Like Catherine Morland, we all dream of discovering that a manuscript tucked away in an archive, among dusty boxes in an attic, or in a mysterious chest in our guest room is really a long-forgotten work by a beloved author. This is the story of a collector who thought he had done just that – and a scholar who almost believed it. Fair warning: there is no new Austen manuscript at the end of this tale. Nevertheless, what follows does remind us of those very Austenian values of forsaking prejudice, embracing sense, and not allowing oneself to be persuaded too easily.

In 1971, Duke University’s Rubenstein Library acquired the manuscript of a nearly-complete eighteenth-century novel, which it believed had never been published. The novel was entered into their catalogue as “Anonymous novel, 18th century.” At some point, the title changed to “Hampshire, England woman’s novel, [17--]” and included the following description: “Manuscript of an unpublished epistolary novel bearing some resemblance to the works of Jane Austen. The volume is accompanied by six pages of type-written notes discussing Austen's possible connection with the unknown female author of this novel.” (Duke catalogue entry)

My research team and I visited Duke in April of 2017 as part of a larger project of collecting, describing, and transcribing manuscript fiction created during the age of print, 1750-1900. It was not long before Hampshire (as I will refer to it for most of this essay) became one of our highest priorities. What we ultimately discovered changed what was known about the manuscript entirely. In what follows I will discuss the current state of research about the work, beginning
with its known provenance and then proceeding using as my organizing principles the three subject areas that Duke has assigned to the novel:

Austen, Jane, 1775-1817 -- Style

Hampshire (England) -- History

Women authors, English -- 18th century

Notes Towards Provenance

Duke acquired the manuscript at Sotheby’s Sale of March 16, 1971 through Winifred Myers, a London-based dealer. The final private owner of the manuscript is not mentioned in the catalogue, but it was almost certainly Brent Gration-Maxfield, a major twentieth-century book collector. We know that he owned the book during the mid-twentieth century: as with many of his other acquisitions, the manuscript now sports modern, fine orange morocco gilt binding with his name stamped on the front interior edge. The only initial oddity was that the majority of the Gration-Maxfield library was dispersed in a series of sales by Sotheby’s that prominently featured Gration-Maxfield’s name. In contrast, this manuscript novel was sold in a miscellaneous auction of “valuable printed books, music, autograph letters and historical documents.”

The Sotheby’s catalogue description of Item 611 “EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EPISTOLARY NOVEL” is dated “c.1780” and gets right to the point: “There is considerable evidence to suggest that this apparently un-published novel was written by a Hampshire novelist belonging to the generation before Jane Austen’s.” The description doesn’t stop there, noting that “The parallels with Jane Austen’s world are obvious, just as it is impossible not to think of Darcy when Sir William’s son ‘found in himself a wish’ that a young lady ‘was not so handsome, as she had no
fortune, nor was of a family equal to the one he was entitled to be connected with’” and that
“Other detailed parallels exist between place and character names in the novel and those in the
Austen circle.” (Sotheby’s 1971)

Sotheby’s did not create these claims themselves. During his ownership, Brent Gration-
Maxfield inscribed a similar claim inside the rebound manuscript under his ex libris:

“Whether published or unpublished, they [sic] is strong evidence of an association
between this unknown Hampshire novelist and the Austen family.
Internal evidence, construction, plot, characters, handwriting, paper, orthography,
grammar, locale, etc., shows the novel to have been written circa 1770-1780, and written
by a Hampshire Authoress living in, or conversant with the area north of Winchester.
In many respects the novel parallels Jane Austen’s works, but the most extraordinary
 coincidences --- if such they be --- are in the choice and names of the characters, and in
the orthography of the second hand.

See typescript notes inserted at end.” (Hampshire flyleaf marginalia)

That typescript, once folded into the manuscript but now placed in protective acetate in the same
box as the manuscript, bears the title “? Austen Mss. Novel.”

