



## Past the Bloom: Aging and Beauty in the Novels of Jane Austen

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And certainly, nothing is more afflicting to a decayed beauty than to behold in itself declining charms that were once adored, and to find those caresses paid to new beauties to which once she laid a claim; to hear them whisper as she passes by, *that once was a delicate woman*.

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1688)

Men grow so excessively delicate in their Taste, that Beauty, in their Eyes, seems to have lost all its Bloom at Sixteen or Seventeen; and how great a Stab it must be to the Vanity of a Woman, who at Five and Twenty, finds herself either not married at all, or to a Husband who regards her no otherwise than a withered Rose.

Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator* (1744–1746)

It was said to be the wish of a celebrated modern beauty, “that she might not survive her nine-and-twentieth birthday.” I have often heard this wish quoted for its extravagance; but I always admired it for its good sense. The lady foresaw the inevitable doom of her declining years. Her apprehensions for the future embittered even her enjoyment of the present; and she had resolution enough to offer to take “a bond of fate,” to sacrifice one-half of her life, to secure the pleasure of the other.

Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795)

**M**ANY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY writers are not kind to characters no longer in the bloom of youth, treating them as mere caricatures or as people whose only purpose in life is to guide the young. They “fail to bring the aged alive as individual human beings” (Fowler, Fowler, and Lamdin 39), particularly in their

depictions of older female characters. This charge, however, is not entirely true of Jane Austen. Admittedly, Austen does incorporate some comic relief at the expense of *Pride and Prejudice's* Mrs. Bennet, *Northanger Abbey's* Mrs. Allen, *Sense and Sensibility's* Mrs. Jennings, and *Emma's* Miss Bates; and her novels do, for the most part, center on the young. In *Persuasion*, however, she gives readers Anne, a heroine in her late twenties, and in *Pride and Prejudice* she portrays the plight of the aging and unmarried Charlotte Lucas with both realism and sympathy. *Sense and Sensibility's* Colonel Brandon, whom Marianne categorizes as “an absolute old bachelor, for he was on the wrong side of five and thirty” (34), is certainly older than most traditional literary heroes. Austen does satirize Sir Walter Elliot, but she does so because of his extreme vanity and self-deception, not just because of his age.

In *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*, Susannah R. Ottaway argues that the “critical transition for female aging was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude” (41); thus “women were supposed to have lost their beauty—and hence to appear old—at quite an early age” (42). Society maintained “clear standards of appropriate and expected behavior in each stage of the life course” (16), and these standards were very restrictive, tending to dehumanize people, especially women, as they grew older. Women at mid-life were expected to refrain from youthful dress, to give up dancing, to display a controlled demeanor, and to deny their sexuality. Those who did not follow these strictures were ridiculed, and authors often mocked them in literature (31). These “vicious portrayals,” Ottaway concludes, “reveal a profound rejection of aging women’s bodies” (41). Congreve’s *Lady Wishfort*, Fielding’s *Lady Booby* and *Mrs. Slipslop*, Sterne’s *Widow Wadman*, Smollett’s *Tabitha Bramble*, and other mature female characters who experience and express sexual desire became comic fodder for playwrights and novelists. This mockery was often expressed by a denigration of their physical appearance and humorous portrayals of the women’s attempts to look younger and/or to attract a paramour. These stereotypes reaffirmed society’s decree that women at mid-life and beyond cannot be attractive and that a refusal to step to the sidelines of life is an aberrant behavior.

