



Article

Jane Austen's *Persuasion*: Finding Companionate Marriage through Sickness and Health

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Abstract: In Jane Austen's last novel *Persuasion* (1817), embodiment and disability function metonymically to show the emotional suffering of its characters. Austen gives temporary impairments to the novel's protagonists, Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth, and physical disabilities to minor characters who suffer actual and metaphorical falls, such as Louisa Musgrove and Mrs. Smith. In *Persuasion*, Austen evokes pain and suffering in both mental and physical ways, with men, like Wentworth, experiencing mental impairments and women, like Anne, Louisa, and Mrs. Smith, experiencing physical impairments. Austen uses impairments, illness, and disability as prostheses to highlight the importance of a marriage of respect, affection, and rationality.

Keywords: Jane Austen; disability; narrative prosthesis; feminism; nineteenth century; English literature; fiction; companionate marriage; heteronormative marriage; illness; injury

1. Introduction

Jane Austen's last novel¹, *Persuasion* (Austen [1817] 2013), has a reputation as a novel about "suffering" (Wiltshire 1992, p. 155). With its core story about a broken engagement resulting in eventual reconciliation, the novel explores loss in ways that other Austen novels do not. As Nina Auerbach observes: "The pervasive tone of *Persuasion* is a tone of neither triumph nor tragedy; it is a paradoxical mixture of pleasure and pain" (Auerbach 1972, p. 128). The effects of "pleasure and pain" are manifested in the physical appearances and health of the characters. While Austen's characters have often experienced impairments, these impairments (Cherney 2019, p. 175)² are more centrally located in *Persuasion* because there is a physicality, an embodiment to the characters in the novel. At the start of the novel, the story's central lovers, Anne and Wentworth, represent opposites, as Anne is an unmarried woman of 27 who is nearly invisible to her friends and family, and Wentworth is a successful sea captain who is virile, strong, and highly visible, particularly to young women. As the novel progresses, this dichotomy begins to fade, helping Anne to become more embodied and Wentworth to recognize the danger of seeking the attention of women. Through their embodiment, Anne and Wentworth rekindle a companionate love, which emotionally and physically fulfills both. Thus, in *Persuasion*, embodiment functions metonymically to show the emotional suffering of its characters and give its audience the catharsis of characters overcoming impairments to heighten the romance at the core of the novel.

In *Persuasion*, Austen evokes pain and suffering in both mental and physical ways, with men, like Wentworth, experiencing mental impairments and women, like Anne, Louisa, and Mrs. Smith, experiencing physical impairments. While Anne and Wentworth are the novel's central characters, the physical impairments of Louisa and Mrs. Smith provide a narrative prosthesis that gives insight to the main characters. Mitchell and Snyder's theory of Narrative Prosthesis³ argues that disability functions as a metaphor to "confront cultural truisms" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 48) and as a means of maintaining "the mind's desire for order and rationality" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 48). Austen provides some



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quasi-disabilities⁴ for Anne and Wentworth to show the effects of weakness of the mind, but uses the physical ailments of minor characters to provide the key insight that allows Anne and Wentworth to overcome their impairments and to promote a marriage based on compatibility and rationality.

This focus on companionate marriage is not unusual for Austen's works, as she often satirizes the aristocracy and gentry by demonstrating the limitations of marriages based on financial and aristocratic preservation. But, *Persuasion*'s satire remains grounded in physicality. For example, Anne's father, Sir Walter, is described as vain and obsessed with his baronetcy and family connections to the aristocracy, even though he was a member of the lower-ranked gentry: "He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 4). Sir Walter is so fixated on these qualities that he is both irresponsible and comical. Even Lady Russell, who is seemingly a sensible person, cedes to Sir Walter, as she, too, emphasizes the importance of the gentry (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 9). Sir Walter represents the heteronormative standards that Austen critiques. In a sense, Austen's characterization of Sir Walter represents what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls the "normate", or the societal standard of what is considered normal (Garland Thomson 1997, p. 8).⁵ In Austen's era, the normate was a marriage that secured a rank, either through marrying another aristocrat or marrying someone with enough wealth to support the financially strapped aristocrat. Auerbach claims *Persuasion* "shifted the axis of her created world" by challenging the traditional sites of power (Auerbach 1972, pp. 116–17). In early nineteenth-century England, the Industrial Revolution encroached upon the agrarian lifestyle, the financial basis for much of the aristocracy and landed gentry. This waning power of these social classes became a target for Austen's satiric pen. Austen's novels rely on the connection between income, romance (Copeland 2011), and sometimes physical impairment. Austen clearly satirizes the aristocracy in *Pride & Prejudice* (Austen [1813] 2016), for example, when Lady Catherine de Bourgh's daughter Anne is of "a sickly constitution" and, thus, not a suitable companion for Darcy. Lady Catherine's insistence on their marriage highlights both how out of touch the aristocracy is and how maintaining inter-marriage can cause physical harm. In *Persuasion*, vanity and foolishness mark those in the gentry, and wealthy navy officers become the new ideal. Auerbach argues that the navy (particularly the Crofts) represents "income, Jane Austen's central symbol of social power" (Auerbach 1972, p. 117). *Persuasion* places new emphasis on the increasing social status of naval officers, particularly on the good character of naval officers outweighing their status outside of the aristocracy and gentry (McMaster 2011).

