



## Why Lyme Regis?

PETER W. GRAHAM

Peter W. Graham is Clifford Cutchins Professor of English at Virginia Tech. He is presently at work on a study comparing the writings, sensibilities, lives, and cultural contexts of Jane Austen and Charles Darwin.

*Persuasion* IS A NOVEL with four principal settings, two rural, one urban, and one neither: Kellynch, Uppercross, Bath, and Lyme Regis. I aim to offer some answers to the question of why the fourth is indispensable to *Persuasion*. Lyme's situation is part, but only part, of the answer. A coastal town at the western edge of Dorset 17 miles from Uppercross, Lyme Regis is the seaside resort closest to the Musgroves' part of Somersetshire. Captain Wentworth's friends Harville and Benwick currently lodge there, though Austen could have located them on any stretch of the southern seacoast—just as she could have situated the Elliot and Musgrove families in many other neighborhoods or counties. But convenience, seaside location, and friends in fairly easy reach are not the only reasons, and perhaps not even the main ones, for Jane Austen to select it as the Uppercross party's destination. A careful look shows that Lyme, much more than a happily located seaport, has rich personal, historical, natural, and cultural associations that allow it to serve Austen's purposes in various ways. Let's begin with a short history of the town, then consider Jane Austen's associations with it, and finally look at how it figures in *Persuasion*.

The town of Lyme, lying at the mouth of the river Lym, occupies some of the most geologically unstable land in Britain. It was part of the manor of Glastonbury Abbey until 1284, when Edward I acquired it, enfranchised it, and conferred the liberties of a haven and a borough. Edward used Lyme in his wars against the French, thus initiating the port town's longstanding his-

torical association with naval matters. The appended title “Regis” recognizes this royal connection. Lyme Regis’s natural situation exposes it directly to the open sea, but it has a harbor thanks to the Cobb, a curving 870-foot jetty and promenade. Reputed to be the only structure of its kind in England, the Cobb seems to have been built in medieval times from rows of oak-tree trunks driven as pilings into the sea floor, with massive boulders called cowstones and cobbles filling the gaps. The name “Cobb” may refer to these stones or may derive from “coble,” a flat-bottomed skiff. Whatever the etymology, the structure is breathtaking in its way—capable of evoking descriptions such as that of the narrator in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: “quite simply the most beautiful sea rampart on the south coast of England . . . a superb fragment of folk art. Primitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo, and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass” (9-10).

Boats sailed from Lyme’s harbor to meet the Spanish Armada. Its townspeople tended toward Puritanism after the English Reformation, and in 1644 Anti-Royalist Lyme withstood a two-months’ besiegement by Prince Maurice and the Royalist forces. In 1685, the Duke of Monmouth landed on the beach west of town to launch his ill-fated rebellion against James II, and the town’s support of Monmouth caused it to suffer heavily in the ensuing Bloody Assizes presided over by Judge Jeffreys. Afterward Lyme Regis ceased to be of historical significance. Its commercial importance faded too, for ships had become too large for the limited space of the artificial harbor. Like many southern ports, Lyme became a base for smugglers and fishermen alike before the fashion for seaside resorts began in the eighteenth century. By 1775 seabathers drawn by the mild, sunny south coast summers and autumns had begun to visit the town, first from Bath, connected to it by a direct coach route. Bespeaking its spa status, Lyme boasted a bathing machine, invented by Ralph Allen and sent down from Bath. But Lyme never became a trendy seaside resort, as did such south coast towns as Weymouth with its Royal patronage (Austen readers of course remember it as the site of Jane Fairfax’s sailing mishap) and Dawlish (where Robert Ferrars fancies building a *cottage ornée*).

