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1. Introduction

Jane Austen – the name calls forth preconceived images in a person’s mind, shaped by novels such as Sense and Sensibility (1811), Pride and Prejudice (1813; =PP), or Emma (1815). Romantic comedy, sparkling and jolly, is what one expects on reading a Jane Austen novel. This prototypical image derives, above all, from the works of Jane Austen themselves. Written in a light, teasing tone and presenting admirable young women who need to go through great suffering only to be bestowed, in the end, on equally admirable young men, they are probably the most suitable novels for hopeless romantics with a good sense of humour.

However, Persuasion (1817; =P), the last novel completed by Jane Austen, seems to break the pattern. Anne Elliot’s re-capturing of Frederick Wentworth and her search for a better place to be is a story of second chances and deals with the regaining of hope and love. Moreover, it lacks various features that are essential to the other novels she wrote. Persuasion’s distinctive nature was already commented on by Austen’s contemporaries,
who condemned the book as the most tedious she had written so far. Indeed, *Persuasion* is not as funny as *Pride and Prejudice*, as its underlying mood is more pessimistic, and it is perhaps not as polished in regard to literary techniques as Austen’s masterpiece, *Emma*. But many critics have acquired a taste for the more tranquil story of *Persuasion* since its publication. It has even been argued that the novel marks a radical shift in Jane Austen’s writing, not for the worse, but for the better: the focalization technique employed was claimed to be more elaborate than in her other writings, the topic more mature, the observation of the change of social order, illustrated in the decay of the gentry in the form of Sir Walter, almost revolutionary.

What has often been forgotten is that Anne, the central character of the novel, plays a decisive role in rendering the book unique among Austen’s works. A shift in Austen’s values manifests itself in the characterisation of Anne; Anne – silent but full of thought, persuadable yet steady, a model of self-composure yet glowing with emotions – is definitely a deviation from what one is used to in Austen’s heroines. Not only is there a greater focus on the character’s “physicality” than with Austen’s other female protagonists, but she also seems more “modern”. Nonetheless, the question remains if Anne is as revolutionary as she appears to be. Is the reputation she holds not wrongfully imposed upon her? Is it not simply a feminist ploy to turn Jane Austen into a rebel? On taking a closer look at the novel, one will find ample proof to underpin both of the theses. Anne’s mind, heart, and body, as well as Austen’s attitude towards them, shall therefore be the object of closer examination in the course of my paper.

2. The mind, the heart, the body
2.1. Anne Elliot’s credibility and discernment

It cannot be denied that Anne is presented differently than other characters in Austen’s fiction. As she is depicted as a person to be taken seriously and whose observations the reader can trust, she does not become a victim of Austen’s famous irony (cf. Mudrick 1970: 62). This can be explained by the very simple fact that Anne is “strictly too old and too wise to play the part in what is still conceived as a comedy” (Kirkham 1983: 154). It is also, of course, grounded in the very structure of the novel: not only is Anne the protagonist, but it is exclusively through her eyes that the reader perceives what is happening in and around her. And what we see from her perspective turns out to be valid: After a few good judgements have been made in the beginning of the novel, credibility has been established. Because of this, it is not a miracle that Anne is allowed to apply self-irony when she believes she is being hypocritical.¹ No higher instance is needed

¹ See, for instance, the scene in which Anne advises Captain Benwick to read less poetry in order to get over the death of his fiancée (*P*: Ch. XI).
to scold her for her behaviour, because she is willing to do it herself, and appropriately as well, the reasons for which will be explained later in my paper.

The time for self-deception has passed for Anne: it ended with her refusal of Wentworth’s proposal eight years before the narration starts, and in the meantime Anne has become self-aware; self-aware in the sense that she has become fully conscious of her own qualities and faults. She also has clearer views of things in general, and of people and their behaviour in particular. Not at all self-indulgent, she is the only one of Austen’s characters in this novel who is not unreliable. Due to her gift of sharp observation, Anne’s perspective predominates. Not in the way Elizabeth Bennet observes things, with arch spirits and self-complacency, but more calmly and, although this word may seem misapplied on first reading, merciless. This derives from the fact that she does not have the same kind of humour as Lizzy. Consequently, the follies of her family and acquaintances do not divert her\(^2\), but she acknowledges them in all their cruelty and vexing awkwardness. Instead of making the reader laugh about their stupidity, the characters are presented “satirically, but without amusement” (Paris 1979: 141). Neither the wrong her family does her, nor the treachery of Mrs. Clay, nor anything else that other people overlook, escapes Anne’s gaze. Such an uncompromising point of view is needed to some extent. If Anne was less precise in her observations or a more cheerful person, readers would not feel the difference between her and her relations as acutely as they do. As it is, Anne is singled out as the only sensible person within her family. All the pain Anne lives through could not be enhanced in a better way by any other device. In the end, Anne’s escape from her family circle is a relief to the readers, and the pleasure they feel about it “is so intense because the dangers to her have seemed so real” (Paris 1979: 141). Her situation is a great burden to her and poses a threat to her happiness.

