The Politics of Social Mobility in Austen's Emma and Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the politics of social mobility in Jane Austen through an analysis of her two last published novels, Emma and Persuasion. The thesis uses an analysis of discourses on spatial and temporal mobility to argue against Marilyn Butler's and Alistair Duckworth's seminal interpretations of Austen's conservative views on the landed gentry and to suggest instead that Austen puts forward progressive narratives in her novels. It emphasizes, in other words, that it is not rank, but the individual's moral values that differentiate the characters. Issues of moral authority and the importance of community complement the study, highlighting Austen's proposed new model for society, in which the individual's inner worth and not hierarchy is the predominant value.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my sister, for supporting me in this endeavour from the very beginning and for their unconditional love and encouragement during difficult times.

I also dedicate this thesis to my fiancé, simply for being there when I needed him the most and for always pushing me to better myself.

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Introduction

When the name of Jane Austen is brought up, it usually conjures up a world of elegance, of old-fashioned manners, of romance and love, and obviously of Colin Firth emerging from a pond in the BBC adaptation of Pride of Prejudice. For many, Austen's novels are quintessential fairy tales made into novels: the heroine always finds true love despite the obstacles placed in the way of her marital happiness. For this reason, the stature of Austen's novels is often diminished, sometimes even by Austen herself who compared her scale to a "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory"[1] but the idea of smallness has been repeated by others, not least of which is Tennyson:

> I am reported to have said that Jane Austen was equal to Shakespeare. What I really said was that, in the narrow sphere of life which she delineated, she pictured her characters as truthfully as Shakespeare. But Austen is to Shakespeare as asteroid to sun. Miss Austen's novels are perfect works on small scale—beautiful bits of stippling.[2]

While the comparison to Shakespeare is flattering, the repetition of littleness greatly diminishes the appraisal of her skills. Moreover, the romantic side of her works overshadows the rest and lessens the value of the entire work. For some readers, especially Janeites, Austen's novels are the epitome of a world that has long ago passed. Hardships, like prospects of eviction or the dreaded spinster state, are obliterated from the nostalgic reviewing of the era. Even Winston Churchill commented on the nostalgia inherent in reading Pride and Prejudice: "What calm lives they had, those people! No

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[1] Letter to James Edward Austen-Leigh 16 December 1816, *Jane Austen's Letters To Her Sister Cassandra And Others*, ed. R.W.Chapman, (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1932), 468–9.
[2] B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2 *1870-1940*, (New York: Routledge, 1987), 137

worries about the French Revolution or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars. Only manners controlling natural passion as far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances".[3] While it is true that there is no direct mention of the French Revolution, "calm lives" hardly describes Lizzie and Jane's existence throughout the novel. Yet, what remains is the sense of nostalgia, of a care-free existence, and the so-called limited range of her writing, coupled with the predominance of romance, has caused many to relegate Austen to a "chick lit" author.

However, this popular image is not entirely representative of the criticism on Austen. Many critics have recognized Austen's contribution to the canon, and to the novel as a genre: her use of the free indirect speech is among the greatest innovations for the genre.[4] Others, like D. W. Harding, have commented on the deceitful tone of the novels and how their elegance and good manners are just a veil hiding the reality that Austen is incredibly mean to her characters and to society as a whole.[5] Marilyn Butler analyzed Austen's novels in relation to the political world and was the first critic to look at Austen not as an individual apart from society but as an individual engaged with society.[6] Her representation of Austen as an Anti-Jacobin was, at the time of the publication, ground-breaking and greatly influenced later Austen criticism. From then on, Butler allowed other critics to explore other possible fields outside of the narrow and limited sphere Austen was kept in. Alistair Duckworth[7] on his side scrutinizes the

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[3] Quoted in Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 229.
[4] Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, (Oxford: Blackwell), 1972, 124-134 and Anthony Mandel, "Language", *Jane Austen In Context*, ed. Janet Todd, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 2005, 23–32.
[5] D.W. Harding, *Regulated Hatred*, ed. Monica Lawlor, (London, Athlone P, 1998).
[6] Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, (London, Oxford UP, 1975).
[7] Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1994).

importance of the estate both as a physical structure and as inherited culture in Austen's rhetoric and argues that it represents her conservatism, as the estate, although endangered, is always restored and improved with the new tenants.[8] Duckworth's interpretation together with Butler's argument are considered by some as "essentially indestructible",[9] although the conservative ideology has been contested and lost some ground as more recent critics offer new perspectives on the subject.

Many critics, however, continue to emphasize Austen's lack of historicity and the limited aspect of her courtship plots. Much like Churchill, Raymond Williams, in The Country and the City, comments on the absence of the historical events when he notes that "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time".[10] As many have argued before, Williams reiterates that she omits to reference historical particulars. Nevertheless, his affirmation is followed by an argument on the various currents of history to the conclusion that the issue is much more complicated than it seems. It is true that Austen does not include history—as it is described in history books—in her plots and no one can deny that the Georgian era is marked by many historically decisive events that could have been integrated into her plots, including the Industrial Revolution, the abolition of slavery, Luddite risings in the North, and the Napoleonic wars and their inherent Continental System.

I want to suggest, however, that Austen chose to incorporate history as a subtext: it is through the consequences of these events and the subsequent modifications to the structure of the social fabric that history is included in her novels. It might seem as if she

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[8] Although this is not the case in Persuasion as it is abandoned by both Sir Walter Elliot and Anne.
[9] David Monaghan, *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, (London: Macmillan, 1981), 4.
[10] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (New York: Oxford, 1973), 113.

disregards the historical context she is living in, yet a simple mention of the city of Bristol in Emma associates Mrs. Elton's family with the slave trade: "Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol—merchant, of course, he must be called; but, as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also" (172). This allusion signifies that she was engaged with contemporary events and social changes, as it would have been understood by her contemporaries as a reference to the slave trade without the need for an explanation. The historical context Williams and others are looking for, in other words, is not explicit, but instead embedded in her narrative. The novel as a genre is perfect for this technique as its realism facilitates the incorporation of everyday events without emphasizing their existence. Her novels thus reproduce the daily reality lived by many as they express the instability of the Georgian era.

Williams brings up another critique on the subject of the limited spectrum of society Austen depicts: he claims that she focuses on the landed gentry and completely overlooks the working classes, except for a few mentions here and there. Although she does not cover all the ranks of society, in terms of social structure and organization, it is the landed gentry which is the most interesting stratum of the Georgian society to observe and analyze because it is within the landed gentry that the anxiety about rank, class, and money is more obvious. I use in this thesis Thomas Keymer's definition of rank and class, which are delineated as follows: "Where 'class' would be measured in terms above all productivity and income, locating individuals in socio-economic positions attained through material success, 'rank' placed primary emphasis on lineage, implying that the

social status was more or less inalienably conferred by birth and descent".[11] The term social status is used as a system which includes both rank and class in determining the social relevance of an individual. The tensions and the resistance to change indicate that they are caught in the maelstrom of social mobility: because they are trapped between the polar opposites of the aristocracy and the poor, the landed gentry witnesses those rising and falling in power and have to define their own place in this changing social structure. For that reason, an analysis of the landed gentry's preoccupation with rules of precedence, appropriate acquaintances and social markers can reveal the complex workings of rank, but also of the new social status. As noted by Duckworth, "Emma is 'about' the relatively new phenomenon of class consciousness as Emma's descriptions of the Martins... and Mrs. Elton's comments... would indicate".[12] This class consciousness and the negotiation of others' social status is the foundation of my argument on Austen's politics. It is my goal to examine the landed gentry's status consciousness in Emma and Persuasion with the intent to reveal Austen's stance on the issue in general.

In order to achieve this, I will use Duckworth and Butler to introduce debates surrounding the politics of social mobility within Austen's novels since they first established her political side and remain the authority on the subject of politics and Austen. As Peter Knox-Shaw points out: "the Anti-Jacobin Austen is still very much at large...While it is true that the most vivid and finely focused of recent accounts of Jane Austen have implicitly opposed the Butlerian thesis, they have done so without providing

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[11] Thomas Keymer, "Rank", *Jane Austen In Context*, ed. Janet Todd, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 2005, 387.
[12] Duckworth, *The Improvements of the Estate*, 152-53.

a rebuttal".[13] Duckworth also provides key analysis of the social world, although I strongly disagree with his conclusion about her politics. To better understand the social construction of the Regency, David Monaghan's Structure and Social Vision helps to highlight the inner workings of Regency society, as well as to understand the limits and constraints inherent in community life.

The structure of rank and class highlights the restrictions to social mobility. The tensions are reflected not only directly in the plot, but also in the narrative structure supporting it, as well as in the social structure underlying the characterization. In "Austen's Later Subjects", Emily Rohrbach discusses how Mansfield Park's narrative structure is shaped by spatiality and how Persuasion's structure is defined by temporality.[14] Emma, being published after Mansfield Park but before Persuasion, may be a balance of those two marked structures. In terms of spatiality, it is the opposite of Mansfield Park in the sense that as Fanny is mobile, Emma is completely immobile within Highbury. The novel also echoes Persuasion: while it deals extensively with history and temporality, there is no discourse on history in Emma, no sense that it is set at a precise time. Spatiality is used to discuss Emma as the discourse on spatial limitation is more significant than the absence of particular temporal markers in the narrative structure. Spatial fixity in Emma and temporal fixity in Persuasion express the tension inherent to social mobility.

Furthermore, these novels clearly exemplify the roles and duties of the landed gentry as well as the consequences of its absence. From being at the center of the

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[13] Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 4.
[14] Emily Rohrbach, "Austen's Later Subjects", *Studies in English Literature* 44, no. 4 (2004).

community, the landed gentry have to adjust to the rise of the middle class and witness their own slow decrease in power within the community. This is not without some tension, and some desire to maintain the status quo. Fixity within the community becomes a trope to express the unease within the community. Moreover, the novels contrast two types of social environment: the single community featured in Emma enables the reader to understand the importance of the landed gentry as the cement of the village while the plurality of societies in Persuasion offers a wider range of possible structures and leaders, as exposed through the various communities encountered in the course of its plot. In consequence, Emma and Persuasion provide a different perspective on the landed gentry, and on the social structure. This is crucial because it reveals a society in transition, but more importantly, it demonstrates Austen's bias towards more progressive social structures.

In order to prove this claim, the first chapter scrutinizes the constrained social world of Highbury in order to understand how important regulations are for the keeping the social fabric intact, yet how dangerous it can become. Highbury's social stability is quite fragile and threatens to tear the community apart at the first offense. Social mobility then becomes an integral part of the plot, as well as of the development of Emma's character. For instance, Emma has to give way to the Coles as they invade a social space that she deems hers when they reach the upper strata of Highbury society. However, Austen does not describe only Highbury's higher ranks, but also portrays the less privileged with the Bateses, who are a constant reminder that power and precedence are not ever-lasting and that most situations in life cannot grant protection against such a fall. Emma's attitude towards them, and others, proves that she is not yet fully aware of her

role of moral authority in the community. Moreover, the issue of finding one's place in this society is represented through the character of Harriet Smith. Emma manoeuvres Harriet into a social status that is not hers, blinded by her mysterious parentage. This thoughtless act pressures the social structure of Highbury. This, in turn, questions who represents moral authority in Highbury as it determines if the community is bound, or not, to collapse as a result of Emma's actions. Furthermore, the tensions about social mobility are transformed into a struggle between spatial mobility and fixity. Consequently, the social structure of Highbury reveals the anxiety of the landed gentry towards the rising middle-class.

