

Persuasion

The period in which Austen lived was one of transition: earlier eighteenth-century or Augustan culture was broadly neo-classical (so following classical models) grounded in rationality, influenced by the scientific approaches of Newton and his colleagues, believing man and the universe could be explained by underlying rational principles. They were not concerned with a personal, private vision but with communicating public known truths in an elegant manner. Pope sums up this approach in *An Essay On Criticism* (1711):

‘True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed’ (l.297-8).

Mind you, Oscar Wilde once commented: ‘There are two ways of disliking poetry: one is to dislike it, the other is to read Pope’. We know from Austen’s letters that she read and admired Augustan writers such as Pope and Johnson in particular and her work was clearly influenced by them.

When Austen was born in 1775 this culture was being challenged by Romantic culture, which asserted an organic rather than a mechanical view of life and placed greater value on private vision than standard rationality. Where Augustanism favoured established literary methods and a settled, ordered society, Romanticism was often radical. The subject matter of Romanticism is typically rural rather than urban, the country rather than the city - very different to Johnson’s attitude: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.

Romanticism affected attitudes to nature, the arts and politics but was initially primarily associated with literature. Rousseau (1712-1778), a French philosopher and novelist, was particularly influential on English writers. His view of human nature was fundamentally optimistic, arguing that society and its institutions, in particular its laws, had corrupted man from a state of natural innocence. It was he who coined the phrase ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ which was subsequently adopted by the revolutionaries.

Such principles found fictional expression in novels of sentiment or sensibility, one of the cultural influences which led to Romanticism. ‘Sensibility’ implied a capacity for refined emotional response to whatever is best and most beautiful in nature, art, literature and people; allied to this was a belief that the power and depth of a person’s feelings were a guarantee of their moral worth.

The philosophical basis of Sensibility, which anticipates Romanticism, is found in Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics of Men, Manners and Morals* (1711). Shaftesbury had been a pupil of John Locke but disagreed with Locke’s idea that the mind was a blank sheet or *tabula rasa*, to be written on by the experiences of the senses. Shaftesbury suggested that we are born with an innate moral sense or conscience which prompts us to right action. This is in stark contrast to Thomas Hobbes’s thesis, expressed in *Leviathan* (1651) that humanity was basically corrupt, driven by selfishness, greed and a lust for power.

In what sense then can we regard *Persuasion* as a Romantic novel?

It is at first glance difficult to see how Austen fits into what Behrendt defines as ‘The masculinist, heroic ideology (encompassing the roles of bard and prophet) long associated with Romantic poetry’. Criticism has turned its attention in recent years to the work of women in the Romantic period (you have examples in the Norton anthology) and has recognised that we need to widen our definition of Romanticism beyond the canonical ‘big six’ (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats).

During the Romantic period the novel, not poetry, was the most widely available form of writing, apart from newspapers and magazines’. Behrendt argues usefully: ‘Just as in the late twentieth century countless citizens follow soap operas...so too did the Romantic reader see in fiction reflections of a world so close to her or his own that the fictions took on the nature of fact’. So in what sense does Austen reflect the social realities of the Romantic era?

As Tony Tanner points out, Austen lived through the American War of Independence (as a child), the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, Industrial Revolution and numerous riots in England such as the Luddite riots in 1811. None of these events, which dominated English culture at the time, find explicit reference in her fiction. This is not because she was unaware of them.

If we take perhaps the most obvious event, the French Revolution - Eliza Hancock, Austen's cousin and friend since childhood, married a French Captain, the Comte de Feuillide, who was a fervent royalist. She was in France in 1793 when the Reign of Terror began and, threatened with arrest by the Committee of Public Safety, she fled to England to stay with the Austens. Her husband, the Comte, was guillotined in 1794 as an Enemy of the Republic. The stories Eliza told about this period gave Austen an enduring hatred of Republican France.

France was involved in wars with other European powers (always including Great Britain) from 1792-1802, from 1803-1814, and during the "hundred days" in 1815 - so we were pretty much constantly at war with France during Austen's adult lifetime. Unusually for Austen, *Persuasion* is set in a specific time period, the autumn and spring of 1814-15 (it was written in 1815-16 and published two years later after Austen's death). So it is set during the lull in fighting between the capture and imprisonment of Napoleon in 1814 and his escape from Elba and final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. Austen's brothers, Charles and Francis (known as Frank), were both in the navy and rose to become admirals. Francis in particular sent detailed letters about the voyages and campaigns he was involved in.

