

Walking Through the Screen: A Comparative Study of Digital Fandom's Influence on Interpretations of the Jane Austen's House Museum and *Pride and Prejudice* Film Sites

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Abstract

Modern online communities often engage with digital tools to interact with and shape the meaning of literary heritage sites. The sites constitute locations associated with an author's life (in the present context, Jane Austen's House, Chawton) and those linked to fictional adaptations like Lyme Park (Cheshire) and Chatsworth House (Derbyshire). The study shall endeavour to leverage paratextual theory and fan studies to demonstrate how digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest have reconceptualised interpretive frameworks which visitors apply to actual locales. Visits to filming locations can be motivated by genuine nostalgic connections; however, digital fans bring augmented reality into play to recast physical spaces into gateways which present such locations as immersive digital content. The paper shall engage with previous studies by Waysdorf, Williams, Rocca and others and bring together tourism focused on the life, novels, and adaptations of Jane Austen, digital paratexts and participatory fan culture to illustrate how definitive film versions, visualised for popular culture, measure up to and at times even outdo the literary canon at the actual commemorative sites. The study offers an analytical approach towards understanding that museums must depart from perceiving digital platforms as competitors and embrace them as facilitators of co-created visitor experiences. This study provides a qualitative and theory-driven analysis but at the same time it recognizes a limitation regarding the lack of empirical sources which include visitor interviews or social media analytics. As emphasised in the conclusion, future studies should overcome this constraint by adopting both data-driven and ethnographic methods.

Keywords: Jane Austen, digital fandom, literary tourism, paratexts, heritage studies

Two and half centuries have elapsed since Jane Austen's birth (16th of December 1775) yet she continues to be "more popular than ever, selling 1.5 million copies annually, many to young readers" (Pentagram). The author has drawn significant attention on TikTok, a globally popular social media platform, with the #JaneAusten hashtag garnering over two hundred million views. It stands to reason that Netflix, the global subscription-based streaming service, is set to produce a six part adaptation of her novel *Pride and Prejudice* which is poised to come out by Fall 2026 (Pentagram). The vibrant sub-community of TikTok, BookTok, which is focused on books, has engaged intensely with Austen's corpus. This level of engagement appears to compete with the passion with which the distinguished high-culture admirers of Austen known as the "Janeites" read her works back in the nineteenth century. BookTok's

consumption of Jane Austen, however, is different as it moves away from a literary focus to a visual and emotional experience and interacts with the novelist through a cinematic universe of screen adaptations and aesthetics.

The basic research question which the papers seeks to address is: to what degree does the “visual canon” generated by online film fan communities eclipse the “textual canon” preserved in traditional literary museums and in what ways do fans employ digital platforms to superimpose these two realities onto one another. In response to the question the study seeks to examine two types of tangible sites within the existing fan consciousness -- the author’s literary home at Chawton where some of her finest novels were written and the settings (stately homes and landscapes) used as filming locations for the two compelling retellings of *Pride and Prejudice*: The iconic BBC adaptation of the novel, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth as Elizabeth and Mr Darcy and Joe Wright’s 2005 film starring Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet. Two primary real-world locations used to represent Mr. Darcy’s estate, Pemberley, are Lyme Park for BBC series and Chatsworth House for the 2005 film, the latter being further accentuated as the possible inspiration for the original novel description.

The paper has a quadripartite structure. The theoretical framework, informed by paratextual theory, fan studies and heritage tourism literature, is outlined the first section. The second section engages with the virtual persistence of Austen Fandom and explores how platforms like Instagram and Tiktok engender visual imagistic codes to examine Austen’s fictional universe. The following section contrasts authorial and diegetic sites to present the perspective that while the former prioritizes historical genuineness the later encourages engagement through cinematic immersion. The concluding section of the study discusses how the findings apply to the real-world work in museums and what needs to be explored next by means of research.

