

Young Jane's Joke: "Sir Charles Grandison"

- the reduced version

Susie Grandfield, Public Relations Officer at Chawton House Library, tells the story of a recent re-discovery.

A rare manuscript of *Sir Charles Grandison* by Jane Austen which is now owned by Chawton House Library, was on display recently. It was accompanied by a fascinating lecture by the Chairman of the Jane Austen Society, Brian Southam, who has published widely on Jane Austen's novels. He has recently edited and transcribed the manuscript, having officially authenticated it as Jane Austen's work after its re-discovery.

The manuscript is Jane Austen's only surviving attempt to write a play of any length; a light-hearted dramatisation of some scenes from her favourite author Samuel Richardson's novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, and consists of 52 small pages in her own hand. The essence of the joke in the play is the reduction of a mammoth novel of seven long volumes to a miniature play of five short acts, a comedy of abridgement.

Within one branch of the Austen family – the

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descendants of Jane's eldest brother, James – the play was common knowledge, but although the handwriting was unmistakably Jane Austen's, according to family tradition the play was not in fact by her. It was said to be the work of her favourite niece Jane Anna Elizabeth Austen, James's eldest child, born in 1793 and who married Benjamin Lefroy in 1814. Her mother died when she was only two and from then on she spent a great deal of her time as a young child with her aunts Jane and Cassandra. Little Anna attached herself to her Aunt Jane and was allowed into her inner sanctum, the dressing-room where she wrote in strict privacy.

Brian Southam disproved the tradition that the play was dictated by Anna as some of the early scenes appear to have been written before Anna was born, and it would seem to have been completed when she was, at most, seven years old. In all probability Jane Austen started the play as a brief skit in the early 1790s, when she was in her mid teens, then laid it aside, and when she eventually took it up again showed it to her little niece, and acted upon the suggestions she made. From this grew up the story that Anna was the author of the work and her Aunt Jane only her amanuensis. Though full of light-heartedness and absurdity, it bears the stamp of an adult mind and could not have been composed by such a young child.

Above: Anna Austen: Literary, mercurial and dear to Aunt Jane's heart, but not so precocious as to be able to write this play at the age of seven as the earlier family tradition maintained.



By permission of the Jane Austen Memorial Trust

Charles Grandison



Above: Chawton House as seen from the drive

The manuscript remained in the possession of the Austen family since the time of her death in 1817 and was handed down from generation to generation, a precious memento of Aunt Jane. It was not shown to Dr. R.W. Chapman when he was editing the Austen papers in the 1920s and 1930s. Miss Louie Lefroy and her sister, Isabel, descendents of Anna, gave Dr. Chapman a great deal of help and access to their share of the family papers at that time but their sister, Jessie, who had the Grandison manuscript, lived separately in Winchester and did not seek his advice.

Brian Southam, who transcribed and edited *Sir Charles Grandison* for publication in 1980, believes that no one outside the family, apart from the auctioneers and officials at the British Library, saw the manuscript until 1977. In that year, he was asked to authenticate it and then to edit it by David Astor, the purchaser, who produced a private press edition and then Oxford published it. It was believed to have been sold

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after his death.

In the early 1990s, Sandy Lerner, an American businesswoman, found and bought the manuscript from an antiquarian bookshop in San Francisco intending to add it to her collection of over 6,000 volumes of books written by early English women writers. A passionate admirer of the works of Jane Austen, she had recently set up a charity to purchase a 125-year lease on the Chawton Estate in Hampshire, the Elizabethan manor house that had belonged to Jane Austen’s brother, Edward Austen Knight, and which in recent years had fallen into a very bad state of disrepair.

The house, gardens and parkland, which would have been frequently visited by Jane, have undergone ten years of sensitive restoration to establish a Library and Centre for the study of early English women’s writing from 1600-1830 and Sandy Lerner’s unique collection can now be read and studied in the same environment in which they were written. In addition the Knight family library of over 2,000 volumes is on loan to Chawton House Library. Jane Austen’s manuscript of *Sir Charles Grandison* will be on display at special events but for conservation and security reasons it is not permanently on show. 📖

NOTE:

The information regarding *Sir Charles Grandison* is taken from Brian Southam’s book published by Oxford University Press in 1980.

Chawton House Library and Study Centre is open for use by members of the public, by appointment.

First time visitors will need to apply for reader’s pass from the Librarian, Helen Scott.

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