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# Jane Austen's Politics as Determined by an Examination of Three of Her Novels

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**Jane Austen's Politics**  
As Determined by an Examination of Three of Her Novels

Research based Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

In fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in Honors English Literature

By  
Rebecca Payton

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## Introduction

Jane Austen is one of the world's most famous authors. Her works are a staple of the classroom from secondary to graduate schools. Though her writings are constantly the subject of critical review, the conclusions regarding her novels' relationship with politics are varied. While some see Austen and her work as an endorsement of counter-revolutionary eighteenth century British ideals, others count Austen as a proto-feminist advocating for the agency of women in a time when the subjugation of the sex was necessary to maintain social order.

This research project sets out to determine if Jane Austen legitimizes the reigning ideology of the late eighteenth century. In this case, ideology is taken to mean "the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain, what they take to be reality,"<sup>1</sup> Ideology serves to perpetuate the interests and ideals of the hegemonic economic and social class, and in Austen's time was characterized by the counter-revolutionary ideals that valued paternalistic authority and advocated a system through which individual rights were reinforced through a community framework. The project will examine whether Austen advocates for these ideals as evidenced in her three novels *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*.

Though the political must be defined as that which relates to the public affairs of a country, particularly as it relates to that country's government, the personal in relation to Austen cannot be discounted, for the examination of her politics is being done in the intensely personal framework of the novel. Determining whether Austen's work perpetuates late eighteenth century British hegemony hinges on understanding not only Austen's perspective on Britain's public affairs, but also on her ability to comment on them as a woman living under this hegemony. Thus, this project turns to her novels, where the personal narratives of

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<sup>1</sup> Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999). Boston: Thomson Learning, Inc. pp 148.

her characters, particularly the female protagonists, can be examined in order to determine the effects of public politics on everyday life.

### **Political and Artistic Context**

It is important to remember that literature is not created in a vacuum. That is to say, in order to properly understand Austen's political views as they are presented in these three of her novels it is necessary to understand the greater political context in which these novels were written. Although the three novels were written over almost two decades, with *Northanger Abbey's* completion occurring in 1799 and *Persuasion* being the last novel she wrote in 1816 before her death the following year, the great changes seen in Europe in the later part of the eighteenth century are the roots from which all her novels grew. The subtle changes within that seventeen-year period do, as well, lead to subtle differences within the novels.

The Seven Years' War was a pan-European conflict spearheaded by Britain and France that ended in 1763. In her comprehensive history *Britons*, Linda Colley outlines the impact this war had on British society. The new lands in North America the West Indies, Africa, and India provided a vast new basis for foreign commerce. Britain gained control of land areas all over the world while simultaneously exporting at record levels, demonstrating the mutually beneficial "interplay between commercial interests and British imperial aggression."<sup>2</sup> This newly enlarged empire was connected by trade, making Britain a unique combination of both a landed society and a commercial one.<sup>3</sup> Coinciding with an increase in new technologies due to the Industrial Revolution, the British aristocracy who invested in these pursuits were the first to benefit from the economic take-off. The aristocrats were not

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<sup>2</sup> Colley, Linda (1992). *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. pp 99-100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the only members of British society to enjoy success, however. Increased manufacturing led to increased jobs in that sector.

Though this war was dramatically successful, making the British empire the largest in the world, the victory came with a price. The nation had a huge national debt that led to tax increases, and there were hundreds of thousands of demobilized troops to absorb. However, the biggest problem was an anxiety over their new dimensions, with many cotemporary critics wondering if the empire had stretched themselves dangerously thin, some even questioning the morality of such an empire.<sup>4</sup>

While the British saw in the Americans a source of tax revenue by which to alleviate the vast national debt, the Americans were unhappy with continued military presence and increased taxation. The situation escalated and led to war, one that was more brutal and costly than the British had expected. In the wake of the Seven Years' War Britain had establish itself as the preeminent world power, yet they lost to their colonists in the War of American Independence. The British saw their defeat as a product of leniency and conciliation, and thus followed the loss of face with a sharp move to the right, with the British elite stressing patriotism and ideals of Britishness.<sup>5</sup> The new patriotism “stressed attachment to the monarchy, the importance of the empire, the value of military and naval achievement, and the desirability of strong, stable government by a virtuous, able and authentically British elite.”<sup>6</sup>

It is with this attitude that Britain approached the end of the eighteenth century. Britishness hinged on a strong state, one run by the aristocratic elite. However, the period also witnessed a huge population growth in industrial areas. More people were gathering in towns with more

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<sup>4</sup> Colley, Linda (1992). *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. pp 102

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

time and means for leisure, much of which was spent in conversation.<sup>7</sup> This led to a “dramatic spread of radical ideas and political organization...and sharp and often violent expressions of discontent over food, labour conditions, and taxation.”<sup>8</sup> These ideas were being echoed in neighboring France, where an ideological shift emphasizing republicanism and individualism was taking place. By 1789, these principles had been radicalized and put into action with the Storming of the Bastille. Furthermore, the following decade witnessed Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power and, by 1804 declaration of himself as emperor, adding the threat of war against the new tyrant to the already looming ideological one.

This radical shift in French power and the advent of Napoleon’s rule led to mass arming all over Europe on an unprecedented scale.<sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, who turned twenty-one in 1796, became an adult in the midst of this hysterical reaction to the events in France. The British capital was forced to examine just who among ordinary Britons would be willing to fight against the French and their republican ideals.<sup>10</sup> The landed gentry founded a counter-revolutionary ideology that was staunchly rooted in the stability of the British hierarchical system, and critics scoured literature and other art forms for signs of subversion.

Thus, Austen was ushered in as a member of the counter-revolutionary generation. Her first works were created amidst a “cultural witch-hunt” in the 1790s.<sup>11</sup> Her contemporaries, women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, were considered dangerous because their work was seen solely as an effort to subvert the institution of marriage and the chastity of the female, a problem worsened by the susceptibility of their under-educated female readership.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 26.

<sup>8</sup> Colley, Linda (1992). *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. pp 284.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 36-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Women and marriage were the foundation on which British hierarchy, and therefore its stability, were maintained. The role of women in this counter-revolutionary era was to uphold the institution of marriage and the societal institutions that depended on the landed, aristocratic male to decide and provide for the rest of society.

