Chawton House and its Library: Legacies and Futures

Kim Simpson
Chawton House, kim.simpson@chawtonhouse.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo

Part of the Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.13.1.1334
Available at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/7

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.
Chawton House and its Library: Legacies and Futures

Abstract
In a review of *Women's Writing, 1660-1830: Feminisms and Futures*, Paula Backscheider draws attention to “the miracle that is Chawton House, whose conferences nurtured these essays” in the collection. This essay will examine the legacy of this unique institution and explore the futures for the organization both as heritage site and as home to a substantial collection of women's writing of the long eighteenth century. The community encouraged and nurtured by Chawton House since it opened to the public in 2003, as is so often the case with all things related to Jane Austen, complicates divisions between the academic and the popular, bringing together people of different backgrounds from all over the world. For diverse audiences, Chawton House—the Visiting Fellowship program, the reading group, the reading rooms, the collections, and, increasingly, the gardens and parkland—have provided the time, space, and material to explore, share, and delight in women's contributions. This essay will celebrate work already done to maintain and shape the legacy of Jane Austen, her contemporaries, and her predecessors—the legacy of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary world. It considers some of the challenges faced by heritage organizations like Chawton House in recovering and representing the work of early British women writers and shaping their legacy, exploring the ways in which issues of canonicity, value and reputation play out in both academic research and public engagement. It outlines some of the strategies used by Chawton House over the last two decades to meet these challenges, including public programming that introduces women writers little-known outside academic circles, but that also asks audiences to consider the conditions that rendered them obscure in the first place. It goes on to consider the ways in which the current moment – both the culture wars and the pandemic—has revitalized these questions of legacy by demanding new perspectives and providing new audiences for heritage organizations.

Keywords
heritage, library, women's writing, long eighteenth century, Jane Austen, recovery project, public engagement, coronavirus, culture wars

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License

This scholarship is available in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/7
The Lower Reading Room of Chawton House is a space in which women’s legacy is tangible, embodied in fifteen hundred titles, and breathable in the tobacco-scented air of the room. On the shelves of this library, a female-authored tract on longitude rubs shoulders with a novelistic description of the circulating libraries of Georgian seaside resorts; behavioral manuals that teach correct curtseys nestle alongside illustrated travel narratives, receipts that involve boiling lambs’ heads whole, and botanical poetry. The breadth and depth of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers’ achievements are materialized in ink, paper, and leather. The shelves house the most canonical of women writers—Austen, Shelley, Brontë—alongside women writers still little known outside academic circles, right down to the obscure and the pseudonymous—the works of ladies of quality, initials, or those unowned by any named person at all. Beyond those Lower Reading Room walls, portraits speak to female legacies: the imposing Elizabeth Knight gives us a story of the first female squire of Chawton House; a portrait of budding poet Eleanor Bowes, who died at 14, suggests to us those other women writers lost too soon; Hoppner’s Mary Robinson is resplendent as Perdita, and her image is of one of several famed actresses in the house, women whose lives saw them move from stage to page with ease. The Upper Reading Room, and its twenty-seven hundred works of secondary criticism, house an academic discourse around these women—reflections on legacy also made material. The stores contain around six thousand more works, including Austen first editions and unique manuscripts.¹

This essay considers some of the challenges faced by heritage organizations like Chawton House in recovering and representing the work of early British women writers, and in shaping their legacy. It takes as its starting point the questions generated by recovery project feminism about canonicity, value and reputation, exploring the ways that these issues have informed academic research and public engagement since the opening of the library in 2003. It considers in particular the dialogue between academia and a broader public played out in the unique environment of Chawton House, exploring tensions between the comforting myths around women’s writing and the emergent research which does much to dislodge them, as well as the tensions between scholarly and commercial interests. It outlines some of the strategies used by Chawton House over the last two decades to meet these challenges, including public programming that not only introduces women writers little-known outside academic circles, but that also asks audiences to consider the conditions that rendered them obscure in the first place. It goes on to consider the ways in which the current moment has revitalized these questions of legacy by demanding new perspectives and modalities. Corrective moves both within and far beyond academia have led to more inclusive notions of gender, and new attention to race and the legacies of colonialism and have been embraced by many heritage organizations. Although it has met with considerable resistance from the right-wing media, the ongoing work to
reinterpret histories and artefacts to better reflect the experiences, needs and interests of communities not represented by traditional white heteronormative histories has welcomed new audiences to heritage settings. Meanwhile, the pandemic, whilst closing down all onsite interaction, also opened up Chawton House and the work it does to a much wider international audience via new digital programs.