Many critics have discussed the role of embodiment in relation to *Persuasion*; John Wiltshire, for example, argues that Anne is often unheard, particularly in the first half of the novel, and that her near invisibility often leads her to overhear conversations: "Anne often just hears patches or fragments of conversations, not only because the speakers are standing or walking a little away from her, but more importantly also because her own feelings impede or intercept the incoming communications" (Wiltshire 2014, p. 148). In other words, Anne's diminished physicality leads to her inability to experience communication with those around her. In earlier work, Wiltshire stresses the physicality of the novel: "*Persuasion* is a novel of trauma: of broken bones, broken heads and broken hearts." (Wiltshire 1992, p. 165). Many of *Persuasion*'s characters are marked by physical trauma or mental anguish. These characters are often divided mentally and physically, manifested in pain, trauma, or illness. Similarly, Kay Young highlights the physicality of Anne and Wentworth's relationship, showing how Wentworth's notice of Anne revives her lost bloom and how Wentworth's desire rekindles when she gains the attention of another man (Young 2003). Other scholars focus on physicality, but also Austen's desire to promote rationality. Laura Tracy contends that Anne had to learn her own relational competence, while Wentworth had to learn it through Louisa's fall (Tracy 1996, pp. 156–58). While her focus is primarily on *Emma*, Carol Shields asserts that sometimes Austen's "physical references go hand in hand with psychological insight and thereby earn their weight" (Shields 1991). Shields suggests that Austen uses physicality to promote key points that she wants to make about

rationality or the personality of the characters. This relates to Mitchell and Snyder's narrative prosthesis, as physical attributes highlight certain "cultural truisms" about the characters (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 48).

While these commentaries provide key insights, I think it is helpful to show how *Persuasion* participates in "overcoming" rhetoric, where characters recover from their impairments. As Jason Farr points out, Austen heroines "either have or acquire visible manifestations of health by the time they marry" (Farr 2019, p. 165). Thus, *Persuasion* follows the pattern of Austen heroines, but also the pattern of stories related to disability, as the characters often "overcome" these disabilities for the sake of the story. Timothy Dolmage talks about multiple disability myths, and one is relevant here: "Disability as a Sign of Social Ill" (Dolmage 2013, p. 36). At the beginning of *Persuasion*, neither Anne nor Wentworth are worthy of companionate marriage. Anne, being persuaded against marrying Wentworth, shows a weakness of mental character that manifests physically. Conversely, Wentworth's anger at Anne's choice leads to poor decisions that physically harm Louisa. Both paths provide punishments for not choosing the path that Austen is promoting, a marriage of two rational people who are compatible. It is also important to note that nearly every quasi-disability, impairment, injury, and illness is overcome in this novel. The lovesickness that causes poor judgment for Anne and Wentworth is resolved, Louisa recovers from her fall, and Mrs. Smith's health improves when Wentworth helps her recover her lost property in the West Indies. Overcoming disability is also a common trope used in narratives, which Mitchell and Snyder point out allows disability to be a prosthesis, a convenient metaphorical tool to tell stories (Mitchell and Snyder 2000).

