

The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library

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Many readers will have first learned of the circulating library from the scene in *Pride and Prejudice* during which Mr. Collins is asked to read to the Bennet family after dinner:

Mr. Collins readily assented, and a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels.—Kitty stared at him, and Lydia exclaimed.—Other books were produced and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce's Sermons.¹

Lydia soon interrupts this solemnity and offends Mr. Collins sufficiently so that he abandons his reading. This passage suggests that books from a circulating library were identifiable from a distance, that such books were likely to be novels, and that stuffy clergymen did not read them while young ladies read little else. Moreover, it is evident that this scene of reading and, indeed, the novel itself are embedded within a system of book distribution centering on the circulating library.

As is clear elsewhere in Austen's novels and especially in *Sanditon*, the circulating libraries made reading fashionable when books were very expensive. By 1800, most copies of a novel's edition were sold to the libraries, which were flourishing businesses to be found in every major English city and town, and which promoted the sale of books during a period when their price rose relative to the cost of living. The libraries created a market for the publishers' product and encouraged readers to read more by charging them an annual subscription fee that would entitle them to check out a specified number of volumes at one time. The very

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existence of the libraries, though, reflected the relatively low marginal utility of rereading novels for contemporary readers, the general view that novel reading was a luxury, and the social subordination of reading to the concerns of everyday life. An investigation of the history of circulating libraries and a contextual analysis of the references made to the libraries in Austen's works and letters will reveal the underlying economy of novel reading, buying, and selling during the early nineteenth century.²

I

A circulating library was a private business that rented books. There are records of booksellers renting books in the late seventeenth century, and the practice of renting out books goes back to medieval times in university towns. But the circulating library as a separate establishment run by a bookseller or entrepreneur does not make its appearance until the early eighteenth century.³ In 1740 Dr. Samuel Fancourt, a dissenting divine, was among the first to use the term when he advertized a circulating library in Salisbury that had begun in 1735 and that consisted primarily of religious books and pamphlets. In 1742 he moved his enterprise to London where it flourished until his death. There were apparently established booksellers in London already renting books who took Fancourt's business as a model and soon were calling their firms circulating libraries.⁴ By 1775 many such libraries were doing business in Bath and London, while others were to be found in the larger towns and in all the watering places and seaside resorts where the wealthy and fashionable congregated. In 1801 there were said to be 1,000 circulating libraries in England.⁵ The circulating libraries were at first natural outgrowths of bookselling, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century had often become enterprises in their own right. They were ultimately driven out by the rise of public libraries in England, but they dominated the market for fiction throughout the nineteenth century and were important until the 1930s when Mudie's, the largest and most famous, closed.⁶

The circulating libraries were associated with leisure and were to be found in the resorts for the wealthy, where the characters of Austen's rural gentry usually encounter them. In the new resort of Sanditon, for example, there is Mrs. Whitby's. At Brighton, Lydia Bennet visits one of the town's circulating libraries, which, the contemporary *Guide to All the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places* says, "are frequented by all fashionable people."⁷ Indeed, the *Guide* tells us that "the taste and character of individuals may be

better learned in a library than in a ball-room; and they who frequent the former in preference to the latter, frequently enjoy the most rational and the most permanent pleasure."⁸ The *Guide* carefully describes the circulating libraries of the watering places and the amusements they can supply, lamenting, for instance, the location of the library at Lyme Regis that Mrs. Musgrove patronizes in *Persuasion*: "Lyme has a small Assembly-room, Card-room, and Billiard-table, conveniently arranged under one roof; and had the Library been joined to it, all the amusement which the place can furnish would have been comprised in one building."⁹ The influence of such guidebook accounts is evident in Austen's description of the buildings of Sanditon close to the sea:

Trafalgar House, on the most elevated spot on the Down was a light elegant Building, standing in a small Lawn with a very young plantation round it, about an hundred yards from the brow of a steep, but not very lofty Cliff—and the nearest to it, of every Building, excepting one short row of smart-looking Houses, called the Terrace, with a broad walk in front, aspiring to be the Mall of the Place. In this row were the best Milliner's shop & the Library—a little detached from it, the Hotel & Billiard Room—Here began the Descent to the Beach, & to the Bathing Machines —& this was therefore the favourite spot for Beauty & Fashion.¹⁰

