

“Strangers filling their place”: Jane Austen and the Decline of the Landed Order

In *Mansfield Park* (1814) Jane Austen analyses the state of the English nation in what was to be the last full year of the Napoleonic Wars but scholars cannot say with certainty what precisely it is that the novel has to say about the state of the nation. Regardless of the divergent criticism, the novel remains inimitable for its explorations of history, family, country, and the natural which are central to Austen’s representation of the landed country family. *Persuasion* (1818) is a post-war novel and in this, it differs quite explicitly from *Mansfield Park* and her other completed works, all of which fall in their various ways under the shadow of the Franco-British wars of 1793-1815. Beginning in “the summer of 1814” (P, 14) and continuing through 1815, the novel is both a reflection on and a product of the social changes wrought by the Napoleonic Wars, changes which amounted, in Linda Colley’s words, to nothing less than a redefinition of the nation. War after 1707 “played a vital part in the invention of a British nation” (Colley, 367) and the post-Waterloo period demonstrated that in Great Britain, a nation forged more than anything else through military endeavour, the winning of radical social change was also intimately bound up with the impact of war (Colley, 371).

The four year period between *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* were significant times in Austen’s career and her conception of British identity. In this essay, I want to argue that Austen articulated an unequivocal shift both in attitudes towards the landed classes and her Tory social outlook. She did this in these two novels through the vehicle of property ownership and land management. Essentially a conservative writer,¹ she raises concerns over the dysfunctionality of

¹ Literary scholarship has produced a wide variety of different readings and approaches to Austen. Marilyn Butler has argued in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1978, 1987) that Austen is a Burkean Tory who shores up the traditional conservative sense of national and familial identity in direct reaction to the spread of Enlightenment and Jacobin thinking into English political discourse. Alistair Duckworth in *Improvement of the Estate* (1971) also reads

the landed order in *Mansfield Park* to suggest that it, particularly the gentry, needs reforming because the landed order were the ones who provided society with its moral leadership. Austen identifies the landed order's improper responses to their social heritage but ultimately preserves the inherited structure of values and behaviour. *Persuasion*, however, is a novel of a different and developing conception of Britishness. The possibility of the landed order's salvation by a recommitment to its original responsibilities degenerates into the degradation of the landed orders in *Persuasion*. As *Persuasion* raises issues about the constitution of social organisations, particularly the status of the landed classes versus meritocratic conceptions of rank, it paints a much bleaker picture of the landed. By *Persuasion* Austen seems to have lost faith in the gentry. *Persuasion* is the most profoundly modern of Austen's six canonical novels for in it she shows the beginnings of a new configuration of the landed society necessitated by the decline of the old order. Despite the decline, Austen's reconfiguration of the landed society remains conservative for she does not abolish it; instead, Austen alters it by introducing new members and a new conception of the landed order.

Jane Austen and Her Fictional Philosophy

Critical accounts of *Mansfield Park* have differed wildly, to a far greater extent than with any other Austen novel, dividing scholars between readings of a radical or conservative Austen. Despite divergent readings, I believe that it is a fundamentally conservative text in which Austen, ever aware of the ways in which the status quo was being threatened, chooses to portray the

Austen as a conservative who uses the estate as an ordered physical structure metonymic for Burke's metaphor of the nation as an inherited institution. Using similar critical-theoretical approaches but arriving at a diametrically opposed conclusion, Claudia L. Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988) argues that Austen's writing displays undeniable, if not overt, marks of sympathy with Enlightenment feminist tenets and offers variously powerful critiques of contemporary English social and political institutions. In this paper, I will argue that the evidence supports Butler's and Duckworth's canonical construction of Austen as a Burkean Tory writer who expresses her views through the vehicle of property ownership and land management in her novels.

dysfunctionality of the landed order in order to solicit reform. With *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's faith in the landed classes reaches its peak;² following this affirmation, however, she depicts a much less stable society in *Mansfield Park*. Mansfield Park is threatened by the loosening of traditional bonds; yet, despite crumbling authority, Austen demonstrates that salvation is possible. Such optimism and confidence in the landed order are absent, or at least, severely undermined in *Persuasion*.

Many of Austen's heroines find themselves in the dilemma of being an individual in a society in which traditional and corporate values are gradually being compromised, or are felt to be yielding, to new economic and individualistic ones. The economic transvaluation of morality is, hence, central in the heroines' struggle to discover the moral order, but once they have, the traditional order is invariably sustained. Fully aware of cultural instability, Austen creates heroines who resist the economic corruption and set themselves up in opposition to those forces that would compromise their principles. This opposition is not subversive for through affirming the principles which underlie society, traditional inherited structures are affirmed. Once the social responsibility of the gentry has been recognised, and thereby affirmed, heroines become mistresses of estates or parsonages to maintain their social inheritance and the continuity of the community.

In Austen's earlier novels, including *Mansfield Park*, Austen appears to have the utmost faith in the inherited structure of society and she reaffirms it through the marriages of happiness and the reestablishment of order by reconstituting those who initially threatened the world of the novel through individual commitment to the ideal and attainable order or by rejecting them.