While this prosthesis is used, I want to stress that only female characters experience a physical manifestation of impairment or disability in *Persuasion* (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 67).⁶ Anne loses her bloom, in part because she has rejected the affections of Wentworth. Louisa falls at Lyme because she misinterprets Wentworth's intentions (although he gives her plenty of reasons to believe them to be true). Mrs. Smith loses her health and finances because of her husband's relationship with Mr. Elliot. While certainly Wentworth experiences some mental anguish, only the women suffer physically in *Persuasion*. Those who experience the most suffering, true illnesses, and injuries provide key insights that allow Anne and Wentworth to reconcile. It is through Louisa's fall that Wentworth realizes his anger at and love for Anne. It is through Mrs. Smith's insight that Anne can rationalize her intuition to realize that Mr. Elliot is unworthy of her affections. These disabilities remove potential suitors for Anne and Wentworth and allow them to reconnect.

2. Anne's Loss of Bloom

Heartbroken after a canceled engagement with Wentworth, Anne struggles with loss, which manifests in her physically fading into the background. The metonymic representation of this loss is Anne's lost bloom (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 21), which, for Regency-era women, represents a lack of visibility and attractiveness, as Kay Young observes: "Anne 'needs figuratively to feel seen 'in bloom' to feel conscious of her sexuality, beauty, and embodiment as a woman of twenty-seven" (Young 2003, p. 83). Her loss of bloom could also be interpreted as a deformity, which Essaka Joshua contends are visible impairments often considered in aesthetic terms (Joshua 2018, p. 47). Therefore, Anne's loss makes her not only unattractive to men, but she becomes hardly visible to friends and family, until Wentworth reappears in her life. Anne has kept her feelings about her separation from Wentworth internalized, which Wiltshire describes as depression: "Anne Elliot's attention is equally contingent, but so often interfered with because her thoughts are saturated by the past" (Wiltshire 2014, p. 147). Regret for her loss affects her emotionally and physically. When Anne discovers the Crofts will be renting her family estate, she "left the room, to seek the comfort of cool air for her flushed cheeks" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 29) at the thought that Wentworth might soon visit her home. The past association with Wentworth not only causes a physical reaction, but it briefly affects her loss of bloom by returning color to her cheeks.

This loss of bloom and Anne's introversion differs vastly from her family's obsession with beauty⁷ (Auerbach 1972, p. 119). In the opening paragraphs of the novel, Sir Walter describes Anne as "haggard" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 6). This description shows not only Anne's physical appearance, but her father's interpretation of that appearance. Sir Walter values beauty more than anything else, and Anne's faded beauty devalues her worth. Austen describes Anne as one who many would find admirable for her character, but to Sir Walter, she is "only Anne" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 5). Young argues that Anne lacks any embodiment or influence on her family: "Anne Elliot is not held in her family's consciousness" (Young 2003, pp. 82–83). Although others, such as Lady Russell and the Musgroves, see her worth, Anne remains mostly invisible to her immediate family.

Anne's father and older sister both represent the obsession with beauty, wealth, and rank. Sir Walter is a baronet, a low-level member of the gentry, who lives a life of such excess that he is forced to rent his family home to cover the debts he has incurred. He focusses more on appearances than practicality; thus, as Young observes, Anne's loss of bloom makes her less valuable in his eyes: "As an object before Sir Walter's representing consciousness, Anne does nothing to 'excite his esteem'—her bloomless body does not bring him to emotion, which reduces her to be a non-representation for him" (Young 2003, p. 82). Austen uses Sir Walter to show that an obsession with status and appearance causes harm. Sir Walter's and Lady Russell's disapproval of Wentworth causes Anne's loss of bloom. During her initial courtship with Wentworth, Anne was "an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 19), but the broken engagement weighed heavily on Anne, resulting in a physical transformation:

"A few months had seen the beginning and the end of their acquaintance; but, not with a few months ended Anne's share of suffering from it. Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth, and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect". (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 21)

Anne's inner conflict manifests in physical ways. Her emotional state affects her physical well-being, thus creating a temporary impairment. As one who has lost love, Anne conveys that loss through her physicality. She cannot be fully desirable to other men because her heart belongs to Wentworth; thus, as Wiltshire observes: "Having been persuaded to break off an engagement with a man whom she still loves, she wears her sadness and deprivation in her prematurely aging body and face" (Wiltshire 1992, p. 155). Austen suggests that loss of love causes this impairment and that falling prey to her father and mother's friend's influence to end her engagement with Wentworth causes illness and weakness. This illness represents the wrong choice for Anne and is Austen's way of criticizing marriages and broken engagements that are based solely on income and not compatibility. Succumbing to the wrong influences of wealth and property affects Anne physically. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that "Austen explores in *Persuasion* the effects on women of submission to authority and the renunciation of one's life story" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, pp. 174–75). Anne's health diminishes as she falls prey to the influence of authority, but she begins to experience a physical restoration as she asserts her own agency. Because Anne's quasi-disability connects with the rejection of Wentworth's proposal, a reconnection with Wentworth can alter or even remove that disability.

