

THE NOVEL, JANE AUSTEN AND ANGLO-AMERICAN MODERNITY: READING 'BEYOND THE SHRUBBERY'

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the Atlantic, watery vortex of myriad economic and cultural exchanges, roaring multiplicity of agencies, vast whirlpool of creative powers. Paul Youngquist and Frances Botkin, "Introduction: *Black Romanticism: Romantic Circulations*"

... just because Austen referred to Antigua in *Mansfield Park* or to realms visited by the British navy in *Persuasion* without any thought of possible responses by the Caribbean or Indian natives resident there is no reason for us to do the same. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

Introduction

Scholars involved in Atlantic studies have long recognised the making of an Anglo-Atlantic world as the outcome of multi-directional transactions across time and space – with the Atlantic Ocean figuring as a bridge or arc rather than a barrier. This is dramatized within the structuring metaphor of the dynamic flow of the Atlantic Gulf Stream itself, reflecting the flow of economic, intellectual, cultural and other exchanges moving backwards and forwards across it. This idea of the Atlantic as a space of flow and exchange contests the concept of a single north-south movement across the Atlantic as an unproblematic phenomenon and instead refigures ideas of core and margin. This is effectively demonstrated, according to Youngquist and Bodkin, in Paul Gilroy's configuration of the Black Atlantic's *movement/counter-movement* (dynamic swirl) that replaces *the stable ground* of the nation as an imagined community of cultural production. In his text, *Theorizing a Colonial Caribbean-Atlantic Imaginary*, Keith Sandiford argues that through the work of early historians such as Richard Ligon and diarists/writers such as Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, an "English imaginary enters the flow or ontological stream of the Caribbean" (3-4). He then points out that this imaginary was "projected to serve the hegemonic designs of empire" (4). However, having entered the Caribbean 'ontological stream,' or should I say, 'onto-epistemological stream,' it played a significant role in what he has termed a colonial Caribbean-Atlantic imaginary. This latter imaginary is the product of bi-directional oceanic flows – that interaction between England and her Atlantic colonies symbolised by "sugar, slaves and the ocean" (Sandiford 8). Writing on the early West Indies as figured in Richard Ligon's *True and Exact History* (1657), and Lewis's *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834), Sandiford observes that in "material, economic, and figural terms, sugar, slaves and the related seaborne trade colluded to generate flows that produced an empire-building, world-making imaginary very early in Barbados' colonial history" (8). Thus, the success of the Barbadian plantation economy along with that of Jamaica (about which Sandiford also writes) played a key role in transforming, not only the Atlantic world, but also European economies.

In this paper, I argue that Jane Austen's last published novel, *Persuasion* (1816) breaks from the trajectory of her earlier novels, goes somewhere new, through its dramatization of the role of the English navy in an Atlantic modernity in which England's domination of the seas – the creation and maintenance of an 'empire of the seas' – played a significant role; thus the title of my study here, "The Novel, Jane Austen and Anglo-Atlantic Modernity." I am engaging here in what Edward Said terms, in *Culture and Imperialism*, a 'contrapuntal reading' of Austen's last published completed novel, as an afterword to the English canon, by using her allusions to foreign lands through England's maritime engagement as the English novel's continual engagement with 'otherness'. In reading 'beyond the shrubbery' – a reference to the gypsy episode in *Emma* (discussed later) – I wish to move my reading of *Persuasion* beyond the apparent domesticity of the narrative to a more open and flowing, even problematic reading.

The idea of reading 'beyond the shrubbery' connotes moving beyond the familiar ways of assessing Austen's fictions as 'domestic fictions' that demarcate a comfortably contained Englishness to one that includes reading the foreign and unhomely in her work. This is not a totally new engagement, as we see from Said's reading of Austen in Culture and Imperialism, more recent essays in The Postcolonial Jane Austen, and other sources. I wish here not merely to add to this ongoing 'debate' but to go a bit further by placing a British-Atlantic imaginary and a Caribbean-Atlantic imaginary in dialogue with each other in my reading of flows and counterflows in Persuasion. Thus, mention of Mrs. Smith's husband's West Indian property, Captain Wentworth's actions or naval activities in the West Indies demonstrate and affirm this Anglo-Atlantic imaginary flow within the Caribbean's onto-epistemological stream. What we have here then are representations of the intersections or crosscurrents of British-Atlantic and Caribbean-Atlantic modernities.

