

The Struggle between the Traditional and the Progressive, the Old and the New in Jane Austen's Novel *Persuasion*

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Abstract

Two hundred years since her death Jane Austen's literary legacy keeps provoking the interest, curiosity and fantasy of both readers and experts. The more time has passed since 1817, the more new aspects seem to be found in her novels, the more references to the state of the society in her novels seem to be surfacing. In this paper we wanted to have a detailed look at Austen's last completed and most serious novel, *Persuasion*, as this particular novel seems to reflect most the changes in the society she was familiar with. This novel is the only one which reflects the decline of the old aristocracy and its impact on individuals as well as on the society in a broader sense. We tried to provide arguments which could help refute the opinions of many who claim that Austen was detached from what was going on in the world she lived in. To support our claim we compared certain aspects found in *Persuasion* with parallel motives in some of her other novels, more particularly *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. One relatively new topic is dealt with in *Persuasion* as well as in *Emma* and that is the topic of gender issues at which we tried to have a closer look too. We tried to point out the paradoxes inherent to most of the characters and the way these paradoxes influence their conduct and behaviour, as well as Austen's objectivity in treating her characters.

Key words: Jane Austen, society, class, aristocracy, gender, prejudice, persuasion

I. Introduction

One of the most frequently used adjectives today is the word iconic. Media are full of the expression, often referring to things or different results of human activities as 'iconic'. Sometimes one cannot

help feeling that this word is really being overused. Talking about cultural icons thus presents a dilemma – there are usually so many candidates that the choice is really hard. This time, however, the task is not so difficult. If there is one personage that meets the criteria for defining someone as an icon then it is definitely Jane Austen. This year it is even more justified as we commemorate the 200th anniversary of her untimely death. The more time has passed from her death, the more literary experts appear trying to find new (coded) messages in her novels, presenting new approaches to them. Keeping these efforts in mind and having put Jane Austen in the context of the 18th and 19th centuries, there are several questions that arise concerning the author – how traditional was Austen in her writing? How rebellious (if at all) was she? How justified are the traditional (and traditionalist) approaches to her literary legacy?

If we take any one of her novels, we will find out that “[h]er taste was for the rebels against literary conventions” (Byrne 2013: 88). However, it was not only literary conventions she rebelled against. Austen’s novels, when compared to those written by her contemporaries, are different, innovative also because “[they] were essentially heroine-centred novels of courtship, not conduct books disguised as novels. They are coming-of-age novels in which ... parental figures are often flawed. The heroine is not taught a lesson: she learns from her own mistakes ... The self and the emotions evolve” (Byrne 2013: 88). None of Austen’s heroines is the same at the end of the story as she was at the beginning. But her novels are not just about the process of maturing of her heroines. “Jane Austen writes brilliantly about courtship and love, but always in a way that she is leavened with a healthy dose of realism. Hers are not novels in which the heroine falls in love at first sight with a handsome stranger who becomes an ideal husband” (Byrne 2013: 188).

It is mostly the novels written while Austen was at the top of her creative powers that are generally in the focus of literary historians and at the same time most widely read. These six novels have made her immortal and they rank among the greatest achievements in the history of British literature. The most popular and most highly valued has undeniably always been *Pride and Prejudice*. However, Austen is not just *Pride and Prejudice*.

