



November 2011

Dear Colleague:

It is a pleasure to announce the NEH Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers on “Jane Austen and Her Contemporaries,” to be held at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri from June 18–July 20, 2012. This seminar will seek to stimulate new insights about Austen by reading her closely alongside British women writers of her own time, using both digital and traditional archival research techniques.

I hope to attract a strong group of applicants, so I welcome both your interest and your help in circulating this announcement of the seminar. In this letter, you’ll find information about the topic and approach of the seminar, the setting for the seminar, and guidelines for potential participants.

Why this topic?

Jane Austen (1775–1817) is an author who seems to need no introduction. But do we know Jane Austen as well as we think we do? Or rather, how do we know her, and how might we know her (and help our students to come to know her and her work) with greater nuance? The proposition of this five-week NEH summer seminar is that there remains a good deal left to apprehend about Austen’s writings. This is particularly the case in the wake of new, searchable data about—and greater awareness of—the published and unpublished writings of her contemporaries. Scholars and students alike make arguments about Austen’s greatness, innovation, uniqueness, universality, and/or achievements, but we often do so with scant reference to the contexts in which she wrote. We should seek to do better.

In this seminar we will investigate the new insights that might be realized about Jane Austen by reading her closely alongside the now understudied—but once well-known—women writers of her day. Whether we are seeking to understand Austen’s fictional techniques, political views, religious beliefs, reception in her lifetime, or posthumous reputation, we stand to learn a great deal by reading her in new contexts. This seminar will have a two-pronged emphasis: 1) undertaking collective close reading and discussion of primary texts by Austen in tandem with those of her once-celebrated contemporaries and 2) providing tools for pursuing advanced study of Austen among other female authors of this era, using both emerging digital and traditional archival research techniques.

Despite valuable scholarship that considers Austen alongside Sir Walter Scott, Frances Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, or the so-called “big six” Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats), there remains a tendency to write and teach about Austen in a restricted frame of reference, in single-author studies or major author courses. Even when she is presented among a cast of literary characters, Austen appears in unsettlingly predictable ways. Scholars of eighteenth-century fiction often choose to devote the last chapters of their books to her writings, presenting her as a culminating figure. Those who specialize in nineteenth-century fiction frequently give Austen the pride of place of their books’ first chapters,

positioning her as a foundational presence from which all that follows emanated. Austen is used to tell a story (one of origin or endpoint) that does little to investigate her immediate literary progenitors and successors as they had an effect on her own writings or on how her reputation was built. Certainly, a generation of scholars has considered Austen in crucial ways that have shattered the myth of her as historically, culturally, and politically ignorant or limited. But we have by no means exhausted our opportunities for gaining new knowledge about this much-discussed, much-beloved author.

Why now?

The need to deepen our claims about Austen has arisen at least in part because, in recent years, the scholarly landscape for Austen studies (and, indeed, for most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers) has changed radically. The emergence of Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO; Gale), Google Books, and British Fiction, 1800–1829, to name the most obvious sources of new data, has made it possible—even imperative—to ask very different questions about Austen. For example, we must look more widely to understand *Pride and Prejudice*'s opening phrase, “It is a truth universally acknowledged. . .” We can now study the phrase as it has appeared in the work of Anna Letitia Barbauld, Edmund Burke, and Joseph Priestley, as well as in hundreds of lesser-known texts, including histories, religious works, and military accounts.

At the same time, we must be very careful about how we make claims using data from digital texts. Too few are aware of their potential limitations and particularities. At the present time in Austen studies, it remains necessary to use both old and new tools—and to understand the benefits and shortcomings of each. This is evident in studying Austen's frequency of use of particular words and phrases. The online *Hyper-Concordance to Jane Austen* is useful, but even a seeming research dinosaur such as the print *Concordance to the Works of Jane Austen* (1982) has its advantages, as we will discover together.

Another issue for the study of Austen among her contemporaries is that only a fraction of relevant materials have at this point been digitized. For Austen, there is now the UK-based *Jane Austen Fiction Manuscripts* site, the applications of which—for scholarship and the classroom—are still being explored. The site boasts 1100 pages of fiction in manuscript; Austen's letters (fewer than 200 extant) have not yet been made available in a comprehensive, editorially reliable digital form. In the study of her contemporaries, however, we find that much less information is available in any form, despite a wealth of information.

Manuscript, print, *and* digital resources must now be consulted, in order to be as exhaustive as possible in one's research; this state of affairs may be frustrating, because few of us were trained in both traditional and emergent research methods. In the seminar, we will spend significant time on traditional methods, seeking out archival information by determining the existence and location of rare documents and deciphering some of them in person. From watermarks to sealing wax, manuscripts hold unique information that cannot (yet) be captured digitally. We live in an era in which it may *appear* that the most relevant research information is available online, but in fact, significant knowledge about Austen's contemporaries is not yet available in digital form. It is imperative that this information not be newly “lost” or forgotten.

We will work together to make sense of when to use emerging digital technologies to attempt to answer scholarly questions and when to seek out paper-based materials, both print and

manuscript. For instance, when ought one to consult Google Books to find reviews of the works of Hannah More, and when would print indexes of book reviews be preferable? Consulting both tools (as the members of this seminar will have the opportunity to do) reveals that neither kind of search is comprehensive. To advance our knowledge of Jane Austen in her own time, we must understand the limitations of the digital world, as well as the crucial necessity of continuing to consult manuscript and print evidence. This seminar will give participants an opportunity to blend the old and the new to produce original work on this pivotal author and her milieu.