**Chawton House, Jane Austen, and women writers**

Although a center for research on women’s writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the house and its library ultimately owe their survival to the immense popularity of just one of those women—Jane Austen—so it seems sensible to start with the most well-rehearsed of Chawton House histories.

The Elizabethan Manor house at Chawton in Hampshire was built in the 1580s on the site of an earlier medieval building, and the freehold was passed down through generations of the Knight family. A heritage site of interest in its own right as one of many country houses visited by thousands of tourists each year, Chawton House is also a place of pilgrimage for Jane Austen fans. In 1798, Jane Austen’s fortunate brother Edward inherited the Chawton estate, along with estates at Godmersham and Steventon, from the childless Thomas and Catherine Knight. It was Edward who provided Jane with sanctuary in 1809 after years drifting through Bath and Southampton, reliant on relatives after the death of her father. This sanctuary, Chawton Cottage was a short walk from the manor, and became the space in which she finished six novels, publishing four of those before her death in 1817. Austen was a frequent visitor at Chawton House, dining with her family members when they were in residence there, and writing to her sister Cassandra in 1814, “I went up to the Great House between 3 and 4 and dawdled away an hour very comfortably” (Le Faye 274). She also visited her brother at Godmersham, spending around ten months there in total, and writing to Cassandra, “we live in the library” (Le Faye 236). That library—“the work of many generations,” to use Fitzwilliam Darcy’s words in *Pride and Prejudice*—now forms one of the primary collections at Chawton House (Austen 38). Comprised of around eighteen hundred titles, the Knight Collection is on deposit from the Knight family having been moved from Godmersham to Chawton by Edward’s son. It has recently been the subject of a major digital humanities project orchestrated by Peter Sabor. *Reading With Austen* provides a digital reconstruction of the library using the 1818 Godmersham catalogue and is a fine example of the potential for the digital world to play host to ongoing explorations of canonical legacies.

Although not an author’s house museum, today Chawton House and its collections offer many visitors the chance to extend their emotional connection
with Austen’s work into a physical space—the site is an example of what Matt Hills calls “cult geographies,” providing an historical connection to Austen herself as a place she spent time in, but also a materialization of visitors’ imagined realities (110-121). Chawton House is what one might expect of a great house in Austen’s novels, and indeed, it has been posited as the basis for Donwell Abbey in *Emma.* Darcy states in *Pride and Prejudice* that he “cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these,” and the continued preservation of what a 1793 guidebook by Zechariah Cozens called “a most excellent library” in the Knight collection holds to the ethics of Austen’s hero (Austen 38; “History of the Library”). The other main collection at Chawton House furthers the visitor’s interplay of space, history, and imagination by adding a wider feminist dimension to the house and its contents, insisting on a longer literary history for women pre-dating Austen, and fleshing out the contexts in which Austen herself was writing. It possesses the power to destabilize comforting myths about Austen and her time period: to reshape ideas of legacy.

This collection contains around four thousand and five hundred works by women from 1660 to 1860 and has a more recent origin story than the Knight family library but is still inextricably bound up with the house itself. Although it survived the slew of country house demolitions that peaked in the mid-twentieth century, by 1989, Chawton House was too run-down to maintain without enormous expense, and it went up for sale. The site was almost turned into a golf course, but was saved by entrepreneur, founder of Cisco Systems, Inc., and Austen-enthusiast Sandy Lerner, who purchased a one hundred and twenty-five-year leasehold from Richard Knight in June 1994. As Chawton House Historian Martin Caddick notes, whilst the local press speculated about Lerner’s intentions, including an Austen theme park, a women’s commune, and even a missile testing site, “her early vision was to provide scholars an authentic experience of what it would have been like to live and write in Jane Austen’s time” (28). This blend of the scholarly and the immersive or experiential is familiar both to heritage workers and to Austen lovers. Prior to opening, Lerner’s extensive collection of early women’s writing, purchased over a number of years and featuring around three thousand writers was transferred from her US-based Bosack-Kruger Foundation to the UK Charitable Trust that had been established: Chawton House Library. The books made their way from the America to Chawton; an academic partnership was established with the University of Southampton in 1999; and after a decade-long renovation project of the house and gardens, Chawton House Library was opened in 2003, aiming to foster research on early women writers. So began a gradual process of the unfurling of women writers’ legacy to a wider public.
Scholarship and community: Rethinking recoveries

