

## from “*Persuasion*: The Righting and Re-Writing of History” [from *Jane Austen and the Navy*]

[Brian Southam’s *Jane Austen and the Navy* examines Austen’s family relationships and naval records, along with her novels, to position her as a historian of the British Navy. In this chapter, Southam argues that with *Persuasion* Austen “set out to write a determinedly morale-boosting novel” that would show the Navy at its best. He compares the novel’s descriptions with the historical realities of the Navy, including its shifting status in popular opinion, the life of women upon ships in wartime, and naval discipline and advancement.]

Nelson was once Britannia’s god of war,  
And still should be so, but the tide is turn’d;  
There’s no more to be said of Trafalgar,  
Tis with our hero quietly inurn’d;  
Because the army’s grown more popular,  
At which the naval people are concern’d;  
Besides, the Prince is all for the land-service,  
Forgetting Duncan, Nelson, Howe, and Jervis.  
Byron, *Don Juan* (canto i, octave iv)

Writing in September 1818, Byron announced this great sea-change in national sentiment at the very opening of *Don Juan*. It was a shift of loyalties that Jane Austen had observed as well; and in *Sanditon*, her last, uncompleted novel, begun early in 1817, the turning of the tide in favor of the Army, at the Navy’s expense, is alluded to lightly. Mr. Parker, Sanditon’s speculative promoter, is keen to keep his new seaside resort abreast of fashion. He regrets using the name “Trafalgar House” for his new home, “for Waterloo is more the thing now,” and Waterloo he is keeping “in reserve,” ready for a “Waterloo Crescent” for visitors the following year.<sup>1</sup>

It was no mystery why Wellington had taken over as the nation’s hero, why Strand Bridge, started in 1811, should be renamed Waterloo Bridge by Act of Parliament in 1816. Military success was fresh in memory whereas the great naval victories were events of the past.

---

1 *Minor Works*, p. 380. [All Jane Austen novels cited here are the Oxford editions, edited by R.W. Chapman (1923), 6 vols. Footnotes have been modified to include full references for the material reproduced here.]

Since Trafalgar and St Domingo the naval record was tame and unmemorable, with no engagement of such magnitude and none to provide such a stirring brew of tragedy and triumph. In response to Napoleon's concentration of naval power, Britain's strategy at sea was one of containment. From Venice to Toulon, along the Channel ports, to Antwerp and the Texel, and northwards to the Baltic, the French fleets, growing in size,<sup>1</sup> were held in tight blockade, a policy which was successful but unspectacular. In the closing stages of the Long War, the great victories and battle honors were won on the mainland of Europe, the scene of Napoleon's final defeat. In these events, the Navy played a purely supporting role for the British and allied armies fighting near the coast. Beyond this, the Navy was also active in trade protection and control. But all this was routine and unexciting, certainly to the nation at large. In the words of the *Naval Chronicle*, by the Summer of 1814 the Army had "overtaken the royal navy" "in the race for glory."<sup>2</sup> By how much was measurable: *The Aegis of England* (1817) by Maurice Evans, a Navy and Army Agent, listed *The Triumphs of the Late War as they Appear in the Thanks of Parliament*. Of the nineteen naval Triumphs, as many as fifteen were achieved up to and including Trafalgar, while in the remaining nine years of the war, only four were added. By comparison, the Peninsular campaign and Waterloo on their own, brought a total of eight Triumphs for the Army. ...

The Navy was itself highly sensitive to the question of its standing. Four years earlier, in July 1812, Vice-Admiral Sir Sidney Smith had written bluntly to Liverpool, the Prime Minister, advising him that having destroyed "all opposition on the coasts of the four quarters of the globe," the Navy had "worked itself out of employment" and was now left to play a supporting role to "the Army in all its operations."<sup>3</sup> It was not just that the Navy felt overshadowed. More seriously, its prestige was badly dented in its latest theater of action, the War of 1812 against America (touched on, for a moment only, in *Mansfield*

---

1 Following Trafalgar and St Domingo, the French fleet was reduced to thirty-five ships-of-the-line. But "Bonaparte flung himself into the task of out-building the Royal Navy." By 1813 his fleet of ships-of-the-line had grown to eighty ready for sea, with a further thirty-five under construction, a total of 115. The comparable British total was 102 (Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, 1973, p. 19).

2 *Naval Chronicle* (January-June 1814), xxxi, Preface, p. v.

3 Michael W. McCahill, "Peerage Creations and the Changing Nature of the Political Nobility, 1750-1850" in Clyve and D.L. Jones, eds., *Peers, Politics and Power: The House of Lords, 1603-1911* (1986), pp. 420-21.

Park).<sup>1</sup> In military terms, judged alongside the Napoleonic struggle, this was no more than a side-show. For the Navy, however, it ranked as a humiliating episode. Britain's mastery of the seas was challenged by an American force which consisted, at the opening of the war, of no more than eight frigates and twelve sloops. But the bare figures are deceptive. The American frigates were super-frigates, exceptionally powerful, utilizing hulls the size of a British second-rate; and their navy as a whole was highly professional with valuable operational experience in fighting the Barbary pirates of North Africa.

Thinking of the Americans as disobedient children to be taught a lesson, to its dismay, the British Navy found itself out-sailed, out-maneuvered and out-gunned. A historian of the period, Edward Baines, captures the shame of this reversal:

At the moment when America ventured to declare war against the most powerful maritime state in the world, her own navy (if navy it could be called) did not include one single line of battle ship, and the utter annihilation of her frigates and smaller vessels was predicted in this country with a vaunting confidence that gave increased poignancy to the disappointment and disasters which Great Britain was doomed in the prosecution of her naval campaigns to endure.<sup>2</sup>

The first engagement, a single combat in August 1812, was ominous. It ended with the capture of the *Guerrière* (38) by the USS *Constitution* (44). For the Americans, it was a historic triumph. As Baines puts it, they celebrated

a victory achieved over the lords of the ocean—over those who till now had claimed that element as their own, and had driven

- 
- 1 Picking up a newspaper, Tom Bertram asks Dr. Grant his "opinion" of the "strange business in America" (p. 119), this being the outbreak and early events of the war, "strange" because the United States declared war on 8 June unaware (on account of the six weeks it took for the news to cross the Atlantic) that Britain had just dropped the root cause of the dispute. These were the Orders in Council which restricted American trade with Napoleonic Europe and authorized the searching of American vessels for British sailors. Since Sir Thomas Bertram's voyage home from Antigua was made in September/October 1812, he would have been at risk from the Americans as well as the French.
  - 2 Edward Baines, *History of the Wars of the French Revolution, From the Breaking out of the War in 1792, to the Restoration of a General Peace in 1815; Comprehending the Civil History of Great Britain and France During that Period*, 2 vols. (1817), ii. 366.

