

Relational Competence: Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Describing Anne Elliot's state of mind at the age of twenty-seven, Austen's narrator tells us that "She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning." With this description, Austen's narrator implies that romance is natural—from nature—to us when we're young, and just as naturally, we grow old and prudent.

Instead, this paper will suggest that Austen is here, as usual, ironic; that she believes that there is nothing "natural" about romance as it is practiced in a culture where men have told the love stories; that love and romance are quite distinct; and that a woman who desires to create and participate in a loving relationship with a man had better be prudent in her youth.

As Austen would have recognized, romance, as defined by the Romantic poets publishing during the period she composed *Persuasion*, was problematic for women. First, the Romantics proposed that the beloved was unattainable—in Byron's poetry often married to another man, in Wordsworth's poems often dead. Second, to be in love was to suffer. A lover was recognized by his yearning. Unfortunately, these criteria are particularly troublesome for women—aside from being miserably married or dead, women traditionally have had no creative or active outlet through which to sublimate their suffering in love—as for example *Sense and Sensibility*'s John Willoughby consoles himself with his hunters after losing Marianne Dashwood. Moreover, when romance dies after three or four years, women usually are left with the children and the washing. As Austen well knew, love stories end at the point of "the happy ending"—everyone agrees that marriage and romance have nothing to do with each other.

Yet, *Persuasion* does not include a portrait of a woman who conforms to the "natural" sequence of early romance and later prudence. Through Louisa Musgrove, Austen demonstrates the "fate" of the girl who throws herself—quite literally as well as figuratively—into a man's arms. As the novel's ingénue—or desirable object—Louisa's leap into Frederick's arms results in her being carried "lifeless" away from the Cobb onto which she has fallen after Frederick failed to catch her as she jumped. Austen implies, in this image, that the ingénue is indeed a desirable object, much like a choice painting or a specially beautiful table. Indeed, Louisa's apparent self-determination is revealed as a stubbornness which she has put on in response to Frederick's tacit instructions about what kind of

woman he would choose to marry. When Frederick lectures Louisa about self-determination in the famous hedgerow scene, he really speaks about Anne, and reveals in his tone his abiding anger at what he believes is Anne's weakness of character leading her to break their engagement. (Of course, had Anne been persuaded by himself to continue their engagement, he would be praising her for her strong character.) But Frederick lacks the self-awareness necessary to understand his effect on Louisa, and Louisa, like a table whose cloth is changed according to the meal it will support, clothes herself in the message Frederick's angry tone delivers. She becomes stubborn and headstrong. She insists on jumping into his arms.

In contrast, Anne, forced—by her decision to end her engagement with Frederick—into “prudent” self-reflection, is able to develop into a “desiring subject,” a character for whom there is no term in Romantic literature when applied to a woman. Her early prudence earned her the time she needed to grow up and to define herself. Anne is the hero, the moral agent and center of the novel. Austen understood how threatening a woman who was a hero could be to a culture which defined women only through the men in their lives. So she gave Anne a cover story—a singleminded attachment to her lost lover. (As Austen noted in *Sense and Sensibility*, most people love more than one person in a lifetime. Marianne Dashwood, who believes in lifelong love, contradicts the experience of her own parents, since her mother was her father's second wife, as her more sensible sister Elinor recognizes.) Using her devotion almost as a disguise, Anne could develop herself and still appear to be feminine as she remained unmarried. She could develop both her heart and her mind by reflecting on her own experiences, by observing others without needing to mold her ideas to her husband's, and by developing the capacity for empathy—a combination Austen proposes is the route to adulthood in each of her novels.

Indeed, *Persuasion*, as a novel, is only secondarily a love story, since the action of the entire first volume occurs after the primary love relationship has ended, and the action of the second volume focuses on developing Frederick as a fit companion for Anne, while Anne's own development, culminating when she discovers the power of her voice and mind after Louisa's fall, when everyone turns to her for advice and counsel, is reinforced. Instead, *Persuasion* is a female *bildungsroman*, a genre traditionally reserved for charting a young man's journey from innocence to experience. Yet because women in Western society are socialized to find their most important identity in relation to other people, Austen focuses on Anne's development of a voice through which she can speak to others as well as express herself, instead of privileging only the development of individuality and separateness. To be adult, Austen

implies, is to be competent at creating and maintaining relationships. To be a woman who is an adult, moreover, suggests a resistance to the social order, manifested in the development of relational competence, aimed at an ideal of interdependence.

Austen recognizes that relational competence is composed of four major criteria:

First, relational competence involves personal awareness—for example, although in *Persuasion*'s opening chapter Anne's voice "had no weight" with any member of her family, Anne could hear herself very well. Anne knew herself.

Second, to be relationally competent is to be aware of the other as other, as not-me, as different. For example, thinking about Lady Russell, Anne recognizes how different are their ideas about love and marriage—a crucial realization for Anne about the woman who is her surrogate mother. With both personal awareness and awareness of the other, we have the potential for disagreement—not fighting—but the disagreement of mutual respect, where we may agree to disagree, or one of us may persuade, not coerce, the other.

