Hereditary Presumption in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Introduction: It is a well-known fact that Jane Austen was more a child of the eighteenth century than the nineteenth, in which she wrote all her novels. Except for the verse of Sir Walter Scott, her allusions to poetry come from the eighteenth century, not even from the earliest acknowledged Romantics of *Lyrical Ballads,* both of whom had been born before her.

Furthermore, she is regarded as basically conservative. Walter Allen states the common view: "Her affinities were with Pope and the Johnson of *The Lives of the Poets*" (117). If this were entirely true, Austen would be reactionary even by eighteenth-century standards. Today, Pope and Johnson are considered the greatest British poet and critic of the eighteenth century (maybe the only great ones), but to contemporaries they were both regarded as Tories, opposed to many of the reforms of their day. All of which is simply to point out how conservative Jane Austen is considered to have been.

Even so, the stereotype of Jane Austen as a conservative should not obscure one "radical" tendency. From first to last, her novels ridicule the assumption that some people deserve a special place in our estimation simply because of the family they were born into. And this accounts for her withering satire on the pretensions of the rich and

powerful. Anyone who has read an Austen novel (from beginning to end) can remember an example or two of detestable authority figures. To take the obvious example in *Pride and Prejudice,* for all the misery Lydia Bennet threatens to cause her family by running off with Mr. Wickham—most of which Mr. Darcy saves the family from—Austen treats her less severely than she treats Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Despite her best efforts, Lady Catherine proves completely harmless, but her regal airs are insufferable. In this paper I intend to show that Austen's early contempt for hereditary presumption is still strong in her last complete novel, *Persuasion.*

Here, it is necessary to add a word about critics of this novel. Some critics find certain characters in *Persuasion* too "flat" (to use E.M. Forster's convenient image from *Aspects of the Novel*)—which is to say, two-dimensional: predictable and unvaried. This is often explained in terms of Jane Austen's fatal illness,[1] which had become a major fact in her life during the writing of *Persuasion.* There may be some truth to this charge, and the ultimate plot resolution (involving, arguably, not one but two *dei ex machina*)[2] could certainly be improved. But the criticism often extends to the treatment of Sir Walter Eliot and his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, as if they should be more concrete presences, and I feel this is off the mark.[3]

In my view, Jane Austen is creating a hierarchy of personal worth, and to this end she shows some of the characters in three dimensions, going about their daily lives—Anne's obnoxious sister Mary would be a wonderful example, except that she is so limited in her nature; Mary's husband Charles really is an excellent example—and others in two dimensions, as necessary icons to embolden the pattern. Sir Walter and Elizabeth are not three-dimensional, but there is no *a priori*

reason they should be. Nor is their portrayal unrealistic, if our touchstone is our own experience. In normal life we know a few characters intimately, with all their contradictions, and the rest only in passing. We certainly don't see the full complexity of their natures, which is why gossip is an idle pastime. Therefore, there can be nothing wrong, critically or even philosophically, with the judicious use of flat characters.

In Persusion Jane Austen uses all her characters, round and flat, to make a statement about hereditary presumption. The characters she attacks are bad in self-evident ways and can be simply discussed from the point of view of their vices. But with the exception of Mr. Elliot, their vices are always associated with the presumption that their birth entitles them to special treatment. To show how Austen elaborates this theme, and to show how serious she is about hereditary presumption, I will focus on characters that her criticism applies to: Sir Walter and Elizabeth, whom I will treat together, as Jane Austen herself treats them; the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter; Anne's sister, Mary; and finally, as a radical approach to the theme, "Poor Dick" Musgrove, the dead brother of Charles Musgrove. For this purpose, after a plot summary for readers unfamiliar with the novel, the paper will be divided into three parts: the first on Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and the Dalrymples; the second on Mary; and the final part on Dick Musgrove.