For Austen’s heroines, youth and beauty are inextricably tied to marriageability. As Maggie Lane notes in *Growing Older with Jane Austen*, “Though loss of youth could comprise other losses—health, strength, innocence, hopefulness and the sense of boundless opportunity perhaps—it was the loss of beauty which made such a difference to women’s destiny because it

was the key to obtaining a husband, a home, a family, and a role in life” (18). The heroines Austen depicts as attractive and marriageable range in age from sixteen-year-old Marianne Dashwood to twenty-two-year-old Jane Bennet. Not until women reach the age of twenty-seven does Austen portray them as aware of their own aging and fearful of never marrying, and their reactions to their waning youthful possibilities extend from Charlotte Lucas’s desperation to Anne Elliot’s resignation. With the exception of the audacious Lady Susan, Austen creates no females past the age of thirty who perceive themselves as attractive and marriageable. As they near the age of thirty, both Elizabeth Elliot and Anne Steele apprehensively recognize that the likelihood of their becoming brides is very slim.

Their anxiety is understandable, for youth almost always goes hand in hand with beauty. As Anne Campbell asserts, physical attractiveness “is closely bound up with age,” and “features that reflect youth” are highly prized (19). Additionally, because a woman’s worth in a patriarchal system is tied to her reproductive abilities, youth is considered a necessary and desirable quality, and women decline in value as they age (Friday 723). Science fiction writer and feminist critic Joanna Russ claims that “patriarchies imagine or see themselves from the male point of view,” and “female culture” is considered an “unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience” (80–81). Thus, Russ claims, there is only one story in which a woman can be the protagonist—the Love Story (84). But women are even further restricted. The problem is not just that women can be protagonists of only one type of story; it is that, among women, only the young have been allowed even that one role. Austen is heir to a social and literary culture that privileges youth and beauty, especially for females, and her novels reflect this influence. However, Austen recognizes that this preference is harmful to women, and her works also illustrate her awareness of and resistance to this regrettable reality.

Although not quite to the extent of Arabella in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, whose expectations have been shaped by her reading of French romances, Austen’s Marianne Dashwood has absorbed and unthinkingly parrots the literary stereotypes for romantic heroes and heroines. Not only must they be handsome and beautiful; they must also be young: “[T]hirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony,” Marianne declares (37). She takes for granted that Colonel Brandon, at his advanced age, has “outlived all acuteness of feeling and every exquisite power of enjoyment” (35), and she is certain that a “woman of seven and twenty . . . can never hope to feel or inspire affection

again” (38). Although Austen does not forsake youthful heroes and heroines, the humor and quiet irony in these early passages foreshadow her attempts to push against boundaries and to extend the possibilities for both females and males past the first flush of youth.

The narrator of *Persuasion* presents Anne Elliot, at twenty-seven, as an unlikely heroine, focusing almost obsessively on her fading beauty and loss of youthful bloom (6, 28, 61, 104, 124, 153, 243). A picture of Anne as an aging, unattractive woman slowly emerges. The unreliable Sir Walter sketches her portrait; an angry Frederick Wentworth applies the finishing touches; then Anne sees herself through their eyes. At nineteen, Anne “had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early.” Her father’s assessment of her immediately follows this description. Even in Anne’s youth he had found little to admire in her, and now that he perceives her as “faded and thin” and “haggard,” he regards her with even more disdain (6). But the narrator also reveals that Anne’s narcissistic father never appreciates her looks because they are so different from his own. After Wentworth reencounters Anne, he declares her “wretchedly altered,” never thinking that his words will be repeated to her. His opinion of Anne’s appearance, though, is shaped more by his emotional pain than by how she actually looks: “He had not forgiven Anne Elliot” (61), and he strikes out in a common and socially accepted way of belittling women, denigrating their appearance.

Anne, whose “convenience was always to give way” (5), accepts these pronouncements about her fading beauty. She suffers “deep mortification” upon hearing from Mary that Captain Wentworth has pronounced her “[a]ltered beyond his knowledge” (60–61). Wentworth’s judgments weigh on Anne’s mind. As June Sturrock asserts, “Although Anne entirely lacks the narcissism of her father and sister, she is represented as acutely and painfully conscious of her changed appearance” (46). She internalizes and embellishes Wentworth’s statements, repeating them over and over in her mind, thus keeping this unflattering image of herself ever before the reader. She imagines him “observing her altered features, perhaps, trying to trace in them the ruins of the face which had once charmed him” (72). Anne “feels her life to be in its autumnal phase” (Paris 143): “with declining happiness, and the images of youth and hope, and spring, all gone together” (*P* 85). The recurrence of the botanical term “bloom” in *Persuasion* underscores the desirability of youth and its ties to beauty and sexual desire. As Sturrock quips, “Blooms, both literal and metaphorical, are for pollination” (41). Further, blooms are gathered, while wilted flowers are cast aside.