² The description of Darcy's home during Elizabeth's visit is a natural analogy for the landed order's social and moral character. Pemberley, landscaped and improved but "without any artificial appearance" (PP, 259), is the model estate. Pemberley enacts in bricks and mortar, wood and water, the novel's synthesising and ameliorating middle way between uncultivated nature and the art of landscape improvements. Aesthetically pleasing but without pretension or extravagance, Pemberley denotes the excellence of moral character.

Austen – cognisant of vulgar society, its corrupting influences and the confrontation between traditional and economic values in her society – uses an ethical framework in which she distinguishes between the ideal society with its hierarchical order, and its corrupted and corrupting elements to resist any transvaluation of traditional morality while consistently expressing a serious concern for the continuity of the state’s social structures akin to the Burkean model of the state as an inherited estate. It is important to stress, however, that I am not arguing that Austen should be read as an author who blindly affirms society while ignoring the dangers of formality or complacent pride in status. Austen is a Burkean conservative but not a reactionary defender of the *status quo*; conscious of weakening external structures, she insists, until *Persuasion*, on maintaining the landed orders while advocating for the proper and gradual improvements, rather than impetuous innovations, of its social heritage, which Burke argues was essential for the preservation and “progression” of the estate (184).

The Estate and the Nation

As the title of *Mansfield Park* implies, the novel is concerned with place and tradition, and with the relation of the individual to his inheritance. Estates function throughout Austen’s fiction “not only as the settings of action but as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners” (Duckworth, 38). Central to this novel is the estate: the metaphor of the whole social and moral inheritance that Austen defends. Landscape improvements figure incidentally in all of Austen’s novels but it is in *Mansfield Park* that they are made into a recurring and central motif to suggest her attitudes to the process of social change. Although landed society is threatened by neglect and moral corruption, it is nonetheless affirmed and maintained in the end.

In developing the motif of improvement Austen skilfully makes a distinction between proper and improper responses to an inherited culture.

The metaphoric use of the great house comes from the tradition of Country House poetry, such as Ben Jonson's *Penshurst* and Andrew Marvell's *Appleton House*, whose significance in mythologising a national polity Raymond Williams has analysed in *The Country and the City* (1973) by equating the management of the estate with that of the state (57). Throughout the eighteenth century, landscape improvements and garden theory were profoundly imbricated with theories of national identity. In the England of the 1790s, and through to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, this image of the estate as a microcosm for the nation and an expression of the ideal English polity gained currency because of its use by Edmund Burke as a recurring image in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790):

You will observe that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity – as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom... By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors (183-4).

Clara Tuite has argued that *Mansfield Park* uses and engages Burke's organic discourse which unites the figures of country, England, and naturalised social hierarchy through the image of the estate to recast the political as the familial (100-101). In doing so, the novel forms an interrelation with Burkean conservatism that makes *Mansfield Park* the familial enactment of the principles of responsible trusteeship and inheritance that structure Burke's political theory.

Improvements, Innovations, and Alterations: Sotherton Court

Austen's attitudes to social change are reflected in two incidents of landscape improvements to the estate described in *Mansfield Park*. The visit to Sotherton and Henry Crawford's improvement proposals for Thornton Lacey are the most metaphoric because they partake and contribute to a characteristically eighteenth-century complex of aesthetic, cultural, and national discourses all of which cohere around one area of metaphoric investigation and display: the garden.

The improvement motif is raised early in *Mansfield Park* during a conversation in the Mansfield dining parlour when Rushworth, who has just returned from a visit to his friend Smith's place, expresses his desire to improve his home, Sotherton. Sotherton Court, an "ancient manorial residence of the family, with all its rights of court-leet and court-baron" (MP, 107) and "one of the largest estates and finest places in the country" (MP, 66), is an estate representative of the nation but Rushworth, incomprehensive of its significance, now considers it "a prison – quite a dismal old prison" which "wants improvement... beyond anything" (MP, 81). Maria Bertram affirms his choice to employ Humphrey Repton, and Mrs. Norris promptly supports her niece. Henry Crawford is soon discovered to be the true expert in landscape improvement and Mary Crawford expresses her approbation for Repton as an improver. The only opposition comes from Fanny and Edmund, establishing a clear division between those who have and those who have not acted properly towards the estate. It is in their comments that Austen's attitudes are made explicit: renovation is acceptable, but anything beyond that is tantamount to abusive over-improvement. What Austen is targeting here is the negative social implications of improvement.

The key to Austen's attitudes about the changing landed classes lies in the treatment of improvements. She is less concerned with Repton's aesthetic merits than with his methods of

radical improvement that promoted the idea of removing oneself from the community by isolating the estate and shutting out the community. Reptonian improvements often involved “drastic alterations to landscape... involving not only the indiscriminate cutting down of trees and the magical creation of rivers and lakes, but... the relocation of whole villages” (Duckworth, 44-5). The inordinate changes resulting from extreme landscaping signified dangerous consequences for cultural continuity.

Burke’s use of the imagery of excessive estate improvements to illustrate the horrors of the French Revolution also had a direct influence on Austen. Tuite argues that the presence of many complicated tropologies in *Mansfield Park* has specific pretexts in Burke’s *Reflections* making the novel the familial enactment of Burke’s political theory, and Burke an essential guide and a “course of household management” (102) in her “didactic novel of class instruction” (124). Burke described his dislike of radical change through the employment of estate metaphors in *Reflections* to illustrate the injuries done to an estate because of extreme improvements. Burke’s stalwart respect for the maintenance of the social heritage represented in the estate dictated his ideas about proper and improper conduct towards one’s inherited estate:

One of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated is, lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters, that they should not think it among their rights to cut off the entail or commit waste on the inheritance by destroying... the whole original fabric of their society, hazarding to leave to those who come after them a ruin instead of an habitation — and teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers (259).

