

New Light on Jane Austen’s Great-Grandmother: A Complete Transcript of Elizabeth Weller’s *Memorandum* and Account Book and Seven Newly Found Letters: Evaluation

By **Azar Hussain**

Azar Hussain (email: azarmhussain@gmail.com) is an independent researcher based in London. His research focuses on the eighteenth century and specifically Jane Austen. His work has appeared in *Notes & Queries*, *Persuasions*, *Persuasions On-Line*, and the Jane Austen Society *Annual Report*.

Evaluation

I am very conscious that the transcripts I have presented contain a great deal of information that will require careful and detailed interpretation, but I would like to conclude by concentrating on four specific questions with a particular focus on reviewing how Elizabeth Weller’s story has been presented to date.

1. Was John Austen III’s will unfair?

The secondary literature has been highly critical of John III’s will. Tomalin notes: “it showed open hostility to his daughter-in-law. Her eldest son was magnificently provided for as heir to the estate, while the other six were left almost penniless” (13). Spence goes further, stating, “The will is a cold, clever document. It is carefully, subtly, even cunningly constructed” (*Becoming* 3). Elizabeth’s *Memorandum* records her disappointment, even shock, on hearing its contents: “ffor as to my Self I were never mention’d, unless as it seem’d necessitated to make me appear as no ffriend, nay rather an enemy to ye family” (5:9–10).

But what exactly did John III's will say? A transcript can be found in *A Century of Wills from Jane Austen's Family 1705–1806*, published by the Jane Austen Society of Australia and edited by Jon Spence. Since this book can be hard to find, I have, for the reader's convenience, made a new transcript. (See Appendix 6.)¹

John III left bequests to his many grandchildren, mentioned by name. John Austen III had at least two sons and three daughters, Ellen, Jane, and Anne. Ellen Austen married Edward Osborn on 8 December 1687, but died soon after and was buried on 19 April 1688. (We will return to Edward Osborn.) Jane married Stephen Stringer on 11 May 1680, and Anne married John Holman on 7 November 1688 (*Pedigree of Austen* 3). These latter two men were John III's executors and are referred to by Elizabeth as "Brother Holman" and "Brother Stringer." John and Anne Holman had at least nine daughters and a son (see Appendix 2), but because the other children were born after his death in the summer of 1705, John III only mentions four of the daughters and the son.² Stephen and Jane Stringer had at least five daughters, all mentioned in John III's will.³ Their daughter Mary would marry her cousin Elizabeth's eldest son, John V (see Appendix 3). Elizabeth herself had seven children, one daughter and six sons (including, as we know, Jane Austen's grandfather), all of whom were mentioned in John III's will. This gives us a total of seventeen grandchildren named by John III. The table below summarizes what each was left, excluding John V, the chief inheritor.

¹ A precis can also be found in Le Faye's *Chronology* (6).

² See Hasted (1782 ed., 2: 387) for an outline of the Austen pedigree, including the details above: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_History_and_Topographical_Survey_of/de09fMymE8AC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA387&printsec=frontcover.

³ For details of the Stringer children, see Hasted (1798 ed., 7: 68): https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_History_and_Topographical_Survey_of/ud5CAOAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA68&printsec=frontcover. Hasted does not here mention the fifth daughter, Mary, who would marry her cousin, John V, but this is referenced in the previous quote from Hasted (i.e., 1782, II:387). As Hasted points out, one of Jane Stringer's daughters was Hannah, who married William Monk. Their daughter, Jane Monk, married Thomas Brodnax/May/Knight, father of the Thomas Knight who adopted Edward Austen, the novelist's brother. Thomas Knight and Edward Austen were therefore third cousins, while Edward's father, George Austen, was Thomas Brodnax/May/Knight's second cousin (*Chronology* 739).

