2: Authority in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion:*

Durkheim, Weber, & Parsons

Three girls, the two eldest sixteen and fourteen, was an awful legacy for a mother to bequeath, an awful charge rather, to confide to the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father. (P 4-5)

*Mansfield Park* is Austen’s first mature novel; *Northanger Abbey,* *Sense & Sensibility,* and *Pride and Prejudice* were all drafted when she was a teenager, before her family left Steventon. *Mansfield Park* was the first novel Austen completed at Chawton, after the migratory decade spent in exile, during which she wrote only letters and the dark fragment, *The Watsons.* After the exhilaration of the publication of *Pride and Prejudice,* Austen’s few comments on *Mansfield Park* suggest that it was conceived as something of a reaction. In a letter to Cassandra, 1813, Austen writes of *Pride and Prejudice:* “The Work is rather too Light & Bright & Sparkling;--it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique of Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile” (L 203). In an earlier letter on receiving her first copy of *Pride and Prejudice*
Austen writes to her sister that Lizzy is as “delightful a creature as ever appeared in print” (L 202).

No one, to my knowledge has ever described her next protagonist, Fanny Price, as “delightful.” As Austen’s least popular novel, it is an odd place to start. I do so because I want to connect the novel with Durkheim’s and with Weber’s encounters with early modernity. They were separately convinced that they had lived into a new and alien social formation. Durkheim and Weber analyze a vast set of social transformations that they sense has just being completed, while, on the other hand, Austen herself lived across and wrote about the beginnings of this same arc of change. This vast social change is essentially what occupied classical sociology during the period of its establishment as a legitimate social science and academic discipline: the shift that Tönnies described as one from community to legalistic society, with all the attendant consequences of atomism, alienation, objectification, reification, and anomie. As such, this social change is an appropriate place to start a sociological reading of Jane Austen’s novels. Of all classic sociology this pair are the most explicitly concerned with change—what are the differences between traditional and modern society; how does the modern division of labor structure social roles—and, as a consequence, their arguments are the most broadly historical. Modernity in Durkheim is experienced as the deterioration of moral consensus, and the rise of anomie—individual rulelessness. In Weber modernity is experienced in
the exercise of a new kind of earned, rather than inherited authority, an
authority far better suited to the uniquely modern social formation of
bureaucracy. In short, Durkheim and Weber lend themselves to our
familiar procedure of connecting social theory and historical context in
the service of interpreting literary texts.

Such a historical argument is best suited to *Mansfield Park*, a novel
which many scholars have claimed is more “historical,” more political in
its judgment, and more embedded in its moment than any of the others.
From Avrom Fleishman to William Galperin, in its sharp commentary on
the moral decline of the landed gentry *Mansfield Park* seems to look
forward, anticipating the Condition of England Novel such as *North and
South* or *Hard Times*.¹ Austen’s previous novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, reads
like a conservative endorsement of civic humanism, with Mr. Darcy who,
according to Pemberley’s housekeeper:

is the best landlord, and the best master,” said she, “that ever lived;
not like the wild young men nowadays, who think of nothing but
themselves. There is not one of his tenants or servants but will give
him a good name. Some people call him proud; but I am sure I
never saw anything of it. (P&P, 249)

The embodiment of duty and responsibility, Darcy stands in striking
contrast to Sir Thomas Bertram, whose sense of responsibility is acute
but ineffectual, and in turn with Sir Walter Elliot, who embodies the
absolute bankruptcy of noblesse oblige. I do not want to claim that
Austen vastly changed her view about the social hierarchy in the five
years between the publication *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, for
these are separate novels with separate aims. But at the least the nature,
exercise, and respect for inherited authority is treated very differently in
these three novels.

