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The Revolution of Bath

The Writing and Re-Writing of Social History in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Erica Pratt

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the world exploded. Revolution broke out across the globe in an era which social scientists now designate as "the Age of Revolution." Although much of Britain's physical involvement in the revolutions of the era took place away from her center, revolutionary ideology permeated her political, social, and intellectual scene. Much of the revolutionary discussion focused on the moral, practical, and political ideology of physical revolution. However, in her last book, *Persuasion,* Jane Austen picks up on the less obvious, but increasingly powerful social revolution which was taking place across Britain.

The social revolution portrayed in the novel is not the deadly affair which saturated social discussion, but it is a fight which requires the characters, particularly Anne, to expand their borders socially and psychologically. As Austen's characters travel through the landscape of social revolution, Bath serves as pinnacle of their journey—the battlefield where characters are invited to perform according to their social training. The initial skirmish takes place before the book begins and uses social fighting techniques of the pre-Napoleonic war. It is fought within an aristocratic structure and defeats our heroine. The second

battle is conducted under completely different training mechanisms, and consequently, this second skirmish signals the fall of aristocracy and the rise of meritocracy. Throughout *Persuasion*, Austen uses the constructs of political warfare to explore the personal and societal effects of social revolution. This exploration is particularly evident in the use of Bath as a battlefield, Anne's prisoner-of-war-like situation at the beginning of the novel, her subsequent liberation, and the final shift in societal values.

Austen is not typically credited with chronicling the processes of revolution. Rather, in the years since her death, she has been trivialized under "the belief that Austen was somehow 'limited' . . . that her content was restricted . . . her national and sexual politics were reactionary; and that the prime function of her novels was to serve as havens from too much reality" (Harris 11). However, viewing her works solely as a "haven from too much reality" offers a very limited perspective. Many of the socio-political questions of her day revolved around revolution, and as an author of the time, Austen confronts many of these issues. As Jocelyn Harris points out, "To praise Jane Austen as the creator of merely stylistic masterpieces is to strip her of the historical, cultural, and literary contexts that might otherwise illuminate her novels" (11). Particularly in *Persuasion*, Austen resists the simplicity with which she is often accused and produces a sharp analysis of the process of social revolution.

As we enter Austen's world, it is important to note that physical space takes on an important role. The physical settings of Austen's novels are typically rife with psychological, mental, or social significance. Rebecca Posusta remarks,

> Austen uses space to define the emotional and intellectual limits of her heroines as well as to suggest the extent of the world in which they may move. Her physical spaces are not only used to illustrate the dichotomy between public and private interaction, but also to demonstrate a contrast between her heroine's psychological place on the one hand and her physical situation on the other (78).

Many of Austen's significant scenes are linked rather poignantly with a physical space. Elizabeth, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, reports she first fell in love with Darcy while viewing his Pemberley estate. In another of Austen's novels, Emma receives several harsh lessons on her first trip outside of her known world during the episode at Box Hill. *Persuasion* is no different in this particular aspect. As Anne travels throughout the novel, her physical location is often

a commentary on her social status. In particular, Bath forms the battleground of Anne's quest to socialize as she pleases.

Anne's initial experience in Bath sets the stage for the power play which occurs throughout the rest of *Persuasion*. While at Bath and away from the influence of her family, Anne meets and falls "deeply in love" (Austen 18) with a naval officer, Captain Wentworth. Although Austen describes Wentworth as "a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy" (Austen 18), Anne's decision to accept his attentions is generally deemed a poor one. The terms with which Anne's father, Sir Walter, and her mentor, Lady Russell, choose to view Anne's engagement is particularly interesting. It is never contested that Wentworth is *not* a fine young man, nor is it ever argued that he might not possess the qualities specified. Rather, he is rejected because he, "has nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence" (Austen 19). The means set forth for evaluating a potential marriage partner clearly delineate the differences between societal values. Anne chooses to see Wentworth through a perspective which closely aligns her with a meritocratic social structure. She admires his personal qualities rather than his lineage and therefore comes in conflict with the ideals of the aristocracy. Unfortunately for Anne, this first clash secures power for the established aristocratic social structure.

