Persuasion and Sexuality

Many transformations occur within the novel *Persuasion*. However, the most important transformation is that of Anne’s sexual renewal. Anne’s change is not a result of any physical sexual experience, but rather as a product of emotional stresses placed upon Anne from outside sources. It is this sexual renewal that allows Austen to share feminine truth through Anne, using the novel as a feminist argument supporting independence.

The generic marriage plot of Austen’s novels is well known and well studied. They follow the familiar romantic archetype of a man meets a woman, they fall in love, there is conflict, the conflict is resolved, they get married. *Persuasion* follows this plot and seems to be another generic love story, but what makes *Persuasion* different is the development of Anne’s sexual transformation and the importance it holds within the novel. Scholars Brown and Markovits argue that Austen’s work is wrongly interpreted as feminist because Austen was a female writing about the female experience. They claim that there are few other feminist qualities to Austen’s work. Brown questions the true definition of “feminist tradition,” asks why it should be important in the overall meaning of the novel, and argues why the work is not a piece of “liberation feminism” but rather a study of “womanhood” (322). Similarly, Markovits proposes that the literal and figurative falls in Austen’s work are references to the fall of Eve and woman’s inherent fallen state. The fall of Eve and similar ideas are against the feminist tradition and therefore give Austen anti-feminist sentiments (780). However, Anne’s sexual renewal and
resulting independence in *Persuasion* does support feminist ideals and gives meaning and importance to the “female tradition.”

Through her sexual journey Anne finds an independence that allows her to break away from the Romantic noblewoman mold and discover her true desires. Austen addresses Anne’s sexual transformation in many ways, including physical and psychological change, sexual humor, sexual jealousy, feminine truth, and dominance over male characters.

Anne experiences her physical transformation when Wentworth returns to her social circle. After her initial rejection of Wentworth, Anne’s young beauty underwent an “early loss of bloom and spirits” (21). This physical change and the emotional damage of losing Wentworth did not make Anne entirely undesirable, Charles Musgrove unsuccessfully attempted to court her during this period. Anne did not respond physically to Charles’ advances because she did not find him sexually compatible. This proves that Wentworth’s compatibility was a factor in Anne’s change.

Upon Wentworth’s return and the beginning of the novel Anne experiences a drastic physical change that is the pivotal point in her sexuality. Her “eyes were bright and her cheeks glowed” (131) because of her renewed romantic fervor and independent strength. She experiences a sexual renewal that not only changes her physically but it changes her psyche as well and brings about her bold actions that draw Wentworth’s attention. Even Sir Walter remarks that she is “less thin in her person, in her cheeks; her skin, her complexion greatly improved” (102). Anne uses her regained looks as a source of empowerment and sexuality.

Anne’s sexuality is used by Austen to add depth and humor to an already strong character. Heydt-Stevenson argues that sexual humor in Austen’s novels “announce her ‘knowingness,’ since laughter, like sexuality, is associated with agency” (312). By exploiting
humor Austen becomes a source of empowerment, showing that the bawdiness of sexual humor can be used in favor of a female when used in support her repressed sexuality. The idea that laughter and sexuality are associated with agency, and Austen’s use of these elements, provides a sense of empowerment that allows her characters to break away from their romantic and good-natured molds.

Heydt-Stevenson also states that the sexual humor in *Persuasion* “shows how Anne Elliot’s frankly gratified appreciation- her sexualizing- of Wentworth’s physique empowers the woman being courted” (316). By sexualizing Wentworth, Anne appeals to the male gender role of sexualizing a female’s body. Anne turns the gender role around allowing herself to gain psychological power and dominance over Wentworth through his objectification. This pivot of the “male gaze” occurs in the novel when Anne and Lady Russell are walking on the street in Bath and Anne sees Wentworth across the street. Anne wonders how Lady Russell will react to this encounter but Lady Russell does not acknowledge if she noticed Wentworth or not. She does remark on window curtains, discussing a certain set as being the “handsomest and best hung of any in Bath” (126). This can be interpreted as an allusion to Wentworth’s body. Heydt-Stevenson states that “‘best hung’ implies ‘well-hung’” Heydt-Stevenson references the OED from 1611 with a definition for “well-hung” as “furnished with large pendent organs; (of a man) having large genitals.” This double-entendre could be interpreted to be explicitly referencing Wentworth’s body and Lady Russell’s observation of his sexuality. This joke is unexpected because it does not follow the “rigid expectations of the trajectory that we assume her humor should take.” Lady Russell could simply be talking about curtains but our “train of association leads us to think about Wentworth’s body” (334). The view we see after we get the joke is
necessary to showing Austen’s range of humor and also of the way in which “ideological blinders have prevented us from following that train of thought” (334).