*Mansfield Park* can be described as a novelistic inquiry into the
nature and exercise of authority.² By and large, authority is exercised here
domestically, familially, and masculinely. As an innocent newcomer and
poor female relation, the character of Fanny Price functions as the object
of the exercise of authority as well as its observer and analyst. In this
respect, Fanny serves as a distant version of the heroine of the comedy of
manners: two modes of living and a protagonist who spans them both,
the dark descendant of *Evelina or a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World.*
Sir Thomas’s absence enables the examination of comparative
authorities: his well meaning; Mrs. Norris’s tyrannical; Tom’s inconsistent
and arbitrary, and Lady Bertram’s vapid and lax. Furthermore, Fanny’s
return to Portsmouth foregrounds two completely different kinds of
household management and familial authority; her mother’s total
inability to manage anything and her father’s threatening absolutism
imagined as a brutal naval discipline visited on Maria:
I don't know what Sir Thomas may think of such matters; he may be too much of the courtier and fine gentleman to like his daughter the less. But, by G--! if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope’s end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too would be the best way of preventing such things. (MP, 439-40)

Beyond household, domestic, and familial authority, *Mansfield Park* offers a tantalizing glimpse of the authority embodied in the slave economy of Sir Thomas's plantation in Antigua. This is the only novel of Austen’s to demonstrate explicitly that off-shore labor pays for English pleasure: Tom’s gambling and dissipation necessitate the trip to the Caribbean to make the estate more profitable, presumably by rationalizing or disciplining labor. The plantation must provide higher yields to cover Tom’s debts, though the trip is described here in exceedingly bland terms: “Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs.” (MP, 32) So too, more than any the others, this novel offers regular reflections on the authority of the church and the duties of the clergyman. (*Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Collins reflects a great length on the dignity and offices of the clergy, but the corresponding conversations in *Mansfield Park* are inevitably graver.) And finally, the novel thoroughly tracks the various Bertrams’ responses to their father’s authority, just as it systematically contrasts the Bertram
children’s sense of duty toward authority with that of the Crawfords and that of the Price children.

As an abstraction, authority is a malleable term and so too much can be accumulated under its rubric. My point here is not to multiply more and more arcane and less and less convincing instances of the exercise of and subjection to authority. Rather, by using Weber, I want to understand authority, both as concept and action, in transition. As the close of the novel makes clear, Sir Thomas painfully comes to question both his own sense of his authority and that which he has inculcated (or failed to inculcate) in his children. We are asked to believe that he changes in his role as head of the Bertrams:

Sir Thomas, poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent, was the longest to suffer. He felt that he ought not to have allowed the marriage; that his daughter's sentiments had been sufficiently known to him to render him culpable in authorising it; that in so doing he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom. (MP, 461)

In the same penitent chapter Sir Thomas goes on to question the whole rearing of his children:

Something must have been wanting within, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active
principle, had been wanting; that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments, the authorised object of their youth, could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them. (MP, 463)

“Principle” is the term consistently used throughout *Mansfield Park* to indicate moral compass, conduct based on care for others as opposed to self-interest, the whole foundation of education.

While his Caribbean trip takes place obscured and off stage, Sir Thomas is forced to assume a different kind of authority in Antigua than at the Park, presumably less benign and more self-interested—he travels to the islands not to represent moral weight, but to extract more money from the slaves that work the sugarcane. Again, while much of this is only implicit, nonetheless, the patrician landowner embodies a different kind of authority than does the slave plantation owner. The embodiment of gravitas, Sir Thomas is often presented trailing clouds of Johnsonian
abstractions such as principle, duty, responsibility, but in repairing to Antigua, he is come more as CFO than moral exemplar for the family. When he returns, the responsibilities of patrician stewardship are reasserted, complete with effacing the last signs of his children’s pleasure:

He had to reinstate himself in all the wonted concerns of his Mansfield life: to see his steward and his bailiff; to examine and compute, and, in the intervals of business, to walk into his stables and his gardens, and nearest plantations; but active and methodical, he had not only done all this before he resumed his seat as master of the house at dinner, he had also set the carpenter to work in pulling down what had been so lately put up in the billiard-room, and given the scene-painter his dismissal long enough to justify the pleasing belief of his being then at least as far off as Northampton. (MP, 190)

Care for the estate and its dependents is also shown fleetingly in Henry Crawford, when he tries to impress Fanny at Portsmouth with his sense of duty:

He had suspected his agent of some underhand dealing; of meaning to bias him against the deserving; and he had determined to go himself, and thoroughly investigate the merits of the case. He had gone, had done even more good than he had foreseen, had
been useful to more than his first plan had comprehended, and
was now able to congratulate himself upon it, and to feel that in
performing a duty, he had secured agreeable recollections for his
own mind. He had introduced himself to some tenants whom he
had never seen before; he had begun making acquaintance with
cottages whose very existence, though on his own estate, had been
hitherto unknown to him. This was aimed, and well aimed, at
Fanny. (MP, 404)

Habitually an absentee landlord, Henry’s doing his basic duty by his
tenants is damningly exhibited here as a ploy to impress Fanny, and
worse, self-satisfying. His chief absorption is improvement as in
designing pleasure gardens, not in improving the laborers’ cottages or
agricultural practice. Moral exemplar in turn differs from the various
forms of naval authority that Austen explores, from William to Admiral
Crawford.