This slow restoration of Anne's bloom begins with some moments of physicality, where Wentworth sees her, and this culminates in the trip to Lyme. When the pair first connect, Anne believes that Wentworth takes no notice of her, but that changes when Wentworth removes one of her nephews from her back. Only Wentworth sees the trouble and quietly and quickly removes the nephew (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 58). This brief physical contact leaves Anne "perfectly speechless" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 58), and she needs "a long application of solitude and reflection to recover" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 58). Wentworth saw Anne's struggles while she remained invisible to her family, as Wiltshire describes it: "Wentworth relieves Anne's body through the agency of his physical contact with the body of the child" (Wiltshire 1992, p. 172). While Anne so often hides in the background,

Wentworth sees her anyway. He beholds Anne and frees her from frustration. He cannot stand to see her in pain.

Additionally, when the Musgroves, Wentworth, and Anne go on a long walk, Wentworth recognizes how tired Anne has become and suggests that the Crofts take her after. Placing Anne in the carriage: “Captain Wentworth without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 64). Both incidents show Anne’s insight into Wentworth: “She understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling. . . . though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief” (Austen [1817] 2013, pp. 65–66). Anne recognizes that Wentworth still cares for her, but he cannot let go of that anger.

The others see Wentworth as amiable and good natured; Anne sees his pain. But, there are also moments of what Young describes as “unthought known attachment to Anne” (Young 2003, p. 88), unrecognized by Wentworth until his revelation at Lyme. While Anne interprets his putting her into the carriage as kindness, rather than affection, this second moment of physical contact solidifies a healing process for her. Young asserts this scene shows how Wentworth, unlike most of the people in Anne’s life, is aware of Anne’s physical body: “Wentworth’s touch brings her to somatic knowledge conscious of itself, of who she was, of who she is. Anne’s relief is to awaken to full being” (Young 2003, p. 85). Because of this full recognition from Wentworth, Anne can begin her process of recovery.

While spending time around Wentworth helps restore her bloom, her full restoration begins at Lyme, when Wentworth sees a visual exchange, where Mr. Elliot⁸ notices Anne and admires her while they walk along the Cobb. Because Anne has been in the company of Wentworth, her “bloom” begins to revive, which draws Mr. Elliot’s attention (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 75). Wentworth notices Mr. Elliot’s attention and gives Anne a look that suggests “That man is struck with you,—and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 75). This moment shows Wentworth’s jealousy and his desire for Anne. Wiltshire notes how “Wentworth’s preoccupation with Anne—made clear on the Winthrop walk—is here brought a stage closer to consciousness” (Wiltshire 1992, p. 185). In seeing Anne desired by Mr. Elliot, Wentworth reignites his passion for her and briefly allows his anger to dissipate. Also, Anne, due to the attention she receives from Wentworth and Mr. Elliot, resumes some of her youthful bloom. Anne becomes desirable again.

These examples can be interpreted in the light of what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson has termed staring as a means of “mutual recognition” (Garland Thomson 2010, p. 199). While Thomson provides this concept of staring as a means of understanding the fascination with the other, her theory offers some insight into the connection between Anne and Wentworth. Without the gaze of each other, they were prone to impairments. The more time they see each other, those impairments begin to dissolve. Thomson says being seen by others helps with self-development: “Staring’s pattern of interest, attention, and engagement, the mobilization of its essential curiosity, might be understood as a potential act of be-holding, of holding the being of another particular individual in the eye of the beholder” (Garland Thomson 2010, p. 205). Anne and Wentworth behold each other. Throughout the novel, how they view each other shows their connection to each other. In other words, they can behold each other in ways that others cannot, which shows their true companionship.

