

Persuasion Discussion Topics for Volume II—final Austen discussion:

What does the word persuasion mean?

Is Anne “persuaded” by Lady Russell to reject Captain Wentworth’s first offer of marriage? (Or is it a “reasoned response” to a compelling explanation.)

Can you intuit what Jane Austen intended us to believe?

I wonder if we might discuss Mrs. Smith and her willingness to condemn Anne to a dreadful marriage. It’s true that her need is great, but her explanation for such an act of betrayal has never seemed to me to be adequate. Considering the extent to which all other characters are called out for their sins or foibles, is Austen being inconsistent here?

Let’s discuss Mrs. Smith—why is she in the novel beyond a deus ex machina for the plot. Is there some larger significance?

Discuss the role of the narrator in *Persuasion* and whether that narrative role has changed/developed over the course of the six novels we read.

What did the navy represent in this period of social change?

Charles Musgrove—no one pays attention to him. He never complains, though his wife certainly does. His most important moment is to leave Anne with Frederick in order that he get to his gunsmith! Is there more we should say?

What is Austen’s attitude about marriage as revealed in the novels?

Epistemological questions—How do we know what we know? When do we know we know it? How do we persuade ourselves that we have insight? This is especially challenging with all the self-persuasion, self-delusion, and even authorial persuasion going on in the novel.

Notice the way Austen builds scenes, multiple chapters of the novel, the whole novel: anticipation, pause, more anticipation, more pause....finally resolution.

Does Austen lead us to the Brontes?

Was Austen a feminist in her novels? Related topic: the education of women and the role it played in Austen’s works.

Let’s discuss chapter 23.

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Anne as the pinnacle of the educated female in Austen. Reminder that Austen was writing in the era of Mary Wollstonecraft, a major feminist. Anne went to school (as did

the Musgrove girls and Mrs. Smith. She reads poetry and non-fiction, knows Byron and Scott and talks to Capt Benwick about them.

Were novels tilted toward a more female readership at that time? Probably yes.

Wasn't more education for women a social change in the era of Austen? Yes (we see a change from *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, even *Mansfield Park* where there is no school for girls. Many of the female characters are self-taught or informally educated (Lizzie Bennet, Fanny Price, Eleanor Tilney, for example). (For much more information re Austen and women's education, read <http://research.monm.edu/mjur/files/2019/02/MJUR-i04-2014-6-McElligott.pdf>)

There is a recognition in *Persuasion* that women have a sense of self and agency: Mrs. Croft example.

Anne finds her voice (140) when she banter with and disagrees with Mr. Elliott on what "good company" consists of. This is the first time we hear her standing up for what she believes. Agency!!!

What is persuasion? Etymologically (according to a google graph and a ngram viewer with a British English focus), it was a word much used from 1800-1818 but used in different ways in different contexts. Persuasion, a rhetorical art, is used to influence someone else or to confirm one's own sense of self (hypochondriacs think they are ill, etc). Persuasion can be internal or external.

Could Lady Russell have been right both times? First time: too big a risk, safety was required, no marriage; later, she recognizes what would make Anne happy (and Frederick has prospered via privateering), thus she supports their marriage.

The role of the pen—writing (two letters, one a passionate love letter). When he drops it, (we too hear it drop), we know how hard he is listening to Capt Benwick and Anne's conversation about male vs female constancy. Someone commented that it's important what he drops as the pen reminds one of Jane Austen as writer.

Following up on the initial Mrs. Smith question--she shouldn't be condemned for her supporting Anne's marriage to Mr Elliot—she assumed from gossip (Nurse Rooke), it was a fait accompli and, as a result, she wanted only to enlist her in getting Mr Elliott to help her regain property she owned, something that only a man could do. As soon as Mrs. Smith recognizes the truth about Anne's feelings for Mr. Elliot, she tells Anne the truth about the depths of his hypocrisy and cruelty to her.

Was Mrs. Smith a reflection of Austen herself? Both Austen and Mrs Smith were in ill health and without wealth; both loved gossip and commenting on people around them; both lived simply—Austen with her sister and mother in Chawton Cottage, Mrs. Smith in the "most lowly" of all the addresses in Bath, yet both were positive and optimistic, continued working—Mrs. Smith making do-dads to sell to support others, Austen

writing up to months before she died. Mrs. Smith who has lost her spendthrift husband is not like Anne as Anne is always sad, never smiling in volume 1. (mtk—interesting that what Anne loved in Frederick was his spontaneity, full of life and ardor, and openness. These are qualities she sees Mr. Elliott as lacking but also ones she lacks once she had broken her engagement 8 years earlier).

Mrs. Smith is loyal to people of other classes (Nurse Rooke, for example, whom she treats as a friend. (mtk—unlike Emma who patronizes Harriet as someone she might mold). Mrs. Smith has plummeted in class (from wealth to poverty), a plummet she was not equipped for and yet she remains positive and interested in the world around her. She gives the reader a unique perspective that is quite unlike that of Fanny Price's mother who also plummeted from wealth to poverty but whose attitude is angry.

We recognized that Austen is not sympathetic to the upper class. It is this group she satirizes most harshly: Lady Catherine de Bourg, Lady Dalrymple...Lady Bertram...

We celebrated Austen's mature narration, her handling of space and tone and sound—especially in chapter 23. We quickly toured the canceled chapters to learn how much better the new ones were and learned that a bit of the cancelled chapter (the whispered conversation outside a door) was included in the fine 1995 movie version of *Persuasion*! One participant called *Persuasion* a “work of genius,” and many of us said that it is our favorite of her novels.

We talked about the different places in the novel (Kellynch Hall, Uppercross House, Uppercross Cottage, Lady Russell's cottage, Lyme Regis, and Bath and in Bath the fact that all the streets where the characters took lodgings have a significance in terms of signifying disparate social rank status from Lady Dalrymple down to Mrs. Smith. (Union Street suggests all that is positive—ironically,. It is the one street in the novel that does not exist even though Anne and Frederick's reconciliation bursts forth as they walk down it.

Bath itself came in for discussion—a world of mirrors, a pretend world, a world that revolves around being seen—but being seen as one wants to be seen, not as one is, a world in which (in *Northanger Abbey*) one has a “short shelf life” to make an impression. Bath is like a stage. It is full of “nothing.” Emptiness.

What fun! What a wonderful group of Austenites.