from it all who dared to dispute their maritime rights and dominion.<sup>1</sup>

The loss of the *Guerrière* struck deep. Benjamin Haydon remembered “dwelling” on the news for “a whole morning, in sullen disgust. I felt as if I had been grossly insulted. I felt indignation & detestation at Dacres [the Captain] for not sinking [for not fighting to the finish]—such were the feelings of every one in the Kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> This is Haydon thirty years after the event, still complaining of the *Guerrière*’s surrender!<sup>3</sup>

Years of superiority had bred the presumption of success. The popular reaction in Britain was one of disbelief and anger, while in government circles the loss was regarded as nothing less than a “Naval disaster.”<sup>4</sup> *The Times* was scathing: “Never before in the history of the world did an English frigate strike<sup>5</sup> to an American ... Good God!”<sup>6</sup> With the country “ridiculously sanguine and secure,” it was a moment when “Our navy was to drive the pigmy fleets of America from the Ocean,” the *Edinburgh Review* reflected in 1814.<sup>7</sup> Instead, came news of defeat, a shock to the profession as well as to the nation. It monopolized the pages of the *Naval Chronicle*. The loss of the *Guerrière*, “one of our stoutest frigates,” was a disaster “rare in our naval annals,” an event that “so far compromised” “the character of the service” that lengthy explanations were called for.<sup>8</sup> Why was our American squadron not already reinforced? Why was a blockade not in place? (no easy task, given the extent of the American seaboard). With the threat of “these immense frigates,” “further misfortunes” were only to be expected and they duly followed.<sup>9</sup> Two months later, in October 1812, the *Macedonian* (38) was shot to pieces and surrendered to the USS *United States* (44); and on 29 December, in the third frigate engagement, the *Java* (38) was taken by the USS *Constitution*. The next issue of the *Naval Chronicle* was

---

1 Ibid., ii. 370.

2 Diary entry for 9 July 1813 (Benjamin Haydon, *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. William Bissell Pope, 5 vols. (1960–63), i. 311).

3 Diary entry for 29 August 1843 (Haydon, 1963, v. 305).

4 The words of Henry Gouldburn, Under Secretary for War and the Colonies, quoted in W.D. Jones “A British View of the War of 1812 and the Peace Negotiations,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 45 (1958–59), p. 484.

5 Striking was the lowering of a ship’s colors, a sign of surrender.

6 Quoted in G.J. Marcus, *A Naval History of England*, i, *The Age of Nelson* (1971), p. 460.

7 *Edinburgh Review* (November 1814), xxiv. 249.

8 *Naval Chronicle* (July–December 1812), xxviii. 343–44.

9 Ibid., p. 344.

dominated by these further disasters, regarded by one correspondent as “a national disgrace.”<sup>1</sup> Letter after letter came in from sailors distressed by these losses and the editor announced the *Chronicle*’s endeavor “to collect every document we could procure respecting The American Navy,”<sup>2</sup> information which, it was hoped, could show the way to success.

Naval voices were heard in Parliament too. During the Commons debate of 18 February 1813, George Canning, with past experience as a Treasurer of the Navy and as a Minister for Foreign Affairs, attacked the Government for its unreadiness in the face of a long-expected war. Amongst the public at large, he sensed “feelings of shame and indignation,” a “wholesome” indignation he called it,

which ought to be cherished and maintained. It cannot be too deeply felt that the sacred spell of the invincibility of the British navy was broken by those unfortunate captures: and however speedily we must all wish the war to terminate, I hope I shall not be considered as sanguinary and unfeeling when I express my devout wish that it may not be concluded before we have re-established the character of our navel superiority, and smothered in victories the disasters which we have now to lament, and to which we are so little habituated.<sup>3</sup>

In private, Canning would have heard the contempt and indignation of diplomats such as George Jackson, who felt that “the conduct of the naval war against the Americans ... would disgrace the sixth form of Eton or Westminster.”<sup>4</sup>

As further losses followed, the Navy’s reputation sagged. The Earl of Darnley, an inveterate commentator on naval affairs, struck a chord of eloquent dismay: “The charm of invincibility had now been broken” and the “consecrated standard” of Great Britain “no longer floated victorious on the main.”<sup>5</sup> Early in 1813, American privateers appeared off the coast of Portugal, capturing transports and supply ships, losses which led Wellington to complain bitterly at naval slackness and inefficiency, and gave the army an opportunity to crow. The military historian Fortescue pointed to a “dangerous hostility” between the services:

---

1 *Naval Chronicle* (January–July 1813), xxix. 12.

2 *Ibid.*, preface, p. vi.

3 *Hansard (Parliamentary Debates)* (vol. xxiv), col. 643.

4 Letter to his wife, 22 December 1812 (George Jackson, *The Bath Archives: A Further Selection from the Diaries and Letters of Sir George Jackson*, ed. Lady Jackson, 2 vols. (1873), i. 448).

5 *Hansard* (vol. xxvi), col. 182, 14 May 1813.

Hitherto the Navy had always treated the Army with contempt; and its arrogance had been extravagantly heightened by its own glorious successes, and by the innumerable failures of the red-coats. Now the tables were turned. The Army was triumphant; the Navy was humiliated; and human nature asserted itself at once. "I think," wrote Larpent after recounting the news of the American victories at sea, "I think the Army rather rejoice, and laugh aside at all this falling on the Navy, as they bullied so much before."<sup>1</sup>

(Francis Seymour Larpent was Wellington's Judge-Advocate in Spain.)

Far from ending "speedily," as Canning had hoped, the war wound on inconclusively for another two years, with actions off the Atlantic coast and on the Great Lakes and a series of raids aimed at destroying coastal towns, expeditions which included the capture of Washington and the burning of its public buildings, a vengeful policy which aroused considerable dismay in Britain. But the Admirals on the spot took a dim view of American resistance. Sir George Cockburn, blockading the central Atlantic coastline, was outraged at what he called the "dastardly and provoking manner" in which the American citizens chose to defend themselves. They "took every opportunity of firing with their rifles from behind trees or haystacks, or from the windows of their houses upon our boats, whenever rowing along the shore within their reach, or upon our people [the ordinary sailors] when employed watering."<sup>2</sup> Cockburn's response was savage retaliation, setting fire to their homes and seizing their stores of food. The Commander-in-Chief on the North America station, Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, proved no less ferocious. In 1814, his orders to the Squadron Commanders "required and directed [them] to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as you may find." This was what he called "retributory justice."<sup>3</sup>

The American War proved costly for both sides and fruitless too. There was no victory. The United States failed in its ambition to seize Lower Canada; Britain made no conquests; and the Treaty of Ghent, signed in December 1814, amounted to little more than an agreement to stop fighting and return to the pre-war status quo.

---

1 J.W. Fortescue (1920), *History of the British Army, 1813–1814*, ix. 106.

2 Rear-Admiral Cockburn to Vice-Admiral Warren, quoted in Roger Morris, *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853* (1997), p. 92.

