Janeites and their Benefactors: The Heritage Industry and the Commodification of Nostalgia

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Janeites and their Benefactors: 
The Heritage Industry and the Commodification of Nostalgia

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Whose Jane Austen?

In August of 2017, Chawton House Library announced that they would be finding new homes for their four Shire Horses. The organization reported that due to significant funding losses, they had to cut back “on any activities or programmes which are not a vital part of our mission in going forward” (“Important News About Our Shire Horses”). Choosing to close their stables was undoubtedly a difficult choice for Chawton House Library, but the director and trustees accepted the organization’s financial reality and were ready to move on to making plans for the future. However, this was only to be the beginning of the Shire horse affair.

The Shire horses’ removal incited a public uproar, led by the impassioned protest group named Save Our Shires (SOS). SOS went so far as to urge the public “to boycott Chawton House as a tourist destination until the Trustees reverse their lamentable decision and restore Heavy Horses to their rightful domain” (“Save Chawton Shires”). Boycott Chawton House? Evidently, there was more at stake than four horses. To the SOS group, the shire horses represented English heritage, but to Chawton House (they dropped the “Library” in 2018), the horses were not “a vital part of [their] mission in going forward.”

The truth of the matter was that the Shire horses were not as lucrative as Jane Austen. Until about 2016, Jane Austen was only peripheral to Chawton House Library’s mission, but the organization was forced to reassess its priorities when the original founder and primary funding source, Silicon Valley multimillionaire Sandy Lerner, decided to step down and end her financial
support. Consequently, Chawton House Library had to quickly find new sources of income. The “Reimagining Jane’s ‘Great House’” campaign was launched, and the Shire horses were sent to new homes.

Chawton House Library is historically connected to Jane Austen’s family, since it was inherited by her brother Edward in the 1780s, and Austen had been a frequent visitor, but the organization was not established to commemorate Austen. Chawton House Library was founded in 1993 as The Centre for the Study of Early English Women’s Writing. The name was changed to Chawton House Library in 1998, opening to the public in 2003, and in 2018 it became simply Chawton House. The evolution of the organization’s name is reflective of its transformation over the past twenty-five years.¹

CHL opened in 2003 primarily as a research library with an extensive collection of works by women writers from the long eighteenth century. The library occasionally held events related to Austen, but most of their programming focused on other women writers, as the library was created deliberately to “transform the literary landscape” (“A Brief Introduction to Chawton House Library and Study Centre”). The other half of CHL’s founding mission was to preserve the house and land, and to “advance the education of the public by creating and maintaining a working farm of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.” This founding mission is important to keep in mind going forward because although it has not officially changed, CH’s marketing has becoming increasingly focused on Jane Austen, who was not central to CHL’s original objectives.

¹ From now on, I’ll refer to the organization before 2018 as CHL and after 2018 as CH, and Jane Austen’s House Museum will be abbreviated to JAHM.
The JAHM, alternately, was founded to preserve Jane Austen’s legacy. The JAHM is synonymous to Chawton Cottage, the name of the house in Austen’s time. Jane Austen lived in Chawton Cottage with her mother, sister Cassandra, and friend Martha Lloyd from 1809 up until her death in 1817, and it is where she wrote or revised all of her major works. Chawton Cottage belonged to Austen’s brother, Edward Austen Knight, who lived in Chawton House down the road. The Jane Austen Society (JAS) was formed in 1940 with the purpose of purchasing Chawton Cottage to make “Jane Austen’s home” a site for Austen pilgrimage. The JAS failed to raise enough funds on their own, but T. Edward Carpenter, a wealthy benefactor, purchased the cottage “for the nation” in memory of his son who was killed in the Second World War. The house opened to the public in 1949 (“Jane Austen’s Home”). Although JAHM was founded initially as a pilgrimage site, it quickly became a museum, due significantly to the efforts of T. Edward Carpenter who promoted the collection of Austen “relics.” Although JAHM has expanded in size and visitorship, it has consistently remained an Austen museum since its founding.

This project is about the separate but parallel histories of the founding of the JAHM and CHL. The JAHM’s founding is in part a story of postwar nationalism and the commodification of English nostalgia. CHL was founded against the background of Thatcher era England, a period of extreme capitalism and social stratification fueled by a narrative of national decline, also leading to the growth of the heritage industry, aided by the creation of the Heritage Lottery Fund in 1994. The following chapters will focus primarily on the postwar period and the early 1990s to present day.

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2 Now the National Lottery Heritage Fund
This history has been examined before, but it has yet to be updated to consider the most recent developments at the JAHM and CH. With the recent emergence of the subfield of Austen Legacy Studies, Austen scholars have created a new framework for looking at the history of Austen’s reception. Deidre Lynch and Claudia Johnson were the first scholars to consider, at length, the history of Austen’s readers and the cultures that have arisen around the consumption of Jane Austen and her novels. Johnson’s “The Divine Miss Jane: Jane Austen, Janeites, and the Discipline of Novel Studies” (1996) began the Austen Legacy conversation by considering the history of the tension between Austen’s popular and academic readers, in response to criticism of Eve Sedgwick’s “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” (1991). Lynch then expanded upon Johnson’s argument in her edited collection *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees* (2000), which Lynch describes as “an examination that ranges widely and does not respect unduly the borders of periodization or the boundaries between academic writing and other ways of talking about Jane Austen” (14). Lynch’s thesis essentially summarizes the objective of Austen Legacy Studies.

Claudia Johnson’s *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures* (2012) further expanded the scope of the discourse, with its aim “not so much to trace Jane Austen’s reputation as . . . to ponder what loving her has meant to readers from the nineteenth century to the present, charting how the contingencies of their historical moments mingle productively with their literary appreciations” (14). Johnson focuses on four periods: the Victorian era, World War I, World War II, and the postwar establishment of the JAHM. She considers how Austen’s novels were read differently in each historical moment and how those readings “can inspire us to reread Austen in surprisingly stunning ways” (15).
Most recently, Devoney Looser significantly advanced the conversation by revising the story of Austen’s rise to fame in her book *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017), which critically investigates the forgotten popular interpretations of Austen from illustrators and dramatic adaptations to political and scholarly uses. Looser is also the one to introduce the term “Austen Legacy Studies” to name the discourse (239). Less central to my investigation but still notable contributors to the conversation are Emily Auerbach’s *Searching for Jane Austen* (2004) and Claire Harman’s *Jane’s Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (2009).

Deidre Lynch and Claudia Johnson are most relevant to my project because they provide the framework for understanding the history of Austen’s readership and legacy, and they both have written on the founding of the JAHM. The history of CHL has been analyzed less extensively because of the recency of its founding. The two writers, of which I am aware, who have discussed CHL are Felicity James and Deborah Yaffe. James’ essay “At Home with Jane: Placing Austen in Contemporary Culture” (2012) considers how the JAHM and CHL were founded to represent contrasting ideologies of domesticity. Yaffe's extensive journalistic investigation *Among the Janeites: A Journey Through the World of Jane Austen Fandom* (2013) tells the story of CHL’s founding, focusing primarily on the figure of Sandy Lerner. Since CHL’s changes, Yaffe has continued to unofficially report on the developments on her blog.

Besides Yaffe’s witty blog posts, the history of the JAHM and CHL have yet to be brought up to date. Revising their histories is important because CH’s recent changes should make us reconsider what factors have shaped the institutions’ histories. Lynch’s essay “At Home with Jane Austen” (1996) placed the JAHM in its interwar context in order to consider how the house’s founding was influenced by the shifting boundaries between elite and mass culture, a
transition which significantly altered Austen discourse. Johnson’s analysis of the JAHM’s founding in *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures* also focuses on the historical context, but she is more concerned with how the museum is reflective of Janeites’ love of Austen and what their behavior in turn illuminates about the novels. These readings are undoubtedly useful, but both scholars are interested in the history of the JAHM as a means of understanding Austen’s readers and reception. The history of the JAHM and CHL does say a lot about Austen’s devotees and their occasional conflicting viewpoints, but if the histories of the institutions were an Austen novel, the Janeite tourists would be opinionated secondary characters. The plot of the JAHM and CHL’s stories are shaped by the primary characters: the founders, the generous benefactors (usually wealthy Janeites), and the heritage industry, controlled primarily by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.³

Therefore, I am interested in investigating this history in order to understand how the “Jane Austen” of the heritage industry has been made. Of course the heritage industry reflects only one or two versions of Austen—Austen exists in too many forms to be singularly controlled by anyone—but the Austen(s) of the heritage industry matter because Austen has become a primary national export. Furthermore, the JAHM and CHL are respected authorities on Austen, so they directly influence how she is perceived on an international scale.

In order to thoroughly trace the history of the JAHM and CHL, I have collected newspaper articles, fundraising materials, public appeals, speeches, interviews, and blog posts. This research took place in Appleton, London, in the JAHM, and in the library at CH. I

³ Robert Hewison coined the term “heritage industry” in 1987, a theory which we will explore later on.
deliberately have chosen to study public source material because these documents were written for a public audience, meaning that the sources reflect the narratives which the JAHM and CHL wanted to convey to potential visitors or donors. My style of investigation is inspired by recent journalists Deborah Yaffe, Ted Scheinman, and Rebecca Mead, who have subverted the boundaries between academic and popular writing, appropriate to the objectives of Austen Legacy Studies.4

The following chapters will follow the histories the JAHM and CHL by tracing the influences of postwar nostalgia, patriotism, the literary landscape, the commodification of nostalgia, generous benefactors, marketing, compromise, Janeites, and the heritage industry. I’ll begin by exploring a few questions regarding Austen’s reception history in order to provide a framework for understanding the history of the institutions. From there, I’ll enter the history of the JAHM, following its developments to present day. The next section will chart the history of CHL to the present, and finally we will consider the future of both institutions. This story is told by Shire horses defenders, a Silicon Valley tech genius, an American Idol star, impassioned Janeites, and many other odd characters all with distinct opinions on Jane Austen. Perhaps by telling their stories we can better understand how the “Jane Austen” of the heritage industry came to be.

4 Ted Scheinman wrote Camp Austen: My Life as an Accidental Jane Austen Superfan (2018) and Rebecca Mead wrote My Life in Middlemarch (2014), which is about George Eliot, not Jane Austen.
Three Critical Questions

The history of Austen’s reception has been continuously revised, appended, and edited. With each new piece of uncovered history, we are asked to reconsider how we see “Jane Austen” and the narrative of her rise to fame. This movement in Austen Legacy Studies not only makes us look more closely at the cultural images of Austen ever-present around us, but also encourages us to expose and analyze the mechanisms and ideologies which shape the Austen that we think we know. Some of these mechanisms and ideologies, such as colonialism and politics, are well worth exploring, but they are not the focus of my argument. Alternately, I will be focusing on the following three questions, as they are most relevant to understanding the history of the JAHM and CH:

1. Who is allowed to read Austen, and how are they allowed to read?
2. Besides her birth, what makes Austen British?
3. How can Austen simultaneously be domestic and feminist?

These questions will allow us to understand the discourses which have shaped the histories of the JAHM and CHL. It is worth noting that the voices involved in these conversations are Janeites, anti-Janeites, fans, journalists, scholars, and everything in between. These subjects invite so much controversy because as we will see, when Austen is involved, the discussion inevitably becomes personal. As much as these debates are about Austen, they are also about personal identities and traditions. With this consideration in mind, let us turn to the question of readership.
Question 1: Who is allowed to read Austen, and how are they allowed to read?

As Austen’s popular reception has become of scholarly interest, the distance between Janeite “cult” members and the academic community is closing in, but division still exists, both within individuals and across communities. A recent discussion in the “Jane Austen Fan Club” page on Facebook brought some of these controversies to light. The group is composed of more than 10,000 members, ranging in types of interest. The posts include photos of homemade regency attire, movie memes, Austen tourism suggestions, novel quotations, and elaborate debates over beloved and hated characters. A new member joined the group and quickly voiced her disapproval of the group’s interests. She wrote,

As a new member of this group, and having done a bit of scrolling, I thought the group was called 'Jane Austen Fan Club' not 'Film/TV adaptations of Jane Austen'. If you only watch Jane Austen and don't actually READ I think you should consider unjoining!

Naturally this caused immediate backlash, consisting of a thread of 195 mostly witty and humorous comments putting the daring newcomer in her place; the instigator soon left the group. As a self-proclaimed “fan club,” the members are unashamedly fans, but clearly there is a level of consciousness and controversy over what that really means. The administrator of the group recently posted a reminder on this subject:

Hello, my fellow Janeites, Janeiacs and Super-Fans!

This is just a friendly reminder that we are a diverse group.

Some of us know everything there is to know about JA and some know very little. Some of us are uber-educated erudite, some are not so much (me). Some speak English well, some not so well (me) and for some, English is a second language. (very difficult) Some
of us have very strong opinions, and some couldn't care less. We come from every walk of life, every background, every religion, every gender, every orientation, every political persuasion, every nationality, every color, every creed, rich, poor, young, old, and everything in between.

And I do mean everything. It is AWESOME!

Already intrigued by the group dynamic, I was thrilled to see these posts appear on my newsfeed because it meant that the question of *who is the right kind of Janeite* was truly relevant. The administrator’s address to “Janeites, Janeiacs, and Super-Fans,” though meant to be humorous, also shows that even within the fan community, there is a range in types of fans. Evidently not every fan necessarily wants to be called a Janeite.

