

Persuasion



Jane Austen

*With an Introduction and Notes by
Susan Ostrov Weisser*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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From the Pages of Persuasion



Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character: vanity of person and of situation. (page 4)

Always to be presented with the date of her own birth, and see no marriage follow but that of her youngest sister, made the book an evil; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, had she closed it, with averted eyes, and pushed it away. (page 7)

Half the sum of attraction, on either side, might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love. (page 25)

She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning. (page 29)

Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. (page 65)

He was evidently a young man of considerable taste in reading, though principally in poetry; and besides the persuasion of having given him at least an evening's indulgence in the discussion of such subjects, which his usual companions had probably no concern in, she had the hope of being of real use to him in some suggestions as to the duty and benefit of struggling against affliction. (pages 95-96)

“A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!—He ought not—he does not.” (page 173)

“Even the smooth surface of family-union seems worth preserving, though there may be nothing durable beneath.” (page 187)

“When one lives in the world, a man or woman's marrying for money is too common to strike one as it ought.” (page 189)

“Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing.” (page 222)

“Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you.”

(page 223)

“If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty.” (page 230)

“It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides.” (page 232)

When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. (page 234)

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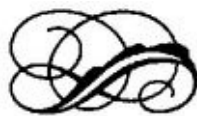
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Jane Austen



The English novelist Jane Austen was born December 16, 1775, the seventh of eight children, in the Parsonage House of Steventon, Hampshire, where she spent her first twenty-five years. During her brief lifetime Austen witnessed political unrest, revolution, war, and industrialization, yet these momentous events are not the central subjects of her finely focused novels. Rather, Austen wrote of her immediate experience: the microcosm of the country gentry and its class-conscious insularity. Jane's father, the Reverend George Austen, was the erudite country rector of Steventon, and her mother, Cassandra (nee Leigh), was descended from an aristocratic line of learned clergymen. By no means wealthy, the Austens nonetheless enjoyed a comfortable, socially respectable life, and greatly prized their children's education.

Jane and her beloved elder (and only) sister, Cassandra, were schooled in Southampton and Reading for a short period, but most of their education took place at home. Private theatrical performances in the barn at Steventon complemented Jane's studies of French, Italian, history, music, and eighteenth-century fiction. An avid reader from earliest childhood, Jane began writing at age twelve, no doubt encouraged by her cultured and affectionate family. Indeed, family and writing were her great loves. Despite a fleeting engagement in 1802, Austen never married. Her first two novels, "Elinor and Marianne" and "First Impressions," were written while at Steventon but never published in their original form.

Following her father's retirement, Jane moved in 1801 with her parents and sister to Bath. The popular watering hole, removed from the country life Jane preferred, presented the sociable young novelist with a wealth of observations and experience that would later emerge in her novels. Austen moved to Southampton with her mother and sister after the death of her father in 1805. Several years later the three women settled in Chawton Cottage in Hampshire, where Austen resided until the end of her life. She relished her return to the countryside and, with it, a renewed artistic vigor that led to the revision of her early novels. *Sense and Sensibility*, a reworking of "Elinor and Marianne," was published in 1811, followed by *Pride and Prejudice*, a reworking of "First Impressions," two years later.

Austen completed four more novels (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion*) in the Chawton sitting room. Productive and discreet, she insisted that her work be kept secret from anyone outside the family. All of her novels were published anonymously, including the posthumous release, thanks to her brother Henry, of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.

The last years of Austen's life were relatively quiet and comfortable. Her final, unfinished work, *Sanditon*, was put aside in the spring of 1817, when her health sharply declined and she was taken to Winchester for medical treatment of what appears to have been Addison's disease or a form of lymphoma. Jane Austen died there on July 18, 1817, and is buried in Winchester Cathedral.

The World of Jane Austen and Persuasion



- 1775 The American Revolution begins in April. Jane Austen is born on December 16 in the Parsonage House in Steventon, Hampshire, England, the seventh of eight children (two girls and six boys).
- 1778 Frances (Fanny) Burney publishes *Evelina*, a seminal work in the development of the novel of manners.
- 1781 German philosopher Immanuel Kant publishes his *Critique of Pure Reason*.
- 1782 The American Revolution ends. Fanny Burney's novel *Cecilia* is published.
- 1783 Cassandra and Jane Austen begin their formal education in Southampton, followed by study in Reading.
- 1788 King George III of England suffers his first bout of mental illness, leaving the country in a state of uncertainty and anxiety. George Gordon, Lord Byron, is born.
- 1789 George III recuperates. The French Revolution begins. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* is published.
- 1791 American political philosopher Thomas Paine publishes the first part of *The Rights of Man*.
- 1792 Percy Bysshe Shelley is born. Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- 1793 A shock wave passes through Europe with the execution of King Louis XVI of France and, some months later, his wife, Marie-Antoinette; the Reign of Terror begins. England declares war on France. Two of Austen's brothers, Francis (1774-1865) and Charles (1779-1852), serve in the Royal Navy, but life in the countryside of Steventon remains relatively tranquil.
- 1795 Austen begins her first novel, "Elinor and Marianne," written as letters (the fragments of this early work are now lost); she will later revise the material to become the novel *Sense and Sensibility*. John Keats is born.
- 1796- Austen authors a second novel, "First Impressions," which was never published; it will
1797 later become *Pride and Prejudice*.

