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I DON'T know what I would think today of the movie version of Pride and Prejudice, which I loved back then; but with that cast, and Aldous Huxley for co-scenarist, it should please me still. I do, however, have trouble with the current adaptation of an even finer Austen novel, Persuasion, for all the nice things it has to recommend it. Let me state that, though I admire and enjoy Jane Austen, I am not a Janeite, and would certainly not concur with Lord David Cecil's declaration, "There are those who do not like her; as there are those who do not like sunshine and unselfishness."

Miss Austen's dialogue is delightful, but her true forte is description, evocation, commentary; no voice in all her fiction is as sparkling as the authorial. And no character in the novels is quite as worldly-wise as the omniscient narrator, who gives omniscience a truly human tone. Yet there is something a bit constrained and constraining about the fictional world in which everything revolves around who will, or will not, marry whom. The traditional ending of comedy may be a marriage, but here it is also the beginning and the middle, with everything, like a stream or rivulet, panting for the matrimonial river to debouch on.

From the standpoint of cinema, in any case, the authorial voice is a major problem. A feature film can bear only so much voiceover, and even the most scrupulously scrutinizing camera cannot catalogue as many details -- or catalogue them as stylishly and wittily -- as Jane Austen's prose can. So a film adaptation of an Austen novel must reconcile itself in advance to a substantial amount of loss, even if it avoids some of the gratuitous errors here committed.

In the September New Criterion, that astute literary critic Brooke Allen, in her essay "Jane Austen for the Nineties," touches briefly on current film and TV versions. She refers to "an ungraceful adaptation of Persuasion (in their attempts to purify the movie of Hollywood sheen and give it an air of naturalism, the producers . . . have too zealously ripped away the romantic gauze: the distressing results are an unappealing Anne Elliot, a pockmarked Captain Wentworth, a greasy-locked Benwick, and a slovenly-looking Lady Russell)." I disagree only with those pockmarks: careful scanning of every closeup of Ciaran Hinds's face failed to turn up a single one.

Amanda Root lets Anne Elliot and the movie down damnably. "A few years before," we read in the novel, Anne "had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early." Miss Root, manifestly a different part of the plant, has no bloom whatsoever, and seems never to have had. A competent actress, she lacks the charm with which even much homelier performers have been known to enchant an audience.

Even more disturbing, though less important, is the Lady Russell of Susan Fleetwood, an actress I could never abide, and who, besides indeed looking slovenly here, towers physically over the tiny Miss Root. You feel that to stop Anne from marrying Wentworth, she might not so much have persuaded her as merely sat on her. And yes, Benwick here is greasy not only of hair, but also of persona and performance. Yet I find Ciaran Hinds a persuasive Wentworth, and all other supporting roles well cast, with Corin Redgrave (Sir Walter), Fiona Shaw (Mrs. Croft), and the wonderful John Woodvine (Admiral Croft) especially admirable.
The screenplay, by the gifted playwright Nick Dear, is adroit enough, and John Daly's cinematography makes the most of what appears to be period lighting (oh, such flickering candles!), while Roger Michell's direction sedulously deconstructs what the young South African calls "that particular glossy, classic look in period drama." But then, the novel itself, written by Miss Austen not long before she died, has about it a middle-aged matte finish, and Jeremy Sams's music, for sober solo piano, spiritedly avoids excess. A few anachronisms can be overlooked, but there is no getting around that not-to-be-overlooked, or looked-at, heroine.