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Jane Austen

One of England’s most beloved literary figures, Jane Austen is synonymous with Regency romantic fiction. Born in 1775, she was raised as a member of the gentry and began writing at the early age of 12. Her best known works include *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), just to name a few. She began writing *Persuasion* in August of 1815, yet she began to grow ill in the spring of the following year and the novel was not published until after her death in 1817. Despite having only six years of success, today her novels have roused a veritable cult following, with Janeites forming societies all around the world. Additionally, her works have been adapted into countless popular television series, films, and stage plays.

Regency England

In 1811 King George III was declared mentally unfit to rule England and his son, the Prince of Wales, was established as his Regent. Thus the “Regency” era of English history began and did not end until 1820 when the king died and the Regent (or Prinny as he was affectionately called) was crowned King George IV.

Regency England was an era characterized by manners, grace, and most importantly, social standing. One’s place within the bon ton was critical, especially for young ladies intent on securing a husband of title and wealth. At the top of the hierarchy was the nobility: dukes, earls, marquises, viscounts, and barons whose sole occupation was pleasure. The upper middle-class was the gentry—gentleman farmers, clergymen, and military officers who came from old and respectable families, but for the most part, were not titled. Baronets, such as Sir Walter Elliot, graced the top of this class. Although not a peer of the realm, a baronet was still subject to entailment—a law which stated that the closest male heir inherit the title and all property.
For younger sons and those wishing for a better life, the Royal Navy was considered a fine and honorable occupation. Officers began their training as young as ten and rose through the ranks of midshipman, lieutenant, commander, and captain by merit of mostly skill and valor. However, having the right political connections didn’t hurt. While waiting for an admiralty to become available, captains often spent their time looking for ways to capture enemy ships and hostile ports in order to reap the rewards in the form of bounties or prize money—any profit from the sale of the cargo, or from the ship itself, was split amongst the crew, with the captain taking home as much as three-eighths of the prize. Just as Captain Wentworth demonstrates, given the right circumstances, an officer could make a sizeable fortune while at sea.

Napoleonic Wars

In 1804 Napoleon Bonaparte declared himself Emperor of France, and England was plunged into an eleven-year war. Napoleon’s initial defeat in 1814 was largely due to the decisive naval battle at Trafalgar, boosting the popularity of the Royal Navy. Although Napoleon was exiled to the island of Elba, he escaped within the year and was finally defeated at the Battle of Waterloo by an army led by the Duke of Wellington on June 18, 1815.

Bath

The site of the only naturally occurring hot springs within England, Bath was first settled by the Romans in AD 49 where they built pumps and bath houses. By the Regency era, Bath was a mecca for those with all sorts of maladies, believing that drinking the restorative waters would cure the most common and uncommon ills. Although Jane Austen herself did not care for Bath, the city plays a pivotal role in *Persuasion* as well as in several of her other novels.

Lyme Regis

This “Pearl of Dorset” has a long and fascinating history. The Cobb, a manmade breakwater built in the 13th century enabled the town to become a major port and shipbuilding center. It is a major feature not only in *Persuasion*, but also within John Fowles’ novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Additionally, Lyme Regis’ abundance of Mesozoic-era fossils puts it on the “Jurassic Coast,” a World Heritage Site.
Captain

Wentworth came out of the wars a very wealthy man with prize money equaling £20,000 – today’s equivalent is $1,018,543.

An unmarried woman of genteel birth was often ridiculed and thought unnatural as the only goal for a young lady was to secure an advantageous marriage for herself and her family.

Once two members of Society were introduced, they were considered known—to fail to acknowledge an acquaintance, whether unintentionally or deliberately (known as giving the cut direct) was inexcusable and could lead to drastic social consequences.

On board ships, the officers generally ate their meals on pewter or silver plates but the average seaman ate off a square, wooden plate—hence the term “three square meals a day.”

Regency Vocabulary

A peer of the realm is any male member of the nobility (duke, earl, marquis, viscount, baron).

A dowager was any widow of a peer.

A fortnight is any period of 14 nights or two weeks.

Lawn bowls is a sport in which the objective is to roll slightly asymmetric balls, called bowls, so that they stop closest to a smaller, white bowl called the “jack” or “kitty.”

A sedan chair was an enclosed, windowless, wheel-less, horseless box suspended by two poles and carried by two chairmen who carried the passenger and who charged by the distance.

Marmion is an epic poem published in 1808 by Walter Scott about the Battle of Flodden Field.

A barouche was a carriage with two seats (one facing forward, one backward) seating four comfortably.

A popular phrase to refer to Regency high society, bon ton means “good taste” in French.

The Navy List is a list of naval officers, their ranks and seniority, and the ships which they have commanded, currently command or to which they are appointed. It is still published by the British Royal Navy.
Janeitism: “the self-consciously idolatrous enthusiasm for ‘Jane’ and every detail relative to her” (Johnson, 211)

Very few authors have such a prolific cult following as does Jane Austen. So, one must wonder what it is about this woman that fascinates us “Janeites” and makes us so passionate about her works. Is it the allure of the Regency era? Is it the clothes and the carriages? Is it the romance? Although all of these things are appealing (especially the clothes), I believe that it is Jane Austen’s ability to weave a tale that not only excites a romantic heart, but that also enlightens a human soul. Persuasion is just one such tale. It is so much more than a struggle between being persuaded for love and being persuaded for duty. It is a tale of forgiveness, redemption, and the importance of second chances. We may witness Anne and Wentworth fall in love all over again, but we also witness their eternal progression. Through their story, Austen awakens our divine sensibilities and reminds us that we too can take advantage of all the blessings forgiveness and redemption offer as long as we accept our second chance.

–Jenny Huffman

Dramaturg’s Note

Béatrice et Bénédict
Based on Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing
June 8–11 de Jong Concert Hall
Tickets on sale April 25 (801) 422-4322 byuarts.com

BYU School of Music presents Berlioz’s comic opera