When Mr. Elliot notices Anne on the Cobb, Austen notes that restoration of Anne’s bloom has begun, but it is “restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of the eye which it had also produced” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 75). Being seen by Wentworth restores Anne. In her previous brief physical encounters with him, she could mistake his actions for moments of kindness and consideration, but when she experiences Wentworth’s jealousy of Mr. Elliot, Anne can be fully restored. In that moment, Wentworth’s attachment to Anne becomes clear. As another man takes notice of Anne for the qualities that Wentworth admired, Wentworth sees Anne as the person he asked to marry him. Anne, in turn, becomes that person, even if it is only for a moment. It

is both a foreshadowing of Anne at the end of the novel, as well as a reminder that Anne only suffers from a temporary impairment. Anne's bloom can easily be restored through the admiration of Wentworth.

3. The Insight of Mrs. Smith

In her early characterization of Anne, Austen uses a metaphor of loss of bloom as an impairment to represent the physical effects of losing love and falling prey to authority figures. These metaphors critique the obsession with appearances that often lead to marriages based on maintaining those appearances. Anne's loss of bloom shows how a woman who submits to these social structures instead of love can be physically harmed. Unlike some of the characters harmed by a social fall, Anne's impairments remain temporary because companionate marriage with Wentworth remains an option. Thus, through a reconnection with her love, Anne can overcome this temporary impairment.

Although she never wavers in her love for Wentworth, Anne has a brief flirtation with another companion. Mr. Elliot offers Anne the potential to continue her life as she has always known it. He represents the life of landed gentry, rather than the life of the navy. Thus, on the surface, Mr. Elliot remains a reasonable suitor for Anne to consider. As mentioned before, the gaze of Mr. Elliot helps restore Anne's bloom, but Anne must travel to Bath, a site of recuperation, to fully gain Mr. Elliot's attention and discover his true intentions. While her recovery begins in Lyme, Anne's true restoration happens in Bath.

In Bath, Anne meets with her old school friend Mrs. Smith, who suffers from illnesses that led her to treatments. When Mrs. Smith prods Anne about her potential marriage to Mr. Elliot, Anne insists that she has no intention of marrying him, which inspires Mrs. Smith to give true insight into Mr. Elliot's character. Mrs. Smith confesses that Mr. Elliot has contributed to her "ruin" and that he is "a man without heart or conscience" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 140). While Anne's romantic focus was on Wentworth, she recognized the familial obligation of a match with Mr. Elliot, who is a suitor who would please her father and Lady Russell.

Mrs. Smith's experiences with Mr. Elliot completely removes him as a potential companion. Thus, Mrs. Smith serves as a guide for Anne, one who knows the suffering that comes from relying on Mr. Elliot. Anne even acknowledges this: "Mrs. Smith has been able to tell her what no one else could have done" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 150). Mrs. Smith provides insight for Anne, thus serving as a metaphorical representation of the consequences of choosing a mate other than Wentworth. Mrs. Smith's experiences, as well as her illness, make her a character with insight because as Austen scholar Stefanie Markovits says (Markovits 2007), Mrs. Smith has "demonstrated elasticity" (p. 791) because she has already experienced "a fall" (p. 791). Her illness shows what could happen to Anne if she married Mr. Elliot, but it also gives Anne an experienced voice of persuasion that leads her on the correct path to Wentworth.

Once Anne hears of Mr. Elliot's disregard for the ruin of Mrs. Smith, Anne sees the contrast with the honorable Wentworth. Wentworth becomes even more worthy, to use Austen's pun, as she sees Mr. Elliot's true character. Thus, Mrs. Smith's illness and fall provide a prosthesis to explain the true character of Mr. Elliot. His heartlessness has caused physical harm to Mrs. Smith, who loses her health and her status. Mrs. Smith is a physical representation of the harm of social-climbing men. The harm done to Mrs. Smith serves as a metaphor for the harm that Anne could experience if she were to choose a match based on preserving the gentry.

