



"That quarter of the mind":
The Psychodynamics of the Female Will
In
Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract: Near the end of *Persuasion* Anne Elliot informs Captain Wentworth that despite Lady Russell's opposition to the couple, Anne will continue to be connected to, even influenced by, her mother figure. This scene is indicative of Austen's dramatic shift from the Cinderella stories in her earlier novels to a psychological study of how women make choices. In the process the novelist anticipates the seminal work in developmental psychology by Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and others, who demonstrate that women choose in relation to others, especially other women, not in isolation as do most men. More remarkably, when Anne reproduces her attachment to Lady Russell in her connections with marginalized people, including nurses and servants, *Persuasion* imagines political solidarity among women and the disadvantaged. In league with these others, Austen's heroine finds a shared path to truth, choice, and satisfying action.

Keywords: *Persuasion*; psychodynamics; feminist psychology; Jane Austen; gender; politics

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The period of English social and literary history we have come to call Romantic included a radical reorientation of the individual in society. Men focused on the autonomy of the male consciousness. William Blake, for example, believed that a poet's imagination redeemed a public world otherwise condemned to vicious forms of poverty and prostitution. Another William--Wordsworth--protested against the obscenities of corporate life by personalizing nature and making a religion of solitude and personal vision. Later, John Keats declared that the coldness inherent in social rituals could only be warmed by the love of particular persons. Such unprecedented respect for the sanctity of individual lives, mostly male, eventually inspired reforms on behalf of groups as disparate as frame-breakers, the Irish, children, Catholics--and women.

In the meantime female writers developed different voices. While they reminded their readers that women could effectively hold powerful positions in society, these writers emphasized the tension between the domestic virtues of women and the social actions of men, not masculine individualism. In her preface to her "Metrical Legends," Joanna Baillie asserted that a "wise and benevolent Providence" has determined a woman's "great and courageous exertion" is realized "when something most dear to her is in immediate danger" while a "man seldom becomes a careful and gentle nurse." Consequently, women best pursue their divinely ordained "domestic duties" so the sexes will "be meet and rational companions to one another" (Baillie 1853, 709). With similar values but a more acerbic tone, Mary Shelley satirized men who failed to find loving

ways to serve their families. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's inability to reproduce his parents' domestic virtues, even when encouraged by Elizabeth's "living spirit of love to soften and attract" (Shelley 1992, 43), produces monstrous results. As the creature explains, his lack of "ties" and "affections" causes his "hatred and vice"; only "the love of another" would remove "the cause of [his] crime" (126). He craved "a woman's sedulous attention" (131).

In her early writing even Mary Wollstonecraft argued that the weaknesses of women stem from stereotyped roles within the family, not the social order. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she explains that "girls, from various causes, are more kept down by their parents, in every sense of the word, than boys. The duty expected from them is, like all the duties arbitrarily imposed on women, more from a sense of propriety, more out of respect for decorum, than reason; and thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, they are prepared for the slavery of marriage" (Wollstonecraft 1967, 232). For Wollstonecraft, gender inequities begin at home; given the liberty to move beyond the simple pieties imposed by oppressive parents, girls would revolutionize the English character with a new freedom.

In *Persuasion* Jane Austen more than any of these writers--male or female--dramatized a woman in transition from the stale domestic world, which she named "the elegant stupidity of private parties" (Austen 1933, 180), to the riskier public world of men. Such a shift reflected the popularity of rising professions, like the military, following the Napoleonic wars. New wealth and prestige in the person of men like Captain Wentworth encouraged women in English society, and in this novel, to enjoy and value such opportunities and positions, and eventually take them for themselves. While remaining focused primarily on personal and domestic issues, Austen was free as never before to

imagine and create alternate kinds of romance and coupling, more democratic friendships and marriages.

The novelist's readers were implicated in this repositioning. In Jane Austen's previous novels her female readers identified with heroines who improved their positions in society under the influence of their love interests, Cinderella-like. When such fantasies needed qualification, Austen distanced herself and her readers from the protagonists through literary devices like irony, parody, and satire until the characters rid themselves of their misunderstandings and character flaws. Within an accepted stable order, female readers didn't focus on personal freedom and action. For their part, male readers were asked to imagine themselves as only rescuers or agents of tough love.

In *Persuasion* the transaction between Jane Austen and her female readers becomes more complicated. The usual poles of "detachment and involvement" between female writers and readers (Flynn 1986, 275) are moved closer, to what Patrocínio Schweickart defined as "minimal distance" and "intimacy" (1986, 55). The result is a more direct, sincere narrative in which Anne Elliot's troubling changes, beginning with her rejection of her father's obsession with things feudal (especially lineage and titles), ask for a compassionate response from readers. More specifically, Austen invites empathy for the heightened desire and anxieties that inevitably accompany more democratic relations. Anticipating later feminist writers, in *Persuasion* Austen studies an essentially relational woman whose identity is fluid, continuously in process (Gardiner 1982, 187-89; Morris 1993, 159). The only task remaining for males (no longer charming princes) is to become "better reader[s]" (Kolodny 1985, 57) of women and their writing by learning, after Wentworth, how women choose and affiliate.

