

# The Significance of Trivial Things

Exhibitions and books commemorating Jane Austen's 250th birthday call attention to the ways in which she transmuted the ephemera of her life into the precious treasures that figure in her novels.

Ruth Bernard Yeazell [The New York Review of Books](#) [September 25, 2025 issue](#)

**Reviewed:** **A Lively Mind: Jane Austen at 250** an exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York City, June 6–September 14, 2025, **Miss Austen** a PBS Masterpiece series adapted by Andrea Gibb from the novel by Gill Hornby and

A memorable scene in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) turns on the tricks of memory. Early in the third volume, Harriet Smith arrives at Hartfield "with a small parcel in her hand" and announces—much to Emma's surprise—that she wants to make a confession. Though Emma is quick to understand that Harriet is referring to her infatuation with Mr. Elton when she speaks of being "ashamed of having given way as I have done," the would-be confessor proceeds with characteristic indirection, frequently falling back on pronouns whose referents remain tacit, before she gets to the real point:

"Cannot you guess what this parcel holds?" said she, with a conscious look.

"Not the least in the world.—Did he ever give you any thing?"

"No—I cannot call them gifts; but they are things that I have valued very much."

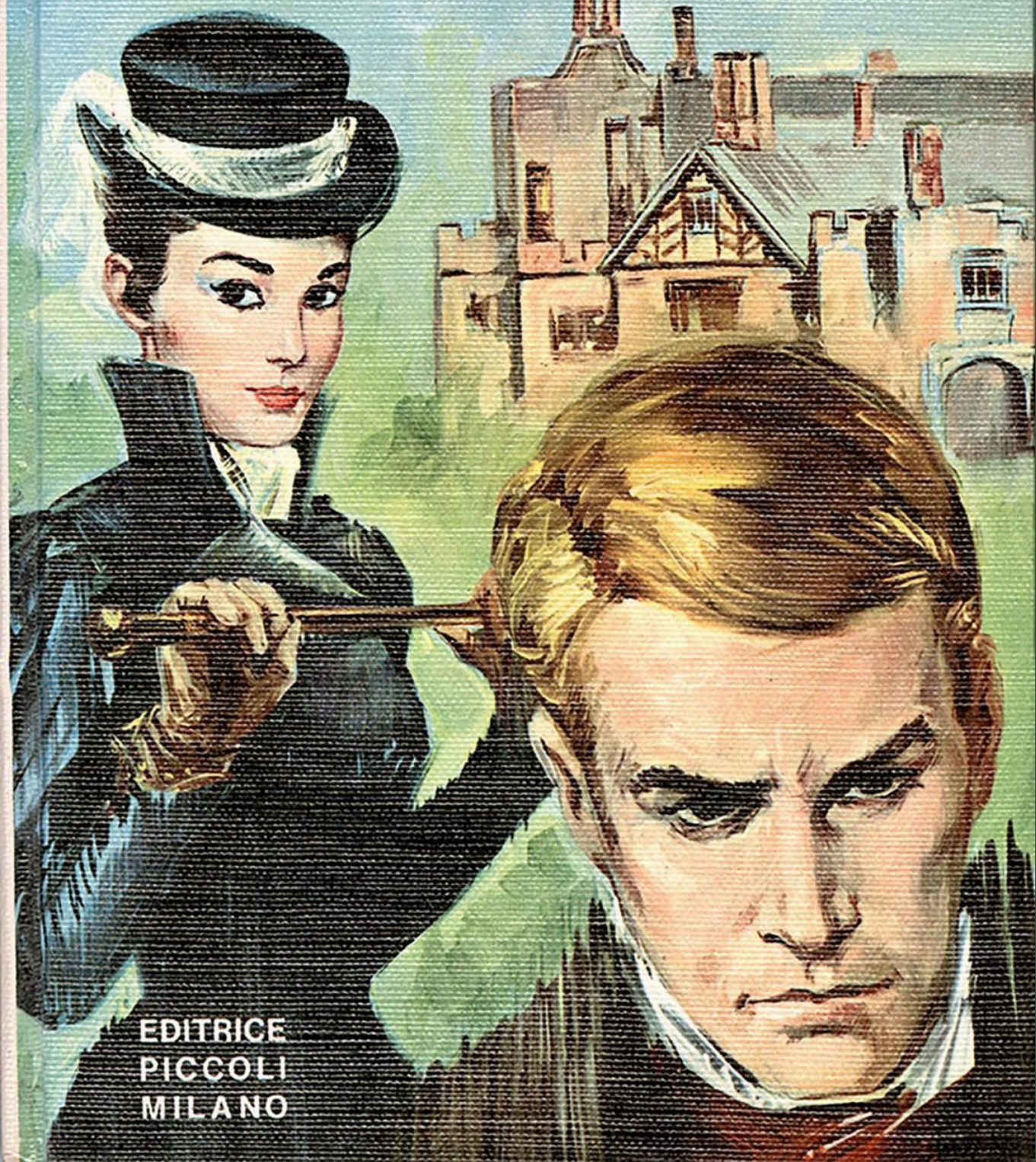
She held the parcel towards her, and Emma read the words *Most precious treasures* on the top. Her curiosity was greatly excited. Harriet unfolded the parcel, and she looked on with impatience. Within abundance of silver paper was a pretty little Tunbridge-ware box, which Harriet opened: it was well lined with the softest cotton; but, excepting the cotton, Emma saw only a piece of court plaister.

