

“I cannot help thinking Frederick’s manners better than his”:

Conduct books and Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*

by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Any reader of Jane Austen's novels quickly discovers that there are societal rules that govern how characters are supposed to behave in the situations and relationships she portrays. It is wrong to complain of a wearisome conversation; it is right to listen politely. This code of rules naturally was created and perpetuated by different sources; the overall term *courtesy literature* refers to texts that identified and explained this proper behavior. Courtesy literature was by no means new to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but essays, periodicals, conduct books, and sermons preaching the virtues of good conduct were widely read during Jane Austen's lifetime.

In his history of courtesy literature from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, John E. Mason defines a *courtesy book* as "a work which discusses the types of human conduct as an expression of class ideals rather than as a subject for metaphysical speculation" (291). Courtesy (or conduct) books are grounded in the practicality and social ramifications of everyday behavior, and cover subjects such as "the conduct of a gentleman's public and private life," "considerations for one's personal advancement," and "the minor problems of correct behavior at table, on the street, and in the drawing-room" (Mason 291). Conduct books did not deal exclusively with superficial etiquette, such as how to walk beside women on a busy street or how to address a new acquaintance. They were also concerned with the character of the young man or woman and with larger questions of propriety. Penelope Fritzer notes, "[courtesy literature] certainly deals with behavior and conduct, but it is even more concerned with the qualities of character that the behavior shows, and, ironically, sometimes obscures" (4).

One common misconception regarding conduct books is the audience to whom they were written. Mary Poovey focuses on the genre of ladies' conduct books, "which consisted of works composed by both men and women, was directed primarily to the middle classes and was intended to educate young girls (and their mothers) in the behavior considered 'proper,' then 'natural,' for a 'lady'" (15). Fritzer quotes Joyce Hemlow's observation that "the years 1760-1820, which saw also the rise of the novel of Manners, might be called the age of courtesy books for women" (qtd. in Fritzer 2). However, conduct books were frequently written to young men as well.

This paper focuses more heavily on the male characters in Austen's work than the female characters. There are several reasons for this. First, most of the existing work on Austen and conduct books tends to question whether or not Austen's novels uphold or challenge the roles and expectations for women outlined in conduct books. This is an interesting topic, one that is hard to ignore in any study of socially-prescribed gender roles. But Austen is not just concerned with her heroines. Typically, a Jane Austen novel involves a hero and heroine who must both grow in maturity, demonstrating their readiness for marriage by first developing their mind and character. This equation is also generally true of *Persuasion*, the novel in which this paper is most interested.

Persuasion is a good place to explore Austen's relationship to conduct books because it contains a variety of male characters and one exemplary hero. Captain Frederick Wentworth, the story's hero, is widely admired by literary critics and Austen fans for combining spirit and vigor with sense and honor. But he must share the stage in *Persuasion* with Anne Elliot, Austen's most mature, grown-up heroine. The novel maintains this sense of maturity because the characters are older—at twenty-eight, Anne is reunited with

Wentworth after an eight-year absence—and because *Persuasion* is Austen's last finished novel and reflects her own maturation as a woman and as an author.

Conduct books have not become obsolete with the passing of time, although the terminology has changed from the more comprehensive terms *conduct* or *courtesy* to the terms *etiquette* or *manners*, which lack the notion of outward propriety undergirded by developed character. Nonetheless, the idea of the conduct book survives today, if altered somewhat, in books such as *Essential Manners for Men*, written recently by Peter Post, the great-grandson of American etiquette writer Emily Post. Times have changed, so *Essential Manners for Men* covers such topics as “The Battle of the Bathroom,” “What TV Show Are We Going to Watch?” “The Cell Phone,” and “Hitting on Women in Mid-Workout,” not hot-button issues for the typical eighteenth-century Englishman.

The gentleman in turn-of-the-century England would have been much more concerned with matters like conversation, politeness, behavior towards women, and his duties as a son, husband, father, businessman, or legislator. In my analysis of *Persuasion*, I have tried to show where Austen upholds these conduct book principles and where she challenges them. Her relationship to conduct books is complex, but *Persuasion* is an ideal place to begin exploring the facets of that relationship.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

While many critics have found it fruitful to read Austen's novels in light of contemporary conduct books, fewer have devoted pages to systematically studying a specific novel. The following paragraphs are only a brief summary of the type of work being done on the subject and the recurring themes in that work. A good introduction to the subject can be found in Penelope Joan Fritzer's *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, which draws some general connections between Austen's novels and common conduct book topics such as education, recreation, social intercourse, and desired personal characteristics. Fritzer's book is a neat survey of Austen's novels, but it is not an in-depth look at one particular topic or novel.

Fritzer deals explicitly with the topic of conduct books and Austen's novels, but a more common treatment of the topic is to include it in the broader subject of women writers and the society in which they lived. A discussion of a female novelist like Jane Austen often involves descriptions of contemporary society and conjectures on how that society influenced the characters and stories. Conduct books are a fascinating example of one societal influence on female authors and readers. Examples of writers who touch on the subject of conduct books in their exploration of female authors include Linda C. Hunt, whose chapter on Jane Austen explores how the notion of the "ideal woman" developed, tracing and then blurring the lines between courtesy book writers and female novelists. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong also refers frequently to the lessons and virtues preached by conduct books, but her broader focus is really on investigating the history of domestic fiction and the development of the writers of that fiction. Finally, in *The Proper Lady and the*

Woman Writer, Mary Poovey mentions conduct books less than Hunt or Armstrong, preferring to enumerate the socio-economic factors that determined Austen's ideology and how that ideology appears in her novels.

The research on Austen and conduct books can further be divided according to the stand that writers take on the extent to which courtesy literature influenced Austen's works. While many authors believe that Austen was influenced by conduct books and that her novels often reflect many of the same values as contemporary conduct literature, others maintain that Austen's works do not share those values or even that Austen meant her novels to contradict some of the contemporary notions of morality and proper behavior proposed by courtesy literature. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar contrast Austen's early juvenilia with conservative conduct book writers like Hannah More, saying that Austen disliked "the evangelic fervor of novelists who considered themselves primarily moralists" and that instead of modeling her work on conduct books, she "repeatedly demonstrates her alienation from the aggressively patriarchal tradition" (116). On the other side of the spectrum, Fritzer posits her arguments. "That Jane Austen is generally in accord with courtesy book advice and behavior is unmistakable" (6), she writes, and adds that Austen's inclusion of characters who do not follow the conduct book rules is not a slight against those rules: "It is not the courtesy books that Austen occasionally mocks, but the characters who have no judgment or discernment" (7). Generally speaking, there is not much opposition to the idea that Austen was at least familiar with conduct books and, therefore, that her novels were influenced by them in some way. Most disagreement occurs over how exactly Austen felt about these books and whether she intended her own novels to complement or contradict them.

Note that most of the research being done on the relationship between Austen and conduct books is limited to a discussion of the novels' female characters. There is a good reason for this limitation; many eighteenth-century conduct books were written to young women, not young men. However, there were also books written specifically to the gentleman, such as James Forrester's *The Polite Philosopher; Or, an Essay on That Art Which Makes a Man Happy in Himself, and Agreeable to Others* and Lord Chesterfield's *Principles of Politeness and of Knowing the World*. Because the didactic aim of Austen's works is directed at men and women alike, I think it is important to consider the modes of conduct recommended to young British ladies and gentlemen.

My own approach to this topic is more akin to Fritzer's than to Armstrong's or Poovey's. Certainly it is profitable to think of Austen's role as a female writer, but I would like to narrow the focus further, to viewing *Persuasion* in light of conduct books of the same time period, and, specifically, to considering the novel's male characters. Doing a close analysis of the male characters of *Persuasion* will then open the way to considering larger questions asked of Austen's works, such as their relation to contemporary ideas and virtues, and what that relation says about the novelist's own social and ideological background.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

Biographical Information

A helpful place to start an exploration of Austen's novels is her own life, a source of inspiration from which she drew for many of her stories. Much has been made of the fact that Jane Austen never married; she was a beloved aunt, sister, daughter, and friend to many, but she was never a wife. We have evidence that she was an attractive woman and that several men were interested in her over the years. We also know that she received at least one marriage proposal, that she accepted it but retracted her acceptance the next day, and that she possibly received, or hoped for, other proposals. Her love life is made more interesting by the fact that she wrote romances. How is it that such a difference existed between her own life and the fiction she created?

As Valerie Grosvenor Myer writes in her biography of Austen, "All Jane Austen's novels follow the romance pattern of happy marriage achieved after difficulties have been overcome. Her own life was very different, emotionally unfulfilled" (41). As the title of Myer's book, *Jane Austen: Obstinate Heart*, suggests, she sees Austen's unhappiness in later life as a result not of insufficient suitors, but of Austen's refusal to accept them. Perhaps Myer overstates in calling Austen "emotionally unfulfilled." She certainly was loved by her family and maintained close bonds with them, especially with her sister Cassandra and her niece Fanny Knight. She also lived to see the moderate success of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*, which were praised by reviewers and readers alike. And, as already mentioned, Austen was not without male admirers; we have record of several men

who expressed interest in her. In exploring why she never married, we must look both to her own personal history and to her novels for clues.

First, it is clear that Austen approved of marriage and wanted to marry. So much is suggested by her novel's plots (all ending in happy marriages), her enthusiasm for the marriage of her siblings and friends, and her own dreams about marriage—in her youth, she used to practice entering her name into a marriage registry alongside her fictitious husband, and she often joked about marrying the poet the Reverend George Crabbe (Myer 57, 62). It is equally clear that the marriages Austen wrote about were the type she truly believed in. A marriage for love was infinitely preferable to a marriage of convenience, but Austen—perhaps because of her own status as a financially insecure, single woman—remained aware of the necessity of money. Her novels all end with ideal marriages: a couple happily in love, but also provided with sufficient financial resources to live comfortably. That Austen believed in this model but recognized that it did not always apply easily to the reality of life in eighteenth-century England is evident from her own actions.

