

Medicine During Regency Era

2015 November 21

Dr. Marli Robinson and Dr. Kevin Levere treated us to a very well put together presentation about Medicine in the Regency Period. Dr. Levere even arrived dressed, cravat and all, as a regency period physician which added great interest to our meeting.

The presentation began in describing the various levels of medical practitioner that would have been around in Jane's time. The three doctors were the apothecary, surgeon, and physician and there were a large variety of individuals described by Dr. Robinson as the "Allied Health Care Team" and these folks ranged anywhere from nurses and midwives to blacksmiths in the form of tooth-drawers. The Apothecary was considered a tradesman and fulfilled the role of our modern day pharmacists with their main form of remuneration being from the purchase of medications and equipment. The apothecary would have been required to train under a mandatory apprenticeship. The surgeon was the highest class of tradesman and was generally compensated very well for services. An apprenticeship was required to be a surgeon as well and at that time there was an increasing requirement for medical school as the Royal College of Surgeons was established in 1800. A Mr. Lyford attended on Jane Austen in her illness and was of the opinion that her illness was caused by bile. At the top of the pecking order was the physician who was a gentlemanly professional. These doctors would have been university educated and their education would have been made up of lectures and observations as the hands on elements of the medical profession were left to the surgeon. During this time, a woman by the name of Margaret Ann Bulkley disguised herself as a male so that she could practice medicine. Physicians were governed by the Royal College of Physicians in London, established in 1518. Unfortunately, as the physician was a gentleman, their only compensation was general by annual retainer.

Health during the period was the next area discussed. Unfortunately, there was still a general trend of the treatment for illnesses having as much likelihood of killing off the patients as curing them in medical treatment called "heroic medicine" likely referring to the dramatic elements involved. Medicine was based upon the belief that illness was caused by an imbalance in the four humours: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Some of the treatments of the time included bloodletting, cupping, leeches, emetics to cause vomiting and clysters (enemas). Some of the worst contagious diseases of the period included small pox (later vaccinated against thanks to Dr. Jenner) which was frightening both because of the rate of mortalities and disfigurements caused by the disease; and yellow fever or yellow jack. It is estimated that about 70% of troops died of yellow fever in the West Indies but with treatments such as: warm baths followed by cold baths; cramming 6-8 invalids into each bath; the suffocating induced by these events; and the bloodletting and blistering, it is not much of a surprise that so many succumbed to the illness. Having children was one of the riskiest adventures of all with two out of every mother and infant dying after or during childbirth. Jane had three sisters-in-law die in childbirth. Women of the gentry commonly suffered from "hysteria" which were only maladies of the rich. In some ways the hysteria was an indirect boast of wealth that indicated that the victim had the leisure to be in hysterics. The treatment for hysteria were laudanum, vinaigrettes, and later were thought by some to have been caused by the "genital neurosis of women" which had to be dealt with by "purging of a different sort". One can only imagine the commonality of hysteria may have increased at this point.

“Taking the waters” became a popular treatment for illness and caused a substantial growth in the population at places such as Bath. Sea bathing later became all the rage and resulted in a mass exodus to beach towns such as Brighton. “If one could but go to Brighton” (Mrs. Bennet).

With all the blunders made by medical practitioners in the regency period, Dr. Levere reminded us all that without some of the observations and experiences of the doctors in that time, we would be where we are today.

After a brief tea, Michelle rose to give an excellent presentation on Death and Mourning in the Regency Period. Life expectancy at that time was around 40 years. There were no funeral parlours or embalming at this time so oftentimes the dead were placed in a room of their home and wrapped in wool. Depending on the time of year and weather, they would be buried at the next opportunity which would be sooner than later during the warmer months. For those with less money, they would be placed in a borrowed coffin and then be buried in a common grave.

Mourning customs were extensive, although more so for women. Women were expected to wear mourning clothes which involved wearing a head covering, have no trimmings or shiny fabrics, and no jewelry or other decorations. Women would not be permitted to go out visiting and were not allowed to attend dances or other social occasions. Men were simply required to wear a black band on their arm for a period of 6 months. Some men added black gloves or a black cravat. Mourning periods varied from 12 months to 2 weeks depending on the relationship with the deceased person.

Michelle then proceeded to discuss the role of death in Jane’s works and how she used the theme in each work. When examined more closely, death plays a significant role in all of the books. Often, it was the death of a parent or the impending death of a parent which was the base of the story and usually the parent who is the more sensible or practical of the parents would be the one to die or to have died. Sense and Sensibility of course begins with the death of Mr. Dashwood which spurs the whole plot of the Dashwood girls moving to Barton Cottage. Later in the book, Marianne’s brush with death acts a major turning point in the story. Interestingly, the discussion of death is largely material and it is the position of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters as opposed to the heartbreak they must have been feeling that is the main focus. Pride and Prejudice focuses largely on the possibility of Mr. Bennet’s death and the importance of the girls getting married to lessen the effect of his death. Additionally, there is the role of the death of Mr. Darcy, senior, in Mr. Wickham’s story. In Mansfield Park, Michelle suggested that in the case of Fanny Price, her family’s poverty is a state worse than death and it is the serious illness and possible death of Tom that allows the plot to turn and for Mary Crawford’s true character to be revealed. Emma begins with the discussion of the death of Emma’s mother. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax also suffered the death of or both parents. In Persuasion, it was the death of sensible Lady Elliot which resulted in the financial circumstances by Sir Elliot. Michelle rightly pointed out that in Lady Elliot, Anne likely lost the only member of the family that would sympathize with her. Later in the story, it was Louisa Musgrove’s fall and threat of death that made Captain Frederick Wentworth see her childishness and once more appreciate Anne’s steadfast and reliable character. Finally, in Northanger Abbey, the entire book centers around death but in a different way as it deals largely with the mysterious nature of death and murder as the naïve Catherine Morland discovers through her folly that perhaps “it is possible to read too many novels” (Henry Tilney).