

The Female Spectator

CHAWTON HOUSE LIBRARY

VOL. 1 TO NO. 2 TO SPRING 1996

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF EARLY ENGLISH WOMEN'S WRITING



Chawton House

The Female Spectator is the newsletter of the Centre for the Study of Early English Women's Writing. The Centre, to be located in Chawton, England, seeks to provide a self-contained research area, and to establish a Library, for the study of the works of early English women writers (1600-1830). The Centre has been established under the auspices of the Leonard X. Bosack and Bette M. Kruger Charitable Foundation, founded through the generosity of Sandy Lerner and Leonard Bosack.

CHAWTON: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

CHAWTON PARK LANDSCAPE

THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES
DEPICTING ITS HISTORY, CONSERVATION, AND FUTURE

by

Mrs. Gilly Drummond, D. L.

Chawton is one of those quintessential English villages that inspires poets, painters, and writers because of its antiquity, charm, stability, and the occasional originality of some of its inhabitants. The manor houses, or great houses, of these villages best reflect, because they best record, the changing tastes of different generations, as well as the particular, often peculiar, interests of their owners. Chawton House, the home of the Knight family since the sixteenth century and now in Sandy Lerner's capable hands, is a good example.

Sandy is warmly welcome, for herself and for the contributions she will undoubtedly make to many lives through the Centre for the Study of Early English Women's Writing and the revival of Chawton House. For us Brits, there is again the happy recognition that another enthusiastic, energetic foreigner will add new dimensions to our lives.

To care for land sensitively, imaginatively and practically, it is essential to understand how it has evolved, and the cause and

effect of man's activities on any particular place. The character of landscape, and historic buildings, is acquired through these historic overlays. In 1903, Christopher Hussey wrote of Chawton in *Country Life*, "The great charm of the place is its simplicity, originality and antique air." At that time, the House would have gleamed with beeswax. The gardens were wide expanses of lawn, flowers, and views, and very close to what Jane Austen would have seen almost a century before during her visits to her brother, Edward Austen Knight. Two world wars, shifts of fortune and the Great Gale of 1987 have dimmed, but not destroyed, its charm and antique air. The challenge for Sandy and the Executive Committee is to reclaim those timeless qualities.

The search for the landscape history of Chawton requires the skills of archivists, archaeologists, architectural and art historians, landscape architects and ecologists. All these professionals require direction, and the guiding light is the vision of the owner. This has to be focused and sharpened, a lively task when there

is an unusual owner! The vision becomes the brief for the required *Historic Landscape Repair/Restoration and Management Plan*, to be submitted to the East Hampshire Planning Authority. The Plan must demonstrate that considerable care will be taken of the estate's 275 acres; historic, scenic, and conservation values will be considered; and appropriate consultants appointed.

Sandy has aptly described the process as "labyrinthine," but there is good reason. Space is at a premium and England is under constant development pressures. If we want to hand on to future generations the historic buildings and landscapes we still enjoy, it is essential that new development adds rather than detracts, is appropriate, and where places are very precious, does not cause irreversible damage.

There was a previous application for a hotel and golf course at Chawton, and it was considered the best solution that could be found at the time. Many of the great houses, including Chawton, originally built for prestige, families and entertaining, have become hotels, conference centers, or institu-

tions, especially if their state required expensive programs of repair. There was genuine delight and relief when a diminutive knight on a heavy horse came to the rescue, with an incisive mind and a commitment to restore Chawton House and Park. A number of consultants had prepared the obligatory reports, but since the appointments of Sybil Wade as the landscape consultant for the preparation of the Plan, Cassandra Knight for the implementation of the restoration works, and Chris Currie as the archaeologist responsible for the historic survey up to 1700, new and important information has been uncovered regarding the property. Crucial decisions for present and future land management will be based on this information.

The objectives of the Plan are to restore the historic gardens and landscape where there is good evidence, focusing on the periods leading up to 1840 and particularly on the work of Edward Austen Knight, to take account of Sandy's wishes to reinstate the traditional farmed landscape, and to accommodate the Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society and the traditional activities associated with the village



From the Knight Family Collection, courtesy of Richard Knight.

This painting by Mellichamp, dated provisionally to 1740, beautifully illustrates a period of transition in Chawton Park's history. The earlier, more formal gardens of Chawton Park would soon be returning to a more natural state. It is possible that this painting was commissioned to record the garden before radical remodeling.

and Great House. Contrary to previously published reports, the lady has taken to these as to the manor born.

The archaeological survey determined that Chawton is an ancient settlement. Flint artifacts have been found in the valley south of the estate, possibly dating to the Neolithic period. The Roman presence at Alton may have resulted in nearby villa estates, but to date only a few diagnostic ceramics have been found close to the study area.