In Austen’s day, then, Lyme Regis enjoyed a seasonal flutter as a minor coastal resort, offered a congenial spot for stranded naval men to perch in peacetime or when they were otherwise between ships, and sustained the expected maritime assortment of boatbuilders, fisherfolk, wreckers, and smugglers—a mix not unlike *Persuasion*’s crowd gathered at the Cobb to help or hope to see a “dead young lady” and treated to the spectacle of not one unconscious Musgrove miss but two. By the time the Musgrove-Elliot-Went-

worth party visited Lyme in November 1814, it had also attained a reputation as a treasure trove of fossils on account of several spectacular finds in the strata of its continually eroding sedimentary seacliffs. Lyme's reputation as a sort of Jurassic Park in stone remains to this day. It's the center of a fossil-rich coastline extending from Exmouth to Bournemouth that has recently been designated a UN World Heritage Site. A few miles west of Lyme Regis lies Beer Head, the vanishing point after which the south coast's white or whitish chalk, limestone, and shale cliffs change to red Devon sandstone. Dominating Lyme Bay just a bit east of Lyme Regis is the 617-foot hill called Gold Cap, the highest point on the south coast. All around the bay the Blue Lias, soft layers of limestone and shale falling away into the sea, furnish abundant paleontological evidence of now-extinct life forms. Due to the softness of the stone, the fossils are prone to degrade on being extracted unless treated with resins or other preservatives, so some of the most famous discoveries from early days did not remain intact.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the most eminent English geologists and paleontologists were engaged in literally and metaphorically ground-breaking work that often centered on Lyme's strata and the fossils embedded there. Among these naturalists were Oxford University's William Buckland, who gave the first name to a dinosaur (the *Megalosaurus*); the Rev. William Conybeare, whose parish for some years was nearby Axminster and who predicted and described the plesiosaurs; the collector of splendidly complete (if sometimes dubious) plesiosaur and ichthyosaur skeletons Thomas Hawkins; and Darwin's eventual adversary the anatomist Richard Owen, instrumental in the foundation of the Natural History Museum in London. But the most famous geological finds at Lyme fell to a working-class girl, Mary Anning (1799-1847), who was later famed as "the fossil woman," praised as "the greatest fossilist the world ever knew," and commemorated by a stained glass window placed in Lyme's church of St. Michael the Archangel by the local vicar and the Geological Society of London. Mary was taught to hunt for fossils by her father, a cabinetmaker called Richard Anning, who died in 1810, leaving a wife and two young children in poverty. With her mother and her brother Joseph, Mary Anning combed the local cliffs for fossils that could be sold as curiosities. Although there is evidence that gentleman collectors had been aware of the presence of "crocodiles" being found by fossil hunters such as the Annings since at least 1810, Mary's celebrity hinges on a somewhat oversimplified story that she discovered the first complete skeleton of an ichthyosaurus, as the so-called "crocodile" was officially named in 1817. The facts of this discovery are more complex than is the myth. Joseph Anning

apparently located the ichthyosaurus specimen in 1811 at Black Ven, a 150-foot hill east of Lyme and next to the fossiliferous shale and limestone of Church Cliffs; and Mary found the remainder of the skeleton in 1812. Described in Sir Everard Home's "Some account of the fossil remains of an animal," an illustrated article appearing in the 1814 volume of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, this find was the first to come to the attention of learned circles. Over the next decades at Lyme, fossil-hunting was a flourishing pastime dominated by such local collectors as the Annings, who had to sell their unearthed discoveries for a living, and the prosperous Philpott sisters, whose specimens now reside in the Oxford University Museum and Lyme Regis's Philpott Museum. The most distinguished English geologists would sometimes join the self-taught yet deeply learned Mary Anning in hunting fossils, and they reported her finds (without crediting the finder) in naturalist circles. In 1823 Mary Anning discovered the specimen recognized by Conybeare as the first virtually complete remains of a plesiosaurus and purchased by the Duke of Buckingham. In 1828 she found the first fossil of a British flying reptile, described as *Pterodactylus macronyx* by Buckland, who stressed its bizarre nature as "a monster resembling nothing that has ever been seen or heard-of upon earth, excepting the dragons of romance and heraldry" (qtd. in Torrens 266). In 1829 Mary Anning discovered *Squaloraja*, a fossil fish seen as transitional between sharks and rays. In 1830 she found *Plesiosaurus macrocephalus*, named by Buckland in 1836 and described by Richard Owen in 1840. Her growing celebrity and expertise at mining the fossil-rich seascape brought crowds of curious amateurs as well as the big guns of the Geological Society to Lyme.