No.	Recipient	Bequest
1	Jane Stringer	£100
2	Hannah Stringer	£100
3	Elizabeth Stringer	£100
4	Ann Stringer	£100
5	Mary Stringer	£100
6	Ann Holman	£100
7	Sarah Holman	£100
8	Mary Holman	£100
9	Frances Holman	£100
10	John Holman	£200
11	Elizabeth Austen	£400
12	Francis Austen	£40 + £200
13	Thomas Austen	£40 + £200
14	William Austen	£40 + £200
15	Robert Austen	£40 + £200
16	Stephen Austen	£40 + £200

Elizabeth’s daughter, another Elizabeth (hereafter named Betty to distinguish her from her mother), received £400, significantly more than her cousins—a fact partially acknowledged by Elizabeth, yet she states that “as to my daughter tho’ her portion seem’d more Large, yet I think there was ye most unnatural affection Shew’d thats possible to Conceive,” which seems an odd statement. Indeed, Elizabeth goes further, claiming that John III “had cutt her off from any prospect of future hopes.” Elizabeth records her shock at her eldest son’s being named John III’s ultimate successor, while also stating that her other children were “unnaturally dealt with’ being left ‘as servants.” Similarly, Elizabeth says of her younger sons, “I think they have Little reason to Say they have any Gift from their Grandfather” (5:

14–22). In comparison with their cousins, however, it seems the Austens didn't do too badly.

John Austen III has been criticized for focusing his attention and concentrating his wealth on his eldest grandson, inevitably at the expense of his younger grandchildren. But it is important to view this decision in the context of the time as opposed to that of our own. Spence has stated that “the old man [John Austen III] seems to have been guided by nothing except the rule of primogeniture: males first and in order of seniority” (*Wills* 5). As Ballard has pointed out, however, leaving the estate to the eldest son was perfectly normal, indeed necessary, to ensure its survival: “It would seem that Elizabeth’s arguments for more equal treatment between the children have harmonized so well with modern notions of equality and fair play that they have beguiled recent commentators into supposing that this was literally the norm and could be afforded by owners of small landed estates” (“Tales” 79). Subsequent generations would follow John III’s example; indeed, Elizabeth’s own son, Francis II, left almost all his considerable wealth to his eldest son, Francis Motley Austen (1747–1815). As Bryan Keith-Lucas has pointed out, “Francis Austen was undoubtedly generous to his nephew in his lifetime, though there was some disappointment when his will left nearly everything to his eldest son, Francis Motley Austen, ignoring his more needy nephews and nieces” (98). Indeed, Francis II’s adherence to primogeniture had direct implications for Jane Austen’s own father, as her brother Henry relates:

Sackville [Francis II’s second son] was destined for the Church—the living of Wickham becoming vacant before he was old enough to take it, it was given *ad interim* to the Rev. Henry Austen [son of Francis II’s brother, Thomas 1699–1772] first Cousin to my Father; the latter [i.e. George Austen] would have had it if his Aunt the real patroness had been alive (for he was a great favorite with her & had the promise for it) but she being dead his uncle Frank, acting for his step-daughter a minor (Miss Lennard), chose to give it *pro tempore* to his other nephew Henry; not that he preferred him but because he was the son of an older Brother than my Father. Primogeniture, with all its ramifications, was more in those days than since the Reform Bill. (Austen-Leigh, *Austen Papers* 19)

Despite Henry’s final qualification, we see that well into the nineteenth century, Austen’s brother Edward (1767–1852) repeated the pattern. During his life, his eldest son, another Edward (1794–1879), received a significant allowance of £800 per annum, while his younger brothers received substantially less (Slothouber 23). Edward II inherited both

Chawton House and Godmersham on his father's death in 1852 and proceeded to sell Godmersham, much to the distress of his siblings. Yet this sale was his prerogative as the eldest son; although his siblings may have felt aggrieved, there was no question that it was his right to do as he pleased.⁴

Yet primogeniture cannot explain away everything in John III's will that would strike a modern reader as inequitable. It is worth pausing over a condition in John IV's will that states, "And my will and mind further is that my said loveing wife shall have the education and bringing up of my said children so long as she continues my Widdow and not longer." John IV's condition should be contrasted with John III's will, which goes further:

And in case the Mother of such eldest Grand Son or any other person who shall have right of guardianship of him shall obstruct refuse or denye his being educated or brought up by my said Sons in Law as beforementioned Then in such case only I give and bequeath the Summe of two thousand pounds parcell of such my Eldest Grand Son Austens portion unto my Sons in Law M^r Stephen Stringer and M^r John Holman.

In other words, if Elizabeth attempts to exercise her right of guardianship over her eldest son or challenge the decision of her brothers-in-law, John V's uncles, her son will lose two thousand pounds of his property to his uncles. This was a significant sum and no doubt prevented Elizabeth from being actively involved in her son's upbringing. This condition also explains Spence's conclusion that the will "hints that [John III] saw his daughter-in-law as his enemy" (5).

