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Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, and the Pursuit of Happiness

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Abstract

This paper argues that there is a Romantic shift in the feminist and individualistic ideology of Jane Austen's work as her career progresses, and Austen begins to admire different cognitive qualities in her heroines. At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's confessed love for Darcy is a carefully reasoned one - Darcy has righted the wrongs cited in Elizabeth's original refusal and Elizabeth can justify her own acceptance of him by objective standards. Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, by contrast, accepts Wentworth ultimately not on the basis of anything he has done differently,

but merely by the realization of her own original emotions and motives as valid. Throughout the novel, Anne develops as this individual on her own, and by the time she finally marries Wentworth at the end of the novel, the marriage is not needed to complete her because she has already made her emotional transformation independent of the marriage proposal. The contextual frameworks for both of Jane Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* are so similar that they demand side-by-side comparison, but the heroines of these novels show a very different approach to characterizing the admirable woman. The evocation of Elizabeth by means of Anne's character serves to elucidate and cement this shift in Austen's tone and feminist worldview. The similarities juxtaposed with a discernible shift in the qualities of the heroine strongly suggest that Anne Elliot is a reworking of Elizabeth Bennet, and that the purpose of *Persuasion* is to reinvent *Pride and Prejudice* in a way shows Austen's reconsideration of the value and motives of marriage and gives even more intellectual and emotional credit to *Persuasion's* heroine. There exists a carefully crafted language of allusion in Austen's works, and especially between these two bookends of her career, which seem to serve almost as a privatized discourse for Austen's own benefit. In this way, Austen is showing her own shift into Romanticism, valuing the emotional over the reasonable, and how this shift should play out into the lives of women. Elizabeth is representative of women being capable and worthy to reason in the world of men, whereas Anne's individualism gives women something even more important in Austen's assertion of the validity and worth of female emotions.

Jane Austen's final novel *Persuasion* remains the most critically neglected text in her canon. At the time of its publication it was criticized for being "a much less fortunate performance than [her previous novels]" and viewed as little more than a substandard version of her practice of writing stories "devoid of invention...obviously all drawn from experience" (*The Critical Heritage*, 80, 84). For years, critics did not challenge these unimpressed opinions that served as the consensus on Austen's final and ultimate contribution to the world. A closer look at *Persuasion*, however, reveals it to be Austen's most revolutionary and socially interesting novel for the way that it portrays the role of the heroine in the world of 19th century England. *Persuasion* is Austen's most radical novel because it accounts for and endorses a philosophy where action is based upon emotion, instinct and interest for one's own personal happiness. Additionally, in *Persuasion*, Austen engages in a language of allusion through the situations and characters that elicits her first novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. This evocation indicates that Austen intends for these two bookends of her career to be in direct dialogue with one another, and that *Persuasion* is a powerful revisioning of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In *Persuasion*, Austen dramatically shifts from creating her heroine as

governed by propriety and reason to being permitted and encouraged to respond and act based upon emotion and instinct, an assertion virtually unheard of in the male-dominated sphere of polite society. This shift is elucidated further by the contextual evocation of her first novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. These first and last works share many of the same character and plot features, but the tone and theme of each are startlingly different. The evocation of Elizabeth by means of Anne's character and the parallel frameworks of the novels serve to elucidate and cement the shift from valuing emotion over reason in Austen's tone and feminine worldview. While *Persuasion* most resembles *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of a direct discourse, many of Austen's other novels, especially *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* will provide standards by which Austen's progression and the emotional development of the heroine can be gauged. At the end of her career, Austen strives to define personal happiness and success by a different rubric than has been demonstrated in her other novels, and in *Persuasion*, she offers an argument for the right that a woman in Regency England has to pursue this happiness. The novel *Persuasion* addresses the question of happiness and reveals many of Austen's influences, primarily through the topics of social change in England, the role of the family, the literature and poetry of Romanticism, and the comparison of the heroines Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot.

Ever unassuming of her own art, Austen describes her novels to her sister Cassandra as "rather too light and bright and sparkling," implying that because of their setting in the aristocratic country they are not as serious or worldly as the efforts of her contemporaries (Letters, 203). From a certain vantage point and on a very superficial level, her other novels do occupy the same social and geographic space. Austen knew and did not apologize for this. She famously described her novels as operating with "the little bit (two inches) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush," a characterization which can seem diminutive if a reader does not understand the magnitude, importance, and depth of understanding of the world that lies behind Austen's details of gentlewomen and manners (323). Critics Gilbert and Gubar assert in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that: "Austen attempted through self-imposed novelistic limitations to define a secure space, even as she seemed to admit the impossibility of actually inhabiting such a small space with any degree of comfort" (108). Such opinions hold that Austen writes from such a specific perspective in order to ensure uniformity throughout her canon. However, *Persuasion*, Austen's last novel, displays a distinct shift in the way that Austen views the role of the heroine and her emotions within her small social sphere of influence.

