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Courting the Eye: Seeing Men in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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<1>Writing in the tradition of the novel of sensibility and its Man of Feeling, Jane Austen developed male characters who are never two-dimensional and are always complicated. It is Austen's heroines, however, who establish the ideal of masculinity towards which her male characters must strive. Filtered through multiple female perspectives, Austen's male characters are essentially created by the women of her works, with the female gaze acting as a catalyst in the development of masculinity in her novels. Furthermore, her male characters accommodate two rival models of late-eighteenth-century masculinity, fusing Edmund Burke's traditional, chivalrous, masculine ideal and Mary Wollstonecraft's more modern, authoritative, and virile male individual. Fashioned as both subjects and objects of desire, Austen's heroes embody an innovative model of masculinity, and the charming Captain Frederick Wentworth is no exception to this rule. In *Persuasion*, Austen achieves a new model of masculinity through the female gaze, which casts Anne Elliot in the role of sexual subject, and Wentworth in the role of desired object. Furthermore, the dynamics of the gaze serve to create equality between Wentworth and Anne, who both simultaneously desire and are desired. By employing the female gaze in her novels, Austen advocates a progressive brand of masculinity in which women are not servile and sexually or emotionally passive, and men are able and willing to adapt to their lovers' desires.(1)

<2>Austen's male characters can be contextualized within the debates regarding masculinity that existed during her own lifetime. In post-French Revolution Europe, numerous anxieties about the "proper" behaviour of men emerged as traditional views met with new interpretations of what it meant to be a man. In eighteenth-century British society, however, the delineations of appropriate male stoicism and moderation were not always clear. For example, the importance placed on manners in Romantic Britain was closely —and dangerously—linked to effeminacy. Michèle Cohen articulates the complexity of this situation by highlighting the fact that the "social spaces" of balls, operas, and dinners in which the sexes met and conversed were the domains of women (47-59). Neither fully public nor private, social spaces were places of performance, locations where men and women constantly watched each other and moderated their behaviours according to cultural expectations. The presence of women in social spaces, however, was essential to a man's full achievement of politeness, and, by extension, the status of gentleman.

<3>The ideal man was virile and powerful, but self-controlled; polite and chivalric, but never effeminate; vigorous, but not overly passionate; and always rational and intimately concerned with the affairs of Britain. As the British nation state grew and became increasingly modernized, however, debates regarding the significance of chivalry in society and the correct balance between masculine rationality and sensibility were frequent in the literary, political, and philosophic discourses regarding masculinity. Two of the most vocal commentators in these debates were Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft, who each prescribed a very different model of masculinity. Burke was in no way concerned with modernizing men's sexual identities (Kramp 20). Instead, he called for a return to traditional values in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and firmly believed that men of power can and must be chivalrous and sentimental. Despite the increasing contestations of the relevance of chivalry in society, Burke argued that chivalry had given "character to modern Europe" (Burke 74, 75), and reflecting on the political and social events in late-eighteenth-century France, he lamented that "the age of chivalry is gone…and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever" (74). Steven Bruhm provides an insightful analysis of Burke's reading of the storming of Versailles and the ensuing capture of Marie Antoinette (64-66). In the same way that Austen's novels focus on the process of viewing, the scene of the queen's arrest is, according to Bruhm, framed by Burke as theatrical spectacle. Demanding that the ideal spectator "reclothe the naked body and soften the horror of the scene" (Bruhm 66), Burke attempts to elicit a traditionally chivalrous response from his readers as they visualize his theatrical rendering of the attack. He relegates Marie Antoinette to the level of visual object, suggesting that a man's masculinity can be assessed by his response to the scene of her capture. A "proper" British man could not possibly fail to respond chivalrously when faced with this scene of female violation. Through the visual culture of sensibility, Burke thus espouses the traditional view of masculinity in which women are subordinate to men.