The medieval period is much more interesting. The House and estate are mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086 when William the Conqueror required a record and an accurate assessment of the value of his new acquisitions after the Battle of Hastings. Chawton was a manor of some importance, with land under the plough and areas of woodlands. It was held under the strong authority of the de Port, later St. John, families of Norman knights. New research in the Royal Records, Calendars and Rolls, shows that Chawton became much more important during the reign of Henry III, husband of Eleanor of Provence, and his son, Edward I, husband of Eleanor of Castile. The Royal Court, which was itinerant in those days, made 22 recorded visits to Chawton between 1229 and 1276, most probably on the way to and from Winchester Castle and London, via Guildford Castle. The court needed sufficient supplies of food, and not one, but two deer parks, with their park pales of fenced banks and ditches, are known to have existed. St. John had the right to hunt, a royal favor. A private chapel and two large gardens conjure up a picture of a bustling, medieval manor and its demesne.

Chawton went into decline with the failures of the male line. Two references, first in 1347 and again in 1552 when the manor was sold outright to John Knight, refer to the site of the manor. Presumably it was a ruin. This leaves us with an intriguing mystery. Where exactly was the site of the old manor and its complex of associated buildings? A possibility is the area now occupied by the existing farm buildings, on level land, close to a water supply and with a private wing, the Old Manor. The old walls may have been rebuilt as stables in 1593 after the Knight family had built their new, grand house, to see and be seen, further up the hill in the 1580s. Again there are implications for the layout of the historic landscape, as there may have been changes in the approach to the old manor and the new.

We know little about the Knight family and their activities during the seventeenth century. How fared their fortunes? Sadly, we may never know. Records were found waterlogged and unreadable in the Chawton House cellars. Bills from a builder indicate that a vast amount of work was being carried out at Chawton between 1707 and 1709. Mention is made of "digging and cleansing 65,000 bricks...clearing the trees and rubbish and digging the foundation of garden wall...with 3,694 foot of brickwork in the garden wall end and side." Fortunately, a detailed survey dated 1741, drawn

and handcolored by Chawton's stewards, the two Edward Randalls, father and son, survives in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The survey shows elaborate, seventeenth-century style gardens and a large walled garden to the south of the House. This has recently been confirmed by a physical survey of the site where remains of the brick walls were found. It is possible that the Randall Survey was undertaken prior to a new plan for the gardens. By 1741 Thomas Brodnax May Knight, of Godmersham, Kent, inherited Chawton.

Thomas B. M. Knight (1701-80) shared a common ancestor with the Austen family, which had been in Kent since Elizabethan times. This Mr. Knight had the happy facility of gaining estates as he added new names; he had been born Thomas Brodnax. Both he and his son, another Thomas, were to be benefactors to the Hampshire Austens. He presented George Austen with the living of the parish of Steventon and son Thomas was to adopt Jane Austen's brother, Edward. Thomas B. M. Knight was fortunate to live at that perfect time in England when many of the new works of Man were in harmony with the works of Nature, and taste was much under discussion. He built an elegant Palladian house at Godmersham in 1732, on the site of an earlier house, beautifully sited to take advantage of the view. "Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks and the winding of the valley with delight," wrote Jane Austen of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*. So, too, at Godmersham.

By the 1740s, the formal gardens of the Randall Survey and their 'preposterous inconvenience' were distinctly out of fashion. Nature itself, in all its variety and irregularity, was the inspiration for modern taste and the development of the English landscape garden. Gentlemen of means, such as Thomas B. M. Knight, were heavily "in mortar and moving of earth." He would certainly have looked at his gardens and woods at Chawton with an improver's eye. An interesting piece of evidence, and an example of this change in taste, is the Wilderness, referred to in a letter to Knight from Randall in 1763, as last cut in 1744. The orderly planting of trees and shrubs, native and exotic, in geometric layouts, had begun to give way to more natural planting. This was later to develop into the shrubberies so beloved by Jane Austen.

The transitional period from formal to natural at Chawton is beautifully illustrated by a large and delightfully detailed painting by Mellichamp, dated provisionally to 1740, and shown on p. 2. The painting shows a double avenue of trees running towards the house. A flight of steps, with formal, grass terraces on each side, leads up to the House. A white, palisade fence encloses the garden. There are clipped evergreens, conifers shaped as spires, ten green animals of some form of topiary running along the top of a hedge and other delightful conceits in the background. To the south of the House is another series of four, leveled terraces with flights of steps leading from white gates. Walled gardens can be seen behind the church and tall trees, their lower branches

removed in the best Kentian style¹. Was this painting commissioned to record the garden before the radical remodeling to come?

1. William Kent (1685-1748). Painter and landscape designer whose ability to see "that all nature was a garden" was a formative influence on the English landscape garden. Many of his sketches show trees trimmed up by the removal of their lower branches.

In 1780 Thomas Knight II inherited Chawton, but he may have taken responsibility for the estates in Kent and Hampshire some time before his father's death; new wings were added to Godmersham in that year. A beautiful painting by Adam Callander, dated between 1775 and 1785, shows Chawton in the full glory of the English Landscape style – smooth, sweeping lawns, clumps of trees, and grazing cattle kept in bounds by the ha-ha, or sunken fence. The painting depicts the landscape Edward would inherit and Jane would share. The Fall issue of *The Female Spectator* will contain that story and illustration.