Anne could once have been described as “blooming.” At the time of her first meeting with Wentworth, she was “an extremely pretty girl” with “claims of birth, beauty, and mind” (26). The “lasting effect” of Anne’s terminated love affair with Wentworth has been “an early loss of bloom and spirits” (28). Quite understandably, Anne regrets her loss of youth and beauty, for she sees her own aging as a symbol of lost love. Austen may use the term “bloom” as a metaphor for youth or chronological age, but in addition to her aging, the loss of bloom also represents Anne’s fading hopes and limited possibilities.

In contrast to her early youthful beauty Anne now appears worn, but at least she is life-worn. She has loved and lost. She chooses real life over mere display, substance over show. Upon meeting Captain Wentworth’s “brother-officers,” Anne is captivated by the “hospitality so uncommon,” the friendship and “attachment”: “‘These would have been all my friends,’ was her thought; and she had to struggle against a great tendency to lowness” (98). Although she perceives the effects of their profession upon their faces and bodies, these signs of aging hardly register in the face of such strong human connection. She honors Mrs. Croft because she has had the courage to experience life beside the man she loves, even “though her reddened and weather-beaten complexion, the consequence of her having been almost as much at sea as her husband, made her seem to have lived some years longer in the world than her real eight and thirty” (48). Anne sees no lasting value in sterile, preserved beauty, and she yearns for a life like Mrs. Croft’s.

Although Austen deals with aging and beauty to some degree in all her works, she most strongly contradicts the traditional negative stereotypes of aging in *Persuasion*, her last completed novel. Anne Elliot is Austen’s rebuttal to Marianne Dashwood’s claim that a “‘woman of seven and twenty . . . can never hope to feel or inspire affection again’” (38). Anne may now be twenty-eight years old, but Frederick Wentworth has “never even believed himself to see her equal” (241). Anne is happy to hear “that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth” (243), but she does not deceive herself as her father has done. Anne is well aware that her appearance has changed with time. Her renewed bloom and vitality manifest the rebirth of her hopes for the future. Wentworth eventually perceives Anne as still beautiful, not because she looks exactly as she did at nineteen, but because he has now come to appreciate “the perfect excellence of [her] mind” and her “steadiness of principle” (242). He values her high moral excellence. His renewed perception of her beauty, then, is “the result, not the cause of a revival of his warm attachment” (243).

In *Persuasion* Austen focuses on Anne’s aging and loss of bloom not to

claim that her age defines her but to show that societal perceptions of female aging have marginalized Anne. She has not been allowed to live the life she would have chosen, and this loss of opportunity, of choice, of love ages Anne far more than the simple passage of time. For this reason, Austen's gift to Anne is "a second spring of youth and beauty" (124). When Anne reconnects with people and again looks to the future with anticipation, she becomes "[g]lowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness, and more generally admired than she thought about or cared for" (245). Mr. Elliot, upon first sight, "admire[s] her exceedingly" for she "was looking remarkably well" (104). Captain Benwick praises her "[e]legance, sweetness, beauty" (131), and a young lady in Bath describes Anne as "pretty, I think; . . . very pretty" (177). These views of Anne contradict the picture formed by Sir Walter's and Captain Wentworth's earlier descriptions, for these observers find Anne's returning vitality beautiful, regardless of her age. Anne should not be singled out and labeled as "Austen's aging heroine." Instead, she should be seen as one of Austen's attempts to explore and validate a wide range of female experiences and as Austen's quiet admonition against restricting the joys of life only to the very young.

