

# Muse & Musings

*"The company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation"*

## April 22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting

### Gothic Influences in Jane Austen's Novels by Dr. Scott MacKenzie

At our April meeting, Dr. Scott MacKenzie of U.B.C. described the attributes of the genre called "Gothic" and then related these to Jane Austen's writing. The first Gothic novel was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, subtitled "A Gothic Story" and published in 1764. This is a rare case of a specific work initiating a whole genre.



*Whitby Abbey, a typical Gothic setting*

The attributes of Gothic fiction include:

- a castle or abbey (thought by some to symbolize society's anxiety about large institutions such as workhouses, prisons and factories that stand in opposition to the home)
- malevolent matriarchs
- absent mothers (introducing the possibility of disputed or secret parentage)
- menacing patriarchs
- the supernatural (often "explained supernatural")
- horror, aesthetic excess, paranoia, etc.

There are many examples of these throughout Jane Austen, and she parodied them all in *Northanger Abbey*. But the particular insight that struck me was about *Emma*. Most of her contemporary readers would have picked up on this, especially after JA (with a wink and a nudge) has Harriet Smith urging Robert Martin to read *The Romance of the Forest*, but we later readers are pretty clueless. The reason Emma is so nonsensically insistent that Harriet

Smith must be a gentleman's daughter is that this is the plot of *The Romance of the Forest*.

— by Elspeth Flood with notes from Joan Reynolds

## May 27<sup>th</sup>: Jane Austen Day

On Jane Austen Day we assembled at tables beautifully decorated by Joan Reynolds to hear two speakers with a lunch between, catered by The Banqueting Table.

### Morning: Seeing and Being Seen in *Northanger Abbey* by Dr. Timothy Erwin

Dr. Timothy Erwin from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas is this year's JASNA travelling lecturer for the West. He spoke about the rise of the art of caricature at the same time as Jane Austen was writing *Northanger Abbey*, and the similarities of comic sensibility between JA and the leading caricature artists, such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson. Dr. Erwin contends that JA's exaggerated humour in *Northanger Abbey* is similar to the exaggerated humour of the caricaturists.

One lovely point that most of us have missed is that when Henry Tilney is explaining the picturesque to Catherine he gets it all wrong – he knows little more about it than she does! The ironic voice shifts from Henry's directed ever-so-gently at Catherine to the narrator's directed at Henry.

Dr. Erwin peppered his presentation with unexpected tidbits, such as that Bath was similar to Las Vegas, or that Mrs. Allen was a "fashionista."



*Catherine at her first ball in Bath "... saw nothing of the dancers but the high feathers of some of the ladies."*

**Afternoon: Canada in the time of Jane Austen**  
**Life and Art in Early Canada 1775 – 1817 by Jessa Alston-O'Connor, MA**

Our afternoon speaker, Vancouver Art Gallery educator and art historian Jessa Alston-O'Connor, gave us a glimpse through art of what life was like in Canada during Jane Austen's lifetime.



The 1786 painting "Portrait of a Haitian Woman" by François Malépart de Beaucourt reminds us that slavery did exist in early Canada. McCord Museum, Montréal.

There were no art galleries in Canada until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, so artworks were in private hands, in churches or public buildings.

Much of the art done in the colonies at that time was portraiture, which primarily shows us the lives and faces of the upper classes. Many of these paintings are primarily of historic rather than artistic value, as the portraiture was not always first rate.

– by Elspeth Flood with notes by Lorraine Meltzer

**Jane Austen's *Persuasion***

**A Novel in Support of Many of the Feminist and Egalitarian Principles in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman***

**By Jennifer Bettiol**

Jane Austen, born at the end of the Enlightenment and growing up while the French revolution raged across the English Channel, could not have escaped being exposed to many radical ideas during her lifetime. Austen's last work, *Persuasion*, is arguably the most progressive of her novels, clearly advocating "the need for reconstruction of civil society . . . and the importance of women to that reconstruction" (Kelly). This paper will present a comparison of *Persuasion* with Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 treatise, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (*Vindication*), examining both the similarities and differences in these books with respect to desired reforms of English society. While it is uncertain whether Austen read *Vindication* (Gilbert), *Persuasion* includes many of the principles in Wollstonecraft's book and provides evidence that Austen herself was a moderate early-

nineteenth century "feminist" who supported changing English society toward a meritocracy.

