The Professor Is In: Reading *Persuasion* with Professor Ray

Chronological / Historical Background: Austen began writing this novel on August 8, 1815 and completed the first draft on July 18, 1816; in August, she altered the final three chapters. That is, in volume 2, she revised her original chapter 10 (chapter 22); she wrote a new chapter 11 (Chapter 23); she took old chapter 11 and revised it, making it new chapter 12 (chapter 24). In chapter 1, the narrator tells us explicitly near the beginning of the book that “the present time” of this novel is summer 1814.

NAPOLEON

**1814**

April 11, Napoleon abdicates unconditionally.

May 4, Napoleon begins his exile on Elba.

**SUMMER 1814: “this present time” (P 1:1)**

**1815**

Feb. 26, Napoleon escapes from Elba.

March 1, Napoleon lands in southern France.

March 20, Napoleon arrives in Paris and takes control
for “The Hundred Days.”

June 18, The British and Prussian forces, commanded by the Duke
of Wellington, defeat Napoleon at The Battle of Waterloo.

June 22, Napoleon abdicates for the second time.

Oct. 16, Napoleon is exiled to St. Helena, an island in the remote
South Atlantic.

1. The novel begins in an unusual way: a character reads a book, and we read what he reads. The book, *The Baronetage*, lists the names, dates, ancestors, and descendants of Baronets. How does this book help Sir Walter to defy time? How is Sir Walter also a victim of time? The second book characters read is *The Navy List*: a book listing names of officers; names of their ships; numbers of guns on the ship; pay scales; uniform regulations. Anne has been reading it, and the Musgrove sisters procure a copy after meeting Captain Wentworth. We will discuss both books, and also Anne’s “book” orated in her conversation with Captain Harville.

2. We first read about our heroine, Anne, in chapter 1: “Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either her father or sister; her words had no weight; her convenience was always to give way—she was only Anne.” How does the phrase “only Anne” change in meaning as the novel progresses?

3. What is Mrs. Clay’s role? Why does Austen give her freckles?

4. In chapter 4, we reach the story of the short romance between Anne and Frederick Wentworth that occurred eight years earlier (1806): this could have been a novel in itself. Why did Lady Russell object to the engagement? Why did Anne, herself, think the engagement wrong?

5. How does Austen bring her heroine and hero together after 8 long years?

6. How does Frederick behave towards Louisa and Henrietta? toward Anne? Why? We will look especially at 1:10, the walk to Winthrop.

7. What is Mr. William Elliot’s role? What keeps Anne from committing herself to him?

8. Interestingly, Austen ends volume 1 with a woman’s fall: Louisa’s, not Anne’s. How do roles change after Louisa’s accident? How does Louisa change? Anne? Frederick?

9. Be ready to discuss Anne’s old school friend, Mrs. Smith; the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter, the Hon. Miss Carteret.

10. How do Anne and Frederick finally get together? Frederick has blamed Anne for doing her duty: how might Frederick also be guilty of the same?

11. Why does Austen place on Anne—only Anne—the “tax” of being a navy wife?

12. If you have the cancelled chapters in your copy of *Persuasion*, consider why Austen decided to cancel / rewrite them.