

Book M:
A London Widow's Life Writings

KATHERINE AUSTEN



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Introduction

The Other Voice

Katherine Austen (1628–1683) is one of the many early modern women once thought to have left no written record of their voices and thus, for the purposes of literary history, to have been completely silent. It is only recently that the writings of some women have gained significant, sustained attention from literary scholars, but for the most part, Austen’s life writings have remained overlooked. She is well worth reading, however, for her fascinating multigeneric manuscript compilation of texts, *Book M*, which provides us with an astonishingly lively and revealing firsthand account of how an especially clever, self-aware, upwardly mobile seventeenth-century woman successfully navigated her way through the perilous patriarchal world in which she lived.¹ Widowed at a young age, she fiercely protected her children and astutely managed the family resources without the assistance of a husband. During her lifetime, there were many potentially damaging, negative stereotypes of widows, and *Book M* reveals Austen’s skillful use of rhetorical strategies to counter those stereotypes.²

1. Austen was from a wealthy family, and she had strong ambitions to be recognized fully as a member of the gentry. As Barbara J. Todd explains, Austen was “liminal as head of a family moving from mercantile to gentry status.” “Property and a Woman’s Place in Restoration London,” *Women’s History Review* 19.2 (2010): 182. During Austen’s era, the social category of “gentry” was somewhat amorphous. Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes explain that “land, lordship ... local acknowledgement,” and wealth are among the most important partial criteria for determining who was a member of the gentry; however, “blood lineage and the ability to exercise martial skills” could also be considered key attributes. *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 7, 9. For a thorough discussion of the complexities of defining the social rank of gentry to which Austen aspired, see Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, 6–19.

2. Groundbreaking early studies of the complexity of women’s social location based upon gender, class, life stage, and so on (and their strategies for negotiating that complexity) include, for example, Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Women, 1540–1620* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York: Blackwell, 1988); Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women’s Writing, 1649–88* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1989); and Tina Krontiris, *Oppositional*

2 Introduction

While Austen confronted personal challenges particular to her widowhood, she also lived through the dramatic upheavals of England's civil wars, its commonwealth and protectorate, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, a deadly outbreak of plague in 1665, and the Fire of London in 1666, which left its indelible mark upon Austen's life by burning down buildings she owned.³ She not only connects these important historical events to her own life and to family members in *Book M*, but she also vividly relates wide-ranging anecdotes and opinions—her own and other people's—about the rich and (in)famous, queens and emperors, poets and prophets, friends and foes.

Austen's *Book M* serves as a particularly rich resource not only for understanding the writer herself but also for understanding early modern English women's writing more broadly. It is a collection of texts in diverse genres, on many topics, woven together by Austen as a means through which to understand, to negotiate, and to voice her view of her world—from her immediate family to the business of the nation. *Book M* includes Austen's spiritual meditations, sermon notes, financial records, letters, personal essays, and more than thirty occasional and religious lyric poems, including elegies and country house verse. She wrote and compiled her book primarily between 1664 and 1666, but it has entries dated as late as 1682, which suggests she returned to it periodically—reading, editing, and amending it.

Austen represents that “other voice” of early modern women who expressed their thoughts and feelings in manuscript rather than print; her voice has been here all along, waiting, and she has much to tell us.

Life and Writings

The daughter of a successful mercantile family, Katherine Austen was born to Robert Wilson, a draper, and Katherine Rudd in the parish of St. Mary Colechurch, London, in 1628, and she died in 1683, having

Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance (New York: Routledge, 1992).

3. On Austen's Blackfriars properties, see Todd, “Property and a Woman's Place,” 186–87.

spent much of her life in Hoxton, Middlesex, northeast of London.⁴ She married Thomas Austen in 1645, when she was a teenager, but Thomas died in 1658, leaving her a young widow and single mother of three. The fact of her widowhood—a status she maintained for the rest of her life—is important because it gave her more independence than a wife would typically have and because it required her to protect herself and her children legally and economically. According to the common law doctrine of coverture, a married woman was eclipsed economically and legally by her husband. In the absence of marriage settlements specifying otherwise, whatever a woman owned before marriage theoretically became her husband's. According to coverture, a wife could not own property, and she could not sue or be sued.⁵ However, when a woman became a widow, like Austen, she regained an independent economic and legal identity, which she could use to defend herself and her family. Austen's *Book M* thus provides us with vital, rare insights into how a young, urban early modern widow and

4. My sources for Austen's biographical information include Katherine Austen, *Book M* (British Library, Additional Manuscript 4454); Barbara J. Todd, "'I Do No Injury by Not Loving': Katherine Austen, a Young Widow of London," in *Women and History: Voices of Early Modern England*, ed. Valerie Firth (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1995), 207–11; Barbara J. Todd, "Property and a Woman's Place," 181–200; and Barbara J. Todd, "The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered," in *Women in English Society, 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (New York: Methuen, 1985), 76–77; Sarah Ross, "'And Trophes of His Praises Make': Providence and Poetry in Katherine Austen's *Book M*, 1664–1668," in *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium*, ed. Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 182–83; and in her introduction to *Katherine Austen's Book M*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, vol. 409 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 6–15; and Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, eds., *Early Modern Women Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 313–14.