Mary Wollstonecraft was acutely aware of the injustice entrenched in the patriarchal English society at the end of the eighteenth century. She bases *Vindication* on her belief that the principles of the Enlightenment should apply to women, and not just to men (Kirkham). Wollstonecraft writes that women are "being educated like a fanciful kind of half being," gaining only "a smattering of accomplishments," while the "strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, – the only way women can rise in the world, – by marriage." She writes that the advancement of women must begin with the middle-class, since wealthy females are spoiled by their privileged rearing and lower-class women lack both the time and the education to promote change (Kirkham). Jane Austen was middle-class and held middle-class values (Poovey). Austen, therefore, belonged to the intended audience of Wollstonecraft's progressive social ideas.



Mary Wollstonecraft c. 1797, by John Opie

Jane Austen was certainly aware that contemporary English civil society was grounded on gendered and economic inequality (Honan). Some of Austen's knowledge of this inequity came from her reading. For example, her favourite novel, Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, was concerned with men exploiting "language to keep women subservient" (Honan). Austen's life experiences also reinforced her awareness of unfairness in her world. When rich relatives adopted her brother, Austen had the opportunity to observe how the very wealthy lived (Honan), becoming more sensible "of how money, land, inheritance and social advantage easily takes precedence . . . over family love . . ." (Honan). After her father died, Austen gained an even greater understanding of the gendered economic disparity in Georgian society when she, her sister, and their mother needed financial support from her brothers (Honan). Having personally experienced the effect of declining resources (Poovey), Austen's observation that "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which

is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (*Letters* 13 March 1817) is hardly surprising. Austen was undeniably aware that sexual and financial inequality were entrenched in contemporary English society.

While Austen was conscious of the inequities in her life, she makes no overt reference to Wollstonecraft in her (extant) letters or fiction. Even though it appears that Austen never read *Vindication* (Gilbert), she did, however, own a copy of Robert Bage’s *Hermesprung*, a novel that supported Wollstonecraft’s beliefs (Gilbert, also Harris *Revolution*). However, Wollstonecraft had a scandalous reputation during Austen’s adulthood, based on her husband’s memoir that disclosed her premarital affairs, attempted suicide, and alleged atheism. This left Wollstonecraft “branded as a whore and an atheist” and caused other women to be silent about their support of her ideals for fear of being likewise defamed (Kirkham). Therefore, even if Austen had read *Vindication*, she would have been unlikely to mention it in her writing, and her sister Cassandra would certainly have been motivated to purge any such references from Austen’s letters.

Whether or not Austen had read or even knew of Wollstonecraft, her awareness of social injustice is well-represented in *Persuasion*. In harmony with many of the ideals outlined in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, Austen treats the rational, educated, professional characters in *Persuasion* favourably, while lampooning the hysterical, self-interested members of the hereditary aristocracy, thereby revealing her preference for the former group.

Wollstonecraft writes that “to do every thing [sic] in an orderly manner, is a most important precept, which women, who generally speaking, receive only a disorderly kind of education, seldom attend to . . .” Anne Elliot, whom Austen describes as a well-read woman with a “cultivated mind,” is arguably the best-educated female – “in both principles and feeling” (Poovey) – in Austen’s novels. (This is despite Anne’s remark about the inequality of women’s education, wherein she laments, “‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree . . .’”)

Anne is certainly an orderly, capable woman by Wollstonecraft’s standards. When young Charles Musgrove injures himself, Anne takes care of him, instead of his mother doing so. When Louisa Musgrove falls at Lyme Regis, it is Anne who is most useful (Harris *Burden*), with Captain Wentworth remarking that “‘if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!’”

