Hang a right at the Abbey: Jane Austen and the Imagined City

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Abstract

This chapter examines Jane Austen’s writing life in the city of Bath, UK. Since the author’s death in 1817, Bath has established itself at the very centre of the Austen tourism industry. This chapter argues that this association of Jane Austen with Bath, and her appropriation by the city is not only problematic, but also dishonest.

The topography of Bath is important to Austen’s work, but also to how she was later represented. She only resided in the city for 5 years, and wrote very little there, but Bath is now secured at the centre of an Austen tourism industry, aided and abetted by the many adaptations filmed in the area. This chapter closely examines Jane Austen’s time in Bath and in particular the two Bath novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.

The chapter further argues that the city of Bath takes on an ‘authorial signature’ of its own as it seeks to commodify a completely fake notion of ‘authenticity’—there is evidence to suggest Jane Austen was very depressed during her time in the city. Bath re-writes the mythology of Jane Austen completely and this re-writing continually renegotiates the Austen canon’s relationship with its global readership. ‘Jane Austen’s Bath’ then is as much an adaptation as the many films, television serials and plays based on her novels.

The city of Bath in the English county of Somerset sits at the base of the Avon valley, built around a natural hot spring. English folklore has it that the spring was discovered by Bladud—later King Bladud—the father of Shakespeare’s King Lear. The Roman invasion saw the city—then named Aquae Sulis—become a site for rapid redevelopment. The area became famous for its distinctive stone buildings, which Jane Austen herself described as having a “white glare” (*Persuasion* 31). Bath was still walled in the author’s time, and the central maze of streets and corridors were home to ordinary working people. The wealthy inhabitants of Bath generally settled in the estates and grand houses arrayed on the fringes of the valleys overlooking the city below. It is necessary to get a sense of the topography of Bath because it is important not only to Austen’s work but also to how she was later represented by the Janeites and the Austen tourism industry.

This industry developed fairly rapidly after the author’s death in 1817. It began in Bath with the erection of a plaque outside No.4 Sydney Place commemorating her residence there. Since then the author has become synonymous with Bath, particularly the areas around Queen Square, the Assembly Rooms—where many of the dances in *Northanger Abbey* take place—The Pump Room, The Circus, The Royal Crescent and Camden Place (now Camden Crescent). All of these areas, which now make up the oldest parts of the city, were places familiar to Jane Austen in her 5 years in Bath, and these locations were also the settings for many memorable scenes in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. These two novels bookend the Austen canon, being the first and last published (the latter posthumously) and will be the main concern of this chapter. However, references made to Bath in other works will be discussed where appropriate.

Today, Bath is a significant part of Jane Austen tourist trail (and therefore part of the author’s heritage) and connects with all other events and locations—such as the Austen family home at Chawton in Hampshire (see Fig. 1), the city of Southampton and her final resting place in Winchester Cathedral (see Fig. 2). Aligned to these ‘real’ places are the virtual spaces online, such as the *Jane Austen Gazetteer* blog, the *Republic of Pemberley* website and many associated Facebook groups. This fascination with an author the Jane Austen museum in Chawton calls, “England’s Jane” means that today: “Austen has become something of a conservative icon in popular culture: a canonical author whose life and work signify English national heritage” (North 38).

It is precisely this heritage that the city of Bath feeds on; the city’s shops and boutiques are full of Austen memorabilia, and since May 1999 Bath has been home to the Jane Austen Centre at No.40 Gay Street, as well as the many Austen literary events and the annual Jane Austen Festival. This takes place every September and features workshops on making Regency gowns and a masked ball at The Pump Room. The festival climaxes with a parade of Jane Austen fans, in full Regency costume, which begins at The Royal Crescent and continues down though the city. Despite other locations perhaps laying greater claim to Jane Austen’s writing life, such as Chawton, Bath seems to have secured itself as the center of the Austen universe, aided and abetted by the many Austen adaptations filmed in the city, which surely serve to further establish the relationship with Bath in the minds of her many readers and fans.

However, the facts are that Jane Austen only lived in Bath for a short time (1801-1806) and there is enough evidence to suggest she wrote very little while she was there, although it is certain she visited many libraries. It could even be suggested that she was fairly depressed during her stay; her father died in Bath, and her aunt was arrested for shoplifting—a capital crime in Regency Britain. Her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* was virtually completed by the time she arrived in the city, and her last work *Persuasion*, was written long after she had left Bath. In her other (more well-known) novels unpleasant incidents happen in and around Bath. Austen’s own letters to her sister, Cassandra, reveal an ambivalence towards the city.

