

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: The Open University		
Unit of Assessment: D27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Informing and enabling changes in exhibition practice on and offline in literary museums and archives		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 January 2000 - 31 December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Nicola Watson	Professor of English Literature	Sept 1999 to the present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013 - 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Watson's research has had an impact on creativity, culture and society. Specifically, its impact is evident in changes in the curatorial thinking and practice of literary museums across Europe, including how these museums design ways of engaging and inspiring new and diverse publics. This impact flows from a combination of Watson's personal interventions within individual organisations, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) and the Cowper and Newton Museum (CNM), and from her collaborative project Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE), which has introduced and modelled ways for curators to develop innovative online exhibition and offline public engagement practices.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>While literary tourism is a widespread cultural activity that makes a significant contribution to the UK economy, it has until recently been under-investigated and under-theorised. Watson's research excavates the neglected history of literary tourism as crucial to understanding the pleasures of reading, past, present and future. <i>The Literary Tourist</i> (2006) [O1] investigated when, why and how the idea and practice of going to places associated with authors and their works arose as a commercially and affectively significant phenomenon in Romantic-period Britain. Chapters deal with Poets' Corner, Shakespeare's birthplace, Burns's birthplace, Scott's Abbotsford, and places associated with children's literature. Watson developed these ideas in 3 subsequent research outputs: 'Shakespeare on the tourist trail' (2007) [O2], 'Afterword: 'Dear Shakespeare-land': investing in Stratford' (2012) [O3] and 'Gardening with Shakespeare' (2015) [O4]. These explore the ways in which readership, authorial celebrity, and the grounds of 'inspiration' were mutually configured in Europe and the USA through literary pilgrimage and types of onsite commemoration which culminated in the writer's house museum. <i>The Author's Effects</i> (2020) [O5] investigated the emergence of the writer's house museum as an essentially Romantic cultural formation through a new methodology -- writing microbiographies of relics, animals, clothing, desks, chairs, personal possessions, domestic artefacts, follies, houses, and gardens pertaining to authors from the late eighteenth century to the present. These microbiographies narrate how affect came to be invested in these objects, and how their affective meanings have changed and developed over time. Throughout this body of work, Shakespeare serves as a crucial test case, as Watson details the fabrication of Shakespeare memorabilia (e.g. 'Shakespeare's chair') and meaningful sites (e.g. Shakespeare's home and garden at New Place).</p> <p>Watson is PI of DREAMing Romantic Europe (AHRC-funded 2018-2020), a pioneering collaboration drawing on the expertise of some 100 scholars and the collections of 47 museums to date to build RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition) [O6]. Watson's research has informed and directed both the content and the format of RÊVE. The project's driving interest in affect derives from <i>The Literary Tourist</i> [O1], and the novel format (microbiographies of objects organized into comparative collections) derives from <i>The Author's Effects</i> [O2]. RÊVE is an online exhibition of iconic trans-European Romantic objects (conceived broadly as celebrated landscapes, buildings and artefacts c. 1780-1860, accompanied by contemporary creative responses to some of them). It is a collaborative research resource designed to investigate how</p>		

objects served as media that carried Romantic structures of feeling across Europe. Through the creation of RÊVE, Watson has brought scholars, curators and archivists together to prompt new lines of thinking and research, to bring inaccessible or little-known items and collections into public view, and to find new ways of engaging the wider public on and offline. As of December 2020, Watson has commissioned and curated the showcasing of objects from 47 collections across 16 countries (Denmark, England, Scotland, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Iceland, USA, and Australia), and RÊVE now comprises close on 150 individual 'exhibits' (i.e. 150 images + 150,000 words) and 8 'collections' posted or in edit, all of which have been edited by Watson. Watson has in addition contributed 6 exhibits (6,000 words) and created 4 collections.

3. References to the research

- O1. Watson, N.J.** (2006) *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230584563>
- O2. Watson, N.J.** (2007) 'Shakespeare on the tourist trail' in R. Shaughnessy ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare in Popular Culture*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 199-226. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521844291.011>
- O3. Watson, N.J.** (2012) 'Afterword: 'Dear Shakespeare-land': investing in Stratford' in *Critical Survey* 24: 2, pp. 88-98. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2012.240207>
- O4. Watson, N.J.** (2015) 'Gardening with Shakespeare' in C. Calvo and C. Kahn eds. *Celebrating Shakespeare: Commemoration and Cultural Memory*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 301-329. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107337466.015>
- O5. Watson, N.J.** (2020) *The Author's Effects: On Writer's House Museums*. Oxford, New York: OUP. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198847571.001.0001>
- O6. RÊVE** (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition) (2017-20). <https://www.euromanticism.org>

All print research outputs were subject to blind peer review and have been certified as 2* or above by an independent external consultant who was a member of the REF 2014 panel for English Language and Literature.

