Anna Uddén, Örebro University

**Questioning the Canon: Teaching Historical Critical Thinking**

The relation between text and context is contested among scholars in the field of literary history (Parker). To raise such a large and complex issue within the range of a 7.5 hec classics course for teacher students may seem like risky business. Can students without much prior knowledge of either literary periods or genres be made to reflect independently on the relation between texts and aspects of context? That was the question for a case-studied course, focused on critical thinking skills. Provided first with models of thinking about literature in context, I wanted students to see that the aim of historical thinking in literary context is not to apply modern concepts to literature of the past. To this end, students were instructed, for instance, to approach English classics with questions that reflect various critical practices, one for each study group, turning the seminar into a critical workshop. Having received an introduction to romanticism through the literary family Wollstonecraft/Godwin/Shelley – as a nutshell historical context – students considered Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as the kind of novel that lends itself to multiple critical approaches. Thus encouraged to ask complex critical questions about literature in historical context – but to resist simple or reductive answers - students practiced thinking on scholarly terms. As the result of this reflective-practice study shows, students sometimes neglect close reading skills as they are caught up in historical narratives – in themselves compelling. They sometimes focus on critical approaches to the exclusion of their own literary response. The task to teach literary appreciation along with historical thinking remains daunting, and one is reminded by the results that students learn individually, learning to take thinking in stride.

Anna Uddén is a lecturer in English literature at Örebro University, with a PhD from Uppsala University (1999) on parody in the eighteenth-century novel. She is currently working on changing notions of authorship in the long eighteenth century, combining historical criticism with concepts of intentionality from narrative theory.