienne

as her devoted sister and adviser."[26] The most remarkable review, however, directly hints at the Le Gallienne–Hutchinson scandal. The last line of the play, as quoted above, has Jane embracing her quill pen as her destiny. But the *New York Herald Tribune*'s reviewer claims he heard a different word at play's end. He writes, "'To freedom!' as the enfranchised Jane cried as the final curtain was just about to fall, and if I understood Miss Josephine Hutchinson aright, 'And my queer own pen!' Well, it made a pleasant evening for all that."[27] The word "queer" was no accidental mishearing. This is smirking, homophobic in-speak, buried in a theater review. When the same reviewer later refers to Le Gallienne's Cassandra as a "watchdog elder sister," there's absolutely no mistake. Some theatergoers saw a queer Austen in 1932. With the Civic Rep's seating capacity of 1,100 and its eleven performances, it was an Austen viewed by a significant number of playgoers.

The history of *Dear Jane* might end there. But in an interesting coda, further romance and failed romance emerged from the play's cast. Hutchinson, in her third and final marriage in 1972, wed former Civic Rep and *Dear Jane* actor Staats Cotsworth (1908–79). A man some years Hutchinson's junior, Cotsworth is listed in the program for *Dear Jane* as one of the cast's dancers. He'd then moved on from the Civic Rep to make a name for himself in radio. After Cotsworth's death, Le Gallienne wanted to reunite with Hutchinson, whom she thought of as the love of her life. Le G hoped they would live out their days together, much like Jane and Cassandra had. She approached Hutchinson with an offer, but Hutchinson declined (Schanke 266). When Le G passed away, she left her wealth to many people and organizations, but to Hutchinson she left a sapphire ring (Sheehy 461). In an imaginative frame of mind, we might see it as the missing prop from *Dear Jane*'s backward proposal scene.

Hinkley's *Dear Jane* offers a vision of the woman writer, of the creative life, and of sisterly love that is iconoclastic, performed by two female actors who were in love. The play shows that, for a time, Austen's life and writings inspired and showcased romance between women, outside of the confines of traditional marriage, onstage and off. This ought to give pause to those who would scorn Austen, in her own right and in her legacy, as an author of reactionary "chick lit." It's also a wake-up call to those quick to dismiss her and her fiction as hopelessly heteronormative. Yet Hinkley's *Dear Jane* did not prove enduring as a play.

Hinkley seems to have been interested in continuing to work with Le G. An unpublished letter survives from Hinkley to Le Gallienne. There Hink-

ley writes that she regrets not connecting in person on her recent trip to New York. Next they do get together, Hinkley promises not to bother Le G with Charlotte, Aphra, or "any other dead lady."[28] Perhaps Hinkley had pitched plays on Charlotte Brontë and Aphra Behn to Le G. But the collaboration of the playwright and director would not continue. It's difficult to determine what long-term effect, if any, *Dear Jane* had on Austen's reputation or on future adaptations in any medium. Playwright Helen Jerome, who was living at the time in the New York area, may have known of *Dear Jane* before writing her hit play, *Pride and Prejudice* (1935). Whether she knew it or not, Jerome managed what Hinkley couldn't or wouldn't—a play centering on the desires of the mesmerizing hero. Jerome did not test, as *Dear Jane* did, the public's readiness for a sex-role-bending, free-thinking heroine or author. Jerome's lust-filled, passionate-kiss ending stands in sharp contrast to Hinkley's runaway sisters. *Dear Jane* dropped off of the Austen-legacy charts, while Jerome's sexy Darcy endured. Quill pens conquered queer pens.