As this social map of Sanditon suggests, the circulating library was expected to be centrally located in a resort's organization of pleasure. Cromer, which Mr. Woodhouse particularly recommends, has a nondescript circulating library, while Southend, where Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley went in the autumn for the sea air and bathing, not only has the virtue of being closer to London but also has a library in "an elegant building, somewhat in the gothic stile . . . beautifully situated on the brow of the hill."¹¹ The attractions of Ramsgate, where Mr. Wickham attempted to seduce Georgiana Darcy, include Mrs. Witherden's library and Burgess's library, the latter having "a good stationery and toyshop attached to it."¹² And one learns that if Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax felt forced to communicate while in public by playing with jumbled letters at Weymouth, they might have done so in the card room above Hervey's library in the Esplanade, which is "large, and elegantly furnished."¹³ Austen herself is known to have seen the inside of several of them. In 1807 she tells Cassandra about changing books at one of Southampton's circulating libraries.¹⁴ Writing in 1814 to her niece about a story the young lady had

written, she comments "I am not sensible of any Blunders about Dawlish. The Library was particularly pitiful & wretched 12 years ago, & is not likely to have anybody's publications."¹⁵ The *Guide* evidently concurs, for it mentions no library and considers the place a disappointing resort, perhaps because it specialized in "all the long train of complaints known under the vulgar name of declines."¹⁶

In the resorts the circulating libraries became fashionable daytime lounges where ladies could see others and be seen, where raffles were held and games were played, and where expensive merchandise could be purchased. Even in Meryton the local library is quite a social attraction. Not only are the novels that Mr. Collins never reads to be found there, but, as Lydia notes, Colonel Forster and Captain Carter are seen "very often standing in Clarke's library" (2:30). Since it was the custom to subscribe to the libraries immediately upon arrival in the watering places and resorts, their subscription books became a useful guide to who was in town. In *Sanditon* the subscription book is used this way. Mr. Parker and Charlotte Heywood go to Mrs. Whitby's circulating library after dinner to examine the subscription book. When they look into it, Mr. Parker "could not but feel that the List was not only without Distinction, but less numerous than he had hoped."¹⁷ The subsequent reference in *Sanditon* to Fanny Burney's *Camilla* recalls the fashionable circulating libraries in that novel: Camilla and Edgar go to a raffle for a locket at the library in Northwick; and later Camilla and Mrs. Arblay visit the bookseller's shop in Tunbridge Wells to subscribe to its circulating library in order to announce that they are in town. While they are there, Sir Sedley asks for the shop's subscription books which are seized from him by Lord Newford, and, as the narrator acidly comments, "with some right, as they were the only books in the shop he ever read."¹⁸ In many respects, then, books and an apparent interest in them were signs of gentility and often displayed only for their social utility.

As the phenomenon of wealthy people borrowing books suggests, the circulating library made books available to readers, and especially to women, when books were very expensive. James Lackington, who made his fortune selling remaindered editions, says in the 1794 edition of his *Memoirs* that "when circulating libraries were first opened, the booksellers were much alarmed, and their rapid increase, added to their fears, had led them to think that the sale of books would be much diminished by such libraries. But experience has proved that the sale of books, so far from being diminished by them, has been greatly promoted, . . . and thousands

of books are purchased every year, by such as have first borrowed them at those libraries."¹⁹ The libraries effectively pooled the demand of many people for books that only a few could afford. In the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century, books were not only luxuries but also rising in price so that to have an extensive library was a sign of great wealth. The average three-volume novel cost a guinea in 1815, or, based on the current worth of a guinea's gold content, roughly the equivalent of \$100 today; and that does not take into account how much lower the standard of living of the average person was then and therefore how many fewer people could afford to buy books.²⁰ When Mr. Darcy says that he "cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these" (2:38), he is not only asserting his belief in the importance of the age's literature but also implicitly declaring that the high cost of books does not concern him. For readers who did not own great estates and who had incomes much smaller than £10,000 a year, however, the high cost of books was important. Edward Ferrars teases Marianne Dashwood for having such a great love of reading that if she had money "the bulk of [her] fortune would be laid out in annuities on the authors or their heirs" (1:93). It is perhaps fortunate then that she marries Colonel Brandon, whose library, as Marianne observes, is particularly well-stocked with works of "modern production" (1:343). For those readers who, unlike Marianne, did not have access to private libraries, the circulating libraries made books accessible at a reasonable cost. Fanny Price, for instance, after returning home to Portsmouth from Mansfield Park, immediately notices the lack of books in her father's house and subscribes to a circulating library:

Fanny found it impossible not to try for books again. There were none in her father's house; but wealth is luxurious and daring—and some of hers found its way to a circulating library. She became a subscriber—amazed at being any thing *in propria persona*, amazed at her own doings in every way; to be a renter, a chuser of books! And to be having any one's improvement in view in her choice! But so it was. Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself.
(3:398)

As Austen suggests, circulating libraries could ideally be, and certainly were in Fanny's eyes, a means for the intellectual liberation of women of small means.

