

# Portrait, play highlight Madison conference

By Paula L. Stepankowsky

Crisp air, a palette of autumn color, and a full slate of activities related to Jane Austen greeted JASNA members as they gathered in Madison, Wisc., Oct. 5 through Oct. 8 for the 1995 AGM focusing on "Revisiting *Mansfield Park*."

More than 430 members, plus guests, filled the ballroom and smaller meeting rooms of the Madison Concourse Hotel near the state capitol for the conference, which included a reading performance of *Lover's Vows*, a Regency Fair, and a sneak preview of the movie *Persuasion*.

The conference also included a display of a portrait of a young woman said to be Jane Austen, which is in the possession of the Rice family, descendants of Jane's brother, Edward. Henry Rice and his wife, Anne, accompanied the painting to the conference and answered questions about it.

Throughout the conference, conference co-coordinators Joyce Bromley and Joe Wiesenfarth added extra touches, such as bottled water from Bath, England, outside each registrant's door in the morning and personal calling cards complete with each person's name and address inside each conference packet.

After Garnet Bass, JASNA's president, opened the conference Friday, Henry Rice gave the family history of the portrait. There is much debate in the art and literary world about whether the portrait, of a teen-age girl with short light brown hair and a white muslin dress, is in fact, Jane Austen.

Prof. Margaret Anne Doody of Vanderbilt University, along with her colleague, Douglas Murray, outlined their reasons for thinking the painting is of Jane in her teens. Prof. Doody said she thinks the portrait is by three hands.

JASNA members debated the issue among themselves.

Emily Auerbach, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, spoke in the next plenary session of her radio series, "The Courage to Write," on National Public Radio.

JASNA has given her a grant to

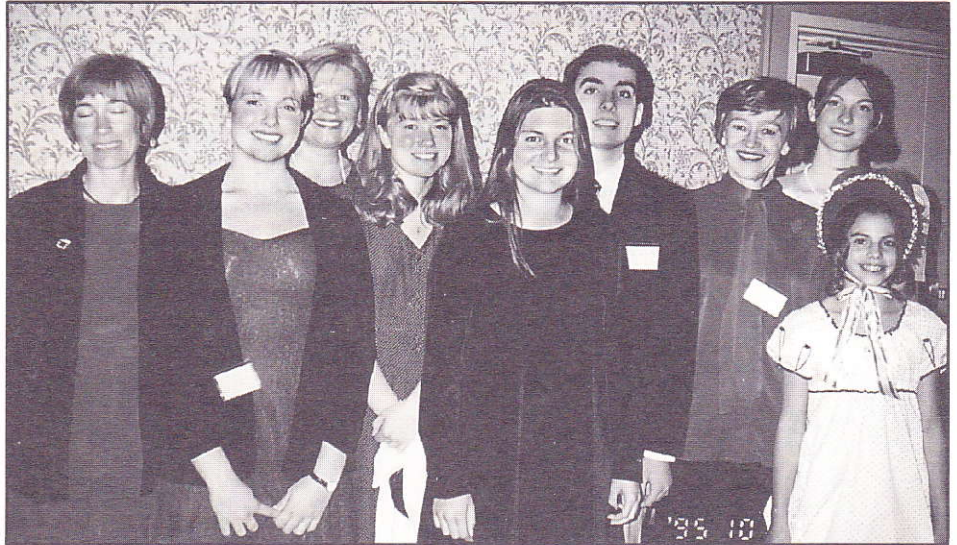


Photo: Jamie Hubbard

Joyce Bromley (third from l.) and Juliet McMaster (third from r.) with winners of the 'Letter to Fanny' writing contest: From left, Julie DeWitt, Casey Lion, Nikki Graf, Alexandra Gunde, Sam Snyder, Jill Myers and Hilary Edesess.

do a series focusing solely on Jane Austen. Prof. Auerbach used JASNA's presence in Madison to work on the series.

Friday's breakout sessions included talks on such topics as rascals in Jane Austen's works, theatricals in *Mansfield Park*, and fashion and satire in *Mansfield Park*.

On Friday evening, members of the Madison chapter of Phi Beta, a national professional fraternity for the creative and performing arts, performed *Lover's Vows*, the Elizabeth Inchbald version of the German melodrama so pivotal in *Mansfield Park*.

As the actors read their parts dressed in period costume, JASNA members who filled the ballroom were able to visualize the scenes in *Mansfield Park* that refer to the corresponding parts of the play.

Saturday morning's breakout sessions included talks on continuations of *Mansfield Park*, coming "out" in society, and sex, race, and class in Austen's novels.

In the afternoon sessions, topics included a discussion of whether Edmund Bertram is a politically correct hero, houses in *Mansfield Park*, and the talkers and listeners of *Mansfield Park*.

At the afternoon plenary session, Jay Clayton, a professor at Vanderbilt University, talked

about communication technology in Jane Austen's time.

Clayton's topic, "Fanny Price in Cyberspace" was particularly apt in view of the growth of the Internet "chat group" run by Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, JASNA Montreal regional coordinator.

In an effort to attract more young people to JASNA, there was an afternoon session for students organized by Julie DeWitt and Juliet McMaster. Young writers were honored for participating in a contest called "Letters to Fanny."

At the Regency Fair before the Saturday banquet, JASNA members, including Irene Diaz, Winnie Blacklow, and Johanna Wiesbrock, dressed in Regency garb and added to the street fair ambiance by selling fruit and pretending to pick pockets.

The theme was carried on at the banquet, where members who came in Regency dress paraded among the tables. Henry Rice offered the traditional toast to Jane Austen.

The brunch speaker Sunday morning was Claudia Johnson, a professor at Princeton University and author of *Women, Politics and the Novel*, who spoke on the topic "Mansfield Park, or What Became of Jane Austen."

Members who stayed through Sunday evening got a sneak preview of the movie *Persuasion*.