

A ‘Convention’ of One’s Own? Comparing Abolition Commentary by Female Authors in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

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Literary response to the transatlantic slave trade is diversified in its scope – the politicized circulation of abolition and anti-slavery narratives created barriers for certain voices to break through and comment on the systemic structures that evidently resulted in massive oppression. However, the transatlantic slave trade garnered the attention to two major women authors who managed to write influential texts regarding their comments on the process of abolition: 18th century English novelist Jane Austen publishes *Mansfield Park* in 1814, and 19th century author Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. Evidently, these texts enhance the memory of the slave trade and slavery, posing the question of *how* both serve the “Phantoms of the Past” research project together. Therefore, upon analyzing *Mansfield Park*, it is clear that Austen provides a memorialization of the transatlantic slave trade by proposing a feminist read to the forms of social oppression that occur through the system. This project takes two forms of analysis: firstly, literary discussions with the novels that beg analysis include: the influence of abolitionist thought on Jane Austen, a close-reading of *Mansfield Park*, and a comparison of feminist lenses with Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Secondly, this project will conclude with a comparison of how Austen and *Mansfield Park* are remembered in slave trade discourses regarding the respective sites of memory conducted throughout this research process. *Mansfield Park* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* both aim to comment, the latter more radically than the former, on the need for abolition, but it is important to consider how these texts serve as sites of memory themselves in a postcolonial context.

This paper begins with an acknowledgement of the privileged voices that both Jane Austen and Harriet Beecher Stowe possess. While *Mansfield Park* does not appropriate the voices of the enslaved person as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* aims to in its discourse, it is necessary to recognize that Austen and Stowe are writing from a middle-class position and have access to resources to project these narratives. Nonetheless, this acknowledgement emphasizes that understanding these power relations are a part of the process of coming to know how both women can contribute to this memorialization. Their contributions cannot be fully diminished; rather, they prove how their positions in society affected the types of audiences they could reach and the extent to which their credibility was heightened in commenting on the slave trade.

Abolition and Austen: Contextualizing Spheres of Influence

Both texts possess characters whose construction is based on the fictionalization of important figures and ideas in the respective author’s life. The life of Reverend Josiah Henson, a run-away slave from Maryland who finds refuge in Canada and eventually Dresden, Ontario, is the focal point for Stowe’s characterization of Uncle Tom. While this connection between author

and man has been criticized regarding the agency of Henson's own biography that he writes\ and Stowe's choice to create Uncle Tom to serve as a submissive character, the causal link between the life of Henson and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* creates discourse that is shaped by Stowe's exchanges with Henson and paralleled with Austen's case of her experiences with the slave trade.

The influence of abolitionist thought in Austen's writing may be due to many factors. Even though she is often remembered as a social critic with a primary focus on gender and may not be considered an abolitionist in the absolute sense, *Mansfield Park* serves as a textual reminder that Austen is aware of these conversations regarding slave trade discourse. Further, the book's publication date of 1814 follows the British parliament's *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act* on March 25, 1807 as well as the 1811 *Slave Trade Felony Act*. Austen also refers to British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson's writings in a letter to her sister on January 24, 1813. She discusses reading an essay by a Captain Pasley, titled *Essay on the Military Police and Institutions of the British Empire*, and upon reflection, recalls: "I am as much in love with the Author as I ever was with Clarkson or Buchanan" (Austen 133). Clearly, Austen's engagement with political texts like Pasley's and connecting them to Clarkson's work *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by British Parliament* (Jones 257) exhibits the social discourse in England that she is actively seeking to become informed of.

