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

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Abstract

Hidden beneath the structure of Regency England lies a society near eruption. In *Persuasion*, Austen brings her characters on a journey through the landscape of social revolution. Bath serves as pinnacle of this 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, however, is conducted under completely different training mechanisms. This second skirmish follows the fall of aristocracy and the rise of meritocracy. Although crushed by the previous defeat, through the new structure, Anne and her friends are able to claim victory. Yes, as one critic has said, Anne “defeats” Bath, but it is much more than a victory over place. She has also re-written history for herself and those who follow her.
In 1793 France declared war on England, and through a series of complex political events would remain at war for the next 12 years. It was not until after the battle of Waterloo in 1815 that the British were finally able to enjoy a lasting peace. During the summer of 1816 an authoress by the name of Jane Austen began work on her final novel *Persuasion*. It would not be published until after her death the next year. However, as a book written in and based on the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, *Persuasion* holds powerful import as a sociopolitical commentary.

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” (Harris, 11). Particularly in her last book *Persuasion*, Austen resists the simplicity with which she is often accused, and portrays a sharp analysis of the process of social revolution.

The social revolution portrayed in *Persuasion* is not the deadly affair fought throughout France. However, it is a fight which requires the characters, particularly Anne, to expand their boarders socially and psychologically. Throughout *Persuasion*, Austen uses the structure of physical revolution – particularly the physical battlefield of Bath, the consequences of defeat and the decline of the ruling power –to explore the personal and societal effects of social revolution.

As we enter Austen’s world, it is important to note that physical space takes on an important role. Rarely is a place simply a place. The physical settings of Austen’s novels are typically rife with
psychological, mental or social significance. Rebecca Posusta remarked in *Architecture of the Mind and Place in Jane Austen’s Persuasion:*

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 heroin’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 of *Pride and Prejudice* reports she first fell in love with Darcy while viewing his Pemberley estate. Emma receives several harsh lessons on her first trip outside her known world during the episode at Box Hill. It is unsurprising, therefore that in *Persuasion* Anne should psychologically be so closely linked with her experiences in Bath.

In a physical war, battlefields take on a special distinction. Students of history learn of battles as place-names. Gettysburg, Waterloo and Verdun are just a few examples of this technique. Movements of troops are specifically aligned so battles can be fought at the ideal place. The battle in *Persuasion* was not physical, but social, and therefore was fought in the social center of England. Throughout the novel Bath takes on an odd sort of omnipresence. It is mentioned by name over a hundred times, and that trend is not restricted to when Anne is physically present. In the beginning we see its omnipresent influence as the family discusses the inevitability of their relocation. The family is situated in Kellynch Hall, but we are directed mentally towards Bath. Nothing is said of goodbyes or leaving the home, but much is said about the possibilities awaiting them. Even Anne’s reaction in this scene is surprisingly strong for one who has been physically removed from Bath for nearly ten years. Although Anne occupies many different settings throughout the course of *Persuasion*, Bath is always mentally present. Even
when Bath itself is not the direct subject of discussion, the presence of Captain Wentworth keeps Anne’s memories fresh. The very name of Anne’s past flame serves as a not so subtle reminder of a journey that was once taken, and presumably one of some worth. Anne is unable to leave her past battleground behind.

Anne’s first experience fighting in Bath is not recorded in its chronological order, nor is it covered with the breadth one might expect given the import it has on the rest of the story. Austen briefly summarizes these experiences in chapter four, glossing 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 Mrs. Russell and Sir Walter than those of Anne and Captain Wentworth. Initially this stylistic maneuver appears odd, however, Mrs. Russell and Sir Walter are the characters who hold power. The first words of *Persuasion* are “Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall” (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 Mrs. Russell that Anne’s engagement was dissolved in the first place, and although Austen records “not with a few months ended Anne’s share of suffering from it” (19), it is generally accepted that Anne’s broken engagement was for the best. As conquers Sir Walter and Mrs. Russell have the power to write the history. Therefore, Anne’s story is trivialized and swept under the rug.