Fossil-hunting, or even mere seaside exploring, around Lyme is a rather risky business. Fossils are best sought at low spring tides when the sea-covered strata are most extensively exposed, especially after storms when the rock layers are likeliest to be scoured of seaweed and freshly eroded. Footing can be precarious at the tideline, and turning tides can pose dangers. Richard Owen recorded a near misadventure he, Conybeare, Buckland, and Anning shared at Lyme in 1839: "Next day we had a geological excursion with Mary Anning, and had like to have been swamped by the tide. We were cut off from rounding a point, and had to scramble over the cliffs" (McGowan 164). Even above the tideline the soft sedimentary cliffs are prone to crumble—sometimes spectacularly—when saturated by groundwater. The Bucklands, visiting Lyme to geologize over Christmas holidays a few months after the narrow escape Owen chronicled, were on site to witness the great landslide west of Lyme Regis in 1839. This catastrophe opened a vast chasm about three-

quarters of a mile long and hundreds of feet deep, sent fifty acres of the Undercliff sliding into the sea, and created a temporary barrier reef of slippage in Pinhay Bay. It might seem that exploring such shaky ground would in Regency times not be thought suitable for genteel young ladies, but the *Persuasion* narrator's nostalgic and detailed evocation of Lyme's environs strongly suggests that the consistently empirical Jane Austen was no stranger to the charms of Charmouth, the Undercliff, and Pinhay.

At any rate we know that the Austens visited Lyme. After the Rev. George Austen relinquished his Hampshire livings and his Steventon parsonage to his eldest son James and retired with his wife and daughters to Bath in 1800, the Austens vacationed at a number of seaside resorts in Devon and Dorset, Lyme among them. Clare Tomalin observes that they may also have been at nearby Charmouth in the summer of 1803 (175). We know that they visited Lyme in November, for Jane's letter of 9 October 1808 to Cassandra compares a fire at Southampton to a notable Lyme Regis conflagration of 5 November 1803: "The Flames were considerable, they seemed about as near to us as those at Lyme, & to reach higher" (*Letters* 143-44, 392, n.7). The Austens were at Lyme once again for several weeks in the summer of 1804. They shared lodgings with Jane's favorite brother Henry and his wife Eliza, though the Henry Austens and Cassandra continued on to Weymouth, just then also being favored by the Royal Family's presence. This division of the party gave Jane occasion to send a letter dated 14 September detailing her circumstances at Lyme. If only this letter were redolent with unironized essences of the sublime and picturesque, prominent in the *Persuasion* narrator's suggestively personal effusions about the sea and landscape at Lyme but unusual elsewhere in Austenworld! But it isn't. Instead, the letter offers an unremittingly prosaic account. It informs Cassandra who's in town, announces that Jane and her parents have been to a ball, and states that she's walked on the Cobb with a new female acquaintance, bathed in the sea, and caught a "little fever and indisposition." It waspishly reports and reacts to family news from their Aunt Leigh Perrot's letter. It provides wry descriptions of the lodgings and the domestic help—"The servants behave very well & make no difficulties, tho' nothing certainly can exceed the inconvenience of the Offices, except the general Dirtiness of the House & the furniture & all it's Inhabitants." It mocks Jane's performance of domestic duties in the absence of responsible, competent Cassandra: "I detect dirt in the Water-decanter as far as I can, and give the Cook physic, which she throws off her stomach" (*Letters* 93). Pale prophecies of *Persuasion* are perhaps discernible in Aunt Leigh Perrot's deplorable inability to distinguish a frigate from a sloop and in the