Austen may not deal directly with war or the storming of the Bastille (she doesn't need to - it dominated the English imagination for decades) but she does engage with the principles of the revolution as they relate to contemporary England, where class tensions erupted into riots but had not yet caused the revolution many feared. Abolition of class privilege was one of the main demands of the French people in 1789 - I've summarised their demands on your handout. In *Persuasion*, Austen addresses this volatile issue.

Traditionally in England there was a kind of unwritten contract between the landed classes and those lower down the social scale: the landed classes, who ran both the legal and political systems, would be gracious and just in return for obedience and deference, resulting in at least a facade of peaceful relationships between the classes. This ideal is represented in works such as Austen's *Emma*, where Mr Knightley is a caring landowner, who looks after those working for him and living on his land; one of the things that influences Elizabeth's opinion of Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is his reputation as an active and responsible landowner.

This earlier eighteenth-century ideal didn't measure up to the reality of events in the Romantic period: between 1790 and 1810 there were 500 riots protesting about the price of bread. 1811 - 1813 saw the Luddite risings (unemployed workers smashing knitting frames). It wasn't until 1832 that the Reform Bill gave the vote to sections of the middle (but not working) classes. Before 1832, voting was restricted to men of property - out of a population of 8.5 million, only 11,000 men could vote. Mary Wollstonecraft (Mary Shelley's mother for those of you who've done the Gothic course) described the elitist voting system of her time as 'a convenient handle for despotism' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792).

Nonetheless, in theory at least, the landed classes governed by a system of voluntary deference, not force. For this reason they had to be seen to take their social responsibilities seriously. Sir Walter in *Persuasion* represents a dereliction of duty on the part of the landed classes; he is a reflection of the dangers Austen perceived, not simply from revolutionary ideas from France but from inside her society. As Tanner argues, Austen's fiction is 'parabolic of what was happening to "society" at large' (p.13) - it functions as a parable, with the community of the novel acting as a microcosm of society.

In *Persuasion* Austen reflects a world of shifting, uncertain values, where traditional figures of authority are revealed to be inadequate. Traditional sources of stability such as social position, property, family, social rules of behaviour and duty, which Lady Russell believes in, are brought into question, being no longer able to maintain the social fabric.

In *Persuasion* rank is deprived of the usual connotations of authority and responsibility and simply signifies itself - deprived of the values which gave it meaning, it degenerates from an active ideal of the ruling class as serving the interests of the country to a mere commodity. The only time Mr Elliot shows interest in the baronetcy is when he sees pecuniary advantage - he uses the notions of 'the value of rank and connexion' simply to disguise his greed. He bemoans 'the unfeudal tone of the present day' (vol II ch 3 p.131), recognising only the ancient privilege of rank, not the attendant responsibility.

Austen suggests different ways of valuing people. Anne, like Austen, judges not the title or 'label' but the individual. Take for example Lady Dalrymple and her daughter: 'There was no superiority of

manner, accomplishment, or understanding' so in Anne's eyes they 'were nothing' (vol II ch 4, pp.141-2). Mr Elliot asserts that 'rank is rank', suggesting that the self-interest of the landed classes serves as its own rationale - Austen reveals the inadequacy of such attitudes, placing such empty assertions next to the navy. As Tanner points out, 'the new realm where rank *does* have a genuine significance and is related to a hierarchy of real functions and obligations is the navy' (p.216). Wentworth, rejected as 'nobody' by Anne's family as a young man, returns to England 'as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him'; he is no longer 'nobody'. Merit and activity are crucial in evaluating a person's worth in *Persuasion*. Sir Walter has no profession, merit or activity - he is the nobody in this new meritocratic world ie one where you earn your position. Sir Walter has even rented out his estate so is dislocated from the traditional feudal world of property and responsibility. Renting out the property purely for financial gain indicates an irresponsible abdication of the duties of land-owning in Austen's society. Rather than maintaining the social order, Sir Walter acts as a parasite, thinking only of personal gain. Anne recognises sadly that Kellynch, symbol of the role and responsibility of the landed classes, 'had passed into better hands than its owners'. His dislocation is symptomatic of the crisis in values in *Persuasion*, reflecting the broader crisis of values in the Romantic period, the lack of clear correlation between social title and social role.

