

# 2015 International Visitor

By Marilyn Francus

“Boo.” As I sat in Chawton House Library, reviewing an 1801 edition of *Elegant Extracts*, or, *Useful and Entertaining Pieces of Poetry*, the word “Boo” suddenly appeared before me in the margin, next to Alexander Pope’s poem, “Epistle to Bathurst.” I laughed, because the Austens had struck again.

Marginal notes catch readers in the act of reading, and as JASNA’s International Visitor in 2015, I went to Chawton to study Austen’s notes in the books in Chawton House Library and the Jane Austen House Museum—and if possible, to find more.

I started with Austen’s copy of *Elegant Extracts* (ca. 1783), a popular prose collection that Austen gave to her niece Anna Austen (later Lefroy) in 1801. This copy includes Austen’s notes about Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I (on the description of the latter: “A lie from beginning to end.”) It also has dozens of Xs and lines marking passages on literary style and form. It’s possible that Jane Austen made these marks, so Anna may have received *Elegant Extracts* fully annotated—or Anna may have made these marks as part of her studies. Either way, the marginalia in *Elegant Extracts* seem like teaching tools: not only inducting Anna into the Austen family preference for the Stuarts, but encouraging Anna to become a writer—which she did.

Every day was an adventure because I never knew what I would find when I opened a book. I found an upside down poem in Austen’s copy of Ann Murry’s *Mentoria*; “stupid” and “foolish, dry” written in Mary Brunton’s *Self-Control*; a “Thank God” in Hannah More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*; a passage cut out of Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer*; an edited sermon of Hugh Blair’s, with numbers in the margin, marking the time to recite it. Many Austens had access to Edward Austen Knight’s library at Godmersham, which forms the core of the archival collection at Chawton—so it is not always clear who

is writing. But it does seem clear that the Austens were reading with pen or pencil in hand, ready to write.

My stay at Chawton developed rhythms—working in the archives during the day, talking with the wonderful staff at the Library and the Museum, and dining with the Chawton Library fellows at night. But there were events and journeys, too. I helped with the annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society of the UK (where JASNA got a great shout out!), and heard Howard Jacobson speak of Austen’s passion, humor, and craft. I attended a conference on Actresses as Authors at the Library;

gave a talk on my research at the Museum; worked in the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester and visited Austen’s grave in the Cathedral; and toured the Austen Centre in Bath, and walked the streets made famous in *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. And there were kindnesses that

I won’t forget. After learning that I had never been to Steventon, Maureen Stiller, the Secretary of the UK Society, took me there—and to Ashe, Deane, and Portsmouth. At Steventon, church volunteer Joyce Bown hosted a delightful lunch, with good company and good cheer. Elizabeth Proudman, a member of the UK Executive Committee, excited that I was researching Anna Lefroy, arranged a lunch for me in Winchester with Helen Lefroy, a great great great niece of Anna, who described Chawton in the 1930s.

My time in Chawton reaffirmed my affection for Janeites—intelligent, generous, and fun, much like the author who inspires them. As an Austen scholar, my stay was very produc-

tive—my notes will keep me busy as I work through ideas about Austen, reading, writing, and cultural circulation. If books are conversations captured in print, then finding and reading the marginalia at Chawton showed me a new way into the conversation of Austen’s world. ✱

