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Women After Waterloo

Evolving Females in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Madison Maloney

Jane Austen famously noted that “3 or 4 families in a country village is the very thing to work on” when writing a novel (287). Throughout each of her works, Austen follows her own advice: she creates heroines who live in tightly woven communities, where few families remain center stage. In Austen’s last book, *Persuasion*, close family connections remain an important narrative structure. Anne Elliot, the novel’s heroine, navigates a relationship with her financially threatened aristocratic family, a contrast to her bond with her newly decorated naval friends, one of whom is her lost love, Frederick Wentworth. Through Anne’s naval connections, she meets a woman who breaks past the societal restraints of close-knit communities. Sophia Croft, ostensibly, is Austen’s first woman to leave England; the Napoleonic Wars afford Mrs. Croft the opportunity to travel the seas with her admiral husband and participate in traditionally masculine experiences.

Historically, women break out of domestic spheres as men are away fighting in the military. Throughout many wars in history, the absence of men as they fight in the military offers women the opportunity to break out of their domestic spheres. The common post-war trend is that not all women wish to return to their previous lives, and while some re-engage with domesticity, others continue to engage politically-active lifestyles. In the years after the Napoleonic Wars, English women created the Manchester Female Reform Society, whose

aim was to spread democratic ideals amongst women (“Female Reformers”). Austen was not part of any reform society, but as she wrote *Persuasion* in a post-Waterloo society, she re-evaluated her female characters’ ability for action outside of their original communities. War changes opportunities for women, and Austen’s *Persuasion* plays with a new kind of female; a post-war lady who is able to act in different ways than Austen’s pre-war women.

Persuasion takes place just before the war’s end, and Mrs. Croft is already the ideal version of a post-war woman, as well as the “guiding hand” who mentors Anne in becoming like her (Southam 274). Anne admires Mrs. Croft, and Brian Southam suggests that she is Anne’s example of a woman whose “life is shaped by the tides of war,” and who uses that shaping to her advantage (274). Furthermore, Mrs. Croft represents not only who Anne could have been had she married Wentworth eight years prior but who Anne might become if she rekindles a romance with the naval captain. While critics have connected some of Anne and Mrs. Croft’s similarities, the depth of these women’s connection is underappreciated. This paper will explore how their experiences are linked through economics, movement, intelligence, and outsider-characteristics, with Mrs. Croft as the model who allows Anne to evolve from Austen’s pre-war heroines into a post-war, Sophia Croft-like figure.

I: Entering the Economic Sphere

Though Mrs. Croft is best known for her travels with the navy and for her equal relationship with her husband, her economic influence is also a significant piece of evidence that marks her as a new, post-war woman. When the Crofts inspect Kellynch Hall before becoming its residents, Mrs. Croft is noted to have “asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the Admiral himself,” and overall, “seemed more conversant with business” (Austen 24). At face value, Mrs. Croft’s understanding of economics furthers her title of equal with her husband (or perhaps makes her his superior in this case). However, the historical context of England’s economy during the war makes this characteristic of Mrs. Croft even more important. Jocelyn Harris explains that the Napoleonic Wars caused “bad harvests, restricted grain imports, and inflation,” all of which led to “soaring food prices” (134). Furthermore, there

was an increase in taxes for many things, including a heightened Property Tax (Harris 136). Frugality, then, was crucial during the war. Mrs. Croft's shrewdness when examining Kellynch Hall proves she understands world events around her; rather than assuming her husband has economic knowledge, Mrs. Croft confidently takes the reins of business to ensure her family's financial safety, a departure from previous societal notions that men must be the main actors in family affairs.

Despite Anne's distress over her family's extensive debts, she exercises the same economic shrewdness as Mrs. Croft. Rather than idly allowing her father to fix their finances, Anne offers suggestions, calling for a "complete reformation, a quicker release from debt," and anything that allows "justice and equity" to prevail (Austen 16). While the Elliots do not *treat* her equitably, Anne proves her mind is equal to understanding economics. While other Austen heroines understand their families' financial issues, the recognition is passive, and their assumption is security can only be found by marrying wealthy. Though a character like Emma receives credit from critics for acting as patriarch of her home, she is not financially needy, nor does she do any *real* work—Mrs. Croft and Anne are among the first women Austen portrays as involved in actual business affairs, and the similarity between their economically attuned minds suggests that, above all other characters (even Anne's mother-figure Lady Russell), Anne will follow in Mrs. Croft's footsteps.