Austen shares with Romantics such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley the focus on the individual as a means of regenerating the social and political body. *Persuasion* explores the problems inherent in the old social order facing new 'modern' values.

Austen differs from the male Romantics you've been studying in that she widens the debate to include women. This was not a primary concern for the 'big 6' male poets - when Wordsworth argues for the rights of men, it is precisely men he is talking about - women are not part of the political equation. Male Romantics such as Coleridge and Shelley were concerned with questions of knowledge and how knowledge is acquired - this extends to the broader Romantic concern with education in various forms. For women writing in the Romantic period, the issue was how to enable women to be well educated at all.

Mary Wollstonecraft, increasingly conscious that any potential social and political improvements would not apply to women, sought to widen Romantic debates, in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), challenging the injustices of the English system as they related to women and arguing for a re-evaluation of the role and potential of women in society; education was vital if women were to fulfil new roles in the professions, for example. While Wollstonecraft had some influence in radical circles, she was much criticised publicly, famously referred to by Rev Polwhele as an unsexed female, his term for women intellectuals, 'a hyena in petticoats' and a 'philosophizing serpent'. Wollstonecraft scandalised the public by her intellectual views but also by her behaviour: she lived openly with William Godwin, the radical philosopher. Austen, in contrast, held strong Christian moral values. Their approach was in this respect very different but nonetheless they both engage with contemporary debate, broadening the male Romantic interest in man in society to include more significant roles for women. Austen's Mrs Croft, who 'seemed more conversant with business than her husband', is part of this debate.

Mrs Croft, though unconventional, is clearly not an 'unsexed [or unnatural] female'. Her insistence on women being regarded as 'rational creatures' as opposed to 'fine ladies' is precisely the kind of sentiment that Polwhele and many others objected to in Wollstonecraft. Yet the gentle comic context, Mrs Croft's propriety and love and support of her husband prevent her from being interpreted as 'a hyena in petticoats'.

Austen may well have intended Anne's comments to Harville on the reliability of male recorded history in the same context (see vol II Ch 11 pp.221-2). Harville declares, 'all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse' reveal the superficial nature of women. Anne retorts, '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'. Austen is questioning received wisdom because that wisdom is male - the female voice is absent - that voice is heard in this novel through Anne and Mrs Croft, which links it to contemporary women Romantics.

Tanner refers to Mrs Croft's childlessness as 'an odd note' - it's unconventional, certainly, in a world where women were taught to value themselves primarily as wives and mothers; Mrs Croft insists on defining women in other terms, as rational creatures. By making her childless, Austen provides an image of an alternative way of defining women. She is of course a good wife but she does not define herself simply as

a wife; her life provides an image of an alternative role for women; it is very active, with a surprisingly equal partnership with her husband; she clearly has a fulfilling and useful life but, crucially, without the role of childbearing. Austen never shared her society's idealisation of the maternal role - in fact, she could be quite rude about it, as we see from her letters: 'Poor woman! how can she honestly be breeding again?' (on your handout).

The rigours of life at sea were not a realistic or desirable option for all women but Linda Maloney notes that 'women [including officers' wives] were found on board the ships, even in wartime'.¹ The image of freedom and adventure is a powerful one: 'I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and have been once to the East Indies; and back again...besides being in different places about home - Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar' (vol I Ch 8 p.70). Austen herself clearly found this notion of freedom attractive: in a letter to Cassandra she writes: 'the prospect of spending future summers by the Sea or in Wales is very delightful. For a time we shall now possess many of the advantages which I have often thought of with Envy in the wives of Sailors or Soldiers.'