As Jane Austen's heroine observes and experiments with new feelings and behaviors, her dramas become decidedly internal, psychological ones. At times she

remains nostalgic for the romance of the vertical world she is leaving. Such feelings keep her from challenging the inequality of women on the high seas. Consequently, she sometimes is passive, remaining emotionally on shore, with “her friends” fearing that her “tenderness” for Wentworth would lead to chronic “dread” of a “future war” that would “dim her sunshine.” Naval officers are, those friends believe, “distinguished” in their “domestic virtues” but inexorably associated with the “quick alarm” of potential national emergency (Austen 1933, 252). Courageous in the face of this uncertainty, Anne nevertheless stays home, where victory and tragedy are beyond her control (Gard 1992, 204-07). She remains an observer of adventures available only to her husband. Her province remains domestic, his worldly.¹

Her conflicts are even more evident in Anne's responses to Lady Russell. Given a second chance to choose Wentworth, the young woman finds the strength to move beyond the safe world of advantage championed by her deceased mother and very-much-alive guardian. But as soon as she steps beyond the influence of her mentor, Anne hesitates. Unable to explain the new realities to Lady Russell, she repeatedly avoids confrontations. Holding out for fantasy rather than truthful action, Anne hopes that Lady Russell, who frustrated her ward's will, may yet become the fast and substantial friend of her husband-to-be (Austen 1933, 249). She vacillates because of her need for approval from a woman, a mother figure, who represents the values Anne prefers to disregard.

Unlike that of previous Austen heroines, Anne's near paralysis at the end of *Persuasion* has nothing to do with the reactions of her father (even when he is incited by

¹In the film version of *Persuasion* (1995) this issue is resolved by concluding with Anne and Wentworth both on the ship. This ending suggests that, unlike in the novel, she changed his mind about the value of women on naval vessels and, by implication, the public role of women.

her sister Elizabeth) or any man, for that matter. She loses her flexibility only when she considers the "disappointment and pain" she would cause Lady Russell when her mentor was "no longer deceived": "her greatest want of composure would be in that quarter of the mind which could not be opened to Lady Russell, in that flow of anxieties and fears which must be all to herself" (Austen 1933, 211-12). Anne fears she and Russell will experience difference as severing, a form of deadly isolation. While she has the strength to incur the unhappiness of her blood relatives, she will feel left "all to herself," no longer able to share her deepest feelings, if she disappoints Lady Russell, and the mother her mentor represents.²

Recent studies in feminist developmental psychology suggest that Anne's dilemma is not simple indecisiveness. According to theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, the nearly exclusive role of women in the caretaking of children in Western cultures has encouraged two distinct patterns of self-awareness and learning between the sexes. As young boys begin to recognize the sexual difference between themselves and their mothers, they feel a loss which, while it often stimulates a chronic fear of betrayal, encourages the pursuit of independence, identified with lack of dependency on females and the feminine. Girls, on the other hand, search for identity through an identification with caretakers. They feel secure and worthwhile by seeing themselves through the loving eyes of their mothers (Chodorow 1978d, Chodorow 1987c, Chodorow 1989b, Chodorow 1994a; and Gilligan 1981b, Gilligan 1988a).

² As the narrator explains, Lady Russell "had almost a mother's love, and mother's rights" (Austen 1933, 27). A surrogate mother, Russell encourages a repetition of the biological mother in Anne; she says "You are your mother's self in countenance and disposition" and asks her to reclaim Kellynch and thus become her mother "in situation, and name, and home, presiding and blessing in the same spot" (160).

The implications for growth and learning can be substantial. Males tend to experience selfhood as the reward for separation; boundaries between the self and other are prerequisite for a sense of ego stability. The identification with the mother in females, on the other hand, encourages more ego flexibility. Boys follow a developmental path toward self-reliance and individualism; girls value intimacy and group decisions. Males put the highest value on justice; females prefer compassion (Belenky et al 1986; Flax 1978; Jordan 1991; Josselson 1987; Miller 1976b and 1991a; and Stiver 1991).