II: Movement and Maritime Women

A female understanding of finances is already unique, and Mrs. Croft's ability for movement outside of England further differentiates her amongst Austen's female characters. Though other women in Austen novels travel, they remain in-country, and they always find their way back to their original society. To qualify, Mrs. Croft is not the only Austen military wife who travels; In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a few references to Mrs. Harriet Forster, the wife of Colonel Forster, who is stationed with the regiment in Meryton. Furthermore, in *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford mentions that her aunt, an admiral's wife, "always felt affected" by the wretched ocean air "if within ten miles of the sea" (326). While Mary's aunt may have traveled the Atlantic, it is never explicitly

stated, so the safe assumption is that she stayed on land, albeit close to sea, while her husband traveled. Furthermore, because the militia is a land regiment, Colonel and Mrs. Forster would not have left land, either. Thus, Mrs. Croft is likely the only woman to have traveled beyond England in Austen's novels, becoming acquainted with various destinations after moving four times across the Atlantic, such as the East Indies, Cork, Lisbon, and Gibraltar.

While Anne never leaves England during the novel, she still has unique movements, like Mrs. Croft. Once removed from Kellynch Hall, Anne is constantly moving, from Uppercross, to Lyme, to Bath. Though Anne's sister is in Uppercross, and her father is in Bath, neither of these places hold true value for her. In fact, when Anne visits Lyme she becomes nostalgic, looking at the naval group around her and sighing that they "would have been all her friends" had she chosen another path (Austen 82). Anne's lament implies she feels more comfortable when traveling with the officers than when she is with her family in a settled area, diverging from previous Austen females who appear more comfortable with provincial lifestyles.

Furthermore, once the Crofts begin renting Kellynch Hall, Anne never returns to her childhood home—rather, she moves from place to place, a contrast to other Austen heroines. While various females travel in the novels, they always retreat back to a landed estate. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth travels to Derbyshire with her aunt and uncle, but eventually returns to Longbourn, and by the novel's end, she has a new home at Pemberley. Fanny Price visits her original home of Portsmouth, but is restored to her true home at Mansfield Park. Emma is the heroine who moves the least—she has never left Hartfield, and her group's excursion to Box Hill, a whole seven miles away, is quite the treat. Catherine Morland, who perpetually travels, has a family home in Wiltshire and a newly established home at Woodston by the text's conclusion. Even the Dashwood sisters, who are initially forced to leave their home in a precarious financial situation not dissimilar to Anne's, eventually both find themselves settled in neighboring estates. In these books, written before *Persuasion* and which take place before any kind of post-war peace is achieved, provincial life is synonymous with stability, status, and value.

Though *Persuasion* takes place before the war ends, Austen writes it *after* Napoleon's defeat, and the changing landscapes for real women may be why the heroine's movements in this novel are portrayed differently. In fact, Claudia Johnson realizes that "only in *Persuasion* does Austen portray the provinciality of her characters as a disadvantage" (Johnson 158). Mary Musgrove, ever

a jealous sister, makes herself feel better about Anne's marriage by reminding herself that Anne has "no Uppercross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of family," reaffirming that Anne will have no definite home, even when she marries Wentworth (Austen 201). However, while Mary sees this as a disadvantage, Anne is perfectly content. The heroine's lack of estate contributes to one of *Persuasion's* main themes: the aristocracy is falling, and one might have better luck casting their lot with a band of naval officers than with titled gentry. In the volatile economy previously mentioned, stable land has become more elastic, more flexible—more prone to being lost to debts, tenants, and so forth. Furthermore, at an individual level, Mrs. Croft and Anne's ability to break away from upper-class societal constraints through movement shows an "elasticity of mind," or rather, a rationality that proves them capable of moving beyond the safety of landed, provincial circles (Johnson 166). The notion that intelligence enables movement is another significant departure from pre-war feminine ideals.

III: Tactful and Tactical Intelligence

Arguably, Mrs. Croft is the only traveling woman and military wife whose character is seen in a positive light; her intelligence—her elasticity of mind—allows her a higher position amongst women. Mrs. Croft is treated as an equal by her husband; she "shares with him in everything" (Austen 136). Perhaps more importantly, she is considered an equal among other navy men as well. When conversing with a group of officers, Mrs. Croft looks "as keen and intelligent" as any of them (136). Her shrewdness and wisdom make her more of a comrade on deck than a lady out of place, a contrast to other military wives in Austen. Looking back to Mrs. Forster from *Pride and Prejudice*, this traveling militia wife is present for much of Lydia Bennet's scheming; at best she is just as silly as her friend, and at worst she is complicit in Lydia's schemes to elope with Wickham. Even women in *Persuasion* who are partners with naval officers, such as Mrs. Harville and Louisa Musgrove, are not characterized as equals to their husbands the way Mrs. Croft is. Louisa becomes Captain Benwick's bride during the novel, and while Anne is pleased by the match, she is also perplexed. How could the "thinking, feeling, reading Captain Benwick" be paired with a "most dissimilar"