Aging, the threat of lost beauty, and pending marginalization engender fear in women—especially for those who have failed to secure a husband. In her teenage years Elizabeth Elliot was a beautiful and confident woman. At twenty-nine she is still attractive, haughty, and vain. However, the narrator reveals that Elizabeth is no longer content with her lot (6): "she had the consciousness of being nine-and-twenty, to give her some regrets and some apprehensions" (7). Time is slipping away, and Elizabeth must confront not only her own fears about aging but also the possible loss of her father's esteem. She has gained favored status because of her beauty, and she might retain his approval even through its loss by an honorable marriage, but a suitable and willing marriage partner has not materialized. Her father employs two gauges of personal worth, a mirror and the Baronetage, and Elizabeth faces failure in both cases. Although she is still confident of her beauty, she knows it cannot last forever: "She was fully satisfied of being still quite as handsome as ever; [but] she felt her approach to the years of danger, and would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelvemonth or two" (7). The loss of her beauty is a frightening prospect, for she believes that it is a necessary tool to achieve her version of an honorable marriage. Because her marriageable years are drawing to a close with little hope of success, she cannot face "the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth; . . . now she liked it not" (7). The expression "the book of books" is a phrase most

often reserved for the Bible, and in using it to refer to the Baronetage, Austen quietly accuses Sir Walter and his daughter of idolatry, for they both worship rank and beauty; they value the temporal over all. Without beauty or her own marriage entry in the Baronetage, Elizabeth faces a future of invisibility. The self-image she values will be reflected nowhere.

The strictures placed on mature women and society's reluctance to view them as attractive often move these women to the sidelines of life—even if they have retained some of their youthful beauty. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. Bennet teases his wife about her plans to visit their new neighbors and warns that it might be best if she does not accompany her daughters, “for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party” (4). Mrs. Bennet simpers under his flattery but replies, “When a woman has five grown up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.” Mr. Bennet's characteristic ironic wit shows in his response: “In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.” This exchange illustrates the way society forced a woman to dissociate her concept of herself as a vibrant, attractive individual from her identity as a mother. Mrs. Bennet had been a beautiful young woman and might still be handsome, for *Sense and Sensibility's* Mrs. Dashwood has retained at least some of her beauty, and research suggests that those considered attractive in their youth are usually also thought to be so in mid-life and old age, albeit in “relative terms” (Lakoff and Scherr 133–34). Additionally, while Austen does characterize Mrs. Bennet as silly and lacking in self-restraint, other than Mr. Bennet's mocking comment about her looks, Austen nowhere suggests that Mrs. Bennet has grown physically unattractive. After her marriage, Mrs. Bennet is no longer valued by society apart from her role as wife and mother. Her husband ignores or belittles her, and she is deprived of any social outlet but visiting and gossip. Her excess energy is expended in uncontrolled verbal outbursts and bouts of nerves. Almost two centuries before Betty Friedan christened it, Mrs. Bennet suffers from “the problem that has no name” (57).

With too much time on her hands and no means of personal fulfillment, Mrs. Bennet strongly identifies with Jane's beauty and Lydia's “high animal spirits” (45). Every time Jane's beauty is celebrated, she feels validated. Mrs. Bennet upbraids her husband for regarding Elizabeth more highly than Jane because his valuing Elizabeth's brains over Jane's beauty is a judgment against herself, even if it is one step removed. Mrs. Bennet sees in Lydia's uncontrolled exuberance a reflection of her own character and a means of vicarious participation in activities no longer available to her. John Wiltshire asserts that, in “the violence of [Mrs. Bennet's] emotions, in the volubility of her discourse, in

the unnuanced, coarse vibrations of her presence,” there is a “sexual energy,” a “still-unappeased sexuality [that] is to play its role in fostering her youngest daughter’s erotic escapade” (184). *Sense and Sensibility*’s John Dashwood, while often obtuse, makes a surprisingly apt comment about the loss of beauty. He observes that “there is something very trying to a young woman who *has been* a beauty, in the loss of her personal attractions” (237). No longer noticed, no longer acknowledged, Mrs. Bennet frantically grasps at youth and beauty in the only ways she can and, like other mid-life women in eighteenth-century literature, becomes a comic character.