<4>Throughout his *Reflections*, Burke's traditional, chivalrous view of manliness is made synonymous with sentimentality, which sparked controversy from many of his contemporaries (Fulford 5). Though Burke insisted that "we have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms" (Burke83), many of his adversaries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, saw his "man of sensibility" as weak and effeminate (Fulford 5). Burke's emphasis on the human body, however, was echoed by Wollstonecraft, who herself counted men's physical strength amongst their greatest assets, and the only way in which they might be considered superior to women. While she called for men to use their bodies, which is their "noble prerogative," to their advantage (*Rights of Men* 135, 104), she posited her demands for virility and reason against Burke's ideals of aestheticism and emotion, a fundamental opposition that Jane Austen merges in her male characters. Wollstonecraft's writings establish a clear dichotomy between sensibility and rationality, which are, according to her, diametrically opposed. Fulford explains that Wollstonecraft attempted to refute her society's "association of masculinity with sublime power, femininity with beautiful weakness" (17). In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she blatantly mocked Burke's prescriptions for men, arguing that the traditional demands for chivalry were merely the means of keeping women in a subordinate position to men and "insultingly supporting [men's] own superiority" (Wollstonecraft 120). Undoubtedly to the applause of all feminists who followed her, she writes: "So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me, that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with eager and serious solitude to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself" (120, Wollstonecraft's emphasis). In her opinion, Burke's manly chivalry was, ironically, emasculating, as the kind of sentimentality that he urged men to display was the type of sensibility society predominantly associated with and expected from women (Kramp 33). Writing with Burke directly in mind, Wollstonecraft stressed that "sensibility is not reason," and that the ideal man would, conversely, blend "happily reason and sensibility into one character" (135). Austen's leading men embody this fusion. She successfully combines Burke's ideals of romance and chivalry with Wollstonecraft's logic and rationality to create men who are able to express emotion while never descending into foppery, melancholy, or sycophancy.

<5>Nonetheless, Austen's leading men hardly adopt a brand of masculinity that is as dichotomized as Burke or Wollstonecraft would have it. Located in a specific cultural and historical moment that included not only war but shifting perceptions of class and gender, the men in her novels must respond to numerous cultural forces that comprise their modernizing society (Kramp 1, 6). *Persuasion*'s Captain Wentworth, for example, must find social acceptance as a self-made, not titled or landed, man, and must re-negotiate the chivalry expected of him by his profession in light of Anne Elliot's expectations of him as a man. The modern nation subsequently regulated how men shaped themselves as "sexual subjects" (1). Austen significantly refashions masculinity, however, by suggesting that these modern men are also capable of being fashioned as sexual objects. Consequently, Austen, whose fiction "develops *out* of Sensibility and *into* Romanticism," as one critic aptly describes it, re-evaluates and modernizes the Man of Feeling, a prominent fixture in the novels of sensibility (Nagle 98). Sensibility and rationality, however, are not polar opposites in Austen's canon as they are in the writings of Burke and Wollstonecraft; rather, as Christopher Nagle suggests, "Sensibility imagines *feeling beyond the bounds of reason*" (99, Nagle's emphasis). Thus, while the Man of Feeling "literally makes a spectacle of himself," as Nagle characterizes it, Austen's men, particularly Wentworth, are much more private, their displays of feeling internalized rather than public (101). Austen's men and women combine both "sense *and* feeling," and she effectively creates what Nagle coins as a "new variety of Men and Women of Feeling" (103).

<6>One of the fundamental aspects of Austen's unique brand of masculinity, however, is that it is always based on women's needs and wants. Her novels subsequently require what Sarah Ailwood terms a "social reconstruction of gender," one that requires greater equality between women and men (11). All of Austen's heroes neglect to shower women with the multitude of compliments they were expected to pay them, and reject the farcical gallantry that relegated women to a subordinate role in their relationships with men (Morris n. pag.). Ultimately, Austen creates a world in which the sexes must co-exist in order to function, and male and female characters serve to facilitate *each other's* development. Captain Wentworth, for example, who thinks of himself, as Judith Wilt puts it, as "set [and] finished," is "astounded to find in…Anne Elliot another chapter yet to go in the story of [his life]" (67). Male sexuality in Austen's novels, though palpable, in no way requires female passivity. Rather, it develops out of and in response to the desires of women.

<7>Austen's heroines make their wants and needs known through their gaze. By connecting the acts of looking and desiring so explicitly, Austen's novels enact the visual culture of the gaze long before feminist and theoretical discussions began to develop. These analyses of the gaze, of course, have their antecedents in psychoanalytic theory. Freud,(2) and later Lacan, argues that the gaze is a "function of desire," one that subsequently creates desire in the gazer (Lacan 92). Lacan further elaborates that this

desire is “caught, fixed in the picture” (92). For both theorists, the gaze is intimately connected to humans’ desire for pleasure and sexual gratification, and each argues that the bond between subject and object is a complicated and nuanced one: though the subject, according to Freud, places him or herself at a distance from the object, Lacan’s language of entrapment suggests that the object is able to wield a certain level of influence through his or her own objectification. Significantly, however, the gaze is not explicitly gendered in Freud’s or Lacan’s discussions. Rather, it signifies *human* desire.