There is no date nor signature to the typescript, but as Gration-Maxfield alludes to the
typescript and its arguments in his flyleaf precis, it is safe to assume he is the author. Dating is
slightly more difficult, but there are allusions to Austen criticism that do allow us to narrow it
down. The author mentions R.W. Chapman, Logan Pearsall Smith’s work on “Moral climates”
(which appeared in his Reperusals and Recollections (1936)), “Mrs. Leavis” (Queenie Dorothy
Leavis, author of A Critical Theory of Jane Austen’s Writings (1941-42)), Mark Schorer’s “The
Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse” (1959), and “Southam” (Brian Southam, author of Jane
Austen’s Literary Manuscripts: A Study of the Novelist’s Development through the Surviving Papers (1964)). Thus, Gration-Maxfield cannot have written his assessment of Hampshire any earlier than 1964.

Gration-Maxfield does not claim that the novel was authored by Austen or her sister Cassandra, in part because he dates the bulk of the manuscript to the 1780s, when Austen (b.1775) and her sister Cassandra (b.1773) were very young. But he implies very heavily that another, older Austen family member could have written it, and that the later second hand might be that of Jane or Cassandra, continuing what an elder Austen woman (likely their mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen) had begun. I will return to that evidence in a later section.

If the typescript was generated in order to command a higher sale price for the manuscript, it was an utter failure. At its 1971 sale, the novel sold for $121. That’s only a fraction of the £30,000-40,000 that each of the Austen manuscripts sold for in the later 1970s. It’s not even in the league of Austen family papers, like those of Anna Lefroy that would later sell for £10,000.ii To date no purchase information about the manuscript prior to the Gration-Maxfield’s ownership has been discovered. As noted, the Sotheby’s catalogue entry does not even mention Gration-Maxfield’s name, let alone any potential prior owners of the manuscript. At no point does the typescript mention any prior provenance. Moreover, the physical evidence has, at least in some sense, been obscured by Gration-Maxfield’s ownership. As with other books in his library, he had Brian Frost & Company bind the manuscript in full orange morocco binding with his name in gilt tooling on the inner fly. One catalogue refers to Brian Frost & Company as “former Bayntun”—in other words, having apprenticed under the famed Bath bookbinder George Bayntun’s house, which opened in 1894 and is still open to this day (Bayntun website). Frost primarily specialized in fine rebindings, and the shop was described as “an
attractive bookshop specializing in antiquarian, general secondhand books and books in fine leather bindings, bound in their own bindery” in the April 1964 issue of The Private Library. It seems very likely that Gration-Maxfield had the book rebound, including three extra protective leaves, and then wrote the precis on one of the new leaves of the newly rebound book.

While the process of rebinding has protected the manuscript, it also tightened the margins, and in some cases has eliminated them utterly. The gutter is very tight, and there is some loss of descenders on the final lines of some pages and parts of letterforms on the edges from trimming of the text block. The prior method of binding is difficult to ascertain. What we can say with some certainty is that the size of the text block (26 cm high in its current form) doesn’t conform to known dimensions of other known Austen manuscript works, none of which are over 21 cm high.

There is no title page to the manuscript itself, though it is a fair copy with few corrections. It was written by two hands: one that composed the majority of manuscript (to page 237), and another that added an addition 43 pages. And it is that second hand that Gration-Maxfield speculates was perhaps that of a young Jane Austen.
“Austen, Jane, 1775-1817 – Style”

Gratton-Maxfield concedes there is no indication that the hand of the copyist(s) is that of the author, given that “it exhibits all the common errors associated with automatic transcription such as omissions, repetitions, and other inconsistencies” (4). That said, he is convinced that the hand seen on the first 237 pages “is very strongly similar to both Jane Austen’s and here (sic) sister Cassandra’s handwriting of the 1790s” (4). He argues that “remarkable co-incidences (if such they be) occur in the orthography of the second handwriting” (1) – that its “labored and rather ill-formed” look is “most suggestive of the handwriting of a young person” (4). He further
argues that the spelling in Hand 2 is markedly different from Hand 1, and is also closely aligned with Jane Austen’s orthographic peculiarities (like her well-known “Love and Freindship”). I have returned to Gration-Maxfield’s list of words he identifies as significantly different between Hand 1 and Hand 2, as well as known Austen variant spellings, creating a list of 54 words which I then searched for in the two different sections of the transcription. Gration-Maxfield is partially correct: in the list of standard and variant spellings that he provides, in the aggregate Hand 2 is much more prone to variant spellings in these words than Hand 1:

Table 1: Gration-Maxfield’s list of words and their variant spellings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spelling Type</th>
<th>Hand 1</th>
<th>Hand 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonstandard</td>
<td>58 (18%)</td>
<td>28 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>271 (82%)</td>
<td>10 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, many of the specific variants he identifies in the manuscript simply are not present at all: of the 54 variant spellings I searched for, 25 did not appear anywhere in *Hampshire*, including many of what Gration-Maxfield considers important links to Austenian spelling (beautifull, freind). A further 13 do not appear in Hand 2’s section of the manuscript. As I will discuss later, there is more sophisticated analysis of style that remains to be done, but this initial fact-checking of Gration-Maxfield’s claims about orthography left that particular claim on shaky ground.

“Hampshire (England) -- History ”: People and Places

But it is not through spelling alone that Gration-Maxfield built his vision of the authors of this work. He believed very strongly that the character and location names were an “extraordinary” coincidence, that in the aggregate the coincidences pile up to something “beyond
reasonable bounds of belief.”¹ The dedication claims that the characters are “drawn from real life” (1) and Gration-Maxfield argues this claim gives particular weight to the “surroundings and social background” of the novel (5-6) The typescript delineates specific parallels for an entire page (see Table 1 and 2 for a summary of Gration-Maxfield’s parallels). He further argues that the novel’s “social and vocational” background of a collection of gentry families and ministers was similar to both Austens’ social circle and the “Three or four families in a country village” (Letters 287).

Table 2: Parallels in Hampshire Character names and Austen works and life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hampshire MS Character</th>
<th>Austen Family, Friend, or Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lady Denham</td>
<td>Sanditon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Hollis</td>
<td>Sanditon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Sanditon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir James and Lady Parker</td>
<td>Sanditon (&quot;Parkers&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misses Stanhope</td>
<td>The Three Sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Willoughby</td>
<td>Sense and Sensibility (&quot;John Willoughby&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukey</td>
<td>Real-life servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Visit&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>Love &amp; Freindship (&quot;Isabel&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Wilson</td>
<td>&quot;Mr. Henry&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Lady Susan&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strephon</td>
<td>&quot;A Comedy&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles, James, Frank, William, John, Anne etc.</td>
<td>Austen’s friends and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Hallett</td>
<td>Appears in an 1805 letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Dorrell</td>
<td>Dorrell Wood “three miles north of Deane, where Mr. Austen was rector”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Rolfe</td>
<td>“Rofles were parishoners of Deane, and at least two were married… during her father’s curacy there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Charles Pelham</td>
<td>Pelham Court and the Pelhams are to be found at Bramston, some 15 miles from Steventon”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir William Trenchard</td>
<td>Trenchards…found in late 18th. Century records at Over and Nether Wallop, Kintbury Eaton”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Gration-Maxwell 3-4
Sir James Parker | A parishioner of Ashe c.1770s where “the Austens had relations”
Sir John Holt | “The Holts are also to be found in the area”

Gration-Maxfield does not list every character in Hampshire – most notably its heroine, Anne “Nancy” Pelham, but also Mrs. Masham, Rev. Brice, Rev. Butler, Miss Spence, and Miss Amherst, among others.

I followed up Gration-Maxfield’s real-life parallels by conducting a search for these names in the “Literature and Language” section of Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (or ECCO). I did not intensively search for first names alone given that thousands of texts across the century include those names, as none are uncommon. All, aside from John Holt, appear in multiple novels at some point in the eighteenth-century: some in two or three novels, others in dozens. It seems clear that the author could have pulled her names from either Hampshire circles or the world of eighteenth-century print: both fact and fiction.

The evidence for familiarity with the county of Hampshire feels more compelling on its surface: of the locations Gration-Maxfield lists, all but one (Clifton) are in Hampshire, and within 15 miles or less of each other.