CHAWTON: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

THE GREAT HOUSE

by

Adam Knight and Adrian Thatcher

Chawton House presents a classic example of what is known in architecture as an "accumulated history." It is a fascinating mix of baffling details that do not present a clear picture of age or origin. However, we are gradually forming an idea of how it evolved with the help of Edward Roberts, an architectural historian, and other experts on historic buildings.

The House and its outbuildings, including the dovecote, a falconry, barns, and the Old Manor, which we now believe to be an Elizabethan stable block, are being examined as thoroughly as technology permits. For example, Dan Miles, an American expert in tree-ring dating, or "dendrochronology," has determined that the beams in the Old Manor were cut "in the fall of 1592," and the timbers in the dovecote date between 1578 and 1618.

The Elizabethan part of the House is a traditional plan of the time and was built by John Knight in 1585, although his family had been leasing the land since 1524. The fireback in the Great Hall commemorates the defeat of the Spanish

Armada in 1588, to which John contributed financially. The parlour to the north is now a grand paneled dining room. To the south one would have expected to find a pantry and buttery rather than the existing study. Traditionally, the kitchens would have been set in a semi-detached building to the south of the Great Hall. This may well have been the case before the south wing was built fifty years later, and the parlour moved to the new service wing, but we have yet to find any evidence of the old buttery building.

Richard Knight, John's great grandson, is thought to have remodeled the House in 1650 by adding two Jacobean wings to the east instead of completing the formal E-plan of Elizabethan times. However, it is difficult to pinpoint where the Elizabethan stops and the Jacobean starts, apart from the change of materials on the west elevation – from flint and stone to red brick. The interior story will be revealed with the help of our dendrochronologist who continues dating samples from the roof timbers. In addition, as repairs take place and the structure is exposed, archeological investigations and a keen eye for clues will add to the story.

For now, we have simply to piece together the possible answers, and it is becoming clear that the Knight Family of Chawton thrived on change right into the twentieth century. The changes of the nineteenth century are well documented by Montagu Knight. His recollections of his childhood and a collection of his maps reveal major changes in the landscape throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A few principle elements have survived those upheavals. The great stair in the south wing is an early free-standing structure showing the tests of time by the angle at

which it sits. Careful observation of the staircases at the north end of the House reveals heavy, crudely carved newels and door frames that remain in their original positions. The first floor (second floor in the U. S.) bedrooms and the Great Hall retain their Elizabethan character and original fireplaces.

The amazing thing is that over and above all its inconsistencies and its "architects," the House retains its Jacobean feel, and indeed, "its simplicity, originality and antique air."



MORE NEWS OF CHAWTON

by

Susan Maher

The Centre is still in its infancy, and like all new projects is experiencing all the delight, excitement, and fits and starts associated with a large undertaking. The winter in Hampshire was particularly severe this year, but it neither deterred the gardeners from making some progress, nor did it interfere with our planning.

Sandy Lerner and I visited with Professors Gillian Beer and Ian Donaldson at Cambridge in the early spring. We talked about the Centre's Library, and how we might work together to ensure that it is available to the widest possible audience. Sandy is extremely anxious to share the books in a way that makes sense and is helpful to scholars everywhere.

In the meantime, the Executive Committee of the Centre has appointed the architectural firm of Nichols, Brown and Webber to guide us through phase one of the restoration

project. We hope to have a plan to present to the East Hampshire Planning Authority this summer. Once we have the approval of the various agencies, we can begin work on Chawton House.

We want to thank everyone who wrote to request placement on our mailing list. We are grateful for your continuing enthusiasm and support. We know, because of your letters, phone calls, and e-mails, that there is enormous interest in the Centre, but we continue to ask for your indulgence and request that you not come to the site of Chawton House – it is not yet a safe place to visit. However, please do continue to visit the Austen Cottage in Chawton. There are a number of exciting temporary exhibits planned for the coming year, including a display of costumes from the 1995 BBC/A&E production of *Pride and Prejudice* and from the recent Columbia Pictures film release of *Sense and Sensibility*.



CHAWTON HOUSE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF EARLY ENGLISH WOMEN'S WRITING

Mrs. Gilly Drummond D. L., Director of Landscape Restoration
 Professor Isobel Grundy, Director of the Library and Academic Liaison
 Mr. Christopher L. Kaufman, Esq., Solicitor for the Centre
 Mr. Richard Knight, Director of Farmlands Restoration
 Ms. Sandy Lerner, Director of Technology Resources
 Ms. Susan Maher, Director of the Study Centre, *ex officio*
 Mr. Adrian Thatcher, Project Director, *ex officio*

A LETTER TO FRIENDS OF THE CENTRE

Dear Friends of the Centre for the Study of Early English Women's Writing and the Chawton House Library:

This installment is coming to you direct from Chawton where the C. S. E. E. W. W. (hereinafter referred to as the Study Centre) is about to hold the semi-monthly meeting of its Executive Committee.

