



The Writer as Activist: Merit and Gender in Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract: While it is difficult to imagine how one might promote positive political change in a democratic setup

without even having the right to vote, women activists of the nineteenth century did manage to get their way to a certain extent by organising rallies and conferences, and also by writing for the public. Jane Austen stands out as a novelist of her time in the way she advocated for gender equality and endorsed a more progressive and androgynous outlook, by the definition of Virginia Woolf, by painting male characters who deftly challenged the prevalent norms of masculinity of her time and went against the patriarchal hegemony by allowing a stable space for women to step up and assume responsible roles in a meritocratic society. This essay provides an analysis of Austen's view of merit and how a more gender-inclusive society may be constructed with the help of male allies.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Persuasion, meritocracy, gender equality, gender roles, women's activism, patriarchy, social reform, gender politics, women's empowerment, socio-economic class, social mobility, gender and merit.

It is a historical fact that the engagement of women with politics as a phenomenon has been subdued and indirect in nature, with the right to vote being accorded to women only in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, an even that was confined to a few industrialized countries. Traditionally, women preferred to get involved in politics not by directly asserting their demands, but by organizing rallies and conferences that highlighted their causes. Some women managed to persuade their husbands to vote in favour of interests which suited them, thus ensuring that even without the right to vote, the issues which mattered exclusively to women remained relevant, if not on the ballot box then at least in public discourse. Even issues which were not exclusively about the interests of women did not receive open support from prominent female figures due to social pressures. The female activist of the time would much rather express her views on a topic by writing about it in newspapers,

journals, and books, than announcing her candidature for a seat in parliament. Many prominent women writers of the time have been identified as political activists as well due to the distinctively political nature of their writing. One surprising exception to this group is Jane Austen, who, according to some scholars, intentionally wrote novels of high quality that were heavy in their cultural overtones, but was intentionally apolitical. This reticence to engage in contemporary politics has often been interpreted as a result of her physical absence from contemporary politics. (Butler, 190). However, a close analysis of the discourse and dynamics between the aristocracy and the returned sailors in her last novel *Persuasion*, reveals a willingness to wade into political dialogue. Austen attempts to illustrate the phenomenal importance of the creation of a new, burgeoning socio-economic class through the reintegration of the returned sailors as a direct challenge to the prevailing aristocracy.

Persuasion has a consistent underlying of a sense of social order and war, which Austen probably saw as a progressive force capable of bringing in positive change, an attitude reflected in her refreshing characters of the naval officers who embody admirable values, including the modest man of integrity in Captain Wentworth and the honest Admiral Croft. Austen probably uses her personal experience of life during wartime to highlight how war permeates every section of society and affects prevailing political and economic thought. (Watson, 5).

Austen's challenge to the prevailing aristocratic tradition is symbolic of the revolutionary lines of thought that were being propagated by the likes of Thomas Paine, William Cobbett, and Thomas Spence (Colley, 152). Set during the Napoleonic wars, *Persuasion* highlights the fact that most of Napoleon's officers were leaders of great capacity who had risen through the ranks by their own merit. (Colley, 150) In the eyes of the British, the French officers were representative of a fair and

efficient system that was better than their own, as was demonstrated by the recent loss in America and the French Revolution. Criticism of the aristocracy began to get louder as leading progressive political thinkers of the time sought to paint the aristocrats as far removed from the people and interests of England, often sharing a parasitic relationship with the people as the ruling elite only interested in furthering their own selfish causes by inflating taxes or influencing public policy at great cost to the common man. Ultimately, this led to greater reforms which curtailed the powers of the aristocracy and brought in a new era of meritocratic tradition in England.

The debate between aristocracy and meritocracy extends itself into the role of gender in determining one's position in society. Austen seems to argue that, while the old aristocracy kept women out of influential and powerful positions, a meritocracy would value women more for their contributions and the skills they possess, even possibly allowing for their elevation to places earlier thought only fit for men. The new system of meritocracy would embrace the steps taken by women for the betterment of society, and would encourage them to work further towards its betterment.

In traditional English society, it was the men who were chiefly responsible for all matters related to finances and women were not expected to contribute financially. This very trope is challenged in the relationship between Admiral and Mrs. Croft. While looking to rent Kellynch Hall, Mr. Shepherd says that "Mrs. Croft asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the Admiral himself" (Austen, 17). This subverts the traditional gender roles idealized under the aristocracy. Admiral Croft is also comfortable in letting his wife take over the reins at opportune moments, as is evident from the time when Mrs. Croft takes over the driving from her husband while they are driving to Anne's cottage (Austen, 85). Anne's reaction to the incident shows the unusual nature of it,

but Austen does not ridicule it in anyway and simply registers some of Anne's amusement at it. This gives the reader an insight into Austen's own view of a happy marriage, as one built upon mutual respect. (Monaghan, 108).

Furthermore, Austen depicts Anne Elliott as a strong woman, as is evident towards the conclusion of the novel. When Wentworth and Musgrove fail to restore order after the fall of Lousia, Anne takes over from them and supervises the resuscitation of Louisa and the consoling of Wentworth. Anne's behavior displays a maturity that is absent among her male counterparts, and "she appears as an adult among helpless children." (Monaghan, 107) This is a resounding endorsement of meritocracy that argues for the structuring on society based on individual capacity. It is because Anne had taken over in a complex situation that disaster was averted, and that any other line of action may not have been so favourable.

Thus, *Persuasion* may be read as a political novel that argues for meritocracy, especially in the treatment of women and traditional gender roles.

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