

The Hero and the Other Man in Jane Austen's Novels

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Two types of men that people Jane Austen's novels are the hero and the "other man," the romantic figure who attracts but does not win the heroine. With the exception of *Northanger Abbey*, in which Catherine Morland immediately falls in love with Henry Tilney, all of Austen's novels feature the other man. George Wickham, John Willoughby, Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford, and William Elliot are on hand to divert the attention of the heroine, to arouse the passion or jealousy of the hero, and to provide tension and uncertainty about the heroine's choice and the final outcome of events. Often, the other man is played against a hero who suffers, at least initially, by comparison. How many young women, or readers, would find Edward Ferrars or Colonel Brandon as exciting, as romantic, or even as interesting, as Willoughby? Who would be more entertaining at a dance, Darcy or Wickham? Who is more amusing, Mr. Knightley or Frank Churchill?

Although Austen's heroes improve with acquaintance while her other men tend to reveal deeper and deeper character flaws, the charm and personality with which the author endows these men compared with the often staid heroes prompts one to ask why the unreliable, untrustworthy men are presented as such personable characters.

Wickham, Willoughby, Crawford, Churchill, and Elliot know how to gain the attention of a young woman. They cannot, however, hold that attention. With the exceptions of Marianne Dashwood and Catherine Morland, Austen's heroines are realistic and sensible, and they realize that whatever attractions he possesses, the dashing young suitor would not make a good husband. As Philip Mason notes, the heroine's "sense of propriety, her perception of what is genteel and elegant, will preserve her from any attachment to a young man markedly inferior" (74) in class or behavior.

As each novel unfolds, the other man demonstrates his inferiority to the hero. Frank Churchill is not the man that George Knightley is. He kowtows to his aunt on whose whim his future wealth depends, nearly destroying his and Jane Fairfax's happiness in the process; he involves Jane in a clandestine engagement and he teases her publicly when she has no means of protection or response. George Wickham cuts a dashing figure in his regimental reds, but his engaging manner and looks cannot make up for the fact that he squanders money, does not pay his bills, stretches the truth to suit himself, and

has run off with a fifteen-year-old girl. Henry Crawford elopes with a married woman, and Willoughby impregnates and abandons Eliza Williams before destroying Marianne Dashwood's peace and happiness. William Elliot shows himself a selfish creature who acts by the Smiths in a cruel way.

The other man may glitter and entrance but he is not made of the stuff which augurs a companionable partnership and domestic tranquility. By contrasting the hero and the other man, Austen shows the qualities she deems requisite in a husband. As the other man loses stature, the hero gains it. His honor, steadiness, kindness, good sense, breeding, and intelligence become apparent to heroine and reader alike. The most obvious example of the hero-"other man" reverse in status is Mr. Darcy and Wickham, who change places in the esteem of Elizabeth Bennet. Slowly and quietly, in a completely gentleman-like manner, Jane Austen's heroes prove their worth.

The hero's worth and integrity, however, do not automatically render him a satisfactory character. Some readers are less than pleased with the husbands Austen has given her heroines. More than one reader has felt that Austen shortchanges Marianne Dashwood not only by pairing her with Colonel Brandon, but also by rendering her more reserved and less vivacious in order to suit him. As Jane Miller writes:

The passionate love of Marianne for Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* may not . . . survive a marriage, let alone a marriage which is financially insecure. Yet the prospect of this lively young woman sharing the bed and bearing the children of Colonel Brandon is not an easy one to accept, and is likely to be felt as deserved punishment for earlier rashness or as potentially making the best of a bad job. (147)

Colonel Brandon is not the only hero found lacking. Austen's heroes may be reliable, but they are not all warm or romantic or exciting. Judith Wilt sees the other man, whom she terms "the Handsome Stranger," as "a touch of anarchy in an organized world, a direct challenge to a future-oriented society, a consciously historical society, in the name of immediate pleasure and spontaneous action" (66). The presence of the other man in an Austen novel provides interest and makes a lively story, but it also lends a wistful note and a glimpse of what the heroine has forsaken in order to secure a comfortable, harmonious future. For those who mourn the relinquishment of the other man, who find Edmund Bertram a touch too righteous, Edward Ferrars dull and colorless, Darcy a bit stiff, Colonel Brandon and George Knightley a little too old, Jane Austen has created Frederick Wentworth of *Persuasion*.

