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“An Early Loss of Bloom:” Spinsters, Old Maids, and the Marriage Market in *Persuasion*

by

Dashielle Horn

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

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“An Early Loss of Bloom:” Spinsters, Old Maids, and the Marriage Market in *Persuasion*

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## ABSTRACT

Thomas Gisborne warns young women in his 1797 *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* that society expects them to marry well (meaning to marry someone wealthy), but he argues that marriage should be based on morality instead of economics. As Anne Elliot learns, the judgments family and friends make about potential marriage partners can deeply influence whether those marriages occur at all. As a result of the pressure from Lady Russell's assessment of the young Mr. Wentworth as socially and financially inferior, Anne declines his proposal and enters a period of early spinsterhood. Scholars rarely discuss Anne as a spinster, and indeed her eventual marriage means that she ultimately does not fit the definition, but for most of the novel she occupies the role of the spinster figure; we see her at age 27 as having prematurely lost her bloom and her beauty, and most importantly, removed herself from the marriage market. Her older sister, Elizabeth, by contrast is 29 yet still healthy, beautiful, and marriageable; the contradiction is telling, and attests to Austen's interest in the nature of spinsterhood. Her protest of the overwhelming societal pressure to marry is clear. Austen's portrait of spinsterhood does not suggest that remaining single is a viable choice in society's eyes, but nor does she condone making decisions about marriage (to accept or refuse proposals) on the basis of finances. I will investigate whether Austen calls for a space for women to choose to remain single, arguing for the productivity of spinsterhood, or whether by ultimately marrying Anne to Wentworth she is reaffirming the marriage plot.

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is fascinated with Jane Austen as a historical figure. Austen movies such as “Mansfield Park,” which infused the character of Fanny Price with hints of Austen’s own personality, and the pseudo-biographical “Becoming Jane” indicate that Austen herself fascinates today’s audiences, not just for her work as an author but also for her own story. Moreover, audiences are particularly consumed by Austen’s singleness; the revisions to her biography in “Becoming Jane” suggest that today’s readers want Austen to have had the same type of love story she gave to her heroines. Surprisingly, scholars as a whole have not taken a substantially more critical position on Austen’s singleness. Indeed, criticism on Austen in relation to spinsters tends to ignore the unmarried women in her novels in favor of looking to Austen’s own failure to marry. This critical gap is remarkable, given the frequent appearance of spinsters and the even more omnipresent danger of spinsterhood, throughout her novels. From Charlotte Lucas’s age anxiety in *Pride and Prejudice* to the prattling Miss Bates in *Emma*, the specter of singleness is persistent. Most notably, the heroine of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot, is herself a spinster figure. Many would protest that Anne is not strictly a spinster, because she does marry at the end. However, for the period of seven years between Captain Wentworth’s first proposal and his second, Anne makes the decision to remove herself from the marriage market, effectively making herself into a spinster figure. Furthermore, her older sister Elizabeth is, at twenty-nine, still a quite desirable marriage prospect for the society men. Why, then, is the younger sister a spinster figure while the older is still pursued by suitors? This apparent contradiction further signals a deep interest on Austen’s part in the nature of spinsterhood. The notion that Austen dedicated an entire novel to the character

of a spinster demands that we look not at Austen's own singleness, but her literary ruminations on spinsterhood.

One scholar has begun this work; Devoney Looser, in *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850*, discusses Miss Bates in *Emma*. Looser claims that "at least... in *Emma*, [Austen's approach to spinsters] involved a willingness to conform to, rather than overturn prevalent stereotypes" (77). However, I would contend that Austen's treatment of Anne Elliot is much more developed than that of Miss Bates. Her discussion of spinsterhood in *Persuasion* is more complicated than simple support or condemnation; she is proposing that spinsterhood can, in certain cases, be a productive space. Moreover, marriage in *Persuasion* is more complex than is usual for the period; while eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society reified marriage, and tended to scorn (to one degree or another) any woman who failed to marry, Austen presents the possibility that marriage can be dangerous, and that remaining single can be the safer option. Marriage is insufferable when husband and wife are not seriously in love (see Charles and Mary Musgrove, for example), and even those couples who are (Admiral and Mrs. Croft, Anne and Captain Wentworth) are not guaranteed lasting happiness in the shadow of the imminent renewal of the Napoleonic wars. Neither the option of marriage nor that of spinsterhood is simple, then; marriage is not necessarily preferable, and spinsterhood is not necessarily a failure to marry. Spinsterhood can thus at times be a protective space, preventing women from the pain of an unhappy marriage or a lost spouse. Or, as in Anne's case, it can allow the space to heal from another kind of loss without being subject to the pressures of the marriage market.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the titular figure of the Victorian card game Old Maid to literary characters such as Miss Havisham, the spinster is a familiar figure in the cultural consciousness. These examples, moreover, are not randomly chosen; the cultural conceptions of these characters reside primarily in the Victorian period, which thus affords a majority of examples. This is due in part to the simple fact that the population of unmarried women grew substantially during the nineteenth century, termed the redundant woman phenomenon. However, the dominant attitude toward spinsters that solidified in the nineteenth century, emerged from a century of many heterogenous and shifting conceptions of spinsterhood. These varied discussions of spinsters were nearly all negative, with only a handful of positive or even neutral spinster characters. It is useful, then, to consider how the spinster figure developed, and where Austen falls in this history.

The redundant woman in the nineteenth century refers to the gender imbalance in the British population; England had more women than men, and thus more unmarried women. This was in part due to the participation in the Napoleonic wars, given that “in 1810 one out of every six adult males was at war by land or sea” (Faymonville 66). However, a number of other factors combined with the war to create the gender imbalance, including “a naturally high male-infant mortality rate..., and the economically motivated migration of young men. Of the estimated 200,000 British citizens emigrating each year, males outnumbered females by a rate of three to two. In addition, [beside those men directly involved in the war,] many men were enlisted in the army or occupied in other government enterprises abroad,” meaning that while they were technically a part of

the British population, they were unavailable for marital purposes (Faymonville 66). Earlier demographics are more difficult to ascertain; the demographic history of spinsters is unknown in the eighteenth century, due to the dearth of pertinent documentation. Birth records and marriage records are inconsistent, so it is impossible to know the statistics regarding marriage and spinsters definitively, and scholars who have attempted to map these gaps in knowledge have generally focused on single parishes, but have yet to provide a general picture of British marriage and singleness. The first solid documentation that occurs is telling, though—historian Bridget Hill points out that the first census “in 1801 revealed a surplus of women over men” (222). The narrative history of spinsters is much clearer, however, and possibly more important in their historical legacy.

Despite the resulting profusion of spinsters, though, the Victorian attitude toward spinsters was overwhelmingly negative as a result of the cultural supremacy held by marriage: “to the Victorian the spinster was either pitiable or contemptible, simply because of her spinsterhood... [marriage] was the great object of every woman, and she who did not attain to it was a complete failure” (Maunsell Field 558). This Victorian conception of spinsterhood still dominates the cultural mind. The temptation when discussing spinsters at any cultural moment, then, is to look through the lens of this Victorian context, and indeed, it is easy to apply this image of spinsterhood when considering the novels of Jane Austen. However, Austen lived and wrote on the cusp of a watershed change in the spinster figure; she was writing during the Napoleonic wars, and thus saw the beginning of the redundant woman phenomenon. Indeed, she obliquely comments upon this trend in that *Persuasion*'s Captain Wentworth is absent from

England during these wars, the same period during which Anne develops into a spinster figure. However, the peak of this phenomenon, marked by the statistical imbalance between men and women, occurred in the mid-nineteenth century— Dicken’s era as opposed to Austen’s. Moreover, Austen wrote in the historical context of the late eighteenth century. Thus, a more appropriate understanding of Austen’s context would be situated in the moment when the shifting eighteenth-century perceptions of spinsters were beginning to solidify, just before the inception of the redundant woman period.