5. For more on coverture, see Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 37–38; Lynne A. Greenberg's introductory note to *Legal Treatises*, vol. 1, *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works, Series III, Essential Works for the Study of Early Modern Women: Part I*, ed. Betty S. Travitsky and Anne Lake Prescott (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), xxiii–xxvii; and Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129–35.

mother exercised her freedoms as a newly single woman by acting independently as the head of her family.

As a dedicated single mother, she managed the education of her children, sending Thomas to Oxford and Robert to school and teaching Anne herself at home. She seems to have kept Anne close at hand and encouraged her daughter's interest in learning how to manage the household. As she notes affectionately, "My Nancy is busy and inquisitive into all things of housewifery—to be informed and to learn—and every country affair delights in, which I am very well pleased to see" (186 below). She also wrote letters to all three children, individually and collectively, instructing them about life. Her maternal advice includes warning them not to take for granted a large inheritance and explaining how the maintenance of real estate can become a dangerous economic drain. In one letter addressed to all of them, for example, she first details a case of estate inheritance within their extended family and then concludes that "if he had not left him anything, it would be better" (98 below).

Austen certainly knew a great deal about finances, since she single-handedly oversaw the family's interests. She made loans within her local community and to family; she bought and developed real estate, including building rental houses; she invested in the East India Company; and she hired lawyers and personally attended hearings of a committee at parliament in an effort to secure possession of a large estate called Highbury.⁶ As a relatively young widow, she struggled with the question of remarriage and found the suit of a Scottish physician, Alexander Callendar, tempting.⁷ Ultimately, however, she decided against a second marriage in order to guard her children's inheritance; returning to the dependent status of a wife and introducing a new husband and stepfather into her small family would have

6. Taking possession of Highbury is a central concern of *Book M*; see Todd, "Property and a Woman's Place," 191–94; Ross, "And Trophes of His Praises Make," 183; and Ross's introduction to *Katherine Austen's Book M*, 9–11, for the legal details of the case. On early modern women's participation in legal and financial matters, see, for example, Erickson, *Women and Property*; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England*.

7. Todd, "Property and a Woman's Place," 187.

jeopardized her ability to guarantee the economic security of her three children by Thomas Austen. Thus, she remained a widow until she died in her mid-50s.⁸

Although she desperately feared the plague of 1665 and personally witnessed its terrors, she was fortunate enough to escape it. She suffered through a number of respiratory illnesses, however, and once fell out of a tree and lost consciousness briefly as a result—an episode she relates with a sense of high drama and to which she ascribes great providential meaning. For the most part, however, she seems to have had a healthy life, despite the fact that she did not have the longevity of some of her relatives and acquaintances. In reflecting on what she considers her mother's premature death, she records her views on what it takes to live a long life:

I observe what a long and healthy age my Grandmother Rudd lived, above 80, and Mr. Smith of Aldbury, 90, and Parson Wilson, about 80. All lived in the city and did not love the country. Their diet was temperate, their exercise little, a subtly pace ever went, not put Nature scarce ever in any violence by overstirring or heating, which makes a faintness oftentimes and a decay. Yet I attribute the chief part of this long life to the quiet of their minds, never engaged in anything disquieted or disordered that peace within them. How was my own mother's strong nature worn out by too much stirring and walking and the many cares and businesses which a great family gave occasions to her! That nature was spent which, in likelihood, by indulging to retirement would have prolonged. The distractions of the times wherein she lived gave her many discomposures and crosses by abuses. Dear Mother, thou hadst a great estate and a great burden, too. (96–97 below)

8. In contrast to Austen, her mother, Katherine Rudd, remarried after Austen's father, Robert Wilson, died in 1639. Her second husband—Austen's stepfather—was John Highlord, an alderman in the City of London. By 1641, Austen's mother was a widow again. See Todd, "Property and a Woman's Place," 183. For Highlord's significant financial influence on his stepdaughter, Katherine, see Ross, introduction to *Katherine Austen's Book M*, 7–8.

Before Katherine's death, she saw to it that her children Thomas and Anne made good marriages, but sadly, her daughter predeceased her. Her second son, Robert, did not marry or have children. As Barbara J. Todd notes, eventually, Thomas's son, John, "achieved most of the markers of full gentry status. Seated at the estate of Durhams (he sold Highbury), grandson John acquired a baronetcy, and became a Whig member of the House of Commons."⁹ Grandmother Katherine Austen did everything within her power to make her grandson's social elevation possible.