Sexual jealousy manifests as a possessiveness of a lover or potential lover when a rival appeals to or takes action towards said lover. Anne’s jealousy of Wentworth’s attention to Louisa and Henrietta creates a sexual jealousy that motivates Anne to pursue Wentworth’s affections. When Wentworth first arrives in Uppercross Anne is anxious to see him again, but his polite and detached actions towards her and obvious attraction to Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove only drive Anne to believe that she has lost Wentworth’s love forever. This sexual rejection makes Anne doubt her sexuality and believe that she cannot offer Wentworth the desirability and high spirits present in the Musgrove sisters. While on a trip to Lyme Anne encounters the handsome Mr. Elliot, whose interest in Anne reaffirms her sexuality.

Louisa’s fall in Lyme is representative of the fallen state of woman in accordance to the Christian tradition of the fall of Eve. Markovits argues that this event reinforces anti-feminist sentiments as the fall of Eve is not recognized by the feminist movement as part of the nature of women (781). Louisa’s fall is a result of her foolishness in jumping down the steps. Because Louisa is not self-recognized like Anne she relies on childish ploys to attract the attention of her suitors. Louisa serves as a foil to Anne in their personalities and in the way they participate in courtship. However, Louisa’s fall is not the focus of this part of the novel, rather it is Anne’s control of the situation which exhibits her new assertive personality. Anne is first to take action and assert her dominance over the men present by directing them how to care for Louisa and consoling their fears. This is another gender-role pivot that shows Anne’s confidence in her sexuality. It exhibits Wentworth’s femininity and his dependence on Anne’s direction. By
allowing Anne to show her dominance over him he loses that component of his sexuality allowing Anne to factor it into her own confidence.

Wentworth and other men in the novel exist to confirm feminine truth as shared by Anne. Morrison argues that “men are of secondary importance in [Austen’s] novels, however useful they may be to the plot, and male experience becomes relevant only in so far as it confirms ‘feminine’ truth” (341). She defines feminine truth as universal truth reflected through female experience. This observation is true in *Persuasion*’s explication of the relationship between Anne and Wentworth and the importance it has to the novel. Wentworth is a minor character in dialogue and character compared to Anne, but it is through his interactions with her that confirm her feminine truth. Sexuality is universal but traditionally is quite different between men and women. Shuttleworth, in a response to multiple Kinsey studies on human sexuality, disagrees with Kinsey’s theory of male and female sexuality including the idea that the greater responsiveness of males to psychological stimuli is attributed to the fact that “males are more often conditioned by their sexual experience . . . than females.” Shuttleworth shows that this occurrence is not due to cerebral factors, but to the fact that males have been “subjected to more sexual conditioning during infancy, childhood, and adolescence.” Shuttleworth goes on to claim that it is not biology that inhibits aggressive male sexual behavior, but “a complex of social forces teaches one thing to males and another to females” (162-163). Society, including the Romantic society in which the novel is placed, teaches men that male sexuality is about ego and dominance, the attractiveness of a sexual partner directly correlates to the male’s status. The Elliott family is worried about Mrs. Clay’s intentions in her friendship with Sir Walter because they do not believe that she is beautiful enough to be an ideal mate for him. This relates to the Marxist themes of the novel, but also identifies Sir Walter’s sexuality and the action he takes in
refusing her advances. Females are taught through these “social complexes” that they should be coy and virtuous. Aggressive sexuality is not a becoming trait of a noblewoman. When Anne becomes confident in herself she sees that female sexuality is transcendent and empowering. When a female accepts her body and is content and confident in her sexuality she can use this will over the egotistic wants of men. She demands their respect and in return earns it in her confidence. Anne’s sexual confidence is exhibited by her actions in Lyme and later in Bath when she rejects Mr. Elliot because of his moral flaws and accepts Wentworth’s declaration of love. These assertions take place after Anne’s regeneration and define the arrival of Anne’s now complete independence.

