

The Jane Austen Society of North America

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"...a delicate fricassee of sweetbread and some asparagus..." ("Emma")

One of Serle's special "company" dishes - although Mr. Woodhouse himself didn't eat it - was a fricassee of sweetbread and asparagus. Now that the season for that delectable vegetable is here, you might be interested in the name. The Latin form *sparagus* was found in English as early as 1000 AD, but by the 16th and early 17th century the common name was *sperage* or *sperach* or *sparage*. About 1600, because of the influence of herbalists and horticulturalists, the term *asparagus* or '*speragus*' became familiar and displaced the earlier form. It was not long, however, before the term was corrupted to *sparagrass* or *sparrow-grass*, which remained the accepted name during the 18th century.

The poet Cowper in 1785 used '*sparagus*', perhaps reflecting the usage of his youth. In his Pronouncing Dictionary of 1791, John Walker wrote: "*Sparrow-grass* is so general that *asparagus* [still used at that time by botanists] has an air of stiffness and pedantry". And in 1801, Southey wrote "*Sparagrass* (it ought to be spelt so)..." By the present century, *asparagus* has become again the accepted form, and *sparrow-grass* has a definite air of rusticity.

Jane Austen never used words sloppily or carelessly. In Emma (1814), the use of *asparagus* is another subtle indication of dear Mr. Woodhouse's addiction to "the fashions of his youth".

"...of the fish she had lost and the fish she had won." ("P&P")

In the last Newsletter, I mentioned the meaning of "fish" as counters in a card game, so called because they were small pieces of bone or ivory often shaped in the form of a fish. Fred Braches pointed out that the relationship may be the reverse. The French word for *peg*, *pin*, *token* or *counter* is *fiche*. The English "heard" this as "fish", and took the word over in their games. The little pieces of bone or ivory were then probably carved into the shape of fish in order to make some sense out of calling them this. The word was further confused with the normal use of the word "fish", and so the collective singular is often used for the plural.

Still one question: Why did card players need fish and counters? Was one used to "make change", for example, one counter equals twenty fish? Who can clear this up for us?

"...a charm which she could not immediately resist." ("Pers.")

"Those who love 'gentle Jane' as a secret friend may undervalue the irony and wit; those who see her in effect as the greatest of Shaw's heroines, flashing about her with the weapons of irony, may undervalue the emphasis on tenderness and good will. But only a very few can resist her." (Wayne Booth: The Rhetoric of Fiction)

"Emma had not foreseen any interest to herself in the occurrences of a Visitation." ("The Watsons")

Emma Watson was left stranded at the Edwards' after the ball because her father needed the family carriage to "attend a visitation". I wondered what was involved in a visitation, and turned to my expert on Church affairs, Mary Coleman. She, in turn, forwarded my inquiry to The Very Reverend Brian Whitlow, Dean Emeritus of the cathedral in Victoria. This is his explanation:

"Since the period is the early Nineteenth Century, I would guess that what is referred to is an Archdeacon's Visitation. This would be for the purpose of inspecting church buildings, the burial grounds, the financial records, the provision (if any) for insurance and in general all "temporalities" of this nature.

Originally, it was the bishop who conducted such visitations, but, by Jane Austen's time in England, this kind of work had become delegated to archdeacons.

It could be an occasion of clerical fellowship, as is often a synod or deanery meeting in Canada today. The churchwardens would also be present. The archdeacon might well deliver a sermon which would most likely be in the nature of a "charge" (similar to that of a bishop at a modern synod)."

This leaves just one further question. If it was the custom for the archdeacon to give the sermon, why was Mr. Howard chosen? Is Jane Austen indicating the honour and respect he commanded in local church affairs, and giving us a subtle clue to his future promotion and prestige in his profession?

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"The person...who has not pleasure in a good novel must be intolerably stupid".
("N.A.")

