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Jane Austen , Edited with Introduction and Notes by Janet Todd

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PERSUASION



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❧
JANE AUSTEN

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Persuasion

The Collector's Edition

❧
With preface and notes by
JANET TODD



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The texts in this edition are based on
The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane
Austen (2005–8), with grateful acknowledgement. Readers
interested in a more detailed textual account and in further
exploration of the novels and their publication history should
consult those volumes. The present edition contains explanatory
endnotes: under thematic headings, they provide information
on a cultural, historical and literary context that might be
unfamiliar to a modern reader. A few footnotes indicate
words that have changed meaning between
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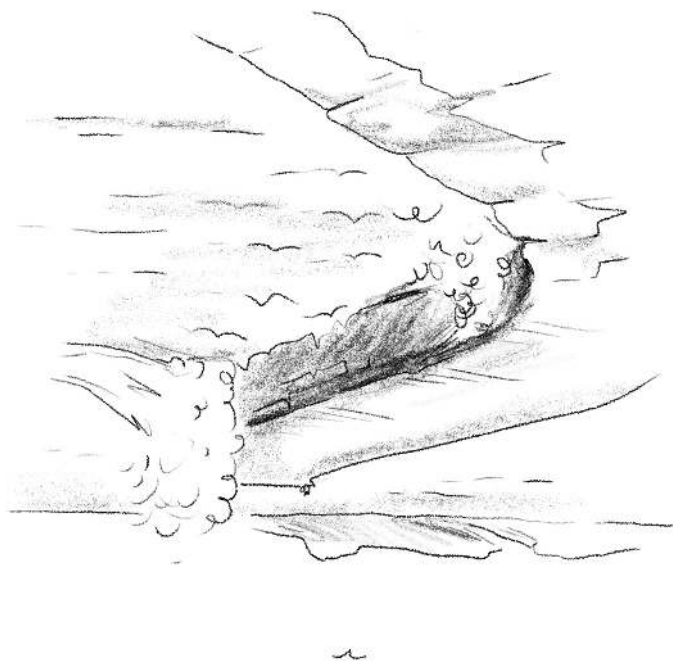
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PREFACE



IN AUSTEN'S FIRST published novel *Sense and Sensibility*, young Marianne is taken to task for staking her life on a first love. It is a youthful passion, a delusion to be rejected through struggle and Christian fortitude. Here in *Persuasion*, however, Austen's last complete work, her mature heroine Anne Elliot seeks no substitute for her first choice. She declares that women love 'longest, when existence or when hope is gone', and her powerful despairing words resonate with the intensity of desire and memory. Anne is allowed to 'learn romance' after losing it when young through prudent persuasion and, for her steadfastness, she receives 'all which this world could do for her'. The book that began as a painful reversal of the courtship novel ends in rapturous romantic comedy.

In the first part of *Persuasion*, a 'small thick rain' falls bleakly on Anne, outside and within. A perpetual nostalgia and yearning have damaged more than seven years of her life and led to crippling depression. She tortures herself in a manner that at times seems almost self-gratifying. But no Austen novel, even one so fixated on the interiority of the heroine as *Persuasion*, is without irony. Wryly the narrator points out that a second attachment is the best remedy for a first disappointment.

Irony even touches the conversation with Captain Harville about irrevocable love. This includes Anne's assertion that the pen is always in men's hands as historians of a universal culture. Yet, while she is making this claim, Anne is actually empowering her own feminine words: her beloved Wentworth, who had indeed been writing, overhears her claim, drops his pen, then picks it up to tell her what she most desires.

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Through the second part of the novel Anne is finding her new power. Wentworth's return, at first as dreadful as his going, slowly becomes bearable. As she watches him flirting with young Louisa Musgrove, she begins to look outwards, and the admiration of another man as well as the bracing winds of coastal Lyme bring a physical awakening, a returning 'bloom' to cheeks once called 'haggard'. With bloom comes renewed energy and initiative, which in turn rekindle Wentworth's admiration.

In a letter to her niece Fanny Knight, Jane Austen wrote that she feared Anne Elliot might appear almost too good. In fact, her creator injected a healthy dose of psychological realism into the portrait of her heroine, allowing Anne some reasonable resentment when, following Louisa's self-inflicted accident on the Cobb at Lyme, she wonders whether it occurred to Wentworth now that a 'very resolute character' has drawbacks. And always Anne guards her self-esteem: despite her diminished domestic circumstances, she would not exchange her fine mind for anyone else's, and, despite the perils of spinsterhood, she has not settled for marriage at any cost.

During much of the novel, Anne is isolated in a family corroded by gentry snobbishness. Even the mother substitute, kindly Lady Russell, has such respect for rank that she continues to honour feckless Sir Walter for his status. Inevitably she viewed the young, charming military adventurer Wentworth as no match for the daughter of a baronet. Anne herself is not immune to the family snobbery. She despises (and underestimates) the lawyer's daughter Mrs Clay for her class as well as manner, and Mr Elliot's wife for her 'low' birth, and she fails to notice the lowly and astute Nurse Rooke, who brings information and gossip into the life of her disabled and impoverished old schoolfriend Mrs Smith. The supreme snob, Sir Walter Elliot, is a wonderfully drawn portrait of a narcissist surrounded by sycophants and mirrors. Puffed up with empty importance, he fails as guardian of his hereditary estate of Kellynch. Contemporary readers who had just experienced the twenty-two years of the Napoleonic and French Wars knew that landowners had greatly benefited from

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inflated wartime agricultural prices and would see how thoroughly Sir Walter, with rich Somerset land, must have wasted his patrimony to end in debt.