Austen's writing is in a unique quarto volume, BL, Additional Manuscript 4454, which is held today by the British Library in London. Austen called this text *Book M*; it is entirely in her own handwriting and was not intended for print publication for a mass audience. She authored most of *Book M*, but she also copied, summarized, and adapted material from other sources, often without attribution. Until recently, scholars of the early modern period have tended to overlook the vital importance of the manuscript circulation of texts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. The printing press with moveable type was introduced into England in 1476, a century and a half before Austen's birth.¹⁰ However, the advent of print did not mean that people simply abandoned the long-standing practice of manuscript publication. Instead, a new print culture developed alongside and intermingled with a preexisting manuscript culture.¹¹

Manuscript and print were socially marked forms of textual transmission that influenced how people read the contents of a work.

9. Todd, "Property and a Woman's Place," 194; Austen's grandson John died without an heir (also see 198n63 on Robert's death in 1699 and his companion, Ursula Gardner, "to whom Robert had proposed marriage and with whom he lived").

10. For a landmark study of the forms of social, economic, religious, and cultural change associated with the printing press, see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

11. On the continued importance of the manuscript circulation and publication of texts throughout the seventeenth century, see, for example, Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Arthur Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Printing one's writing for a broad readership was thought by some to be demeaning or vulgar because it meant exposing one's ideas to the common masses; from the elite perspective, printed texts could thus carry negative connotations. Given how hierarchical early modern English society was and how much power was in the hands of the few, writers often sought to connect with the highest ranking or most powerful readers, rather than with the greatest number. In this view, better that one king or queen read and approve of one's writing than thousands of commoners. The notion that printing one's words was a form of intimate, personal exposure to a mass population also linked it to the idea that it signaled a lack of chastity in women. Since chastity was pervasively represented as the single most important female virtue—indeed, as the foundation of all other female virtues—it could jeopardize a woman's reputation for upstanding moral behavior for her to print her writing. By contrast, for her to share her ideas with friends and family members through manuscript transmission was seen as far more proper; in fact, some families encouraged this practice.¹²

To understand fully how these cultural attitudes relate to Katherine Austen's *Book M*, it is important not to conflate chastity with virginity. In the early modern English view, a virgin (or maiden) has never had sex and thus is also chaste, but a woman who is not a virgin is still considered chaste under the right circumstances. In particular, a married woman who is no longer virginal is chaste as long as she remains sexually faithful to her husband and conforms sufficiently to patriarchal expectations for properly feminine behavior (e.g., by submitting to male authority, refraining from excessive speech, etc.).

12. On women's coterie exchange of manuscript writing and for an especially helpful analysis of the limiting assumptions that have led scholars to overlook the importance of early modern women's manuscript writings, see Margaret J. M. Ezell's groundbreaking *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 39–65. Also on women's participation in manuscript culture, see Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric*, 30–61; and Love, *Scribal Publication*, 54–58. On women's encouragement as writers in familial contexts, see especially Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Marion Wynne-Davis, *Women Writers and Familial Discourse in the English Renaissance: Relative Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and my own *Gender, Sexuality, and Material Objects in English Renaissance Verse* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

A woman who is innocent of any illicit sexual behavior but who transgresses openly against mainstream cultural beliefs concerning how “good” women should act—by talking too much or at the wrong times, by flagrantly disobeying her father, husband, or other figures of patriarchal authority, for instance—could *potentially* leave herself open to accusations or rumors of unchaste behavior because chastity was seen as the key virtue underpinning all other female virtues. Austen—a relatively young, marriageable widow—was thus not surprisingly concerned about portraying herself in *Book M* as a proper woman according to the dominant social expectations of her day in order to maintain her reputation for chastity. Sharing her writings exclusively through limited networks of manuscript transmission, rather than seeking to disseminate them via print to a large, general readership, was one of several means by which she could protect her feminine virtue.

For women and men alike, in fact, circulating texts through manuscript transmission was more prestigious than printing them. It is also important to keep in mind that the capacity for mass distribution inherent in print publication did not lead directly to significant financial gain for writers. There was no authorial copyright, and writers sold their works to booksellers and printers outright for a low price. Writers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England did not make money primarily by printing and selling multiple copies of their books. High-ranking authors—such as Sir Philip Sidney—wrote not to make money but rather to strengthen social networks among like-minded elites, to display social graces appropriate to their rank, to entertain themselves and others, to demonstrate their learning and to teach their audiences, and to express their views. Lower ranking poets sought financial support—in addition to gifts and favors, such as lodging and food, secretarial and tutorial jobs, clothing, wine, and so on—from powerful social superiors or “patrons,” and dramatists hoped for the support of patrons or for acting companies to purchase their work. As Margaret J. M. Ezell points out, while today we tend to think of success on the literary marketplace—measured in terms of the number of books sold and the amount of money made through sales—as one possible indicator of the value of a literary work, this