The Royal Literary Fund was a philanthropy established in 1790 for writers in impoverished circumstances. Using statistical records from the archives, Nigel Cross, in The Common Writer: Life in 19th c. Grub Street, discusses many of the lesser known or unknown authors of the 19th c. In his review of this book (TLS 14 Feb.) Alan Bell writes at one point: "Women formed a significant minority; Cross calculates that about 20% of authors were women, making some 4,000 British women writers at that time. Although he wisely remarks how unsatisfactory it is to use 'female' as a literary grouping...when they had nothing in common but their gender and the fact of authorship, at the lower level Cross finds that women writers do have important linking features: 'Lack of education, lack of opportunity, lack of status, and lack of property all combined to narrow the literary horizons of women and make it that much harder for them to achieve artistic distinction'."

Speaking of the distressing condition of women writers, working at 'virtually sweated-labour rates', Cross concludes: "This reality of female authorship has often been obscured by the achievements of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë,



Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot. These four exceptional novelists have cast the work of the majority of women writers into the deepest shade."

Because their names are still so well known, we tend to think of these great women writers as being the only women writers of their time. But the Austen family were noted for being great novel readers, and, as this book shows, there were hundreds of novels for them to choose from.

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"...to assist in the due celebration of that festival..." ("S&S")

"In pre-mechanization days, by the second half of April the Spring land-work was virtually complete. On arable land, March was the busy Spring month, with ploughing, sowing, harrowing and rolling going on almost incessantly. No farmer willingly sowed 'cuckoo' oats or barley, after the cuckoo had arrived and therefore too late, as a rule, to produce a worthwhile crop.

By contrast, May was one of the slackest months of the whole year. The crops were growing, and even if they were half-smothered by weeds there was little one could do about that, apart from hand-pulling.

Cows and sheep meantime fed on the grass that the good Lord provided... Hay-making lay comfortable weeks ahead...Only turnips grown for sheep demanded any attention...and that was normally carried out by piece-workers.

So it had been from time immemorial, and the concentration of so many festivals in May was due as much to the fact that country folk (the majority of the population) had time to observe them as to any other factor. The month started with traditional May Day celebrations...because it was the old Celtic quarter-day of Beltane, alias the Roman feast of Floralia. Following quickly were Rogationtide, Ascensiontide and Whitsuntide, all celebrated by various rites according to local customs." (Ralph Whitlock, Manchester Guardian)

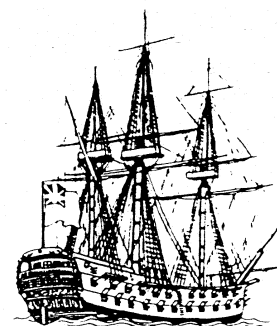
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"I know nothing superior to the accommodations of a man-of-war." ("Pers.")

In the Oakridge Centre Mall is a model of a 1792 era sailing ship - like Captain Vancouver's Discovery, or the ships that Jane Austen's sailor brothers commanded, or those of Captains Wentworth, Harville, Benwick, et al.

It is worth seeing, and trying to imagine oneself spending months or even years in the cramped quarters aboard.

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"...joined some gentlemen, to talk over the politics of the day..." ("N.A.")

Pride and Prejudice, described by Jane Austen herself as "light and bright and sparkling", adapts well to stage or theatre. Several members drew my attention recently to reviews of a new production at the Old Vic in London, which has some unusual aspects. According to reviewer Rosemary Ashton (TLS) "the production is stylish, comic and fast-paced. It sounds good and, with intelligent design and choreography, it looks good, too." However, the producer David Pownall has moved Mr. Bennet from the library where he absents himself most of the time in the novel, to the front of the stage to act as chorus and guide, commenting on characters and action, and also on the war, poor harvests, Napoleon, and the Industrial Revolution. His cynical and sardonic wit not only uses Pownall's words and idiom, but contravenes Jane Austen's strict policy of avoiding any expression of men's views when they are alone, and never bringing contemporary events or politics into her social comedies.