The one marriage proposal that we know did occur came from Harris Bigg-Wither, who was recommended to Austen by her close friendship with his sisters and by his ownership of Manydown, a country mansion with a beautiful park. Austen accepted his proposal for only one night, then turned it down the following morning upon reflecting that Bigg-Wither, though sensible, was not likely to share her level of “intellect and cultivation” (Myer 60). While this would have been a respectable marriage of convenience, Austen would not marry without love. As Myer concludes, “The plots of Jane’s novels and her refusal to marry for convenience make it plain that she believed in marrying for love, but she

knew that in the real world most men had a way of falling in love with girls who brought money with them” (64).

Austen’s views on marriage were also shaped by the marriages she saw around her. The seventh of eight children, she watched five of her brothers get married. She got along fairly well with her sisters-in-law, but also saw the drain that marriage and children took on them. Four of her brothers married again after their first wives died, and their families were generally large: Edward had eleven children; Frank had six; and Charles had eight children. Since the Austens were respectable but not wealthy, Jane and her sister Cassandra never had much money, and the Austen’s sons either went into the navy or the church to make a living. The only exceptions were George, who was handicapped and rarely mentioned, and Edward, who was adopted by the wealthy Knight family, rather like Frank Churchill of *Emma*. One other piece of Austen’s family history worth mentioning is her sister Cassandra’s engagement to Thomas Fowle. The two were very much in love but delayed their wedding in hopes that a living would soon fall vacant for Reverend Fowle. In the meantime, Fowle followed his patron to the West Indies, serving as chaplain, but died of yellow fever while at sea. From these various family experiences, Austen likely learned that money was necessary in marriage, but also that it was much better to marry for love, and not to allow poverty to prevent a marriage or unnecessarily lengthen the engagement.

In thinking of the concept of the ideal man in Austen’s novels, we can safely infer that her best heroes—Mr. Knightley, Captain Wentworth, and Mr. Darcy—were not modeled on real-life men but that they, together with the heroines they married, represented Austen’s ideal couples: loving, financially stable, but also mutually attentive and equally important. In

none of these cases is the heroine overshadowed by the hero; instead, each book depicts two people who learn from one another and grow closer in the process.

Generally speaking, then, there is agreement between Austen's own personal opinions of and experiences with marriage and the way she represents marriage in her novels. However, at times her novels borrow more directly from her own life. In *Persuasion*, for example, Austen benefited from following her brothers' careers through the navy by using her knowledge of the profession in creating the plot and language of the book. *Persuasion* features several naval gentlemen: Captain Wentworth, of course, but also Admiral Croft and Captains Harville and Benwick. Austen's brother Frank, who rose to the navy's highest rank, once said that he thought Captain Harville might have been modeled after him: "At least the depiction of his domestic habits, tastes and occupations have a considerable resemblance to mine" (qtd. in Hawkrige, 82). Another character from *Persuasion* that could have been drawn from Austen's own life is Lady Russell, the concerned mentor who advises Anne Elliot against marrying Wentworth the first time he proposes. Austen's friend Mrs. Lefroy was instrumental in discouraging her nephew Tom's interest in Jane, and it is possible that the novelist drew some inspiration for the character of Lady Russell from Mrs. Lefroy, whose husband had been preceded at the rectory by the Reverend Dr. Richard Russell (Myer 57). One final aspect of *Persuasion* that is likely grounded in Austen's family experience is the lesson Anne learns about "that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence" (25) that prevented her from marrying Wentworth—on account of his poverty—when he first proposed. This caution was very similar to that shown by Austen's sister Cassandra, who postponed her marriage to Thomas Fowle for the same reason, but was not fortunate as Anne Elliot was to get a second chance. When Cassandra read how Anne

had been “forced into prudence in her youth” (25), she wrote in the margin of the book, “Dear dear Jane! This deserves to be written in letters of gold” (qtd. in Myer 54).

Thus, it is clear that Austen’s novels were influenced—at times very directly—by her own life. But did that influence work both ways? Her own life experiences shaped her novels, but did she intend for her books to have an affect on or application to the cultural reality in which she lived? Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that Austen did not like moralistic, didactic novelists and was “far from modeling herself on conservative conduct writers like Hannah More or Dr. Gregory or Mrs. Chapone” (116). The letters that they use to support this position were written by Jane to her sister Cassandra. Cassandra must have recommended reading Hannah More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*. Jane hasn’t read the book yet, but she exclaims, “my disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals.—Of course I shall be delighted when I read it, like other people, but till I do, I dislike it” (170). In the following letter, Jane teases Cassandra about her habit of misspelling and remarks about the book’s title, “the only merit it could have, was in the name of Caleb, which has an honest, unpretending sound; but in *Coelebs*, there is pedantry and affectation” (172).

However, more evidence is needed to prove Gilbert and Gubar’s conclusion that Austen abhorred didacticism and contemporary conduct books. After all, even if Austen expresses dislike of *Coelebs*—the dismissal of which her flippant, teasing tone suggests shouldn’t be taken as seriously as Gilbert and Gubar seem to think—she did like other didactic novelists. In addition, it is more likely that Austen found fault with More’s religious inclination (her Evangelical zeal) than with her writing technique; in other words, she disagreed with More over the message, not the means. Gilbert and Gubar even point out an

example of didacticism in Austen's own work: in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot lectures sad Capt. Benwick on the benefits of "a larger allowance of prose in his daily study," advising him to read "works of our best moralists," "the finest letters," "memoirs of characters of worth and suffering," and "the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances" (89). Gilbert and Gubar get around suggesting that Austen is recommending didacticism by pointing out that Anne (and, by extension of the metaphor, Austen herself) later admits that, "like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination" (89).

One obviously didactic novel with which Austen was very familiar was Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*. Austen admired the book and even went so far as to turn the lengthy novel into a play version. Brian Southam contends that glimpses of Austen's admiration of Richardson appear in various places in her novels: in her witty dialogue, the idea of women as rational creatures, the importance of women's minds, and the creation of model characters (76-7). *Sir Charles Grandison* is practically a conduct book dramatized. Southam states as much: "Richardson's object was to create a conduct-book hero, a paragon whose behaviour the gentleman reader is meant to aspire to, to learn from and copy" (77). This conduct book aspect of the book was not intended solely for men; it also "set a standard for the lady reader to require of her own circle of gentlemen friends" (Southam 81). That Richardson created Grandison as a sort of model figure is evident from the character's name, the book's subtitle ("the Good Man"), and Richardson's descriptions of Grandison's excellence in a variety of roles: husband, son, brother, friend, domestic man, master, companion, and neighbor (Southam 77). And while Austen perhaps found Richardson's didacticism a bit heavy-handed, she nonetheless toyed with Richardson's idea of the hero as

mentor and husband/reward (Southam 79), eventually tweaking her own novels' endings to reflect a more egalitarian model: hero and heroine as the teacher/reward for each other.

Southam summarizes how Austen differs from Richardson: "the heroes and heroines learn from one another, and this mutual process of learning and teaching provides a binding element in their affection" and "the superiority, the moral and intellectual leadership, is by no means male" (79). Thus, Austen was able to take the didactic principles of a book like *Sir Charles Grandison* and use them to her own ends, creating the type of instructive characters with whom readers were familiar, but also using these characters' actions to challenge familiar assumptions about men and women.

Sir Charles Grandison was not the only exposure Jane Austen had to the principles taught in courtesy literature. As a child, Austen owned a copy of Dr. Percival's *A Father's Instructions to his Children, consisting of Tales, Fables and Reflections; designed to promote the love of virtue, a taste for knowledge, and an early acquaintance with the works of Nature*, as well as Ann Murry's *Mentoria: or, The Young Ladies' Instructor* (Myer 35). Her novels contain references to other courtesy works, such as Rev. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* in *Pride and Prejudice* (Tucker 133). As noted earlier, she was also familiar with Hannah More, the Evangelical social reformer whose topics included the role and duties of women (Gilbert and Gubar 116, Tucker 206-8).

Thus, although biographical information cannot conclusively decide the relation between Austen's novels and conduct books, it at least provides some evidence that Austen was exposed to conduct books and was generally familiar with the principles for young men and women they recommended. Her biography implies a consistency between the types of marriages she portrayed in her book and the type that she sought for herself, an important

fact when considering how she depicted male characters in her novels and whether she believed the best of those characters to be attainable ideals. A glimpse at her own life also reveals that she enjoyed and was strongly influenced by moralistic, didactic writers, which is critical when suggesting that one of her writing goals was to establish good models for her readers to follow.

A Complicated Relationship: Conduct Books and *Persuasion*

We can assume that Austen was familiar with conduct books and the types of behavior they recommended. A more difficult issue to approach is the level to which her works commented on those conduct books. Although some writers may argue that Austen was reacting explicitly against conduct book ideals (Gilbert and Gubar 116), this seems to be an oversimplification of the complicated connections that existed between moralists, novelists, and their readers. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh writes of this situation: “the relation between [Austen’s] novels and the conduct books are complex and on the level of inference rather than demonstrating a one to one relationship” (217). While it is difficult to show definitively that Austen is making a direct reference to a conduct book in one of her novels, we can certainly examine the ways in which gentlemen were represented in her books and how they were advised to behave in common conduct books of the same period.

The presence and influence of the conduct book is not limited to the eighteenth century. As John E. Mason says in *Gentlefolk in the Making*, “it is difficult to find a classical or medieval text that does not contain at least the hint of an idea later recurring in one or other of the courtesy writers” (4). Mason contends that the conduct book increased in popularity and production into the seventeenth century, but that by the end of the eighteenth

century, conduct books increasingly became etiquette manuals, rather than one of the four types of books written earlier: the books of parental advice, polite conduct, policy, or civility (5, 292). During Jane Austen's lifetime, however, texts describing the proper young man and woman were still widely read: Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, Lord Chesterfield's *Principles of Politeness, and of Knowing the World*, and Dr. John Gregory's *Letters to his Daughters* were especially popular. These books were not limited to providing advice for the education of young women, although much critical attention has been paid to this capacity. Rather, the books also described the necessary requirements for creating a proper young gentleman. Mason traces the themes of many of these books back to John Locke's late-seventeenth-century treatise on education. Locke identifies four "essential qualities for a gentleman": virtue, wisdom, breeding, and learning (Mason 177). Simply put, these qualities assure that a gentleman is a virtuous Christian man, skillful in handling business, of good family background, and appropriately educated. These or similar qualities were often picked up by later conduct book writers and reinterpreted for the current time period.