Anglo-Atlantic Modernity/ies

It must be borne in mind, as Sandiford reminds us, that the West Indies in the eighteenth century contained some of the most profitable European colonies in the world (8). It is not too much of a stretch to see here the role that European navies and their activities played in helping to ensure and secure this success. The oceanic metaphor of flows and counterflows employed by Sandiford (the image of the 'arc' that runs throughout his text) along with a poetics of relations, are therefore fittingly used in this context of early European imperialism. Sandiford employs the trope of the 'flow' to connote the coexistence of diametrical opposites in his work. To facilitate this, it is therefore vital to search for "a conceptual fluid dynamics" (25). Of the 'flow' he writes:

I have chosen the principle of flow to empower and hold in paradoxical union the disparate energies implicated in those oppositions. Flow makes an apposite fit for the persistence of water and its affiliated figurae in these texts, as well as for the repeated patterns of movement and relationships that converge and then radiate outward to peripheries and back again. (25)

For his part, Ian Baucom, following Giovanni Arrighi, identifies 'spaces-of-flow' which were pursued in the development of economic and financial systems in the English eighteenth century and onwards. Of these 'spaces-of-flow,' he identifies London and Liverpool as the Atlantic's most dominant during this period, with Liverpool certainly challenging, if not superseding, London. Having identified the role they played in the development of the banking and insurance system, he also shows that they presided over "circuits of exchange" (52) that were "less national than transmarine" (52) and that the "cycle of accumulation . . . was less British than Atlantic" (52). Baucom continues: the "oceanic trade . . . had become fundamental to Britain's prosperity even as it linked the nation's capital culture to an extranational, circum-Atlantic geography of exchange" (52), and concludes that the "finance culture that preceded, enabled, and secured this circuit of cross-Atlantic commodity exchange; the bank, stock, credit, insurance, and loan-driven money forms of value that underwrote this cycle of accumulation, presided over its rise" (53).

In line with Baucom, David Hancock, writing on the role of the London merchants of the eighteenth century in the rise of the British-Atlantic economy, states that they created an

interconnected chain of shipping and trading routes between London and Calcutta, Madeira, the British West Indies and the North American mainland [that] made them wealthy and provided the commercial infrastructure for the development of the British Atlantic world in the eighteenth century. (2)

These views underline what Laura Doyle, in "Notes Toward a Dialectical Method," calls the "interactive co-production of imperial modernities" (196) that transpired or were produced in the Atlantic worlds. Hence, based on this, we can develop a theoretical framework around what may be called, 'circum-Atlantic studies.'

According to David Armitage's typology of Atlantic history, circum-Atlantic history provides a fruitful and challenging area of research and discussion by conceiving of the Atlantic as a "zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission" (16). Here we have the history of the ocean as an "arena distinct from any of the particular, narrower, oceanic zones that comprise it (16). Circum-Atlantic history is

the history of the people who crossed the Atlantic, who lived on its shores and who participated in the communities it made possible, of their commerce and their ideas, as well as the diseases they carried, the flora they transplanted and the fauna they transported. . . . [It] incorporates everything *around* the Atlantic basin, and it is mobile and connective, tracing circulation *about* the Atlantic world. (16)

My rather elliptical application of these writers' construction of an oceanic world of mobility and exchange, however, demonstrates the flow as a repeated pattern of movement and relationship and provides a useful platform for my reading of the early English novel in this paper – particularly the main area of my paper which examines the triadic flow between the English country house, the West Indian sugar colonies and the ship.

Related to the above, Arthur Stinchcombe has said, regarding the political system of the late eighteenth century British Caribbean colonies, that it was "organized around the tie between planters and the English government . . . with British mercantile forces and the military (especially the navy) around the periphery of this tie" (178). I disagree with Stinchcombe on one point; namely his contention that the navy's role here was peripheral. My own view is that the navy was central to British colonial/imperial activity in the Caribbean. Baucom underscores the importance of the Royal Navy to the earlier financial revolution of the eighteenth century: the

debts the Royal Navy ran up as it pursued a British hegemony over the Caribbean and fought to maintain imperial sovereignty over the American continent; the soldiers' and sailors' payrolls dispatched to Lord Cornwallis and Admiral Rodney as they waged war on the colonial patriots and pursued the French from one Caribbean port to another; the constantly accumulating debts of compensation paid out to the wounded and the families of the dead; and, above all, the interest-bearing bills of exchange that were consigned to naval storekeepers in Kingston, victualing agents in Barbados, and quartermasters in Newfoundland served as a constant source of enrichment to the financial revolution: an always open trans-Atlantic factory of debt. (84)

It is this understanding of the centrality of the navy's role in British imperial activity in the Caribbean that undergirds my reading of Austen's Persuasion in this paper.