woman—the “high-spirited, joyous-talking Louisa Musgrove”? (135). In a similar vein, Captain Harville is introduced as “a perfect gentleman,” and though his wife is quite agreeable, she is also “less polished than her husband” (82). Mrs. Forster, Louisa, and Mrs. Harville lack a presence of mind that keeps them from being true equals to their husbands, whereas Mrs. Croft’s intelligence marks her superior to other women and an equal amongst men.

Mrs. Croft suggests intelligence is not just crucial for herself, but for other women as well. Importantly, she explains this principle in Anne’s presence as she details her journeys across the Atlantic. When Wentworth expresses distress that women can accompany men aboard ship, Mrs. Croft declares that women are not just “fine ladies,” but “rational creatures” who “cannot expect to be in smooth waters” all their lives (Austen 60). Though historically women were expected to hold virtues like meekness and patience, Mrs. Croft suggests that rationality, a trait typically attributed to men, is a crucial virtue for women as well. Whatever hardships women face on board, they must have the capability to respond in an intelligent manner. Mrs. Croft sets an important example for Anne—shortly after this conversation, Anne departs on a trip to Lyme, where her wisdom plays a key role in her party’s fate.

As Anne travels, she demonstrates a superiority of mind that allows her to tactically navigate distressing situations. At the Cobb, Louisa falls while jumping from a flight of stairs; her injury is grave, and some in the group believe her dead. Louisa’s brother and two naval captains, Benwick and Wentworth, are present, and both men are paralyzed with shock. Wentworth’s strength has left him, and he cries out, asking if there was “no one to help” the fallen Louisa (Austen 92). Anne jumps to action, calling for a surgeon; from that point forward, the men rely on her judgment for what should be done. Anne demonstrates great wisdom, akin even to that of a naval captain; Paul Westover finds that Louisa Musgrove’s fall in Lyme could actually be read as a battle scene, with Anne as captain. Through the disorientation, “Anne is the only one to remain cool under fire,” and “takes command on deck” (Westover 96). While the trained officers lose control of their faculties, Anne shows “a presence of mind that reveal her afresh as the equal of Captain Wentworth” (96). Mary Favret bolsters these claims by asserting that in “her service and care, there is a touch of the officer in Anne Elliot,” which cannot be ignored (168). Just as Mrs. Croft uses her intelligence to secure equality amongst her husband and other officers, Anne uses her cleverness to assert herself equal to Wentworth and other men in their travel group.

Certainly, other females in Austen's novels demonstrate intelligence—however, in *Persuasion*, Anne and Mrs. Croft are the two women who demonstrate the most wisdom as their knowledge translates into sage insights and action. Notably, Lady Russell is also considered an intellectual woman, but she can never achieve the equality Anne and Mrs. Croft attain because she places too much “value on rank and consequence” and prefers to adhere to tradition (Austen 15). Mrs. Croft and Anne are intelligent *and* adaptable, which allows them to better navigate society's fluctuating standards.

Women in *Persuasion* who lack superior minds remain on land, but while Anne only demonstrates landed intelligence throughout the text, her level of wisdom (particularly in distressing tactical situations) implies that she is the ideal woman to leave land behind and travel with her husband throughout his naval service, just as Mrs. Croft has. Certain critics argue Anne would never join Wentworth at sea post-novel. Charles Rhezka notes that “no significant naval engagement took place during the period between Napoleon's escape and decisive defeat,” so Anne's fears of paying the “tax of quick alarm” that war brings to “a sailor's wife” are unlikely to be realized (Rhezka 100, Austen 203). However, whether Anne would have *actually* gone to sea is not as important as whether she was *prepared* to go to sea. Throughout *Persuasion*, the text insists that Anne is ready for naval experiences similar to Mrs. Croft's. As was earlier established, Anne has experience traveling—while she has never left England, she is accustomed to ending her day without a place of her own to return to, just as anyone on a ship, male or female, retires to their temporary quarters. Furthermore, through Anne's response to Louisa's fall, she demonstrates the shrewdness and rationality that Mrs. Croft argues a woman should have on deck. Anne's ability for movement and her preparedness for professional life distinguishes her from other Austen heroines—their virtues best suit them for a domestic profession in a landed estate, while Anne's qualities suit her for movement across the Atlantic.