As Marilyn Francus details in her introductory essay to this special issue, recovery project scholars have been told that we ought to be recovering from recovery for at least two decades. Spurred on by Jean Marsden’s 2002 interrogation of the presentism she saw at play in recovery project scholarship, many have posited new directions for recovery project feminism, more awareness of the assumptions that might underpin it, or even its abandonment altogether. New formalism decried much recovery project scholarship as “literary sociology” that overlooked the importance of the formal and aesthetic qualities which should interest literary scholars and suggested instead a refinement of recovery’s unruly canon (Richetti 367). As Susan Staves puts it, scholars should be “capable of some useful discrimination between a good eighteenth-century poem and a bad one”—the work taking center stage before the conditions in which it was produced (4). Of course, who gets to decide what is good is a thorny question for feminist scholars, and questions of quality are just one avenue of interrogation. Also pressing for recovery project scholars are the vexed but fruitful questions of how legacies are created, controlled, or concealed, what we should do with them now and in the future, and why this matters.

Chawton House’s whole existence has been marked by these reconsiderations and critical interrogations of the recovery project; it might be seen as a palimpsest upon which debates over recovery have played out, with rethinking recovery providing a major impetus for its scholarly community. At the heart of this community have been Chawton House Library’s Visiting Fellowship and conference programs. The former ran from 2007 to 2017 in partnership with the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Southampton, and has supported world-class research on women writers, with Fellows going on to produce monographs and articles, but also important exhibitions, digital projects, and public lectures. Over a decade, the program welcomed around 250 Fellows, each residing in the converted stables at Chawton House for a month, with three or four Fellows in residence at any one time. Scholars at all career stages came from all over the globe: America, Canada, and Europe, but also Brazil, South Korea, Australia, and Japan. Research touched on myriad aspects of the collections: manuscripts and translations, sentimental, gothic, and amatory fictions, works of science, religion, travel, cookery, children’s literature, and conduct books. The Fellowships provided those who undertook them with a supportive academic environment, beautiful surroundings and time and space to focus, to explore, and to write.

In addition to generating research on the collections with its Fellowship program, Chawton House also became a center for discussion, collaboration, and public outreach. The networks forged by the Fellowships were extended by conferences—twelve in just under a decade. In her introduction to a 2010
special issue of *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* dedicated to a discussion of the future of feminist theory in eighteenth-century studies, Laura J. Rosenthal argues that feminist readings had, by then, achieved breadth of material but not depth of analysis, and that the parameters of the initial recovery project had blinkered feminist scholars. Rather than ignoring the foundational work of the recovery project, Rosenthal identified a need for fresh engagement with recovered texts and authors: “We will have made significant progress,” Rosenthal writes, “when an even fuller scope of the impact, engagements, and intellectual propositions of women writers significantly exceeds the paradigms that allowed us to take them seriously in the first place” (10). This is a call that has been taken seriously at Chawton House in the last ten years, and particularly in the conferences held there.

A conference in May 2012, for example, marked the bicentenary of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* by providing a reappraisal of her life and works in the wake of modern scholarly editions of her work and a biography by William McCarthy (2008). A 2016 conference entitled “Placing Charlotte Smith: Canon, Genre, History, Nation, Globe” explored the latest emergent research on Smith two hundred and ten years after her death, at a moment when Smith scholarship was “coming of age.” The questions posed by the conference organizers invited participants to consider Smith’s place in the canon—not only her influence on genre development and her historical commentary, but also the places and ways in which she might be memorialized. Delegates at these and other conferences, then, assessed the legacies of individual women writers—including Charlotte Brontë, Germaine de Staël and Isabelle de Charrière—in ways that took as a given their importance and their engagements with concerns much broader than proto-feminist ones. They examined women’s novel-writing but also looked beyond, considering women’s contributions to religion, their work as art critics, and their engagement with Shakespeare, to give a few examples.

Conferences also reflected on the critical terrain of feminist literary history; they looked back—commemorating the ground-breaking work of Marilyn Butler (1937-2014), for example—but also to the future. The ten-year anniversary conference to mark the Library’s opening was “Pride and Prejudices: Women’s Writing of the Long Eighteenth Century.” The speakers celebrated the achievements of the last decade, but also mapped new directions for scholarship of women’s writing, ultimately leading to an edited collection: *Women’s Writing, 1660-1830: Feminisms and Futures* (2016). The introduction stresses that the book is not a conference proceedings, instead giving a sense of the conference having opened lines of dialogue for scholars to discuss the seismic changes to the field in the years between the conference and publication of the book. The discussions of 2003 generated “chats in corridors and over coffee, which were followed up by conversations in other locations, at other conferences, by email and by telephone” (Batchelor and
Dow 11). Chawton House, in this account, is an initial point for a continuing conversation that has continued at Chawton House, but also far beyond its walls.

