"She Learned Romance as She Grew Older": From Conduct Book Propriety to Romance in *Persuasion*

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How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been, – how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence! – She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older – the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning. (30)

This summary of Anne’s life at the beginning of *Persuasion* sets her character development apart from other Austen heroines. At twenty-seven Anne is by far the eldest heroine and her maturity of vision is reinforced for the reader by her having almost complete narratorial approval. Because Anne had been “forced” into prudent behaviour when young but “learned” to value romantic love in her maturity, the progress of her life runs counter to the typical educational sequence. Yet “Sequel” suggests that another story is to come, another narrative which will continue the previous sad story of Anne’s life.

I am interested in Jane Austen’s juxtaposition of prudence with romance and how both aspects are dominant in *Persuasion*. Because Anne had learned most of her lessons before the action begins, she can act as tutor to various characters in the novel, including the hero Wentworth (McMaster 59). This reversal of conventional relationships is one of the “natural sequels” of Anne’s earlier forced prudence. In order to analyze Anne’s unusual development from prudence to romance, I will consider her behaviour towards Wentworth in terms of the ideals of ladylike conduct expressed in the advice manuals popular in Austen’s period. I will also explain how I read Anne’s story to be a romance in several senses of the term.

In the 18th century, advice manuals for women underwent a change from being books of religious devotion, or handbooks of domestic economy to become practical guides for conduct, called “Courtesy books” (Blain et al 10). Aimed at the middle ranks of society who were interested in self-improvement, the books attempted to define the position of women in society. Not books of etiquette, they nevertheless provided instruction for newcomers into polite society and attempted to teach good morals as the foundation for correct behaviour: manners were supposed to be the outward expression of morality (Hemlow 732-33). The books define the feminine in terms of a domestic world or “province” which is complementary to the economic world of men (Armstrong 98). They prescribe an ideal of correct feminine behaviour in terms of a series of abstractions such as obedience, modesty, chastity, piety, and gentleness (Spencer 16), all the while calling these ideals natural! Although the writers claim that women are equal companions to men, there is a repeated emphasis on women's physical and mental frailty, delicacy, and softness which suggests otherwise.

Two of the most influential books are Rev. James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), which Mr. Collins vainly tries to read to the Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice* (ch. 14), and Dr. John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774). Although written from the different vantage points of preacher and concerned parent, both describe an unforgiving society which continually judged female behaviour with a worldly eye. Specifically addressing young women about to “enter” the world, their advice covers the entire range of female behaviour. Fordyce’s titles are revealing; they include “On the Importance of the Female Sex, especially the Younger Part,” “On Female Reserve,” “On Female Virtue,” “Meekness,” and so on; Gregory’s chapters cover religion, conduct and behaviour, amusements, friendship, love and marriage. Fordyce tended toward the pithy maxim such as “Remember how tender a thing woman’s reputation is; how hard to preserve; and when lost, how impossible to recover” (16-17), immortalized in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (150). Gregory tended to be more practical and worldly in his advice, for instance regarding dress he states:

> The love of dress is natural to you, … Good sense will regulate your expense in it, and good taste will direct you to dress in such a way as to conceal any blemishes, and set off your beauties, if you have any, to the greatest advantage. But much delicacy and judgment are required in the application of this rule. A fine woman shows her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them. The finest bosom in nature is not so fine as what imagination forms. (73)

One strand of the novel in the 18th century, the didactic novel, paralleled the conduct book: the heroine was often an “exemplary” character who embodied the qualities specified in the manuals (Spencer 142). Towards the end of the 18th century, Fanny Burney’s novels were considered “courtesy” or conduct book novels due to their range of didactic interests (Hemlow 758). By the time Jane Austen was writing, the feminine ideal had passed into the domain of common sense and was accepted as “natural” (Armstrong 100). Therefore, the relation between her novels and the conduct books are complex and on the level of inference rather than demonstrating a one to one relationship. Austen’s characterizations of her heroines are often considered to be final variations on conduct book ideals, and I consider Anne Elliot to represent the most subtle variation. I will explore how Anne’s behaviour can be interpreted as Austen’s mature response to the conduct book writers by providing instances of when Anne applies the rules, stretches the rules, and even overturns or
Yet when safely reunited with Wentworth, Anne tells him that she would “have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience” (246). These are problematic passages. In the latter instance, however, Anne has just told Wentworth that she has been trying to judge her earlier actions “impartially” in terms of right and wrong (246). Her statement suggests an absolute moral code modeled on the conduct books. Concerning filial duty, Fordyce stresses that parents know best: “I would begin where your duty in society begins, by putting you in mind how deeply your parents are interested in your behaviour” (4); “do nothing to make them unhappy; do all in your power to give them delight” (5). If a young woman marries an inappropriate man, Fordyce states that she “disgraces her education, dishonours her sex, disappoints the hopes she had raised” (6). Moreover, the consequences are never ceasing: “the reflexion of having acted undutifully … to those that gave you birth, were alone sufficient to poison the whole pleasure of life” and “the horror of guilt” will “haunt and distract the mind, more particularly if the parents were uncommonly worthy” (180).