II. Austen and society

The more time has passed since the first publication of her novels, the more the opinions on Austen as a writer seem to vary. The first point to concentrate on is that of her relation to the period she lived in. In literature, this was the period of Romanticism (1780-1832) and many critics see her as "the most significant novelist of the Romantic period" (Poplawski 2012: 377). But how much did she really have in common with the period? Poplawski further states: "Jane Austen bears a complicated relationship with the literature of time. In many ways her literary models and enthusiasms were the writers of the 18th century, with whom she has much in common, rather than the new forms of Romanticism, with its privileging of emotionalism, freedom from restraint and wild and solitary landscapes" (Poplawski 2012: 377). The above quoted statement can be applied to all of Austen's novels including the last completed one, *Persuasion* (1818), the novel published posthumously with *Northanger Abbey*. These two novels represent two different poles of Austen's literary career as the latter one was written in her early youth and the former one is Austen's last completed piece. *Northanger Abbey* is a youthful and playful parody on then hugely popular Gothic novels. Its heroine, Catherine Morland, is young, naive, trusting and inexperienced and the tone of the novel fully corresponds with her character. On the other hand, *Persuasion* can be defined just as the opposite. According to some critics it is Austen's most mature novel, "more firmly located in the ideas and debates of the time" (Poplawski 2012: 377). As her writing 'career' progressed, Austen's works were "[l]ess obviously intended to ridicule and more concerned with acute depiction of character and interaction" (Carter & McRae 2001: 237), the statement that best illustrates the difference between the 'juvenile' *Northanger Abbey* and 'mature' *Persuasion*. The choice of the title is quite ambiguous and the noun acquires many different meanings throughout this relatively short novel. The versatility with which Austen used it is remarkable. Basically, the central heroine of the novel, Anne Elliot, falls victim to persuasion by different people around her. However, in one situation shortly before the end of the novel the word "becomes a synonym for misunderstanding" (Mullan 2012: 223). This misunderstanding stems from Wentworth's 'persuasion' that Anne "is becoming attached to

Mr. Elliot" (Mullan 2012: 223). This is the moment when Wentworth starts to realize that he loves Anne and he begins to be jealous.

Not only is this novel said to be the most mature novel, it is also the most serious one. "[F]or devotees [it is] her most touching and interesting novel" (Alexander 2007: 251). The plot is set in the period of temporary peace of 1814-15 after Napoleon's expulsion to the island of Elba and before his return and last attempt to win back his former power. However, these facts were left out because Austen only used these events as the framework for her own preoccupations. As Kelly states in her recent publication, "*Persuasion*, set at a turning point in history ... is a novel about instability, about things being overturned, about loss, destruction and change" (Kelly 2016: 266).

For Austen, there are other more important issues the novel is based on, the issues she had first-hand experience of. Similarly to her other novels we encounter the issues of marriage, family, friendship or class system and society in general. Austen also touched the issue which has always played a very important role in how people are perceived by others – the importance of physical appearance in judging other people's character. But it is also a novel about gender differences, not very commonly reflected in those times (to be looked at in more detail later). It is a novel about how the past is haunting the characters in the most recent present. All these topics are easy to be identified and all of them have one unifying point in the character of Anne Elliot.

III. Heroine – definition and reality in fiction

When looking back at Austen's previous novels, it is evident that Anne is different from any other of her heroines. One trait she lacks when compared to them is their vivacity, taste for life. Considering the fact that *Persuasion* is Austen's last and shortest novel one has to keep in mind that when writing it, Austen was already very ill and her gloom seems to have been transferred to the novel and defined the character of the central heroine. When we have a closer look at dictionary definitions of the nouns hero/heroine, it is evident that the definitions are quite varied, nevertheless, it can be said that all Austen's heroines meet the standards implied by the

noun “hero/heroine”¹ regardless of what the primary definition in a particular dictionary is. From the definitions presented in the footnote it is evident that there are quite recent examples (2002) when the two synonymous nouns are defined in reversed order, i.e. contrary to the male form, the female form of the noun is primarily perceived as that of a central character of a literary piece and the heroic deeds are offered just as the second variety of the meaning. However, most of Austen’s heroines find themselves in a situation brought upon them by life in which they show courage, endurance and fortitude typical for heroic deeds. Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) bravely opposes her mother’s pressure to marry the most ridiculous man among their acquaintance, or Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s attack. Lady Catherine is actually a minor character but her impact is strong considering her argument with Elizabeth shortly before the end of the novel. It emphasizes her defining qualities. “Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the daughter of an earl, but her arrogant and pretentious stupidity evokes our measured disdain” (Wright 1962: 28). Fanny Price (*Mansfield Park*) has to fight even harder for her final happiness.