Meanwhile, work continued apace to communicate these findings to a more general public. As is so often the case with all things related to Jane Austen, the Chawton House community complicates divisions between the academic and the popular. Encompassing the retired Hampshire schoolteacher who has loved Austen since his teenage years, the young Chinese Masters student who wants to understand the industry around Austen, the lifelong scholar of Austen’s innovative style, and the genealogy enthusiast who enjoys the detective work of unearthing Austen’s complex family relations, the audience generated by the academic and outreach events at Chawton House has been one of considerable diversity. It is an audience that has also been further diversified by the necessary and increasingly commercial focus of the house in the wake of changes to funding structures in more recent years, and now includes those interested in country houses, architecture, gardening, or simply in a pleasant day out.

“One cannot have too large a party”: Sharing legacy

“We foster research and understanding of early women writers, restoring them to their rightful place in the history of English literature and enabling them to speak directly to – and inspire – future generations.” So reads the first line of the “About Us” page of the Chawton House website at the time of this writing. It goes on to mention the unique collection of women’s writing, with many works “entirely neglected throughout the twentieth century,” describing the purpose of the research carried out on site as “helping to put these books and their authors back on the intellectual map.” While these lines are inspiring, they overlook the substantial and foundational work of twentieth-century feminist scholars such as Jane Spencer and Janet Todd in favor of a narrative of more recent discovery. Additionally, the sentiments suggest a lag in communicating the ongoing critical debate taking place about the future of feminist scholarship to a public audience. There is something of a reluctance in these lines to burden a comforting narrative of empowerment with the more complex reality of legacy shaping.

The negotiation of tensions between historical facts and comforting (and therefore saleable) myths is a key task for heritage. The recovery project for museums and libraries encompasses both of these poles. It provides the opportunity for fact-based, archival discovery which is still very much underway. It also works to dislodge one myth about the historical paucity of women’s literary engagement, although in its early form, recovery project scholarship often replaced this myth with another, which homogenized early women writers as feminist trailblazers. Public engagement at Chawton House
has sought to bring fact and fiction into alignment, to complicate recovery project narratives whilst not losing their appeal. The vital work of the initial recovery project—the discovery of long lost or forgotten women writers—remains at the core of Chawton House’s public programming: firstly because we still cannot take recovery as a given outside academic circles, but secondly because, in a world where the gender pay gap, the MeToo movement, and the debates over women’s reproductive rights are realities, its message still resonates. Many visitors and enthusiasts hold fast to ideas about what it was like to be a woman in the eighteenth century: totally uneducated, tyrannized by male relatives, straitjacketed by corsets and coverture, likely to die in childbirth, forced to write in secret, to publish anonymously or as a man, and—if recognized as writers—subjected to shame and derision from readers and male writers. Given these entrenched ideas, there remains a need to keep on rehearsing the story of recovery, to keep on justifying women writers’ inclusion in the canon, and to keep on insisting upon their existence and professionalism in the face of continued misinformation. For these audiences, as Mike Crang puts it, “prior knowledge and anticipation produce an expected landscape, and visitors often come prepared to see, to have knowledge confirmed rather than changed” (119). As communicators of knowledge via heritage channels, we have to meet people where they are, maintaining a delicate balance between the scholarly rigor of the academic world, and providing correctives whilst also ensuring welcome and inclusivity—to “entertain and instruct,” as so many eighteenth-century texts would have it.

Any divergence between the academic and the popular is most easily bridged with canonical writers like Austen because there is such hunger amongst so many to continue discussion of Austen’s legacy, to explore new angles on her life and work, and, via Austen, to reflect on the legacies of the Regency period more broadly. This is particularly evident in the conversations around adaptations, many of which have responded to the public demand for more inclusive versions of Austen. Far from offering a homogenous escape into an idealized, apolitical past, such adaptations generate vital discussions, particularly on social media, of issues around sexuality, race and colonialism, and in turn enable reflections on the limitations of these spaces and conversations. Austen lends herself to being made anew, and the program at Chawton House continues to explore these acts of remaking, engaging with novelists and playwrights as well as scholars.