With strictures such as these, Anne’s logic becomes more understandable: the very worthy Lady Russell has been like a mother to Anne, and Anne feels she owes her filial duty. Yet despite her change in attitude, Anne has remained consistent: she maintains that she was right in her behaviour, that she does not blame either Lady Russell or herself, but she would not give the same advice. As Anne wisely observes, it is only with hindsight that the advice can be seen as mistaken (246). By placing conscience over emotions she is applying conduct book rules and logic. She even uses conduct book phraseology when she tells Wentworth, “a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman’s portion” (246).

In the last section of the novel, when Wentworth comes to Bath, Anne stretches the rules concerning proper ladylike behaviour. While Anne will forego an evening with her insufferable cousins the Dalrymples to visit Mrs. Smith, when there is a chance that she will see Wentworth at a concert her transparent change of plans raises Mrs. Smith’s curiosity about an underlying motive (180). Anne next instigates a delicate pursuit of Wentworth which bends the conduct book rules. Gregory states, “It is a maxim laid down among you, and a very prudent one it is, – that love is not to begin on your part, but is entirely to be the consequences of our attachment to you” (97). He is adamant about procedure, whereby men must take the lead; to do otherwise is “to violate the modesty and delicacy of [the female] sex, and to invert the clearest order of nature” (108). Yet, when Wentworth enters the room, Anne takes the initiative:

Anne was the nearest to him, and making yet a little advance, she instantly spoke. He was preparing only to bow and pass on, but her gentle “How do you do?” brought him out of the straight line to stand near her, and make enquiries in return … (181)

During this conversation, Wentworth talks about the events at Lyme and through his speech and actions Anne learns about his feelings for Louisa and intimations of his feelings for herself (184). Reinforced with this proof of his love of her (186), Anne begins to act more assertively. The subsequent scene is comic, for while Mr. Elliot has “manoeuvred” himself to a seat by her (186), Anne is manoeuvring herself in order to give Wentworth a spot: “by some other removals, and a movement of her own, she contrived to find herself quite near” (187). Anne begins to act more assertively.

Interestingly, the skill with which Anne interprets Wentworth’s returning interest is prescribed as a conduct book virtue by Fordyce:

This, I apprehend, does not require reasoning or accuracy, so much as observation and discernment. Your business is chiefly to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful. It is not the argumentative but the sentimental talents, which give you that insight and those openings into the human heart, that lead you to your principal ends as Women. (108)

I will return to Anne’s argumentative skills later, but at present note how Anne not only possesses this ability for “reading” people, but also that she employs this ability for her own ends. Austen characterizes Wentworth through a clear code of gesture and automatic actions. Anne is able to interpret this nonverbal behaviour (Warhol 6-7), but so is the discerning reader. Gregory provides a brief “reader’s” guide for women detailing what a “man of delicacy” acts like, when under “the effect of honourable passion,” especially when he believes he has little hope of success (101-05). Gregory observes, “It renders a man not only respectful, but timid to the highest degree” (101). When talking with his beloved, “he quietly relapses into seriousness, if not into dullness” (102); and “Diffidence and embarrassment will always make him appear to disadvantage in the company of his mistress” (102).