Plot: Sir Walter Elliot, Baronet, a spendthrift and a snob, is persuaded by his lawyer and friends to let his estate, Kellynch, to a certain Admiral Croft and his wife, and move to Bath. Sir Walter already faces the inconvenient fact that his estate is entailed (and will

pass when he dies) to a young cousin, a Mr. Elliot, who has already, and rather abruptly, rejected the opportunity to marry his eldest daughter, Elizabeth. The more immediate problem, though, is that Sir Walter, with Elizabeth's help, has run through a dangerous portion of his funds, and Kellynch is now too expensive for him. He will be accompanied to Bath by Elizabeth, who shares his values and habits — she is extravagant, snobbish, and cold-hearted; by Elizabeth's companion Mrs. Clay, a commoner; and eventually by his second daughter, Anne, the heroine. Anne is unloved by her father and sister. Ironically, Elizabeth blatantly prefers the commoner Mrs. Clay to Anne. There is even some fear that Mrs. Clay has designs on Sir Walter, who also seems to like enjoy her company. So Anne is pleased to remain behind and help her younger sister, Mary — Mrs. Charles Musgrove — on the latter's estate. Though far less elegant than Elizabeth, Mary is a snob in her own right. She is also a hypochondriac and an incompetent mother who finds excuses to leave her children with Anne at every turn.

Seven years ago, Anne broke off her engagement with the love of her life, Captain Wentworth. She did so in large part because of the well-intentioned advice of her surrogate mother, Lady Russell,[4] who didn't feel that Anne should risk her future on an untested young naval officer. Wentworth's feeling of betrayal at this rejection was aggravated by the cold snobbery of Sir Walter and Elizabeth. Mary was away at school and, along with everyone else, remained ignorant of the affair. But now Captain Wentworth has returned to Anne's village in triumph. In the early nineteenth century, victorious British naval captains were allowed to keep the lion's share of their spoils, and Wentworth has become a wealthy man. Anne's problem is that

Mrs. Croft, wife of the new tenet, is Captain Wentworth's sister. Staying at the Musgrove estate means taking part in the social events at that house, at the nearby house of Charles Musgrove's parents, and also at Kellynch, since the Crofts prove very congenial. So Anne is bound to meet Captain Wentworth again, and she soon does. Like Anne he is still unmarried; but while she has determined never to marry anyone but him – she still loves him and resigns hersel to remaining single – Captain Wentworth talks openly to his sister and the Admiral of marrying the first presentable girl who will have him.

Relations between Anne and Captain Wentworth are rather formal at first. He is never impolite, but Mary thoughtlessly reports that he admitted to finding Anne greatly changed. Anne also feels she has lost her bloom. Still, as time goes on, the two occasionally exchange words with each other, and Anne's constant usefulness at the Musgrove house does not go unnoticed by Wentworth. She is always busy when she stays there. Besides playing the piano for dances at the nearby house of Charles Musgrove's father, Anne is a very convenient and uncomplaining babysitter for Mary.

In a short time, it appears that Captain Wentworth will marry one of Charles Musgrove's sisters. When he realizes that one of them, Henrietta, is already promised to a young parson, namel Charles Hayter, he apparently settles on the other one, Louisa. It is at this point in the story that Wentworth suggests a walking excursion to the quaint seaside town of Lyme, where the group can meet two of his navy friends, Captains Harville and Benwick.[5] Captain Benwick is mourning the death of his wife, Captain Harville's late sister, and has been living with Harville and his wife. Traveling with Captain Wentworth are Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove as well as Charles,

Mary, and Anne. The impression Anne gets upon meeting the Harvilles is of a couple that are happy and industrious, despite living in rather poor, close quarters. And Captain Benwick, though melancholy, is very eager to discuss books with Anne.

