

## The country house, costume drama, the imagination, and Jane Austen: some thoughts

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Lyme Park, or Pemberley? Belton House, or Rosings Park? Saltram House, or Norland Park?

When we visit a country house, there is so much at play that shapes how we interact with and understand it. First and foremost, the presentation and interpretation by the family or organisation that run it is of course the most significant in shaping the narratives that we take away from a visit.

But a country house is never just *a country house*. It isn't just four walls, architecturally significant and often at the centre of a huge parcel of land, created and extended by a family of significant lineage throughout the centuries since its first building. A country house is a composite of many things: a symbol of economic, political and colonial power; a place of cultural finesse and connoisseurship; a social centre full of treasures, entertainment and impressive interiors; a place of work, often agricultural industry and conspicuous consumption. It is also an invented place, shaped by our engagement with literature and film, that sees our imaginings of a country house embodied within a physical space, altering how we as visitors experience the real.

In particular, it is arguable that the novels of Jane Austen, and their adaptation for both the small and big screens, have had a profound impact upon how visitors experience the British country house.<sup>1</sup> Sarah Parry dubbed the explosion of visitors to country houses that were selected as filming locations for Austen adaptations as 'the Pemberley effect', with Lyme Park, used as Mr Darcy's seat of Pemberley in the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, playing host to almost triple the amount of visitors in the year after transmission that the one previous.<sup>2</sup> Parry also begins her article with the correct and decisive comment that Jane Austen's legacy has been an important element in the absorption of many historic houses into popular culture in recent years, particularly when a connection is cultivated through screen adaptation.<sup>3</sup>

Parry's article struck a chord with me, leading me to examine my own interactions with the country house, outside of my research into gender, collecting and the intellectual culture of the country house during the eighteenth century. Lyme was not a house I researched, but it is a house I consistently tell friends and family members is one of my favourite National Trust properties. There is a fascinating medieval manuscript there, the Legh family is very interesting, and the grounds are beautiful. But why, ultimately, do I love it? It's because I learned to love it through watching it on screen as the location of pivotal scenes in my favourite adaptation of my favourite novel.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Trust has a page on their website devoted to their properties used in TV and film adaptations of Austen novels. See: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/jane-austen-film-and-tv> (Accessed 28/08/2021)

<sup>2</sup> S. Parry, 'The Pemberley Effect: Austen's Legacy to the Historic House Industry', *Persuasions* 30 (2008), 116. See: <http://jasna.org/assets/Persuasions/No-30/eac266b8fe/parry.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

In my head, I have always known Lyme, or perhaps more aptly, *Pemberley*, to be the home of Mr Darcy (Colin Firth, of course), thanks to Andrew Davies, who adapted *Pride and Prejudice* for the BBC in the 1990s. To me, it's where Elizabeth Bennet (Jennifer Ehle) begins to realise there is more to Mr Darcy than she has been led to believe by his haughty conduct in society. Of course, to get the full 1995 Pemberley effect, I have to imagine that when I step through the doors at Lyme, I am transported instead to the inside of Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire, which served as the interior to Lyme's exterior. Once, when visiting Sudbury (another of my favourite Trust properties, primarily because it is not too far from where I grew up), a room guide in the Long Gallery told me that a group of women who visited had once asked him to point out *exactly* where Colin Firth had walked during a scene where he stalks purposefully through the gallery at night, holding a candle aloft and followed by his dogs.

Many of us who enjoy these adaptations become gripped by a nostalgia for a fictional world within a very tangible place, blurring the imagined history of the country house with the real tale of its origins and everything it represents. My question is: how do we disentangle the fictional from the real, especially with something like the legacy of Jane Austen, which seems less like the legacy of a writer and more of a huge brand?

Every Austen novel includes at least one country house (two of the six novels are even titled with their houses), and they become so vividly part of the action, they represent so much more than just where the story unfolds. Consequently, when we read the novels and watch adaptations, we become fixated on being in the places chosen to represent the fictional, or those places that may have inspired Austen in real life. (The eternal debate about whether or not Chatsworth served as the model for Pemberley rages on.<sup>4</sup>)

Jane Austen probably did not intend the creation of the image of the country house that has been enduringly sculpted from her words and our interpretation of them, but yet, in some contexts, it seems that our interactions with the country house are mediated by this image. The romantic Regency country house is part of the "brand". Yet, why is Austen synonymous with "the big house", despite never living in one and having a precarious relationship to home for much of her life? And why a romanticised big house at that, despite her allusions to the things we know the country house is representative of? (Here, I'm particularly thinking about gender inequalities in estate inheritance and the connection between the country house, slavery and colonialism, which *Mansfield Park* makes clear).

What I'd like to know is how this blurring between fiction and reality impacts both our engagement with the real world of the country house and the imaginary world that often stems from popular culture, in particular the world of Austen, which so often feels more real

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<sup>4</sup> Janine Barchas has argued in her close reading of references in the novels, as well as the geography described in the novel of the tour taken in Derbyshire and moving northwards by Lizzy Bennet and the Gardiners, that it isn't Chatsworth, but Wentworth Woodhouse we should be looking towards. See her blog here: <https://www.press.jhu.edu/news/blog/will-real-model-pemberley-please-step-forward> (Accessed 28/08/2021) But it has been argued for a few decades that, despite Chatsworth's mention in the novel, it really did serve as the inspiration for Pemberley. See Chatsworth's page on the crossover between potential reality and the 2005 film adaptation here: <https://www.chatsworth.org/news-media/chatsworth-on-film/pride-and-prejudice/> (Accessed 28/08/2021)

than not. What could a close reading of Austen's country houses do when examined in relation to their 'real' counterparts, and their own histories? And how do we receive them – if we remove rose-tinted glasses and engage with these histories (both positive and negative) more fully, can we read better the complex context of the country house in literary representation?

#### References/Further Reading:

Sarah Parry, 'The Pemberley Effect: Austen's Legacy to the Historic House Industry', *Persuasions* 30 (2008), 113-122. Accessible online: <http://jasna.org/assets/Persuasions/No-30/eac266b8fe/parry.pdf>

Janine Barchas, 'Will the real model for Pemberley please step forward?', *JHU Press Blog*, 26 September 2013. Accessible online: <https://www.press.jhu.edu/news/blog/will-real-model-pemberley-please-step-forward> (Accessed 28/08/2021).

National Trust, 'Bringing Jane Austen to life'. Accessible online: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/jane-austen-film-and-tv> (Accessed 28/08/2021).

Chatsworth, 'Pride and Prejudice'. Accessible online: <https://www.chatsworth.org/news-media/chatsworth-on-film/pride-and-prejudice/> (Accessed 28/08/2021).