Gregory’s description accords with much of Wentworth’s behaviour in Bath, with the exception of his continuing change of colour. Just as Anne, once her “second spring” of good looks has returned, blushes in Wentworth’s presence, so does he in hers. Fordyce and Gregory stress how revealing the blush is as a token of maidenly innocence (Yeazel 65). Fordyce rhapsodizes, “it is the precious colouring of virtue,” quoting “Clear Chastity / with blushes redd’n ing as she moves along / disordered at the deep regard she draws” (33). (Note regarding Anne, however, that she is not at all put out of countenance when the unknown Mr. Elliot looksearnestly and admiringly at her! [104].) For his part, Gregory thought so highly of the blush as an emblem of innocence that he gives it first place in his chapter on conduct and behaviour (Yeazel 68). Significantly, he acknowledges that men blush too:
Juliet McMaster remarks that due to their loving knowledge of one another Anne and Wentworth are equally hypersensitive to one another’s responses and gestures (72-73, Van Sickle Johnson 45). Moreover, by reading each other’s blushes they achieve a kind of reciprocity. For example, when Anne first sees Wentworth in Bath, she almost faints. But “when she had scolded back her senses” she is ready for their meeting, while he is not (Van Sickle Johnson 57):

He was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her than she had ever observed before: he looked quite red. For the first time, since their renewed acquaintance, she felt that she was betraying the least sensibility of the two. She had the advantage of him, .... (175)

Later, at the concert, their reciprocal responses are described through Anne’s heightened perceptions:

He stopped. A sudden recollection seemed to occur, and to give him some taste of that emotion which was reddening Anne’s cheeks and fixing her eyes on the ground. — After clearing his throat, however, he proceeded .... (182)

Afterwards, when Anne reflects on Wentworth’s behaviour, her conclusion that he “must love her” is based on more than his speech about Louisa and Capt. Benwick:

— sentences begun which he could not finish — his half-averted eyes, and more than half-expressive glance — all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least; (185)

The conduct book writers refused to admit passion into an English-woman’s constitution, although they could not answer for those born in southern countries: “I do not think that your sex, at least in this part of the world, have much of that sensibility which disposes to such attachments” (Gregory 96). They insist that “what is commonly called love among you” is “rather gratitude, and partially to the man who prefers you to the rest of your sex” (Gregory 96). It is ironic then, that the code of the blush, so unvaryingly presented as signifying innocence by the conduct book writers is, in Austen’s rendition, a continuation of Renaissance love theory which contradicts their arguments! (McMaster, ch. 1).

Austen imbues Wentworth’s character with an emotionality that softens his vigorous, athletic nature. He is the only Austen hero who “clear[s]” a hedge at a leap (91), but his sensibility somewhat “feminizes” him. This characterization parallels the waiting role he is forced to play in Bath, where he assumes the passive position of the conventional heroine (Poovey 232). Wentworth’s characterization also parallels the reversal of the traditional mentor-pupil relation whereby he is the one who must be taught (Butler 275, Kirkham 145). Accordingly, I interpret Austen’s presentation of Wentworth to anticipate what some feminist critics call an “andrognous” ideal.4

The greatest instance of Anne’s self-assertion of her feelings toward Wentworth is the intent behind her debate with Captain Harville about men’s and women’s love at the (appropriately named) White Hart Inn. Anne is utilizing the language of propriety in a contrary fashion to the way it was intended, for she uses a general statement about women’s constancy in love as a covert announcement of her abiding love for Wentworth. As Anne is fully aware, according to the rules of propriety, she does not know Capt. Harville well enough to engage in an intimate conversation (Nardin 143). Yet note how she justifies her conduct and “reads” Capt. Harville’s gesture at the same time:

He looked at her with a smile, and a little motion of the head, which expressed, “Come to me, I have something to say;” and the unaffected, easy kindness of manner which denoted the feelings of an older acquaintance than he really was, strongly enforced the invitation. She roused herself and went to him. (231)

Likewise, Harville’s query about woman’s love is not spoken; Anne not only interprets his gestures but also literally gives voice to his thoughts. After Harville contrasts his deceased sister’s steadfastness in love with Benwick’s changeability, Anne generalizes about woman’s constancy. She is responding to an unexpressed question:

Captain Harville smiled, as much as to say, “Do you claim that for your sex?” and she answered the question, smiling also, “Yes. We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.” (232)

Interestingly, Anne’s description of women’s lot sounds very similar to Fordyce where he argues for the inferiority of women to men:

Nature appears to have formed the faculties of your sex, for the most part, with less vigor than those of ours; observing the same distinction here, as in the more delicate frame of your bodies ....; War, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and abstruser sciences and the like, are most properly the province of men. (107)

Allison Sulloway considers Anne’s debate with Capt. Harville to summarize conduct book ideals in an ironic fashion, thereby inverting the arguments about women’s weak minds, weak bodies and inconsistent nature (183-85). Other feminist critics align Anne’s speech with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (e.g. Kirkham 147). I agree that Anne’s display of debating skills dispels any notions of intellectual weakness on her part, while her description of education as power: “Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands,” and her refusal to be hemmed in by examples of books also sound feminist (234).