The second chapter then analyzes temporal mobility in Persuasion in order to reveal the degree to which fixity or mobility characterizes the landed gentry, as temporal mobility expresses the ease or unease of the landed gentry with social mobility. This is also articulated with the constant reminder of rules of precedence and of the need to always structure relationships according to a hierarchy. Although in Persuasion, the issue is not so much about the landed gentry, highly associated with decay, but it is the lack of a proper agency to replace the landed gentry at the heart of the community that is the concern. The different types of communities found in England featured in the novel serve as a contrast to the rural model. The landed gentry, portrayed by the Elliots and the Musgroves, is nevertheless always in mind as it is always compared and contrasted with other types of communities, like the Navy, and such touristic centers as Bath and Lyme.

With Emma and Persuasion, Austen opposes two models of society: a complete small rural community, almost airtight, and a more urban environment, as some parts of Persuasion are set in Lyme Regis and Bath. The contrast between the country and the city

puts forward different class structures and models of community. It thus engages the narrative with diverse discourses on social mobility, on rank and class. An undeniable aspect of the anxiety related to class and status in Georgian society is the importance of tensions between rank and money, ancestry and nouveaux riches, landed gentry and trade in the courtship plot. Although Austen is widely regarded as a political conservative,[15] or even a reactionary, this thesis will show that there are elements in her work which suggest a more progressive political agenda than what is accounted for in the criticism.

[15] See Butler and Duckworth for a more detailed analysis of her conservative allegiance.

Emma: The Evils of Immobility

The issue of social mobility is translated in Emma through a discourse on order, regulations and spatial immobility. At first sight, Highbury is a bucolic idyll, removed from the bustle of London. Its reigning queen, Emma, is described as "handsome, clever, and rich, with a happy disposition" (7). However, it is important that Emma maintains her facade, that of clever and happy young woman: she has not the luxury of openly admiting her feelings to others since the village is such a tight community. Moreover, in order to sustain itself without discord or social strife, Highbury depends highly on regulation. Emma is adamant to maintain the resultant order of the community, since she fears losing her influence within it. She scorns those who could be a menace to her, as her initial attitude towards Jane Fairfax reveals. On the other hand, she does not mind elevating Harriet to the rank of her friend based on the premise that she is "the natural daughter of somebody" (23), despite Mr. Knightley's reccomendation of prudence on such subjects. Her behaviour, therefore, when compared to Mr. Knightley's, is disingenous and it threatens the social fabric in the long run.

If Highbury's social fabric could last for so long, it is because social life is highly regulated: there are no surprises, but no drama either. Because regulations maintain the social order, the community has become ill-equipped when facing social disruption. From a pastoral setting, the novel becomes a social laboratory: it explores the various reactions to disruption, from rejection to the embrace of change. Yet, the narrative proves that not all reactions are positive for the community. Even though she is part of the landed gentry, Emma cannot, on her own, protect and serve her community rightfully. The novel thus questions the supposed role of moral authority given to the landed gentry. This opens up

possibilities for other members of the community to step forward and lead: for instance, Mr. Elton desires to secure his influence by marrying Emma, and Frank Churchill transforms the regulated social order with games and balls, spreading chaos among the community. The limited social setting in Emma is a particular issue as Highbury, though at a reasonable distance from London, is a closed environment, centered on itself, impermeable to foreign influences. As mentionned in the introduction, space is a defining element of the narrative and thus reveals the tensions and the inner workings of the community. Immobility, both social and spatial, becomes a means to minimize the tensions among the community and to circumvent the social changes occuring in the rest of England. Yet, all those constraints and regulations imposed on and by the Highbury citizens cannot delay progress for much longer as Emma's behaviour becomes a ticking time-bomb. The social structure with the landed gentry at its head proves in Emma to be more disruptive than protective, as Emma gives preference to her desires instead of her duties, thus foreogoing primordial rules regulating her station.

1.1 Regulations and Rebels

The resistance to mobility is translated into an idealization of regulation and order in the community's social interactions. Only these two measures can assure the citizens of Highbury that the social fabric will not tear apart. As Oliver MacDonagh argues: "It need hardly be added that the people of Highbury themselves recognized and were content to live within the hierarchical arrangement of society".[16] To gain that security, they accept that the course of day follows a predetermined order. This unenthusiastic approach to life is illustrated by Emma who is easily content with her surroundings. She

[16] Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 133.

is comforted by her knowledge of her future, as nothing unexpected or unpleasant can alter her peaceful life, as demonstrated by this scene at Ford's:

> Emma went to the door for amusement.—Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage-horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (217)

This is in fact enough for Emma as she does not expect much more from Highbury anyway. Yet, intrinsically, Emma is searching for other amusements, as indicated by her patronage of Harriet and the ease with which Frank Churchill manipulates the heiress with prospects of games and balls. However, as the most important lady of Highbury, it may be part of Emma's prerogative to control and change the regulations to suit her will. She has the means to change the dull and repetitive country life, but is often impeded by her own father. For him, anything out of the ordinary—be it cake or outdoor adventures—is not wholesome and therefore, should be prohibited. Mr. Woodhouse, although with good intentions, puts a hold on these and thus to the possibilities to

revitalize Highbury. He is the primary advocate of immobility and regulation, as change can only deprive him of his comfort and of his peace of mind. Emma, out of respect for her father, yields as much as she can to his whims; yet she strives to find a balance which would accommodate all with a sort of feeble status quo.

This need for a controlled and permanent environment is further exemplified by the scene following Frank Churchill's revelation about Perry's intentions to buy a carriage. Perry's secret tergiversations on the carriage and the commotion that follows the disclosure of that news expose the inner workings of social markings in the village. The carriage does not, in this situation, embody the mere physical means of transportation, but it rather indicates a social marker that only a few could possess. It furthermore represents both social and physical mobility: physical mobility, through the carriage, becomes a representation of social mobility, as this carriage would elevate Mr. Perry among the community in a fashion impossible for Emma to deny. This scene also demonstrates that parts of the community—not just Emma—are uncomfortable with the idea of change within the social world. Perry is aware that such an improvement would affect the social status quo and that it must be dealt with prudently in order to not appear to be overstepping his bounds. As revealed by Miss Bates, "Mrs. Perry herself mentioned it to my mother, and the Coles knew of it as well as ourselves—but it was quite a secret, known to nobody else, and only thought of about three days" (324-25). This need for secrecy and the short period in which it is debated, validates the idea that the decision surely would upset the community. While great care is taken to avoid this, the event exposes a dissention among the community. Mr. Perry did not ask for the advice of either Mr. Woodhouse or Mr. Knightley, both of whom are regarded as authority figures, but

instead he addresses the "lower order". He turns to his peers, the Coles. Eventually, the plan is abandoned and Perry's economic and social status remains unchanged. This shocking news is much like the majority of Highbury's gossip: it is soon forgotten and replaced by some other gossip.

Although the Coles are considered peers of Mr. and Mrs. Perry, their place among the Highbury community is quite ambiguous. Their status is problematic because it is in the hybrid or coincident system of class and rank: it is neither above nor inferior to the Woodhouses. The Coles have no rank and are not an established family owning an estate, but their recent success in trade makes them on par with Hartfield in terms of money: "They... were, in fortune and style of living, second only to the family at Hartfield" (194). Their position, contrary to that of the Bateses or the Martins, is far from being straightforward and this blurred line is threatening for Emma, especially when she knows her superior status is indeed fragile. As mentioned by Marilyn Butler, "Emma's conception of herself as first lady is a kind of figment of the mind. Although hers is an old and wealthy family, the Woodhouses' money has nothing to do with Highbury: they own very little land there".[17] It is therefore justified that she tries to downplay the rising family in order to defend and maintain her own status.

To the contrary of Mr. and Mrs. Perry, the Coles do not hesitate to assert their new class and social position in Highbury. Their behaviour highlights Emma's snobbery, as pointed out by Alistair Duckworth:

> Social position must be informed by personal worth, and as Emma expresses her unwillingness to have anything to do with the Martins,

[17] Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, (London, Oxford UP, 1975), 272.

> whom she considers on one occasion 'another set of beings', she aligns herself with those other characters in Jane Austen's novels—Lady Catherine, General Tilney, Mrs. Ferrars, the Bertram sisters, and others—who wish to retain rank as privilege, money as an assertion of exclusiveness.[18]

However, contrary to Duckworth's assertion, Emma separates people only in terms of rank; money is not "an assertation of exclusiveness" and does not substitute for the privilege of a noble birth, of an estate or a title. For instance, the Westons, for some generations, have been working on their social status, which is now confirmed by the purchase of Randalls. However, the Coles have yet to obtain such a social marker, hence the lack of recognition of their now genteel status. Therefore, they remain for her "of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel" (194) no matter how rich they are. She does, however, grade them higher on the Highbury social scale than the Martins, but they are definitely lower than any landed proprietor of the area.

As a result, class does not supersede, or even equal, rank in Emma's social world. Money is thus seen as a lower scale than land, one which separates those without estate or titles. When confronted with the Coles, Emma does not restrain her snobbery, since they are not, according to her, on par with Highbury's best families. Duckworth suggests that "The snobbery, that is, belongs to the character and not to the author, whose concern in Emma is to heal through her art the social gaps described and to reconstitute a sense of community."[19] While I agree with the first part of the argument, the last part seems to be

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[18] Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1994), 151.
[19] Ibid, 151.

hard to reconcile with the novel. As much as Emma changes and understands her past mistakes, the separation with Harriet, or the mentions of the "small band of true friends" (453) at the marriage suggest a sort of isolation, a consolidation of the separation between ranks and between classes. Emma lacks what other novels like Pride and Prejudice have: a real sense of an extended community and integration of classes within the rank system as proven with Darcy's friendship with the Gardiners. Contrary to Darcy, Emma never openly recognizes the Coles as equals and this is illustrated by her first reaction to their possible invitations for a dinner, which highlights her displeasure with these "social rebels" who refuse to conform to a model based on rank only:

> Their love of society, and their new dining-room, prepared every body for their keeping dinner-company; and a few parties, chiefly among the single men, had already taken place. The regular and best families Emma could hardly suppose they would presume to invite—neither Donwell, nor Hartfield, nor Randalls. Nothing should tempt *her* to go, if they did; and she regretted that her father's known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish. The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them. This lesson, she very much feared, they would receive only from herself, she had little hope of Mr. Knightley, none of Mr. Weston. (194)

Emma feels that she needs to reinforce her status and impose social immobility. However, this only further alienates her from society, as to her surprise, she is not invited to the dinner, unlike to Mr. Weston and Mr. Knightley: "Her being left in solitary

grandeur, even supposing the omission to be intended as a compliment, was but poor comfort" (195). Being excluded from a party made chiefly of her own circle of friends is an insult to her as she is not given the opportunity to answer the invitation: her opinion is taken for granted. When the invitation is received, she still hesitates, out of snobbery towards the Coles, but also, as a form of regulation. She intends at first to teach them a lesson with her refusal: that they are not to invite above them. Fortunately, after being persuaded by the Westons of the respectability of the event, she accepts. Regarding the Highbury community, MacDonagh argues that "viewed in terms of actual persons, the members... formed a continuum rather than a series of sharply separated flocks".[20] Highbury society is in fact so small, that the same people form an uneven society, but one that keeps circulating. It is no surprise then that the Coles invite the same "higher society" as a party at Hartfield would. The change here is that the invitation does not come from social equals, but from what Emma considers below her.