Wollstonecraft writes that marriage should be based on “motives of affection” and Anne’s avoidance of her cousin William Elliot’s (implied) wish to marry her and her ultimate marriage to her beloved Captain Wentworth

are in accordance with Wollstonecraft’s principles. Both Anne’s discussion about love and constancy with Captain Harville – where they speak as equals (Kirkham) – and her effective proposal to Wentworth following his anguished love letter (Harris *Burden*) depict Austen’s support of female equality in *Persuasion*. In Anne Elliot, Austen has created what Wollstonecraft would consider a moderately progressive female.

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft explicitly supports well-educated, “notable women . . . often friendly, honest creatures . . . [with] a shrewd kind of good sense joined with worldly prudence . . .” These words perfectly describe *Persuasion*’s Mrs. Croft. Austen calls her “intelligent and keen” and “open, easy . . . without . . . any want of good humour.” Mrs. Croft sounds like a Wollstonecraft disciple when she “complains of women being treated as fine ladies instead of ‘rational creatures’ . . .” (Peter Knox-Shaw paraphrased in Harris *Revolution*). She appears to be an equal in her marriage to Admiral Croft (Harris *Burden*), in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s ideals in *Vindication*. Mrs. Croft is one of the most liberated females in Jane Austen’s *oeuvre*.



**Left:** *The fall on the Cobb*: Anne Elliot (Amanda Root) ministers to Louisa Musgrove (Emma Roberts), while Captain Benwick (Richard McCabe) wrings his hands and Captain Wentworth (Ciaran Hinds) is distressed. **Right:** Admiral (John Woodvine) and Mrs. Croft (Fiona Shaw) both from the 1995 film of *Persuasion*.

*Persuasion*’s Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove are more conventional and traditional than either Mrs. Croft or Anne Elliot. Austen’s description of them as “young ladies . . . who had brought from school . . . all the usual stock of accomplishments” seems to mirror Wollstonecraft’s lament that the goal of female education is to obtain accomplishments that will help in the marriage market. However, both Henrietta and Louisa grow in self-understanding in *Persuasion* and Austen allows them to be rational enough to choose their mates wisely, in accordance with Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideal of marriages as “matches of affection.”



Not surprisingly, the women who suffer Austen's contempt in *Persuasion* would not meet with approval from Wollstonecraft. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft worries about the injury to marriage and family life that can result "when sensibility is nurtured at the expense of the understanding." Austen's Mary Musgrove is an excellent example of over-wrought sensibility. Her hypochondria and self-pity echo Fordyce's encouragement of fragility in women (to arouse the safeguarding instinct in men), a notion that Wollstonecraft resisted (Jones). Wollstonecraft writes that "women, whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or the natural selfishness of sensibility expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family" and that "the majority of mothers . . . leave their children entirely to the care of servants; or . . . treat them as if they were little DEMI-gods . . ." These words apply well to Mary Musgrove, an inconsistent mother with little control over her children, who readily leaves her injured son in the care of Aunt Anne and her children with her in-laws for more than a month.

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft records her abhorrence of "the preposterous distinctions of rank." Mary Musgrove's whiny complaint that, at a family dinner, her mother-in-law did not give her the precedence due to the daughter of a baronet leaves the impression that *Persuasion*'s author feels that the rigours of rank need not be adhered to indiscriminately in informal situations. In her portrayal of the moaning, ineffectual Mary Musgrove, Austen effectively echoes Wollstonecraft's advocacy for female education that would support, not hinder, women in their roles as wives and mothers.