II

In practice the circulating libraries provided women with entertainment in the form of novels. Some men, of course, read novels. But although Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* declares that “the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid” and says that he has “read all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works,” his views and knowledge of circulating library fiction seem to have been unusual for a man (5:106). More usual apparently is Mr. Thorpe, who, when asked if he has read *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, replies “I never read novels; I have something else to do” and asserts that “there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except *The Monk*” (5:48).²¹ The libraries became particularly associated with reading novels because of the low marginal utility of rereading them; that is, in comparison with other books, most novels were (and still are) disposable pleasures to be read once and forgotten. Writing in 1935, F.R. Richardson of Mudie’s remarks that “even books by authors of substantial reputation rarely circulate for more than six or eight months, and those by unknown or comparatively unknown writers we do not expect to last more than four months, or three.”²² This meant that while among a large number of readers in the aggregate there might well be an appreciable demand for reading a novel once, the pleasure to be gained from rereading what one had just finished was relatively minimal—hence people were quite willing to rent a novel they were unwilling to buy. Thus publishers of novels found that rental libraries were purchasing a large and gradually increasing part of an edition. As early as 1770 Richard Griffith observes that of 1,000 copies of a novel, 400 would be sold to circulating libraries.²³ When book prices rose, this became true for almost all books. In *Letters from England* (1809) Robert Southey states that the demand for books largely comes from “the main libraries, or from private societies instituted to supply their place, books being now so inordinately expensive that they are chiefly purchased as furniture by the rich. It is not a mere antithesis to say they who buy books do not read them, and that they who read them do not buy them.”²⁴ Commenting on the prospects of a second edition of *Mansfield Park* in 1814, Austen says, “People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at.”²⁵ She was right to worry, since of the 750 copies John Murray printed only 252 were sold by 1820 when the leftover stock was remaindered.²⁶ It is likely, for example, that when Robert Martin says he will get *The Romance of the Forest* on Harriet’s recommendation when he next

goes to market in Kingston, he intends not to buy it but to obtain it from a circulating library as Harriet probably did previously.

Austen herself was a subscriber to Mrs. Martin's circulating library in Basingstoke and later lamented its demise. In a letter of 18 December 1798 she writes to Cassandra:

I have received a very civil note from Mrs. Martin requesting my name as a Subscriber to her Library which opens the 14th of January, & my name, or rather Yours is accordingly given. My Mother finds the Money.— Mary subscribes too, which I am glad of, but hardly expected.— As an inducement to subscribe Mrs. Martin tells us that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of Literature, &c. &c.— She might have spared this pretention to *our* family who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so;—but it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her subscribers.²⁷

By 1814 one would typically subscribe to a circulating library like Mrs. Martin's for two guineas a year and be entitled to have two volumes out and by paying more could have more volumes.²⁸ Assuming a moderate reader and three volumes per novel, this would mean that one could read twenty-six novels a year for a little more than the price of one. In *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered; With Instructions for Opening and Conducting a Library* (1797), Thomas Wilson hyperbolically claims that “the yearly subscriber may read as many books for one guinea, which, to purchase, would cost ONE HUNDRED.”²⁹ The natural consequence of this economics of reading was that by Austen's time most copies of a novel's first edition were sold not to individuals but to circulating libraries. Since the libraries found that the vogue for a novel was usually limited to a few months, they bound their books in cheap marbled-colored bindings that were distinguishable at a distance as Mr. Collins's remark suggests and that wore out quickly in the hands of their many readers. Thinking about the state of such volumes in “Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading,” Lamb rhapsodizes, “How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn-out appearance, nay the very odour . . . of an old ‘Circulating Library’ Tom Jones or Vicar of Wakefield!—How they speak of the thousand thumbs that have turned over their pages with delight!”³⁰ This hard use has meant that, with the exception of novels which were particularly valued and purchased by their readers, surviving copies of the period's novels are very rare. Witness, for example, Michael Sadleir's account in “Passages from the Autobiography of a Bibliomaniac”

of his long quest to collect the seven gothic novels that made up Isabella Thorpe's list in *Northanger Abbey*.³¹

The general economy of novel reading is reflected in the catalogues of the period's circulating libraries. By contemporary accounts the largest circulating library of the period, and the largest from which a catalogue survives, was John Lane's library in London. Lane's catalogue advertizes more than 20,000 titles, while the smallest surviving catalogue from James Sanders's library in Derby (circa 1770) lists just over 200 titles.³² The average circulating library issuing a catalogue had around 5,000 titles of which about 1,000 were fiction, or roughly twenty percent. This figure probably understates somewhat the libraries' emphasis upon novels, since large enterprises would stock multiple copies of recent fiction. John Lane, for example, advertized that he had as many as twenty-five copies of a popular novel.³³ Further, since it is probable that catalogues have tended to survive from the larger and longer-lived businesses and that small libraries often may not have issued printed catalogues for their subscribers, one perhaps gets a better view of the great demand for novels by examining the figures from the catalogues of the small circulating libraries. These libraries averaged 430 titles of which seventy percent were fiction.³⁴ The libraries' short lending period of two to six days for new books and their heavy fines (which required one to buy the book) also point to the concentrated demand for the latest publications.