3 Quoted in Bryan Perrett, *The Real Hornblower: The Life and Times of Admiral Sir James Gordon, GCB* (1998), p. 106.

These were events on which the Austens were well-informed through the sailor brothers and their circle of naval friends. ...

Victory or defeat and “the protection of Heaven” were heartfelt matters on which Jane was prepared to reveal her deepest hopes and fears. Her correspondent, Martha Lloyd—in 1828, the second wife of Francis Austen—was then staying at a naval household in Bath, the home of a mutual acquaintance, Captain Whitely-Deans-Dundas. The future direction of the war was of wide concern. If it did take a turn for the worse, further naval reinforcements would be needed to face an American Navy now quadrupled in size and Francis might well have been recalled to active service. As it was, the Austens had a further reason for watching the progress of the peace negotiations at Ghent, which began in August 1814. Heading the three British Plenipotentiaries was Francis’ old patron, Vice-Admiral Lord Gambier, chosen to reassure the country that its maritime interests were in good hands—although, in reality, Gambier acted wholly on instructions received from London.

The Peace Treaty, signed on Christmas Eve, was more an occasion for relief than celebration, a mood caught in the *Naval Chronicle*. The Editor observed that the “strictures on the state of our navy, and the American war” planned for the Preface to the July-December 1814 volume would now be dropped.<sup>1</sup> But quite apart from this ignominious war, other things contributed to the decline in naval morale and its effect upon the public. One was the simple fact of war-weariness, “the irksome eighteen years’ confinement between wooden walls,” as Admiral Pellew put it.<sup>2</sup> Desertion was a growing problem, “running from King’s ships” a spreading ‘disease,’ one correspondent wrote in the *Naval Chronicle*.<sup>3</sup> ‘Zeal and energy’ were found ‘wanting,’ and this among the officers as well as the men.<sup>4</sup> The years of inactivity set the Navy’s old fighting spirit in decline. Captain Charles Napier reported that many officers believed ‘the falling off of discipline’ was to be attributed ‘to the length of the war, and the entire disappearance of the enemy, leaving the Navy little or nothing to do.’ ...

With the cessation of arms in mid-March 1815, the American War came to an end. On the 29th of the month, Jane Austen completed *Emma*. In mid-June, Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo. The following month he surrendered to Captain Frederick Maitland of

---

1 *Naval Chronicle* (1814), xxxii. v.

2 Quoted in C. Northcote Parkinson, *Edward Pellew, Viscount Exmouth* (1934), p. 412.

3 October 1813, xxx. 409–10.

4 Rear-Admiral Laughton, letter of 20 February 1812, quoted in Parkinson (1934), p. 413.

the *Bellerophon* (74) off Rochefort. At Tor Bay, on 7 August, Napoleon was moved to the *Northumberland* (74), for the voyage to St Helena. On 8 August, the very day that the London newspapers announced “Bonaparte has sailed,” Jane Austen began *Persuasion*.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background of naval defeat and humiliation and, over a longer period, the decline in naval spirit, Jane Austen set out to write a determinedly morale-boosting novel, a story designed (with an eye on the sailor brothers) to show the Navy in its best light, recalling the great days of Trafalgar and St Domingo, high points in the careers of Admiral Croft and Wentworth. Opening as it does in the summer of 1814—with Napoleon dispatched to Elba and the Navy scaling down—*Persuasion* was also designed to show the profession in peacetime. The return of naval men to civilian life in large numbers, after virtually twenty years of war, was a social phenomenon of some magnitude. Unlike the ordinary seamen, these returning officers were not leaving the Navy. No longer required on active service, they remained at home on half-pay. To use Jane Austen’s terminology, what was their personal and professional “character”?<sup>2</sup> What would be their impact on society? How would they be received and how would they fit in? How do their naval “manners” differ from the manners of polite society?<sup>3</sup> And how are these naval “manners” to be interpreted? What kind of husbands do they make? What do they look for in their wives? And what marks out a naval wife—the examples are Mrs. Harville and Mrs. Croft—and how are they shaped by the experience of a naval marriage? These, or something like them, are the questions Jane Austen aimed to answer in *Persuasion*, arranging these aspects of the naval theme around the imaginative and emotional heart of the novel, the story of Anne Elliot destined, after much suffering, to glory “in being a sailor’s wife.”<sup>4</sup>

These issues of personal and professional “character” are decisive in the story’s pre-history, the events of that momentous “summer of 1806”<sup>5</sup> when Anne Elliot was “persuaded”<sup>6</sup> to break off her original engagement to Wentworth, newly-promoted Commander for his

---

1 The *Northumberland* actually set sail on 11 August. Historians vary in their dates. I have followed Carola Oman, *Britain Against Napoleon* (1942), p. 349 and John Bowerbank, *An Extract From a Journal, Kept on Board HMS Bellerophon, July 15–August 7, 1815* [1815]. Together, they seem to provide the most convincing timetable for these events.

2 *Persuasion*, p. 99.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 249 etc.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 27.



part in the British victory at St Domingo. The compelling “persuasion” was not her father’s silent disapproval, his thinking the connection “a very degrading alliance” (an unpropertied Wentworth ranking far below the offspring of an established Baronetcy), for this was an objection Anne was ready to resist.<sup>1</sup> What drove her to break with Wentworth was Lady Russell’s anxiety, amounting to near panic, at the thought of her god-child taking a sailor for her husband. A sailor, moreover, of no fortune or family, a young officer wholly dependent for his success upon “the changes of a most uncertain profession” and without interest, having “no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession.”<sup>2</sup> In Lady Russell’s eyes, this was a man who would sink his wife “into a state of most wearing, youth-killing dependance!”<sup>3</sup> Wentworth’s confidence, his “intelligence, spirit and brilliancy,”<sup>4</sup> the energy and liveliness which appeal so strongly to Anne, only serve to excite Lady Russell’s fears:

he 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; but Lady Russell saw it very differently.—His sanguine temper, and fearlessness of mind, operated very differently on her. She saw in it but an aggravation of the evil. It only added a dangerous character to himself. He was brilliant, he was headstrong.—Lady Russell had little taste for wit; and of any thing approaching to imprudence a horror.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Ibid., p. 26.

2 These fictional circumstances, on the money side, are a replication of life not unusual in wartime England. An exactly similar situation can be followed in the *Journal of Betsey Wynne*. Aged sixteen and in love with a penniless Captain, she sets down her predicament. “Alas, how will this matter end. If he does not make prize money, it will never do, I should not mind it but my parents would never consent to it without he gets a pretty good fortune.” “The Spanish War is a great disappointment for us. But it will bring in prize money, a necessary thing for the accomplishment of my happiness.” Entries for 4 and 26 August 1796 (Fremantle, 1937, ii. 119–20, 124). Betsey’s story is worth following in full and is referred to later in this chapter.