A brief look at two conduct books will show the complexity involved in describing gentlemanly conduct, as well as the writers' assumption that gentlemen must learn to conduct themselves properly in a variety of responsibilities and roles. In *Youth's Friendly Monitor* (1756), James Burgh provides a summary of the three duties of all gentlemen:

Our Duty to ourselves, or our regulating our own Passions and Appetites: Our Duty to others, which consists in dealing with all Men with perfect Justice and Integrity...and with the utmost Benevolence, Liberality, and Charity, that may consist with our respective Stations in the World, and the good of Society. And in our Duty to God, which is, Thinking and Speaking of him as becomes Creatures to think and speak of their Creator; and yielding a perfect and universal Obedience to all his Laws.... (13)

Burgh expects gentlemen to be consistent in their self-control, their relations with others, and in their obedience to God. Sir John Fielding, in *The Universal Mentor* (1773), echoes Burgh's belief that a gentleman must display proper conduct in all of his roles:

As a son, he will exert filial gratitude and respect;—as a husband, tenderness, constancy, and protection;—as a father, example, care, instruction, and impartial affection;—as a friend, sincerity, confidence, candour, and liberality;—as an enemy, generosity, forgiveness, and pity;—as a statesman, public spirit, fidelity, economy, and impartial justice to the merits of others. (vi)

It is important to note that for Fielding and Burgh, being gentlemanly means much more than being well-mannered. Fielding does write that a gentleman must have good manners: “he must be modest, without bashfulness; frank and affable, without impertinence; complaisant and obliging, without servility; chearful and good-humored, without noise” (88). But to these good manners must be attached other attributes: “dignity and elevation of spirit,” “clear understanding, a reason unprejudiced, a steady judgment, and an extensive knowledge,” a heart “free from meanness” and “full of tenderness, compassion and benevolence,” or, as Fielding concludes, “in a word, a fine gentleman is, properly, a compound of the various good qualities that embellish mankind” (88). It was the intent of conduct books to teach these “various good qualities” and prepare young men for the variety of situations and roles that they would encounter, advising them how to play the part of the gentleman in every situation.

Descriptions of the proper behavior, education, and character for a gentleman are not limited to conduct books, however. As Linda Hunt shows, the line between conduct book and novel was often blurred. Homai J. Shroff maintains that although the perfect gentlemen who dominate the pages of eighteenth-century novels may seem unrealistic to modern-day readers, contemporary “readers and critics quite frequently advised novelists to ‘confine

yourselves to the study of characters worthy of imitation” (98), hence the appearance of characters such as Squire Allworthy or Sir Charles Grandison, whose names alone indicate their didactic positions. Robin Gilmour’s *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* explains the importance of works such as the *Spectator* (1711-14), which he contends determined what constituted the proper gentleman of the early eighteenth century.

According to Gilmour, the *Spectator* is responsible for the birth of the “modern gentleman...a man of modesty, restraint, good humour and good sense...tolerantly amused by the surviving relics of Restoration excesses, above the folly of dueling...alert to the contemporary importance of the merchant” (27). Shroff adds that the *Spectator* essays “first made virtue, duty, religion, good sense and good breeding all seem to be one” (269), so that good form became an essential part of what constituted the ideal gentleman. Gilmour reads this modern gentleman as opposed to the typically aristocratic, “honorable” ideal of the Restoration, “a code of gentility answerable to conscience and domestic decency rather than the old public court of ‘honour’” (27).

Gilmour sees this modern ideal being taken up by novelists such as Samuel Richardson, whose hero Sir Charles Grandison tries to bridge the two ideals by refusing to duel but still maintaining his personal courage, moral virtue, and the comfort that he could “cut his opponent to ribbons” if he wanted to (Gilmour 28). Brian Southam summarizes who Sir Charles is: “the epitome of the civilized Augustan gentleman, a marriageable gentleman, too—rich, well-born, handsome; a patient and faithful lover; gracious, considerate, and protective towards women, and heroic in their defence. He sets the ultimate standard of the ideal husband” (77). Gilmour describes Sir Charles as “the ideal of the Christian hero” (31). Jane Austen’s famous claim that when it comes to novels and heroines,

“pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked” (335) may help to explain why none of her characters end up being as idealized as Sir Charles. Instead, most of her heroes and heroines have flaws or weaknesses that need to be improved as the novel progresses. Yet, despite Austen’s personal dislike for perfect characters, other contemporary readers obviously took Richardson’s creation very seriously. Richardson designed his novels to encourage young women to avoid the “Reformed Rake” and to instead seek husbands like Sir Charles, but one contemporary worried that his novel would “give the women an idea of perfection in a man which they never had before, the consequence of which niceness will be a single life for ninety-nine out of a hundred” (qtd. in Shroff 99).

Of course, these didactic novels were not only written by men. Gilmour traces a line “from Richardson through Fanny Burney to Jane Austen” (31), as the stories begin to revolve around the more moderate, everyday lives of rural gentry, rather than the extremes of vice and virtue, rakes, brothels, and nobility in Richardson’s novels. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh notes that these novels often featured heroines who embodied the conduct book ideals. She sees this embodiment as stronger in Fanny Burney than in Jane Austen: “Fanny Burney’s novels were considered ‘courtesy’ or conduct book novels due to their range of didactic interests,” but, “By the time Jane Austen was writing, the feminine ideal had passed into the domain of common sense and was accepted as ‘natural’” (217), which meant that her novels were not as explicitly didactic as Burney’s. The increasingly conservative nature of early nineteenth-century English society led to rewriting and defining the feminine ideal. Other female writers who toyed with the limits of fiction and instruction in this time period were Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More.

Because the jump from conduct manual to novel was often a short one, novels were also able to function as locations to investigate the characters described by the conduct manuals. By dramatizing these manuals, authors were able to explore the tensions or problems inherent in these ideal men and women. Consider, for example, the importance of the hero's birth. As in Locke's treatise, birth plays a key role in the creation of the ideal gentleman in many eighteenth-century books, including dictionaries, conduct books, and novels. Although Johnson's dictionary details four meanings for the term "gentleman," the most common one is the first: "A man of birth; a man of extraction, though not noble" (Shroff 18). We see this issue being discussed in fiction as well: must the gentleman be of high birth, or is proper conduct enough? Interestingly, Shroff writes that most of the novelists created heroes who were gentlemanly both in blood and behavior. For example, consider Samuel Richardson, who writes that "rank or degree entitles a man, who is not utterly unworthy of both, to respect" (qtd. in Shroff 27). Henry Fielding's *Essay on Conversation* states that the man who can converse easily and good-naturedly with others is a gentleman, regardless of his rank or wealth: "Whoever...endeavours to his utmost to...contribute to the ease and comfort of all his acquaintance, however, low in rank fortune may have placed him...hath, in the truest sense of the word, a claim to good-breeding" (qtd. in Mason 276). Yet, despite the recommendations Fielding makes in his essay, his hero Tom Jones is conveniently revealed to be a true member of the landed gentry at the novel's end. As Shroff says, "the novelist may seem to toy with the idea of presenting a good servant lad or a brilliant beggar boy as a hero, but such characters are ultimately metamorphosed into philanthropic country gentlemen" (257). Jane Austen generally does not depart from this attention to wealth and background either. In her novels, the handsome but scheming rake is

usually of low birth, and the heroine ultimately falls for the well-born, wealthy landed gentleman instead. This pattern holds true for several of Austen's novels and suggests that, at least in this one area, many eighteenth-century novelists created characters consistent with the representations of contemporary conduct books.

Another interesting issue that appears once conduct books are dramatized or challenged in eighteenth-century novels is the proper roles of men and women. Unlike the necessity of a gentleman's high birth—which most novelists and conduct book writers agree on—the types of roles recommended for men and women is a much more problematic issue. Conduct books drew clear lines between men and women, beginning with their early education and progressing through the pursuits and occupations proper to them and their roles in marriage and family life. James Nelson's *An Essay on the Government of Children* (1753) demonstrates the different subjects in which boys and girls should be educated: boys should learn “languages, philosophy, mathematics, law, and history, together with poetry, painting, music, dancing, fencing, riding, and architecture,” while young women are responsible for learning “elegant penmanship, needlework, dancing, French, Italian, and music, as well as such higher subjects as she may be able to acquire, particularly arithmetic, geography, and drawing” (Mason 201). In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot notes this discrepancy in education when she says of men, “Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (209). The personality and character traits recommended for women also differed from those suggested for men, and the ideal of the submissive, obedient, meek wife was widely praised in works such as Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765).

Obviously, Jane Austen's heroines do not always follow this ideal. While they are often depicted engaged in writing letters, talking walks, or working on needlepoint projects,

the author also shows them reading books (and not just romances) and debating male characters over what is proper or correct in different situations. *Persuasion* in particular contains many role reversals between the genders. Mrs. Croft drives better and knows more about home maintenance and improvements than her husband, the Admiral. Captain Benwick sighs and pines over his lost fiancée and must be corrected by the more controlled, less emotional Anne Elliot. Sir Walter Elliot spends much of his time studying his face in a mirror, thinking about beauty and handsomeness, and contemplating his own dress.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh argues that Captain Wentworth himself, the book's hero, is feminized throughout, by his loss of control at Lyme (after Louisa's fall), his need to wait for Anne in Bath (rather than her waiting for him), and "the reversal of the traditional mentor-pupil relation whereby he is the one who must be taught" (220). Because Anne has already developed her own character early in the novel, she maintains a more stable, masculine role in these situations, helping Wentworth to grow to the point where a successful marriage between them is possible.

