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ENG 295

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### Charles Austen's Influence on *Persuasion*

Jane Austen's character Frederick Wentworth in the novel *Persuasion* is based upon her real life brother Charles Austen. Frederick Wentworth, or Captain Wentworth as he is referred to in the novel, has a career path similar to Charles Austen. Captain Wentworth had physical attributes congruous to Charles Austen. The fictional character Wentworth is an homage from a big sister, Jane Austen, to her little brother Charles Austen. Events during the Napoleonic war in Charles's life is parallel to the events Wentworth went through in real life. The modeling of Wentworth after Charles is complimentary of Charles's past as well as optimistic for his future. Wentworth and Sir Walter's oppositional attitudes about appearance are fictional representations of problems that Charles Austen might encounter when dealing with English upperclassmen. Oppositional attitudes about appearances of Wentworth and Sir Walter are advisement to Charles and other Naval officers dealing with the changing post-war society. Jane Austen had two brothers but Wentworth is more like Charles Austen than Francis Austen. Other Naval characters besides Captain Wentworth merely resemble Francis Austen, whereas Wentworth is commensurate of Charles. Captain Wentworth is structured after Captain Charles Austen.

Captain Wentworth's naval career is a duplicate of Charles Austen's naval career. Frederick Wentworth has spent eight years in the service of his country, Great Britain, prior to the events of *Persuasion*. During that time, he was promoted to the rank of Captain. Captain is the middle of the rank structure. Frederick Wentworth had climbed from the rank of Midshipman

to Sub-Lieutenant to Lieutenant to Commander and then to Captain. If successful, he would ascend from Captain to Commodore, Rear Admiral, Vice Admiral, and potentially Admiral. The other main Naval characters in *Persuasion* are Midshipmen Dick Musgrove and Admiral Croft. Wentworth depicts a transitory state of being. He is the man that Dick failed to become and the man that Admiral Croft once was. Dick is summarized as, “nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done anything to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead.” The purpose of Dick Musgrove is to show the growth that Wentworth has achieved. Dick’s shortcomings are the possible, and perhaps probable, outcomes of most midshipmen and they contrast sharply against Wentworth’s great success in war. Both Wentworth’s past and future are described by Charles Musgrove who, “was very sure that he [Wentworth] had not made less than twenty thousand pounds by the war. Here was a fortune at once; besides which, there would be the chance of what might be done in any future war; and he was sure Captain Wentworth was as likely a man to distinguish himself as any officer in the navy” (Austen). The eight years he spent in the Navy granted him wealth and status as well as improved his looks, these improvements are described by his eventual bride, Anne Elliot, “the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages” (Austen). Captain Wentworth rose from the bottom to the middle and shows all the signs of rising further still. In addition to wealth and rank, he has gained handsomeness.

Charles Austen, at the time of *Persuasion*, being written, was also a handsome man with a glorious past behind him and a spectacular future ahead of him. Austen biographer Hubback explains, “Henry, Francis, and Charles were all exceptionally handsome men” (Hubback).

Charles started out his Naval career as a midshipman on board the *Unicorn*. Captain Williams of the *Unicorn* was given the honour of knighthood after capturing the French frigate *La Tribune* while Charles was aboard. The battle to capture *La Tribune* took place in 1796, only two years after Charles began sailing (Hubback). This exciting introduction to Naval warfare instilled a passion for the life of a Naval officer in Charles. His passion would energize Charles throughout his long naval career which ended as, “Admiral in command during the second Burmese War (1852), when he died at the front.” For fifty-eight years, Charles Austen served in the British Royal Navy, thirty-five of those years were spent after Jane Austen’s death in 1817 (Spacks). Hubback adds details of Charles ascendancy, “In 1810, Charles gained post rank as captain of the *Swiftsure*. *Persuasion* does not tell us the exact date of Frederick Wentworth’s promotion to Captain. The event of *Persuasion* take place during the same time as it was written, 1814-1815 (Spacks). During 1815, “Captain Charles Austen was kept busy with Greek pirates in the Archipelago until the *Phoenix* was lost off Smyrna in 1816. He then returned to England” (Hubback). Wentworth and Charles Austen became Captains the same year and lived extremely synchronous lives. Historical dates and coincidences are the assumed reasoning behind creating a character who is a British Naval Captain, but why make Wentworth so heroic instead of simply a dutiful Captain?

