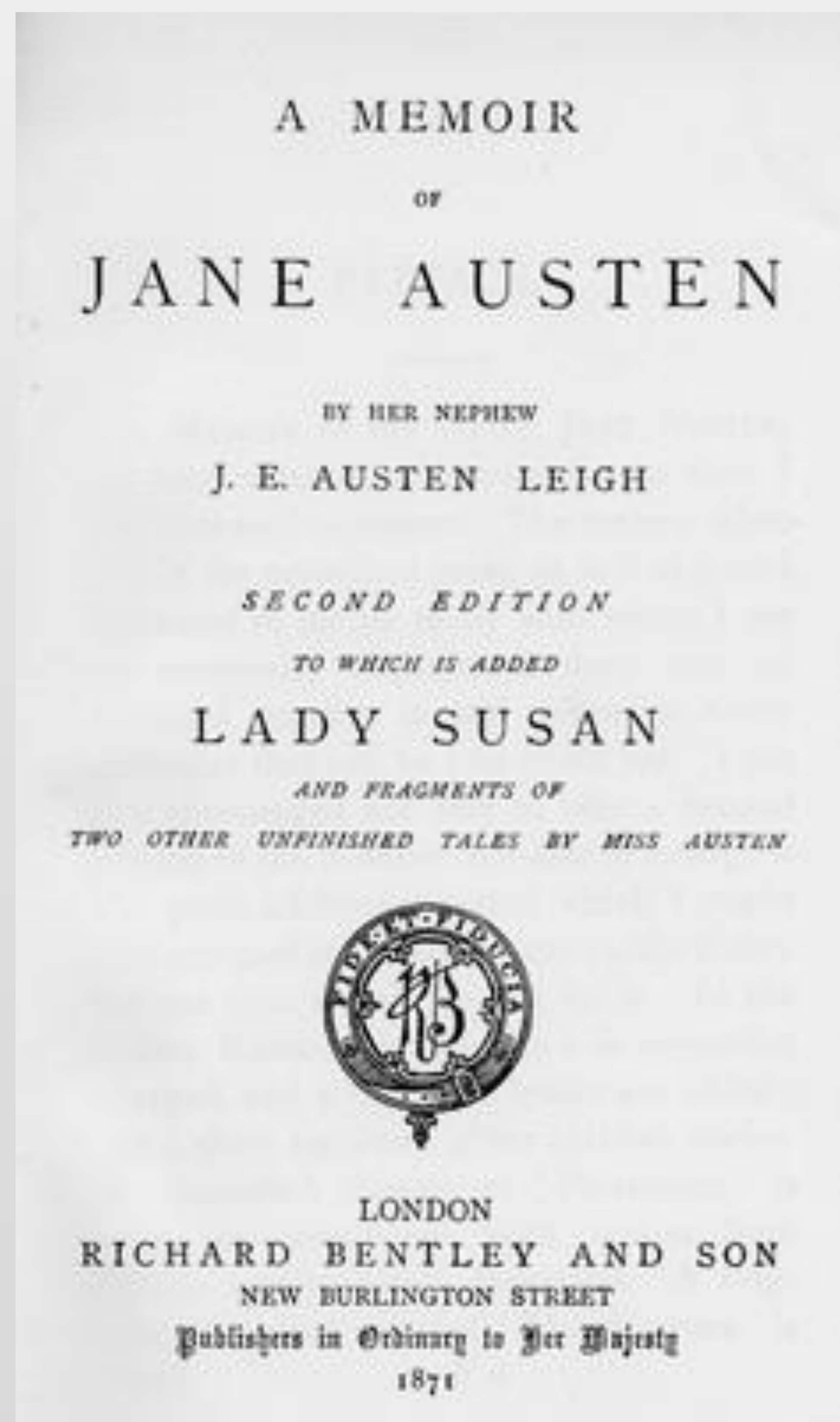
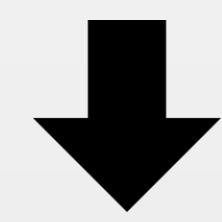


# Jane Austen and the Novel Stage

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## Abstract

A year ago, a professor asked me, “when you think of Jane Austen, what do you think of?” For many, we think of her as one of the great novelists. Best known for her work *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*, many readers often overlook her lesser-known stories. At the time of Austen’s passing, she left behind an unfinished fragment of work, presenting her family with a dilemma: what does one do with the piece of a puzzle left unknown to the world?

Austen’s manuscript was subsequently published by Austen’s nephew in his *Memoir* as *The Watsons*, yet scholars have speculated about the mystery of what to make of the fragment, presumed by all that it was a novel-in-the-making since that was Austen’s chosen art form.