This is essentially the world within which Austen's two 'Anglo-Atlantic' novels are emplotted. Both Mansfield Park and Persuasion are concerned, and more than tangentially, with not only the effect of wealth on late eighteenth and early nineteenth century English society (Michie 27), but also the spaces-of-flows, including financial flows, between Britain and her Atlantic empire; the former making that link between the English Great House of Sir Thomas Bertram (Mansfield Park) and his sugar interests in Antigua; the latter dramatizing, through the work of the Royal Navy, the maritime links between England and what Austen terms, in Mansfield Park, her "foreign stations" (53). These connections are demonstrated in Austen's fictions in the ways in which, as Jon Mee points out, she shows how a "newly

central role [adopted by] women" (75), this "expanded view of domesticity" (75), coincides or coalesces with the expansion of Empire. Perhaps, it is because of this that Miss Frances, at the beginning of Mansfield Park, is so readily able to speculate that Sir Thomas could find a place for her eldest son "in the concerns of his West Indian property" (8) or that he could be sent to "Woolwich" (8) or "out to the East" (8). In addition, Mrs. Croft, Admiral Croft's wife in Persuasion, often accompanies her husband on voyages aboard his ship. Austen was certainly aware of and demonstrated in all her fictions England's tentacled imperial reach and its maritime imperialism in the making of a commercial culture and national capitalist wealth. Indeed, within this context, Mee's point that these are "domestic fictions written on the exotic 'support' of colonial trade" (75) is well taken. It must be borne in mind that Austen's fictions were written in what Angus Ross, in his introduction to Samuel Richardson's Clarissa, calls "that required constituent of the realist, an elaborate, well-worked-out context of economic relationships" (20). These economic relationships, at whose foundation were Britain's imperial activities - including its control of the empire of the seas - are at the heart of family relationships in Austen's novels (the Bertrams' in Mansfield Park, the Crofts' and the Wentworths' in Persuasion are exemplars). It must be remembered also that Austen grew up at a time of Britain's increased imperial reach and the consolidation or integration of its Atlantic community, from the mid to late eighteenth century (see Hancock).

In fact, the following view of the novels of Sir Walter Scott offered by Jerome De Groot may also apply to the novels of Austen, Scott's contemporary:

The revolutionary and Napoleonic wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the emergence of capitalism as an economic structure after the Enlightenment, had a direct cultural consequence which was the realist novel. The economic grounds for realism, the appearance of capitalism, meant that the novel evolved into something which reflected a new sense of [historical reality]. (24)

Although there is evidence of such historical reality in Austen's fiction, in her narrative construction of plot and character, the historical continuity of the historical novel is seen more markedly in Persuasion and Mansfield Park. Additionally, I share the view with Saree Makdisi who, writing on Mansfield Park, contends that the novel

anticipates the new role of the British empire as a machine for the production of a new form of subjectivity, one appropriate to its needs both at home and abroad, needs that cannot be understood simply in terms of national interest and national identity, let alone geopolitical organization. (195)

Makdisi goes on to suggest that

what is perhaps most remarkable about the novel's treatment of imperialism is that it demonstrates the extent to which a certain disciplinary logic . . . the logic animating the self-regulated modern subject, must operate seamlessly *across* the empire's domain, unifying rather than separating domestic and imperial space. (195)

She concludes by observing that

Mansfield Park traces the development of an entirely new form of imperialism, reaching out from the empire's heart to tie masters and slaves, colonizers and colonized . . . however unequally and brutally . . . together, not just geopolitically but in terms of a narrowly and instrumentally understood conception of self-regulating subjectivity. (195)

Taking into consideration Makdisi's views above on Mansfield Park's thematisation of this 'new' form of imperialism, I wish to suggest that Austen consolidates this position in

Persuasion by seamlessly linking the world of the English great houses to the activities of her naval men (and women) and the world beyond the shrubberies of the English house – the West Indies, Madeira, the East Indies. In Persuasion, by allusions and hints, memory and recall, Austen’s narrative links domestic and imperial space.

The English Novel

The English novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was as much a product of the imperialism, mentioned above, as a narrative of it. As Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever have stated in their introduction to The Literary Channel: the Inter-National Invention of the Novel, the novel has a long historical link in the development of its “formal innovations as responses to the transformations accompanying the advent of capitalist modernity” (1). In other words, the rise of the novel is coterminous with the growth of European capitalist modernity and, in the case of Britain, with an Anglo-Atlantic modernity.¹ Cohen and Dever go on to argue for the novel’s “implication in the project of empire and the consolidation of the nation-state” (1-2), thus echoing views expressed by both Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel and Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities. While the novel thematised English domesticity and class formation, an empirical epistemology that was decidedly English and an examination of an English individual consciousness, it also narrated the concerns of England’s overseas empire and imperial possessions. It both narrated and participated in what may be termed an Anglo-Atlantic modernity through its creation of Anglo-Atlantic subjects from shipwrecked captains to exported criminals to escaped slaves to intrepid naval captains, and their financial backers in London, Liverpool and other cities.² It played a significant role in helping to fashion the illusion of a distinct English racial identity as vital to individual freedom and the rights of citizenship. From Daniel Defoe to Jane Austen and beyond, the novel not only contained Atlantic references and allusions but also represented England’s involvement in Atlantic modernity. As Edward Said has affirmed in Culture and Imperialism, “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible . . . to read one without in some way dealing with the other” (71).

