

Message from the President

“Pray, is she out, or is she not?”

While Miss Crawford finally concludes that Fanny Price is *not* out, after 1995, the rest of us must reach a very different conclusion about Jane Austen. Movie and television studios are acting as if they have suddenly discovered a brand new talent. First came *Clueless*, the hilarious retelling of *Emma* for today’s hip teens. Then we had a poignant and beautiful *Persuasion*, produced for the BBC in England and released in theaters here; the eagerly awaited Emma Thompson film of *Sense and Sensibility*; and the new television serialization of *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet another movie version of *Emma* is reportedly in production now. Jane Austen may actually gain name-recognition among individuals not noted for frequenting the circulating library. If only she could collect royalties.

With all the Hollywood-style hype have come newspaper and magazine articles that attempt to decipher the reason for the sudden interest in Jane Austen. Some of the writers have had a long love affair of their own with Jane and are thrilled to be writing about a subject so close to their hearts. We can only hope that their work, in addition to the movies, will lure many who might not otherwise read, or reread, Jane’s novels.

The out-or-not-out question took a different twist at mid-year when the *London Review of Books* topped a review of the new *Letters* with the headline: “Was Jane Austen Gay?” The ensuing discussion of Jane’s relationship with Cassandra shocked some, grieved others, and exasperated many. Rather than enter such pointless debate, I suggest we follow Elizabeth Bennet’s example. Remember her words: “Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.” So let us laugh.

A different kind of laughter flowed from Madison, Wisconsin, the first weekend in October. It was laughter sparked by joy as 430 of our members discussed Miss Crawford, Fanny Price, Edmund Bertram, the ins and outs of being out, and other topics related to *Mansfield Park*. Many of the papers in this journal originated with the conference. Through their publication and the other articles herein, we hope to give you the opportunity to share the laughter and the joy that is Jane Austen’s special gift to us all.

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