<8>This interpretation of the gaze as gender neutral has been largely unacknowledged by the feminist critics—such as Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan—who analyze it merely as a tool of women’s subjugation. Both Mulvey and Kaplan assume that the gaze is inherently male, and that women are forced into a passive role as its object. By arguing, that, in heterosexual relationships, the woman “*holds* the look, and plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey 40, my emphasis), however, Mulvey makes room for some level of power or influence on the part of the woman. Arguably, a woman can desire a man as an object while also actively motivating his desire. Though many twentieth-century critics failed to account for this dynamic, it is implicit throughout Jane Austen’s novels. The representation of Austen’s world depends on women and the existence of a female gaze that is independent of male demands and desire is indisputable. Furthermore, male sexuality in Austen’s novels develops in response to women’s objectification and sexualisation of men.

<9>With their use of multiple layers of perception and their implicit link between sexuality and visuality, Jane Austen’s novels are particularly fertile ground for the application of Mulvey’s and Kaplan’s discussions. In Austen’s novels, gender is performance. Negotiating the “social spaces” of their daily lives, her heroes and heroines fashion and moderate their behaviours in response to the visual cues of others. In fact, the female gaze was often alluded to in the literature of the Romantic and Victorian periods: referred to what Mark Hennelly aptly labels “the lady-in-waiting or lady-in-watching syndrome,” the motif of a woman looking out a window was extremely prevalent in the English canon, particularly the English women’s canon (191, 192). Jane Austen’s corpus is no exception. In *Persuasion*, for example, Captain Wentworth is frequently spied through windows by women, be they Anne Elliot or Henrietta Musgrove, who is so engrossed with her search for the captain in the street beyond her window that she “could not listen at all to [Charles Haytor’s] account of a conversation which he had just held with Dr. Shirely” (Austen 66). It is implicit throughout her novels that the female gaze can and does exist, that women cannot only return men’s looks and “play” to their desire, as Mulvey argues, but also objectify men through their own gaze. The representation of Austen’s world depends on women, and it is around this female gaze that her plots and characterizations pivot.

<10>In *Persuasion*, parade and spectacle are crucial in establishing one’s social presence and for determining the social worth of others. The body is the medium through which one comes into contact with the world, and Austen emphasizes the acts of seeing and being seen throughout the novel, whether by others or one’s own self; though Anne is decried by her father for having been “too little seen” by her larger society (18), Sir Walter Elliot’s chambers are filled with “such a number of looking glasses…[that] there was no getting away from oneself” (104). Austen clearly acknowledges here that men *can* objectify themselves, a fact that Mulvey and Kaplan, writing nearly two hundred years later, fail to address. However, *Persuasion* presents a world in which the gaze obscures and even collapses the boundary between the public and private, and society’s gaze can be threatening and potentially destructive. Sir Walter must moderate his spending habits while acknowledging that he constantly “has eyes upon him” (20), lest rumours of his financial destitution begin to circulate. The gaze is a medium for power, and subtle glances can dictate whether one succeeds or flounders in society. Looks can burrow into a person’s deepest secrets, as Mrs. Smith’s “penetrating glance[s]” attempt to do to Anne (157). Furthermore, they can manipulate and coerce people into thinking and acting in specific, socially acceptable ways: when Captain Wentworth is overly curt to Anne at the Octagon Room toward the end of the novel, she wonders if he had been persuaded into reticence by the “unpleasant glances” of her father or Lady Russell (153). The gaze can be an extremely powerful social weapon in *Persuasion*. It is not only a medium for communication between lovers, as will be discussed, but a means of monitoring and even controlling others.

<11>Nearly a decade before the novel begins, Anne herself was a victim of such social coercion; persuaded by Lady Russell that Captain Wentworth was financially and socially inferior, and thus incompatible as a marriage partner, she refused his proposal and severed all romantic ties to him. Initially, Anne seems to be quite an unlikely Austen heroine. She is by far the oldest, and, at the relatively advanced age of twenty-seven, appears to have allowed life to pass her by. With her mother dead and her father on the verge of bankruptcy, she is virtually a has-been in the inner circle of her society. Her mental and social stagnation manifest themselves in her outward appearance, and though she was once “a very pretty girl,” she has, at nearly thirty, lost “her bloom” (11). She is established by Austen as little more than a withered old maid, long past her prime.