We should note also that the novel did not ‘rise’ as a singularly influenced, nationally inspired genre, but as a transnational, even inter-national, transmigratory and translational literary form – again the idea of the flow’ reappears. As Catherine Ingrassia has shown, “the idea of ‘the novel’ was not located in British culture, but was consistently European and often global in its scope and influences” (1). The English literary tradition was the outcome of cross-cultural exchanges and ‘global outreach.’ The plot of many of these early novels occurs within what Doyle, in Freedom’s Empire, calls the “new money economy” (153) of late seventeenth and early to mid eighteenth century transnational economies that “developed with the founding of the Bank of England in the wake of the Glorious Revolution” (153). Margaret Anne Doody reinforces this position in her The True Story of the Novel. In addressing the status of the English ‘domestic’ eighteenth and nineteenth century novel, she points out that it is a “vortex of energies, strong lines of force radiating outward from the home center and drawing foreign elements toward it. . . . The walls of ‘home’ are very

¹Georg Lukacs also links the ‘rise’ of the realist novel (however problematic) with the development of capitalist modernity. See his The Historical Novel and Studies in European Realism.

²See Laura Doyle, Freedom’s Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640-1940.

porous. . . . Its characters refuse to keep enclosed in a narrow private world, but are very dashing in all directions" (278). We see this refusal to keep to a narrow private world in Austen's narration of the stories of Anne Elliott and her naval men in *Persuasion*. For while the sea is not a central locale within the novel's plot, it is, however, through the author's allusive poetics, an important 'flowing' motif in understanding the arrangement of the plot and sub-plots. Therefore, it is profitable to examine the 'rise' of the novel within this broader, unstable, multidirectional context that has to do with English imperial power and expansionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This will, of course, assist in helping to "articulate cultural anxieties about the changing forms of [wealth] and [its] impact" (Michie 1) on the early nineteenth century society of Austen's novels.

English eighteenth and nineteenth century literature wrote the West Indies as the exotic other place, a possession of the great British empire, against which was writ the larger and more important 'text' of Englishness. However, we should remember that by the eighteenth century, the West Indies existed as a real place for many English writers through the association with British imperial activities in the colonies. (A perusal of the volumes of the *Naval Chronicle* of the latter half of the century and thereafter can attest to this but, even here, the West Indies exists as that space of 'alterity' owned or desired by the British). However, as Simon Gikandi argues, this creation of otherness or "colonial alterity" (228) proved to be "one of the conduits into which anxieties about Englishness were channelled" (228). However, in writing Englishness against this West Indian otherness, and further, in footnoting or parenthesising the West Indies within the English text, English literature (perhaps unwittingly) created a space for 'other' readings of its texts. If, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue, a "canon is not a body of texts *per se*, but rather a set of reading practices . . . assumptions . . . about genre, about literature, and even about writing" (189), then an interrogation of the canon is an interrogation of the ways that 'official' British literature has been read and the literary and cultural assumptions surrounding this literature. Subsequently, a counter-canonical 'reading' may include reading against the grain by way of reading absences, allusions and hints.

For my purposes here, therefore, I am interested in the ways that the West Indies/West Indian occupied British intellectual and imaginative space even while being denied subjectivity and presence within a broader context of Atlantic modernity. This came about, I argue, in the wake of developments in the eighteenth century that witnessed a representation in fiction of mercantile capitalism merging with imperial expansion. (See Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as well as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*.) The eighteenth century was not only the century of the 'rise' of the novel form in the terms set out by Ian Watt's magisterial study of the novel, but of the novel itself as the invention or inauguration of a fictional entity and reading process – the novel as institution, as Said puts it.³ It is precisely within this latter context, I argue, that Said locates his (mis)reading of Jane Austen.

The novel's hybrid nature may then be seen as symptomatic of the flows – the cultural crossings and generic promiscuity – that English fictional writing could not contain. The presence of the 'other', even when 'absent', is found everywhere in the early British

³In making the case for *authority* as one of the beginning conditions of the novel, in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Said takes the term 'author' (from which 'authority' is derived in this context) as itself a derivative of the Latin word *augere*. Thus, "in the written statement, beginning or inauguration, augmentation by extension, possession and continuity stand for . . . authority" (83-84).

novel. Ros Ballaster is of the view that the hybrid nature of the British novel, rather than signalling the abandoning of the argument about the national character of the novel, instead "recognize[s] that it could be taken as a measure of the strength and adaptability of an emergent 'Englishness' that it could speak from and of the place of the 'other'" (76). The idea of Englishness, according to Ballaster, is strong enough not only to self-consciously recognise what is British, but also to have the adaptability to recognise the 'other' as integral to its self-definition. But it is precisely this self-confident and 'complete' sense of British self-identification that has become the 'target' of 'contrapuntal readings' over the past three decades or more. And it is the canonicity of this literature of British self-confidence and wholeness that has come under 'review.'