Burke warned against vain trusteeship and the “unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions,” claiming that reckless actions would break “the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth” (259). The need for a stable structure is emphasised, and Burke repeatedly stressed the necessity of continuing to “act on the early received and uniformly continued sense of mankind... [and] like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from profanation and ruin” (256). Burke’s veneration of traditional structures and dislike of excessive alteration serve as useful keys in understanding Austen’s attitudes and critique of the gentry.

Despite his insistence on estate preservation, Burke was not staunchly opposed to change and renovations; he warned against the unimproved existence of institutions: “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” (170). The greatest danger, however, lies in the overthrow or destruction of traditional establishments and he carefully distinguishes between renovations and innovations; innovations were to be avoided because they were considered destruction of the estate and were always odious because they conveyed an idea of alterations for the worse. To renovate was “to treat the deficient or corrupt parts of an established order with the character of the whole in mind” (Duckworth, 46) but to innovate or alter “was to destroy all that had been built up” (Duckworth, 47). The technical uses of these terms are crucial in understanding Austen’s social criticism.

On a formal level, Austen’s use of genre is an icon for Burkean social renovation. In 1815, Walter Scott reviewed Austen’s *Emma* for the *Quarterly Review* and drafted, in the process, a formal lineage for British fiction which recognised Austen’s “primacy as the mother of the novel” (Burgess, 152) and her children, Austen’s novels, as the “modern novel’s legitimate... inheritors” (Burgess, 152). In doing so, Scott firmly established and “subsumed her

novels in his own ongoing project of cultural renovation and preservation through fiction” (Burgess, 153). Austen’s reform was exercised through her national romances – novels that reinvented the eighteenth-century romance genre, a genre “defined in large part by its enactment and narrative reshaping of the dynamics of social order... [to] convey a variety of positions oppositional to or supportive of contemporary social organisations from the domestic to the political” (Burgess, 10). Austen used romance as a formal metaphor for social renovation to express her serious concerns with the cultural inheritance of the state and to enact social critique, whether conservative or radical.

The idea of inheritance which “furnishes a sure principle of conservation” (Burke, 184) has been lost, or at least severely crippled, in *Mansfield Park*. The condition of Sotherton serves as a negative example of cultural atrophy stemming from neglect. Besides maintaining the strictest “etiquette” (MP, 218), which characterises the conduct of all affairs at Sotherton, its owners have little grasp of anything more important. Rushworth and his mother have no awareness of their duty. Mrs. Rushworth memorises the history of the portraits simply that she might be able to impress visitors; she does not comprehend the familial and national importance of the heritage embodied in paintings, which Burke similarly emphasises in his “gallery of portraits” (185). The history to which Mrs. Rushworth belongs, represented in the paintings, parallels the “pedigree... [of] illustrating ancestors” (Burke, 185) of Britain’s estate. Such a gallery ought to “procure reverence to our civil institutions” and teach observers to revere “those from whom they are descended” (Burke, 185). Such veneration of social heritage, or even any acknowledgement of an illustrious history, is absent with Mrs. Rushworth. In no sense does she regard herself as part of a living tradition.

Similarly, Rushworth's inability to see any significance in the cessation of the custom of family prayers reveals a moral idiocy and inadequate leadership. Dismissing the "house [that] was built in Elizabeth's time" as nothing more than "a dismal old prison" (MP, 81), Rushworth is well aware of the aesthetic deficiencies of his estate, but ignorant of far worse ills. Rushworth's improvements focus on the road leading to his house rather than the run-down cottages in the village that Maria describes as "a disgrace" (MP, 107). The propinquity of house and church, common in English estates and often emphasised in Austen's novels, "signifies the necessary interdependence of the clerical and landed orders" (Duckworth, 50), but the distance of the church from the house, and the redundancy of the family chapel suggest that Rushworth neglects both his secular and religious obligations to the community under his charge. It is also unlikely that Maria as mistress will summon the family to regular worship, further reinforcing Austen's dismay at the spiritual gap that the landed orders were supposed to supply. Rushworth's misdirected improvements and his later delight in wearing a "blue dress, and a pink satin cloak" (MP, 159) for the theatricals, reveal his vain character, foreshadowing the extreme vanity of *Persuasion's* Sir Walter Elliot who marks the unsalvageable decline of the gentry.³

Rushworth's readiness to cut down the avenue of trees also exposes his moral asininity and deficient leadership. Fanny's objection to Rushworth cutting down an avenue has a deeper metaphoric meaning because cutting down trees has been associated with a radical break with the past (Duckworth, 53). Trees, especially oaks, also have a major role in English national symbology and Rushworth's avenue is an avenue of "oak entirely" (MP, 107). Burke describes the English political scene in the 1790s as a field in which "half a dozen grasshoppers... [make]

³ It is interesting to note that in Austen's treatment of Rushworth's interest in his "blue dress, and a pink satin cloak" there is a possible connection to Thomas Paine's relentless mockery of aristocrats for their attachments to "fine blue ribbons" (80). This parallel suggests that Austen concedes Paine's point only to rebut it by marginalising Rushworth and promoting Edmund and Fanny. Although the aristocracy is indeed as corrupt as Paine proposes, removing them is not the answer. The damage is contained by introducing new members and a new conception of the aristocracy.

the field ring... whilst thousands of great cattle, repose beneath the shadow of the British oak” (Burke, 248). Regardless of political differences, the British oak, representing the British estate and its institutions, is at the centre of the field providing both groups with shade and protection. Cutting down oak trees, therefore, has explicit anti-nationalistic overtones.