There have been many questions asked about our plans for the Study Centre. Fortunately, I have been chosen to respond to the easy ones, that is, the ones which have answers (more and more, I seem to get the jobs which are usually delegated to trained seals, though anyone who knows me knows that I am incapable of being trained at all).

There are answers and then there are answers. N. B. There will still be very few dates, but unfortunately fewer answers. The reason for the somewhat imprecise wording is that we are still very much in the negotiation stage with the various agencies in Britain which control our ability to repair Chawton House, and amend it for the purposes of the Study Centre. If I seem a bit vague, it is perhaps intentional, to be sure.

First, it is our plan that the Centre house scholars. We believe about ten to twelve could be comfortably accommodated. Adam Knight and Adrian Thatcher have carefully assessed Chawton House room-by-room to see how the House might accommodate the needs of the Study Centre. They are preparing a (large, complicated) *brief* to be given to the various agencies that oversee the restoration works on *listed* buildings. This brief must cover not only the obvious issues of restoration and the updating of the building (we have recently had to disconnect all the electrical wiring into the House as it has been deemed to pose a fire hazard, for example), but must also address the structural, historical, and safety issues of the use of the House. The bottom line on, "Will there be a place for scholars to reside whilst studying at the Centre?" is a very firm, "We hope so." There are a myriad of issues to be faced, even though Chawton House will remain a private house (as opposed to a building for the public, such as an hotel), where its guests are by invitation, and their stay for a specific time.

This brings us to the next most frequently asked question, "Will the House be open to the public?" The answer there is a less equivocal, "No," if public means the House would be open daily as is Chawton Cottage, for example. The whole point of undertaking the restoration of the House and grounds is to bring the estate back, approximately, to what it was in Jane Austen's time. Amendments to the House to make it safe as a public building would necessitate the addition of ramps, fire doors, fire escapes, and alarms, which would preclude the restoration of the House with a minimum of modern-day intru-

sion. There are also issues of traffic and parking in Chawton village, hypothesized competition with the Cottage, noise for our neighbors, and so on. However, as importantly, if the House is to be used as a Study Centre, it is imperative that scholars be able to work in an atmosphere comparable to that of the eighteenth century, and one of relative peace and quiet. Otherwise, what is the point?

This rhetorical question is my segue to the third question concerning where the books will be housed. If we did not wish to undertake to provide an atmosphere recreating, as closely as possible, an English country house of the period of our women writers, the Study Centre and its Library could be housed in a tilt-up, concrete warehouse in Basingstoke (or in Mountain View, California, for that matter, where the books are now). In formulating my view of the type of environment that would make for the most interesting, informative, and unique experience for scholars working on the genre of the novels and their milieu, it seemed that Chawton House, a beautiful building, secluded in the Hampshire countryside, could be renovated to recreate an eighteenth-century working and living environment (albeit much grander than many of the living situations of the early women writers).

To this end, we have had to look carefully at the building which will house the Study Centre and its Library. Since it is not a modern building purpose-built to our specifications, we have had to make some compromises on behalf of the House itself. It has lived over four hundred years in the world with much unsympathetic change which has, doubtless, vexed and distressed it. We hope to do a very soft-handed job of restoring the House and making a creditable environment for our (hoped-for) live-in scholars.

After much research, it seems simply infeasible to house the rare books at Chawton House. The only area of the House which is structurally capable of holding the enormous weight imposed by thousands of books and their shelving is the basement. This solution, however, has two attendant problems: the basements are quite small, and that water flows downhill. While we might be able to amend the first problem, we certainly cannot change the laws of physics. In order to protect the books, we would have to install a sprinkler system. As anyone who has ever lived with any plumbing – modern or otherwise – knows, plumbing will invariably leak. The basement, as basements do, will collect the water from all of the leaks from all four floors of the House. This seems an unkind thing to do to rare books.

We are currently looking for a new home for the very old, rare and fragile works of the women of our period. It is our plan to work with one of the universities in England, where modern facilities for rare book collections are extant. Scholars and others approved by the Library would be able to request the books from the university to use for a limited time. We hope that prospective donors of books to the Library will understand that it is our concern for the life of the books which has

prompted this difficult decision. We want to emphasize that, wherever the books may be housed, they will remain the property of the Study Centre.