**Table 3: Parallels in Hampshire locations and Austen’s life**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hampshire MS Location</th>
<th>Gration-Maxfield’s Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“P-------m”</td>
<td>“A P-------m Court is but a couple of miles from Steventon, and P-------m Lane runs north of the parsonage”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of Littleton</td>
<td>Seven miles from Steventon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of “W---------“ Borough</td>
<td>“The only borough town was Winchester. i.e. ‘Winton’ Borough.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton</td>
<td>Known to Austen family and appears in published novels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-------n</td>
<td>Chawton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Women authors, English -- 18th century”: A correction
At this point in my reading of the manuscript and of the typescript by Brent Gration-Maxfield, I was left with a series of unanswered questions. Gration-Maxfield has focused on “Where then does this mss. fit in the Austen family circle?” (6). But I found myself adding: does this manuscript fit within the Austen family circle? Gration-Maxfield was content to believe that “Factual proof will no doubt always be wanting” (6) but scholars cannot rest content in suggestive mysteries. Thus, I pressed on with more careful examination.

I knew that further physical analysis of the manuscript was necessary. Gration-Maxfield’s dating of the manuscript to the 1780s is not based on any specified evidence. More intensive examination of paper, ink, binding, and handwriting will allow for more precise dating. Indeed, there are more provenance questions in play than even Gration-Maxfield fully allowed for. Why is the format of the manuscript – even taking into account later binding, trimming, etc. -- so very markedly different from any other surviving Austen manuscript? If this is a manuscript closely associated with the Austen family, when and how did it leave the family’s hands? Why is there so little provenance information available prior to its sale in the 1970s, and why did it change from “anonymous novel, 18th century” to its present title?

But I was in Chawton, my students were in Alabama, and so this was a task we planned on returning to once I was back in the States. In the meantime, my wonderful undergraduate research fellow Mary Butgereit had transcribed the entire manuscript. We intended to use the transcription to compare the work to multiple collections (“corpuses”) of eighteenth-century literature, including the known Austen corpus of both her published works as well as her juvenilia, as well as the Text Creation Partnership’s transcriptions of 2,188 eighteenth-century texts (TCP-ECCO). That corpus includes multiple editions of all three of the novels of Samuel Richardson, whose first novel Pamela (1740) seems to have been the inspiration for much of
Hampshire’s plot. While computer-based comparisons of style and vocabulary are limited in what they can achieve in terms of positive identification, such analysis could have allowed us to see what Hampshire most closely resembles at the level of the text, and to eliminate works it does not resemble. This is a method Gration-Maxfield could not have imagined, though he came close when he noted that he has “avoided pointing such close affinities with the mss. by such analytical methods or by character transformations, and has attempted to confine comparisons [sic] to those in which theory plays little part” (5).

At the same time, I was fact-checking and expanding on those “non-theoretical” methods that were employed by Gration-Maxfield. With the help of Deirdre Le Faye’s magisterial work on Austen’s extended family network, I was able to identify women of the right age with documented connections to the county of Hampshire. It was my hope that some trace of handwriting may survive from each candidate, which would have allowed us to eliminate suspects. When I began writing this essay, I hoped that this research, as preliminary as it is, would spark new potential avenues of research and possible candidates.

You’ll notice I spoke of such work in hypothetical past tense. This is because the transcription itself rendered that work totally unnecessary – or at least, changed the questions I am now asking about this manuscript. That is because of two new pieces of evidence that arose very quickly thereafter. I knew that the manuscript’s handwriting had no resemblance to that of either Jane or either of the Cassandras, but I was still intrigued by the idea of a manuscript by another Hampshire woman writer (or writers) from nearly the same period. And so to try to identify the handwriting I had contacted Kelly McDonald, whose research into nearby families and their voluminous correspondence might have provided a handwriting match for the manuscript. Instead, to my chagrin, in her own curiosity she did the one thing that neither I nor
any member of my team had yet done: she put several keywords from the manuscript into Google. Within seconds, she had discovered the true identity of this manuscript: *The History of Nancy Pelham*, a novel that was serialized in *The London Magazine* (and, we later discovered, the *Hibernian*) between 1777 and 1779. The novel is signed simply as “Arpasia,” a somewhat-frequent pseudonym that appears several times throughout the eighteenth-century.