Captain Wentworth is an exemplary figure in the novel *Persuasion*, not just an ordinary officer of the British Navy, but special like Charles Austen was special. Often times, subordinates offer the clearest, most unbiased descriptions of their superiors. Hubback explains that a midshipman in the Navy during 1800s would have been, “specially under the eye of the captain, who was supposed to make them keep accurate journals, and draw the appearances of

headlands and coasts” (Hubback). Those who were successful in their naval career could be expected to praise their Captain in a reciprocal manner. Dick Musgrove was a, “midshipmen as every captain wishes to get rid of” (Austen) and despite his poor performance and subsequent scoldings he still writes letters: “In each letter he had spoken well of his captain—mentioning him in strong, though not perfectly well-spelt praise, as ‘a fine dashing fellow, only two particular about the schoolmaster’” (Austen). Southam chronicles, “the very qualities of character which won British Captains mastery of the seas. As for Wentworth himself, ‘genius and ardour’ set him on a ‘prosperous path’ to prize-money; and in combat he ‘distinguished himself’, and early gained the other step in rank’ (to Captain)” (Southam). Captain Wentworth could have been a suitable character by being an average Naval officer. He is presented as an unusually wealthy man who has attained uniquely great amounts of success.

Wentworth’s success in battle are the sisterly compliments of an older sister to her younger brother and war-hero, Charles Austen, a war hero. His career after Jane Austen’s death was exemplary but did not affect her development of the character Captain Wentworth. Jane Austen biographer Reef shares that at the time of creating Wentworth, Austen had only the knowledge of Captain Charles Austen to draw inspiration from. She may have predicted even more greatness to come for her little brother, but she didn’t need to because he already was a war hero and an officer at the age of thirty-six when she wrote *Persuasion*. Charles Austen’s heroism is best exemplified by his actions during the Napoleonic war. During which he blockaded the port of Brindisi as Captain of the *Phoenix* with the *Garland* under his orders (Hubback). The profits of war, in the form of jewelry, were shared by Charles with his sister Jane. Southam describes the interactions between sister and little brother, “These gold chains and crosses, Jane

wrote to her sister, would make them ‘unbearably fine’, a thought that Charles, no doubt, would be delighted by, since he paid attention to his sisters’ gowns and expressed his admiration for them. In turn, Jane Austen would comment on his radiant health” (Southam). Charles was successful in war and Jane benefited from it by the pleasure of having a successful brother and the gifts he would bestow upon her. In return for these gifts she would compliment him with comments about his health and create a flattering character as a homage to him. Captain Wentworth was Jane’s way of showing her love and affection for her brother, a brother who she most likely wished to continue having a happy life even after the end of Napoleonic War.

When Charles returned to England after chasing pirates in Greece, he returned to a country that was filled with men who had not served in the military but were nonetheless regarded highly by the class structure. *Persuasion* is not all praise for the Navy as a result. A book couldn’t be written solely about a wonderful Captain. Jane Austen’s tribute to her younger brother is juxtaposed sharply against the obeisance gesture of the creation of Sir Walter. Sir Walter’s negative qualities. By creating Sir Walter, Jane creates a very real novelic representation of the oppositional forces Charles would face at home. Charles is happy in marriage during the writing of *Persuasion*, so the quest for love that the novel centers around is not related to his current situation. His eventual return to England and subsequent confrontation with baronets and upperclassmen would occur. Jane foresaw this conflict, created an allegorical sub-plot, and then comforted and reassured her brother of his future well-being by granting victory to his representative character, Captain Wentworth. In order to do this, she first needed to create an unlikeable Sir Walter who is “a conceited, silly father” and “growing dreadfully in debt” (Austen). She then properly catalyzes the conflict between Wentworth and Walter by having Sir