Because of her broad appeal, study days at Chawton House are often oriented around Austen. In the past, they have provided the opportunity for scholars and heritage professionals to share their work in history, literature, music, and material culture with Austen communities, and Sanditon, Chawton, the 1995 BBC Pride and Prejudice, and Southampton Spa have all received detailed attention, generating engaged and well-informed discussion. Colleagues entertained audiences with performances and recitals of the music Austen
enjoyed, and shared their discoveries of eighteenth-century music, whilst also reflecting on the practices of reading aloud and the dramatics that Austen partook of. Whilst Deidre Lynch notes that among popular readers “a customary method of establishing one’s credentials as a reader of Austen has been to regret that others simply will insist on liking her in inappropriate ways,” the academic world is increasingly acknowledging the importance of affective engagements with Austen—often facilitated by heritage for commercial reasons—particularly in light of the pressure on UK academics to demonstrate public engagement (7).

Public engagement beyond Austen can be challenging, particularly when writers are obscure, or texts are inaccessible to modern readers, through language, content, or simply being out of print. Many audiences are naturally drawn to writers they already have some knowledge of, so events on Mary Shelley or the Brontës draw wider audiences than events on, say, the Porter sisters, or Anna Letitia Barbauld. Not all women writers possess Austen’s versatility; some are deeply rooted in their historical moment, filled with dense references to contemporary events that can be lost on modern readers. Others are written in genres that no longer have the effect they once did—novels of sensibility or Gothic works seem even more fanciful now than they did to hostile reviewers when first published, particularly when filtered through expectations of what a novel is, or what a genre might do, drawn from a nineteenth- and twentieth-century canon. Furthermore, at times, readers’ expectations of a writer’s radicalism may be disappointed when reading texts billed as feminist or abolitionist. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to recognize that different demographics may respond better to different writers. Strategic presentism can help establish a connection for those not necessarily interested in eighteenth-century women’s writing, allowing explorations of the ways in which material both resonates with the present and depicts attitudes and acts that may be problematic, such as gendered violence.9 Employing biography as a gateway is usually beneficial.

Opening up questions about canonicity, fame, and reputation has been a crucial strategy at Chawton House, and a means to engage public audiences with debates on recovery. Exhibitions have been crucial in this process. In 2015, a generous grant from the Garfield Weston foundation enabled the purchase of state-of-the-art displays cases for exhibitions and meant that Chawton House was able to solicit loans from other research libraries, considerably widening the scope of possibility for exhibitions and displays. The first exhibition was, naturally, an Austen one. “Emma at 200” opened in 2016, to mark the bicentenary of the publication of Austen’s fourth novel. But in 2017, the exhibition program focused on “Reimagining Reputations.”10 A Spring exhibition on Eliza Haywood used early editions of her work from the collection to reconstruct her immensely productive career, but also traced her reputation during and after her death. Although now firmly accepted into the
women’s writing canon and taught on most undergraduate eighteenth-century literature courses, Haywood remains relatively unknown to general audiences, and the exhibition was therefore necessarily introductory. These lags between academic consensus on legacy and knowledge in the public world can often lead to frustration as scholars who have spent decades working on writers like Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Mary Wollstonecraft see such writers marketed as obscure, or newly discovered, and again the balance between creating appeal and communicating research can often be tricky to achieve.

The Summer 2017 exhibition, curated by Gillian Dow, focused on the subject of “Fickle Fortunes,” and deployed a comparative tactic as a means to introduce lesser-known Continental writers. Marking the bicentenary of the deaths of Jane Austen and Germaine de Staël, the exhibition contrasted these writers’ careers and reputations in order to consider the waxing and waning of literary reputations. How did a moderately successful English novelist end up eclipsing a pan-European intellectual superstar in renown and popularity? Historicizing fame and reputation in this way was a corrective to certain commonplaces and oversights about eighteenth-century women writers, including blindness to cross-gender and cross-channel networks, and a belief that some women writers became canonical because they were ‘good’, and some were lost because they were ‘not’.

Regular evening lectures from 2016 onwards have also been a productive way to engage the public in recovery project work by academic colleagues, curators, novelists, and journalists. The audience was, until more recently, made up of engaged local people, and had a fairly regular following, similar to that of the monthly reading group. Talks have covered more canonical writers like Austen, Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and Charlotte Brontë, but also their lesser-known predecessors and contemporaries: Charlotte Lennox and Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi. Many speakers drew on the post-recovery impulses to complicate narratives about the history of women’s writing. Jean Marsden warned against “ignoring difference in favor of sexual solidarity,” and the vital conversations and collaborations between men and women have been the subject of talks on the Shelleys, and on literary coteries in recent years (661). The collection at Chawton House also contains a large body of anonymous work—erroneously believed to belong in the category of women’s writing, due in part to Virginia Woolf’s seductive but misleading assertion that anon was often a woman. More thorough exploration of these texts, and indeed more interrogation of the rationale for giving Chawton House’s women writers a library of their own would allow for a broader discussion of what “women’s writing” might mean, which seems particularly important given the increasing recognition of gender fluidity.