It has been said that one consequence of John III's will was that his grandson, John V, was estranged from his family and had little, if any, interest in them. Le Faye maintains that "the breach in the family caused by the inequality of John III's Will was never mended, and the senior Broadford line made no attempt to help or keep in touch with the younger Austen branches" (*Family Record* 2). Similarly, Tomalin states, "The eldest son was brought up quite separately by his aunts and uncles, sent to Cambridge, and came into his grandfather's estates; he showed no disposition to befriend his less fortunate brothers"

⁴ For a detailed review of Edward II's life and the lives of his siblings, as well as the sale of Godmersham, see Jones. For more on the hard lot of younger sons of the gentry in general, see Muir.

(13–14). Yet Ballard questions the extent to which John V was oblivious of his family. For example, John V paid his sister Betty’s wedding portion in 1722 (“Tales” 76),⁵ and, as appears in the accounts I have transcribed, he claimed to have covered some expenses for his brothers in 1719. On John V’s death, Francis II assumed guardianship for his children, which might explain why John VI (1725–1807),⁶ one of those children, subsequently left his fortune to Francis II’s grandson. John V was also in touch with his mother’s family, the Wellers. He was trustee for the estate of his grandfather Thomas Weller for an interim period before the residue was distributed between his Weller uncles, the legatees (Ballard, “Tales” 76–77).⁷

John V’s will, made on 11 July 1728, a month before his thirty-second birthday, also complicates the traditional narrative.⁸ He states he is of “sound and disposing mind,” saying nothing about his bodily health, although he would die later that year and was buried on 11 September 1728 (*Chronology* 12). Though he includes the contingency of his wife being pregnant at the time of his death, he passes his property on to his brother Francis.

And if it shall happen that if
my said son shall die before he shall attaine the Age of one and twenty
years without having any issue of his Body lawfully begotten And in
case my said wife shall not be with child at the time of my death of
any son or sons then my will and mind is that the said mannors
messuages lands tenements and hereditaments herein before devised
to my said son shall goe and I doe hereby devise the same unto my said
brother ffrancis Austen and his heirs upon condition they he the said ffrancis
Austen and his heirs shall and doe pay or cause to be paid unto my said
daughters Jane and Elizabeth or to the survivor of them the sume of two
thousand pounds of lawfull money of Great Britain within six months
after the death of my said son John.

⁵ Based on this date, Tomalin appears to be mistaken in saying that Elizabeth “saw her daughter married” (13). The 1913 *Life and Letters* also contains this apparent error (3).

⁶ John VI’s year of birth has been given as 1726 (Le Faye, *Chronology* 728), but Ballard states that he was christened on 20 May 1725 (91 n.9)

⁷ Further information on John V and John VI can be found in Ballard’s “The Austens’ Residence in Sevenoaks.”

⁸ PROB-11-628-169. For a summary, see https://www.thekeep.info/collections/getrecord/GB179_SAS-HA_66_551.

John V also made Francis II one of his three executors. When taken together, the evidence above throws some doubt on the traditional narrative that John V's separation from his family caused a lasting breach and that he subsequently had little to do with them.

2. Who were John IV's creditors?

Elizabeth's *Memorandum* is especially valuable in providing a detailed breakdown of her husband's creditors. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate their identities in detail and the reasons why John IV would have been in their debt, but two names deserve immediate consideration. The first of these is "Bro: Robert," who is due £5 8s 11d (10:17). Could this entry refer to Robert Weller himself? If so, why would he be one of his brother-in-law's creditors? Was he perhaps attempting to help John IV manage his debt without Elizabeth's knowledge? As we will see below, at least two other creditors were family members. It seems odd that Elizabeth was unaware that various members of the family had lent her husband money. John IV has been consistently condemned for his fecklessness and irresponsibility. Le Faye's statement in the *Family Record* is typical: "This younger John seems to have been a careless, easy-going man, who thought frugality unnecessary, as he would succeed to the estate on his father's death" (2). This judgment may well have been true, but perhaps John IV deserves the benefit of the doubt.