That the improvements to Sotherton are taken up primarily by the younger generation signals the immediacy of the problem that Austen saw in the gentry. Traditional values are being corrupted among those who would eventually take over to become the next generation of landed society who must continue and maintain its inherited cultural heritage. The disregard for institutions and what they represent is precisely what Burke warns against for its potential to destroy Britain’s national inheritance. Inordinate changes resulting from extreme landscaping, combined with the selfish actions of the future gentry, threaten to tear down all that had been built up and leave posterity “the whole original fabric of their society” (Burke, 259) in a ruin. Sotherton represents the danger of “people [who] will not look forward to posterity... [or] backward to their ancestors” (Burke, 184), and who, in their failure, place the principle of conservation and transmission of the entire state in jeopardy.

The Estate, Improvement, and the Nation: Thornton Lacey

Henry Crawford’s suggestions for improvements to Thornton Lacey, which border on excessive alteration rather than the appropriate treatment of the deficient parts of the parsonage, represent an intensification of the problems posed by gratuitous and unprincipled estate improvements to gratify selfish desires, which Rushworth shows in his plans for Sotherton. Duckworth notes that “it is remarkable... how closely Crawford’s proposals resemble Repton”

(51), indicating the important didactic nature of this episode in a thoroughly didactic novel (Tuite, 124).

Given the metaphoric importance of estates in Austen, Crawford's suggestions to "clear away," "plant up," and "shut out" (MP, 253) features of the landscape are insidious because his wish to re-orient the front of the house suggests a desire for cultural reorientation that denotes a rejection of tradition. Crawford is intent on completely changing the condition of Thornton Lacey by "raising it into a *place*" (MP, 255), but while Edmund is not averse to "modern dress" (MP, 84) and has "two or three ideas" (MP, 254) about improving his living, he will not permit the wholesale redistribution of his parsonage. Here Edmund falls in line with Burke's prejudice in favour of an established commonwealth. It is only with "infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes" (220).

Crawford's advice is not only uninvited but pretentious and supererogatory. It is, however, the details of what Crawford plans to do that is most telling of what Austen finds most problematic with changing social attitudes. Crawford's plans are antithetical to the landed orders' traditional social heritage. The religious obligations of the gentry are consigned to pride, and worse, a false sense of pride. By "raising it into a *place*" (MP, 255), Crawford expects to give it "a higher character... as to make its owner be set down as the great land-holder of the parish" (MP, 255) and pretensions of "privilege and independence beyond all calculation" (MP, 255). Such grandiose plans for a parsonage contradict the basic Christian tenet of humility that Edmund as clergyman has vowed to observe. More than posturing, however, Crawford's plans are hostile to the traditional social obligations that form a part of the heritage of the landed orders.

Edmund's refusal of Crawford's suggestions does not imply that the parsonage is a perfect structure or that Austen views the social structure as an immutable constitution whose integrity would be destroyed by the slightest change. As her attitude to proper improvement has already suggested, she does not propose the inherited estate remain as an atemporal structure. Given the fallibility of human nature, an estate can never be a perfectly exemplary social model. There is a constant need for the individual not only to preserve but also to renovate his inheritance properly. He should respect the character of the whole while repairing the deficiency of the part only. Historical prescription and recognition of the existing cultural heritage should guide the renovations. Those who like the Bertram sisters assume that status confers value, or, like Tom Bertram, that the responsibilities of an heir may be neglected, promote the cultural atrophy and permit the reckless alterations that are to be eschewed. The estate is a valid structure only if it is supported by individuals who are committed to their social inheritance.

The inherited heritage assured: salvation and *damnatio memoriae*

In part as a result of these scenes of renovation, Tuite argues that *Mansfield Park* can be seen as a didactic allegory of the aristocratic family throughout the eighteenth century – its flaws, dangers, and accomplishments extendable in application to the English landed orders in general (103). It is in light of this understanding that the question of who can and cannot be counted as part of the family becomes central to the novel, and in extension applicable to English landed society. The answer is a key to the novel's "formidable aesthetic mastery as a conservative... text" (Tuite, 103). As Marilyn Butler suggests, *Mansfield Park* offers "a curious blend of stylization and naturalism," the effect of which is to "give flesh to the conservative case as no one else had done except Burke" (228). Being a fiction of "aristocratic regeneration" (Tuite, 111),

the novel affirms a conservative world and its socially hierarchical relations through the *damnatio memoriae* motif to expel subversive characters.