<12>Anne is not introduced until the second chapter of *Persuasion*, literally remaining silent until chapter three. Notably, however, the first time she speaks is in praise of men. Her first words are delivered with her characteristic equanimity and gratitude, but also pronounced truthfulness and wisdom: she states that Britain's naval officers "who have done so much for us have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must allow" (21). Her introductory statement is particularly significant in a novel that differs so dramatically from Austen's others in its discussions and depictions of masculinity. In contrast to Austen's other works, which are set during various points of the Napoleonic wars, *Persuasion*, set during peacetime,complicates traditional gender prescriptions. In the world of *Persuasion*, the war has ended, and Britain's military and naval men are returning home to their former lives. Though the majority of the men introduced throughout the novel, such as Captains Wentworth, Harville, and Benwick, as well as Admiral Croft, are involved in a traditionally "masculine" profession, they are all essentially inactive since, for the time being, they are effectively unemployed. Currently, these men do not actually *do* anything, instead whiling away their time in the constant company of women. Consequently, as one critic argues, the cast of naval officers embody "a new model of masculinity," which effectively allows women to be written "into the adventure narrative" (Ailwood 323). The wives of these officers, such as Sophia Croft, subsequently enjoy a level of participation in public life. The traditional public/private and male/female spheres are, as a result, largely collapsed.

<13>*Persuasion* is also concerned with male physicality in a way that Austen's other works are not. Complicating Mary Wollstonecraft's praise of the masculine form, Captain Harville articulates to Anne the emotional burden man's body must endure:

> I will not allow it to be more man's nature than woman's to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved. I believe the reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings. (187)

For Harville, bodily strength breeds mental sensitivity, a innovative re-interpretation of nineteenth-century gender prescriptions. As he suggests, British men are willing and able to express intense emotion, and his discussion of exactly "what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children" (189) before he goes off to war would undoubtedly be lauded by Edmund Burke.

<14>Moreover, the novel is extremely focussed on how class and gender should manifest themselves physically. Sir Walter, one of the most foppish of any of Austen's male characters, makes constant reference to male physicality, and dismisses the navy because it not only brings "persons of obscure birth into undue distinction," but also ensures that the "sailor [grows] old sooner than any other man" (22). For Sir Walter, there are numerous fears and apprehensions associated with both the aging and worn male body, as well as the body of a man who oversteps his social station. The figure of the sailor unites both of these horrendous characteristics.

<15>Any temptation on the part of the reader, however, to accept Sir Walter's disparagement of sailors is destroyed once Captain Frederick Wentworth is introduced. Wentworth is easily Austen's most charismatic and instantly attractive male characters. It has been suggested that he is, in effect, a combination of all the Austen heroes that precede him, and while he has emotional depth, he is also keenly aware of his social and national responsibilities (Ailwood 232). Handsome, "brilliant," and marked by a "fearlessness of mind" (Austen 27), he is also an entirely self-made man. Unlike Sir Walter, Wentworth does not simply enjoy the benefits of a title, or reap the financial rewards of primogeniture. Rather, in a society where masculine prowess is inherently linked to title, and where, as Sir Walter notes, "a *Mr*…always needs a note of explanation" (26, Austen's emphasis), Captain Wentworth has secured his own fortune and determined his own fate. As Wollstonecraft would argue, his talents are developed and "unfolded by industry" (*Rights of Men* 104). He belongs to a new, modern class of men who *work* for a living, who achieve their set goals, and who ultimately garner rewards through the use of their minds and bodies. Though Wentworth's face may be, as Sir Walter would sneer, "as orange as the cuffs and capes of [his] livery" (Austen 24), he is also wealthy and successful, distinctions that Sir Walter, in his economically and socially deteriorating state, is no longer able to boast. Wentworth essentially embodies the new model of masculinity that will come to dominate the modernizing British nation.

<16>Wentworth, however, also embodies the passion, emotion, and romance prescribed by Burke. He is presented as a textbook romantic, who is "ready to fall in love" and who has "thought on the subject [of his future wife] more than most men" (54). Like many of the male characters in the novel, Wentworth does not suppress his emotion. Each of the naval men, for example, comment explicitly on the relationship between Captain Benwick and his fiancée, Fanny Harville, who died while they were at sea. Wentworth "believed it impossible

for man to be more attached to woman than poor Benwick had been to [her], or to be more deeply afflicted under the dreadful change" (81). Wentworth is notably modern in his ability to express his feelings.