"Now," said Harriet, "you *must* recollect."

Emma, of course, does *not* recollect, and Harriet is forced to enlighten her by recounting an episode in which Mr. Elton cut his finger with a new penknife and Emma asked her to supply him with a piece of court plaister, a small sliver of which, idly handled by the injured man before being returned to his besotted admirer, has been preserved as a "treasure" ever since. Though Emma has no recollection of her friend's "saving this relick," Harriet's account jogs her memory and prompts her to confess her own part in the episode, which originated in one of her matchmaking "tricks," an ample supply of the requisite plaister having been available in her pocket the entire time. But Harriet has yet another and "superior treasure" to disclose: the stub of an old pencil, whose greater value derives from the fact that it once belonged to Mr. Elton. Not just touched by the loved one, "this," as she says, "was really his."



# Orgoglio e pregiudizio



EDITRICE  
PICCOLI  
MILANO



Harriet is a quicker study than we sometimes imagine, and Emma's initial failure to recognize the first treasure has taught her something about the subjectivity of memory. "Do not you remember one morning?" she begins, only to catch herself. "No, I dare say you do not." But the story of the pencil stub has a hook for her listener that its predecessor lacked, and Harriet has no sooner conjured up the moment at which Mr. Elton was trying to record something Mr. Knightley was saying about spruce beer than Emma responds eagerly:

"I do remember it," cried Emma; "I perfectly remember it.—Talking about spruce beer.—Oh! yes—Mr. Knightley and I both saying we liked it, and Mr. Elton's seeming resolved to learn to like it too. I perfectly remember it—Stop; Mr. Knightley was standing just here, was not he?—I have an idea he was standing just here."

"Ah! I do not know. I cannot recollect.—It is very odd, but I cannot recollect.—Mr. Elton was sitting here, I remember..."—

Just where each man was positioned while discussing spruce beer is almost as trivial a detail as the pencil stub or the beer itself, but Austen makes delicious comedy out of the gap between the two women's memories. The vividness with which Emma recalls exactly where Mr. Knightley was standing tells alert readers much of what they need to know about their heroine's erotic feelings, though Emma at this stage remains more clueless about such matters than Harriet.

In the recent PBS series *Miss Austen*, Cassandra Austen, the novelist's sister, responds to an unctuous clergyman's wish for a "substantial biography" of "the real Jane Austen" with a firmness that would have satisfied the most doctrinaire of New Critics. "Everything one needs to know about Jane Austen is to be found within the pages of her novels," she declares sharply. "There is nothing more." Cassandra, of course, famously burned the majority of Jane's letters after her death in an apparent effort to preserve the sisters' privacy, though the television series, like the novel on which it is based, proceeds to violate its heroine's creed by attempting to reconstruct the very episodes it imagines she wished to suppress. As the makers of the series clearly know, our biographical appetite is not easily satisfied, especially in the case of a writer as widely loved as Austen.

