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Romantic Imprisonment

Women and Other Glorified Outcasts

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Anne Elliot. It is a lighthearted exemplification of the law that governs *Persuasion*, a law oriented to the fulfillment of human desire, in close association with nature and natural rhythms. *

The union of Louisa and Benwick comes only after each has been brought close to loss and death. Benwick is suffering after the death of his fiancée, "a very superior creature"; Louisa's fall on the Cobb threatens her for a time with death or derangement. Wentworth defines the rhythm of the union clearly: "It was a frightful hour," said he [speaking of Louisa's fall], 'a frightful day!' and he passed his hand across his eyes, as if the remembrance were still too painful; but in a moment half smiling again, added, 'The day has produced some effects however—has had some consequences which must be considered as the very reverse of frightful.' "

The iron law of consequences is suspended in *Persuasion*; the seeds of apparent tragedy produce unexpected joy. The surprising union of Benwick and Louisa is a half-parodic repetition of the central reconciliation of Wentworth and Anne after "so many, many years of division and estrangement"; they are "more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected" (p. 240).

Like *The Tempest*, *Persuasion* transforms tragedy into the profoundest comedy, and, also like *The Tempest*, it closes with a glimpse of a sea voyage, which will be explored more fully later on. At this point, we should examine some of the tragic motifs more closely, because almost all of them are reprises of events in Jane Austen's earlier novels. This transformation of material from earlier works relates *Persuasion* most intimately to *The Tempest*: it introduces for the last time motifs and events that have furnished the author's universe from the beginning, but which are joyfully transformed in the crucible of a brave new world. > adds *Persuasion* as the last one

In one important sense, *Persuasion* looks back as far as *Northanger Abbey*, which Jane Austen may have been revising during its composition: there is another journey to Bath. In *Northanger Abbey*, we regarded Bath with double vision. The inexperienced heroine, Catherine Morland, was dazzled by its excitement, but Henry Tilney's monologues subtly equated it with an oppressively inhuman spiritual climate. Phrases and incidents recurred in the narrative which associated Bath with imprisonment, further undermining Catherine's early

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O Brave New World: Evolution and Revolution in *Persuasion*

An analysis of the symbolism in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* may lead us to discover stirrings of revolution underneath the quiet surface of the novel. To define the revolution of *Persuasion*, we should begin by examining the laws of its created world in relation to those governing Jane Austen's earlier novels.

It may be helpful in this connection to think of *Persuasion* as Jane Austen's *Tempest*, another final work that reprises and transforms themes and motifs introduced earlier in the author's canon. The plots of both are determined to a great extent by the movements of the sea. Written during Jane Austen's last illness and not published until after her death, *Persuasion* is defined by its blended tone of elegiac departure and the "senseless joy" of renewal and reconciliation. Its action touches extremes of loss and desolation, but out of each desolation comes the grace of recovery and enrichment of what was lost.

Like *The Tempest*, *Persuasion* is brooded over by the threat of loss and death. Seen in these terms, the marriage of Louisa and Benwick is more than a mechanical contrivance to free Wentworth for

the Tempest
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innocent vision of it. When the Tilneys liberated Catherine from Bath, she found herself enclosed in the more obvious, if more genteel, prison of Northanger Abbey, which was governed by the same unnatural values that presided over the world of Bath. The apparent alternative to Bath provided by the Tilneys melted into a more insidious extension of it, and the disillusioned Catherine was cast out of both worlds after her journey of initiation into "actual and natural evil."

But Anne Elliot has no such lesson to learn. She knows from the beginning that she cannot endure "the white glare of Bath" (as Jane Austen could not). There are no subtle undercurrents needed to modulate our responses: Bath is equated from the beginning with the inhuman ostentation of Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, and explicitly defined by Anne as a prison: "Anne entered [Bath] with a sinking heart, anticipating an imprisonment of many months, and anxiously saying to herself, 'Oh! when shall I leave you again?'" (p. 137).

But Wentworth and the naval group arrive in Bath almost immediately, and the alternative they provide is genuine. The Elliots have no power to oppress their joyful fellowship, although at first they may appear to: "The door was thrown open for Sir Walter and Miss Elliot, whose entrance seemed to give a general chill. Anne felt an instant oppression, and, wherever she looked, saw symptoms of the same. The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence, or insipid talk, to meet the heartless elegance of her father and sister" (p. 226).