Austen briefly summarizes the courtship of Anne and Wentworth, his proposal, her rejection and the aftermath in Chapter Four. However, she glosses over the details so completely that it could nearly be mistaken for the story of any young couple. More time is spent on the emotions and thoughts of Lady Russell and Sir Walter than those of Anne and Captain Wentworth. Initially, this stylistic maneuver appears odd, however, Lady Russell and Sir Walter are the characters who hold power. The first words of *Persuasion* are "Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall" (Austen 1), and the following paragraphs are used to describe his personal importance. He takes precedence and is clearly determined to write the story. It is through the influence of Sir Walter and Lady Russell that Anne's engagement is dissolved in the first place, and although Austen records "not with a few months ended Anne's share of suffering from it" (Austen 19), it is generally accepted that Anne's broken engagement was for the best. As conquerors, Sir Walter and Lady Russell have the power to write the history. Therefore, Anne's story is trivialized and swept under the rug.

As mentioned earlier, the initial episode in Bath is important throughout *Persuasion* because of the results—specifically Anne's new status as a member

of the losing side. Although Anne had been in Bath for only a few months, she continues throughout the novel to suffer from her choice. Interestingly, her suffering does not seem to take the form of typical heartbreak. It is so silent even Lady Russell is surprised when Anne mentions regrets regarding Captain Wentworth. Instead, the suffering of Anne is marked by a loss of power—particularly in regards to her ability to move as she pleases, socialize with those whom she chooses, and even speak as she desires. These are strange consequences for a lover with a broken heart, but they are not particularly strange consequences for a defeated prisoner of war.

The first demonstration of Anne's imprisonment is her inability to choose her surroundings. Within the first few pages of *Persuasion*, Austen demonstrates Anne's lack of control. Although she sincerely dreads the idea of returning to Bath, Anne's voice is silenced, and she finds herself packing. She is carted from place to place on the whims of her family, and even when she strongly objects to their wishes, she finds herself following obediently along. Leaving for Bath, staying at Kellynch Hall, moving to Uppercross, and going to and returning from Lyme are all decisions made for Anne by her family members. If, as Posusta argues, physical space demonstrates the extent of control which Austen's heroines have within their world, Anne's lack of space surely demonstrates her lack of power.

This lack of power is further explored through Anne's inability to control her social surroundings. Jeff Nunokawa remarks in *Speechless in Austen*, "Another truth in Austen, if not universally acknowledged, at least universally felt: the pleasure of merely socializing is its own reward, and the pains of exclusion from this pleasure its own punishment" (6). Socialization is power in the world inhabited by Austen's characters. Those who have the power to socialize not only have the freedom to move about as they please, but notoriously select and reject their associates with care. Simply glancing at a list of people whom Sir Walter or Elizabeth, Anne's older sister, snub throughout *Persuasion* would provide ample evidence of this reality. Anne, however, has none of that power. Rebecca Posusta notes that at Kellynch Anne "very rarely takes part in conversation . . . She is imprisoned in her thoughts when she is surrounded by those she does not value and who do not value her . . . Anne only speaks twice in the first three chapters of the novel. On these occasions, the dash between her brief, measured words suggest a habit of inflexibility" (80-1). It has been said the victors write the history, and until Anne returns to Bath, those victors do not include Anne or her friends of the navy. Around the socially elite

presence of Kellynch Hall, Anne is silent and allows the victors—namely Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Lady Russell—to write the history. The lack of power in the few words which Anne does speak is quite evident.

Anne's inability to speak emphasizes her exclusion from society. She is not able to effectively enjoy even the most basic of social pleasures—that of communicating. Nunokawa further expands on this point by arguing, "In Austen's world, though, the body in pain less arranges the exile of its victim from the society of communication, the communication of society, than constitutes the horrors of that state of exile" (13). Therefore, one of the side effects of exile is the inability to communicate. Not until Anne moves to Lyme and away from the influence of Kellynch Hall does she begin to speak. Interestingly, when Anne finally has the power to hold a lengthy conversation, she begins with Captain Benwick, who likewise has difficulty communicating. His intractable grief and love of morbid poetry push him into social exile, but through this connection, Anne begins to voice her ideas regarding love. The process wherein Anne slowly breaks her communicative exile also signals a shift in the existing power play. She begins to speak, move, and ultimately prepare for a second battle in Bath.