Anne’s use of the word “forced” to describe the typical man’s lot, in other words, Wentworth’s situation after their break-
In 182), but springlike in its return to the spirit of youthful love and intensity. 

The plot of Persuasion is a love-story or romance in the modern sense. Yet the narrative suggests another use of the term, current in Jane Austen's time. In 1785 Clara Reeve published one of the earliest historical accounts of the novel (Spencer 76). Reeve defines the difference between the romance and novel whereby "The romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written" (l, 111). I consider Austen to be playing with the notion of romance in this sense of her characterization of Anne.

After Anne goes to Lyme, several characters outside of her male admirers remark on her improved looks, notably Lady Russell and her friend, who wonders if she uses Gowlands lotion (145)! The scenes are amusing to Anne, but when Lady Russell compliments her, Anne ruefully "hope[s] that she was to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty" (124). In Bath, the narrator says that Anne had fared better than her classmate Mrs. Smith by possessing every aspect of beauty and youth except bloom (153), and other characters of discernment, including ladies gossiping in stores, stress Anne’s beauty (177-78). The term "glow" now begins to be associated with Anne as much as with Wentworth. At the concert, when she senses Wentworth’s returning love, she is radiant: "Her happiness was from within. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks glowed …" (185). In the next chapter, Mrs. Smith notices Anne’s transformed countenance, correctly "diagnosing" the cause to be the presence of a lover, and causing her to blush in confusion (194, McMaster 21). In chapter eleven when the lovers are reconciled, the description of their silent reunion is ambiguous:

Anne could command herself enough to receive that look and not repulsively. The cheeks which had been pale now glowed, and the movements which had hesitated were decided. He walked by her side. (240)

The glow of love belongs to both equally.

Also in Bath, Anne begins to act more youthfully. She sentimentalizes suffering when she eulogizes about the uplifting effects of sickness to poor, ill Mrs. Smith:

"What instances must pass … of ardent, disinterested, self-denying attachment, of heroism, fortitude, patience, and resignation – of all the conflicts and all the sacrifices that enoble us most. A sick chamber may often furnish the worth of volumes."

"Yes," said Mrs. Smith doubtfully, "sometimes it may." … (156)

Anne’s enthusiasm reveals her to be inexperienced, sheltered, and unrealistic. A little later Anne breaks her partly formed engagement with her friend because she hopes to see Wentworth, an instance of girlish enthusiasm (180). Then, after seeing Wentworth and believing he loves her still, she romanticizes that "Their union … could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation" (192). Anne is so fulsome that the narrator directs a gently ironic comment towards her:

Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way. (192)

Yet behind the teasing I detect through the imagery the figure of Persephone bringing an early spring to the February streets of Bath. I argue that ultimately, the tone of Persuasion is not autumnal as has so often been claimed (e.g. Gard 182), but springlike in its return to the spirit of youthful love and intensity. When Anne and Wentworth saunter along the gravel walk in Bath, the narrator says,

There they returned again in to the past, more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected; more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other’s character, truth, and attachment. (240-41)

I consider Austen, like a fairy godmother, to be imbuing Anne with a return of youth and beauty. The final paragraph of Persuasion locates the source of Anne’s now permanent glow as being her reciprocated love for Wentworth. The narrator compares Anne’s happiness with that of her friend Mrs. Smith: "[Mrs. Smith’s] spring of felicity was in the glow of her spirits, as her friend Anne’s was in the warmth of her heart" (252). The penultimate sentence calls Anne’s future life "sunshine" (252). The imagery of glow, spring, and sunshine suggests indeed a return to springtime. Anne’s earlier hope about regaining a “second spring,” a hope that was really a wish, has come true!