As both Mr. Knightley and Mr. Weston understand the necessity of social mobility, we can deduce that some changes can be accepted by the community, and some like Perry's carriage, can cause a commotion. The balance between fixity and movement has to be struck and this issue seems to carry the novel from the first page to the last. Yet, the stability of the social order, however wished for, remains an unobtainable goal. As MacDonagh suggests, "This ideal arrangement is never matched exactly by the actual social order; or more correctly, a fixed social order exists only as an abstract notion, or model, to be employed as a point of reference perhaps, but never realized".[21]

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[20] MacDonagh, *Real and Imagined Worlds*, 134.
[21] Ibid, 135.

Nevertheless, the first sentence of the novel gives the impression of stability and immobility, like a still photograph, but rapidly the necessity to address change—embodied by Miss Taylor's marriage to Mr. Weston—acts as a catalyst and forces Emma to re-evaluate her life, her values and her capacity to adapt to new people and new situations. Emma's conservatism and need for social immobility are therefore not a positive force since the course of the novel clearly demonstrates that she is wrong.

Yet, not all changes are favourable as those who strongly oppose the village's stability disrupt this precious status quo and threaten the social fabric by their intervention. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are two such disruptors: the first for his control of information and by his impulsiveness and the latter by her refusal to integrate into society. Churchill seems to resist regulations, as he revitalizes Highbury's society with an expedition, games and balls. Highbury's rigid social environment needs Churchill's presence to stir up the residents from their inertia. Following Churchill's return to the small village, balls, which were non-existent, are talked of again, as well as expedition outside Highbury. The ensuing chaos reveals the true nature of Highbury's citizens; and by stirring the social life, these activities reveal to everyone the tensions within the community. The situation forces the community to interact in manners they avoided to preserve the superficial bon accord. For instance, when Mrs. Elton opens the ball instead of Emma, she is allowed to justify her pride and sense of self-importance as being the new leading woman. Towards these two social rebels, Emma cannot act properly: she falls for Churchill and considers Jane as an obnoxious outsider. The failure to address appropriately such disruptions as the Coles' invitation or Jane's need for

privacy reveals Emma's inadequacy as a moral authority, and thus as leader of the community.

1.2 The Leading Men

Moral authority also shapes the way in which rank and class are regarded within the community and Emma offers a number of reactions to this issue, including complete rejection of social mobility and the embrace of social change. Emma is clearly imperfect and is the character whose education, as portrayed in the course of the novel, exposes her faults. Her refusal to address properly the problematic Coles and her disdain towards Miss Bates are not model behaviour for the community and the fiasco at Box Hill is a sore lesson for her. Her rival, Jane Fairfax, although more accomplished than Emma, can hardly claim that title either, as she resists the social contract established among the community. She has to reject Highbury's social rules in order to remain an outsider: she removes herself from the communication channel, preferring to be on her own rather than to partake in social gatherings. Because of her situation, her secret engagement with Frank, Jane must keep parts of her life unknown to others for fear of compromising their union. While Emma is more socially active, but lacks perseverance in accomplishments, Jane struggles to fit in Highbury's society, even though she could be the center of attention due to her mastery of the pianoforte. Neither is complete enough to be authority figures.

The vicar of Highbury, Mr. Elton, holds a religious authority over Highbury as a result of his association with the church. However, this is not equated with moral authority. For instance, his conduct towards Harriet—both in his refusal of Emma's

matchmaking plan and his refusal to dance with her later at the ball at the Crown Inn—illustrates his resistance to social change.

> 'Never, madam,' cried he, affronted, in his turn: 'never, I assure you. *I* think seriously of Miss Smith!—Miss Smith is a very good sort of girl; and I should be happy to see her respectably settled. I wish her extremely well: and, no doubt, there are men who might not object to—Every body has their level: but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!' (125)

Here, he bases his decision on social status and not on Harriet's inner worth. His behaviour is unbefitting his duties as vicar. Mr. Elton should be a leading man, not advocating for the rank system. However, despite his obvious snobbery, he is not against some kind of social mobility as long as he can benefit from it: he does believe in his own social rising. He thus proposes to Emma, his hierarchical superior, despite his claim of looking for an equal alliance. As pointed out, Emma, being an heiress of thirty thousand pounds, is a little higher on the social scale than him; however her reaction to his proposal is unequivocal about their different and separate stations in life:

> She thought nothing of his attachment, and was insulted by his hopes. He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love... There had been no real affection either in his language or manners... He only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty

> thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten.
>
> But—that he should talk of encouragement, should consider her as aware of his views, accepting his attentions, meaning (in short), to marry him!—should suppose himself her equal in connexion or mind!—look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself shewing no presumption in addressing her!—It was most provoking. (128-29)

Mr. Elton's proposal and Emma's reaction to it reveal Mr. Elton's true nature and aspirations: he seeks merely to enrich himself through a financial transaction and to secure his social status among the community. His rejection by the heiress of thirty thousand pounds explains the sudden engagement to a young lady of ten thousand pounds.

His vulgarity is finally exposed to all in the choice of his wife, Augusta Hawkins. The short courtship—which was a question of days and not of weeks—reveals her inferior manners. This is illustrated by her constant comparison of Hartfield to Maple Grove and her patronage of Jane Fairfax, who is reluctant to accept her help and consideration. Mrs. Elton serves mainly as a foil to Emma's own actions and the narrative contrasts the two ladies' actions, morality and intent. While Emma learns from her mistakes and repents, as proven with the religious words used at the end of the novel,[22] Mrs. Elton is unaware of the harm she causes and unapologetic in her transgression of the social hierarchy. This is exemplified when she tries to take charge of the party invitations

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[22] Duckworth, *The Improvements of the Estate*, 177.

much to Mr. Knightley's displeasure. Her authority is constantly questioned and rebuffed by Emma, Mr. Knightley and even by Jane Fairfax. Mr. and Mrs. Elton's characterization— as well as other's opinions—clearly demonstrates that they are not the moral authority in Highbury, no matter how high and morally superior they believe themselves to be. Thus, it proves that social immobility and vulgarity of manners are not acknowledged as positive within the community. The Eltons are instead characterized as foils or comic relief, thus emphasizing the idea that their values are not representative of the established set of values promoted by the novel.

On the other side of the spectrum stands Frank Churchill, the outsider. Contrary to the Eltons, he does not separate the world into definite social ranks, as revealed by his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax, a young lady much beneath his station. Yet, he hides it until the very last moment, when he divulges the information through a letter. This reveals a consciousness about social rules and social immobility, even though Churchill tries as much as he can to circumvent the establishment. As much as he does not seem to segregate people in terms of rank or class, he does understand the necessity of these social rules and appears to abide by them. This obviously pressures the community and its social arrangement, as Duckworth suggests:

> The most serious threat to the social world of Emma comes from outside, the place of Henry Crawford, the actor and improver, being taken by Frank Churchill. From Churchill's arrival until the end of the novel Emma is faced of choice of two directions, Churchill and Knightley, and the choice she comes to from the depths of her true self is as crucial as that

made by Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park when faced with the matrimonial possibilities and Mary Crawford and Fanny Price.[23]

Churchill's refusal to behave with integrity and truth as well as his controlling methods are much to blame in a world where appearances and countenance are important. On the surface, he appears quite the elegant gentleman, but Mr. Knightley is right to make the distinction between amiable and aimable (141). His relationships to others are based only on what could provide pleasure and excitement, but also what can act as a cover for his secret. He swiftly fools around with Emma's suspicion of a secret affair between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon in order to alleviate the doubts his presence may raise.

Moreover, he seems to resist immobility by an extravagance in expeditions and travels. His restlessness threatens the village of Highbury as his presence—and his sudden absence—upsets the social structure.[24] In the first volume of the novel, his absence puzzles many characters as he is monopolized by Mrs. Churchill: his rejection and disrespect of social rules and decorum are conspicuous. Later on, his presence and his extravagance nonetheless continue to baffle them. This reaction is normal since the village is used to maintain an order in which Frank Churchill represents chaos.

Puzzles and games also define Frank Churchill as they are part of his methods to control the flow of information. They also represent chaos and threaten to destroy the community as a whole, since they are based on miscommunication and only serve to camouflage Churchill's engagement to Jane. Moreover, he manipulates and controls

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[23] Ibid, 148.

[24] Contrary to Mr. John Knightley and Isabella, whose presence and leave of absence are announced, and thus regulated, Frank Churchill comes and goes without announcing his intentions, thus resisting the inner regulations of Highbury.

Emma using games and balls. Even though Mr. Knightley warns Emma about him, she falls for Frank Churchill and even ends up flirting with him.

These also have deep repercussions on the community as Emma becomes uncivil to Miss Bates and thus fails to uphold her social obligations towards the more destitute. This event is a defining moment for Emma: she realizes that living licentiously like Churchill is incompatible with her duty among the community. Here, Churchill's mobility and adaptability lose their rejuvenating effect on the community and thus are a negative force as they jeopardize the social order. This undermines his credibility as a source of moral authority. His conduct, towards Jane Fairfax, Emma and the community as a whole discredits him. Only the letter, in which he explains his conduct and asks for forgiveness, can redeem him in the eyes of the community.

Because his manners are almost irreproachable, Mr. Knightley incarnates moral authority. He is exemplary because he can read people and see their inner worth. Yet, as argued by Mary Waldron, even though he is considered as an exemplary figure, it does not mean that he is without fault,[25] but when he errs, it is, contrary to Mr. Elton and Mr. Churchill, of no real consequence for the community as a whole. He can navigate among Highbury's different ranks and classes always with respect, without seeming too vulgar, or too condescending. For a landed proprietor, he takes good care of his estate and works closely with the Martins in order to improve farming techniques. No other proprietor in Austen's novels, including Darcy, is seen working so closely with his tenants and with the community. It is true that since he is the moral leader of the community, Emma can

[25] Mary Waldron, *Fictions of her Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 114-26.

be interpreted as a conservative vision of the country: it is a world where the landed gentry controls the rural world and serves as a unique model to follow.