The types of characters that Austen creates in *Persuasion* say a lot about her relation to conduct books. She does not challenge them outright; on the contrary, many of her characters could almost be pulled from the pages of a conduct book. Catherine Morland is in danger of becoming overly influenced by Gothic romances, which young women were cautioned against reading in many conduct books. Emma Woodhouse spends much of her thought in domestic affairs: her own, and in trying to manipulate others' affairs, all to the neglect of her studies. The younger Bennet sisters—though obviously not Austen's heroines in *Pride and Prejudice*—display precisely the type of silly, vain behaviors that many

courtesy books aimed to check. And, Austen's books all end in happy marriages: she did not prevent her heroines from becoming loving wives.

On the other hand, Austen's works contain other examples that do not fit as easily with the conduct book ideal. The two women who most dispute this ideal are Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot. Both women challenge the novels' male characters, are self-confident and opinionated, and have strengths that appear in contrast to examples of silly men in the novels (Mr. Collins, for example, or Sir Walter Elliot). But there are limits to the amount of debating that female characters can do. Ultimately, both Elizabeth and Anne realize that they simply are unable to participate fully in what was largely a man's world. Although Anne may be much more logical, responsible, and kind than her father, he controls the family resources and must be flattered into leaving Kellynch, not argued with rationally. However, despite the limitations that these female characters face in Austen's fiction, their presence reveals the complex relationship that exists between Austen's novels and contemporary conduct books. Many times, Austen does conform to the principles recommended by courtesy literature, but she rarely—if ever—does so completely. Instead, her novels reflect a balance between depicting the world around her, envisioning a better model, and entertaining and satisfying her readers. Practically, this means that in many ways, her novels complement the contemporary conduct books, but that at times Austen breaks from this tradition to create more egalitarian heroes and heroines.

One way to study Austen's relation to conduct books is to look specifically at the men in her novels. Although critical attention is more often focused on her novels' heroines, it seems to me that Austen's didactic writing took aim at men as well as women, and that her male characters thus warrant study. The ideal conduct book gentleman at the turn of the

century was polite, well-mannered, educated, preferably of good birth and fortune, and virtuous. This definition seems to be largely echoed by novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Fanny Burney, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Tobias George Smollett. Shroff writes that for all of these authors, “the hero is always a landed country gentleman, or at least settles down as one when the novel draws to a conclusion. The idealized figure is paternal, benevolent, considerate, and conscious of his duties and social obligations. His graciousness, courtesy and good-breeding are usually emphasized” (257). The heroes of Jane Austen’s novels tend to follow this same pattern, although Austen emphasizes that the hero must grow into his role and his character. Her novels contain no characters as idealized or perfect as Sir Charles Grandison. Instead, most of her heroes have flaws that need to be addressed and corrected before they can marry the heroine. And, sprinkled among the heroes, there are a number of ridiculous male characters. *Persuasion* contains a wide variety of men, from preening baronets to deceitful cousins to several species of naval officers. How do the various men in *Persuasion* measure up to the conduct book standards of the day?

The Men of *Persuasion*

The male characters in *Persuasion* are many and varied, ranging from the story’s anti-hero, William Elliot, to the story’s hero, Captain Frederick Wentworth. Between these two extremes reside several other characters, all of whom vary in terms of virtue, manners, social standing, and plot involvement. Sir Walter Elliot, Charles Musgrove, Charles Hayter, Admiral Croft, and Captains Benwick and Harville all fall into this middle category.

William Elliot

The book's only truly "bad" male character is William Elliot, first cousin to Anne Elliot and, when the two first meet in Lyme, apparently a well-mannered gentleman. In fact, one reason why Austen's depiction of William Elliot is interesting is because he initially appears to be the perfect conduct book gentleman. When Anne meets William in Lyme, Austen describes him as "politely" drawing out of her path and being "completely a gentleman in manner" (91); indeed, he is even "a man of exceedingly good manners" (92), and Anne finds the chance encounter "a secret gratification to herself to have seen her cousin, and to know that the future owner of Kellynch was undoubtedly a gentleman, and had an air of good sense" (94). But this meeting in Lyme is not the reader's introduction to William Elliot. His name appears in the first chapter of the book, and in a decidedly less favorable light. Elizabeth Elliot, who had hoped to marry William, the heir to her father's estate, is disappointed that, "instead of pushing his fortune in the line marked out for the heir of the house of Elliot, he had purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth" (5-6). As the story progresses, the reader learns that William's marriage is born largely out of an impatience to wait for the wealth and title that will be his.

His character flaws—impatience being one—are the key to reconciling the differences between the conduct book gentleman Anne meets at Lyme and the greedy man who has deserted his friends and runs off with Mrs. Clay (the female version of his character) at the book's end. While William appears to be a perfect gentleman in his first few meetings with Anne, she soon begins to detect a sense of duplicity in his actions. "I have always wanted some other motive for his conduct than appeared," she tells Mrs. Smith when she learns that her cousin is in fact "a disingenuous, artificial, worldly man, who has never had

any better principle to guide him than selfishness” (184). Anne’s phrasing here—“some other motive for his conduct”—demonstrates why William Elliot’s actions are really never the conduct book ideal. Lord Chesterfield’s letters are often criticized for seeming to recommend a hypocritical façade of polite manners that hides the true self. For example, in recommending dignity of manners, Chesterfield explains that a man without real virtues can display “an outward decency and an affected dignity of manners” instead: “If therefore you should unfortunately have no intrinsic merit of your own, keep up, if possible, the appearance of it; and the world will possibly give you credit for the rest” (42). Gilmour applies this problem to Austen’s novels, recognizing that “all her villains are in this sense actors, young men of ‘pleasing address’ and masters of what Chesterfield called ‘those lesser talents, of an engaging, insinuating manner, an easy good breeding, a genteel behavior and address’” (19). But most conduct books stressed that good manners were to be a result of a solid character, virtue, and good sense, not a substitute for these more foundational attributes. By having Anne comment on the disconnection between William’s conduct and his motives, Austen emphasizes that she thinks that proper conduct ought to be supported by proper motives.

William is also not the conduct book ideal because he is far from being a suitable husband for Anne. While Anne initially finds his attention flattering and his address pleasing, Laura Tracy points out that William’s “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” (157). Therefore, he only admires Anne and behaves properly because he hopes these actions will prove to be profitable. He does not demonstrate the qualities of “tenderness, constancy, and protection” that Sir John Fielding’s *The Universal Mentor* requires in a husband (vi). The reader does sense that William may be genuinely

attracted to Anne, at least for a while, but this fleeting admiration does not make him deserving of Anne as a wife. Tracy writes that William's presence in the book also highlights one of Austen's sub-themes about men and marriage: "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" (157). Austen is warning against the reformed rake. In this regard Austen is again in step with conduct books of the times, which recommended that in marriage, "Man and Wife should have but one and the same Interest; and to make up this, there must be a suitable Agreement and Harmony in Age, Humour, Education and Religion; nay, even in Families and Fortunes" (Essex 97). John Essex, in *The young ladies conduct*, seems to think that similarities in upbringing and expectations will help couples avoid the conflicts of marriage: "we may expect an equal Satisfaction, as the natural result of an equal Match" (97). William's flaws will not disappear after marriage; Anne obviously realizes this and does not encourage her cousin's attentions, preferring to wait for the more equal match with Frederick Wentworth.

Sir Walter Elliot

If William Elliot's flaws are multiple, Anne's father's weakness can be summed up in one word: "Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character" (2). In fact, Austen begins her novel with a common sight in the Elliot household: Sir Walter looking fondly at the family's entry in the Baronetage. This book holds great power over him; it amuses and consoles him, for "he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favorite volume always opened" (1). Of course, the entry itself is boring, just a brief history of important family dates and names: marriages,

births, and deaths. That Sir Walter can be so consumed with such an insignificant book says much about his character. He clings vainly to his rank and physical appearance. Austen ridicules Sir Walter openly; she writes of his self-absorption, “He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion” (2). The conduct book writers of the time would have shared Austen’s dislike of Sir Walter’s conduct and attitude.

In *Personal Nobility* (1793), Vicesimus Knox proclaims his goal in writing: “to preserve the luster of Nobility unsullied” (xix) and encourage members of the nobility to increase their wisdom and virtue and prove themselves capable of being social and political leaders. He believes that members of the nobility should possess, in addition to titles, “talents,” “superior knowledge,” and “PUBLIC SPIRIT, generosity, and NOBILITY OF MIND” (x). He writes, “Modern meanness, mixed with PRIDE FOUNDED IN PEDIGREE ALONE...will be despised in every country on the face of the earth” (xi). Even though Sir Walter comes from a family that has served in the office of High Sheriff and in parliament (*Persuasion* 2), he seems unconcerned with the sort of intellectual development that Knox describes as critical for titled men.

Sir Walter also has the weakness of being unable to manage his own finances and household. Austen tells us that Lady Elliot had kept the family within budget and had managed the house with “method, moderation, and economy” (7), so that the current financial problems are caused not by lack of money but by lack of self-control and discipline on Sir Walter’s part. Austen emphasizes Sir Walter’s inability to recognize his own fault and to approach the situation rationally: “It had not been possible for him to spend less,” she

writes, for “he had done nothing but what Sir Walter Elliot was imperiously called on to do; but blameless as he was, he was...growing dreadfully in debt” (7). When he realizes that some cuts in spending must be made, he decides to stop contributing to some “unnecessary” charities, to not buy new furnishings for the drawing-room, and to not send a present to Anne (7). At Lady Russell’s suggestions that further cuts could be made, Sir Walter exclaims, “What! Every comfort of life knocked off! Journeys, London, servants, horses, table,—contractions and restrictions every where. To live no longer with the decencies even of a private gentleman!” (10).