*The new home at Bath: Anne (Amanda Root), Elizabeth (Phoebe Nicholls) and Sir Walter Elliot (Corin Redgrave), half of Mrs. Clay (Felicity Dean) and an unnamed footman, in the 1995 Persuasion.*

Wollstonecraft, deploring persons who valued possessions over nobleness of character, writes, "Ignorance and the mistaken cunning that nature sharpens in weak heads as a principle of self-preservation, render women very fond of dress, and produce all the vanity which such a fondness may naturally be expected to generate, to the exclusion of emulation and magnanimity." Austen appears to agree with Wollstonecraft on this, too, when she depicts the vain (and totally unlikeable) Elizabeth Elliot as overly fond of her rank as a baronet's daughter. Elizabeth is overly concerned with appearances, too. She

is more interested in the impression her new home in Bath makes on Anne, than in seeing her sister after a few month's absence, and she also complains, " 'I used to think [Lady Russell] had some taste in dress, but I was ashamed of her at the concert' ."

*Vindication* condemns the blind pursuit of wealth and rank, noting that "the respect paid to property flow, as from a poisoned fountain, [is the source of] most of the evils and vices which render this world such a dreary scene . . ." Austen crafts Anne Elliot's cousin, William, in a manner that shows her dislike of the avaricious, too. She describes William Elliot as " 'without heart or conscience' " and writes that he married his first wife for her money, attempted to marry Anne to keep a watchful eye over Sir Walter (to protect William's potential title and inheritance), and then put Mrs. Clay "under his protection in London" to prevent her from marrying Sir Walter. William, together with his cousin Elizabeth Elliot, epitomize both Wollstonecraft's and Austen's shared contempt of an unfettered drive for fortune and social position.

Wollstonecraft, believing that inherited riches and position have a deleterious effect on the beneficiary, writes that "what but habitual idleness can hereditary wealth and titles produce?" She further observes, "Birth, riches, and every extrinsic advantage that exalt a man above his fellows, without any mental exertion, sink him in reality below them." In *Persuasion*, Austen presents the landed aristocracy – represented by Sir Walter Elliot, who lacks "principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him . . .", and by his daughters Mary and Elizabeth – as idle, vain, selfish, and in a state of moral and financial decay. When Wollstonecraft laments, "In proportion to his weakness, [the rich man] is played upon by designing men [and women]," Sir Walter comes to mind. Austen depicts him falling under the management of his lawyer, Mr. Shepherd, and then nearly falling for the marriage machinations of Shepherd's sycophant daughter, Mrs. Clay.

Instead of basing the leadership of civil society on inherited wealth, Wollstonecraft believes the leaders should come from "the middle rank [as it] contains most virtue and abilities." In *Persuasion*, Austen also supports merit over inherited advantage (Harris Burden), for she portrays the officers and their families as "informal, egalitarian, genteelly intellectual, candid, inclusive, and discriminating" (Kelly). The rational male characters in *Persuasion* – Captain Wentworth and the other naval officers – have earned their fortunes and their distinctions, while the rational female characters – Anne Elliot and Mrs. Croft – are not clamouring for titles or marrying for money and rank. Having Admiral Croft, a professional

navy officer, lease Kellynch from Sir Walter, while having Anne Elliot accept that those who left “deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall has passed into better hands than its owners,” privileges meritocracy over aristocracy. In sum, *Persuasion*’s negative portrayals of inherited rank and privilege, together with its positive representations of success resulting from hard work, suggest that Austen supported a movement away from a decaying aristocratic society toward a meritocracy.



Idle, vain, selfish, and in a state of moral and financial decay: Sir Walter Elliot, played to perfection by Corin Redgrave.

Though Austen’s *Persuasion* does not deal with all the ideals that Wollstonecraft espouses in *Vindication*, many are supported in other works by Austen. Wollstonecraft’s fear of women becoming “the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility” and the danger inherent in poorly-educated girls being “left by their parents without any provision,” thereby becoming dependent on the “bounty of their brothers,” are major themes of *Sense & Sensibility*. Mary Wollstonecraft also worries about the dangers that innocent women will face from “men of wit and fancy [who] are often rakes.” This worry is well-addressed by Austen in *Sense & Sensibility*, *Pride & Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*.