When studying the alignment of feminine sexuality and Marxist theory we see that Anne’s class directly affects her sexuality. Persuasion’s theme of class and duty is observed by all of the characters except for Anne and Wentworth. Anne’s family places a very high regard on class standing and the customs and traditions that are assumed by their specific class, the lower gentry. It is this propriety and sense of duty that prevents Anne from marrying Wentworth following their initial courtship. Anne’s class essentially prevented her from fulfilling her sexual desires therefore interrupting her sexuality. The lower gentry esteems themselves and their well-born bodies to be above those of lower classes. Due to this ideology and primogeniture laws incest was common among the upper class. Anne’s short-lived relationship with Mr. Elliot is an example of a marriage set-up to favor both parties. Mr. Elliot would remain heir to Kellynch and Sir Walter’s title and become more amicable to the Elliot daughters while Anne would benefit by keeping Kellynch in her direct line and by remaining a member of the gentry. This marriage seems to the reader to be arranged as it is strongly supported by Anne’s family and Mr. Elliot. However, Anne’s empowered sexuality gives her the agency to reject Mr. Elliot after she
discovers his troubled morals and true intentions for the estate. This independence leads Anne to a more stable future with a man who will treat her with the respect that she demands.

Anne’s sexuality is not only influenced by her primary suitors. Her sexuality does not solely rely on these men but obtains confidence from other men and even women. The Marxist Reimut Reiche defines true sexuality as not being “unlimited single and group copulation, access to pornography, legalized prostitution. . . and the like.” He argues that true sexuality “is made up of full genital sexual enjoyment.” Reiche states that sexuality involves “‘mutuality’ or the capacity to feel, to respond, to empathize, to give as well as receive” (996). Sexuality is neither solely dependent nor independent, but is created within an individual through outside stimuli and through the individual’s response to the sexuality of others. Anne strengthens her sexuality through interacting with men and drawing from their physical appearance and desires. She does not solely have mutuality with her suitors, Elliot and Wentworth, but also with men on the street. While on a visit in Bath, Anne silently interacts with a man she passes on the street. “He looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration which she could not be insensible of. . . . It was evident that the gentleman (completely a gentleman in manner), admired her exceedingly” (108). This interaction aids Anne’s confidence and the mutuality she feels with the man on the street contributes to her sexuality. Anne’s ability to have mutuality with others besides her primary suitor is an empowering practice that appeals to modern feminist arguments.

Though it may seem to the reader that she relies solely on men to provide this mutuality, making her dependent on them, the truth is that she experiences mutuality with everyone she interacts with, regardless of sexual intention. Anne participates in mutuality with Mrs. Smith when she shares and empathizes with her. This proves that Anne does not need to rely on the
approval of men, but has meaningful relationships with other women and it is those relationships which support her independence.

Anne’s decision to marry Wentworth at the end of the novel is the final example of independence Anne exhibits. She trusts that Wentworth will respect her and confirm her “feminine truth.” Anne “was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth’s affection” (178). Anne’s independence has not made her hard-hearted or cold to others. She has not adopted masculine attributes due to her transformation, rather she has cultivated her femininity. In marriage she remains independent in the sense that she is aware of her confidence and remains in control of her thoughts and actions. Anne does not allow marriage to place her back into the mold of the Romantic woman.

Austen’s use of sexuality in *Persuasion* is effective in supporting feminist ideals of independence and fighting the Romantic ideals of a male dominated society that imposes gender roles, physical standards, and traditional virtues on women. It is though her sexual transformation that Anne gains the independence to break away from the Romantic female mold and prove to Austen’s contemporary female readers that they can follow Anne’s example. From a modern standpoint the reader’s new ideas of independence and the use of sexuality in a Romantic text provide support for today’s feminist movement and the individuals who advocate feminist ideals.
Works Cited