Leaving the Harvilles at home, the rest of the group make a trip to the seaside, where potential disaster strikes. Louisa insists on jumping off the side of some rather steep stairs into the arms of Wentworth below. Ignoring Wentworth's protest after the first jump that this is dangerous, she tries it again, and misses, falling to the hard ground. Shock robs everyone of their presence of mind except Anne. She suggests that Captain Benwick should be the one to find a physician (since he lives in Lyme), and that Captain Wentworth should carry Louisa to the nearby inn. Louisa remains in a coma and is soon moved to the Harville house. Wentworth makes it politely clear that Anne is the most capable person to remain at that house and nurse the girl, but Mary insists on her precedence as a married woman; so Anne returns to Mary's house, again to take care of her children. Ironically, Mary proves worse than useless, constantly requiring attention herself for imagined afflictions. But Louisa recovers, and Anne goes off, resignedly, to Bath, to be with her unloving father and sister.

The remainder of the novel takes place in Bath. Sir Walter and Elizabeth are very busy making up to their better connected cousins the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter. In the past, Sir Walter had sinned by omission, simply forgetting to send a required letter of condolence on the death of the Viscountess's husband, and she hasn't forgiven him. Now is his chance to make up to her, which he and his favorite daughter do in such an obsequious manner that Anne is embarrassed for them — especially so because none of the

Dalrymples seems possessed of either talent or wit.

In the meantime, Mr. Elliot, the handsome young man to whom the Kellynch estate is entailed, comes to the house and is reconciled with Sir Walter. Elizabeth presumes he is paying court to her, but Elliot actually has designs on Anne, whom he vastly prefers. It should be added that some combination of exercise and friendly companionship has restored Anne's bloom, and the common judgment now puts her beauty on a par with Elizabeth's and her disposition, of course, far above that of the spoiled sister's. But in the meantime Anne has been informed by the visiting Admiral Croft (who always comes to Bath during the autumn) that Louisa has actually released Captain Wentworth from any perceived obligations and is betrothed to Captain Benwick. This means that Captain Wentworth would be free to propose to Anne again, if he is attracted to her again (as he proves to be). Anne learns from an old friend, the widowed Mrs. Smith, that Mr. Elliot is a liar and a very cruel man, so she feels no attraction to him at all. The only surprise in the dénouement is that when Elliot realizes he cannot have his cousin Anne, he runs off with Mrs. Clay, and Elizabeth is left in a state of spinsterly mortification. Anne, on the other hand, finds an indirect means of telling Captain Wentworth that she still loves him, and he repays this information with a direct proposal. Captain Wentworth is not only reconciled with Anne but even with her mentor, Lady Russell. So they embark on a happy and prosperous marriage.

Hereditary Presumption: Sir Walter Elliot and Elizabeth are almost identical in their pretensions and morality. Sir Walter is treated more closely and wittily for obvious reasons.[6] As she does with all

characters of this kind – Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice,* for instance[7] – Jane Austen sums up Sir Walter at the very beginning: "Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character, vanity of person and situation" (36). "Vanity of person" refers to Sir Walter's deluded sense that he is still a striking figure. The implicit joke is that in comments like, "He has a fine appearance for a middle-aged man," the last phrase takes away much of what the rest of the sentence grants. Sir Walter's delusion is very modern. In one light, it is a mere peccadillo. For instance, when he criticizes his new tenant Admiral Croft on grounds of appearance without having met him, the satire is rather mild. When Anne explains, in surprising detail,[8] who Admiral Croft is – that, for example, he was in the "Trafalgar action" – Sir Walter responds as follows: "Then I take it for granted that his face is about as orange as the cuffs and capes of my livery" (51). Superficially, this just seems like "vanity of person."

As contemporary readers of the novel must have felt, however, from a landed aristocrat this is a very ungrateful view of a member of the fleet that defeated the French in the battle that immortalized (and caused the death of) Admiral Nelson. Fittingly, it is Admiral Croft who comments most tellingly on Sir Walter's vanity. Having moved into Kellynch, where he and his wife are much more popular with the locals than Sir Walter ever was[9] the Admiral sets to work improving the house. The major change is removal of most of the mirrors in Sir Walter's dressing room. His comment is simple and unanswerable: "I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life, — Such a number of looking-glasses! oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself" (143).

