Throughout Persuasion there are many social interactions, many conversations had and walks taken, but the most important conversations have literature at their core. By analyzing The Baronetage that Sir Walter Elliot reads, the conversation that Anne has with Captain Benwick, and the letter that Captain Wentworth writes to Anne, this essay will investigate how Jane Austen portrayed writing as the truest form of authenticity because of its permanence, dependability, and resolution.

When we meet Sir Walter Elliot, he is pouring over his favourite book. It may be that he “never took up any book but the Baronetage” (Austen 3) but the fact remains that there “he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one.” The book has no story, however, it is simply a list of the British nobility. His presence within the pages means a great deal to him, as we know because his entry in the book is “the page at which the favourite volume always opened” (3) since he flips to it so often. We know that Sir Walter Elliot is a man that only cares about “vanity of person and situation” (4) and this book encapsulates both. He feels that he is a better person for being published in it, and this throws Anne into a deeper insignificance when we meet her because as he’s looking at the book he smiles at the “Marys and Elizabeths” (4), the names of his other two daughters, that are present in the book, but he never mentions Anne. It is significant that he doesn’t think of Anne as being related to this book since

In the first sentence of Persuasion a character is holding a book that is very important to him. Although he is vain, and although he is ignorant, he understands the power that the written word holds.
this book is so important to him: what does that show about his feelings towards Anne? This book shows permanence. It is a book that is owned by all of the elite people in Britain, and therefore Sir Walter Elliot’s inclusion into the book binds him to the aristocracy. That is the power of the written word. It doesn’t matter that Sir Walter Elliot is foolish and rude in real life, his name is penned into the book and cannot be erased. His adding to his passage, his own annotation, shows a desire for his role in the book to grow, and in doing so have his reputation grow as well. It is fascinating that although Sir Walter Elliot’s daughter Elizabeth is “very like himself” (5) but that she does not revere the book like he does. The reasoning for this could be that she sees the book as a threat to her desires, which are to marry into a successful family: the type of family that would be in the book. As she grows older her chances of marrying have diminished, and she explicitly expresses that she “would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood” (7) and that only then would she “take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth; but now she liked it not.” (7) Austen is showing us the power of text through the permanence that it creates.

Later on in the novel Anne meets Captain Benwick. He is very depressed as he mourns the death of his beloved fiancée. In a very important conversation, Anne and Captain Benwick discuss poetry. Captain Benwick shares his favourite poems and explains how poetry had given him the “tenderest songs” (98), the “impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony” (98), and lines that “imaged a broken heart” (98). It is clear that poetry holds an immense power, and that Jane Austen is showing how strongly it can affect a person. Benwick is completely consumed by these poems and Anne worries that they will do him more harm than good, since “the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly” (98). Austen is laying it out in front of us, she is explaining that words hold vast ability, that can simultaneously magical and destructive. Extremely significantly, the meeting ends with Anne realizing that “she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination” (99). Literature has taught her something, it has given her the ability to help others. She has made mistakes in her past, as she admits here, but she has learned from them. She has understood the strength and beauty of literature and can now pass that wisdom onto others. An interesting contrast can be made in Benwick’s character. He is, as Anne says, “shy” (99), and it is only when talking about poetry that he becomes animated. The day after this conversation, while on a walk with their group of friends, Benwick and Anne again talk of poetry, and their friend points out that Anne has “done a good deed in making that poor fellow talk so much” (105) and that “it is bad for him… to be shut up as he is” (105).
Therefore we learn that poetry is not only a pastime for Benwick, but that it has been a true consolation to him. He does not feel comfortable in the presence of others and poetry has given him something legitimate to hold on to that he has not been able to find in social life. Furthermore, when Benwick eventually proposes to Louisa Musgrove, Anne thinks that “of course they had fallen in love over poetry” (165). Therefore poetry, reflected and transformed through Benwick, shows the power to bring comfort, danger, celebration, and dependability.

Finally, we have the letter that changes everything, the letter where Captain Wentworth finally reveals his true feelings to Anne. When Anne finishes reading the letter she feels that “such a letter was not to be soon recovered from” (235). This letter is full of emotion and importance that Anne is absolutely stunned by it. It is interesting that when Captain Wentworth finally chooses to express his feelings he does so through a letter, and not through speaking. Letters, and writing in general, allow a person to preplan their thoughts and deliver them exactly, and without hesitation, interruption, or distraction. Before expressing his feelings to Anne he had been stuck in an unfavourable situation. Because of the time he had been spending with Louisa Musgrove, many thought them engaged. Captain Wentworth admits that he “had not considered that [his] excessive intimacy must have its danger of ill consequence” (240), and this is an example of the lack of clarity that can occur in normal social interaction. Through a letter Captain Wentworth was able to express his feelings clearly, but sometimes through conversation and social interaction things can be misunderstood: writing brings clarity. It is even admitted by Anne, when Captain Wentworth asks her whether she would have accepted him several years ago, that she would have if she had simply received a letter. “Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared” (244) says Captain Wentworth, and we see yet again that letter-writing can bring transparency. Most relevantly, however, for this letter, for Captain Wentworth, and for the theme of this novel, writing brings resolution. Captain Wentworth confesses that he had been “overwhelmed and buried” (242) in thinking of Anne as the woman “who had been influenced” (242) to abandon him. He states in the novel that what he wants in a partner is someone with “a strong mind” (60) and Anne had, eight years ago, proven herself to have a weak mind. Letter writing is the opposite of weak, it is strong. Anne says of the letter that “nothing was to be retracted or qualified” (238). This is because letters, and writing in general, cement ideas. These ideas can be discussed in discourse, but they remain resolute, forever solidified in ink.

In Persuasion we see the authenticity of the written word. By examining how important a book of names can be to Sir Walter Elliot because
of the permanence it gives him, the same permanence that terrifies Elizabeth Elliot, by examining how powerfully poetry has affected Benwick, and consoled him in a time when no one else could, and finally by examining the power that letter-writing has for Captain Wentworth, how it embodies the strength of mind and willingness to commit that he holds in such high regard, it is easy to see how highly Jane Austen respects writing. In the novel of Persuasion, writing offers resolve.

Works Cited:


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