In this chapter I want to do three things. Firstly: to examine Jane Austen’s life in Bath, and the circumstances that brought her there. Secondly: I will closely examine the two Bath novels and making reference to other works where necessary, I will re-examine how (and why) Austen wrote about the city to establish how reality was replaced by a largely fake understanding of her time there. Thirdly: this chapter will re-appraise the subsequent Jane Austen tourism industry. I will argue that the city takes on the “authorial signature” as Bath tourism seeks to commodify a completely fake notion of “authenticity”; as visitors walk around Bath, they confront an entirely false reconstruction of Jane Austen’s life, filtered through the many adaptations filmed in its narrow streets, crescents and parks. Finally, this chapter will argue that the city of Bath re-writes the mythology of Jane Austen completely, and this re-writing continually renegotiates the Austen canon’s relationship to its fans and readers on a global level. Two quite different representations of Bath then start to emerge from this analysis.

**A non-writing life**

Bath, in Jane Austen’s time, was a fairly new city. The construction of the famous Royal Crescent was only begun in the year of Austen’s birth, 1775, and Camden Place (now Camden Crescent) was built between 1788 and1793. Camden Place would feature a great deal in *Persuasion*, being the home of the Elliots. Queen Square itself—where Jane Austen had stayed in 1797 at No.13 and later lived more permanently in nearby No.25 Gay Street—is in a slightly older part of the city and was completed in 1735. In the late 1700s, there was a growth in construction, and by 1795 Bath’s population was 33,000, making it one of Britain’s largest cities. Bath is now famed for its grand houses on the slopes of the Avon Valley, its ornamental parks and gardens and impressive crescents and squares of tall white town houses. The house the Austens occupied for longest, No.4 Sydney Place, was built just nine years before the family took up their lodgings there.

Bath and the Austen family had always been fairly intimately connected; Jane Austen’s parents, George and Cassandra, had married at St. Swithin’s Church, at the top of Walcot Street (below the escarpment occupied by Camden Place) in 1764. It is certain their youngest daughter visited the city in the 1770s and that Jane’s elder sister, also called Cassandra, visited while Jane was at school. It is known for sure that Jane visited in 1797, staying at No.13 Queen Square while working on the novel *Susan*—which would later become *Northanger Abbey* in 1803. In a letter to Cassandra, dated 19 June 1799, she claimed “I am very happy at Bath” (Austen, 19 June. 1799). The family’s complete move to Bath however, upon her father’s retirement, seems to have come as quite a shock.

Jane Austen’s biographer, Claire Tomalin, claims that on hearing the sudden news the family was about to relocate the author became “greatly distressed” (171). Tomalin even goes as far to suggest that she became very depressed and stopped writing altogether. It is thought that Jane Austen wrote virtually nothing during her stay, beginning and abandoning a novel after her father’s sudden death in 1805. However, for Margaret Kirkham, this inactivity has only served to fuel a view that Jane Austen disliked her time in the city: “There is no support . . . for the idea that Jane Austen had a settled dislike of Bath” (63).

Maggie Lane hedges her bets, writing in a guide to “Austen’s Bath”—aimed very much at Janeites and tourists: “[Jane Austen’s] own attitude to the city was sometimes hostile, frequently ambivalent, yet the impression created by the complete body of her writings on the subject . . . is far from being a dismal one” (12). I would both agree and disagree with the statement, as an examination of Austen’s novels does reveal at least an ambivalence regarding her exile from the English countryside of Hampshire.

In 1801 Jane and her mother had led an advance party to Bath to find suitable accommodation. In that year she updates Cassandra on 3 January: “There are parts of Bath which we have thought of as likely to have houses in them—Westgate Buildings, Charles Street and some of the short streets leading from Laura Place or Pulteney Street” (Austen, 3 January. 1801). This letter is clearly written for someone also familiar with the narrow streets and alleyways of the city, which would directly inform the topography of her novels; Westgate Buildings is where Mrs. Smith, down on her luck, resides in *Persuasion—*written after Austen had left Somerset. Laura Place and (Great) Pulteney Street are on the East side of the city, across the River Avon and near to where the Austen family would eventually live at No.4 Sydney Place. A few months later, on 5 May as spring set in, Jane Austen’s seems in an equally depressed mood: “The first view of Bath in fine weather does not answer my expectations; I think I see more distinctly through rain. The sun has got behind everything, and the appearance of the place from the top of Kingsdown was all vapour, shadow, smoke and confusion” (Austen, 5 May. 1801). Lodgings were finally found, and the entire family moved to No.4 Sydney Place in the summer of 1801. For Jane Austen, this was the beginning of her non-writing life. As Claire Harman puts it: “The family’s move to Bath silenced her” (42).