All inhabitants of Mansfield Park are deficient according to the novel's own system of values, requiring the preservation of the estate not by its trustees but by the one character who is, initially, and temporarily later, an outsider. The shortfalls of the Bertrams endanger the estate; those who should properly improve the state imperil it. Only Fanny possesses the instinctive sense of duty necessary for the continuance of the traditional culture of Mansfield because she is both an enemy to excessive estate improvements and the "only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent" (MP, 204). Fanny's right conduct is emphasised from the beginning and Austen is explicit about the crucial importance of education and the failure of parents or guardians in providing it.

Education sets Fanny apart and enables her to become Mansfield Park's saviour. Though shy, frail, submissive, and sanctimonious, her education allows Mansfield to rid itself of its decadent and corrupt tendencies. Fanny's education is clearly distinguished from the impractical accomplishments of Maria and Julia. Edmund, as mentor, has assisted in "the improvement of her mind" (MP, 52) by recommending books, encouraging her taste, and correcting her judgement. Fanny's general disregard for the "ceremonies of life" (MP, 117) and her "conduct... [that is] the result of good principles" (MP, 117), formed largely under Edmund's tutelage, makes her "the representative of Austen's own fundamental commitment to an inherited culture... and a social order" (Duckworth, 73).

The strength of Fanny's moral character and purity of her motivations set her apart. Fanny first distinguishes herself as a moral force during the theatricals, underscoring her earlier concern over the fate of the Sotherton avenue and the disuse of the chapel. When the

preparations become oppressive to her, she retires to “her nest of comforts” (MP, 172) to “pursue useful tasks which foster growth and respect the wisdom of the past” (Duckworth, 74). Fanny’s withdrawal from the corruption of the theatricals is “a search for a purity of moral intention” (Duckworth, 74) that allows her to judge of what is right in the novel. Even when she is berated by Mrs. Norris in the theatrical incident, Fanny adamantly insists on acting in accordance to what is “right” in obedience to a moral inheritance. She is the effective mistress of the Mansfield estate because she exhibits awareness in her duty to the social trust, the natural moral order, and the courage to maintain faith in principles and rules of right even when they are ignored.⁴

According to Tuite, conservative satire is predicated upon an important structural and ideological distinction between the individual and the general social class, whereby castigation of the individual... who departs from a particular moral or social code occurs... to correct and strengthen that code (110-11). This kind of distinction and correction are central to Austen’s social critique because critique as correction and cure “is a critical function” (Tuite, 111) of the novel. Like the country-house poem, *Mansfield Park* is predicated “on moments of aristocratic crisis” (Tuite, 111) during which it launches a pre-emptive defence for claims of hereditary privilege under attack. *Mansfield Park* is not, however, a reactionary defence of the *status quo*. Austen’s didacticism functions by local correction: even as it exempts institutions from critique, it projects the restoration of the whole through criticism of the individual (Tuite, 111).

The *damnatio memoriae* is the ultimate motif used in *Mansfield Park* to solidify the reconstituted and reaffirmed social order and traditional heritage of the landed orders by

⁴ There seems to be a Christian context of servant-leadership here in Fanny that accords with the moral order that Duckworth argues is part of Austen’s conservatism. Duckworth argues that the “recurring requirement of Jane Austen’s moral vision is that the formal and static façade of authority be enlivened and regenerated by individual energy” (7). In *Mansfield Park*, it is the resistance of Fanny Price to those forces endangering her world which permits the continuity of an integral society.

deliberately expelling unwanted members from the renovated family circle (Tuite, 104). The *damnatio memoriae* was a Roman patrician practice whereby “disobedient family members were omitted or effaced from a family portrait” (Tuite, 118); in the aristocratic drama of *Mansfield Park*, this involves retrenchment of moral characters, like Fanny and Edmund, and the excision of the scandalous. The “renegade Ward females are cut out... because they threaten the line with bad blood, bastardy and a crude dynastic marriage economy of mercenary ‘alliance’” (Tuite, 118). Those who are quick to innovate are ejected, as are those who deride the sanctity of marriage. Conversely, because Fanny actively remembers, looks back, perseveres, and is able to “reanimate the beleaguered... Bertram line” (Tuite, 119), she is entrenched and painted in. This punctilious ending reinforces the ideological and generic project of *Mansfield Park*.

The system falls apart: *Persuasion*

With *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s faith in the landed classes reaches its peak but following this affirmation landed society becomes less stable in *Mansfield Park*. Despite threats of loosening traditional bonds and crumbling authority, salvation is still possible. Such optimism and confidence in the landed society, arguably, disappears in *Persuasion* as Austen’s attitudes towards the landed classes and her Tory social outlook shifts. The estate as the metaphor of the whole social and moral inheritance that Austen defends is no longer the focus; the estate is not simply endangered but completely abandoned. Austen skilfully uses the structure of *Persuasion* to help readers grasp the extent to which the novel’s conclusion reverses her earlier position towards landed society. *Persuasion* is organised according to very simple but nonetheless effective principles. Kellynch, Lyme, and Bath are used to provide access to and exploration of the novel’s very distinct “little social commonwealths” (P, 44). Thus, after beginning with a

presentation of the moribund aristocracy at Kellynch, Austen moves on to the viable alternative, but by no means perfect, world of Lyme and the naval officers. The novel is brought to its conclusions when the separate social groups converge at Bath. Austen's representation of William Walter Elliot, the self-conscious manipulator whose concept of duty is "to do the best for himself" (P, 190), darkens the prospects for the restoration of the landed order, and in effect, dooms it. The marriage that ends *Persuasion* signals Austen's painful acknowledgement that the social order which she vindicates throughout her literary career is finally falling apart. The union between Anne and Frederick reveals the breakdown of the rigid boundaries of traditional society and suggests the possibility of a viable alternative, or, at least addition, to the landed classes, represented in the vigorous naval officers.