This year is the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of her birth, and Austen's admirers have been responding to that appetite with their own versions of Harriet's treasure box. Not all these treasures were "really hers," to adopt Harriet's idiom, but all in some way serve to evoke her memory. *A Jane Austen Year: Celebrating 250 Years of Jane Austen* is primarily a picture book compiled by Jane Austen's House in Chawton, the museum that now occupies the cottage where she wrote or revised her major novels. Arranged on the model of a calendar, it loosely ties Austen-related images and snippets of text to months of the year, so that a reproduction of a letter to Cassandra dated 4 February 1813 appears in the February section, and a still from the BBC's 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* helps to mark September, the month of its initial release. Among the illustrations for May is a photograph of a patchwork quilt made by Jane, Cassandra, and their mother that now belongs to the Austen House; a much larger photographic replica of it recently hung in an exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York also designed to commemorate the anniversary. (The quilt is assigned to May because of a letter dated 31 May 1811, in which Jane inquires of Cassandra, "Have you remembered to collect peices for the Patchwork?—We are now at a stand still.")

More substantive than *A Jane Austen Year*, the Morgan's "A Lively Mind: Jane Austen at 250" supplements its important collection of Austen manuscripts and first editions with artwork and objects drawn from other libraries, museums, and private collections, under a rubric that recalls another passage from *Emma* about the potential significance of trivial things. "A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer," the narrator remarks, in a line that hovers ambiguously on the verge of free indirect style, as Emma stands in the doorway of Ford's shop in Highbury and observes the everyday scenes around her.

Kathryn Sutherland, who also cites this line in *Jane Austen in 41 Objects*, aptly terms it "a manifesto for a new kind of fiction": "the novel of women's ordinary lives." Characterizing her own contribution to the anniversary as both "a biography of Jane Austen discovered aslant though small biographies of things" and "an exhibition," Sutherland premises her book on the belief that mute objects can be made to speak and that even the smallest has much to say, particularly about a writer so concerned with "little matters"—the phrase comes from another letter to Cassandra—as Austen. "To imagine Jane Austen in a series of objects is to intercept their lives at the moment that best reveals hers—the moment when we might almost reach out and touch her," Sutherland writes.

That "almost" is doing a lot of work, especially when the objects in question are represented only by words and pictures rather than appearing in material form, as they mostly do at the Morgan. But reaching out and touching is forbidden at museums too, and Sutherland is an eloquent guide to the acts of imagination required to bring such objects to life. The patchwork quilt also figures among her treasures, and it not only prompts observations about what Caroline Austen meant when she spoke of her aunt as "fond of work"—i.e., of sewing—as opposed to her report that the novelist "spent much time in writing" but also triggers an unexpected allusion to the young Samuel Beckett, who characterized "Jane's manner" as "material that can be treated most conveniently in the crochet mode."

Austen was forty-one when she died: hence the number of objects Sutherland has assembled. The book makes only a partial attempt to organize its exhibits chronologically, though a loose arc might be traced from some of the earliest—a letter from Mrs. Austen to her sister-in-law written in August 1775 announcing her pregnancy, for example (her calculation was a month off), or a page of the parish marriage register from the Reverend Austen's church at Steventon in which the youthful Jane mischievously scribbled entries for imaginary marriages of her own—to a single phrase that breaks off tantalizingly on the top of an otherwise blank manuscript page of the unfinished *Sanditon*, marking the moment when the dying Austen wrote her last words as a novelist.