1801 Jane's father, the Reverend George Austen, retires, and with the Napoleonic Wars looming in the background of British consciousness, he and his wife and two daughters leave the quiet country life of Steventon for the bustling, fashionable town of Bath. Many of the characters and depictions of society in Jane Austen's subsequent novels are shaped by her experiences in Bath.

1803 Austen receives her first publication offer for her novel "Susan," but the manuscript is subsequently returned by the publisher; it will later be revised and released as *Northanger Abbey*. The United States buys Louisiana from France. Ralph Waldo Emerson is born.

1804 Napoleon crowns himself emperor of France. Spain declares war on Britain.

1805 Jane's father dies. Jane and her mother and sister subsequently move to Southampton. Sir Walter Scott publishes his *Lay of the Last Minstrel*.

1809 After several years of traveling and short-term stays in various towns, the Austen women settle in Chawton Cottage in Hampshire; in the parlor of this house Austen quietly composes her most famous works. Charles Darwin and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, are born.

1811 Austen begins *Mansfield Park* in February. In November *Sense and Sensibility*, the romantic misadventures of two sisters, is published with the notation "By a Lady"; all of Austen's subsequent novels are also brought out anonymously. George III is declared insane, and the morally corrupt Prince of Wales (the future King George IV) becomes regent.

1812 *Fairy Tales* by the Brothers Grimm and the first parts of

Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* are published. The United States declares war on Great Britain.

1813 *Pride and Prejudice* is published; it describes the conflict between the high-spirited daughter of a country gentleman and a wealthy landowner. Napoleon is exiled to Elba, and the Bourbons are restored to power.

1814 *Mansfield Park* is published; it is the story of the difficult though ultimately rewarded life of a poor relation who lives in the house of her wealthy uncle.

1815 Austen's comic novel *Emma* is published, centering on the heroine's misguided attempts at matchmaking. Napoleon is defeated at Waterloo. Charlotte Brontë is born.

1817 Austen begins the satiric novel *Sanditon*, but abandons it because of declining health. She dies on July 18 in Winchester and is buried in Winchester Cathedral.

1818 *Northanger Abbey*, a social satire with overtones of (parodied) terror, and *Persuasion*, about a reawakened love, are published under Austen's brother Henry's supervision.

Introduction



You could not shock her more than she
shocks me;
Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of “brass,”
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.

—W. H. Auden

Just as Jane Austen is the favorite author of many discerning readers, *Persuasion* is the most highly esteemed novel of many Austenites. It has the deep irony, the scathing wit, the droll and finely drawn characters of Austen’s other novels, all attributes long beloved of her readers. But it is conventional. It is said that as her last novel, the novel of her middle age, it additionally has a greater maturity and wisdom than the “light, bright and sparkling” earlier novels, to use Austen’s own famous description of *Pride and Prejudice*, her most popular work. In other words, *Persuasion* has often been seen as the thinking reader’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

But *Persuasion* is less “light” in more than one sense; Anne Elliot, its heroine, is introduced as more unhappy and constrained by her situation than any heroine of Austen’s since Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*. In contrast to Elizabeth Bennet’s or Emma Woodhouse’s sparkle and volubility, Anne’s “spirits were not high” (p. 14), and remain low for much of the novel. But whereas Fanny Price, like Anne, is ignored and held in low esteem by family members, is perfectly poised to be rescued by love, in fact Anne is barely a Cinderella figure, and not only because she is wellborn, of a better social rank than even the heroine of *Emma*. In fact, Anne Elliot has more in common with Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian heroine Jane Eyre in that she seems at first distinctly ineligible for the role of a beloved, appearing to the world as apparently unlovable and without much physical charm. Anne, however, has none of Jane Eyre’s ready temper, tongue, and fire; she tends to think and feel alone and in silence—except, of course, that we, her readers, share the literary mind she inhabits and see the world with her through her finely discerning eyes. Heroines are always subjected to surveillance in nineteenth-century fiction; here the heroine is invisible but voluble in her mind, as Lucy Snowe is in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*.

Anne Elliot is a creature of thought and feeling, not what she seems to others. The same may be said of Jane Austen herself, whose life and writing often appear as one thing in the popular mind, yet turn out to be far more complex than convention allows when closely examined. There is the real Jane Austen, who left little in the way of biographical material (no diary has ever been found, and most of her letters were destroyed by their recipients or their heirs); and then there is the Jane Austen of the contemporary imagination. This latter version has colored the many films and television productions.

of her work, not to mention the societies and cultish fan enthusiasm, which constitute what the critic Margaret Doody calls “Aunt Jane-ism,” a phenomenon she defines as “imposed quaintness.”

