

## Women's Health Issues in Jane Austen's Time December 5, 2009

A heavy rain did not prevent a fine turnout of more than 100 Janeites at the regional meeting of the JASNA New York Metro region, held December 5 at the Midtown Executive Club in New York City. Several members took the opportunity to visit the Morgan Library's splendid Jane Austen exhibition beforehand.

The afternoon opened with the popular "talking Jane" game: "Mrs. Jennings' Match Game." As explained by Stephen O'Leary, we were to match characters from different novels with each other, selecting both "positive" and "negative" characters. (Yours truly suggested matching Mr. Palmer with Miss Bates. I think he would slit his wrists within 20 minutes.)

The main speaker at the meeting was Dr. Cheryl Kinney, well known to JASNA members because of her appearances at AGMs and regional events. Dr. Kinney is a much-honored gynecologist who practices in Dallas. Her talk was entitled "A Dangerous Indulgence: Women's Health Issues in the Time of Jane Austen." She enthralled us with a talk that was, by turns, informative, amusing, horrifying and thought provoking. Like a master performer, she elicited laughs, rapt attention, squirms, wincing, and frequent expressions of both horror and sympathy. In a nutshell, she declared, "medical knowledge was in its infancy...medical outcomes dreadful."



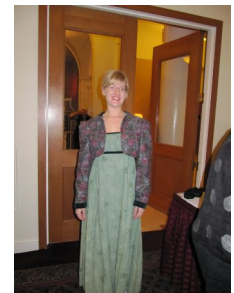
Mary Musgrove: A doctor's nightmare

She spoke in general about 18th century diseases, mortality rates, and the different categories of medical consultants, along with their theories and practices. She then addressed these issues as they pertained to women, especially in childbirth. Throughout she wove in references to the Austen canon. For example, she explained the significance of who sends for an apothecary, who insists on a surgeon, and how Austen's favorable portrayal of Nurse Rooke, the midwife in *Persuasion*, is atypical of fiction of the period.

Among the more horrifying items she recounted: up to one in ten mothers died in childbirth. Wealth and status were no protection, as illustrated by the sad story of the Prince Regent's daughter, Princess Charlotte, dead at 21 after two days of labor and multiple bloodlettings. As horrific as childbirth was, infection was the real killer of women. The plague and consumption accounted for nearly two thirds of the deaths of all young women in 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

Dr. Kinney ended by discussing the nature of Jane Austen's fatal illness, which was probably tuberculosis that infected her adrenal glands after she nursed her brother in London. As Austen wrote in a letter, "sickness is a dangerous indulgence at my time of life."

When Dr. Kinney finished her talk she was rewarded with enthusiastic applause. No doubt she could have talked twice as long and still fascinated us, but it was time for refreshments. Dainty sandwiches and tasty desserts were available downstairs in an attractive room with large pillars. Zoe Kaplan gave the traditional "Birthday Toast" with pizzazz. Pug's Boutique did a brisk business. A generous gift basket was raffled off. The most coveted item, however, was a beautiful green walking dress with a reversible spencer, donated by Rosemary and Lois Gordon. The successful bidder was Mary Ann Linahan.



Kari Hansbarger modeling the dress.

*Meg Levin*