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‘Thanks for Fanning’: Online Austen Fan Fiction

Abstract: This chapter traverses the discursive space mapped and staked out by the dedicated Austen fan site, the Republic of Pemberley, and its offshoot, the Derbyshire Writers’ Guild. It pays attention to the ways in which these online spaces evoke material and ‘real world’ places, generating a sense of civic municipality as well as literary community. Drawing on the insights of Library and Computer Studies, this chapter takes up the linguistic clues set up in the nomenclature used at these sites and reads their fan fiction collections in relation to the practices and traditions of the bricks-and-mortar library and its physical archive. It goes on to offer close readings of a number of Persuasion-based stories from the Bits of Ivory archive at the Republic of Pemberley and the Fantasia Gallery at the Derbyshire Writers’ Guild.

Persuasion begins with a book, but this chapter will start with two (sets of) folders. One is on the desktop of my computer, and contains a series of sub-folders, arranged under the names of websites, types of fiction and the titles of Austen novels. In this digital repository – replete with references that tellingly invoke their ‘real life’ counterparts of desks, folders and documents – I store online fan fiction in portable document format (PDF), the platform that has enabled our shared confidence in a ‘high fidelity exchange of documents’, in which ‘a document sent here will appear the same there and vice versa, and that it may be displayed equally on screen and on paper.’ 1 The second nest of folders was encountered by Deborah Yaffe in her journeys amongst the Janeites of America. Debbie McNeil, an avid reader of online Pride and Prejudice fan fiction, ‘store[s] her favorite unpublished fan fiction – 140 stories, whittled down from more than 200 – in twenty-five loose-leaf binders, which she [keeps] in a closet.’ 2 As these introductory images of document management suggest, this chapter explores online Austen fan fiction in the context of its curated electronic (and print) provenance as well as its literary milieu. It follows Abigail Derecho’s influential application of Derridean notions of the archontic as ‘ever expanding and never completely closed’ to fan fiction, 3 but also extends this model, by considering how its texts are stored, organised, encountered, extracted and read in terms of the physical archive. In other words, this section explores how online Austen fan fiction is both archontic and archived, text and collections of text.

While physical archives are located in geographical spaces and material places – in cities, streets, buildings, compacta, shelves, boxes and folders – the point of entry and encounter for collections of fan fiction is often a list of links on a website. For the two dedicated Austen host sites with which this chapter is primarily concerned, however, the physical world beyond the screen and keyboard, with its print and paper culture, is a continual referent and an organising principle. Both the Republic of Pemberley [http://www.pemberley.com] and the dedicated Austen fan fiction site, The Derbyshire Writers’ Guild [http://www.dwiggie.com], complicate the virtual nature of their fannish offerings by presenting themselves in terms of physical places of gathering and community. The Derbyshire Writers’ Guild, also known as Dwiggie (and its devotees as ‘Dwiggies’), divides its discursive space between, among others, Epilogue Abbey (‘Archive of stories that take place in the same time period as Jane Austen’s novels and stay relatively true to her work’), Fantasia Gallery (‘Modern stories, time-shifted stories, stories with fanciful elements,