Certain truths about the spinster figure transcend this temporal boundary. The unfortunate fact is that “historically, in cultural representations, women have been defined in relation to men” (Gordon 1). This relation is, unsurprisingly, most commonly centered on marriage. Marriage has consistently held enormous sway over the cultural expectations of women; marriage maintains, even to a great degree today, hegemony over all other forms of commitment and relationships. However, we may be used to some latitude in this expectation, or at least the counterarguments. Prior to the feminist revolution, however, these counterarguments were not a part of the cultural ether. Before this moment, “when women were ‘understood either married or to be married,’ when they were only regarded as fulfilling their destiny as wives or mothers, and when to be a ‘maid’ was essentially a temporary state passed through on the way to marriage, unmarried or husbandless women were an anomaly” (Hill 221). Marriage is the organizing assumption of society, and particularly of women’s lives. So any woman who rejects this state, voluntarily or otherwise, is marked as an outlier and suffers the attendant consequences. The most notable is the assessment that the spinster is in some way flawed, that she was unsuccessful in attaining a husband due to some personal

inadequacy. This is an overwhelmingly powerful punishment in itself. However, it is by no means the only punishment inflicted on spinsters— “it was not just the disgrace and the shame of failing to get a husband, but their denial by society of any identity” (Hill 229). From certain perspectives, women without husbands were nonentities. Even worse, unmarried women, including both spinsters and widows, have the potential to be the “focus [of] all the malice, hatred, and scorn that any non-conforming minority can attract to itself” (Hill 222). So while the degree of vehemence in response to marital non-conformity can vary as with any other prejudice, it is generally quite negative and the worst end of the spectrum is horrible. These especially negative responses may in large part be because spinsters “were also regarded as in some way a challenge to male authority, in particular the authority of husbands” (Hill 229). In the hegemony of marriage, such resistance is unacceptable.

The range of cultural attitudes toward unmarried women is amply apparent in literature, and indeed, literature may be one of the most powerful ways to investigate the trajectory of the spinster figure. Whether in fiction or non-fiction treatises, writing on spinsters abounds. This is perhaps because “in Anglo-American culture, the never-married old woman is a stock character, a bundle of negative personal characteristics, and a metaphor for barrenness, ugliness, and death” (Simon 2). So what are the markers of the spinster figure? The most important is singleness, and not simply the current state of being unmarried, but some implication that this state is permanent. That permanence is usually conveyed by age; spinsters are of a certain age, though as I will later elucidate this exact age is unclear and in some cases negotiable. These are the requirements for spinsterhood, but the qualities ascribed to them tend to vary more. Such qualities are

difficult to enumerate definitively both because they often differ and because “spinsters remain shadowy figures” (Hill 226). They are rarely the central characters in a work, due to the centrality of the marriage plot in literature. They generally “appear briefly, and often with no explanation whenever a family crisis or problem arises” (Hill 226). This literary pattern appears because this is exactly the role spinsters most frequently took in reality—caretaker and family assistant.

Literature demonstrates a changing attitude toward spinsters during the eighteenth century. Historian Stephanie Coontz notes that “idealization of marriage reached such heights that the meaning of the word *spinster* began to change. Originally an honorable term reserved for a woman who spun yarn, by the 1600s it had come to mean any woman who was not married. In the 1700s the word took on a negative connotation for the first time, the flip side of the new reverence accorded to wives” (147). Looser points out that cultural stereotypes surrounding the spinster, which ranged from the pitiable peevish old woman to the vicious harridan, then began to form in the eighteenth century (82). Katherine R. Allen also indicates that this is the period at which the term “[ ]spinster[ ]” became linked to ‘old maid,’ implying ‘certain pejorative attributes—such as narrowness of spirit and a tendency to gossip over teacups’” among other things (22).

However, Susan Lanser gives the most comprehensive treatment of the production of the spinster figure in the eighteenth century. She clearly demonstrates that the cultural attitudes toward the spinster were far more complicated than history remembers. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that discussions of spinsters are in the minority; like spinsters themselves, these discussions are subordinate to the discourse of marriage. Overwhelmingly, “marriage is presented as effectively the only path to female

respectability, so that even those who recognize its drawbacks opt for it, focusing their attention on when, whom, and how to wed” (Lanser 302). Correspondingly, conduct manuals, the body of work written for young women, offer advice not on the choice to get married, but assumes this as the natural goal for all young ladies and belabor instead how to get married and how to be a good wife. The classic example of such a treatment of young women’s lives is Fordyce’s sermons, published in 1775; he primarily instructs ladies about whom to marry and how to please the husband.

Fordyce’s sermons, famous to today’s readers from Mr. Collins’s comical proselytizing in *Pride and Prejudice*, advised women in matters of marriage, among other things. He emphasizes that the aim of marriage should be to attain happiness and live a virtuous life. He criticizes women whose “only concern was to be married, not to be happy, or to gain a heart, not to keep it” (193). He does, in a singular moment, though, admit that marriage is not the only option for women, to “establish it betimes as a certain maxim, that to be married is neither the one, nor the chief thing needful. Are all in that state happy? Or must she be necessarily unhappy, who is not in that state? May not a single woman be wise and virtuous?” (175). This passage thus suggests that Fordyce believes that happiness and virtuousness are the goals in life, not marriage, and that, in turn, spinsterhood is a viable option. However, he immediately follows this moment by saying that “should such a woman live to grow old in the single state, she will be regarded with a mixture of hatred and contempt... every one will recollect the imputation which has been so frequently brought against Unmarried females at that age” (175). Though Fordyce does not condone this attitude toward spinsters, he regards it as an

inevitable fact of society. Though spinsterhood could be a potential path of happiness and virtue, in practice this is impossible through his formulation.

Another popular conduct manual, Thomas Gisborne's 1797 *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, offers more context significant in the new eighteenth-century landscape of marriage focused on love. The business of marriage dictates that a "good match" for a woman means "she is united to a man whose rank and fortune is such, when compared with her own or those of her parents, that in point of precedence, in point of command and finery and of money, she is, more or less, a gainer by the bargain" (Gisborne 172). This financially-focused marriage market, though, means that the neighborhood society is concerned with advantageous matches for local ladies rather than the potential husbands' characters: "he may be proud, he may be ambitious, he may be malignant, he may be devoid of Christian principles, practice, and belief;... and yet, in the language, and in the opinion of the generality of both sexes, [if he is wealthy,] the match is excellent" (Gisborne 172-173). However, Gisborne argues that the mercenary marriage is doomed to unhappiness, claiming that "it would be... folly to expect that such marriages, however much they may answer the purposes of interest or of ambition, should terminate otherwise than in wretchedness" (Gisborne 173). Contrary to the neighborhood society's expressed concerns, Gisborne notes that happiness is a necessary consideration in forming any marriage, however equitable or advantageous, because "the prospect of passing a single month with an acquaintance, whose society we know to be unpleasing, is a prospect from which every mind recoils [and]... the evil would appear in foresight scarcely to be endured" (Gisborne 165). A person valuing happiness in marriage should thus look for affection with a potential spouse before entering an engagement.