Jane Austen and the English Novel

My focus here on the novel, Jane Austen and an Anglo-Atlantic modernity acknowledges Austen's imbrication in the poetics of the early English realist novel's engagement in the writing of empire – England's involvement in Atlantic modernities. Austen's Persuasion (and Mansfield Park) may be used as an example of her novelisation of England's expansionism and the contest for the 'empire of the seas.' If Austen's final novel in particular contains more references to foreign lands and naval activities than her previous five, this may be because Persuasion is a novel, according to Deidre Lynch, in which "Austen heads somewhere new" (vii). This 'new' direction may be seen in the realisation that it is among those texts that mark a transition in the novelisation of an Englishness that saw the narration of a "nation that had to incorporate a much more diverse range of social types and provide them with a livelihood" (Armstrong 54). The period in which Austen wrote was a time of increasing travel, imperial expansion and 'global rivalry.' Persuasion in many ways hints at, rather than dramatises this in the "reception and the influence of foreign thought and culture in [Austen's] England" (Class and Robinson 1) in its narration of the activities of Austen's returning naval men and the ways that they contributed to the formation of a 'new' England or 'new' English identities.

In many ways, Persuasion marks a threshold in the English novelisation of its nationalism by dramatising Englishmen and women 'crossing' over to a new world order – an order that was deeply involved in Anglo-Atlantic modernity. As Lynch has observed, "Britons inhabiting the 'new world order' of 1815 were, in unprecedented ways, invited to see themselves as time-travellers who had crossed a threshold and passed into a new historical era" (ix-x). Marilyn Butler suggests that "[i]n Captain Frederick Wentworth Persuasion has a classic case-study of a modern-minded man from the conservative point of view" (224). Such a character-construction seems typical of Austen's poetics of allusions and hints at a move toward 'newness' without radically breaking with the past. This 'conservative' modern-mindedness is seen in Austen's last piece of fiction, the fragment Sanditon (1817). In this unfinished novel, we have Austen's first 'black' character, the "oddest thing that ever was!" (419), Miss Lambe, the mulatto, "young Westindian of large Fortune" (419). She had been brought over to Sanditon by Mrs Griffiths for special care to restore her "delicate health" (419). "She was about 17, half Mulatto, chilly & tender, had a maid of her own, was to have the best room in the lodgings, & was always of the first consequence in every plan of Mrs. G" (421). West Indian young women of large fortune, such as Miss Lambe, Olivia Fairfield, the heroine of The Woman of Colour (1808) and Rhoda Schwartz of Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1876), were all the progeny of miscegenation, often (illicit) sexual liaisons between white planters and their black or mulatto mistresses. These wealthy young women, in nineteenth century England, often parentless, figure not only the strange or exotic presence in the text, or England's flirtation with the cultures of the West Indies, but also speak to the ways that England's involvement in Atlantic

modernity deeply changed the Englishness of the society, fracturing and fragmenting, producing continued forms of resistance to English homogeneity. As Douglas Bush argues, “[i]n matter and manner Sanditon is radically different from its predecessors” (192), marking a “shift to a new world and new methods” (193). I do not agree with the ‘radical shift’ that Bush suggests because firstly, there is still much of the old class order in the fragment and secondly, it is too small a fragment of the text on which to base such bold conclusions. However, one may conclude that in Sanditon, Austen continued to signal her desire to go somewhere ‘new’, a ‘newness,’ I argue, that started with Persuasion.

Further, I acknowledge the ‘atmosphere’ of civil dissension of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in which Austen wrote and in which she set her novels. This climate is described by Marlon Ross as the “growth pains of a new nation” (57). As Ross notes, toward the end of the eighteenth century, Britain’s growth could be reconceptualised in terms of a “complex kind of imperial desire, the desire to monopolize the sources of acquisition – to control the waterways, to control international trade, including slavery, and to control the import of raw materials needed to fuel industrial expansion” (69-70). In a real sense, both Mansfield Park and Persuasion relate to this. In addition, and of note here, is the observation by Janine Barchas that “Austen deviates in her last novel from her prior investment in the landed gentry, celebrating instead her strong ‘enthusiasm for the Navy’” (206). But this seemingly radical modernity in Austen’s last novel is somewhat complicated, Barchas argues, by the inversion of names and roles given to her main players in the drama of Persuasion. For, while Austen “selects names from the most ancient families of England’s landed aristocracy” (206) – Wentworth and Croft – to give to her heroic new sailor class, she “assigns to her landed gentry . . . Dalrymple, Carteret and Elliott” (206), names belonging “to navy greats recorded in the lists” (206). Thus, Barchas concludes, “Austen’s choice of names for her fictional characters thus complicates the novel’s opposition between old and new, land and sea” (206).