IV: Redefining the Outsider

Mrs. Croft and Anne's final parallel is their characterization as outsiders and how they treat others who appear to be outsiders. Mrs. Croft is introduced as having “a squareness, uprightness, and vigour of form,” as well as a “reddened and weather-beaten complexion” that makes her seem much older than

thirty-eight (Austen 44). Immediately, Mrs. Croft is differentialized from other women. She has no children, nor any particular beauty. In fact, her characteristics have a masculine look, and her complexion is even compared to her husband's. Mrs. Croft's unique appearance coupled with her previously discussed unique actions in economics, movement, and intelligence make her somewhat of an outsider. Certainly, she is an outsider beloved by those who know her, but an outsider nonetheless. Anne also exhibits the characteristics of an outsider. Like Mrs. Croft, Anne no longer has any bloom, and she is growing out of her young age; at the novel's start, she is twenty-seven. Unlike other Austen heroines, who are all in their late teens or early twenties and have a naivety ripe for a bildungsroman, Anne was "forced into prudence in her youth," and has a maturity singular to her character (Austen 30). Despite her "elegance of mind," Anne's age and appearance make her a "nobody with either father or sister," and she is consistently cast to the side — an outsider in her own family (11).

When Mrs. Croft and Anne meet, the two outsiders quickly bond. Anne instantly feels Mrs. Croft pays her "feelings of great consideration," and believes "herself a favourite" of the woman (Austen 44, 103). Mrs. Croft is one of the only females to show Anne significant attention. Lady Russell is present in Anne's life—she was the dear friend of Anne's deceased mother and is now Anne's godmother. This information, however, insinuates that Lady Russell's presence in Anne's life is somewhat obligatory. Mrs. Croft, on the other hand, has no prior attachment to Anne, and engages with her on genuine terms. She may be the sister of Wentworth, but there is no indication that Mrs. Croft knows of a past romance between her brother and Anne. Rather, Mrs. Croft sees that Anne is an outsider—a woman like herself, a woman with great potential—and becomes not just her model, but her friend.

Just as Mrs. Croft pays attention to Anne, Anne pays attention to another outsider: Mrs. Smith. An old childhood friend of Anne's, Mrs. Smith is now a sick, financially destitute widow who lives alone. Anne visits her often, but more significantly, Anne never abandons her. Previous heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, are also friends with women who are on the outskirts of society. Elizabeth is connected to Charlotte Lucas, a plain and unmarried twenty-seven-year-old woman. However, after Charlotte marries Mr. Collins, a man who is somewhat of a joke, Elizabeth's "disappointment" in Charlotte ensures that "no real confidence could ever subsist between" the friends again (*Pride*, Austen 92). Similarly, Emma befriends Harriet Smith, the ditzy, illegitimate daughter of no one important. Though Emma tries to mold

her into a respected young lady who can enter society, Harriet's decision to marry a farmer leads Emma to cast her off; "the intimacy between [Harriet] and Emma must sink," and Emma allows their friendship to fade away (*Emma*, Austen 371). Thus, Mrs. Smith's appearance in the last three paragraphs of *Persuasion* is significant; she is "the earliest visitor" in Anne and Wentworth's married life, and is offered aid by the Wentworths, rather than scorn (202). The text implies an outsider is becoming an irrelevant concept. Before the war, upper-class landed gentry and aristocrats were the most valued members of society; the way *Persuasion* values figures like Mrs. Croft, Anne, and Mrs. Smith suggests that outsiders have power, and that power is taking root in traditional society.

V: Conclusion

While Mrs. Croft and Anne are outsiders in traditional society, by the novel's end, they are also the characters most satisfied with their lives, and the women who have the most equality amongst men. During the war, Mrs. Croft became a female model of successfully navigating the fields of economics, travel, and intelligent action; she embraces her status as a different kind of woman in both looks and lifestyle. Throughout *Persuasion*, Anne adheres more to Mrs. Croft's model than the example of other heroines before her, suggesting that in the post-war world, the new woman is not to be ignored. Rather, as traditional standards and people become displaced, women who are confident in modern ideals will eventually take center stage as leaders and equals amongst men. Of course, there is always more work to be done and more battles to be fought, but Christopher Clausson finds that for Jane Austen, "a wider world is suddenly visible on the horizon" (99). After Waterloo, the world stretches beyond the privileges of landed gentry and invites figures like Mrs. Croft and Anne Elliot to represent Austen's idea of the modernized, moveable, post-war woman.

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