

Regarding Mr. Spence

WILLIAM F. ROCKER, D.D.S.

Holland, Michigan

“I think he must be a Lover of Teeth & Money & Mischeif . . . I would not have had him look at mine for a shilling a tooth & double it.—It was a disagreeable hour” (223-24). Jane Austen’s summation of Mr. Spence, a practising London dentist, reflects the popular view of dentistry in the early nineteenth century. These impressions of the two-day visit were written to Cassandra Austen in a letter contained in the newly published *Jane Austen’s Letters*, edited by Deirdre Le Faye. On first reading, the account confirms the primitive conditions of dental care rendered at that time. When the reader looks more closely at the treatment given by Mr. Spence, and compares it with the standard of care during the period, he discovers some surprisingly modern methods.

Jane Austen was accompanying Edward Knight’s children to London in the fall of 1813. At the time of the trip Marianne Knight was celebrating her twelfth birthday. Fanny Knight, the eldest daughter, was twenty years old and their sister Lizzy Knight was thirteen. Austen reports that they were making the rounds of London and writes, “4 o’clock.—We are just come back from doing M^{rs} Tickars, Miss Hare, and M^r Spence” (219). “I learnt from M^{rs} Tickar’s young lady, to my high amusement, that the stays now are not made to force the Bosom up at all;—*that* was a very unbecoming, unnatural fashion” (220). Miss Hare, a hatter, “had some pretty caps, and is to make me like one of them, only *white* sattin instead of blue” (219-20).

Austen’s assessment of the young Knights’ dental visit was equally frank. “Going to M^r Spence’s was a sad Business & cost us many tears, unluckily we were obliged to go a 2^d time before he could do more than just look:—We went 1st at 1/2 past 12 and afterwards at 3. Papa with us each time” (220).

On this occasion, Jane Austen was experiencing dental practice when “the great bulk of dentists, practising in the United Kingdom, of whom there were some hundreds, were, as a class sadly lacking in scientific knowledge” (Hill 2). The reputation of the dental profession, if it can be characterized as a profession, was such that “Sober-minded and really respectable men, who hoped by honourable effort and proper professional conduct to advance their position, felt it to be a reproach when called by the name of dentist” (Hill 3). One reason for this sad reputation was that many dental practitioners of the time “were in the habit of increasing their returns to a considerable extent by the sale of such accessories to the teeth as might find a place on the dressing or toilette table of their patients” (Hill 4).

A dentist mentioned in Jane Austen’s letters the following year was one of these highly visible merchandising dentists identified as Scarman. “My Brother & Edw^d arrived last night. . . . Their business is about Teeth & Wigs, & they are going after breakfast to Scarman’s & Tavistock S^t” (271). Mr. Scarman was in a well-known London dental office. He practiced with Jacob Hemet who had, “in an advertisement in August 1790 . . . claimed ‘a course

of the above 40 years experience as a Dentist to the Royal Family and principal Nobility” (Hargreaves 195). Jacob Hemet marketed “his ‘Essence of Pearl’ and ‘Pearl Dentifrice,’ patented on January 22, 1773” (Hargreaves 195). Jane Austen confirms her brother’s treatment in a letter to Martha Lloyd, “so it was settled, when James was here;—he wants to see Scarman again, as his Gums last week were not in a proper state for Scarman’s operations” (273). We wonder if through the miracle of “Pearl Dentifrice,” which contained “natural mineral alkali, the odorous particles of the flowers of oranges and roses extracted by watery infusion . . . and orrice root” (Hargreaves 195), that after a week, James was ready for the operation?

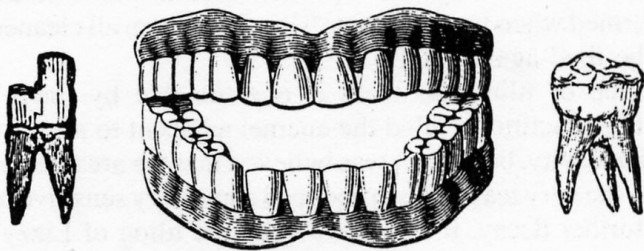
In spite of unsophisticated conditions, dentistry in England was advancing as a field of scientific study when, “Between the years 1771 and 1778 the eminent English surgeon and Physiologist, John Hunter, produced notable studies on dental subjects, his *Natural History of the Human Teeth* became a classic” (Brown 17).

Hunter did much “transplanting” work among the gentry, who could afford to pay his twelve dollars for a *live* tooth and five dollars for a *dead* one! (It should be remembered that about this time a farm labourer would only earn around nine dollars per year. In cases of extreme poverty people were forced to sell their good teeth to buy something for the rest to chew on!) To have false teeth fitted became the rage in eighteenth century England. Full sets were fashioned in solid gold and natural teeth set on bases of ivory. Sheep’s teeth too were used for milord and milady’s mouth; occasionally, too, the body snatchers did a prosperous trade in teeth. (Brown 17)

Dentists in London had survived a 1376 split, after which “Those who practised surgery were barber-surgeons and made up one division, and those who practised tooth-drawing and ‘phlebotomy’ — blood letting—made up the other” (Brown 16). In the late eighteenth century French dental knowledge and German technical developments were considerably ahead of England and, therefore, “practitioners of dentistry in England were keenly interested in new developments and encouraged the flow of knowledge in and out of the country” (Brown 16). “The greatest name of the period is unquestionably that of the Frenchman Pierre Fauchard (1678-1761). His massive book of 863 pages, *Le Chirurgien Dentiste*, is filled with useful information on every aspect of contemporary dentistry” (Wilson 18). Although there were advances made in Europe, and made by Hunter in England, the editor of Hunter’s second edition of the *Natural History of the Human Teeth*, says:

At the period Hunter wrote, dental surgery was perhaps lower than any department of professional science or practice. The treatment of the teeth was still consigned to the hands of the ignorant mechanics, whose knowledge was limited to the forcible extraction of aching teeth, the manufacture of substitutes for those which were lost and some rude methods of filling the cavities produced by decay. (Koch 68)

The dental practitioners were slow to improve their training and even by the mid-nineteenth century in London, “out of 200 dentists only 12 were members of the College of Surgeons” (Hill 29). It was later, in 1857, that the



College of Dentists of England was formed and mandated that the “competency of each candidate for membership must be satisfactorily proved by examination” (Hill 74).