Walter describe Naval officers as, “offensive to me. . .being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of. . .becoming prematurely an object of disgust” (Austen). Sir Walter is “defeated” in the sense that his opinion of Naval officers changings greatly by the end of the novel so much so that he describes Captain Wentworth as, "A well-looking man," said Sir Walter, "a very well-looking man" and when it came to a Naval officer marrying his daughter, “Sir Walter made no objection” (Austen). Physical appearance was extremely important during the 1800s which makes Sir Walter’s change of opinion very important and Charles Austen must have been very pleased to read it.

The exact importance of physical appearance in the 1800s is written about in *Dandies, beauties, and the issue of good looks in Persuasion* by June Sturrock. The Regency Period in which *Persuasion* was written was the period in which the word “dandy” came into vogue. Physical appearance is an important part of the novel which mostly focuses on Anne’s bloom, or lack of it. Masculinity and physical appearance are discussed at length in the novel with detailed descriptions of characters or characters describing others physical appearance. This near-obsession with male appearance in the book was reflective of the society of the early 1800s. During the Regency Period “dandies” or men with extravagant clothing and desires to look highly fashionable, were abundant. These “dandies” were lampooned frequently in print with one particularly amusing story about a man who was burnt to death because he was trying to save a pair of fancy boots he apparently couldn’t live without. Sir Walter isn’t precisely a dandy but he is pretty close. The shared traits of narcissism and love of “looking glasses” qualify him as dandy-esque. His and Elizabeth’s constant talking about the maintenance of physical beauty are

related to the popularity of studying physiognomy during the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Physiognomy is, “The study of the features of the face, or of the form of the body generally, as being supposedly indicative of character; the art of judging character from such study” (OED).

Sir Walter’s opinion about the appearance of navy men changes into, “ when he saw more of Capt. W.— and eyed him well, he was very much struck by his personal claims and felt that *his* superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against *her* superiority of rank”

(Austen). Unlike Sir Walter and Elizabeth’s unchanging “beauty” and accompanying obsession with it and everyone else’s, Anne’s “bloom” changes during the course of the story. Her change in looks is a response to the changes in her surroundings, both physical and societal. She contrasts against the unchanging and confident Captain Wentworth, who in addition to unchanging is also not ambiguous.

Jane Austen had two novels, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*, which include strong naval presences. Southam explains that the accurate depiction of the British Navy is because of the communication Jane had with her brothers. Charles was Jane Austen’s younger brother but he wasn’t her only brother. Her older brother Francis Austen was a large part of her life as well. Perhaps Captain Wentworth is based upon Francis and not Charles? or maybe Wentworth is an amalgamation of them both, and so are all the other naval characters. There are similarities and differences between Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft and between Charles Austen and Francis Austen that show that is not the case. The rank is the most apparent difference, Croft being an Admiral and Wentworth being a Captain. The difference is less so with Francis, a Flag-Captain, and Charles a Captain during the writing of *Persuasion*. Their position in the family is more important because little brothers are treated different than older brothers. Jane was

more likely to write about a young Captain because of the influence of her younger brother. Hubback chronicles how Francis was successful in the Napoleonic wars but Charles was more successful in regards to prizes (money) won. Often times, the similarities are so great that Southam lumps these two men together as “the sailor brothers” (Southam). When viewed as individuals the evidence is great that Captain Wentworth is more alike to Charles Austen than Francis Austen.

