



**“Oh! Who can ever be tired of Bath”? (*Northanger Abbey* I.X.59):
The Representation of Bath
in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion***

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Abstract:

If Bath became an attractive destination for the English aristocracy and upper middle classes in the wake of Queen Anne’s visit there in 1702, the elegant resort now largely thrives upon the highly profitable Austen industry, boasting an annual Jane Austen Festival and a Jane Austen Centre (including cosy Regency tearooms!) located at No. 40 Gay Street: “a must for any Jane Austen fan”...There is no denying that Bath was a place of true significance for Jane Austen: her first recorded stay there in late 1797 undoubtedly ignited her literary imagination, since what would become her first completed novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is partly set in the Georgian city. Although the lively social life of Bath still proved an exciting scene for the young novelist during her second stay in 1799 with her brother Edward, she was reportedly less enthusiastic when her parents decided to move there in 1801 for the benefit of Mrs Austen’s health. While Bath was famous for the curative virtues of its waters, theoretically synonymous with purity and purification, Jane Austen’s letters to her sister Cassandra point to other metaphors as the Austens were having a hard time trying to find an affordable home – and one not affected by signs of dampness: “We have now nothing in view. – When you arrive, we will at least have the pleasure of examining some of these putrifying Houses again” (22 May 1801). As Bath became the Austens’ permanent home between 1801 and 1806, Jane Austen’s personal experience there proved less thrilling, especially after the unexpected death of Rev. George Austen in 1805 left his widow and single daughters in straitened circumstances.

The “sense of place” Jane Austen felt thus evolved over time, as evidenced in her letters and in two of her novels: *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, her last completed work, which she wrote while suffering from the illness that would kill her. If the two novels were actually published together with a “Biographical Notice of the Author” drafted by Henry Austen in December 1817 following the premature death of his sister, their respective atmospheres testify to their authoress’s changing perception of the bustle of the city whose rigid social customs had degenerated into vain rituals and stupid private parties during the Regency. While *Northanger*

Abbey is reminiscent of such descriptions as can be found in the *New Bath Guide* of 1795, where the city is aptly referred to as “a vortex of amusement” which provided both the aristocracy and the middle classes with the opportunity to indulge in activities related to entertainment and health, *Persuasion* is more alert to the changing social nuance of location and to the breaking up of a society hardly aware of its derelictions.

This paper will thus focus on the various metaphors associated with Bath in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* where the interdependent economies of health, sickness, marriage and gossip work to uncover what actually lies beneath the genteel surface of polite manners and civilized conventions. While *Northanger Abbey* hints at the actual and symbolical dangers inherent in Bath’s ruthless marriage market, *Persuasion* conveys the heroine’s disenchantment with the clamour and “white glare of Bath”, where characters such as Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay find themselves in murky waters. Whereas most characters go to Bath to be cured physically and emotionally – its waters symbolizing a smooth circulation and flow – the representation of Bath in *Persuasion* ironically conveys a sense of social competition, alienation and disunion. Despite Catherine Morland’s enthusiastic exclamation “Oh! Who can ever be tired of Bath?”, the most recurrent metaphors that run through the two novels reveal other disturbing undercurrents, probably accounting for the fact that Jane Austen herself did grow tired of Bath, tired of watching people “in pursuit only of amusement all day long” (*NA* I.10.59), especially when she could not afford to enjoy all the pleasures the fashionable city had to offer or simply could not stand such a picture of intellectual poverty.

Biography:

Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou is a senior lecturer in English Studies at the University of Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne and a member of the Centre d’Histoire du XIXe Siècle (EA 3550). She is the author of two essays on Jane Austen’s novels: *La Représentation de l’argent dans les romans de Jane Austen: L’Être et l’avoir* (Coll. Des Idées et des femmes, L’Harmattan, 2012) and *Between Secrets and Screens. Sense and Sensibility: Jane Austen, Ang Lee*. (Paris: CNED, PUF, 2015). She has also published several articles on Jane Austen’s fictional responses to the economic and social transformations of her time. Her current research explores how novels written by women during the Georgian and Victorian periods address female concerns about property, inheritance, consumption or the domestic economy, and engage with increasingly complex financial realities.