As British society moved from a more international world-view to Francophobia, the deep-rooted popular modern English Toryism was born.<sup>13</sup> The Enlightenment era in which criticism of social constraints placed upon women were acceptable to a degree gave way to a period which encouraged the femininity of women. Although Austen certainly respected her sex enough to give her characters reason and rationality, her works did not diverge entirely from the accepted narrative. Ultimately, though some of her plots critique the foundations of specific marriages, Austen endorses it as an institution, and for all of her characters the consummation of their stories is when they become successful women and find a husband.

That is not to say that Austen did not undertake social critique. Like any author Austen engaged the controversies of her class and time, but in a more subtle and nuanced manner.<sup>14</sup> Her position within the gentry influenced how she engaged in this critique. Her father was a clergyman with only a small income, but her family was well-connected, and her brothers were successful with careers in the Navy and church. Although she understood and enjoyed many of the benefits of the upper class, her father's relatively lower status and income allowed her to see the influence and implications of the newly expanding economy.

For Austen, these effects of increased wealth among the gentry were more of a threat to the established hierarchy than Jacobin ideals of the French Revolution. As the eighteenth century came to an end, she watched as the aristocracy expanded. Those of newer wealth

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

from trade or industry, like the Bingleys in *Pride and Prejudice*, used their profits to secure a spot among the traditional landed and titled aristocrats, like the Darcys. The old system was hierarchical with the landowner as head of the community, based on communal feelings and dutiful adherence to established roles. The new system, in contrast, valued financial gain over traditional community obligations. The shift “was a widespread, voluntary change in attitude, an assumption of selfishness that led to resentment on the part of the other classes, and a sense of separation of class interests, which by the end of the Napoleonic Wars was being clearly articulated.”<sup>15</sup>

Austen demonstrates this in her depiction of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. Although the two men are seemingly identical, with both men having large fortunes at their disposal, Austen makes it clear that Bingley’s is new money. Scholars like Joan Ray maintain, “Austen’s contemporary readers would immediately pick up that the Bingleys come from a manufacturing city up north, and that the Senior Bingley had grown rich in textile manufacturing.”<sup>16</sup> The two men have been friends for rather a long time in their adulthood, but none of Mr. Darcy’s oldest friends, like Colonel Fitzwilliam, know much about Mr. Bingley, signaling that he has not been a part of their circle forever. Furthermore, the manners of his sisters are a mere performance of people of rank, appearing less well-bred than Georgiana’s guardian Mrs. Annesley, and their declarations of enthusiasm, like for reading, are contradicted by their actions.<sup>17</sup>

These changes manifested themselves in a physical way, as well, which Austen witnessed. The community fields surrounding villages were appropriated to landowners, forcing larger numbers of people than ever before into hired work rather than farming. Those who got the

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<sup>15</sup>Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 102.

<sup>16</sup>Slothouber, Linda (2016). “Bingley’s Four or Five Thousand, and Other Fortunes from the North,” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*. The Jane Austen Society of North America, Inc. pp 50-63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

land built new types of farms that decentralized the process. Butler summarizes the time well by stating, “In short, the Hampshire village, in Jane Austen’s lifetime, was in a centrifugal phase as a community: the classes grew wider apart in wealth and physically moved away from one another.”<sup>18</sup>

Austen criticizes the end of the old paternalistic order and the failure of the gentry to perform its function. She creates male characters who, for a variety of reasons, fail to uphold the order and contrasts them with dutiful heroes. Mr. Darcy is arguably the greatest of her male heroes, and he is both distinguished within the old order and a model paternalist.<sup>19</sup> Of Darcy his housekeeper says, “He is the best landlord and the best master that ever lived. Not like the wild young men today who think of nothing but themselves. There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name. Some people call him proud; but I am sure I never saw anything of it. To my fancy, it is only because he does not rattle away like other young men.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion* is one of the worst offenders, for he is frivolous, shallow, and overwhelmingly selfish. He has no interest in his paternalistic duties, caring only for his own status and comfort.

Sensibility, or the ability to respond to complex emotional influences, which was a literary movement associated with the creation of the novel, was to Austen a danger. It encouraged a focus on the individual, which only served to encourage the gentry to shirk its communal responsibilities. The fashion of sensibility is adopted by characters who, though they claim to be ruled by their hearts, are actually driven by selfish ambition. Marianne of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, is the picture of sensibility in that she is imaginative, idealistic, and emotional. She unabashedly declares her feelings for John Willoughby, yet Austen warns of

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Austen, Jane (2003). *Pride and Prejudice: Revised Edition*. London: Penguin Classics. pp 210.

the dangers of this kind of love of passions in revealing Willoughby as a seducer. It is Marianna's marriage to Colonel Brandon that mediates her sensibility with a strong sense of traditional honor, ties to the community, and a military tradition. These are the qualities that Austen respects the most, using Marianne as an example of how sensibility can lead its followers astray. This quality of sensibility given to characters in her novels, and the dangers that accompany it, come to represent the new order, epitomized by "egotism, ignorance of the inherited culture and religion and responsibility that is passed down within a hereditary aristocracy."<sup>21</sup>

It is from this environment Austen created *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*. Her reactions to her political climate are recorded in these novels, and by examining the characters and issues foregrounded in them it will be made clear where Austen stands in the tumultuous political climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The following analyses will include a deeper look at the importance of abbeys and implications of Bath as seen in *Northanger Abbey*, the effects of the slave trade as demonstrated in *Mansfield Park*, and the importance of the British Navy in *Persuasion*.

### ***Northanger Abbey***

Jane Austen completed and sold *Northanger Abbey* in 1803, immediately following the heyday of the gothic novel in the late 1790s.<sup>22</sup> Austen's novel is a satire of the genre, both mimicking its form and citing several of its well-known works. Austen uses the form of the gothic novel but sets the story in England to foreground the ramifications of a changing English society, one that was shifting from a land based to a cash based economy. With this shift came social changes that Austen uses *Northanger Abbey* to discuss.

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 104.