Mrs Croft is also significant of course in that she is associated with the navy and its values. Sir Walter criticises the navy as 'the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction' (I ch 3, p.24). Wentworth in particular embodies changes in Austen's society, where money and not just land was becoming a means of attaining social acceptance and respect. Austen was very conscious that the navy, not the ruling landed classes, had saved England during the wars. I'm sure Tanner is right to suppose that she knew about contemporary fears of invasion by France; it is inconceivable that she wouldn't have done.

Ignorance of the navy and its role among the inhabitants at Uppercross underlines the gulf between those who traditionally upheld England and its values but who have become neglectful of their duties and the profession which has taken over their role. This becomes clear when Wentworth acts for Mrs Smith in a legal case (last page of the novel). Mr Elliot, gentleman and executor of her husband's will, reneged on his responsibilities, refusing a socially useful role for a purely self-serving one (see vol II ch 9). Elliot's low moral status is confirmed when he takes Mrs Clay as his mistress - referred to in the novel as being 'under his protection'. Wentworth embodies the best of the new meritocratic society, together with the traditional propriety and social responsibility of a gentleman. Being useful is an important concept in *Persuasion*. Even Sir Walter admits grudgingly, 'the profession has its utility' (I Ch 3 p.24), failing to recognise the importance of usefulness in this world.

The naval figures are warm and genuine, their behaviour determined by their humanity, as opposed to the rigid rules of social etiquette which Elizabeth Elliot follows and which allow her to snub Wentworth in company. The Musgroves offer another image of spontaneity and feeling patterns of behaviour; the younger generation in particular, have 'modern minds' ie attitudes informed by the Romantic ideals of openness and genuineness of feeling; their 'manners unembarrassed and pleasant'. While their genuineness is clearly preferable to the hypocrisy and rigid etiquette of the Elliots, it is not without its problems, as we see in Louisa's accident in vol I ch 12 .

The accident is significant in two respects: it reveals the potential flaws in Louisa's modern attitudes, the potential for self-destruction and it operates as a means of testing character by revealing characters' reactions to it. Anne shows herself to be a figure of strength and steadfastness, able to focus not on her personal response to an upsetting incident but on being socially useful. Here even Wentworth reveals some weakness, paralysed by guilt.

Louisa's accident embodies the dialectic at the heart of the novel between Romantic ideals, placing greater value on the individual and strong feeling as opposed to traditional eighteenth-century values of rationality and collective wisdom. Louisa's individuality and spontaneity are attractive but her headstrong refusal to follow Wentworth's rational advice not to jump because she is too high up, is clearly foolish. She embodies the dangers of Romantic values of the self when not tempered with rationality.

Wentworth had earlier admired Louisa's determination to make her own decisions; she boasted of her firmness of mind, 'I have no idea of being so easily persuaded' (vol I ch 10 p.85) and Wentworth concurred, 'let those who would be happy be firm'.

A word of warning about the prevalence of the word 'persuade' in this novel. Firstly Austen almost certainly didn't choose the title *Persuasion*; it was probably chosen by her brother Henry when preparing the

novel for publication after her death. Cassandra told her nieces and nephews in later years that 'among several possible titles, the one that seemed most likely was *The Elliots*'. However, the issue of 'persuasion' is of course significant; the moral dilemmas involved in whether or not to subordinate one's moral judgement to that of another person become deeply problematic when there are no clear figures of moral authority, as is the case for Anne.

Louisa appeared to embody the qualities of firmness and resolution, as celebrated in Wentworth's famous metaphorical discussion of the nut which 'has outlived all the storms of autumn' (vol I, ch 10, p.86). The accident teaches Wentworth, in his own words, 'to distinguish between the Steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will' (II ch 11 p.228) ie the difference between sticking to one's principles and simply being headstrong.

Tanner sums up effectively the principles being represented in Louisa's accident: 'In a changing society a more emotional, 'romantic' personal code is emerging as both desirable and necessary - with a proper appreciation of the difference between "spontaneity" and "impetuousness", between the mere rashness of "risk" and the securely grounded independence of individual feelings' (pp.248-9). Anne after Louisa's accident 'wonders...whether it might not strike [Wentworth] that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits.' (I chapter 12, p.113). This is surely Austen's verdict on this modern very individual code of conduct: at its best, it is attractive and genuine, preferable to the hypocrisies and the stagnant values of earlier generations; but everything needs balance.