Paul Johnson, in the Daily Telegraph, agrees: "Jane Austen knew what was going on in the wider world. She probably held definite, if undemonstrative, views about many political and social questions. But she did not see what political, military and industrial matters had to do with her novels. She was writing comedies of manners..."

A more important criticism of the play is the way it has been cut: there is no visit to Pemberley, no passing of time while Elizabeth and Jane are unhappy and uncertain about their lovers, no representation of the relationship between the sisters, no depiction of Charlotte's feeling of the inevitable necessity for marrying Mr. Collins - in short, no sense of the dark side of a woman's life, the struggle, the endurance and the trial, before the happy ending.

Just the same, I still wish I could be in London to see it!

"You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here." ("Emma")

Great Moments in History:



"It was 1795, and Napoleon's troops were about to pummel the Austrians and Italians. But Napoleon was hungry for more than power: he and his troops craved three squares a day. So the French government set a substantial cash prize for anyone who could find a way to contain and transport health-giving foods to Napoleon's army. A chef, Nicholas Appert, claimed the booty in 1809. Appert's invention: the first canned food."

(Nicole Parton: The Sun)

Napoleon as Emperor in 1815. Woodcut, after a medal.

"The park paling was still the boundary on one side." ("P&P")

During the Middle Ages the ceremony of Beating the Bounds was the accepted way of teaching the people the limits of their parish. The priest, villagers and children, usually on Ascension Day (40 days after Easter), would walk the boundaries, and at each marker, the stone - or usually the boys themselves - would be beaten with willow wands to impress the location of each point upon their minds. Sometimes portions of the Gospel would be read, and curses proclaimed upon anyone who moved one of the boundary markers.

In 1973, in Jane Austen's village of Chawton, the ceremony of Beating the Bounds was revived to raise money for church repairs. "The beaters, some of them dressed in country smocks over a hundred years old, were blessed at the lych gate by the rector, then toiled up hills, through briars, and over fences to reach every boundary mark."

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"We do not expect perfection". ("M.P.")

The Scottish Classics series has re-issued John Galt's The Member (1832) about a Nabob intent on buying a seat in the House of Commons. In a review in TLS March 21, Thomas Crawford writes:

"His first sentence is as masterly as that which opens Pride and Prejudice: 'When a man comes home from India with a decent competency, he is obliged to endure many afflictions, not the least of which are nestfuls of cousins' children, in every corner of the kingdom, all gaping like voracious larks for a pick'."

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"But history, real history, I cannot be interested in." ("N.A.")

"Medical history was made on May 14, 1796: Edward Jenner, an English physician, carried out the first vaccination on an eight-year-old boy - thereby proving that human beings could be safely inoculated against smallpox with the blood of cattle infected with cow-pox. The father of modern immunology, Jenner had to fight many disbelievers."

I am sure Lady Catherine de Bourgh was among the aristocratic ladies who learned his methods and insisted on inoculating their own servants and villagers.

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"But whether she would do for a lady's-maid, I am sure I can't tell." ("S&S")

One of the Conference speakers will be Judith Terry, of UVic. Her recently-published novel, Miss Abigail's Part: or Version and Diversion, tells the story of events at Mansfield Park from the point of view of a young maid-servant in the house. You may wish to look for it, and get some different impressions of Fanny Price and the Bertram family.

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"But not long was the interval of tranquillity". ("P&P")

We are enjoying a pleasant relaxing interlude now, before the major work of preparing our Conference begins.

The work-party in March was very successful, with thirteen members busy for three hours folding, stuffing, stamping and labelling 1800 envelopes with our letter and the brochures from the Tourist Board. Thanks to the B.C. Government, that mailing didn't cost us anything except our effort. By now, you must have received the "First Letter" mailed from Philadelphia, giving preliminary plans for the lectures and social events. (If you did not receive it, call me about getting back on the mailing list for the next letter.)