"No getting away from oneself." Sir Walter is an egoist, and a really balanced nature like the Admiral's simply can't live with the props of egoism. Sir Walter's pride is seen at very nearly its worst in his impromptu critique of the navy:

> "Yes; it is in two points offensive to me; I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and secondly, as it cuts up a man's youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man; I have observed it all my life" (49).

Sir Walter's vanity of "person," comic enough in itself, associates with a vanity of "situation" that is more serious. He dislikes the navy for the same reason Jane Austen approves of it: because it rewards people for accomplishments rather than ancestry. The rest of the story is an eloquent attack on people with Sir Walter's attitude.

We see it in Elizabeth's coldness towards Captain Wentworth two of the three times she meets him. The first time, seven years before the novel begins, when he was courting Anne, Elizabeth treated him with the same cold disdain as Sir Walter did. The second time, in Bath, she shows "complete internal recognition" but "unalterable coldness" (186). The third time, also in Bath, she has changed. She smiles graciously on Captain Wentworth, but for a reason that would disappoint a sincere Tory as much as a Whig:

> The truth was, that Elizabeth had been long enough in Bath, to

understand the importance of a man of such an air and appearance as his. The past was nothing. The present was that Captain Wentworth would move about well in her drawing-room. (230)

The key sentence in this observation is, "The past was nothing." Elizabeth would deserve a higher circle in Dante's hell if her snobbery were a deeply felt conviction that Wentworth was inferior by birth. That would at least imply a reverence for her ancestors. But her attitude turns out to have nothing to do with her antecedents, or with reverence or conviction of any kind. She relents and is ultimately gracious to Wentworth because his presence in her drawing room will bolster her present reputation.

It is for this reason that Anne wishes both Elizabeth and her father showed more pride rather than less in their fawning advances on their "noble" cousins the Dalrymples:

Anne had never seen her father and sister before in contact with nobility, and she must acknowledge herself disappointed. She had hoped better things from their high ideas of their own situation in life, and was reduced to form a wish which she had never foreseen – a wish that they had more pride; for "our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret," "our cousins, the Dalrymples," sounded in her ears all day. (161)

In other words, Sir Walter and Elizabeth now show themselves to be vulgar name-droppers, and they attend every party that the Dalrymples hold. Anne never confronts either of them with her own opinion of these parties, but she passes fairly explicit judgment on their taste

and their character in the following assessment, which includes a cold dismissal of the Dalrymples themselves:

> Anne was ashamed. Had Lady Dalrymple and her daughter even been very agreeable, she would still have been ashamed of the agitation they created, but they were nothing. There was no superiority of manner, accomplishment, or understanding. Lady Dalrymple had acquired the name of "a charming woman," because she had a smile and a civil answer for every body. Miss Carteret, with still less to say, was so plain and so awkward, that she would never have been tolerated in Camden-place but for her birth. (162)

As evidence that Anne isn't being hypersensitive (in the manner of the younger sister in *Sense and Sensibility* when she all but snubs her kind cousin Sir John and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings), her opinion of Sir Walter's florid letter of apology to the Dowager is quietly shared by two other acquaintances, Lady Russell and Mr. Elliot, both respecters of rank (162). Mr. Elliot, of course, is in no position to judge anyone else's character, but he is intelligent and refined.[10]

We might already regard the above as a sufficient dismissal of Sir Walter Elliot and what he represents, but the novel goes farther. It shows Sir Walter at his very worst, ridiculing Anne's intention to visit her crippled friend Mrs. Smith when he wants her to join his party at the Dalrymples. His tirade on the subject anticipates brutal Nazi distortions of the Superman concept. He begins by decrying the unfashionable area that Mrs. Smith is forced to reside in:

> "Westgate-buildings!" said he; "and who is Miss Anne Elliot to

be visiting in Westgate-buildings? – and who was her husband? One of the five thousand Mr. Smiths whose names are to be met with every where. And what is her attraction? That she is old and sickly, – Upon my word, Miss Anne Elliot, you have the most extraordinary taste! Every thing that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations are inviting to you. But surely, you may put off this old lady till to-morrow. She is not so near her end, I presume, but that she may hope to see another day. What is her age? Forty?" (169)

It is a comment on the nastiness of this speech that the last part, which satirizes Sir Walter's double standard for "old," is its closest approach to decency. The amusing sequel to this is a long rhapsody from Sir Walter on the commonness of the name "Smith" ("a mere Mrs. Smith, an every day Mrs. Smith, of all people and all names in the world to be the chosen friend of Miss Anne Elliot" [170]). Sir Walter's scorn of the masses gets so bad that Mrs. Clay, the one commoner in the room, sees its application to herself and quietly disappers. If Mrs. Clay were not in the room, though, this would be nothing new. We already know what a snob Sir Walter is. The surprising part of the utterance is Sir Walter's scorn for Christian charity. In a society in which everyone attends church on Sunday, Sir Walter flouts one of the basic beatitudes. In effect, he lampoons Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and for only one reason: he feels that Anne might help him, however fractionally, in his campaign to please the Viscountess. The baseness of this is underscored by the revelation that Mrs. Smith is a truly worthwhile person – she remains cheerful in spite of poverty and ill health, and she provides Anne with great

practical help by informing her of Mr. Elliot's true character.

Sisterly Presumption: The last family member, Anne's younger sister, Mary, has less symbolic importance than Sir Walter but she is a much more fully drawn character. Mary is a sort of monster of egotism and ends every conversation by talking about herself. She also has the ability to claim illness one minute and then recover the next in order, for instance, to go out with her husband. Thus, when Anne first shows up at Mary's house, Mary complains that Anne should have come several days earlier because she, Mary, is so ill. But it then transpires that she only just informed Anne of her illness, that she has actually been out dancing during the period of alleged illness, and that she is about to undergo a miraculous recovery so she can attend a party at her in-laws' nearby house, leaving Anne to take care of her children.

But with Mary there is always something unexpected. She has a genius for selfishness, being lazy, vain, ungrateful, and unnatural in her lack of maternal instincts. In this scene, it happens that besides having claimed to be too ill to go out, Mary really has a sick child to tend, named Charles after his father. Little Charles has a virus, and viruses were no laughing matter in that society of bad medicine. Realizing that Mary isn't really ill and wants to go to the party, Anne volunteers to stay at the house and nurse little Charles, which leads to this wonderful rationalization from Mary:

> "Are you serious? Dear me, that's a very good thought, very good indeed. To be sure I may just as well go as not, for I am of no use at home – am I? and it only harasses me. *You, who have not a mother's feelings, are a great deal the properest*

person. You can make little Charles do anything; he always minds you at a word." (82; italics mine)

The speech is actually much longer, full of manic raptures on the good time Mary intends to have at the party and ends, "I should not go, you may be sure, if I did not feel quite at ease about my dear child" (83). The great gambit in Mary's speech is the suggestion that Anne will be better at taking care of little Charles because she is unburdened with a mother's strong feelings. Some amusing corollaries could be deduced from this logic. We could conclude that indifference is the ideal parental state. Of course, Mary will not admit indifference either. Hence the ultimate claim that she wouldn't leave if the "dear child" were in any danger. But the most striking thing about this speech – set off above in italics – is the ingratitude to Anne. Mary is using Anne as a free baby sitter who is giving up the evening for her sake;[11] and she knows that Anne gets better cooperation from Charles and the other children than she does; but she ascribes this to a lack of feeling on Anne's part. It is probably true that surgeons, for instance, are more efficient if they aren't too involved emotionally with the patient they are operating on, but maternal care is different kind of activity, and influence (as opposed to brute control) comes with love and respect. Mary is constantly describing her own dealings with the children in violent terms:

"I hope I am as fond of my child as any mother – but I do not know that I am of any more use in the sick-room than Charles for I cannot be always scolding and teazing a poor child when it is ill; and you saw, this morning, that if I told him to keep quiet,

he was sure to begin kicking about. I have not nerves for that sort of thing." (82)

The joke is that Mary thinks the only way to treat children is harshly. Mary belittles Anne's forbearance with her children; but besides reflecting Anne's sense of duty and decorum, Anne's patience is an expression of love. In describing a similar circumstance in *Little Dorrit* (with Amy Dorrit always taking care of her selfish sister's children), Dickens goes so far as to call Amy the children's true mother. But Mary, in turning her own laziness into a virtue, takes all the maternal credit.

Mary's vices are all related to her selfishness and could be enumerated at tedious length. To take two good examples, besides showing no great love for her children – or at least a willingness to sacrifice for them – and showing no gratitude for Anne's constant help, Mary is constantly getting in the way. She insists on joining her sisters-in-law and Anne on a walk, though she is politely warned that she dislikes walking and quickly tires – whereupon, she tires and forces everyone to turn back. Far more seriously, at Lyme, when Louisa Musgrove lies unconscious from her fall, and Anne is correctly recommended by Captain Wentworth[12] as the best person to stay at Captain and Mrs. Harville's house to take care of her, Mary insists that she should stay instead of Anne. This, Mary argues, is a matter of precedence since she, though younger, is the married sister.[13] Charles refuses to control his wife, and Captain Wentworth is tempted to risk rudeness by being blunt. But this is socially impossible, so Anne returns to the Musgrove house to watch Mary's children, while Mary, instead of tending Louisa, decides that she herself is ill, and requires Mrs.

Harville to give up some of her time with Louisa.

The key to this latter passage is the idea of precedence. Mary can compete with Anne in nothing tangible. Anne is talented and hard-working, while Mary is talentless and a shameless hypochondriac, who constantly uses illness as an excuse for not doing her share. Yet Mary thinks that the custom of deferring to married women is enough to place her above Anne. Louisa confides to Captain Wentworth that her brother Charles only proposed to Mary after his proposal to Anne had been rejected, and further, that everyone in the Musgrove family prefers Anne. We can see why they would. But for all Mary's faults, the one that most offends her in-laws is her sense that she comes from a family that they must to defer to. She even insists one being deferred to by her mother-in-law.

Consequently, when Mary visits Bath she flaunts the same values as Sir Walter and Elizabeth, both of whom disparage her appearance in her absence. Mary even drops her noble cousin's name, referring to "the great connexion between the Dalrymples and ourselves" (228). Above all, though, Mary makes herself quite odious by her treatment of Henrietta's suitor, Charles Hayter. Hayter is regarded by everyone except Mary as a fine young clergyman. Mary's own husband likes him despite their different interests and regards the Hayter estate as a very worthy acquisition for Henrietta. Nevertheless, Mary is fixated on the fact that the Hayter ancestors were common people. The truth is that this Charles is infinitely more refined than Mary herself. What makes this particular example of Mary's snobbishness worse than the others is its potential consequences: given the chance, Mary would sacrifice the young couple's happiness.

It is Captain Wentworth, a past victim of Elliot snobbery, who

passes silent judgment on Mary's attitude. Waiting a safe distance from the Hayter house, while her sisters-in-law pay a visit, Mary expresses her aversion in a very blunt and vulgar way, and Captain Wentworth passes silent judgment:

> "It is very unpleasant, having such connexions! But I assure you, I have never been in the house above twice in my life."
>
> She received no other answer, than an artificial, assenting smile, followed by a contemptuous glance, as he turned away, which Anne perfectly knew the meaning of. (109)

Anne's perfect recognition of this contempt reminds us that seven years earlier Captain Wentworth was treated by Sir Walter very much the way Mary wishes to treat Charles Hayter. Jane Austen deliberately contrasts Mary's values with Anne's by a simple parallel. As previously mentioned, Anne dismisses the Dalrymples as "nothing." Mary brushes off the Hayters in similar terms: "I do not reckon the Hayters as any body" (174). The difference in criteria is obvious and reinforces the point that superior people judge on the basis of accomplishments and merit, while inferior people like Mary prefer to judge by family, unless the judgment threatens their own status.

