

COMMENTS ON JANE AUSTEN April 2026

Dr Penny Gay, Professor Emerita, University of Sydney

Introduced by Geoff McWilliam, Dr Gay, in commenting on why men should read Jane Austen, explained that she simply writes better than any of the authors who went before her, and that she created a new form of novel involving women and men relating to each other in a particular place and at a particular time, a form that is now very popular. In her case the place was England and the particular time was the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century.

Dr Gay described Austen's novels as well-crafted masterpieces focused on events in a particular calendar year, which is never named, but can be deduced from clues in the novel. They demonstrate her deep understanding of the complex conditions in society, particularly for the 'gentry' class in the villages and towns of southern England – still largely agrarian in nature.

Austen displayed a particular skill in writing extensive conversations between characters to carry the novel's story. She was inspired by Shakespeare's dialogue in his comedies, and she made it sound entirely natural and modern, although it was typically witty and theatrical.

Dr Gay showed illustrative slides and read passages from "Emma" to demonstrate Austen's ability to write in great detail about people and relationships in a fictional village remarkably similar to the actual village of Walthamstow, now a suburb of London. The reader is encouraged to spot clues as to what the real motives underlying any scene or conversation are. The example she gave was that of Jane Fairfax's piano, the gift of her secret lover.

Walthamstow c. 1810

By contrast, in the novel "Mansfield Park" Austen has a young lady playing a large modern harp which requires her to show off her bodily attributes – a possible way of attracting a rich husband. The expensive harp, however, cannot be conveniently transported when all the local carts are needed for getting in the hay. Mary Crawford, the harpist, does not understand the priorities of an agrarian economy. Austen's true heroine in this novel, Fanny, is the one who understands the moral problem of slave labour in relation to British landowners increasing their capital by creating sugar and cotton plantations in the West Indies. Dr Gay describes this novel as being the least entertaining and beloved of the Austen novels, but she admires it because it is particularly insightful and reflects Austen's strong social conscience.

Dr Gay followed up with comments on the professions available in Austen's day for members of the gentry if they were not landowners or had no capital investments. They included the Law, the Church and the Military (Army or Navy). They did not include Medicine, which was still regarded as a trade. Interior and garden design emerged in the 18th century as another possible profession, as some rich landowners required modern 'improvements' to their houses and landscapes.

Most Austen heroines married clergymen, whose stipends were often quite small – she arranged her novel plots so that the clergymen were given funds from their family in order to enjoy a comfortable gentry life while ministering to the local community.

Points arising during questions included:

- Accents in Austen's world would not have been posh/upper class, but would have reflected more the 'polite' speech of gentry living close to London and the universities.
- Dickens' major novels were written about 30 years later than Austen's. His writing reflected more upon the advancing industrial revolution and the cities than the agrarian economy prevailing at the time and place of Austen's writing.
- The increased level of interest in Austen's novels in recent times results from the TV 'costume dramas' of the 1990's.

Bernie Haylen highlighted several of Dr Gay's achievements in thanking her on behalf of members.

Alan Locke