account of a “new, odd looking Man who had been eyeing me for some time, & at last without any introduction asked me if I meant to dance again” (94). Could this interested male gaze, even if it issues from a face far from possessing the handsomeness of the “Elliot countenance,” have provided the germ for Mr. Elliot’s admiring glances, first fixed on Anne by the sea and then in the inn corridor? Austen imagines her real-life mystery man “to belong to the Hon<sup>ble</sup>. Barnwalls, who are the son & son’s wife of an Irish Viscount—bold, queerlooking people, just fit to be Quality at Lyme” (94). The Irish peerage and the watering-place snobbery detectable here might make *Persuasion* readers think of the Elliots’ cousin Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter, second- or third-class celebrities sufficient to impress Sir Walter and Elizabeth and to cut a swathe among the birds of passage at Bath.

According to family tradition Jane may have met a man much more congenial than the supposed Mr. Barnwall during this visit to Lyme Regis. A story Cassandra passed on in later years to her niece Caroline mentioned Jane’s forming a friendship that showed signs of becoming a romantic attachment at one of the Devonshire resorts they visited. There was talk of meeting again the following summer; but instead of a happy reunion, a report of the young man’s death ended the story before it had properly started (Tomalin 178). One might wonder whether faint, lingering sadness over such a curtailed romance could explain some of *Persuasion*’s famed autumnal melancholy, could have suggested Captain Benwick’s loss of his young love Fanny Harville, and could account for why the narrator suggests that Lyme must not just be “visited” but “visited again” for its worth to be understood.

Jane Austen, destined never to return to Lyme in life, revisited it in art with an intensity that has inspired many other pilgrims. Alfred Lord Tennyson visited Lyme primarily for its Austen sites rather than its historical resonances, maritime climate, or sublime views. According to his son Hallam’s memoir, Tennyson walked 9 miles from Bridport to Lyme on 23 August 1867—“led on to Lyme by the description of the place in Miss Austen’s *Persuasion*.” Arriving, Tennyson called on his friend Palgrave, and “refusing all refreshment, he said at once, ‘Now take me to the Cobb, and show me the steps from which Louisa Musgrove fell.’ Palgrave and he then walked to the Undercliff” (Tennyson II, 47).

Charles Darwin’s son Francis similarly became interested in the geography of Lyme Regis on account of *Persuasion* and commemorates his visit there in an essay collection titled *Rustic Sounds*. The younger Darwin, his eye conditioned by Austen’s Lyme chapters, notices the steep hill sloping down

into the village with the hotels at the bottom, thinks it impossible to say at which the Musgrove party put up, but hypothesizes, "I am inclined to believe it was that on the west side." He supposes that the house in which the Austens are likely to have lodged is probably Captain Harville's. His most compelling interest, however, is in answering the question of precisely where Louisa's accident occurred. Here are Darwin's words on the matter:

There are three separate flights of steps on the Cobb, and the local photographer, in the interests of trade, had to fix on one of them as the scene of the jump. I cannot believe that he is right. These steps are too high and too threatening for a girl of that period to choose with such a purpose, even for Louisa, whose determination of character we know to have been one of her charms. Then again, this particular flight is not (so far as I could make out) in the New Cobb, which is where the accident is described as occurring. It is true that at first sight it hardly looks dangerous enough to bring about the sight which delighted the fishermen of Lyme, namely, a "dead young lady," or rather two, for the sensitive Mary contributed to the situation by fainting. I am, however, confirmed in my belief by what happened to myself, when I went to view the classic spot. I quite suddenly and inexplicably fell down. The same thing happened to a friend on the same spot, and we concluded that in the surprisingly slippery character of the surface lies the explanation of the accident. It had never seemed comprehensible that an active and capable man should miss so easy a catch as that provided by Louisa. But if Captain Wentworth slipped and fell as she jumped, she would have come down with him. (Darwin 76-77)

A few small inaccuracies or imprecisions aside, the blend of empirical observation and literary hypothesizing evident in Francis Darwin's pilgrimage and in his analysis testifies eloquently to how real the presence of Austen's Lyme has become to her readers.