It is easy to see why Austen’s novels have become a kind of cinematic fetish: Film adaptations selectively focus on the clear trajectory of the courtship plot, the fine detail, the enclosed, knowably seemingly nonpolitical world in which everyone seems to know his place. In fact, for many the novels have come to stand for a nostalgia of pre-Industrial Revolution England, an idyll of country houses, genteel manners, and clear moral standards, an Old World apart from the chaos of urban, technologized life and the struggle for modern capital. So solidified has this mythical vision become that there is now a popular series of mystery novels by Stephanie Barron that feature Jane Austen as the amateur detective, similar to Agatha Christie’s spinster figure Miss Marple, solving fictional mysteries with pert and ingenious wit in her quaint village.

Into this escapist vision of sentimental village days, the life of Jane Austen was molded to fit a perfection from the first biographical sketch of her. This was a short preface to the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* by her brother Henry Austen, called “A Biographical Notice of the Author”; it emphasized her modesty, sweetness, and simple piety. He informs us: “Sho and easy will be the task of the mere biographer. A life of usefulness, literature, and religion, was not by any means a life of event.” Nor, according to Henry Austen, did his sister take her literary activities very seriously: “Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives [for writing].” For more than one hundred years after her death, the major biographies were in fact written by family members, who painted Austen as sweetly old-fashioned, genially mild and reserved, spirited but primly spinsterish. As a writer she was treated as a kind of modest, supertalented amateur, without the taint of unladylike ambition, someone who diffidently put aside or even hid her pages when anyone came in the room. (Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh insists on the much-quoted idea that Austen wrote on single sheets she could quickly hide, but in her biography Claire Tomalin argues that it is unlikely she could have done her extensive revisions one sheet at a time. In reality, the author had a handsome writing desk in the dressing room she shared with her sister, and regularly read work in progress aloud to her appreciative family.) In fact, critical interest in Austen grew to contemporary proportions only after the 1870 publication of *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, by Austen-Leigh (see “For Further Reading”), which reinforced the idea of the uncomplicated decency and pure gentle spirit of “dear ‘Aunt Jane’ ” who lived in a simpler age, “before express trains, sewing machines and photograph books.”

At the turn of the century Henry James wrote about his distaste for the “pleasant twaddle ... [about] our dear, everybody’s dear, Jane,” poking fun at the idolatry of a fictitious nonthreatening version of Jane Austen (James, “The Lesson of Balzac”). Yet James himself evaluated Austen as “instinctive and charming” rather than a deliberate craftsman, of “narrow unconscious perfection of form” whose chief failure is “want of moral illumination” in her heroines (letter of June 23, 1883; in James, *Letters*). In this estimation James merely echoes her nephew’s notion of Austen as a gentle, cheerful, prim domestic woman whose writing was a kind of amateur activity and whose evident genius and durability was therefore a “mystery.”

Though real evidence for what Jane Austen was really like is slim, the publication in the twentieth century of her early fiction and the surviving letters has revealed much that does not fit comfortably into her persistently quaint image. The short early pieces she wrote, dedicated to various family members and probably read aloud, are absurd, extravagant, and flippant in tone, rather than modest and prim. They appear to be parodies of forms such as lurid Gothic or weepy sentimental fiction, but

extremely widespread in the late eighteenth century. Just as the Brontës' juvenilia was lurid, melodramatic, and hyperromantic, Jane Austen's earliest fiction surprises with the antisocial liberties it takes. It is more reminiscent of eighteenth-century models such as Sheridan or Fielding than it is like Victorian moral realism. Though unrefined in more than one sense, those earlier works glow with the "sparkle" Austen referred to in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, but without that novel's serious social and moral values.

The letters, sharp-tongued and acerbic, like the early fiction, shocked and even offended some readers when they were first published. Jane Austen's nephew, writing in his memoirs before the publication, cautioned that their "materials may be thought inferior" because they "treat only the details of domestic life. They resemble the nest which some little bird builds of the materials nearest at hand." But in fact they are filled with harsh, pointed, and dark wit: She calls one person a "queer animal with a white neck"; she writes that she "had the comfort of finding out the other evening what all the fat girls with short noses were that disturbed me." There is nothing of Fanny Price's or Anne Elliot's "gentle manner" and "elegant mind" here, nor is there anything like the prissy, quaint, modestly humble Aunt Jane of the myth.

The letters reveal a voice that does not shy away from the harsh realities of sexual and social life. "Another stupid party last night," she comments to her only sister and beloved confidante, Cassandra. And while at the "stupid party," she made the following observation:

I am proud to say that I have a very good eye at an Adulteress, for tho' repeatedly assured that another in the same party was the She, I fixed upon the right one from the first.... She is not so pretty as expected; her face has the same defect of baldness as her sister's... she was highly rouged, & looked rather quietly and contentedly silly than anything else (letter of May 12, 1801; see Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*).

Nor does she treat the most conventional subjects with any sentimentality. As for motherhood: "Anne has not a chance of escape.... Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty. I am very sorry for her. Mrs. Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children" (letter of March 23, 1817; see *Jane Austen's Letters*). It is instructive to remember that her most frequent correspondent, her sister Cassandra, burned all the letters she considered most unsuitable for the public to read, which was the bulk of them. We may therefore safely infer that the ones that have come down to us tend to be the blandest.