model does not work for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.¹³

Austen is not the only seventeenth-century author who did not write to make money from her literary efforts or to publicize her ideas to the greatest possible number of readers. Instead, as in the case of many of her contemporaries, male and female, her writing practices were, on one hand, contemplative activities that helped her to understand herself in relation to the mundane and spiritual worlds, and on the other, forms of social engagement that reinforced her personal connections to her family and local community. At times, her meditations even express and bolster her sense of national belonging. In her entry, "Of English and Dutch Quarrel, 1665," for example, she angrily figures the Dutch as an ungrateful serpent feeding cruelly on virtuous mother England: "it is ... unworthy that that nation should prove a viper to eat out the bowels of the mother which has fed and nourished it, the English nation having been the instrument of the Dutch's subsistence and greatness" (135 below). She reinforces the gendered imagery she introduces into her personal meditation on England's international conflicts by also focusing, with nostalgic admiration, upon Queen Elizabeth's political role in assisting the Dutch in the late sixteenth century; in Austen's account of history, "they made their miserable laments known to Queen Elizabeth (who was the balance to turn the scale of Europe). She adhered to their party and delivered them from the Spanish insultment" (135 below). In this brief entry, she figures England as a generous, self-sacrificing, victimized mother whose internal organs are invaded and consumed by a phallic, poisonous snake, and she invokes the long-dead Elizabeth I as an idealized heroic protector. By creating these charged images, Austen works out her own gendered sense of national identity for her own benefit and probably for an audience of like-minded family and friends.

Perhaps in the age of electronic social media, such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and personal blogs, it is becoming easier for us to recognize why someone would choose to write prolifically, strategically, and with deliberate craft and imagination without doing so primarily to sell books. Perhaps our electronic writing practices today can help us understand how writing as a member of a locally restricted

13. Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History*, 4, 32.

community—or coterie—can support, in reassuring ways, one’s sense of personal identity and how and where one fits into the world. In fact, one can draw an especially illustrative (although ultimately limited) analogy between a personal Facebook account and *Book M*. Like a Facebook account holder today, Austen portrays herself in *Book M* in a manner that is carefully tailored to how she would like her coterie audience to perceive her. *Book M*, like a Facebook page, does not give its reader transparent, unmediated access to its creator but instead allows her to display the personal attributes she wants others to see.

In addition to giving her readers a carefully controlled perspective on Austen herself, *Book M* reveals compelling glimpses of other texts that were especially important to her. Throughout *Book M*, for example, Austen includes cross-references to other books.¹⁴ In some cases, those books were authored by other people, but she also refers to books designated by other letters of the alphabet that were probably her own. Thus, *Book M* was almost certainly one of many such books Austen wrote and compiled across her lifetime. According to what we currently know, those other books—*A* to *L* and after *M*—are now tragically lost. If Austen named *Book M* as she did to catalog it among her other writings, then she had probably been an active writer for many years before the day in 1664 when she opened a new book and began to pen *Book M* on its pristine, blank pages. Indeed, her inclusion of introductory pages giving her book a title and a table of contents indicates her experience with reading and writing and the deliberate care that went into her creation of *Book M*. In all likelihood, Austen was an even more prolific writer and an even more important chronicler of a remarkable century than *Book M* alone reveals her to be.¹⁵ In opening this single, precious, surviving volume—humbly and simply designated by the thirteenth letter of the alphabet—we enter

14. Also on Austen’s cross-referencing, see Sarah C. E. Ross, textual introduction to *Katherine Austen’s Book M*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, vol. 409 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 42–43.

15. Todd proposes that *Book M* was “focused on interpreting dreams and apparitions (earlier books may have examined other topics such as honour).” “Property and a Woman’s Place,” 190. Raymond A. Anselment speculates that “Austen intended to combine the surviving folios into a work that presumably included her earlier widowed years.” “Katherine Austen and the Widow’s Might,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 5.1 (2005): 6.

Austen's fascinating life story *in medias res* and can only speculate about what we have most unfortunately lost before and after *M*.

Context, Contents, and Analysis

When Katherine Austen was born in 1628, Charles I was King of England.¹⁶ He was the son of King James I, who reigned in England from the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 until his own death in 1625. King James had advocated an especially authoritarian form of monarchy, and his son, Charles, also attempted to center absolute power in the crown. A complex combination of political, social, economic, and religious factors was already generating conflict when Charles I ascended to the throne in 1625. By the summer of 1642, the nation was divided in loyalties and erupted into civil war between the king's forces and the parliamentary army. By the end of January 1649, Charles I was defeated, tried for high treason, convicted, dethroned, and beheaded. Austen spent her teenage years living in a nation at war with itself. Whether she personally witnessed the king's death or not, she was certainly aware of this dramatic historical event—the public execution of an anointed monarch by his own subjects. During the next decade, England did not officially recognize a king or queen ruling over it: Charles Stuart, the son and heir of Charles I, fled England and lived abroad in exile. The national leader during much of this period was Oliver Cromwell, a military general who governed England under the title of Lord Protector. After Cromwell's death, parliament asked Charles to return to England as King Charles II; his return in 1660 represented the restoration of the monarchy that royalists—persons sympathetic to the perspective of the crown during the civil wars—like Austen had long awaited and saw as a proper return to the natural order of things.