Back to firmer footing now, and a close look at *Persuasion's* account of Lyme Regis. The excursion from Uppercross lies at the exact center of the novel, in the last two chapters, XI and XII, of the first volume. Anne's feelings about her relationship with Wentworth frame the section. Thanks to the sequence of events, those feelings change radically from an anxiety to avoid crossing paths with him at Kellynch Hall (so painfully associated with their former attachment and breakup) and to keep him and Lady Russell apart to a

comfortable and gratified awareness that he values her friendship and defers to her judgment. The changes in both Wentworth's attitude and Anne's perception of it rise out of several causes associated with the visit to Lyme.

Notes of intemperance surround the excursion from its very inception. "The young people were wild to see Lyme," says the narrator. "The first heedless scheme had been to go in the morning and return at night" (94). The enthusiasm for accompanying Wentworth back to the town where his friends the Harvilles are lodged begins with Louisa, "the most eager of the eager," but spreads to the whole younger generation at Uppercross: Charles, Mary, Anne, Henrietta, and Louisa are all to go.

When the party arrives at the resort "too late in the year for any amusement or variety" in its public life, what's left are the charms of nature and of private society. The narrator's description of the environment displays a fervor for Lyme's sublime natural features comparable to the Uppercross party's purported wildness to see them:

[A] very strange stranger it must be, who does not see charms in the immediate environs of Lyme, to make him wish to know it better. The scenes in its neighbourhood, Charmouth, with its high grounds and extensive sweeps of country, and still more its sweet retired bay, backed by dark cliffs, where fragments of low rock among the sands make it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation;—and the woody varieties of the cheerful village of Up Lyme, and, above, all, Pinny, with its green chasms between romantic rocks, where the scattered forest trees and orchards of luxuriant growth declare that many a generation must have passed away since the first partial falling off of the cliff prepared the ground for such a state, where a scene so wonderful and lovely is exhibited, as may more than equal any of the resembling scenes of the far-famed Isle of Wight: these places must be visited, and visited again, to make the worth of Lyme understood. (95-96)

Readers would have to look to the likes of Thomas Hardy for so loving an appreciation of south-coast nature rather than culture—and certainly Austen the novelist, who generally like Mary Crawford seems to find nature more worth noticing when it's the backdrop for human nature, never displays quite so antisocial an aesthetic.

Who of the Uppercross party is worthy of savoring these sublime and beautiful views? We don't find out, for the group is soon at the shore where, after "lingering only, as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea,



who ever deserve to look on it at all" (96), they turn their steps to the Harvilles' small house near the foot of an old pier. The chapter's recurrent motif of revisiting here modulates out of the melancholy key associated with it at the start of the chapter, when Anne so feared encountering Wentworth at Kellynch, and becomes a more optimistic, almost Wordsworthian way of seeing that allows place to serve as a sustaining palimpsest of past and present. Similarly, the motif of parted lovers here takes a new form with the entry of Captain Benwick, still mourning the loss of Fanny Harville yet seen by Anne as "'younger in feeling if not in fact. . . . He will rally again, and be happy with another'" (97). The implications that she won't rally and that she would not entertain another are shortly to be challenged.