This controversy is connected to a very complex history of the term, which has been most thoroughly explained by Deidre Lynch in her book *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees* and in her essay “Cult of Austen.” The term “Janeite” was first used by George Saintsbury, a literary scholar, in 1896. The OED’s first historical entry for “Janeite,” quotes Saintsbury’s *A history of 19th century literature, 1780-1895* (1896): “It did not apparently occur to this critic that he (or she) was in the first place paying Miss Austen an extraordinarily high compliment—a compliment almost greater than the most enthusiastic ‘Janites’ have ventured.” Lynch explains that the term was adopted by devotees “to declare that their hearts belonged to Austen” (“Cult” 112). John Bailey published a “Georgian Edition” of Austen’s works later in 1927. In his introduction, he notes “the extraordinary spread of the cult of Jane Austen” (“Cult” 111). The term *cult* was powerful because it strongly characterized Janeites. Lynch analyzes the historical use of *cult* to get a better sense of the associations it carried for Bailey’s readers. She found that it
previously was a “straightforward word for worship,” but it developed a derogatory sense by the
time Bailey was writing, acquiring a “semantic shading that Austen’s adherents could exploit in
order to distance themselves from those other people who, it was proposed, enjoyed Austen in
the wrong way and for the wrong reasons—injudiciously, cultishly” (113). It’s interesting, then,
to see such similar divisiveness now within the Janeite community.

The Janeite/anti-Janeite tension that Lynch explores appears again and again throughout
the twentieth century. As Nicola Trott argues, the turn of the century marked a shift in Austen’s
reception, “from Life to Work, and woman to writer” (“1830-1970” 92). It is definitely too
simple to say pre-1900 readers were Janeites and post-1900 readers were anti-Janeites (Johnson,
Lynch, and Looser all prove this otherwise), but Trott’s observation that Austen’s reception
altered as she entered the elite academic realm is important to consider. Claudia Johnson adds
that “the elevation of novel studies has a distinct relation to Austen,” noting her incorporation
into the Oxbridge curricula in the 1940s, when both universities were revising their courses
(“Divine” 163). This definitely contributed to the widening division among Austen readers, as
“serious critics” deliberately disassociated themselves from “cult-like” fans.

Devoney Looser reminds us that even though elite men were shaping Austen’s image,
their Austen was not the only Austen of the time. She writes, “In early 1900s London, when elite
men were drinking, singing, and calling Austen an apolitical author in their private men’s
clubs . . . suffragists were marching through the streets outside with her name emblazoned on a
banner” (3). One notable example of a subversive Austen was Rudyard Kipling’s story “The
Janeites” (1924), a story about a secret society of Janeite soldiers during World War I, which
besides doing many other things, satirizes Austen elitism. Looser reminds us that “It sounds
impossible, but Jane Austen has been and remains a figure at the vanguard of reinforcing tradition and promoting social change” (3). Looser proves that at any given moment in history, ambivalent portrayals of Austen have existed.

Without understanding the various uses of Austen throughout the twentieth century, it’s difficult to explain the tension that is still evident between contemporary Austen readers. In 2003, Robert Miles wrote in his critical text *Jane Austen*, “Almost without exception the vast library of critical works that has grown up around Austen . . . begins with a gallant effort to rescue the writer from the heritage industry or the Janeites” (2). Even in 1905, Henry James criticized the “publishers, editors, illustrators . . . who have found their ‘dear, our dear, everybody’s dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable, form” (*Critical Heritage* 230). Clearly James voiced his concern a little too early, but what his semi-serious statement illustrates is an evident concern for Austen’s image being tainted by popular culture. To that, Devoney Looser most recently replies, “Every previous blow that Jane Austen’s reputation has supposedly endured at the hands of popular audiences who would sully her has failed to rub her out.” (222).

The question of who should read Austen and how they’re allowed to read her works has shaped Austen’s reception history, whether or not it has always been acknowledged. On a public scale, inter-Janeite prejudice is sustained by conflicting ideologies and appropriations of Austen, but on a personal scale, Austen reader prejudice is sustained by a continual desire to believe that Austen is our personal companion. As Lynch summaries: “since she is my Jane Austen, she cannot be yours too” (“Cult” 18). The JAHM and CHL were built in environments of possessive
Janeiteism, and as we will see in the next question, this possessiveness is further exaggerated in cases of cross-cultural Janeite clashes.

**Question 2: Besides her birth, what makes Austen British?**

Chawton Cottage was first recognized as site for Austen pilgrimage in 1917 when a group of Anglo-American Janeites erected a plaque beside the front door of the house in commemoration of the centennial of Austen’s death (*Cults* 139). The plaque reads:

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JANE AUSTEN
LIVED HERE FROM 1809-1817
AND HENCE ALL HER WORKS
WERE SENT INTO THE WORLD
HER ADMIRERS IN THIS COUNTRY
AND IN AMERICA HAVE UNITED
TO ERECT THIS TABLET