Although Anne partially regains her voice in Lyme, it is not until she returns to Bath that she is able to fight the war which grants her true freedom. As mentioned earlier, Bath is the social center of England, and this war is fought for social power, therefore many of the skirmishes are fought through conversation and Anne's ability to spend her time with those she pleases. Marriage, the most binding of social contracts and the crux of Anne's previous battle, is the focal point of this revolution.

Throughout her stay in Bath, Anne finds strength in the company of those who share her values, but finding her voice amongst the socially elite proves to be more of a process than an event. For the most part, Anne is able to converse freely with Lady Russell and Mr. Elliot, the suitor selected by those who favor the ancient regime. Unfortunately, despite this small increase in communicative power, her ideas regarding society and marriage are trivialized and rejected. In a similar vein, much of Anne's conversation with Sir Walter and Elizabeth involves both parties attempting to control Anne while Anne attempts to resist this control. Particularly when Anne chooses to visit Mrs. Smith, an impoverished friend, over Lady Dalrymple, a social elitist, Austen records, "Elizabeth was disdainful, and Sir Walter severe" (104). As Anne begins to reject the social stigmas inflicted by her aristocratic family, she finds herself in a position of increased power. After a discussion with Mrs. Smith on the history of Mr. Elliot,

Anne muses, “Mrs. Smith had been able to tell her what no one else could have done. Could the knowledge have been extended through her family” (Austen 141). In this new world, family is not the measure of distinction. Mr. Elliot, despite his claim to familial ties, was not to be trusted and was not pardoned for his behavior. Anne’s victory is signaled by her increasing ability to communicate, but it is brought about by her choices to communicate with the right people. Had Anne continued her allegiance to the old values of aristocracy, she would have found herself aligned unhappily to a dishonest man. Fortunately for Anne, the victors from ten years ago have lost their power.

The world changes from an aristocracy to a meritocracy, and Anne’s victory is secured through her recognition and appliance of this new social structure. As Anne continues to seek power through socialization, Captain Wentworth is forced to fight a similar battle. In the beginning of *Persuasion*, Wentworth is characterized as a man of few words. He is quickly dismissed by those of the upper class, and often we hear of his perspective through the voices of other characters. Upon his return to Bath, Wentworth still does not appear to have gained the ability to speak. It is evident he desires to communicate with Anne, but is continually frustrated in his aim by those who are associated with the aristocracy. Even when he is finally able to make his desires for marriage clear, it is not through vocalization, but through the written word. His inability to speak openly is evident within his letter, “I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach” (Austen 158). Because of his previous experiences in Bath, Wentworth is likewise a prisoner of war. He does not act or speak as he chooses, but is driven by those around him. As Anne speaks openly about love to Captain Benwick, Wentworth is given the power to write and once again explain his feelings toward Anne. Only after his proposal and the subsequent liberation it brings does Austen remark,

> Soon words enough had passed between them to decide their direction towards the comparatively quiet and retired gravel walk, where the power of conversation would make the present hour a blessing indeed; and prepare for it all the immortality which the happiest recollections of their own future lives could bestow (160).

It is through the power of conversation Anne is able to regain her happiness, and the next four pages are a testament to Anne’s newfound ability to talk. It is through these comparatively long conversations that Anne is not only able to talk through the years of misunderstandings, but also strengthen and establish

her position as victor. Voices such as those of Lady Russell and Sir Walter are largely silenced, while our heroine determinedly makes plans with her hero.