Austen's royalism is discernible only indirectly, through, for example, her generally positive references to various monarchs. Todd provides telling material evidence of Austen's royalism through her discovery of the widow's role as a government creditor: she made small, short-term loans to the government, which meant economically

16. For a helpful introduction to seventeenth-century English history, see Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (New York: Norton, 1980).

“supporting the Restoration government, playing the role of a citizen of London.”¹⁷ Austen’s religious commentaries, which suggest she was Anglican,¹⁸ also imply support for the monarchy, since royalism and Anglicanism were often (but not always) intertwined. In fact, the political, economic, and social upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s cannot be disentangled from religious conflict. When Austen was born, the national religion of England was Anglicanism, and there was an official state church. However, many other Protestant Christian groups or sects also existed in England. People who disagreed with those sects often referred to them disparagingly as “puritans,” although we usually use the term today in a more neutral fashion. Those called “puritans” included Presbyterians, Baptists, Anabaptists, Congregationalists, Independents, Quakers, Seekers, Ranters, Muggletonians, and Fifth Monarchists, among others. Anglicans disagreed with the beliefs and practices of both puritans and Roman Catholics (Henry VIII had officially severed English ties with the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1530s). In *Book M*, Austen aligns herself with Anglicanism through her approving reflections on sermons and religious essays by Church of England divines such as John Donne, Daniel Featley, and Henry Hammond; her outraged disapproval of the Quaker rejection of the social courtesy known as “hat honor” (that is, removing one’s hat in the presence of a superior to acknowledge and reinforce symbolically one’s inferior place in the social hierarchy); and her negative opinions regarding Roman Catholics, to whom she refers scornfully as “papists” and whose views on saints she criticizes.¹⁹

17. Todd, “Property and a Woman’s Place,” 189.

18. An Anglican was a Protestant Christian who was a member of the Church of England, “the English branch of the Western Church, which at the Reformation repudiated the supremacy of the Pope, and asserted that of the Sovereign over all persons and in all causes, ecclesiastical as well as temporal, in his dominions” (*OED*).

19. Hill explains that “to say ‘thou’ to social superiors, to refuse to remove one’s hat to constituted authority, was neither *merely* religious nor a harmless eccentricity in the explosive political atmosphere of the sixteen-fifties” (*The Century of Revolution*, 144). Austen sees the symbolism of “hat honor” as so rife with meaning that she writes a long, chastising letter to Thomas, her first son, on the importance of upholding the traditional custom (see 87–88 below). For a compelling argument about how mothers’ advice to their children (including sons old enough to be away at college) regarding proper attire played a key role in shaping

While Austen thus associates herself with mainstream Anglican belief in many ways, she also reveals an ongoing fascination with prophetic discourses, which flourished during the 1640s and 1650s. Many people claimed to be prophets during the civil wars and interregnum; in fact, Christopher Hill has commented that the role of prophet during this period was “almost a new profession” for men and women alike.²⁰ However, most of those who claimed to be prophets aligned themselves with parliament against the king and his followers and with the more radical Protestant sects against the Anglican Church.²¹ Prophetic discourse during this era was complex. Keith Thomas details the multiple traditions from which mid-seventeenth-century prophetic discourse borrowed:

The real boost to ancient prophecy ... came with the Civil War, when Galfridian prophecies joined astrological prognostication and religious revelation to place an unprecedented amount of prophetic advice before the lay public. Although the three genres were distinct, their separate identity was not always preserved ... The literature of the Civil War period suggests a disposition to welcome any kind of prophetic utterance, regardless of the foundation upon which it purported to rest.²²

A major feature of prophetic discourse during Austen’s lifetime was the idea that the divine—in the form of God, the Holy Spirit, or the indwelling light—could use people’s bodies as vessels through which to transmit important truths and urgent messages to humanity.

them as citizens and subjects, see Edith Snook, *Women, Beauty, and Power in Early Modern England: A Feminist Literary History* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 86–111.

20. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 73

21. On the social status of the members of radical religious sects, see Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 76, 80; Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 4; and B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Millenarianism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 82, 85, 93.

22. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 409.

These supernatural communications could be very political and specific: for instance, *The Cry of a Stone* (1654), a printed religious pamphlet, relates how the Fifth Monarchist prophet Anna Trapnel had millenarian visions foretelling the doom of Oliver Cromwell for having strayed too far from a radical Protestant sectarian agenda in his role as Lord Protector.