3 Ibid., p. 27.

4 Ibid., p. 26.

5 Ibid., p. 27.

The irony that Jane Austen leaves unspoken here is that the traits which make Wentworth appear so “dangerous” to Lady Russell are 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). Having watched the “navy lists and newspapers,” with their report of “successive captures,” Anne “could not doubt his being rich.”<sup>1</sup> The elaborating detail, the precise measure of Wentworth’s success, comes later in the novel: his promotion to Captain in 1808 on his posting into a frigate, the *Laconia*, at the age of twenty-five; and his prize-money, when he returns to England in 1813, amounting to £25,000. Riches and naval rank are social advantages and Jane Austen invokes them in closing the story. Now a gentleman of “independent fortune,” Wentworth’s standing is “as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him” (since promotion above Captain was by seniority alone). Nonetheless, what finally carries the day with Sir Walter is Wentworth’s “superiority of appearance,” an attribute to match Anne’s “superiority of rank.” This, and a “well-sounding name” with its aristocratic associations,<sup>23</sup> brings him up to the mark as a son-in-law to be entered into Sir Walter’s “volume of honour.”<sup>45</sup>

However, the focus of the novel is not on the process by which Wentworth gains social and financial acceptability in the eyes of Sir Walter, but on the way in which Anne and Wentworth gradually come together again with a new understanding of each other’s qualities and a rediscovery of their love. ...

The first picture we have of the Navy’s homecoming, its peacetime reception in England, close on the formal ending of the war (the Peace of Paris was signed on 30 May 1814), comes in chapter 3. The scene is heavy with irony, the satire caustic. Having preserved the country throughout the war, the Navy, in the person of some “rich Admiral,” as yet unknown, is now to save the bankrupt Baronet in time of peace. Opportunism, not gratitude is in the air. There is no hint of patriotism, not even the slightest show of *amor patriae*.

---

1 Ibid., p. 29–30.

2 Ibid., p. 248.

3 “Wentworth” was also the family name of the Earl of Strafford, a connection which is made by Sir Walter (p. 23), informed by his “favourite volume,” “Dugdale” (pp. 3, 4). This was William Dugdale’s *The Ancient Usage in Bearing of Such Ensigns of Honour as are Commonly Called Arms* (1682). The edition of 1811 contains *A Catalogue of the Baronets of this Kingdom of England*, one of whom was William Wentworth, the current Earl, listed on page 70.

4 Ibid., p. 249.

5 “honour” carries a punning reference to *Honour* in the title of Dugdale.

In a minor comedy of “persuasion,” the naval virtues are recited, not those of ardor, zeal and gallantry, but those of “responsible tenants,” men with “very liberal notions,”<sup>1</sup> “so neat and careful in their ways.”<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter’s creatures, the aptly named Mr. Shepherd and Mrs. Clay, reassure him. Even so, the Baronet remains reluctant and grudging, unwilling to allow even a naval tenant free use (technically, the “privileges”) of the Kellynch house and grounds. All this is too much for Anne and her first words in the novel are spoken on the Navy’s behalf:

“The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow.”<sup>3</sup>

Mild and unemphatic, nonetheless the rebuke is sufficient to introduce Anne as the conscience of Kellynch, the only one to value the Navy for its service to the nation rather than for profit, in Mr. Shepherd’s naval image as a “prize” to be exploited: “If a rich Admiral were to come in our way, Sir Walter... .”<sup>4</sup> ...

The second naval episode—Wentworth amongst the Musgroves at Uppercross—could not be more different. Ignorant of naval matters, the household forms an appreciative audience. Jane Austen toys with a classic scene of romantic comedy, the hero returned from the wars to a roomful of young ladies (the Musgrove daughters, Henrietta and Louisa, plus their cousins, the Hayter daughters, unnamed and unnumbered) ready to fall at his feet. Wentworth, flattered and amused, is eager to oblige. He claims the hero’s privilege: “His profession qualified him, his disposition led him, to talk.”<sup>5</sup> He plays to the gallery with tales of success and hair-raising adventures, moving the Miss Musgroves to “exclamations of pity and horror.”<sup>6</sup> To all this, Anne is a silent and sorrowing observer. Her pain is less at the sight of Wentworth basking in the glow of attention than at the reminders of the past which arise from his talk of naval life. ...

Anne is not the only person affected by Wentworth’s reminiscences. They remind Mrs. Musgrove of her son Dick, who died two

---

1 Ibid., p. 17.

2 Ibid., p. 18.

3 Ibid., p. 19.

4 Ibid., p. 17.

5 *Persuasion*, p. 63.

6 Ibid., p. 66.

years before, aged nineteen. The elements of his story are given in chapter 6: “sent to sea, because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore,” he was such a midshipman “as every Captain wishes to get rid of” and had, after several moves, arrived at the *Laconia*. During the six months he was under Wentworth’s “influence” he had “written the only two letters which his father and mother had ever received from him during the whole of his absence; that is to say, the only two disinterested letters; all the rest had been mere applications for money.”<sup>1</sup> Having heard that Wentworth is coming to visit the Crofts at Kellynch, Mrs. Musgrove re-reads Dick’s letters, including his “strong, though not perfectly well spelt praise” of Wentworth “as ‘a fine dashing fellow, only two perticular about the school-master.’”<sup>2</sup> At Uppercross, the sight of Wentworth brings it all back and Wentworth sits down alongside Mrs. Musgrove (“of a comfortable substantial size, infinitely more fitted by nature to express good cheer and good humour, than tenderness”),<sup>3</sup> to attend “to her large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for.”<sup>4</sup>

The guying of Mrs. Musgrove continues in the next paragraph with a disquisition on the “unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize.”<sup>5</sup> Does Mrs. Musgrove really deserve such a flaying? A trace of Swift or Pope has entered the scene. ...

The “naval” importance of Dick’s story is to remind us that yes, there could be duffers, dunderheads and ne’er-do-wells amongst the youngsters at sea, that they were not all as bright, zealous and successful as William Price, and that, fortunately, there were Captains as responsible and good-hearted as Wentworth to care for the youngsters in their charge. Readers of Southey’s *Nelson* would remember this too about a great naval hero. In the second chapter, Southey describes Nelson’s care for the seamanship of the young Midshipmen and his concern of their “nautical studies” in “the schoolroom.”<sup>6</sup> ...