Austen also possessed direct familial connections to the slave trade that are essential to recognize, as they inform the construction of the footprint she leaves in colonial memory. Her father the Reverend George Austen, and whose career brought the Austen family to Bath, became a trustee in 1760 for a plantation in Antigua in connection with an Oxford contemporary James Nibbs (Tomalin Appendix ii). Further, her brother Charles Austen's Royal Navy career includes copious amounts of visits to Portsmouth, the location of Fanny Price's home in *Mansfield Park* and a smaller port associated with first the circulation of the slave trade, and its eventual suppression (White 28). Her brother Francis Austen, another officer in the Royal Navy, was also a "fervent abolitionist" who comments on slave labour in Carolina: "slavery however it may be modified is still slavery, and it is much to be regretted that any trace of it should be found to exist in countries dependent on England, or colonized by her subjects" (148-149). Since these men had access to these economic and social conditions which shaped British society through the slave trade, Jane Austen consequently gets involved in the slave trade discourse in two ways. Firstly, as a passive participant by benefiting from her father's work as part of the colonial reality and structures, but as an active participant by ideologically engaging with abolition as a favourable social condition as expressed through *Mansfield Park*. By understanding Austen's familial position as working within spaces that evidently influence Austen's choices of setting and place in the novel, this lens informs the reading of the narrative she constructs in *Mansfield Park* and elevates her and the text as participants in slave trade memory.

Literary Analysis: *Mansfield Park* as an Abolitionist Text?

As discussed, Austen's position in society as an educated woman and member of the Austen family (naval officers and evangelical plantation trustee) clearly impacts her constructions of masculinity associated with the plantation economy. Sir Thomas, the estate owner of Mansfield Park and Fanny's uncle, is set as the prime example of the mobility associated with the position. He periodically heads to Antigua throughout the course of the novel, where his plantation is located, however Austen is ambiguous about the specifics. Rather,

the focus becomes how he occupies space as an authority figure: Sir Thomas's return to England re-establishes the order at Mansfield Park, creating a duality in the way Sir Thomas performs his "business" in Antigua. Austen writes: "He had the best right to be the talker; and the delight of his sensations in being again in his own house, in the centre of his family after such a separation...and he was ready to give every information as to his voyage...His business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid" (Austen 176). Suggestively, if Sir Thomas functions as an "absentee" plantation owner (White 20), he possesses a similar "right to be the talker" when he asserts his authority in the other direction of the Atlantic upon returning to his other sphere of influence. Austen's discursive choice to combine Sir Thomas's presence at Mansfield Park as contingent on a successful Antigua mission calls to question the intent of how this "success" is defined by a patriarchal society and aims to oppress social discourse. While there is an explicit spatial binary of plantation versus Mansfield Park, the performance of his masculinity is emphasized and successful upon his ability to be fluid in his conduct of plantation order at his own estate in the context of an England facing an abolitionist future.

Fanny Price, the young and 'uncivilized' cousin from Portsmouth, becomes positioned to be the voice in which Austen's abolitionist sentiments are explored, especially as she navigates her identity at the Mansfield Park estate. After briefly bringing up the topic of the slave trade with Sir Thomas, she is met with the silence of her female cousins, prompting her to confide in her other cousin Edmund the following day:

'Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?...I longed to [inquire further] – but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, [I shewed] a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel' (Austen 195).

While Fanny's question is not clearly defined, this ambiguity invites the reader of Austen's time to consider the slave trade wholly, as the Bertram's reception of Fanny's comment would have been paralleled in other drawing rooms within British society. Fanny's dependence on Sir Thomas's validity of her opinions subsequently calls for the validation of her participation in the slave trade discourse. Fanny does not question her own place within a topic of social importance especially because it contextualizes why the family's wealth and identity may be fragile in the midst of experiencing economic and material changes with abolition. Therefore, how contemporary readers of *Mansfield Park* can interact with this passage in the of slave trade memory must understand the dialectic and temporal layers in which Austen projects the tense circulation and reception of slave trade discourse in an earlier England undergoing abolition, for a post-Abolition audience.

Mansfield Park as a text navigates the spaces of silences and colonial consciousness. Edward Said is known for critiquing the novel by noting how these characters work within spheres of privilege and how Fanny acts as a "silencer" in the drawing room: "[he assumes] that West Indian slavery and colonial responsibility were topics 'excluded' from or 'avoided' in Romantic era fiction" (Boulukos 364). However, Boulukos challenges Said by arguing "that a momentary silence in the conversation of a Baronet's family should not be too readily equated to the 'silencing' of 'subalterns' themselves, however tempting the symbolism" (Boulukos 361). Austen is not erasing these conversations of abolition, rather she constructs a moment that reflects how these conversations exist in the consciousness of the people, especially in women such as Fanny and Austen herself. In fact, Fanny's question is "by no means only at the local

level” (White 33), as she matures she grows to become interested in global and interconnected information systems. Therefore, both the short presence and limiting of slave trade discourse speaks to a reflection of how patriarchal structures attempt to reproduce silences in the colonial consciousness, yet simultaneously tempt contemporary readers to consider how Austen subtly challenges this social and ideological authority by giving Fanny that brief moment of agency.