Whilst some myths and presumptions are easy to dislodge, others meet with more resistance, particularly when it comes to interrogating the versions of Britishness that are often associated with Jane Austen and the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries more broadly. Issues of imperialism, colonialism, and race have been spotlighted since the murder of George Floyd, and the sea-change which is following in its wake. During this time, heritage institutions have found themselves on the front line of the culture wars in the UK, attacked by the right-wing press and the government for their attention to the nuances of race, gender, colonialism and economics. The National Trust’s *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (September 2020), co-edited by University of Leicester Professor Corinne Fowler provoked one such controversy, drawing intense criticism from conservative politicians, journalists, and historians, as well as disturbing personal abuse for Fowler on social media platforms. Since August 2020, the British Library has been forced to respond to persistent media misrepresentations of its interpretation choices, its alleged involvement in partisan political campaigning, and its decision to remove an introductory essay from an exhibition catalogue after the author made unacceptable statements about slavery and its legacy. Closer to home, Jane Austen’s House became the target of similar media misrepresentation of comments made by its Director over the museum’s plans to explore the colonial contexts of Austen’s life and works, including her connections to the slave trade (Simpson). There was particular outrage over the suggestion that Jane Austen would face “historical interrogation” for drinking tea, with the *Express* calling the project “woke madness,” and the *Daily Mail* declaring it “a revisionist attack” (McGrath; Cole). The longstanding and careful academic engagement with the colonial implications of Austen’s work—that stretches back to scholars such as Edward Said, is reflected in teaching syllabi across the UK, and has informed displays and exhibitions for many years—was entirely overlooked by these inflammatory articles. However imaginary, the prospect of a site (and an author) seen by some as a safe haven of conservatism being forced to shine a light on the murky practices of the British Empire was too tantalizing a tool for the media to resist.

The volume and intensity of the criticism, and the more sinister government interventions in the culture sector, do nothing to mask the increasing desire and interest in society to confront colonial history. In January 2021, following the toppling of the Edward Colston statue during a Black Lives Matter protest, the British government proposed new laws to “protect England’s cultural and historic heritage,” meaning that the removal of historic statues, plaques and other monuments now requires full planning permission. Oliver Dowden, then Culture Secretary, proposed a policy of “retain and explain,” whereby interpretation of controversial statues, for example, should simply contain a bit more information. Implicit in this prescription is that what constitutes heritage itself should remain static. This proposal entirely ignored the complex and careful work of decolonization going on in museums, libraries and universities, which, in addition to reinterpreting some objects, also asks much
more fundamental questions about what sorts of heritage ought to be presented, and in what ways and in which spaces.

These questions map, in some ways, onto the recovery project itself, and to considerations of the literary canon that are far from over. In its infancy, the recovery project sought proto-feminism or transgression in the work and lives of those women it brought to light. However, much recovery project research has also been interested in looking beyond feminism: in deeply conservative women writers, for example, or in moments in women’s writing that betray opinions and ideologies we now find uncomfortable and offensive. Scholars such as Moira Ferguson have shown us the ways in which a narrative about white women heroically writing in the service of abolition could be troubled by the terms in which they were writing and the stereotypes that they were trading in, and such insights are important for heritage organizations seeking to move past purely celebratory accounts.

Such work informs the way, at Chawton House, we share the work of women writers engaging in debates over slavery, including Amelia Opie, Frances Kemble and Hannah More, but our presentation of these women remains an ongoing curatorial process and a dialogue between organization and varied audiences, which “retain and explain” does little to capture. As British educational and heritage institutions continue to grapple with the legacies of slavery and Britain’s colonial past, and continue to face pressure from a conservative government and media to leave off doing so, this strand of critical recovery only becomes more important. To interrogate women writers’ portrayals of race or the implications of the practices of Empire has never been a betrayal of feminism. It is now an essential tool for intersectional recovery rooted in a drive towards decolonization, and towards a more representative canon that refuses the cultural amnesia of mainstream historical narratives.