Nevertheless, Kinghtley is the moral leader, not because he belongs to the landed gentry, but because he is truly superior. Emma and Mr. Woodhouse also belong to the landed gentry and the role of leader does not apply to them. Mr. Knightley proves to be a caring and dedicated man. He moreover shows real concern of Jane's health when he sends his coach as the Eltons forget to send theirs, showcasing their superficial concern for her. He also rescues Harriet at the ball at the Crown Inn and dances with her. This rescue is of the utmost importance as it reveals the significance of the social world. Emma bestows more weight to Churchill saving Harriet from the gypsies instead of recognizing the value of the social rescue. Nonetheless, Knightley's action is of greater consequence; yet it is regarded as petty and unimportant. He simply asks her to dance, while this act saves Harriet from embarrassment in a world where appearances are paramount. His propensity to care for others is exemplified more clearly by Miss Bates, who never stops thanking him for his generosity. As Duckworth points out, "More importantly he exemplifies the kind of behavior Jane Austen considers necessary for the maintenance of a morally founded society".[26] Mr. Knightley is definitely the example all the landed gentry should emulate. Yet, the presence of Emma, the faulty heiress remains a reminder that if unguided, the landed gentry can be more problematic and threatening than the absence of it. While Duckworth's analysis of Emma tends to interpret the novel as the model on which English society should be built, it is clear that the novel serves more as a warning to the landed gentry about the consequences of their actions, than an

[26] Duckworth, *The Improvements of the Estate*, 156.

unconditional praise of their station. As seen in the novel, without forms of regulation, the landed gentry can fall into egoism and forget about the duties inherent with the station. Austen, throughout her novels, often portrayed the landed gentry mismanaging the estate, thus depicting the consequences of ill judgment on the side of the landed gentry.[27] Mr. Knightley is not praised because of his estate Donwell, but because he can lead the community to better days, with a combination of avant-gardism and respect of the established rules. This is even more important as Highbury is a community centered on itself, disconnected from the center, with almost no contact with the rest of England.

1.3 "Only sixteen miles off" of London

Highbury's location close to London would normally suggest numerous travels and expeditions to and from the metropolis, but curiously enough, the distance seems quite a journey in and of itself. It is in part due to Mr. Woodhouse's incapacity to travel such a distance that it becomes seemingly monumental. This spatial immobility creates a sense of isolation and remoteness, as if Highbury was an island of itself. MacDonagh points out that:

> A second peculiarity of Emma, in contradistinction to any other of Jane Austen's writings, is that the entire action is practically confined to a single place. The horses may have to be taken out to convey Mr. Woodhouse to Randalls, or Emma to the ball at the Crown Inn, and people walk ceaselessly to and fro, even a little beyond the extremities of the

[27] The Peterloo Massacre (1819) can be seen as a result of the landed proprietors disregarding their duties to the British citizens, especially the poor.

> village proper. But it may all be fairly described as internal movement, at least within Greater Highbury.[28]

Highbury is clearly separated from the rest of the world. This, in turn, stresses the significance of social order: since there are not many changes occurring in the social world, the relations one has with the rest of the community are primordial as "it is impossible in Highbury to avoid anyone merely because one dislikes them personally... in so compressed a society personal preference could not safely be indulged".[29] Contrary to the country, in London one has the license to avoid undesired company, as illustrated in Pride and Prejudice when Darcy avoids Jane Bennet. The social fabric is therefore more fragile in a closed environment such as Highbury than it is in London or in villages with a sufficient amount of newcomers and social traffic. Social immobility thus goes together with limited amount of social traffic as it privileges stability and regulations. It becomes natural for the community to limit or impede mobility.

This implies that the country as a social environment is far from being idyllic as it requires measures to restrain the people from moving, either physically or socially. With a smaller population, changes in the social order can appear to be more abrupt than in the city since the differences of status are more definite. There is a fixity inherent to a small community like Highbury. By focusing on a community with a limited number of people, the narrative comes to grips with issues of country life like lack of social traffic, and limited access to entertainment. Contrary to Raymond Williams' argument that Austen avoids discussing the farming class,[30] she does address the issue of the time-frozen

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[28] MacDonagh, *Real and Imagined Worlds*, 129-30.
[29] Ibid, 134.
[30] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (New York: Oxford, 1973), 117.

village and also portrays the evils of immobility. As pointed out by William Galperin, the representation of Highbury as a perfect village may come from our modern reading:

> The second of Emma's representative features involves its country village setting that readers from Mary Mitford onward have deemed here an oasis, delightfully removed the bustle of metropolitan life, or a sharply demarcated social space in which a normative, increasingly partial ideas of Englishness is postulated on behalf of specific class and ideological interest.[31]

It is quite clear that Highbury is not an oasis, and that it can feel like a prison. Although apparently content with her existence, Emma seems bored with her daily life and duties. This in part explains why she falls under Frank Churchill's spell so easily: he breaks down the monotony of her existence with balls and games, to the detriment of her role as caregiver to the community. She is thus ready to challenge the social fabric for her own amusement.

By focusing only on a single parish, Austen can give life or a voice to characters that otherwise would remain in the background: Miss Bates, for instance, is given a prominence in the plot that is unusual for her status in any other novels by Austen.[32] To the attentive reader, Miss Bates is a mine of information on Highbury's citizens and she reveals many clues to Frank Churchill's engagement to Jane Fairfax. Communication is at the heart of the novel and miscommunications and misunderstandings are the causes of conflict within the community. As Butler suggests, "The reason that Emma nevertheless

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[31] William Galperin, *The Historical Austen*, (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003), 180. (my emphasis)
[32] It is true that Mrs. Smith in Persuasion is a similar character. The distinctions between them will be dealt with in the next chapter.

gives so powerful an impression of sustained and vigorous movement is that its conflicts are translated more fully than in any of the other novels into the medium of language".[33]

Physical mobility is translated into verbal mobility and the manner in which news is transmitted exposes the inner workings of the society. As pointed out with Perry's carriage incident, this information is initially divulged only among the "lower orders": the Coles, Mrs. Bates, who in turn informs her daughter who spreads this piece of information to Jane and Frank. Frank later makes the episode known accidentally to the "higher order", Emma, Mr. and Mrs. Weston. This illustrates that communication does not flow as easily and as naturally between ranks and classes as in a homogenous society because the constraints and regulations already in place forbid this flow, this mobility within the community.

Moreover, the country also encourages a stiffening of social conduct and a fear of change within the community. This fear, as mentioned above, is indicated by Mr. Woodhouse, who is always afraid or concerned about matters of health. He represents the evils of immobility: Mr. Woodhouse has become withdrawn from society and imposes his own opinions on everyone. "What was unwholesome to him he regarded as unfit for any body; and he had, therefore, earnestly tried to dissuade them from having any wedding-cake at all, and when that proved vain, as earnestly tried to prevent any body's eating it" (20). As closed minded as he is, Woodhouse can be excused for his resistance to change because he cares deeply for the citizens of Highbury and makes sure that Miss Bates and her mother receive bounties from Hartfield to alleviate their existence. His strong opinions and his insistence on thin gruel, for instance, are only proof of his

[33] Butler, *The War of Ideas*, 260.

attachment to the community: he simply wants to make sure everyone is healthy and eats wholesome food, although it becomes obsessive.

Nevertheless, Mr. Woodhouse's mindset has repercussions, especially on Emma, who has to accommodate his immobility. Any plan outside of Hartfield requires much preparation. The same applies to the Box Hill trip: it requires much preparation to accommodate everyone and much like the Christmas dinner at Randalls, it ends on a sour note and the social order is ripped apart. Yet, from these two events, the community was indeed able to overcome the obstacles and move on. Not that the events are forgotten, as Emma will never forget Mr. Elton's indelicate proposal, nor will Jane Fairfax forget Churchill's flirtatious behaviour during the Box Hill expedition. As a whole, the community is strong enough to persist. The novel illustrates two different responses to difficult events: either the community members keep their feelings buried, as Emma and Harriet do about Mr. Elton's behaviour, or they find the strength to make amends like Emma to Jane. Yet, these two manners stand as diametrically opposites on the consequences on the social arrangement. While the first tries to maintain the status quo and ignores the uneasiness of the situation, the second addresses the issue and attempts to solve it. The latter is proof that Emma really matures during the novel as she comes to understand the mechanics of social regulations and of social mobility. Until that moment, she "remain[s] a danger to the social community in which she plays such a prominent part,"[34] as Duckworth claims. The need to go beyond Highbury's borders is further highlighted by Emma's and Mr. Knightley's honeymoon: "a tour to the seaside" (452), a trip which involves stepping outside of Highbury, and even Surrey, into the great

[34] Duckworth, *The Improvements of the Estate*, 156.

unknown. This proves that Emma has come to realize that her previous ways—her snobbery and her matchmaking schemes—are no longer adequate for the world in which she lives. Knox-Shaw details her progress as such:

> Social position is of the utmost importance to Emma at the novel's start. Her arrangement of destiny have everything to do with the articulation and preservation of rank...And her chagrin at having to stand second Mrs. Elton on the dance floor, or hear her assume equality Mr. Knightley, is intensified by the way she has collapsed any alternative scale of value by repeatedly pronouncing on the priority of rank over worth.[35]

Once she understands the nature of her mistakes, with the help of Mr. Knightley, Emma is transformed from a young woman for whom appearances are all, to a young woman whom trust and truth are the only values that matter. Her wedding elegantly illustrates the progress made:

> The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade...But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (453)

From her initial immobility—both social and spatial—Emma comes to achieve the balance between stagnation and chaos as she opens up to the world while respecting that some things are immovable. She also comes to judge people, not on their rank, or lack of it, but for what they really are. Emma, therefore, is not so much about the nostalgia of a

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[35] Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 201.

bygone era—where regulations and order prevail as Duckworth and Butler claim—but about coming to terms with society in a world that constantly evolves. It is about how an individual can adapt his conduct to address mobility in a positive manner without looking back.

Persuasion: The End of the Rank System

While Emma is about the restoration of the landed gentry as moral leaders among the village community, Persuasion acts as a mirror to Emma and offers a rewriting of the novel's ending: if Emma had never understood the importance of her duties she probably would have ended up as Elizabeth, Anne's sister, a jaded spinster who enjoys only the privileges of her station, and none of the responsibilities. This self-indulgence is the novel's catalyst as it forces the Elliots to move out of their property. The landed gentry is thus always compared to other forms of hierarchy. If Emma is considered as the landed gentry's swan song, then Persuasion definitely displays the obsolescence of the rank system. The Elliots, who rely on this system, are seen as outdated: they are incapable of facing the present state of society. Even their reliance on precedence in their social relations illustrates the fixity inherent in ranks. While Anne moves from one social group to the other and embraces the life of a captain's wife, the Elliots are left aside, clinging to any possible connection in order to "artificially" maintain their precedence and rank.