The opening chapter of *Persuasion* recounts Sir Walter Elliot's way of life, which demonstrates forcibly the decadent condition into which Austen believes the gentry has sunk. Sir Walter is extremely superficial and conceited; he is concerned with externals such as social position and personal appearance, but does not realise that they have value so long as they reflect the moral concerns of the inner man. As the narrator puts it, "vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation" (P, 10). The vanity exists on more than one level here for Sir Walter's vanity is both self-regarding and futile: he is vain and his life is in vain. To symbolise this, Austen surrounds Sir Walter with images of his own sterile self-duplication. As the Baronetage offers Sir Walter a reflection of himself, so too does his house, for he lives in a house of mirrors. He has wholly subscribed to a culture of appearances – of aristocratic conventions retained without responsibility, and of consumption driven by fashion and emulation. When Admiral Croft moves into Kellynch, the first thing he does is to take down Sir Walter's mirrors: "Such a number of looking-glasses!... there was no getting away from one's

self” (P, 121). Sir Walter’s vanity is the vanity against which Burke derided as “opposed to ‘true humility’” (qtd. in Duckworth, 186) because it makes the whole man false.

Sir Walter has forgotten the duties of his office; he is the irresponsible trustee, clearly unacceptable and deleterious to national wellbeing. He is a later and more outrageous version of Rushworth – vain, extravagant, and with no awareness of the “duties and dignity of the resident land-holder” (P, 130). That the Baronetage is the “book of books” (P, 13) at Kellynch represents the Elliots’ having replaced a traditional pride in social function for a vanity of status. For Sir Walter, the possession of a great house provides him with a source of prestige rather than a sense of duty. He is entirely unaware that the reputation of the aristocratic gentleman derives from the very real function that he is expected to perform. Austen severely censures his profligacy which forces him to rent Kellynch and retrench to Bath. Sir Walter’s decision to let Kellynch “is tantamount to his rejecting an entire cultural heritage” (Duckworth, 187) for though under his trusteeship Kellynch was not the exemplary estate of traditional order, the intrinsic value of his inheritance, like Rushworth’s Sotherton, is indicated in its valuable pictures and its rooms and furniture. The abandonment of the resonantly Burkean estate is nothing less than the landed classes’ relinquishment of power and privilege and the crumbling of the traditional order.

Besides describing the decrepit state of the aristocracy, the damning portrait of Sir Walter Elliot as a human relic and useless embodiment of a sterile aristocracy serves one final purpose: to prefigure the eventual collapse of the landed order. Far from “consolation” (P, 9), what the Baronetage entry offers is more like a chronicle of loss – of the dead wife, and of that far from incidental stillborn son. Although Sir Walter is not the first of Austen’s heirless patriarchs, and therefore to risk the loss of his estate, the precise date of the infant’s death is significant. That the stillborn son should date from the Revolutionary year of 1789 must be, given the degree of

precision in this passage, a deliberate symbolic gesture as a harbinger of the death of the aristocracy. Sir Walter, who produces nothing, not even heirs required by the patrilineal system which defines him, is unable to survive in the post-war order. Having no practical use-value but doing what he thought he was “imperiously called on to do” (P, 15), he is a leech on society. Indeed, the aristocracy in 1818 was hardly a propitious one. As Percy Shelley describes George III in “England in 1819,” the monarch was an “old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King” (l. 1), and the Prince Regent was hardly the model for the nation.

Although Austen recognises that things are changing, she is not yet ready to accept that power must pass into the hands of a middle class whose economic transvaluation of morals – not least through its contagion to aristocrats like Sir Walter and Mr. Rushworth – she found subversive to her vision of society that was essentially “a structure of values that are ultimately founded on religious principle” (Duckworth, 28). Austen could not accept the transformation of middle class materialism and the bourgeois emphasis on fashion and consumption, what Monaghan calls “the cash ethic” (144), with humanitarianism and a social conscience. The particular qualities with which Austen endows the navy, and to a lesser degree the Musgroves, separate them from their expected class affiliations, indicating that she has reconsidered their worth. The ability of the naval officers to resolve the significance they place on work, profession, and money with concern for the national interest, although not traditional values, transform them, nonetheless, into an idealised alternative to the landed order (Monaghan, 144).

The rehabilitation in attitudes towards the navy begins early in the novel when Sir Walter, representing perhaps the Austen before *Persuasion*, concedes that the navy “has its utility” (P, 24) but quickly complains that the profession “brings persons of obscure birth into undue distinction” (P, 24). The Lord St. Ives of his story is readily identified as Lord St Vincent, whose

father was a country curate; Sir Walter's vanity is injured by finding himself, as Baronet, obliged to give place to men of humble origin whose success owes nothing to the privilege of birth (Southam, 268). Anne, possibly Austen's avatar, rejects such derogatory comments; the fact that they have served their country and demonstrated a willingness to work wins her admiration. "The navy," she responds to her father's complaints, "who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give" (P, 24).