We have postponed sending out the "Second Letter" until late July, when all the details of times, places and costs will be settled. Another work-party will be organized to handle that mailing, but it will be on a smaller scale so we should have more time for the "party" and less "work". The response from the first letter showed over 200 people seriously considering coming, which sounds very promising for a good Conference.

Volunteers will be needed in the final planning stages to help make decisions, and to discuss the "running" of the Conference. On the days of the meetings, Friday, Sept. 26th to Sunday, Sept. 28th, we will need help with tending the Registration table, the sales table, and monitors for each lecture/seminar room, as well as Hosts/hostesses at the reception, dinner, etc. If you will be free on the Friday from noon to six, we would like to make a roster of those willing to take a "shift" - if we have enough names, each person will need to be on duty only for a couple of hours or so. Please think over what part you would like to play in these preparations, and let me know in due course.

Donna Short is in charge of listing and testing (no expense account!) restaurants in the vicinity of the Hotel Georgia, and I am sure she would welcome company or opinions. Ideas for a list of "other attractions" (besides Expo) for our guests to see would be welcomed - someone to check opening hours, prices, addresses, etc. of museums, art galleries and so on would be helpful. If you have other ideas, please let me know.

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"It was a splendid sight; and she began...to feel herself at a ball". ("NA")

Look ahead - the 1987 Conference will be held in New York, and already the plans sound tremendous. The theme is "The Juvenilia" - Jane Austen, at the age of 11 in 1787, began writing to entertain her family, and thus the New York Conference will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the beginning of her career.

The feature of the five day meeting will be "An Evening at the Pump Room" with music, dancing, costumes, perambulating and refreshment. Other activities include a film, seminars, lectures, dramatizations, etc. etc.

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"...gave her hand with an affectionate smile". ("S&S")

Shaking hands may once have been a matter of life and death, if the custom originated as a gesture showing that one was indeed unarmed. Today it has degenerated into an almost meaningless gesture, falling more and more into dis-use as our society becomes less formal, at its most futile in a long "receiving line" where some unfortunate VIP has to offer a hand to be squeezed by hundreds. It has still a valid use today, however, when we shake hands as token of agreement to a contract, or as a sign of amity following a quarrel.

In Jane Austen's day, the act of shaking hands was still very meaningful. The common usage of greeting was a curtsy or bow, and shaking hands was a sign of something more significant, almost as warm as a kiss would be today. The despairing Marianne Dashwood pleads with Willoughby: *"Will you not shake hands with me?"*

In almost all the novels, Jane Austen makes use of the nuances of meaning which can be read into the gestures of offering or shaking a hand, or not doing so. These clues teach us something about the character, or reinforce ideas we have already gained. When John Thorpe is introduced to us in *Northanger Abbey*, for example, we watch him greet his sister as he *"slightly and carelessly touched"* her hand, his mother, with *"a hearty shake of the hand"*, and Catherine, with *"a whole scrape and half a short bow"*. We immediately know almost all we need to know about John Thorpe. Mr. Knightley, hiding his love for Emma, takes her hand, and *"was on the point of carrying it to his lips"*. Contrast this with Wickham: convinced that Elizabeth at last knows the worst about him, he cannot meet her eye, but he kissed her hand *"with affectionate gallantry"*.

Kissing hands is not just a gesture of masculine gallantry. When Elinor expresses her sorrow and sympathy to Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*, he *"took her hand, pressed it and kissed it with grateful respect"*. Respect is also the emotion expressed by Fanny Price when she leaves Mansfield Park to go to Portsmouth: *"She kissed the hand of her uncle"*. And Harriet is so overcome by Emma's compliments and (mistaken) advice about her future that she *"kissed her hand in silent and submissive gratitude"*.

Strong silent masculine feelings are expressed by a hearty shake of the hand. Mr. Weston, thankful that Frank Churchill's engagement has not hurt Emma, *"shook her heartily and gratefully by the hand"*. Anne takes pleasure in seeing *"the Admiral's hearty shake of the hand"* when he meets his old friends in Bath. And we can imagine Charles Blake feeling very adult and masculine to Emma Watson as he *"shook her by the hand and wished her goodbye"*.