Thus Anne in *Persuasion* insists, even after her declaration of love to Wentworth, that being persuaded by Lady Russell was no failure: "I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. [. . .] I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered [. . .] in my conscience" (Austen 1933, 246). Not a figure of either Jane Austen's confusion or the cultural relativism of her times, as some recent critics have argued (Butler 1975, 281; Hopkins 1987, 157; Poovey 1984, 224-40; Tanner 1986, 248-49; and Weissman 1988, 91), Anne simply recognizes, and upholds, women's more flexible ego boundaries. Women need to decide--and change--without experiencing feelings of disconnection from other women, according to *Persuasion*.³

Thus, neither silliness nor weakness drives Anne's consideration of Lady Russell's reaction to the reversed decision. As she insists that her mentor accept the new realities--"There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do than to admit that she had

³ After overhearing Wentworth's praise of constancy in the metaphor of the hazelnut, spoken to Louisa Musgrove, Anne answers him in her imagination with a defense of women's more flexible ego boundaries: "She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel, that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character" (Austen 1933, 88).

been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes"--Anne also needs to remain empathetic toward the Lady. As the narrator explains, during the transition "Anne knew that Lady Russell must be suffering some pain in understanding and relinquishing Mr. Elliot, and be making some struggles to become truly acquainted with, and do justice to Captain Wentworth." Believing that her mentor "loved Anne better than she loved her own abilities," Anne encourages Lady Russell to reproduce her mothering by "attaching herself as a mother to the man [Wentworth] who was securing the happiness of her other child" (Austen 1933, 249).

Compared to earlier Austen novels, change for women in *Persuasion* has little to do with relationships with men, as long as those females choose their romantic attachments well. Austen's last complete novel has almost no interest in men's opinions or potential control over women; even Wentworth exists primarily as the object of Anne's desire. Instead, the heroine's identity in *Persuasion* is determined by how well she negotiates the influences of other women in her life, beginning with her dead mother and the mother's surrogate, Lady Russell. Just as these women have the potential to stifle Anne's love for Wentworth and the new opportunities he offers, other women--often marginal ones-- serve as catalysts for both personal and social improvement. They offer her alternate points of view, deviant realities, and new kinds of courageous and, in a decidedly personal sense, political action.

As Anne accepts a ride to Uppercross in the Crofts' gig, she is intrigued that Wentworth's reasonable distance from her is repeatedly undermined by his instinctive responses of concern and care--a form of desire. Then the narrator complicates the protagonist's romantic reveries by describing Mrs. Croft, a woman inspired by both past and future roles for women. Like a traditional female, the Admiral's wife empathizes with

her passenger, insisting first that "sure *you* are tired" and then imposing (with her husband's help) a "kind urgency" that rescues Ms. Elliot from fatigue. But Mrs. Croft is not a submissive woman or wife. Sensing Anne's attention to the emotions of others, the wife warns Admiral Croft that his descriptions of their hurried courtship might cause the younger woman to "never be persuaded that we could be happy together." Then, for Anne's ears, Mrs. Croft reminds her husband that "I had known you by character [. . .] long before" (91).

Not just another woman sensitive to domestic dramas, Mrs. Croft models a marriage in which women are equal companions with their husbands. In an age when the paradigm was shifting, as W. H. Auden noted in *The Enchafed Flood*, from the false security of land to the vital adventure of the sea (1967, 12-13), Mrs. Croft assures Mrs. Musgrove that "the happiest part" of life for an Admiral's wife is "spent on board a ship." Fear and "imaginary complaints" only plagued her when Mrs. Croft was separated from her husband and "the North Seas," where their shared adventures flourished (Austen 1933, 70). In a most telling moment, Mrs. Croft corrects her husband's careless driving, indicating the initiative and leadership of the new woman. The lesson is not lost on Anne, who imagines "their style of driving [. . .] no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs" (91-92).

Inspired by Mrs. Croft's happiness in the public world of men, Anne strolls Milson-street with Admiral Croft. Feeling equal to the men she meets, Ms. Eliot practices being a man's friend and companion, not just his appendage. Intuitively, Croft assumes the role of mentor, introducing his young charge to the male world of competition, judgment, and intrigue: "here comes a friend, Captain Brigden; I shall only say, 'How d'ye do,' as we pass, however. I shall not stop. 'How d'ye do.' Bridgen stares to see anybody with me but my wife. [. . .] If you look across the street, you will see Admiral Brand coming down

and his brother. Shabby fellows, both of them! [. . .] There comes old Sir Archibald Drew and his grandson. Look, he sees us; he kisses his hand to you; he takes you for my wife” (Austen 1933, 170). As Anne’s renewed desire for Wentworth stimulates her curiosity about the post-Napoleon world of military men, the walk with Croft demonstrates that she can flourish in that mysterious male world (Auerbach 1972, 119-24).