The trip to Lyme solidifies Austen's shifting attitudes towards the Navy that is shown "in its best light" (Southam, 265) as "a litany to warm naval hearts" (Southam, 275). From Mrs. Croft's determination to be with her husband Anne learns that naval characters possess warm family feelings: "While we were together... there was nothing to be feared... The only time that I ever really suffered... was the winter that I passed by myself at Deal (P, 70). Next, Anne learns that the sailors have developed a professional ethic that emphasises naval fraternity and genuine mutual concern. Wentworth asserts that he would "assist any brother officer's wife... [and] bring any thing of Harville's from the world's end, if he wanted it" (P, 69); this camaraderie is confirmed in the Harvilles, who with little cash and temporary accommodations, have transformed their lodgings nonetheless into a warm family dwelling that can offer a space to a distressed and fortuneless comrade like Benwick, who like many officers after 1815, without prize-money and on a reduced pay scale, has barely enough to live on (Southam, 285), and a hospitable welcome to Wentworth. The effect of such familial and selfless comradeship, even with those penniless, is more poignant when contrasted with the Elliots' vacuous circle of people of rank. Anne is thoroughly impressed by the three captains' "friendliness... brotherliness...

openness” (P, 97) and sings the navy’s praises with Louisa in her adoration of the sailors who possess “more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England” (P, 97).

That such domestic happiness and mutual concern is possible in the navy is, I believe, Austen’s direct manipulation of the Burkean model of the state to emphasise the possibility of the naval officers in replacing the landed order as the next pillars of the English state. The state, according to Burke, is not a crude contrivance of man, but a finely-tuned creation of God. Members of the landed order are to form relationships with their communities to maintain order because a strong community creates a strong country. The wellbeing of the state is directly related to the quality of the relationships that the individual is able to establish with his family and his community. If any part fails, the state suffers; if enough parts fail, the state fails. Conversely, if the individual, the family and the community flourish, the nation prospers. The health of society, then, was felt to depend above all on the individuals, especially those of the gentry because they were the foundations of the English country, and in extension, the state (Burke, 202). In contrast with Sir Walter’s pompous narcissism and apathy towards estate management, naval values as largely familial elevate the naval characters into a viable replacement for the enervated and rapidly declining landed society.

Contrasted to this society are the Crofts who, despite their bourgeois upbringing, have the qualities required of landed society in their sense of duty and their national commitments that Anne praises early in *Persuasion* during a conversation with Sir Walter. Cognisant of this lamentable replacement in positions, Anne admits that Kellynch has passed into “better hands” (P, 119), and that under the trusteeship of the ennobled Crofts her father’s neglected duties would be fulfilled: Anne “felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief” (P, 119).

Once the action shifts to Bath Austen ceases almost completely to express reservations about the prospect of living in a world dominated by people outside the landed order, and this is in large part achieved by the insidiousness of the embourgeoisied William Walter Elliot. The formality and proper social principles inculcated in Anne are shown to be not merely unnecessary but even synonymous with hypocrisy and alienation. In support of this conclusion, Austen places great stress on the deficiencies of Mr. Elliot, whose excellent manners serve only to cover his real depravity. To all appearances, he is an excellent person, possessed of a combination of personal and social accomplishments and moral excellence that suggests a union of all that could be desired in a man but social decorum is merely a mask for the hypocrite to achieve selfish ends. Here Austen re-examines the idea of the gentleman and the role of manners and her conclusion is sceptical. She questions the trust in gentlemanly behaviour and the consistent presentation of the hypocritical Mr. Elliot as a man of “polished” manners may be indicative of her wavering trust in manners as traditionally “that mode of public conduct which ideally exists as the outward and visible sign of an inward moral condition” (Duckworth, 181).⁵ All of Mr. Elliot’s actions are superficial and without moral ground; that Austen should use the character most closely connected to the landed society that she wanted to defend, is suggestive of her lost of faith in the landed order. If the ideal leaders are corrupt, an alternative must be found.

Nowhere more than in the marriage between Anne and Wentworth do we catch intimations of Austen’s apprehension that traditional society is vanishing and the solid base of her inherited world seriously weakened. Anne is the only Elliot to show any respect for the traditions of the estate and, therefore, the only member of the landed orders mindful of her social

⁵ It is interesting to note the simulacral nature of William Walter Elliot and Sir Walter. William Elliot’s manners are “polished” and likely without inward substance, and Sir Walter’s room at Kellynch is filled with mirrors. As Sir Walter’s heir, William Elliot has also succumbed to the bourgeois emphasis on fashion and appearance, and middle class consumer culture. Both men have neglected their traditional roles.

inheritance. In a novel where the estate exists as a physical emblem of cultural heritage, Anne, like other Austen heroines, should invariably become mistress of either an estate or a parsonage. Although Anne innately possesses right conduct, active principles, and moral fortitude her marriage does not guarantee the continuity of the community for she does not return to the stable and rooted existence of the land: “Anne had no Uppercross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family” (P, 235). Instead, she becomes a sailor’s wife, “glories in being a sailor’s wife” (P. 237), and also commits herself to an itinerant existence.