Persuasion is the most securely fixed in time of any Austen novel. It takes place during the ‘false peace’, the summer of 1814. Jane Austen began writing in August 1815 and much happened between the two dates. In April 1814 Napoleon had surrendered and been exiled to Elba. In March 1815 he escaped, landed in France and raised an army, and the war resumed. By June it was over, with Napoleon defeated at Waterloo. Jubilant fireworks and bonfires marked the victory in England and the old conservative order was re-established in Europe. Triumphalism was, however, short-lived as the economic and social costs of the long war made themselves felt throughout the population. Set before Waterloo, *Persuasion* ends with the possibility of more action for its fighting men, and, composed after it, the novel reflects the postwar mood of social uncertainty. Like the Musgroves’ old house at Uppercross, the country is in ‘a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement’. The warrior sailors do not return to the same place they left.

Austen engages with history through a small cohort of these men. In common with her other novels and teenage ‘History of England’ (*Childhood Writings*), here she treats the political through the personal and domestic. The patriotic heroism of these sailors across the globe exists mainly in Anne’s appreciative eyes; they themselves see war as a road to riches and advancement, and know the Navy is full of corruption and rivalry; careless and unhappy after losing Anne, Wentworth is at first given a rotting ship by a callous admiralty. Yet, for those who serve, the Navy represents cohesion and camaraderie. Against the old landed gentry with their ignorance, class-bound indifference to those below them and subservience to an absurd aristocracy, Austen pits a sort of meritocracy of men marked by energy and domestic virtues. But there is no revolutionary message of mobility: the professional Admiral Croft is not more than a tenant of Kellynch, however deserving, and the estate will in time return to the traditional ruling class through Mr Elliot, the unprincipled heir.

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All Austen heroines can quote literary works, but, like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, Anne Elliot lives much of her life within poetry. For comfort and inspiration she recalls not only Austen's old favourite poets of nature and rural life, William Cowper and George Crabbe, but also contemporary Romantic poets, Lord Byron, Robert Southey, Walter Scott and Charlotte Smith, whose sonnets echo the mood of melancholy and nostalgia of much of the novel. Like young Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey*, however, Anne Elliot comes to recognise the limits of her reading and, when she encounters the weepy sailor Benwick, suggests a heavier dose of down-to-earth prose in his diet.

Gender is fluid in *Persuasion*. A man is allotted the literary susceptibility that contemporary culture usually assigns to women. Admiral Croft, a man in charge of great ships, is unable, without his wife, to avoid bumping into a dung cart when driving his gig; when young Louisa is concussed from her fall, the battle-hardened men turn to a woman for immediate help. Despite knowing his sister to be as 'intelligent and keen as any of the officers', Wentworth is in general unaware of women as thinking beings. Like trivial Sir Walter, he judges by looks and dismisses the older Anne as faded. He demands much of women: that they combine 'sweet' femininity with masculine steadfastness. As the book proceeds, he develops his views, but perhaps it is as well for their forthcoming marriage that, not long before the reunion, Anne 'naturally fell into all her wonted ways of attention and assistance'. Her authority will be domestic not public: she will be a wife and supporter of a handsome man less subtle than herself. But she has inner steel: she has, after all, rejected a man who could restore her to her beloved childhood home of Kellynch. Other Austen novels end by delivering their heroines to rural mansions or snug parsonages: here Anne Elliot learns what the wandering naval men already know, that home is a mental not a physical place. Instead of a house, she receives a means of independent transport, a 'pretty landaulette'.

In March 1817, four months before her death, Jane Austen wrote that her book might be published the following year, so further revision was probably contemplated. There is indeed an unpolished,

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sometimes jagged quality to *Persuasion*, a sketchiness to some incidents such as the plotting of Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay, and some sarcastic comments on body size and dead children mourned by sentimental foolish mothers that may have been excised on revision. Yet there is a marvellous symmetry to what we have, and the very sketchiness of minor characters highlights the focus on Anne's consciousness, adding to the book's unique intensity. It is perhaps an ambiguous intensity, for some readers have judged the novel a satire on the frailty of human sorrow, while others – probably the majority – have responded to a powerful portrait of female grief triumphantly, euphorically overcome.

As the last novel, *Persuasion* is inevitably seen in the light of Austen's final illness. This was becoming apparent in 1815 as she began writing and cannot have been helped by the rigours of nursing her feverish brother Henry soon afterwards. In late May 1816, she interrupted the writing of *Persuasion* to take the waters at Cheltenham Spa. She completed her novel on her return and wrote 'Finis. July 18, 1816'. Then, unhappy with the climactic scene, she wrote a second version which heightened the emotional temperature. According to Cassandra, *Persuasion* was concluded on 6 August 1816. So, uniquely in Austen's oeuvre, for *Persuasion* an earlier part of the text survives. A transcript is reproduced here (pp. 237–50) to allow readers to catch a glimpse of Austen's creative process.