As Sir Thomas spends more time at Mansfield Park, the relationship between him and Fanny evolves into one that reflects a master-slave binary. Compared to the earlier arrangement where Fanny liberally attempted to engage with slave trade discourse, her refusal of Henry Crawford’s engagement causes Sir Thomas to restrict her mobility at Mansfield Park. He says to her: “For I *had*, Fanny, as I think my behavior must have shewn, formed a very favourable opinion of you from the period of my return to England. I had thought you peculiarly free from willfulness of temper...But you have now shewn methat you can and will decide for yourself” (Austen 314). Sir Thomas explicitly punishes Fanny by sending her back to Portsmouth; these conditions and expectations of Fanny’s behavior as an upper-class woman, especially being socially conditioned within Mansfield Park as a signifier of privilege, parallel the expectations of performances of the social structures outlined on plantations due to her true freedom of consciousness being restricted to how Sir Thomas defines it. Austen ironically illustrates how even though Fanny is meant to find her “freedom” and “liberty” at Mansfield Park because she is exposed to a “proper” England, this construction of English society still needs to justify its authority. Much like how Toni Morrison emphasizes that the American identity is contingent on the creation of the Africanist other (Morrison 6), Austen exhibits through Fanny and Sir Thomas how Britain needs the colonies to define its role of the “centre,” and consequently the oppression of those who show a “willfulness of temper” against colonial and patriarchal authority. Clearly, this reading of the structures set in *Mansfield Park* contribute to how this definition gets remembered in texts that touch on the transatlantic slave trade.

Sites of transatlantic slave trade memory have their own purpose in *Mansfield Park* as well. While Mansfield Park is a constructed reality, it becomes spatially related to Bath, the West Indies, and Portsmouth; its lack of a specific year and time period also speaks to Austen’s function within realism (White 31). Fanny regularly elevates her brother William as a naval officer – to the point where Fanny’s suitor Henry Crawford questions his own masculinity. “William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean – in the West Indies...[Henry] longed to have been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much...The glory of heroism, of usefulness, made his own habits of self-indulgence appear in shameful contrast” (Austen 232). Henry regularly leaves Mansfield Park to participate in business in Bath, therefore his jealousy of William’s naval career contingent on his West Indies travel is another subtly that Austen proposes should Henry’s business have anything to do with the slave trade and Bath’s own participation. Subsequently, the glorification of William’s position could potentially be paralleled of that with Austen’s own brothers’ Royal Navy careers and the realm of influence they have on her own writing. Evidently, Austen is working with these narrative layers that are defined by the slave trade economy.

Further, Austen deconstructs the men’s participation in transatlantic experience. When William returns from his naval employment briefly and comes to Mansfield Park in time for Fanny’s formal “coming-out” and presentation to society, Sir Thomas wishes to engage with William to discuss their experiences with the “balls of Antigua” (246). Thus the conversation of transatlantic travel and “business” becomes further isolated to the privileged gender status and

explored beyond Fanny's earlier failure to engage the Bertram company. This alternate participation in transatlantic social spheres invites a postcolonial reading of how the men would have acted in Antigua, as well as in the presence of black communities: "The attractive wildness of such creatures was a result of the increasing control over them by English imperialists. Certainly, the illusion of order, as well as the fixity of the other, worked to ease anxious English gentlemen" (Brody 138). Therefore, Sir Thomas and William are able to confide in each other out of a familiar experience of transatlantic travel and their active interactions with people of colour and enslaved persons. The Atlantic's indirect presence in *Mansfield Park* calls upon how Austen's reservation of this discourse to the two men frames the spatial experience of the slave trade in the novel based on a masculine presence of authority. Ultimately, Austen illustrates *Mansfield Park*'s realms of interconnectedness with temporal and spatial frameworks associated with the slave trade's oppressions demonstrates how the novel serves transatlantic slave trade memory, despite its privileged within the British literary canon.