4. Wentworth's Anger and Louisa's Fall

While Anne internalizes her loss, Wentworth reacts to Anne's rejection with an anger that causes harm to others. Wentworth directs this anger at Anne through his attempts to ignore her, through passive-aggressive remarks about the inconstancy of women (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 63), and through his careless flirtation with Louisa Musgrove, who mistakes

his anger for affection. The first glimpse of the anger comes in the novel's first encounter between Anne and Wentworth:

Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtesy passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full-full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it. (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 43)

Wentworth acknowledges Anne through the expected politeness of the era, but does not speak to her, instead addressing only Mary and the Miss Musgroves. Their reunion shows that Wentworth sees Anne, but he ignores her and takes pains to talk with everyone but her. Austen scholar Marilyn Butler notes that Wentworth's "frame of mind is calm and nearly dispassionate" (Butler 1975, p. 278). Unlike other characters, Wentworth sees Anne, but remains cold and distant by withholding his attention. Young argues that both Anne and Wentworth lack a fully embodied emotional response to each other: "For Anne to recover her body (feel herself in her body), and for Frederick to acknowledge from such an attachment there is no recovery (feel himself in his feelings), each must recover the lost relational object that enables them to experience happiness again as an embodied feeling of attachment" (Young 2003, p. 89). Thus, as a couple separated, Anne cannot recover her full physical health (or bloom), and Wentworth cannot recover his full emotional capacity (let go of his anger), until they attach to each other. While they remain apart, Anne lacks bloom, and Wentworth experiences anger.

Because Wentworth ignores Anne, she only hears his public opinion of her through the Musgroves. Therefore, Mary tells Anne that Wentworth described her as "so altered he should not have known you again" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 44). In contrast, Anne views Wentworth as all the more "manly" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 44) in response to this criticism of her physical appearance: "Anne, a member of the landed gentry, suffers from a declining physical appearance; likewise, Captain Wentworth, a product of upward social mobility, 'glows' with a more attractive countenance" (Bailey 2011, p. 33). The Wentworth who has returned from war and now courts other women has become more attractive.

In describing his perfect wife, Wentworth highlights his anger. When prodded about marriage, Wentworth offers a brief description of his potential wife: "A strong mind, with sweetness of manner" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 45). Foremost for Wentworth remains this strong mind, hinting at Anne's weak mind for calling off their engagement at the influence of Lady Russell. Claudia Johnson asserts: "A strong man himself, Wentworth knows, or at least he thinks he knows, that he wants the same qualities in a woman" (Johnson 1988, p. 150). Wentworth's description of this strong-minded woman becomes clearer in his hazel-nut speech, which playfully compares the strength of a nut to that of the type of woman he seeks: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 45). This speech criticized Anne's lack of strength to choose him, despite her family's objections, but also tells Louisa that she needs to have this type of strength to be a worthy companion.

This speech has two listeners: Louisa, who takes it as a missive of how to please Wentworth, and Anne, who recognizes this firmness of mind as the opposite of what happened in their failed romance. Anne's calling off the engagement made Wentworth value decisions unaltered by influences from family or friends. While Louisa interprets this speech as a roadmap for how she should behave, Anne and, in turn, the reader see this as a representation of Wentworth's anger toward Anne. This anger at Anne's change of heart goes against the expected behavior of men of this era, according to Claudia Johnson: "But Wentworth does not appear to believe that the inconvenient modesty of the maiden will be redeemed by the submission of the wife, or to value the 'feebleness' so often held to be part of women's duty as well as her charm" (Johnson 1988, p. 149). Wentworth does not seek a weak wife, but he wants a partnership. Because of her rejection, Wentworth sees Anne as weak of mind, and because she is physically altered since her decision, she seems physically weakened, as well.

Wentworth's anger leads to an uncaring treatment of Louisa, who suffers a fall because of Wentworth's flirtations and insistence on a strong-minded partner. Louisa performs that "strong-mindedness" in her insistence that Wentworth help her jump off the stairs at Lyme. When she is advised not to make her last jump, Louisa says: "I am determined I will" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 79). Wentworth fails to catch the jumping Louisa, which clarifies what Young describes as Wentworth's "unthought known attachment to Anne" (Young 2003, p. 88). In failing to catch Louisa, Wentworth inflicts his pain on Louisa, causing a physical and metaphorical fall. While Wentworth suffers from an internal head injury, Louisa manifests that injury, as she also has "no wound, no blood, no visible bruise" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 79). Louisa's injury mirrors Wentworth's pain, but, because she is a young woman, Louisa's injury is physical and permanent. A distraught Wentworth recognizes this shared injury in his utterance "Is there no one to help me?" (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 79). Wentworth's carelessness with Louisa develops into a head injury that leaves Louisa unconscious, in much the way Wentworth unconsciously played with her affections. Louisa bears the physical mark of the "head injury" that Wentworth experiences in his anger.