Recovery and its discontents have shaped Chawton House. Through Fellowships and conferences, exhibitions, study days, talks, performances, and reading groups, scholars and creative practitioners have demonstrated over and over again the collection’s power to reformulate and reshape legacy, and have done so primarily by thinking about what paths the recovery project might take. Scholars have thought through questions of quality and canonization, evaluating women writers working in multiple genres and going far beyond the fact that they were women, that they wrote, or that they were feminist. They have paused to survey the field and to consider their methodologies. And they have also negotiated the challenges of thoughtful public engagement with emergent research. How do we challenge persistent myths and conflicting ideas of women writers as either brutally repressed or daringly transgressive? How do we generate interest in unknown women?
In 2016, changes to the funding structure of Chawton House necessitated a shift in focus to move the organization towards self-sufficiency and to ensure its immediate survival and stability thereafter. The house, once only visitable by appointment, is now open to the public seven days a week, with a thriving café and shop; the display boards around the house, alongside the labels on the artwork and exhibitions, all make the most of the Knight family history, the Austen connection, the portraits, the collection, and the garden and parkland. With visitor ticket sales now the primary income source, footfall and broad appeal are essential, and the story of women’s writing has become part of a larger whole. In early 2020, the commercial turn was beginning to yield success and a collections review was underway, but another much more acute pivot was in store.

**Computers, coronavirus, and carrying legacy into the future**

In March 2020, the UK went into full national lockdown, creating a crisis for the heritage, culture, and arts sector. Closing meant that Chawton House instantly lost sixty percent of its income, and required a very fast re-evaluation of public programming, shifting from onsite to online provision. The digital world, whose possibilities were already being mapped by some, was now mandatory terrain for all: Zoom and Microsoft Teams, Padlet and Panopto, Adobe and iMovie became essential tools in maintaining communities.

The small team at Chawton House began pandemic outreach by putting together a digital Lockdown Literary Festival in May, one of the first of its kind. Talks by well-known popular novelists such as Joanna Trollope, Gill Hornby, and Natalie Jenner, were interspersed with talks from prominent scholars, and contributions on women’s writing ranged from a survey of early feminist works and a discussion of female literary societies to an exploration of the role of the publisher John Murray in women’s literary networks, and the introduction of Jane West and Jane Porter alongside Jane Austen to audiences less familiar with “the other Janes.” A well-subscribed summer lecture series of fortnightly talks and interviews on Jane Austen ran from June to September 2020, and a digital day of celebration for the Jane Austen Society’s eightieth birthday took place online in July, followed by an examination of Austen’s unfinished novel *The Watsons* to mark Austen’s birthday in December. Events like these blended scholarly and popular content, and attracted a large international community. They are now an integral part of the events program, so that, at the time of writing, the Chawton House YouTube channel has just under one hundred thousand views. Unlike visitors to the house, who come to Chawton for a multitude of reasons, the majority of this digital audience has a strong interest in women’s writing and literary history.

Despite the closure of the house for the greater part of the year, library acquisitions continued, and the collection has not become static. In January
2020, thanks to the diligence of the Godmersham Lost Sheep Society and a grant from the Friends of the National Libraries, the library acquired the Knight family copy of William Cowper’s 1782 Poems. Austen’s enjoyment of Cowper is well-documented, although he, like so many eighteenth-century female contemporaries, remains relatively unknown beyond academic circles, except in relation to Austen. A virtual study day to mark the anniversary of his death on 25 April 1800, comprised a variety of short films on the many facets of his life and work from Cowper specialists across the world, part of an ongoing project to build permanent and free online resources to elucidate onsite collections at Chawton House for a wider national and international audience. An acquisition of a previously unknown letter by Mary Russell Mitford in 2021, in which she thanks the recipient for his gift of the 1833 Bentley edition of Austen’s collected works, will provide further opportunities for onsite display and online engagement. It casts a light on Hampshire literary networks, as well as on the practice of letter-writing—the subject of an exhibition running in 2023 to mark Chawton House’s twentieth anniversary: Quills and Characters.

In addition to new public engagement programs, the now digital online magazine, The Female Spectator, begun by Sandy Lerner in 1995 and inspired by Eliza Haywood’s publication of the same name, was resurrected in summer 2021. This publication is committed to sharing and promoting the research of scholars of women’s writing alongside Chawton House news in two issues per year and has so far featured content from former Executive Director Gillian Dow, former Visiting Fellows, including Tita Chico and Emily Cock, and current early career researchers. The Chawton House reading group, which meets monthly to discuss works by women in the collection, moved online and, as a result, doubled in size to welcome participants in Europe, America, and Canada, expanding to two groups, and providing a sense of community through months of lockdown. COVID-19 has changed the face of heritage, but, somewhat perversely, it has also enabled Chawton House to escape the confines of its rural location, to experiment with a variety of digital formats, and to share the legacies of women writers with a broader audience than ever before. As an organization, Chawton House is now able to offer a wide array of engagement opportunities, at varying levels of depth.