Navigating Conventions: Comparing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Mansfield Park*

Both *Mansfield Park* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are positioned well within the context of the Phantoms of the Past project to discuss how these texts reinforce slave trade and literary discourse through their authors' feminist philosophies. Symbolically, the assertion of masculinity through the heads of the households in both novels invite a binary of the submissive plantation wife. Lady Bertram and Marie St. Clare are subjected to their husbands' involvement in the slave trade, consequently resulting in the failure of both women to subvert their consciousness of the colonial order. When Lady Bertram attempts to object Fanny's departure, her resistance is dismissed: "But [Sir Thomas] was master at Mansfield Park...he did induce his wife to let her go; obtaining it rather from submission, however, than conviction, for Lady Bertram was convinced of very little more than, that Sir Thomas thought Fanny ought to go" (Austen 366). Austen's diction choices of "master" to "submission" subtly inserts slavery discourse paired with the silencing of a woman, despite her own high position within the society of Mansfield Park.

Similarly, Stowe warns her American audiences of this caricature through Marie St. Clare. She possesses both the submissive nature of Lady Bertram, paired with the slighted opinions of Mrs. Norris, Fanny's other aunt. Marie's legacy as a Southerner distorts her view of morality. She reflects in conversation with Miss Ophelia regarding the immortality of slaves: "'O, well,' said Marie, yawning, 'that of course—nobody doubts that. But as to putting them on any sort of equality with us, you know, as if we could be compared, why, it's impossible!...I don't often show my feelings. I make it a principle to endure everything in silence; it's a wife's hard lot, and I bear it'" (Stowe 248-249). Stowe's critique can be found in Marie's justification that her opinions on the morality of slaves is subject to St. Clare's authority, even though she admits to the lessening of slaves and often objects to St. Clare's elevation of Tom's humanity. Stowe's warning of how the slave trade economy encourages this behavior of women paired with Austen's construction of Lady Bertram's submission exhibits how the slave trade causes aspects of femininity to be defined and controlled by the oppressive position of the slave trade husband. Sir Thomas's attempt to preserve the order that is being threatened in Antigua is ultimately transferred to his conduct of the women at Mansfield Park, coupled by a definitive acceptance of the inequality of enslaved people, provide as explicit examples of how the authors critique the conduct of women at the expense of a system which reproduced oppressions in a transatlantic context.

Ironically, both Austen and Stowe privilege the relationships between opposite gendered cousins: Edmund and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* and Miss Ophelia and Augustine St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Fanny is able to confide in Edmund; her rationality is not questioned when she engages her unaccepted sympathetic abolitionist discourse with him. For example, she says: "The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. It entertains *me* more than many other things have done – but then I am unlike other people I dare say" (Austen 194). In a way, this trust between Edmund and Fanny is paralleled by Vermont-native Ophelia and New Orleans-based St. Clare; Stowe questions the translation of morality amongst the North and South through the cousins' dialogues. St. Clare reflects: "You see, Cousin, I want justice done us. We are in a bad position. We are the more *obvious* oppressors of the Negro; but the unchristian prejudice of the north is an oppressor almost equally severe" (Stowe 448). The cousins each become a synecdoche of their respective states' sociopolitical position on slavery; Stowe's discursive efforts to establish how women can approach the topic of slavery can enhance the deconstructing of Austen's use of Fanny's connection with Edmund to speak liberally about a polarizing issue in British society.

Both Ophelia, symbol of the glorified North, and Fanny, the eventually 'properly' civilized child, challenge the domestic space. While Stowe positions Ophelia to comment on the conduct of the St. Clare household, Fanny is learning to navigate these domestic spheres to not only find her place in society, but to instill an identity of a woman of empire in an anticipated post-abolition England. Regarding Fanny's struggles in *Mansfield Park* with the meddling Crawford family, her authoritative Aunt Norris, and strict uncle, White reflects: "Fanny's quiet determination against all the odds may parallel the determination of abolitionists to oppose the might of the plantocracy, and to argue for and to pressure for the right of autonomy for slaves, harnessing appropriate power" (White 36). However, for Stowe, the grassroots power for abolition comes from a complete restructuring of the patriarchal and capitalist society:

[the domestic] constitute an alternative system: an economy of mother-love built on an excess of demand and desire upon which both the slave economy and Northern capitalism operated... Virginia Woolf's observation on the need of women writers to destroy the images and characteristics of domestic femininity... becomes inverted here to signify a literacy act empowered by, and empowering, domesticity (Brown 97, 101).