The contextual frameworks for both of Jane Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* are so similar that they demand side-by-side comparison, but the heroines of these novels show a very different approach to characterizing the admirable woman. While not confined to the conclusions, the last chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* help to illustrate and

encompass the magnitude of Austen's shift. At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's confessed love for Darcy is a carefully reasoned one – Darcy has righted the wrongs cited in Elizabeth's original refusal and Elizabeth can justify her own acceptance of him by objective standards. Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, by contrast, accepts Wentworth ultimately not on the basis of anything he has done differently, but merely by the realization of her own original emotions and motives as valid. The similarities juxtaposed with a discernible shift in the qualities of the heroine strongly suggest that Anne Elliot is a reworking of Elizabeth Bennet, and that the purpose of *Persuasion* is to reinvent *Pride and Prejudice*. This reinvention shows Austen's reconsideration of the value and motives of marriage and gives even more intellectual and emotional credit to *Persuasion's* heroine.

There exists a carefully crafted language of allusion in Austen's works, and especially between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, the two bookends of her career which seem to serve almost as a privatized discourse for Austen's own benefit. In this way, Austen is showing her own shift of ideals, valuing the emotional over the reasonable, and how this transition should play out into the lives of women. Elizabeth is representative of women being capable and worthy to reason in the world of men, whereas Anne's individualism gives women something even more important in Austen's assertion of the validity and worth of female emotions.

Throughout the earlier part of Austen's canon it is clear to readers that her heroines and the characters around them are judged by the principle of personal merit being ultimately connected to their power and ability to discern general universal truths. By *Persuasion*, however, Austen appears to have shifted to a perspective where she values the courage to identify and act upon personal values and instincts. This means that the realities she admires Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* for recognizing are vastly different from the things she holds as true for Anne in *Persuasion*. Elizabeth is deft and quick to see through the haughtiness, foolishness and misguided ideals of her society, and she is a genuinely kind individual who admires the same in others. Anne, on the other hand, is eventually able to see the worth of her own instincts and emotions, and to value her duty to herself and her own happiness above what society says she owes to her family and her class.

In *Persuasion*, the reader is confronted with one of the most radical novels to focus on the women's point of view to that date, challenged finally by *Jane Eyre* twenty-seven years later. The narrative style of *Persuasion* is a much more interior narrative than any of Austen's other novels, and the prose is also unique in the way that it follows and meanders with Anne's thoughts and perceptions in a style that looks to be borderline stream of consciousness. Compared to the impeccably plotted and shrewdly narrated linear form of *Pride and Prejudice* or the prose of *Sense and Sensibility* where even the most personal and emotional moments are imparted through the eyes of an objective narrator, even the narrative tone of Anne's voice in *Persuasion* reveals a

reassessment by Austen of the innate value of a heroine's emotional life.

Persuasion and Pride and Prejudice- A Framework of Allusion

More so than any of her other novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* resemble each other in facts data and issues grappled with. For both of the novels, the original refusal of the suitor by the heroine is a necessary plot feature for Austen to convey her final point. Further these two refusals, Elizabeth's of Darcy and Anne's of Wentworth, are purposefully similar in that they drive the final action of the novel and are important and tumultuous issues for the heroine, yet these refusals are primarily interior issues for the heroine in the novel. In both the case of Elizabeth and Anne, few other characters in the novel know that Darcy or Wentworth have been rejected or consider that the issue significant or noteworthy. Austen is drawing the comparison between the two situations and heroines by illustrating the refusals as personally and insularly monumental, but not factors in the greater landscape or the other characters' reality. Because these two refusals are so similar, but the events that spring from them so different, Austen is trying to show her reconsideration of Elizabeth's value judgment and situation. Elizabeth was lucky that despite her rude words to Darcy, his persistence and desire to reform brought him back to Elizabeth rather quickly. Anne, on the other hand, had to wait over ten years to rectify her mistake. Austen is specifically referencing Elizabeth's situation with Anne's back-story, and showing the reader how she would write *Pride and Prejudice* differently now at the end of her life. *Persuasion* is intended to be the story of what happens when Darcy does not return with another proposal right away and its entire plot is a function of Austen's reformed values and ideals.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek calls Jane Austen "the only counterpart to Hegel in literature" for the way that her novels employ dialectical progression as a tool for arriving at a pure truth (62). Zizek provides many examples of different Austenian equivalents to Hegelian theories. Additionally, he suggests that whether or not Austen was actually purposely utilizing and referencing Hegel, she was still the only writer of her time to truly understand the philosophy of human interaction and relationship. This assertion of Zizek's is connected to the language of allusion between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* because both novels use the same Hegelian tool of misrecognition to allow the characters to arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationships. The truth that eventually arises from the conflict and crisis of misrecognition between the heroine and her suitor is more valuable in quality than the relationships that would have arisen had the characters recognized and acted upon each others innate qualities from the beginning. Elizabeth and Darcy misinterpret each others characters, and while Anne and Wentworth do not suffer from a lack of understanding, Anne is not able to recognize the value of and her own ability to choose for herself. Austen uses this philosophical device in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* as a means to evoke the

former by the latter and show how her own misrecognition as a novelist was to portray the ultimate virtue as reason, sense and reform, when really felicity is tied up in self-awareness and the validation of one's own emotions.