By the time lockdown was lifted in the UK July 2021, there was a sense of digital saturation, and a pause allowed for a consideration of how to integrate the enormous changes of the past two years, and the certainty of a hybrid future, into a longer-term recovery plan. Questions about the perils and possibilities of digitization that were with us a long time prior to COVID-19 remain pertinent: what futures might we envisage for specialist collections in the digital age? What has been the cost of so much screen time? Do material traces of legacy still matter? Whilst online provision has meant wider access for many, it has also greatly disadvantaged and isolated those unable to
connect because of digital poverty or illiteracy. Creating and editing digital content is intensely time consuming and has eaten into research time for many academic colleagues already dealing with immense workload pressure. In other words, care needs to be taken to explore the limitations of the digital world and the blind-spots that it might produce—to subject this moment to the same level of scrutiny as the recovery project itself has been subjected to.

As life begins to return to normality, albeit a slightly altered normality, visitors have returned to Chawton House. These included new cohorts of Visiting Fellows, the first in August 2021, and then another two cohorts in 2022. Supported by income from public programming, and by a generous grant from the Ardeola Trust, the reading room is once again letting scholars in on its secrets. Crang talks about the need to recognize a “circuit of culture,” whereby heritage is not a one-way process of transmission of a fixed message but instead “involves interpretations being made available to a public that then reinterprets them through various of their own ideas and backgrounds. So the experience of places is not fixed but, rather, is open to wider cultural values and varying intertextual sources brought into play by the visitors” (121). Chawton House, its library, and the scholars who work on its collections continue to play a crucial role in both shaping and responding to shifts in cultural values, in posing questions that allow audiences to engage with questions of recovery in ways that are not fixed, and in building inclusive communities that celebrate the legacies of women writers.

Notes

This essay is part of a special issue: “Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women,” guest edited by Marilyn Francus, *Aphra Behn Online* 13, no. 1 (Summer 2023). To read the essays in the cluster, follow this link: [https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/](https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/).

1 I am grateful to Curator & Collections Manager Emma Yandle for providing up-to-date and accurate figures.

2 For a detailed account of this inheritance, see Christine Grover.

3 For one such example, see Penny Gay.

4 On country house demolitions, see Peter Mandler.

5 For a sense of the press coverage of Lerner’s takeover of Chawton House, see Alex Renton.

6 Chawton House Library was renamed as Chawton House in 2018, and will be referred to as Chawton House in this article.

7 See, for example, Batchelor and Dow, but also Robin Runia.
See, for example, the “Race and Racism in Austen Spaces” essays by Kerry Sinanan, Amanda-Rae Prescott, Tré Ventour-Griffiths and Bianca Hernandez-Knight.

For an example, Sumi Bora.

For an online version of both 2017 exhibitions, see Gillian Dow, Kim Simpson, and Catriona Seth.

For an example of this sort of reaction, see “The Common Sense Group. Founded by Conservative MP Sir John Hayes in 2020, the group had 59 MPs and 7 House of Lord members in November 2020. They campaign against immigration, “the woke agenda,” and, most recently, COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

For an account of this controversy, see Jamie Doward.

For an account of this controversy, see Jamie Doward.


See Edward Said. Critics have noted the Bertram’s positions as slave owners as far back as Tony Tanner in a 1966 essay, and Margaret Kirkham in her chapter on Mansfield Park in Feminism and Fiction, although postcolonial readings proliferated during the 1990s, and extended beyond Mansfield Park. See also You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan.

For the “retain and explain” laws, announced in January 2021 to protect statues and monuments in Britain, see “New legal protection for England’s heritage,” and for subsequent accusations of government interference in the supposedly independent culture sector, see Gareth Harris.

Chawton House is grateful for the scholars who provided their time and expertise free of charge for this, and other digital events during the pandemic, particularly Devoney Looser, Emma Clery, Gillian Dow, Janine Barchas, Jennie Batchelor, Hilary Davidson, and Janet Todd.

For a discussion of the impact of digitization projects, see Stephen Gregg.

The Fellowship program will continue to offer at least six Fellowships each year, forming part of a wider package of support for Early Career Researchers and scholars in recognition of the precarity of academia in the present moment.

Works Cited