In this respect, Anne Elliot is untypical. At the beginning of the novel we learn about the events that took place long before it opens. As Wright has it “... although Overpersuasion is, in one aspect, the theme of *Persuasion*, the story is also one of the conflict between parental authority (prudence) on the one hand, and the sanguine hopes for love, on the other” (Wright 1962: 44). Anne had yielded to “overpersuasion” and authority of her father. She had been unable to

¹1. A hero is 1.1 the main male character in a book, play, film, etc. who is usually admired or respected for his good qualities; 1.2 someone who has done something brave, new, or good, and who is therefore greatly admired by a lot of people; A heroine is 1. the main female character in a book, play, film, etc. who is usually admired or respected for his good qualities; 2. A woman who has done something brave, new, or good and who is therefore greatly admired by a lot of people (*Collins Cobuild*, 1987); hero – A hero is **1.** someone who has done something brave, for example saving a person’s life or risking their own life.... **2.** the main male character of a book, film, or play, who usually has good qualities; heroine. A heroine is **1** the main female character in a book, film, or play, who usually has good qualities. **2** a woman who is admired for doing something brave or good. (*Macmillan*, Oxford, 2002).

resist the pressure from her prejudiced and class conscious family and Lady Russell. In this sense Anne is far from being a heroine. However, typically for Austen such judgement is not that straightforward and easy to apply. In one moment of the novel Anne, in an attempt to make her own suffering more bearable, to persuade herself about having done the right thing, defends before herself her own decision: "Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up. The belief of being prudent and self-denying, principally for his advantage, was her chief consolation under the misery of a parting, a final parting" (Austen 1994: 26). She had bravely faced his accusations, his "feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment" (Austen 1994: 26). In other words, she showed quite a good deal of heroism by both yielding to persuasion and breaking the engagement, and facing Wentworth's anger with no attempt at self-defence. As the novel progresses and Anne and Wentworth find themselves in the same company again, Anne is given a new chance to win him back. This, however, is not that easy to achieve. She is too timid to actively try to renew their acquaintance and she feels guilty. Moreover, Wentworth acts indifferent towards her and he seems to be attracted to young Musgrove girls. It takes some time for Anne to start regaining at least some confidence and determination to try to win him back, thus gradually turning into a real heroine when she first opposes her father. The conflict with her father over the familial duty of visiting their aristocratic relative and Anne's refusal to cancel the visit of her old school friend, a Mrs. Smith, can be marked as a definitive turning point in her life. By giving Mrs. Smith this ordinary surname, Austen accomplished two things – she emphasised her lower class affiliation than that of the Elliots while at the same time she pointed out Sir Walter's feeling of superiority:

A widow Mrs. Smith, lodging in Westgate Buildings! A poor widow, barely able to live, between thirty and forty; 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, and to be preferred by her to her own family connexions among the nobility of England and Ireland! Mrs. Smith! Such a name! (Austen 1994: 156)

Anne not only firmly stands against her father, in this crucial moment she starts to demonstrate her newly acquired confidence.

IV. Decline of old aristocracy

"As for the aristocracy, Jane Austen hardly touches on it; but when she does, its members are usually satirized" (Wright 1962: 28). Thus, another (after Lady Catherine) representative of aristocracy, mercilessly satirized, is Sir Walter Elliot. The novel's opening first introduces Sir Walter and his family. It is not before his middle daughter Anne, the novel's central character, appears on the scene when we go some eight years back in retrospect to learn about her unlucky fate and the roots of her misery, the events which were to be of crucial importance for the plot of the novel. In that time "... Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl but her bloom had vanished early; ... now ... she was faded and thin" (Austen 1994: 4). She "was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing: indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (Austen (1994: 26). That was the first act of persuasion with all its consequences applied in Anne's life.