Theoretical Framework: Paratexts, Pilgrimage, and Performance

G rard Genette coined the term “paratext” to define the various features which encompass a written work such as titles, introductions and illustrations. These elements play an intermediary role and impact the approach and interpretation of the content by the readers. The idea has been applied to fan studies by scholars where screen adaptations are identified as influential paratexts which retrospectively redefine the interpretation of the original works (Glosson 45). Scholars such as Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield have cogently argued that cinematic adaptations of Austen do not merely convey but effectively transform the source text, creating new interpretive communities and visual traditions that compete with literary authority (Troost & Greenfield, “Watching Ourselves Watching” 10). The BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in the mid-nineties was much more than an innovative conversion of the dialogue and plot. Essentially it was the invention of an iconic visual expression, specifically the «wet shirt» scene (Colin Firth walking out of the lake) which has become integral to readers’ perception of Mr. Darcy.

The idea of “unintentional paratexts,” as examined in Waysdorf’s work, is significant in this context. The author examines Portmeirion in Wales, which served as the setting for the television series *The Prisoner*, to assert that fans consider such locations as “unintentional paratexts” that function “alongside, but not necessarily in sync with, official heritage discourses” (Waysdorf 4). Another case in point is Williams’s representation of *Hannibal* fans touring filming locations in Florence whereby she asserts that «fan tourism, participatory culture, and paratextual play” come together as the tourists “perform the text” at these sites (Williams 6). Although Jane Austen heritage sites concern themselves more with historical accuracy, fans visit them seeking to venture into the fantasy world portrayed by screen adaptations.

In *Performing Jane: A Cultural History of Jane Austen Fandom* Sarah Glosson describes pilgrimage as “core mode of fannish engagement,” going together with collection and creation of imitative works (78). The author also contends that user-generated content such as the

Pinterest board, the TikTok review, the Instagram photo set are not significant deviations from traditional fandom but “performative” extensions of practices traceable to the nineteenth century (Glosson 102). What distinguish the two phenomena are factors like recognition and scope. Traditional pilgrimages to these sites had fans record their impressions in personal notebooks whereas modern fans co-construct the meaning of the locale by instantaneously relaying their experiences to a mass audience.

Taking this analysis a step further, Krueger focuses on digital platforms and demonstrates that “social media as an easily accessible information commons provides a digital record of ongoing conversations about the author, her novels, and the people who enjoy them” (Krueger, “Handles” 380). According to her research on “Handles, Hashtags, and Austen Social Media,” digital platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram serve as sites of “curatorial fandom,” as fans dissolve the distinctions of textual quotation, production stills and original photography through inspiration boards and aesthetic collections (Krueger, “Handles” 385). Similarly, Troost and Greenfield maintain that each new adaptation generates its own “paratextual afterlife” in which fan-produced images and discussions redefine the very expectations which readers bring to Austen’s prose (Troost & Greenfield, “Pride and Prejudice Updates” 132).

Instead of merely acting as static structures, institutions have actively adapted to the changing environment. In their book *The Edinburgh Companion to Jane Austen and the Arts*, Krueger, Bray, and Moss assert that «heritage sites play a large part in maintaining Austen’s afterlife not only at physical sites, but also through digital platforms» (Krueger, Bray, and Moss 214). Immersion in the digital world reached an unprecedented level during the global outbreak of the coronavirus disease as “digital sites, conferences, and events hosted by Austen institutions helped fans feel more connected to the author, the Austen landscape, and each other---thus showing that digitality is crucial to literary tourism” (Krueger et al. 218). Physical locations and digital platforms therefore do not compete in a way where one’s gain is the other’s loss but in a mutually beneficial partnership. This relation however, as the paper shall endeavour to assert, is not always balanced in terms of its power and impact.

The Digital Afterlife of Austen: BookTok, Aesthetic Reels, and Visual Canons

TikTok’s sub-community, BookTok, has solidified its role in redefining the interaction of the digital citizens with the text. The #JaneAusten hashtag garnered more than a quarter-billion views (Pentagram) with the platform familiarizing the author to contemporary readership by means of feed-optimized user videos. The visual-coding of the videos draws a lot of attention demonstrating, among other things, macro photos of handwritten marginalia, softly lit alcoves and more importantly stills from 1995 and 2005 screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*.

The subjective experience of such interaction is summed up in a BookTok remark which says “what plays in my head when I watch P&P” (Lemon8, “What Plays”). In the memory and imagination of the fan the textual details of the book and the visual elements of the film coalesce to create a unified version of the story. Mr. Darcy, “evokes strong emotional responses, symbolizing the complexities of love, pride, and personal growth,” the user writes; the responses, however, are never direct but are shaped by the enduring visual interpretations of Colin Firth and Matthew Macfadyen (Lemon8, “What Plays”).