In rural areas circulating libraries did not exist, since a bookseller needed an urban population of about 2,000 to make a living.³⁵ Meryton has Clarke's, but the villages of Highbury and Uppercross are without this civilized amenity. While there were special arrangements for country subscribers that for the same price usually offered more books than a town subscription did (perhaps in the rational expectation that the wealthy would ultimately buy what they liked), the country patrons still had to provide or pay for carriage. In *Sanditon* one observes, for example, "a young Whitby running off with 5 vols. under his arm to Sir Edward's Gig" so that the books can be conveyed to Denham Park.³⁶ Those less well off either had to have access to the library of a country house or to belong to a book club or book society as Jane Austen did at Chawton. These clubs and societies, however, were unlikely to cater to the taste of women, composed as they were primarily of upper middle-class men interested in political and economic subjects.³⁷ In 1813 Austen writes that she is reading her book society's latest acquisition, Captain Pasley's *Essay on the Military Police and the Institutions of the British Empire*, and professing to find it "delightfully written & highly entertaining."³⁸ Yet despite

the male preference for such heavy reading, Austen reports that “the Miss Sibleys want to establish a Book Society in their side of the country like ours.”³⁹ There can be little doubt, then, that when isolated country readers of modest means like Mrs. Musgrove visited market towns and seaside resorts, they found the circulating libraries like the one at Lyme Regis to be significant attractions.

Most circulating libraries evidently had such a small stock that they could not rely solely upon renting books to support their proprietors and so usually sold a supplementary line of luxury items or offered some other form of entertainment in addition to their reading rooms. In *The Use of Circulating Libraries* Thomas Wilson remarks that

not one Circulating Library in twenty is, by its profits enabled to give support to a family, or even pay for the trouble and expence attending it; therefore the bookselling and stationary business should always be annexed, and in country towns, some other may be added, the following in particular, are suitable for this purpose. Haberdashery, Hosiery, Hats, Tea, Tobacco and Snuffs; or Perfumery, and the sale of Patent Medicines.⁴⁰

When she is in Brighton, Lydia Bennet reports that officers had accompanied her to the library “where she had seen such beautiful ornaments as made her quite wild” (2:238)—as if Lydia needed any assistance. Charlotte Heywood in *Sanditon* turns away from the drawers of rings and broaches in Mrs. Whitby’s library so that she won’t spend “all of her Money the very first Evening.”⁴¹ In one of Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts*, *The Two Wealthy Farmers; or the History of Mr. Bragwell* (1796), the local circulating library is said to “sell paper with all manner of colours on the edges, and gim-cracks, and powder-puffs, and wash-balls, and cards without any pips, and every thing in the world that’s genteel and of no use.”⁴² Alluding to More’s dour utilitarian view of the circulating library, Austen’s narrator in *Sanditon* cheerfully remarks of Mrs. Whitby’s establishment that “the Library of course, afforded every thing; all the useless things in the World that could not be done without.”⁴³ And in saying this as in much else, Austen displays her understanding of how necessary luxuries and books are for a civilized society, how many genteel and apparently useless things really cannot be done without.

III

As *Northanger Abbey* demonstrates, Austen not only appreciated the limits of an imagination formed solely by reading fiction and, in particular, gothic novels, but also recognized how they were being manufactured to order. Henry Tilney explains that his sister's misapprehension of what Catherine Morland means by new horrors coming from London stems from her not having appreciated Catherine's mixing of fact and fiction and not having foremost in mind the pleasures of reading the novels emanating from Paternoster Row:

Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?—And you, Miss Morland—my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London—and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window.

(5:113)

Such novels were especially associated with the circulating library, not only because that is where most readers obtained them but also because John Lane, the proprietor of the Minerva Press, was both the leading publisher of gothic fiction in England and the principal wholesaler of complete, packaged circulating libraries to new entrepreneurs.⁴⁴ Consider the seven gothic novels on the list that Isabella Thorpe gave Catherine, for example: Mrs. Eliza Parsons's *Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and her *Mysterious Warning* (1796), Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont* (1798), Peter Teuthold's translation of Lawrence Flammenberg's *Necromancer of the Black Forest* (1794), Francis Lathom's *Midnight Bell* (1798), Eleanor Sleath's *Orphan of the Rhine* (1798), and Peter Will's translation of the Marquis of Grosse's *Horrid Mysteries* (1796). The Minerva Press issued all of them with the exception of the novel by Lathom, who later published several novels with the press.⁴⁵ Lane's position

as the leading publisher of gothic fiction and as a wholesaler of complete circulating libraries points to the large number of readers like Isabella Thorpe and Catherine Morland and to the substantial profits to be made from catering to their reading tastes.