Next to enter the scene are the amiable Harvilles, the wife "a degree less polished than her husband," though both have "the same good feelings" (97). From the Harvilles' example Anne finds that, contra Lady Russell's opinion, a marriage need not involve social equals to be a good one. When the Upper-cross party is invited to the Harvilles' modest dwelling, Anne discerns both an unpretentious ease and a domesticity unlike anything she's known at Kellynch. The "degree of hospitality so uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display" and the "ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements" Captain Harville has fashioned to "turn the actual space to the best possible account" give Anne a rosy picture indeed of married life in naval circles. "'These would have been all my friends,' was her thought" (98). That thought is voiced in exaggerated form by Louisa, her companion on the walk back to the inn, who "burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy—their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved" (99). Anne might not have Louisa's tendency to declare her sentiments in sweeping superlatives and absolutes, but she does share the sentiments themselves. Thrown into contact with Captain Wentworth on his turf (or should we say quarterdeck?) rather than her father's, Anne now thinks herself growing accustomed to being in her former fiancé's company without confusion. But her evening is spent mostly with Captain Benwick, and principally devoted to discussing the Romantic poetry of Scott and Byron that they both admire, and for some of the same reasons. Benwick "shewed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a bro-

ken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope that he did not always read only poetry . . ." (100). As was the case on listening to Louisa shortly before, Anne finds herself hearing her own feelings expressed in an untempered form. Her corrective prescription of morally edifying prose may be apt, but she ends the chapter fearing "that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination" (101). That Anne can sympathetically recognize her own melancholy failing in Benwick and then be amused at the likeness as well as at the gap between her advice and her own practice yet again shows that, despite the hypothetical charms of might-have-been, she is closer than before to abandoning the backward glance.

Chapter XII brings enough incident to put an end to introspection. An early morning walk by the breezy seaside—assisted, perhaps, by the correspondent breeze stirred in her heart and memory the night before—has Anne "looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced" (104). This re-Anne-imation attracts a look of "earnest admiration" from the passing gentleman who later turns out to be Mr. Elliot. His attraction spurs Captain Wentworth, just ahead partnering Louisa, to look back and, in his turn, to appreciate. "He gave her a momentary glance,—a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, 'That man is struck with you,—and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again'" (104). The unknown gentleman has a second run-in with Anne as they nearly collide in the hallway of the inn; and this time it is further evident that he has exceedingly good manners and an agreeable person, enough to make Anne feel "that she should like to know who he was" (105). She learns directly, for the gentleman's curricule is departing and a waiter is at hand to say to whom the equipage belongs: "'a Mr. Elliot; a gentleman of large fortune . . . in his way to Bath and London'" (105). This information, Mary's snobbishly fussy reaction to it, and Anne's "secret gratification to herself to have seen her cousin" (106) lay the groundwork for one of the subsequent misconceptions that will teasingly delay the novel's romantic denouement: Wentworth's belief that Anne reciprocates Mr. Elliot's regard. But her enhanced appreciation of Wentworth himself is the next thing the morning's events promote, for with the arrival of Captain Benwick, still "a young mourner," Captain Harville is impelled to describe how attentive Wentworth had been to the freshly bereaved Benwick:

on the *Laconia's* arrival at Plymouth Wentworth “wrote up for a leave of absence, but without waiting the return, travelled night and day till he got to Portsmouth, rowed off to the *Grappler* that instant, and never left the poor fellow for a week; that’s what he did, and nobody else could have saved poor James. You may think, Miss Elliot, whether he is dear to us!” (108).

Directly afterward, Anne sees Wentworth’s grace under pressure at first hand and he sees hers, as what Maggie Lane has termed “the most dramatic incident in the whole of Jane Austen’s writing outside her childhood burlesques” (105) unfolds. The party is making a farewell visit to the Cobb, too windy up top for the ladies to find agreeable. All pass quietly and carefully down the steep steps that may or may not have been the stair that locals call “Granny’s Teeth”: all except Louisa.