Anne comes from an aristocratic family and of this privilege her father and both her sisters are considerably proud. Their pride also comprises social prejudice and snobbery which rule their general behaviour and attitude to people who are not their equals. These qualities had been the reasons of their decided rejection of Frederick Wentworth as Anne's suitor: "[Sir Walter] thought it a very degrading alliance" (Austen 1994: 24). However, Anne would have been able to stand up against her family's resentment be it not for the same kind of attitude on the part of Lady Russell, her god-mother and a family friend:

Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind ... to involve herself in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, ... and no connections to secure even his farther rise in that profession ... to be snatched off by a stranger without alliance or fortune, or rather sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependence. (Austen 1994: 25).

Back then Wentworth “had no fortune” (Austen 1994: 25) or social position, or “connections”. Not only would he be unable to provide for a family but for both her father and Lady Russell this marriage would have meant Anne’s fall in social hierarchy which was inadmissible as it would have affected the entire family. When we encounter Anne she is a melancholic woman. The author pays considerable attention to Anne’s mental suffering, it is important for Austen to let readers understand her misery.

Persuasion is arguably the Austen novel that most shares its heroine’s experiences and feelings, yet in its opening chapters she only slowly becomes present to us. We come to her via her family’s vanities and follies – ‘she was only Anne.’ She speaks for the first time in the third chapter. (Mullan 2013: 192-3)

However, not even her compassion would prevent Austen from being ironic when commenting on the circumstances under which this relationship came to existence and an end: “A few months had seen the beginning and the end of their acquaintance; but not with a few months ended Anne’s share of suffering from it” (Austen 1994: 26) or from reflecting on Anne’s misery as that of a romantic heroine: “Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect” (Austen 1994: 26). Anne’s position in the family is anything but enviable. Her older sister Elizabeth is a true daughter of her father in all their snobbery and conceit. The youngest daughter, Mary is also the embodiment of the Elliot feeling of superiority, ‘the Elliot pride’.

Sir Walter Elliot, Anne’s father, the man in whom “[v]anity was the beginning and the end of [his] character; vanity of person and of situation ... and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts [of beauty and baronetcy], was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion” (Austen 1994: 2), is undoubtedly one of the greatest paradoxes of the novel. It is he and his vanity that jeopardize the family’s good reputation and privileged position. Due to Sir Walter’s uncontrolled spending the family find themselves in this peculiar situation. The situation is grim, however, the words like “debts” and

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“retrench” (economize) are unacceptable for the Elliots. The idea of having to let the family seat is both humiliating and attractive. Anne’s suggestion of economizing while at the same time remaining at home is rejected as the idea of moving to Bath is definitely much more appealing. In her feeble attempt to save the situation Elizabeth

had finally proposed these two branches of economy, to cut off some unnecessary charities, and to refrain from new-furnishing the drawing-room; to which expedients she afterwards added the happy thought of taking no present down to Anne, as had been the usual yearly custom. (Austen 1994: 8)

Austen’s mastery of sarcasm shows to the full. Not only do Elizabeth’s words sound ridiculous within the context of the situation, they define her character with economy of words. Even in their economic misery the Elliots are unwilling to acknowledge their downfall or their own responsibility for the situation. No one must know the real reason of their departure as this would mean the loss of prestige. No other place but Bath is suitable for their temporary retreat as no other location would be dignified enough for a baronet and his family.

IV.1 Old aristocracy in the changing world

The Elliots’ present situation is not a coincidence. There have always been voices which claim that Austen just ‘moved within’ the circles she was most familiar with and wrote about the events she herself witnessed or experienced and did not care much about what was going on around her in a broader sense. Nothing could be further from the truth, because “[w]hat Jane Austen did – and no author before her had attempted it so successfully – was to apply the techniques of the novel to the acute observation of society in microcosm...” (Carter & McRae 2001: 236) of which *Persuasion* is the best evidence. None of Austen’s former novels was so firmly grounded in the social and political reality of the time. None of them reflected the social and political changes so strikingly as this particular novel.