This separate order is exhibited through Ophelia's attempt to 'civilize' Topsy, the Halliday's utopia, and Mrs. Bird's sympathy for Eliza (98). Clearly, Ophelia is positioned in a more progressive context as a result of Stowe's reliance on her equivalency with St. Clare, thus Stowe's revolutionary proposal is presented as a vision that is to be applicable in all American households. As compared to Fanny's navigation of the suppressions of her identity through Mansfield and dislocation at back at her working-class home in Portsmouth, Austen's portrayal of Fanny's determinacy and abolitionist parallels becomes a question of social consciousness than political philosophy. Both women possess privileges of their own – Ophelia from her wealth and race, and Fanny from her experiences at Mansfield Park – however their interaction with their respective domestic spaces exhibit how the indirect abolitionist discourse of Austen compares to the explicit style of Stowe, ultimately placing both texts as products of abolitionist thought with a clear feminist lens.

Remembering Austen: Exploring Sites of Memory in Bath

The emphasis on physically experiencing sites of memory is a core component of the Phantoms project and can help uncover the ‘phantoms’ tied to a postcolonial understanding of Jane Austen’s own ideological interactions with the slave trade. Consequently, the site visits in Bath exhibit this connection in ways that are both explicit and erased through the projected civic narrative. The first space to discuss is the location of Austen’s apartment on Sydney Place. Conveniently across from the present-day Holburne museum, Austen’s apartment is a popular tourist stop for visitors in Bath. However, the apartment is also in the same neighbourhood as multiple plantation owners who got reimbursed by the British government as a result of the economic redistribution of wealth post-Abolition. Austen’s apartment is plaqued despite her inconsistent habitation in the city from 1799 to 1806 dependent on her father’s employment and eventual death (see Appendix B; Jane Austen 2019). The site visit [aroused questions of how the memorialization of a civic narrative leads to other histories being forgotten \(see Appendix A and B\)](#). Evidently, how Austen gets privileged amongst those who are chosen to be commemorated illustrates the deep structural barriers of colonial and social memory that Bath attempts to control. Yet when communities attempt to remember Austen in a way that destigmatize her texts as solely as commenting on the social construction of high-British society and position of women, then her sites of memory can enter the decolonizing agenda.

The Jane Austen Centre also exhibits symptoms of erasure – it is carefully curated to showcase Austen’s authorial influence paired with the commodification of her name and as “Bath’s most famous resident” (see Appendix C). There is no racialized “other” in the curated world of Austen, rather visitors are instead presented with a construction of the author solely as an imperial signifier of white-ethnocentric British identity and the Georgian-Regency period. Her texts are placed in conversation with the place-based identity that they produce, with notable references to Austen’s experiences in Bath and claiming the inspiration the city provided for her novels mentioned throughout the course of the tour. While Austen’s role in shaping the civic identity of Bath is undeniable, one must be cautious of how civic narratives can participate in ongoing processes of colonization. To illustrate, the tour guide mentioned how her sister Cassandra Austen did end up burning most of Jane’s letters when she died, thus aspects of Austen’s erased identity erased as well become subject to the politics of memory regarding how Bath perceives Austen’s authorial contribution as one that legitimizes and translates an image of a proper British society through her texts, versus how postcolonial critics aim to uncover an underlying abolitionist sentiment in the author. As evident with *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not commit to silencing of slave trade discourse: rather, she leaves it to the responsibility of the reader to be an active participant in the discourse as well. Therefore, in the context of Phantoms, the Jane Austen Centre is an integral space for slave trade memory as it poses as a historical exercise for how Austen herself must be reimaged; when thinking of decolonizing the civic narrative of Bath, sites of memory associated with Austen can be reinverted.