With several rooms at its disposal, the Morgan Library can afford a more lavish display of treasures, as well as a wider temporal and geographical sweep. "A Lively Mind" opens with a section devoted to "Youthful Ambitions" that includes, among other items, the entire manuscript of *Lady Susan* (circa 1794–1795), meticulously copied by the author—the only complete draft of an Austen novel to survive and one of the Morgan's prized possessions—and closes with a 2019 painting by Amy Sherald of a confident-looking young Black man in a multicolored sweater, whose title, *A Single Man in Possession of a Good Fortune*, riffs on the well-known opening of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Sherald's painting is preceded by an impressive survey of Austen translations in multiple languages, ranging from a French edition of *Sense and Sensibility* published in 1815, just four years after its appearance in English, to a 1984 edition of *Pride and Prejudice* in Hebrew. The Morgan owes this arresting display to the efforts of a dedicated American, Alberta H. Burke, whose collection of Austen-related material, most of it assembled in the 1930s and 1940s, was divided after her death between the library and Goucher College in Maryland. The manuscripts in Burke's collection went to New York, where the former director of the Morgan, Charles Ryskamp, eagerly welcomed what he called these "most remarkable of her treasures." But the translations and

other material remained with Burke's alma mater in Maryland, which has provided "A Lively Mind" with the bulk of its evidence for the novelist's reception history.

Among Burke's prized possessions was a copy of the so-called "Philadelphia *Emma*" of 1816—the first Austen novel to be printed in America and the only one to appear in her lifetime. At the Morgan, this two-volume edition headlines a section devoted to Austen's North American readership. But while it's exciting to see how swiftly *Emma* crossed the Atlantic, if only because the absence of international copyright encouraged such piracy, the edition apparently failed to sell, and more than a decade elapsed before another Austen novel was printed in America.

Contemporary fans may prefer to luxuriate in the globe-trotting achievements of *Pride and Prejudice*, to which the translations assembled at the Morgan give abundant witness. In addition to Hebrew, one can spot variants of Austen's most famous title—borrowed from Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782)—in Chinese, Serbian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Russian, Italian, Swedish, Portuguese, and Spanish, with different versions of the latter originating from Buenos Aires as well as Madrid and Barcelona. Austen's paired abstractions have occasionally undergone a slight mutation along the way, as in the Greek *Perephaneia kai prokatalepe* (1953), which means something more like "Epiphany and Preconception," while at other times they have been replaced altogether by names of characters: the exhibition includes a German *Elisabeth und Darcy* (1939), for example, as well as a Dutch *De gezusters Bennet* published sometime in the 1950s, whose title implicitly subordinates the promise of romance to a celebration of sisterhood. And then there's the jacket of an Italian *Orgoglio e pregiudizio* (1969) that keeps Austen's abstractions but manages to add a bit of S&M to the picture by representing Elizabeth in a tightly fitting black riding costume, hovering over a brooding Darcy with a whip in her hands (see illustration on page 12).

Such treasures invite us to commemorate Austen by recalling what subsequent centuries have made of her. *A Jane Austen Year* draws repeatedly on images from film and television; Sutherland's forty-one objects include not only a handwritten Danish translation of *Pride and Prejudice*, "lovingly prepared" in 1904 by two Danish sisters for a mother who didn't read English, but costume designs by Rex Whistler for Helen Jerome's 1936 theatrical adaptation in London and a picture of the shirt that clung provocatively to Colin Firth's Darcy as he emerged dripping from the lake in the BBC miniseries. "Like a medieval relic," Sutherland reports, "the Darcy shirt toured Britain during the BBC centenary celebrations of 2022 as one of the '100 Objects that made the BBC.'" And like a relic, too, its aura of singularity was misleading, since the production had actually required six identical versions of the shirt, not to mention a body double for Firth.

Several relics at the Morgan testify more directly to the body of Austen herself. Among the most striking is a meticulous reconstruction of a silk pelisse that she's widely believed to have owned: slim and elegant in brown and gold, it may well be the one to which Austen was referring when she asked Cassandra in a letter of 1814 to "send up my Silk Pelisse" to London.

Sutherland, who reproduces a photo of the original, speculates that the novelist may have decided to treat herself to this glamorous garment once she had finally gained a modicum of financial independence from the sales of her work. On a much smaller scale is a gold and turquoise ring, on loan from Chawton, that arguably possesses an aura the pelisse lacks, since it can be directly traced to the hand of its owner.