Gisborne also addresses the situation of spinsters. Like Fordyce, he primarily focuses on how to get married, whom to marry, and how to stay married, instead of why to marry or offering alternatives to marriage, and when he does mention permanently single women, his sense of their lives is of “the dismal vacuity that seems to await them” (223). Though he does not condemn or criticize them, his tone throughout is of overwhelmingly condescending pity, because “they are persons cut off from a state of life usually regarded as the most desirable” (428). He points to inherent flaws in single women, saying “that certain peculiarities of deportment, though they are studiously to be shunned and corrected, it is not necessary here to recite, are proverbially frequent in women, who have long remained single” (427). Failure to marry seems to have a degrading influence in this perspective, as if women are incapable of maintaining virtue without the influence of a husband. Significantly, Fordyce’s sermons and Gisborne’s conduct manual were targeted toward young women; these were the attitudes toward spinsterhood internalized by the very population entering the marriage market.

Fordyce and Gisborne represent two of the most important discussions of marriage in the eighteenth century, but they are only two voices. Over the course of the century, the discourse surrounding spinsters undergoes a significant transformation. The stigma against old maids first powerfully manifests in literature in 1713 with the anonymously authored *Satyr Upon Old Maids*. This work is perhaps one of the most markedly vicious critiques of spinsters, using descriptive phrases such as “nasty, rank, rammy, filthy Sluts” (quoted in Lanser 297). Similar attitudes often appear in non-fiction as well, in sincere as opposed to satirical texts. For instance, the 1753 anonymous *Essay on Celibacy*, which Lanser does not address, takes an extreme position against singleness



among both genders. Failure to marry constitutes celibacy, in this author's formulation, which he or she claims is unnatural. Thus, "stale maids" (7) are effectively, "by weakening civil ties, forwarding a total depravation of manners" (vi). He or she goes on to describe spinsters as "secular nuns, or hermitesses, who, contrary to one end of their formation, the laws of their country, reason, common sense, interest, and the plain rules of health, endeavour to divest themselves of certain natural powers, and stifle, or leave ungratified, the strongest and most useful inclinations" (6). The author even claims, in the most inflammatory section, that "willfully barren old maids, deserve, and are sure to be beaten with many stripes" (xii). Logically, then, unmarried readers are instructed to marry with all possible haste, particularly those "unmarried ladies of thirty, or even thirty-five years" (xi). For those who still refuse to marry, he or she suggests that unmarried persons should be taxed for their disservice to society (68). This position, of course, is quite extreme and does not at all represent a standard attitude toward spinsters.

The problem, however, is that at this point no standard seems to appear; instead there are two opposing viewpoints, extreme vituperation on one end of the scale and support of singleness as a viable life choice on the other. Mary Astell's 1694-1697 *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is the central example of the latter, advocating singleness not only as a possible alternative to marriage, but as preferable (Lanser 299). Arguments for singleness "usually rest their case on a critique of marriage and/or men, arguing that marriage as presently practiced actively harms women or at least denies them the possibility for spiritual and intellectual fulfillment" (300). Lanser identifies one other significant defense of singleness, Bernard Mandeville's 1709 *The Virgin Unmasked*, which "attempts a compelling empirical case against marriage for women while also

analyzing the political systems of several countries and advancing its own political and social philosophy” (300). However, these defenses of spinsterhood are rare and far outweighed by the virulent attacks in the early part of the century. Indeed, Lanser claims that these defenses fade by 1720 (301).<sup>1</sup>

One essay stands out to me, though, that Lanser neglects to mention. The anonymous essay *Considerations on Establishing a College for Old Maids in Ireland* published in 1790 seems quite significant in that it advocates for an alternative to marriage for women. The text proposes a college, indicating the importance of society (female companionship) and education as well as a physical place for unmarried women to live (9). The reasoning behind the necessity of such an establishment is quite vehement: “how deplorable then is the condition of an OLD MAID! Stripped, perhaps, by the death of her relations, and abandoned by the friends of her youth, she pines in solitude: a prey to infirmity, or bending beneath the weight of years, she sits, cheerless, the solitary tenant of an humble habitation” (8). The college, then, prevents such a lady from the extreme isolation described, and the subsequent hermitic decline. The benefits of a college for unmarried women, are shown to be numerous: “by opening a rich, though distant prospect of sublunary happiness to the young female, it would serve, in some degree, to defeat the dark arts of base seducers; and an old age of neglect would no longer, by its visionary terrors, precipitate the timorous virgin into the indissoluble bonds of matrimony” (18). The author notes that the pressure to marry, and the fear of spinsterhood itself, impels some young women into marriages which are not always happy. Moreover, this fear makes them increasingly susceptible to seduction, with the

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<sup>1</sup> The exception, according to Lanser, is Sarah Scott’s 1792 *Millenium Hall*, which notably is the only novel recognized by scholars to defend spinsters.

hope that becoming a mistress will lead to becoming a wife. This alternative option, then, which provides a future of an old age spent in the care of other women, would release much of this pressure for women and lead to fewer unhappy marriages and fewer fallen women. This suggestion of an alternative to marriage appearing to be quite singular in its aims, it shows a perspective few other eighteenth-century authors recognize.

These opposing viewpoints reach an uneasy reconciliation in the last few decades of the century, though. Ultimately, the images of spinsters are tempered, though still quite negative overall, into “a more unified image of a singlewoman with both vices and virtues—an object of polite pity, slight admiration, and temperate ridicule” (Lanser 304). This middle position is exemplified by William Hayley’s 1785 *Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay Upon Old Maids*, which is the most frequently discussed eighteenth-century discussion of spinsters. Hayley focuses on “the particular failings of Old Maids”—curiosity, credulity, affectation, and envy and ill nature—as well as “on the particular good qualities of Old Maids”—ingenuity, patience, and charity (Hayley ix). He attempts to form a balanced picture, but the failings still outweigh the virtues, and he is still engaging in stereotyping. Lanser argues that the way he frames these binary qualities “turns even alleged virtues into vices” (304). Hayley’s treatment of spinsters, according to Lanser, is part of an effort to redomesticate the spinster. Such late eighteenth-century attitudes turn “the old maid into a negative but also socially recuperated (second-class) identity that will change very little from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth” (299). Austen, then, writes in the moment this conception of the spinster solidifies. Lanser claims that she subscribes to this attitude, in that she “ultimate[ly] recuperates [spinsters] into a domestic economy” (306), though I will argue that Austen’s treatment

of spinsters is much more complex in that she sees opportunities in spinsterhood. Regardless, though, this settled image of the spinster lacks the virulent vituperation of previous attacks. At worst, seen in *Emma*'s treatment of Miss Bates, Austen treats spinsters with pity and gentle contempt.

Spinsterhood was thus not generally admitted as a potential life choice, despite the few texts supporting single women. By the Victorian period, according to Shirley Foster, "because so much importance was attached to the roles of wifhood and motherhood, marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfillment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural" (6). However, the changes in conceptions of marriage also placed new pressures on women to marry, as "emotional and psychological pressures on women to marry were thus added to the social and economic ones of earlier periods" (Foster 6). The attitude directed towards those who became spinsters despite these pressures, then, was that they were "inadequate in some respect and therefore failures. It was unthinkable that any woman could choose spinsterhood" (Hill 230). In fact, the very concept of remaining unmarried appears unthinkable in some contemporary texts.

The increased emotional and psychological pressure to marry may reflect cultural anxiety that women would choose not to marry. Indeed, there were legitimate (though not legitimized) reasons to not marry; namely, legal rights greatly favored the unmarried woman, because the married woman's rights were subsumed into the husband's upon marriage. A number of historians have recorded this legal oppression of wives, such as Hill, Foster, David R. Green and Alistair Owens, and Arvonne Fraser, often citing the contemporary accounts of eighteenth-century legal scholar William Blackstone.