<sup>22</sup> Myrick, Lynn (2012): Introduction to *Northanger Abbey (1817)*. Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics. pp xi-xv.

Typically, the gothic novel was set in foreign countries like Italy or Spain and in an era far removed from nineteenth century England. Austen, in her parody of the form, however, sets her novel in England, near Bath. The threat represented by the gothic, then, is moved from a foreign sphere far away from the reader to one much closer to home. The violence and instability of the gothic is placed on a domestic landscape, challenging the complacency of the readers of gothic novels to see that Catherine Morland's fears may not be as far from the truth as they may wish.<sup>23</sup>

The underlying uncertainties of English society began with the Reformation and the rule of Henry VIII. Before this time, monasteries had housed religious officials, historically functioning as both the spiritual center of the community as well as the community hub for paternalistic charity.<sup>24</sup> During the reign of Henry VIII the monasteries were dissolved as part of the creation of the Church of England and given to private owners. Although Henry VIII claimed that monastic reforms were pious and reformative, his motives were far less pure. He claimed that the money from these sales would go to the establishment of schools and relief to the poor, yet he ultimately did none of these and instead used the money to finance costly wars.<sup>25</sup> Among these owners were the fictional Tilneys who, over two hundred years later, still benefit from his corruption in their ownership of Northanger Abbey.

Austen writes of the abbey having been “a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation, of its having fallen into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution, of a large portion of the ancient building still making a part of the present dwelling although the rest was decayed, or of its standing low in a valley, sheltered from the

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<sup>23</sup> Barchas, Janine. *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (2012). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. pp 106.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, Marilyn (1985). *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 106.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, Roger. “The Hidden History of Northanger Abbey: Jane Austen and the Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *Religion and Literature* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (2011). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. pp 61.

north and east by rising woods of oak.”<sup>26</sup> This description mimics in some ways the actual history of the Farleigh Hungerford estate, the estate of a Tudor era baron who scandalously trapped his wife in a tower. The estate, for example, not only included a medieval abbey acquired after dissolution and a manor house built from its ruins, but it also included a famous stretch of woods lying just north of the abbey, from which Austen presumably got the fictional abbey’s name.<sup>27</sup>

She continues her historical allusions in her choice of the surname Tilney. Literary critic and historian Janine Barchas notes that “the name Tilney reached the zenith of its political currency in the reign of Henry VIII, when a series of calculated ‘marriages allied the Tilneys to virtually every important family in the country, including the royal family.’”<sup>28</sup> The real-life Tilneys were closely associated with the Tudor court, making the fictional family a reference to the reign of Henry VIII both through their name and their home’s history.<sup>29</sup>

The privatization of religious building was also a part of her counter-revolutionary stance. During the early years of the French Revolution, the National Assembly called for the closure of all monasteries and radically re-organized the French church, forcing priests to take an oath to uphold it.<sup>30</sup> When many of these priests refused they escaped to England, where their stories spread quickly and would have surely been heard by Austen. These new monastic seizures prompted many, Austen included, to revisit the same events in their own English history in light of contemporary societal changes. Of this critic Roger Moore writes, “with the destruction of French monasticism before their eyes, early nineteenth-century authors

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<sup>26</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics (2012). pp 144.

<sup>27</sup> Barchas, Janine. *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (2012). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. pp 104.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, Roger. “The Hidden History of Northanger Abbey: Jane Austen and the Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *Religion and Literature* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (2011). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. pp 63.

appreciated the consequences of transferring property from sacred to secular hands in ways that only their sixteenth-century forebears could have previously done, and their writings often echo the arguments of early English Protestant critics of the Dissolution.”<sup>31</sup>

Although the abbey she created was fictional, it was based on a foundation of historical truths. Her utilization of genuine historical references, though subtly intertwined into her narrative, act as a mechanism by which to draw attention to another period in England’s history, one where political change had chaotic results. Just as in the medieval period when religious buildings with a paternalistic community function were sold and privatized, Austen’s England was abandoning the countryside community hierarchy in favor of a form of order striving only for the maximization of profit.<sup>32</sup>

Among those striving for profit amidst this new industrial-capitalist order were gentry like the Tilneys, whose obsession with wealth Austen was suspicious of. She demonstrates her distrust in such men by creating a character who should be honorable and dutiful, yet is never so. Despite General Tilney’s distinguished position in the military and community, appearance and wealth are all that drive Tilney. He is obsessed with wealth, taking pains to keep the rooms most often seen by visitors updated to modern taste. Austen remarks that the dining parlor was “a noble room...fitted up in a style of luxury and expense which was almost lost on the unpracticed eye Catherine.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Tilney wholly lacks genuine hospitality or any regard for welfare and feelings of others. This is seen most prominently when he sends Catherine home upon finding out that she was not as wealthy as he had believed, giving her no proper explanation, money,

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<sup>31</sup> Moore, Roger. “The Hidden History of Northanger Abbey: Jane Austen and the Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *Religion and Literature* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (2011). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. pp 64.

<sup>32</sup> Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State* (1987). New York: Tavistock Publications. pp 3.

<sup>33</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics (2012). pp 158.

or escort for the journey home. At a time when it was not just unsuitable for a girl of Catherine's age and position to travel such a distance unaccompanied, but it was also dangerous, his behavior should have been unacceptable. He is the antithesis of the paternalistic community figures that previously resided in the abbey, representing how harmful the money-seeking culture of Austen's shifting England was beginning to be.

Austen furthers her criticism of nascent industrial-capitalist England in her depiction of Bath. Bath was a social hub of regency England. It was the embodiment of upper class leisure. It was a space where monetary wealth was put on display, and social standing was based on appearances and connections. Bath was the center of the marriage market, and single, female visitors were up for acquisition. It is into this atmosphere that Austen places the innocent Catherine Morland, who is ignorant to the implications of her trip to Bath and her behavior there.

The city embodies the frivolities and individual excesses of the new order that Austen finds worthy of criticism. She surrounds Catherine with morally corrupt characters who continually break engagements and words of honor, demonstrating the harm of an order that promotes self-interest rather than duty or honor. The most conspicuous promise-breaker of the novel is Isabella Thorpe. Throughout the novel, Isabella makes promises to Catherine that she has no intention of keeping, from returning her home in time to visit with the Tilneys to writing her letters once Catherine leaves Bath.