The second creditor worthy of attention is John Osborne, who, Elizabeth notes in her *Memorandum*, was owed the significant sum of £57 10s (10:19). In Letter 2, dated 8 January 1706, Elizabeth describes him as the "chief creditor." He is also mentioned in Letter 6, dated 3 February 1707, where Elizabeth states that she has sealed a bond for £50 to him. In Letter 2 Elizabeth also refers to "my Brother Osborn," appearing to indicate Edward Osborn, the husband of John IV's sister Ellen, who died young. Elizabeth's letter suggests that John Osborne, the "chief creditor," is Edward's nephew, but it is unclear why John IV would be so indebted to his brother-in-law's nephew. Hasted mentions a John Osborne who lived in "Augustpitts" in the parish of Horsmonden,⁹ and in his will John III left £10 to a John Osbourne of Horsmonden, clothier. August Pitts is also mentioned in the will of John V. In RAAL's undated typescript of the Weller manuscript, there is a sentence that does not appear in *Austen Papers*, a list of family members among John IV's creditors: "Among the list of her husband's creditors are 'Cosen Geo: Lake, Bro. Robert, Bro. Stringer, and Jo. Osborn'" (9). We know RAAL was aware of the Osborn connection, as he mentions the marriage of Ellen Austen to Edward Osborn in his *Pedigree* (3); the marriage

⁹ In the first edition of his *History*, Hasted mentioned Osborne in 2: 387; he appears again in the second edition (5: 318).

is also mentioned in RAAL's various genealogical notes and family charts now kept at the Hampshire Record Office, but with no further details.¹⁰ Perhaps RAAL was unable to discover any more about this connection with John IV and so did not include it in his transcript in *Austen Papers*. Regardless, further research into the identity of John Osborn and his connection with John IV would be much welcome.¹¹

3. How accurate are the current representations of Elizabeth Weller?

As we've seen, the biographical tradition presents Elizabeth Weller as heroic, saving her family singlehandedly. Two points here deserve attention. The first is that Elizabeth's letters to her father transcribed by Robert Weller clearly show that her father was actively engaged on her behalf. Indeed, Letter 6 (3 February 1707) shows that Thomas Weller visited in person, presumably to negotiate with the executors and others, and Elizabeth is clearly concerned for his health on account of the journey from Tonbridge and her father's age. This involvement makes perfect sense, since Thomas Weller was himself a lawyer and, like any father, would be keen to protect his daughter's interests. In Letter 4 Elizabeth mentions a need for someone "to write" and alludes to "Bro. Harry," perhaps her older brother Henry Weller (1667–1714). Ballard points out that Thomas Weller, Elizabeth's father, had a brother Henry, Elizabeth's uncle, who bequeathed £400 to be shared equally between the younger children of John IV and Elizabeth (although this legacy came too late to help Elizabeth, as her uncle died in 1721) ("Tales" 91 n4).

Through her ingenuity and foresight, Elizabeth provided her sons with a good education that gave them the opportunity to make their way in the world. But it is important to note that it is highly likely that she received help in this from various members of her family. Elizabeth's son Francis II was apprenticed in 1714 to the attorney George Tilden of Clement's Inn. George's wife, Rose, was the sister of Daniel Tilden, who married Elizabeth's sister Mary Weller on May 13, 1697 (Ballard and Cresswell 75–76). It seems likely that it was through these family connections that Francis's clerkship was secured. Something similar appears to have happened in the case of another son, Jane Austen's grandfather, William, who was apprenticed to William Ellis of Woolwich, surgeon to the Prince of Wales's household and an intimate friend of Robert Weller. Ballard notes, "Just as George [Austen] was helped on his way by his uncle Francis, Robert Weller had

¹⁰ 23M93/97/5/4, 23M93/97/5/5.

¹¹ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Gordon Ward also mentions a John Osborn of Sevenoaks (200). Jane Austen herself mentions a "M^r & M^{rs} Osborne" in her letters (6–7 November 1813).

probably assumed a comparable position of guidance and authority in loco parentis in relation to William Austen” (“Tales” 74).

A final point that emphasizes the many supportive connections between these Kentish families and Austen’s own is that Elizabeth and Robert’s younger brother Edward Weller (1678–1762) married Ann Hooper (1687–1741), the sister of George Hooper (1691–1752), who would marry Elizabeth’s daughter, Betty. Jane Austen’s father, George Austen, would live with his aunt and uncle Hooper after being orphaned. Thus, Tomalin’s statement that “father, husband, father-in-law and brothers-in-law had all failed her and her children, and she had saved them single-handed” (14) seems to require some qualification, given that various members of the family did in fact rally round to help Elizabeth and her children.¹²

The second point relates to the character of Elizabeth herself. Elizabeth describes her own reaction on learning of her daughter’s portion: “nay I will own I did not forbear Saying, ‘Shure my ffather takes her for a bastard!’ when I heard how he had cutt her off from any prospect of future hopes” (5: 17–20). These words were perhaps not well chosen, and Elizabeth’s first letter to her father suggests that she was on bad terms with her father-in-law even before her husband died. It can certainly be argued that Elizabeth was a strong and outspoken woman, a trait that violated the conventions of her time, and that she suffered for it accordingly. But it may also be the case that Elizabeth had more in common with Marianne Dashwood than Elinor, and perhaps this volatility further complicated her dealings with her executors and in-laws.