4. Details of the impact

Watson's research has been changing on and offline exhibition and public engagement practices of literary museums and archives scattered across Europe. These are typically characterized by institutional insularity, a local or at best national focus and the treatment of objects as physical artefacts. The greatest challenge facing their curators is how best to bring old objects and spaces alive for new and diverse publics, given the very limited resources at their disposal. Watson's research into how reader-tourists invest affect in objects and places associated with authors has been taken up by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Cowper and Newton Museum. Her research methodology as expressed and extended by RÊVE has changed participating curators' understanding of how to interpret and display literary objects in an online environment. RÊVE has also changed and expanded curators' appreciation of how online exhibition can deliver new visibility to new publics at little cost, particularly pertinent in light of COVID-19. In sum, Watson's research project has trained curators in new ways of engaging with the public.

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT)

The impact of research outputs [O1] to [O4] is evidenced by two invitations extended by the SBT to Watson. On the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016 she was invited to contribute to two expert-practitioner workshops advising the SBT and the designer Tim O'Brien on a complete reinterpretation of the site of Shakespeare's long-vanished house, New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon. As O'Brien puts it, Watson provided "*knowledge of how a place can represent what a genius, who was for all time, has to offer for those, who have yet to know*" [C1]. Watson's advice on the imaginative centrality of the author's desk and chair to the literary tourist experience led to the installation of a sculpture of Shakespeare's desk and chair as an important part of the visitor experience at New Place: of the 314,723 visitors to the garden and house

between August 2016 and March 2019, up to 30 visitors a day from all over the world sat in 'Shakespeare's chair', occupying the imagined space of genius and so dramatising themselves as stakeholders within a common global cultural heritage [C1]. As a TripAdvisor review of 27 June 2019 puts it with satisfaction, "*there's a metal chair and desk for you to have your photo taken where he MIGHT have sat to write his plays*". In the wake of this project in 2018, the SBT also invited Watson to develop an exhibition as part of an experimental initiative designed to add value to its collections via online narrative. Watson created 'Shakespeare and Literary Pilgrimage' which she also presented at a Public Day for an audience of approximately 50 [C1].

Cowper and Newton Museum (CNM)

Watson's research on the poet William Cowper's importance in the rise of literary tourism (research outputs [O1] and [O5]) has led to innovative collaboration with an under-resourced museum local to the OU, the CNM, notably a museum trail and 2 public lectures (Being Human Festival 2017, MKLitFest 2018) which attracted 46 participants to the Festival venues and 19 new paying visitors to the museum. The benefit to the museum's relations with the local community was evidenced in participant feedback: attendees were inspired with enthusiasm for reading Cowper, for taking up walking as a creative practice and a productive way of relating at once to the locality and global geopolitics, and, more generally, for this sort of engagement event "*More of these kind of talks here at the museum would be wonderful*" [C2]. In 2019 Watson also set up a new writing group of 12 within the Museum, 'The Memoir Club', inspired by Watson's research into the history of writers' houses as a form of autobiography. Qualitative participant feedback expressed new confidence in self-expression and writing skills [C2]. In 2020 Watson brought 12 scholars to CNM to create a museum-specific collection for RÊVE ('Romantic Dwelling'); this was utilized by museum volunteers as a development opportunity [C3]. Watson's novel ways of using the museum and its collections have been significant in shaping and delivering the museum's current mission statement to "*position the museum as a leading literary museum and as an inspirational place for readers and writers*" [C2].

Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)

The reach of RÊVE is evidenced by the metrics: now averaging between 2,500-3,500 hits a month, it has racked up a total of 40,771 hits between 1 Sept 2018 and 31 Dec 2020 [C4]. It is currently showcasing 111 objects from 47 collections across 16 countries (Denmark, England, Scotland, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Iceland, USA, and Australia). These metrics can be corroborated by Alice Rhodes at the University of York. RÊVE's extensive reach provides the basis for its impact upon curatorial thinking and practice. Two principal kinds of impact are especially evident: 1) that curators have in fact collaborated with scholars and other heritage institutions across Europe to produce an unprecedented cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary, transnational virtual exhibition, engaging in thinking and writing about the affective histories of individual objects and so creating new narratives of the 'Romantic'; and 2) that curators have been persuaded to explore the potential of digital space to put their own collection into conversation with others, to add value and visibility to their collections, to increase public engagement online, and to respond to the challenging situation presented by COVID-19 [C3]. The Director of Collections at the CNM reflects on much of this when she writes of her excitement at how participation in RÊVE has allowed her to "*introduce key items to a wider international audience and increase awareness of the collection*", "*allowing digital cross-referencing with similar pieces from Europe*" which facilitates improvement of the description of the materials in their collection [C3]. Curatorial feedback explicitly identifies 4 ongoing impacts:

- (1) Changing attitudes to working cross-institutionally: Nicolas Hearn, French and Russian Subject Specialist at the Taylor Institute Library (University of Oxford) remarks that RÊVE brings down the "*barriers that exist between librarians, curators*" [C5], and Professor Anne Bohnenkamp-Renfen, Director of the Frankfurt Goethe Museum, describes how by encouraging collaboration with other museums RÊVE has produced "*a wealth of new ideas about [...] European Romanticism*" [O6].

