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## "I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach": The Language of Agency and Passivity in *Persuasion's* Constancy

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Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is hardly a "courtship novel." If there is any "courting" going on, it is relegated to the subplots of the novel's secondary characters, giving greater attention to the narrative's construction of an older, more mature heroine. In her final novel, Austen explores her own "post-courtship" protagonist, focusing upon the role of constancy in a woman's deep attachment to a former love and its broader implications for the volatile society in which she lives. We love Anne Elliot for her detachment from the frivolity of youthful infatuation and for her characterization as a sensible, grown woman who recognizes the validity of her attachments through an extended romantic abstinence. In his 1971 article "The Achievement of *Persuasion*," Thomas P. Wolfe writes in opposition to Anne's constancy toward Captain Wentworth as the primary lens through which we might view "some inviolable core of [Anne's] self that almost defies analysis" (693). Instead, Wolfe advocates the "deeper overtones" of themes of constancy in the novel, recasting it as an "abiding integrity" linked to the composition of Anne's own intact self (696). Although I align myself with Wolfe's reading of *Persuasion's* "deeper overtones" of constancy, *Persuasion* seems to call for a more thorough inquiry of the rhetoric of agency and passivity in the formation of its "constancy." Likewise, it is difficult to impede the relationship between constancy and the passage of time; the novel builds the relationships between

its characters upon the effects of time, allowing for the favorable (and unfavorable) byproducts of the passing years to implement the plot. This interplay between agency and passivity in *Persuasion*'s "constancy" lends itself to Austen's presentation of time, transforming our typically inactive view of love's constancy into a powerful source of agency in rapidly changing, early nineteenth century England.

*Persuasion* begins with a haughty father reveling in his family history, fully enamored with his own fleeting entry in the aristocratic chronicles of time. As Sir Walter Elliot "turn[s] over the almost endless creations of the last century" within the pages of the "Baronetage," he initiates a preoccupation with the effects of the passing years (9). This sense of stagnancy in the aristocracy is characterized by hereditary rights, passively allowing the inheritance of property through birth or marriage. Time has played a passive role thus far, permitting the upper class to slide into inactivity as hereditary inheritance runs its natural course. This "natural course," however, sanctions that which Sir Walter abhors. After referring to Captain Wentworth as a "nobody," he "wonders how the names of many of our nobility become so common" (25). The answer is the influx of marriage between the classes, stirred by the military's faculty for upward social mobility. The passivity of time is not only the foundation upon which the aristocracy is built, but it is also the force which will serve in its slow demolition.

Anne's perspective of time contrasts with the way in which her father pompously grapples with its effect on societal distinction—she is accepting, willing to let the years pass as they always have. "The years" take on an active role in Anne's perception, "destroy[ing] her youth and bloom" and giving Wentworth "a more glowing, manly, open look" (53). Anne's view of time is that of a slow destroyer and uplifter, stealing her "bloom" and gifting Wentworth with a more "manly" disposition. Time is an unfair mediator between the would-be lovers, and Anne must work to nurse her own feelings with the power of her tempered reasoning. When Anne sees "the

same Frederick Wentworth," she asserts the ability of the years to simultaneously deconstruct one lover and improve another (53). Anne, a member of the aristocracy, suffers from a declining physical appearance; likewise, Captain Wentworth, a product of upward social mobility, "glows" with a more attractive countenance.

Austen uses Anne's conversation with a naval officer—Captain Harville—to link themes of upward social mobility with the novel's broader preoccupation with romantic constancy; in this conversation, Austen intertwines the language of passivity and agency, using the dialogue as a space for the two modes to interact. Harville asks, "Do you claim that for your sex?" He gives Anne the agency to make a "claim" for her gender, rather than simply accepting an old conjecture. She responds with a "claim" that is ironically passive, rejoining, "We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit" (187). The act of "forgetting" is hardly an act at all; instead, it is an evanescence of the memory, implemented by the passage of time. Anne even references "fate"—the most essential control over human agency—in her support of feminine devotion. She effectively lists her reasons for the strength of women's constancy, but she does so by way of the rhetoric of passivity. She continues, "We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion" (187, emphasis added). Anne links a woman's solitude—which she "cannot help"—with the "exertion" on which men are "forced." Neither instance allows for agency. A woman is relegated to a quiet home while a man is "forced" into "profession, pursuits," and "business of some sort or other" (187). Certainly, women endure this passivity in a separate and often more mundane sphere, but the lack of an actively chosen pursuit is simultaneously a feminine and masculine concern.