Women were believed to be especially vulnerable to this kind of supernatural takeover because they were assumed to be physically and mentally weaker than men.²³ As Phyllis Mack explains,

[t]he characterization of the female visionary as an empty vessel reflected an attitude that was far more complicated than simple misogyny, for the defects of rationality and the attuned intuition of visionary women were actually viewed with respect, even envy, by those philosophers who felt alienated from God by their compulsive, prideful reliance on the power of their own reason. Indeed, in this respect all women had a clear spiritual advantage over men, for the static resulting from their weak and intermittent surges of intellectual energy was less likely to interfere with their capacity to act as receptors for the divine, spiritual energy emanating from heaven.²⁴

There were many women claiming to be prophets—and often sincerely believed to be prophets, even by powerful political leaders and by people who were not affiliated with their particular religious sects—when Austen was a teenager and young adult in London.²⁵ She must

23. On relevant assumptions regarding female biology and the prophetic body, see Phyllis Mack, 24–34; Diane Purkiss, “Producing the Voice, Consuming the Body: Women Prophets of the Seventeenth-Century,” in *Women, Writing, History, 1640–1740*, ed. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 139–58; and Sue Wiseman, “Unsilent Instruments and the Devil’s Cushions: Authority in Seventeenth-Century Women’s Prophetic Discourse,” in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), 192.

24. Mack, *Visionary Women*, 33.

25. On the seriousness with which prophetic statements could be taken and the difficulties surrounding how to discern which prophetic claims were truly divine messages, see Mack,

have been aware of this cultural trend and the kinds of authority—paradoxical though they were, since they were predicated upon assumptions of female inferiority, weakness, and passivity—available to women prophets.²⁶

Book M registers Austen's ambivalent fascination with prophecy.²⁷ As Diane Purkiss explains, "For the radical sects in the seventeenth-century, prophecy was any utterance produced by God through human agency. Hence, the prophecies of women ... include hymns, general moral exhortations, scriptural exegesis, prayers, spiritual autobiography and mystical revelations, as well as predictions."²⁸ Although Austen was not a member of a radical sect, she too participated in prophetic discourse in the sense Purkiss describes, and she too did so in multiple genres. Yet, because the prophets of the civil war era were so often associated with parliamentarians, puritans, and the urban rabble, Austen tries to distinguish herself from them.

Visionary Women, 79–83; Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), 34–47; and Esther Gilman Richey, *The Politics of Revolution in the English Renaissance* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 1–3.

26. On the paradoxes of prophetic authority for women, see Wiseman, "Unsilent Instruments" and Purkiss, "Producing the Voice." Anne Laurence details religious behaviors considered acceptable for women: writing (but not printing) books of prayers, spiritual advice, and meditations; teaching religious ideas within the household; prophesying via dreams and visions; and modeling proper religious beliefs and practices. "A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England," in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 346–47, 363. For references to Austen's dreams in the context of analyses of early modern dreams in general, see Mary Baine Campbell, "Dreaming, Motion, Meaning: Oneiric Transport in Seventeenth-century Europe," in *Reading the Early Modern Dream: The Terrors of the Night*, ed. Katherine Hodgkin, Michelle O'Callaghan, and S. J. Wiseman (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15–30; and Patricia Crawford, "Women's Dreams in Early Modern England," in *Dreams and History: The Interpretation of Dreams from Ancient Greece to Modern Psychoanalysis*, ed. Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.

27. For a detailed analysis of Austen's ambivalence about prophecy, see my *Poetic Resistance: English Women Writers and the Early Modern Lyric* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 129–49; and "Widow, Prophet, and Poet: Lyrical Self-Figurations in Katherine Austen's 'Book M' (1664)," in *Write or Be Written: Early Modern Women Poets and Cultural Constraints*, ed. Ursula Appelt and Barbara Smith, 3–27 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001).

28. Purkiss, "Producing the Voice," 139.

She thus writes statements disparaging prophets and arguing against dream interpretation. For example, she entitles one essay, “How Ill to Desire to Know Our Fortune.” She even includes this statement mocking diverse attempts at divination:

If men do listen to whispers of fear and have not reason and observation enough to confute trifles, they shall be affrighted with the noise of birds and the night raven, and every old woman shall be a prophetess, and the events of our affairs—which should be managed by the conduct of counsel, of reason, and religion—shall by these vain observations succeed by chance, by ominous birds, by the falling of the salt, or the decay of reason, of wisdom, and the just religion of a man. (67 below)

However, she also records multiple views on the question of whether dreams can foretell the future and interprets her own dreams as prophecies.²⁹ She claims that she dreamed she saw her servant, William Chandeler, “fall down dead” four nights before he really did die (80 below), and she entitles her ninth numbered poem, “Upon My Dream the 20th October 1664, When I Dreamt I Saw 4 Moons in a Clear Sky: Meditation.” She strongly implies that she has a vocation as a prophet when she asks herself, “Was not one of my dreams the presagement of blessing to the nation, as the dream of a poor stranger did confirm Gideon to go on with the more confidence to his victory?” (58 below). She relates legends of famous people who fail to interpret the signs around them and suffer for their mistakes. She speculates about whether certain numbers—such as six and seven—might have special meanings for her personally because they have been viewed in pagan and Christian traditions as supernatural signs.