Rather than detailing Anne’s feelings regarding her experience in Bath, Austen chooses to capitalize on the effects of Anne’s decision. 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 Mrs. Russell is surprised when Anne mentions regrets regarding Captain Wentworth. Instead, the suffering of Anne is marked by 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 inability to choose her surroundings occurs within the first few pages of *Persuasion*. Anne sincerely dreads the idea of returning to Bath, but her voice is silenced. 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, going to Lyme, 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 structure. 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 itself is power in the world inhabited by Austen’s characters. Those who have power not only have the freedom to move about as they please, but notoriously select their associates with care. Simply glancing at a list of people who Sir Walter or Elizabeth snub throughout *Persuasion* would provide ample evidence of this reality. Anne, however, has none of that power. Rebecca Posusta notes 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.” Inability to communicate, therefore is one of the side effects of exile. Not until she moves to Lyme and away from the influence of Kelwynch 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.

Although Anne partially regains her voice in Lyme, it is not until she returns to Bath and accepts Wentworth’s proposal that Anne is truly set free. She finds strength in the company of Benwick, the Crofts, the Musgroves and Mrs. Smith, but finding her voice amongst the socially elite proves to be more of a process than an event. Anne is able to converse freely with Mrs. Russell and Mr. Elliot, but her ideas regarding society and marriage are trivialized and rejected by both parties. As Anne continues to find her voice, Captain Wentworth fights a similar battle. It is evident he desires to speak while in Bath, but he is continually frustrated in his aim. Even when he is finally able to make his intentions 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” (158). When Anne speaks openly about love to Captain Benwick, Wentworth is then given the power to write. Only after this liberation does Austen mark:

> 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’s and Sir Walter’s are largely silenced, while our heroine determinedly makes plans with her hero.

When Anne returns to Bath she does so as a completely new social construct begins to emerge. Her physical and communicative liberation also signals a decline in the importance of those who held power over her. Jeff 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. Within Bath place continues to play an important role. From Sir Walter at Camden Place to Mrs. Smith in the Westgate buildings, the social stratosphere is marked geographically according to the rules of aristocracy. 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’ (4), mattered so much.”

Unfortunately for Sir Walter, his lofty situation above the city does not reflect his 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, Sir Walter struggles to maintain the illusion of power as he desperately seeks the favor of Lady Dalrymple, scorns the social choices of Anne and continues in his lavishly vain lifestyle. These elitist choices make Sir Walter’s position all the more precarious, rather that securing it. He continues
engaging with society through outdated methods. Oblivious of the shifting societal values, the end of the book shows Captain Wentworth, not Sir Walter, as the victor.

This change of power between those who fight with aristocratic methods and those who have risen with the new meritocracy occurs somewhat gradually and in a series of small moments. Anne’s entire experience in Bath is a battle between the powers of aristocracy and aristocracy, and often these parties seek to further their agendas through Anne. Conflicts arise regarding her presumed marriage to Mr. Elliot, her friendship with Mrs. Smith, her preferred circle of friends, and even her choices in entertainment. Initially we see a strong attachment to the social rules proscribed by her family. In Milsom street she greets Captain Wentworth, but leaves with Mr. Elliot. During the concert she spends more time with the Captain, but is pulled away by Mr. Elliot.

As Anne begins to reject the social stigmas proscribed 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!” (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.

Through the new structure of meritocracy, Anne and her 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. Henrietta and Louisa are likewise
married, and their marriages are discussed in terms of companionability rather than social compatibility.
Mrs. Smith finds her situation dramatically improved, and even Mrs. Russell is gratified by Anne’s
happiness. On the other hand, Elizabeth finds herself steadily aging and without any prospects in sight,
Mr. Elliot chooses to “withdraw” (165), Mrs. Clay disappears, and Sir Walter is left to reconcile himself to
Wentworth. Even in regards to Lady Russell, Anne takes an authoritarian stance and pronounces that
doing justice to Captain Wentworth, “was what Lady Russell had now to do” (165). This statement not
only demonstrates the immense amount of power which Anne now holds, but also the change in values.
Imagine Sir Walter’s 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. (165)

Clearly the tables have turned. Although money, beauty and family titles were once considered the
standard for respectability, the ideals of aristocracy have been replaced with the value of meritocracy.

Social revolution is rarely given the same distinction as political revolution. Austen, however,
interweaves the revolutions. The social revolution in England during the 1700s was technically bloodless,
but as Austen demonstrates, the consequences were anything but insignificant. On a personal and
national scale, the shift from aristocracy to meritocracy was as significant as the war with France. Anne
suffers the consequences of social exclusion, yet rises to the top. Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mr. Elliot and
others benefit from the social structure implemented by the aristocracy, but then fall. Austen brings the battle to the drawing room, and leaves her readers contemplating ideas of both society and revolution.
Works Cited


