

Crossing Boundaries: Land and Sea in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

LAURA VORACHEK

Department of English, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 600 N. Park Street,
Madison, WI 53706

Jane Austen suggests in *Persuasion* the pressures that the increased mobility of the middle class placed on the established aristocratic society in her time. Anne Elliot especially brings to light the inherited assumptions of her society. She can marry within her social rank (Mr. Elliot or Charles Musgrove) or marry below her (Wentworth at age 23), but either is a choice within the limits established by her society. One owns land or one does not. But when Wentworth returns, a man of name and wealth, he is not a member of the landed gentry nor is he below Anne in social rank. He represents an alternative in the navy. Naval society differs from aristocratic society in that social mobility is possible, wealth and status are attainable, based on merit rather than birth. A gentleman in the navy is one who earns this position; he distinguishes himself by serving his country. As the definition of "gentleman" shifts from one based on the requirements of inherited rank, wealth and property to one based on individual actions and merit, the definition of "home" shifts too: from a place, the inherited family estate, to a condition based on love and affection. When "home" is outside the house, woman achieves greater latitude in defining her place in society. Naval society provides a space for such shifts to occur because it lacks land. Naval society owns the sea.

The "yet unconquered sea world in Jane Austen's day" (Vlasopolos 480) contains within it associations of the unknown and, as such, is a place for exploration and adventure as well as undiscovered possibilities. The metaphor of the sea also introduces connotations of instability and uncertainty. Finally, the sea is a physical place, though not one owned by individuals and, therefore, very different from land. Austen makes use of each of these associations in the course of her examination of the clash between the aristocratic society and the naval society.

Critics generally fall into two camps regarding Jane Austen's work, those who see it upholding the values and traditions of her society and those who see in it a bitter critique of those values and traditions.¹ Falling in between the two poles, Mary Poovey argues in "*Persuasion* and the Promises of Love" that Austen responds to the challenge posed to the aristocracy's values by individual values in the early nineteenth century partly by using "one system of values to correct the abuses of the other" in the novel (155). But Poovey

finds this solution inadequate and reasons further that Austen uses romance to deflect attention from the ambiguities raised by this approach. Further, she argues that the romantic plot serves to relegate "all the potentially subversive content to a marginal position or carefully delimited arena" (175). While Poovey believes this carefully delimited arena is the private sphere, I would argue that Austen contains all challenges to the existing social structure by keeping them at sea.

Under this social structure, women are dependent upon men for a home. Anne's physical dislocation, a result of her father's inability to maintain Kellynch-hall, is not resolved until Anne and Wentworth finally are able to discuss openly their mutual feelings after the scene at the White Hart Inn. The paragraph that follows their conversation begins "At last Anne was at home again" (245). While this phrase signifies her return to Camden-place, its position in the text, immediately following several paragraphs of direct speech between Anne and Wentworth and with no transition marking a removal from the previous location, indicates that the condition of being "at home" is contingent upon being loved and cared for. In marrying Wentworth rather than Mr. Elliot, then, she makes an even exchange. She may have "no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family" (250), but we do not mourn the loss of her ancestral home because she gains the same security and sense of identity in Wentworth's love. Here the lack of land enables a shift in traditional definition of "home."

The lack of land or, more precisely, the sea enables another shift in the definitions of the aristocratic society—that of a woman's role. Because Anne loses all but her name at the start of the novel she is, in effect, in the same position as Wentworth who had only his name when she ended their engagement eight years previously.² She has no land or fortune and is considered "nobody" by her family (5), much as Wentworth was when he proposed to Anne the first time. However, she has the opportunity to prove herself worthy of Wentworth's affections, as he has proven himself worthy of hers in the years before the novel opens, when she is at sea literally (the seaside at Lyme) and figuratively (having lost her grounds of being).

When Louisa falls from the Cobb, all are paralyzed due to hysterics, fainting or fear, and even the brave Captain Wentworth is unable to meet the crisis. "Is there no one to help me?" he cries "in a tone of despair, and as if all his own strength were gone" (110). It is of course Louisa who needs help, but Wentworth's call suggests that he too needs to be rescued. He has got in over his head, so to speak, in courting Louisa and as he was not prepared to marry her, he is not prepared to catch her. Anne, however, calmly comes to the rescue. After directing Benwick to go for a surgeon, she attends to the others'

needs with such skill that the men “look to her for directions” (111). Interestingly, Anne possesses the strength that Wentworth lacks at this crucial moment and instinctually knows how to rectify the situation. She thereby defies the traditional construction of women, demonstrating her intelligence and quick thinking and asserting herself rather than lapsing into the self-denial we have seen up to this point. Anca Vlasopolos suggests that Anne becomes a “commander” during this scene, “acting as a rational being capable of righting a disastrous course.” It is this “capacity to move with ease into the unknown, liminal space of the crisis created by Louisa’s fall” that makes her desirable to Wentworth once again (483). Thus Anne proves herself worthy of Wentworth’s love by successfully navigating unexplored waters, by demonstrating bravery at sea, in short, by proving herself fit for duty in the navy.