But the most bodily immediate of the exhibition's relics is a lock of hair, also from Chawton, that Cassandra apparently cut from her sister's corpse on the morning of July 18, 1817. One of several such locks that the grieving Cassandra distributed to friends and relatives after the novelist's death, it later played a memorable part in Burke's history as well, when the American collector found herself unexpectedly caught up in transatlantic competition over Austen's legacy. Burke, who had purchased the lock at Sotheby's in 1948, was sitting in the audience at the opening of Jane Austen's House the following year when its founder, T. Edward Carpenter, bemoaned the loss of so many relics to America. The outraged Burke reportedly leapt to her feet and gave a rare

public speech, in which she promised to donate her recent acquisition to the new museum. The lock's appearance in New York, in other words, marks at least the third time it has crossed the ocean.

The hair at the Morgan presumably has a secure provenance, even if readers of Austen would be justified in approaching such a token with a certain wariness. Locks of hair figure in both romantic subplots of *Sense and Sensibility*, and each in its way proves unreliable. In chapter twelve of the novel, the youngest Dashwood, Margaret, rushes into the room to impart a great secret about Marianne and Willoughby. "I am sure they will be married very soon," she tells Elinor excitedly, "for he has got a lock of her hair." Though Elinor, the oldest Dashwood sister, is characteristically cautious—"it may be only the hair of some great uncle of *his*"—Margaret gets the best of the argument when she provides an eyewitness account of Willoughby wielding the scissors. The trouble with this lock of hair is not that it came from the head of someone else, but that its implicit promise of commitment doesn't signify. The lock will be returned to Marianne together with her letters when Willoughby abruptly announces his forthcoming marriage to another woman, and though Austen later qualifies our judgment of his apparent callousness when he regretfully recalls how "the dear lock" was torn from his pocket by his future wife, such evidence of genuine feeling doesn't override his obvious determination to sacrifice that feeling to the demands of his bank account. Willoughby had apparently meant to keep his "memento" of Marianne, but he hadn't meant to keep faith with her.

Related ironies attend the counterpart to this sequence. Now it is Marianne who spots a plait of hair at the center of a "conspicuous" ring worn by Edward Ferrars and the otherwise cautious Elinor who misreads the sign by wishfully assuming that the lock in question has somehow been snipped from her own head. As she later learns when her rival wields the truth against her, the hair actually belongs to Lucy Steele, and Edward wears the ring as a sign of their secret engagement. Luckily for Elinor, however, it's the woman in this case who proves faithless, and Lucy elopes with Edward's younger brother, Robert, instead. "Please to destroy my scrawls," Lucy writes to her former lover, when she, like Willoughby before her, announces her desertion by letter, "—but the ring with my hair you are very welcome to keep." This is the last we hear of that object, whose fate is presumably summed up in the narrator's dry report of Elinor's response to the letter: she "read and returned it without any comment."

To register Austen's amused skepticism about our relic-keeping is not to deny the aura such objects can retain. And when it comes to a beloved author, at least, nothing carries more of an aura than manuscripts. Traces of the body that double as records of the mind, these are presumably among the "Treasures" to which the novelist referred in 1807 when describing a young visitor "now...examining the Treasures of my Writing-desk drawer"; and despite the fact that even a readable hand like hers can always be deciphered more easily in print, there remains something exhilarating about seeing the words as Austen directly transcribed them. In addition to the unique copy of *Lady Susan*, acquired by the formidable Belle da Costa Greene in 1947,

the Morgan owns nearly a third of Austen's surviving letters, as well as other forms of record-keeping: an autograph memorandum of personal accounts dated December 1807, for example, or the rather poignant "Profits of my novels, over & above the £600 in the Navy Fives" that she recorded several months before her death a decade later. The largest sum noted is £38, 18 shillings for *Emma*—an amount that Sutherland, who includes a photograph of the publisher's canceled check, pointedly compares to the £10,000 a year in profits Walter Scott was earning around the same time.