Many people opposed circulating libraries and especially their encouragement of young women in reading novels. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen notes that even novelists had joined "with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust" (5:37). The objections to novels and novel reading ranged from their dignifying idleness to their encouragement of immorality. Although Coleridge had been made a free member of a circulating library in King Street, Cheapside, at age eight and claimed that he read every book in the catalogue,⁴⁶ he says in *Biographia Literaria* (1815) "For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time* with the name of reading"; he declares that novel reading reconciles "indulgence of sloth and hatred of vacancy," and he considers it no better than "gaming, swinging or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking; [and] conning word by word all the advertisements of the daily advertizer in a public house on a rainy day."⁴⁷ In George Colman's *Polly Honeycombe* (1760), the father, having just rescued his daughter from a disastrous engagement with the son of his maid, exclaims "a man might as well turn his Daughter loose in Covent-garden, as trust the cultivation of her mind to A CIRCULATING LIBRARY."⁴⁸ Sir Anthony Absolute in Sheridan's *Rivals* (1775), having observed Lady Languish's maid returning from such a place, remarks to Mrs. Malaprop, "Madam, a circulating library in a town is, as an ever-green tree, of diabolical knowledge!—It blossoms through the year!—And depend on it, Mrs. Malaprop, that they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last."⁴⁹ In Hannah More's *Two Wealthy Farmers*, Mr. Bragwell, responding to Mr. Worthy's question as to whether his daughters read, says "Read! I believe they do too. Why our Jack, the plough-boy, spends half his time in going to a shop in our Market-town, where they let out books to read with marble covers."⁵⁰ And Sir Edward Denham in *Sanditon* asserts "I am no indiscriminate Novel-Reader. The mere Trash of the common Circulating Library, I hold in the highest contempt."⁵¹ Although the English enjoyed reading novels, there was much prejudice against them as Mr. Collins's disdain in *Pride and Prejudice* reflects.

Despite remaining a great reader of novels and vigorously defending the form, Austen in her own work depicts the age's great social ambivalence toward reading novels and its suspicion of anyone's finding pleasure in reading. In *Northanger Abbey* she defends the novel as a "work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (5:38). But while Austen's own fiction certainly measures up to this high standard, the social context displayed within her work accurately reflects the low value placed on reading books in general and novels in particular. Reading can distract characters in her novels from performing their duty or indicate their incapacity. In *Persuasion* Mrs. Musgrove finds herself unable to care for Louisa after her fall at Lyme Regis and so, among other things, "had got books from the library and changed them so often, that the balance had certainly been much in favour of Lyme" (5:130). Isabella Thorpe, a great reader of gothic novels, is revealed to be an artificial coquette; and Catherine Morland is deceived by her fanciful expectation, gained from reading too many novels, that murder is to be discovered in every old country house. Harriet Smith, whose taste runs to Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791) and Regina Maria Roche's *Children of the Abbey* (1798), is a lighthearted young lady of little consequence, while Emma Woodhouse, who is not much of a reader and "has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old" (4:37), not only has the greater social standing but also has much else to do in attending to her father and managing everyone's affairs. Reading was generally felt to represent a withdrawal from a woman's proper social concerns. Mary Bennet, whose interests are confined to reading sermons and moral essays, is the most limited and least marriageable of the family's sisters. This attitude informs both Miss Bingley's sneering comment about Elizabeth Bennet that "she is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else," and also Elizabeth's spirited reply, "I am *not* a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things" (1:37). Later Elizabeth says to Darcy at the Netherfield ball, "I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else" (1:93). Very occasionally novels could even involve social embarrassment or immorality. Writing to Cassandra in 1798, Jane Austen announces "We have got 'Fitz-Albini'; my father has bought it against my private wishes, for it does not quite satisfy my feelings that we should purchase the only one of Egerton's works of which his family are ashamed. That these scruples, however, do not at all interfere with

my reading it, you will easily believe."⁵² Later in 1804 she writes from Southampton where she was borrowing books from a circulating library: "'Alphonsine' did not do [Madame de Genlis's novel]. We were disgusted in twenty pages, as, independent of a bad translator, it has indelicacies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure; and we changed it for the 'Female Quixote'" by Charlotte Lennox.⁵³ And in *Northanger Abbey* Austen convincingly depicts the social and moral dangers of taking fiction too seriously.