SUCH ART AS HERS
CAN NEVER GROW OLD
```

Claudia Johnson notes that the gathered Janeites were fully aware that the war was still going on. A similar memorial was held in Southampton, though their plaque no longer exists. The Southampton plaque was erected for a “new hope of the civilization that we are fighting together to save” (Pollack *Jane Austen Centenary Memorial*). The language of both centennials is interesting because it is patriotic but Austen is simultaneously used to unify Janeites above nationalities. Austen is emblematic not of Englishness or Americanness but of “civilization,” which in this case refers to the moral, ordered world of which Austen is associated.

Throughout the following chapters we will see Austen employed sometimes as a model of Englishness and sometimes as a unifying cross-cultural force. Sometimes Austen represents
the idyllic world of the past, and other times she is employed as a tool for revising English
literary history. And there are moments in the JAHM and CHL’s history when she is
simultaneously all of these things at once.

Austen’s “Englishness” narrative is told by J.E. Austen-Leigh’s 1870 Memoir, the
fundraising appeals for the JAHM in The Times in the 1940s, the National Lottery Heritage
Fund, the National Trust’s upkeep of estates featured in various Austen film adaptations, and
even Austen’s face on the £10 note. Simultaneously, Austen’s “universality” narrative is told by
countless Hollywood and Bollywood adaptations of the novels, more than 50000 active members
of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA), and at least 12 other Jane Austen
Societies across the globe.

Although there are Janeites world-wide, I am most concerned with the relationship
between British and American Janeites because they are most central to the history of the two
institutions. Although the British heritage industry is based on the preservation of British
heritage, Americans have played a significant role in the formation of Austen’s heritage, as
benefactors or as Anglophilic pilgrims. The 1917 plaque commemoration is an instance of
Anglo-American unification, but as we will see in the following chapters, there is also a history
of Anglo-American tension, usually around the ownership of Austen “relics,” or in the case of
CHL, when Sandy Lerner appeared to be a threat to English heritage.

Austen’s association with English heritage resulted from the cultivation of a national
literary canon throughout the nineteenth century. Nicola Watson discusses how “literary tourism
emerged as a side-effect of cultural nationalism.” She explains that the forming literary canon
was “seized upon in order to effect a sort of interiorized national mapping” which went on “to be
consumed both within and beyond the British Isles” (14). Alison Booth further explores how literary Britain became a tourist attraction and a cultural export throughout the nineteenth century. In 1833, Sir Walter Scott’s home Abbotsford, became a public museum. In 1847 Shakespeare’s house was bought for the nation (Booth 43). In 1866, the Blue Plaque scheme was started to label buildings associated with British figures (Booth 13). In 1881, the Robert Burns Cottage and Museum was founded, followed by an 1890s boom in literary houses and author societies, in part fueled by a surge in American Anglophilia.

Therefore, by the 1917 Austen centennials, many authors had museums dedicated to their memories, sustained by British cultural nationalism and and American tourists. Perhaps Austen was not yet given a museum because unlike her Romantic contemporaries, Austen’s England is not linked strongly to the English landscape. As Looser observes, “Scott had been the Wizard of the North, and Shakespeare the Bard of Avon, but Austen would end up on the receiving end of a name far more intimate and domestic, less tied to any particular geographical place” (5). Austen’s works are less geographically linked than Scott or Shakespeare because they evoke a nostalgia in readers for semi-fictional places. Although London, Bath, Hertfordshire, and other countries are real, Austen rarely offers much detail of the settings, and the action is focused much more on the characters and their relationships than the actual places themselves. As Looser explains, Austen would become associated with an Englishness much more “intimate and domestic.”

Chawton Cottage, therefore, would become the appropriate representation of Austen’s domestic legacy, but not until 1949, more than one hundred years after Scott or Shakespeare’s museums were founded. Why was Austen’s museum so late to the writers’ house party? The
following chapters will further investigate the historical timing, but Lynch’s essay “At Home with Austen” can offer us some preliminary answers. Lynch explains that between 1918 and 1945, there was a shift in British nationalism away from imperial ideologies and towards a domestic rhetoric. She explains that the country estate was no longer the emblem of grand Englishness; instead Englishness was repackaged as an article of “domestic consumption” and middle class domesticity (160), which Austen and Chawton Cottage could easily be made to represent.

**Question 3: How can Austen simultaneously be domestic and feminist?**

Before the founding of the JAHM, Austen was already associated with a domestic narrative, which was shaped most significantly, though not singularly (as Devoney Looser reminds us) by Austen’s nephews’ publications: James Edward Austen Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen: And other Family Recollections* (1870) and Lord Brabourne’s *Letters of Jane Austen*, volumes 1 and 2 (1884). Their works viewed their aunt through a familial, domestic lens, and they naturally referred to Austen as Aunt Jane, a nickname that would catch on. Looser writes in her introduction to *The Making of Jane Austen*, “These first two family-authored works promoted their author-ancestor as a very particular kind of aunt—the cheerful, pious, domestic, polite, maiden aunt” (7). These characteristics were so compelling because they painted Austen as a warm spinster who curiously but seamlessly produced wonderful works of fiction.

Austen’s nieces and nephews associated Austen’s stories with fairy tales because they recalled listening to her tell stories to them when they were children (*Cults* 79). Lord Brabourne was actually a writer of fairy tale books, and the language in his stories is echoed in his
introduction to Austen’s letters. Claudia Johnson notices that both his fairy tales and his accounts of his aunt are placed in a “queer temporality, old and yet not that old, familiar and strange at the same time” (*Cults* 82). This combination of domestic miniature and a fairytale-like timelessness—present in both nephews’ accounts—was a hit with Victorian Janeites, and it powerfully influenced future popular reception of Austen.

Although Austen would never escape the nickname of Aunt Jane, other writers have criticized Austen Leigh and Brabourne’s image of the domestic Austen. Constance and Ellen Hill’s *Jane Austen: Her Home and Her Friends* (1902) complicated Austen’s domesticity by attaching an element of wonder and mystery to Austen’s aura. The Hill sisters’ book was biographical and an account of their own literary pilgrimage. Looser notes that although the Hills refer to “Aunt Jane” on nearly every page, their usage carries a different tone than the *Memoir* and *Letters*. Instead of calling Austen “Aunt Jane” diminutively, their use creates a sense of familiarity, respect, and even awe. The sisters state at the end of their book, “Now her works are enjoyed by thousands of readers who owe to her some of the happiest hours of their lives” (292). Looser notes that this is a “monumental claim,” that definitely broadened the dimension and power associated with Aunt Jane (2).

The Hills’ Aunt Jane, who managed to be domestic and familiar *and* powerfully influential, was a fitting object and muse for the Hills’ literary pilgrimage. Constance and Ellen Hill visited every site associated with Jane Austen, even places such as Steventon where all that remained of Austen’s childhood home was a pump (which would become its own news story in
the 1970s). Constance wrote the text and Ellen drew the illustrations. Johnson also observes that “although the mood of Hill’s book is certainly genial . . . its most powerful encounters are dislocating,” citing a moment in the book where Constance Hill “can ‘fancy’ that she can glimpse ‘two girlish forms . . . those of Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra’ walking among trees and flowers at Steventon” (*Cults* 73). So Hill’s domestic, parochial Austenland is not only fairy-like, but also haunted.

This complicated domesticity is reflected in the formation of the JAHM, which simultaneously recreated Austen’s home and created a shrine to Austen adorned with “relics,” which evoke a saint-like spiritual quality. Perhaps the narrative of Austen’s domesticity must have an edge of uncertainty because she does not entirely fit the female domestic role, as she was neither a wife or a mother. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan explains,

> Jane Austen’s gender as writer has never been an innocuous issue. For second-wave feminism in the Anglo-American academy engaged in canon battles and arguing for the recuperation of a tradition of women’s writing, the fact of Austen’s being the first major English woman writer led to interest in two questions broadly identifiable as: how might we view her within a category designated as ‘women’s writing,’ and how was she shaped by and how did she herself shape different literary histories? (“Recent” 101-102)

Although Austen has been the face of feminist agendas since the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century, if not before, feminist criticism did not enter the scholarly Austen discourse until the 1980s. The primary influential works of that discourse are Sandra Gilbert and Susan

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5 On September 26, 1973, the top half of the pump was reported as stolen. The crime report in *The Times* quoted the curators of the JAHM who stated that they, “believe it may be sitting somewhere in the United States in the house of a mad Austenite.”

6 Ellen Hill also designed the 1917 Chawton Cottage plaque.

Rajan also explains that prior to the 1980s wave of Austen feminist criticism, Austen overshadowed other contemporary women writers, “but more recently it has led to the resurrection of a host of women writers” (102). This is important to consider as we go forward because this conversation is exactly what laid the groundwork for CHL a decade later, which would be founded as The Centre for the Study of Early English Women’s Writing. Although Austen’s feminism is no longer a new idea, there are still stubborn defenders of a more conservative Austen. We’ll see how the tensions between these contrasting Austen ideologies will shape the development of the JAHM and CHL.

These three themes—Austen’s readership, nationality, and gender—will come up again and again throughout the following chapters. We will see how founders, tourists, newspapers, benefactors, and outside groups have negotiated these ideologies over the past century. We will try to understand how the rhetoric of these conversations reflect underlying assumptions and beliefs about readership, nationality, and gender, and consequently we will see how these
negotiations and compromises shape the ways in which Austen is represented by the JAHM and CHL. The story officially begins in 1925 with the birth of the museum.
I am excessively fond of a cottage; there is always so much comfort, so much elegance about them. And I protest, if I had any money to spare, I should buy a little land and build one myself, within a short distance of London, where I might drive myself down at any time, and collect a few friends about me and be happy. I advise everybody who is going to build, to build a cottage.

―*Sense and Sensibility*

Eight years after the dedication of Austen’s centennial memorial plaque, another Janeite, W. Hooper of Surrey, decided that it was high time that Chawton Cottage was restored to a respectable state. He wrote to *The Times* on the 30th of December, 1925,

Sir.—The celebration of the 150th anniversary of Jane Austen’s birth affords an opportunity for calling attention to the shabby and neglected condition of her home at Chawton. The House, a large red brick building situated on main road between Alton and Winchester, is, as to the greater part, divided into two or three separate tenement dwellings. The remaining portion, comprising the family sitting room, with the little study adjoining which Jane is said to have done her writing, is used by the village club. The only mark of her connexion with the building is a faded tablet on the front erected some years back by her English and American admirers: and there are no facilities for visitors wishing to see the interior.

It is hardly creditable to the nation that the house in which our great woman novelist spent the latter years of her life and wrote or completed her masterpieces should be allowed to remain for a state evincing such scant respect for her memory.
Although W. Hooper’s appeal seems not to have prompted immediate action, the letter likely was the inspiration for later efforts, and it set the tone for how Chawton Cottage would be discussed publicly. Two themes that would continue to appear in the discussion of Austen’s house are anniversaries and the nation. The 150th anniversary of Austen’s birth prompts Hooper to take notice of the state of her house, which is in a “shabby and neglected condition.” Hooper’s emphasis on the anniversary makes the condition of the house seem relevant and urgent. This is amplified by his later statement that “it is hardly creditable to the nation” that the home of “our great woman novelist” is in such a state. The reality of the situation is that repairing Chawton Cottage is not actually urgent: people live in the house as tenants, Jane Austen is not being forgotten, even if the tablet by the front door is fading, and it is not an insult to Austen’s memory to let it stay utilized by its occupants and the village club. In fact, Austen might have found pleasure in knowing her home would continue to be filled by normal local people.

However, Hooper’s language makes it seem as if Austen’s memory is fading, her home is crumbling, and the nation is failing to do their part in upholding England’s values and history, a theme which we will continue to see recur. Deidre Lynch offers some historical context for these emerging themes. She writes,

The creation of the Austen Society, the proliferation of Shakespeare festivals, and the curricular rise of ‘English’ were so many early-twentieth testimonies to the notion that select literary works constituted a preserve for real Englishness. Such Englishness

W. Hooper does not appear to be later involved in the founding of the JAHM, but he was involved in other national heritage projects. A Times article “Redborough Commons” from 1937 indicates that he assisted in the funding of the National Trusts’ acquirement of the Cotswolds, and a later Times article titled “The Pilgrims’ Way” from 1947 indicates that Hooper was involved in the Surrey Archeological Society.
metamorphosed in turn between 1918 and 1945. The idol of that identity politics moved away from the outsized epic rhetoric suited to imperial missions toward an emphasis on the ‘inward-looking, domestic, and private’ and toward the proposition that the real locus of national history was the middle-class woman’s life in a house. (‘At Home’ 161) Lynch explains that the First World War put imperialism in the background of British nationalism, transforming the image of “Englishness.” Instead of a narrative of domination, real Englishness became associated with the comfort of the safe home, or more specifically, “the middle-class woman’s life in a house,” and who embodies that image more fittingly than Jane Austen? Looking again at W. Hooper’s letter, his language perfectly echoes the ideas of Englishness that Lynch discusses. In 1925, Hooper is writing at the exact moment of post-WWI transitional patriotism, imagining Chawton Cottage as a representation of quintessential Englishness: middle-class, domestic, and literary.

For unknown reasons, W. Hooper’s letter to The Times seems not to have warranted a response until 1940, when Dorothy Darnell, a Chawton local, found a cast-iron grate from Chawton’s Cottage’s drawing room in a garbage pile. She decided to found the Jane Austen Society with the express purpose of purchasing Chawton Cottage for the creation of a Jane Austen museum. On December 7, 1946, the Jane Austen Society wrote to The Times to announce their fundraising efforts. They write:

Sir,—We ask the hospitality of your columns, believing that many of your readers would be interested to hear of the existence of the Jane Austen Society and its aims. This society was founded in May, 1940 with the object of getting possession of the house formerly known as Chawton Cottage. In this house Jane Austen lived with her mother
and her sister Cassandra from 1809 until her death in 1817. All the novels except
‘Northanger Abbey’ were written here in the form which we have them. . . .

It would not be possible to obtain vacant possession of the whole house, nor is it
desired; the present tenants would not, under the society’s plan, be in any way disturbed;
but immediate possession would be assured of a large room on the ground floor which
(identifiable from its blocked-up window) was the Austens’ drawing room. This would
house some very interesting relics which have been promised and form the nucleus of the
place of pilgrimage the society hopes to see established. . . .

The owner has agreed to a price of £3000. Through-going repairs are urgently
needed. The society therefore has itself to raise at least £5000.

Instead of addressing a nationalistic mission, the letter focuses solely on the importance of
preserving the house for Jane Austen. Perhaps by 1946, the overtly patriotic domestic English
rhetoric emerging in 1925 had subdued and become seamlessly natural. The “hospitality of your
columns” and even the name Chawton Cottage, carry an affect of comfort. The aims of the Jane
Austen Society also seem to be less dramatic than W. Hooper’s urgent appeal. They have no
intention of disturbing the current tenants and only have the humble aim of possessing the
drawing room. The mention of “relics” and “pilgrimage” introduce a rhetoric of religiosity
(evident in Austen discourse since the 1870s) that will become primary to the museum’s public
appeals over the next decade.8

The letter is signed by R.A. Austen-Leigh (Austen descendent, published Jane Austen’s
Life and Letters in 1913), Elizabeth Bowen (writer, friends with David Cecil at Oxford), David

8 Lynch discusses religiosity in “Cult of Jane Austen,” and Johnson expands on these ideas in Jane
Austen’s Cults and Cultures.