In the twentieth century and beyond, scholarly criticism has caught up with this complexity and become complicated and divisive, if not defensive, itself. Virginia Woolf, always a discerning critic, emphasized the difficulty of reading Austen rather than her simplicity. While she has an "unerring heart and unfailing morality," an "incorruptible conscience," and "infallible discretion," Woolf wrote "Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off." But Austen truly began to be taken seriously as an artist when the renowned British critic F. R. Leavis saw her as a moralist, the innovator of the "great tradition" of the serious modern novel, in contrast to the standard view of her as merely charming. Following publication of the letters and short fiction, a new view of Austen as stringent, angry, even sour, began to emerge in the twentieth century. In this vein, D. W. Harding called her deep use of irony "regulated hatred" as corrective to the previous emphasis on her saintlike character and supposedly sweet and whimsical humor. Edmund Wilson believed he was giving her the highest compliment when he praised Austen for being unlike other female novelists, with their "projection of their feminine daydreams," grouping

her with those who treat the novel as art, as “the great masculine novelists” do.

But as frequently happens, Austen is too rebellious for some and not rebellious enough for others. Feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have seen her as subversive of hierarchy, especially in her depiction of the difficulties faced by single women; other critics, such as Marilyn Butler and Mary Poovey, focus on her strong conservative roots, her staunch Toryism and high valuation of rank when accompanied by responsibility, her support for religious morality, respectability, and authority when thoroughly informed by good character. Another branch of feminist criticism has corrected the Janeite view of her as modest and shy of acclaim and proposed that she was as personally ambitious as modern women. One recent type of analysis, one that has contributed enormously to our understanding of Jane Austen’s work and served as a counterbalance to the confining myth of her charm, is historicist. This body of criticism has allowed us to see through the enclosed world of the novels to the social complexities that underlie the seemingly smooth and simple surface of all of Austen’s fiction.

For example, though like others of Austen’s works *Persuasion* is in form a courtship narrative that ends with a marriage, it is a novel obsessed with—at the same time that it takes as its theme the obsession with—hierarchical rankings of value, both social and moral. Sometimes social and moral superiority coincide, while at other crucial places in the novel they are at odds with each other. As so often happens in the British novel, romantic love ignites the spark of opposition between the social and the moral, at the same time that it finally serves as a kind of glue that unites the two categories into the coherent world that we expect of a nineteenth-century work. But courtship is only part of the story. Towns, houses, carriages, furnishings, reading materials, manners, leisured preferences, all are subjected to a systematic analysis that reveals social rank. Income, property, possessions, and taste are constantly weighed in the balance as indices of worth. In the end *Persuasion* is not simply a love story, but a story about competing forms of value, including above all the relative value (and price) of feeling and reason, of authority and desire.

Austen’s structure of value is as complex as the Janeites depict it as simple. For example, in her novels she plays on the theme of inequity with intricate patterning: Thus Anne Elliot is of high merit but low value in her world, while her relatives such as Sir Walter and her sister Elizabeth are of high social value and low merit. We are made intensely aware not only of shades of dominance in class, but of discriminations between the value of old and young, married and unmarried, sons and daughters, older sisters and younger, the respectable and the vulgar, and of the frequent arbitrariness of these unearned distinctions of worth and power. The titled are often fools, vain, pompous, deluded by self-love and self-importance—all of which implies that the author seeks ironic distance from a world that makes class distinctions in particular the barometer of personal worth. Yet ancient untitled families in Austen’s work, like the Darcys and the Knightleys, are frequently “knightlike” in stature, especially when they assume responsibility for dependents or those beneath them, as Sir Walter does not. They are “guardians” of society, as much as or more so than are the clergymen and naval officers.

In light of this, it is interesting to examine the role of the navy, in *Persuasion* as well as less prominently in *Mansfield Park*, as a symbol of the integration of social distinction and moral character. It is true that the navy was one of the few means by which men of low resources could use a combination of luck and merit to gain financial and social privilege in an age when trade investment was still suspected of the taint of vulgarity. In reality, however, what Austen uncritically calls “connections” or “interest,” meaning a system of patronage, played an important role in advancement. The plot of *Persuasion* depends a good deal on the opportunity that the navy affords

Captain Wentworth to earn “rewards” (money gained from conquering enemy ships during war and selling their booty) and therefore to advance by “merit.” The task of the hero, and the heroine who must choose him as husband, is to integrate solid social rank with “character” based on principles and family values. The critic Juliet McMaster has called these heroes “moral aristocrats.”

Jane Austen’s own class position was a more problematic one than is commonly thought. Sentimental biography pictures her undisturbed in comfortable and stable village surroundings. But Jane lived at the troubled border of comfortability in a number of ways. Her family belonged to the so-called “pseudo-gentry,” the professional rank of a rural society still dominated by a land-owning class. Jane was the daughter of a clergyman who lived as middle-class, but at the price of continuing debt, partly alleviated by taking in student-boarders throughout her childhood until the house was crowded. The Austen family was “gentry” not by birth but by virtue of her father’s (low-paying) profession, and they were frequently dependent on connections from whom they could borrow money. Jane Austen’s circumstances were unsterotypical, even painful, in other ways as well: She was a woman who was fully aware of the necessity of marriage to relieve the inequity of power and resources for women, and rejected that option at least once. While happiest in the village she was raised in, she was forced by her parents to live in uncongenial surroundings in the tourist town of Bath for years, until her father’s death. And not least, later in life she was a female novelist earning her own money, a very unusual circumstance in her class. Though Austen’s life tends to be conflated with those of her characters, it is ironic that even Elizabeth Bennet’s financial situation is in fact much better than her author’s was.