The individuality of the brothers and its importance is explained by Brian Southam in *Jane Austen's sailor brothers: Francis and Charles in life and art*. Brian Southam dissects the two men and examines what made them who they were. Francis’s life was a life of success. His achievements seem to come easily and frequently and he does not experience the kind of setbacks that Captain Wentworth experiences. He is successful in love as well and is married twice. He does not share Captain Wentworth’s success at profiting from war and loses the chance at a big prize in 1806. He does share similar hobbies with Captain Harville including carpentry, carving, toy-making and handicraft (Southam). Certainly the novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* were tributes to both brothers whom Jane Loved very much. But the quiet, brooding Francis is not as similar to Captain Wentworth as the lively boisterous Charles Austen. Charles spent much of his time at sea and his behavior was unavoidable but could be considered neglectful, which is the apprehensions of Anne when she marries Captain Wentworth. Whereas Francis was enjoying time at home with his family, Charles was at sea more, living a life that would be unappealing to Lady Russell. Brian Southam clearly separates the two brothers and Charles individualism shows how he imbued Jane Austen when she actualized Captain Wentworth on the page. Fanny, Charles Austen’s wife, was adored by Jane and possibly



inspiration for the character Anne would become after marrying Captain Wentworth.

*Persuasion* is the last novel ever written by Jane Austen. The novel has two versions of the same ending: Anne marrying Wentworth who is a gracious winner. Wentworth treats those who mistreated him in the past with kindness, “Lady R—in spite of all her former transgressions, he could now value from his heart;—while he was not obliged to say that he believed her to have been right in originally dividing them, he was ready to say almost anything else in her favour. . .” (Austen). We do not know exactly how he lives the rest of his life but if he acts righteously towards Lady Russell then it is safe to assume that he treated others the same. We do know that he gained many friends through his marriage to Anne. He treated those friends kindly, “Captain Wentworth, by putting her [Mrs. Smith] in the way of recovering her Husband’s property in the W. Indies, by writing for her, and acting for her, and seeing her through all the petty Difficulties of the case, with the activity and exertion of a fearless Man, and a determined friend, fully requited the services she had rendered” (Austen). Jane Austen not only wrote Wentworth as having lived a good life but writes a hopeful future for Wentworth and everything about his conduct is positive and predictive of a happy life including continuing to serve the Navy and spent time in the West Indies.

Hubback tells us of a future we do now about, the future of Charles Austen, “In 1826 Charles was again on the West Indies station” (Hubback). It is probable that after reading *Persuasion* in 1816 Charles was both flattered and inspired by Wentworth and chose to live in the West Indies. The loss of his sister would have been painful and he might have lived his life with the knowledge that she was looking down upon him and expecting great things. Like Wentworth reciprocating the kindness of Mrs. Smith, Charles Austen could have reciprocated the

kindness of his sister's inclusion of himself in her novel by living a good life. Hubback illuminates us as to the events of Charles's life after his sister's death. Charles Austen became a Rear-Admiral in 1846 and was appointed Commander-in Chief on the East India Station in 1850. He died on October 7, 1852, having written a letter to his wife the day before.

*Persuasion* is a story about courtship and the influences that affect it. The excitement of eight years of Naval service is not described in detail, but the tidbits that are there are thrilling and exciting. Wentworth's career in the navy is a heroic tale and adds to his appeal and subsequent frustration felt by the reader when Anne doesn't simply rush into his arms the second his feet hit the shore. This career was chronologically similar and had the same tonality of Charles Austen's naval career. *Persuasion* has one midshipman, three captains, and one admiral but they are not all the collective influence of Francis Austen and Charles Austen, Jane's navy brothers. Jane created a story whose subplot dealing with societal trends, vanity, and the definitions of handsomeness would have been a support to her brother who was returning to England after fighting in a war. The complimentary tribute, or homage, of Wentworth is a sign of affection from an older sister who loved her baby brother. She admired his past and had high hopes for his future. The fictional assumed future happiness of Wentworth and Anne was actualized in the reality of Charles Austen's life after the death of his sister. Jane Austen had a close relationship to her family and her characters and she used her real-world brother to create the novel-world character, Captain Wentworth.