Sir John Fielding’s *The Universal Mentor* (1773) speaks to this very issue. Fielding argues that every man, regardless of fortune or birth, must study and practice economy. He writes, “There is no Station so high as to exempt a Person from Business” (9). Those who do not study Business, he says, will end up overspending their incomes. He recommends moderation at first, followed by carefully increased spending, warning that it is much more difficult to cut back than to add to one’s expenses. It is better to “set out in a moderate way at first,” than to “begin Life in an expensive way, which they know they cannot afterwards lessen, if the Necessity of their Affairs should require it, without looking little in the Eyes of the World” (9). The examples Fielding gives are precisely the types of expenses that Sir Walter cannot part with:

If a Citizen begins Housekeeping with two Servants, he can easily have a third afterwards, if he finds it proper: But it will not look well, that he retrench the Number he set out with; or if a Gentleman begins with a Chariot and Pair of Horses, how easy is it to get two more, or to set up his Coach and Six, if his Rents will afford it; whereas on the contrary, he cannot dispose of his Horses, or otherwise lessen his Expences, without drawing upon himself the Reflections of his meddling Neighbours. (9-10)

By refusing to give up his horses and servants, Sir Walter not only reveals that he has no self-control or knowledge of economy; he also demonstrates his lack of compassion and generosity, since he prefers to cut out charity and gifts to his daughter than suffer any personal loss of comfort. This kind of action is hardly the conduct book ideal of the gentleman.

The vanity that defines Sir Walter is a flaw according to Austen and contemporary conduct books. *The Universal Mentor* also warns against measuring oneself against others. In describing the differences between wise and foolish men, Fielding writes,

A wise man endeavours to shine in himself, a fool to outshine others; the first is humbled by the sense of his own infirmities; the last lifted up by his discovery of other men's.... Men are more ambitious to display abilities of their head, than to cultivate the good qualities of the heart. The body weighs down the soul.... (242)

Sir Walter displays all of these weaknesses, and is not even ambitious about displaying his mind's capability, being satisfied instead with merely displaying the smoothness of his skin. Like Fielding's fool, he rejoices in being better looking than others: he is shocked at having to give precedence to Admiral Baldwin, "the most deplorable looking personage you can imagine, his face the colour of mahogany, rough and rugged to the last degree, all lines and wrinkles, nine grey hairs of a side, and nothing but a dab of powder at top" (16). Although Fielding would agree with Austen that Sir Walter's behavior is ridiculous and incorrect, Austen goes one step further by mentioning that such vain behavior is traditionally expected of women, not men: "Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did" (2), she writes. It is common for conduct books to warn young women against the evils of overemphasizing dress, hairstyles, and personal beauty, and to warn young men against

marrying these types of young women. In *Youth's Friendly Monitor* (1756), James Burgh gives the following advice on choosing a wife:

Don't marry a noted Beauty, unless you intend to give up the whole Peace and Happiness of your Life for a Honey-moon. There is not one of a thousand of them that is sufferable, through Vanity and a total Emptiness of all that is necessary for making an agreeable Companion to a Man of Sense, a prudent Manager of a Family, and a discreet Mother of Children. (11)

Burgh gives no indication that this type of vanity can be found in men as well as women, but perhaps Austen is invoking this conduct book horror of vain, silly young women and challenging it somewhat by creating the character of Sir Walter, whose vanity even exceeds that of the Musgrove or Bennet sisters, simply because, at fifty-four years of age, he has still not outgrown his infatuation with beauty and rank.

Charles Musgrove and Charles Hayter

Sir Walter considers the Musgrove family into which Mary has married an "old country family of respectability and large fortune" to which Mary "had therefore *given* all the honour, and received none" (4). Charles Musgrove first proposes to Anne, but is accepted by Mary when her sister declines. Lady Russell does not understand why Anne refuses Charles; after all,

Charles Musgrove was the eldest son of a man, whose landed property and general importance, were second, in that country, only to Sir Walter's, and of good character and appearance; and however Lady Russell might have asked yet for something more, while Anne was nineteen, she would have rejoiced to see her at twenty-two, so respectably removed from the partialities of her father's house, and settled so permanently near herself. (23-4)

Lady Russell seems to be most interested in finding Anne a "proper" match and keeping her close by, whereas Anne—like Austen herself—desires more for her hero than mere

respectability, good character, and satisfactory appearance. In fact, Charles Musgrove is a good man, and his faults lie primarily in small matters: being away from the home hunting rather too often, or failing to be suitably attentive to his wife. Austen's description of his walk with Anne and Mary is revealing:

Charles, though in very good humour with [Anne], was out of temper with his wife. Mary had shewn herself disabling to him, and was now to reap the consequence, which consequence was his dropping her arm almost every moment...and when Mary began to complain of it, and lament her being ill-used, according to custom, in being on the hedge side, while Anne was never incommoded on the other, he dropped the arms of both to hunt after a weasel which he had a momentary glance of; and they could hardly get him along at all. (78-9)

Although Charles is exasperated with his wife, he still should have helped her along the path, especially not dropping Anne's arms, since Anne is actually quite tired at this point. As happens often in the book, a minor character's flaw is used as opportunity to highlight the hero's proper conduct. When Charles Musgrove quits helping Anne along, Frederick Wentworth quietly speaks to his sister and arranges a place for Anne in their gig, demonstrating his concern for her and yet not calling attention to his own good conduct.

Of course, the reader is quite willing to make excuses for Charles, whose marriage to whining, proud Mary Elliot is less than ideal. Other characters often express their desire that he would have married Anne instead, and that her good sense and calm, kind behavior would have made for a much happier marriage. Their opinions would have been shared by conduct book writers. James Burgh writes, "Whatever Accomplishments the Person, you fix your Choice upon, may have, take care that *Good-sense* and *Good-nature* be two of them. If you marry a Fool, she will disgust you, and a Fury will torment you" (11). Most conduct books would have pronounced Mary a failure as a wife and mother. Fielding writes, "The utmost of a woman's character is contained in domestic life, and she is praise or blameworthy,

according as her carriage affects...her husband's house" (250). But Mary is an irresponsible mother and household manager, often lying on the couch with imaginary illnesses, whining to her sister, suspecting her maids, speaking ill of her husband's family, and either ignoring or spoiling her children. Her children and her family respect and mind Anne's instructions much more than Mary's. So, just as Charles's flaws show the strength of Frederick's character, Mary's failures as a mother and wife reveal Anne's proper attitude and conduct.

Charles Hayter, like his cousin Charles Musgrove, also exists, at least in part, to demonstrate the differences between his conduct and that of the story's hero. At the beginning of the story, Henrietta Musgrove is in love with Charles Hayter, but the arrival of Frederick Wentworth immediately causes Henrietta to forget her first allegiance. Like Charles Musgrove, Charles Hayter is a decent, good man, but not as gentlemanly as Wentworth. We know that Charles Hayter is good because Mary does not like him; she complains to her husband, "And, pray, who is Charles Hayter? Nothing but a country curate. A most improper match for Miss Musgrove, of Uppercross" (66). Her husband is more sensible; he explains Hayter's real merits: "Charles has a very fair chance, through the Spicers, of getting something from the Bishop in the course of a year or two; and you will please to remember, that he is the eldest son; whenever my uncle dies, he steps into very pretty property" (66). As an eldest son, Charles Hayter will inherit property, and his cousin is fond of him and thinks of him as "a very good-natured, good sort of a fellow" (66). But although Hayter is a decent match for Henrietta, he does not display the more elegant, sensitive breeding of Frederick Wentworth. For example, when two-year-old Walter Musgrove insists on climbing on his aunt Anne while she is trying to watch his sick brother, Charles Hayter responds by demanding that Walter get down, while Wentworth actually

helps Anne by removing Walter and playing with him in a corner. Both Anne and Charles are mindful of Wentworth's more proper behavior in the situation. Austen comments,

It was evident that Charles Hayter was not well inclined towards Captain Wentworth. [Anne] had a strong impression of his having said, in a vexed tone of voice, after Captain Wentworth's interference, "You ought to have minded *me*, Walter; I told you not to tease your aunt;" and could comprehend his regretting that Captain Wentworth should do what he ought to have done himself. (70)

Thus, it is not only Austen and Anne who recognize Wentworth's superiority; the Musgroves, and at times the other male characters themselves, also remark on the hero's better character and conduct.

The Officers: Admiral Croft, Captain Harville, and Captain Benwick

Persuasion is not the only one of Austen's books to represent branches of the British military. There is also Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*, Fanny Knight's brother William in *Mansfield Park*, and a whole slew of officers in *Pride and Prejudice*. But *Persuasion* is dedicated to the navy, a profession with which Austen was well acquainted, having two brothers who served as naval officers. Aside from Captain Wentworth, the most important officers in the story are Admiral Croft and Captains Harville and Benwick.

Plot-wise, Admiral Croft is critical to the story. It is he who rents Kellynch Hall from the Elliots, which allows his brother-in-law Frederick to come back into contact with Anne after an eight-year absence. Overall, Admiral Croft is a very gentlemanly type of man, perhaps not as polished as the conduct book ideal, but gentlemanly nonetheless. Sir Walter agrees to let the house to the Crofts because the admiral is of a gentleman's family, is not bad looking, and has made a substantial fortune fighting at Trafalgar and in the East Indies. Anne has more reason to like Admiral Croft than the superficial attraction of good birth and

fortune. In her father's absence, she "felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that...she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay" (108). Even though Sir Walter is of higher birth than Admiral Croft, he behaves improperly by overspending his budget, and then displays his meanness of spirit by cutting out charity and gifts in an attempt to save money. Anne recognizes that the Crofts are much more likely to serve as proper examples for their tenants than the Elliots. Thus, Admiral Croft is much closer to the conduct book ideal than Sir Walter, because even though Lady Russell finds his manners "not quite of the tone to suit" her (110), Anne finds that his "goodness of heart and simplicity of character were irresistible" (110). The fact that he is occasionally abrupt, forgetful, or inattentive is secondary to the strength and worth of his character.

What is most interesting about Admiral Croft, however, is his relationship to his wife. Theirs is the only true, loving marriage in the story. Anne observes that she and Frederick had at one point been more alike than any of the married couples, "with the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, who seemed particularly attached and happy" (54). Austen has created a marriage that works because both characters are good-hearted. The Crofts are both kind, well-meaning, fun-loving, sensible people. Perhaps Austen realized that readers might question why this particular marriage worked. In any case, she includes a scene where Anne and the Crofts are discussing courtship. Admiral Croft tells Anne, "We sailors, Miss Elliot, cannot afford to make long courtships in time of war" (80), and goes on to question his wife on the exact length of their courtship. Mrs. Croft declines giving a specific number of days, instead teasing, "if Miss Elliot were to hear how soon we came to an understanding, she would never be persuaded that we could be happy together. I had

known you by character, however, long before” (80). Mrs. Croft’s concern that Anne might think their decision rash is echoed by conduct books that suggested longer courtships: “Those marriages generally abound most with love and constancy, that have been preceded by a long courtship. The passion should strike root, and gather strength, before marriage is engrafted on it” (Fielding 163). However, despite recommendations like Fielding’s, Austen allows the marriage between Admiral and Mrs. Croft to flourish because they meet during wartime, know each other’s reputations beforehand, and are both good, sensible people.