For a youngster’s point of view, we have the recollections of Douglas Jerrold, the journalist and *Punch* contributor, who became known as “the father of nautical melodrama.” The son of a Sheerness actor-manager, he joined the *Namur* as a Volunteer First Class in December 1813, at the age of ten. According to his son, Jerrold

---

1 Ibid., p. 50–51.

2 Ibid., p. 52.

3 Ibid., p. 68.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Southey (1813), p. 26.

remembered the ship—a towering three-decker of 90 guns—looming over him, a “great floating mass” with all “the pomp and power of a kingdom about it.” Under Charles’s care, the boy was well treated: “The good Captain Austen received him kindly”; he was allowed to keep pigeons; and found himself “petted.” Hours were spent in the Captain’s cabin reading Buffon’s *Natural History* “through and through.” This was an encyclopedic work—running from the theory and history of the Earth to mollusks and insects—thorough preparation for an Austen-trained youngster equipped to travel the world with his eyes open.<sup>1</sup> Much time was also devoted to Jerrold’s favorite occupation of getting up “theatricals.” This was an enthusiasm that Charles was ready to encourage. Like any experienced Captain, he understood the value of entertainment in keeping up a crew’s morale. Shipboard theatricals could be ambitious, with primitive scenery and costumes. “[A]n innocent amusement, much better than being idle and drinking,” Captain George Duff wrote home to his wife from the *Mars* (74) at sea, just before “the gentlemen of the cockpit” (the Midshipmen) put on “the tragedy of Douglas and the pantomime of Harlequin and the Miller” with painted backcloths and ladies’ dresses made out of old sheets and silk handkerchiefs.<sup>2</sup>

The ship’s boys ended each day with the singing of a hymn.<sup>3</sup> But there was another side to life on the *Namur*. As the port guardship for Sheerness, one of its functions was as a receiving-ship for men collected by the press-gangs, something Jerrold recounted in “Jack Runnymede: The Man of Many ‘Thanks’” (1838). A resentful and mutinous body, these sailors were forcefully disciplined and punishment was a routine feature of shipboard life. Such scenes left their mark on the youngster. Jerrold was to draw on this experience in the graphic description of flogging in *The Mutiny at the Nore: A Nautical Drama* (1830), which also brings out the horrors of surgery at sea, a sight he witnessed on the *Ernest* (12), transporting the wounded back from Waterloo. ...

[With Mrs. Croft, f]or the first time in Jane Austen we meet a woman whose life is shaped by the tides of war. Determined to be with her husband, whether at sea or on his stations abroad, during the fifteen years of their marriage Mrs. Croft has been “a great traveler,”<sup>4</sup> and the naval destinations are reeled off in the vivid dialogue of

1 Not, of course, the forty-four volumes of the complete French edition (1749–67) but almost certainly one of the English condensations, reduced in length to a volume or two. Many such editions were in circulation by 1812.

2 Letters of 9 and 10 November 1804, quoted in *Naval Chronicle* (January–June 1806), xv. 281.

3 W. Blanchard Jerrold, *Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold* (1859), p. 23.

4 *Persuasion*, p. 70.

chapter eight: the East Indies, Cork, Lisbon and Gibraltar, and four times across the Atlantic, voyages undertaken whatever the discomforts and dangers, whether in the confines of a frigate or the “accommodations of a man-of-war,”<sup>12</sup> and always with a sense of security in companionship[.] ...

Strictly speaking, it was against regulations to carry women on board ship unless on Admiralty orders, or, after 1806, on orders either from the Admiralty or a Captain’s “Superior Officer.”<sup>3</sup> Orders would be given, for example, for carrying the families of diplomats, such as the “Lady Mary Grierson and her daughters” returning from Portugal,<sup>4</sup> whom we can assume to be an Ambassador’s family. In practice, however, as Brian Lavery tells us, the wives of officers and petty officers were “often carried to sea” and usually did a specific job, such as “looking after the sick and wounded,”<sup>5</sup> as the wife of the Surgeon’s Mate might do. Observance of the regulations varied from ship to ship, depending on the Captain’s compliance and the complaisance or otherwise of the Flag officers involved. And while the Captains’ wives might be tolerated, the carrying of mistresses was going too far, although aristocratic Captains were prepared to buck the system, as Nelson complained to Sir John Jervis in 1797, pointing

---

1 Ibid.

2 Presumably the Admiral’s Flagship, in which she enjoyed far more spacious quarters, usually twice the size of a Captain’s. Betsey Wynne, allowed to travel in the Admiral’s quarters of the *Britannia*, a three-decker of 100 guns, found there “as good accommodation as we would have in any house on shore” Fremantle (1937), ii. 107. In a 32-, 36- or 38-gun frigate, the Captain’s accommodations occupied an area of approximately 33 x 26 ft, tapering to about 20 ft at the stern, divided by removable bulkheads. A standard arrangement allowed for three or four compartments; a great cabin, at the stern end, for entertaining, an anteroom or day cabin, a bedroom and a small pantry. A “water closet” or “seat of ease” was to be found behind a sliding door on each side of the great cabin. When the ship came into action, the outer bulkheads were dismantled, allowing access to the stern guns within the Captain’s area.

3 In the *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea* (1790), Article 38 of the instructions to the Captain or Commander reads as follows: “He is not to carry any Woman to Sea nor to entertain any Foreigners to serve in the Ship, who are Officers or Gentlemen, without Orders from the Admiralty.” This follows the wording, virtually unchanged, of the King’s Regulations of 1731. The *Regulations and Instructions* were slightly relaxed in the edition of 1806 inasmuch that “orders” could come from the Captain’s “Superior Officer” as well as from the Admiralty.

4 Ibid., p. 68.

5 Brian Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1793–1815* (1989), p. 141.

out that in the previous war with France (which ended in 1783), “not an Honourable but had plenty of them; and they will always do as they please. Orders are not for them—at least, I never knew one who obeyed.” ...

The official objection to Captains’ wives was realistic and commonsensical. Unlike the wives of the lower ranks, they could not be expected to do a job. On overseas stations there was the risk that their husbands would be tempted to loiter on shore, diverted from their duty at sea; and in fighting ships they were a distraction and could only be in the way. Some officers kept to the letter of the regulations. Writing home to his wife from blockade duty off Cherbourg in 1813, Captain James Gordon reported that his Commadore, Captain David Milne, had with him in the *Venerable* (74) his wife, two children and a maid. “What do you think of that? How officers can act so contrary to their orders I know not.”<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, we get an insight into the circumstances, as in Captain Dillon’s decision to take his wife and grown-up daughter with him in the *Leopard* (74), then engaged in ferrying troops from England to Portugal:

After mature deliberation upon my state of affairs, I thought it would be advisable to take my wife to sea, and, by uniting the two incomes together, we might live within our means. ... I wrote to propose to her to accompany me, judging that, in the command of a troopship, I should not have much cruising against the enemy. Consequently my wife would not be much in the way. She accordingly made her appearance, accompanied by her daughter and maid. I remarked that the officers were pleased at the arrival of the ladies, anticipating an amusing change in the monotony of a sailor’s life.<sup>2</sup>

Dillon’s daughter stayed in the *Leopard* for no less than ten months, leaving on her marriage to one of the Lieutenants, and his wife remained even longer.