[S]he must be jumped down them by Captain Wentworth. In all their walks, he had had to jump her from the stiles; the sensation was delightful to her. The hardness of the pavement for her feet, made him less willing upon the present occasion; he did it, however; she was safely down, and instantly, to shew her enjoyment, ran up the steps to be jumped down again. He advised her against it, thought the jar too great; but no, he reasoned and talked in vain; she smiled and said “I am determined I will:” he put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless! (109)

The horror of that moment takes diverse forms: Mary’s scream and swoon into Charles’s arms, Henrietta’s faint, intercepted by Benwick and Anne, Wentworth’s despairing “Is there no one to help me?” as he supports the unconscious Louisa. Anne, the first to regain practical sense, instructs Benwick: “Go to him, go to him. . . . Rub her hands, rub her temples; here are salts;—take them, take them” (110). When these preliminary measures have no effect, Wentworth’s reaction is bitter emotional agony, capped and curtailed by sound practical sense from Anne:

“Oh God! Her father and mother!”

“A surgeon!” said Anne.

He caught the word; it seemed to rouse him at once, and saying only “True, true, a surgeon this instant,” was darting away when Anne eagerly suggested,

“Captain Benwick, would not it be better of Captain Benwick? He knows where a surgeon is to be found.”

Every one capable of thinking felt the advantage of the idea.

(110)

The “completely rational” members of the party left behind are Wentworth, Charles Musgrove, and Anne. Of the three, she’s the one who takes charge: “Anne, attending with all the strength and zeal, and thought, which instinct supplied, to Henrietta, still tried, at intervals, to suggest comfort to the others, tried to quiet Mary, to animate Charles, to assuage the feelings of Captain Wentworth. Both seemed to look to her for directions” (111). “Strength, zeal, and thought”: three virtues Wentworth, disappointed back in the day when his young fiancée yielded to Lady Russell’s persuasion, would not in times since have ascribed to an older Anne.

The Harvilles, alerted to the emergency by seeing Captain Benwick rushing past their house, arrive on the scene and add to the party of the sensible and useful. A look between husband and wife determines what’s to be done—Louisa must be moved into their own house and tended by Mrs. Harville, herself an experienced nurse, and her competent nursery maid. The rest of the chapter displays Wentworth and Anne as a capable couple like the Harvilles, briskly settling things between themselves, though not without the intrusion of powerful, unrelated feelings. Wentworth says,

“If one stays to assist Mrs. Harville, I think it need be only one.—Mrs. Charles Musgrove will, of course, wish to get back to her children; but, if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!”

She paused a moment to recover from the emotion of hearing herself so spoken of. (114)

Anne must recover from two things: the compliment—a mode of address largely unfamiliar to her—and the first-name intimacy into which Wentworth, in the warmth of the moment, has relapsed. She rightly senses that he has forgiven her in his heart. “‘You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her;’ cried he, turning to her and speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past. She coloured deeply . . .” (114).

In the hands of a less resourceful and more conventional spinner of romances, this would be the moment of rapprochement. But Austen has another full volume of frustrations to lay before her star-crossed lovers, and some of these now intervene. Mary’s ill-judging, aggrieved sense of consequence makes her clamor to stay behind with Charles and instead have Anne accompany Henrietta home to Uppercross in Wentworth’s carriage. Wentworth’s “evident surprise and vexation, at the substitution of one sister for the

other,” mortifies Anne, who thinks he values her “only as she could be useful to Louisa,” believes he suspects her of trying to evade nursing duties, and assumes that his bitter laments of regret bespeak a lover’s regard for the comatose girl (115–16). But their last moment together approaching Uppercross, as he prepares to return Henrietta to her parents, restores the mutual respect and like-mindedness that had earlier united them and that characterizes the Harvilles’ interaction.

“I have been considering what we had best do. She must not appear at first. She could not stand it. I have been thinking whether you had not better remain in the carriage with her, while I go in and break it to Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove. Do you think this a good plan?”