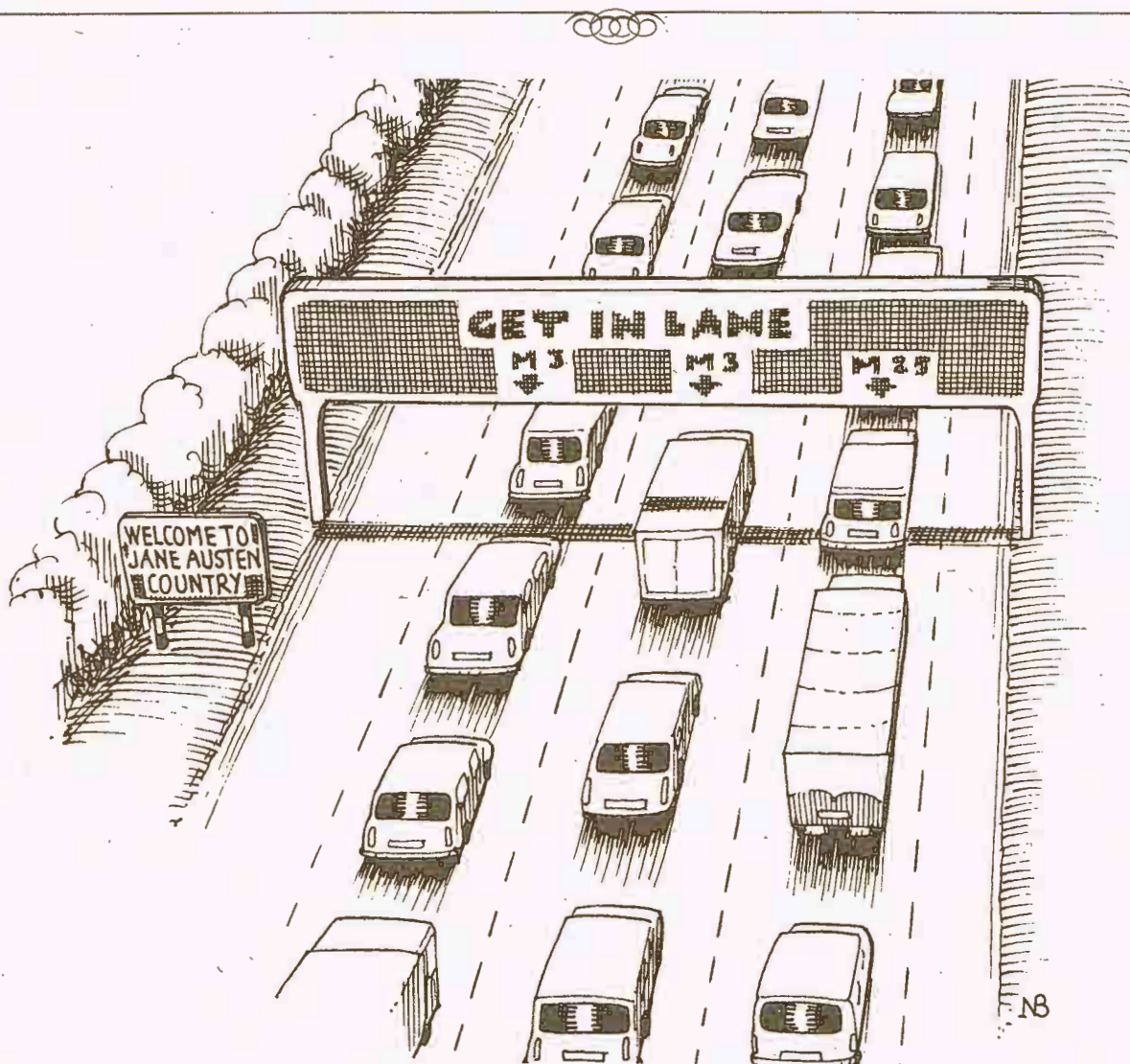
However, there are literally thousands of newer books, including all the reference works, which will be housed at Chawton House. We believe this two-location arrangement works for two reasons. First, it is simply not possible to control adequately the temperature and humidity of the basement of a sixteenth-century country house. Second, as it is our larger purpose to make the texts of the early writers as widely available as possible, we are now beginning to implement our plan for putting the novels on-line. Indeed, for most scholarly purposes, the location of the books should not matter. It is an unfortunate property of old books that they cannot withstand even moderate amounts of handling and exposure. Collecting the actual text in digital form, and storing the artifact away, out of danger, seems the most prudent course.

Why then, you might ask, make a Study Centre at all? If the novels are on-line and the rare books housed elsewhere, and

the only books available are reference texts, why call it a Library? Why go through the expense and bother of restoring a very old Chawton House, to become a very new Study Centre? *To give scholars the experience of living, working, and writing in eighteenth-century conditions.* The residential sections of Chawton House will have very discreet plumbing, electricity and heating, and these may be disused at the scholar's discretion. We are hopeful that scholars will choose to make chamber pots, candles, and quilts a part of their everyday existence and to live, work, and write much as their foremothers did. We certainly hope they will share their experiences during their stay at Chawton House with those of us who, perforce, must choose to live with the luxuries of running water and indoor plumbing. All of us connected with the project very much hope that the powers-that-be in England will sympathize with our plan, and allow us to invite scholars to bring Chawton House back to life with as little shame and misery as such a project can give.

Yours most truly,

Sandy Lerner





THE EARLY WOMEN WRITERS: LIVES AND TIMES

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FORTHCOMING SERIES HIGHLIGHTING
AUTHORS WHOSE WORKS ARE PART OF THE CHAWTON HOUSE LIBRARY

by

Isobel Grundy
Director of the Chawton House Library

Jane Austen wrote of novelists, "Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body." The other novelists cited in that passage in *Northanger Abbey* were all women – colleagues to be proud of, and whose achievements were not properly recognized.