Another woman who moves with ease outside the domestic arena, as Anne does at Lyme, is Mrs. Croft. Mrs. Croft and her husband have rarely been apart during their fifteen years of marriage and most of their time together has been spent at sea. She tells Mrs. Musgrove, “. . . I can safely say, that the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship. While we were together, you know, there was nothing to be feared” (70). In spite of the dangers of sea travel, Mrs. Croft experiences the security of a home as long as she is with her husband. As with Anne and Wentworth, the Crofts’ marriage also suggests that the definition of home is shifting from a physical location to an emotional condition. Because the home is traditionally the sphere of women in the aristocratic society, this movement from a fixed, external space to an internal space seems to allow women greater movement and an expanded role, as in the case of Mrs. Croft.

The only time Mrs. Croft has not felt the security of her home was the winter she passed by herself while her husband was in the North Seas. She tells Mrs. Musgrove, “I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next” (95). Ironically, while her home is intact, Mrs. Croft enjoys freedom of movement at her husband’s side, but when her home is rent by separation she is confined by imaginary illnesses. That she suffers from a sense of danger while living relatively securely on land but feels perfectly secure while exposed to the hazards at sea indicates the psychological nature of this new definition of home.

With her husband Mrs. Croft is an equal partner, seeming “to go shares with him in every thing” on land as well as at sea (168). Anne sees the Crofts’ method of driving a carriage as representative of the manner in which they live their life together, and in which Mrs. Croft must take an active role:

But by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage. (92)

While not enjoying the smoothest ride, they reach their destination safely and, most importantly, together. Significantly, while Anne does not become the mistress of an estate when she marries Wentworth, she does become "the mistress of a very pretty landaulette" (250) leaving little doubt that her marriage will undertake a similar arrangement. As we have seen at Lyme, Anne has proven herself capable of taking the reins and righting a course that has gone astray under Wentworth's control.

Read in terms of the model set by the Crofts, the final line of the novel serves two functions. It lends a realistic perspective to the life of a woman who has left the security of a physical home, and it serves to delimit the freedoms Anne gains in her marriage to Wentworth. "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (252). Anne has made a home out of Wentworth's love, proven herself seaworthy, and joined a partnership rather than entered into a traditional marriage. Her distance from the aristocratic society is further emphasized in that she is now a homeowner and has a "profession," being a sailor's wife. Along with the freedoms this affords her, she must also pay the "taxes" that every citizen pays, in her case the quick alarm of impending war. As Mrs. Croft says, "'We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days'" (70), and one may expect that Anne will be prepared for the separation from Wentworth during the war the reader knows to be imminent. However, when separated from her husband, Mrs. Croft lost the security and freedom of movement that her home with him provided her. Therefore, one may also expect that Anne will lose her security and freedom of movement when Wentworth goes to sea.

Although Austen has presented an alternative society where definitions of gentlemen, home, and a woman's role are expanded, she nevertheless limits the challenge this presents to the aristocratic society by identifying it with those whose home is the sea. While Wentworth removes Anne from land ownership on which aristocratic society is built, it is not eradicated by the introduction of the sea. Austen prefers to create a new opposition between land and sea, with each term having little effect on the other. Despite Austen's obvious affection for the naval society, the instability associated with the sea, specifically the impending war, indicates that the landed

aristocracy, momentarily at least, remains dominant. Mr. Elliot will still inherit Kellynch-hall, and the narrator suggests that Mrs. Clay may one day have the coveted position of Lady Elliot. The corrupt, self-serving gentry will be perpetuated while the true gentlemen of the navy are at war and their wives are "homeless." Poovey suggests that no reform of the aristocracy will take place because Anne will not be able to effect change as a landowner (169). Land remains significant for belonging to and having an effect on aristocratic society. That Anne will not leave a mark on this society is perhaps presaged by the Baronetage in that it is the Marys—and perhaps the Elizabeths—women like her sisters, who marry landed gentry and remain fixed geographically as well as socially. Seaworthy women like Anne and Sophia Croft, however, enjoy greater latitude, in every meaning of the word, as long as they are at "home."

NOTES

- ¹ For a thorough review of recent criticism, see Alistair Duckworth's "Preface to the Paperback Edition" of his book *The Improvement of the Estate*. Duckworth himself argues that Austen's novels affirm the inherited values of her society, and these values are symbolized in the estate. Birgitta Berglund also reviews the Austen criticism in "Jane Austen: Radical or Reactionary?"
- ² Several critics note that Anne and Wentworth switch roles after volume two of the novel. For example, Poovey asserts that Wentworth suffers the anguish of the typical female situation after Lyme, submitting to social conventions regarding his assumed engagement with Louisa and, at Bath, being placed in the "feminine position of helpless onlooker and overhearer" (167). Duckworth also points out that in the second volume Wentworth is placed in the same position as Anne in the first volume, that of the lover who must watch while the love interest is courted by another (200). I am contending that this role reversal takes place at the start of the novel when Anne loses her home.

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