

JANE AUSTEN'S PERSUASION - 200 years later

Jane Austen was born in 1785 in Hampshire, a rural part of south west England.

She was one of 7 children and (for a girl) received a good education. By the time of her death in 1817, she had written 6 major novels which went on to become classics of English literature. One of these, *Persuasion*, her last novel, was first published a year after her death in 1818.

Austen's books were published anonymously. At the time, the ideal roles for a woman were as wife and mother, and writing for women was regarded at best as a secondary form of activity. We know very little about her personal life because her sister, Cassandra, with whom she was very close, kept her diaries and the secrets within them very closely guarded after her death. However, although all her novels have at their heart the role of the female in society and in romantic relationships, we do know that Jane Austen never married, and probably never found true love.

It seems that in 1802 she did agree to marry someone called Harris Bigg-Wither, but the next morning she changed her mind. There are also a number of contradictory stories connecting her with someone with whom she fell in love but who died very soon after. But Jane Austen's own novels provide indisputable evidence that their author understood the experience of love and of love disappointed. *Persuasion*, is just such a novel.

It tells the story of Anne Elliot, a woman who at 27 is well past the bloom of youth and is set to become a spinster. Some years earlier she met and fell passionately in love with a young naval officer, Captain Wentworth. However she was 'persuaded' to break off the engagement by friends and family, who questioned the wisdom of her marrying a penniless young naval officer without family or connections. A stroke of fate brings Wentworth back into Anne's life and social circle eight years later when he is now a successful self-made man and the focus of attention for all the single women present wishing to marry well.

As Anne and Wentworth re-negotiate their feelings for each and the expectations of others, Jane Austen explores issues of class, age, character and personal ambition.

Of all the novels that Austen is best known for, this one seems to me the darkest and most tender. Deep feelings of jealousy, shame and bitterness are stirred in the principle characters who, as in *Pride And Prejudice*, are forced to face personal failings before they can find



happiness. Anne made a mistake, she was guided by the misplaced advice and social influence of others, and now lives a cold life of self sacrifice and service to others. Intelligent and sensitive, she lives with regret whilst others, spurred on by ambition and selfishness, seem to prosper. Everyone needs Anne, but no-one seems to appreciate her fully. I first read the novel as a 16 year old student and this tale of thwarted love made a huge impression. The way Austen paints the painful details of first love, and of living with a daily reminder of love lost, is part of the power of this subtle book, and what makes the final resolution so very satisfying

"All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one: you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone!"

In the end, Anne finds her true voice and is rewarded by Wentworth's love and admiration again. Jane Austen asks some difficult questions about the role of female characters in a male society. And just as Anne has struggled to be heard by those around her, the Author also gives her heroine the last word on the role of the female author.

"Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. ...the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" *Persuasion*

In this year of Suffragettes you could do worse than give this wonderful testament to female endurance a read.

Sonia Beck



Sonia is co-director of Lighthouse Theatre. Lighthouse Theatre are a touring theatre company based in Wales, UK. They have been delighted to make regular visits to The Anglo Institute, running workshops and performing a number of shows in the theatre. They will be contributing monthly articles to the newsletter, looking at different British writers and playwrights.