A professional record of another kind is the brief letter—or rather, Austen's copy of the letter, carefully preserved—that she sent in November 1815 to the librarian for the Prince Regent, James Stanier Clarke, in response to "the Information," as she put it, "of my being at liberty to dedicate any future Work to HRH the P.R." Though such "liberty" must have grated on a woman who had privately expressed her hatred for the royal libertine, Austen apparently decided in the end to treat the offer as a business opportunity, and *Emma*, then in press, carried the following inscription: "To His Royal Highness, The Prince Regent. This work is, by his Royal

Highness's permission, most respectfully dedicated, by His Royal Highness's dutiful and obedient humble servant, The Author." Aptly remarking "the vacuous, repetitive" character of this language, Sutherland suggests that there's something deliberately comic in its excess: an effect she associates with the teenage writings but that might equally recall the mature satirist of *Pride and Prejudice*, as if Austen were taking a certain wicked pleasure in choosing to play an obsequious Mr. Collins to the Regent's Lady Catherine.

Most of the letters that Cassandra saved from the fire are in a very different register. "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth," Austen wrote to her sister in 1801, and it was that habit of talking on paper—talking, in fact, "almost as fast as [she] could"—that she both mined and transformed in her fiction. Sutherland, who calls the letters "the key to everything," compares their seemingly "artless" voice to that of *Emma*'s chattering Miss Bates, while arguing that like that "great talker upon little matters"—the phrase this time is Austen's—they reveal more than we might think. "A Lively Mind" displays one such letter from June 1799 that manages to combine a Miss Bates-like obsession with things to eat—think of her repeated effusions about the Donwell baking apples—with something more nearly resembling Harriet's constant dithering about articles of clothing:

I saw some Gauzes in a shop in Bath Street yesterday at only 4s a yard, but they were not so good or so pretty as mine.—Flowers are very much worn, & Fruit is still more the thing.—Eliz: has a bunch of Strawberries, & I have seen Grapes, Cherries, Plumbs & Apricots—There are likewise Almonds & raisins, french plumbs & Tamarinds at the Grocers, but I have never seen any of them in hats.—A plumb or green gage would cost three shillings;—Cherries & Grapes about 5 I beleive—but this is at some of the dearest Shops;—My Aunt has told me of a very cheap one near Walcot Church, to which I shall go in quest of something for You.... Eliz: has given me a hat, & it is not only a pretty hat, but a pretty *stile* of hat too—It is something like Eliza's—only instead of being all straw, half of it is narrow purple ribbon.

This breathless jumble of concrete nouns almost outdoes Miss Bates herself, even as it also anticipates another such outpouring in *Emma*, when "Mrs. Elton, in all her apparatus of happiness, her large bonnet and her basket, was very ready to lead the way in gathering, accepting, or talking—strawberries, and only strawberries." The berry-inflected stream of consciousness that follows is virtually Joycean:

Delightful to gather for one's self—the only way of really enjoying them.—Morning decidedly the best time—never tired—every sort good—hautboy infinitely superior—no comparison—the others hardly eatable—hautboys very scarce—Chili preferred—white wood finest flavour of all—price of strawberries in London—abundance about Bristol—Maple Grove—cultivation—beds when to be renewed—gardeners thinking exactly different—no general rule.

Commenting on a fellow novelist in another letter at the Morgan, Austen marveled at how much Jane West managed to produce, given all her domestic responsibilities. "Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb," she lamented, but the evidence of the compositions clearly argues otherwise.

Sutherland observes that the "untransformed banalities" of Austen's letters, "magically transmuted, become the precious trivia of the novels," and that seems right, whether the trivia in question are Mrs. Elton's strawberries

or Mr. Elton's pencil stub. Details like these and many others—Mr. Woodhouse's gruel, Frank Churchill's haircut, Mrs. Bates's spectacles—are the ephemera that make up Austen's world, and ephemeral as they are, their aftereffects linger. The cherished pencil stub is destined for the fire, together with the court plaister, but few readers are likely to forget the episode in which they figure. Among "The Opinions" of *Emma* that Austen collected and transcribed after the novel's publication is an excerpt from an enthusiastic letter that a relative by marriage, identified as "Mrs. C. Cage," had sent to the novelist's niece Fanny. Mrs. Cage, who liked the novel "better than any," was particularly keen on its characters. "Miss Bates is incomparable," she wrote, "but I was nearly killed with those precious treasures!"

## **Ruth Bernard Yeazell**

Ruth Bernard Yeazell is Sterling Professor of English at Yale. Her books include *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* and *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel*. Her new book, *Vermeer's Afterlives*, will be published next year. (September 2025)