The term “visual canon” denotes a selectively assembled body of images, visual motifs, architectural contexture and characterial anatomy which the fans assimilate as the baseline representation of Austen’s fictional realm typically without realizing that these images are engendered by creative directorial choices rather than the text. A visual blueprint for Regency-era fashion discernable in the 1995 limited series left a lasting impression. In comparison, the 2005 film preferred the atmospheric, Romantic style featuring ethereal scenery and naturalistic lighting which makes it noticeably different from BBC’s more home-centred style.

The Visual canon transforms simple imagination into tangible, unavoidable experiences. For the fans Chatsworth House means a lot more than a mere mansion. It is the physical space where Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet gazes in wonder and the exhibit space where she lights upon Mr. Darcy's portrait. The current creative and enterprise investment supporting this visual inventory is evident from the re-emergence of the 2005 film on the big screen as milestone revival in 2026 commemorating its 20th anniversary. The re-release came with "new merchandise and a themed ball in Pasadena" (Particle News) which reflects the interest it continues to generate.

Fans do not, however, consume the visual canon blindly. They often question and critique the elements they find poorly executed or creatively contradictory. Within Austen fandom, the polemics triggered by Penguin's 2026 "BookTok-inspired" covers demonstrates notable strain. One critic observes that the "shimmery blue-purple" coats and "violent orange trousers" in which the covers in question showcase the characters create an "airport chick lit" impression which is out of keeping with Austen's trademark literary style (Rasool). Austen is not what is being sold by Penguin, the critic asserts, but rather "meet-cutes and stolen glances, wrapped in bright packaging indistinguishable from anything else adored by BookTok lovers" (Rasool). Such disputations offer valuable lessons revealing that the purist segment of the fan base sees the visual canon as being inimical to the textual canon in that it oversimplifies or glamorizes in a way that subverts Austen's sharp irony. Devised to "dupe innocent new readers into picking up Austen's masterclass in wit" (Rasool), these covers are an undeniable representation of the commercial motives. The premise that this qualifies as "duping" rather than entry point to deeper literary engagement is informed by a possessive investment in canonical superiority which is a posture rejected by fandom.

Authorial and Diegetic Landmarks: Two Models of Heritage

A dynamic environment of intense creative labour where her literary masterpieces were created, Jane Austen's House in Chawton is her physical birthplace. Austen went over her draft of *Pride and Prejudice* and composed her subsequent fiction here, at the compact walnut writing table in the dining quarters. The museum values genuine, verified historical artefacts and aims to create an intimate experience that makes visitors feel physically close to the author. The spaces where Austen lived and worked (her writing desk, her cozy resting place, and the very garden path that inspired her) are open for visitors to discover. The museum organizes engaging events like the 2026 *Emma* Festival's «Dress Up Day» which transport the visitors "into Austen's world" as they don their regency costumes and engage in activities such as painting sessions and period dances (Groom).

Virtual existence of the museum over digital platforms supplements the tangible exhibits rather than offering an equivalent alternative. A Blush Noisette rose framing the anterior passageway is one of the distinct vegetational aspects featured in Pentagram's 250th-commerative celebration design. It also features an oak tree associable with one "planted by Jane herself over 200 years ago" (Pentagram). These elements hold together the digital identity in the physical space. Over digital platforms, the museum foregrounds historical artefacts, biographical context and research initiatives drawing a clear line between the real Austen and her cinematic translation. The pervasive influence of the visual canon often coerces our observations into pre-existing frameworks. "Tens of thousands of visitors each year" flock to the museum as "a place of pilgrimage for devoted fan" (Pentagram). Excessive fondness of the novels inspires the pilgrimages of most of the fans, but the images playing in their minds, their imaginative landscape of the story, are often influenced by cinematizations. The real-world settings cannot completely control how they are perceived as the paratextual context always tends to influence

interpretation.