While her father, George Austen, was a country parson of limited means who frequently had recourse to borrow money from better-off relatives and could rarely afford a carriage of his own. Austen’s mother, the former Cassandra Leigh, came from a better-connected family with some intellectual and genteel roots. Jane’s father was kindly and indulgent, her mother hypochondriacal yet active and strong-minded. The social life of the family was extensive and complicated, with a wide-ranging network of kin and intimates to visit and entertain and gossip about, yet the picture of stable rural society most people associate with Jane Austen was not true even then. The Austens socialized most with people like themselves, the new professional class of people with some money and education but no ancestral land, who tended to mobility, renting or buying this property or that, moving from town to city and back again, changing dwellings with professions and very often driven away by debt.

Jane herself, as a single woman with no portion of her own, was considered a poor relative by the more successful members of the family, such as the family of her brother Edward. As a boy Edward had been adopted by wealthy childless kin, the Knights, and took their name after their death. He inherited an estate, Godmersham, to which Jane was invited often, and at which she was perceived as an outsider. Her niece Fanny, Edward’s eldest daughter, wrote after her aunt’s death that she was “below par” in refinement (though “superior in mental powers and cultivation”) and had deliberately to overcome her “common-ness” when visiting. Here is Austen’s cheerful assessment of herself in 1815: “I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.”

Jane Austen began to compose fiction at a young age, at least in early adolescence if not before, producing extravagant parodies, such as “Love and Friendship,” that she dedicated to various family members and friends. Her mother was in the habit of writing clever comic verses to amuse the family and helped Jane read aloud her novels later on; her father seems to have encouraged her writing, since

a notebook in which she transcribed her early stories is marked “Ex dono mei Patris,” which means “gift from my father.” The first draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, called “First Impressions,” was probably composed when she was twenty, the same age as its protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, though it was not published until 1813, near the end of Austen’s life.

For a novelist so identified with romantic love, courtship, and marriage as literary subjects, her life is notoriously bare of evidence that she ever experienced love or romance. She did flirt with one young man, Tom Lefroy, but wrote of him coolly when he left the country: “This is rational enough; there is less love and more sense in it than sometimes appeared before, and I am very well satisfied it will all go on exceedingly well, and decline away in a very reasonable manner ... it is therefore more probable that our indifference will soon be mutual unless his regard, which appeared to spring from knowing nothing of me at first, is best supported by never seeing me” (letter of November 17, 1799; see *Jane Austen’s Letters*).

In fact, it is questionable whether she even desired marriage. “Oh what a loss it will be when you are married,” she wrote to her favorite niece, Fanny, “You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Niece. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down in conjugal & maternal affections” (letter of February 20, 1817; see *Jane Austen’s Letters*). She is known to have accepted one marriage proposal, from a younger and quite well-off brother of friends whom she was visiting. From the mercenary point of view, she had everything to gain from marrying the young man, including presiding over a large house and estate in Hampshire. But the next morning she retracted her assent to his proposal, explaining that she did not feel enough for him to marry him. The only other rumored romance, of a brief love affair later in life cut off in its earliest stage by the suitor’s death, hinted at by her sister and part of the family tradition, has not been substantiated.

In general the letters reveal a strong endorsement of both romantic love as a basis for marriage and also the necessity of dealing realistically with the economic pressures faced by single women with few other options open to them:

There *are* such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thousand, as the Creature You and I should think perfection, Where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart & Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own County. And now, my dear Fanny, having written so much on one side of the question, I shall turn around and entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection (November 17, 1814).

I have no doubt of his suffering a good deal for a time, a great deal, when he feels that he must give you up;—but it is no creed of mine ... that such sort of Disappointments kills anybody (November 17, 1814).

Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (March 13, 1817; see *Jane Austen’s Letters*).

One of the very few ways in which “spinsters” could earn money in Regency society was by writing, if they were lucky enough to have someone intercede to negotiate good terms and if their writing could then produce something like a profit. It was very difficult for women to publish in the eighteenth century, when they risked accusations of vulgarity (which could be adverse to their reputations and marriageability), yet there was an explosion of popular and, after the novelist Fanny Burney’s success

serious writing by the time Austen tried to publish.

The first three works Jane Austen produced—early versions of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1795, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1796 and 1797, and of *Northanger Abbey* in 1798—were satires on sentiment and Gothic popular fiction. In 1797 her father wrote to the publisher Cadell, sending a manuscript “First Impressions,” the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, but received no reply. This must have been discouraging. The next attempt was not made until 1803, when “Susan” (later revised *Northanger Abbey*) was sold to the publisher Crosby for £10. But though it was advertised, it was never actually published, and later Jane had to buy it back for the £10 advanced, a large sum for her.

