

Message from the President

In the mid-nineteenth century, a verger at Winchester Cathedral noticed an extraordinary number of visitors to the grave of a woman who had died half a century before. The grave marker explained little. It told that she was “the youngest daughter of the late Rev^d George Austen” and praised “the benevolence of her heart, the sweetness of her temper, and the extraordinary endowments of her mind.” Thoroughly puzzled, the verger finally asked one of the visitors: “Can you tell me, was there something particular about that young lady?”

Variations of the verger’s question echo in the late twentieth century. “Can you explain the growing popularity of Jane Austen today?” “Why do *you* read Jane Austen?” “What’s the big deal about Jane Austen?”

Most readers of this journal have their own answers to such questions. Other answers can be found inside these covers as professional scholars and talented amateurs reveal their insights into the works, life, and era of the “young lady” now recognized as one of the greatest novelists of all time. Many of these papers were written first for presentation at the 16th annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America, held November 4-6 in New Orleans. With a focus on “Rebellion, Revolution, and the Regency,” they help us understand the social and political milieu in which Jane Austen lived and wrote.

From this understanding grows a heightened appreciation of what Jane Austen can mean to a society approaching the twenty-first century. Let’s take just one example. In one of the conference small-group sessions, Professor Joseph Wiesenfarth explored “The Revolution of Civility in *Pride and Prejudice*.” Specifically, he discussed the increasing importance of “civility”—as opposed to courteous, or courtly, behavior—during Jane Austen’s day. This civility smoothed the interactions of people as the rise of the middle class began to level the old distinctions of rank. It created common rules of behavior.

Today, we often bemoan the decline of civility. What is so different about what is occurring now, Professor Wiesenfarth was asked. He replied (in language more eloquent than this paraphrase): In Jane’s day, people sought common ground to create linkages with one another. Today, people emphasize their differences and erect barriers to communication and cooperation.

This brought to mind a recent announcement from a noted family foundation. Over the next five years, it said, the foundation will concentrate on funding projects that “build communities that nurture people, spur enterprise, bridge differences, foster fairness, and promote civility.” Bridge differences. Promote civility. What better way than by encouraging the thorough and thoughtful reading of Jane Austen novels?

Two innovations come your way in this issue of *Persuasions*. The first is an index, cumulative for the first 15 issues, which promises to be a boon for researchers and for those of us with less than perfect memories about which

year a certain article appeared. Several volunteers assisted in developing and reviewing the index. We thank Maureen Witte, Arthur Axelrad, Jonathan ("Ted") Adams, and Patricia Latkin.

This is also *Persuasions's* debut as an officially refereed journal. The editors previously had an unofficial group of readers who lent their expertise as needed. To encourage subscriptions from university libraries, the editors now have formalized this process. On the inside front cover, you will find the names of *Persuasions's* official referees; they are both professional and amateur scholars, much like the society itself. We appreciate the contributions of these dedicated individuals.

Whether or not the phrase refereed journal is attached, *Persuasions* brings us a mixture of entertainment and enlightenment unmatched by any similar publication. Year after year it earns the praise Jane Austen once bestowed on *Pride and Prejudice*: "light & bright & sparkling." I join the editors in hoping that you enjoy this issue of the journal dedicated to answering the Winchester verger's question. Yes, sir, there was indeed something very particular about that young lady.

GARNET BASS