While Austen thus flirts in a vacillating manner with prophetic discourse throughout much of *Book M*, she resists—with only partial success—her possible association with radical mid-seventeenth-century women prophets by looking instead to the distant historical past

29. Also on Austen’s fascination with dreams, see Ross, introduction to *Katherine Austen’s Book M*, 22–26.

for earlier models.³⁰ For example, she writes an essay, “Of the Sibyls, Their Transportations Not Heeded,” about the famous female seers of classical antiquity, and she comments admiringly on the medieval Catholic prophet, Hildegard of Bingen: “She was of the pope’s conclave and emperor’s counsel, to whom they had recourse in difficulties. Yea, the greatest torches of the church lighted themselves at her candle, and patriarchs and bishops sent knots as passed their fingers for her to untie” (76 below). Yet, sometimes, almost despite herself, she sounds just like the radical women prophets of the previous decades:

For this complaint of oppression, God hath punished the land formerly in the great calamities which fell upon the times, and surely if they pursue and commit the same crimes of injustice and injuries to poor men, and especially to act violence on widows and orphans, how will their cries and grievances pierce the ears of Heaven, who will hear and judge their cause against an unjust nation! (125 below)

She angrily asserts that the injustices done by parliament to her own family will bring down the wrath of God upon England. Like her radical prophetic sisters, she also identifies frequently, throughout *Book M*, with David the Psalmist.³¹ While Austen probably thought

30. If Austen knew about the aristocratic female prophet, Lady Eleanor Davies, as a possible model, it is no wonder that she did not draw comparisons between Lady Eleanor and herself. Austen valued social propriety too highly to consider Lady Eleanor an acceptable predecessor, given that the aristocrat, despite her elite status, was notorious for being imprisoned and sent to Bedlam and for such acts as tarring the hangings behind the bishop’s seat at Lichfield. On Lady Eleanor’s exploits, see Thomas Spencer, “The History of an Unfortunate Lady,” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 20 (1938): 43–59; and Esther Cope, *Handmaid of the Holy Spirit: Dame Eleanor Davies, Never Soe Mad a Ladie* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992). On gender and social transgression, see David Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England: Tales of Discord and Dissension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

31. As Ross notes, “Austen borrows widely from scripture and beyond as she slips freely in and out of differently gendered models of forbearance; she subscribes to the general wisdoms offered by the male, yet freely assumes the particular statuses offered to the female godly.” Introduction to *Katherine Austen’s Book M*, 21.

of herself as a devout, mainstream Anglican, her fascination with prophecy reminds us how very complex—even contradictory—a person's beliefs can be and how multifaceted an individual's relation to her historical moment can be.

Austen's engagement with the prophetic discourses of her era reveals only one intriguing aspect of her shaping of her sense of self in relation to her time and place. Another crucial part of this process was her great effort to police how she was perceived as a widow. This is important because widowhood was seen as a distinct life stage for women; the shift in status from wife to widow—as touched upon briefly above—brought with it many profound changes, including the potential for the newly single woman to experience, on the one hand, greater independence, and on the other, increased risk. When Austen started *Book M*, she had already lived as a young widow for several years. The contents of her book suggest that she was acutely aware of her widowed status and that she used her writing, in part, to counter negative stereotypes seventeenth-century literary and medical discourses created about widows. These discourses figured widows as lustful, power hungry, and uncontrollable because of their sexual experience as wives, their potential for economic independence, and their seeming freedom from the patriarchal surveillance of fathers and husbands.³² *Book M* reveals that Austen's widowhood made her self-conscious about her female gender and how it affected her ability to protect her children and to manage the family finances, which included hiring lawyers and attending parliament to fight for possession of the Highbury estate and investing in the East India Company.³³

She includes many meditations and poems explicitly commenting upon her widowhood. For example, in this brief lyric, she laments her past disregard for widows (which she aligns with the

32. On stereotypes and expectations of widows in early modern England, see Barbara J. Todd, "The Virtuous Widow in Protestant England," in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (New York: Pearson Education, 1999), 66–83; Todd, "The Remarrying Widow," 54–55; Erickson, *Women and Property*, 153; and Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 68–69, 175.

33. On how Austen uses *Book M* to address her widowed status, see Todd, "The Virtuous Widow," 75n39, 80, 82; and my *Poetic Resistance*, 111–28; and "Widow, Prophet, and Poet," 3–27. On her self-figuration as a widow, see also Anselmet, "Katherine Austen and the Widow's Might."

patriarchal perspective of thoughtless men in line 1); reveals the new knowledge she has gained as a result of her own widowed condition; asks for forgiveness for her sinful ignorance; and prays for pity, comfort, and relief on behalf of widows:

Men never think their wives may be
 Necessitate by misery,
 Or their children be a prey
 When themselves are gone away.
 I not resented widow's tears [5]
 Before I was distressed with fears.
 This retribution do I find:
 To meet with all the world unkind.