Nonetheless, the lifestyle Anne finally chooses is in no way idealized, as she must pay "the tax of quick alarm" (236). Here, we are no longer in the optimism of Emma, but in a world made of different shades of gray, without social leaders or definite moral authority. While Knightley in Emma is hardly ever seen expressing an erroneous opinion, no one in Persuasion can claim the same: the novel remarkably depicts the uncertainty of the Regency period. The use of repetition of events creates the impression of myriads of possibilities unfolding in front of the heroine. The characters' relationship with time reveals the ability, or inability, to face the present state of the world, thus exposing their attitude towards social mobility. This is further illustrated with the Elliots' need for

precedence in every aspect of their life. Yet, the narrative also portrays different models of society, which are not based on resistance to social changes or marked by precedence.

2.1 From Temporal Fixity to Mobility

In order to reveal the relationship between time and social mobility, Austen first introduces the character of Sir Walter Elliot as the embodiment of the old order.

> Sir Walter Elliot... was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage....As he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed – this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened. (5)

While the Baronetage is not literature in itself, it represents a written form that is devoted to the past only. The alterations he adds to the margins are also instances of past events: the book does not illustrate the present, or the state of things as they are, but the events that have happened. The book "followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family, in the usual terms: how it had been first settled in Cheshire,... exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II, with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married" (5-6). This emphasizes the idea that the past is no guarantee of the future: the Elliots, in spite of their "glorious" beginnings, may not see their glory days revived. This undermines Sir Walter's pride in his present family: only Mary is married while Elizabeth resents the Baronetage, because it exposes her age and her situation as a single woman.

Elizabeth's own perception of time is debatable. Thomas Wolfe argues that Elizabeth "had merely 'the consciousness of being nine-and-twenty.' This sense of the past is really not Elizabeth's... but the narrator's, or we find, Anne's".[36] While Elizabeth does not openly despair about her age, her visceral reaction towards the book suggests something different than what Wolfe claims. "Always to be presented with the date of her own birth, and see no marriage follow but that of a younger sister, made the book an evil; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, had she closed it, with averted eyes, and pushed it away" (9). This proves that Elizabeth is quite conscious of her age, but that she would rather not think about it or be reminded of it. She would rather consider herself as "frozen" in time instead of accumulating all these years. Therefore, the Baronetage is a powerful temporal marker since it is both Sir Walter's pride of the historical foundations of the Elliots and Elizabeth's resentment towards her age and unfulfilled destiny. It also represents a form of temporal fixity, defined as the negation that times are changing.

The past is also contrasted with the present state of society when Anne visits the Musgroves. She witnesses a sort of chaotic order as the young generation of Musgroves prepares to embrace the modern times. "Oh! could the originals of the portraits against the wainscot, could the gentlemen in brown velvet and the ladies in blue satin have seen what was going on, have been conscious of such an overthrow of all order and neatness! The portraits themselves seemed to be staring in astonishment" (38). The paintings are therefore representations of the old order, of the past. This disparity between "order and

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[36] Thomas P. Wolfe, "The Achievements of Persuasion", *Studies in English Literature* 11, no. 4 (1971), 689-90.

neatness" and the "confusion" and "alteration" (38) are accentuated by Anne's appeal to the historical portraits as a form of authority. By giving some life to the portraits, she also blurs the line between past and present, as both coexist momentarily. Moreover, Anne's own opinion about the confusion reigning in the drawing-room is also ambiguous: "The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother were in the old English style, and the young people in the new" (38). The use of free-indirect discourse blends the distinction between Anne's point of view and the narrator's. K.R. Ireland assigns the comment to the narrator when she argues that "observations on the contrasting old and new English styles displayed in the lives and houses of two generations of Musgroves, likewise proceed from the narrator's level of temporal consciousness".[37] Contrary to Ireland, I argue that both Anne and the narrator suggest that the Musgroves are also in a state of transition between old and new ways. Although the state of confusion is not entirely negative, it also implies that this change may not be for the better. The future is therefore impossible to predict. This simple comment on the possible reaction of gentlemen and ladies from the paintings on the state of the Musgroves' drawing-room thus reveals that the relations to temporal markers—and by extent to temporal mobility—vary in degrees from one character to the other. Temporal mobility is thus more or less widespread within the community, but unlike in Emma where the community disapproves of social mobility, there is no consensus among the community in Persuasion about it: except from the Elliots, there is no particular desire to freeze time, or to embrace the spirit of the age.

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[37] K. R. Ireland, "Future Recollections of Immortality: Temporal Articulation in Jane Austen's Persuasion", *NOVEL* 13, no. 2 (1980), 220.

While the Elliots, generally speaking, suffer from temporal fixity, Anne's own relation to time is complicated as it evolves throughout the novel. At first, she seems to be living in the past, as if the present and future are not accounted for. "The persistence of memory, in particular, is a recurrent theme," Daniel Woolf suggests, "Austen explores both the painful and pleasurable aspects of memory quite explicitly".[38] Anne lives with the constant remembrance that she refused Wentworth years ago. From that moment on, until she can correct her relationship with him, it is as if she were enduring the passage of time until she dies. When explaining the passage about Anne's piano performance, Wolfe states that:

> As it seems often to occur, there is in the present situation a sense of the past that alleviates the feeling of suffering in the present... The 'past' works another way; it builds immunity. That this was 'no new sensation,' that she has 'been always used' to such treatment, has given her a persisting center of self that remains unhurt, that can channel what should be painful into an identity that is secure.[39]

The notion of the past is fundamental to the understanding of Anne's character and her refusal to face the present. As explained by Woolfe, Anne's refusal to face reality is a mechanism of self-defence: when compared to the painful experience of regrets, denial seems to be the lesser evil. Like her father, who refuses to acknowledge that he and Elizabeth are growing old, Anne at first lives in the past to avoid the potential pains that she could encounter in the present. Nevertheless, the imminent arrival of Wentworth

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[38] Daniel Woolf, "Jane Austen and History Revisited: The Past, Gender and Memory from Restoration to Persuasion", *Persuasions* 26, (2004), 220.
[39] Wolfe, "The Achievements of Persuasion", p. 694.

functions as a catalyst: he stirs her from her stupor. "A few months more, and he, perhaps, may be walking here" (25) thinks Anne. This forces her to imagine what the present will be like in the future. The status quo in which she lives is no longer effective while Wentworth is around: she has to acknowledge the consequences of her decision. Therefore, she needs to remodel her vision of temporality. As Emily Rohrbach argues:

> Anne Elliot's [alienated subject position] is an expression of temporal concerns. Issues of the 'historical sequence' of consciousness... are foregrounded in Persuasion, in the complexities of narrative temporality structuring the discourse of Anne's consciousness. Persuasion explores the shifting of meanings over time... The upshot of this vast swing of the evaluative pendulum is to reveal how difficult it is to know the present – how difficult to answer the question of how a present decision or event will figure into the subject's history.[40]

Anne confronts the consequence of her refusal by reclaiming the concept of present and future. In order to come to terms with the present, she creates a model to avoid the painful realities of the present. "Of particular interest, then is a pattern of a strange temporality in the discourse of Anne's consciousness, a temporal structure aimed at this very question; that is, her thoughts repeatedly take the shape of imagining the present as a memory from the perspective of a future self".[41] This is exemplified when she first meets Wentworth: "While a thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. And it was soon over" (56). This is reemphasized

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[40] Emily Rohrbach, "Austen's Later Subjects", *Studies in English Literature* 44, no. 4 (2004), 743.
[41] Ibid., p. 743

after the details of his visit are voiced: "'It is over! it is over!' she repeated to herself again, and again, in nervous gratitude. 'The worst is over'" (56). The present is barely accounted for since her reactions consist only of past and future: according to Anne, the visit will be over, and is over. The visit never "is". She does not feel the moment, that the event is taking place in the present. "Future and past are not distant points on a timeline stretching backwards and forwards from the present, but are rather dimensions of the present moment itself: they give temporal relief to a single point in history".[42] Anne escapes the plight of the present by using the past and future: it relieves her from the present and enables her to live without too much pain. This "in-the-moment" stage is only achieved when she witnesses Louisa's fall from the Cobb.

Louisa's fall is a turning-point in Persuasion. Not only is it the moment when Wentworth realizes that a flexible mind is not necessarily a weak mind, it is also the central repetition or re-enactment of Wentworth's proposal to Anne. As Lorri Nandrea suggests, "Neither the fall nor the second proposal repeat what happened before. Instead, the same question, or invitation, is given three different answers or outcomes. Thus, what the story repeats is not what happened, but what failed to happen".[43] It is also the one moment in which Anne does not see the moment as being part of the past or the future; she lives the moment with all the urgency Louisa's situation requires, while Wentworth is incapable of facing it. Witnessing the disastrous outcome of Louisa's choice, Anne can comprehend how the same event, reconstituted here symbolically, can have different outcomes: the present is simply the result of past choices and, by extension the future, of

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[42] Lorri G. Nandrea, "Difference and Repetition in Austen's Persuasion", *Studies in the Novel* 39, no. 1 (2007), 57.
[43] Ibid., p. 49.

present choices. As stated before, it is this event that changes Anne's perspective on the present and future as she understands there are no right answers without knowing the full consequences. It means that Lady Russell is only proven wrong when Wentworth comes back rich from eight years at sea. Louisa is only proven wrong when she falls and hits the ground at Lyme. The opposite reactions to the event, that is Wentworth's proposal, are both wrong because of the circumstances which were unknown at the time. This is why Anne philosophically cannot blame Lady Russell for persuading her of the need for prudence.

> I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong... and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now.... Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. (230-31)

Anne comes to realize the impossibility of predicting the future and the outcomes of actions. Choices, in the novel, are never without consequences and often, the person is left with regrets that the right decision was not taken. They become part of the narrative in order to contrast Anne's decision with other possible decisions and to illustrate how they can drastically change someone's life. This is also emphasized during Wentworth's conversation with Anne in Bath. He learns that had he proposed two years after her refusal, she would have accepted. Here, it is another possible chain of events that is

unwrapped, while only Wentworth seems to feel the pain of what could have been. "Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared. It is a sort of pain, too, which is new to me. I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed... I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve" (231). For Anne it is no new feeling, since she spent the last eight years asking if she would have been happy had she stayed firm and maintained the engagement. Therefore, regrets become a motif that frames the narrative: the repetitions of Wentworth's proposal enable both the characters and the readers to grasp the capriciousness of the present, and the unpredictability of the future. Anne and Wentworth come to accept temporal mobility—the need to adapt—and face the future, not by judging from past events, but by choosing to live together in spite of "quick alarm" (236).

While she was at first frozen in time, much like her family, Anne has learned that it is impossible to guess what the future holds, and that one should make the best out of the present. Although she comes to terms at last with the present state of society, this was not without pains. In Persuasion, temporal fixity is associated with the denial of reality: those who refuse to face the present state of society are caught in a sterile environment, and caught also in their delusions about what society should be, and not what it has become. Characters like Anne, who at first constantly live in the past, can still move on and embrace life as it is, although the process is not without some difficult introspection. Others, like Sir Walter, will always comment on the indecency of having to "give place to Lord St Ives" noting that his "father we all know to have been a country curate, without bread to eat" (20). This suggests that precedence, associated with the rejection of

the present, becomes another form of fixity which prevents Sir Walter from recognizing the value of a meritocracy, as embodied by Wentworth and Lord St Ives.