So, if Jane Austen did not write in Bath, then what did she do? There is some evidence to suggest that she did do some proof-work on *Northanger Abbey* and began an uncompleted novel in 1804 provisionally titled *The Watsons*. She perhaps approached publishers based in the city, but for the most part, she read—many of her characters make reference to the popular novels of the time: “In Bath, Jane Austen must have had access to virtually any author she wished to read and a quiet reading-room too, if she wanted it” (Kirkham 64). Bath’s period as being a social fulcrum had long since past when the Austen’s arrived in the city, but “the season” was undergoing some sort of a revival and offered the writer a ringside seat from which to view its ritualistic peculiarities. During Austen’s stay in Bath members of the British Royal family and superstar poets, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, were frequent visitors. There were still regular balls at the Assembly Rooms and many major London plays were also staged at the Theatre in Old Orchard Street—now a Freemason’s Hall. So, as David Wheeler points out, Bath at the time had plenty to offer to an artist who had a keen eye and interest in social observations and the complicated machinations of manners, mores and relationships: “[Bath provided] for those seeking romance, an air of excitement and sometimes danger . . . [It was] a place of varied acquaintance, secrecy, deception, and supervisional blindness” (Wheeler 122-123).

Some brief romance did come Jane’s way in 1802 in the form of Harris Bigg-Wither and a proposal of marriage, but this was swiftly rejected. By 1804, the lease was up at No.4 Sydney Place and the family moved to Green Park Buildings, where George Austen died suddenly on 21 January. He is buried in the grounds of St. Swithin’s Church, Walcot, where he had married Jane’s mother. The Austens quickly found more modest lodgings at No.25 Gay Street in 1805. They then moved to an address in Trim Street in 1806, before leaving Bath for good. This fairly consistent change of address—beginning at the smartly appointed house in Sydney Place, and ending up in the relatively central Trim Street—suggests that the family’s financial circumstances were in gentle decline; the address at Green Park Buildings was initially rejected on first inspection.

Was Jane Austen happy in Bath? Was she healthy? The author, unpublished until 1803, was effectively an exile; far from her own sense of home—which for her was the English countryside. This is mirrored in her novels—*Emma* being the only exception—as central characters are displaced in some way. Like Jane Austen herself these characters are forced to leave their homes by circumstances beyond their control; there is a clear nostalgic pull in her fiction. In Austen’s time, nostalgia was considered to be an illness, what Nicholas Dames describes as “a disease of yearning” (123). In the novels this nostalgia is not just associated with place, but works against people: in *Persuasion*, many of the characters are ill or injured in some way: Anne is nostalgic for her previous relationship with Captain Wentworth. In *Northanger Abbey* it is illness which first takes Catherine Morland to Bath. Illness tends to dominate the Bath novels—John Mullan suggests that the writer found the claims made for the restorative properties of the water from the famous spa as “absurd” (246). Is it possible then that Jane Austen’s nostalgia for her old life was so acute, it resulted in pathological symptoms? Possibly. It may have contributed to her sabbatical from creating fiction. It is clear to any reader, however, that Austen’s characters seem adrift in Bath; none of them seem to belong, which widens her appeal to readers who themselves feel displaced. The novels seem to occupy very temporary places and circumstances. Whether she was content or not in the city, Bath did exert a remarkable hold on her eventual resumed writing career.

**The Missing Abbey**

*Northanger Abbey* was Jane Austen’s first substantial completed work—although it would not be published until after her death. Originally titled *Susan*, it was virtually finished by the time the family came to the city in 1801. So, this novel should be read as being written by someone who, while being a frequent visitor to Bath, was not a resident, and this makes quite a difference interpretively. In the novel’s establishing scenes, which are uncomfortable for any reader, the character of Catherine Morland is both alien and awkward—she doesn’t know anyone at the Pump Room and is desperate to make introductions. The Morlands live on Great Pulteney Street, near to the Austens’ later residence in Sydney Place. This means Catherine has to cross the River Avon, via Pulteney Bridge, to reach the central areas of the city. So here Austen removes Catherine further still from the social interactions of the many balls and society gatherings. If a close reader assumes that Austen’s characters are vehicles for the author’s own feelings about the city, then they would be confused by the ambiguity of *Northanger Abbey’s* narrative; Jane Austen is an extremely subtle artist.

In the novel, Mr. Allen professes himself to be “sick of Bath” quite early on (*Northanger Abbey* 44). Isabella Thorpe and James Morland both loathe Bath too—so that is fairly clear. The former calls Bath both “vile” and “horrid” in letters to Catherine (*Northanger Abbey* 205). Even Henry Tilney thinks the city is “tiresome” after just 6-weeks (*Northanger Abbey* 69). However, Catherine initially loves Bath: “Oh! Who can ever be tired of Bath?” (*Northanger Abbey* 70). For the Janeites and those involved in Austen tourism, this exclamation is used as evidence to support Bath’s claims on the author, and the phrase adorns a great deal of Austen merchandise, giving credence to the view that: “To Catherine Morland, Bath represents a pleasurable education” (Lane 10). This could be Austen’s own view of course, except that Catherine does come to see Bath in a new light, literally, during the famous walk to Beechen Cliff: “[W]hen they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape” (*Northanger Abbey* 102).