Robert Mayo, who has written about *Nancy Pelham*’s appearance in the magazines, notes that the editor of *The London Magazine* wrote to “Our worthy correspondent Curiosus” that “all the information the publisher is able to give respecting the history of Nancy Pelham” is that “it was written by an American lady, but he never knew either her name or rank in life” (qtd in 426). An imagined sequel was never produced, likely because the Richardsonian style Arpasia was responding to (and imitating) was waning in popularity in the 1780s (334-6).

The question then arose of which came first: the manuscript or the magazine? This turned out to be easier than we could have hoped – and much stranger. I reached out to my former student Hannah Skjellum (now a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Thanks to her clever photography skills, I was able to confirm that the paper of the Duke manuscript copy of *Nancy Pelham* is from the Abbey Paper Mill in Greenfield, which was founded in 1821. Gration-Maxfield argued that the paper is key to the dating of the *Hampshire* manuscript, but provided no further specific evidence for the claim. It is the paper, however, that ultimately disproved Gration-Maxfield’s entire theory. Rather than a manuscript of the 1780s, the manuscript is a partial copy of a late 1770s periodical novel in parts, which was copied no sooner than forty years after its initial printing. Moreover, the novel is itself a decorous, optimistic reimagining of Samuel Richardson’s first novel, *Pamela* (1740). The “Austen” style
noted by prior owners and dealers is, in fact, Richardsonian – a key influence on Austen’s own style.

This is the end of this essay but not, I promise, the end of the story. While Duke’s manuscript is not an Austen manuscript, or even one with clear connections to Hampshire during Austen’s lifetime, it is an intriguing glimpse into a way of preserving and sharing fiction that we have not fully explored. Given the geographic specifics of the novel in both forms, is there, after all, an actual connection between the printed novel and the community around Winchester and Steventon, if a bit earlier? Why on earth would anyone copy by hand a story published nearly fifty years earlier? Was there a subsequent reprinting we have not yet found that ties the story closer to this later copy? Is this a work of a woman writer and female copyists at all, or has our interest in Austen and our assumptions about both periodical and manuscript authorship predetermined the way we see the gender of those involved in its production?

“Arpasia” is definitely not Jane Austen. But I still hope to find her.
Works Cited


--. Catalogue of valuable printed books, music, autograph letters and historical documents ... (Book auction sale catalogue) London, 1971.

My thanks especially to my research team of undergraduates who worked with me on the larger manuscript project in the 2016-17 school year. Matthew Stinson and Kelsie Shipley photographed the manuscript, Mary Butgereit did initial transcription and fuller encoding with the assistance of Carrie Hill. Hannah Skjellum, now graduate student at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, went back to Duke to check for watermarks on the manuscript’s paper. Endless thanks to Kelly McDonald for cutting to the heart of the matter. My thanks to Kate Collins at the Rubenstein Library for helping with provenance information from the Duke University Library Manuscript Department’s initial acquisition, and to David Levy and Mitch Fraas for finding further examples of Gratien-Maxfield’s descriptive practices.

None of the verifiable surviving Austen fiction manuscripts are in private hands. Sanditon was donated to Cambridge in the 1930-31 academic year. The purchase of Volume the First by the Friends of the Bodleian Library was arranged by R.W. Chapman in 1933 for £75. Lady Susan moved between several private collectors before it was acquired by the Morgan Library for $6750 in 1947. Volume the Second was sold at Sotheby’s on 6 July 1977, and acquired by the British Library for £40,000. Volume the Third was bought by the British Rail Pension Fund, 14 December 1976 for £30,000, before being purchased by the British Library in 1988 for £120,000. Sir Charles Grandison was sold at auction in 1977 and has since passed to Chawton House Library, where it is now housed. A small portion of The Watsons was acquired in 1925 for £317.5s.6d by the Morgan Library, where it remains. The larger portion of the manuscript was sold in 1978 for £38,000, 1988 for £90,000, and finally in 2011 to the Bodleian. Given that this portion of The Watsons was the only remaining piece of Austen fiction in private hands, it sold for £850,000 to the Bodleian Library. For fuller provenance details, see Kathryn Sutherland’s Jane Austen’s Fiction Manuscripts: A Digital Edition.