2.2 An Issue of Precedence

Anne's union to Wentworth reveals the inner workings of hierarchy as the gap which separates the two lovers at first is wide. Although Anne is in the lower half of the gentility, she is still superior to Frederick Wentworth in terms of rank. A marriage between the two would definitely be considered shameful by Sir Walter and Elizabeth. As mentioned earlier, for Sir Walter, the world consists of blood lineage as outlined in the Baronetage and of commoners: for him, either a person has connections, and is somebody, or a person is nobody. For instance, when Mr. Shepherd reveals to Sir Walter Elliot that the Crofts are related to a gentleman called Wentworth in the hope to win his side, the latter replies: "Mr Wentworth, the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term gentleman. I thought you were speaking of some man of property: Mr Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected; nothing to do with the Strafford family. One wonders how the names of many of our nobility become so common" (24). As in Emma, Sir Walter separates rank from class and values the former the most as he associates property, and not money, with social value as a gentleman ought to have some property.[44] It is, however, ironic that a man who considers property as a social marker would give up so easily his claim to his estate and rent a house in Bath instead.

Nothing outside of rank or blood relations is deemed worthy by Sir Walter Elliot and this pride resembles Emma's own self-pride prior to her epiphany. Much like her, the

[44] Duckworth has a great analysis of the relations between estate and vanity in The Improvements of the Estate pp. 184-87.

Elliots are compromised by a limited set of families in the community, of which they are the superior element. Therefore, lacking any superior rank on which they can model their behaviour, they act as if they are high nobility, higher on the scale than they actually are. This is illustrated by Sir Walter's necessary equipment as a baronet, but also by Elizabeth's refusals to marry anyone but Mr. Elliot.

> This very awkward history of Mr Elliot was still, after an interval of several years, felt with anger by Elizabeth, who had liked the man for himself, and still more for being her father's heir, and whose strong family pride could see only in him a proper match for Sir Walter Elliot's eldest daughter. There was not a baronet from A to Z whom her feelings could have so willingly acknowledged as an equal. (10)

Equality is extremely important, as it denotes that Elizabeth's personal rank system is both an expression of her self-value—thinking herself superior to baronetcy—and the fact that a title is not enough for her. For instance, Mr. Elliot's being the heir of Kellynch Hall represents a bonus to the baronet title as it would keep the estate within the family. This explains Elizabeth's concept of equality, as well as it illustrates the issue of a system based on rank. Even when using a complicated and detailed system to structure society such as rank—which in theory covers all the possible gradations—it further complicates the issue and imposes more degrees of separation between individuals than a simpler class system. Therefore, an equal relationship is more difficult to attain as the distinctions between individuals, although minute, are enough to separate them from others.

While unequal relationships are numerous in Austen's novels—one can think of Emma's first reaction to the Cole's dinner party or Darcy's comments on the dancing

party at the assembly—characters displaying pride of rank can be reformed like Darcy and Emma or they can be used as a foil to denounce that pride, as with Mrs. Elton or Lady Catherine de Bourgh. It thus emphasizes the idea that a structure based on class instead of rank would alleviate some of the snobbery by reducing the number of degrees in the structure. One example of this is Elizabeth Bennet's answer to Lady Catherine de Bourgh's claim that she is below Darcy's station: "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (311). Although looking for equal relations or unions, the Elliots often find themselves favouring relationships that make them feel superior. Equality seems to be understood as a fine balance between superiority on their part and lack of humiliating traits in others. This would explain how Elizabeth can consider Mrs. Clay as her confidante instead of choosing her own sister Anne, despite Mrs. Clay's lack of lineage.

Equality is also used when the narrator discusses Sir Walter's thoughts on the lack of good union under his name in the Baronetage: "All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth, for Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune, and had therefore given all the honour and received none: Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably" (8).The only union added to the Baronetage is Mary's union to Charles Musgrove—the Musgrove are second only to the Elliots—and is considered unequal because Charles lacks a rank, an official title. To add insult to injury, Mr. Elliot, the heir presumptive, not depending on Sir Walter, married early in life to money, refusing the prospect of marrying Elizabeth. Consequently, he also rejected the potential of securing the estate of Kellynch Hall.

> Instead of pushing his fortune in the line marked out for the heir of the house of Elliot, he had purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth.
>
> Sir Walter had resented it. As the head of the house, he felt that he ought to have been consulted... His disapprobation was expressed, but apparently very little regarded. Mr Elliot had attempted no apology, and shewn himself as unsolicitous of being longer noticed by the family, as Sir Walter considered him unworthy of it: all acquaintance between them had ceased. (9-10)

It does not come as a surprise, however, that Mr. Elliot changes his mind and reconnects with Sir Walter. He pays just as much attention to looks as Sir Walter himself, and this reveals his superficial nature. Having married money, the next step to his social elevation is to own an estate. It would legitimize his vanity and pride as well as securing a form of relevance in a world in transition from the rank system to the class one.

Vanity is also at the root of Sir Walter Elliot's personality and it is passed down to his daughters Elizabeth and Mary. As demonstrated, Elizabeth is vain and proud, but it is in Mary that issues of precedence and rank are revealed the most. All the relations with the Musgroves and the Hayters are predetermined by rules of precedence and her own sense of self-importance, of the superiority of being a baronet's daughter. "Again, it was Mary's complaint, that Mrs. Musgrove was very apt not to give her the precedence that was her due, when they dined at the Great House with other families; and she did not see any reason why she was to be considered so much at home as to lose her place" (43).

This, in return, causes frictions with the Musgroves, especially with Henrietta and Louisa, as they are constantly reminded by Mary's conduct of her "superiority".

> And one day when Anne was walking with only the Musgroves, one of them after talking of rank, people of rank, and jealousy of rank, said, '... I wish anybody could give Mary a hint that it would be a great deal better if she were not so very tenacious, especially if she would not be always putting herself forward to take place of mamma. Nobody doubts her right to have precedence of mamma, but it would be more becoming in her not to be always insisting on it. It is not that mamma cares about it the least in the world, but I know it is taken notice of by many persons.' (43-44)

Her behaviour, topped off with her characterization, emphasizes the evils that come with the rank system. It is a known fact that she is Mrs. Musgrove's superior in rank[45], but her constant demand for precedence only highlights her shallowness and her vanity, and moreover her incapability to adapt herself and to fit in her environment. Her life has become a constant sterile battle about receiving her due recognition and place in the world.

Paradoxically, however vain and proud Sir Walter Elliot is, he is the only one who changes among the pompous trio. Yet, the change only concerns Sir Walter Elliot's opinion on Wentworth and seems motivated only by his fortune and his good looks, as looks is second only to land and title in Sir Walter's scale.

> Sir Walter, indeed, though he had no affection for Anne, and no vanity flattered, to make him really happy on the occasion, was very far from

[45] Mary, being the daughter of a baronet, is superior to Mrs. Musgrove, as she is "only" the wife of a squire.

> thinking it a bad match for her. On the contrary, when he saw more of Captain Wentworth, saw him repeatedly by daylight, and eyed him well, he was very much struck by his personal claims, and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against her superiority of rank; and all this, assisted by his well-sounding name, enabled Sir Walter at last to prepare his pen, with a very good grace, for the insertion of the marriage in the volume of honour. (232-33)

With this passage, Sir Walter, despite having no enticement to consider this match equal, surprisingly does not consider it a poor one either. Everything that normally would have been obstacles—his consideration that sea ages badly men or the fact that the Wentworths were not related to the Stafford family—is finally overcome. The match, although not entirely perfect in the eyes of Sir Walter, is quite satisfying for him. Of course, his change of heart is not as profound as Emma's epiphany on her conduct. Yet for a man who "vanity was the beginning and the end" (6) it comes off slightly as a reformation, however small it is.

Unexpectedly, it is the new generation—Elizabeth and Mary—that denies the changes and rejects the new structures: their views on Anne and Wentworth remain the same, throughout the novel. For instance, while waiting for the Dalrymples at the concert, Anne "comprehended that her father had judged so well as to give [Wentworth] that simple acknowledgement of acquaintance, and she was just in time by a side glance to see a slight curtsey from Elizabeth herself. This, though late, and reluctant, and ungracious, was yet better than nothing, and her spirits improved" (171). Elizabeth does not even try to be well-mannered towards Wentworth and displays her shallowness and

her disdain to Wentworth, as she considers him quite beneath her. Anne's younger sister, adamant about her precedence and her due, is not as categorical as Elizabeth. Mary's reaction to the engagement is in fact quite representative of her: it is ambiguous.

> Mary was probably the one most immediately gratified by the circumstance...it was very agreeable that Captain Wentworth should be a richer man than either Captain Benwick or Charles Hayter. She had something to suffer, perhaps, when they came into contact again, in seeing Anne restored to the rights of seniority, and the mistress of a very pretty landaulette; but she had a future to look forward to, of powerful consolation. Anne had no Uppercross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family; and if they could but keep Captain Wentworth from being made a baronet, she would not change situations with Anne. (233-34)

She seems unable to decide whether or not she is pleased with this: the Elliots' honour is safe as Anne's precedence over Henrietta and Louisa is maintained. Yet, she fears for her own precedence at the same time. As long as Anne is without a proper piece of land, Mary remains her superior. However, if Wentworth is made a baronet, she will lose all pretence to precedence as Anne's rank will be secured by her own blood lineage, but also through her alliance to a baronet, with a hefty fortune to crown it all.

As a consequence, pride and vanity, when mixed with an obsession with precedence and rank, prove to be socially sterile as they break up individuals into small groups and the hierarchy resulting from this separates and alienates certain individuals. This explains why the Elliots have shown themselves incapable of dealing with certain

groups: Mary refuses to visit the Hayters because she considers them vulgar and Anne is regarded as extravagant when she prefers to visit Mrs. Smith to a visit to Laura Place. Precedence also perverts their relationship as they never can be equal to others: the relations are either inferior or superior to them. They cannot enjoy company for what it is as they focus not on the person's inner worth, but on their own precedence in relation to that person. Anne, on the contrary, can navigate through the different social classes and, much like Mr. Knightley, can appreciate the diversity in society, despite one's low origins or social status.

2.3 A Community of Peers

Contrary to the rest of her family, Anne adapts herself with ease to the different social groups she encounters. Although always a stranger among the different communities, she manages to be accepted and to partake in the social life of all the different communities, with the notable exception of her own family circle. When she leaves Kellynch Hall to reside with Mary at Uppercross Cottage, she leaves the family she knows to live in the neighbouring company of the Musgroves. Aside from the "organized chaos" and the Great Hall being in a state of improvement, the Musgroves are quite a happy family. Where Kellynch Hall appears silent and cold, the Great Hall is bustling with life, noises and an "accord" between the parents' old ways and the young generation's modernity. Yet, as Melissa Sodeman points out, all this activity and chaos are "overwhelming and sometimes oppressive to Anne".[46] But for her, it comes down to whether or not she can find herself useful and the accident of little Charles not only

[46] Melissa Sodeman, "Domestic Mobility in Persuasion and Sanditon", *Studies in English Literature* 45, no. 4 (2005), 790.

delays her meeting with Captain Wentworth, but also proves her worth and usefulness. This event foreshadows Louisa's own fall and Wentworth's realization of Anne's fortitude.