The Tilneys in *Northanger Abbey* were, like the Elliots, a motherless family presided over by a cold father; General Tilney was able to oppress his children's gaiety and freedom much as the Elliots do momentarily here. But in *Persuasion*, the world of heartless elegance is defeated on its own terms by the world of feeling. The new power of the navy forces Elizabeth Elliot to invite Wentworth to a select evening party, and Anne's knowledge of her secret engagement thaws her vision even of her father's house in Bath:

It was but a card-party, it was but a mixture of those who had never met before, and those who met too often—a common-place business, too numerous for intimacy, too small for variety; but Anne had never found an evening shorter. Glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness, and more generally admired than she thought about or cared for, she had cheerful or forbearing

feelings for every creature around her. Mr. Elliot was there; she avoided, but she could pity him. The Wallises; she had amusement in understanding them. Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret; they would soon be innoxious cousins to her. She cared not for Mrs. Clay, and had nothing to blush for in the public manners of her father and sister. With the Musgroves, there was the happy chat of perfect ease; with Captain Harville, the kind-hearted intercourse of brother and sister; with Lady Russell, attempts at conversation, which a delicious consciousness cut short; with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, every thing of particular cordiality and fervent interest, which the same consciousness sought to conceal;—and with Captain Wentworth, some moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of more, and always the knowledge of his being there! (pp. 245–46)

The infiltration of the naval group into Sir Walter's exclusive Bath soirée is able to nullify the power of Sir Walter's society, in Anne's eyes at least, and she is our guiding consciousness. When Anne is liberated from Bath, there is no imprisonment in an imperfectly restored medieval abbey: she is carried into the world of the future, and to sea.

It has often been noticed that *Persuasion* is an inverted *Sense and Sensibility*.² In many ways, Anne Elliot is a mellowed and fully accepted variant of Marianne Dashwood with the world restored. Marianne's solitary walks and bursts of poetry were cruelly parodied at the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, and in the last volume of her story, they almost led to her death by bringing on an attack of putrid fever. Anne also escapes into solitary walks and poetic musings, but hers are sanctified. Their potential preciosity and affectation are drawn off into Jane Austen's parody of Benwick, just as the potential danger of Anne's abandonment to feeling is contained in Louisa Musgrove's fall on the Cobb. Mrs Musgrove's "large fat sighings" over the death of her unworthy son contain all the potential insincerity and ludicrousness of Anne's protracted mourning over the death of feeling. These flat, comic characters siphon off our subversive impulses toward the romantic heroine, and probably Jane Austen's subversive impulses as well. They allow a full acceptance of Anne's emotional world, and they allow Jane Austen to posit an ethic of feeling purified of "sensibility": "How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been, how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems

to insult exertion and distrust Providence!—She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning" (p. 30).

Jane Austen's final admonition to Lady Russell is an unequivocal repudiation of the attempt of "sense" to counsel feeling:

[Lady Russell] must learn to feel that she had been mistaken . . . ; that she had been unfairly influenced by appearances . . . ; that because Captain Wentworth's manners had not suited her own ideas, she had been too quick in suspecting them to indicate a character of dangerous impetuosity; and that because Mr. Elliot's manners had precisely pleased her in their propriety and correctness, their general politeness and suavity, she had been too quick in receiving them as the certain result of the most correct opinions and well regulated mind. There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do, than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes. (p. 249)

In *Sense and Sensibility*, nature and feeling were dangerous and productive of disease; one could survive in a chilled society only by avoiding both. The passages cited seem to be clear and conscious signposts, indicating how far Jane Austen has traveled since then. In *Persuasion*, prudent accommodation gives way in a world guided by emotion and vision. A contrast of the villains in each novel seems to be another signpost:

Elinor saw nothing to censure in [Willoughby] but a propensity, in which he strongly resembled and peculiarly delighted her sister, of saying too much what he thought on every occasion without attention to persons or circumstances. In *hastily* forming and giving his opinion of other people, in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged, and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve in spite of all that he and Marianne could say in its support.³

Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished,—but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection. Her early impressions were incurable. She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a *hasty* thing, than of those whose

presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped. (p. 161, my italics)

The contrast is clear. But the point is not simply that Jane Austen has discarded an ethic of prudence and repression for an ethic of emotional release: she has shifted the axis of her created world. The characters in *Persuasion* must accommodate themselves to a different set of laws. Its world is governed by nature and by human desire, and characters who cannot accommodate themselves to these laws, like the Elliots and Lady Russell, are threatened and deprived of power as unequivocally as Marianne Dashwood was in Jane Austen's earlier world.