Hence Sandy Lerner's determination to found the Study Centre at Chawton House, and the Chawton House Library. Works from the Library will be made available to the widest possible audience, and will include books by Jane Austen's female contemporaries and predecessors. The Library will contain works by writers of all genres – not only novelists. To introduce the many authors from the collection, *The Female Spectator*, in addition to serving as historian and celebrator of the Chawton House project, will run a series of articles on these women. The articles will be written by invitation, by scholars who are able to bring out the truly gripping quality in these women writers' exhilarating, often upsetting, and always moving lives. The series will not limit itself to writers whom Austen might have read. It will not imitate a university course, or rank the writers chronologically or any other way. Instead, we shall pursue our interests, opportunities, and even whims.

This follows an ancient tradition. In the middle ages, writers of both sexes were already using the list of "female worthies" as a publicity tool to argue the worth and value of women. In the early eighteenth century, Elizabeth Bathurst made a list of all women praised in the Bible, from the dozens in the *Old Testament* to the very respectable showing in the *New Testament*. *The Female Tatler*, predecessor to Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator*, which is our predecessor, announced in its 57th issue that it was planning a "Table of Fame for the Ladies." It would come "down to the present Times," and be all panegyric. Alas for *The Female Tatler*, its "Table of Fame" never materialized. Instead the magazine revealed, in successive issues, a tale of disagreement among its editors. One editor thought there might not be enough famous women to supply the series; another was afraid the others might include famous women who were not virtuous. What began as a plan for a statement of female fame ended

in questioning whether fame is or has been available to women at all.

Closer to Jane Austen's own day, the "biographical dictionary" was flourishing. Scholars published collections of essays on the lives of writers and artists. (If only Samuel Johnson had included just one woman in his *Lives of the English Poets*!) A number of women published volumes of "lives of famous women": Mary Hays in 1803, Mary Matilda Betham in 1804, Mary Pilkington in 1811, and Mary Roberts in 1821.

We shall not make the same mistakes as *The Female Tatler*. We shall not come down to the present, and we shall not limit ourselves to the panegyric, or stories exclusively of virtue. We would do better to model ourselves on the first of the biographical dictionaries mentioned: *Female Biography*, by Mary Hays, 1803. That collection deserves special mention here, partly because one of Austen's sisters-in-law owned a copy, and partly because of what is said in Hays' preface: "My pen has been taken up in the cause, and for the benefit, of my own sex." She further adds that women do not have to be academic; they do not like "to make a display of a vain erudition," and they do not have to tolerate the pedantic or boring. They like to read for pleasure, they demand "lively images, the graces of sentiment, and the polish of language." That sounds like a model Jane Austen would have approved.

To read about these other women's lives and careers is to realize how lucky Austen was. She had supportive relations, enough money to live on, and a good, though informal, education. If she did not have a room of her own, she had a table of her own. Her family was keen on circulating libraries and reading groups, and they shared chores in such a way as to ensure that Jane Austen had enough time to write.

Compare Austen's middle-class income with that of Aphra Behn, the first writer in our series. She had no source of income except what she could earn. She spent time in debtors' prison, and she died in poverty. The question of how to earn a living – or modestly, how to earn something to supplement an inadequate living – is a *leitmotiv* in the lives of early

women writers. Compare Austen's supportive family with that of Elizabeth Elstob, who became one of the pioneers of the study of Anglo-Saxon, but who had been orphaned in childhood and brought up by an uncle who believed the proverb that "one tongue was enough for a woman," another *leitmotiv* of many women writers. Compare Austen's available space with that of Eliza Fenwick. In her first surviving letter to Mary Hays, when Fenwick had published her magnificent novel, *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock*, she said, "I cannot write, perpetually surrounded with my family." A few months later she was perpetually surrounded as well by six children between two and five years of age, for whose daytime care she was paid a total of £32 per year. Compare Austen's available time with that of Mary Jones of Oxford. Her brother was an academic, but in one of her letters published in a volume of *Miscellanies* in 1750 she complained that she never had "time to read; my manner is to skip thro' a book," and that "I never begin my Studies, till other People are abed and asleep." Reading and writing at night while others are asleep is another *leitmotiv*.

But it will not be all gloom. These women succeeded, against long odds, in doing something that was vitally important to them. In that respect, at least, their lives are success stories. "I am happy while I read and write," said Lady Mary Wortley Montagu at the age of seventy. We hope it will make our readers happy too, to read accounts of a few remarkable women who, before Jane Austen or before the time of her fame, managed to make themselves into authors. Some of them knew they were part of a history of women's writing in English, and some of them never thought about it at all.