Women such as these could not, in the words of Mrs. Croft, afford to behave like “fine ladies.”<sup>3</sup> Like her, they needed to be “blessed with excellent health,” capable of standing any climate and free from sea-sickness “after the first twenty-four hours.”<sup>4</sup> It has to be said, however, that Jane Austen skates over a good deal. The gap here

---

1 Quoted in Perrett (1998), p. 100.

2 William Henry Dillon, *A Narrative of my Professional Adventures*, ed. Michael A. Lewis, 2 vols. (1956), ii.172.

3 *Persuasion*, p. 70.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

between fiction and fact is wide. Even for the wives of Admirals and Captains, there was far more to be endured. A sound witness to this is Betsey Wynne. Before their marriage in January 1797, Thomas Fremantle warned Betsey that she had not seriously considered what life at sea with a frigate Captain would entail, details she recorded in her diary: “to what I engage myself, to how much misery I shall be espoused, how could I live on board? What shall I do if the ship comes to action? etc.” But she felt that she had properly thought of “all this” and was confident of enduring “the inconveniences which must of course occur from being at sea.”<sup>1</sup> Over a period of seven-and-a-half months, travelling from Naples to Portsmouth on the *Inconstant* (36) and the *Seahorse* (38), with stays of several weeks at Elba and Gibraltar, and an attack on Tenerife, Betsey was to face “misery” and “inconveniences” she had not anticipated. Despite being a good sailor, her own appetite sharpened by weather that laid other passengers low, there were storms of a violence to confine her to her cabin and give her sleepless nights, as did “the noise of the guns.”<sup>2</sup> Following the unsuccessful attack on Tenerife, the *Seahorse* took on board the “sick and wounded.” Betsey found the ship “worse than a hospital ... from morning to night and from night to morning you hear nothing but those unfortunate people groan.”<sup>3</sup> Fremantle, too, was injured, suffering a wound in his arm which remained unhealed for many months; and Nelson, more seriously injured, had his right arm amputated before joining Fremantle in the *Seahorse* on its way to England.

Even more distressing were the ship’s punishments. Fremantle was a strict disciplinarian and drunkenness, a habitual offence, resulted in “Much flogging” of the crew. In her cabin, Betsey “could distinctly hear the poor wretches cry out for mercy,” something which “broke my heart.”<sup>4</sup> To convey the brutality involved, I quote a sailor’s description of the cat-o’-nine tails:

This instrument of torture was composed of nine cords, a quarter of an inch round and about two feet long, the ends whipt with fine twine. To these cords was affixed a stock, two feet in length, covered with red baize.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Anne Fremantle, ed., *The Wynne Diaries* (1937), ii. 160.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

5 Samuel Leech, *A Voice from the Deck: Being a Record of the Thirty Years Adventures of Samuel Leech* (1857, edn 1999), p. 28.



Three days later came the “diabolical” punishment (as Admiral Smyth calls it),<sup>1</sup> most feared of all, flogging round the Fleet: “the three Mariners were punished and flogged along side of every ship.”<sup>2</sup> On this same day, other sailors were also flogged on board the *Inconstant*. Once again, “in the cabin” Betsey heard “all that is going on quite distinctly,” leaving her “miserable all the morning.”<sup>3</sup> For all that she enjoyed her honeymoon at sea, in the privacy of her own “comfortable cabin,”<sup>4</sup> the sail-maker’s wife in attendance, and that she could pass her days with her harpsichord, her books and her water-colors, and make music with other passengers, the grim realities of naval life, its cruelty, bloodshed and horror, could not be blocked out.

How much Jane Austen knew of this and how much she assumed her readers to know is uncertain. But she must have been aware that for the ordinary sailor life in these ships was often “a hell upon earth”—the words of the naval historian William Laird Clowes, writing in 1900.<sup>5</sup> To quote an account from 1812, it was no better than “dwelling in a prison, within whose narrow limits were to be found Constraint, Disease, Ignorance, Insensibility, Tyranny, Sameness, Dirt and Foul Air: and in addition, the dangers of Ocean, Fire, Mutiny, Pestilence, Battle and Exile.”<sup>6</sup> Besides the injuries and mutilations of war, these were the “common afflictions” of shipboard life: “hideous ulcers (a general complaint) arising from bruises received in the course of their hard work, and exasperated by the damp in

---

1 W.H. Smyth, *The Sailor’s Word Book* (1867, edn 1991), p. 582.

2 Court martial used this punishment as a substitute for execution for serious crimes such as treason, mutiny or assaulting a superior. To achieve the maximum deterrent effect, it was conducted as a solemn and formalized ritual. The prisoner, lashed to a frame or grating, was paraded in a launch (the largest of a ship’s boats) from vessel to vessel, the crews lining the sides to witness his ordeal. With a sentence of 300 lashes, for example, seventy-five might be given alongside the prisoner’s own ship and forty-five at each of the five other ships in a Squadron, as determined by the Commander-in-Chief. Full details of this punishment are given in J.D. Byrn, *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy* (1989), pp. 68–71, and a graphic description, bringing out its full horror, is quoted in Clowes (1900), v. 28–29 from *Nautical Economy* (1836) by William Robinson, an account of his experiences on the lower deck of the *Revenge* (74) from 1805 to 1811. The flogging reported in Jerrold’s *The Mutiny at the Nore* is a flogging round the Fleet (see above, pp. 272–73).

3 Fremantle (1937), ii. pp. 164–65.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

5 William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History* (1900), v. 20.

6 Edward Mangin, “Edward Mangin’s Journal,” in *Five Naval Journals, 1789–1817*, ed. H.G. Tursfield (1951), p. 37.

which they lie, and by the foul water they are obliged to drink”; “ruptures, an ordinary consequence to young men, from pulling ropes”; “some with ulcerated lungs”; “others suffering from lacerations, dislocations and fractures from falls... ”<sup>1</sup>

Amongst these rigors and afflictions, punishment came high. For those at home, it was not a taboo subject: “if those lads do not behave, I must try what the cat will do,” and of some deserters, “Of course, my duty obliged me to flog them,” Captain James Gordon wrote to his wife in 1812–13.<sup>2</sup> No passenger could remain long on a ship unaware that naval discipline was a discipline of violence. What else could it be, given the conditions of shipboard life, the quantities of alcohol dispensed, twice daily, in the allowance of grog, and the nature of the crew, some of them criminals released for naval service, some of them unwilling victims of the press-gangs, some of them more or less experienced seamen from all over the world, a mingling of races and nationalities?

As to the guiding principles of good captaincy in ruling his ship, the prevailing orthodoxy is spelt out in a letter—he called it a “Sermon” giving “a few hints”—from St Vincent (then First Lord of the Admiralty) to a recently and very rapidly promoted Commander, Francis William Fane. Fane stood in need of advice. A Midshipman in the Spring of 1801—his father an MP, his second cousin the Earl of Westmoreland, Lord Privy Seal and, on his mother’s side, related to St Vincent—he reached the Captains’ List in just over two years.