This area is now the wooded edge of Alexandra Park, high up on the slopes which gather at the city’s eastern edge. It is significant that Catherine sees all of Bath laid out below her, and where she catches “the last view of Bath without any regret” (*Northanger Abbey* 145). There are few cities in Britain that afford such a view from such a high place. The word “voluntarily” is an interesting one too, as it suggests that Catherine is operating independently of her creator, further ramping up the ambivalence. Here Austen is denying responsibility for Catherine’s actions, which makes her rejection of Bath all the more powerful. In this novel, the city is portrayed almost like a machine at the bottom of the valley, working itself on the movements and motions of its (temporary) occupants—the emerging Industrial Revolution, with its attendant smoke-stacks and mills must have been quite a sight from the top of the Cliff; it is this machine that Austen is commenting on. This industrial view of the city has been superseded by a tourist mythology, which has been completely informed by the “England’s Green and Pleasant Land” trope, associated with the song “Jerusalem.”

It is significant that Catherine rejects Bath as soon as she rejects Isabella. Isabella is part of the machine, and therefore personifies Bath, which allows Austen to further “mock the insipid social conventions of Bath: its balls (Catherine’s first visit to the upper rooms is especially appalling) its Sunday promenades and above all its conversation” (Fergus 14). Only by standing above the city can Catherine see the machine for what it is, and it is significant that Isabella does not stray far from Milsom Street and the engine of the Assembly Rooms; Catherine and Henry have to escape the city before Jane Austen can concentrate on their relationship.

Janine Barchas suggests that Jane Austen is deliberately writing for an audience familiar with Bath’s topography and the history of one of Georgian Bath’s founding fathers, Ralph Allen: “Austen assumes a reader’s knowledge of Bath, helped along by a telltale name of Allen, will conjure his buildings in the landscape of her scenes” (438). This would partly explain why Catherine is so eager to visit a Gothic Abbey, when there is a huge one right in the middle of the city—which is never mentioned—but the novel was created at a time when Austen’s knowledge of Bath was sketchy at best. The absence of the Abbey may have been a deliberate slight, however, because even in 1800, Bath Abbey was viewed by many as a rather decrepit parish church (its full Victorian restoration not beginning until 1863). Hence Catherine’s willingness to experience a “real” one. The topography of Bath and its outskirts is perhaps put into service more effectively in Jane Austen’s final work, posthumously published in 1818 with *Northanger Abbey*. *Persuasion* displays an author still at the height of her powers, and now far more familiar with the city, but also someone almost returning to the scene of some crime with unfinished business still left to do.

**The White Glare**

In using Bath as a location for part of *Persuasion*, having lived in the city ten years previously, Austen seems more jaded and circumspect. She is now writing as a far more experienced author, a published writer and as a former resident. She is now also writing from memory and as Pierre Nora points out: “memory dictates and history writes” (17). For Austen, *Persuasion* is almost an historical novel. In this final work, Austen’s characters also seem more set in their opinions of the city. Chiming with Jane’s own letter to her sister in the Spring of 1801, at the beginning of the novel we find the central character of Anne Elliot “dreading the possible heats of September in all the white glare of Bath” having earlier learned that “she disliked Bath and did not think it agreed with her” (*Persuasion* 31; *Persuasion* 14). As the narrative unfolds in this novel in particular, Austen never misses an opportunity to comment on her own experiences of living in the city through Anne.

The novel is scattered with clues to Jane Austen’s mind, which seem here a more informed and solid opinion of the social terrain of *Persuasion*. One of the Musgrove daughters observes: “None of your Queen-Squares for us!” (*Persuasion* 40). This is precisely the area to which the Austens moved in 1805, Gay Street being the short hill which leads from Queen Square to the Circus and where the Crofts take up residence in the novel. The Austens also lived for a brief time in Trim Street, which also connects closely with this area of the city. While the Elliots reside at Camden Place, overlooking the city on its northern slopes—now a Crescent and through-road to Fairfield Park and Larkhall—her crippled former school-friend Mrs. Smith lives in virtual penury at Westgate Buildings; the very place Jane and her mother considered moving to in 1801 as told to Cassandra in her letter of that year.