Austen continues to play off of this rhetoric of passivity in Harville's initial response to Anne. He explains, "as our bodies are strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather" (187, emphasis added). Despite

the more “robust” nature of his examples, they still indicate an instance that is acted upon. If we are to equate agency with a kind of “determination” (not so far from what Wentworth claims to seek in a mate), it is not necessarily present in this exchange—yet. At the close of the conversation, Anne agrees that many of the “songs and proverbs . . . all talk of women’s fickleness” and that these specific texts “were all written by men” (188). The ability to comment upon “woman’s inconstancy” limits itself to a single sex, placing the “pen” in “[men’s] hands” (188). Anne concludes, “we never can expect to prove anything upon such a point,” putting the conversation’s passive rhetoric on hold in a moment of stagnancy—there is nothing to prove in either case since both are stifled by an idea so rooted in a “bias toward [their] own sex” (188-89). Anne seems to imply that romantic constancy—although very much bound up in patience and passivity—transcends the simplest dichotomy of active versus passive, pointing to a deeper sensibility which is unhindered by the passage of time or by gender. Her mention of these biases prompts Captain Harville to respond by wishing that he “could convey to [Anne] the glow of his soul” when a naval officer sees his family again “after a twelvemonth’s absence” (189). He continues, “If I could explain to you all this, and all that a man can *bear and do*, and glories to *do* for the sake of these treasures of his existence” (189, emphasis added). Harville’s most powerful response to Anne’s inferences points to “bearing and doing,” combining a sense of passivity and agency in one’s constancy to a spouse.

Austen’s structure of this particular exchange serves the intricacies of romantic constancy, ironically allowing Wentworth to “drop his pen” while he crafts the letter that will place the initiation of an engagement in Anne’s own hands (188). Austen permits such a conversation to precede Anne’s reading of his proposal, preparing the reader for a complete shift in Anne’s passive characterization of constancy to her sudden possession of all the romantic agency. Perhaps this exchange is also indicative of Anne’s perception of constancy as a vital component of her intact

self. Marilyn Butler points to this same sense of selfhood, noting, “All Anne’s characteristics find expression in this conversation: her fortitude, gentleness, modesty, integrity” (283). Butler continues, “The ideal Wentworth outlines in the conversation she overheard, when he spoke of the hazel-nut, comes vividly to life” (283). Anne’s fluid conversation with Harville is a marker of her own emotional relationship to constancy; she can discuss that which she understands clearly with great volubility, revealing an expression of the self that is linked to her intransigent affections.

This determination that arises in the preceding conversation catalyzes Wentworth’s proposal spurred by Anne’s discussion of constancy. Wentworth begins his letter by rejecting his own passive condition, stating, “I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach.” He entreats Anne to “tell [him] that [he] is not too late, that such precious feelings are gone forever,” pushing her to actively respond to his affections (191). He combines the passive and active functions of “hearing” and “distinguishing” respectively when he writes, “I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me . . . you sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others” (191). Wentworth’s constancy implies a romantic language that is particular to him and Anne, deciphering that which “would be lost on others.” At the close of his proposal, Wentworth provides Anne with the tools for agency, writing, “a word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father’s house this evening or never” (191). This “language” is almost completely devoid of speech, bound up in silent communication. Wentworth’s transcendent language is reminiscent of the surpassing quality of Harville’s final conclusions on constancy, linking both passivity and agency in the nature of romantic constancy. Wentworth’s letter lends itself to this complexity, actively writing a proposal that resigns him to play a passive role to Anne’s agency.

The relationship between the navy and the aristocracy implements a new power dynamic within nineteenth century England, blurring

social distinctions in a way that will inevitably affect the marriage market for women like Anne. Alistair M. Duckworth points out, "Anne's task in *Persuasion* is not, then, to reclaim Kellynch . . . but to discover new possibilities of accommodation for herself" (192). Anne is no longer limited to the constraints of the aristocracy; instead she is allowed to consider "the risks and uncertainties of life at sea or among sailors" (192). Duckworth asserts that the contrast between the navy and the aristocracy is not a portent of social upheaval; rather, it provides a new world of "accommodation for the marginal woman" (193). The Elliot family, although it maintains its name, engages in a slow financial ruin through the vanity of Sir Walter. Austen's representation of the aristocracy does not dissolve, but it gradually loses its favor in the eyes of the reader. Anne—constant in her affections toward Wentworth despite his social standing—is eventually rewarded by a position within this new "accommodation." Constancy is profitable for Anne; it allows for her to take her place in a changing social climate without compromising her affection for Captain Wentworth.

When we consider Anne and Wentworth's constancy juxtaposed with this maintenance for social "distinction," two very different forms of constancy arise: one serves progress while the other serves stagnancy. Anne and Wentworth's constancy is a manifestation of the inevitable intermingling of the classes, eliminating barriers of wealth and social opinion in a changing world. Sir Walter's constant attention to his social status is a vain attempt at maintaining a fading tradition. Austen emphasizes this needless attempt in her characterization of Sir Walter as a vain, self-interested man, unaware of the progress that surrounds him.