Blackstone claimed that “by marriage,... the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband” (quoted in Hill 196). Women thus became legal nonentities upon marrying. The specific rights denied to them were also numerous. For instance, married women could not own property except under very particular previously stipulated circumstances: “the personal property of the wife,” Blackstone wrote, ‘becomes absolutely her husband’s which at his death he may leave entirely away from her’” (Hill 197). She was further stripped of legal personhood in that the wife “had no legal right to contract,” even well into the nineteenth century (Fraser 866). These rights were not granted to married women until

1857, [when] the British Parliament passed an omnibus bill that allowed wives to directly inherit and bequeath property; permitted a wife who had been deserted by her husband to keep her earnings; empower courts to direct payments for separate maintenance; and gave a separated wife the right to sue, be sued, and make contracts. Only in 1882, with the Married Women’s Property Act, did married women achieve the same rights as unmarried women. (Fraser 876)

Even more shockingly, “it was not until 1923 that English women gained equal rights in divorce, and it took fifty more years, until 1973, before Parliament allowed English mothers to have legal custody of children equally with fathers” (Fraser 868). The oppression of wives, then, is not a nineteenth-century problem; it is a modern problem.

Thus unmarried women had distinct legal advantages. Green and Owens point out that as long as women remained single, they had the same legal rights to property ownership as men. However, upon marriage women “‘died a kind of civil death’,

according to Blackstone” (516). Spinsters, on the other hand could exercise a number of these rights denied to women; “they could own property, and common law imposed no restrictions on their right to trade independently” (Hill 221): “spinsters could own and acquire possessions, be bound by contract, be responsible for their own finances, and run their own lives” (Foster 8): and spinsters and widows “retained some legal parity with men, including the right to run a business in their own home and to the disposal of property on their own death” (Green and Owens 516). For all of these reasons, Foster claims, “singleness was in many ways a more attractive proposition than the married state,” and marriage for women was a legal “disabilit[y]” (Foster 7).

Moreover, the standard line about marriage before the twentieth century is that women had to marry for financial support because job opportunities were so slim. Scholars have recently begun to show, however, that job opportunities for women were not so limited as is generally claimed. The common belief is that unmarried women were confined to the professions of governess or seamstress, and these opportunities were quite limited. However, this is a matter of some disagreement between scholars. The traditional argument is upheld by scholars such as Hill and Halperin. Hill in particular argues that “the very few employment opportunities suitable to unmarried women of genteel upbringing who needed to make a living may well have made their plight acute” (232). Halperin notes that “at a time when they could not go into university or enter the professions, single women not in possession of a good fortune could find security only in marriage” (728-29). A husband’s financial support of the wife is part of the social contract, dating from even before the inception of the love marriage. And women who

were unmarried were then dependent on siblings or parents, who were often taxed by a number of other dependents.

However, Green and Owens contest these traditional claims, arguing that the employment opportunities for unmarried women were far more extensive than is generally assumed. They do admit that “from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century the range of economic activities considered socially acceptable for middle-class women narrowed [as] bourgeois femininity became increasingly to be associated with the home—a process of ‘domestic incarceration’” (511). Nonetheless, women could be found in many potentially unexpected professions: “in the 1790s, . . . middle-class women could be found working in jobs such as gaolers, plumbers, butchers, and tailors” (511). The common belief that “by the 1840s, they were overwhelmingly concentrated in three overcrowded and correspondingly poorly paid occupations: as governesses, seamstresses and milliners, and as lady companions,” neglects recent evidence that unmarried women were in fact quite active in business, including “the ownership of freehold or leasehold property as well as involvement in the financial markets of the time” (511). Women routinely were money-lenders, investors, and landladies. Investment was a particularly significant source of income for unmarried women: “the private worlds of some middle-class single women were supported primarily through investment in public funds. . . . single women often entered the relatively safe markets of the government funds” (531). This revelation that single women were active in British business and financial markets runs counter to the “governess and seamstress” model, and paints a drastically different picture of spinsterhood—that of a single woman wielding financial power.

This question of employment for unmarried women, though, is obviously complicated by the issue of class. These scholars' conclusions seem to indicate that lower class women have a greater range of employment options, if not financial security. Upper class women do not have the options of plumber or gaoler, it seems. Edward Copeland discusses this class differential in wage earning as it appears in literature, noting that the upper classes resisted genteel women's employment. This anxiety was then translated into novels, which primarily focused on these women of the upper class, by "authors like Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith, even Mary Wollstonecraft, all born into that socially ambitious class...[; they] consistently resist turning their heroines into wage earners" (Copeland 116). These authors resolve these issues by marrying their less affluent heroines into the gentry. Again, *Emma* affords us a classic example of this phenomenon, that of Jane Fairfax marrying Frank Churchill. Marriage saves Jane from having to become a governess in Ireland, as she so nearly is forced to do. This anxiety is also present in *Persuasion*: "Austen gives us the impoverished gentlewoman Mrs. Smith, who actually manufactures goods, 'little threadcases, pin-cushions and card-racks,' which she puts out for sale, but not for personal profit, Austen carefully explains, only [for charity]" (123). Even though Mrs. Smith is financially destitute, her former position in the gentry, to which she still nominally belongs if not in reality, prevents her from earning the income she so urgently needs.

Those spinsters who failed to procure employment, however, often earned familial support through some form of service to the family, whether parents or married siblings. This service can vary in form; on one end of the spectrum, Hill asserts that it



was fairly common to find unmarried women acting... as servants to their own kith and kin” (232). Alternatively, though, Ruth Perry discusses the common eighteenth-century figure of the aunt, which is frequently a spinster’s family position in literature. Aunts serve as caretakers, assisting in times of illness or crisis, or as serving as advisory figures to young protagonists in the absence of mothers. Perry sees these figures as possessing powers mothers lack, referring to the increase in spinsters as “a boiling up of female strength and independence” (366). In this view, “an ‘aunt,’ [the familial spinster, is again a threat to patriarchy,] a woman with the power and the capacities of a man” (361). Though Anne is a spinster aunt, though, she does not seem to actively resist patriarchy; instead, the pertinent context concerning the spinster’s position in the family that Anne exemplifies is the role of service. She is only valued by her family for the assistance she lends in nursing, childcare, and general convenience.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Readings of spinsters in Austen, and indeed, readings of love and marriage, are for many scholars inextricably linked to Austen's biography. Devoney Looser notes that "Austen is perhaps the most famous British author described so prominently as a spinster" (75). This description seems more reflective of readers' impression of her than of reality, however. Looser reveals the contradiction in the designation "old maid" as it is applied to Austen, given that she died in her middle age. In plain terms, she didn't live long enough to be old (28). The familiar readings of Austen as prudish or a bitter spinster are wrongly reflected on the writings themselves. The ubiquity of this approach is somewhat mystifying—surely scholars can trust that Austen had reasons for exploring marriage plots beyond the fact that she herself never married. Moreover, because scholars are so focused on Austen as a spinster author, they generally neglect the spinsters who appear in the text.

However, to satisfy those scholars who insist on a focus on Austen's biography, John Halperin's work is essential. He comprehensively invalidates those claims that she was a loveless prude. Her life was in fact marked by numerous loves and suitors; she simply did not marry any of them. Halperin enumerates the romantic interests in her life, saying that "despite what most people believe, she had a succession of admirers, a number of chances to marry, and several disastrous disappointments" (719-720). These men include "Tom Lefroy, Edward Taylor of Bifrons, the Rev. Samuel Blackall, Mr. Holder of Ashe Park, Harry Francis Digweed, Mr. Evelyn of Bath, the unnamed clergyman encountered in Devon in 1801, Harris Bigg Wither of Manydown, the Rev. Edward Bridges, Stephen Rumbold Lushington, M.P., Mr. Seymour of London, and Dr.

Charles Thomas Haden” (736). Bigg Wither was Austen’s one famous proposal, in 1802: “just a few weeks short of her twenty-seventh birthday, disappointed in love and still unpublished, the novelist had accepted him,” though she changed her mind the next morning (730). Even those scholars who attempt to make readings of Austen’s novels based on the presumption that she never loved are faced with the fact that in Austen’s life as in her novels, love and marriage are not mutually inclusive.