While this may be so, the choice of names however, points to a deliberate attempt by Austen in her last novel to take us somewhere ‘new’, to point toward the creation of a new commercial class and the building of a new economy in England. In this sense, I argue that Austen anticipated much of what came later in Victorian fiction with the creation of more diverse and problematic subjectivities in the work of Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray and Trollope (although the nineteenth century is seen as the period of the nationalization and consolidation of the English novel). This apparent contradiction lies at the heart of my rereading of the early nineteenth century English novel and Austen’s final completed novel in particular. In addition, I argue that what Makdisi says of Mansfield Park may also be applied to Persuasion, namely that the novel “anticipates the new role of the British empire as machine for the production of a new form of subjectivity . . . appropriate to its needs both at home and abroad” (195). This view can be supported by Lynch’s which holds that

much in Persuasion suggests how responsive Austen was to the arrangements her fellow novelists were developing to portray the complex interconnections between individual lives and larger social structures, as well as to portray the private sphere, where everyday lives are led by ordinary people, as a site of national historical formation. (xvi)

Thus, Persuasion not only invites ‘reading beyond the shrubbery’, but is itself emplotted beyond the familiar ‘domestic’ world of Austen’s other novels. The easy, ‘complete’ world of Highbury and its environs in Emma for example, exist not only in the shadow of a war being fought abroad in which British soldiers are involved, but also in the presence of a wild gypsy world “beyond the shrubbery” (218) just outside its borders. The ‘gypsy episode,’ as it is called, exposes the threat that the ‘contaminated other’ poses to Emma’s enclosed society. But while this threat is soon contained physically, it is continued narratively long after the event:

The gypsies did not wait for the operation of justice; they took themselves off in a hurry. The young ladies of Highbury might have walked again in safety before their panic began, and the whole history dwindled soon into a matter of little importance but to Emma and her nephews: - in her imagination it maintained its ground, and Henry and John were still asking every day for the story of Harriet and the gypsies, and still tenaciously setting her right if she varied in the slightest particular from the original. (219)

Emma's retention of the story, while it shows the 'lasting' effects of the news of the incident on her, takes on a much larger significance in demonstrating her narrative control of the event especially in its further dramatisation of her version of the Frank Churchill/Harriet 'romance'. Her nephews' insistence on the realist retelling of the story of Harriet and the gypsies, illustrates a certain canonicity in the narration and interpretation of the event. The challenge to the order and propriety of the Highbury world is contained not only in the flight of the gypsies but also in the manner of the narration of the incident, the ways in which it is 'domesticated' by Emma's re-telling.

However, the challenge posed to eighteenth and nineteenth century English fiction in writing this 'emergent' Englishness and the consolidation of a national identity, lay in how to contain this 'threat' of the 'other.' How was the 'other' to be constructed? Where was he/she to be placed within/out the fictive world of the text? What properties of the 'other' would best demonstrate or showcase the uniqueness, strength and adaptability of English character? For the 'other', as I have already indicated, was not constructed for him/herself, but to serve the greater British sense of self-existence and self-identification. But as we know from our readings of these novels, the 'other' could not be easily contained. Stevenson's Hyde, Shelley's Frankenstein, Stoker's Dracula, speak, if problematically, to the whole issue of the dangerous 'other' who transgressed his/her boundaries. Much effort and textual space has been spent trying to identify and contain this threat. In addition, since texts are not transparent, self-contained artifacts occupying a single space, but usually spill over their boundaries, creating other spaces, they are subject to myriad readings and plural meanings.

'Reading' Persuasion

In what is left of this paper, I want to offer a reading of two incidents that occur early in Persuasion that further inform the argumentative thrust of this essay. The first occurs at the beginning of the novel with Sir Walter Elliott, the custodian of aristocratic lineage and of its textualisation (the Baronetage), 'reading' the Baronetage, looking over his family tree and the importance of his lineage and heritage as a vital member of the local aristocracy. The Baronetage is thus not only an "authoritative list, as of the works of an author" but "a basis for judgment; standard; criterion."⁴ The second incident involves the Musgrove sisters 'reading' or scouring the Navy List, the "first that had ever been at Uppercross" (63) to find out the ships which Captain Wentworth had commanded. These two 'texts' play more than a simple inter/textual role in the novel. They, in fact, signify on two important aspects of the narrative: first, the 'class contest' between the struggling aristocracy, represented by Sir Walter, and the rising naval group, represented by Admiral Croft, Captains Wentworth, Benwick and Harville; second, they underwrite some of the changes occurring in early nineteenth century England, represented in the novel, as a result of the inter-continental flows or exchanges of late

⁴These definitions of the Baronetage are drawn from the American Heritage Dictionary.

eighteenth, early nineteenth century British expansionism and the new peace being enjoyed after years of war.