Austen's intermingling of social spheres in *Persuasion* becomes even more evident when we encounter Mrs. Smith. This representation of the true "marginal woman" complicates a positive reading of England's social change in Austen's novel. Mrs. Smith, although she survives the loss of her husband and financial ruin, is still on the outskirts of society. She is by no means destitute, but the

narrative seems to indicate that the changing times have dealt her a significant social blow. The distinction between Anne and Mrs. Smith is most apparent when Anne meets her old school friend for the second time in the novel. Mrs. Smith asks Anne, "Did you observe the woman who opened the door to you, when you called yesterday?" Anne replies, "No. Was not it Mrs. Speed, as usual, or the maid? I observed no one in particular." Mrs. Smith rejoins that it was her "friend, Mrs. Rooke" (Austen 159). Anne overlooks Mrs. Rooke in her visit to Mrs. Smith, relegating the nurse to a state of little consequence. We see, however, that Mrs. Smith aligns herself with Mrs. Rooke, indicating a variance in one's relationship to the working-class. The two women—although one is an employer and the other is an employee—are friends; Mrs. Smith's loss of stature in the social sphere allows her to foster a relationship with one of inferior class standing, providing one of the few instances in Austen's novels where a servant is explicitly befriended.

The purpose of Mrs. Smith in the novel is vague; as readers, we are confident that Anne would reject Mr. Elliot without Mrs. Smith's revelation of his character. K. K. Collins supports this incongruity, noting, "If Jane Austen has included Mrs. Smith to release vital facts that are made to fall sterile on the action, the character is a grim flaw indeed. Either Mrs. Smith has some purpose outside of the plot proper or she has little purpose at all" (384). If anything, Mrs. Smith reveals Anne's inability to truly reconsider her affections for Wentworth. After listening to Mrs. Smith's encouragement for a marriage between Mr. Elliot and Anne, Anne replies, "upon my word, he is nothing to me. Should he ever propose to me (which I have very little reason to imagine he has any thought of doing), I shall not accept him" (158). Mrs. Smith's eventual disclosure of Mr. Elliot's faults is irrelevant to Anne; perhaps this full disclosure is only a tool for the reader, revealing that Mr. Elliot was hardly worth consideration for our well-reasoned heroine.

Anne's constancy is resilient, but her discourse with Mrs. Smith alludes to a different sort of agency for the "marginal woman." Mrs. Smith's connection to Nurse Rooke and her remarkable attention to the activities of the wealthier classes expose a new way to engage in the changing social world: gossip. After Anne discovers that Mrs. Smith does not know Colonel Wallis personally (only through word of mouth), Mrs. Smith explains, "It does not come to me in quite so direct a line as that; it takes a bend or two, but nothing of consequence. The stream is as good as at first; the little rubbish it collects in the turnings is easily moved away" (165). This "stream" that contains a "little rubbish" is the tool by which Mrs. Smith connects herself to the upper class, and she uses it to actively intervene on the part of her acquaintances. For Anne, this intervention is useless; however, it displays Austen's juxtaposition of two very different forms of agency in a woman's world. Anne maintains her constancy; Mrs. Smith chats.

In terms of the novel, Anne's choice of agency is rewarded by her marriage. The agency of constancy (in an ideal resolution) produces an institution in itself—marriage. Austen's "reverse" courtship novel presents the solidarity of marriage as the "roots" in a revitalized England. Anne's constancy works as a connective tool throughout the plot, transcending the segregation of the aristocracy and the navy with an inveterate affection for her old love. Marriage is not only a source of cohesion in these changing times, but it is also the way by which the social classes will legally and romantically intertwine; thanks to Austen, Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are a clever manifestation of this new "twist."

In early nineteenth-century England's shifting social landscape, we see a redefinition of class distinction, characterized by the upward social mobility of the changing times. Austen poignantly presents a heroine who bridges the gap between the old and the new, solidifying this connection through a resilient romantic constancy toward Captain Wentworth. This constancy remains

unhindered by the passage of time, representing a present-driven motif of earnest emotion and affection. *Persuasion* is a victory in terms of "courtship"—although it excludes the courtship altogether. It is a novel of reconciliation, sparked by the inveterate connection between two former lovers and carried out through the interplay of romantic agency and passivity. Wolfe's "abiding integrity" is a resilient advocate for the rewards of an intact self; both Anne and Wentworth participate in romantic agency through an unalterable predilection toward one another and subsequently carve a respectable space for themselves within Duckworth's new "accommodations." Perhaps Austen suggests that this reconciliation of Anne and Wentworth is applicable to the larger reconciliation between England's class distinctions, asserting a social constancy that patiently awaits revival. Constancy is the fresh form of agency in a "new" England, representing an earnest steadfastness in the swift transformation of a society.

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