Jane Austen, though without any vehement renunciations, looks at man in the world and is deeply troubled by what she sees: a coarse and inadequate world with coarse and inadequate standards – but she can neither abandon the world nor wholly reject its standards; she sees men and women as silly but kind, attractive yet wicked, vain and vexing; laughable, pretentious, deluded, stupid; but deeply human, often intelligent, and – above all – capable of love. She is no narrow expositor of an outworn morality, no mere angry satirist. (Wright 1962: 27)

As has already been mentioned, eight years have passed since Anne and Wentworth's broken engagement. In human life, it is a relatively short time. From the point of view of social history, it is not long either. But despite this, the changes the society of England had undergone within those eight years are striking. Austen saw the decline of the old aristocracy as well as the rise of a new class of people known as 'new money'. She recognized the difference between those who lived on property handed down from generation to generation which could not and would not multiply as there was no one to make it grow – none of them would consider the possibility of earning money by work. The necessity to work was for them as humiliating as having to admit that they were broke. Austen first touched this issue in *Pride and Prejudice*. Here the Bingley sisters and Lady Catherine de Bourgh are the typical examples of social prejudice when objecting to (the latter) or even ridiculing (the former) the Bennets' working relatives. That the social changes were occurring fast is more evident particularly in *Persuasion*. Sir Walter, two of his daughters, but also Lady Russell represent the old world. It is hard for them to accept the changing world or to adapt to it. They are still presented as members of the privileged class and they seem to be acting under the false impression that they are generally highly respected and held in high esteem. However, the truth is that they are becoming outsiders and the respect they are being paid is quite forced. Their haughty behaviour and self-centredness evoke no sympathy. For Sir Walter the confrontation with the reality of the changing world comes through Admiral Croft. He is the one representing both the then highly esteemed royal navy and the above

mentioned new money, the class of the newly rich who amassed their wealth through work. Moreover, besides being successful and rich, Admiral Croft is also a sensible and decent man. He can be perceived as a sort of a challenge to Sir Walter but in this respect Sir Walter seems to be immune to any chance of reform. In his pride, conceit and self-centredness Sir Elliot at first dismisses the idea of handing his ancient family seat over to a 'nobody', someone whose property is not based on tradition but was gained through work. Sir Walter's initial opposition against letting Kellynch Hall to Admiral Croft is another example of Austen's art of sarcasm applied to this particular character. Sir Walter's reluctance to hand his home over to a "prematurely aged Admiral" demonstrates his prejudice against the Admiral's unsuitable origin as well as his typical way of judging people just according to their physical appearance – Sir Walter "considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy..." (Austen 1994: 2). Of himself Sir Walter thinks that "he's immune to the processes of time" (Kelly 2016: 284). It is evident that the "immunity to the processes of time" has at least two meanings – Sir Walter thinks himself to be immune to ageing while he also resists any attempts at making him understand the changing world. The changes going on in the society are beyond the scope of his interest. Ironically, the cultivated and large-minded Admiral soon wins Sir Walter's sympathy but it is the Admiral who keeps the distance. There is a parallel between the Admiral's attitude to Sir Walter and that of Elizabeth Bennet to Mr. Darcy at the beginning of their acquaintance marked by the prejudice of lower class members against aristocracy. However, the Admiral's reserved attitude towards Sir Walter is not based only on his prejudice against aristocracy. He is astonished by the Elliots' adhering so strongly to the outdated rules of hierarchy either within the family or in broader society, by their "clinging to outdated loyalties" (Kelly 2016: 184). The Admiral may be of 'low origin' and thus inferior to the Elliots but the circumstances make Sir Walter accept his offer and subsequently the Admiral and his wife as his equals.