However, a modern-day reader may notice that Austen’s manuscript doesn’t look like a modern-day novel. Scholars have examined the mystery behind the ink-stained and distressed pages of Jane Austen’s *The Watsons* manuscript, wondering what to make of it. Scholars have noted the peculiar use of dialogue and the incompleteness of the manuscript, speculating that parts of the story may never have survived the ordeal of time.

## Hypothesis

1. I believe that there are hints toward the need for physical presence in a reading circle while reading *The Watsons*. Austen’s manuscript as an inherent theatrical aspect to it.
2. Historians analyzing literature consumption patterns during the 18th-century’s Age of Elocution, such as Dr. Ros Ballaster, argue for the concept of “Presence-Effects,” where “the shared experience of being there is not something that can be produced in print.” (Ballaster 2-3)
3. Leveraging Ballaster’s point that aural and ephemeral elements cannot be reproduced in a physical format, I argue that to gain the full experience of the story of *The Watsons*, there is a required theatrical aspect.

## Research & Methodology

To test the hypothesis, we gave the passages to the focus group and that we documented what came out in the readings and the subsequent discussions. To imitate 18th-century reading circles, our focus group met in a boardroom-style classroom where we sat at the table facing each other to imitate the circular fashion that communal reading circles may have been in. Our focus group read the passages aloud and commented on aspects of the story that were only revealed in the oral readings and the subsequent discussions. In the three scenes that the focus group performed, we picked up hints of the 18th-century “presence-effects” that Ballaster points out.

## Focus Group Experiment

Below are the results from our experiment of reading *The Watsons* aloud in the same way it would have been read in the 18th century.

*Tom Musgrave to All:* ‘Upon my Honour Ladies,’ said he, ‘I am highly indebted to your Condescension for admitting me, in such Dishabille into your Drawing Room in finding myself here once more. You know what a sad visitor I make.’  
(Austen 286-7)

There is nothing on the page indicating that his description of himself could be anything but how he described himself: negligently dressed. Oral readers in our focus group were disinclined to believe him due to his excessive need to convince the sisters of his earnestness. He was seeking compliments.

*Tom Musgrave to All:* And I was so excessively impatient to see Emma.’ [To Lord Osborne] ‘— Do you not comprehend the sort of feeling?’

*Lord Osborne to Tom:* ‘I dreaded the meeting, and at the same time longed for it.’

*Tom Musgrave to All:* ‘I could never dread a meeting with Miss Emma Watson, Not at all! or any of her Sisters. Fine open weather, Miss Emma! — What are my sensations!’  
(Austen 286-7)

In our analysis of the passage, we came to the consensus that the line twists the meaning of “dread” was emphasized and thus its meaning was twisted by Musgrave. This reveals the power dynamic between the two love-interests.

*Tom Musgrave to Emma:* ‘I have found all in Stanton more than answer my warmest hopes. — Charming season for Hunting! — Did you ever see anything more perfectly beautiful? I was thinking of you — as many at a greater distance are probably doing at this moment.’

*Emma to Tom:* ‘Were you speaking to me?’  
(Austen 286-7)

Through performance, Musgrave’s true attitude was revealed. He is not innocently making small talk. Musgrave’s intentions to court the Watson sisters weren’t genuine. There is a dark underlying meaning to hunting.

## Conclusion

Throughout the efforts to unravel the mystery of *The Watsons* through time, Austen’s manuscripts were “left untouched by theatrical adaptors until Wade’s play” (Parey 4). However, in 2019, playwright Laura Wade reimagined Austen’s *The Watsons* manuscript as a modern-day stage adaptation, which I will argue is an attempt to recapture the oral ephemerality and reveals the importance of the aural elements that this project investigates. I intend to build on this argument to show how even centuries later, scholars are still attempting to solve the inextricable mystery of *The Watsons* on the novel stage.

## Further Reading

*The Watsons* may be coming into its theatrical being. “Wade makes the fact that Austen’s text is unfinished the very topic of the play and points to the adaptive process through authorial metalepsis by writing herself in the text under the name of Laura.” (Parey 9) Wade embodies Austen, as the person who is composing the story but is part of the narrative in the same way that readers in domestic reading circles play a part in composing the complete product of *The Watsons* and all play a part in how the story will end. “A character tells the others that they are the unfinished creation of an author called Jane Austen, breaking the illusion for the audience as she steps in the characters’ world. Laura breaks the illusion and stops the unfolding of the story” because she wants to give characters the liberty of choosing their own ending. (Parey 8)

During our classroom experiment, we also looked to each other for directions. Similar to the metatheatrical aspect to Wade’s play, there was a metatheatrical aspect during our group performance. In conclusion, our focus group adapted Austen’s manuscript, too.

## Attributions and Citations

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