The same principle applies to literary aspects of Romanticism. [Video clip] This is a scene from *Sense and Sensibility*. Edward's trying to read Cowper. Marianne judges him by fashionable ideals of taste - just as there were right ways of viewing landscape, there were right ways of reading. Austen isn't satirising the poetry here (Cowper was one of her favourite poets) - she's lampooning superficial attitudes to art and judging character. Marianne's Romantic notions of self-expression differ from Elinor and Edward's reserve but they too feel deeply; they temper feeling with rationality and duty. So we have the same conflict of values here that we find in *Persuasion* in the figures of Anne and Louisa.

Austen was very aware of contemporary literature and its influence. In *Northanger Abbey* she wrote a Gothic novel which comments on Gothic literature; in *Persuasion*, she writes a Romantic novel which comments on Romanticism. Benwick speaks warmly of 'the richness of the present age' ie the Romantic poets but focuses on poetic 'lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness' (I ch 11 p.98). Austen speaks through Anne when she says that 'it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely...the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly'. The problem is not Romantic poetry but indiscriminating minds, who read self-indulgently. Austen's favourite poet was Cowper, generally regarded as a pre-Romantic poet, who addressed the simpler human and rural themes, marking the point at which English verse moved away from neoclassical concerns towards Romanticism. Yet she also enjoyed a range of other writers, including Augustan greats such as Samuel Johnson. What she is advocating here is a discriminating approach to literature.

Austen satirised literary pretentiousness throughout her work - see the extract from *Sanditon* on the handout, where Sir Edward is using fashionable literary terms which he doesn't understand; there is nothing genuine about his literary appreciation. He's rather like people who claim to like arty films they really don't understand just because they want to appear cultured. Benwick's literary tastes are treated more sympathetically because they are genuine, a temporary indulgence which will presumably fade just as his feelings of despair at losing his beloved fade when he encounters Louisa.

There is some evidence of Romantic influence in the writing of *Persuasion*. Certainly the lyrical passages describing Lyme are unlike anything in Austen's earlier works, with 'green chasms between romantic rocks' (vol I ch 11, p.93) inviting them to linger 'as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserve to look on it' (p.94). You might want to compare this with Keats's poem, 'On the Sea' - sadly not in the Norton:

'Ye who have your eyeballs vexed and tired,
Feast them upon the wideness of the sea...'

By the end of the eighteenth century the contemplation of landscape was regarded as an important pursuit for cultured people and critics and philosophers began to be interested in the way in which people responded to natural scenery; to display a correct taste in landscape was a valuable social accomplishment and a legitimate indication of character. Austen was writing in the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge; there was a clear awareness that the way in which an individual responded to nature could reveal their inner psychological landscape.

While it is true that as Marianne Dashwood says, in *Sense and Sensibility*, 'admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon', terms like sublime', 'beautiful', and 'picturesque' were important manifestations of shifts of thought and feeling that created the Age of Sensibility, one of the cultural factors leading to Romanticism.

William Gilpin defined the picturesque as 'a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture' (*Essay Upon Prints*, 1768) ie a landscape that was like a picture. The term became particularly prominent in the Romantic period, referring to an ideal of natural beauty and celebrating that which was wild and disordered. In *Sense and Sensibility* ch 18 (on handout) Austen considers the theory and practice of the picturesque. Edward teases Marianne, 'I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep which ought to be bold'. Elinor recognises what he's up to: 'Because he believes many people pretend to more admiration of the beauties of nature than they really feel and is disgusted with such pretensions, he affects greater indifference and less discrimination in viewing them himself than he possesses'. Perhaps the same may be said of Austen herself in her earlier work.

The descriptive passages in *Persuasion* may be slight but they are not insignificant; if we are focusing on Romantic elements in the text then clearly it is significant that Austen relates the natural landscape to human emotional experience: the autumnal weather functions partly as an image of the autumnal sentiment in Anne. You might find it helpful to compare Austen's description of 'the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges' in vol I ch 10 with Keats's ode, *To Autumn* (in the Norton).