The difference between Anne and the rest of her family shows also in their understanding of the importance and role of aristocracy in the society. Sir Walter and Anne's sisters care only about their own interests, for them the most important thing is their privileged social standing while Anne seems to be the only one who feels the

responsibility and duties this privilege implies. As in *Pride and Prejudice*, in *Persuasion* also, aristocracy is in the focus of the author's criticism but this time she is not as lenient as she was in *Pride and Prejudice*. Sir Walter and Elizabeth are two static characters – they are unable to change and they do not undergo any remarkable development unless we consider their change of attitude towards Captain Wentworth. At the beginning of their renewed encounter Wentworth is not deemed worth their slightest attention, "...it grieved Anne to observe that Elizabeth would not know him ... she had the pain of seeing her sister turn away with unaltered coldness" (Austen 1994: 175), while before the end of the novel they are willing (forced by the circumstances) at least "to give him that simple acknowledgement of acquaintance, and she was just in time by a side glance to see a slight courtsey from Elizabeth herself" (Austen 1994: 180). Wentworth will never be their equal socially but his merits and property made him superior long ago.

In the portrayal of Captain Wentworth, we see Jane Austen's most deserving self-made hero. He is indeed her only truly romantic hero. He has risen in society not through inheritance but by hard work, courage and enterprise. If Sir Walter represents 'old money' and the decaying gentry, Wentworth is the embodiment of the new, the confident and the professional. (Byrne 2013: 250)

This fact takes us back to Anne's broken relationship with the Captain. After eight years that have passed from the separation she finds out that her feelings for the young man are as strong as they had been before and is taken aback by their intensity. Moreover, now she is a mature adult woman who knows that she should not have listened to her family and should have fought more for her love.

V. Gender issues

The passages introducing Captain Wentworth are intertwined with another issue Austen tackles in this novel – the traditional division of male and female roles. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering what has been mentioned so far, this topic takes a large part of the novel. The issue is first introduced through the conflict

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between the Musgroves. When Mary (Anne's youngest sister) and Charles' son gets injured before the planned dinner with Captain Wentworth, her husband sees no reason to stay with the boy and thus give up the dinner arguing that the kid is out of the immediate danger but more importantly that it is a woman's task to look after children. In this scene Mary demonstrates her dominant features – snobbery, pride and selfishness. For her, social prestige is the most important thing. But there is more to this scene than Mary's remonstrance – she tries to rebel (though perhaps unconsciously) against the traditional understanding of women's and men's roles. The scene also helps to emphasise bipolarity of character of both sisters – there is definitely much truth in Mary's words "So here he is to go away and enjoy himself, and because I am the poor mother, I am not to be allowed to stir..." (Austen 1994: 54), while it is evident that all Mary's objections stem from her selfishness. On the other hand, Mary's response to the situation makes Anne's loving, caring and competent nature more prominent. She willingly takes over the care of the injured boy, however, she is driven by two contradictory motives. She has always been self-sacrificing but, coming back to the above mentioned bipolarity, this way she can avoid (postpone) meeting Captain Wentworth. Another example of traditional male-female conflict in the novel, a bit more serious one, arises when the assembled company witnesses the argument with his sister in which Captain Wentworth voices his opposition against having women on board a ship, a view in which he is unbending: "I hate to hear of women on board, or to see them on board; and no ship under my command shall ever convey a family of ladies anywhere, if I can help it" (Austen 1994: 67). To "Captain Wentworth's old fashioned belief" (Byrne 2013: 100) his sister responds: "Oh! Frederick! But I cannot believe it of you ... I hate to hear you talking so like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days" (Austen 1994: 67-8). It is possible that Wentworth's opinion on women, at least in the early stages of the novel, has been influenced by his old disappointment and confusion at being confronted with his past experience and thrown back into the company of the woman who was the immediate cause of this disappointment.