Mrs. Croft is an especially sensible, perceptive character, probably more so than her husband. She is not as elegant as Lady Russell, but she has sound judgment. When Admiral Croft is ready to marry Frederick off to either of the Miss Musgroves, Anne notices that Mrs. Croft’s milder praise suggests that “her keener powers might not consider either of them as quite worthy of her brother” (81). The character of Mrs. Croft is interesting for a study of the relationship between conduct books and Austen’s novels because she is not the conduct book ideal wife, yet is obviously set up by Austen as the better half of the best marriage in the book. Most conduct books limited women’s sphere of influence to the home and described them as the weaker sex. Fielding writes of the differences between men and women,

The modesty and fortitude of men differ from those virtues in women, for the fortitude of a woman would be cowardice in a man; and the modesty, which becomes a man, would be forwardness in a woman.... Modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety, are the feminine virtues. (250)

Frederick Wentworth seems to be using a similar characterization when he claims, “There can be no want of gallantry, admiral, in rating the claims of women to every personal comfort *high*... I hate to hear of women on board, or to see them on board; and no ship, under my command, shall ever convey a family of ladies any where” (59). His sister quickly responds

by reminding him of her time at sea, concluding, “But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days” (60). Her response pokes holes in the conduct book illusion of fine gentlemen and ladies that does not make room for marriages like hers. Austen makes much of the fact that theirs is more of a marriage of equals, one where the home vs. world paradigm does not apply. Mrs. Croft is as intelligent about ships, voyages, financial matters, and driving as the admiral. When the Crofts first come to look at Kellynch Hall, Mr. Shepherd describes Mrs. Croft as “a very well-spoken, genteel, shrewd lady, she seemed to be ... [who] asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business” (19). Anne admires the fact that Mrs. Croft is able to participate in conversation with the admiral’s navy friends; she remarks on “Mrs. Croft looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her” (148). When the couple is out driving, Admiral Croft is known for driving poorly and upsetting the carriage. Rather than fainting over the near-accidents, Mrs. Croft simply takes the reins herself occasionally, carefully maneuvering the carriage around obstacles. Anne comments on this style of driving, which “she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs” (81). Indeed, as a principle in their marriage, “Mrs. Croft seemed to go shares with him in every thing” (148), and Austen demonstrates that this slightly unorthodox relationship results in one of the only truly happy marriages in the book.

The other two naval officers in *Persuasion* are friends of Wentworth’s. Austen is careful to show that although Captains Harville and Benwick are both decent and good, they lack that something more that the book’s hero has. Both captains have a weakness of some sort. Captain Harville has been wounded two years before and is recovering in Lyme;

Captain Benwick is suffering from the emotional trauma of his fiancée's death. When Anne meets the two men in Lyme, she finds Captain Harville a "sensible, benevolent" (85) looking man whose health makes him look much older than Captain Wentworth. Captain Benwick, on the other hand, is described as a little man, and the youngest of the three. The physical descriptions of these men only help to accentuate Wentworth's vigorous athleticism and good looks. But his friends also differ from him in terms of habits and manners.

Austen writes of Anne's host, "Captain Harville, though not equalling Captain Wentworth in manners, was a perfect gentleman, unaffected, warm, and obliging" (85-6). The Harvilles' manners are not as high as Wentworth's, but Anne finds their friendliness and hospitality more enjoyable than what she calls "the usual style of given-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display" (86). Later, after Louisa's accident, the Harvilles again extend hospitality by welcoming her into their house to recover. Thus, although Captain Harville does not rival Captain Wentworth in terms of gentlemanly manners, he nonetheless is warm and kind enough to make Anne regret that she has not married into this circle of friends.

Captain Benwick is perhaps a more interesting case than Captain Harville, simply because of his interactions with Anne Elliot. When the group first arrives in Lyme, Benwick is still mourning over the loss of his fiancée. An active reader, he is consoling himself by reading poetry, and Anne suggests that, given his situation, he ought to supplement his reading of emotional poetry with more prose works. Penelope Fritzer points out that most conduct books called for reading instructive books, so that Benwick's reading only poetry is problematic: "in his situation it is a form of emotional overindulgence and unsteadiness" (29). Austen tells us that Anne, "feeling in herself the right of seniority of mind" (89),

recommends reading moralists, letters, and memoirs as well. Her recognition of her position here is telling, because conduct books did not depict women teaching men. As Isobel Grundy writes, “Anne lectures [Captain Benwick] about moral duties...which reverses the whole conduct book tradition of men advising women” (94-5). Anne maintains this sense of seniority over Benwick throughout the book. She gives an account of him to Mary, Charles, and Lady Russell, suggesting that Lady Russell would approve of his pensive reading and quiet manners (which the reader suspects are too tame for Anne). She remains more of an instructor to Benwick than a friend or love interest.

It is obvious that Captain Benwick, though he seems to have some affection for Anne, is never a real rival to Frederick Wentworth. Anne agrees with Admiral Croft’s conclusion that “James Benwick is rather too piano for me, and though very likely it is all our partiality, Sophy and I cannot help thinking Frederick’s manners better than his” (151). After thinking about Benwick’s engagement to Louisa Musgrove, Anne decides, “The conclusion of the whole was, that if the woman who had been sensible of Captain Wentworth’s merits could be allowed to prefer another man, there was nothing in the engagement to excite lasting wonder” (147). In other words, Anne is less shocked at their sudden engagement than at the idea that Louisa could prefer James Benwick to Frederick Wentworth. Undoubtedly Anne, like the Crofts, is partial to Frederick’s merits, but Austen includes a variety of male characters like Captains Benwick and Harville against which to show off the book’s hero and to encourage the reader to grow partial to Wentworth as well.

Captain Frederick Wentworth

I have saved the hero of *Persuasion*, Captain Frederick Wentworth, for last. There are a few reasons for this. First, because he is the novel's hero, much of this paper's analysis depends on how Austen depicts Wentworth. And, second, Austen depicts Wentworth in a way that is more complex in its representation and in its relationship to conduct books than the novel's other characters.

The reader never really wonders who the hero of *Persuasion* is. Although there are other good male characters in the book, Wentworth always appears better by comparison, and William Elliot, who is the only character whose outward manners rival Wentworth's, is cast as a somewhat suspicious character from the beginning. Wentworth is by far the handsomest of the male characters. Anne notes that the six years at sea "had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages" (52). Even Sir Walter agrees that Wentworth is a good looking man: "he was very much struck by [Captain Wentworth's] personal claims, and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against [Anne's] superiority of rank" (222). The other primary means by which the reader recognizes Wentworth as the book's hero is the way that he appears in comparison to other characters. Wentworth is better looking and more well-mannered than Captains Benwick or Harville; he is more attentive and thoughtful than Charles Hayter or Charles Musgrove; he is more financially savvy than Sir Walter; he is more constant in love than William Elliot; and he is more elegant and polished than Admiral Croft.

In many ways, Captain Wentworth exemplifies the conduct book ideal gentleman. For instance, soon after being introduced at Uppercross, Wentworth finds himself in a

conversation with the Musgroves about their son Dick, a ne'er-do-well who has drowned at sea some time since. Austen is harsh in her description of Dick Musgrove:

He had, in fact, though his sisters were now doing all they could for him, by calling him 'poor Richard,' been nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done any thing to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead. (43)

Dick had been on Captain Wentworth's ship for six months and had written home a letter praising Wentworth as "a fine dashing fellow, only two perticular about the school-master" (44-5). In addition to all his other flaws, Dick's spelling would of course have been criticized by Lord Chesterfield, who wrote, "If writing well shews the gentleman, much more so does spelling well. It is so essentially necessary for a gentleman, or a man of letters, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule on him for the remainder of his life" (33-4).

(Thankfully, Dick died before his twentieth birthday and thus avoided being ridiculed for the rest of his life for his misspelling.) Though everyone knows that Dick was not a good son or sailor, Anne bears patiently with Mrs. Musgrove's lament that he would have been Captain Wentworth's equal had he lived. Captain Wentworth himself, when approached by Mrs. Musgrove, stifles his amusement at the situation, and is able to respond seriously to the mother's sorrow: he sits down and enters into conversation with her, "doing it with so much sympathy and natural grace, as shewed the kindest consideration for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent's feelings" (58). His actions here are consistent with what James Burgh recommends in *Youth's Friendly Monitor*. He suggests that the wise person follow this rule: "Never to say any thing to any Person's Disadvantage, except to prevent his imposing upon somebody, whom you know he endeavours to over reach. And, when you know no Good you can say of a Person, whose Name you hear mentioned, to be quite silent"

(6). Although it is apparent to Anne that Wentworth most likely found Dick to be a less-than-ideal sailor, he avoids speaking ill of Dick, instead focusing his attention on the mother's feelings.

Captain Wentworth is a good acquaintance and friend. Although he has not known the Musgroves long, he is comfortable with the family and charitable in his dealings with them all. He goes shooting with Charles and treats the young ladies with stories and chivalry, in accordance with Chesterfield's recommendation that men pay particularly close attention to women, who should have "their very thoughts and wishes guessed at and instantly gratified by every well-bred man" (14). His appearance among the Musgroves gives the impression that he is the type of well-mannered man that is the *Principles of Politeness* ideal. Chesterfield's description of "a gentleman, who is acquainted with life, enters a room with gracefulness and a modest assurance, addresses even persons he does not know, in an easy and natural manner, and without the least embarrassment" (10) could easily apply to Captain Wentworth. Wentworth is also shown to be a loyal friend. As soon as he learns that Captain Harville is living in Lyme, he leaves Uppercross to visit his friend, and shows no sign of superiority over the Harvilles despite his greater fortune.