After producing unsold manuscripts of the first three novels, there was an apparent hiatus in Austen’s writing for ten years, for reasons that are not clear. This period coincides with her unwilling removal from her birthplace in Steventon to Bath at her father’s retirement, when she was twenty-five. She did not resume writing until after her father’s death, which necessitated the removal from Bath. From that point her brothers, including her wealthy brother Edward, contributed small amounts toward the upkeep of Jane and her sister and mother, settling them in the small but busy village of Chawton, where most of the village residents worked on Edward’s lands and estate. As a dependent, Jane had to live where others chose and travel when others pleased. In 1809, for example, when she wanted to leave her brother’s house during a visit, she had to endure the small humiliation of pleading with him to take her home or being forced to wait until it pleased him to transport her. During this period, in addition, it must have seemed that she was unlikely to either get married or get published.

The first publication was *Sense and Sensibility*, put out by Thomas Egerton in 1811 but produced at the expense of the author. The profits from the sales of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1813 gave Austen her first real taste of independence when she received £140 for it from her publisher. Since it was a small success, Egerton bought the copyright outright for *Pride and Prejudice*, which appeared in 1813. But though the latter went through three editions by 1817, Egerton insisted that *Mansfield Park* be published at Austen’s expense. A better, more literary publisher, John Murray, was sought, and he was willing to publish *Emma* in 1815 for royalties.

Though her early biographers made much of her modesty and lack of ambition, Austen was in truth intensely interested in public reaction, so much so that she kept a notebook in which she copied down written reviews of her work, as well as private opinions, including the advice and preferences of her acquaintances. Austen was not a best-selling novelist, but she was an esteemed one. Though highly praised by Walter Scott and some others in her lifetime, her books did not achieve anywhere near the popularity of Scott, Dickens, or Thackeray in the nineteenth century, and the number of her reviewers was small. But Scott’s anonymous review of *Emma* (1816) had recast Jane Austen’s novels as examples of a new genre, the realist modern novel, favorably contrasting them with old-fashioned melodrama and romance, which taught “the youth of this realm ... the doctrine of selfishness” pursuing imprudent love.

Early in 1816 Austen began to feel unwell, and though she was able to recover the copyright of “Susan” and revise the novel as *Northanger Abbey*, as well as finish *Persuasion*, she was ill for much of the last year of her life. “Sickness is a dangerous Indulgence at my time of Life,” she wrote in one of her last extant letters (March 23, 1817; see *Jane Austen’s Letters*). She died, appearing cheerful and busy to the end in her letters, in the midst of working on her unfinished novel *Sanditon*, while in Winchester, where she had been taken for treatment by a surgeon. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously by Murray together as a four-volume set, with a “Biographical Notice

appended by her brother Henry Austen. Interestingly, *Persuasion* is the only novel of Austen's for which we have an original version altered for publication. Its two last chapters were extensively revised and expanded to amend the way in which the hero approaches the heroine to declare his love. Austen's evident dissatisfaction with the original, more abbreviated conclusion of the novel belies Henry James's dismissive view of her writing methods as merely "instinctive."

Soon after her death, Austen's work entered the debate about what the novel ought to do: Should it imitate social reality, improve morals and convey high thoughts of the philosophical mind, or represent the claims of passion? One contemporary critic noted that just as novels are rarely "improving" enough for readers, the moral of *Persuasion*, that "young people should always marry according to their own inclinations and upon their own judgement," was indicative of a low moral tendency in contemporary novel-writing. Sentimental fiction as a woman's genre was supposed to confine passion within the bounds of strict morality.

Later in the century Charlotte Brontë, like Wordsworth before her, found Austen "shrewd and observant" rather than "profound," and remarked that "the Passions are perfectly unknown to her." Brontë, having been accused of immoralism herself, does not ask for moral function, but for passion and philosophy. She describes Austen's work as "a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses" (letter of January 12, 1848; see Wise and Symington, eds., *The Brontës: Their Friendships, Lives, and Correspondence*). She accuses Austen of unfemininity: "Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (*nonsenseless*) woman" (letter of April 12, 1850). But the influential critic George Henry Lewes admired her realism, which he called "daring from its humble truthfulness," and an American critic writing in 1849 cited her as a "model of perfection in a new and very difficult species of writing ... [with] no surprising adventures, ... no artfully involved plot, no scenes deeply pathetic or extravagant, no humorous." By the end of the century Austen was identified with Scott's view of her, as embodying a realism that copies nature and imitates the commonplace yet imparts moral wisdom, "universal truths," and is instructive where romance inflames.

Persuasion is forever being called "mature," implying that Jane Austen had at last arrived at some culminating wisdom in her lifelong struggle for it. It is also frequently described as "autumnal," emphasizing its status as her last completed work before dying. As far back as 1862, a reviewer labeled it her "tender and sad" novel. In fact, *Persuasion* begins with loss, both personal and economic, and slowly reverses the trajectory.