I would again like to emphasize, though, that these biographical readings deflect from the literary work Austen does in treating spinsters in her novels; for the purposes of literary study, Austen’s status as spinster should be secondary to the spinster characters in her novels.

## ANNE ELLIOT AS SPINSTER

As I've indicated, scholarly treatments of spinsters in Austen are few. The only scholar, to my knowledge, who has dedicated study to Austen's spinster characters is Devoney Looser, who focuses specifically on *Emma*, and claims that Austen engages in stereotyping (77). Austen does something quite different in *Persuasion*, however; the very fact that her central character, the heroine, is a spinster at all indicates that she is interested not in a stereotype but a character study. She essentially devotes the entire novel to developing the character of a spinster, an act that by its very nature challenges stereotyping. Anne Elliot is a fascinating spinster figure in that she consigns herself to spinsterhood before eventually getting married and in that her sister Elizabeth, though older, is still on the marriage market, and *Persuasion* has not, that I can find, been examined in this light. Laura Fairchild Brodie has perhaps come the closest, in her provoking argument for Anne as a widow figure, "Society and the Superfluous Female: Jane Austen's Treatment of Widowhood." She claims that Anne's sense of loss following her aborted engagement with Wentworth is akin to the loss of a spouse through death. However, her arguments are even more effective when applied to the figure of a spinster.

The two categories are clearly quite similar, and Gisborne even shows that they may be collapsed. He surprisingly mentions the possibility of choosing spinsterhood in *Duties of the Female Sex*. He notes that, in his estimation there are few spinsters who have not had, earlier or later, the option of contracting [a marriage]. If then, from a wise and delicate reluctance to accept offers made by persons of objectionable or of ambiguous character; from unwillingness to leave the abode of a desolate parent, struggling with difficulties, or declining towards the grave; from

a repugnance to marriage produced by affection surviving the loss of a beloved object prematurely snatched away by death; if in consequence of any of these or of similar causes a woman continue single, is she to be despised? (427)

He thus specifies a number of scenarios in which turning down a proposal is not only acceptable, but preferable, including the assessment that the suitor is morally questionable, service to a parent, or prolonged mourning. Anne, notably, fits the latter situation, loss of a loved one, and even in the case of Mr. Elliot's suit, the first as well, about the suitor's moral character. Gisborne's argument, though, is fascinating for its implication that, in these scenarios, spinsterhood is preferable to unfavorable marital circumstances. Though he does not justify the choice, from the point of refusing a proposal, to transform oneself into a spinster, he does justify these circumstances that may make one into a spinster.

He very powerfully suggests, then, that spinsterhood can be a choice under certain circumstances, particularly of loss. So though Anne is not technically a spinster, given that she is still relatively young and that she eventually does marry, he implies that the role of spinster may be assumed. Indeed, the entire span of the novel is devoted to illustrating a period in which she functions as a spinster, and the gradual transformation that leads her back to marriageability. A number of factors indicate her spinster status. The classic defining characteristic of spinsters, other than singleness, is age; Anne stands out in the pantheon of Austen heroines as the oldest at twenty-seven. Looser argues that "*Persuasion*... use[s] age and aging as its central theme, in no small part because of its older heroine" (80). However, Looser points out that "older" is a highly subjective term: "the age at which one might be said to reach old maidenhood—whether in Austen's

fiction or in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries in Britain—is notoriously difficult to pin down” (81). However, the scant demographic information available before the first census in 1801 is helpful here; historian Peter Razzell indicates that the average age of marriage among women between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries was between twenty and twenty-five years old (752). Maryanne Kowaleski’s work further clarifies that the average age of upper class women in the late eighteenth century, at first marriage, was twenty-five or under while women of the lower classes married somewhat later (342).

Generally speaking, then, given that specificity is nearly impossible to attain, we can place the line dividing young, marriageable maids from old maids as some point between thirty and forty (Looser 81). Looser points out that “age is shown to be a matter of attitude, as well as number, in Austen’s novels” (78). Clearly, age is not the sole concern in the formation of spinsters. For instance, the central contradiction of the novel, Anne’s position relative to her older sister, is fundamentally concerned with age; the younger sister is a spinster while the older remains marriageable. John Lauber argues that “there is little to say about Elizabeth;” however, Lauber also claims that “Elizabeth Elliot is a feminine counterpart of her father, though the gnawing fear of spinsterhood prevents her from quite achieving his entire self-satisfaction” (523-24).<sup>2</sup> The fear he identifies, of becoming a spinster, is incredibly important. Elizabeth embodies the position of all unmarried women in their late twenties, when they are not yet in the marginalized space of the spinster, but that possibility looms. The line between maid and spinster seems ominously fine, so fine it nearly seems arbitrary. However, Elizabeth is quite clearly not

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<sup>2</sup> Duffy also recognizes Elizabeth’s fear, in that she dislikes seeing the blank space, where a husband’s name would go, next to her name in the Baronetage (281).

*yet* a spinster; this potential demands that the reader wonder why she is not assigned the role of old maid; she is twenty-nine, two years older than Anne. Why should Anne at twenty-seven be a spinster while Elizabeth is still marriageable, only on the verge of spinsterhood? Austen points to other factors influencing marriageability, which always depends on a delicate balance of age, beauty, and money. Spinsterhood, then, depends on a combination of age, beauty and health, financial situation, and even position in the family.

The latter factor may not seem terribly decisive, but given the fact that upper class spinsters were typically dependent on family and consigned to some type of familial service, the family's treatment of a woman is essential. The first two descriptions of Anne, which notably follow the descriptions of her father and older sister, make this treatment quite explicit:

a few years before Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as, even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own), there could be nothing in them, now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem. He had never indulged much hope, he now had none, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favorite work, [the Baronetage]. (Austen 5)

While much of Sir Walter's opinion reflects his own vanity and anxiety about age, he clearly treats her as a marital non-entity, and thus as someone with nothing to offer the family. As Fairchild Brodie puts it, "having abandoned her marital aspirations, Anne, presumably, can contribute little to the Elliot heritage" (711). The second description of Anne emphasizes that her sister holds a similar lack of regard for her, that "Anne, with an

elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister; her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way—she was only Anne” (5). Though there are obviously many things to value about Anne, neither Sir Walter nor Elizabeth pay heed to these qualities, relegating her to an inferior position in the family structure. John Hardy very simply describes their relationship as one in which “Anne is virtually ignored, except when she can be a convenience to them” (109). However, Sir Walter and Elizabeth generally have little use for her, so her helpful impulses are usually convenient only to Mary and the Musgrove family.

Sir Walter’s anxiety about age and beauty are not to be discounted, though—these are central reasons why Anne is neglected by her family. He, the patriarch, is in Joseph M. Duffy Jr.’s words “the sublime conserver of youth and energy” (277), and these are the only qualities, along with the beauty they imply, that he values in those around him. The worth he places on youth and beauty are such that he is “obsessed with age and especially horrified at the signs of aging in those around him,” (79) such as Lady Russell and of course Anne. The respective family positions of Elizabeth and Anne, then, as valued and valueless, is dependent on their apparent youth, their appearance, and their position in the aristocracy. Elizabeth, as firstborn daughter, has higher standing than Anne. This formulation is especially clear, as Duffy points out, in Sir Walter’s treatment of Mr. and Mrs. Croft and their fellow naval officers and wives: “time’s burden lies not upon the otiose Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, whose handsome exteriors do not give way, but upon the naval officers and their wives... and upon Anne whose peculiar plight is that she—until the end of the novel—has undergone the pain of experience without the



fulfillment of experience” (280). His description of Anne, too, is telling; she ages due to her abortive attachment to Wentworth, and the attendant pain of separation, a point to which I will return.