Another allusive element that *Pride and Prejudice* shares with *Persuasion* is the presence of a dastardly bounty-hunting suitor. Charming but corrupt George Wickham is obviously more malicious in his intentions and actions than William Elliot, but both are similar in that their primary aspirations in marriage are monetary which conflicts with the philosophy of the heroine that marriage should be a commitment based upon love and mutual respect. Elizabeth sees that Wickham could be her intellectual equal, but his poor conduct in relation to Georgiana Darcy, Mary King, and Lydia Bennet make him morally unsuitable for the alliance marriage requires. William Elliot, on the other hand, is not so immoral and wicked as Wickham, but there is no doubt that his goal is after Kellynch Hall and the financial and social boon that allying himself with Anne would bring. Austen is showing in *Pride and Prejudice* how the rejection of a suitor has to be based upon serious moral and social qualms, - both Wickham and Collins are clearly defective by Elizabeth's rigid standards - but in *Persuasion*, Austen is conceding that personal preferences and impressions are grounds enough for rejecting a suitor deemed socially appropriate. This assertion on the part of Austen, and her revised philosophy on the value of a character's instinct is closely related to the idea that the working title of *Pride and Prejudice* was *First Impressions*. *Pride and Prejudice* shows how Austen believed a character's first impression of another to be untrustworthy, as Elizabeth's interactions with Wickham and Darcy show. Conversely, in *Persuasion*, the fact that Anne's initial instincts about William Elliot and Wentworth do hold true at the end of the novel is drastically revising the truism that *Pride and Prejudice* alleges to prove. Anne describes William as: "Rational, discreet, polished, not open, no burst of feeling," and this grounds for dismissal shows how Austen's priorities for her heroine have shifted from what is reasonable based on empirical evidence to what is desirable from an emotional and personal perspective (106). The implicit comparison drawn between Wickham and Elliot is advanced even further by the fact that both characters end up married to another prominent, but less desirable character in the text. Wickham's folly results in his marriage to Lydia, and Elliot's rejection leads to his elopement with Mrs. Clay, for the whole time he had been playing a "double game" (167).

Letters serve as the cathartic event towards marriage in both novels. Both Darcy's defensive epistle and Wentworth's furtive note are similar and implicitly in dialogue with one another. They are viewed as imperative by male writers for voicing emotions and circumstances that they feel can not be spoken out loud for fear of disgrace and humiliation. In this way, Austen forces the male characters to act in an epistolary sphere where they would normally be brash and overbearing, and this is a radical gesture which serves a very different purpose in *Pride and Prejudice* than it does in *Persuasion*. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth is the turning point in *Pride and Prejudice*, the vehicle for change and

personal reform in Elizabeth. Nevertheless, Darcy's letter is also wildly problematic. The letter insults Elizabeth, her family, and her station in life. Darcy admits to loving Elizabeth, but qualifies the admission with the deep distaste he feels for his uncontrollable affection. Despite this, upon receipt of the missal, Elizabeth begins the slow transformation to overcome her pride, and to become more acutely and deliberately self-aware and finally reciprocate Darcy's love. In stark contrast to this, Wentworth's letter to Anne is wholly affectionate and complimentary, but in terms of character development is ineffectual and moot. By the time Wentworth delivers his letter to Anne, she has already decided that she will take him back given the chance, and that is the true crux of the novel. The crisis and tension in *Persuasion* is not whether or not Wentworth will return to Anne, but whether Anne will reject the family and social ties which caused her to disown her own happiness as a young woman. Therefore, while both the letters serve the practical purpose of hastening the plot towards marriage, Elizabeth's receiving of Darcy's letter is seminal in her progress towards becoming a self-reflective individual. Anne, in contrast, has made that transformation on her own.

Both Anne and Elizabeth are middle daughters in mildly impoverished aristocratic families who live in the country. Their fathers are strikingly similar in the crude essentials, as they are men of good blood who have overspent their means and have little capital with which to make their daughters attractive for marriage. The role of middle daughters is important for both Elizabeth and Anne because it relieves them, to some extent, of the familial pressure to marry early, and allows them the freedom to strike out on their own and defy what is expected for them in marriage. Neither the trailblazing first child nor the coddled baby, the middle child in these texts is able to buy some time and space for personal discovery before shoved into the sphere of marriage. While they both use their small amount of freedom in different ways, Elizabeth is openly beloved and her father's constant and favorite companion. Elizabeth is frequently extolled by her father for her virtues and sense, whereas Anne is all but ignored by her father, held in contempt for her practicality and seen as inferior. The fact that both Elizabeth and Anne are middle daughters is important in these texts because their placement in their families dictates much of the family politics that will be taken on in the novels and ties them together as similar characters.

In lieu of strong parental support, Austen provides role models for happy marital relationships in the immediate social circle. In *Persuasion*, the Crofts are openly affectionate and devoted to one another, Mrs. Croft has found it very rewarding to be the wife of a sea captain, traveling with him. Mrs. Croft says: "We none of us want to be in calm waters all our life." She provides a model for what happiness Anne could have attained if she had followed her initial instincts. Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen places the relationship of the Garners on a sort of narrative pedestal because they represent a new class of successful but not aristocratic families. Also, as a part of this new class, they have managed to stay happy and satisfied with each other despite their many

children and years of marriage. This is important because were Elizabeth only exposed to her own parents' flawed relationship, she would have little experience with which to pin her own high matrimonial ideals upon.