Through the new structure of the meritocracy, Anne, Wentworth, and their friends are able to rise. The social landscape is drastically altered, but Austen leaves us with little doubt about the victors. Anne follows the path of Austen's other heroines when she marries the man she loves. Wentworth leaves the scene happily married to a previously inaccessible woman, well-respected, wealthy, youthful, and with high prospects. Many of Anne's friends who were previously deemed socially inferior likewise gain from the shift in power. Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove are married, and their marriages are discussed in terms of companionability rather than social compatibility. In the case of Mrs. Clay, Anne is able to bring her from the dregs of society into a respectable position. The lives of those around Anne are dramatically affected by the shift in power.

Anne's physical and communicative liberation not only signals victory on the side of the meritocracy, but also coincides with the decline in the importance of those who held power over her. Nunokawa reminds us, "As much as the novels are lit by the brilliance of social success, they are littered with the casualties of social death, brought on by disasters large and small" (3). No revolution is complete without loss, and the social revolution of *Persuasion* is no exception. As the fortunes of Anne continue to rise, Elizabeth finds herself steadily aging without any marital prospects in sight. Even Mr. Elliot, Elizabeth's only potential suitor, chooses to "withdraw" after Anne announces her decision to marry Wentworth (Austen 165). Lady Russell experiences a sharp decline in her ability to control Anne, and although she is gratified by Anne's happiness, Lady Russell's loss in power is emphasized when Anne pronounces that doing justice to Captain Wentworth, "was what Lady Russell had now to do" (Austen 165). This statement not only demonstrates the immense amount of power which Anne now holds, but also the change in values.

Sir Walter, who is set up at the beginning of the book as a caricature of the old world regime, particularly suffers from this decline of power. Imagine his chagrin at the beginning of the novel if he had ever thought Anne would someday say of herself and a man of the Navy:

> The disproportion in their fortune was nothing; it did not give her a moment's regret; but to have no family to receive and estimate him properly; nothing of respectability, of harmony, of good-will to offer in return for all the worth and all the prompt welcome which met her in his brothers and sisters, was a source of as lively pain as her mind could well be sensible of (Austen 165).

Much like King Louis XVI of France who had naively gone about fixing the clocks in the palace of Versailles while the commoners screamed for bread, Sir Walter's determined isolation from the real world leaves him irrelevant and socially cut off.

Sir Walter's location within Bath reflects this reality. As Parker notes,

> Camden-place (now Camden Crescent) in the early part of the nineteenth century was nearly the northernmost point of the city, in other words, at nearly the highest point of its elevation. From this height Sir Walter could literally look down on almost everyone else in Bath, an important consideration for a man to whom rank, 'the place he held in society' (Austen 4), mattered so much (*What Part of Bath Do You Think They Will Settle In?*).

Sir Walter's move to Camden Place was a strategic maneuver designed to strengthen his position at the head of society. Unfortunately, his lofty situation above the city does not reflect superiority, but the instability of his situation (Harris 165). The building project which produced Camden Place was discontinued due to instability of ground (Parker). Despite his illusion of power, the very elevation which marks Sir Walter's aristocratic pride also signals the inevitability of his decline. Throughout Anne's second visit to Bath, Sir Walter struggles to maintain the illusion of power as he desperately seeks the favor of the socially elite, scorns the social choices of Anne, and continues in his lavishly vain lifestyle. Instead of securing his position in society, these elitist choices make Sir Walter's position all the more precarious. He continues engaging with society through outdated methods and remains oblivious of the shifting societal values. In the end, this blindness leaves Anne and Captain Wentworth as the social victors instead of Sir Walter and Elizabeth.

Social revolution is rarely given the same distinction as political revolution. Austen, however, interweaves the revolutions. The social revolution in England during the 1800s was technically bloodless, but as Austen demonstrates throughout *Persuasion*, the consequences were anything but insignificant. On a personal and national scale, the shift in social structures was as significant as the war with France. Anne suffers the consequences of social exclusion, yet rises to the top as she fights for and adapts to the emerging social structure. Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mr.

Elliot, and others benefit from the social structure implemented by the old system, but then fall as the structure shifts. The decline of the aristocracy and rise of the meritocracy dramatically changed the landscape of European identity. In a world rife with revolutions, Austen brings the battle to the drawing room and proves the transforming power of societal revolution.

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