As we have seen, however, John III’s will prevented Elizabeth from having direct influence on her sons’ education and upbringing—which must have been a new source of grief to Elizabeth, who had already lost her husband and who would also lose her home. Perhaps there were faults on both sides. Such friction between families, especially over money and possessions, was not new at the time and is sadly still all too common an occurrence today.

¹² It is also worth remembering that, according to Henry Austen, when Francis II set up as a lawyer in Sevenoaks, he did so with “£800 and a bundle of pens” (*Austen Papers* 16). It isn’t clear where the sum came from, but it would have been a significant amount. Perhaps this money too came from one of his uncles.



John Austen III (1629–1705), Elizabeth Weller's father-in-law.

© Jane Austen's House



Francis Austen II (1698–1791), Elizabeth's second son and grandson of John Austen III.

© Sheffield Museums Trust

4. How much of this history did Jane Austen know?

In his biography of Austen, David Nokes recounts George Austen's rereading the well-worn pages of Elizabeth's *Memorandum*, but it is not clear whether this narrative has basis in fact or is a form of poetic license (Nokes 16–18). Clare Graham states, "This whole story was of course well known to Jane Austen and is surely the origin of the scene in *Sense and Sensibility* when Fanny Dashwood so skilfully talks her husband John out of honouring the promises made at his dying father's bedside to ensure that his stepmother and half-sisters would be well looked after financially" (56, emphasis added). This connection to *Sense and Sensibility* may echo the 1913 *Life and Letters*, as it is also expressed there (2 n.1); the suggestion is also made in Park Honan's biography of Austen (12). We do know that Austen visited her great-uncle Francis II at his home in the Red House in Sevenoaks in 1788. Would the *Memorandum* have been displayed to the guests from Hampshire? Would the story of John III's callous treatment of his daughter-in-law have been recounted? Although possible, it seems improbable: Ballard notes that "it seems unlikely that her written account was circulated beyond the immediate families of Old Francis and his uncle Robert Weller" ("Tales" 71).

Another potential source for Jane Austen's knowledge of Elizabeth Weller's history is Edward Hasted's *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*. This was an important work, and its subscribers include a number of individuals closely connected with the Austens: both Thomas Knight the elder (1701–81) and younger (1735–94); George Austen's second cousin George Children (1742–1818); Edward Austen's father-in-law, Sir Brook Bridges (1733–91); Madam Lefroy's husband, the Reverend Mr. Lefroy of Compton (1745–1806); Mary Lennard (1750–1833), the daughter of Austen's godmother Jane Austen; and Francis Austen, Mary Lennard's stepfather and Jane Austen's great-uncle.¹³ As noted above, Hasted documented Austen's ancestry with his customary painstaking detail. But Hasted did not just focus on the past. He mentioned not only Austen's brother Edward on a number of occasions as proprietor of Godmersham, but also their father, "the Rev. George Austen, rector of Steventon, in Hampshire" (2nd ed., 7: 373).¹⁴ It is no surprise that both editions of Hasted can be found in the 1818 catalogue of the Godmersham library.¹⁵ Could Austen's interest in her family have been piqued while turning over the leaves of Hasted? Did it prompt her to ask questions about her great-grandparents? We cannot know, but it remains an intriguing possibility.¹⁶

One thing we do know is that on the death of the long-lived John VI, Elizabeth's grandson, Austen noted in a letter of 20–22 February, 1807: "We have at last heard something of M^r Austen's Will. It is beleived at Tunbridge that he has left everything after the death of his widow to M^r M^y Austen's 3^d son John; & as the said John was the only one of the Family who attended the Funeral, it seems likely to be true.—Such ill-gotten Wealth can never prosper!" Francis Motley Austen's third son, John Austen VII (1777–1851), was John VI's first cousin once removed; his inheritance would have included the properties of Broadford

¹³ Note that this list is not exhaustive. The subscribers from the first volume of the first edition of 1778 can be seen here:

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_History_and_Topographical_Survey_of/dKIOAOAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PR9&printsec=frontcover

¹⁴ Edward is mistakenly identified as "the eldest son": https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_History_and_Topographical_Survey_of/ud5CAOAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA373&printsec=frontcover

¹⁵ Available online: <https://www.readingwithausten.com/catalogue.html>.