APHRA BEHN (1640-1689)



Engraving by T. White, from the (presumed) portrait by Riley.
Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

In the Fall 1996 issue of *The Female Spectator*, Janet Todd, Professor of English at the University of East Anglia, will begin our series on the early women writers with an article on Aphra Behn, playwright, poet, and writer of fiction, and the first professional woman writer in English. In addition to her other works on women writers, Professor Todd has just completed a seven volume edition of the Works of Aphra Behn (London: Pickering and Chatto and Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), and a biography, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (London: Andre Deutsch, forthcoming).

AUSTENMANIA

THE AUSTEN RENAISSANCE: WHY NOW?

by

Juliet McMaster
University of Alberta

Why Jane Austen? Why now? Those are questions much in the air in these stirring times, when those of us who write about Austen or participate in Jane Austen Societies find ourselves suddenly popular with the media.

Why now? Better late than never, certainly. But I'm inclined to counter, *Why not a lot sooner?* After all, she has been around a long time. And look what she has going for her! A ready-made audience with *avid* fans; lead roles with stunning star potential and character plots to kill for; plots perfect for a love story or musical; Regency costumes; sharp dialogue already written – and all this to be had for little more than the cost of hiring three or four families in a coun-

try village. What more could a Hollywood Producer ask for?

Not long after seeing *Sense and Sensibility*, I went to see *Goldeneye*. After about the fourth vehicle exploding in flames and the fifth building collapsing into rubble around James Bond, I had an acute attack of nostalgia for the green expanses of Dartmoor and the pointed dialogue and developing character that Emma Thompson had given us in the Austen movie.

It seems like insane perversity in the film industry to put so much energy into making films like *Goldeneye*, when Jane Austen provides treble the interest, at a fraction of the cost.

Although Jane Austen has provided matter for many a stage adaptation, a steady stream of conscientious BBC television serializations, and one major movie (the *Pride and Prejudice* of 1939), it has been only in the last two or three years (with the results hitting the screen in the last twelvemonth) that Jane Austen's huge potential as movie material has begun to be realized.

Suddenly – or rather – at *last*, the film and television industries have recognized all those advantages of adapting Jane Austen's novels, and they have got busy. In quick succession, we have had *Clueless*, based on the plot of *Emma*, the television serial *Persuasion* that was released as a movie in North America, the full-fledged movie of *Sense and Sensibility*, and the unprecedentedly popular television serial of *Pride and Prejudice*. And a movie of *Emma* is on the way.

One must allow something for the bandwagon effect. Of course, if one Austen adaptation hits the news as a success, it provides some incentive to launch others. But the adaptations seem to have started concurrently rather than consecutively. The remarkable success (remarkable to the movie industry, but less so to habitual readers) of such period-piece forerunners as *Room with a View*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Howard's End* has no doubt done much to alert movie-makers to the screen potential of such a writer as Jane Austen.

More significant, though, I suspect, is the influence of women. Though the movie industry can't get along without actresses, it has taken a long time for women to gather power in production, direction, screenwriting, and *choice* of film to produce. It is interesting to read Lindsay Doran's Introduction to *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries*, by Emma Thompson. In the long gestation period from the movie's conception to its birth and screening, women took the crucial steps to make it happen. It was a fellow student at Barnard – “another all girls school” – who awakened Doran, the film's producer, to Jane Austen as the “coolest” author.¹ It was the “two central female characters instead of the usual one” that determined Doran's choice of *Sense and Sensibility*, and it was meeting Emma Thompson and inviting her to write the screenplay that bumped the idea up to reality. Women have been important in the other productions, too. *Clueless* was both written and directed by Amy Heckerling.² It is no surprise, but it is a delight, that Jane

Austen, who turned her particular and brilliant spotlight on woman's consciousness and experience all those years ago, should find many of her present-day promoters among women.

Among confirmed Austen devotees and the thousands of members of Jane Austen Societies, one inevitably hears murmurs of “I told you so.” We always knew she would make the big time. Nonetheless, we revel in the adaptations as they come and the opportunities they offer for refinements of judgment. We also find controversy among ourselves.

Clueless, though furthest from a Jane Austen text, was in many ways a splendid test case, because it proved the viability of an Austen plot in a modern setting and for a modern audience. Here is a demonstrably well-made and adaptable story, with a beautiful consonance of character and action, and with a contemporary setting and modern relevance. Emma Woodhouse makes her own plot, playing God among her acquaintance, and so does her cool teenage reincarnation, Cher. It was a brilliant stroke to translate Emma's Regency snobbery into Valley Girls' teenage fashion: what other set could be so ruthlessly exclusive? *Clueless* has been a popular success with audiences who have never heard of Austen, but for Austen aficionados it offers the bonus of ingenious translation into the modern idiom, from Cher's make-over of the movie's Harriet to the tactless insult to the San Salvadoran maid, who does duty for Miss Bates. Although Jane Austen doesn't appear in the credits, the movie is not quite clueless: the smooth-talking, dreamy hunk ‘Elton’ keeps a snapshot of the made-over Harriet character in his locker, not because he fancies her, but because Cher took the snapshot. Sound familiar? (“Where is Jane Fairfax then?” I found myself wondering feverishly at one point. “Oh, I see. We don't need a Jane Fairfax, because Frank Churchill is gay. That figures!”) An un-clued-in audience can take the movie straight, as an engaging and affectionate send-up of teen fashion and values. The Austen reader can savor the ingenuity of the translation. In either case, the plot works beautifully, and one can debate the foibles and attractions of that heroine whom Jane Austen suspected no one but herself would like.