However, the most striking example of the conflict between men and women and their social roles is the one that arises shortly before

the end of the novel. This relatively long passage proves to be crucial for Anne's future and deserves a proper look into. Anne is talking to Captain Harville, Wentworth's fellow sailor and friend, thus confronting their conflicting views of their respective roles and attitudes. This is, perhaps, the clearest example of Austen's progressive view of the relationship between men and women, of the inequality of their position in the society and the stereotypes which rule their mutual relationships. Through Anne, the author tries to defend women:

We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. (Austen 1994: 233)

to which Captain Harville replies:

I will not allow it to be more man's nature than woman's to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved. I believe the reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings. (Austen 1994: 234)

In her defence of women Austen has Anne say: "... if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Austen 1994: 235) and continue "... All the privilege I claim for my own sex ... is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (Austen 1994: 237). To justify the statement about this dialogue's being crucial for Anne's future life it has to be stressed that even though Anne is talking to Captain Harville, she is actually addressing Captain Wentworth who is also present. As if she were trying to defend herself, to explain her behaviour and to apologize. Alexander claims

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that "At the climax, Anne takes her opportunity to make it clear to Wentworth – indirectly but persuasively – that she loves him still" (Alexander 2007: 252). The same might be applied to the dispute between Wentworth and his sister quoted earlier. He was talking to his sister but the words he used when speaking of his ambition to marry sounded as if they had been addressed to Anne: "'Yes, here I am Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish match. Anybody between fifteen and thirty may have me for asking.' ... 'A strong mind, with sweetness of manner', made the first and the last of the description" (Austen 1994: 60). These moments help us learn more about Captain Wentworth and what is going on in his mind,

we briefly penetrate directly into Captain Wentworth's thoughts for the only time in the novel, in order to be told something about him that is entirely untrue ... He tells himself that Anne's power over him is 'gone forever' because he would like to believe it to be true. (Mullan 2013: 193)

Persuasion is not the first novel in which Austen touched the topic of gender issues. Here we find resemblance with the theme Austen had touched earlier, in *Emma*. A serious conflict arose between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Similarly to the above mentioned dispute between Anne and Captain Harville, this is also a clash of two worlds, two opposite views and different ways of perceiving these worlds. However, as is always the thing with Austen, it is not easy to decide who is right. By trying to 'elevate' her friend of dubious origin, Emma wants to break the social barriers thus representing [Austen's] "willingness to force the landed gentry together with other classes without making broad comedy of it [which] is ... enormously innovative. So is her willingness to include in her novels marriages that cross class barriers" (Kelly 2016: 239-40), while at the same time to fight off boredom. Mr. Knightley, on the other hand, holds firm class views and prejudice inherent to him as a born gentleman. Moreover, he has his suspicions as far as sincerity of Emma's motives is concerned. The conflict between Emma and Mr. Knightley is much more serious than that between Anne and Harville but their meaning, even from today's point of view is equally important. The two females could not be more different as far as their character is concerned which is also emphasised by the

nature of the disputes. In accord with her amiable character, Anne, “the most mature of Jane’s heroines” (Kelly 2016: 290) is mild and conciliatory in her attempt to defend her own sex against male prejudice which makes her also “the most modern” (Kelly 2016: 290). On the other hand, more independent and self-confident, Emma is much more adamant and uncompromising in her attitude: “it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her” (Austen 1994: 47). The conflict with Mr. Knightley is serious because both of them, though largely driven by their different kinds of prejudice, are quite right in their conflicting views. To Mr. Knightley

he [Mr. Martin] is not her [Harriet’s] equal indeed, for he is as much her superior in sense as in situation. ... What are Harriet Smith’s claims, either of birth, nature or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom. ... She is not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information. ... My only scruple in advising the match was on his account, as being beneath his deserts, and a bad connection for him. (Austen 1994: 48)