To the inferior officers and men, your humanity and good sense will naturally incline you to shew all manner of kindness consistently with the preservation of good order and due execution of the Service. Upon complaint being made of any irregularity, investigate it with temper and never delegate these examinations to a Lieutenant, much less the infliction of punishment, which never ought to take place but when absolutely necessary, and the strictest decorum observed in the conduct of it, and whatever your feelings are nothing like passion ought to appear.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Ibid., p. 29.

2 Perrett (1998), p. 99.

3 Letter dated 21 May 1802 (David Bonner Smith, ed., *Letters to Admiral of the Fleet The Earl St. Vincent*, 2 vols. (1927), ii. 249–50). Only a few weeks earlier St Vincent had been obliged to explain to the Earl of Westmoreland why it was “morally impossible” for him to give Lieutenant Fane “the two steps of Commander and Post-Captain at once” (letter dated 19 April 1802, *ibid.*, pp. 247–48).

But there could be some distance between St Vincent's "Sermon" and the experience of the crew. ...

With this picture of naval punishment before us, we can see a rational basis to the string of evasions and excuses that Wentworth produces when the idea of carrying women in his ships is aired. The reader knows that these passengers might have to face something far more disturbing than physical discomfort. Similarly, looked at afresh, Mrs. Croft's determination to accompany her husband, sharing his war-time life at sea whenever she could, reveals a singularly unlady-like toughness. Anne, too, has "fortitude."<sup>1</sup> But there is no suggestion that her married life will ever take her to sea. The possibility of "a future war," raised several times in the course of the novel, rather implies separation, and this is the prospect which fills Anne with "dread."

The naval scheme of *Persuasion* becomes more explicit when the story brings us to Lyme. Having given us two officers flush with prize-money, Austen now shows us the plight of Harville, a Captain who has missed out. His choice of home is not for its picturesque setting, not for the "charms" of the countryside around, the beauties of Charmouth, a few miles along the coast, or the wonders of Pinny nearby, "with its chasms between romantic rocks,"<sup>2</sup> but because lodgings were cheap in a seaside resort out-of-season and cheapest of all in such nondescript "small" houses as those found unfashionably "near the foot of an old pier of unknown date."<sup>3</sup> When it came to taking prizes, it was, in Wentworth's words, "Poor Harville."<sup>4</sup> He had also been out of active service for two years, having suffered a "severe" leg wound.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, Harville was supporting his wife and three children as best he could on his half-pay and a pension for his injury.

The predicament of fortuneless officers such as Harville was a problem which increased towards the end of the war and was widely discussed.<sup>6</sup> ... [W]ithout the support of prize-money or some other source of income, half-pay would provide only a bare minimum to live on. ...

---

1 *Persuasion*, p. 252.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

6 See, for example, letters addressed to Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, in the *Naval Chronicle* (July–December 1812), xxviii. 212–13, 375–76; *Naval Chronicle* (July–December 1814), xxii. 131–32, 202–04; Duke of Norfolk, House of Lords, 11 March 1814.

... Within Jane Austen's parade of naval officers, Harville and Benwick provide a contrast in tastes and aptitudes, Harville, "no reader" but gifted with his hands,<sup>1</sup> a man of invention and contrivance, the other "a young man of considerable taste in reading" and keen to share his enthusiasms.<sup>2</sup> Benwick belongs to a very recognizable type. It was no embarrassment for a fighting-man to admit to a love of poetry. The *Naval Chronicle* is full of sailors' compositions and verse of the sea. The issue for November 1799 carried an appreciative review of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, quoting sections from "The Ancyent Marinere." On this account, it was reported by the publishers, Longmans, "that the greater part" of the edition "had been sold to seafaring men, who having heard of the Ancient Mariner, concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters."<sup>3</sup>

Sea-going versifiers, however young, could find an audience among their shipmates. In "Pleasures of Naval Life" (1813), a poem of two thousand lines written from his own experience at sea, Thomas Downey describes a Midshipman reciting "his lays" in the gun-room, "Sometimes applauded loud, as often vext / By critics near who slyly mar the text."<sup>4</sup> There were poetic Admirals too. Sir Sidney Smith, under whom Francis served in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1800, was given to reciting poetry by the yard, in English, Latin and French, and celebrated both his victories and his defeats with lengthy poems of his own composition.

Educated sailors, in the mold of the Austen brothers, would have been on the look-out for brother-officers with whom they could share their interests. The absence of such companions, on a lengthy voyage, could be a real deprivation. We have the *cri de coeur* of a contemporary, Captain Francis Beaufort, caught in this very situation in June 1805:

What an acquisition such a man in a long passage to India! To have had some fund of conversation besides the weather, the beauty of the dolphin, the last sail that was seen, etc. would really be worth a great sacrifice of some desirable qualities in an officer, which he certainly wanted.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid., p. 100.

3 *Naval Chronicle*, ii. 328–30; Thomas Allsop, ed., *Letters, conversations and recollections of S. T. Coleridge*, 2nd edition (1858), p. 128.

4 From Thomas Downey, *Naval Poems* (1813), Canto II, p. 57. The long list of Subscribers is largely of naval men and the volume is dedicated to John Wilson Croker, Secretary to the Admiralty.

5 Quoted from Beaufort's Journal in Friendly (1997), p. 132.

Many years before, Midshipman Beaufort had written to his father naming “books” as his “food.” While “philosophy” made up his staple diet, “poetry and travels” provided his “banqueting stuff.”<sup>1</sup> With such well-stocked minds, conversation amongst officers in the ward-room or around the Captain’s table would range widely. Charles, on the *Phoenix*, could report to Jane that “Books became the subject of conversation” and that her own novels were praised highly.<sup>2</sup> ...

Jane Austen’s furthest exploration of naval experience comes in chapter 11 of volume two, the scene at the White Hart leading to Wentworth’s declaration of love and reunion with Anne, a resolution that the novelist sets in motion along a decidedly “naval” path. The naval theme is worth following in some detail, both in the scene-setting and in the discussion, a quasi-debate, that Wentworth overhears between Anne and Harville, and which triggers his letter. The issue is this: separated by war or circumstance, which sex loves longest, which most deeply, men or women? This discussion is sparked by the errand on which Harville had been sent by Benwick, to arrange for the framing of the portrait miniature, once a fiancé’s gift for Fanny Harville and now destined for Louisa Musgrove.<sup>3</sup> This is a change that Harville finds upsetting. He feels his dead sister’s memory insulted by the speed with which Benwick has transferred his affections. That Wentworth overhears Anne and Harville and that he is already sitting at a writing-table is not purely fortuitous. As Jane Austen is careful to explain, the framing errand has been passed on to him; when the discussion begins, he is writing to Benwick about this new arrangement.