Like Elizabeth, Anne is described as having been beautiful when she was younger, but of the kind of beauty that fades with age. Austen takes advantage of the fact that the reader never has to wonder if Elizabeth will maintain her "fine eyes," and Anne, could very easily be an older version of an unmarried Elizabeth. Both heroines are second daughters known for their sensible natures, thus Austen is showing the reader that perhaps sense and reason are not the best ways to ensure one's own happiness after all. The allusion is corroborated further by Anne's sisters, who are named Elizabeth and Mary, both names present in the daughters of the Bennet family. Granted the possibility of the coincidence being a matter merely of stock English names, it seems unlikely that Austen, who had a penchant and a skill for employing the most loaded and crafty of titles would not be equally careful in naming the characters in her heroines' families. Everything in the naming of the two novels harkens the other to memory, including the alliteration of the "p's" in both titles, and the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* was originally titled *First Impressions*. The notion of first impressions is tremendously loaded and nuanced concept in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, but takes on a deliberately different slant in *Persuasion*. Despite the similarity between *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* and the situations presented therein, the heroines are two very different women portrayed at two very dissimilar points in their lives. Elizabeth is widely regarded by everyone around her as charming, beautiful, witty, and the favorite, while Anne is marginalized for her plainness in the shadow of her more beloved older sister. The internal difference between the two heroines is that Elizabeth starts *Pride and Prejudice* as a proud character who must overcome that defect to find love with Mr. Darcy. In contrast, Anne is introduced to the reader as already regretful – she knows she has made a mistake in rejecting Wentworth and has matured enough to admit this before the novel even begins.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne is scolded and looked down upon for indulging in an impulsive and emotionally exciting relationship with Willoughby, and it is only when she finally concedes to marry Colonel Brandon, a man almost twice her age, that she is praised for being reasonable and proper. In her book, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey argues that the novel *Sense and Sensibility* shows how Jane Austen's ethical pronouncements are keeping with the 18th century moralists who denounce emotion and excess. Austen is careful to structure the novel so that the reader identifies with the sensible Elinor rather than the passionate Marianne, and to further ensure this reaction from her readership, all the most passionate and exciting moments, such as Willoughby rescuing Marianne from the storm, are conveyed through indirect narration to keep the reader at a safe and disapproving distance. This stands in stark contrast to the narrative style of *Persuasion*, which is decidedly interior and personal throughout, which helps the reader to identify and sympathize with how Anne has been denied the

opportunity for emotion and passion by the expectations placed upon her. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne is cured of her dangerous excess of passion by the end of the novel. Other female characters who are not cured, like Lucy Steele, are definitively punished for their impropriety. Austen's final judgment on Lucy is that she displays: "an earnest, an unceasing attention to self interest" (376). This explicit condemnation is interesting in terms of looking at Anne's actions in *Persuasion*, because while Austen states that Lucy's unabashed self-interest is indicative of her "wanton ill-nature," Anne is not held to the same moralistic standard. Instead, Anne's bravery in ignoring her family's wishes is rewarded, and she acts based entirely and exclusively upon what she perceives will make her happiest.

Anne Elliot and Her Pursuit of Happiness

Austen's comparison of Elizabeth and Anne is meant to show that Anne is representative of a different personal philosophy on the part of Austen. Further, the comparison serves to show that Austen has reconsidered what happiness should constitute in Regency England and what rights a woman has to pursue that happiness and fate. Much of the rhetoric and philosophy of this time that will influence Austen to make a case for Anne Elliot's right to pursue her own personal and emotional happiness is the same rhetoric being used to justify the American and French Revolutions. Austen clearly clings to the idea of humankind not being defined by the conventional indicators of their social class or political system. An earlier contemporary of Austen's, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote an extended defense of the causes and influences for the French Revolution. In it, Wollstonecraft writes:

a new spirit has gone forth, to organize the body politic; and where is this criterion to be found, to estimate the means by which the influence of this spirit can be confined, now enthroned in the hearts of half the inhabitants of the globe? Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face. . . The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding; and, as it opens, liberty with maternal wing seems to be soaring to regions far above vulgar annoyance, promising shelter to all mankind (Wollstonecraft, 19).

In this passage, Wollstonecraft is not only assigning a female gender to liberty, reason, and God, but she also reveals that the ideal social model is built upon an ethic of care and respect for the rights of individuals. Overall, Wollstonecraft condemns severely the violent outcome of the Revolution, yet staunchly maintains that more good was accomplished than ill by the revolt (Mellor, 68). This idea of liberty being found under the wing of *maternal* shelter

will become important later in this paper when the theme and implications of the “missing mother” is discussed. The connection between a philosophical treatise on the justification for the French Revolution and the story of Anne Elliot deciding to marry a ship captain may not seem immediately evident, but in *Persuasion*, Austen is implementing the radical theory of Wollstonecraft's social commentary within the microcosm of Anne's life.