Though *Persuasion*, like other Jane Austen novels, is about the maturing through trial of a young woman, the novel does not begin with its central character, Anne Elliot. Instead the first pages are devoted to her father and his obsessive vanity about his lineage as baronet, from which follows his contempt for those he considers beneath him. Like many of Austen's fictional fathers, Sir Walter is detached, ineffectual, and self-serving (the good fathers in Austen's novels tend to die before the novel opens, as in *Sense and Sensibility*), but unlike Elizabeth Bennet's father in *Pride and Prejudice* he is also shockingly stupid. He has one trait uniquely his own in contrast to Austen's other clueless patriarchs: He is said to value his beauty only slightly less than he values his social rank. Austen slyly classifies Sir Walter as feminine in his erotics of self: "Few women could think more of their person

appearance than he did” (p. 4). Personal vanity is linked to a kind of romantic love for himself that precludes his feeling much affection for his family: “He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion” (p. 4). Here, as elsewhere in the Austen canon, the egocentricity of personal display is tied to the falseness of social place as a marker of distinction. The presence of vanity strongly indicates here that real worth is inner value, demonstrated by “true” taste that is modest, clean, and neat, not by outer symbolic displays or performance.

In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the heroines have fond sisters who are the complements and provide the intimate support the heroine requires in order to speak her mind within the narrative. Anne Elliot is not an only child, but her sisters are monsters of selfishness and either ignore her shamefully or use her shamelessly. Before the end of the first chapter, it is established that the heroine is both privileged and very little valued or recognized: a “nobody,” “only Anne” within her family. Her godmother, Lady Russell, a close friend of her dead mother and clearly a mother substitute, is alone capable of understanding her worth, but she is hardly a fairy godmother to Anne Cinderella, as we soon find out.

The narrative gets underway at the point (the end of the very first chapter) when we learn that the high ranking of this family on the social hierarchy does not guarantee the stability of their economic value; the finances of the estate are in peril, debt is accumulating, and the family must “retrench”—that is, live at less expense. This instability of economic privilege conflicts with the belief that the recognition of social privilege is universal, which is both the essence of Sir Walter’s being and at the core of traditional British society. Sir Walter reacts with a foolish refusal to economize, while Anne is shown not only to be wise and prudent beyond her years but also strong and humble in her willingness to climb slightly down the economic ladder with dignity. The manor house that is the symbol of the estate, the source of their family wealth and privilege, must be “let”—they must separate from it but not entirely give it up. At this point the heroine (along with her family) enters a kind of limbo in which she is a wanderer from the ancestral estate, privileged by birth but with a social and economic identity whose worth is uncertain and in flux. All she has is her value in the marriage market.

In chapter 3, the theme of social mobility is introduced: Sir Walter objects to letting the house to an admiral because the navy offends his two most valued traits: privilege ranked by birth, and male beauty. The navy is “the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of,” forcing men to behave as social equals to those “whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to” (p. 19). This is the privileged perspective on meritocracy, of course. Austen makes fun of its snobbish presumptuousness of superiority by birth in immediately linking it with Sir Walter’s fear and horror of the unattractive. He assumes that the weathered appearance of a naval man must be an “object of disgust” to all. Sir Walter’s extreme obsession with male youth and beauty satirizes a worldview in which social worth is externalized by attractive appearance, so that nature and social life are assumed to work in tandem.

We are therefore well into the novel before we learn that Anne has “low spirits” because she has had an unhappy parting seven years before from a man she loved, Captain Wentworth of the navy, brother-in-law to the Crofts, who are about to rent the ancestral hall of the family. Their early engagement is treated with the author’s irony, but a fondly indulgent one: “Half the sum of attraction, on either side might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love” (p. 25). Nevertheless, their proposed alliance is the beginning of the Trouble around which all narratives are said to center. The marriage of Anne and Wentworth implies a rejection of the traditionalist principle

of stable and universal hierarchy, since Wentworth is, in that perspective, “a young man, who has nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession” (p. 26). Wentworth is the upwardly mobile, talented young man of the nineteenth century, “full of life and ardour”(p. 26). He has only his own resources rather than privilege to fall back on, yet he is confident and proud. The contrasting terms that describe him illuminate the tensions between two worldviews: what Anne Elliot in her youth sees as “brilliant, headstrong,” fearless, warm, and witty, the traditionalist Lady Russell sees as “dangerous” and imprudent. Though Anne rebels in feeling against an “over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence”(p. 29), she obeys out of deference to Lady Russell’s superior wisdom and authority, breaking the engagement.

In doing so Anne “relies” on Lady Russell as a mother—one who combines wisdom with “tenderness”—and is “persuaded” that the alliance is wrong. Yet Lady Russell is immediately shown up as narrow and self-interested when she wishes Anne would marry the mediocre Charles Musgrove because of his “landed property,” “general importance,” “good character and appearance,” and (apparently not least important) his location “near herself.” She displays a shrewd awareness of the marriage market: “However Lady Russell might have asked yet for something more, while Anne was nineteen, she would have rejoiced to see her at twenty-two” so respectably situated(p. 27). Anne’s feelings count for little here; whereas Jane Eyre tells her own story and finds her voice in narrating to us, we are told “How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,—how eloquent, at least, were her wishes”(p. 29). So far the theme appears to be “prudence” (privilege, disguised as wisdom, going by the rules) versus “romance,” in which prudence comes up against an egalitarian meritocracy identified with “romance” and its trans-formative capacities and possibilities: “She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning”(p. 29). This well describes the way in which Austen reverses the usual narrative association of youth with romance and feeling and age with reason and wisdom. The story looked at this way is one of romantic renewal, a kind of Winter’s Tale.