Degradation is one expression that Austen uses in both *Emma* and *Persuasion* in connection with the improper matches of her heroines though the two women concerned find themselves in opposite situations. In *Persuasion*, it would have been a degradation for aristocratic Anne Elliot to marry the Nobody, i.e. Mr. Wentworth. When in the end they do marry, the marriage with “...Wentworth represents for Anne: separation from what she knows, from the weight of her own history. When she chooses Wentworth, she rejects the title and the big house, family and tradition – all the things that novel heroines have wanted since the novel began” (Kelly 2016: 287). On the other hand Emma defends her friend’s, the Nobody’s right, the opposite way: “Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly her inferior as to rank in society. – The sphere in which she moves is much above his. – It would be a degradation” (Austen 1994: 48). There is striking difference between the two statements – in Anne Elliot’s case the arguments of her family were justified from the

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point of view of class issues while in Harriet's case it is just Emma's presumptions utterly unjustified. Very rightly then Mr. Knightley cries out in astonishment: "A degradation to illegitimacy and ignorance, to be married to a respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer!" (Austen 1994: 49) There is considerable part of truth even in what Emma says in defence of Harriet's rejecting Mr. Martin as she makes this statement: "I am very much mistaken if your sex in general would not think such beauty, and such temper, the highest claims a woman could possess" (Austen 1994: 50). Mr. Knightley may strike us today as a prejudiced snob which he undoubtedly was but there is much truth in his words which prove his knowing the world and the society he lived in when he claims:

Men of sense, whatever you may chuse to say, do not want silly wives. Men of family would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity – and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed. (Austen 1994: 50)

As always in Austen's novels, there is more to Mr. Knightley's defence of men than mere snobbery. He is trying to defend Mr. Martin's interests and protect Harriet from what he sees as Emma's folly. The example taken from *Emma*, the novel which is so different from *Persuasion*, has been used to emphasise the author's profound understanding of the society she lived in with all its dominant features and aspects with which one was constantly confronted both in real life and in literature.

VI. The Smiths of England

It cannot be a coincidence that the family name of Smith appears in both novels under very similar circumstances. This is the point which takes us back to what has been touched in relation to Anne and her father. Both novels are set within a limited circle of landed aristocracy and gentry. In both novels the family name of Smith appears, representing Miss Harriet Smith in *Emma* and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*. Harriet Smith's role in *Emma* has already been dealt with. In *Persuasion*, Mrs. Smith is quite a marginal but important character. She is the target of Sir Walter's prejudice and arrogance. Anne's old

school friend finds herself in troubles due to the risky investments of her husband and the unwillingness of some people to help her. However, Mrs. Smith is also burdened with prejudice stemming from her middle-class origin and claims that she had never cared for the company of Mrs. Elliot (Anne's cousin's late wife) as she came from the wrong class, "[h]er father was a grazier, her grandfather had been a butcher" (Austen 1994: 201) and lacked appropriate upbringing – ironically, an opinion shared with the rest of the Elliot family for whom Mr. Elliot's marriage with "a rich woman of inferior birth" (Austen 1994: 6) had been 'resented' by Sir Walter. The only information about late Mrs. Elliot Anne seems to have is also burdened with prejudice as she asks Mrs. Smith: "But was not she a very low woman?" (Austen 1994: 201)

Conclusion

In the end, as is generally known, Anne leaves her own environment to descend in social hierarchy so that she can be with the man she has loved for so long. At this point Austen is not preoccupied with the ruling class issues or any kind of prejudice.

One reason why Captain Wentworth is now acceptable is that he has fulfilled every promise which his optimistic temperament declared nine years before. Anne's judgement is now mature and firmer than it was when she was a girl of nineteen; she could now more reasoningly disagree with Lady Russell. (Wright 1962: 168)

The entire novel and its ending emphasize the way "... [Austen] applies the microscope to human character and motivation" (Carter & McRae 2001: 236) which she does "with no great didactic, moral, or satiric purpose, but with a gentle irony and perspicacity which make her novels unique as representations of universal patterns of behavior and as documentation of an aspect of the provincial society of her time" (Carter & McRae 2001: 236-7). Of this society with all its dominant features and aspects with which one was constantly confronted both in real life and in literature Austen showed profound understanding.

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