The beginning of the 19th century was time of great unease and unrest among the aristocracy of England for two main reasons. The first revolves around the French Revolution taking place just across the English Channel. Civil unrest in France had very quickly morphed from a reasoned social movement to a bloody reign of terror, and the aristocracy of England was all too aware how rapidly the movement had taken hold and how close in proximity France really was. All of Austen's heroines are of the landed gentry, so the quiet dis-ease of a potential proletariat uprising necessarily pervades all her novels. Social revolution proves to be a topic that Austen is highly ambivalent about because the philosophy underlying the recent revolutions in France and America embody the same ideals that allow Anne to pursue her own happiness at the conclusion of *Persuasion*. “The Declaration of Independence” written by the Americans in 1776 could just as easily have read as a mission statement for Anne in her move to reject English societal and familial constraints and embrace her own ideals. When the Founding Fathers wrote that all men were equal and: “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” they probably did not have the disempowered female class in England specifically in mind. But the same rhetoric would protect English women as well as American colonists.

None of Austen's novels explicitly or frankly discuss the goods or evils of revolution, and Austen is clearly physically bound to the class system in England so thoroughly that she can not conceive to create a heroine outside of her own station and class. Yet, at the same time, intellectually she obviously sympathizes with and implements the rhetoric used to overthrow those same systems in France and America. The character of Anne in *Persuasion* shows this tension, and even at the conclusion of the novel when she has liberated herself from the familial and social constraints which fettered her in her youth, she remains tied to the financial realities which remind us of her economic class.

By the time *Persuasion* is written, France had begun to instigate the Napoleonic wars across Europe which also affected England emotionally and militarily. Austen references this issue of the aggressive Napoleon and social issues in France more explicitly in *Persuasion* than any of her other novels with the many soldier characters who speak to their experiences at war. However, the true social issue *Persuasion* is the rise of the English trading class and the social ramifications upon the impoverished landed aristocracy. The idea that the not nobly born trading class could raise themselves to and above the economic and social status of the aristocracy was in many ways more radical

and terrifying than anything that the French were threatening, militarily or socially. Of course, *Persuasion* is not the first time where Austen struggles with this idea of British class in a novel. In *Pride and Prejudice*, it is eluded to that Mr. Bingley's wealth is not as noble as Mr. Darcy's because his family acquired the wealth in trade. There is a sharp sense of irony that follows Caroline Bingley wherever she goes, because for all her haughtiness and nasty comments about "Cheapside," the reader of Austen's day would have known that her wealth was not aristocratic, which would have made it inferior. Mr. Darcy, in contrast, is treated by Austen as the redeemed aristocracy: at first he seems arrogant and representative of everything wrong with the current social system, but by the end of the novel, he has proven his generosity and ultimate goodness.

While the success of *Pride and Prejudice* rests on the fact that the reader truly believes that Darcy and Elizabeth are genuinely in love and will live a happy life together, it is certainly *convenient* that Elizabeth happens to fall in love with the richest, most aristocratic man introduced in the book, and her older, simpler sister marries the man whose money was acquired through trade. In *Persuasion*, Austen is treating the issue of the class system in England very differently than ever before, because it is her first novel where the happy conclusion does not include the reformation of any member of the gentry to prove the social and innate value of the aristocracy. At *Persuasion's* conclusion, instead of a confirmation of the world being at peace the way it was with inherited wealth reigning supreme over England's economy, we see Austen giving her readership an assertion that money and power are indeed shifting away from the impotent aristocracy and instead to this class of self-made individuals. The radicality of this social statement is easy for a modern audience to overlook and underestimate, but at the time, power and class shift would have been very troubling and controversial issues.

Persuasion is also the first novel where Austen portrays genuinely impoverished and lower class characters like Mrs. Smith and her nurse. Mrs. Smith used to be a member of the gentry, but lost everything after her husband's death and became destitute in her widowhood. Considering that the bulk of Austen's canon is made up of heroines who are gentlewomen teetering on the brink of poverty, this is a very interesting and loaded character for Anne to befriend. Essentially, in this last novel, Austen finally shows her readership the darker side of the social and economic issue that she has been tiptoeing around for her entire career. Women can not own or inherit property, and so without advocacy and support, they can easily fall into destitution. In regard to Anne's visits to Mrs. Smith, Anne's father says that: "everything that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations, are inviting to you" (125). And indeed, Anne does not shy away from her visits with the lower class which serves just as much to show a critique of gentle society's response to fallen gentry as it does to showcase Anne's personal and revolutionary goodness. Upon the story's conclusion, Mrs. Smith's livelihood has been restored to her because Wentworth is convinced to act upon her

behalf. The presence of Mrs. Smith and the frank discussion of her financial and social troubles is a statement of and testament to the need for a reevaluation of the value and applicability of traditional class distinctions in 19th century England.

This class issue is complicated by the fact that even while Wentworth remains the same in personal merit and essentials, his situation has changed. Though Anne marries him for the same reasons she loved him before the novel started, the reader is left with the problem that Wentworth is not exactly the same as he was before – by the time he proposes to Anne the second time, he has become very rich. The whole point of the novel is Anne's remorse about her rejection of Wentworth, and she recognizes her mistake before she learns of his greatly increased fortune, yet that serendipity just doesn't quite ring true. Austen has clearly made a class shift, with the qualities she is valuing in Anne and the people that surround her. Nevertheless, at the end of her life, Austen is still not willing to say that a couple who loves each other would be happy without abundant fortune and prestige.