Yet, tensions at the Great Hall do exist and Anne here acts as a middle-ground between Mary and the Musgroves. She is recognized by both sides as being rational and is used as a messenger in order to convince the other party to change their behaviour. These tensions mar the relationships of all the family, as communications are sometimes insincere between the members: Louisa forces her sister to revive her relationship with Charles Hayter using the pretext of a long walk in order to secure Captain Wentworth for herself. She never openly admits her intentions, but it is clear that she set a trap for her sister. Nevertheless, the sisters maintain their friendship, as Louisa's plan, though selfish, is still in the best interests of all concerned: the animosity between Charles and Wentworth is dissipated, the sisters are no longer in competition for the same man, and Henrietta maintains her engagement with Charles. Despite the balance between the old ways and the new ones, and the true affection amongst them, Mary excluded, Anne does not consider the Great Hall as the ideal familial or domestic environment because of those tensions and their lack of refinement.[47] Compared to the new tenants of Kellynch Hall, the Musgroves lack the unity and the bon accord that characterizes the Crofts.

In spite of their lack of title or formal pedigree, the Crofts, and the Harvilles as well, stand as models Anne admires. While her family strives to define equality in their relations, these Navy families represent equality in Anne's mind. Mrs. Croft participates in almost everything that the Admiral does. Her status of woman does not prevent her

[47] For a more detailed portrait of the Musgroves, see MacDonagh's Real and Imagined Worlds pp. 103-108.

from following the Admiral on board, and when he fails to drive properly their carriage, it is Mrs. Croft who takes the rein to avoid an accident.

> But by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself they happily passed the danger... and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the Cottage. (85-86)

Mrs. Croft does not wait for the Admiral to act; she acts before it is too late. For Anne, they represent the ideal form of companionship as neither one of them is subjugated by the other, or unnecessarily elevated either. They form a couple based on partnership, one complementing the other. Contrary to Emma and Knightley, where he acts as both a mentor and a husband to Emma, Sophia and the Admiral stand for a true companionship and the true understanding of the other's mind.

The Navy also matches Anne's sense of community. As portrayed in the novel,[48] the Navy represents courage, loyalty—and patriotism—as well as ingeniousness. These are also values that could be translated from a masculine environment to a feminine one, as depicted by Mrs. Croft, and to some extent, by Anne herself. Based on these values and with accomplishments as foundation, the Navy becomes a model for an active and morally founded society, where those who participate for the greater good of society are rewarded and recognized as important, while the idle and self-centered characters, like Sir Walter, find themselves isolated, and having to give precedence when used to receive it. This model is also inclusive, as it promotes an active participation with society. This is

[48] See Mansfield Park for a different view of the Navy.

revealed during the visit to the Harvilles at Lyme. The Harvilles, although lacking the proper space to entertain such a large party, as would Kellynch Hall or the Great Hall, invite Wentworth and his friends. Nevertheless, their house reflects the mindset of its owners: they welcome all:

> They...found rooms so small as none but those who invite from the heart could think capable of accommodating so many. Anne had a moment's astonishment... but it was soon lost in the pleasanter feelings which sprang from the sight of all the ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements of Captain Harville, to turn the actual space to the best account, to supply the deficiencies of lodging-house furniture. (92)

Moreover, the Harvilles' decoration is far from the ostentatious arrangements of Kellynch Hall, or the discordant alterations at the Great Hall. Although eclectic, nothing seems out of place or peculiar. There is a balance between what is ornamental and what is actually useful. This concept of utility is a recurrent theme in Persuasion as it describes Anne's position on the gentry, but is also representative of the Navy and clashes with Sir Walter's idleness.

> The varieties in the fitting-up of the rooms, where the common necessaries provided by the owner, in the common indifferent plight, were contrasted with some few articles of a rare species of wood, excellently worked up, and with something curious and valuable from all the distant countries Captain Harville had visited, were more than amusing to Anne; connected as it all was with his profession, the fruit of its labours, the effect of its

> influence on his habits, the picture of repose and domestic happiness it presented, made it to her a something more, or less, than gratification. (92)

Captain Harville's home is thus more convivial and welcoming than Kellynch Hall or Uppercross, although it is not as spacious as either nor does it have the same functions. Its decoration becomes the expression of the owner's true self: here, the domestic happiness and the rich experience of a man at sea shine through what would be considered clutter or lack of refinement. The physical space also translates the owners' hospitality, as the rooms are fit to easily accommodate the large party, without feeling too small. Moreover, it reflects the importance of manual work in Captain's Harville's life. The large employment and manual work that he undergoes despite his injury suggests a strong mind, but also a courageous mindset.

> Captain Harville's courageous refusal to be defeated comments unfavourably on those characters who have permitted circumstances to limit their responses. Sir Walter Elliot and Elizabeth abandoned their home, with its spacious rooms, its beautiful paintings and the fine furniture, and voluntarily choose to reduce the extent of their commitment to society by living among the 'littlenesses' (138) of Bath.[49]

This dedication to work and to be of use to society rejoins with Anne's situation, where she tries to be useful and takes on the roles neglected by others. The Navy community, through the examples of the Admiral, the Harvilles and Captain Wentworth, represents what Anne expects of society: frankness in exchange, easy manners void of vanity or pride, and a commitment to society, all which seem lacking in nobility.

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[49] Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1994), 193.

After seeing them individually, the last part of the novel provides the opportunity to compare and contrast these different societies as they are all reunited in Bath. Contrary to Emma, Persuasion's action is spread across many locations: from Somersetshire, then to Lyme Regis in Dorset and finally back to Somersetshire in the city of Bath. The city creates this mishmash of classes and ranks in an almost orderly manner. For in Bath, social status is expressed in terms of lodgings available or fashionable parts of town. This in turn creates a "ghetto effect" based mostly on economic terms. The city, therefore, does not protect the less fortunate, but separates them from the wealthy. For instance, Mrs. Smith, when compared to the Bateses, has a much harder time surviving. "She had been very fond of her husband,—she had buried him. She had been used to affluence,—it was gone. She had no child to connect her with life and happiness again, no relations to assist in the arrangement of perplexed affairs, no health to make all the rest supportable" (144-45). Compared to the Bateses, her lodging is definitely smaller than their parlour in Highbury and Mrs. Smith cannot count on the gentry to survive or alleviate her state as she depends on herself and does knitting and other work to carry on. While the Bateses are taken care of by Mr. Wooodhouse and Mr. Knightley, Mrs. Smith has fallen through the cracks and seems invisible in Bath, until Anne decides to take care of her, as a duty to her friend.

Bath, although fashionable, is also problematic for the Elliots. Their claim to social status resides only on Sir Walter's title as their finances do not match their self-importance. While they were used to precedence and flattery on a daily basis, they have a harder time perpetuating this in Bath, especially since Sir Walter tries to reconnect his family to the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple. He and Elizabeth then do anything they

can to be affiliated with and recognized for their relationship with the Dalrymples. Anne is shocked by their behaviour: she "had never seen her father and sister before in contact with nobility... She had hoped better things from their high ideas of their own situation in life, and was reduced to a wish, which she had never foreseen—a wish that they had more pride" (139). Put in an environment with people ranked higher than them, and without their claim to property as a sign of rank, the Elliots lack dignity and thus are bound to make any connection that will justify their own sense of self, even though it means selling themselves in order to keep their relevancy.

Anne's journey through all these communities draws attention to the different values promoted in society. At Kellynch Hall, it is the vanity of one's rank, even to point of neglecting the duties that come with it. At Uppercross, it is the communal sense of family, even if it means that communications cannot be entirely sincere in order to preserve the family unity. With the Harvilles, it is conviviality despite the means to fully accommodate people. When these communities meet in Bath, Anne can appreciate and esteem them. Her marriage allows her to choose the company she desires, a company of peers, of equals. It is a form of community not based on rank or class, but on the understanding of equal hearts and minds. Comparing the difference between Anne's marriage and the other Austen's heroines, Duckworth states that

> Their journeys toward a social destination — often reversing an initial movement away from society —have stabilized the world of their novels, as their marriages have guaranteed the continuity of the community.
>
> It is not so in Persuasion, for here the estate is not endangered but abandoned, and much as Anne would wish to maintain and properly

> improve her inherited home, she is helpless to act or to influence actions to this effect.[50]

Her journey indeed is different, as at the beginning of the novel Anne is almost completely alienated from society and is forced throughout the novel to move towards society. However, as much as Duckworth tries to make a distinction, the estate is still in danger at the end of the novel: nothing yet prevents Sir Walter Elliot from accumulating more debts than he already has and being forced to sell the estate. Yet, contrary to other Austen heroines, Anne is not concerned by the fate of the family estate since she chose her own society over the possible legacy of an estate, valuing more the company of loved ones than acres of land or a hall. She may for the moment have "no Uppercross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family" (234), but as it was proven many times over the course of the novel, the future is yet to come and it is still possible that she will have an estate to call her home.

The different characters in Persuasion can be read as representations of the various stages of social and temporal mobility. Sir Walter, who only reads the Baronetage, is a man trapped in the past, blinded by the past glory of his family, not able to face the present state of things in which one can attain a position in life without relying on blood connections. Anne is also ambivalent but is able to build a new model of relationship with Wentworth. Their society will not revolve around family, or around a community but around a set of friends, with the same mindset, same values. They do not rejoin society, but instead creates a parallel one in which rank and class are insignificant.

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[50] Ibid. 184-85.

The fragmentation persists because institutions, like family, have to be rejected for Anne to be happy with Wentworth, contrary to Duckworth's assertion that

> Her fiction puts forward a positive vision of society, and although her great novels, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, and Emma, each end by describing the 'perfect happiness' of hero and heroine in the company of a 'small band of true friends' (Emma 484), this is not to be read as a circumscription of Jane Austen's ethical concern, or as an indication of her loss of faith in an inherited structure of morality. In each case, society has been reaffirmed around the central union, and the social fragmentation that initially threatened has been reconstituted through individual commitment into a new whole.[51]

In Persuasion, the fragmentation is never healed: the divide between the need for a form of meritocracy and the rank system is never sorted out as Anne stands on one side as the rest of her family, although diminished in the end, stand firmly on the other side.