My sin forgive, let pity flow,
 And comfort unto sad hearts show. [10]
 Most gracious Heaven, relieve sad hearts;
 Be healing balsam in their smarts.
 O Heaven, send down thy full relief,
 Who art the help of all in chief. (113 below)

While she confronts the difficulties of her widowhood directly at times, as she does in this poem, she also resists identifying completely or consistently as a widow.

In fact, much like her contemporary Lucy Hutchinson, Austen figures herself occasionally as still effectively married to her dead husband, and thus, as a wife—not a widow at all.³⁴ She interprets her dreams of Thomas as giving her direct access to his advice, as if their marriage continued without interruption on a ghostly plane. She also compares herself with Penelope from *The Odyssey* when she resists

34. Todd notes that there was one “model” of early modern widowhood in which “the woman’s responsibilities to her dead husband continued to be the central theme: a widow was merely perpetual wife.” “The Virtuous Widow,” 67. On Lucy Hutchinson’s self-portrait as a wife operating under the common law doctrine of coverture, despite her actual status as a widow, see my *Gender, Sexuality, and Material Objects*, 178. As an interesting point of contrast to Austen and Hutchinson, Anne Clifford, according to Snook, used the reverse strategy and deliberately fashioned her appearance to “[look] like a widow before she was one.” *Women, Beauty, and Power*, 169.

her Scottish suitor's efforts to woo her into a second marriage. "For my part," she relates, "I declined all things might give him a vain encouragement and told him I was like Penelope—always employed. 'Aye,' says he, 'her lovers could not abide her for it'" (169 below). In the classical epic, Penelope is the royal wife of the hero, Odysseus; she loyally waits twenty years for him to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. She has many persistent suitors, but she tells them she cannot marry again until she finishes weaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus's father. At night, as depicted on this book's cover in *Penelope Undoing Her Tapestry*, she unravels what she has woven during the day, thus delaying remarriage. By comparing herself with Penelope and asserting that she is "always employed" or busy, Austen uses an especially condensed, rich literary allusion to insist that she is really not a widow at all, but instead, an extraordinarily faithful, long-suffering—and clever—wife. Furthermore, her self-comparison to Penelope implies her view that suitors threaten a woman's economic resources and that their interests are primarily financial, rather than genuinely loving. She relates the following brief dialogue with her suitor, in which she deflates his professed romantic idealism—in a context where he flatters her by expressing how much he enjoys talking to her about learned matters—with pragmatic cynicism: "He then said to me and protested, if I was a very beggar woman, if I would have him, he would have me, and he would discourse with me all day, for he never talked with me but learned something of me. I told him he was mistaken, and if I was so indeed, he would not" (168 below). Fashioning herself as a seventeenth-century English Penelope suggests not only that Austen is a heroically loyal wife but also that she is a wealthy, powerful woman who has the good sense to protect her material resources.

Book M includes fascinating details about Austen's management of her family's money and property, and it thus provides especially valuable information about urban women's economic participation in early modern England. Although many women became impoverished when widowed, Austen was fortunate enough to have considerable wealth, and *Book M* demonstrates how active a wealthy widow could be in managing the family's money, real estate, and investments. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford note that "[w]idows at all social levels appealed to the stereotype of the poor, distressed,

and weak individual... . Some who were neither poor nor weak still deployed the same rhetoric to urge men to help them.”³⁵ Austen is one of the many widows who used the tactic Mendelson and Crawford describe: throughout her book, she portrays herself as helpless and impoverished, even though she was actually wealthy, astute, and aggressive in managing her family’s financial affairs.³⁶ For example, in one meditation, she prays, “O God, though my enemies seem to take advantage upon my weak and destitute and helpless condition—a woman without alliance of the family to help me—yet, O God, help me and make me overcome those bands that do environ me” (128 below). Austen thus frequently makes use of the stereotype of the weak widow to downplay her actual considerable material, familial, and personal resources.

Economic matters were foremost in Austen’s mind much of the time; Todd argues that Austen was “a pioneer female financier” and uses her as a case study “to advance the project of imagining how tens of thousands of other women experienced the contradictions of a public economic presence.”³⁷ Explaining how extensive Austen’s investment activities were, Todd writes,

she was involved in virtually every form of non-mercantile capital investment available to a woman of her time. I have yet to discover another woman with such wide-ranging interests. Her real-estate holdings extended from her home in Hoxton, a north-eastern London suburb, not just across London, but also from the western parts of Wales to the farthest eastern coast of Essex. Lending to government drew her to the Guildhall and Westminster, and investing in the East

35. Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 175.

36. Austen’s mother was skilled at advancing her children’s economic interests; she served as a powerful model for Katherine. See Todd, “Property and a Woman’s Place,” 183–85; and Ross, “And Trophes of His Praises Make,” 183.

37. Todd, “Property and a Woman’s Place,” 181, 182.