Anne’s marriage to Wentworth is a union of landed and naval interests that infuses the effete characters of the landed class with the “vigour” (P, 50) of the energetic naval officers and, most importantly, indicates the prospect of naval officers being able to enter the landed classes. Duckworth agrees that “there can be no doubt that Austen intended a thematic contrast of some sort” (202) to suggest the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of dynamic naval officers. Because most naval officers came from landed families themselves, what this marriage represents is the potential for those officers of “obscure birth” (P, 24), those officers not from landed families, to achieve what Sir Walter found upsetting about the navy, that of “raising men to honours” (P, 24). Associated with social mobility, this marriage also gives voice to anti-aristocratic sentiments that call for the advancement by virtue of meritocracy rather than birth that will be played out in the course of the nineteenth century as those engaged in the professions, trade, and industry make increasing demands for a society in which work and the acquisition of money were sources of prestige.

Although as far as we can see Wentworth will remain a professional rather than landed, the end of the novel holds incredible hope for the potential and capability of him to become wealthier and landed, and maybe even made a member of the aristocracy. Charles Musgrove

believes that Wentworth “had not made less than twenty thousand pounds by the war” (P, 74). Prize-money, “the golden harvest of the sea” (Southam, 121), was not an ignoble pursuit but “a truism accepted throughout the Navy... [as] the only route to wealth” (Southam, 114). Frigate captains, like Wentworth, could have received up to three hundred years of pay by capturing one enemy frigate (Southam, 121). Mary speculates on Wentworth’s ennoblement as a consequence: “If he should rise to any great honours! If he should ever be made a baronet!” (P, 74) – though, ever filled with the Elliot pride, she snobbishly adds that “It would be a new creation, however, and I never think much of your new creations” (P, 75). Brian Southam points out that throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “elaborate tariffs of honours, promotion,, and cash payments” (112) were paid to victorious officers that included peerages (111). Though Anne is left without an estate, Austen suggests the very real likelihood that she will have one eventually, along with a titled husband, a fact that Mary perceives and jealously belittles.

By her last novel, Austen is no longer able to keep faith in the landed order that she has so earnestly defended in spite of its deficiencies in her earlier works. In a novel where old certainties have finally crumbled, loss pervades the world of *Persuasion*. Although the heroine embodies within herself the best of traditional standards, she can do little to prevent Sir Walter’s denial of responsibility and retreat from Kellynch. Since Kellynch will not return to the Elliot family until inherited by William Walter Elliot, a man who unites the worst of middle-class materialism and aristocratic snobbery, there seems little hope for a moral revival of the landed order. Thus, Anne turns to the navy, who represents, albeit in a somewhat idealised form, the alternative, because they, at least, remain true to such essential virtues as honesty, personal warmth, and family feeling. The marriage between Anne and Wentworth holds hope for a new social organisation, anticipating a more meritocratic and socially mobile society.

Conclusion: “Strangers filling their place”

Austen’s serious concern over the state and the continuity of the social structure marks all her novels but in *Persuasion* there is an unmistakable shift articulated in her attitudes towards the stability and preservation of the ideal order represented in the landed classes. Although Austen found landed society problematic and morally questionable, she influenced cultural renovation and preservation from a conservative position by defending it. In view of the Burkean estate metaphor, all improvements in *Mansfield Park* take on serious political meanings as potentially subversive and destructive actions that threaten to destroy the entailed estate. Heirs must be mindful of introducing improvement gradually and the estate is ultimately saved by one who recognises its values and is able to support and maintain the inherited structure of values and behaviour. It is not so in *Persuasion*, for here the estate is not endangered but abandoned; the disintegration evident at the beginning is now nearly complete. Maaja Stewart argues that Sir Walter, who has lost all moral credibility, deserves to fall, and Austen purposely dismantles the morally privileged position of the landed in order to transfer their valued cultural capital and social heritage to the rising middle class through Anne’s marriage to Wentworth (90). Acknowledging the corrupted system of manners which endangered the landed order’s moral authority, Austen acquiesced to the inevitability of reformulating the landed orders but instead of a complete supplantation, she sought a compromise by suggesting a new order characterised by meritocratic conceptions of rank and the infusion of new naval blood into the decaying landed order. The formal and static façade of authority is enlivened and regenerated by the transfer of power and moral legitimacy from the estate ideology to that of mercantile and industrious experience in *Persuasion*.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. Mansfield Park. Peterborough: Broadview P Ltd., 2001.

Austen, Jane. Persuasion. Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice. Peterborough: Broadview P Ltd., 2001.

Burgess, Miranda. British Fiction and the Production of Social Order, 1740-1830. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Burke, Edmund. Reflections on the Revolution in France. Ed. J. C. D. Clark. Stanford: Stanford UP: 2001.

Butler, Marilyn. Jane Austen and the War of Ideas. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Colley, Linda. Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837. London & New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

Duckworth, Alistair M. The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels. London & Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

Stewart, Maaja A. Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts. Athens, GA: U of Georgia Press, 1993.

Monaghan, David. Jane Austen Structure and Social Vision. London: MacMillan Press, 1980.

Paine, Thomas. Rights of Man. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "England in 1819." The Norton Anthology of English Literature – Volume II. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: Norton, 2000. 728.

Southam, Brian. Jane Austen and the Navy. London and New York: Hambledon and London Ltd., 2000.

Tuite, Clara. Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

Williams, Raymond. The Country and the City. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.