Some critics would argue with this interpretation of Captain Wentworth's conduct book-like behavior. Barbara K. Seeber and Kathleen James-Cavan argue that Wentworth's good conduct is actually just a façade of propriety that he and Anne create and defend as they rewrite the story to cut out Louisa Musgrove. Seeber and James-Cavan believe that Wentworth uses Louisa cruelly by flirting with her and encouraging the stubbornness that results in her accident at Lyme. They contest that Anne and Wentworth's relationship is no more enduring or loyal than that of Wentworth and Louisa or Captain Benwick and Fanny

Harville (47). They see Anne as a willing participant in rewriting Wentworth's conduct, overlooking the inconsistency in his opinions of her physical appearance, for example, or believing his statements that he never loved Louisa. These charges against Wentworth do have some basis. It is obvious that Austen intends her hero to have faults that must be addressed before he marries Anne. Both Anne and Wentworth know that he did not behave entirely properly with regards to the Miss Musgroves. Wentworth recognizes that he had tried to forget Anne and be content with other women, and he regrets the pride that kept him from attending to her again. Anne states that he had been wrong to receive attention from both young women at once. Wentworth concludes by admitting, "I had been grossly wrong, and must abide the consequences" (217). Of course, Wentworth is not perfect; none of Austen's characters are, and he must recognize and correct his flaws as the story progresses. Even such a strict enforcer of proper conduct as Lord Chesterfield realizes that people make mistakes. He writes, "...we sometimes do things utterly inconsistent with the general tenor of our characters. The wisest man will occasionally do a weak thing; the most honest man, a wrong thing; the proudest man, a mean thing; and the worst of men will sometimes do a good thing" (27).

On the other end of the critical spectrum is Margaret Madrigal Wilson, whose article on the hero and the other man entertains the question of why Austen often creates such likeable rakes and villains, which must then be given up by the heroine in favor of a more sensible (but sometimes more dull) husband. Wilson sees Captain Wentworth as resolving the differences between the hero and the other man. She writes, "For those who mourn the relinquishment of the other man, who find Edmund Bertram a touch too righteous, Edward Ferrars dull and colorless, Darcy a bit stiff, Colonel Brandon and George Knightley a little

too old, Jane Austen has created Frederick Wentworth of *Persuasion*" (183). She describes Wentworth as the ideal husband:

Captain Frederick Wentworth is the steadfast, industrious, mature, and rational man that Austen considers her heroine would want for a husband. The same Captain Wentworth is the vigorous, traveled naval officer who exhibits the attractive manners, ease, presence, and glamour of the other man. (183-4)

Wilson interprets the episodes with Louisa much differently than Seeber and James-Cavan. She sees Wentworth as being generally pleasing, charming the entire Musgrove family without flirting pointedly with the Miss Musgroves. She also points out that Wentworth is an honorable hero; once he realizes that others consider him bound to Louisa, he is willing to marry her if she expects him to. Wilson also addresses the issue of character flaws in the husband, arguing that Wentworth is unique among Austen's other heroes because he must change throughout the novel to deserve marriage to Anne:

What also makes Frederick Wentworth an attractive hero is that he is not a perfect man who Anne Elliot will deserve only after undergoing a maturation process or moral development. Rather, Anne is Wentworth's feminine ideal and he is the one who must develop to be worthy of her. Austen shows this development in Wentworth's gradual relinquishment of the resentment against Anne which he has nursed for eight years and in his increased understanding of her worth. (185)

While Wilson's view of Wentworth's worth may be a bit optimistic and idealistic, her argument about the relationship between Anne and Wentworth is compelling. Although Wentworth is not the only one of Austen's heroes who must change through the story, *Persuasion* does provide probably the most sensible and grown-up of Austen's heroines. Anne Elliot has done much of her maturing during the eight years when Wentworth was at sea; upon his return, their marriage must be delayed until he has caught up to her in maturity.

Wentworth's relationship to Anne is complex, at least in how it compares to conduct book advice on marriage and relationships. Anne and Wentworth's first courtship is much

more like the conduct book ideal than the second. Austen describes their first meeting and engagement as follows:

He was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling.—Half the sum of attraction, on either side, might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love; but the encounter of such lavish recommendations could not fail. They were gradually acquainted, and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love. It would be difficult to say which had seen the highest perfection in the other, or which had been the happiest; she, in receiving his declarations and proposals, or he in having them accepted. (21)

There are several reasons why this courtship is consistent with conduct book principles.

Anne and Frederick assume the traditional gender roles expected in courtship: he pursues and proposes, and she responds and accepts. The two characters seem to be taken directly from conduct books; he is handsome, intelligent, and spirited, while she is pretty, modest, and sensible. They seem destined for domestic bliss. In *The Young Ladies Conduct*, John Essex recommends, “Man and Wife should have but one and the same Interest; and to make up this, there must be a suitable Agreement and Harmony in Age, Humour, Education, and Religion; nay, even in Families and Fortunes” (97). During their courtship, Anne and Frederick share this “one and the same interest,” except in the subject of fortune, which proves to be Lady Russell’s reason for discouraging the match. But Anne herself recalls that “there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved” (54-5) as hers and Frederick’s during their engagement. Of course, in being optimistic about his opportunities in the navy, Frederick simply could have been following Sir John Fielding’s advice that “To make a fortune in the world, a man should appear to have made it already” (77). Although Lady Russell does not agree with Fielding on this point, she

perhaps would be more likely to accept another of his observations, that “Women are a long time true to their first love, except they happen to have a second” (248).

Lady Russell hopes that Anne’s refusal of Frederick Wentworth will be followed by more suitors, but “No second attachment, the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure, at her time of life, had been possible” (23). Instead, Anne remains faithful to her first love, as does Frederick Wentworth, although Isobel Grundy points out that “Anne’s isolation from eligible men during those faithful years has been no greater than Wentworth’s isolation from eligible women. It’s another reason, seldom attended to, for Austen’s choosing a naval hero for this plot” (98). During those eight years apart, both Anne and Wentworth undergo personal change. She loses some of her youthful bloom, grows to regret her refusal of Wentworth, and must develop greater patience and strength to deal with the trials of being ignored and unappreciated by her family and of seeing her father waste the family fortune. Wentworth, on the other hand, meets with good fortune during those years: he grows more manly and handsome, amasses considerable wealth, and increases in rank. When the two meet for the second time, the reader discovers that they no longer share the same feelings and interests, and the means by which they are reunited depends less on conduct book advice than their first courtship did.

Although we have been discussing the many ways in which Captain Wentworth is the ideal conduct book gentleman, there are actions in the book that challenge this notion. One problematic scene occurs right after Louisa Musgrove’s fall at Lyme. Captain Wentworth’s first words are, “Is there no one to help me?” (97), certainly an odd phrase for the vigorous captain. Austen adds to this interesting scenario by describing what happens next: “Captain Wentworth, staggering against the wall for his support, exclaimed in the bitterest agony, ‘Oh

God! her father and mother!’” (97). In this moment, both Wentworth and Charles Musgrove are rendered immobile by the shock of Louisa’s fall and Mary and Henrietta’s fainting. Only Anne Elliot retains the use of her senses, immediately telling the men what to do in the situation. Austen depicts Charles Musgrove and Captain Wentworth begging Anne for directions: “‘Anne, Anne,’ cried Charles, ‘what is to be done next? What, in heaven’s name, is to be done next?’ Captain Wentworth’s eyes were also turned towards her” (98). It is Anne who comes up with the most logical solutions: call a surgeon, carry Louisa gently to the inn, and attend to Mary and Henrietta. This scene is unusual because Wentworth is elsewhere described as athletic and strong. He hurdles over a hedge to speak to his sister (79), and, immediately prior to Louisa’s accident, has been jumping her down the stairs. Yet, at a moment of crisis, he behaves much like the women, losing his presence of mind and becoming physically weak. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh says that Austen gives Wentworth emotionality and that “his sensibility somewhat ‘feminizes’ him” (220). Reid-Walsh cites other instances of this characterization: the forced passivity that Wentworth must display as he waits in Bath to hear whether Anne is engaged to William Elliot, typically the “position of the conventional heroine,” and “the reversal of the traditional mentor-pupil relation whereby he is the one who must be taught” (Reid-Walsh 220).

Seeber and James-Cavan comment on Anne and Wentworth’s romance, “While Anne knows her feelings throughout, Wentworth undergoes the evolution of feeling characteristic of Austen heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse” (43). When Wentworth first reappears in the society of Uppercross and Kellynch Hall, he is not inclined to think highly of Anne. After he comments on her changed appearance, Anne realizes, “He had not forgiven Anne Elliot.... He had been most warmly attached to her, and had never seen a

woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again” (53). It is not until Louisa’s fall at Lyme that he begins to recognize Anne’s worth. He tells her later that, “till that day, till the leisure for reflection which followed it, he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa’s could so ill bear a comparison; or the perfect, unrivalled hold it possessed over his own” (216). By undergoing this “evolution of feeling,” Wentworth is again feminized, especially since Anne takes the place of teacher and pursuer in the relationship.

Laura Tracy writes that the second half of *Persuasion* “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...is reinforced” (155). I would maintain that while the accident at Lyme is a key confirmation of Anne’s development, it is not part of that development. She displays strength of mind and character at earlier points in the novel, in dealing with her father and sister, disagreeing with Lady Russell, and living with the Musgrove family. But, because Anne’s character is developed before Wentworth’s, she reverses the traditional teacher-student role (think Mr. Knightley and Emma), educating Wentworth on what is proper and right. Even at the end of the novel, when the couple has been reunited, Anne continues to instruct Wentworth. He tries to justify his fear of renewing his address to her by recounting her previous prejudice against him. Anne does not let him do so. “You should have distinguished,” she says, “You should not have suspected me now; the case so different, and my age so different” (218). She provides a logical argument for why the situation has changed, and for how he ought to have responded,

but Wentworth can only reply, “Perhaps I ought to have reasoned thus...but I could not” (218).