Mrs. Dashwood, though not subjected to the same level of ridicule as Mrs. Bennet, is also a mid-life woman living through her daughters, especially Marianne. Austen takes pains to make the similarity between Mrs. Dashwood and the young and beautiful Marianne clear: “The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great” (6). Mrs. Dashwood, though forty years old, is still attractive, and she has the same reaction to a desirable young man as her daughters do. She must be charmed from the sidelines, however, since society has decreed that for women of her age love and desire must be a spectator sport. Austen repeatedly depicts Mrs. Dashwood in the background of her daughters’ love relationships, mirroring their reactions and emotions. Like Elinor, she feels “an evident wonder and a secret admiration” on her first sight of Willoughby (42), and like Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood grows increasingly infatuated with the charming young man: she “entered into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking [their] excessive display of them” (54). When Willoughby leaves Marianne, both mother and daughter flee the parlor to express their grief in private (75, 77).

Mrs. Dashwood also participates vicariously in Elinor and Edward’s relationship. Both women come to appreciate Edward as they become better acquainted with him while still at Norland (16–17). On his first visit to Barton Cottage, Mrs. Dashwood greets Edward with “joy,” putting him at ease with her “captivating manners.” Austen gives Mrs. Dashwood, not Elinor, the central role in this reunion and claims that “a man could not very well be in love with either of her daughters, without extending the passion to her” (90). Yet this compliment is an empty one, for no suitors are lined up asking for Mrs. Dashwood’s hand. Though nearer her age than Marianne’s, Colonel Brandon does not see the still-beautiful widow as a contender for the role of his wife—even though she is the pattern for Marianne in both looks and character.

Austen never presents Mrs. Dashwood as a woman desperate to retain her youth, and unlike Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood acts with dignity and does



not embarrass her daughters with improprieties. By creating Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne as mirror images connected by both looks and personality, Austen strongly suggests that Mrs. Dashwood does not see herself as an unattractive old woman, even if she has resigned herself to society's strictures. When Marianne dismisses Colonel Brandon for his supposed decrepitude, her mother protests: "My dearest child, . . . at this rate you must be in continual terror of *my* decay; and it must seem to you a miracle that my life has been extended to the advanced age of forty" (37). Mrs. Dashwood may protest with humor and hyperbole, but she expresses a heart-felt sentiment. Even if society has cast her in the role of matron, she does not feel ready to withdraw from life. By identifying with her daughters and emotionally investing herself in their romantic attachments, she can experience and express amorous feelings and still protect herself from mockery and scorn. Consequently, Mrs. Dashwood settles for this restrictive but available outlet.

Lady Susan, though, rebels against these strictures. She is beautiful, still youthful in appearance, intelligent, and cunning, and she absolutely refuses to be marginalized. Throughout *Lady Susan*, Austen emphasizes both Lady Susan's age and her attractiveness. Almost every character praises her beauty, often reluctantly, and most are surprised that she retains such beauty at her age. "However you may chuse to question the allurements of a Lady no longer young, I must for my own part declare that I have seldom seen so lovely a Woman as Lady Susan," her sister-in-law opines; "from her appearance one would not suppose her more than five & twenty, tho' she must in fact be ten years older" (*MW* 251). Reginald cannot wait to meet her: "What a Woman she must be! . . . engaging at the same time & in the same house the affections of two Men who were neither of them at liberty to bestow them—& all this, without the charm of Youth" (248). His father recognizes Lady Susan's reputed beauty, but warns his son that her "age is itself a material objection," as is her "want of character" (260). Her refusal to play the accepted role of mid-life matron sets her apart as a curiosity and invites condemnation, yet Austen gives Lady Susan beauty, wit, intelligence, and strength—all admirable qualities. *Lady Susan* is one of Austen's early productions, and this work shows her already wrestling with society's view of female beauty and aging as opposed to a woman's self-perception and individuality.