She did: he was satisfied, and said no more. But the remembrance of the appeal remained a pleasure to her—as a proof of friendship, and of deference for her judgment, a great pleasure; and when it became a sort of parting proof, its value did not lessen. (117)

So why Lyme Regis? As Austen depicts it in *Persuasion*, the town of Lyme is as different from a workaday seaport such as Portsmouth in *Mansfield Park* as it is from a new-built holiday town such as her imaginary Sanditon. Despite locals’ curiosity about the better-born who are passing through, Austen’s Lyme out of season lacks the class-consciousness of Bath or of the tenant villages surrounding estates like Kellynch or even Uppercross. It is a setting suited to the unpretentious amiability of Wentworth’s fellow officers, a place where Anne can escape from the hierarchies that constrain her inland, whether she’s at home or away—where the idea of romance across classes can be entertained. If Anne can see Wentworth at his best among his peers, the friends who would have been hers had she married him, he can see her at her best in the emergency that calls forth her nerve, zeal, and thought—qualities damped down or repressed in her daily round of country life as visiting spinster sister or trapped-at-home younger daughter.

Lyme Regis as rendered by Austen offers a remarkable fit between exterior and interior worlds, nature and human nature, geology and sociology. Lyme’s vistas inspire transports of sensibility just as its bracing air invigorates the body; but nowhere else in the Austen canon have the rewards of balance been so concisely demonstrated and the perils of imbalance so dramatically and literally punished as on the Cobb. The sea breezes Anne enjoys there bring some color back to a complexion faded by eight years of lonely, clois-

tered penance, the consequence of yielding to a perspective too heavy on Lady Russell's sense. In contrast, the stone steps offer headstrong Louisa Musgrove a temptation, a fall, and an ensuing concussion, unconsciousness from a blow to the head being an ironically suitable fate for her excessive sensibility and resistance to persuasion. Louisa, knocked out by her willful and passionate lover's leap, may be Austen's poster-child of senselessness. Leave it to Anne to chart a fair course between the extremes of sense and sensibility. Accustomed to moral discipline, she recovers animal vitality at Lyme. Its sublimity is the background to her reanimated beauty. Its eroding cliffs, packed with the remnants of long-extinct species, point her seaward. Lyme prepares Anne eventually to turn her back on those dying dinosaurs among whom she's lived, the landed Elliots, and to cast her lot with the ascendant meritocracy of the British navy, the captains whose ships rule the waves where pleisosaurs and ichthyosaurs once swam.

#### WORKS CITED

- AUSTEN, JANE. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. Oxford: OUP, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Persuasion*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1990.
- AUSTEN-LEIGH, RICHARD ARTHUR. *Jane Austen and Lyme Regis*. London: Spottiswode and Co., 1946.
- DARWIN, FRANCIS. *Rustic Sounds*. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries, 1969 (rpt.).
- FOWLES, JOHN. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Short History of Lyme Regis*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1982.
- HOME, SIR EVERARD. "Some account of the fossil remains of an animal . . .," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (1814), 571-77, and plates 17-20.
- LANE, MAGGIE. *Jane Austen's England*. London: Robert Hale, 1986.
- LEFROY, FANNY CAROLINE. "Hunting for snarkes at Lyme Regis." *Temple Bar* 57 (1879): 391-97.
- MCGOWAN, CHRISTOPHER. *The Dragon Seekers*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2001.
- PALGRAVE, FRANCIS TURNER. "Miss Austen and Lyme." *The Grove* 1 (1891): 390-94.
- TENNYSON, HALLAM, LORD. *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*. London: Macmillan, 1897.
- TOMALIN, CLAIRE. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 1997.
- TORRENS, HUGH. "Mary Anning (1799-1847) of Lyme; 'the greatest fossilist the world ever knew.'" *British Journal for the History of Science*, 28 (1995): 257-84.

Why Lyme Regis? Print Email. By Peter W. Graham. Peter W. Graham, author of *Jane Austen and Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* (Ashgate Press, 2008), has published and spoken on various Jane Austen topics and was the 2009-10 JASNA Traveling Lecturer for the Eastern region. He teaches English at Virginia Tech. Featured in. No. 26 " 2004. Real People/Places in Austen's Fiction " . Download Why Lyme Regis? PDF. " Back to Publication. About JASNA.