In *Persuasion*, just as Austen grants the 27-year-old spinster heroine Anne Elliot a second chance for a happy future, so she gives Anne her version of the ideal husband. Captain Frederick Wentworth

is the steadfast, industrious, mature, and rational man that Austen considers her heroine would want for a husband. The same Captain Wentworth is the vigorous, traveled naval officer who exhibits the attractive manners, ease, presence, and glamour of the other man. With a "great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy" (*Persuasion* 26), Captain Wentworth is uniquely suited to be both lover and husband.

Unlike Austen's other heroes, Wentworth appears in the guise of a suitor at two different stages of his life. He first strides onto the scene full of youthful confidence. Like Austen's other men, Wentworth is at leisure; he has the time and inclination for courtship.

Wentworth—like Wickham, Willoughby, and Churchill—has no fortune. Unlike them, however, he does not count on a woman (young or old) to finance his future. He has entered a profession that will allow him to be as active and successful as he can be.

[H]e was confident that he should soon be rich;—full of life and ardour, he knew that he should soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to every thing he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still.—Such confidence, powerful in its own warmth, and bewitching in the wit which often expressed it, must have been enough for Anne. . . . (27)

As we know, it is not enough for Anne's relatives and because the couple's engagement was broken and Wentworth has gone to sea again, he does not emerge as the hero until nearly eight years later. When Frederick Wentworth re-enters Somersetshire, he displays the charms of the other man but he also demonstrates the solid qualities that denote a gentleman and an Austen hero.

All his sanguine expectations, all his confidence had been justified. His genius and ardour had seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path. He had, very soon after their engagement ceased, got employ; and all that he had told her would follow, had taken place. He had distinguished himself, and early gained the other step in rank—and must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune. . . . in favour of his constancy, she had no reason to believe him married. (29-30)

Wentworth has been industrious, ambitious, honorable, and faithful to the memory of Anne Elliot. But now he is on shore, ready to woo, and in terms of attractions and interaction with women, Wentworth is less like the hero and more like the other man of an Austen novel. He enjoys being in company: "His profession qualified him, his disposition led him, to talk" (63). He charms the entire Musgrove family. Louisa and Henrietta find him "infinitely more agreeable" (54) and handsomer than any other young man they know. Charles and Mary comment on his unreserved manners, and Anne notes that his years at sea have given him "a more glowing, manly, open look" (61).

Although superficially Frederick Wentworth is akin to the other man, in essentials, he is as heroic as Darcy or Knightley. There are numerous instances in the novel that prove him worthy of hero status. Frederick Wentworth is honorable—willing, if not eager—to marry Louisa Musgrove if she wishes and expects it. He is considerate, speaking kindly to Mrs. Musgrove of “poor Richard” who alive was a grievance to all. He also shows compassion for Anne, noticing her fatigue and arranging for her to ride home from an outing while everyone else walks. When the novel’s setting switches to Lyme, Frederick Wentworth’s solicitous relationship with his naval comrades becomes apparent.

Philip Mason, who traces the concept of a gentleman through history and English literature in his book, *The English Gentleman*, states that Captain Frederick Wentworth was Austen’s most perfect hero, successful and faithful to Anne’s memory (78).

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

In her other novels, Austen gives us an ideal picture of marriage for 18th-century young women; ideal in the sense that the heroines are allowed sanctioned unions with the men they love. The portraits of these men, however, are tempered by realism. The men are good, they are kind, they do things that might be considered heroic, but they are not perfect, and they are not every woman’s dream husband. In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen does not hold out on her heroine. Not only is Anne Elliot given a second chance for love and marriage, she is given Captain Frederick Wentworth—Austen’s version of the ideal hero—who yet has the attractions of the “other man.”

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