However, there are many principles in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* that Austen does not examine in her novels. While Wollstonecraft extols a system of government-established day schools where boys and girls, rich or poor, are educated together, Austen does not allude to educational reform in her novels. Although Wollstonecraft drops a “hint . . . that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government,” Austen never examines this subject in her works. Though Wollstonecraft asks, “How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own

industry,” Austen never discusses the employment of middle-class women (except as governesses or schoolteachers) in her novels.

Whereas Wollstonecraft counsels that if women would “suckle their children, they would preserve their own health, and there would be such an interval between the birth of each child, that we should seldom see a houseful of babes,” Austen does not mention birth control in her fiction. Even though Wollstonecraft writes that she does not want it to “be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things,” the ideals outlined in *Vindication* often go beyond what is considered in Austen’s novels. This demonstrates that Wollstonecraft’s requirements for social reform were much more radical than Jane Austen’s. Nonetheless, I believe that Jane Austen was, by the standards of her day, a feminist.

Not all literary critics concur with my conclusion that Austen was a feminist. Some believe that it is “anachronistic” to label Austen a feminist since that word was not devised until 1851 (Looser). Mary Poovey believes Austen was essentially a conservative, while Joe Mee feels that Austen “challenge[d] traditional forms of patriarchy, while still stressing the value of the domestic in preservation of the nation.” Modern feminists are often the strongest critics of Austen since they place much emphasis on her “insistence upon marrying off her heroines” (Julia Prewitt Brown paraphrased in Warhol).



*The Fashionable Mamma* by Gillray: Mary Wollstonecraft recommended mothers’ “suckling their own children” to space out the arrival of babies.

However, other critics find that Austen’s emphasis on “intelligent, strong women” in her work to be indicative of her feminism (Looser), although some call it a “sneaking feminism,” since she uses romantic novels to moderate her radicalism (Looser). Discussion of feminism in Austen’s works and in her personal life



sometimes overlooks an important point: Austen's fiction must be read contextually. In Jane Austen's England, heterosexual marriage was the only option for women save for spinsterhood. Therefore, any writing from the early nineteenth century – such as Austen's *Persuasion* – that challenged society's male-dominated norms (Brown) was fundamentally progressive and “feminist.” From our modern perspective, Austen's form of feminism may seem rather insignificant (Kirkham), but by the standards of her day, as evidenced by *Persuasion*, Austen was clearly a moderate “feminist.”



*The Women's March on Versailles, 1789 and the Women's March on Washington, 2017.*

After comparing *Vindication* and *Persuasion*, I concur with Peter Knox-Shaw that there is no doubt that Wollstonecraft's viewpoints are present throughout Austen's novel (Harris *Revolution*). I also agree with Lloyd Brown's contention that there is enough commonality between the two books to conclude that Austen herself was “sympathetic to the eighteenth-century feminist revolt against narrow male definitions of female personality and women's education.” Even though there are no extant references by Austen about Wollstonecraft or her work and even though Austen's views are more temperate than those of Wollstonecraft, in its moderate feminism and in its preference of meritocracy and social change, Austen's *Persuasion* is unquestionably a novel in support of many of the principles in Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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Page numbers have been omitted from the references in this article. Please send an email to the editor (see box on the last page) to receive a PDF of the article with full references.

## Member Profile

### Jennifer Bettiol



Jennifer was formerly JASNA-Vancouver's Treasurer

#### 1. Tell us a bit about yourself and your life to-date.

After completing a BCom at UBC, I became a Chartered Accountant and worked in public practice and as a controller. Last December I retired from teaching adult-education accounting courses at Langara College.

When I started working toward an MA in interdisciplinary studies a few years ago, my intended focus was adult education. However, for my first course I chose an elective on Comparative Canadian Literature and I was hooked. I completed my MA last year, focusing on Literary Studies. My graduating paper was about living with and dying from cancer in the short fiction of Alice Munro.