<17>Wentworth himself, however, had endured his own "dreadful change" at the hands of Anne Elliot. In fact, both Anne and Fanny Harville successfully damage the men they love. Wentworth is essentially a destroyed man after he is rejected by Anne, a scar he still carries with him eight years later. When the two meet again at Uppercross, the narrator reveals that Wentworth "had not forgiven Anne Elliot" (54). Clearly, however, and contrary to Anne's own perceptions, he has not forgotten her either, and though "she had used him ill, deserted and disappointed him…had given him up to oblige others…he had been most warmly attached to her, and had never seen a woman since whom he thought her equal" (54). Like the despondent Captain Benwick, Wentworth is emotionally devastated by the woman he loves, and his emotional response to Anne remains as strong as it had been nearly a decade earlier. As Ivor Morris contends, the entire plot of *Persuasion* "turns upon the reality and consequence of masculine pride" (n. pag.), and it is only because of this pride that Wentworth takes eight years and some time away at war to reprise his proposal of marriage to Anne.

<18>Unlike Benwick, however, Wentworth does not retreat into himself, read melancholy poetry, and lament over lost love. Though he carries Anne's rejection with him, Wentworth instead learns to cope with his emotion, and, tempering sensibility with reason, remains a fully functioning member of society. He is, arguably, the most social of all of Austen's leading men, and has an innate allure that makes him attractive to men and women alike; at the Musgroves', he is hailed for "making himself agreeable to others," and for having "looked and said everything with such exquisite grace" that all "heads were…turned by him" (Austen 51). The arts of conversation and socializing come naturally to Wentworth, causing Anne to envision him as the constant centre of attention. He is elevated to a quasi-mythic status in the eyes of the Musgroves, who determine him to be "all that was most agreeable," praising his "charming manners" and lauding his lack of "shyness or reserve" (52). The inhabitants of Uppercross flock to him, idolizing him in virtually all he does.

<19>Frederick Wentworth is, to be sure, an intensely exotic and erotic figure, and his stories of past voyages have blatantly sensual and sexual connotations. Of all of his listeners and spectators, however, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove are the two who most obviously sexualize him; indeed, as Audrey Hawkridge suggests, "he is so lionized by the Musgrove women that he hardly needs to assert himself" (142). During his evenings at Uppercross, he is generally in extremely high spirits because he is lavished with "the attention of all the young women" in his company (Austen 62). Captain Wentworth is the focal point of the evening, the centre of the women's attention. He is there for *their* visual enjoyment, and they are "entirely occupied by him" (62). He is an object for them, a virtual plaything.(3) Louisa and Henrietta competitively vie for Wentworth's attentions, and "nothing but the continued appearance of the most perfect goodwill between themselves could have made it credible that they were not decided rivals" (62). While Wentworth is the object of their "eager admiration" (62), the Musgrove sisters also realize that they must play to his gaze, lest his attention fall onto the rival sister. The two are engaged in a struggle to be the object of Wentworth's visual attention. With her depiction of the pleasure that females can derive from the display of the male body, Austen subsequently complicates arguments by figures such as Kaplan and Mulvey long before such arguments were even articulated. The world of Austen's novels is unquestioningly patriarchal, and, ultimately, the happiness of each of her heroines depends entirely on a proposal of marriage from a man. To be sure, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women had a rather limited amount of power in virtually all areas of their lives, both public and private. Austen never forgets this fact, and, as such, does not entirely invalidate Mulvey's arguments regarding women's subordination. Nonetheless, the dynamic of the gaze ultimately serves to establish equality between these men and women as they objectify and are objectified by each other. Women such as the Musgrove sisters choreograph the world of courtship. They actively respond to the male gaze, sexualize themselves, and are more than capable of exploiting men as sexual pawns. Though he clearly possesses his own gaze, Wentworth is also, in the most literal sense, an object of female desire.

<20>Anne, however, possesses her own gaze through which she studies and scrutinizes Wentworth. Although it is a sexualizing force, Anne's gaze is, unlike Louisa's and Henrietta's, always discrete and thorough, never silly or flirtatious. After their eight-year separation, Anne reacquaints herself with Wentworth through her gaze, not through verbal communication. For the majority of the novel, in fact, Wentworth and Anne hardly speak to each other. Anne's social awareness, and, by extension, social power, does not lie in her speech. Rather, her mode of expression lies in her gaze, and she tends to learn about people by watching them; she is the perpetually silent and unseen observer. Moreover, Anne spends much of the novel attempting to shield herself from Wentworth's gaze: at the Musgroves' one evening, she "desired nothing…but to be unobserved" (62), and when she spots Wentworth during a walk in Bath with Lady Russell, she positions herself so as to

remain unseen while also having “him in view the greater part of the street” (145).