More than any other mature woman in Austen's fiction, Lady Susan makes decisions based solely on her own needs and desires and takes whatever action is necessary to achieve them. She is fully aware of social mores—"I was determined to be discreet . . ." (244)—but she observes them only enough to

avoid ostracism. Lady Susan, in fact, is fighting for economic survival, which she can achieve only by marrying a prosperous man. Lakoff and Scherr claim that “a woman’s beauty is of no intrinsic use to herself, but is of value only in that it enables her to attract to herself someone in possession of the things that will be useful or pleasurable to her” (19). Lady Susan is a poor woman and has used one of the few forms of power available to her—beauty—to achieve economic security. She did not love her first husband, and after his loss she grieves only because she must again bargain away her beauty and independence for economic support.

Although Lady Susan bows to financial necessity, she does not deny her own sexuality in the process. She engages in an adulterous affair with Mr. Manwaring without guilt, and she enjoys manipulating and wielding sexual power over Reginald De Courcey and other men she deems less intelligent than herself. She amuses herself by “subduing” Reginald and “triumphing over a Mind prepared to dislike” her (254, 257). She flirts with the “contemptibly weak” Sir James Martin to “detach him from Miss Manwaring” (245). Readers of Austen sometimes criticize Lady Susan for not playing the dotting mother and for her vigorous attempt to marry Frederica to Sir James, yet she is actually doing for her daughter what she has always been forced to do for herself—to secure financial stability through marriage. Geneviève Brassard argues that “Lady Susan is an independent spirit who resists the self-sacrifice domesticity and motherhood demand” (27). “Throughout the novel,” she continues, “Lady Susan resists patriarchy’s appropriation of her beauty, wit, and eloquence, into performative roles such as faithful wife, inconsolable widow, and loving mother” (44). Lady Susan *is* a wife, widow, and mother, but she fills those roles on her own terms, and her beauty and cleverness give her the confidence to do so and intimidate her critics.

Brassard’s claims regarding Lady Susan’s independent spirit ring true, but she further asserts that Austen “admires” and “rewards” Lady Susan (46). This simply is not so. Although Austen was very young when she wrote *Lady Susan*, she recognized even then the financial necessity of marriage for most women. According to the chronology in Deirdre Le Faye’s *A Family Record*, Austen wrote *Lady Susan* very close to the same time she penned “Elinor and Marianne,” her first version of *Sense and Sensibility* (xxi), a novel that centers on the plight of economically disadvantaged women. However, sympathizing with Lady’s Susan’s motivations does not mean that she approves of her actions. Austen never submitted *Lady Susan* for publication, perhaps because of the difference between Lady Susan and Austen’s other heroines. Although the

heroines of Austen's published novels are not perfect, they do consistently model or strive towards virtuous behavior. Secondary characters engage in behaviors inconsistent with Austen's Christian worldview, but Austen does not present these actions in a positive light. Like the sentimental excess and comic hyperbole of the juvenilia, *Lady Susan* shows Austen experimenting with extremes, but now with more seriousness and skill. Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and Lady Susan all react to the same constraints and social expectations. By showing their differing responses, Austen accomplishes what Fowler, Fowler, and Lamdin accuse eighteenth-century novelists of failing to do: she "bring[s] the aged alive as individual human beings" (39), even if she does not equally approve of each character's actions.