Her biggest breach of faith, however, in ending her engagement to James Morland, is not a decision she makes because of convenience, as many of her broken promises to Catherine are. This decision comes solely from a policy favoring wealth.<sup>34</sup> Isabella, while still engaged to James Morland, uses her charms to manipulate Captain Frederick Tilney, hoping to marry

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 45.

him rather than James. This is because, as General Tilney states, he “will perhaps inherit as considerable a landed property as any private man in the county.”<sup>35</sup> She is greedy and unscrupulous, but ultimately not as manipulative as the man she wishes to charm. Isabella, too, is representative of the mercenary quality that Austen warns so strongly against.

General Tilney is another example of the implications of broken engagements. He, too, attempts to manipulate another’s position for his own gain, most notably Catherine’s when he mistakenly believes her to be quite wealthy. He invites her to his home yet unceremoniously tosses her out without any fear of social reproach, believing her to be so inferior that she is below the imperatives of patriarchal hospitality.<sup>36</sup> Of his behavior Eleanor says:

“After courting you from the protection of real friends to this-almost double distance from your home, to have you driven out of the house, without the considerations even of decent civility! Dear, dear Catherine, in being the bearer of such a message, I seem guilty myself of all its insult; yet, I trust you will acquit me, for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real power is nothing.”<sup>37</sup>

According to the hierarchy of the countryside community, General Tilney should be a gracious and generous host to someone of a lower class, but he instead behaves as though the opposite were true. To General Tilney, his position absolves him of responsibility to those below him, making Austen’s characterization of a man of his position a rather radical portrait of corrupted patriarchy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics (2012). pp 176.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 46.

<sup>37</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics (2012). pp 216.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Austen in *Northanger Abbey* utilizes the gothic form to draw attention to the dangers of a changing order. She places what was normally foreign in the domestic, providing the reader with a framework to see the danger in the familiar while still retaining distance. For Austen, these dangers exist in the transformed social order, one that is no longer based on the paternalism of the English countryside. She sets her story at an abbey and at Bath, filling familiar places with characters who do not fulfil their word or communal responsibilities. General Tilney is the embodiment of the new money-seeker, absolving himself of responsibility rather than carrying it out dutifully, prioritizing personal profit over the welfare of others. Although Austen utilized a conventional form in *Northanger Abbey*, her debut novel is subversive in its underlying warning against England's budding industrial-capitalism and the social order that was developing alongside it.

### ***Mansfield Park***

Begun in 1811, *Mansfield Park* is Austen's first novel as an adult. She consciously set out to write a novel that was different from *Northanger Abbey*, one that was not "too light, and bright, and sparkling."<sup>39</sup> In *Mansfield Park*, Austen creates a metaphor for English society, one that she argues must be founded on more than legal rules and regulations, but on morality and a community of values.<sup>40</sup> She characterizes property and wealth as potentially dangerous, as she does in *Northanger Abbey*, but this time her criticism goes one step further. While *Mansfield Park* also foregrounds a destabilized patriarchal order at the hands of a mercenary man, its underlying message regards the morality of slavery at a time when the issue was at the forefront of politics. Thus, Austen does more than just criticize industrial-capitalism and

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<sup>39</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 94.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State* (1987). New York: Tavistock Publications. pp 3.

its effect on English families, but she subtly draws attention to the political, and to Austen moral, issue of slavery.

Austen began writing *Mansfield Park* in 1811. The novel's timeline sets the story at roughly the same time. Although the internal dating of the novel is puzzling, references throughout the novel to nineteenth century publications like *The Quarterly Review* and one of poet George Crabbe's *Tales* led scholars like Gabrielle White to determine that Sir Thomas returned from Antigua sometime after 1812.<sup>41</sup> Austen uses real historical references and dates, as well as continued references to Antigua and the West Indies, to create realism and forefront the issue of slavery.

These years were significant years for the abolition movement. The slave trade was formally abolished in the British empire in 1807, and three years later further legislation was passed by Parliament making slave-trading a felony with a fourteen-year prison sentence as punishment.<sup>42</sup> This was the same year in which Austen began *Mansfield Park*. Sir Bertram's trip to Antigua coincides with these laws, providing an explanation for his trip and the for the lengthening of his stay there.

Her most obvious historical slavery reference is in the novel's title. Austen chose to name the Bertram residence Mansfield Park, a reference Lord Chief Justice Mansfield of the British court. He was known for his decision in Somerset Case. James Somerset, the slave of a Boston customs official Charles Stewart, was brought to England from the colonies and subsequently ran away. He was recaptured and held on a ship bound for Jamaica. Aided by abolitionist Granville Sharpe, Somerset's incarcerators were forced to remove him from the ship through a writ of habeas corpus, requiring that his body be presented before the court.

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<sup>41</sup> White, Gabrielle. *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: 'a fling at the slave trade' (2006)*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, pp 20.

Somerset's lawyers argued that, although slavery was legal, it was illegal for his owners to take him by force and sell him abroad, and in his decision Lord Mansfield agreed. He wrote, "The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law...It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from the decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore, the black must be discharged."<sup>43</sup>

While his decision did not outlaw slavery, confusion at the time led British blacks to celebrate as though it did. Historian James Walvin notes in his book *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire* that a group of free blacks who had heard of the decision toasted Lord Mansfield, congratulating one another on the acquisition of rights for their race.<sup>44</sup> This was not true, but it was an important first step to abolition, and the idea of emancipation for slaves was one that the British public held on to, with this decision bringing abolition to the forefront of many Britons' minds.

One of those minds was Austen's. She clearly builds *Mansfield Park* on a foundation of references to the issue of slavery, including timeline and title. Her references, though they may go unnoticed to a modern reader of the novel, would have been obvious to someone who read the novel at the time of its publication. She never explicitly comments on abolition, however. The only specific mention of slavery at all is by Fanny in Chapter 21. While speaking to Edmund she says, "Did you not hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?"<sup>45</sup> Edmund responds that he had hoped she would ask more questions, which would have pleased Sir Thomas, but Fanny responds saying, "And I longed to do it-but there was

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<sup>43</sup>Murray, William, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Mansfield. *Case of James Somerset, a Negro, on a Habeas Corpus, King's Bench: 12 George III (1771-71)*.