Cecil (Austen scholar at Oxford, later published *A Portrait of Jane Austen* in 1978), R.W. Chapman (Oxford scholar, published edition of Austen’s novels in 1923, and her letters in 1924 and 1932), W. Hugh Curtis (Chairman of JAS), Dorothy Darnell (founder of JAS), Beecher Hogan (unknown), Elizabeth Jenkins (novelist, published biography of Jane Austen in 1938, cofounder of JAS), G.L. Keynes (scholar and surgeon, published a bibliography of Jane Austen in 1929), Mary Lascelles (Oxford scholar, published * Jane Austen and her Art* in 1939), C.S. Lewis (writer, Oxford scholar, published *A Note on Jane Austen* in 1954), Wilmarth S. Lewis (Horace Walpole scholar, American), Edward Marsh (patron of the arts), C.B. Tinker (scholar, American), Wellington (later president of the JAS), Clough Williams-Ellis (architect), and Mervyn Winton (unknown).9

It is worth noting who these people are because it is in some ways an unexpected group. The majority of the contributors are fellows at Oxford at the time they are writing the appeal, which is interesting because it shows that the founding of the Jane Austen museum was in some ways an intersection of popular Austen fandom and scholarly interest. The 1940s was a pivotal moment in Austen reception history because as Johnson explains, as scholars were beginning to take Austen’s works more “seriously,” her works became regularly incorporated into Oxbridge curricula (“Divine” 163). B.C. Southam attributes A.C. Bradley’s 1911 lecture on Austen at Cambridge to the starting point of “the serious academic approach to Jane Austen.”10 Nicola Trott writes, “The University of Oxford, where Bradley held a Chair, went on taking Austen

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9 All biographical information is from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

10 Devoney Looser claims this attribution is exaggerated (151).
seriously: the University Press published in Mary Lascelles’s Bradley-inspired *Jane Austen and her Art* (1939) the first full-scale historical and scholarly study” (“1830-1970” 93).

However, these Oxford academics are not the critics of the era who were making Austen high class and elitist. In fact, R.W. Chapman and Lord David Cecil were looked down upon by other academics for being effeminate readers. Claudia Johnson points to D.W. Harding’s essay “Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen” (1940) as being perhaps the most influential of elitist, condescending, divisive Austen scholarship. His argument “invokes Austen’s importance during wartime by calling her ‘a formidable ally’ in our battle against ‘things and people which were to her, and still are, hateful’ (*RH*, 25)” (*Cults* 141). Johnson explains that the hateful things and people to which Harding refers are surprisingly not Austen haters but Austen adorers who “read her the wrong way and love her for the wrong reasons” (141). Johnson suggests that he is likely addressing R.W. Chapman, Lord David Cecil, and Elizabeth Jenkins, all of whom signed the Jane Austen Society letter. Johnson writes,

Among others, R.W. Chapman, no doubt, though never mentioned, whose edition (as we have seen) memorialized the elegance of Austen’s period—its dresses, dances, carriages, and language; probably Lord David Cecil, also unmentioned, who in 1935 had written, ‘There are those who do not like her, as there are those who do not like sunshine or unselfishness’; and certainly Elizabeth Jenkins, whose biography had appeared a few years earlier and who is mentioned in the essay. Such readers belong, in Harding’s view, to an entire generation of readers deemed foolish because they believe that Austen typifies ‘the gentler virtues of a civilized social order’ (*RH*, 5). (*Cults* 141-142)
So although it would seem as if Chapman, Cecil, and Jenkins were all taking Austen “seriously,”
to other contemporary critics, they were gentle Janeites who were perpetuating a soft Austen,
something that Johnson does not consider when discussing the museum’s founding. Johnson later
writes that Harding’s essay “had the effect of wresting cultural authority away from largely
upper-class men and women of letters and to legitimate a newer and middle-class professoriate
who saw themselves and Austen alike as dissenters” (149). Harding’s issue is not with the
general public; his problem is with the nostalgic older generation of belletrists who are keeping
Austen from becoming a serious figure for critical discussion. Johnson states, “Harding is anti-
Janeite in order to be pro-Austen” (142). Harding’s condemnation of Chapman, Cecil, and
Jenkins is important because it shows that the origin of the Janeite division was not between
scholars and fans but among academics, making the creation of the Jane Austen museum even
more (politically) significant because it was a clear and vocal defense of Janeitism.

Of course while all of this was going on in the background, evident among Austen critics
and perhaps in gentleman’s clubs, none of this inter-Janeite tension is apparent in the articles and
public appeals of the Jane Austen Society. Interestingly, a leader published in The Times on the
same day alongside the letter embellishes the JAS’s appeal with much more dramatic, patriotic
language. The author writes,

The proposal, supported on this page by weighty opinion, for the acquisition and
preservation of JANE AUSTEN’S Hampshire home will commend itself to many. The
Jane Austen Society, hitherto local and modestly obscure, now appeals to a wider public.
Chawton ‘Cottage’ deserves preservation, in an age of destruction and decay, even if it
had never harboured genius. It is a sturdy, seemly building; and hard by is the lovely
‘Great House,’ Chawton Manor . . . the inhabitants of the cottage no longer, on stated
days, watch for the coaches bearing ‘the legislators of the ‘future’ to and from
Winchester. The creaking door that protected JANE AUSTEN’S anonymity is silent. Her
syringa no longer blooms. Only a plaque of Victorian design bears testimony to vanished
glories.

The historical imagination can do much. The pensive pilgrim has but to close his
eyes and open his mind, and water will rise in the pond, the coaches will rattle by, the
door will creak, and ‘syringa, very ‘pure’ will scent the air. But the historical imagination
needs at least a vestige on which it may build. The promoters of the appeal hope, and
their hopes will be echoed, to preserve for posterity more than a vestige: a solid
monument of Georgian comfort and Georgian elegance. (‘Jane Austen’s Home’)

Compared to the language of the appeal, this article is much more stylized. Evidently the writer
of the article did not think that the appeal on its own was not enough to persuade readers to
support the project. The first phrase to notice is “Chawton ‘Cottage’ deserves preservation, in an
age of destruction and decay,” followed by the next line “It is a sturdy, seemly building.” This
description implies that the house itself is in good condition, but England is what has been
destroyed; however, in Hooper’s 1925 article, it is the house that is described as in a “shabby and
neglected condition.” Now in 1946, England’s wreckage is viscerally present, and consequently,
the emphasis of the appeal has shifted. It is no longer about saving Austen’s threatened house: it
is about the preservation of an endangered Englishness.

This is not surprising considering the ways that Austen was read during World War II.
Claudia Johnson explains,
The Jane Austen we encountered in World War I is beloved in foreign parts, in strange lands, and in damp trenches by soldiers who are on their way to becoming, in Rupert Brooke’s words, ‘dust whom England bore’ . . . During World War II, Austen moves toward the center of a version of English identity felt to be coextensive with a cherished civilian home front under attack. (*Cults* 127-128)

Austen was read primarily as a form of escapism for soldiers and people and home during World War I, but her novels took on a new meaning for readers during the second war because England was directly under attack. Instead of providing an escape, the novels offered readers a reminder of English values, the values that seemed directly under threat. Bath in particular was linked increasingly to Austen during the second world war. In 1937 in the *Baedeker Great Britain*, Austen’s residence in Bath is noted along with a mention of *Persuasion*. Then in 1942, Bath was hit in the Baedeker Blitz with a series of deadly and destructive bombings. Johnson notes that the Baedeker bombings “were understood as attacks not on sites of military importance but on English culture and history, calculated to demoralize the public” (134). This is particularly important to understand because it means that Bath was quite deliberately targeted for its historical and cultural significance, of which Austen was a prominent part. Therefore, the association of Austen with the destruction of English culture was quite real.

Yet the Englishness under threat is a very particular Englishness. This is first indicated in the article by the line, “Only a plaque of Victorian design bears testimony to vanished glories,” emphasized more explicitly in the last line, “a solid monument of Georgian comfort and Georgian elegance.” Interestingly, the “Victorian” plaque refers to the 1917 centennial plaque. Evidently the writer has chosen to overlook the plaque’s post-Victorian creation and the
involvement of Americans in its creation. The war’s impact on England triggered an intense
nostalgia, and perhaps some amnesia, for a pre-industrial and pre-Victorian, age. Deidre Lynch
explains,

And like the eighteenth-century manors that focused preservationist initiatives following
the Georgian Group’s establishment in 1937, the Austen novel could also function in a
variety of narratives as a paradise lost and a means to discredit the present: narratives
about, as we have seen, town dwellers’ accelerating dereliction of the countryside, as well
as narratives about cultural decline in an age of mass education and entertainment. (“At
Home” 172)

The problem with these narratives is that they were not really preserving Georgian culture: they
were preserving a time and world that never existed. The countryside and stately homes became
symbols of lost English culture, and Austen became rhetorically implicated in this narrative. In
his book The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline (1987), Robert Hewison
explains that until the 1930s, the National Trust had been mainly focused on preserving Tudor
and Jacobean structures (59). The Georgian Group was established in 1937 by a member of the
National Trust with the objective of preserving country homes from 1714-1830. This marked a
shift in national heritage interests towards the Georgian period, which became even more evident
after the second world war. Hewison points specifically to the 1947 Town and Country Planning
Act which “introduced the concept of green belts, and sought to improve on the principle . . . that
specific buildings, graded according to architectural merit, should be listed, and therefore
protected from demolition or alteration” (61).
This legislation coincided with a significant growth in museums and consequently the emergence of the heritage industry, catalyzed by a postwar wave of nostalgia for preserving English history. Hewison writes, “The nostalgic impulse is an important agency in adjustment to crisis, it is a social emollient and reinforces national identity when confidence is weakened or threatened” (47). He explains that the problem, however, is that “The heritage industry presents a history that stifles, but above all, a history that is over. The development of Britain has reached a finite state that must be preserved at all costs against the threat of change” (141). This effect is important to keep in mind as we follow the development of the JAHM. Although the founders of the museum were focused primarily on preserving Austen, the newspaper coverage made the museum a part of a larger narrative of patriotism, heritage, and the preservation of a very specific English history.

On February 23, 1948, R.W. Chapman wrote to The Times to inform the editor that the Jane Austen Society had succeeded, though not without significant assistance. He writes,

Sir,—The appeal that you were so good as to publish on December 7, 1946, on behalf of the Jane Austen Society, for funds to purchase the house in which Jane Austen spent her last years, had a ready response from all parts of the English-speaking world. It is hoped that the sum hitherto subscribed, about £1,460, will suffice to carry out necessary and urgent repairs; it may even provide a small nucleus of an endowment fund. It would not have been sufficed to buy the property. Happily Mr. J.E. Carpenter has bought it, and has undertaken to hand it over, in memory of his son, Lieutenant Philip John Carpenter, 1st Battalion, The East Surrey Regiment, who fell at Trasimene on June, 1944, to such
trustees as the society may appoint. The subscribers, and all who wish well to the project, will be glad to learn of this generous and public-spirited act.

T. Edward Carpenter, London solicitor and JP (Felicity James 139), saved the day by purchasing the house in memory of his son, whom “was deeply interested in Jane Austen’s novels” (qtd. Johnson, Cults 41). Johnson notes that there is a marble panel commemorating him in the drawing room. She writes, “Chawton Cottage became his memorial as much as it is a museum devoted to Austen herself . . . The monument and museum together suggest that Austen is what Philip John Carpenter fought and fell for” (Cults 141). T. Edward Carpenter’s purchase of Chawton is important for a few reasons: it solidifies the connection between preserving Austen’s house and preserving the England lost in World War II; it bridges the gap between R.W. Chapman and his fellow Jane Austen Society cohorts and the Janeites associated with the war; and it is appropriately Austenian for a wealthy benefactor to arrive at an opportune moment.

The house opened as a museum on July 23, 1949. An article published in the Sunday Times the following day described:

The Duke of Wellington, opening the museum—the occasion also commemorating the 132nd anniversary of Jane Austen’s death—said that Lady Catherine de Bourgh would have discharged his task so well as to put him ‘to the blush,’ although she might have thought her time was wasted on a literary character. . . .

After Mr. Carpenter had said he deplored the fact that so many Jane Austen relics had found their way to America, mentioning specifically locks of Jane’s and her father’s hair, an American, Mrs. Henry G. Burke, of Baltimore, rose and said she would be glad to present those very locks to the museum. She said she had bought them at a Sotheby’s sale
in May, 1948. Dr. Chapman also presented the museum with a tiny ivory box made by one of Jane’s descendants, an admiral.

The museum, housed in the drawing-room, has as yet few of Jane’s personal possessions. There are two silk purses, a kerchief which she embroidered, her oak desk (which puts at fault Austin Dobson’s description of her ‘mahogany desk’), and a piece of doggerel.

Johnson adds more details to the events around Alberta Hirschheimer Burke’s donation of Austen’s lock. She refers to a letter later written by Burke’s husband, who said that upon hearing Mr. Carpenter’s complaint, “Alberta muttered under her breath, ‘I will give them the damned hair.’” Johnson also explains, “Accounts of this event appearing in the reports of the Jane Austen Society present it as a happy coincidence. But Burke was irked to find herself reproached as a grasping American, purchasing what Britons themselves offered for sale” (155). This tension is particularly interesting because it shows the complicated relationship between British and American Janeites. Although the Jane Austen Society was happy to receive donations from across the “English-speaking world” (Chapman Times), they are not as happy that the international love of Austen has resulted in the American possession of many of her relics. This conflict would repeat nearly identically in 2013 when American singer Kelly Clarkson would purchase Austen’s turquoise ring, only to be handed over to the museum after a press uproar.

The appeal for relics related to Austen became the museum’s primary focus once it opened in 1949. The house was originally intended to be a site for Austen pilgrimage, but it developed into a museum significantly due to Carpenter’s encouragement of the collection of Austen relics. Consequential articles were published in various newspapers with titles such as
“Relics of Jane Austen Wanted for Museum at Chawton” (*Alton Gazette*, date unknown) or “Austen ‘Scraps’ Wanted” (*Southern Daily Mail*, July 10, 1950). The museum’s founders, particularly Mr. Carpenter, wanted to collect authentic relics in order to “recreate the conditions that Jane and her family might have known in the house, with pictures and furniture arranged in a naturalistic manner” (“Building the Collection” JAHM 2019). Ironically, however, most of the “relics” which the museum obtained had only a slight connection to Austen, or no real connection at all. Instead, Janeites sent in items of personal significance, such as an “Effigy doll of Jane Austen.” A woman named Ruth C. Koch from Massachusetts sent a photograph of a coat that her mother had made for her supposedly modeled after a coat owned by Austen (Johnson, *Cults* 158). Johnson explains that although these objects don’t necessarily represent Jane Austen’s life at Chawton, the objects are valuable to the people donating them, which tells another unexpected but important story about the kinds of people who care about Austen. This, she notices, is fitting because objects are only really mentioned in Austen’s novels when they are significant to a character, such as Harriet Smith’s box of keepsakes or Fanny Price’s few reminders of home.

The museum itself, not just its patrons, tried to make any connection with Austen that they could, even if that meant displaying a piano “similar” to the one Austen owned (Johnson, *Cults* 153) instead of the actual original. Johnson suggests that “we go to these lengths to materialize her . . . in part because there is so remarkably little of her left” (175). Austen did not have many possessions, and most of what she did have was sold in 1845 after her sister Cassandra’s death because the items were just household objects. Surprisingly, no one seemed to be discouraged by the improbability of recreating her home, proving that Janeites’ desire “can
subsist on so lean a diet” (Cults 176). However, Johnson also considers the converse: that “relics” can only connect us to Austen to an extent. She writes, “The treasures we might cherish for their power to conjure Austen’s presence can also bewilder us into a false sense of the fullness of her being, which, if we are to feel it at all, we will find only in reading her novels” (179).

Some of the founders of the Jane Austen Society seem to be of this mind. In a July 23, 1951 article in The Times, a correspondent writes,

Lord David Cecil, speaking at the annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society yesterday, said that this was his first visit to Chawton. He had not been there before, he added, because the author’s description of places did not play a major part in her books. (“Jane Austen Society”)