A less obvious--but more substantial--influence on Anne's growth is Mrs. Smith. Like Lady Russell and other traditional women in *Persuasion*, Anne's friend has a "submissive spirit"; she is more empathetic than confrontational. But Mrs. Smith's resilience, not her sweetness, contributes to Anne's education. Having lost her husband and money, and living without children, relatives or good health, Mrs. Smith develops what the narrator defines as an "elasticity of mind," the "power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself" (Austen 1933, 154). Because she is able to be comforted without becoming self-absorbed, Smith initiates Anne into life's dark realities; there is, she says, "'so little real friendship in the world!'"--and unfortunately (speaking low and tremulously) there are so many who forget to think seriously till it is almost too late" (156).

Refusing to become bitter over such realities, Mrs. Smith uses humor to teach her friend about the impediments facing women who pursue change. Many women, Smith observes, lack initiative: "we women never mean to have any body. It is a thing of course among us, that every man is refused--till he offers" (Austen 1933, 195-96). Not passive herself, the friend is careful to keep Elliot's letter to Charles Smith, a letter which demonstrates the cousin's intent to gain Kellynch or destroy it. Most unlike Lady Russell, Mrs. Smith allows Anne full freedom to choose or not choose William Elliot and then, once Anne has decided against him, speaks boldly and directly: "Mr. Elliot is a man without heart or conscience; a designing, wary, cold-blooded being, who thinks only of

himself; who, for his own interest or ease, would be guilty of any cruelty, or any treachery [. . .] He is black at heart, hollow and black!" (199).

Such honesty, while empowering, is limited to the domestic arena, the usual place of women's influence. Smith is more effective when she enlists the support of other marginalized women in investigating Anne's predicament. By establishing their own covert network, these women reveal truths unknown to the players in the Wentworth/Elliot drama: "Mrs. Smith [. . .] had already heard, through the short cut of a laundress and a waiter, rather more of the general success and produce of the evening than Anne could relate" (Austen 1933, 193). In league with her nurse, Smith establishes a confederacy of women dedicated to alternative sources of truth and action for women otherwise outcast in the public world.

In order to assure the effectiveness of such a group, Mrs. Smith insists that Anne recognize the abilities of Nurse Rooke. The nurse, the friend emphasizes, "thoroughly understands when to speak. She is a shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman. Hers is a line for seeing human nature; she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received 'the best education in the world,' know nothing worth attending to" (Austen 1933, 155). Nurse Rooke serves as informant within the invisible network described by Smith: "Colonel Wallis has a very pretty silly wife, to whom he tells things which he had better not, and he repeats it all to her. She, in the overflowing spirits of her recovery, repeats it all to her nurse; and the nurse knowing my acquaintance with you, very naturally brings it all to me" (205). Freed from both the narrow assumptions of the patriarchy and the disabling fusions of the matriarchy, these women pair affection with subversion.

In the earlier novels of Jane Austen, her heroines learn and change through promising attachments to men of influence. In a stable and static world, the women only

need to temper some of their prejudices, admitting their indiscretions or childish fears. In intimate moments they revise past mistakes in order to discover an internal harmony which they easily share with their loved ones. They either admit, for example, the need for more sense or sensibility (*Sense and Sensibility*), or they exchange destructive appearances for healthier realities (*Pride and Prejudice*). If there is injustice in their world, as in *Mansfield Park*, the women wait for others, usually men, to see the truth and revise society. Such character issues become complicated when the aristocratic order begins its decline in *Emma*. But even Emma Woodhouse finds contentment only by bending her otherwise disruptive will to the responsibilities introduced by her patient male mentor.

Such comforting direction is absent from *Persuasion* in part because Wentworth is not aristocratic. He is a naval officer, a member of an emergent class enjoying the rewards of victories in the Napoleonic Wars. Worse yet, Anne has lost the mother who would have introduced her to the traditional expectations of females in the domestic scene. While potentially as willful as Emma, the heroine of *Persuasion* is inhibited by grief for the deceased Mrs. Elliot and a wish to replace her with another mother figure. Anne is desperate for the direction and order offered by a superior who acts as a female counselor. This need is doubly pressing because the locus of persuasion has shifted to a more public world for women, where no one, male or female, can rescue Anne from her conflict. Her choice of Captain Wentworth and the risks associated with his profession is the price of her freedom.

Motivated by her desire for Frederick Wentworth, Anne Elliot learns to integrate her “inner freedom” into a “selfless intentionality” (Astell 1987, 3, 13). Such growth requires that she maintain ties to other women even as she accepts the Captain; as a woman, she changes without severing nurturant connections. That is why she

simultaneously accepts and limits Lady Russell's influence. It is also why as she commits to a new life, Anne seeks persuasion from women of a different class, ones with substantially different motives from those of her blessed mother and her mentor. It is not the individualistic male way of learning; for her it is sometimes clumsy and time-consuming. At first Anne experiences the fears that rise when "that quarter of the mind" is not fully shared with other women. But once she controls her anxiety, she feels the joyful return of her will and a renewed sense of shared purpose--and subversive choices and acts--with those women and others.

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