Sir Walter’s treatment of his eldest daughter, though, is drastically different. The initial description of Elizabeth is quite revealing:

it happens sometimes that a woman is handsomer at twenty-nine than she was ten years before; and, generally speaking, if there had been neither ill-health nor anxiety, it is a time of life at which scarcely any charm is lost. It was so with Elizabeth, still the same handsome Miss Elliot that she had begun to be thirteen years ago, and Sir Walter might be excused, therefore, in forgetting her age, or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever, amidst the wreck of good looks of everybody else; for he could plainly see how old all the rest of his family and acquaintance were growing. (5)

Elizabeth holds a privileged position in their household, not only because of her social ascendancy as Miss Elliot to her sister’s Miss Anne, but also because of the premium Sir Walter places on beauty. Moreover, she is still solidly in the marriageable period of her life, though “she felt her approach to the years of danger, and would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelve-month or two” (6). Sir Walter agrees, and regards Elizabeth as the hope for continuing his legacy (given that Mary was married so unsatisfactorily to Charles Musgrove): “all equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth... Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably” (5). Both Walter and Elizabeth regard her singleness as a temporary state, dictated by their high

demands of rank and wealth in any potential marriage partners. Simply put, they are holding out for an exceptionally advantageous match for her.

And Sir Walter's is not the only opinion rendered about Elizabeth's marriageability. Following his reencounter with Anne in Bath, a number of society ladies conversing with Captain Wentworth discuss her position on the marriage market, saying that "all the men are wild after Miss Elliot" (128). In their minds, she is the attractive Elliot sister to them, and their determinations are couched on terms of appeal to male suitors. Significantly, though, this statement comes amid a conversation praising Anne; while they note that the society men value Elizabeth, they value Anne. This comes after her bloom has begun to return, as they say that "'she is very pretty, I think... very pretty when one comes to look at her. It is not the fashion to say so, but I confess I admire her more than her sister.' 'Oh! so do I.' 'And so do I. No comparison'" (128). For all of these ladies' admiration, though, the general male population still ignores her in favor of Elizabeth, despite Elizabeth's age.

Clearly, then, the Elliot family's devaluation of Anne, particularly in terms of beauty, plays a significant role in the formation of her spinster role. Sir Walter, for instance, directly describes "Anne [as] haggard" (5). The change in her appearance, from youthful beauty at the time of Wentworth's first proposal, to haggard seven years later, to a return of beauty in the second volume, is closely linked to her position relative to marriage. Wentworth makes this first shift, the loss of bloom, clear, as Mary recounts to Anne that "'Henrietta asked him what he thought of you,... and he said: 'You were so altered he should not have known you again'" (44). This knowledge of Wentworth's comparison of his memory of her features to her current state weighs on Anne's mind.

She is frequently conscious of his scrutiny: “*once* she felt that he was looking at herself, observing her altered features perhaps, trying to trace in them the ruins of the face in which had once charmed him” (53). Regardless of what he actually thinks about her appearance, she internalizes her own belief in her dissipated features, assisting in her self-evaluation as spinster.

This interior shift no doubt contributes to her oft-discussed loss of bloom. Closely related to beauty, it is a more vague term that, like “old,” is quite subjective. Murphy’s play *The Old Maid* notes that “some faces preserve the bloom longer than others you know” (52). Indeed, Looser claims that “it may be inferred from the use of the word *bloom* throughout *Persuasion* that even among the more sympathetic characters and the narrator, youth and age are not measured by numbers alone” (80). “Bloom” frequently occurs in eighteenth-century texts to describe young women, or more specifically the youthful period of health and beauty that is equated to marriageability. It is also associated with a healthy flush, implying a clear connection between Anne’s returning bloom and her frequent blushes after Wentworth returns to her life. After the bloom fades, the woman in question may be termed a spinster. Ironically, “bloom” comes from the Middle English “blom,” which according to the *Middle English Dictionary* has connotations of purity associated with the Virgin Mary. Thus, bloom initially praised virginity (and in turn singleness), though by the eighteenth century it signified fitness for marriage. This turn once again clearly demonstrates the paradigm shift in the discourses of marriage and singleness surrounding the eighteenth century. The term “bloom” appears in a number of contemporary texts addressing spinsterhood, the most oft-discussed of which is Hayley’s *Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay* (1785). He

uses the word more than once, but most significantly in directly equating bloom to marriage. He describes a spinster as a woman whose “natural charms have not, in the short period of their bloom” attracted her a husband (54). The polemic *Essay on Celibacy*, then, advises that “the bloom of life may be devoted prudently to love,” thus forestalling spinsterhood (112). *The Old Maid* further equates bloom (and marriageability) to freshness, comparing women to fruit. The spinster figure’s brother asserts that “the bloom has been off the peach any time these fifteen years” (12-13). In this comparison, woman as fruit, the woman in question is deemed fresh or not fresh; marriage is consumption, and a woman’s suitability for consumption is under scrutiny.

In *Persuasion*, Anne’s loss of bloom is attributed to her thwarted love for Wentworth seven years before the beginning of the narrative. Their initial relationship is described as short, but with intense lasting effects: “a few months had seen the beginning and the end of their acquaintance; but not with a few months ended Anne’s share of suffering from it. Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth, and an early loss of bloom and spirit had been their lasting effect” (21). Her fruitless attachment to Wentworth in fact causes her to age prematurely, due to the pain of that loss and unfulfilled love. In bitterly ironic contrast, “the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given [Wentworth] a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages” (44-5). For many scholars, the repeated use of the word “bloom” relates to the natural, specifically autumnal imagery often attributed to *Persuasion* and Anne herself (Hardy actually refers to her as the “autumnal heroine” 114). For instance, Duffy claims that “the notable repetition of ‘bloom’ in these descriptions underscores the parallel of human life with the natural cycle

that Miss Austen develops in the novel and prepares the reader for at least the imagery of the recrudescence of Anne's beauty" (284).<sup>3</sup> Though her beauty does eventually return, I am not positive this metaphor is sound; the expression "the bloom is off the rose" exists for a reason, namely that in nature blooming is a part of a natural process in which a flower blooms then falls. This would suggest that Anne's loss of bloom is normal or inevitable, an unsustainable conclusion.

Anne's faded bloom is thus shown to be psychological in its causes; the issue at hand is not merely the physical signs of aging or dimming beauty, but that these external effects are markers of the interior effects as well. John Wiltshire notes that "she wears her sadness and deprivation in her prematurely aging body and face," pointing to the close relationship between her exterior and interior conditions (155). The unfulfilled romance she shared with Wentworth left her with a profound sense of loss— that which causes Fairchild Brodie to go so far as to identify her with Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith as widows. She has "lost her fiancé," and Fairchild Brodie, at least, considers that separation comparable, in terms of the trauma it causes, to the death of a loved one (699). Her whole demeanor is forced to change as "wisdom and resignation have supplanted the excitement of courtship rituals" (Fairchild Brodie 699). Though Fairchild Brodie makes these claims to argue for Anne as a widow figure, though, they really more aptly paint her as a spinster figure; a widow could always remarry, as many did, but by definition a spinster is precluded from marriage and any attendant courtship. Instead, Anne becomes what is most useful to the family: a helpful figure and assistant.

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<sup>3</sup> Equally notable is Duffy's use, writing in 1954, of the signifier "Miss Austen;" even in such a subtle way, he emphasizes Austen's own marital status, implying some relevance to Anne's narrative.