In the novel, unlike Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Anne never changes her view of Bath. Even quite deep into the narrative, “she persisted in a very determined, though very silent, disinclination for Bath” (*Persuasion* 133). The word “silent” is quite telling here. When Anne finally persuades Captain Wentworth of the true value of her affections, in a rather curious passage she walks from one end of central Bath to the other, virtually decontaminating the city, on her way to the dreaded hovel occupied by Mrs. Smith: “Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, that Anne was sporting with from Camden Place to Westgate Buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way” (*Persuasion* 189).

Some, such as Parker, have suggested that the very landscape of *Persuasion* in relation to Bath serves some other purpose: “Jane Austen used these special topographic characteristics of Bath to symbolise the actual social hierarchy in Persuasion . . . . The entire city becomes a metaphor for the society she portrays” (169). Barchas concurs that in *Persuasion* “location matters, because the level of habitation in Bath calibrates neatly to rank” (457). It is true that Sir Walter, in taking a home at Camden Place (now Crescent) is at the highest point of the city, virtually opposite the wooded Beechen Cliff where Catherine Morland rejected Bath outright in *Northanger* *Abbey*. The Crofts occupy the middle ground of Gay Street as it slopes toward Queen Square with Mrs. Smith firmly at the bottom of the social hierarchy in gloomy Westgate Buildings. However, this is perhaps too coincidental, as this is just the way the city is arranged, with the grander residences on the outskirts overlooking Bath, and the smaller residences being more centrally located It is still the same today with the social housing area of Snow Hill almost directly below the jut of Camden Crescent. Gay Street is in fact very close to Westgate Buildings.

In the other novels tent-poled by *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* Jane Austen rarely passes up an opportunity to frame Bath as having an unpleasant mechanical pull on her characters: *Sense and Sensibility’s* rakish John Willoughby seduces Eliza Williams and leaves her pregnant in Bath (Chapter 31); George Wickham runs away from his unhappy marriage and hides in the city frittering away money he doesn’t have in *Pride and Prejudice* (Chapter 61); the monster of *Mansfield Park*, Admiral Crawford, regularly visits Bath (Chapter 20) and in the penultimate novel of the canon—and the last to be published in Jane Austen’s lifetime—*Emma*, Mrs. Elton is described as having been to a “bad school” in Bath (Chapter 32) and Philip Elton, a clergyman on the make, goes to the city and returns with Miss Hawkins (Chapter 22).

Taking the Austen canon as a whole, bookended by the two Bath novels which opened and closed an astonishing literary career, we can say with some conviction that Jane Austen felt the city had had an adverse effect on her and on her writing life. Although she never quite came out and definitively said it, Jane Austen’s own “silent, disinclination for Bath” is still quite perceptible. She was able to turn this to her advantage though, as Bath offered a palette of events, rituals, history and characters with which to assemble a critique of Regency England. In 1801 the writer herself was able to observe a very public marriage breakdown played out at the Upper Rooms, and commented in a letter to her sister on 12 May: “I am proud to say that I have a very good eye at an Adultress” (Austen, 12 May. 1801). It is clear then that the city offered Jane Austen a cast of rather creepy characters from which to draw inspiration: “Bath, with its emphasis on appearance and consumerism, not only corrupts individuals, it also threatens to corrupt the social structure and traditional rural life” (Wheeler 133).

The reality of Jane Austen’s life in Bath has been viewed purely through the lens of the many adaptations and the tourism mythology which has sprung around her; a disjunction has been created between the reality of her writing life, and the fiction she created. “Jane Austen’s Bath” in almost every way is far removed from the representation the author worked hard to create in her novels. This further extends the consumerism which surrounds the author and her work, and creates the false sense of authenticity Jane Austen herself so despised. Years later on 30 June 1808, she remarked in a letter to her sister: “It will be two years tomorrow since we left Bath for Clifton, with what happy feelings of escape!” (Austen, 30 June. 1808).

**A Tale of Two Cities**

According to Claire Tomalin, by 1813, *Sense and Sensibility* had “sold out” and *Pride and Prejudice* was a “clear hit” (242). Although published anonymously, these works were fairly well-regarded towards the end of Jane Austen’s life. When she died in 1817, shortly after completing *Persuasion*, she was interred in Winchester Cathedral—her brother Edward Austen Knight had become rich and successful employee of a noble family. He had also been recently ordained as a priest. The Prince Regent (later King George IV) was said to be an admirer. However, it wasn’t until the publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1870, that the Austen cult really gained momentum. The Austen family’s late-19th century PR machine was a masterful operation.