With this embarrassment of riches to hand, we can indulge ourselves in fine discriminations. The kiss at the end of the movie *Persuasion* has become a *cause celebre*. Would Anne and Wentworth have kissed in the streets for all to see? No! respond the purists, in indignation. I thought that the kiss, with the attendant carnival, was an appropriate cinematic imaging of Austen's words – she depicts the united lovers as having “spirits dancing in private rapture.” I was rash enough to say so in a newspaper interview. Subsequently, my mail brought me two letters on the same day, written more in sorrow than in anger, with the burden, “Oh, Juliet, how *could*

1. Lindsay Doran's Introduction to *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries*, by Emma Thompson (New York: Newmarket Press, 1995), p. 7.

2. The notable prominence of women in the Austen renaissance was first pointed out to me by Paula Simon, a former student, with whom I was interviewed by CBC radio.

you?" To approve of that kiss, I find, is a severe lapse in orthodoxy.

As a critic of what is *added* in the adaptations, I rejoice most in Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*. I probably take my life in my hands, or at least my reputation, when I say that Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* actually needed the additions. Edward Ferrars on the page is – Jane, forgive me! – a wimp, and Colonel Brandon, a heavy. In the movie they have been rehabilitated, and made charming and attractive. Emma Thompson's additions are tactful and appropriate, and made with loving attention to the text. Margaret Dashwood is hardly in the text, but what *is* there is exactly what Thompson builds on. Among the few things that Margaret does do in the book is spill the beans about a man Elinor is interested in and whose "name begins with an F." From this mustard-seed Thompson grows a beautiful tree: Margaret's character blossoms as one who is interested in romance, especially Elinor's, and who knows and has reason to like Edward. Out of this grow her visually appealing tree houses (the second, after the move to Barton Cottage, suitably downgraded from the palatial one at Norland), her withdrawal after her father's death, and the growing attraction of Elinor and Edward as they conspire to bring Margaret back into the family circle. The screen incarnation of Margaret – engagingly played by Emilie François – brings grace and vigor to the love stories. Only a writer deeply imbued with the Austen spirit could add so much to the novel that rings true. There are other additions, still full of verve and energy, that come with the process of providing bodies, settings and props for Austen's story: the carriage that seems to be literally boiling over with excited dogs, the carefully characterized and spirited horses, and the explosions of laughter when Sir John Middleton and Mrs. Jennings share a joke. The movie is played for the passion as well as the laughs.

The BBC television serialization of *Pride and Prejudice* broke all records for numbers of viewers in both England and North America. The video went on sale in England before the serial airing was over, and sold in record numbers, and *still* the ratings didn't drop for the final episodes. People simply couldn't wait to see if this extraordinarily rich and handsome man does succeed in persuading the woman who rejects him, to marry him. It is a simple formula, after all, but it has to be worked very well indeed to achieve such success. The series is still light, bright and sparkling. Elizabeth is playful and delightful, and delivers the lines we all rejoice in with the verve and piquancy they deserve. But the concentration on Darcy's smoldering passion, and his absolute need and desire, is the main factor in the unprecedented popularity of the serial.

Putting the passion back into Jane Austen (it was always there; but the more decorous adaptations of the past tended to stiffen

it with starch) has been one reason, I think, for the surge in popularity. A dash of D. H. Lawrence has been added to the Miss Austen formula, which people hadn't remembered was there. The men appear in dishabille – Darcy, unshaven, on the fencing piste, or dripping after immersion in the lake at Pemberley; Brandon, desperate in shirtsleeves, demanding something to do to save Marianne; Willoughby, soaked and riding away in the rain. (And the sex appeal is working: 'a friend who is a high school teacher tells me all her girls are in love with Brandon.') The women are made more physical, too. They look as though they actually live in those clothes. They walk, run, ride, and yes, climb trees. It was what Hollywood needed to learn: Jane Austen is pretty sexy.

The battle isn't won yet, though. Although *Sense and Sensibility* was among the movies nominated for best film, and hopes ran high that Jane Austen, Emma Thompson, and a movie about women's consciousness would win the day, the Academy's vote went to *Braveheart* – violence and testosterone. But this time it wasn't just the women who thought the Academy got it wrong.

We must wait for next year, and *Emma*.



My courage always rises, Mr. Gibson, with every attempt to intimidate me.

The Female Spectator

The Female Spectator is the newsletter of the Centre for the Study of Early English Women's Writing. If you would like to receive future issues, send your name and address (please print) with your request to be placed on the mailing list, to the address below. Address changes should also be sent to:

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