In “‘Domestic Virtues and National Importance’: Lord Nelson, Captain Wentworth, and the English Napoleonic War Hero,” Joycelyn Harris makes some telling observations on the importance of these two ‘texts’ to the novel’s story, which should be cited in full because of what they lend to the position I am taking here: one sister

places Captain Wentworth’s ‘precious volume,’ the Navy List . . . against Sir Walter Elliot’s ‘volume of honour,’ the Baronetage . . . to show that for all its awful cost, war enabled promotion through merit rather than birth. These two volumes represent radically different definitions of honour and rank, with the Navy List’s proud record of names and deeds everywhere challenging the Baronetage’s parade of inherited but not always deserved privilege. . . . In a final twist, Wentworth’s prize money and fame inscribe him not only in that modern volume of honour, the Navy List, but also in Sir Walter’s fossilized one, the Baronetage. He will actually appear in it twice, for though Sir Walter records his marriage to Anne Elliot there, he will be enrolled in the Baronetage by his own right after Austen wickedly decreed, by a last-minute change in the manuscript from knighthood to baronetcy . . . that he will rival Sir Walter in rank. (204-205)

Austen not only, as Harris states, opens a “wide satiric gap between the ‘rating’ system of the navy and the more arbitrary hierarchies of society” (204), she also provides an opening through which we may read challenges to master narratives and canonicity: the provisional and ‘revisional’ nature of this ‘thing’ called the canon. As J. F. Burrows has shown, the

opposed values of Sir Walter and Captain Wentworth are nicely epitomized by the attitude each takes to his particular ‘volume of honour.’ If the Baronetage feeds Sir Walter’s sense of rank and station, the Navy List, with its record of appointments and promotions, reflects Captain Wentworth’s ideas of personal endeavour and personal achievement, of the career open to talent. (3)

Austen may have been aware of the rivalry within the navy between competing ‘classes’ and ranks and for that matter outside the naval group, within the aristocracy, that moved some to refer to some captains as ‘scavengers’ – those that trawled the sea for profit. Such a view of these naval officers, who acquired wealth through such activity, men like Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth, would certainly not have been lost on someone as shallow and snobbish as Sir Walter. However, this would have been tempered or countered by the recent successes of the navy in helping to secure the peace now being enjoyed, not least of which would have been the success of the late Admiral Horatio Nelson on whom both Croft and Wentworth may be loosely ‘patterned.’ That those in the navy saw their importance to the success of the realm as worthy of gratitude (in its many forms) is certainly borne out by this view of someone writing in the Naval Chronicle of July–December 1814. Responding to the calling of certain captains as ‘scavengers’ and the squabbling over promotions, especially to the rank of captain (commander) of naval vessels, a writer observes: “let any one coolly reflect on the brilliancy of naval achievements, - that the *empire of the seas* has secured us that of the land – and every defect vanishes, and leaves nothing behind but admiration and gratitude” (97). And while Austen may not have read the Naval Chronicle, she was certainly aware, through her two brothers in the navy, about the events and standards of naval life. In fact, in Mansfield Park she appears to confirm the former when she has Miss Crawford state: “Post-captains may be very good sort of men, but they do not belong to us. Of various admirals I could tell you a great deal: of them and their flags, and the gradation of their pay, and their bickering and jealousies” (53).

In Austen's work, reference to the supportive role of the navy in overseas possessions is far more frequent than direct reference to those same colonial possessions. (This is more so in *Persuasion* than in any other Austen novel.)⁵ *Persuasion* is set in a fictive world in which the British Navy was highly successful in battles. The front cover of the Broadview Press edition of the novel, with a photograph of ships docked in the harbour (itself another 'reading' of the novel perhaps), demonstrates the importance of the navy to Austen's last novel. She shows how the wealth obtained by these naval officers such as Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft, a sort of navy-supported privateering, created a group of self-made men in opposition to the inherited wealth of a declining aristocracy. And it must be noted that this taking of prizes by the navy is linked to colonial entanglements in the colonies, especially between England and France. And it is from this colonial rivalry that these 'post-captains' such as Wentworth made their fortunes through successive captures of 'enemy' ships and other illegal vessels trawling the Atlantic waters.⁶ These fortunes later flowed into the English economy, often altering the lives/status of their bearers.

This colonial 'rivalry' mentioned in the previous paragraph was, however, represented in fiction before Austen, in eighteenth century novels in both England and France that, according to Helen McMurran, "not only wield[ed] domestic authority in the wider matrix of empire" (131) but also "emplot[ted] Atlantic mobility . . . generated in and through exchanges between Europeans and non-Europeans . . . as well as through the trans-imperial relations in the Atlantic . . . [and] entanglements between different nations' colonizers" (131). It is of particular importance that in Austen's *Persuasion*, it is the action around the French colony of St. Domingo in the West Indies that first brought Captain Wentworth note among the group at Kellynch Hall eight years earlier (25). However, back then he was not considered good enough for Anne and his proposal is dismissed first by Sir Walter as a "very degrading alliance" (25) and later by Lady Russell as a "most unfortunate one" (25). Thus the closed ranks of the aristocracy, writ large by the *Baronetage*, of which Sir Walter assumes the self-appointed role of gatekeeper, are at the moment, safely guarded from the encroachment of these 'others'.