The dominant mood in the novel has often been characterised as autumnal, nostalgic, with a sense of the most significant experience being past, retrievable only in the memory (something you will be familiar with in Wordsworth and Coleridge) but which has also been interpreted as reflecting Austen's state of mind as she faced terminal illness - she had Addison's disease.

Marilyn Butler emphasises the subjective nature of this novel: 'The sad scenes of autumn in the novel, the desolation of winter rain, are as they are because they are felt by Anne. The world of her consciousness is so all-absorbing that it is not clear whether the outer world...has objective existence or not' (p.279). This focus on the psychology of the protagonists is again characteristic of Romanticism.

We see the progress of Anne's relationship with Wentworth through Anne's consciousness, through half-articulated sentiments which we can only interpret through Anne, sustained images of separation eg Anne and Wentworth passing on opposite sides of the street, being separated by circumstances such as Anne being in the same social group or 'party' as Mr Elliott at the concert, being prevented from communicating openly by repeatedly meeting when surrounded by the group of their acquaintance or the crowds of Bath.

The significant action is not external, in the world of the crowd but internal: after hearing Wentworth discussing Benwick's decision to marry, with the heartfelt comment 'A man does not recover from such a devotion...to such a woman! He ought not - he does not', Anne retreats into her own consciousness, barely aware of the 'ceaseless buzz of persons walking through...and beginning to breathe very quick' (vol II Ch 8 p.173). It is passages such as this, which the focus on the subjective consciousness, which lead to *Persuasion* being regarded as a Romantic novel.

The impossibility of direct communication is particularly apparent when Wentworth overhears Anne's conversation with Harville about Benwick's decision to marry Louisa; the resulting debate concerning whether men or women love longest gives Wentworth some intimation of Anne's feelings. Harville is only aware of the external reality of a friendly debate. Wentworth and Anne are deeply aware of the significance of Anne's observations to their inner drama, one of which everyone else is unaware. It is at this point that Wentworth, reading between the lines of what Anne's saying, has the courage to express his

inner thoughts on paper so that he and Anne can communicate effectively, albeit still indirectly at this point because they are unable to speak openly.

Throughout the novel we see the tension between the inner and outer world; Anne's early environment is one of repression - she has to learn to allow herself spontaneous feeling, the very feelings for Wentworth which her father had given 'all the negative of great...coldness' to (I ch 4). Yet her inner life is rich, meditative and feeling. The two worlds conflict for some time, causing great tension: Anne refers to 'that quarter of the mind which could not be opened to Lady Russell...that flow of anxieties and fears which must be all to herself' (II ch 10). *Persuasion* explores the ways in which society restricts and puts pressure on people; hence the focus on manners and propriety, the concern with possible hypocrisy. Byron commented in 1821, 'In England the only homage which they pay to Virtue - is hypocrisy'(letter, 11th May, 1821).

On a psychological level, Wentworth and Anne 'read' each other in ways which the other characters cannot for example in I ch 8 when Wentworth and Mrs Musgrove are discussing her dead son; only Anne can read 'a momentary expression...a certain glance of his bright eye'(p.67) which tells her what he's really thinking.

Anne and Wentworth are conscious of a sub text which the others are unaware of: when Mrs Croft speaks of long engagements, Anne 'felt its application to herself...at the same moment that her eyes instinctively glanced towards the distant table, Captain Wentworth's pen ceased to move...he turned round the next instant to give a look - one quick, conscious look at her'(II Ch 11 pp.217-8).

Anne is the locus of deep feeling in the text but also the moral fulcrum - she embodies a resolution between the apparently conflicting demands of the individual feeling heart and rationality, between progressive notions of individuality and conservative notions of duty and propriety. This is summed up in the central debate of whether or not she should have listened to Lady Russell's advice not to marry Wentworth.

Eva Figes comments that *Persuasion* 'reads...like a personal recantation of the assumed philosophy of sense and prudence which Austen, along with her contemporaries, had preached for so long', pointing out 'The sad autumnal quality of the novel' and 'the overwhelming mood of regret, that one can only conclude that the author is reassessing the philosophy of sense so forcefully fed to the young women readers of her day, and that she finds it sadly inadequate'(pp.110-11). In vol I ch 4 we read that Anne, who was persuaded to give up Wentworth, 'had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older - the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning'.