Conclusions

Contemporary interactions with transatlantic slave trade texts can frame postcolonial conversations to help uncover new phantoms. Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* deserves a position in the broader project of Phantoms of the Past as a text influenced by abolitionist thought. It is clear that Austen provides a memorialization of the transatlantic slave trade by proposing a feminist read to the forms of social oppression that occur through the system. A brief analysis of

Austen's abolitionist influences, the close-reading of the text, and comparison to Stowe's radical approach in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reinforce the importance of *Mansfield Park*'s identity in slave trade memory. Further, its place is reinforced alongside Austen's own position by analyses of the sites of memory visits made in February of 2019 to Bath. Austen is woven into the complex civic narrative and overarching British identity that complicates how she is remembered as an author. However, memory is consistently active and a conscious action, therefore by contextualizing Austen and *Mansfield Park* in the vision of Phantoms of the Past, the ways in which the novel and author are not canonically remembered will gain traction and help contribute to the understanding of the relationship between sites, texts, and people of the transatlantic slave trade.

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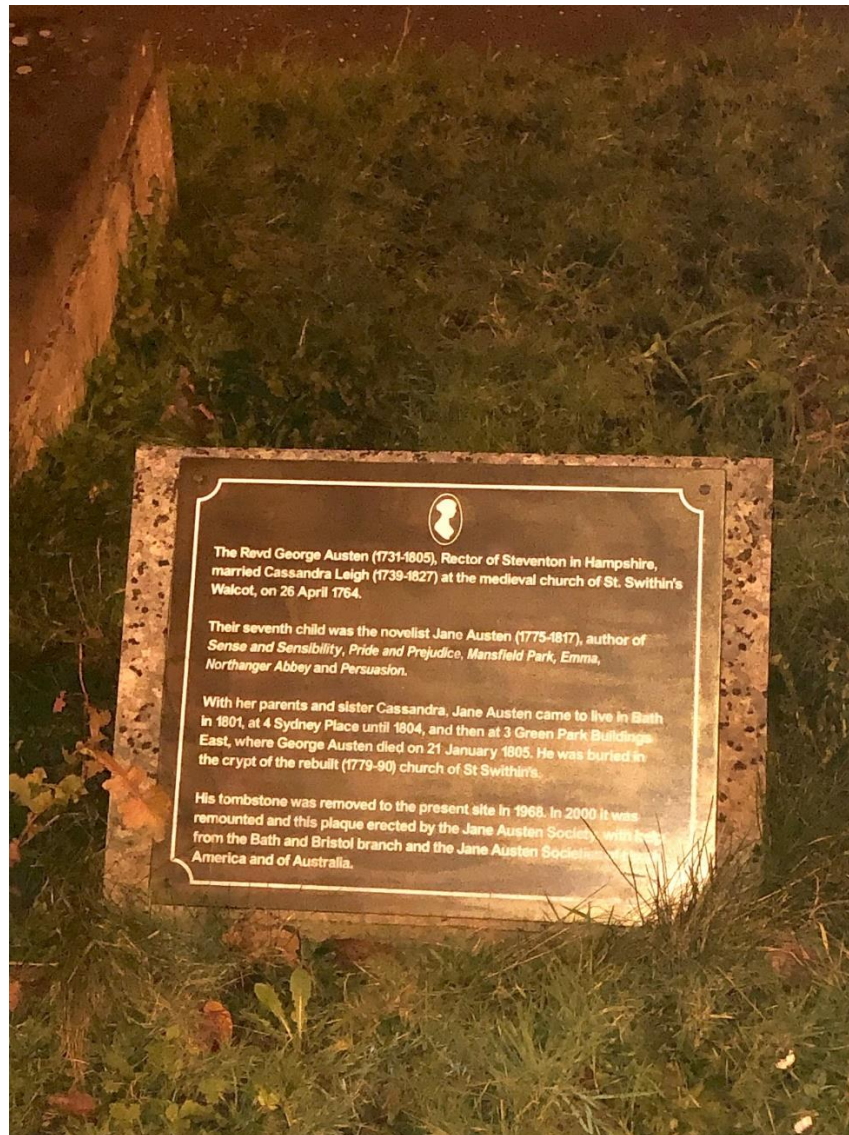
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Appendix A: Jane Austen's Apartment on Sydney Place. Taken February 19, 2019.



Appendix B: Reverend George Austen's grave. Taken February 17, 2019.



Appendix C: View from the Jane Austen Centre. Taken February 20, 2019.