IV

Circulating libraries, then, were an important part of the social fabric in Austen's England and materially affected the conditions in which her own novels were produced. They helped to create an audience for the ephemeral novel when books were expensive and, in particular, made reading a social activity in which women could usually properly participate. Nonetheless, one should also recognize that the circulating libraries institutionally represented the low social valuation of fiction, something which professional readers often forget. The existence of the libraries reveals both the ambivalence toward reading for pleasure and also the general aesthetic economy of novel reading. Still, despite the age's ambivalence toward novels and its suspicion of reading pleasure that informed its view of the circulating libraries, we should recognize that, if nothing else, the readers and their libraries encouraged and enabled Austen to write her novels. Among many others long forgotten, her works were to be found on the shelves of the circulating libraries and were to be numbered among their "useless things," useless and beautiful things that we still cannot do without.

NOTES

¹*The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd edn., ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932-34), 2:68. Further citations of Austen's novels in my text refer to volume and page numbers in this edition.

²This approach has certain affinities with Robert Darnton's synthesis of publishing history and contemporary reception that reconstructs the consciousness of late eighteenth-century French readers in "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 215-56; and with that of Alvin B. Kernan who considers the formation of the professional writer's self-consciousness in terms of the "social construction" of literature in *Printing Technology, Letters & Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987). My method is more oriented toward questions of form as articulated by the publishing market than that of Jerome J. McGann who considers the context of literary publication as ideological staging and who analyzes the history of literary reception as a register of ideological differences in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985). The use of publishing history as a basis for or a supplement to literary investigation has been variously labelled as "sociology of literature" and a species of "new historicism," see John Sutherland, "Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology," *Critl* 14, 3 (Spring 1988):574-89; and David Simpson, "Literary Criticism and the Return to 'History,'" *Critl* 14, 4 (Summer 1988):721-47. Interested in larger realms outside literature, both Sutherland and Simpson seek to subsume recent literary studies making use of publishing history within their own theoretical frameworks and agenda, but only Simpson, it seems to me, sees this kind of criticism as worth pursuing in itself and accurately portrays the origins of the recent critical use of publishing history in attempts to ground historically reception theory and literary self-consciousness.

³For the history of the circulating library, see Alan Dugald McKillop, "English Circulating Libraries, 1725-50," *Library* ser. 4, 14 (1934):477-85; Hilda M. Hamlyn, "Eighteenth-Century Circulating Libraries in England," *Library* ser. 5, 1 (1946-47):197-222; Philip Kaufman, "The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* n.s. 57, pt. 7 (1967); Devendra P. Varma, *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge* (Washington: Consortium Press, 1972); Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970); and Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), pp. 3-18. Since Varma's and Kaufman's histories end at 1800 and Griest's begins with the founding of Mudie's in the 1840s, there is a gap in the accounts of some forty years during the industrialization of book publishing. The only attempt to place Austen's novels within the context of the circulating libraries is R.W. Chapman's sketch, "Reading and Writing," in his edition of her works (1:422).

⁴On Fancourt, see Varma, pp. 26-28; M.J. Crump and R.J. Goulden describe a printed catalogue of Fancourt's Salisbury library and print the library's rules of 1739 in "Four Library Catalogues of Note," *Factotum* 1 (1978):9-11; and Elizabeth A. Swaim, "Circulating Library: Antedatings of the O.E.D.," *N&Q* n.s. 25, 1 (Fall 1978):14-15. Under combinations of "circulating" the OED cites Fancourt's 1742 advertisement for his London library as the term's first appearance.

⁵*Monthly Magazine* 11 (1801):238.

⁶Griest, pp. 17-27. It is interesting to note, as Griest points out, that both Boots and Harrod's originally began as circulating libraries before moving into their present lines of business.

⁷[John Feltham], *A Guide to All the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places* (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), p. 78.

⁸[Feltham] (1803), p. 78.

⁹[Feltham] (London: Richard Phillips, 1806), p. 264.

¹⁰Jane Austen, *Minor Works*, ed. R.W. Chapman, rev. B.C. Southam (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 384.

¹¹[Feltham] (1806), pp. 199 and 384. These descriptions remain the same throughout the *Guide*'s many subsequent editions; see, for example, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, [1824]), pp. 169 and 106.

¹²[Feltham] (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), p. 415.

¹³[Feltham] (1815), p. 493. This card room is later noted as regularly being used as a ballroom in the winter months; see [Feltham] (1824), p. 362.

¹⁴Letter to Cassandra, 7 January 1807, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, 2nd edn., ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 173. (Hereafter cited as *Letters*.)

¹⁵Letter to Anna Austen, 10 August 1814, *Letters*, p. 393.

¹⁶[Feltham] (1803), p. 197.

¹⁷*Minor Works*, p. 389. Unfortunately, only one such subscription book from the period has survived, that of James Marshall in Bath from 1793 to 1799, but one notes that the signatures of the Prince of Wales and Mrs. Piozzi grace its pages. Philip Kaufman reproduces the page from this list that has the Prince of Wales's signature in "The Community Library," p. 21.