When we open *Persuasion* we see staring at us from the first page in capital letters: ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH HALL. Sir Walter's identity is inseparable from his title, from his crest, above all from Kellynch Hall; he is identified with the apparatus and accoutrements that encompass him. This apparatus of identity lends resonance to the early description of Anne: "She was only Anne" (p. 5).

But the power of Kellynch Hall is no longer supported by the power of money: the Elliots cannot keep their house, just as the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* could not. Elizabeth was forced out of her childhood home by Mr. Collins, a horrible embodiment of the power of form to stifle humanity, and her problem in the book was to find a house she could live in. Wickham's "unhoused free condition," his world of impulse and feeling, was an illusion, easily dissolved by the power of money. Nature, growth, freedom, could survive only in the heavily fortified atmosphere of Pemberley, presided over by the equivocal figure of Mr. Darcy.

Admiral Croft and his wife, Wentworth's sister, encroach upon Anne's home in a similar way, but unlike the threat of Mr. Collins, their encroachment is a liberation. The navy in *Persuasion* is associated with nature, openness, hospitality, romance; but, as Marvin Mudrick points out in *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, it is also associated with income, Jane Austen's central symbol of social power. Power has passed from those who oppress and chill feeling to those who represent it, and this is symbolized by the dispossession of the Elliots. If there has been a revolution of values in Jane Austen's mind, she depicts a similar revolution in her society. Only *Persuasion*

Power goes to feeling rather than money

endows the representatives of nature and feeling with the superior social power income symbolizes and bestows. Anne, our moral and emotional barometer, recognizes the justice of the change: "She could have said more on the subject; for she had in fact so high an opinion of the Crofts, and considered her father so very fortunate in his tenants, felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch Hall had passed into better hands than its owners" (p. 125). Admiral Croft symbolically strips away Sir Walter's mirrors, thus purifying Kellynch of its stagnant self-enclosure:

"I have done very little besides sending away some of the large looking-glasses from my dressing-room, which was your father's. A very good man, and very much the gentleman I am sure—but I should think, Miss Elliot" (looking with serious reflection) "I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life.—Such a number of looking-glasses! Oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself . . . now I am quite snug, with my little shaving-glass in one corner, and another great thing that I never go near." (pp. 127–28)

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the threat of dispossession was an additional threat to Elizabeth's security and independence. An influx of liberating energy might be indicated at the end of *Emma*, when Mr. Knightley moved into Hartfield, but the implications of this move were ambiguous; perhaps his own energy was boxed in. In *Persuasion*, the implications of the move are unshadowed: a decaying sector of the petty aristocracy is dislodged from its sanctuary by the purifying force of a new world.

Mansfield Park and *Persuasion* are often grouped together as Jane Austen's "Cinderella novels," but Fanny Price's alienation at Mansfield was the result of her social inferiority; she was removed from the Bertram family by her lower social and financial status. Anne, on the other hand, is an Elliot in all but spirit. It is her "elegance of mind and sweetness of character" that isolate her among the Elliots of Kellynch Hall: "She was only Anne." As her isolation is interiorized into a quality of mind and feeling, so are her silent observations of the world around her. Fanny's moralizing judgments are trans-

formed into Anne's sympathetic emotional projection. She defines a situation not by its propriety, but by the emotional vibrations it contains. Furthermore, her own emotional life is so rich and constant that it often interferes with her role as spectator, as here, for instance: "[Wentworth's action] produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from, till enabled by the entrance of Mary and the Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to their cares, and leave the room. She could not stay. It might have been an opportunity of watching the loves and jealousies of the four; they were now all together, but she could stay for none of it" (p. 80).

Fanny had little to distract her from observing the sword dance of other peoples' loves and jealousies. Only Anne is provided with a significant and autonomous inner world, which is strong enough to pull her from the incessant conflicts around her.

When William Price entered Mansfield, the sea wind blew through Jane Austen's world for the first time, but it was not strong enough in *Mansfield Park* to provide an alternative to Fanny's oppressive existence at Mansfield; William sailed off again, and the sea became associated in Fanny's mind with the "noise, disorder, and impropriety" of her father's house at Portsmouth. This new element in Jane Austen's novels shrinks into a dirty puddle in *Mansfield Park*. Only in *Persuasion* do we become aware of the enormous revolutionary potential it contains, as it brings mobility to a static society and emotional release to a suppressed heroine. Wentworth is William Price transformed into a lover and able to offer the dispossessed heroine citizenship in a fresh community, full of vitality and promise.