There was nothing hearty about Miss Bingley's farewell when Elizabeth and Jane were leaving Netherfield. After embracing Jane, she *"even shook hands with Elizabeth"*. And Miss de Bourgh makes the same effort and *"exerted herself so far as to curtsy and hold out her hand to both"*.

Shaking hands to conclude a bargain or seal a decision seems a masculine trait, but in *Sense and Sensibility* it is Mrs. Jennings who greets Marianne's decision to visit her in London, with *"let us strike hands upon the bargain"*. Emma Woodhouse signifies the end of her quarrel with Mr. Knightley, with *"Come, shake hands with me"*. In *Mansfield Park*, Edmund gives his father a complete

account of the theatricals, and Sir Thomas, *"having shaken hands with Edmund"*, puts the matter behind him. (It is easy to imagine here an echo from Jane Austen's childhood, an incident perhaps often observed, between one of her brothers and her father: confession, repentance, forgiveness).

Real affection, sympathy and compassion are indicated in the manner in which hands are taken or held in all the novels: Mrs. Dashwood with Marianne, *"silently pressing her hand with tender compassion"*; Mr. Woodhouse, *"'Poor dear Isabella', fondly taking her hand"*; Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth, on two occasions - when she learns of his engagement to Jane, and when he has heard of her engagement to Darcy - shake hands *"with great cordiality"* and *"with such warmth"*. When Jane Fairfax's difficulties are over and she and Emma can meet as friends, they do so with *"a very very earnest shake of the hand"*.

We can see how superficial the gesture can be when true affection is only pretended: Isabella Thorpe was squeezing or pressing Catherine's hand from their first meeting, and their first parting was comforted by *"a most affectionate and lengthened shake of hands"*. Mrs. Palmer, the second time she saw the Dashwoods, *"took them all most affectionately by the hand"*. And we can hardly believe that John Dashwood *"kindly"* took Elinor's hand, except that the advice he was giving her was not going to cost him anything.

The importance of hand shaking is stressed by the incidents where one person tries to avoid it - Marianne holds out her hand to Willoughby when they meet at last in London: *"He could not then avoid it. He held her hand only for a moment"*. Greeting Edward Ferrars, also, *"she met him with a hand that would be taken"*. When Willoughby has told his story to Elinor, *"He held out his hand. She could not refuse to take it"*. Fanny Price had difficulty with Henry Crawford, *"he would take her hand, he would not be denied it"*, as Emma did with Mr. Elton, *"her hand seized, her attention demanded"*.

The character who does the most offering or shaking of hands in all the novels is Emma Woodhouse, followed by Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Both young women are open, honest and sincere about expressing their feelings, and the gesture is a spontaneous sign of friendliness and affection. In *Persuasion*, the only mention of shaking hands is Admiral Croft's greeting to an old friend. Anne is too reserved, too often in the background; no matter how strong her feelings, she is not a person to step forward and offer her hand.

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"She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm." (Pers.)

A news report last week announced the sinking of the *Pride of Baltimore* in the Atlantic Ocean, north of Puerto Rico, with a loss of 4 of the crew of 12. The ship was a two-masted schooner built as a replica of American privateers which harassed British naval vessels in the War of 1812, and cut supply routes to the Duke of Wellington, fighting in Europe against Napoleon. Captain Wentworth spoke of his adventures in his first ship *Asp* on a voyage to the West Indies, *"taking privateers enough to be very entertaining"*. The *Pride of Baltimore* visited the Port of Vancouver in June, 1983, and welcomed visitors aboard.

According to the report from New York, *"the Pride of Baltimore was headed for its home port in Chesapeake Bay when it ran into foul weather. Suddenly, it was struck by what sailors call a "white squall", a kind of tornado or thunder-storm at sea. The hull rolled into the waves, the crew were tossed into the water and 60 seconds later, the ship began to sink.*

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