Evidently Lord Cecil was not interested in the secondary or tertiary objects distantly connected to Austen, considering that he had not even visited Chawton until 1951. Nevertheless, he supported the project, showing that the museum was founded by and supported by different kinds of Janeites. It also shows that perhaps the founders did not know what kind of Austen readers they would attract. We have seen through the previous newspaper articles that the founders were interested in preserving Chawton House simply as a memorial to Jane Austen. The whimsical and patriotic language used to describe the project came from other writers, not the founders. The same can be said of the relics. The founders hoped to obtain authentic relics which belonged to Austen; the dolls, photographs, etc. came from Janeites who responded to the museum’s appeals. That is not to say that the founders of the museum did not also enjoy Austen fandom—they too were condemned by “superior” critics—but perhaps the museum became a
shrine to Austen not due to their efforts but because of the outside response. T. Edward Carpenter also undoubtedly contributed to this shift because, in a way, he bridged the gap between the founders and the general public. This is important to notice because it shows that the founders’ original purpose was altered 1.) because of funding, and 2.) because of public opinion, two themes that later repeat in the founding of Chawton House Library.

By 1952, the house had acquired enough relics to truly consider itself an Austen “museum,” with plans to open more rooms within the year. A correspondent for The Times reported,

At present only one room, the Austen family drawing room, is reserved as a museum, where Jane Austen’s desk, an escritoire bookcase, a kerchief she embroidered, some locks of her dark brown hair, and other relics may be seen. Her donkey carriage is in keeping outside.

The association of the house at Chawton with Jane Austen was for a time little better recognized. While the disciples of the Brontë sisters had full possession of the parsonage at Haworth (save for a few top rooms), Janeites had little pleasure in knowing that the house at Chawton was in deplorable disrepair. . . .

How different she was from George Eliot, who always waited for ‘inspiration’ and could not bear to hear the scratching of her husband’s pen in the same apartment. Miss Austen had no separate room, as she had at Steventon, and the scratching of a pen was as naught. She had to write in a living room overlooking the road—quiet maybe in her day—and was subject to interruptions from the servants and from visitors. The children from Steventon would burst in. She would not have the creaking door repaired because the screeching of hinges warned her of any visitor, who might not be welcome at the
moment and gave her time to slip her sheets of manuscript under the blotting paper.

Here, in such disturbing conditions, Jane Austen wrote all her novels except one. Were the characters drawn from life? Are they to be seen only in fancy in the museum to-day? (“Miss Austen’s House”)

This article depicts Austen in a domestic light, but it is odd in its descriptions of “interruptions” and “disturbing conditions.” The author evidently has trouble locating Austen in a domestic scene and in the context of other female authors. Whereas the Brontës and Eliot seemed to have comfortable home lives, Austen’s was filled with noise and distractions. Of course the writer is significantly projecting their viewpoint and fabricating a narrative built on scant evidence, but their imaginative writing is nevertheless intriguing, in a way, and it furthermore captures the difficulty of domesticating Austen. Perhaps this offers a new perspective of the purpose of the JAHM; by obtaining more of her belongings and opening more rooms of her house, Janeites like the article’s author could restore Austen to the proper domestic space that she never fully had.

The narrative of protecting Austen’s home continued to strengthen as Chawton faced more outside threats. The primary threat of the 1950s was a bypass proposed to be built through Alton, the town adjacent to Chawton. In an article in *The Times* on March 13, 1952 titled “Chawton Road Plan: Jane Austen Society’s Protest,” a letter written from the Jane Austen Society to the Hampshire City Council is described, which explains that the bypass would “greatly decrease the number of visitors and may make it no longer possible to maintain the museum.” A similar article was published later that year and yet again in 1957, showing that the threat of the bypass loomed despite no evidence of actual action. The 1957 article titled “Chawton’s Alarm at By-Pass Plan: Fears for Jane Austen Museum” reported, “Local feeling is
strong against the possible destruction of beauty.” The bypass was not built until 1971, but its actual construction did not seem to warrant a strong response (Lambert “A Timeline”). This may seem like a strange story to consider, but it is important because it shows a continued narrative of decline and imminent destruction, which carries the same themes and language as the post-war appeals. It seems that the narrative of saving something under the threat of destruction or decay is a repeated characteristic of the museum’s history, and we will see these emerge yet again in the story of Chawton House Library.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the museum remained relatively stable. Although there were some outside threats, like Chawton redevelopment plans in 1977 (Howard “Pride and prejudice against developers”), the museum remained financially supported by the Jane Austen Memorial Trust, set up by T. Edward Carpenter, until the charity was transferred to the Jane Austen’s House Museum Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2014 (“Jane Austen’s House Museum,” Chawton Parish Council). The museum seems to have retained high visitor-ship throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s through the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Austen’s death in 1967 (Howard “Janeites join”) and the bicentenary of her birth in 1975 (Howard “Villagers of Chawton”). These recurring anniversaries have provided the museum with consistent occasions for programming and celebration, as we will later see with the 2017 bicentenary. The 1990’s spike in film adaptations significantly increased tourism to the JAHM: a 1996 Times article, reported that in six months, the museum had more than 25,000 visitors, undoubtedly due to Colin Firth’s debut in the BBC Pride and Prejudice series (“Austen Fever”). Austen’s unceasing popularity has made the JAHM a destination for Janeite tourists of each generation. The following chapter will explore the museum’s most recent history, which shows
the endurance of some themes such as relic ownership and Anglo-American Janeite relations, along with the navigation of new challenges for cultural heritage organizations, which are forced to adapt to stay relevant and marketable.
The JAHM has made headlines a few times in recent years, which has consequently brought Janeite controversies to the public stage. The most unexpected of conflicts arose in 2008 around the matter of leaving human ashes in the museum’s gardens. The *Daily Mail* reported in November on a letter written from the JAHM to the Jane Austen Society, which stated,

> While we understand many admirers of Jane Austen would love to have ashes laid here, it is something we do not allow. It is distressing for visitors to see mounds of human ash, particularly so for our gardener. Also, it is of no benefit to the garden! (“Forced to Ban”)

Evidently this was an uncomfortable situation for everyone involved. Was this a new level of Janeite devotion? Charlotte Higgins, writing for *The Guardian*, rationalized,

> The only explanation is the currently unstoppable power of the Austen cult, fuelled by Colin Firth in a wet blouse, by Andrew Davies's adaptations, and by Hollywood. I'm all for enjoying books, but the cult of Austen has reached ridiculous proportions. In a post-feminist world that should know better, she seems to be adored as the comforting provider of romantic, happy-endings nonsense instead of the sharp and acerbic social satirist she deserves to be seen as. (“Ashes Scattered”)

The controversy gave critics like Higgins another opportunity to exacerbate the Janeite divide, condemning the ash spreading Janeites as crazy and backwards in order to prove that Austen devotees such as herself would never do such a thing.
Higgins is also brushing aside a complex history of Janeite devotion that existed long before the Hollywood adaptations. Janeites have been interested in Austen’s body certainly since the 1920s, and likely before. In *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures*, Claudia Johnson writes about “Jane Austen’s Body” and the history of Janeites’ fascination with Austen’s corporeal elusiveness. She writes,

> Visiting Chawton Cottage one summer, I overheard a Janeite from Bath bragging about acquisitions to the Jane Austen Study Centre there, but her enthusiasm was crushed when a Janeite from Winchester rejoined, ‘But we have her bones.’ Clearly, the cult of Jane Austen is not merely—or primarily—a book club, but rather retains an affiliation with habits of veneration rooted in the devotion to local saints and their relics. (*Cults* 16)

Although Austen is not buried at Chawton Cottage, the house is still filled with Austen’s presence, perhaps even more than her grave at Winchester Cathedral. It houses Austen’s only remaining lock of hair, the desk where she wrote most of her novels, her bed, and various other relics associated with Austen’s corporeal presence. Therefore, when Higgins attributes the Janeites’ ash spreading to seeking comfort and “happy-ending nonsense,” she is not entirely wrong, but she fails to consider the spiritual, saint-like quality associated with Austen’s presence which likely compels families to want to spread their loved ones on Austen’s soil.

Austen’s saint-like status has made her few existing belongings, or “relics,” enormously valuable to the JAHM and to Janeites worldwide. One such relic is her gold and turquoise ring, which 2002 American Idol winner Kelly Clarkson bought in 2012 at a Sotheby’s auction for £152,450. Ted Scheinman, author of *Camp Austen: My Life as an Accidental Jane Austen Superfan*, reported on the events from a JASNA conference in Minneapolis. He described that
Clarkson’s purchase “prompted furrowed brows on at least two continents over the prospect that this ring . . . might find an unceremonious home in southern California” (“One Ring”). Evidently even American Janeites thought that the ring belonged in the UK. The culture minister at the time, Ed Vaizey, gave the museum extra time by enforcing a “rare ‘temporary export bar’ that kept the ring in the U.K.,” giving the JAHM until the end of December 2013 to raise enough funds to meet Clarkson’s price. Vaizey stated, “Jane Austen’s modest lifestyle and her early death mean that objects associated with her of any kind are extremely rare, so I hope that a UK buyer comes forward so this simple but elegant ring can be saved for the nation.” Vaizey’s language is highly patriotic. His phrase “saved for the nation” nearly exactly echoes the rhetoric of the JAHM and CHL founders. Evidently Austen was still a valuable national asset.

By the end of September 2013, the JAHM had raised £157,740, “with the help of an anonymous six-figure donation” (Scheinman). The Minneapolis JASNA conference attendees suspected that the donor was Sandy Lerner, which was ironic as she too was an American buyer. The gossip around the anonymous donor sounded strikingly similar to the responses to the news of Jane Fairfax’s mysterious piano in *Emma*. Even Scheinman comments that “Chatter over ‘anonymous benefactors’ in Austen’s novels turns normally rational creatures into parodies of Miss Bates.” He talked to the woman running the Chawton House table at the conference who hinted, “Consider who can spend that kind of money, and then consider which of those people is, shall we say, involved at Chawton.” All signs point to Lerner. British and American Janeites alike rejoiced at the ring’s return to Chawton, though the American news told the story differently. *NBC* reported, “Kelly Clarkson forced to sell $250,000 ring to Jane Austen museum” (“Kelly Clarkson”). Clarkson, however, remained amicable. She stated, “The ring is a
beautiful national treasure and I am happy to know that so many Jane Austen fans will get to see it at Jane Austen's House Museum” (NBC). Considering how few items in the JAHM actually belonged to Austen, having the ring in its possession was highly important. It has now been safely on display since its return, and visitors can even buy a replica from the gift shop.

Although the ring undoubtedly brought attention to the museum, the JAHM still was in need of funding for structural upkeep. In 2016, the museum launched the “Jane’s Fund” campaign at their annual “T. Edward Carpenter Memorial Lecture,” in memory of the JAHM’s founder (“Launching Jane’s Fund”). The campaign webpage explains that “recent surveys have revealed that vital building repairs are required to ensure that the fabric of the Grade I Listed house does not deteriorate further.” Perhaps more compellingly, the appeal states,

We urgently need your help to enable us to secure the house where Jane created Emma Woodhouse and Mr Knightley and perfected Elizabeth Bennet, Mr Darcy, Catherine Morland and the Dashwoods. From replacing the roof tiles to major structural work on the bowing front wall, your donation can help us protect the house for future generations. (“Jane’s Fund”)

The campaign utilized the upcoming 200th bicentenary of Austen’s death to emphasize the importance of saving not only her house, but her beloved characters, from decay. Interestingly, W. Hooper’s 1925 letter to The Times used strikingly similar language: “The celebration of the 150th anniversary of Jane Austen’s birth affords an opportunity for calling attention to the shabby and neglected condition of her home at Chawton.” Again, an anniversary gives more urgency to Chawton Cottage’s state of disrepair.
The 2017 bicentenary gave the museum even more opportunities to promote their campaign. The £10 Austen banknote entered circulation in September 2017, and the museum cleverly anticipated its release by launching a campaign asking Austen appreciators to “Bring Austen Home” by sending their first Austen notes to the “Jane’s Fund” (“#BringJaneHome”). The museum advertised “Jane Austen’s House Museum ambassadors Lucy Worsley, Joanna Trollope and Kathy Lette” were among the first to vow to donate their £10 notes. The campaign gained instant twitter and Facebook attention. The attention has died down, but “Jane’s Fund” has raised £55,901 as of April 2019 (“Just Giving”). Amidst the fundraising activities, the museum celebrated the bicentenary with a series of public events and an exhibition called “Jane Austen in 41 Objects.” The exhibit created an online gallery of the objects on display at the museum. One object from the exhibit, a patchwork coverlet made by Austen, her mother, and her sister, inspired a “Community Story Quilt Project,” in which people worldwide created quilt squares to illustrate Jane Austen’s history (“Community Story”). These projects were funded by a £191,600 Bicentenary Collections Project grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund grant (“Austen Bicentenary Collections”).

Due in part to the success of the 2017 events and initiatives, the museum received a £92,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant for “Resilient Heritage.” In the museum’s announcement, they explain their plans for utilizing the funds:

Running throughout 2018 and 2019, the project will focus on the promotion, protection and public enjoyment of Jane Austen’s home, building on the successes of the 2017 bicentenary year. From team-wide training to refreshing the Museum's visual identity, the project aims to improve the visitor experience and enhance opportunities to visit and
learn about the Museum. As a small organisation but one of international cultural
significance, we are thrilled to have been given the opportunity to further increase the
number of people who directly engage with Jane Austen's heritage. (“Resilient
Heritage”)

Interestingly, the JAHM recognized that they needed a stronger visual brand at the same time as
CHL was entering an extensive rebranding phase as well. Although the museum’s objectives, to
preserve Austen’s house and her heritage, have remained more stable than CHL, the museum
also must adapt to in order to remain interesting and relevant to the public.

The most recent exhibition, opened in February 2019, reflects the museum’s effort to
adapt and stay interesting. Instead of celebrating Austen’s heritage though her novels or
belongings, the exhibit, titled “Making the Museum” tells the story of the museum’s history,
celebrating 70 years since its founding in 1949. The exhibit begins in 1939 when Dorothy
Darnell first wrote a description of Chawton Cottage’s condition. The exhibit does not mention
W. Hooper’s 1925 letter to The Times, perhaps because he was not later involved in the
museum’s founding. The majority of the exhibit focuses on the 1940-1950 period, but the exhibit
also displays objects that Janeites have donated over the years, such as a miniature of Chawton
Cottage donated by a Chawton neighbor, Mrs Thalia Sanders, in 1981, along with other “pilgrim
offerings” (“Making the Museum”). The exhibit will run through the end of the year,
accompanied by a series of related events including a 70th birthday party in July during Jane
Austen Regency Week, an annual event which draws thousands of Janeites to Chawton in
Regency attire. The JAHM will continue to evolve, but they will never run out of anniversaries
to celebrate.
Creating Chawton House Library: Enter Sandy Lerner

For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?

-Pride and Prejudice

Inheritance Drama

Beneath the mania fueled by ‘90s film and television adaptations emerged another storyline: a narrative of family controversy fitting for an Austen novel. The main players were Mr. Richard Knight and Mr. Henry Rice, both descendants of Austen’s brother, Mr. Edward Knight who had taken the name of Knight in order to inherit the Chawton estate in 1812. Mr. Richard Knight inherited the same estate in 1987. However, he soon realized he would not be able to maintain the estate, as the main house, Chawton House, would require at least £900,000 of maintenance in order to protect it from disrepair. In 1989, Richard Knight decided to put the property on the market for £1.5 million, looking to lease for up to 90 years. Enter Mr. Henry Rice. Mr. Rice, a descendent of the same Austen brother, wrote to The Times on September 8th, 1989 voicing his intention of purchasing the estate from Mr. Knight in order to found a Jane Austen Study and Research Centre. Mr. Rice explains that he formed the Jane Austen Centre Trust along with Brian Southam and Anthony Trollope, and the trust has made an offer of £1million. Rice writes, “The centre will be for the benefit of all students and lovers of her work . . . No such library or centre devoted to Jane Austen has existed hitherto” (“Centre”). A corresponding article written on the same day, however, explains the tension underlying Mr. Rice’s proposal. Simon Tait reports in The Times, that Mr. Knight wants to sell a leasehold, but