The fall jars Wentworth into realizing the damage he has inflicted on Louisa, a key revelation for Wentworth, according to Butler and Claudia Johnson. Butler says Wentworth realizes "that what he took for firmness of character in Louisa is really an extreme self-will which disregards rational restraints" (Butler 1975, p. 276). Wentworth wanted to believe that Louisa was the strong-minded woman he sought, but Louisa was instead just "persuadability to him in disguise" (Johnson 1988, p. 156), and he is to blame because, as Claudia Johnson says, "he rewards her with his praise" (Johnson 1988, p. 156). In other words, Louisa lacks the strong self-will, but creates an illusion of self-will to please Wentworth. Louisa is not strong-willed, but rather a weak-willed woman who alters to suit Wentworth's attentions (Wiltshire 1992, p. 186).⁹ Wentworth sees his own weak will in succumbing to anger and denying his true affections for Anne. Through Louisa's fall, Wentworth begins to recover from his anger, but the aftereffects of his anger differ from the internalized loss of bloom suffered by Anne. Louisa faces permanent physical effects and loses consciousness, eventually becoming a milder person. Anne was fully conscious of her loss, and that carries a physical effect. Again, a woman suffers at the mental weakness of a man. Wentworth's lack of acknowledgment of his own anger at Anne's rejection causes physical harm to Louisa, who serves as a metaphor of the wrong path for Wentworth.

5. The Paths Not Taken

Anne and Wentworth receive insight into the partners wrong for them through the metaphorical and physical falls of Mrs. Smith and Louisa Musgrove. Both lovers also are given insight into the importance of a marriage based on rationality and compatibility in the physicality of the Musgroves and the Crofts, two couples that represent potential paths for Anne and Wentworth. Anne's sister Mary's marriage to Charles Musgrove is a marriage based on financial considerations (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 69).¹⁰ The marriage shows the two of them often apart from each other, with Charles hunting and Mary seeking attention through her hypochondria. Living a sedentary marriage based on wealth, the Musgroves live independently. The two partners are not companions, and this is manifested in different physical reactions. As a woman with little to do, Mary relies on imagined illnesses, in part because she is bored and desires more attention from her spouse.¹¹ Mary creates physical ailments to elicit an emotional and physical response from her spouse (Farr 2019, p. 166).¹² Additionally, Charles spends most of his time away from home, often participating in outdoor sports to avoid his domestic unhappiness. Their relationship represents the disconnect and unhappiness associated with matches based on financial consideration. Because they are not happy, Mary focuses her mental energy on creating physical impairments, rather than connecting to her body. Charles spends his time on physical pursuits, rather than connecting emotionally and physically to his spouse. They are incompatible and represent what would happen if Wentworth were to marry Louisa.

Conversely, Austen offers an example of the marriage of suitable income and companionship with the Crofts, who provide a metaphoric representation of what companionate marriage should look like. Anne describes the Crofts as “particularly attached and happy” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 46). Auerbach asserts that the Crofts’ “marriage is a naval marriage, different in kind from any other in Jane Austen’s books, and it will set a hopeful pattern for Anne and Wentworth’s” (Auerbach 1972, p. 123). Not only as a naval couple do the Crofts represent ideals of naval officers rising in financial and social rank, they also share a deep physical commitment to each other. Additionally, because this naval marriage relies on the two of them traveling the world together, it suggests a marriage of action and reliance on each other. They are connected in both mind and body and, thus, are happy in their match. Unlike Mary’s imagined physical ailments, Mrs. Croft remains physical strong, saying “I have always been blessed with excellent health” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 51). In fact, Mrs. Crofts notes her only sickness was during a brief stint away from her husband, when she suffered from “all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself” (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 51).¹³ Mrs. Croft experiences illness, which she describes as imaginary, when she is apart from Mr. Croft.