I met my husband, Dennis, when I was articling at Ernst & Young. We have two adult sons.

#### 2. When did you join JASNA?

I heard about JASNA from Catherine Morley many years before I joined (but at that time my dragon boat practices conflicted with JASNA meeting times). I joined JASNA in 2006 so that I could attend the (fabulous) Vancouver AGM the following year.

#### 3. How did you first get started with Jane Austen?

When I was about 12, the school librarian did a presentation about classics and recommended *Pride and Prejudice*. I remember that some of the writing was a bit difficult for me at that age. But I related to Lizzy Bennet (for I have four sisters with rather similar names to the daughters in *P&P*), although I did not like Mr. Darcy at all.

By my mid-twenties I had read all six Austen novels. The last novel I read, *Persuasion*, has always been my favourite for its mature story of lost love rekindled.

#### 4. What do you like about JASNA?

While I enjoy learning about the social and political context of Austen's work, I also like meeting the interesting people who attend the meetings and AGMs and who share a love of all things Austen.

#### 5. Has JASNA given you any special memories? New friends? Inspiration to new experiences?

While I have made many friends at JASNA Vancouver, one of my JASNA highlights was going on the 2012 tour of England with Adrienne Salvail-Lopez.

On that tour we attended a private viewing of *The Watsons* manuscript at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and that inspired me to complete a brief conclusion to Austen's fragment. Next, I would like to attempt a (longer) conclusion to Austen's *Sanditon* fragment.

## Regional Coordinator's Corner

What a wonderful year of programming we've had!



While I missed the first meeting of the year due to the Royal Visit, we had a Brontë-speaker, a cocktail master, our own authors, a silent auction, Austen first-editions and, above-all, the excellent company of our group!



Beautiful place settings by Joan adorn our Jane Austen Day tables

A thank-you to JASNA for the Travelling Lecturer grant to help pay for hosting Timothy Erwin on our Jane Austen



Day, this year held in May. An enlightening talk from him, and our afternoon speaker Jessa Alston-O'Connor was certainly engaging. Must be fun to follow one of her tours at the VAG!



*Our Jane Austen Day speakers Jessa and Timothy enjoying lunch at beautiful table settings by Joan.*

How wonderful to see four JASNA Puget Sound members take the day to travel to Vancouver for our JA Day. A benefit from our association with JASNA: your membership extends your welcome to every and any

JASNA region. We hope to see them again in future meetings. If anyone travels to a Puget Sound meeting, please do let me know.

How do I measure success at our meetings? By the amount of discussion and conversation following our speakers. And on JA Day I was thoroughly pleased - there was lively and thoughtful Q&A following our afternoon speaker, despite drowsy minds from our delicious catered lunch.

As the season wraps, we have the summer and fall to look forward to. First, a public event in partnership with the VPL on August 12<sup>th</sup> is an opportunity to invite everyone to learn more about our dear Jane at a Box Hill-themed event. Then in the fall, I have my registration confirmed for the AGM at Huntington Beach. I'm sure the host hotel, Hyatt Regency Resort, would make Mr. Parker's plans for Sanditon pale in comparison.

I wish a pleasant and safe summer to everyone.

If you have programming ideas, please speak with me or send me an email: [jasnavancouverRC@gmail.com](mailto:jasnavancouverRC@gmail.com)

– by Michelle Siu

## **See you in September!**

Please see the program of events on our website:

[JASNA-Vancouver program](#)

**This Newsletter**, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, is distributed to members by email and posted on our website. Members who so request may receive a hard copy either at a meeting or in the mail. All submissions and book reviews on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome.

Email: [elspeth.n.flood@gmail.com](mailto:elspeth.n.flood@gmail.com) Or mail: Elspeth Flood  
#501 – 1520 Harwood Street  
Vancouver, B.C. V6G 1X9

JASNA Vancouver website: [www.jasnavancouver.ca](http://www.jasnavancouver.ca)