The heroine’s traditional solution to this classic problem of the novel, the conflict between categories marked “feeling” and “reason,” or “individual” and “community,” is love and marriage. Through the social legitimation of her personal feeling, her personal worth is recognized, her social status as wife established, and her economic future as middle-class or better secured. Lady Russell is the temporary impediment in that she has a “value for rank and consequence” that “blinds her”—this trait she is partly aligned with the social traditionalists, though also partly with the new ranking by feeling, since she alone is capable of appreciating Anne’s worth. Though Lady Russell is not entirely condemned—she is said to have a “more tempered and pardonable pride”(p. 25)—her decisive victory over the lovers at this point groups her with those who defend social hierarchies as fixed and given, so that she stands in need of correction by Anne.

The title of the novel, *Persuasion*, points to the causes and consequences of this momentous decision in Anne’s life. Feeling and reason are commonly categorized as inimical to each other in regard to the behaviors that determine lives, but here the treatment of persuasion is not confined to the reasonability of the external world versus the anarchy of internal selfish drives. On the contrary, the exploration of the internal world of the mind that constitutes much of this novel is given over to a remarkable literary description of what we would now call the process of rationalization and its consequence, the inability to trust to reason: “How quick come the reasons for approving what we like!” remarks the narrator (p. 15). Like Sir Walter and his inability to see Mrs. Clay’s freckles, we a

see only what we want to; we are all of us blinded by desire, as much as Lady Russell is blinded by rational pride. Even thoughtful Anne can convince herself that giving up the engagement is for Captain Wentworth's own good. As in the psychological novels of George Eliot and Henry James, or the psychoanalytic theory of Freud, emotion dominates over wisdom and clear thinking. The unreliability gives much finer shadings to the idea of "persuasion" than the plot at first seems to suggest.

When Anne stays home to nurse her nephew, she is selfless in volunteering, but her goodness is admixed with the unadmitted desire to avoid an awkward first meeting with her former lover. In this scene she is not as unlike her sister Mary and brother-in-law Charles, who are more obviously self-centered as she at first appears. All are united in their willingness to be persuaded by what they want to think. In this scene in chapter 10 the free indirect discourse that reveals Anne's thoughts melds with the author's in forming a standard for valuing behavior. The implication is that there is a universal and stable standard available, but it is rendered unstable because of feeling. Though Anne knows the truth about others as a silent watcher and "longs" to represent the truth to them all, we soon see that she too rationalizes her own behavior: "From some feelings of interest and curiosity, she fancied now that it was too late to retract" when she realizes her former lover is going to accompany her party on a walk (p. 79).

Jane Austen's characteristic style has an interesting relation to the ambiguity surrounding thinking and feeling. Her famous tongue-in-cheek satire or irony consists in a radical disconnection between what a character says and means, as when Anne, nervous about meeting her former lover's relative now tenants at her own home, "found it most natural to be sorry that she had missed the opportunity of seeing them" (p. 31) or between the conventional and real meanings of a narrative description, as when Anne's sister Mary and her husband are said to be "always perfectly agreed in the want of more money" (p. 42). Mary does unknowingly what the narrator does knowingly. She is deficient in "understanding" and "temper," and has the "Elliot self-importance" and "no resources for solitude" (p. 36); but she says "I made the best of it; I always do" about supposedly feeling ill, when she so clearly does the opposite. Characters correct each other's view while the narrator corrects our view of all of them, forcefully demonstrating a radical instability of perspective quite unlike the harmonized world associated with Austen's work.

Mary's character is based on the high comedy of rationalization, in which we are in on the joke of her selfishness. But Mary's function is not simply comic; she shows off Anne's temper, her restrained patience, gentleness, moderation, self-suppression, even what Jane Austen calls her "forced cheerfulness." In her extreme obedience to her own egotism, Mary belongs to those who are "romantic" in their suffering—that is, self-indulgently dramatizing and thinking highly of the importance of their own feelings. In contrast with her two selfish sisters, Anne is praised for her "elegant and cultivated *mind*" (my italics; p. 39). Anne's visit to Uppercross, home of Mary's in-law the Musgroves, is a corrective to the Elliot pride, a lesson to Anne "in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle" (p. 40). Yet all those at Uppercross are also in the "self-delusion" of egoism, barely listening to any concerns but their own. Where the Elliots are cold and unfeeling, the Musgroves are feeling but dim.

Captain Wentworth's relatives, the Crofts, by contrast, one of the number of "three or four families" that Jane Austen acknowledged she liked to write about in each novel, are the rare happy couple in Austen's works. Their mutual devotion is based on companionship and "open, easy and decided manners—they are neither cultivated nor proud but frank and honest. Mrs. Croft, Captain

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