The interpretive norm governing diegetic landmarks is distinct. The emotional resonance of these sites doesn't come from Austen's written words but the constructed visual look of the adaptations. Fan reactions clearly accentuate this dramatic divergence. "The iconic lake where Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy took his famous dip" (GetYourGuide) is what travel guides highlight when referring to Lyme Park. "Widely believed to be Austen's inspiration for Pemberley," Chatsworth also happens to be the place where "Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley) gazed out over the wilderness" from *Stanage Edge* (Lemon8, "Filming Locations").

Therefore, emotional impact and sensory engagement take precedence over standard historical education. Visitors on the 2026 "Manchester: Peak District Pride & Prejudice Day Tour" will, "feel like you're in a movie" and "stand on the exact spot at Lyme Park where the 1995 'lake scene' was filmed." (GetYourGuide). "Exact spot," "iconic," "feel like you're in a movie", the choice of words sums it up perfectly. These prominent physical spaces from within the fictional world of the story are employed as visuals one can walk across. Thus, the traditional space between the physical reality of the viewer and the projective narrative disappears with the observer integrating with the cinematic setting.

Far from being a dubitable marketing stunt, this represents active fan engagement with a permanently evolving trend. Fresh paratexts created by fans (who replicate scenes, have themselves clicked in character poses and share the content on digital platforms) shape up as credible resources for prospective visitors, a performative dynamic that Williams's concept of "paratextual play" captures (Williams 10). Physical locations thus transform into a collaborative environment enabling users to become co-creators of the narrative through ongoing interactions. The physical network built to capitalize on the specific fictional setting is thorough allowing fans to step directly into the fictional universe. Both Chatsworth House and Lyme Park charge admission fees while tour operators offer attractive packages that combine visits to several sites. In addition to this, the commemorative reissue of the 2005 film goes together with "themed merchandise and events" (Particle News). In her appraisal of *Game of Thrones* tourism in Dubrovnik, Rocca contends that "diegetic heritage" is far from neutral; instead, it is shaped by what she terms "the imperialism of popular culture". In other words, the process by which screen fandom turns local sites into global commodities (Rocca 45) Fans, it can safely be concluded, are active, critical thinkers rather than mindless, brainwashed consumers. Platforms such as TikTok and Lemon8 thrive on real, relatable content created by the fans themselves. "Engaging with travel communities on platforms like TikTok with hashtags such as #TravelTikTok and #EnglandTravel can offer real-time tips, travel itineraries, and vibrant discussions about these destinations" (Lemon8, "Filming Locations"). Instead of just accepting state-sanctioned history, fan communities expand on it and frequently question its authority.

Layering Realities: How Digital Platforms Mediate On-Site Experience

The physical journey of the visitors is profoundly influenced, and their expectations often shaped, by the online information and virtual previews they come across before arriving at specific locations. Owing to prior exposure, visitors experience Chatsworth through the lens of pre-existing stipulations and memories rather than with an completely open and unformed mind. A number of Instagram reels using Dario Marianelli's 2005 soundtrack, mood boards on Pinterest under the "Pemberley aesthetic" tag and video critiques on TikTok evaluating the precision of travel routes have all likely been seen, pinned, and watched by them.

Paratextual material which the visitors consume before going to the physical site determines how they go on to process the experience at the destination. Climbing the staircase forces an active, incarnate engagement with the environment, turning a purely observational act into an

interpretive phenomenological experience shaped by collective visual consciousness of the networked fan communities. The “landscape cinematography” of the film as one travel guide observes, enables these locations to “not only provide picturesque settings but also deepen your appreciation of the narrative’s social and cultural contexts” (Lemon8, “Filming Locations”).

In-person participation serves as a deeper layer of fan identity. At Jane Austen’s House, fans don “beautiful empire line gowns, delicate parasols and the occasional top hat” (Groom). Enthusiasts also get to redo the lake scene at Lyme Park and document themselves with exact editions of the novel at its referenced locations. This facilitates the transformation of subjective identity and performance into a curated spectacle created to gain digital validation. The digital feedback loop of such tourism, where the physical documentation of an experience is posted online, acts as a paratext shaping the interpretations of the next wave of visitors. Visual traditions perpetuate and replicate through this foundational framework which ensures that the documented content determines the anticipation of prospective visitors.