Jane Austen was accepted into the canon of English Literature as an important writer in F.R Leavis’ *The Great Tradition* (1948), and her work has never been out of print since, combining popular appeal and reach, with academic and critical credibility. While there have been cinematic Jane Austen adaptations since the late 1930s, it is on television where her work has had its second-life, or what Walter Benjamin would call “afterlife” (72). Television is very much in the domestic space, which may go some way in explaining the popular appeal of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* in particular. There have been many more television versions of the novels than films, and this is significant, for “[o]ur memory is intensely retinal, powerfully televisual” (Nora 13).

While television did not become a mass medium until the 1950s, as early as then the first serials based on the Austen novels were being made for this new audience. The structure of the books with their short punchy chapters perfectly suited this new medium. *The Internet Movie Database* currently lists Jane Austen as being the source of fifty-one film and television adaptations. As a result the relationship Jane Austen had with the city through her fiction begins to slip and slide as these two very different representations of a city emerge; the television adaptations function to write Jane Austen into the history of a city she was keen to escape from.

Many of the Jane Austen adaptations were filmed wholly or partly in Bath. The 1971 Granada adaptation of *Persuasion* was shot in the area almost in its entirety and so was the 2004 ‘Bollywood’ adaptation *Bride and Prejudice*, signaling the author’s now global reach. It is interesting to note that even novels not located directly in Bath had to be filmed there—by the early twenty-first century, audiences in Asia and beyond clearly linked the city with the Jane Austen canon. The city was now synonymous with the author and her work. It could be said that this representation of the city had become an author, beginning a process of re-writing the mythology of a writer’s life for the purposes of its own heritage. In other words, Bath had taken on what Michel Foucault (1991) would call the “author function”—the author exists only as a function of the written work (108).

Other locations had a much greater claim to being a significant part of Jane Austen’s life. The family moved to the house at Chawton, from Southampton, in 1809. Apart from a brief stay at the home of her Doctor in Winchester in the last days of her life, she lived and worked there until she died. She completed *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* at Chawton, and the Jane Austen Museum was opened there in 1947, a year before Leavis’ *The Great Tradition*. Today, the house boasts a period recreation of how the building would have been in the Austens’ time, and the small round writing table she worked at in the evenings sits in the parlor near the front door (see Fig. 3). In the garden, there are a number of model Regency houses for children to play with, creating their own Austen stories with dolls. The museum also demonstrates how much of a pull the adaptations have on the Austen canon, with several costumes and dresses on display—including Kate Winslet’s dress—from the 1995 film of *Sense and Sensibility* (see Fig. 4) and the 2007 biopic *Becoming Jane*. Even a location as ‘real’ as Chawton displays an insecurity by seeking recourse in artifacts from the adaptations as evidence of its ‘authenticity’—further serving to illustrate the slippery nature of Austen’s own “author function.”

At Winchester Cathedral, just over 18 miles from Chawton, Jane Austen is interred near the left wall of the nave, just inside the main entrance. There is a modest exhibition, which also mentions some of the adaptations, and famously the inscription on the tomb itself makes no mention of Jane Austen’s literary artistry or fame as one of England’s most important novelists (see Fig. 2). In 1872, in the wake of Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir*, a brass plaque was erected opposite the tomb, under the window, which does at least state that the author was “known to many by her writings” (see Fig. 5).

It is strange then, that the city of Bath is a major touchstone, not just for readers and fans (the Janeites) but the adapters of her work too. It is currently not possible to visit—except on the street—any of the residences the Austens occupied between 1801 and1806. Most are private homes. The houses at No.4 Sydney Place and at Green Park Buildings were turned into separate apartments many years ago; No.25 Gay Street is a dental practice and private apartments and No.13 Queen Square is now part of a block which includes a hotel and a firm of lawyers—no one is quite sure which address in Trim Street the family briefly lived in 1806 before they left the city for good. However, at No.40 Gay Street—within sight of both No.25 and No.13 Queen Square, and around the corner from Trim Street—is the Jane Austen Centre.

The Jane Austen Centre is careful not to describe itself as a museum, rather a period recreation (for largely British and American tourists) of what life in Bath was like during Jane Austen’s brief residence; the building features an historical exhibition about what living in Bath would have been like during the early 1800s. The building is both a simulacrum of a Regency home and a deceptive celebration of the author’s time in the city. Like Chawton, the Jane Austen Centre uses the adaptations as the mark of its authenticity, and it is indeed the center of any Jane Austen related activity in Bath, including the annual festival. Its associated gift-shop sells a range of mugs and key-rings connected to the Austen adaptations; the Jane Austen Centre memorabilia seems to favor the celebrated 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, as the likenesses of Jennifer Ehle (Elizabeth Bennet) and Colin Firth (Fitzwilliam Darcy) feature on an array of merchandise (see Fig. 6) – the Centre opened in May 1999, just a few years after the BBC series had become *the* prime Austen text. Other than this, the building has no real relationship to the author or her work. Actors in Regency attire stand outside the building on Gay Street, as if guarding the city’s claim on the author. The building also contains a tearoom, where for a fee, you can be joined by “Mr Darcy” himself—a drama student in a wig. In a further comment on the constructed nature of Austen’s history, the staff of the Centre, in full costume, can often be spotted smoking cigarettes and chatting into their mobile phones in nearby Old King Street.