Nevertheless, Anne is a passive observer. It is not in her nature to fight her way out of her miserable situation or to speak reason to the people she knows (although she tries to more than once). It is her part to listen and understand. Having no one to confide in, this is a lonely occupation. In fact, Anne suffers from “intellectual solitude” (Watkins 2007: 3). The only friendship she has is with Lady Russell, but in the book, it is altogether neglected. Intimate conversations never take place, and the two are scarcely seen together. Apart from Lady Russell, nobody seems to be a suitable companion for Anne because her acquaintances lack the elegance of mind that Anne possesses, or are not interested in her at all, as is the case with her family. One could argue that Anne is solitary because she is so

\(^2\) There are, however, situations whose comic effects she cannot escape; it makes her smile, for example, to listen to Henrietta’s monologue about Dr. Shirley in Chapter VII. Foolishness, therefore, is not utterly perceived without humour, as long as it is not harmful to anybody.
accomplished and virtuous that nobody is able to match her: It is “Anne’s excellence [that] leads to isolation” (Watkins 2007: 4). Most of the time, the reader finds Anne physically alone, and her thoughts remain unshared. Her state of mind is often turned inward, but she is more self-absorbed than self-centred. Often one will discover that “Anne found herself” to be addressed by somebody; she is so deeply buried in thought that she only gradually becomes aware of her environment. But Anne’s loneliness also generates, naturally, an intensive examination of what is taking place outside her body. Perhaps the state of what Tony Tanner calls “in-betweenness” (cf. Tanner 1986: 193), to be standing outside the various communities surrounding her, is what makes Anne capable of understanding the different discourses which are used by those circles. To watch and listen from the outside provides greater chances for successful judgement than to be involved does. Her isolation is, in other words, one of the reasons for Anne’s keen understanding.

Anne’s function as a listener is not strictly passive, however; it also gives her power. For her, “the look is a means of communication more proper than words, perhaps more effective” (Warhol 1992: 9). Her gaze, the medium through which the reader learns to judge other characters, “removes [...] her entirely from the ranks of objectified heroines of sensibility” (Warhol 1992: 9). It is her act of looking on other characters in the novel that allows the reader to enter the story. Through her gaze, she judges other people, and she judges them correctly. Seldom does she fail in her judgement, and never is she completely deceived. It is true that she does not sense what a villain Mr. Elliot is; but as soon as she is given the opportunity to scrutinize his character, she feels that there is something wrong about him. She accuses him of a lack of feeling: “Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished, but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight [...]. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection” (P: 159). Mr. Elliot has reasons to be reserved, as he is not honest. Anne, in this case, is the only one to take offence although she needs the help of Mrs. Smith to discover who he is. Of Wentworth it is said that “she understood him” (P: 90), and it turns out that Anne was always right in her speculations about his feelings. Another example of her remarkable judgement is Captain Benwick, by whom she is not very surprised when it is announced that he is not lastingly injured by the death of his fiancée. His heartache is speedily cured by Louisa, who must stay with the Harvilles to recover after her fall down the stairs. It is Anne’s empathy that tells her that a person who is capable of feeling is very likely to fall in love for a second time. Ironically, she seems to be an exception to the rule. She knows that she cannot prevent herself from loving Wentworth and only him. The fact that Anne is aware of those feelings does not make it easier for her to bear the weight of her own emotions; these will be discussed in the next section.
2.2. Anne Elliot’s uncontrollable emotions and the struggle for composure

“Anne hoped she had outlived the age of blushing; but the age of emotion she certainly had not” (P: 47). This comment by the narrator is placed casually in between a conversation and it is symptomatic of the way emotion is depicted in *Persuasion*. On the one hand, emotion plays a major part in the novel, as *Persuasion* is, above all, a love story with a heroine often overwhelmed by her passions. On the other hand, feelings may not be displayed freely; to feel, but not to show any more feeling than is proper, is the motto. Victorian England, so it seems, already casts its shadow over this novel.