¹⁸Francis Burney, *Camilla; or A Picture of Youth*, ed. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 402. Elaine Bander considers the allusion to *Camilla* as a comparison of Charlotte Heywood's financial prudence with Camilla's extravagance in Tunbridge Wells, see "The Significance of Jane Austen's Reference to 'Camilla' in 'Sanditon': A Note," *N&Q* n.s. 25, 3 (June 1978):214-16.

¹⁹James Lackington, *Memoirs of the Forty-Five First Years of the Life of James Lackington*, 7th edn. (London: James Lackington, 1794), pp. 247-48. More than one hundred years later, F.R. Richardson makes the same observation: "Surely the circulating library has met a demand, not created it. Surely the majority of its borrowers are people who would never pay seven shillings and sixpence for a new novel, who would very rarely buy books in any case, and who would simply read far fewer books, instead of buying more, if the libraries were swept out of existence" ("The Circulating Library," in *The Book World*, ed. John Hampden [London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1935], p. 196).

²⁰A guinea contained a quarter of an ounce of gold, while an ounce of gold sells for about \$400 today. This rough comparison still understates the relative cost of books. For relative price indexes for this period, see Glenn Hueckel, "War and the British Economy, 1793-1815: A General Equilibrium Analysis," *Explorations in Economic History* 10 (1973):388. On the encouragement that the cost of books gave to the development of technological innovations in printing and on the subsequent effect upon the readership for poetry, see Lee Erickson, "The Poets' Corner: The Impact of Technological Changes in Printing on English Poetry, 1800-1850," *ELH* 52, 4 (Winter 1985):893-911.

²¹Philip Kaufman has argued that the subscription list of James Marshall's library in Bath, seventy percent of which were men, "decisively dispels the traditional belief that women were the main support of the nefarious traffic in flashy novels" ("In Defense of Fair Readers," *Review of English Literature* 8 [1967]:75). But it is hard to see how this is so, based on the evidence. He fails to take into account that James Marshall's library had a relatively small percentage of fiction in its stock compared to other such establishments in Bath, and so was less likely to have women subscribers, given the competitive market. In 1808 the library (then run by his son, C.H. Marshall) had only eight percent fiction versus the average library's twenty percent ("The Community Library," p. 12; Varma, pp. 173-74). Further, since the records of individual borrowings have not survived, one cannot assume that the men were borrowing the library's fiction.

²²Richardson, p. 201.

²³[Richard Griffith], *A Series of Genuine Letters, between Henry and Frances*, 6 vols. (London: W. Johnston; [vols. 5 and 6] W. Richardson and L. Urquhart, 1766-70), 5:15.

²⁴Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. Jack Simmons (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 349. Mrs. Catherine Gore observes that novels rose from two shillings sixpence a volume in 1780 to seven shillings a volume in 1810 in "The Monster-Misery of Literature," *Blackwood's Magazine* 55 (1844):557. Unaware of the general inflation in that period and of the economy of novel reading reflected by the existence of the circulating libraries, she blames the increase in prices on the libraries themselves which as a whole are "the monster-misery of literature." Mrs. Gore's complaint that the libraries prevented authors from selling directly to their readers has long appealed to historians and critics of the novel, who have remained blissfully innocent of economics and economic history. See, for example, Michael Sadleir's comments in his Sanders Lectures of 1937, "Aspects of the Victorian Novel," *Publishing History* 5 (1979):7-47, 8; and, referring to Sadleir's lectures (existing then in typescript), Kathleen Tillotson in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 22.

²⁵Letter to Fanny Knight, 30 November 1814, *Letters*, p. 419.

²⁶David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 59-60. The largest edition of any novel printed during her life was the 2,000 copies of *Emma* published by John Murray in 1816. Although 1,248 copies were sold by October 1816, 539 were on hand in 1820 when the edition was remaindered (Gilson, p. 69).

²⁷Letter to Cassandra, 18 December 1798, *Letters*, pp. 38-39.

²⁸Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press 1790-1820* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), p. 116. This is the subscription price for John Lane's library, which had risen from a guinea in 1798 and which reflected the rising price of books.

²⁹[Thomas Wilson], *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered; With Instructions for Opening and Conducting a Library* (London: J. Hamilton, 1797); rpt. in Varma, p. 196. D.H. Knott has identified the author as Thomas Wilson, a bookseller who during the 1790s operated a circulating library in Bromley, Kent; see D.H. Knott, "Thomas Wilson and *The Use of the Circulating Library*," *Library History* 4 (1976):2-10. Later, Wilson offers this fanciful calculation of the savings available to the most voracious of the circulating library's readers: "The subscriber for three months has seventy-eight clear days (Sundays excepted) to read in; he is entitled to two books at a time, and changes every day, which gives him the perusal of one hundred and

fifty-six volumes, that at the low average of three shillings per volume, will cost twenty-three pounds eight shillings. Thus the subscriber at three shillings and six pence per quarter, will pay only one farthing per volume for reading, as one hundred and fifty-six farthings is three shillings and three-pence, leaving only the small difference of three pence in the calculation of a quarter's subscription" (Varma, p. 197).