The role of the sea in Jane Austen's last three novels, and perhaps in *Sanditon* as well, is a subject which has not been sufficiently examined. With the growth of her sailor brothers, a new world and new possibilities come into Jane Austen's novels. When William Price enters, there is a new emotional excitement in *Mansfield Park*, and the relationship between Fanny and her sailor brother is the vivid heart of the book. But later on, the sea becomes equated with a world in which Fanny cannot live, and she shrinks back into the bosom of Mansfield. Emma, Jane Austen's most powerful heroine, has never seen the sea: her father is afraid of it. Her honeymoon will be two weeks at the seashore under Mr. Knightley's protection, but then she will move

back to Hartfield, where there will now be two fathers instead of one. Only in *Persuasion* is the sea world allowed to dominate and take control of the book and carry off the heroine, with all its romantic excitement, and all its attendant danger.

In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen's world is transformed, in its details as well as its larger structure and tone, by the influx of a revolutionary force: the world symbolized in the sea, which for the first time gives a home to values that had to struggle for survival on land. The passage of money from land to sea guarantees the power of these values. This sea change, symbolized by the transfer of Kellynch Hall at the beginning and the transfer of Anne Elliot at the end, suggests a hope that a purified community will be able to flourish in the "real" world. In freeing the navy of any trace of incompetence or corruption—even the incorrigible Dick Musgrove conveniently dies soon after his induction—Jane Austen is not simply echoing her brothers' probable chauvinism: she is symbolizing utopian hopes suggesting peculiar affinities to Shelley's in *Prometheus Unbound*, begun in 1818, the year of *Persuasion*'s publication.

The role of Wentworth as hero is interesting in relation to Jane Austen's new utopianism. Wentworth has been called the first of Jane Austen's heroes who is a self-made man, and he is also the first hero to represent the world of the future rather than the past. As Anne's lover, Wentworth can initiate her into the brave new world that is so radically transforming the structure of the old. The warmth and generosity that were chilled by the old society can flourish in the new. Before her reconciliation with Wentworth, Anne attends a naval officer's dinner party, and becomes aware that naval society thrives on everything aristocratic society suppresses: "There was so much attachment to Captain Wentworth in all this, and such a bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality so uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display, that Anne felt her spirits not likely to be benefited by an increasing acquaintance among his brother-officers. 'These would have been all my friends,' was her thought; and she had to struggle against a great tendency to lowness" (p. 98).

To find this generosity of feeling, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, and Emma Woodhouse retreated into the past: Elizabeth encountered herself in Pemberley, Fanny in Mansfield, and Emma was

protected by the sheltering values of Mr. Knightley, whose relation to an older tradition of English life was symbolized in part by his name. But there were oppressive and equivocal elements in this protective world of tradition. Darcy's resemblance to his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, pointed to elements in his character of the antihuman pride of his class, although at times Jane Austen ignored Darcy's unpleasant side with skillful sophistry in order to maintain the light and bright and sparkling tone of the book. Mansfield was the home of vanity and oppression throughout most of *Mansfield Park*: only when the greater cruelty of the new was made apparent did it begin to loom large as a refuge. Even Emma and Mr. Knightley were not able to share the rich fruitfulness of Donwell. They had to move into Hartfield, another home of constriction and oppression, governed by Mr. Woodhouse's fear of marriage, procreation, food, and the elements. It is significant that in *Persuasion* we are placed on the fringes of the aristocracy from the beginning. The hero of this book breaks into the equivocal shelter of England's past, and links the heroine with forces of future hope and change.

In an interesting article, "Luck and Fortuitous Circumstance in *Persuasion*: Two Interpretations," Paul Zeitlow provocatively discusses the role of fortune in the novel, which is associated particularly with Wentworth's rise.⁴ I would disagree only with Zeitlow's "darker" interpretation, which argues that the role of luck places the characters in a contingent universe. The world of *Persuasion* operates according to a coherent pattern, to which each instance of luck contributes: the novel becomes contingent only if we insist on comparing its autonomous laws with those of our own universe. The "providential" interpretation does not seem incompatible with intimations of tragedy; in fact, like the providential structure of *The Tempest*, it depends on them. The element of chance in Wentworth's career, particularly the favorable weather without which he would have been drowned on his first sea voyage, suggests an equation between his life and the rhythms of the elements: he is a man in harmony with the spirit of the sea, who lives in conjunction with the elements and their motions.

