

Persuasion, Vol. IV, Chapter XI

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People who think *Persuasion*¹ Jane Austen's finest novel are responding to its intensity and passion, qualities it adds to those of the earlier novels. The intensity and passion are nowhere better seen than in the letter-writing episode of Vol. IV, Chapter XI. While Anne Elliot and Captain Harville dispute whether women or men love more truly, Wentworth sits apparently out of earshot—writing a business letter—but listening intently. What he hears Anne say drives him to renew his proposal to her, by means of a *second* letter, written to Anne during and about the conversation and responding to its detail. “I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others. . . . You do us [men] justice indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among men. . . .” One could in fact correlate such detail of his realizations with the stages of the previous



“With eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her”
Chapter XXIII.

conversation, to record how each charges the other, so charting the stages of this moving dénouement.

Instead, I wish to suggest a possible source or analogue, which creates the same kind and degree of intensity by similar means. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* the disguised heroine, Viola alias the epicene Cesario, debates the identical topic with the Duke Orsino, whether men or women love the more truly. Intensity of passion here derives from the fact that Viola is speaking in disguise, about herself but undisclosed: "My father had a daughter loved a man . . .," and this so-called sister of Cesario pined away for love of a man, such as Orsino. She lets him see a flicker of her love when she says how her sister loved a man, "As it might be perhaps, were I a woman. / I should your lordship" (II.iv.105-07).² Orsino responds to the flicker, forgetting his own opinions and his unrequited passion for Olivia in contemplating Cesario's portrait of women's misery.

Now though the situation does not tally with that in *Persuasion* the two share the clarifying of affection by means of ostensibly general chat; in the one work a redirecting and deepening of the man's love, in the other an emboldening and deepening. The shared medium of this clarifying of feeling is utter uneventfulness: two people talk, the talk is generalities, no outward actions occur. Yet, because of the context so carefully prepared up to these scenes, and through the multiple ironies, the simplest of devices—disguise in Shakespeare, overhearing and letterwriting in *Persuasion*—achieve miraculously much. The sheer accomplishment of both writers may be best seen in such bold economies.

Whether the Shakespeare scene be a source or rather an analogue, I conclude that the comparison just sketched works to the advantage of the later writer. Whereas it takes Orsino another eight scenes and a fit of savage jealousy to realize that Viola had been saying she loved him, Wentworth comes to the point *within* the scene. Such boldness befits a sailor, and this one. But in context we register the human risk he is taking. If he renews his proposal now, after eight and a half years, a second refusal would be far more hurtful than his first; it would be downright humiliating. Hence the most passionate tone of the letter: "Believe it [true attachment and constancy among men] to be most fervent, most undeviating in, F.W." It is now or never.³ Here is one of several crises in *Persuasion* where Jane Austen seeks and attains the conviction of passion more often admired in the Brontës.

† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the on-line edition of this essay. – C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager

NOTES

¹ All quotations are from R. W. Chapman's edition, volume 5, in *The Novels of Jane Austen* (London: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1933, reprinted 1954). In one-volume editions of *Persuasion*, the relevant chapter is 23.

² *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (The Indos Edition), London: Collins, 1951. A comparison with *Twelfth Night* is conducted in Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 210-11, though along different lines.

³ As the postscript implies: "A word, a look, will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house this evening, or never."