<sup>44</sup> Walvin, James. *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire* (2001). Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell Publishers.

<sup>45</sup> Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park* (1814). New York: Washington Square Press (1962). pp 163.

such a dead silence!”<sup>46</sup> This silence did not stem from any embarrassment from her family that their wealth was based on the slave trade, but from her cousins’ boredom in talking of a political subject, at all. She remarks that “while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like-I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.”<sup>47</sup> Fanny being interested in such a topic shows the depth of her character, which is in stark contrast to that of her cousins’.

Without ever mentioning the topic again, Austen frames her criticism of slavery as a criticism of English society. Rather than broach a controversial political issue outright, which she certainly could not have done, she creates an intricate metaphor. Although the reader will never see how Sir Thomas treats his slaves, the reader does see how he treats Fanny and his daughters, particularly how he treats Fanny in comparison to his treatment of his daughters. She foregrounds the treatment of another virtually voiceless minority, women, to understand that of another, slaves.

In his treatment of his dependents, Sir Thomas regards them as part of his property, and as such are subject to his absolute control.<sup>48</sup> He is rigid in his rules and constant in his surveillance, being of the belief that without his direction none of his children would behave respectably. However, his constant constraint on the behavior of his children, namely his daughters, is what drives them to behave in just the way he hoped to avoid. The Bertram sisters rebel far more strongly than any other of Austen’s characters, demonstrating Austen’s belief that to force individuals to act a certain way ensures that they will not do so when given the opportunity to decide on their own.<sup>49</sup> Although Sir Thomas made sure his children

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<sup>46</sup> Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park* (1814). New York: Washington Square Press (1962). pp 163.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State* (1987). New York: Tavistock Publications. pp 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*.

followed a rigid set of rules, he did not ensure that those rules were placed on a moral foundation. The inappropriate actions of his daughters as well as those of his youngest son, namely Maria's affair, Julia's concealment of it, and Tom's extreme extravagance with money demonstrate the instability of any order whose security is based on rules that have no basis in morality.

Sir Thomas also made sure that Fanny understood that she was not entitled to his benefaction in any way, being only his poor relation. The importance of her gratitude is mentioned time and again throughout the novel. Sir Thomas sees his guardianship of Fanny as a kindness for a girl who could not possibly act for herself, controlling her behavior through developing an almost burdensome sense of gratitude as well as maintaining his strict, absolute control.<sup>50</sup> Of her refusal to marry Mr. Crawford, Sir Thomas remarks, "You do not owe me the duty of a child. But, Fanny, if your heart can acquit you of ingratitude-"<sup>51</sup>

The emphasis on gratitude is really an emphasis on the issue of benevolence itself.<sup>52</sup> Sir Thomas views the match with Henry Crawford in a purely monetary, self-interested way. Fanny's refusal to marry Henry Crawford is an affront to his authority like he has not yet seen from his own daughters, and he does not hold back in his cruel response to Fanny's conviction. The level of gratitude he expects from Fanny is indicative of the widening divisions of class that act like race, keeping Sir Thomas as ultimate authority and center of absolute power. Sir Thomas, and the emerging patriarchal capitalism of England that he represents, is not concerned with the happiness of the individual at all. He is more than

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 94.

<sup>51</sup> Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park* (1814). New York: Washington Square Press (1962). pp 264.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 107.

willing to sacrifice Fanny's happiness, and his own daughters' in the case of Maria's marriage to Rushworth, to satisfy his own self-interest and self-aggrandizement.<sup>53</sup>

Austen thus presents property and wealth as a dangerous trap. Those with wealth do not wish to simply maintain it, but they seek to enlarge it, and in many cases, like that of Sir Thomas and his dependents, at almost any cost.<sup>54</sup> Austen criticizes such a system where the prosperity of a community is measured only by its wealth. She shows that the community cannot exist without a strong moral basis, and those that attempt to do so, like at Mansfield Park, are doomed to fail. To Austen, it was no longer true that those with wealth, and those in power, were always good, for now much of that power rests not a foundation of morality but on a foundation of money and property alone.<sup>55</sup>

The way Austen characterizes Fanny demonstrates this. Although she comes from a poor family and has few possessions, Fanny is dutiful, obedient, and virtuous. Her judgment and moral character are the novel's correction to the capitalist idea that morality and wealth are synonymous. To someone like Sir Thomas who holds this view, it is unthinkable that Fanny would not take advantage of a such a match made available through the marriage market, yet Fanny does so because her character is entirely separate from capitalist values founded on the exploitation of others for personal gain.<sup>56</sup> She sees through the temptations of money, and also of sexuality, that Henry Crawford represents. Sir Thomas cannot see through such temptations in Henry Crawford or his own children, which is ultimately his downfall.

The only way in which order is restored in the novel is through Edmund and Fanny's union. What had once seemed so dangerous now was vital for Sir Thomas to redeem Mansfield Park. Their marriage and Fanny's return represent a change in values, shifting

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<sup>53</sup> Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State* (1987). New York: Tavistock Publications. pp 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 29.

from the flawed capitalist values represented by Sir Thomas to the strong moral values that make Fanny so admirable. It is Fanny's love of Mansfield Park that restores Sir Thomas's enjoyment of it.

It is in this way that Fanny becomes such a critique of patriarchal values in a society in which the economy dictates its morality. The issue of slavery, then, is the symptom of a larger moral problem. The hierarchy of nineteenth century British society is corrupted by the acquisition of wealth and money, turning the benevolence of those at the top into self-interested domination. Although Fanny has the legal right to refuse where the slave does not, her story is representative of the failings of a corrupted patriarchal system. Furthermore, Austen's characterization of Fanny as almost impossibly virtuous is subversive in its assertion that those with the least wealth and power have a capacity for honor that the self-interested aristocracy does not, a potentially radical message for a time in British society that depended upon the subordination of certain classes to maintain order.