³⁰*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E.V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1903-1905), 2:173.

³¹Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Record*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), 1:xvi-xvii. See also Michael Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels: A Footnote to Jane Austen*, English Association Pamphlet 68 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, November 1927).

³²Kaufman, "The Community Library," pp. 11-13.

³³Advertisement in *The Oracle*, 25 January 1798, quoted in Varma, p. 53.

³⁴Kaufman, "The Community Library," p. 12. See also Hamlyn, p. 218. John Feather estimates that forty percent of a bookseller's stockholding was fiction (*The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985], p. 385). Q.D. Leavis cites figures from *The Report on Public Libraries* (1927) which, if taken as the direction that readers' tastes were headed, further suggest that the percentage of fiction titles in the stock of the large circulating libraries is likely to be misleading about what was borrowed. She notes that while urban libraries "had 63 per cent. of non-fiction works on an average to 37 per cent. of fiction, only 22 per cent. of non-fiction was issued in comparison with 78 per cent. of fiction, while the county libraries, which stocked 38 per cent. of non-fiction to 62 per cent. of fiction, issued only 25 per cent. non-fiction" (*Fiction and the Reading Public*, pp. 4 and 274n).

³⁵Feather, p. 148 n.98.

³⁶*Minor Works*, p. 403.

³⁷See Paul Kaufman, "English Book Clubs and Their Role in Social History," *Libri* 14, 1 (1964):1-31.

³⁸Letter to Cassandra, 24 January 1813, *Letters*, p. 292.

³⁹Letter to Cassandra, 24 January 1813, *Letters*, p. 294.

⁴⁰Varma, p. 199. Even for a bookseller, running a circulating library was apparently a difficult business, especially since the value of books for the enterprise rapidly depreciated. This meant that a substantial portion of the subscriptions and fines received was a return of capital which had to be reinvested constantly to maintain an attractive stock. It certainly was no business for the unsophisticated businessman or woman, particularly at the beginning of the nineteenth century when book prices were rising and thus forcing owners to increase their investment to keep the same number of new titles on their shelves. As one might expect, the relatively easy entry into the business and the necessity of reinvesting an increasing portion of receipts when book prices rose led to many bankruptcies. John Feather notes that almost half of the bankruptcies in the provincial book trade from 1732 to 1799 occurred from 1790 to 1799 (*The Provincial Book Trade*, p. 30). Mrs. Martin's circulating library in Basingstoke which had begun in 1798, for instance, went bankrupt in 1800: "Our whole Neighbourhood is at present very busy greiving over poor Mrs. Martin, who has totally failed in her business, & had very lately an execution in her house" (Letter to Cassandra, 25 October 1800, *Letters*, p. 76).

⁴¹*Minor Works*, p. 390.

⁴²[Hannah More], *The Two Wealthy Farmers; or the History of Mr. Bragwell* (London: Howard and Evans, 1800), p. 12.

⁴³*Minor Works*, p. 390.

⁴⁴See Blakey, pp. 3-4, 111-24. In the *Star* for 26 October 1791, Lane advertized for sale complete libraries, ranging from 100 to 10,000 volumes (Blakey, p. 121).

⁴⁵For the publishers, see Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels*, pp. 26-32; on Lathom, see Andrew Block, *The English Novel, 1740-1850: A Catalogue including Prose Romances, Short Stories, and Translations of Foreign Fiction*, 2nd edn. (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1961), pp. 133-34. Of Austen's personal acquaintance with these particular novels, we only know that Austen's father read *The Midnight Bell*, which he had borrowed from the inn's library, when the family was staying at the Bull and George in Dartford; see Austen's letter to Cassandra, 24 October 1798, *Letters*, p. 21.

⁴⁶James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: William Pickering, 1838), pp. 17 and 20.

⁴⁷Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 1:48-49n. For a survey of objections to circulating libraries and to women reading novels, see John Tinnon Taylor, *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760 to 1830* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1943), pp. 21-86. Robert W. Uphaus discusses the contemporary fear that novel reading aroused a young lady's "sensibility" in "Jane Austen and the Female Reader," *Studies in the Novel* 19 (1987):334-45.

⁴⁸[George Colman], *Polly Honeycombe. A Dramatick Novel*, 4th edn. (London: T. Becket, 1778), p. 43.

⁴⁹*The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 1:85.

⁵⁰[More], p. 12.

⁵¹*Minor Works*, p. 403.

⁵²Letter to Cassandra, 25 November 1798, *Letters*, p. 32.

⁵³Letter to Cassandra, 7 January 1807, *Letters*, p. 173.