If Mansfield Park is saturated with representations of authority,
Persuasion is even more intense in its scrutiny of the changing nature of
authority. Sir Thomas is at least well meaning, but Sir Walter presents an
abject failure as the embodiment of patrician authority. We might say
that in his personal vanity Sir Walter serves as a late and brutal parody of
aristocratic embodiment as Habermas describes it: the aristocrat is
defined by what he is, his aura and his title, while the bourgeois is
defined by what he makes, what he does.¹ “Persuasion” is the title posthumously assigned by the family (Henry), and it is also the term used throughout the novel to describe the exertion of authority, especially Lady Russell’s over Anne in the place of her mother. In his grand survey of the differences between traditional and modern society, gender is not an issue for Weber. But gender is always an issue for Austen, as *Persuasion* systematically examines the connection between authority and gender, the differences between paternal and maternal influence in particular, but also more generally the differences between the way women exert influence and authority as compared to the ways that men exert influence and authority.

As Sir Thomas’s moral and literal authority steadily erodes in the last section of the novel, Fanny’s moral authority is recognized, welcomed, and celebrated:

> By one of the suffering party within they were expected with such impatience as she had never known before. Fanny had scarcely passed the solemn-looking servants, when Lady Bertram came from the drawing-room to meet her; came with no indolent step; and falling on her neck, said, “Dear Fanny! now I shall be comfortable.”

(MP, 447)

Both Fanny Price and Anne Elliot are pictured as quiet, nonassertive observers, characters whose moral authority becomes more public and
more acknowledged over the course of the narrative. While it is too easy to construe *Mansfield Park* as a proleptic parable of the birth of the Angel of the House, nevertheless, Fanny’s gentler sway effectively displaces Sir Thomas’s proper, but distant and ineffectual Patriarchal authority, just as the sea captain and naval hero has to acknowledge that Anne has the better judgment. Neither novel looks forward to feminine utopias, but they both expose the failures of paternal authority, and subtly suggest alternatives.

Weber’s treatment of authority can be understood in different contexts. In his grand historical modernization narrative, unchanging tradition gives way to modernity. The whole of the European nineteenth-century, with its revolutionary transformations of industrialization and urbanization, is construed as the gradual but total supersession of traditional society characterized by agricultural community with the massive industrial city. As Anthony Giddens summarizes, “Closely connected to it is the decline of tradition, the foundation of day-to-day life in the local village community and important even in urban life in the pre-capitalist era. Tradition encapsulates the present in the past, and implies an experience of time distinct from that which predominates in contemporary Western societies.” More particularly, the key organizational feature of the new social formation is bureaucracy, the large private institutions that grow out of industry—large-scale capitalist business—and the large public institutions of the nation-state that
administer society. The magnitude of these modern institutions requires a new kind of leadership, a new kind of authority. Where traditional and tribal authority is inherited (usually patrilineally), modern authority adheres to the individual and to his or her achievements, and is therefore earned. Finally, charismatic authority or leadership plays a major role in Weber’s master narrative of tradition, disrupted by revolutionary or charismatic leader, followed inevitably by the routinization of the new social formation.6

In Emile Durkheim’s roughly concurrent version of the modernization narrative, it is the division of labor that ultimately erodes the collective (and foundationally religious) conscience of traditional society, the moral consensus that enables social solidarity, leaving anomic individuals, without rule, without sense of obligation and constraint, without a sense of belonging to and obligated to a larger social whole—the essential problem of modernism (paralleling Tönnies’ description of the transformation from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, from community to legalistic society). For Durkheim, society and morality must precede the individual subject:

The true object of morality is to make man feel that he is not a whole but part of a whole—and how insignificant he is by reference to the plurality of contexts which surround him. . . . Society is not a simple aggregate of individuals who, when they enter it, bring their
own intrinsic morality with them; rather, man is a moral being only because he lives in society, since morality consists in being solidary with a group and varies with this solidarity.