The approach of this seminar

This seminar will meet half days in the mornings (with several full days) on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays on campus at the University of Missouri. It is expected that seminar members will attend every class session. We will read in concert a total of eight novels--four novels by Austen and four by her contemporaries, supplementing those readings with critical essays. (There will be several readings to be completed in advance of the seminar as well.) Most Mondays will be spent discussing an Austen novel, with Wednesdays discussing a novel by an Austen contemporary, concentrating on the ways in which they illuminate Austen's writings or vice versa.

Fridays will be spent collectively examining issues of reception with additional materials to be located and described by participants themselves. We will look at research methodologies that might be used and textual and editorial problems that ought to be addressed in relation to the novels we read together. We will consider contemporary reviews and other commentary in periodicals, as well as material in published and unpublished life writings from the period. Guest speakers, in person and via Skype, will be invited to address us to us on editorial, publication-related, and archival matters. Finally, we will take a group daytrip via chartered bus to the Spencer Library of the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, KS, to consult manuscripts and receive instruction in paleography.

Each participant will engage in (and ultimately make public the results of) ongoing research or pedagogical projects, including work for publication and/or print or digital editions.

Who should apply?

NEH guidelines indicate that these seminars are designed for teachers of American undergraduate students. Most participants will be expected to have a graduate degree in English, history, women's studies, or a related discipline and to have a demonstrated research and/or teaching interest in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century studies. Qualified independent scholars and those employed by museums, libraries, historical societies, and other organizations may be eligible to compete for a spot in the seminar, provided they can effectively advance its teaching and research goals. Adjunct and part-time lecturers are also eligible to apply. Sixteen participants will be selected.

Applicants must be United States citizens, residents of U.S. jurisdictions, or foreign nationals who have been residing in the United States or its territories for at least the three years immediately preceding the application deadline. The NEH also asks selection committees to give priority to applicants who have not participated in an NEH-supported seminar, institute, or Landmarks workshop in the past three years. Up to two full-time graduate students in the

humanities may also be accepted to the seminar. Finally, you may apply to more than *two* seminars or institutes in a given year, but you may attend no more than one.

Complete application information will be found on the seminar website:

<<http://nehseminar.missouri.edu>>. Application materials must be submitted by March 1, 2012. Your application will have several components (including a CV and two letters of recommendation), but the most important part of the application is your essay. This essay should provide information about why you are applying to this seminar; your relevant personal and academic information, including your qualifications and anticipated contributions; what you hope to accomplish; and the relation of the study to your teaching.

Potential applicants should feel free to contact me directly with specific questions about their application for the seminar at <looserd@missouri.edu>.

Where and when?

The stipend for this five-week seminar will be \$3900, with a check for the first half stipend waiting for participants at their arrival on campus. Please note that these stipends may be considered income and thus have tax consequences.

At the University of Missouri, seminar participants will be granted Internet access and full library privileges during the course of the seminar as visiting scholars. Of greatest research interest to the participants will no doubt be MU's subscription to *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (ECCO), Parts I and II. Additional databases such as *British Periodicals*, *Electronic Enlightenment* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* will be available for scholars to consult on and off campus during the seminar's length.

Seminar participants will be encouraged to live together on the University of Missouri campus at the centrally located TRUE Scholars House, in its modest, private single rooms, fully furnished and carpeted. The opportunity for participants to live together is an important, enriching element of the seminar experience. The house itself is commodious and is air-conditioned with a generously sized full kitchen and eating area, a large main lounge, a quiet study room, a coin-operated laundry, a large patio area, and access to cable TV and wireless Internet. More information about (and photographs of) the facility may be found here:

<http://reslife.missouri.edu/housing2/hall_truescholars.htm>. The single room rate is estimated at \$40 a night and includes weekly linen service and periodic cleaning. Participants will also have the option of purchasing a la carte or meal plan options through Campus Dining Services. Campus parking will be available for a modest fee. There is no grocery store within walking distance of campus but local bus and taxi service are available.

The NEH neither encourages nor discourages Summer Scholars from having spouses, partners, and/or families with them during this period of time. It is, of course, expected that NEH Summer Scholars will be fully engaged in the seminar over the course of the five weeks, regardless of their personal circumstances. The NEH stipulates that family members may not participate in formal program activities, though informal social involvement will be possible.

Beyond of the rigors of the seminar, participants will find that Columbia, Missouri is a culturally vibrant place to spend the summer, with several free outdoor concerts, campus theatre

performances, and a nearby independent film cinema. The natural setting of the campus also has its beauties, with the adjacent MKT and Katy Trails (for walking and biking) stretching hundreds of miles across the state. Seminar participants will also have complimentary access to the University's state-of-the art Rec Center <<http://www.mizzourec.com/>>. Columbia has a population of approximately 100,000 and is served by a small regional airport; the city is also equidistant from Kansas City and St. Louis, MO (120 miles) and may be reached from both airports for a fee by a van shuttle service, Mo-X <<http://moexpress.com/>>.

Contacts

More detailed information about the seminar, including application instructions, will be made available at the seminar website, <<http://nehseminar.missouri.edu>>. If you have questions about any aspects of the seminar, please feel free to contact me at <looserd@missouri.edu>. For questions about housing, logistics, or the website, please contact Caitlin Kelly at <clkp68@mail.missouri.edu>.

Thank you for your interest in applying to what promises to be an exciting seminar!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Devoney Looser". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "L".

Devoney Looser
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