Wentworth's career brings us to another important element in *Persuasion* which has been merely hinted at in Jane Austen's earlier novels: the new importance of productive labor as fulfillment in itself. The importance of natural rhythms in the book, and the ideal-

ization of the navy as a life conjoined with them, are never equated with a passive yielding to external ebbs and flows. The relation between nature and human exertion is embodied in a beautiful emblem near the beginning of the novel, during the Uppercross party's walk to Winthrop: "After another half mile of gradual ascent through large enclosures, where the ploughs at work, and the fresh-made path spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again, they gained the summit" (p. 85, italics mine).

The labor of the farmer harmonizes with and even anticipates the natural processes. As the farmer works with the rhythm of the seasons, so the sailors work with the rhythm of the sea. The luck-guiding Wentworth's career indicates a healthy kinship to natural processes and laws similar to that of the farmer. The ideal of labor in harmony with nature is especially important if we compare it to the fear of the weather shown by so many of Jane Austen's earlier characters, a fear which many patronizing critics have attributed to Jane Austen herself. Moreover, this ideal is not limited to obviously "out-door" professions such as farming and sailing; the social-climbing Mrs. Clay, of all people, makes a useful extension when she connects the idea of exposure with *all* the professions:

"Soldiers, in active service, are not at all better off; and even in the quieter professions, there is a toil and a labour of the mind, if not of the body, which seldom leaves a man's looks to the natural effect of time. The lawyer plods, quite care-worn; the physician is up at all hours, and travelling in all weather; and even the clergyman,—" she stopt a moment to consider what might do for the clergyman—"and even the clergyman, you know, is obliged to go into infected rooms, and expose his health and looks to all the injury of a poisonous atmosphere." (p. 20)

With simple irony, Jane Austen invites us to reverse Mrs. Clay's meaning by linking work to wholesome exposure to the weather, even to a "poisonous atmosphere" of the kind Marianne Dashwood so rashly ventured into years before. The opposite of the man who labors is the beautiful and youthful Sir Walter, says Mrs. Clay; and Sir Walter, says Jane Austen, represents the death-in-life of a man who escapes into his own mirrors. In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley the gentleman-farmer was permitted to stand as an ideal because we were always aware

of William Larkins' and Mr. Knightley's own activities in attending to the business of the estate. But in *Persuasion*, this compromise is no longer possible. The world of gentlemen and fine ladies shrinks into the symbol of Sir Walter Elliot's mirror, and although there is some talk at the end of a reconciliation between Wentworth and Lady Russell, the landed world of the gentry is shown to be pretty much unredeemable and decaying. Money and the world of the future lie in work, of which the sea is the chief emblem.

But ideas of exertion and exposure are not linked exclusively to men. The first chapter of *Persuasion* describes Elizabeth Elliot's barren existence, "the prosperity and the nothingness" of her life. She is not barren only, or even primarily, because she is still unmarried at twenty-nine. She is barren because she has nothing to do: "Such were Elizabeth Elliot's sentiments and sensations; such the cares to allay, the agitations to vary, the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of her scene of life—such the feelings to give interest to a long uneventful residence in one country circle, to fill the vacancies which there were *no habits of utility abroad, no talents or accomplishments for home, to occupy*" (p. 9, my emphasis).

Her married sister Mary, whose attachment to her imaginary illnesses is as profound as Sir Walter's to his mirrors, is scarcely better off. Mrs. Croft, the first wholly admirable and likable married woman in Jane Austen's novels, makes a remark that casts an indirect light on Mary's illnesses:

Thank God! I have always been blessed with excellent health, and no climate disagrees with me. . . . The only time that I ever really suffered in body or mind, the only time that I ever fancied myself unwell, or had any ideas of danger, was the winter that I passed by myself at Deal, when the Admiral . . . was in the North Seas. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from *not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next.* (p. 71, my emphasis)

If the navy is Jane Austen's vision of a brave new world, Mrs. Croft is her tactful and subtle portrait of the "new woman." The Crofts are the first happily married couple in Jane Austen's novels to receive more than peripheral treatment. But this does not mean that Jane Austen was mellowing in a sentimental way toward marriage as

she had seen it on land. Their marriage is a naval marriage, different in kind from any other in Jane Austen's books, and it will set a hopeful pattern for Anne and Wentworth's.