The dental office of the period was also evolving. Mr. Spence, the dentist visited by Jane Austen and her nieces, probably practised in one like this typical London office:

The “surgery” had a large window, in front of which was a chintz covered armchair. Facing this was a stand with hot and cold water and bottles of drugs. On a near-by table lay the instruments in a Morocco-covered case. The dentist was attired in a type of . . . fancy waist-coat and slippers all brightly coloured. His servant sold toothbrushes, emphasizing that these were useless unless they bore his master’s name. (Campbell 1)

In addition, “Their rooms were highly scented, handsome, and lavishly appointed” (Campbell 2).

Jane Austen reports that during their visit to the office of Mr. Spence, “When [Marianne’s] doom was fixed, Fanny Lizzy & I walked into the next room, where we heard each of the two sharp hasty Screams” (223). The extractions done on the twelve-year-old Marianne were not because of abscess, but for orthodontic purposes. It seems that “poor Marianne had two taken out after all, the two just beyond the Eye teeth, to make room for those in front” (223). This procedure, serial extraction, is used by dentists today. Mr. Spence’s treatment, therefore had a modern flair. Mr. Spence may have been following the recommendations of Bartholomeo Ruspini, a dentist to the Prince of Wales and inventor of the mouth mirror, who “was a strong advocate for the treatment of children’s teeth, believing that the neglect of these was the cause later of such widespread loss of adult teeth” (Weinberger 333).

Lizzy’s treatment by Mr. Spence was initiated on the day before Marianne’s traumatic extractions. There were two trips to the office on this day and Austen laments, “Lizzy is not finished yet” (220). She reports, “There have been no Teeth taken out however, nor will be I believe, but he finds *hers* in a very bad state, & seems to think particularly ill of their Durableness”

(220). This is significant information. It must be that Mr. Spence was a careful diagnostician and was concerned about giving the necessary treatment to improve Lizzy's oral condition. In addition to extractions and the elimination of pain, Mr. Spence was interested in preventive dental care. This is confirmed when we learn that "They have been all cleaned, *hers* filed, and are to be filed again" (220).

The practice of filing the teeth is questionable by today's treatment standards. The practitioner filed the enamel adjacent to a cavity to make it level with that cavity, because it was believed that the area treated would not trap food. At the very least, filing produced some very sensitive teeth, if it did not hasten further decay. It may have been the filing of Lizzy's teeth that caused "a very sad hole between two of her front Teeth." Austen grieves again, "alas! we are to go again to-morrow" (220). The following day "we were a whole hour at Spence's, & Lizzy's were filed & lamented over again" (223).

When Fanny was treated by Mr. Spence, he found that she was in the best oral health of the three. Mr. Spence apparently continued his routine of careful examination, cleaning and treatment. "Fanny's teeth were cleaned too—& pretty as they are, Spence found something to do to them, putting in gold and talking gravely" (223).

The gold fillings that were placed in Fanny's teeth give us another clue about the quality of dental care provided by Spence. "Gold foil was the material of choice as a filling material, although early dentists also used silver, platinum and lead for this purpose" (Hillam 99). Gold is still, two hundred years later, a very desirable and biologically compatible material for dental restorations. "A well-executed gold filling, inserted in the manner recommended by Levison and Robertson, with all the decay removed and the metal tightly plugged into the carefully dried cavity, might well last as many years as would a modern one" (Hillam 99). Mr. Spence must have been a dentist of considerable skill and professionalism.

Like a modern preventive dentist, Mr. Spence had been "talking gravely" and educating his young patients on the merits of regular dental care. When Fanny's treatment was completed, he was heard "making a considerable point of seeing her again before winter" (223). Regular dental care and a recheck of his fillings were, no doubt, his motivation for examining Fanny's teeth again. As for Lizzy and Marianne, whose teeth were apparently in poorer condition, "he had before urged the expediency of L. & M.s being brought to Town in the course of a couple of Months to be farther examined, & continued to the last to press for their all coming to him.—My B^r would not absolutely promise" (223).

Jane Austen had a very low opinion of Mr. Spence when she observed him to be interested only in "Money & Mischeif" (223). However, she must have developed an appreciation for dental health, as we can see in a later letter when she describes Mr. Lushington:

Now I must speak of *him*—& I like him very much. . . . He is quite an M.P.—very smiling, with an exceeding good address, & readiness of Language.—I am rather in love with him.—I dare say he is ambitious and Insincere.—He puts me

in mind of M^r Dundas—. He has a wide smiling mouth & very good teeth, & something the same complexion & nose. (240)

Clearly Mr. Spence, with his twentieth-century methods struggling in nineteenth-century trappings, had made a lasting dental impression on the very skeptical Jane Austen, who in spite of her reluctance to treat her own teeth, saw the benefits of good dental care in the smiles of those she loved.

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