The separation from Wentworth itself has serious internal ramifications, then; however, the emotion corresponding to that loss is the love that remains. Since their relationship was aborted not because of any incompatibility or amelioration of feeling, those emotions remain a part of Anne, but without fulfillment. Daniel Cottom argues that love in Austen's novels is "innocent, ignorant, foolish, fatuous, or desperately reckless, [so] these characters all serve to demonstrate the rule that all attachments are fragile and subject to displacement" (153). However, his claim glaringly neglects Anne and Wentworth, whose attachment is so strong it is the driving force of *Persuasion's* plot. In basic terms, their affective attachment is too strong to allow for a second love; it precludes all subsequent attachment, causing Anne to become a spinster for the ensuing seven years.

Several scholars have commented on Anne's profound sense of loss, though not the way in which it allows her to become a spinster figure. Duffy suggests that her sorrow informs her perception of herself, saying that "her bereaved and enervated condition is the deliberately emphasized effect of the loss of her lover, and its manifestations are internal and spiritual as well as external and physical" (284). In the novel, the first commentary on their relationship is framed in these terms of loss and attachment: "more than seven years were gone since this little history of sorrowful interest had reached its close; and time had softened down much, perhaps nearly all of peculiar attachment to him, but she had been too dependent on time alone; no aid had been given in change of place (except Bath soon after the rupture), or in any novelty or enlargement of society" (21). This suggests that, had certain steps been taken, Anne perhaps could have overcome her attachment. However, the novel itself contradicts this idea; though it constitutes only

minimal enlargement of society and change of place, the addition of the Musgrove family and their estate is an important event, yet it has no impact on Anne's attachment but to confirm it. We are told that "she had been solicited, when about two-and-twenty, to change her name by the young man who had not long afterwards found a more willing mind in her younger sister" (21). Her refusal of Charles Musgrove's proposal is essential: it demonstrates the depth of her past relationship with Wentworth (had she married him, it would have been out of love, not for the social and financial benefits of marriage), the longevity of her attachment to Wentworth, and most notably, her choice to remove herself from the marriage market. Admittedly, Louisa indicates that her parents suspect that Lady Russell had persuaded Anne against this proposal as well; however, there is no real evidence to support this supposition, whereas the idea that it was her choice is better supported. This act of refusing a proposal, particularly one from a man who is perfectly nice, demonstrates no immorality, and holds respectable rank and wealth, is a powerful statement indicating that she has consciously retreated from marriageability. Duffy asserts that she "existed in a state of 'desolate tranquility,' growing older, unloved and loving in memory only and without hope," but he does not allow for the possibility that her ensuing "dull and spiritless routine" is the result of choice (272). She could have married early in this period of separation, and thus avoided the scene Duffy paints; however, she chooses retreat from marriage and potential suitors by behaving like a spinster.

This decision is reinforced, then, by the later statements about Mr. Elliot. Through free indirect discourse, the narrator asserts that "she never could accept him. And it was not only that her feelings were still averse to any man save one; her judgment, on a

serious consideration of the possibilities of such a case, was against Mr. Elliot” (116).

The narrator first upholds the idea that her attachment to Wentworth precludes any subsequent attachment, but appears to indicate that this is a less consequential factor than Elliot’s character. This disapproval of Mr. Elliot’s moral person, which recalls Gisborne’s edict to only marry a moral match, also speaks in a veiled way to Anne’s relationship with Wentworth. In Wentworth’s “great deal of intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy,” Anne “had seen the highest perfection” in him (19). Though his moral character is not specifically alluded to, the narrator notes that there was no reason in Wentworth’s personality to question marrying him. Indeed, she only turns Wentworth down because Lady Russell “persuaded [Anne] to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it” (20). Again, Lady Russell alludes not to Wentworth himself in this reasoning, but to the engagement, and the specifics are not a reflection on him but on society’s scrutiny of the relationship. So in stating that Mr. Elliot was never a real marital candidate for Anne, Wentworth is reflected though never specifically mentioned.

Wentworth’s own attachment to Anne is more difficult to ascertain, as the narrator does not allow access to his interiority through free indirect discourse. His feelings primarily are seen through his contributions to conversations about Benwick and Fanny Harville. Most notably, in speaking to Anne about Benwick’s engagement to Louisa, he tells her that “Fanny Harville was a very superior creature, and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such devotion of the heart to such a woman! He ought not; he does not” (132). Though he is ostensibly speaking about Benwick’s feeling, his own emotion is quite evident. The final sentence, “he ought not;



he does not,” presents a level of emphasis unnecessary when speaking about someone else’s relationship, and reveals his beliefs about the nature of love itself. He also displays a level of passion with his exclamation point and repetition that would be unusual in speaking of another man’s emotional state. And given that he frames this assertion in general terms (“a man” as opposed to specifically marking Benwick), one can reasonably conclude that he is thinking of his own attachment to Anne.

Benwick also serves as a significant point of comparison for Anne. Anne’s sense of loss and suffering almost demands that the reader draw parallels to Benwick’s grief. Wiltshire points out that “Anne’s condition has been a prolonged, and private, mourning. Her loss and her grief are set by the novel within a continuum of other mourners who freely display their grief” (156). Benwick is clearly the most free with his grief. Anne herself makes this connection explicit, thinking “the sympathy and good-will excited towards Captain Benwick was very great. ‘And yet,’ said Anne to herself, . . . ‘he has not, perhaps, a more sorrowing heart than I have. I cannot believe his prospects so blighted forever. He is younger than I am; younger in feeling, if not in fact; younger as a man. He will rally again, and be happy with another” (71). Anne is conscious that happiness with another is not an option for her—she is permanently preoccupied with Wentworth. Moreover, she very interestingly frames this ability to love again in terms of age, and again refers to the “fluid[ity]” of age in Austen’s novels that Looser identifies (78). That age also seems much more fluid for men; Anne identifies gender as a factor in that Benwick is “younger as a man,” pointing to the double standard of marriageability. A man remains of a marriageable age for much longer than women, decades longer. Men do not have expiration dates on their marriageability, unlike women. But Anne’s feeling has

mentally aged her (which in turn has had physical consequences), and this process has pushed her beyond the pale into spinsterhood. Furthermore, though, this feeling of age contributes to her inability to seek love elsewhere. The experience with Wentworth has, in a way, fundamentally wearied her of courtship.

So, instead of participating in activities related to the marriage market (dancing, for instance), Anne dedicates herself to becoming useful to her family, that primary role of the upper class spinster. Dancing, as the central site of contact between potential marriage partners, is the most telling example of this choice in *Persuasion*. Anne famously chooses not to dance, but instead to play the piano for the young and marriageable members of her acquaintance such as Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove. Captain Wentworth remarks upon this, Anne supposes: “she was sure of his having asked his partner whether Miss Elliot never danced? The answer was, ‘Oh no! never; she has quite given up dancing. She had rather play. She is never tired of playing’” (53). The formulation that she has “given up dancing” again reinforces her choice. Her motives are further elucidated in this scene, when “the evening ended with dancing. On its being proposed, Anne offered her services, as usual; and though her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely glad to be employed, and desired nothing in return but to be unobserved” (52). She plays not out of vanity, as Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* does, but to have some useful function. Valerie Shaw argues that “Anne makes usefulness her rationale for living, and again Austen implicitly criticizes altruistic exertion by showing that lending oneself to the selfishness of others can be a way of dodging a natural desire to be wanted, not just needed” (298). By being useful, she thus ameliorates the sorrow of not being wanted by her family, particularly Sir

Walter and Elizabeth. This dedication to service, Fairchild Brodie points out, extends to many different forms of service: “she plays the piano while others dance; she cares for the local poor; she nurses her sister and nephew and responds decisively to Louisa’s accident... Having relinquished her claim to a private domestic sphere, Anne nurtures the community at large” (712). Put simply, she is the most useful and responsible character in the novel; in moments of need, all eyes turn to Anne.