"[Mrs. Croft] had bright dark eyes, good teeth, and altogether an agreeable face; though her reddened and weather-beaten complexion, the consequence of her having been almost as much at sea as her husband, made her seem to have lived some years longer in the world than her real eight-and-thirty" (p. 48, my emphasis). Although Jane Austen never trumpets on about "fulfilling careers for women," in the Crofts' exemplary marriage, the wife shares her husband's life of exertion and exposure; she no longer lives in a woman's world, and she has no children. Later on in the book, we see Mrs. Croft "looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her." As an emblem of this good marriage, Jane Austen inserts a sly feminist note:

"My dear Admiral, that post!—we shall certainly take that post" [says Mrs. Croft].

But by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage.

(p. 92)

Mrs. Croft's view of women, which her life gives her freedom to practice, is summed up in her cry to Wentworth: "But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all *fine ladies*, instead of *rational creatures*. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days" (p. 70, my emphasis).

To appreciate the triumph of this assertion, we must turn back to Mr. Collins' proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*, and to Elizabeth's truly desperate plea: "Do not consider me now as an *elegant female* intending to plague you, but as a *rational creature* speaking the truth from her heart."⁵ Mr. Collins' and his society's disjunction between the elegant female and the rational creature was perhaps the most severe threat to Elizabeth's life, and this disjunction has persisted as an undercurrent throughout Jane Austen's novels. In the quiet urgency of its insistence, we may even hear echoes of voices like Mary Wollstone-

craft's: "My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *ascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone."⁶ In Jane Austen's canon, only the heroine of *Persuasion* is able to achieve the freedom to be rational, and therefore human, that Mary Wollstonecraft had envisioned twenty-five years before.

For the gentle Anne herself is not immune from such a topic. It arises in what is perhaps the most consistently misread scene in all of Jane Austen's novels: the dialogue with Captain Harville at the White Hart Inn, which Jane Austen substituted for a more conventionally contrived love scene after she had finished the novel. Therefore, if we define *Sanditon* as a sketch and a fragment, we may regard this scene as Jane Austen's last fully realized piece of writing. In the undercurrents of Anne's romantic lyric, Jane Austen's vaunted "realism" is given its fullest expression. If, in one side of the mirror Anne's speeches are a simple lyric cry, a nineteenth-century provincial version of the "patience-on-a-monument" motif, a glance through the looking-glass shows us their unromantic foundation. Women feel, quite simply, because they are given nothing else to do: "We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions" (p. 232, my emphasis).

Only a rather cruel male supremacist would define intense suffering as the "merit" of women rather than their "fate." But many critics have done so, both in their reading of this scene and in their sentimentalization of one side of Anne Elliot's character. She does not sentimentalize herself, and she is right not to. Her modest and simple tone should not blind us to what she is saying: women do not pine for love and suffer over men because they are by nature more sensitive and emotionally refined, and thus, as it were, "created to suffer." They suffer because their social role creates for them a life without exertion, in which state one's feelings become a torment. Once again, Mary Wollstonecraft may help us to read Jane Austen, by defining a similar condition, though less sympathetically: "Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of

their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. . . . Ever restless and anxious, their over-exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. . . . Miserable, indeed, must be that being whose cultivation of mind has only tended to inflame its passions!" (*Vindication*, p. 67).

Anne shifts this theme into another key in her next speech: "You have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home, country, friends, all quitted. Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be too hard indeed' (with a faltering voice) 'if woman's feelings were to be added to all this'" (p. 233). Anne's own emotional situation is leading her to take an elegiac, even a tragic, view of all human affairs, men's doing as well as women's suffering. Her characteristic richness of sympathy may also obscure her basic statement: the life that women are expected to live is conducive primarily to anguish. We do not expect a radical definition of woman's nature from Anne Elliot, and putting such words in her mouth is a supreme example of Jane Austen's ability to bury her most significant statements in contexts that allow complacent readers to accept her without dismay.⁷

But readers who want Jane Austen to be a defender of the status quo will have to skip Anne's next speech entirely. Harville has substituted for his initial interpretation of her words another male cliché about woman as "la belle dame sans merci." He supports his statement by citing poetry, songs, and proverbs, to which Anne replies, "If you please, no references to examples in books. 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 anything" (p. 234).