### *Persuasion*

*Persuasion* was published six months after Austen's unexpected death in 1818, making it her unanticipated final novel. It was her first and only novel written following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, making it the most removed from the political issues that previously drove her fiction, yet most aptly situated to reflect on these implications of these events. Austen remarks in her advertisement for *Northanger Abbey*, which was published alongside *Persuasion*, that in the thirteen years since she wrote *Northanger Abbey* "places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes."<sup>57</sup>

It is these years that account for the changes that set the novel apart from its counterparts, namely the development of changes in the post-war social order. In *Persuasion*, the question

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<sup>57</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Franklin: Dalmatian Press Classics (2012). pp xvii.

was no longer who should win the war, but who should win the peace. Austen sets up, in her most radical picture of English social structure, an ideal order that legitimizes rule by those in possession of the moral upper hand which, in the post-war England, is no longer those at the top of the social hierarchy.

The Napoleonic Wars came to an end after over ten years of conflict with a successful naval maneuver at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Austen's brothers both found success in the British Navy during this time, no doubt part of her drive in writing a novel that so wholeheartedly works on the Navy's behalf. Unlike in *Northanger Abbey* where General Tilney, though part of the Navy, is representative of the landed gentry and ruling establishment, those associated with the Navy in *Persuasion* are the alternatives to rather than an extension of the establishment.<sup>58</sup>

Where before Austen presented somewhat unrepresentative instances of genteel incompetence or harshness yet ultimately endorsed a patriarchal hierarchy based on moral grounds, here the landed classes have lost the prestige and moral authority for both the heroine and the author.<sup>59</sup> *Persuasion* asks questions about the nature of English social hierarchy that her other novels have not done, destabilizing the legitimacy of the hereditary by making the noble family at its center noble only in title rather than in actions.<sup>60</sup>

The most obvious of the ignoble nobility is Sir Walter Elliot. His loss of Kellynch Hall to the Crofts is one that Anne believes is well deserved. While Anne sees their loss of Kellynch as a necessary consequence to a reckless lack of economy, Sir Walter and Elizabeth see it as their duty to live in the same way as their illustrious ancestors.<sup>61</sup> Of this Austen writes, "It did

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 147.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

<sup>60</sup> Neill, Edward. *The Politics of Jane Austen* (1999). New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. pp 118.

<sup>61</sup> Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994). New York: Routledge. pp 174.

not appear to him that Sir Walter could materially alter his style of living in a house which had such a character of hospitality and ancient dignity to support.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, when the time comes that they must depart to Bath to remedy their financial missteps, it is made clear that Sir Walter is in no way the picture of patriarchal authority and generosity that Austen endorses with characters like Mr. Darcy in her other novels. She critiques Sir Walter’s behavior and therefore critiques the newly arranged order that not only allows, but encourages him, to act that way.

Since he is no way the model paternalist that Darcy is, Sir Walter’s tenants are not sad to see him go. Austen writes, “Sir Walter prepared with condescending bows for all the afflicted tenantry and cottagers who might have had a hint to shew themselves.”<sup>63</sup> Anne, on the other hand, makes duplicates of Sir Elliot’s books and pictures, deals with the arrangements for the garden, and goes “to almost every house in the parish, as a sort of take-leave,” having been told that they wished it.<sup>64</sup> In this way Austen makes Anne a more suitable heir to the estate than any of the other Elliots, and the Crofts continue Anne’s tradition of management and make themselves to her much more deserving of a place at Kellynch Hall than her father. Anne, then, rejects a principle of hereditary for one that instead relies on merit and distinction to properly promote a healthy and functioning community.<sup>65</sup>

Sir Walter, however, dislikes the Navy and in particular the Crofts because they are undistinguished by birth. He objects to the Crofts’ letting of Kellynch Hall because it would be the “means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of...”<sup>66</sup> He further remarks on the harm that the Navy does to the physical appearance of men, holding this as much of an

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<sup>62</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 15.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994). New York: Routledge. pp 175.

<sup>66</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 22.

objection as the inferiority of their birth. To Sir Walter, appearance, both of beauty and wealth, go hand in hand with distinction, finding no reason to seek legitimization of gentry positions on any other basis. To Austen, however, the nobility of action that could once be counted on from those of noble birth has been compromised by the value shift, and the attitude she gives Sir Walter serves only to make him look ridiculous and undeserving in contrast to those of lower distinction who uphold traditional values more nobly than he.

The concern for rank and consequence that characterizes Sir Walter is used to make him ridiculous. Though he represents the corruption of the patriarchy, he is in no way threatening to Anne as General Tilney is to Catherine. Sir Walter's corruption is laughable, with his obsession with appearance and almost comic recurrence. While in Bath, a city that for Austen embodies the excesses and moral fluidity that constituted industrial-capitalist England, Sir Walter's chief occupation is concerning himself with his own appearance and remarking on that of others.

He uses his time to peruse Bath for anyone else as good-looking as he is, enjoying the company of Colonel Wallis because everyone gazes admiringly at two such handsome men.<sup>67</sup> He rents an expensive house at Camden Place, and is only concerned with the Crofts on their visit to Bath insofar as to ensure that they live in a neighborhood suitable for visiting. His only criticism of Elizabeth's friend Mrs. Clay, though she has many legitimate aspects with which to find fault, are the freckles on her face. He even goes so far as to counsel Lady Russell on her make-up technique, remarking that she should wear more blush if she wants to receive callers in the morning with the blinds open.<sup>68</sup> Sir Walter is constantly engaged in the superficial, never paying mind to any of the serious matters that take place around him, and in

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<sup>67</sup> Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994). New York: Routledge. pp 175.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

his character Austen creates a critique of the ridiculous individual and the system that promotes that sort of behavior in someone of his once-meaningful position.

The most obvious evidence of his preoccupation with appearance and rank is his near obsession with Lady Dalrymple, the Walters' cousin and Dowager Viscountess. Once he reestablished a relationship with her, he and Elizabeth were sure to place her calling cards "wherever they might be most visible."<sup>69</sup> They constantly refer to their "cousins at Lara-place" and their "cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret" to anyone who will listen. When they attend a concert at the Octagon Room all together, for example, Sir Walter makes the most of a dramatic interest with her party and poses theatrically with Elizabeth in front of the fireplace.<sup>70</sup> To Sir Walter, having the appearance of being distinguished is to be so. Austen finds fault with a hierarchy based entirely on an empty image. She instead promotes, through her depictions of Sir Walter's lower-ranking counterparts, an order that creates a community of content through their distinguished actions and values.