The three Ward sisters of *Mansfield Park* broaden the scope of Austen's renderings of mid-life women. In their youth, the three sisters were considered equally "handsome" (3), but circumstances and age make a noticeable difference. Miss Maria Ward "had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram . . . and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady" (3). Her consequent life of ease and prosperity enables her to retain her beauty as she ages (332). Her sisters, though, are not so fortunate. Miss Ward was "obliged to be attached" to a man less prestigious and less prosperous than she had anticipated (3). In her disappointment, Mrs. Norris's temperament worsens, and she becomes gradually more angry, manipulative, embittered, and spiteful. Miss Frances's "very imprudent marriage" (4), however, is financially disastrous, and she loses both her gentility and her beauty. Her daughter Fanny makes the connection between beauty, youthfulness, and socioeconomic levels during a visit with her family at Portsmouth. She compares her mother to her Aunt Bertram, who "had been a beauty, and a prosperous beauty, all her life" (332). Fanny cannot help observing the effects of poverty on youth and beauty: "It often grieved her to the heart—to think of the contrast between them—to think that where nature had made so little difference, circumstances should have made so much, and that her mother, as handsome as Lady Bertram, and some years her junior, should have an appearance so much more worn and faded, so comfortless, so slatternly, so shabby" (408). Although Fanny very much laments her mother's loss of beauty, Mrs. Price is too busy dealing with her indolent husband, a household overrun with children, and a meager income to be very concerned about her vanishing beauty or the lack of satisfying social outlets for women her age.

Austen repeatedly illustrates that society does not celebrate aging women. Aging men, however, are viewed much differently, and Austen's depictions

of mature characters repeatedly demonstrate gender differences. While *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot is not overly fixated on physical appearance, she does observe one truth about aging and beauty with obvious consternation. Even though Captain Wentworth describes as her “[a]ltered beyond his knowledge” (60), she cannot say the same of him: “he was not altered, or not for the worse. . . . No; 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” (61). At fifty-four, Sir Walter Elliot “was still a very fine man” (4), *Persuasion's* narrator claims; and in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland appraises General Tilney and finds him “a very handsome man, of a commanding aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life” (80). While his language is characteristically disrespectful, John Thorpe validates Catherine's assessment: “He is a fine old fellow, upon my soul!—stout, active,—looks as young as his son” (95). Though narrators and other characters repeatedly discount women who are “past the bloom,” General Tilney is admired and considered still youthful because he has retained his physical prowess and energy.

Everyone in *Emma* considers Mr. Knightley at “seven or eight-and-thirty” (9), only a year or two shy of Mrs. Dashwood's age, a most appropriate hero. Because male beauty is determined more by dominant physical characteristics and socioeconomic power than by the absence of crow's feet around the eyes, observers still consider Mr. Knightley to be at the height of attractiveness. This contrast in gender-specific attitudes about aging correlates with eighteenth-century theories of both female and male beauty. “Women were generally perceived to be ‘old’ before men throughout the early modern period,” Ottaway observes (35). “Rather than [being tied to] a loss of specific attractive features” as was true for women, the physical signs of aging for men were declining strength and a loss of physical abilities. Thus, men crossed the threshold of old age much later in life than women (34–35). On this point, Austen's representation of Mr. Knightley reflects the general perceptions of the era. At the dance, Mr. Knightley becomes an unconscious participant in a male beauty contest. Emma admires his physical appearance and observes that he looks “so young.” As she studies him, Emma focuses on his physique rather than his face: “He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps any where, than where he had placed himself. His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes” (326). She judges George Knightley youthful and attractive because of his commanding, vigorous physical appearance, which is especially emphasized when contrasted with physical decline.