The wheel comes full circle with the digital journey record which transforms a temporary physical visit into a shareable and memorable relationship with the destination. As personal logs, artefacts of cultural achievement and vital contributions to a collaborative understanding of the site, posts on online communities serve multiple important functions. The posts, at issue, together create a supplementary or paratextual resource utilizable by future scholars and fans; this makes Krueger’s concept of social media as an “information commons” especially relevant (Krueger, “Handles” 390).

Conclusion: The Visual Canon and the Future of Literary Heritage

The study demonstrates that internet subcultures, with their digital storytelling and communal fan imagery, largely determine how tourists and enthusiasts view and interact with real-world locations. The way fans connect with a writer’s work at house museums depends directly on the conscious choices made by the museum. Focusing on actual artefacts and building design, curators steer visitors towards feeling the spirit of the writer and imagining the exact history that inspired their novels. In spite of that the imaginative frameworks of the visitors are substantially conditioned by the visual canon. Instead of serving as an imposed limitation, the visual canon acts as the intrinsic engine of a site’s identity at places like Lyme Park in Cheshire and Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. Precisely because they allow fans to “walk through the screen,” these locations are cherished as portals opening into the fictional world brought to life by cinematic adaptations.

Instead of supplanting physical heritage, participatory culture blends with it in an exceedingly intricate synthesis. Online fan communities have broken down academic and physical barriers allowing a diverse global audience to discover and relate to Jane Austen’s works. Besides this, online marketing and fan-driven travel content have given a huge fillip to heritage tourism paving the way for the generation of revenue which goes into the preservation and maintenance of physical landmarks. Moreover, digital landscape encourages active participation turning the process of solitary reading into a creative dialogue.

Moving from general recommendations to specific, viable strategies, heritage organizations face three concrete imperatives. First, instead of perceiving digital platforms as harmful or hostile to their essential purpose, museums should collaborate with fan communities to create interpretive resources. This can be done, among other things, by authorising fan-driven digital tours and instituting official hashtag campaigns for curating user-generated content related to particular exhibits. Second, heritage sites could incorporate “paratextual wayfinding” such as QR codes to direct visitors to exclusive behind-the-scenes content or aesthetic edits. In this way, the layering of textual and visual canons can be made an explicit part of the visitor

experience rather than an implicit or unacknowledged influence. Third, curatorial approaches should counterbalance the emphasis on visual artefacts by setting up 'slow reading' zones and tactile interactives that centre on Austen's aesthetic and the social context of her era. By these means visitors can be presented with an alternative perspective to the fully engaging cinematic experiences which they anticipate. Interventions like these would reframe the recognised dichotomy between textual and visual frameworks as a constructive dialogue instead of mutually exclusive struggle.

Despite a strong theoretical framework, the present study is constrained by its dependence on secondary sources and openly accessible digital footprints. It does not gather empirical data which may include visitor interviews at historic estates (Chawton House, National Trust - Lyme, Chatsworth House), digital ethnographies or quantitative social media analytics. As a result, the study cannot claim to represent the complete variance of fan perspectives or the quantitative reach of the visual canon among diverse demographic groups. Nevertheless, future studies can be readily built upon the shortcomings identified here.

Such combination of diverse ideas paves the way for subsequent research investigations. To supplement the qualitative analysis presented here, quantitative data could be obtained through data-driven studies that trace site-based fan content, specifically by analyzing hashtags, geotags and actual visual elements. In addition to this, an analysis of how enthusiasts interact with the legacies of authors like Shakespeare, Dickens and the Brontë sisters, can determine if certain fan behaviours are tied strictly to Jane Austen's works or if they are common across the wider literary world. Furthermore, to capture the essence of subjective awareness of "layering" textual and visual canons, ethnographic research with fans themselves by means of interviews at pilgrimage sites would be essential.

The 250th-anniversary events which unfolded through 2026 made it significantly clear that the Jane Austen heritage industry is at a crucial turning point as it is faced with the challenge of navigating a legacy indelibly shaped by modern film adaptations and viral BookTok culture. Digital fandom has redefined the interpretation of physical heritage sites. This implies that the basic challenge for cultural institutions is whether they can adapt, creatively merging text, visuals and screen-based media to counter this new phenomenon.

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