Introduction:
Jane Austen’s Legacy

In 2017, a wide-eyed, youthful image of Jane Austen is to appear on the reverse of all newly-minted, Bank of England £10 banknotes. It is an appropriate gesture, as no one, except perhaps the Queen on the other side of the banknote, is more quintessentially English. The mere mention of Jane Austen’s name conjures up images of Georgian manor houses, such as Godsmersham, Austen’s brother’s estate in Kent, which will also feature on the new banknote. The banknote’s depiction of the author’s world is calm and prosperous, a safe haven unaltered by time, war, and economic upheaval, exactly the way the Bank’s Board of Directors would like the public to think of their

Figure I.1  Publisher John Murray misspelled Jane Austen’s name when he sent her a modest royalties payment for *Emma* in 1816
*Source:* Image courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

S. Craig, *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation*
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financial institution – solid as the Bank of England. The decision to feature Jane Austen on the currency of the realm could not have been better timed nor the denomination more aptly chosen.

The banknote will make its debut exactly 200 years after Jane Austen’s death in 1817, but Austen neither lived nor died in a manor house such as the one depicted on the new £10 note. She could not afford to. Although she visited such places as a guest, Austen lived in rented houses and rented rooms and was repeatedly uprooted as her father’s and then her widowed mother’s incomes dwindled. Her final home was Chawton Cottage, a grace-and-favor brick house on her brother’s estate in Hampshire. Jane Austen never enjoyed the security of a comfortable income, the £2,000 to £10,000 a year she routinely doled out to her male characters.

Jane Austen optimistically estimated her father’s income to be “very nearly six hundred a year” (Letters 9 January 1801), but, as Deirdre Le Faye reminds us in Jane Austen: A Family Record, “Mr. Austen’s income from his parishes and the sale of his farm produce fluctuated unpredictably” depending on the harvest of his crops and the price of livestock (112). Contemporary sources estimated that an income of £600 was sufficient to comfortably maintain a single woman living a gentry lifestyle, as long as she was already provided with a house and “if she was careful” (Rizzo 35). It was not enough to maintain a carriage. The widowed Mrs. Austen supported herself and her two daughters with an income of £450 a year, although, after the bank crashes of 1815, the amount was reduced to £350. As an adult, Austen was given an annual £20 allowance by her parents, paid to her in quarterly £5 installments. Jane Austen sold her first copyright to a publisher for £10. Oh, the irony.

Georgian England and Jane Austen’s life were much more economically and politically unstable than the reverse of the Bank of England’s new £10 note indicates. She lived through recessions, depressions, bank failures, and political and economic scandals that make ours look tame by comparison. It is hardly surprising then that all of Austen’s books engage in the ongoing debate about the national economy and reflect the political and economic tensions of the year or years when each book was written. Austen’s modern readers know that England survived the Napoleonic Wars and all of the political and economic upheaval that they caused, but Austen and her original reading public did not have that assurance. Therefore,