While several of Austen's women dread or lament the loss of youth and beauty, the only male character who does so is Sir Walter Elliot, and he takes his fixation to ridiculous lengths. Standing in Bond-Street one day, he "counted eighty-seven women go by, one after another, without there being a tolerable face among them. . . . [T]here certainly were a dreadful multitude of ugly women in Bath; and as for the men! they were infinitely worse," he decrees (141–42). He notices everyone's aging—Anne's, Mary's, Lady Russell's, Mr. Elliot's, new acquaintances', complete strangers'—and feels compelled to carry on a running commentary about the decline in their appearance. Sailors repeatedly capture his attention and censure. He maintains that serving in the navy "cuts up a man's youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man; I have observed it all my life. A man is in greater danger in the navy of being insulted by the rise of one whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to, and of becoming prematurely an object of disgust himself, than in any other line" (19). The navy offends him because a man might be honored for hard work and moral character rather than inherited rank and personal beauty, and this system undermines his own preferred methods of judging human worth.

In *Persuasion* Austen uses the sailors as foils. Sir Walter and his daughter Elizabeth may be very attractive and more than usually resistant to normal aging, but his obsession with good looks represents, as Sturrock suggests, "a refusal to accept . . . the traces of the processes of living, the marks of age, weather, grief, and experience" (44). The sailors—and most men engaged in "necessary and honourable" professions (20), as Mrs. Clay reminds Sir Walter—age in the natural course of time and under the normal stresses of life, while the self-absorbed Sir Walter retains his youthful visage, sequestered in his closet and surrounded by his mirrors. He may still catch the ladies' eyes at fifty-four, but he has no real personal relationships. He is invested in no one's life but his own.

Readers of *Persuasion* are repeatedly reminded that Sir Walter and Elizabeth are handsome and youthful, but those reminders come through the eye of a biased beholder, Sir Walter himself, not through the voice of the omniscient narrator. Very early in the novel, Austen sets readers up to doubt the reliability of Sir Walter's perceptions. He is a man whose wife had found it necessary to cover up his many "failings" and promote his "respectability" (4). He has proved himself to be a "conceited, silly" father, unable to recognize the merit of his daughter although her worthiness is plainly visible to others (5). Through the occasional use of free indirect discourse, Austen's narrator presents Sir

Walter's own views as fact, and then slyly contradicts his observations. This pattern operates in particular when it comes to claims of his own youthful appearance. Tongue in cheek, the narrator informs readers that, because of his and Elizabeth's great personal beauty, "Sir Walter might be excused . . . in forgetting her age, or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever, amidst the wreck of the good looks of every body else; for he could plainly see how old all the rest of his family and acquaintance were growing" (6). Sir Walter deceives only himself, and his opinions stand unverified. The fact that he is still considered "a fine man" does not mean that his age does not show. Admiral Croft confirms that Sir Walter is in a mature stage of life, for upon seeing his dressing room, Croft exclaims, "I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life.—Such a number of looking-glasses! oh Lord!" (128).

Jane Austen is a product of her culture, and her works reflect this influence. Like many novelists before her, she represents young females as beautiful, desirable, worthy heroines and relegates mature women to supporting, and sometimes even comic, roles. Most of Austen's heroes are handsome and still in their twenties. Some, though, are markedly older; and Austen, like eighteenth-century society, is kinder to aging males than to aging females. Her preference for youth can be explained by her choice of genre, the Love Story Plot, which requires a marriageable heroine. Even within the confines of this genre, Austen expands traditional representations. With Anne Elliot, Austen extends the age for attractive, marriageable heroines upward. And even though women aged thirty and above play only supporting roles in her novels, Austen constructs many of them as more than flat characters or mere stereotypes, instead creating mid-life women of varying levels of attractiveness, who react in diverse ways to their own aging and declining beauty and to the labels and limitations society places on them. Personal beauty is an important part of a character's self-image, whether female or male, young or old, and Austen does not ignore its significance. Nonetheless, she illustrates that deriving all one's sense of worth from physical beauty is self-defeating, for aging and the subsequent diminution of youthful beauty is both natural and inevitable. Austen favors characters who age with grace and dignity. These individuals may lament the loss of their youthful beauty or regret the way society perceives and limits them, but they are more invested in maintaining good character than physical beauty, and in nurturing the relationships and participating in the activities that sustain them rather than isolating themselves to avoid the normal ravages of life.

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