

Jane Austen's doctors and patients

An inexorable natural selection ordains that works of art that survive 200 years are likely to have outstanding merit. So then with Jane Austen's novels, enjoying a recent upsurge in popularity, in films and on television, and also allowing us to catch a few glimpses of the medical practice of the times. Compared with modern American doctors, the surgeons and apothecaries of 1800 were poorer and less exalted in status. Thus in *Sanditon* Sam is "only a surgeon," and Miss Edwards's parents are looking "much higher." But with American medicine on a slippery slope since the 1970s, the new generation of American primary care physicians and family practitioners could some day experience a rude regression to a more traditional but less golden mean.

Jane Austen depicts her country practitioners as generally hard working and coming promptly when called. Considering how few remedies they had, they were met with inordinately high expectations. Their bedside manner may have been better; they called regularly on the sick in their homes and were meticulous in reassuring their patients. In *Persuasion*, Mr. Robinson feels and feels and rubs his young patient's dislocated clavicle, looks grave, and speaks in low tones, but then reassures the parents that he "found nothing to increase alarm." Later, when Louisa imprudently jumps from the Cobb at Lyme Regis and falls lifeless on the pavement so that the bystanders are sick with horror, we are told that a surgeon came "almost before it seemed possible," diagnosed severe concussion, but reassuringly said that he had seen recoveries from even greater injuries.

Belief in doctors' effectiveness varies. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood's recovery from a fever with putrid tendencies is unquestioningly attributed to Mr. Harris's trying as a last resort "some fresh application." But the haughty Mrs. Denham in *Sanditon* thinks that calling a doctor would only be encouraging the servants and poor to fancy themselves ill. She has lived 70 years without seeing a doctor and thinks that her late husband would still be alive had he done likewise: "Ten fees, one after another, did the man take who sent him out of the world."

The patients described are often chronic hypochondriacs. Functional disorders and somatisation abound. "I wish you could persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill," says Charles Musgrove in *Persuasion*. In *The Watsons* young Margaret has headaches conveniently when there is work to be done in the house. Emma's father, Mr. Woodhouse, is an invalid, terrified about catching cold, suffering from a weak stomach that tolerates no rich food, and forever calling on his physician, Dr Perry. In *Sanditon*, Diana Parker is so ill from chronic spasmodic bile that she can hardly crawl from bed to sofa; Susan's severe headaches require six leeches a day; she has had three teeth drawn, her nerves are deranged, she has fainting spells, and can speak only in a whisper. Poor Arthur, her brother, is also quite languid, and they fear for his liver. How reassuring that some things never change.--