- (2) Changing ideas about interpreting individual museum objects: Professor Diego Saglia, University of Parma, remarks that RÊVE has enabled the board of the nascent Museo Byron in Ravenna “to expand and refine our understanding of objects as carriers of ideas and affect within a dual temporal perspective” [C5]. Jeff Cowton, Director of the Wordsworth Trust, notes that his ideas about objects and places have changed towards a sense that objects can convey their own stories: working with the project has “led to new ways of approaching how we might see a manuscript; not just as a piece of paper holding textual information but as a 3-dimensional “object” with its own provenance and personal associations” [C5].
- (3) Changing thinking about exhibition-practice on and offline: Two curators are installing RÊVE as part of their multi-media exhibitions (FrankfurtGoethe Museum [C5] and the CNM in Olney [C3]). Francesca Sandrini, Director of the Museo Glauco Lombardi in Bologna, has observed that RÊVE has pioneered a new appreciation of the power of the digital exhibition [C6], and Susan Halstead, a member of the British Library Research Services Team, writes, “The experience of participating in *Dreaming Romantic Europe* and RÊVE proved to be very positive, providing useful ideas and suggestions for trying to create new ways of using objects such as diaries, water colour albums, and notebooks that can find fuller enhancement in alternative multi-media forms” [C6]. Dr Anna Mercer, Officer at Keats House, notes that digital exhibition has opened up the possibility of displaying treasures long hidden in storage to new audiences online [C6]. Kirsty Archer-Thompson, Collections and Interpretation Manager at Abbotsford, comments of the virtual exhibition, “[Walter] Scott actually writes about objects from his own collection talking to each other across time and space. I love that this is what we are doing right here, right now” [C9].
- (4) Stimulating new curatorial thinking about how best to engage the public on and offline: The CNM is using RÊVE to inspire adult audiences, including museum volunteers, “to research objects themselves” [C3]. The report on a public event in Ravenna notes that RÊVE has provided an innovative model for engaging a local school with the Museo Byron, helping teachers to close the curriculum gap [C7]. In the area of creative response, the Director of the Maison de Chateaubriand cites RÊVE as the inspiration for “many parallel and complementary initiatives in which museum visitors are invited to react in every way imaginable to things Romantic” [C6]. Online, under closures forced by COVID-19, RÊVE has enabled and showcased entirely new ways for museums to reach out to their publics, mounting a pandemic initiative, ‘Romantic Sounds’, a suite of 9 sound miniatures by 7 early-career composers, each responding to a different object within the collection. These sound miniatures are hosted by RÊVE as a free and open access resource; they are also linked to the museums’ websites to ensure their widest possible reach.

As higher education adapts to the pandemic, RÊVE is starting to have an impact upon pedagogy. For example, Professor Clare Brant of Kings’ College London has used RÊVE as a resource with her students, writing, “Especially in this Covid-affected year, it is fantastic to have such a stimulating resource easily – and freely – available to scholars and students” [C8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

C1. Testimonials. Timothy O’Brien, RDI, Theatre Designer, New Place. 11 March 2019; Dr Paul Edmondson, SBT, 15 March 2019. Article from Shakespeare Connected 8 August 2018.

Cowper and Newton Museum

C2. Summary Report. Qualitative Feedback: Feedback, MKLitFest event held at Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, ‘Take a Walk with a Famous Poet’ September 2018. Qualitative feedback on ‘The Memoir Club’, 2019. Testimonial. Amanda Molcher and Kate Bostock, Trustees, Cowper and Newton Museum. 6 March 2019.

RÊVE

- C3.** Testimonial. Kate Bostock. Cowper and Newton Museum. 30 March 2020.
- C4.** Summary Report. RÊVE metrics. 1 September 2018 - 31 December 2020.
- C5.** Testimonials. Nick Hearn, Taylor Institute Library, Oxford University. 23 April 2020. Prof Dr Anne Bohnenkamp-Renfen, FrankfurterGoethe Museum. 17 April 2020. Prof Diego Saglia, Museo Byron, Ravenna. 17 April 2020. Jeff Cowton Curator & Head of Learning at the Wordsworth Trust. 24 March 2019.
- C6.** Testimonials. Francesca Sandrini, Museo Glauco Lombardi, Bologna. 15 April 2020. Susan Halstead, British Library. 18 April 2020. Dr Anna Mercer, Keats House Hampstead. 14 April 2020. Dr Bernard Degoût, Director of the Maison de Chateaubriand, Paris. 1 April 2020.
- C7.** Summary report on public engagement event, Oct 2019 Ravenna.
- C8.** Testimonial. Prof Clare Brant, King's College London. 27 August 2020.
- C9.** Transcript. Conference discussion with curators and stakeholders. DREAMing Romantic Europe: Romantic Media. 29 June 2020.