he understands that the trustees (Mr. Rice’s trust) is only interested in a freehold (“Austen Descendants”). This would prove to be more than a minor difference.

A leasehold would allow the Chawton Estate to remain in the Knight family’s name, even if the property was leased for 90 years. A freehold agreement would mean that the Jane Austen Centre Trust would buy the estate entirely, breaking off the centuries long Knight line of inheritance. An article in the New York Times published a week later explains, “Mr. Knight says he wants to keep the house in the family and does not mind the idea of the center, but must sell because he cannot afford the upkeep” (“Austen’s Family Squabbles”). Mr. Knight’s priorities surprised Mr. Rice and others, who expected Mr. Knight to value the creation of an Austen Centre, especially as the president of the Jane Austen Society. His JAS involvement, however, appears to have been less important than keeping the property in the Knight family and making an advantageous financial decision. The NYT article cites Brian Southam, a member of the Jane Austen Centre Trust, who remarked that “[Austen] would have been entertained by the ruckus.”

The conflict, though serious, also carries an element of irony in its Austenian nature.

The headline of a December Times article announced Mr. Rice’s failure: “Jane Austen trust concedes defeat.” The trust’s offer was rejected and Simon Tait wrote, “Instead, it is expected that the house will be sold for development possibly a hotel with a golf course.” This turn of events almost echoes the plot of Austen’s last unfinished novel, Sanditon which centers around the transformation of a fishing village into a seaside resort, but thankfully the Chawton resort/golf course scheme never came to fruition. The property was sold on a leasehold agreement to Chawton Developments with the resort project in mind, but in 1991 the project was put on hold, as market conditions proved to be unpromising. This was excellent news for Mr.
Rice. Simon Tait interviews Mr. Rice who says, “We had thought that we had reached the end of the road, but now there is a chance that the house may become the study centre after all.” Tait goes on to explain, “If agreement is reached with the trust, the house will be passed to it partially restored. The trust would then launch an appeal for between £5 million and £7 million. There are more than 60 Jane Austen societies in America and a growing enthusiasm in Japan.” Tait used a nearly identical closing line in his 1989 article (though there were 10 fewer societies in America at the time). The mention of Jane Austen societies seems slightly tacked on, but Tait certainly seems to be recognizing the American involvement in Austen culture and heritage.

With still insufficient funds, Mr. Rice’s Jane Austen Centre Trust would not be awarded the project. Instead, a third party entered the picture: Sandy Lerner. Lerner, a cofounder of California tech company Cisco Systems, and formerly founder of Stanford’s JASNA chapter, had a large fortune, and as an enthusiastic Janeite, she was eager to make the Jane Austen library a reality. This order of events is strikingly similar to the founding of Jane Austen’s House Museum 50 years earlier, where T. Edward Carpenter saved the day after public appeals didn’t raise enough funds. In an *Independent* article in April of 1993, journalist Alex Renton writes,

> The mysterious Ms Lerner is inspiring as much fevered rumour as any of Jane Austen's single men of means. Mr Jarman, the developer who has himself gone bankrupt with the collapse of his plans, has heard, as have others, that Ms Lerner made her money through 'virtual reality' systems. ‘I think she'd like to turn Chawton into a Disneyland-style theme park,’ he says.

Before Lerner’s offer was accepted, there was much public skepticism regarding her intentions. Some, as Renton explains, were worried that Lerner’s involvement in the tech industry meant
that she intended to turn Chawton into a modern theme park. Others worried that Lerner’s motives were too political. One Janeite that Renton interviews thinks Lerner is planning a “women’s commune” in order to further a feminist agenda, a territory that has long been contentious in the Austen community. A later *Telegraph* article reveals even more absurd rumors, such as that her husband “was secretly designing missile guidance systems for the Ministry of Defence” or that “[t]he badger society claimed her plans to restore the 18th-century landscape would interfere with some abandoned badger setts” (“Money’s My Little Defining Thing”). Evidently many subgroups felt threatened by Lerner’s plans.

The rumors surrounding Lerner’s Chawton involvement seem all too Austenian. The introduction of Mr. Darcy at the Meryton assembly comes to mind, from Chapter III of *Pride and Prejudice*:

> [B]ut his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud; to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.

Austen’s clever narration gives the reader an immediate sense of the local peoples’ opinion of Mr. Darcy, and their opinion of him changes as they observe him throughout the evening. By the
end of the paragraph, and the night, there seems to be a general consensus of his disagreeableness. This is all done through free indirect discourse, without the direct commentary or observation from any specific onlooker. Instead, Austen captures the evolving consensus of the entire room matter of factly, though not without a hint of mockery. In Lerner’s case, her chorus of onlookers are the Disney skeptical, feminist fearing, missile plot inventing, and badger protecting conspirators who felt threatened by her plans. This chorus of “townspeople” may seem like background noise, but their voices should not be brushed aside: they are just as much a part of the discourse as Knight, Rice, and Lerner. If Austen’s novels teach us anything (which they certainly do), it is that no individual’s choices are made in a vacuum. There are always onlookers with opinions, even if they sound outrageous. Their fear demonstrates that making any decision involving Austen’s name is a highly complex matter, not only because people feel personally invested in the author, but because Austen matters involve an intersection of unexpected groups with their own clashing concerns and agendas.

Lerner’s decision to purchase Chawton House was in fact fueled by a tension between Janeites. In October of 1992, Lerner was at a JASNA meeting in Santa Monica California, and she attended a lecture by Nigel Nicolson who had written a book on houses connected to Austen. According to Deborah Yaffe in her book Among the Janeites, Nicolson mentioned in passing that Chawton House was on the market and there were talks of a study center. Nicolson, however, had plans to start a center in Bath, claiming that anyone supporting the Chawton plan was a “stupid old cow.” Offended by his “casual upper-class British misogyny,” Yaffe writes, Lerner “picked up the telephone and told her secretary to buy Chawton House” (54). From the start,
Lerner entered the Chawton project knowing she was going up against conservative British Janeites and relishing the opportunity to prove them wrong.

Rachel Kelly’s September 1993 *Times* article titled “My £1 love for Austen” offers more background on Lerner. Kelly addresses the fears of Chawton locals who worried that Lerner’s plans would not align with their own more traditional values. Kelly writes, “Ms. Lerner had just attended her first parish meeting, soothing the sensibilities of locals who feared she might turn the house into a Disney theme park or rival Austen museum.” This comment shows that from early on, the Chawton House team wanted to make it clear that they were not competing with the museum. The concern for an overly feminist agenda is also noted: “Although she is wary of calling herself a ‘feminist’ in Britain and prefers to label herself an ‘independent spirt’, she appreciates what she sees as Austen’s spirit.” Lerner, however, wanted to be on the best terms with local Janeites and therefore chose to be careful with how she presented the project. Lerner’s idealistic plan also had a tense underside. Kelly writes, “She is positively glowing as she slips into her rich Californian drawl, after rather more clipped exchanges about the tricky negotiations involved in buying the house from the receivers.” Evidently undertaking the project was not seamless, considering Lerner’s careful navigation around political/feminist language and this mention of the “tricky negotiations.”

Another *Times* article by Kelly from August of 1993 offered more details, explaining that Lerner purchased Chawton House for £1.25 million through her organization, the Leonard X. Bosack and Bette M. Kruger Foundation, named for her parents. *Times* writer Rachel Kelly ends the article with a reaction from Richard Knight who says, “This is the best possible news as far as I am concerned. I am looking forward to seeing Chawton House restored and appreciated, and
it is even better that its use will be associated with, among others, Jane Austen” (“Jane Austen’s Home Sold”). Knight’s enthusiasm, whether genuine or not, shows that his earlier resistance to the plan had mostly to do with inheritance. Lerner’s lease agreement keeps Knight happy, as the estate remains in his name.

Although Lerner approached the project with good intentions—to create a women’s writers library—it was impossible for her to know what complicated territory she was entering. In some ways, the rumors of Lerner’s plans carry an element of truth; no, she was not interested in building a Disney Austenland, but she was an eager, idealistic American businesswoman with a vision larger than Chawton’s humble village had expected. A 2003 article in the *Telegraph* offers some clearer insight into what went into the founding of Chawton Library. Elizabeth Grice writes, “When she bought the roofless Elizabethan house from a bankrupt developer who had planned to turn it into a hotel and golf course, she assumed she would be regarded as “a good person.” Instead, the rumour mill got to work, grinding her academic intentions in a mishmash of hysteria and innuendo” (“Money’s My Little Defining Thing”) Understandably, Lerner thought she was being heroic. So why weren’t the Janeites and the Chawton locals grateful?

Perhaps we can look to *Emma* for perspective. Emma encourages Harriet to refuse Mr. Martin’s marriage offer, persuading her that she could do better and that Mr. Elton would be a more fitting alternative. She thought she was being helpful, but she failed to consider the repercussions of her involvement or who would be affected besides Harriet. Of course, Lerner’s Chawton situation was very different, but in both cases our protagonists thought they were being “good people” but soon found that not everyone saw them that way.
Lerner’s own love of Austen developed when she was studying computer science at Stanford and she found comfort in Austen’s novels as an escape into a “civilized, humorous world” (Grice). Once her tech success made Lerner a large fortune, she expanded upon her interest and built up a library of 6,200 rare books and manuscripts, mostly composed of women’s writers from between 1600 and 1830. Lerner explained to Grice that reading Austen’s predecessors and contemporaries made Austen make a “whole lot more sense.” Lerner’s extreme immersion into seventeenth and eighteenth century literature shows that her interest in Austen is not mere surface level fandom: she is truly well read. It may not be fair to judge Lerner from what we know of her reading (the same could be said for Austen), but it does reveal something useful. Lerner may have known Austen and her contemporaries backwards and forwards when she decided to buy Chawton, but she didn’t realize that any project involving Austen inevitably brings with it the baggage of Janeite history and British heritage.

The Question of Heritage

In a 1998 Sunday Telegraph article, Christopher Woodward brilliantly reveals some of the underlying issues in the library’s creation. The article touches on tensions that are rarely addressed directly in other news pieces. The main focus of the article is the question of whether or not Chawton should receive Heritage Lottery funding. Woodward doesn’t take an explicit stance but offers a strong argument for the value of an institution like Chawton House. He explains, “The project poses a fundamental question for HLF: does scholarship alone deserve Lottery money?” This is definitely a complicated question. On the one hand, Chawton House

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11 The article refers to the Heritage Lottery Fund as HLF, though the organization would later change its name to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2019.
was formed as a heritage site, meant to preserve not only Austen’s family history but more centrally the work of women writers that has for so long been overlooked. At least the latter purpose seems to further the Heritage Lottery Fund’s mission, to support British cultural organizations to promote the preservation of British heritage for the public’s benefit.¹²

However, would Chawton’s establishment really benefit the public? And how could public benefit really be measured? Surely Chawton would not attract as many visitors as a museum, both because it would require an appointment to visit and because it’s not the sort of place that you just happen to pass by. Woodward writes, “The project plans to accommodate a dozen scholars in contemplative seclusion and to turn coach parties away. Is any modern museum brave enough to declare that, sometimes, a pilgrimage by a single scholar can be worth more than a visit by a coach load of frog-marched school children?” Woodward’s mention of worth is the key issue. I think we can explore the complexities of this question without yet entering the murky territory of what is true British heritage.

The value that Woodward is addressing is first off a financial question. The HLF must select recipients of their funding carefully because their money is not really a gift but an investment. The National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) was created in 1980 with the passing of the National Heritage Act. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) was formed in 1994 to distribute the funding allocated by the NHMF, which is a “non-departmental public body accountable to Parliament via the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)” (“Heritage Fund”). Although the government is not a part of the HLF’s funding

¹² Most current mission statement: “We use money raised by players of the National Lottery to inspire, lead and resource the UK’s heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future” (“Heritage Fund”).
decisions, the HLF still receives its funds from the government and the national lottery for the purpose of preserving national heritage, so its decisions must be made in the best interest of the nation. The hope, in the long term, is that these organizations and projects will increase income by increasing visitor numbers and tourism, and on a less measurable level, British culture will remain rich, both for the sake of maintaining a sense of internal cultural identity and to sustain a national narrative. The HLF’s selection, therefore, must be careful and strategic.

Besides museums and libraries, the HLF also funds organizations such as buildings, monuments, parks, maritime and transport preservation, and community heritage projects (“Heritage Fund”). Woodward notes a more controversial use of HLF funds: to purchase Winston Churchill’s papers for £12.5m “for the nation” in 1995 to be displayed at the Churchill Archive Centre. The decisions proved to be so controversial that in 1998, the value of the Churchill paper choice was still being publicly debated. Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport at the time, did not support the HLF’s decision, stating in April 1998 that since the papers were purchased, around 150,000 people had viewed them, therefore theoretically costing each visitor £840. An Independent article stated: “Mr Smith said that, in future, lottery funding would be directed away from spending on bricks, buildings and other objects and towards spending on people and activities” (“Lottery Gifts”). This controversy surely adds a level of contention to the Sunday Telegraph article on Chawton written just five months later.

The decision of whether or not to fund Chawton therefore was not simply about the worth of Jane Austen or women writers; it was a question of people and impact. Returning to Woodward’s question, could “a pilgrimage by a single scholar” be more valuable than a constant influx of visiting school groups? Quantifiably and financially, no, but maybe this sort of value
can’t be measured. Woodward spoke to Isobel Grundy, the librarian at Chawton at the time, who said “Lecturers who can enthuse a classroom are those actively engaged in new research. And if only two or three students in that class are inspired to be become teachers themselves, that’s enough to bring Austen’s novels to a new generation of children.” She also “rebuts any talk of ‘elitism’,” a sticky area in Austen readership. Grundy reminds Woodward that the house is accessible to anyone by appointment and it did plan to have visits from schools on occasion. Perhaps Woodward’s question of whether any other “modern museum” would be brave enough to value a visit from a scholar over groups of schoolchildren is not the right question to ask. After all, its name, Chawton House Library, explicitly states its purpose as library, not a museum.

Woodward also comments on the difference between British and American Janeites to note a potential underlying complication for the project. Lerner’s nationality is not a small detail in the affair—it immensely influenced the way in which she was perceived and the general sense of threat to the Austen of Chawton’s heritage. The difference is as much about Britishness and Americanness as it is about new and old ideologies, but not in the way that you would expect. In his article on the HLF, Woodward writes, “Lerner’s New World millions have rescued Chawton, and Gillian Drummond’s old world tact has guided Lerner through the prickly sensibilities of the English countryside and its cautious planning system.” This sentence is loaded with labels that may not do justice to the nuances really involved. Lerner’s “New World millions” is an accurate description: she really did make her fortune through the tech industry, not through family. But Drummond’s “old world tact” followed by the “prickly sensibilities of the English countryside” indicates that Lerner’s new money is not the issue as much as her difficulty in navigating deeply rooted English traditions and ways of doing things. Although Lerner was certainly careful in how
she presented her plan to the public, reactions from locals and the press show that from the start, conservative Austen defenders were determined not to like her.

Woodward further emphasizes the American/British divide in a nearly out of place comparison of the cross-atlantic reader cultures. He writes:

It is no secret that English Jane-ites do not see eye to eye with their American counterparts. At their annual meetings, the English Society members compare recipes from the best-selling *Jane Austen Cookbook* and argue whether Colin Firth’s Mr Darcy has eclipsed Laurence Olivier’s. The American Society believes Jane Austen was the first feminist and the highlight of its annual meeting is a lecture appraising ‘the relational competency’ of Austen’s male characters.

Is this a reasonable description of both societies in the late ‘90s? If we accept Woodward’s analysis, it certainly shows an interesting contrast between the groups. The British Jane Austen Society evidently was more willing to engage with Austen in pop culture, while the Americans alternately appear to have taken themselves too seriously, more concerned with engaging with Austen through the lens of contemporary social issues than being willing to laugh. Of course, Woodward’s description may very well be exaggerated, but his word choice “it is no secret that…” indicates that this split in Janeite culture is to an extent publicly recognized.

But the question of the article is heritage. In the first paragraph, Woodward writes: “The ancestral house of the Austen family is the centre of a six-year controversy which may only be settled by a meeting of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) next month in what could be seen as a test case for the future of our heritage.” Woodward doesn’t seem to be joking. Read this way, the article is a presentation of the evidence necessary for the reader to decide whether or not
Chawton is a worthy heritage site. Evidently Woodward believes American/British cultural
differences to be a relevant factor. He doesn’t ask it directly, but Woodward’s writing brings up
the question of whether an American Janeite can truly preserve Jane Austen and British heritage
in the true spirit of, well, “Britishness.” No matter how good Lerner’s attentions may be, she
could not make herself British.

The Grand Opening

On July 19th, 2003, CHL officially opened after ten years of restoration. It took longer
than everyone had expected, especially Sandy Lerner, but at least in the face of an audience, she
appeared to still hold on to her vision. She addressed the crowd at Chawton with a speech titled
“Forty Rooms of Their Own.” Lerner began by explaining what the project was not. She said,
“First of all, I’d like to answer the question about what it is—it’s not a shrine to Jane Austen.
Tom Carpenter does that impossible job absolutely admirably right down the road.” With a
good sense of humor, Lerner simultaneously acknowledges past tension and shuts down any
potential twaddle fueled by further misinformation. It is particularly important to note that from
the start, Lerner wants to make it clear that CHL is not centered on Jane Austen.

Lerner goes on to say that CHL is also “not a shrine to early English women writers and
the reason is not that they don’t deserve one, but my point is we just don’t know what to erect
yet.” She then explains what CHL is meant to be. She asks,

So why is it reasonable to make an evaluation of these women in their work
without a very thorough understanding of what they already knew? I’m pretty convinced

13 Her reference to Tom Carpenter, curator of the Jane Austen House Museum at the time, seems also to
refer to Carpenter’s grandfather T. Edward Carpenter, who founded the museum 54 years earlier.
in my scattered pursuits of carriage driving, farming and reading the non-fiction of the period, that we don’t even really understand the words, let along the subtleties or connotational inference of these novels. I know that there are probably many people here who think they do, but then at one point so did I, and I think that we need to keep open minds. Hasn’t it really been the closed minds of the past that have really led to the need for the study centre? I think that it is still going to require a lot of assumptions and guesswork, which is hopefully the product of the very serious scholarship that will go on here and at Southampton and other places—and neither pride nor prejudice.

I had originally envisioned the house as recreating as much of this eighteenth-century context as possible and providing a real environment that would give scholars an opportunity to immerse themselves in the technology and atmosphere of the time. Between the neighbours and health and safety issues, this turned out to be impossible. We’ve turned now to focus really on the library of novels and the ephemera. . . I think it’s nothing more or less than an attempt to recreate this missing context for an informed, inclusive, unbiased critical appraisal that is, in some cases, four hundred years too late. . . . And finally, I would like to give these single, mostly poor women, those things they were writing about: warm fires, furniture, friends and forty rooms of their own. It’s about time.

Lerner’s speech is brilliant because it shows the ambition of the project but also her humble recognition of how much she does not know. From the start, Lerner wanted to create a living eighteenth century literary experience, not so far off from Austenland, but the essential difference is that she did not want to create an escapist retreat; she wanted to create a historically accurate
immersive experience that would better allow scholars and visitors to understand the details of eighteenth century life. As she explains, this vision was unattainable, and Lerner hints at tensions with “neighbours and health and safety issues” which proved her plan impossible. However, she demonstrates how the library will still allow for the accomplishment of the original mission, even if readers would not be immersed fully in a historical setting.

Lerner’s emphasis on having open minds is also interesting because it is a reminder that despite the backlash faced while creating the library, the library’s underlying purpose is in fact to revise British literary heritage so that it is not limited by the “closed minds of the past.” As Lerner states, CHL’s mission was to create an “informed, inclusive, unbiased critical appraisal.” Finally, her closing line is cleverly compelling because it offers a possibility for a feminist domestic space that is actually empowering, not limiting, contrasting to the 1950s descriptions of Austen’s Chawton Cottage which intended to domesticate, not liberate Austen.

Lerner’s ambition was extremely progressive and radical, if not long overdue. The fundraising pamphlet from the opening stated:

Chawton House Library Friends Association is an opportunity for people to help transform the literary landscape. It supports the work of a living estate where the study of early women writers expands our understanding of women’s potential in a new century. It harnesses the enthusiasm of today’s readers, writers and social transformers in order offer unique educational opportunities and helps to develop women’s literary communities worldwide. (“A Brief Introduction”)

The mission is clear and bold: to “transform the literary landscape.” The study centre is designed to encourage scholars to research eighteenth century women writers, who then would share their
research, and slowly, overlooked writers would gain recognition. The slow trickle down process of scholarly research is ignored here and replaced by more dynamic terms like “harness the enthusiasm,” “social transformers,” and “communities worldwide.” Moreover, the emphasis on “women’s potential in a new century” implies that transforming the literary landscape is a project only possible now, in the twenty-first century.

This vision is undoubtedly compelling, but it seems surprisingly absent of Jane Austen. Yes, Lerner warns us that CHL is not about Austen in her first sentence, and of course the purpose of the library is to give other women writers their deserved attention, but after so much gossip about Lerner and the house with Austen’s name used in every news story, it seems odd that after all that, the house isn’t about Austen at all. Were the rumors all unfounded?

No, because the house was initially about Austen. If we remember back to 1989, Henry Rice had plans to create a Jane Austen Study Centre before Sandy Lerner even entered the picture. And Rice’s library was going to be all about Austen. When he failed to raise enough funds, Lerner then stepped in and bought the house with the plan to make the Austen library a reality. Then followed the rumors fueled by concerned locals and threatened Janeites who worried that Lerner was undermining their traditions and tainting the name of Jane.

Despite the public emphasis on Austen, Lerner’s intention from the start was to create a study centre for rare books (8000 of which she donated from her own collection) to place Austen in the context of her female contemporaries and predecessors (Yaffe 58). So Lerner adapted Rice’s idea, and decided that instead of creating a library about Austen, she would use Austen as tool for bringing attention to other forgotten women writers. However, by 2003, Austen became entirely peripheral to CHL’s mission. It makes sense that Austen was largely absent; after all, the
library’s mission was to bring other women writers to the forefront, and constantly focusing on Austen would be counter to that purpose.

Exit Sandy Lerner

Between 2003 and 2016, Chawton seemed to be successfully running as a research library. Multiple visiting fellowships were being offered, the Library was publishing a quarterly magazine *The Female Spectator*, sent to the Friends of Chawton House, and in 2015 the house was opened to visitors without appointment. The Library also had a monthly book club, hosted regular speakers, and ran educational programming with the museum. The events, programming, and research was mostly centered on eighteenth century women writers, with an occasional Austen event here and there.

Meanwhile, Lerner was working on her own side project, a sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*. She published *Second Impressions* in 2012 under the pseudonym Ava Farmer, in order to disassociate her tech industry legacy from her creative project. Lerner’s sequel, however, was not Austen fan-fiction; it was the product of extremely extensive research in order to create a sequel steeped in historically accurate details. Although this extreme attention to detail may not have been exactly in the spirit of Austen’s novels, it was in the same spirit of the Library’s creation: to contextualize Austen as accurately as possible.

By 2015, it seemed that CHL was doing just that. In May, Sandy Lerner was awarded an honorary OBE for service to UK culture. In Chawton’s online announcement, they explain, “As a foreign national, the award of an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen recognises the significance of Dr Lerner’s cultural contribution to the UK in restoring the house an estate and establishing the
Library” (“CHL Founder”). In a podcast released soon after, Gillian Dow expanded upon the significance of the recognition: “Sandy’s tremendous contribution has helped make women writers part of mainstream English literature” (“June’s Podcast”). Clearly CHL was fulfilling its original mission, at least as much as they could in their first twelve years.

Then why did Lerner decide to leave Chawton a year later? On October 12, 2016, CHL wrote on their website: “After more than 20 years as the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr Sandy Lerner has announced that she is stepping down from the board, and taking on the honorary position of Founding Patron” (“Our Future”). The interim chair, Dr. Linda Bree made the following statement:

What Sandy Lerner has done in establishing Chawton House Library is a magnificent thing, and what she proposes – as she turns her attention, after all this time, to her other interests – is typically generous. We will now need to work towards a sustainable future for the Library which will pay tribute to her vision, and the years of time, energy and expertise she put into establishing it.

Lerner later explained in an interview for Inc. Magazine, “When it came to the Chawton House Library, which I founded in England, it was definitely outrage, but it turned over the long term into all of the hallmarks of tantrum.” She actually suggests in the interview that outrage is a necessary ingredient for creating a successful business, but “You have to really separate outrage from tantrum.” She could be alluding to the tantrum which inspired her impulsive decision to purchase Chawton House in 1993, when she was offended by Nigel Nicholson at the JASNA conference. Or perhaps it has to do with a statement that she made in 2003 at the opening, when she said, “I’m the only one that has made it this far this long” (“Forty rooms of their own”).
Whatever the reason, which we will further explore, Lerner’s decision to leave CHL altered the course of the organization’s future.
Chawton House’s Transition: From Ph.D. to CEO

After Sandy Lerner announced her resignation in October 2016, Chawton House Library had to quickly make a plan. Later it would become known that the library was under the impression that they would have more time to arrange their plans before losing their main funding source. James MacBain, the COO of Chawton House told the Liphook Herald in September 2017,

When Dr Lerner informed us that she would cease annual funding after 2017, she also pledged to donate a very substantial one-off donation – a very welcome offer, which would have allowed us to seek funds from other sources and develop a robust business plan while maintaining a secure financial footing. However, in early 2017, it became apparent that no time or plans had been fixed by Dr Lerner for this donation, and the trustees had to make speedy decisions in a very different and unwelcome context, recognising that such a donation may well not ever materialise.

Lerner’s donation never did in fact materialize, which unsurprisingly has caused Chawton a lot of trouble. According to Chawton’s official statement, Lerner “turns her attention, after all this time, to her other interests,” but Deborah Yaffe, journalist and author of Among the Janeites, suspects that “Lerner’s decision to leave Chawton came after years of tension.” In her blog post titled “Lerner Leaves Chawton House,” she goes on to observe, “As is customary in these cases, Chawton’s announcement doesn’t even hint at a less-than-amicable parting, but it’s hard not to pick up notes of anxiety amid the official optimism” (“Lerner leaves”). Chawton undoubtedly
was under extreme pressure. Lerner had been the source of 65% of their annual funding, so losing her support meant that they had to quickly devise plans for staying afloat.

What immediately followed was a series of budget cuts and fundraising appeals, most of which proved publicly controversial. The first significant cut was the suspension of the research fellowship program, which had funded multiple scholars’ research at the library each year since 2003. The library stated in March 2017, “For the next two years, we will concentrate on delivering a plan for the overall vision for Chawton House Library. This planning will include looking at routes to reintroduce residential fellowships as part of a wider strategy” (“Visiting Fellowships”). They clarify that the library is not changing and “access to the reading rooms is still very much available.” This decision, however, was significant because Chawton House Library’s central purpose was its valuable research library. Although the organization insisted that the library would not be changed, the suspension of its fellowships meant that it would be used significantly less, meaning that Chawton House Library’s immediate plans for survival would require putting its original mission to the side. The question, though, was for how long would this shift be temporary?

Meanwhile, the trustees and Director of Fundraising Jane Lillystone were quickly figuring out how to attract attention and raise funds. Their immediate goal was to raise enough money to stay open for the next 18 months while they devised long term plans and applied for large grants from the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. In June of 2017, Chawton House Library launched their appeal “Reimagining Jane’s ‘Great House.’” In a podcast on their website, Lillystone explains,
The project will give the opportunity for more people to walk in Jane’s footsteps from Jane Austen’s House Museum, as she would have done . . . come to the house and actually walk in the rooms that Jane Austen would have walked in and look at the dining room table that Jane would have dined at with her family, and walk around the grounds that Jane would have done. And that’s an incredible opportunity, and an incredible heritage, that we are absolutely really keen to preserve. (“The Future”)

Lillystone adds that the project is “Raising the profile of not just Jane Austen but also of the fantastic women writers that were her foremothers and contemporaries that we hold in the library,” but this acknowledgment sounds like an afterthought. The language of the appeal is already noticeably different from Chawton’s original purpose. The library has become secondary, and now Jane Austen is at the forefront, as the title of the appeal makes clear. Moreover, it is “Jane’s ‘Great House,’” which is a peculiar title for a few reasons. “Great House” is in quotation marks because it is what Austen called her brother’s house in her letters; however, not everyone would know this, so the title makes it seem as if Chawton Estate was Austen’s house and, furthermore, the choice of “Jane” over “Austen” or “Jane Austen” suggests a personal familiarity absent even from the name “Jane Austen’s House Museum.” This familiarity is evidently an intention characteristic of the campaign, made especially clear in Lillystone’s description of “walking in Jane’s footsteps,” inviting the listener to imagine Austen’s presence, an idea that seems to echo Constance Hill’s 1902 *Jane Austen and Her Friends*. After striving for twenty years to be more than an Austen tourist attraction, Chawton House Library gave in, at least in terms of their public image.
In the same podcast, Gillian Dow, the director at the time, shared news of Chawton House Library’s most recently opened exhibition about Austen and Germain de Staël. Dow explained that the exhibit was appropriate because 2017 was the bicentenary of both writers’ deaths. She also noted that the library didn’t want to detract from the museum’s celebrations, as it was “their big year.” If the library had known sooner of their funding emergency, they probably would have chosen to capitalize more on the bicentenary as well, but they respectfully refrained. Their de Staël exhibit shows that at least for the time being, the library was creating programming related to their women writers collection, even if their public image was shifting more towards “Austenland.”

The new website for “Reimagining Jane’s ‘Great House’” explained the appeal’s objective:

The ‘Great House’ is now a fast developing visitor attraction complete with Austen family heirlooms, as well as a world-renowned research centre for early women’s writing. . . . We have ambitious plans to create a cultural literary destination within the wider grounds of the ‘Great House’, offering larger and more extensive visitor facilities and providing an enhanced experience of the Chawton estate that was Jane Austen’s home throughout the final, productive years of her life. The reimagining of Jane’s ‘Great House’ into a more recognised, commercially viable destination will help secure the house, the wider estate, and also our unique collection of early women’s writing and books we know Jane Austen read in her brother’s library. Our treasures include an original manuscript in Jane Austen’s own hand, first and early editions of all of her
novels, and also works by important women writers who inspired her, and whom she inspired.

The language of the appeal again puts Austen at the center, and the library has again become an appendage tacked on literally with “and also.” The first attraction is the “Austen family heirlooms,” something not mentioned in early Chawton House Library descriptions. This new emphasis is particularly interesting because it is only a more sophisticated way of saying “relics,” a word closely associated with the museum’s history. Now Austen’s family “heirlooms” are the draw, a label markedly more serious and less spiritual, and the library is secondary. The way that the future attraction is described makes it difficult to picture a concrete plan: What is a “cultural literary destination?” And what does it mean to be a “recognised, commercially viable destination”?

A separate article in Chawton House Library’s publication The Female Spectator explains that “The revenue from these increased commercial activities will continue to support the education and research programmes, with the aim of inspiring future generations of readers and writers.” This statement helps to answer the questions above, suggesting that a commercially viable cultural literary destination is one that capitalizes on every connection to Austen in order to draw in funds from Janeite Superfans, then effectively uses those funds to maintain a “world-renowned research centre for early women’s writing.” Evidently the latter objective is not commercially viable or else the library would be front and center in the fundraising campaign. Strategically, this choice is logical: the academics who support the library’s mission are not the target audience for funding; however, turning Chawton House Library into a major Austen tourist destination fundamentally conflicts with the library’s original mission: to revive other women
writers. Would it be possible for Chawton to simultaneously support both missions for two different audiences?

In July 2017, the “Reimagining Jane’s ‘Great House’” project launched a social media campaign called #TheDarcyLook which told participants,

It’s easy to get involved, all you need is a white shirt, a bucket of water and a willing male who thinks he can channel his inner Colin Firth! . . .To help save Jane Austen’s ‘Great House’, get wet in a white shirt! Upload the photo/video, then text JANE03 £3 to 70070 and nominate 3 friends. Don’t forget to donate!

Jane Lillystone, CHL’s fundraising director, said to the Guardian, “I hope Jane would have liked it. She often had a very different opinion about things, and liked to tease, so I hope she would” (Flood “Great House launches urgent appeal”). The challenge seemed to receive a decent response of videos on Facebook and Twitter, but not everyone was so keen on the idea. Deborah Yaffe posted on her blog “There are many things I would be willing to do to secure the future of Chawton House Library, one of the Austen world’s great treasures. Starring in my very own wet-shirt-Darcy video is not among those things” (“The Austen ice bucket challenge”). Yaffe’s comment shows that its success would not depend on Austen’s approval, but it would rely on the support of her readers. Although the challenge would attract the attention of some Janeites, it might lose the support of others.

The success of #TheDarcyLook proved to be the least of Chawton’s worries. The Janeites would not be the ones to expose CHL’s dissonant public marketing and internal purpose; instead, the ones to expose the fault line would be none other than the defenders of the Shire horses. The drama started on August 22, 2017 when CHL announced, “The Charity is first and foremost an
important historic, cultural and literary landmark, and our priority must be towards securing the
house and library for future generations. We have therefore taken the difficult decision to
suspend the Shire horse programme, and look to find our four horses excellent homes
elsewhere.” Yaffe blogged about the news the next week, expecting it to be the end of the story,
but it certainly was not (“Goodbye to Chawton’s horses”). Chawton’s announcement led to an
uproar from infuriated Shire horse defenders who quickly organized a group called Save Our
Shires (SOS) and formed a change.org campaign that acquired over 500 signatures in a week.
The page campaign page urged, “Please do not support a public charity that evicted its four
Heavy Horses, an endangered species, from an Estate described as a working manor farm of the
late eighteenth-century” (“Save Chawton Shires”). The protesters were upset because 1) the
horses were endangered 2) the horses were a part of CHL’s mission statement, and 3) because the
financial decision seemed unreasonable and irresponsible.

Not only did SOS voice their opinion vocally, but they also proved to have money to
back up their anger. Soon after launching the online campaign, Diana Tennyson, a long time
supporter of CHL and chief executive of the Wildlife Support and Conservation organization,
offered £10,000 to CHL in order to keep the stables open for another six months while the
trustees could plan for more funding (“Chawton Kremlinology”). Though never mentioned,
Tennyson’s offer seems to echo the previous heroic efforts of T. Edward Carpenter and Sandy
Lerner; but, in this case, CHL turned down Tennyson’s offer, insisting that they could not
maintain the horses. The urgent language of the appeal, matched with an attempt at heroism, is
also interesting because it again employs the rhetoric of decline to making a more compelling
case, as we have seen earlier in the museum’s early appeals, the Chawton bypass debacle, and
Lerner’s rescue of the Chawton estate. One SOS supporter commented on the change.org campaign: “Heavy horses are part of the heritage of this country. As their numbers decline it cannot be left to private owners and breeders to save them. We need working estates to keep the profile of these horses alive and in the public domain.” It’s interesting to see the language of decline and heritage utilized yet again, but for a slightly different purpose. The urgency of saving literary heritage has been transplanted to the mission to save the country’s pastoral history and to protect its endangered Shire horses.

Where did Austen go? The SOS controversy was unlike earlier public debates because it was not between Janeites. The campaign mentions Austen on occasion. In a recent March 2019 update, SOS reported that CHL’s “statistics demonstrate that visitor attractions featuring nature attract twelve times as many paying visitors than those involving books and Jane Austen” (“Save Chawton Shires). If this is true, it makes sense because CHL’s revenue never came from its library users: its revenue came significantly from renting out the house and grounds for events. SOS tried to justify their claim by arguing that the shire horses were essential to CHL’s revenue and to their mission statement, but they willfully ignore any other part of mission statement, going to the extreme of demanding people to boycott CHL entirely. Although Austen has proven to be controversial in the affairs of JAHM and CHL, she never caused such animosity. Yaffe responded to the controversy in a blog post explaining, “Although no one can fail to regret the departure of Chawton’s beautiful horses, it’s hard for me to see what end is served by an effort to starve a cash-strapped cultural institution of needed funds” (SOS for Chawton’s Horses). Her point gets at the real problem. A commenter replied, “To an outsider like myself, I was very sorry to see the horses go, but they are not central to what Chawton House is about. The SOS
campaign seems vindictive and unpleasantly personal - and damaging to the future survival of the House.”

This episode returned the question of heritage and funding to the public stage. It also proved that, to whatever degree, CHL’s manor farm was essential to their income, and moving forward, they would have to fill that loss with another commercial source. That source would be, as they had already announced, Austen tourism. Their new marketing plan seemed to be succeeding because in November 2017 CHL received a £100,000 grant from the Garfield Weston Foundation, which would be paid over two years through the organization’s transitional period. This was exciting news, but Yaffe accurately notices that “Lerner’s funding in 2015 totaled more then $600,000, so even the generous new grant replaces barely ten percent of that” (“Good news (at last!) for Chawton House”). In their announcement, they also announced new support from Sense and Sensibility actor Greg Wise, following his wife Emma Thompson in his endorsement. CHL also mentions their #BrickbyBrick campaign “where supporters can ‘buy a brick’ and help us save Jane Austen’s Great House one brick at a time” (“Campaign Receives 100K”). These fundraising efforts—grants, celebrity endorsement, and public appeals—show how CHL’s marketing strategically targeted three different audiences (note than none are horse conservationists).

The changes that had been developing during the beginning of Chawton’s transition period solidified with their official name change in February 2018. Instead of being Chawton House Library, they decided to just be Chawton House, a decision that is clearly indicative of a shift in the house’s purpose. The Chair of Trustees, Louise Ansdell, explained,
The library collection, which features many treasures, including a unique manuscript in Jane Austen’s own hand, will still remain at the core of what we do. However, we’ve had feedback that potential visitors to the house and gardens are confused and – in some cases – put off by having ‘library’ in the name, which could mean that it is only open to library users when this is certainly not the case – we want all to come and enjoy what we have to offer. (“Announcing our name change”)

Ansdell went on to explain, “We aim to continue to grow and diversify our income streams to secure our future, including both traditional fundraising and growing the visitor business. None of this will affect the continued work of the library, which is still a thriving hub of research activity.” This statement is interesting because it clarifies that the library remains active and important to Chawton House; however, the new plan would rely on various sources of income, reliant on a more diverse patronage, who Chawton House could more easily attract with a deemphasis of their library. Ansdell’s comment that potential visitors were off-put by “Library” is directly in response to an email from Diana Tennyson to the board in September 2017.

Tennyson had said, “Unfortunately the library can only be termed a niche commodity. Although it generates some interest and research, it is probably over-rated and rather worryingly does not appear to help promote the Charity. So many people I speak to believe the house is a library and nothing more” (“Wildlife Support”). Evidently Tennyson’s opinion carried significant weight, even if the board did not want her Shire horse offer.

The name change was soon followed by a job posting: the CEO of Chawton House. Gillian Dow, Professor of English at Southampton University had been Chawton’s executive director since 2014, but she was ready to move on after accepting a year long research fellowship
(“Could you be the new CEO?”). With her departure came the opportunity to refocus the administration of Chawton, shifting, as Deborah Yaffe would write, “From Ph.D. to CEO.” This change is important because it shows that more than just Chawton’s marketing was changing; the organization needed a transformation from the top down. However, with the change from Ph.D. to CEO, Chawton inevitably would be further diminishing the importance of its library and research resources. The job posting explains,

Chawton House is undergoing a major transition to become a significant cultural and literary destination, seeking to work in close partnerships across Hampshire as part of the ‘Jane Austen Country’ experience. It aims to build on all that has been achieved to date to develop a sustainable future for the charity, benefitting the local community, visitors from further afield, and audiences from across the globe. (“Could you be the new CEO?”)

The emphasis of the job is clear: make Chawton into an Austen tourist destination and find ways to bring in consistent funds. The description notes that applicants “will need a strong track record in commercial delivery and fundraising.” Yaffe notices, “Strikingly absent from the listing is any reference to scholarly chops – Ph.D., background in Austen studies, that kind of thing.”

Apparently creating an Austen tourist attraction does not require an understanding of Austen.

In January 2019, Chawton House appointed Katie Childs as the new CEO, who “has had a prolific career in the heritage sector,” according to Chawton’s announcement (“New CEO”). Her previous work includes International Programme Manager at the British Museum, Policy and Projects Manager for the National Museum Directors’ Council, and most recently she led the 2018 First World War Centenary commemoration at the Imperial War Museum. Childs’ extensive
experience in the heritage sector is reassuring because it means that she is not just a robot fundraising machine, and she certainly cares about the history and mission of CH.

In her “From Ph.D. to CEO” blog post, Yaffe expertly summarizes Chawton’s current position. She wrote:

It’s a tricky balancing act: Keeping Chawton, with its extraordinary collection of rare books, alive as a site for serious scholarship, while simultaneously attracting the tourist dollars of the folks who trek down the road to Jane Austen’s House Museum to buy Colin Firth tea towels and snap selfies with Austen’s desk. In a sense, Chawton House is a microcosm of the struggle within the Janeite world between devotees of Classic Author Austen and fans of Pop Culture Jane.

Yaffe is right; CH is a microcosm of Janeite struggles. CH’s undetermined future could mean that the two institutions will have more opportunities to collaborate. Perhaps CH and JAHM both could benefit from one other’s resources: the museum has a relatively consistent influx of international and domestic visitors and school groups, and Chawton House has a beautiful estate, grounds, Austen history, and of course, a valuable library.

Furthermore, and this is something Yaffe does not mention, CH is a microcosm of the challenges of the heritage industry. Although preservation of heritage is the end goal, commercial success is the only way to keep nonprofit cultural institutions alive. Ideally, the commercial aspect is a means to funding preservation and education, but in an age of austerity, profit has to be prioritized. Therefore, time will tell if CH’s commercial priorities will eclipse their original literary heritage mission, that is, we will see if “Austen Country” will silence the voices of the
other women writers inside CH. Hopefully Katie Childs and her team will find a way to save Austen and her foremothers.
Cultivating a Critical Culture

In the same year of Lerner’s departure, another larger departure became imminent: Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. The 2016 referendum and its consequential effects have reinvigorated the narrative of British cultural decline, a narrative that we have heard before. The danger of this narrative is its nostalgic impulse, and as this nostalgia is politicized, it is also commodified, in part by the heritage industry. Robert Hewison wrote in 1987, I criticize the heritage industry not simply because so many of its products are fantasies of a world that never was; not simply because at a deeper level it involves the preservation, indeed reassertion, of social values that the democratic progress of the twentieth century seemed to be doing away with, but because far from ameliorating the climate of decline, it is actually worsening it. If the only new thing we have to offer is an improved version of the past, then today can only be inferior to yesterday. Hypnotized by images of the past, we risk losing all capacity for creative change. (10)

Sandy Lerner was intent on countering just this problem when she asked in her speech at the opening of CHL in 2003, “Hasn’t it really been the closed minds of the past that have really led to the need for the study centre?” (“Forty Rooms of Their Own”). Lerner is commenting on the same issue as Hewison: the heritage industry’s preservation of outdated social values. Cultural organizations have the ability to prevent the regressive slump into nostalgic amnesia, but as we have seen, this is not always easy or profitable.

Hewison, however, does propose a solution. He suggests,
The answer is not to empty the museums and sell up the National Trust, but to develop a
critical culture which engages in a dialogue between past and present. We must rid
ourselves of the idea that the present has nothing to contribute to the achievements of the
past, rather, we must accept its best elements, and improve on them . . . the definition of
those values must not be left to a minority who are able through their access to the
otherwise exclusive institutions of culture to articulate the only acceptable meanings of
past and present. It must be a collaborative process shared by an open community which
accepts both conflict and change. (144, emphasis added)

Perhaps this is where Janeites can help. Hewison’s suggestion of a “critical culture” sounds a bit
idyllic, but the work within the field of Austen Legacy Studies has already proven that “a culture
which engages in dialogue between past and present” is indeed possible, and Austen has proven
to be an appropriate subject for facilitating this dialogue. Although Austen readers can be
possessive and strongly opinionated, they are united by an appreciation for a writer who
transgresses traditional cultural boundaries, who is appreciated by mass media and “high
culture.” Indeed, Janeites are an exemplary model of “an open community which accepts both
conflict and change.” As Johnson explains, Janeites read Austen for escape, but they are aware of
the boundaries between fiction and reality. She explains, “The Janeite’s self-congratulatory
pleasure in being able to discern them, and cross over them and back again, is all the more
delicious because they are invisible to the uninitiated” (Cults 88). Perhaps this is evidence that
nostalgia is not always dangerous. The heritage industry will always be an industry reliant on
funding, but perhaps if Janeites continue to cultivate a critical culture, they may just catch the
eye of another generous benefactor. Dare I say it is a truth universally acknowledged that a nonprofit heritage organization is in need of funds?
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