<21>It is through Anne, however, that the reader first “sees” Wentworth. After their first meeting, Anne realizes that “the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessoning his personal advantages. She had seen the same Frederick Wentworth” (53). Mary Wollstonecraft retaliates against such double standards for beauty in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, claiming that it is governed by “male prejudice, which deems beauty the perfection of women—mere beauty of features and complexion, the vulgar acceptation of the word, whilst male beauty is allowed to have some connection with the mind” (150). For this reason, women are “made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over” (9). Wentworth, however, remains as virile and sexually attractive in Anne’s eyes as he had eight years earlier. While many of the other characters in the novel simply discuss Wentworth’s positive characteristics, Anne very specifically grounds him in the physical. She essentially anatomizes him, dividing him into his constituent parts and fetishizing him; watching Wentworth converse with Mrs. Musgrove one evening, Anne finds herself gazing at his face, “his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth” (Austen 58). Through Anne, in addition to Louisa and Henrietta, Wentworth is developed as a fully sexual being, more than capable of inspiring desire in women.

<22>In his relationship with Anne, however, Wentworth’s gaze is curiously absent, and his behaviour, at least from Anne’s perspective, is marked by his near refusal to look at her. Through Austen’s narrative technique, however, the reader *is* granted access to Wentworth’s own thoughts, and consequently realizes that, on many occasions, Anne completely misreads the emotions behind his gaze. In reality, he examines her in the same way that she examines him; Anne is merely unaware of his looks, and his letter ultimately proves her misunderstanding. Nonetheless, for the majority of their various meetings, the reader only has access to Anne’s interpretations of his gaze, and she has “no reason to suppose his eye wandering towards her while he spoke” (55). Though Anne recognizes him immediately when they reacquaint at the beginning of the novel, there is, in her view, a complete lack of recognition on his part, despite the fact that her life has remained stagnant during their separation. Anne’s sister Mary reports to her that, in Wentworth’s eyes, Anne appeared “so altered he should not have known her again” (53). She believes that he examines her with completely detached and analytical scrutiny. Anne does not feel sexualized through Wentworth’s gaze, and for the majority of the novel, she feels as though his infrequent looks lack passion:

> *Once* she felt that he was looking at herself, observing her altered features, perhaps, trying to trace in them the ruins of the face which had once charmed him…Anne did not wish for more looks and speeches. His cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than anything. (62, Austen’s emphasis)

While Anne looks upon Wentworth as a sexual creature, his gaze, as she misreads it, is a source of pain and embarrassment for her. Through it, she is constantly reminded of what she once was.

<23>This perceived de-sexualized male gaze is proof, however, of the progressive brand of masculinity Austen presents in *Persuasion*. Anne is the active subject in her relationship with Wentworth. She sexualizes him, but is never objectified by him. Furthermore, their first courtship had been based on an equality of mind between the two lovers. His “intelligence, spirit and brilliancy” were met and tempered by her “gentleness, modesty, taste and feeling” (26); they were “rapidly and deeply in love. It would be difficult to say which had seen highest perfection in the other, or which had been the happiest” (27), and, for “one short period of her life” (42), Anne had known someone who truly appreciated her person and her talents. Though Anne is quiet and often shy, she is not passive, and though Wentworth never objectifies or overtly sexualizes her, she is able to reduce him to his constituent physical parts. In Anne and Wentworth’s relationship, the power of the male gaze is greatly overshadowed by the female.

<24>Indeed, the male gaze, as filtered through Anne, is entirely absent from the most pivotal moments of their relationship. Their first meeting, for example, almost completely lacks a visual element, and though “her eye half met” his, they do not study each other (52). Anne instead focuses on his voice “as he talked to Mary, said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to make an easy footing” (52). In this scene, brief though it is, Anne serves as the sole interpreter of Wentworth’s looks and words, and after they make their fleeting eye contact, she wonders “how were his sentiments to be read” (53). The lack of the male gaze is Anne’s interpretation, which is marked by her own embarrassment at having reacquainted with Wentworth while being subjected to the prying eyes of her sister and the Musgrove girls.