The fact remains though that Jane Austen never lived at this address, something which some visitors are keen to point out on the *Trip Advisor* website. A comment from an American tourist visiting in August 2010 is typical:

I am what you would call a Janeite. I've read all the novels, seen all the film adaptations; bored friends with Jane trivia and am, perhaps most embarrassingly, a member of the Jane Austen Society of North America. That said, save yourself the money and eventual aggravation. The Jane Austen Centre actually \*annoyed\* me; they have ZERO artifacts directly related to Austen herself. The exhibit is actually laughable; all reproductions and mannequins. Don't waste your time. Instead, hop on the train and head from Bath to Alton, grab a cab and go to the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton. To say it is 1,000 times better would be an understatement (*Trip Advisor*, August 2010).

The Jane Austen Centre’s response to these comments is also fairly standard:

We are so sorry to hear that you did not enjoy your visit. We are a very different type of experience from the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton, but we hope complimentary. The Jane Austen House Museum holds most of the surviving artefacts from Jane Austen's lifetime. We are not a museum but an interpretive centre and our aim is to tell the story of Jane Austen's time spent living in Bath and what life was like in the city in this period. Bath had a very significant influence on Jane Austen's writing and on her life and we hope to tell this story in an atmospheric and entertaining way through our historical exhibitions, costumes, film, live guides and Regency Tea Room (*Trip Advisor*, August 2010).

It is interesting that the Centre aims to be both an interpreter and the place where you can get the real story of the author’s life in Bath. The Jane Austen Centre is a museum of a type; in the words of Umberto Eco, it “establishes reassurance through repetition” (57). In little over a decade it has established itself as the “authentic” Jane Austen experience, however dubious that claim clearly is, by weaving the factual historical locations of Austen’s life in the city with the fictional locations of the adaptations and their props—as well as establishing the Jane Austen Festival. For Fredric Jameson, this curious postmodern moment is symptomatic of: “[A] world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (7).

The Jane Austen Centre then, is one such imaginary museum. The Centre is an important aspect of tourism in the city; however its relationship with the reality of a writer’s life is problematic. The fans flock to the Centre, full of artifacts from the various adaptations, because the fake is more intoxicating; they would rather visit the Jane Austen Centre than the real locations of her life. As Eco suggests, the fake then becomes the real thing. The Jane Austen Centre is largely based on the many adaptations of the novels, rather than the novels themselves; it is based on an idealized biographical map of the Austen family experience, rather than their actual (and authentic) experiences of the city. This has given more fuel to the Jane Austen cult, constantly repeating a representation of Jane Austen and the further development of one particular re-imagining of Bath.

Jane Austen was after all living in the midst of a city in transition, where industrial and rural lives were in conflict with one another. The Jane Austen Centre works to remove all traces of Bath’s industrial past; they project an image of the writer as a rural spinster living in and commenting on a world of balls and country houses. In this way, the Austen industry deliberately meshes in with larger political discourses associated with “England”; a rural paradise, where the countryside embodies the virtues of permanence, stability, transhistoricity—as opposed to the industrialized world embodied by the United States. The global Austen adaptation industry is the means whereby readers and audiences transnationally access the local themes of familial relationships, social standing and love as well as more global concerns of industrialization, exile and inequality, which continue to resonate today.

In appraising the author’s work, we must separate the heritage of “Jane Austen’s Bath” from the real or authentic city and the author’s life there. In this sense, “Jane Austen’s Bath” is as much of an adaptation of an experience as any filmed and televised version of one of her novels; an experience which is exported globally through adaptation. Like many adaptations Bath has become the source for many people’s experiences of the author and her work, including the adaptors of the novels.

**Re-writing Jane**

In tracing Jane Austen’s relationship with the city of Bath, we can see how it connects with her fiction—and therefore how it connects and reconnects many varied readers and audiences to the city—and how its topography informed both her first and last works, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, in markedly different ways. Her thoughts about the Bath are ambivalent at best and may have been shaped by a quite serious psychological nostalgia for her former life at Steventon Rectory in the Hampshire countryside. Bath life did give the author a platform from which to archly comment on the social mores of Regency Britain, and it gave her a place to send her characters into exile. In Austen’s fiction, the city functions as a kind of holding area from which characters must move on from if they are to find happiness and fulfillment elsewhere.