Poetry and Moderation: Vices and Virtues

Most of Austen's heroines are readers, at least in the most casual sense, and often the books and authors these heroines are reading affect the plot and theme of the novel. For example, in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Mooreland is greatly influenced by the Anne Radcliffe's Gothic novels, which were hugely popular during the time in which the novel is set. It is because of Catherine's obsession with the imaginative and fanciful aspects of these Gothic novels that the novel is centered upon her transformation from a woman seeking guidance disproportionately from fiction to someone who can trust her own rational perceptions (Mekler, 29). This use of outside literature as a plot device in *Northanger Abbey* differs greatly from its function in *Persuasion*, because in the latter novel, Austen is using poetry as justification for Anne's emotional maturity, whereas in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine must move away from the gothic novels to prove her maturation. Anne, by contrast, is not compelled by trendy pulp literature, but instead is deeply affected by the poetry of the Romantics. Indeed, the notion of Romantic poetry in *Persuasion* is used as an important instructive device in Anne's development to individuality, and as a thematic touchstone for helping to elucidate Austen's intentions and thesis. In the passage where Anne and Benwick discuss poetry, Anne says:

He was evidently a young man of considerable taste in reading, although principally in poetry; and besides the *persuasion* of having given him at least an evening's indulgence in the discussion of subjects, which his usual companions had probably no concern in, she had the hope of being of real use to him in some suggestions

as to the duty and benefit of struggling
against affliction, which had naturally grown
out of their conversation (*italics mine*, 76).

Obviously *Persuasion* is a loaded title given the way Anne had been persuaded against her own happiness in the beginning of her life. But this quotation also shows how Austen is implicitly referencing the persuasion that coerced Anne into rejecting Wentworth initially, and her persuasion towards Romantic poetry which eventually leads her to be able to embrace the ideology that necessitates her rejection of the social and familial pressures upon her in favor of an enlightened emotional life. The book's title embodies dual meaning: firstly of Anne's unhappiness in her family and station in life being attributed to her being persuaded away from her original affections towards Wentworth, and secondly the ultimately redemptive power of her interest in and persuasion towards the poetry that influences the theme of this novel.

Through Anne's conversations, primarily those held with Captain Benwick about poetry and Romanticism, Austen references several poems specifically, all written by Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. The poems in *Persuasion* are "Marmion" and "The Lady of the Lake" by Scott and "The Bride of Abydos," "The Corsair," and "Giaour" written by Byron, whom Anne calls "the one poet." Byron was wildly popular and widely read at the time of *Persuasion*'s writing, so it is not unusual that Austen would have Anne reading him. Instead, what is radical and surprising is that Austen has Anne able to see past the sensationalism that was Byron's public persona and intelligently discuss his "dark blue seas" with Captain Benwick on the seashore at Lyme (109). Austen has literature serving a very different purpose in *Persuasion* than in her other novels, because it is something to be considered, treasured and used as a moral and emotional guide. As an example of the high voltage and power held by Austen's interesting selection of poems in *Persuasion*, "Marmion," published by Scott in 1808 is still the most famous poetic treatment of the Battle of Flodden Field. This battle took place under Henry VIII in 1513 while the English were at war with the French yet again, but the actual fight was between the British and the oppressed Scots who had been armed by the French. By the end of the poem, the hero Marmion has died, the lovers have been reunited, and a nun is walled up in a fort as punishment for breaking her vows. In the context of *Persuasion*, written at a time when England was still at war with France, the Scots were still oppressed, and women could still be walled up literally and metaphorically for abusing their chastity, this poem has explosive significance for its treatment of political, social, religious and women's issues.¹

In this way, the reader can see why Austen would assert the alluring danger of poetry, especially in the aristocratic sector that was supposed to maintain and support the status quo, at home and abroad. Anne says: "it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely" In labeling poetry as a dynamic force, Austen references the explosive and virulent nature of Romanticism and how it both shocked and

allured the world's literate population. All the treacherous things about the poems Anne loves so much are the same aspects that made the literary movement of the time so revolutionary and intense. In the end, Austen sanctions this intensity because she says that Anne, herself, "had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would bear ill examination" (97).

Austen's espousment of Romantic poetry in the plot and context of *Persuasion* also becomes significant in relation to her other novels. As mentioned before, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* is fascinated by Gothic novels but realizes by the end of the novel that she must reject them to fully mature. Similarly, Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* is drawn to the poetry of William Cowper, but finally learns to leave such imprudent passion behind when she begrudgingly embraces propriety at the end of the novel. This is not surprising, because the idealism of literature is frankly not conducive to remaining resigned to one's place in place as a female in society. In all these previous instances, Austen reveals her literary sympathies, but is not optimistic enough to believe that their liberalism will honestly serve her heroines well in their practical lives. In these instances, Austen's espousment of reason over the emotion of Radcliffe and Cowper sets the narrative of *Persuasion* in stark contrast to her earlier novels. While Austen grants that Romantic poetry is perilous to interact with in *Persuasion*, she never requires that Anne discard the literature she loves to become content with her place in society. Rather, she does quite the opposite when she allows Anne to maintain her passionate reading *and* her sense: Austen also posits the unlikely and surprising union of Captain Benwick and Louisa Musgrove as a result of their enjoying poetry together. Therefore, Austen diverges from her earlier pronouncements that a woman must disown both knowledge and art to be at peace with the order of society. Society is changing, power is shifting, and women should be able to follow their happiness and instincts. Austen is giving very different and fresh message that Romantic poetry will not only enlighten a large body of people, but perhaps even induce them to act in a socially revolutionary manner.