Third, relational competence includes our awareness of the effect we have on other people, engendering the capacity to live responsibly. Without such awareness of our effect on other people, we tend to go through life amazed that we're surrounded by havoc and disaster created by others, much as Frederick, unaware of his effect on Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, takes no responsibility for nearly wrecking Henrietta's relationship with Charles Hayter.

Fourth, relational competence involves an awareness of the other's effect on oneself, which enables us to develop a capacity for understanding the fluctuation of our emotional reality. By knowing the effect of another person on oneself, we can choose whether we do or do not want to be thrown away, like Louisa Musgrove. And we can understand why we are hurt and angry and therefore may hurt another. If Frederick had been aware that being with Anne aroused his anger, he might have been able to curb his flirting with Louisa, a girl he neither cared for nor respected.

As Austen knew, relational competence is best developed through interaction with others when we are open to learning and to changing. In fact, relational competence fundamentally involves an attitude of openness based on the desire to become more fully engaged with others and therefore more fully present in our own life. Openness is a major issue in *Persuasion*, as in all of Austen's novels, because Austen lived in a closed and formal society. For Austen, to be open in a closed society marked personal authenticity—although, of course, she did not mean the openness of Byronic melodrama, but rather an openness akin to a genuine conversation, like the one Anne experiences with Captain Harville in Bath, a conversation in which

at least one person speaks her mind and heart with the sort of integrity that acknowledges she possesses both, and which addresses that same central place in her partner. In short, to become capable of relational competence is to become capable of love—and unfit for romance. With relational competence we no longer need to suffer and yearn to signal we're in love; instead, we want contact, connectedness, and presence.

The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed focus on the relational competence of all the men in Anne Elliot's life. Yet, a closer look at William Elliot, Frederick Wentworth's main rival for Anne's affection, suggests that Anne uses openness as a base-line standard to evaluate a man's appeal. In his closedness, his self-concealment, William Elliot demonstrates his lack of capacity or desire to allow himself to be genuinely known by another person—and thus his incapacity to know himself. Instead, he dedicates his days to manipulating others. Although William, in contrast to Sir Walter, recognizes that humans affect each other, his primary, indeed his sole concern devolves on serving his own best interests by presenting to another the persona they desire him to be and thereby getting from them what he desires.

In fact, William Elliot exemplifies one of Austen's sub-themes about men in her work, that men cannot be changed by women, despite the courtship myth that women employ when they imagine that with marriage they will correct all the "little" flaws marring their lovers. Instead, Austen knows that all of Mary's complaining can't change Charles Musgrove, and even Frederick can't be changed by Anne's love. Austen implies that men in Western culture are created to be independent subjects—heroes of their own lives—and thus, like Anne Elliot, must change themselves.

(Parenthetically, Austen points out that men can and do change women, but only those women who have agreed to become the ingenue—like Louisa Musgrove with both Frederick and Captain Benwick. Austen suggests that the ingenue is an object in her own life, much like a table whose cloth is changed by a new owner.)

But in order to create a "happy ending" for *Persuasion*, Austen had to develop in Frederick a relational competence to match Anne's—otherwise he could not be a fit partner for her. When Frederick first arrives at Uppercross, eight years after his broken engagement, he reveals that he remains as angry at Anne as he was when the event first happened. It is important to note that his anger is fixed and unchanging, making his character non-relational; he has no personal awareness, as is demonstrated by his blithe assumption that being in Anne's vicinity does not affect him, even as he flirts with both Louisa and Henrietta in revenge against Anne, and he has not awareness of

how he affects other people, assuming that he has as little impact on Henrietta and Louisa as they have on him.

Apparently, Frederick is angry because Anne was persuaded to break their engagement by Lady Russell, and he is unforgiving because he assumes this proves Anne has a weak character—although if Anne had been persuaded by himself to continue the engagement he would believe she had a strong character. In addition, there is no textual evidence to indicate that when he and Anne first fell in love, he was any different in character than he is now, eight years later. Fundamentally, Frederick has used his anger to remain emotionally undeveloped—blaming Anne for his unhappiness, he has not attempted to become responsible for his own existence.

Finally, Frederick, in response to Louisa's fall from the Cobb at Lyme, is able to awaken to his stunted condition. When Louisa falls, Frederick is shocked awake to his responsibility for her fall—not simply that he failed to catch her, but also that, metaphorically, he pushed her by teaching her that the woman he would marry must be strong willed and self-determined, lessons Louisa heard through the screen of Frederick's anger at Anne and became, obediently, stubborn and headstrong. Frederick recognizes, at last, that he "trifled" with Louisa, as adults play with toys, because we assume that objects are not affected by us since we are not affected by them.

When Louisa falls, Frederick begins the arduous process of self-reflection that will lead to making him relationally competent and thus capable of loving Anne in a mutual, interdependent relationship. Anne has been, like so many women, loving a man more for his potential than his reality. Austen implies that had Anne married Frederick when she was nineteen, their union might have proven Lady Russell right, if not for the latter's reason that Frederick had no money and no status. Incompetent relationally, Frederick might have been unable to love Anne after romance had withered.

Ironically, only after Frederick considers himself to be in a relationship with Louisa is he able to become capable of a relationship with Anne, and with that capacity, provides a "happy beginning" for *Persuasion*. In marrying Anne to Frederick, Austen indicates that a genuinely loving relationship opens where fairy tales close—after the couple come together.