<25>Furthermore, the turning point in their relationship occurs as Anne reads a letter written by her lover. Letters are, in fact, employed less frequently in *Persuasion* than in Austen’s

other novels, providing Wentworth's correspondence with maximum impact, both on Anne, now a literal reader of his emotions, as well as the readers of the novel (Stafford 150). As she realizes the extent of Wentworth's feelings for her, however, his gaze is absent. Anne must sexualize him *through* his letter. When he finally seduces her, *she* is the one in the subject role. Her "eyes devoured" his words, as Wentworth admits to her that she had been successful in "penetrate[ing]" his inner feelings (Austen 191). The letter explicitly suggests both characters' sexual appetites, and, in it, Wentworth is more than capable of finding an outlet for his emotions, both erotic and romantic. The letter is, according to Michael Kramp, "the most open disclosure of amorous emotion" (137) by any of Austen's heroes. In it, Wentworth presents himself as a vulnerable lover, citing Anne as the motivation for all his actions. Austen offers full access to her hero's inner workings: "You pierce my soul, I am half agony, half hope…Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you" (Austen 191). While many of Austen's heroes, such as the aloof Mr. Darcy, frequently stumble to express adequately their feelings, Wentworth, though succinct, is hardly at a loss for words.

<26>Christopher Nagle provides a useful reading of the scene in which Wentworth writes and presents his letter to Anne. While it offers an explicit commentary on gender roles via Anne and Harville's discussion of men's and women's constancy, the scene, which depicts Wentworth's endeavour to express himself, also "conveys both [his] weakness as a traditional man…and his strength as a new Man of Feeling" (111). Wentworth can read and respond to Anne in a way that no other character in the novel can, but once Anne takes Wentworth's seat to read his letter, thereby entering into his personal space, it is he who is "penetrated" by her. The scene establishes Wentworth and Anne as readers in both the literal and metaphorical sense: she reads his letter, which relates his reading of her emotions. Anne, who has spent the entire novel misreading Wentworth's looks, finally and literally reads of his undying love for her. Furthermore, Wentworth is given a medium through which he can right her misconceptions of him. Ultimately their relationship successfully combines sensibility, feeling, and rationality, without representing, as Nagle suggests, the "static, conventionally gendered poles of reason or feeling" (114). Michael Kramp furthers this discussion, arguing that Wentworth is not fixed in the same way that Austen's other heroes are. His life as a sailor allows him a certain freedom of existence, whereby he "no longer depends upon a hegemonic social/sexual identity" (139). By novel's end, Anne and Wentworth are not locked into a model of domesticity. Rather, they "resist the lure of social security in favour of the mobility of the sea" (140).

<27>Ultimately, "a look" must decide whether Wentworth's letter has been successful in convincing Anne of his attachments (Austen 191). It is Anne, then, who controls whether or not their relationship recommences. Through her gaze, she is granted agency. She and Wentworth finally and completely reconnect during a chance meeting in Union Street, when, hearing the familiar footsteps of Wentworth behind her, she has only "two moments' preparation for the sight of [him]" (193). Austen's diction here is—perhaps deliberately—ambiguous: it is not clear if Anne is preparing herself to gaze upon Wentworth, or to be the object of Wentworth's gaze. This ambiguity, however, carries with it a connotation of equality between the lovers, and, when Wentworth finally arrives on the scene, he "only look[s]," while "Anne could command herself enough to receive that look" (193). Rather than blush and avert her eyes, Anne actively participates in and reciprocates his looking, and it is ultimately *her* gaze that encourages him in his endeavours to woo her. As Wentworth "walked by her side," the synchronicity with which they talk and mutually "decide their direction towards the comparatively quiet and retired gravel walk" (193) of Union Street, and away from the prying eyes of various passersby, suggests a clear equality between them. In the ensuing conversation, in which they find themselves "more equal to act" (194) than before, Wentworth rectifies "the blindness of his own pride, and the blunders of his own calculations" (196), and he and Anne set to right all the previous misconceptions and misreadings that had occurred between them. Wentworth especially remedies Mary's reported fact that he had been dismayed to find Anne so altered by the eight years that had separated them. He reports that his brother had been so foolish as to ask "if [Anne] were personally altered, little suspecting that to [Wentworth's] eye [she] could never alter" (195-6). Anne declares that she will never again be persuaded against him now that "the case is so different, and [her] age is so different" (197). Rather, *she* will be the one to choose her own fate. On this note of empowerment and equality, their future beings.

