

A Source for the Names in *Persuasion*

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Jane Austen may have borrowed some of the names she uses in *Persuasion* from a highly popular contemporary source: Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Epistles* (1789-90).¹ We know that she had read Knox's *Elegant Extracts*, which she mentions in *Emma*, and that she approved of Knox as a moral writer.² The names Elizabeth, Anne, Wentworth and Russell all appear in the second part of volume two, as do models of sisterly, daughterly and connubial relations which echo the relationships in *Persuasion*; moreover, Knox's *Epistles* offer patterns of moral and intimate communication suited to Austen's final novel.

As well as letters by a Lady Russell, volume two contains an epistle to Lord Wentworth from Lord Balitmore commiserating on the death of his wife. This tender letter emphasizes how beloved Lady Wentworth was, a situation Austen repeats in the death of Lady Elliot (II, 68). Austen's Lady Russell, furthermore, was an intimate of Austen's Lady Elliot: in her narrative, Austen links the two names juxtaposed in *Elegant Epistles*. Another letter from Lord Wentworth to his nephew, Sir William Saville, warns him against visiting the expensive, morally dangerous London, sound advice as Sir Walter's nephew illustrates in *Persuasion*. This letter also recommends that he reduce his expenses in order to preserve his future estate, and "consult Mr. Greenwood, who hath seen much, is very well able to judge, and certainly most faithful to you." (Letter XXXIII, 72) Austen gives the name "Shepherd" to Sir Walter's agent, but he functions like Greenwood to preserve the estate, and he advises the obstinate Sir Walter Elliot to retrench to ensure future grandeur.

The relationship between Lord Wentworth, his bosom-friend the Countess of Clare, and his daughter Anne, however, most obviously resembles the relationship between Austen's characters Sir Walter Elliot, Lady Russell and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. The Countess fills the place of a mother for Anne and her sister Arabella as Lady Russell does for the Elliot girls, inviting them to stay with her for Anne's "health". After self-pitying objections to letting his daughters go which echo Mr. Woodhouse's complaints in *Emma*, Lord Wentworth writes,

My lord of Clare having writ unto me, your ladyship desired to have my daughter Anne with you for a time in England to recover her health, I have at last been able to yield so much from my own comfort, as to send both her and her sister to wait your grace's wise and tender instructions. . . . besides the younger gladly imitates the elder, in disposition so like her blessed mother, that it pleases me very much to see her steps followed and observed by the other. (Letter XXXIV, 75-76)

In *Persuasion*, it is the younger sister Anne who resembles "her blessed mother," but like Lord Wentworth's daughter, she is descended from no-

bility, and accomplished in music. Anne Elliot plays the piano where Lady Anne Wentworth "danceth prettily" and "speaks French prettily," and both Annes are preferred in delicacy to their sisters. (77-78) The frontispiece of volume two of *Elegant Epistles* showing "Queen Elizabeth haranguing her army," in sharp contrast to the intimate letters on family affairs which follow, may have helped to shape Austen's depiction of Elizabeth Elliot as coldly ambitious and tyrannical in contrast to her gentle sister Anne.

Many critics have remarked on Austen's incestuous plots in which father-figures, like the paternal Mr. Knightley, marry the heroines. Such a pattern supports the idea that Austen may have cast the 'father' of *Elegant Epistles*, Lord Wentworth, as Anne's suitor in *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth, and shunted off his repellant characteristics of favoritism, selfishness and melancholy onto Sir Walter and Anne Elliot's surrogate mother at boarding school, Mrs. Smith. *Elegant Epistles* certainly dramatizes the contrast between birth and breeding, and between public and private roles which also structures Austen's *Persuasion*.

NOTES

I wish to thank the Newberry Library and the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies for a fellowship which enabled me to conduct this research.

- ¹ Knox's *Elegant Epistles, from the most Eminent Writers* appeared from the undated first edition to eleven editions by 1822, including editions in 1814 and 1815. The first six-volume run offers "a Copious Selection of Instructive, Moral and Entertaining Letters from the most Eminent Epistolary Writers," arranged chronologically from "Ancient and Classical" writers in the first volume to Johnson, Cowper, Gibbon and Fox in the final one.
- ² *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford University Press, [1923] 1987), 20. Patricia Howell Michaelson, "Reading *Pride and Prejudice*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 3, 1 (October, 1990), 65-76.
- ³ *Elegant Epistles*, 4 Vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1803). The first run, *Elegant Epistles, from the most Eminent Writers*, 6 Vols. (London: John Sharpe, n.d. [1789?]), contains letters from many of Austen's favorites, including Cowper and Johnson, on topics spanning all subjects: death, grief, literature, people, social theories, domestic humor, etc. Several address children or discuss education.