If this was true for the whole novel, *Persuasion* would hardly be counted revolutionary. But fortunately there is one detail that makes the heroine unconventional: Anne feels much more than is tolerable and she is not always capable of concealing it. Throughout the book, one can find whole paragraphs which prove this. Anne is described as either being agitated or fighting to suppress her confusion. Wentworth’s arrival brings her close to a nervous breakdown although she attempts to be calm. She does not succeed in her attempt “to be feeling less” (P: 58) and it seems as if she leaps from one emotional crisis to the next.

Indeed, her emotions are so strong that they affect her body as well as her behaviour. Anne often betrays more emotion than she intends to. Sometimes her excitement leads to glowing cheeks (cf. P: 241), sometimes it takes away her eloquence. During the inspection of Kellynch Hall by the Crofts, for example, she loses her temper and cannot “answer as she ought” (P: 47) when Mrs. Croft starts speaking about her brother. When she overhears a conversation between Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove of which she finds herself to be the topic, this experience is so stirring she cannot “immediately fall into quotation again” (P: 83). In other situations, she reacts similarly: On being ‘saved’ by Wentworth from the attack by her nephew, Anne is so overwhelmed she cannot speak for a while and she feels it necessary to leave the room until she has found her balance again. Finally, in the scene in which Anne reads of Wentworth’s love for her, she feels “an overpowering happiness” (P: 239) and goes so far as to pretend that she is ill in order to hide her emotions from her companions. This “excuse” is readily believed: “They could then see she was very ill” (P: 239). Seldom does Anne feel good about the emotions that love causes in her; it brings about only mortification or, at its best, confusion. She experiences matters of the heart as physical pain, almost never as enjoyment; as Robyn Warhol points out, “love quite literally hurts in *Persuasion*” (Warhol 1992: 16).

When strong emotions conquer Anne, her “rational mind is put away or at least overtaken” (Young 2003: 81) by her feelings. This is truly something that does not happen in *Pride and Prejudice*. Even in the end, Lizzy is not said to really feel happiness, but she acknowledges that she
must be happy, as she is so lucky to have an engagement with a man she can respect (cf. *PP*: 352). Further, the language of emotion is almost entirely left out in this novel. Which does not mean that Lizzy never feels anything, but that the reader is not supposed to be bothered with it. The only occasions where Lizzy’s emotions are commented on is when she feels ashamed, that is to say, when she blushes, which frequently happens in the book (Young 2003: 81). In *Emma*, emotion is dealt with in much the same way. Apart from occasional manifestations of embarrassment about her own misinterpretations, Emma hardly ever conveys uncontrollable feelings. Her love for Mr. Knightley consists of two major components: jealousy and the knowledge that he will make an appropriate companion for her. Although she does feel something, the quality of her emotions never outgrows the state of teenage immaturity. She cannot love in the way Anne does: deeply, desperately, without much of an objective chance for self-fulfilment, and still with softness of heart and kindness of mind. This emotion, reminding us rather of Charlotte Brontë than of Jane Austen, is one of the great deviations from the tradition of Austen’s writing. Anne, for this reason, is a singular phenomenon in Austen’s novels, at least in regard to her inner life. She is romantic to a degree that Austen’s other heroines are not.

As noted before, Anne does not deceive herself about her feelings. This is what also greatly distinguishes her from Lizzy, who, until very shortly before the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, is not able to admit her love for Mr. Darcy. In addition, Anne Elliot also differs from Emma Woodhouse: Emma, the “imaginist” (Gibson 1988: 60), only sees what she wants to see; she lives in a world she constructs for herself, a world that mainly consists of match-making and of happy couples, over whom she presides as the one who pulls the cords. The discovery that Mr. Knightley is more to her than a brother takes her by surprise, as she never before had wasted a single thought in that direction. Both Elizabeth and Emma need to learn the right balance between their own girlish feelings and a more adult attitude that turns them into worthy members of society. Anne’s development takes quite a different course: “She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older: the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.” (*P*: 28) For the other heroines, a process of maturing takes place; Anne, by contrast, needs to learn how to be happy again.

2.3. From ‘nobody’ to ‘somebody’

“Anne […] was nobody with either father or sister; her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way – she was only Anne” (*P*: 4). The way Anne is introduced in the novel is significant, for it marks a

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3 According to Kay Young (2003: 90), in Austen’s works the representation of shame is the “predominant account of embodied feeling before *Persuasion*”. 