<28>Anne's gaze thus frames Wentworth as a sexual being, and also encourages him to adopt a progressive model of masculinity. Though Austen initially appears to have ignored Wollstonecraft's aforementioned discussion of male and female beauty, framing Wentworth as a virile specimen but Anne as a decrepit old maid, she actually exploits society's double standards regarding beauty in order to demonstrate a highly progressive gender dynamic. Wentworth finds Anne as physically attractive as she finds him. In finally and happily uniting the two, Austen challenges her society's standards of beauty. Anne Elliot is neither young (in her society's opinion), nor traditionally beautiful; nonetheless, she is able to find happiness in a marriage of equals. As Wollstonecraft would undoubtedly applaud, Austen allows Anne to be celebrated by her lover for her "strength of body and mind," not necessarily for her

"bewitching beauty" (*Rights of Woman* 395).

<29>Furthermore, as Michael Kramp suggests, although Wentworth "clings to conventional male behaviour" (132) early in the novel, reverting to "hyper-conventional chivalric" conduct (129), he changes when he realizes that his actions have no impact on Anne. Though his chivalry charms the Musgrove sisters, he finds that Anne "deprived his manners of their usual composure" (Austen 67). Such inconsistencies in his behaviour clearly show that it is artificial, and that he assumes a chivalric role because he believes it is expected of him. Anne encourages him not to be simply her "guardian or friend," but a "committed and passionate lover who risks his security by revealing his emotions" (Kramp 136). In order for him to marry Anne, he must, in Sarah Ailwood's analysis, divorce himself from "the ideologies of sexual difference embedded in discourses of nationalism and chivalry" (261). This reformed masculinity develops entirely in response to Anne's desire.

<30>Jane Austen's subtle yet progressive depictions of men reflect the renegotiations of masculinity that were occurring in the intellectual circles of post-French Revolution Europe. However, she also creates a mode of masculinity that is uniquely hers. Emphasizing the importance of spectacle in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, and acknowledging the performative nature of sexuality—an undeniably modern aspect of her novels—Austen presents men who are *made* by her women. Through her gaze, Anne Elliot achieves emotional and sexual equality with Wentworth, and by employing multiple levels of female perspectives in her narratives, Austen proves that the female gaze encompasses as much authority and power as the male gaze. She effectively rewrites masculinity over the course of her career, and her new "Men of Feeling" simultaneously accommodate and amend eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender prescriptions. Though implicit, male sexuality is palpable in Austen's novels, and her surprisingly modern heroes continue to find relevance two centuries after their inception.

Endnotes

(1)This argument is part of a larger project on masculinity, performance, and visual culture in Jane Austen's oeuvre. For a related discussion, see my treatment of *Pride and Prejudice* in "'You Have Bewitched Me Body and Soul': Masculinity and the Female Gaze in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" in *At the Edge* 1 (2010). This journal is available at http://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/ate/index. Though the current article adopts a similar theoretical lens in its reading of *Persuasion*, it must be noted that Anne Elliot occupies a markedly different social position than Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, often the object of Mr. Darcy's "earnest, steadfast gaze" (139), is explicitly sexualized by him. Though she possesses her own gaze through which she scrutinizes and eroticizes him, she is also frequently made his visual object and is fetishized in a way that Anne is not (think, for example, of Darcy's obsession with Elizabeth's "fine eyes"). *Persuasion*, by contrast, emphasizes female voyeurism. Anne watches Wentworth, but remains unseen herself—*his* is the body on display. Able to observe while remaining hidden from view, Anne occupies the conventionally masculine position of the voyeur while Wentworth becomes the traditionally female object of desire. The renegotiation of gender roles that Austen introduces in *Pride and Prejudice* is developed fully in *Persuasion*: not only is Anne and Wentworth's relationship predicated on equality, it also questions and subverts the "proper" behaviour of men *and* women.(^)

(2)See Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).(^)

(3)In *Persuasion*, Austen employs the same game motif regarding courtship that she does in *Pride and Prejudice*. Both Charlotte Lucas and Caroline Bingley acknowledge the aggressive and contrived nature of husband hunting. Lucas cautions Elizabeth Bennet, for example, against Jane Bennet's shyness, warning that "it is sometimes a disadvantage to be so very guarded. If a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from *the object* of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him" (15, my emphasis).(^)

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