In the years which followed Austen’s death, and the publication of *Memoir*, the cult of Jane Austen erupted. For some reason the Janeites needed somewhere “real” associated with the author and her work, and Bath suited very well. Jane Austen did not write about a consulting detective, deposed kings or the type of Gothic romances she mocks (and spoofs) in *Northanger Abbey*; she wrote about her own circumstances and experiences and always used an unmarried female central character to do so. This explains how vital context is to her readership. Jane Austen’s “author function” is very important in understanding her work; there are no Elizabeth Bennet, or Catherine Morland fans, only Jane Austen fans, her writing life blurring with her *written* life.

The city of Bath then takes on the “authorial function”, regarding Jane Austen. The city is an example of the commodification of a manufactured authenticity which is completely fake, and as Pierre Nora points out, memory and history are two very different things: “History…is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history as a representation of the past” (3). “Bath is Bath”, wrote Jane Austen to Cassandra on 6 November, 1813 (Austen, 6 November. 1813). For her readers and fans, the city is much more than that; they too seem to be suffering from a particularly postmodern tooled “nostalgia”. The city itself searches for Jane Austen’s history, seizing on every opportunity to link its narrow streets to the stages of the Austen family biography.

To walk around Bath today is to experience a reconstruction of Jane Austen’s life in the city, an experience filtered through the many film and television adaptations of her novels—many of which seem to insist on shooting something (anything) in the city. In the same way a study of adaptation can efface the author of the source text, Bath attempts to efface the “real” Jane, for a construct which chimes with its own manufactured sense of self. Bath lays claim to not only the novels, but to the novelist’s writing life as well. And in the same way some adaptations can “re-write” their source material, the city of Bath re-writes and reconfigures the myth of Jane Austen in a way which matches and informs contemporary portrayals of the author (Cardwell 205). This is most notable in the 2007 film, *Becoming Jane*, which is set in 1775, before the author’s move to Bath.

Literary studies often favor particular authors and particular works. No student will be expected to read all of Jane Austen’s novels in one sitting for an assignment. Adaptation studies add more to the mix, allowing for an examination and appreciation of texts related to a particular novel; no serious study of Jane Austen could now possibly ignore over 60 years of film and television adaptations, something which adaptation scholars recognize: “[t]he [literature] student is encouraged to recognise that meanings in novels are fluid and unstable, made and not given, and that their study may involve exploring parallel texts (such as paintings, film and television, and theatre) without a dominant hierarchy that assumes literature as origin” (Reynolds 2-3). These adaptations, as they evolve over time and contribute to a meta-text of an assemblage of Austen adaptations, demonstrate an audiences’ relationship with an author’s work. But, this is still quite a narrow field of study for an author of Jane Austen’s stature.

If we are to fully appreciate a writer and their work then studying the adaptations of one novel, or basing a view of an author on just two or three of their works is still only going to reward the scholar with rather a limited view. With authors of Austen’s type, whose readership feel an unparalleled and intimate relationship with her, only an appreciation of their nostalgia, shaped by adaptation, tourism and location, can help us explain this particular writer’s continuing popularity and grip on popular culture. Janeites can literally walk in both Jane Austen and her characters’ footsteps; Bath is a city where biography and fiction collide. This nostalgia is why her novels her continually reworked for film and television. Writers such as Jonathan Gray call for an “offscreen studies” whereby an appreciation of “paratexts” leads us a long way in comprehending the relationship literature has with other media: “If we imagine the triumvirate of text, audience, and industry as the big three of media practice, then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three” (23).

The biographical material of Jane Austen’s life is surely one such “paratext” as must be the city of Bath. “Jane Austen’s Bath” has re-written the biography of the author, as many adaptations re-write their sources. This representation of the city is as much an adaptation as the many films and television programs based on her novels. This representation is based on a false sense of history, and enhanced by a memory shaped by adaptation. As an adaptation then, “Jane Austen’s Bath” shares the same flaws, gaps and imperfections as all of the other adaptations and texts based on her works, from the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice* to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), via *Clueless* (1995).

The “real” Bath of Jane Austen’s time does still exist, in many ways. Little has changed today in terms of social division; the wealthy still occupy the tall white town houses, which crown the Avon valley. There is much the author would recognize in reading the *Bath Chronicle* today, as she would have done in the same newspaper in 1801; a marked divide still exists between rich and poor. Bath is in many ways a city of contradictions, the same now as it was in the early 1880s. Bath was a new city in Jane Austen’s time, and today any new building is made to look old. The city’s projection of itself as “Jane Austen’s Bath”—an “authentic” Jane Austen experience—is not the same city she wrote so much about in her novels. Instead it has been created to contain her.

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