Anne, however, has no interest in cultivating the favor of these cousins, separating her from her family's obsession with wealth and appearance. Of her opinion Austen writes:

"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."

Clearly, Anne finds no merit in title alone. She chooses to spend her time while the others are visiting at Laura-place to visit with Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith, a former school friend of

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<sup>69</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 170.

<sup>70</sup> Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994). New York: Routledge. pp 176.

Anne's, despite having lost her husband and fortune, is the embodiment of both good manners and spirits. Anne finds her in possession of "an elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone".<sup>71</sup> Although Sir Walter encourages Anne to drop her acquaintance with a friend that is of such a circumstance, Anne refuses. This not only demonstrates Sir Walter's lack of authority, undermining patriarchal hierarchy, but it also legitimizes the post-war order.

Admiral Croft embodies the new order of post-war England. He is distinguished, not by birth, but in his rise through the ranks. Austen contrasts the Crofts sharply to Sir Walter, creating in them people who are respectable rather than Sir Walter who she makes ridiculous. Admiral and Mrs. Croft are not of the gentry, but instead live happily at sea, unconcerned with perpetuating social values by means of local attachments or the production of heirs.<sup>72</sup> While William Elliot believes that the increasing prominence of men like Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth are symptoms of the "unfeudal tone of the *present* day," Anne, and Austen in turn, see them as the legitimate heirs to the hierarchical upper hand.<sup>73</sup> Where Austen once had faith in those of the aristocracy to maintain the community hierarchy she valued so much, she now looks to those who distinguished themselves in the recent war to restore a system she believes is failing.

Their class's suitability for such a position is exemplified by the Crofts' behavior at Kellynch Hall. They maintain Anne's charitable work, something that Sir Walter and Elizabeth saw as one of the few expenses they could spare when trying to fix on a plan of economy. They make several changes and repairs to the house, as well, departing from Sir

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<sup>71</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 176.

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 147.

<sup>73</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 122.

Walter's ostentatious style in favor of one that is more functional. Admiral Croft also moves the umbrellas from the butler's pantry to a stand next to the door. While this may seem insignificant, it shows that valued his relationship with his servants, for under Sir Walter it is presumed that a servant had to be sent for every time he needed an umbrella to protect his ever-important appearance from the elements.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Austen shows that the Crofts are much better suited than Sir Walter is to manage Kellynch Hall efficiently.

Mrs. Croft, in accordance with the new order, represents a system of manners that is not differentiated by sex. Though she demonstrates none of the typically feminine qualities associated with good manners, such as sweetness or daintiness, she is "open, easy, and decided, like one who had no distrust of herself, and no doubts of what to do; without any approach to coarseness, however, or any want of good humour."<sup>75</sup> She represents a departure from gendered manners and the old English ideal of chivalry that Austen seems to find just as unnecessary as her character does.

Austen's belief in the rational and moral equality of the sexes is demonstrated further in Wentworth's anger with Anne over her diffidence, a quality which typically would have been viewed as typical of women. Whereas Henry Crawford sees Fanny's refusal to marry him as a charming part of feminine manners, Wentworth is angry with nineteen-year-old Anne for having a weak character and deferring to the opinions of her family and friends. While contemporary conduct literature and conservative ideology would have endorsed heartily female submission, Austen departs from both and instead makes Captain Wentworth seek out a strong, decided woman to marry. Although the patriarchal order would be maintained

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<sup>74</sup> Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994). New York: Routledge. pp 176.

<sup>75</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 72.

through such a marriage, this marriage would be like the partnership of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, which Austen validates.<sup>76</sup>

Lady Russell is Mrs. Croft's antithesis, embodying the old order and conservative ideologies. It is Anne's deference to Lady Russell, not to her father, that kept her from marrying Captain Wentworth when she had the chance. Her "prejudices on the side of ancestry" and "value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them."<sup>77</sup> Though she is presented sympathetically, Lady Russell's opinions are never to be regarded as wholly trustworthy. She is learned and well-spoken, yet she clearly respects Sir Walter despite his having been made stupid. Both she and Mrs. Croft are made to be of a keener wit than their male counterparts, yet Lady Russell alone gives veneration where it is clearly undue.<sup>78</sup>

It is in this way that Austen paints a picture of a society in which the rich are not necessarily the most morally venerable. While her other novels, though subversive, ultimately endorse the patriarchal old order, Austen in *Persuasion* destabilizes completely a hereditary view of English society, favoring instead a more classless society based on merit. Her autonomous heroine Anne legitimizes a new order that attacks the principle of heredity. To Austen, the post-war order deserved to be placed in the hands of those who won it. She uses the Navy's social position to destabilize the patriarchal order that they went to war to protect. Austen makes those of title only distinguished in name and those without status the most worth of distinguish, departing from the old English order and endorsing fully a new social frontier.

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<sup>76</sup> Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1987). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 149.

<sup>77</sup> Austen, Jane. *Persuasion* (1818). London: Random House. pp 13.

<sup>78</sup> Neill, Edward. *The Politics of Jane Austen* (1999). New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. pp 120.

## Conclusion

Jane Austen began writing novels amidst a national crisis. The threat of French invasion, both physical and ideological, drove those in favor of English patriarchy to undertake a counter-revolution. Austen, reaching adulthood during this war of ideas, set forth her novels as part of the fray. In examining *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*, it is clear that Austen began endorsing a social hierarchy that, by the time of her death in 1818, she seemed to no longer endorse. What began her career as a mildly subversive parody of the gothic in *Northanger Abbey* shifted in the intervening years to more serious inquiry into the nature of hierarchy in *Mansfield Park*, ending finally with a destabilization of the old social order and an endorsement of a new, rather classless one in *Persuasion*.