Poor Dick, or Filial Presumption: The last and shortest example of this thematic opposition to entitlement by birth occurs when the newly arrived Captain Wentworth pays a visit to the parents of Charles Musgrove. The thought that Wentworth might propose to one of this elderly couple's daughters is already in the air, so he is the center of attention.

It happens that one of the Musgrove children, Richard, died two years ago. He was clearly the black sheep of the family, at opposite poles from Charles Musgrove, who has all the yeomanly virtues. "Poor Dick," as he is habitually called, had gone to sea to change his luck, so the mention of him to a seaman like Captain Wentworth is predictable. But to everyone's surprise, it transpires that Wentworth was captain of the very ship that Dick had been assigned to. Of course, the elder Musgroves have sentimentalized Dick's failings; but Captain Wentworth is only human and can hardly suppress a sneer when he recalls who Richard Musgrove actually was. The most caustic reaction to the Musgroves' recollection, however, is not Captain Wentworth's but Jane Austen's, in the following narrative comment:

> The real circumstances of this pathetic piece of family history were, that the Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year; that he had been sent to sea, because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved; seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted, when the intelligence of his death abroad had worked its way to Uppercross, two years before. (76)

This is an arrestingly plain statement and would be entertaining in any case. It must give many readers a rare feeling of moral superiority to the great novelist, since none of us would ever describe the death of our own child, however incorrigible, as fortunate. But the statement is more than this. It is a radical variation on the theme of

entitlement by birth. It demonstrates the depth of Austen's aversion to hereditary assumptions. She is extending her aversion to its logical conclusion. Not only may we judge titled strangers strictly by their spiritual and social qualities and their deeds, but we may judge our children by the same criteria. If a noble dowager has no conversation and has done nothing remarkable, we need not respect her. And if a son has done nothing to earn our love, we need not care about him or even mourn his demise. Jane Austen recognizes that parents (represented in the scene by the elder Musgroves) have an instinct that tends to debar this philosophy, but she plainly considers it sound. More importantly, she is expressing how radically she opposes the deference to inherited status. This is a very democratic sentiment.

Notes

1 David Cecil surmises that Austen probably intended to edit *Persuasion* more, but became too weak to do so. "For towards the end of 1816, her illness began to get worse" (189). Penelope Hughes-Hallet, editing Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra, stresses that Austen followed through with the project despite her illness: "By the middle of June [1816] the sisters were back at Chawton, and Jane, despite general debility and a sense of discouragement, settled down to her work on Persuasion" (135)

2 One bolt from the blue is Anne's invalid friend, Mrs. Smith, who reveals the truth about Mr. Elliot and makes it much less awkward for Anne to avoid him because she feels neither compunction nor ambivalence in doing so. And the next one is Mr. Elliot's sudden elopement with Mrs. Clay. We really aren't prepared for this. In defense of the novel, these events have a mortifying affect on Sir Walter and Elizabeth, but they aren't necessary at all to accomplish Anne's modest goal of a happy marriage with Captain Wentworth and independence from her family.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Marilyn Butler's view that Elliot is "glaringly wrong." I believe she begs the question when she refers to Austen's "Failure to define the tempter-figure" as "surely the most significant of the failures of Persuasion" (280). In fact, Elliot is

presented much more convincingly as an urbane and attractive man than Wickham in Pride and Prejudice. The reason Elliot has "no place in Anne's consciousness" (280) is that, almost by definition, Anne is devoted for life to Captain Wentworth. But the scene in which Elliot praises Anne's ability in Italian and corrects her dismissal of the Dalrymples are impressive. By contrast, we only hear that Wickham is charming. He says nothing to prove it.