In Anne Elliot, Austen has constructed a complex character who embodies numerous paradoxes. Anne is a mature version of the feminine ideal which was defined in 18th-century conduct books, yet she breaks these rules in accordance with her needs. Furthermore, by characterizing Anne’s growth as a movement from prudence to romance, Austen creates a romance heroine, a romantic figure. Anne, and hence Austen, knew the poetry of Scott and Byron. Some critics have suggested that Austen appropriates the language of Romantic poetry to describe Anne’s and Wentworth’s love for one another. Indeed, Anne comes to identify Wentworth and their love in absolute terms, calling the contents of his letter, “all which this world could do for her” (237). I detect in Austen’s portrayal of the rejuvenated Anne suggestions of fairy tale
romance and mythic renewal. By creating a woman who combines correct judgment with tenderness, moral superiority with passion, is Jane Austen not describing a new type of heroine? Anne’s character recalls Wordsworth’s definition of the poet transposed into a domestic context: is not Anne “endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness?”; does she not have “a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul”? Is not Anne someone who is “pleased with [her] own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other[s] … in the spirit of life? …” (Wordsworth 737). Jane Eyre – beware!

NOTES

1 See the writings of Poovey, Hunt, Spencer, Sulloway and Johnson for a discussion of the relation between Austen’s novels and the didactic novel.

2 Ten Harmsel and Poovey both discuss Anne’s application and modification of the rules of decorum slightly differently. Ten Harmsel describes Anne as being both conventional and unconventional at the same time (174). Poovey considers Anne to “struggle” to make “social conventions accommodate and communicate her feelings” (232).

3 The note in the Penguin Classics edition of Persuasion reads: Miss Larolles, who was the head of the voluble sect in fashionable society, “talking faster than she thinks,” vainly tried to attract the attention of Mr. Meadows, the languid head of the Insensiblists, by sitting on the outside of the benches: “It’s the shockingest thing you can conceive, to be made sit in the middle of those forms; one might well as be at home, for nobody can speak to one” (395, note 13).

4 For example, Carol Thurston in The Romance Revolution (1987) interprets the characterization of heroine and hero in contemporary (usually erotic) popular romance fiction to explode the old stereotype of passive woman and masterful hero. Rather, she sees the heroine as no longer competing with other women for the hero’s attention but focussing on her own challenges (8-9). Their relationship is equal and they have characteristics usually ascribed to the other. The heroine is socially (and sexually) experienced, confident and assertive; the hero is sensitive, vulnerable and open (98-99).

5 My Jane Austen Electronic Discussion group has had some spirited discussions about the scene at the White Hart Inn and Anne’s debate with Capt. Harville, during the Christmas and over the New Year of 1991 to 1992 and again this May.

WORKS CITED


found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them. -Three girls, the two eldest sixteen and fourteen, was an awful legacy for a mother to bequeath, an awful charge rather, to confide to the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father. see how old all the rest of his family and acquaintance were growing. Anne haggard, Mary coarse, every face in the neighbourhood worsting, and the rapid increase of the crow's foot about Lady Russell's temples had long been a distress to him. She had, while a very young girl, as soon as she had known him to be, in the event of her having no brother, the future baronet, meant to marry him, and her father had always meant that she should. She has intentionally masked her name as male in order to sell her paintings, because she realized the preconceptions that females cannot paint was preventing her from getting any recognition. Despite that, she has continued to draw, and has rejected the family telling her to marry. Eventually, she falls ill and goes to a common hospital, where she painted until she died. Mildred, upon learning this story, is afraid for Lily's future, but says that she does not want to force Lily to marry, and tells her that she will support Lily in her endeavors. If there's anything else you want to... quiero saber Si el padre de Cenicienta fue atrapado? Romance entre Mc y Ml Si hay un rival para Mc o Ml ¿Qué hay de Cenicienta? ¿Y las hermanastras? JoshyM62, Jun 28, 2020. Though older than Lydia, she is her shadow and follows her in her pursuit of the officers of the militia. She is often portrayed as envious of Lydia and is described as a "silly" young woman. An example of this is the prevention of Bingley and Jane's romance because of Bingley's undeniable dependence on Darcy's opinion. He lacks resolve and is easily influenced by others; his two sisters, Miss Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Louisa Hurst, both disapprove of Bingley's growing affection for Miss Jane Bennet. She attempts to dissuade Mr Darcy from liking Elizabeth by ridiculing the Bennet family and criticising Elizabeth's comportment. Miss Bingley also disapproves of her brother's esteem for Jane Bennet, and is disdainful of society in Meryton.