The presence and celebration of Romantic poetry in *Persuasion* would be confusing if Austen were not trying to make a genre shift with the novel *Persuasion* while also adapting her ideals and values for the heroine. The barest and most precise tenets of the Romantic movement - individualism, imagination, and emotion - are all present in *Persuasion* and viewed as qualities in Anne to be admired, not character flaws that needed to be overcome as they are in her other novels. In this way, the reader can see how if the argument can be made that Romanticism gave individualism and the emotional life back to a human race bogged down in reason and empiricism, then Austen is reacting to that literary movement by trying to give the very same gift back to women who throughout history have been belittled and feared and condescended to for their emotions. On this point, Austen is echoing Wollstencraft who says that liberty is a feminine virtue, and that it is the maternal parts of society that will provide care and respect for each person's individual rights.

In light of this reading of Austen's radicality and espousment of the emotional Romantics, it is ironic that for so many years Austen has been interpreted primarily as a restrained conformist of a subjugated body of female writers. Charlotte Brontë, writing in 1848 accused Austen of being "a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers" (Gaskell, 282). Most Janeites would take issue with this statement in relation to her entire canon, but at the very least, *Persuasion* proves itself to be anything but neat and reserved, rather it is full of the emotion, passion and revolutionary ideals of the Romantics.

The Heroine and Her Family

Another aspect of Austen's canon that is woven throughout many of her novels but finally comes to a decisive head in *Persuasion* is the notion of the missing mother that leaves the heroine bereft of maternal guidance. In *Persuasion*, the late Mrs. Elliot is recognized as having not been the happiest woman in her choice of marriage partners despite her "sensible and amiable" character (7). Even her daughters are aware of the fact of her unhappiness, so perhaps Austen is implying that had Mrs. Elliot lived, she would have urged or least allowed Anne to act differently in her own marriage choices. Gilbert and Gubar write that: "The fact that her mother's loss initiated [Anne's] invisibility and silence is important in a book that so closely associates the heroine's felicity with her ability to articulate her sense of herself as a woman" (178). At the same time, it is clear that Austen is advocating a new kind of woman, with fresh concerns and ideals, and the role of the traditional mother is antiquated because they no longer can teach their daughters how to best exist in the world. For Anne to have a supportive and active mother in her life would most likely lead to her making the same societal decisions that Austen is fighting against in this text.

Many scholars have noted and commented upon the recurrent theme of the missing mother in 19th century British women's literature, especially in the novels of Jane Austen, the Brontës and Mary Shelley. L. Adam Mekler, in his article "Recovering the Absent Mother in Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, suggests that: "the 'missing' mothers ...provide opportunities for the 'corrective' instruction of patriarchal figures whose teachings threaten the authority and autonomy, and even the very lives, of different female characters in these novels" (25). Mekler advances this argument to illustrate the situation of Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey*, but one could see how it could perhaps also apply to Anne Elliot, who because of her mother's death has been left to the manipulative influence of other social forces around her. Gilbert and Gubar advance a similar interpretation when they say that Austen is: "aware that male superiority is far more than fiction, and she always defers to the economic, social, and political power of men as she dramatizes how and why female survival depends on gaining male approval and protection" (154). In the absence of her mother, Lady Russell assumes the role of Anne's advisor in matters of marriage and other smaller decisions for personal happiness, but

despite her best intentions advises Anne to act against her emotional better judgment. As a woman, she can not be considered a traditional “patriarchal” force, but as a purposely unmarried woman who manages her own affairs, Lady Russell has a very “masculine” amount of control over her own life. For whatever reason, however, she does not view Anne as capable or worthy of the same. Anne's father is the typical caricature of the disinterested paternal figure who wants Anne to serve no other purpose than what will be the most beneficial to him at any given moment in time. In contrast to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, who learns from the patriarchal figures around her by expecting honorability and fiscal virtue from her suitor rather than traditional romance, Anne finally rejects the forces that lead her astray from her initial intentions to marry Wentworth.

In her article, “Jane Austen and the Tradition of the Absent Mother,” Susan Peck MacDonald takes a different stance on the recurring dearth of maternal influence. MacDonald allocates this pervasive theme primarily to a narrative function when she says: “if she is dead or absent, the good mother can remain an ideal without her presence disrupting or preventing the necessary drama of the novel” (58-59). MacDonald goes on to stipulate that if the mother insists on remaining present for her daughter's maturation, then she necessarily must be flawed in a way that will not alleviate her daughter's trials but augment them. And though it is true that a novel like *Pride and Prejudice* would suffer a crushing blow narratively if Mrs. Bennet were an intelligent and sensitive mother rather than the comically atrocious maternal figure that plagues Elizabeth and Jane in their attempts to secure genuine love, it seems as if the pain suffered by the heroines without strong maternal support is both too frequent in the genre and too devastating to be merely a functional corollary to the tale of a young woman coming out into society.