This is Anne's only complaint that is directed specifically against society. It is mild, but telling. Society's conventional view of women is dictated by men, because better education allows men to write all the books. Only unequal education prevents women from writing as many books as men do, and presumably, books that are as good; if they were allowed to make themselves heard, the conventional view of women would be radically altered. This emphasis upon unequal education rather than inherent inequality once again recalls Mary Woll-

stonecraft's central thesis in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,⁸ and in fact, Jane Austen did write the books whose lack Anne Elliot deplores. How profoundly they subvert the conventional picture of the "elegant female," of the "fine lady," is something that only our own century has begun to see. In Jane Austen's most famous and emotionally charged love scene, the heroine speaks obliquely for her right to exist in something more than love. These speeches reveal Anne as worthy not only of Wentworth, but of Mrs. Croft as well.

Anne's life after her marriage seems to be forecast for us in the dialogue between the Crofts and Wentworth which has been cited above. Wentworth is holding forth vehemently on the evils of women at sea: "I hate to hear of women on board, or to see them on board; and no ship, under my command, shall ever convey . . . ladies anywhere, if I can help it" (p. 69). "Women . . . have no right to be comfortable on board" (p. 69, Jane Austen's emphasis). Admiral Croft reminds Wentworth that once he marries, his feelings will change, and his sister berates him for seeing women only as "fine ladies." The irony is simple and cheerful. Once exposed to the sea air at Lyme, Anne will begin to "bloom" again. This word, which is applied to Anne throughout the novel, hints at her renewed conjunction with the processes of nature. Like Mrs. Croft, Anne will be "liberated" after her marriage. She will go to sea.

To end a discussion of *Persuasion* on a note of triumph and cheer, however, is to falsify another side of the sea world. Death is not associated only with the land. It is a continual presence on the sea, and the book is always reminding us that great disaster is the other side of great achievement. Wentworth's description of his triumphant voyage on the *Asp* strikes a note that is sounded throughout: "I knew that we should either go to the bottom together, or that she would be the making of me" (pp. 65-66).

Like *The Tempest* again, *Persuasion* does not end with a chorus of reconciliation and joy, but with a glimpse of "quick alarm." As in *The Tempest*, the sea is threatening as well as merciful. "His profession was all that could ever make [Anne's] friends wish [her] tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance"

(p. 252). Danger is the other side of romance. The sense of liberation does not nullify the sense of fear: it contains it. As in Tennyson's "Ulysses," the triumph of the sea over the land contains the possibility of violent death, but to die violently is better than to rust away on land in stagnant enclosure.

This final union of fear and joy strikes the emotional heart of the book. The pervasive tone of *Persuasion* is a tone of neither triumph nor tragedy; it is a paradoxical mixture of pleasure and pain. A description of a paradox of intense contrasting emotions is repeated over and over again. It is almost savored. "[Anne was] grieving to forego all the influence so sweet and so sad of the autumnal months in the country" (p. 33). "Anne walked up at the same time, in a sort of desolate tranquility" (p. 36). "It was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed" (p. 91). "Internally [Lady Russell's] heart revelled in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt" (p. 125). "All the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise were over with her. Still, however, she had enough to feel! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery" (p. 175). "When pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure" (p. 184). "There was no delay, no waste of time. She was deep in the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness, instantly" (p. 229). And so on. Emotional extremes meet and marry in an intensity of feeling.

This blended tone of *Persuasion* brings us close to the elegiac lyrics of Jane Austen's contemporaries, Shelley and Keats, whose poetry dwells on the inward complexities that accompany a release of passion and vision. The revolutionary vision of *Persuasion* encompasses both the polemics of a Mary Wollstonecraft and the subtleties of later Romantic art. Jane Austen was a provincial spinster who did, perhaps, spend most of her life indoors, but she was not encased in the eighteenth century; she felt and recorded the vibrations of her age as the Romantic poets and prophets did, but, like the lady that she was, she spoke more softly.

→ ROMANTIC poets

II.

Men's Women

Handwritten notes in the right margin: "I don't know if I've ever read this before" and "I don't know if I've ever read this before".

Handwritten notes in the left margin: "I don't know if I've ever read this before" and "I don't know if I've ever read this before".