In the exchanges between Anne and Harville, for the first time Jane Austen explores the unheroic areas of war-time suffering and endurance—the experience of families waiting anxiously at home, the agony of parting for sailors leaving their loved ones, and their impatience to see their families once again at the end of a voyage. The debate is sparked by Harville’s skepticism about how long women’s love endures, a challenge which Anne answers by describing what it means to women to have to suffer passively:

---

1 Ibid., p. 84.

2 Letter of 6 May 1815 (quoted in John H. and Edith C. Hubback, *Jane Austen’s Sailor Brothers* (1906), p. 270).

3 Such miniatures were especially valued in war-time as mementoes or keepsakes. One survives of Francis Austen, painted in 1796, in a Lieutenant’s uniform (illus. 3, reproduced in color in Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen*, 1998, p. 13). Painted long before he met Mary Gibson, it was not a lover’s gift but intended for the family.

“Yes. We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.”<sup>1</sup>

Harville counters with the example of Benwick. At the time he heard of Fanny’s death “The peace turned him on shore” and there was no “exertion” to distract him.<sup>2</sup> If not in “outward circumstances,” replies Anne, then the proclivity to change must lie, in Benwick’s “nature.” Harville denies this, on the “analogy” between men’s bodies and their feelings: just “as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather.”<sup>3</sup> Anne returns the analogy. But she loses the thread of her argument in contemplating what sailors have to endure:

“Your feelings may be the strongest,” replied Anne, “but the same spirit of analogy will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender. Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer-lived; which exactly explains my view of the nature of their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard upon you, if it were otherwise. You have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home, country, friends, all quitted. Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be hard, indeed” (with a faltering voice), “if woman’s feelings were to be added to all this.”<sup>4</sup>

Harville is interrupted by the sound of Wentworth’s pen falling, his attention caught by their discussion. When Anne and Harville resume, it is to agree to disagree and Harville tells Anne “in a tone of strong feeling” what it means to be a sailor, to see his wife and children—“the treasures of his existence!”—return to land for the last time before he sets sail, and the waiting he endures, at the end of his voyage, returning to a different seaport:

---

1 Ibid., p. 232.

2 Ibid., p. 233.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

“if I could but make you comprehend what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children, and watches the boat that he has sent them off in, as long as it is in sight, and then turns away and says, ‘God knows whether we ever meet again!’ And then, if I could convey to you the glow of his soul when he does see them again; when, coming back after a twelvemonth’s absence, perhaps, and obliged to put into another port, he calculates how soon it be possible to get them there, pretending to deceive himself, and saying, ‘They cannot be here till such a day,’ but all the while hoping for them twelve hours sooner, and seeing them arrive at last, as if Heaven had given them wings, by many hours sooner still! If I could explain to you all this, and all that a man can bear and do, and glories to do, for the sake of these treasures of his existence! I speak, you know, only of such men as have hearts!” pressing his own with emotion.<sup>1</sup>

That “last look,” of sad parting and fond farewell, is a recurrent theme in the poetry of the sea and it made its way onto the pottery and porcelain of the period and was the subject of many prints. In ships at sea, “these treasures of his existence” were the traditional toast for Saturday night, “Sweethearts and wives,” and an old song, a shipboard favorite tells how the wardroom would rise and drink to “The wind that blows, The ship that goes, And the lass that loved a sailor.” Parting marked the lives of the sailor brothers. Francis recalled “leaving his wife in an advanced state of pregnancy at home” on joining the *St Albans* at Sheerness only weeks before the birth of his first daughter, Mary Jane, on 27 April 1807.<sup>2</sup> For Charles, it was more painful still, leaving three children for the *Phoenix* in October 1814, their mother, Fanny Palmer, having died only weeks before, following the death of a fourth child, an infant three weeks old. Francis’ Memoir is tight-lipped and reveals little of his feelings. But Charles’ diaries tell us of his loneliness at sea and the dreams of Fanny and their children crowding night after night to haunt him. Something of this sadness and desolation would have been carried in his letters home, for Jane Austen to reflect in these pages.

The story of *Persuasion* comes to a close at some indeterminate point in the Spring or early Summer of 1815. Among the Allies, it was a moment of anxiety. Following Napoleon’s escape from Elba at the end of February, the threat of renewed war was looming. On 21

---

1 Ibid., p. 235.

2 Memoir quoted in Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen’s Family: Through Five Generations* (1984), p. 184.

March, the Admiralty announced a suspension of demobilization. The Fleet was to be kept in commission. To bolster public confidence, popular and experienced Admirals were placed in the key commands, Lord Keith, now in his seventies, brought out of retirement to lead the Channel Fleet and Sir Edward Pellew, now Lord Exmouth, recalled to the Mediterranean. But Waterloo set Napoleon on the path to exile; and in Hampshire, Francis remained on half-pay, undisturbed, with his family.

These circumstances are caught in the playful irony of the closing lines. This is a Navy held in the embrace of romantic comedy, a service now “more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.” As Monica Cohen puts it, in *Persuasion* we see the Navy’s “prestige—its influence—changing from one being based on martial deed to one predicated on domestic utility: sailors are good to have around the house because they’re so good with their hands.”<sup>1</sup> Anne has no home to look forward to. But she enjoys the happiness of marriage, “glories in being a sailor’s wife” and “in belonging” to the “profession.” Yet there are shadows to the “sunshine”: “the dread of a future war” that a sailor’s wife must endure and “the tax of quick alarm that a sailor’s wife must pay.”<sup>2</sup> This was a potent image for readers of *Persuasion*. Property or Income tax, widely regarded as oppressive and inquisitorial, was a war-time measure, introduced in 1799; and Napoleon’s escape from Elba reawakened the threat. While politicians debated the issue, a woman of Jane Austen’s age was enquiring of her daughter, “And what do you say about the probability of the war, and the income tax being renewed?”<sup>3</sup> This is the social reality adjacent to the novel’s text. “Future war” is a prospect that Jane Austen allows to surface from time to time during the course of the novel. It holds the promise of naval advancement and success—more prize-money and a knighthood, a Baronetcy even, for Wentworth; a commission for Midshipman Drew; promotion for Benwick (a recently made Commander, he needs such a break, since “these are bad times for getting on,” remarks Admiral Croft); and Admiral Croft looks forward to a future war as an event of “good luck.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Jane Austen intended, the sobering reminders, still fresh in our minds from the conversation of Anne and Harville at the White Hart, are of war’s partings and absences, its “difficulties,” “privations” and

1 Monica F. Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* (1998), p. 21.

2 *Persuasion*, p. 252.

3 Letter from Maria Joseph Stanley to her daughter Louisa, 13 March 1815 (Adeane, *The Girlhood of Maria Josepha Holroyd. Recorded in Letters of a Hundred Years Ago* (1899), p. 353).

4 *Persuasion*, see pp. 70, 75, 92, 170 and 171.



“dangers.”<sup>1</sup> And from earlier in the story, we remember Mrs. Croft, alone in her lodgings at Deal, living “in perpetual fright” wondering when she was to hear next from her husband “in the North Seas.”<sup>2</sup> ...  
(2000, second edition 2005)

---

1 Ibid., p. 233.

2 Ibid., p. 71.