Anne is also much more aggressive in their second courtship. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh notes that Anne bends or breaks conduct book rules by taking the initiative in approaching Wentworth, moving to the end of a bench at the concert to create an opportunity for speaking with Wentworth, and then communicating her feelings for Wentworth to him (albeit indirectly, through a nearby conversation with Captain Harville). Reid-Walsh writes that in being forward, Anne is violating Dr. Gregory’s advice about courtship: “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” (qtd. in Reid-Walsh 218). In their second courtship, then, Anne and Wentworth often seem to exchange places, with Anne taking the more masculine roles of teacher and pursuer and Wentworth behaving like a heroine—his love for Anne grows gradually, and he is not free to act on that love once he recognizes it. At the very least, their roles within the relationship are more flexible than those recommended by conduct books.

Certainly, Captain Wentworth is a gentleman; both Austen and conduct book writers would admit him to be so. He displays many of the conduct book qualities and is an attentive brother, faithful friend, profitable naval officer, and pleasant guest. The one area in which he deviates from the conduct book ideal is his relationship to Anne. There, he must submit for a time to her greater sense and power, although at the end of the book Austen suggests that Anne and Wentworth have again been reunited “with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them” (221).

CHAPTER 4: SOME FINAL QUESTIONS

In tracing the male characters in *Persuasion*, I have tried to show the interaction between two ideals—those of the author and those of the conduct book. It is a complex relationship, sometimes a smooth and complimentary union of the two ideals, and other times an incompatible meeting. To come to some conclusions about this relationship, it may be helpful to expand beyond the study of individual characters to a consideration of some of the bigger questions about this issue.

What about the women?

While this paper is dedicated primarily to studying the depiction of the gentleman in *Persuasion*, a discussion involving conduct books would not complete without mentioning Austen's representations of women. Particularly in this novel, the heroine is an especially interesting subject to consider in light of contemporary conduct manuals. Anne Elliot is probably the most mature of Austen's heroines, and in many ways she does epitomize the conduct book woman. As a young woman, she appeals to authority figures—particularly Lady Russell—and wants to secure their blessing on her decisions and actions. Reid-Walsh points out that in her rejection of Wentworth, Anne is “placing conscience over emotions” and “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’” (218). Anne is also very competent in the domestic sphere, an attribute that is always part of conduct book requirements for wives. Anne manages her sister’s children and house much better than Mary herself, so much so that the Musgroves tell Wentworth that they wish

Charles had married Anne instead (77). Anne is not flighty or silly; instead, she is very rational, cautious, modest, and gentle—all conduct book traits. She knows how to mingle in various companies, knows how to conduct herself with her inferiors, and is a picture of propriety in almost all situations. The only times that Anne seems to deviate from the conduct book recommendations are in her dealings with men. She frequently—if subtly—reverses roles with men in several places in the novel. She gently lectures Captain Benwick about modifying his reading list; she directs Charles Musgrove and Captain Wentworth after Louisa's fall; and she both instructs and pursues Wentworth during their second period of courtship.

We must talk about Anne when discussing Wentworth, and we cannot mention Admiral Croft without discussing Mrs. Croft. These two successful relationships in the novel have strong, independent women who do not necessarily fit the conduct book pattern in their relationship to their husbands. Note that Mrs. Croft, like Anne, has very good manners. Austen writes, "Her manners were open, easy, and decided, like one who had no distrust of herself, and no doubts of what to do; without any approach to coarseness, however, or any want of good humor" (41). In all her dealings with Lady Russell, the Elliots, and the Musgroves, Mrs. Croft conducts herself with propriety, graciousness, and good-breeding. It is only in her relationship with her husband that she violates conduct book principles by asserting her independence and being equally knowledgeable of men's topics like business, driving, and the navy.

Conduct books establish vastly different realms for men and women. Men are to be familiar with the ways of the world, whereas women are to be confined by the affairs of home and family. These different realms are accompanied by different character traits.

Boldness, knowledge of the world, spirit, and learning are valued in men, while women are not expected to be well-read and are recommended for gentleness, modesty, and quietness.

Laura Tracy sees *Persuasion* as challenging these divisions set up between men and women.

Although Captain Wentworth is often hailed as the most ideal of Austen's heroes, Tracy says the story is actually all about Anne. But, Tracy says, establishing Anne as the center of the book would be a dangerous move for Austen, so she sees the romance story as masking this centering of Anne. Tracy writes,

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.... 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. (155)

Certainly, Anne does use those eight years to develop her character. Unlike Emma

Woodhouse, Elizabeth Bennet, Catherine Morland, or Marianne Dashwood, for instance,

Anne does not need to grow into adulthood and maturity throughout the novel. Instead, she must wait for Wentworth to develop, although Tracy emphasizes that Austen defines

“adulthood” differently for men and women:

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. (155-6)

If Tracy is correct in suggesting that *Persuasion* is focused on relationships—and I think she is—then it appears that in this novel Austen is proposing a very different kind of marriage relationship than that recommended by conduct books.

Is Austen commenting on conduct books?

But even if the ideal couples that Austen depicts are different from those portrayed in the pages of contemporary conduct books, does this difference mean that Austen is intentionally challenging conduct books? I do not think so. In fact, many of her heroes and heroines exhibit conduct book traits. In *Persuasion*, both Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot are often much closer to the conduct book ideal than other characters. But, as we have seen, there are areas in which the characters of *Persuasion*, including Wentworth and Anne, do not follow the conduct book model.

In creating Admiral and Mrs. Croft and Captain Wentworth and Anne, Austen is portraying a different picture of marriage and, by extension, of gender roles as well. In this sense, Austen is responding to the traditional roles that society expected and conduct books upheld. In *Persuasion*, Anne actually speaks out about the culture's assumptions about women. In her friendly argument with Captain Harville at the White Hart Inn, Anne defines the societal limitations placed on women. "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" (207), she tells Harville. When Harville tries to support his argument that women are more fickle and inconstant than men by reference to books written by men, Anne replies, "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing" (209). Reid-Walsh writes of this speech, "I think Anne's romantic intentions enable her to understand the conventional position of both sexes whereby women and men are 'forced'

into contrary roles of prudence or exertion” (221). Certainly, Anne recognizes the traditional woman’s role in romance, and then hastens to assure Harville, “it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it” (210).

This conversation between Anne and Harville is one place in *Persuasion* where Austen explicitly addresses the roles of men and women and, in doing so, challenges the conduct book model. However, her use of conduct book principles elsewhere in the novel suggests that Austen does not wish to discredit them completely but, rather, to show that there should be another way to conduct male/female relationships.

What does the comparison of conduct books and *Persuasion* tell us?

Persuasion’s concern with the relationships between men and women reveals the close tie between novels and conduct books. As Linda Hunt has shown, the line between novels and courtesy literature was often faint at best, and moral instruction could be derived from a range of sources, including sermons, essays, conduct books, periodicals, or didactic novels. Even a novel like *Persuasion*, which is not as explicitly instructive as, say, *Sir Charles Grandison*, contains elements of didacticism. It would be natural for Austen’s readers—who would have been exposed to a variety of courtesy texts—to view the novel’s hero and heroine as models to be followed.

By taking as her leads two characters who in many ways display conduct book virtues and expectations, Austen is able to explore the limits of those expectations. It is as though Austen is bringing the pages of a conduct book to life, and, by relocating the characters into a fiction work, is able to identify what is problematic in the rigid rules of the conduct book. *Sir Charles Grandison*, as we have seen, is also a conduct book dramatized, but there are critical

differences between this novel and *Persuasion*. While Austen valued Richardson for portraying women as rational creatures, she elevates women higher in her own novels and creates a hero less perfect than Grandison, working to lessen the social divide between men and women.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Persuasion demonstrates the complex relationship between Jane Austen's novels and contemporary conduct books. Readers who view Austen's books as treatises on proper manners are not entirely incorrect, and in this sense her novels have much in common with conduct books. However, Austen is not blithely transferring conduct book principles into fiction; rather, she closely edits those principles to reflect her own values.

The one area in which Austen deviates the most from the conduct book ideal is her depiction of relationships between men and women. This is certainly true of the men and women in *Persuasion*. The book contains several role reversals between male and female characters: Mrs. Croft is more adept at business and driving than Admiral Croft; Charles Musgrove is better at managing the children than his wife Mary; Anne claims superiority of mind over Capt. Benwick; Charles Musgrove and Frederick Wentworth look to Anne for direction at Louisa's fall; and Wentworth plays the heroine role to Anne's hero, instructed by Anne throughout the book and forced to wait passively while she behaves more aggressively during their second courtship.

In many ways, the best of Austen's characters are conduct book models. Anne is modest and sensible, she is skillful at managing a household and children, she is accomplished at piano and conversation skills, and she has a sense of duty that leads her to respect Lady Russell's advice. Mrs. Croft, too, is well-mannered: she is shrewd in her judgments, but kind and warm in her dealings with other people. Captain Wentworth is sympathetic in his memories of Dick Musgrove; he is both manly and sensitive; and he is admired and respected at sea, at Uppercross or Kellynch Hall, or in Bath.

However, Austen does not follow the conduct book model of marriage, in which the husband rules the family and the wife's duties revolve only around domesticity. The two happiest and most prominent marriages or relationships in the book involve Admiral and Mrs. Croft and Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot. The women in these relationships are not at all inferior to their husbands, nor are they isolated figures, interested only in family matters or ignorant of the world. In part, because of their husbands' professions, Mrs. Croft and Anne are forced into a greater knowledge of the world. Like their husbands, they also belong to the naval profession. Austen's larger point, though, is that regardless of profession, these unrestricted marriages are not only possible, but actually better and happier than traditional marriages.

Persuasion seems to be the culmination of Austen's thoughts about male/female relationships. Having toyed with the idea of hero and heroine as mutual instructors and mutual reward in her other works, in her last novel she provides two solid examples of what a hero and heroine can be. Captain Frederick Wentworth and Anne Elliot love and honor one another, but they also esteem and respect one another. They are characters whose behavior demonstrates the depth and maturity taught by conduct books, but they also create a new model for a more egalitarian approach to marriage.

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