When women are not given supportive and interested families, they are left to find themselves and their place in the world on their own. Anne's absent and disinterested parents make it easier for her to become individualistic and more acutely self-aware. The loss of the mother specifically references the trend towards the idealization of the functional and effective nuclear family in the latter part of the 18th and early 19th centuries, especially the nurturing mother who remained in intimate proximity to her children throughout their childhood. During this time, the visual image of the mother breastfeeding and nurturing her children became very popular in British magazine illustrations and poetry (Mellor, 81). Austen's novels contain none of these popular images of the nursing mother, and so Austen seems to negate or challenge this cultural shift with the mother's gaping absence or moral defection. Rather than portraying the mother through her biological ties to the infant, specifically through eroticized and milk-filled breasts, Austen means to illustrate the different ways the role of mother can be socially executed. In one way or another, the mother shows the responsibility a woman has to be a moral guide to her daughter and how through either absence or impotence, the daughter will be left without her natural instructor. This absence does not always result in the

worst case scenario, however, because in many ways, Austen is showing how the traditional mother is obsolete to the new woman. Without a mother's stabilizing presence, a heroine is able to propel herself forward to a consciousness that allows her to make decisions based upon her own interpretation of what is good and desirable.

All this leads to the question of the contract of family versus duty to one's self. Must a heroine remain loyal to her family if her family does not remain loyal to her? For women, especially unmarried women in early 19th century England, the family is the traditional and primary means for economic support, happiness and safety. Through the character of Anne and the undesirable position her family places her in *Persuasion*, Austen begins to suggest that these systems are not infallible or universal. Finally, Anne finds the freedom and the courage to reject the standards her family believes she owes them, and to act based wholly on her own desires and vision of happiness. Not only is the role of the mother obsolete to the new woman who is permitted passion and happiness, but the entire family is given an ethic of care and support that they must adhere to or the heroine's social responsibilities to her family will be null and void.

Conclusion

Jane Austen died of a degenerative illness in July of 1817 shortly after her final draft of *Persuasion* was completed. Both *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were to be published by her brother posthumously, so Austen never had a chance to publicly defend or clarify the ideals put forth by *Persuasion's* social and moral prescription. In fact, upon her death, Austen was instantly beatified by her family members, her sister Cassandra severely edited and destroyed many of Austen's letters in order to make them conform to her own sense of propriety, and her brother wrote a preface to *Persuasion* that focused primarily upon Austen's Christian goodness rather than her triumphs as a novelist. The effect of these actions still reverberates through the literary world and public perceptions of Jane Austen. In a work titled *The Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Kathleen Tillitson speaks to this simplification of Austen's canon and how the majority of those acquainted with Austen's image entirely miss the complexity of her worldview. Tillitson writes: "A writer of the school of Miss Austen' is a much-abused phrase, applied now-a-days by critics who, it is charitable to suppose, have never read Miss Austen's works, to any female writer who composes dull stories without incident, full of level conversation, and concerned with characters of middle life" (Tillitson, 144).

In this way, it seems as if the public opinion on Austen since her death has been extremely polarized between those who have understood her and hold her work beloved, and those who can not get past the polished and proper image that Austen's family members very effectively insisted would outlive her. Any member of the first group of people would hope that a thorough and careful reading of *Persuasion* would cure the second group of their misconceptions,

because this final work is anything but a comedy of manners, neatly trimmed and executed. *Persuasion* is a novel about revolution and a dying aristocracy. In *Persuasion*, Austen renounces the notion that women should be forced to marry within their social class and that class distinctions are worthwhile at all. Austen echoes Wollstencraft in insisting that women be educated and well-read and allowed to hold emotional and subversive literature close to their hearts, even if it complicates a gentlewoman's worldview. Anne Elliot's actions show overbearing family influence to be an invalid force in a woman's life, and the maternal figure to be an antiquated role model for a woman aspiring to find happiness from a 19th century world. Even more radical, all these ideals are placed directly against the backdrop and in opposition to what is perhaps Austen's best known and revered novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. This comparison serves to show how Jane Austen's life and ideals were not static and stony, but that she was constantly questioning and amending what she knew and held true about the world she lived in. Austen's final contribution to the literary world drastically amends the virtues placed forth as ultimate in *Pride and Prejudice*, reason and propriety. Instead, in *Persuasion*, Austen staunchly asserts that goodness and happiness lie in a woman's ability and courage to act upon her passion, emotion and instinct.

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Endnotes

1. I suspect that there is some element of another dialogue that Austen is trying to have with Scott through this novel. Scott was one of the few writers and critics of Austen's day that actually understood and recognized the complexity and greater social implications of her novels, and he published an 1816 review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* to that effect. Therefore, I would be interested to explore further Austen's relationship to Scott and try and determine what this exchange between them would be.

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