Yet, this is not a painless transformation for Anne, since she needs to leave her shell and face society as it is evolving. She at first lived as if time was non-existent, in the sense that there was no present, no future for her: there was only the past. She then slowly changed her model of temporality which at first encompasses only the past and the future, to finally deal with the present. Some—like Sir Walter and his daughters Elizabeth and Mary—cannot escape the temporal fixity in which they are trapped, and this is expressed through their need to constantly demand precedence. Based on the old model of lineage and connections, they are unable to truly entertain equal relationships:

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[51] Ibid 27.

the system of rank being very detailed and precise about degrees and variations between individuals, finding a true equal is similar to a herculean task. Yet, not every community is based on precedence or even on rank and it is to Anne's pleasure that she meets and appreciates the Navy community, first the Crofts, then Wentworth, and the Harvilles. Through her journey, Anne changes her perspective on temporality, precedence and equality and begins a new and unfolding voyage which is in the making. Austen deliberately suspends her novel with the clouds of a possible war, and refrains from mentioning Napoleon's return from Elba. She ends her tale in the same manner that people lived in 1814-1815: they simply could not know that history was about to change, they only could face the myriads of possible outcomes.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's body of work indicates that she was engaged in the socio-political context of her time. From her "History of England" recorded in her Juvenilia[52] to Persuasion's representation of the Napoleonic wars, politics, history and social commentary are all integrated into her narratives. They are added as a context, but not as the focal point of the narrative. To deny their presence in the novels is to deny the depth of the narrative and the skill of the author. Yet, Austen's exact position on politics remains debatable. This thesis argues that she rejects society as it is as well as the one about to rise because they both are hierarchies based on arbitrary values such as filiations and possessions. Instead, she puts forward through the discourse on fixity a new society in which the values at the foundation are mobility and adaptability. She lays the basis for the modern society built on individualism, on morally founded individuals disregarding their lineage, profession or lack of both. Some, like Alistair Duckworth and Marilyn Butler, see in her narratives the expression of moral orthodoxy, of conservatism, and of the maintenance of status. According to them, her narrative conveys the ideal of the landed gentry as the center of the community. While this tallies with the narrative core of Emma, it is more than probable that an emphasis on moral orthodoxy and conservatism was not the first intent of the novel. As Peter Knox-Shaw suggests, for Emma "Austen was consciously engaging in a rite of restoration".[53] If Highbury is restored, it is because of the understanding of mobility, not of orthodoxy. Moreover, Duckworth affirms that "the typical Austen plot may move in the direction of isolation and subjectivism, but in

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[52] Jane Austen, Catharine and Other Writings, Ed.Margaret Doody and Douglas Murray, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

[53] Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 197.

the end there is a rapprochement between self and society".[54] Both in Emma and in Persuasion, because society is considered imperfect, the rapprochement between self and society cannot be complete. Emma, although she comes to understand the interdependence of rank and class as well as the importance of her duty to the community, does not seem to engage with community as much as Knightley does and she seems isolated from the rest of the community. Anne refuses to follow her inherited culture and joins the Navy community, which suits her values.

This thesis has shown through a consideration of social mobility in two novels that Austen had more liberal views on politics. Her narrative demonstrates that the status quo is impossible to maintain: characters' rank or class evolves, no matter how strict and constrained the social fabric is. Emma and Sir Walter Elliot cannot impede such changes as the rising of the middle-class; they can only learn to live with them or suffer them. Moreover, those who reject the changes are left behind or excluded from the community as the heroines look towards the future and embrace its changes. For instance, in Persuasion, even though Mary has a husband and children, she finds herself isolated within the Musgrove family, as she is unable to develop any form of relationship with them due to her sense of self-importance.

Yet, not every social movement is favoured in the two novels. Mobility for the sake of mobility is discouraged: Emma realizes that it is a mistake to elevate Harriet to her own rank, based on an obscure parentage. She recognizes that Harriet belongs more to Robert Martin than to Mr. Elton or Mr. Knightley. Elevating Harriet to Highbury's higher social sphere gave her an undeserved sense of self, and the return to normalcy

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[54] Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1994), 8.

means the loss of a confidante for Emma. The same can apply to Elizabeth's friendship with Mrs. Clay, who is preferred to the detriment of Elizabeth's own sister, Anne. Less naive than Harriet, Mrs. Clay profits from Elizabeth and Sir Walter Elliot's friendship and even attempts to seduce him in order to become the new mistress of Kellynch Hall. In the same vein, marriage with a view to social elevation, or to secure more money is denounced as much as the unjust elevation of undeserving characters. Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma and his later union to Augusta Hawkins confirm his superficial nature. The Eltons are not the example to follow when compared to Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax's marriage, which undeniably elevates the latter.[55] Frank and Jane, despite the lies and the deceit, truly love each other, while the same cannot be said about the Eltons. Mr. Elliot's prospects for Anne are not entirely irreproachable either: after preferring money to rank, his reasons for marriage are dubious. True, Mrs. Smith constantly vaunts Anne's qualities and virtues to him, but it is the expectation of ruling Kellynch Hall that really motivates Mr. Elliot. To him, "rank is rank" (141) and the ideal of marriage for love is completely obliterated by the prospect of gain, in whatever form.

In Emma, Highbury being a small community, the landed gentry is what hold it together. Mr. Knightley is the epitome of the landed gentry as his actions are directed mostly by his sense of duty towards Highbury or the Donwell tenants. He regulates the social world and makes sure that those in need are cared for. Without him, the community would disintegrate, as the expedition to Box Hill demonstrates. His ultimate

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[55] Austen portrays different degrees of unions throughout her novels: of heart, of mind and of convention (or pecuniary). The heroine's union is one of heart, based on love and understanding. Mr. Collins and Charlotte represent the second union: it is not based on love, but on understanding, as Charlotte can palliate to Mr. Collins' presence, convincing Elizabeth that this union is not as degrading as she expected. The Eltons form the last category, as Lydia and Wickham, as they are together for money (in Mr. Elton's case) or for lack of a better option,

decision to live at Hartfield following his union to Emma proves that he can depart from norms and customs for the greater good of the community as a whole. His flexibility around people, adapting to every kind of party, is definitely his best feature. Without his guidance, Emma would lead the community to disaster as she lacks the required flexibility and understanding of her duty. The incident at Box Hill remains a warning sign for the community. If the landed gentry, here represented by Emma, does not act as the leader of its community—thus with flexibility, but also with respect towards others—then chaos and disruption of the social order are inevitable.

In contrast to Emma, in which the issue of community dominates the narrative, Persuasion consistently calls our attention to the lack of a community around Kellynch Hall. Besides Lady Russell and the Musgroves, no one seems to reside near Kellynch Hall. There is no mention of duty or responsibility towards the community. Moreover, the Elliots abandon their estate and their roles for Bath, where they can maintain their frivolous lifestyle. The social order is then ruptured and it is up to Anne to find her place in society. Austen's last published novel is also more individualistic as Anne is not bound to her family in the same manner Elizabeth is to their father: she is of no use to them in Bath and is sent away to friends and extended family. Therefore, family, being the first instance of society, is no longer seen in the novel as a pillar of society and it is the individual who has to find replacements for this institution.

While flexibility is an important trait for the landed gentry, devotion to the community is also required. Among his activities, Mr. Knightley works with and supervises his tenants, and sends apples to the Bateses. The Woodhouses also participate in community life by giving back to the needy. For Emma, it is a chore, but with the help

of Mr. Knightley, she realizes the effects and benefits on the community of those so-called chores. On the contrary, the Elliots, with the exception of Anne, are not engaged with the community. They leave without for Bath a word and it is up to Anne to compensate for their disregard of their duty. She seems to find her place when she works for others: she plays piano in order to allow the Musgrove ladies to dance, she becomes a substitute mother to little Charles while tending his injury. Her devotion to others is recognized since she is the person Wentworth turns to following Louisa's fall at the Cobb. Anne's community of peers reflects this trait as the Harvilles and Mrs. Smith find employment of some sort and contribute to their community and this despite their handicap.

By contributing to one's community, the landed gentry is enabled to see the inner worth in each individual, despite their status. For instance, Mr. Knightley is able to see beyond Robert Martin's status as a farmer to acknowledge the fact that he would be a suitable husband for Harriet, just as much as he recognizes that Harriet would have been a better Mrs. Elton than Augusta Hawkins. Emma, in contrast, is initially unable to see past rank and deems the Coles vulgar even before going to their party, only to realize that it was "consisting precisely of those whose society was dearest to her" (194). Had she behaved like Mr. Knightley, with a good and fair understanding of people, she would have accepted the Coles' upward social move and welcomed them among the "higher circle" of Highbury. Instead, she clings to her rank at the risk of ending up alone at Hartfield, secluded from society and is only compelled to go by her friends, Mr. Weston and Mr. Knightley. Also blinded by prejudice, the Elliots cannot see the duplicity of Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot. Moreover, they never fully acknowledge Anne's and Wentworth's

worth as individuals whereas the couple can appreciate diverse parties because they can recognize the value of each individual.

It is imperative for the landed gentry to participate in community life and to discern the inner worth of their fellow-citizens. If not, they are bound to be pushed aside by the rising middle classes. Like the Coles' initial reaction towards the Woodhouses, the middle class might exclude those who always considered themselves superior because of their lineage or estate. By accepting social mobility, and thus "raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of" (Persuasion 20), the landed gentry can secure a cohabitation based on reciprocity with the emergent classes. Those who fail to accept this are bound, like Emma[56] and the Elliots, either to be excluded from society and reign alone, or subject themselves to those higher than them on the social scale, to the annoyance of being on the giving end, not the receiving one.

Austen promotes a world where blood or rank or class do not matter. She rejects those constraints and etiquettes, and creates characters dependant not on status, but on individual worth. High society is not, contrary to the Anti-Jacobin movement, all benevolent, kind and well educated. Some are benevolent and good, but others can be haughty snobs like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. It is then impossible to distinguish the good from the bad according to their status: Mr. Knightley is infinitely more amiable than his counterpart in Persuasion, Sir Walter Elliot, even though both own estates and are at the top of their community. The same can be said of Frank Churchill and Mr. Elliot: although they are both deceitful, the former has a more "valid"[57] reason to be such. In

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[56] Prior to her epiphany.
[57] His intent to protect Jane Fairfax is noble, but the manner in which this was conducted is regrettable.

other words, rank or class do not have inherent quality or faults because those are found in individuals, not in societal strata. In the world she created with her novels, what really counts is the inner worth, the merit of the person. It is the individual's moral and social conduct that matters, his values and beliefs. She deconstructs the society as known and builds this new model where the structure depends only on the individual's inner worth: what used to structure society, like lineage and money, or institutions like family and profession, become insignificant compared to the consequence given to the individual. One can no longer depend on his social status, as proven by Emma's and Sir Walter's conduct, in order to find favour with the author. The contrary applies too: Robert Martin, although a simple farmer, is depicted positively throughout the novel. In her novels, Austen uses a form of poetic justice to balance society and to support those who, despite their origin or income, deserve the best. This is especially noticeable in Persuasion as the social order based on rank seems to come to an end. It is no coincidence that Anne does not, at the end of the novel, have an estate of her own: this is the dawn of a new era, at least as Austen envisions it.

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