However, Anne's balanced verdict would seem to be Jane Austen's: 'much as I suffered from it...I was perfectly right in being guided...she was in the place of a parent...I am not saying that she did not err in her advice...I was right in submitting to her...I should have suffered in my conscience'(II ch 11, p.232) otherwise.

Anne and Wentworth have to reconcile themselves to the past. When Wentworth praises Anne for her calm resolution after Louisa's accident, he speaks in a way 'which seemed almost restoring the past'(I ch12); the accident provokes a reassessment of values which will ultimately lead to resolution.

Anne ultimately articulates an apparently romantic notion of 'loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone'(II ch 11) but it is not a love based on superficial attraction but one which endures hardship and separation; it stands the test of both reason and time. Austen is not advocating youthful passion in a simplistic sense, nor is she rejecting it; she is promoting mature responses to life, what we would term self-knowledge.

The conclusion reflects this balanced message. Marriage will not bring Anne stability, as represented by marrying a man of property, which we see in the conclusions to her other novels. Anne 'gloried in being a sailor's wife' but will have to face the 'tax of future alarm'(p.237) - they're aware that they're taking a risk and may have to pay the price.

Critics disagree as to Anne's probable role after she marries Wentworth: Nina Auerbach, assuming that Anne will join Wentworth at sea, argues that she will be paying the 'tax of quick alarm' rather sooner than we might expect ('O Brave New World'). Rzepka argues that Anne is unlikely to follow in Mrs Croft's footsteps and join her husband at sea, basing his argument on Anne's 'almost instinctive impulse to nurse and nurture others, particularly children'(p.104). Arguing that Anne is rather good with children and

therefore seems destined to a life on shore looking after them doesn't strike me as particularly persuasive next to the figure of Mrs Croft. Certainly most critics are closer to Auerbach on this.

Tanner argues that by pointing to the sea at the end Austen is relocating the values of society and domesticity, pointing to a more personal society, whose actions are determined from the heart. I'm not convinced that Austen's standpoint is this radical. While the novel ends with a warm endorsement of the navy in terms of its social and personal values, 'distinguished' in both 'its domestic virtues' and its 'national importance', Austen clearly isn't suggesting that England should do away with the landed classes and established modes of behaviour.

The navy and the world of individual merit is in part symbolic but is not offered as a perfect answer - Austen's world was one of far reaching social and political problems to which there were no easy answers. It is this which she represents in the novel - Anne and Wentworth symbolise a possible new order, combining the best of traditional duties and proprieties with progressive notions of the significance of the individual and genuine moral feeling - it is in this sense that we can approach *Persuasion* as a Romantic novel. They represent the possibility for change, for progression, a moving away from and beyond the stagnant world of Sir Walter.

According to the old social order, Anne could have 'restored' the family and its values by marrying Mr Elliot - Lady Russell speaks of her being 'restored to Kellynch' in this way. What determines the possibility of restoration is individual values and feelings - Anne's marriage to Mr Elliot would be socially desirable but impossible on an individual level. The restoration is personal, a vindication of Anne and Wentworth's feelings. However, it's not simply a question of feeling but the values which are associated with the genuineness of that feeling. Anne's assessment of Mr Elliot's character is helpful here: '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'(II ch 5, p.152). Anne, we read, 'prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character'(pp.152-3). The focus is on the genuineness of feeling as an indication of character but for Anne there is always a moral register - she distrusts the polished exterior of one who shows no moral feeling - 'indignation or delight at the evil or good of others'.

The morally corrupt Mr Elliot is likely to inherit Sir Walter's estate; the future of Kellynch and all it embodies is uncertain. There is no optimistic assertion of social renewal in *Persuasion* - the hope lies in the regeneration of the individual.

The relationship between the individual and society is central to Romanticism. Austen's hope in the individual, balanced by her guarded faith in humanity, is not unlike Jonathan Swift's: 'I love mankind. It's human beings I can't stand'.

© Dr Beth Swan, www.english-lecturer.co.uk

¹ Linda Maloney, 'Doxies at Dockside', essay in *Ships, Seafaring and Society*, ed. Timothy Runyan.