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state of disembodiment that can hardly be outdone: Anne, literally, has no body; she cannot oppose her family or force them to notice her. She is, at least during the first pages, non-existent; and more importantly, she will remain invisible to her family until the final pages of the novel, when her name can be added to Sir Walter’s beloved Baronetage. Anne, knowing exactly of how little importance she is, even makes it “her object […] not to be in the way of anybody” (P: 82). Throughout the book, the only occasions where Anne is noticed by those around her is when she can be of use, for instance when she nurses little Charles after his fall from the tree, or does what is necessary in the Cobb scene. The sporadic attention others grant her is rather cruel because it makes apparent how little she is generally noticed.

When Austen does focus on Anne’s physical presence, her body is in a diminished and pitiful state. Her bloom, so it is described, has “vanished early” (P: 4), and what is left of Anne’s beauty is all “faded and thin” (P: 4). It is less her physical health that is injured, but more so her heart: Since Wentworth is gone, happiness has moved to an unattainable distance. Her beauty, as a consequence, has vanished as her trust in being loved has. To be “forced into prudence in her youth” (P: 28) has deprived her of all the features associated with youth and happiness. Her body, it is made clear, is a mirror of Anne’s feelings; she is “feeling embodied” (Young 2003: 78).

Due to this, it is not astonishing that Anne’s body is subject to constant transformation after Wentworth’s return to Kellynch. The novel ends with a restoration of Anne’s beauty and bloom that renders her eight years younger, and by doing so, reconnects her with the joyous times of her first engagement. When Anne manages to enlighten herself as to her feelings, she gains strength and the conviction that it is possible to reawaken Wentworth’s love for her. This regaining of self-confidence is what makes her become a ‘somebody’, and therefore an object of worship and admiration again.

At the beginning, hope for a second chance appears to be far-fetched. Wentworth, who has become a Captain in the meantime, betrays no sign of a revival of his affection on their first encounter, and even perceives Anne as “so altered he should not have known [her] again” (P: 59). Despite these initial problems, it can be observed that the more they meet the more their attitude towards each other changes, which has effects on Anne’s outward appearance. After the first walk in Lyme, Anne is allowed for the first time to be more than a faded spinster: “She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind […] , and by the animation of eye which it had also produced” (P: 103). This does not escape the attention of Mr. Elliot, yet unknown to Anne, who passes her by. It is only the admiration of this man that brings a change in Wentworth’s attitude towards Anne’s appearance. Finally, he is able to “see something
like Anne Elliot again” (P: 103). In Bath Anne’s beauty is constantly remarked upon. Lady Russell rejoices in seeing Anne so good-looking and even Sir Walter is pleased by the change. Of course Anne’s beauty is also in the eye of the spectator: When Wentworth and Anne are happily reunited at the end of the book, he claims that “to [his] eyes, [Anne] could never alter” (P: 245), which is an evident self-deception if one considers his utterances about Anne earlier in the novel.

Another important aspect of Anne’s physical change is the use of her voice. In the beginning of the novel, her voice is practically unheard; the only information that is given is in her thoughts. On the rare occasions where something is said, it is only summarized with phrases such as “She said all that was reasonable and proper on the business” (P: 102), whereas every utterance made by other characters is extensively dwelt upon. Anne functions as a pure listener here, as the eye and ear of the book, without the intention or the opportunity of making her thoughts known to the characters surrounding her. In the conversation about the sale of Kellynch Hall, Anne raises her voice for the simple reason that she feels the urge to defend the navy and with it Captain Wentworth. This is literally the only cause for which she will speak up.

Anne seldom speaks, but when she does, it is quite often missed or ignored by the others. A case in point is on the walk to Winthrop when Anne asks the members of the party “Is not this one of the ways to Winthrop?” (P: 83). The response is telling: “But nobody heard, or, at least, nobody answered her” (P: 83). On other occasions, though, it is unequivocal that Anne is heard, but no one pays any attention to what she says.

It has been mentioned earlier that Anne’s “word had no weight” (P: 4). This statement proves to be true when Anne tries to convince her sister Elizabeth of Mrs. Clay’s vicious character. The good advice is not listened to, let alone heeded. Mary, Anne’s other sister, is also inclined to take into account Anne’s reasoning only when it confirms her own opinion. When she wants to join an evening party despite her sick son, who needs to be nursed, Anne can easily persuade her that it is no problem for her to stay with little Charles. Nor does her father listen to her: Anne’s plans for economizing do not suit his feeling of dignity and he declares them to be insufferable and puts them aside. This, in short, means that Anne’s opinion is of no consequence to her family. Just as her body is invisible, her voice does not function as a means of communication for her. She is practically inaudible.