¹⁶ Hasted frequently mentions court leets and court barons in his *History*. Could this source be where Austen picked up these phrases that she uses in *Mansfield Park* in connection with Sotherton (96, 660 n.5)?

and Grovehurst.¹⁷ John VI was George Austen's first cousin, and so Jane Austen would also have been his first cousin once removed. John VI died on Monday, 26 January 1807, at Broadford (*Chronology* 336), and Austen's letter is dated 20–22 February from Southampton, just under four weeks later—making her “at last” seem a bit odd. Was Austen eagerly anticipating the news? Were her family? Who would have informed them of it?¹⁸

There are a range of explanations. Dirk Fitzhugh notes that “Jane may have thought that John Austen III should have made a more equitable distribution of his assets in 1705, and that in 1807 John Austen VI should certainly have done so” (96–97). Keith-Lucas has suggested, however, that Austen was referring “to the rapidly acquired wealth of Francis and Francis Motley Austen, rather than to the Horsmonden property,” adding in a footnote: “The sentence is ambiguous, but there is no apparent reason why she should refer to the Horsmonden property as ‘ill-gotten’; it had been passed down in the family since the reign of James I” (98). Ballard suggests that Austen was referring to the legacy that Francis Motley Austen received from his godmother, Lady Falkland, said to be worth £100,000 (“Tales” 78). Austen's meaning is now difficult to recover, but there may well be some truth to the notion that Austen knew something of Elizabeth's side of the story, was aware of how John VI's wealth had passed down to him, and thought it unfair. A letter from Austen's brother Henry to his nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh refers to John VII in a somewhat acerbic tone: “it is no scandal to say that my aforesaid relations of West Kent never raised any alarming fears of their setting even the Medway on fire; and certainly the Rev. John Austen will bring no such disgrace on his family” (Austen-Leigh, *Austen Papers* 18). Even years later, the division of the spoils still rankled, at least with certain members of the Austen family.

Given these circumstances, it is hard not to recall the the narrator's summary in *Sense and Sensibility*: “The old Gentleman died; his will was read, and like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure” (4). Ironically, Austen herself was to suffer a similar shock in 1817 when learning of her uncle James Leigh-Perrot's decision to leave all his property to his wife for her lifetime (Le Faye, *Family Record* 246). Once again,

¹⁷ John VII's son, John Francis Austen VIII (1817–93), would inherit the substantial estate of Kippington after the death of his uncle Thomas in 1859, but he would have no sons. See Fitzhugh.

¹⁸ Ballard suggests that the informant was Harriet, daughter of the Rev. Henry Austen (69).

considerable wealth was passed on to those who were hardly in need of it, while less well-off relations appeared to be overlooked. The consequence of Leigh-Perrot's will may well have been very serious indeed. On 6 April 1817, just over three months before her death, Austen wrote, "A few days ago my complaint appeared removed, but I am ashamed to say that the shock of my Uncle's Will brought on a relapse, & I was so ill on Friday & thought myself so likely to be worse that I could not but press for Cassandra's returning."

I would like to conclude with two points. First, I would like to stress that I am in no way trying to detract from Elizabeth Weller's reputation or whitewash John Austen III's character. Elizabeth was clearly a brave and determined woman, and there is indeed a strong argument that Jane Austen the novelist would not have come into being without her. Elizabeth's life, as presented in the literature, is an inspiring one and makes for a good story, partly due to its clearly defined heroes and villains. But it is worth remembering that the truth is rarely so simple. The transcripts I have presented should at least make us pause for thought before unquestioningly accepting the standard account of her life and circumstances.

I am also mindful that I have used these transcripts merely to make a small number of simple inferences. But I am conscious that the transcripts contain much material that will require the specialist knowledge of social, legal, and economic historians to be interpreted correctly and fully. Much work remains to be done, but I do hope that this publication will be a first step in reevaluating and reassessing what we know about Elizabeth Weller.