However, this situation, Anne’s loss of bloom and suffering, is not constant throughout the novel. Contrary to the common reading of Anne as an “autumnal” character, she is in no way a static character. She undergoes a significant transformation between the two volumes. Wiltshire contends that “the first volume of *Persuasion*, one can say with only a small exaggeration, is a portrait of suffering. Anne Elliot is a woman oppressed and insignificant, a ‘nobody’, discouraged by a burden of grief and regret that she has borne alone for the seven years prior to the novel’s inception” (155). This portrait changes, though. The audience is impressed with the depth and longevity of her suffering over the past several years, and scholars seem to be left overwhelmingly with this impression of Anne as a languishing woman succumbed to grief. However, her character begins to change quite significantly within the period of the narration. In Ashley Tauchert’s words, she “functions along the mythic sequence of petrification and resurrection” (143). The reason for her awakening is clear—Wentworth’s return to her life, as Duffy among others has noted (273). The sheer emotion she feels upon even hearing the name Wentworth, first in reference to the Captain’s brother, evoking “a gentle sigh,” causes a physical reaction in her oft-discussed “flushed cheeks” (19). This, occurring at the end of the third chapter, already signals the impending return of her

bloom; one of the specific eighteenth-century usages of “bloom,” according to the OED, includes a “crimson tint of the cheek; flush, glow.” A blooming young woman, then, could either be the young and fresh maid described earlier, or she could simply have an attractive blush; however, the two are very often one and the same. Each of Anne’s frequent blushes potentially rejuvenates her by a marginal degree.

By the time the narrative turns to Lyme, then, Anne’s reawakening is well underway. Here, by the seaside, she is described as “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 the animation of eye which it had also produced” (76). Once again her bloom is linked to the healthy flush in her cheeks; however, we may also surmise that the company of Wentworth plays no small part in the returning bloom, as by this point Wentworth is well established in the Musgrove social circle surrounding Anne at Monkford. However, Wentworth does not see this return of Anne’s beauty until he sees “the reflected admiration in William Elliot’s eyes” (285). Their party encounters Mr. Elliot, whose identity is then unknown, in passing, and “it was evident that the gentleman... admired her exceedingly. Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which showed his noticing of it. 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’” (76). By seeing the opinion of an objective man, who has no complicating history with Anne as Wentworth does, he witnesses the change he has overlooked. Moreover, he points to the artificiality of Anne’s loss of beauty; she is not inherently less attractive, or fundamentally aged physically, but the sorrow has merely masked her beauty and spirit during the intervening

seven years. As William Galperin argues, “her beauty and desirability are restored under the triangulated gaze of the two men” (13). She has had a seven-year reprieve from the marriage market, and the attendant possibility of being desired, and she has had time to heal from her heartbreak; by this point, then, the very fact of being desired begins to rejuvenate Anne. And seeing other men desire her alerts Wentworth to this fact. To be blunt, an element of jealousy allows him to see her clearly. This was earlier evident when Louisa informed him of Charles Musgrove’s proposal to her, when he shows interest in the fact that she refused his proposal as well (65).

Her reawakening continues in Bath, which is notable for the fact that it was a resort linked with rejuvenation and health. Her bloom continues to appear only intermittently, with her flushes, and enables Mrs. Smith to compare her old school friend to her memory: “twelve years had changed Anne from the blooming, silent, unformed girl of fifteen, to the elegant little woman of seven-and-twenty, with every beauty excepting bloom, and with manners as consciously right as they were invariably gentle” (110). Her transformation is not complete: she is once again a beauty, but the spirit implied by bloom has not yet returned. After her reunion with Wentworth, though, we see the transformation completed: “glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness, and more generally admired than she thought about or cared for, she had cheerful or forbearing feelings for every creature around her” (179). Ultimately, the piece missing from her life, which causes that dissipated look people interpret as lack of bloom, is happiness. Once the thwarted love that caused her despair in the first place is fulfilled, her rejuvenation is complete.

Though Anne is ultimately rewarded with marriage, as Austen's other heroines are, *Persuasion* is not a straightforward marriage plot. This is one feminist critique of Austen, according to Looser, of "Austen's insistence on marrying off and domesticating her heroines" (5). Of course, Looser notes, those critics are imposing their ideas of feminism on Austen. However, it is true, that the marriage plot is fundamentally problematic when it holds hegemony over narrative fiction. As White points out, "there is indeed much to complain about if all plots that are to end happily must do so by providing mates for our heroes or heroines, given that such a requirement implies that marriage closes plots (and thus people's lives) 'naturally' and that marriage is the only desirable end for female protagonists" (71). However, Austen makes a few interventions into the marriage plot. The first such intervention is the fact that, for much of the novel, marriage is not even an option. Anne refuses to admit the possibility of marriage, by refusing proposals and by molding herself into the role of a spinster. *Persuasion* is not a novel concerned with creating a heroine whose goal is to marry or with forming a plot to realize that goal, as scholars such as William H. Magee suggest is the sum of Austen's work (198). Instead, Austen makes the central consideration of the novel the portrait of a spinster figure, a woman who has no intention of marrying. In doing so, she demonstrates that there is value in treating the spinster figure at length and in depth. Anne Elliot is a compelling character not because of who she marries or attempts to marry, but because of her psychological complexity and interiority. Moreover, she is a particularly interesting character because of her age; she is much older than Austen's other heroines, who are centralized in their early twenties, and as such has a wildly different perspective. She has

suffered loss, and her life is not dedicated to the pursuit of marriage, so Anne is thus able to offer something novel to the genre.

Other scholars have commented on Austen's unorthodox treatment of marriage. Lloyd W. Brown, for instance, points out the "absence of any enthusiastic endorsement of marriage as the woman's sacrosanct destiny" (337). He notes that Austen opposes Fordyce's notion that women's "business" is to mold themselves to men's preferences (336). White also points out that, though Anne does in the end marry Wentworth, "even the happy ending of *Persuasion* is precarious; we are assured of Anne and Wentworth's happiness only in the context of the threat Napoleon and was in general pose to sailors and their wives" (80). The final sentence of the novel refers to the threat of war: Wentworth's "profession was all that could ever make her friends wish [her] tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (184). White calls this "Austen's subversive acknowledgment that happy endings are fantasies" (74). This uncertainty, Fairchild Brodie argues, means that "the threat of widowhood looms large" (698). The ending is technically triumphant, with Anne's return of bloom and happiness in her husband, but Austen ends the novel discussing not domestic happiness but Wentworth's service to the nation and the potentially mortal consequences that accompany it. The "reward" of marriage in this marriage plot, then, is incomplete and tempered with the very real danger of a return to sorrow.

Clearly, then, Austen is not engaging in the usual idealization of marriage. She recognizes the many dangers of marriage, even of happy marriages. She argues that marriage should only be entered into for love—not for social status or money. Marriage without affection bears the obvious danger of unhappiness. However, even happy marriages have the potential to end in grief and loss, as shown by Mrs. Smith’s situation, and this risk is real and even likely during the Napoleonic wars. Thus any marriage must be considered carefully, and the risks weighed. Romance and love are constantly in tension with danger in Austen’s formulation. And if one finds the risks unbearable, Austen suggests, remaining single may present a preferable option. Spinsterhood is a position of safety and retreat, protection from further loss and a place to recuperate from past suffering. Austen shows that to be a spinster is not a failure, or a desperate situation. Though she does not actively encourage becoming a spinster, she participates in the eighteenth-century conversation about spinsters to explore it beyond the stereotypes, and in doing so necessarily intervenes in the discourse of both spinsters and marriage.



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