Even in these early pages Austen hints at challenges to the aristocratic tradition and the author/ity and 'canonicity' of the *Baronetage*. For example, the eldest daughter, Elizabeth, scorns the *Baronetage*, 'the book of books' because at the 'old' age of twenty-nine she is still unmarried, has not been "properly solicited by baronet-blood" (7) and cannot therefore take up the book "with as much enjoyment as in her early youth" (7). She dislikes the book because the fact that she is "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" (7). The two books are thus representations not only of two classes or groups in society, but are also examples of the ways in which 'traditions' are invented and developed over time. They show that master narratives and 'canons' are specious and contingent, and never entirely free from the challenges of other texts and narrative traditions.

It is in *Persuasion* that Austen's poetics shows an England that is being gradually, if not radically, restructured by England's overseas activities. There is that constant arcing, especially

⁵Of 37 references to the Armed Services overseas in all of Austen's fiction, 24 are found in *Persuasion* alone (Nunn 4).

⁶Wentworth actually holds a post, not a rank. As a full captain in command of a sixth-rate ship of twenty guns or above, his title is a 'post-captain' rather than a commander or a lieutenant-in-command who, like Captain Benwick, merely held the courtesy title of captain. He makes his fortune by "successive captures" (29-30), not by salary, for a captain's pay was only about £100 a year. (See Harris in this regard.)

early in the novel, between the 'home' land of England and her Atlantic empire, exemplified in the naval activities and in the oceanic metaphors. Nowhere is this probably better dramatised in the novel than in a conversation between Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Musgrove on women at sea. Responding to Wentworth's views that he would rather not see "women on board" (67), Mrs. Croft, his sister, replies:

Oh Frederick! – But I cannot believe it of you. . . . Women may be as comfortable on board, as in the best house in England. I believe I have lived as much on board as most women, and I know nothing superior to the accommodations of a man of war. I declare I have not a comfort or an indulgence about me, even at Kellynch-hall . . . beyond what I always had in most of the ships I have lived in; and they have been five altogether. (67)

Later, responding to Mrs. Musgrove's comment on her "great" (68) travels, Mrs. Croft reiterates that she has done

[p]retty well, ma'am, in the fifteen years of my marriage; though many women have done more. I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and have been once to the East Indies, and back again; and only once, besides being in different places about home – Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar. But I never went beyond the Straights – and never was in the West Indies. We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies. (68)

The views expressed by Mrs. Croft in both these statements, while they certainly allow for a fruitful discussion of the place of women in British maritime activity (and their narrativisation of such activity – I am thinking here of Lady Nugent's Journal (1801-1805) as well as Janet Schaw's Journal of a Lady of Quality [1934]), also underline the 'circum-Atlanticism' that forms the basis of this paper. Mrs. Croft's Atlantic journeys occur within that world of exchange, flows and counter-flows that was essential to England's imperial project in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the linking of the ship and the country house – a reference that demonstrates Austen's tendency to 'domesticate' such imperial/colonial themes in her fiction. And while I cannot say that Austen *directly* addressed colonialism or colonialist themes, a careful reading of her works will find these themes at key moments throughout.

However, it is in Persuasion (and Mansfield Park) of all her novels that Austen dramatises how important these 'domesticated' colonial themes are for the story she wants to tell. And the point has been well made by Nunn that "were it not for Persuasion and Mansfield Park . . . in which there is a foreign reference every five or six pages, it would still be difficult to argue for even a limited degree of significant global reference in Jane Austen's novels" (6). And it is this limited 'global reference' that provides the basis for the discussion here. For as Said has pointed out in Culture and Imperialism, Persuasion references "interests and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas and four continents" (84). It is in this novel that we see what may be called Austen's global reach and her domestication of colonial issues through allusions and hints rather than direct reference. It is here that we get a glimpse of Austen's 'acknowledgment' of British naval superiority as the "cornerstone of its imperial power" (Darryl Jones 180), obliquely referenced through the successes of Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth. As Jones has stated, by "making Admiral Croft a veteran of Trafalgar, Austen is of course associating him intimately with Nelson, and thus with a triumphantly patriotic assertion of heroic national identity" (180). In addition, by linking the growth and admiration of Captain Wentworth and the other naval characters with the 'outsider' role of Anne Elliott, the character whose subjectivity best demonstrates the development of individual consciousness, Austen is giving much of the subjective and narrational authority in the novel to characters/individuals from the 'other' text, the Navy List.

Conclusion

Austen's novel then, with gentle irony and satire, represents the world that paved the way for Victorianism – the world of a landed aristocracy amid changing fortunes, seen in the rise of a 'new class' among whom were naval men and returning soldiers. Persuasion thus represents a time of change at home and abroad. But this time of change was also a time of the consolidation of a specific national character, the consolidation of Englishness based primarily on British maritime dominance.

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