Her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* took what was typically foreign and placed it in the domestic. The medieval castles of the traditional Gothic were replaced with the somewhat recently privatized monastic holdings of England. The abbey at Northanger represents an old community hierarchy that was slowly disintegrating, being corrupted by the nascent capitalism and emphasis on monetary wealth. Lands and buildings that in the past served to assist the community now, under the supervision of aristocrats like General Tilney, came to be physical manifestations of wealth and rank only.

General Tilney, in turn, is the embodiment of the dangers of a new system founded, not on a moral hierarchy, but on an economic one. General Tilney is the picture of a patriarchal system corrupted by wealth, and he is never concerned with the health or well-being of others. His behavior towards Catherine at Northanger proves his character and, more importantly, his readiness to absolve himself off the responsibilities of his class in order to serve his own self-interest.

Austen furthers her criticism of the increasingly free market economy in her portrayal of Bath. Bath, to Austen, embodies all that is wrong with the new order. *Northanger Abbey* drops naïve young Catherine into a world of which she knows nothing about, placing her on the marriage market without her having any idea of there being one. The city's chief amusements focus on being seen, and wealth, or the appearance of it, are almost all that matter. The city and its focus on money have the power to corrupt, and this is proven by Isabella.

*Mansfield Park*, too, foregrounds a man who is representative of corrupted patriarchal values. However, as Austen matured so did her questions about the nature of English hierarchy. In an economy that encourages the maximization of profits so strongly that it is founded on the enslavement of a people, Austen questions the legitimacy of benevolence and the supposedly benevolent.

She creates a carefully constructed metaphor for English society. As a popular female novelist, Austen could not outright challenge the patriarchal order. Rather, she demonstrates through the treatment of female characters within the novel the way other dependents were also continually devalued. These other dependents were the slave population, an issue that weighed heavily on British minds at the time of the novel's publication. Following a decision by Chief Justice Lord Mansfield, whose name lends the title of the novel, that reinforced the personhood of slaves, Austen weighs in on the debate with references throughout the novel.

In his treatment of his dependents, Sir Thomas views them as property alone and, therefore, subject to his complete control. His rules are rigid, yet they are not founded on a moral basis. He is interested, much like General Tilney, only in furthering his own wealth and influence. She endeavors to create a novel that demonstrates that a community founded on economic principles alone cannot stand, and legitimizes the patriarchal system through the

morally-grounded marriage of Fanny and Edmund. Though she clearly warns of a patriarchy corrupted by money and its acquisition, she still endorses the social hierarchy maintained through marriage.

In her final novel *Persuasion*, however, the Austen of *Northanger Abbey* has aged thirteen years. In this time England has undergone many changes, seeing the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the political conflict that drove much of her beginning fiction. Instead of a novel that sets out to endorse eighteenth century notions of order and propriety amidst a crisis of ideas, Austen writes a novel that decidedly departs from the old order.

She uses *Persuasion* to show the damage of a social hierarchy founded on title alone, no longer believing that the landed hierarchy has any moral basis at all. The Austen that believed in the steadiness of a patriarchal community in which the gentry were selfless benefactors has shifted into an Austen that views those with title at the top of the patriarchy as no longer deserving. Her autonomous heroine Anne, though morally respectable in much the same way as Fanny, has none of her respect for domestic patriarchy.

More than that, the reader is clearly supposed to have no respect for Sir Walter and the status he represents either. His constant posing and obsession with appearance and rank do not make him a threatening picture of corrupted patriarchy, as was General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, but they make him laughable. By the second half of the novel he serves only as a source of comedy. Austen, then, clearly demonstrates her belief that those who won the war should win the peace, characterizing the Navy as the solution to hierarchical corruption.

Unlike General Tilney, the Navy of *Persuasion* is the correction to the patriarchy, not a representation of it. Admiral and Mrs. Croft, as well as Captain Wentworth, represent a social class deserving of their upward mobility. Throughout the novel Austen legitimizes their

position by making them much better suited than their titled counterparts to maintain an order that resembles the parish community that Austen valued from the very beginning. Though the new social order is based, not on rank, but on merit, it still maintains the charitable and community values that Austen found important throughout her life.

The new order of men value women who do not embody the conservative ideals espoused by eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct literature. Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth form relationships with women who are strong and decisive rather than sweet and diffident. Though the novel still endorses marriage as a way to maintain order, marriage of the new order, to Austen, is more of a partnership than an admittance of female submission. In *Persuasion* more than any of her other novels, Austen is concerned more with an idealized future social order rather than one of the present.

Although as time goes on Austen's endorsement of patriarchal hierarchy is more and more radical, the central themes of her novels all maintain the same thing. In all three of these works, despite the differences in time in which they were written, Austen warns of the ability of money and rank to corrupt. While in *Northanger Abbey* she endorses an old order that by the time of *Persuasion* has been corrupted completely, Austen maintains throughout all her novels the importance of a community founded on moral rather than economic values. Catherine, Fanny, and Anne, though they may be different, all demonstrate Austen's belief in the moral equality of the sexes. In *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*, Jane Austen continually maintains the necessity of morality in society, and each of these novels demonstrate what happens when it is corrupted.

Upon examination of these three of her novels, it is clear that Austen's idealized order shifted as time went on. Although she advocates in favor of titled hierarchy much more adamantly in her beginning novels, her belief in a strong moral societal foundation does not

waver in any of them. By the time of *Persuasion*'s completion, Austen legitimizes a much more radical picture of English society than she does in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*. However, her decided belief in the corruptive power of wealth as well as her view of morality as the only legitimate community foundation place her novels in a unique political position. Despite the assertion of many critics that Austen is decidedly conservative, she always questioned the legitimacy of the patriarchal order in the face of capitalistic ideals, but she did so in a beautifully subtle and nuanced way.

When looked at in light of the Industrial Revolution that began near the end of her life, Austen's novels and the messages within them are particularly prescient. Even in the countryside she would have seen the stirrings of the changes to come. Her novels, though they entertain with stories of love and advantageous matches, are also a decisive warning. Throughout the three novels which have here been examined and the remaining three that have not, she adamantly maintains the power of wealth to corrupt, and by the last of her novels it is clear that she sees rank as no preservative.

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### Northanger Abbey

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