I do agree with D. W. Harding, though, that Mrs. Clay's final "throwing...up" of her chances "in order to become Mr Elliot's mistress...is left exceedingly improbable" (25), but Harding adds (26) that Austen did consider the novel publishable.

3 E. M. Forster makes an interesting comment about a 1923 edition of Austen's works, including *Persuasion*: "...when *Persuasion* was published with *Northanger Abbey* in 1818, its title did not appear on the back of the volumes; but why should the inconvenience be perpetuated in 1923?" The inference is intriguing. At the time it was published, *Persuasion* must not have been considered as important as *Northanger Abbey* (since the spine of that volume only contained the name of the earlier novel); and furthermore, that lapse in taste might have continued in scholarly circles right into the 1920's.

4 D. W. Harding expresses this very aptly: "Lady Russell is explicitly presented as the equivalent of a greatly loved mother, more nearly ideal than any other living mother that Jane Austen gives a heroine" (9). When we think of Lizzy's ridiculous mother in *Pride and Prejudice* and Fanny's feckless, defeated mother in *Mansfield Park,* this becomes significant.

5 Jane Austen at several points in the novel expresses her respect for the navy. Admiral Croft's superiority to Sir Walter is one. And this scene, where Anne is in anguish that this cultured and useful company might have been hers if she had married Captain Wentworth. As David Nokes points out (488), Austen's own brother Frank (a naval captain) was "the model for her hero, Wentworth." Cecil also explains: "the ardent affectionate admiration she felt for the British navy" (189) in terms of her brothers, who were naval officers.

6 In case the reasons why Sir Walter is the focus of this satire rather than Elizabeth are not so obvious, there are two. Firstly, the baronet, as a patriarch, is a better symbol of aristocratic arrogance than an older daughter who won't even inherit his estate. And secondly, vanity of appearance is neither rare nor unnatural in an attractive young woman, but it is silly in a middle-aged man.

7 Here is Austen summing up Mrs. Bennett at the end of Chapter 1 of Pride and Prejudice: "Her mind was less difficult to develop [than her husband's]. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (3).

8 Anne knows the navy because she has been following Captain Wentworth's movements. As has been noted above, Jane Austen's brothers were naval officers and she knew the navy as well as she did because of her interest in them.

9 On the other hand, the late Lady Elliot, who was Anne's last loving connection in her nuclear family, was disciplined, unextravagant, and presumably popular.

10 Lady Russell's weak point is being a bit of a snob. Though a woman of impeccable character and decency, she secretly finds Admiral Croft's manners inelegant; and she has a somewhat feudal reverence for Sir Walter. And we learn from Anne's resourceful friend Mrs. Smith that Mr. Elliot has changed his mind and lusts after Sir Walter's title. Now that he is rich, the title seems to be his next materialistic goal.

11 In fact, Anne dreads meeting the newly returned Captain Wentworth and is therefore happy to stay at Mary's house this time.

12 From Anne's viewpoint, this is one of the first signs that Captain Wentworth has forgiven her. We learn in the proposal scene towards the end of the book that by this time, the Captain had fallen in love with her once again – or, as he explains, come to recognize that he had never really stopped loving her.

13 This puts Mary in the tradition of Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*. Having nearly ruined her own reputation (and *life*) and those of her sisters by running off with Mr. Wickham, Lydia is saved, along with the rest of the Bennets, by Mr. Darcy. Thanks to the allowance Darcy has privately promised Wickham, Lydia is able to marry him, in unceremonious haste. But disregarding the circumstances of her marriage, she still insists on the precedence of a married woman: "Ah! Jane," she says to her oldest sister, "I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman" (235).

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