Later, Anne’s voice is more frequently heard. Along with the transformation of her body, the presentation of her speech increases, until it reaches its climax in the conversation with Captain Harville, which finally leads to the renewal of her engagement to Captain Wentworth. In the course of this argument, she firmly advocates her opinion; not as playfully as Elizabeth Bennet, who gives her partner in conversation the opportunity to explore their thoughts, but with gentleness, seriousness and persistence.
Thus, her voice reflects Anne’s development from a hushed and faded twenty-seven year-old to a much more self-confident woman.

What is remarkable about the presentation of Anne’s body in *Persuasion* is not the treatment of it, but rather its sheer existence and explicit mentioning. Due to the form of the book – the reader sees through Anne’s eyes – the reader is constantly aware of the presence of Anne’s body. In addition, Jane Austen provides her readers with numerous examples of allusions to Anne’s physical state, which can not be found in the other novels. To be precise, Elizabeth Bennet’s exterior never seems to be worth mentioning, apart from an utterance about her “fine eyes” (*PP* : 45). This holds true for some of Austen’s other novels as well. It is true that Emma Woodhouse’s appearance is described in the very first sentence with “handsome” (*E* : 7), but as the story proceeds, is never returned to again. One could argue here that in those books, the character of the heroine is at the centre of the story, because it is the one thing to undergo a process of change. Anne, on the contrary, does not develop in regard to her traits of character, but rather concerning her attitude towards life, love, and the body. She becomes a happier woman, and because of that recovers her beauty.

In *Persuasion*, the new attitude towards the body is evident. In the other novels, the reader is a spectator who cannot enter the body of the heroine. The focus in *Persuasion* has shifted in such a manner and to such an extent that one “recognize[s] a distance from [Anne]. But the distance is not one of superiority or of judgement; it is simply the distance of not being Anne” (Morgan 1980: 195). For the first time in Austen’s fiction, the body plays a major role, and interestingly, not as a mere vehicle for the reader’s imagination, but as an actual participant of the plot. The mind, the heart and the body are so closely intermingled that it is close to impossible to separate them.

3. Conclusion

Anne Elliot is highly interesting and complex as a character, and, as this paper has demonstrated, much more mature and equipped with other virtues than Austen’s heroines before her. Her knowledge of herself renders her a more viable person, her strongly felt emotions a more modern and less reserved woman. The repeated references to her body are a novelty in Austen’s fiction. Most importantly, the way the mind, the heart and the body are linked is unique in Austen’s fiction. Thus one can call Anne Elliot without hesitation a new character. It remains nonetheless doubtful if she is ‘radically’ different from the heroines of the other five novels. Anne still stands in the tradition of *Pride and Prejudice* and the other novels and is obviously linked with them, be it through the presentation of character, similar opinions, or by the fact that in the end Anne finds her
happiness in marriage. Besides, the plot of *Persuasion* also repeats far too many constituents of its predecessors to be a complete novelty.

Many feminists have pounced on Anne Elliot as an example of a new image of womanhood. What has been forgotten or purposely ignored in this argumentation is that in the characters before Anne, there were also tendencies to the unconventional and revolutionary. Emma is unwilling to marry although she is considered to be in the best situation to do so, on the grounds that marriage can offer her no additional pleasures. Although her plans are put off by Mr. Knightley, the fact she has the idea of staying single in the first place is unusual. Elizabeth, too, is self-governed, and the only reason why nobody takes offence is because she knows how to soften her straightforwardness with wit. Perhaps one may say that Austen could only conceive of a character like Anne having already created characters like Emma and Lizzy.

To conclude, one must admit that there are plenty of new aspects to be found in *Persuasion*. Anne, therefore, is certainly further developed than her predecessors. This is only natural as *Persuasion* was written later than the other novels; a change in the whole attitude is unmistakeable. But it would be wrong to put *Persuasion* away from, or even worse, above Austen’s other works. Every single one of them contains a stage in a process of maturing, and each of them possesses its own charms. One thing, however, is very clear: One can only be astonished at Jane Austen’s craftsmanship, as she has managed again to create a novel so close to perfection, and a heroine so amiable and worthy.

References


Note

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