Anne and Wentworth are clearly designed to emulate the Crofts, in the naval marriage, but also in the connection based on rationality and companionship. Because Anne rejected Wentworth in their youth, they are mired by their temporary impairments. These temporary impairments are Anne’s depression, which leads to her lack of bloom, and Wentworth’s anger, which leads to his haphazard courting of Louisa and her eventual fall. Anne internalizes her feelings, causing a physical diminishment. Wentworth externalizes his feelings, causing physical harm to Louisa. Even as these impairments cause a separation, it is not until Anne is seen by Mr. Elliot that Anne and Wentworth realize the harm they are doing to each other by neglecting their connection.

6. Conclusions

While Anne and Wentworth go through a slow process to reconciliation, their personal impairments are resolved. In fact, there is some level of restoration for both Louisa, who recovers and falls in love with Benwick (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 121), and Mrs. Smith, who, with Wentworth’s help, receives money from her husband’s West Indies estate (Austen [1817] 2013, p. 178). The companionate marriage between Anne and Wentworth eliminates or lessens the impact of illnesses and injury. As Anne and Wentworth wed, Mrs. Smith’s life is more financially solid, and Louisa has found happiness with another. The companionate marriage heals the woes of those who find it and those who surround them.

Going back to Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis, a cure remains part of the theory. To fulfil this concept of narrative prosthesis, the story is marked by difference or deviance, and the story “rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 53). For *Persuasion*, the companionate marriage based on rationality is the “cure”, or the rehabilitation. For this Austen work and others, this marriage functions as the ideal, as the “purification of the social body”. A marriage of respect, affection, and rationality is what Austen’s novel endorses.

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Notes

- ¹ While this piece will focus on an interpretation of Austen’s novel, other scholarship has examined Austen’s personal life during the creation of *Persuasion* and the work itself. Additional scholarship could examine this with more depth.

- 2 I intentionally use the word impairment because it carries a more physical connotation to it, rather than the word disability, which often carries with it both the physical and societal associations with the word. Impairment functions more as a description of a characteristic, rather than as a term like disability, which carries with it the social implications that James L. Cherney says includes “structures that privilege come body types and conditions over others”.
- 3 Mitchell and Snyder assert that disability has a long history in literature “as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight”.
- 4 I am using this term quasi-disabilities here to suggest how these disabilities function as a story element more than representing lived experiences of disability. Essaka Joshua asserts that disability in the long eighteenth century (which Austen is often associated with) was “any kind of incapacity in a person or thing”, whereas deformity was “used to describe congenital and acquired impairments that are visible”. In *Persuasion*, there are visible and invisible impairments and, thus, somewhere between incapacitating and aesthetic. Joshua, “Disability and Deformity”.
- 5 Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8. Lennard Davis also describes normal as a construction: “But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society”. It is also important to note the normal as we understand it today did not exist in Austen’s era, as even the word normal was not used in English until 1840 (Davis 1995, p. 24).
- 6 This study is focusing more on the female characters, who either experience impairments or recover from impairments in this novel. There are other examples of impairments, including Captain Harville, who “had never been in good health since a severe wound which he had received two years before”.
- 7 Auerbach says: “Only Anne is provided with a significant and autonomous inner world, which is strong enough to pull her from the incessant conflicts around her”.
- 8 Mr. Elliot will be used to describe the younger Mr. Elliot, Anne’s cousin, who will inherit Kellylynch. The older baronet, Anne’s father, will be referred to as Sir Walter.
- 9 Wiltshire says: “Louisa is high-spirited, enthusiastic, and has been flattered by the attentions of an unusually attractive and forceful man”.
- 10 Captain Benwick and Fanny Harville are the tragic version of another potential path for Anne and Wentworth. Fanny Harville dies while Benwick is trying to earn enough money to marry. Because of Fanny Harville’s death, Benwick experiences loss, just as Louisa experiences loss after her fall at Lyme. Benwick and Louisa could be an area for further study, but I focus on the Musgroves and Crofts, as they are actual couples at the time Anne and Wentworth are rekindling their romance.
- 11 A similar comparison could be made with *Emma*, in the way that Mr. Woodhouse often uses potential illnesses and dangers to keep Emma close to home.
- 12 In Farr’s analysis of Austen’s *Sanditon*, he points out that: “Austen’s acerbic portrayal of hypochondria and invalidism reveals an embodied queerness in characters who are remote from heterosexuality”. Additional research could examine the potential queerness of the Musgroves.
- 13 This offers a stark contrast to Mary Musgrove’s imagined illnesses, which are used to get attention from her husband and his family, who pay little-to-no attention to her.

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