Weber distinguishes among three ideal types of authority. Rational or legal authority he associates with administration, the office, and ultimately with the characteristically modern organization, bureaucracy. It would be egregiously anachronistic to apply such a type to Austen, but we can see suggestions of this emergent form in the references to business or affairs, which is often distinguished from more conservative references to agricultural or estate management. Affairs take Sir Thomas to Antigua, off shore, away from his role as lord of the manor. In Antigua, presumably, he is obeyed as owner (or master), in Mansfield he is obeyed as father and aristocrat. If modern, administrative, or legal authority is determined by “a clearly defined sphere of competence” (333)—e.g. what the office as such is responsible for, technical knowledge or qualification (337) demanded by the office, the position as such—traditional authority resides in the figure of authority himself. Here, “the object of obedience is the personal; authority of individual which he enjoys by virtue of his traditional status.” (341). The early modern Lord of the Manner is, by virtue of his person, justice of the peace, and obeyed as such, whereas the modern magistrate is appointed and obeyed by virtue of his office:
In the pure type of traditional authority, the following features of a bureaucratic administrative staff are absent: (a) a clearly defined sphere of competence subject to impersonal rules, (b) a rational ordering of relations of superiority and inferiority, (c) a regular system of appointment and promotion on the basis of free contract, (d) technical training as a regular requirement, (e) fixed salaries, in the type case paid in money. (343)

(Such authority survives in parenting: “Because I said so, that's why.”)

In connecting, as I will, naval figures with charismatic authority, I am not trying to imply that an allegory of modernization is at work in these novels, for Captain Wentworth, even as a self-made man, is not a business leader, or a captain of industry. Further, the association with charismatic authority is conveyed through military valor and leadership, not to the charismatic inspiration of a Joseph Smith, much less a Martin Luther King. Rather, I want to stress the dramatic function in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* of the contrast between old (traditional), new (rational and legal) and the disruptive and revolutionary function of charisma. This is Weber’s formulation:

Both rational and traditional authority are specifically forms of everyday routine control of action; while the charismatic type is the direct antithesis of this. Bureaucratic authority is specifically rational in the sense of being bound to intellectually analyzable
rules; while charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules. Traditional authority is bound to the precedents handed down from the past and to this extent is also oriented to rules. Within the sphere of its claims, charismatic authority repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force. It recognizes no appropriation of positions of power by virtue of the possession of property, either on the part of a chief or socially privileged groups. The only basis of legitimacy for it is personal charisma. (361-2)

Captain Wentworth is not shown to be a character who makes any such claims, but he functions as a character whose authority is recognized by those around him, particularly Captains Harville and Benwick. He represents then not the next historical stage, but rather the rebuke or repudiation of the old.

I am less interested in situating Mansfield Park on the timeline of this grand historical narrative, than in reading the novel as one that shows inherited, aristocratic authority under stress. Unlike Austen’s other representatives of the landed gentry—Darcy, Mr. Knightley, and Sir Walter—Sir Thomas is consistently presented as deliberative, self-conscious about his station, reflecting regularly on his duty. Austen sets him in motion as a stern, distant autocrat, presuming a foundational absolutism straight out of Sir Edward Filmer’s Patriarchia. The
organizational structure of Mansfield Park itself is visible, for the place and role of each, Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, Tom, and Mrs. Norris, are all laid out in a structure that is not branching, but directly hierarchical; Tom is to rule in Sir Thomas’s absence: Tom “was now master of the house,” and “Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place.” (MP, 123 & 196). The only complication is Mrs. Norris’s bustling, busybody intrusions into an otherwise strictly male line of order, rule, and succession. The catch is that no one pays much attention to Sir Thomas’s commands: his wife slumbers, his eldest son defies him, his sister-in-law usurps his authority, his daughters evade his scrutiny and his precepts, and Fanny obeys him largely out of intimidation: Edmund is the only actively obedient character. We see little of Sir Thomas internally, for his thoughts are only detailed in the novel's last chapter. Most of the narrative is focalized through Fanny, and as a consequence, Sir Thomas appears grave, stern, and inhospitable; we are told of his “grave looks,” “his “untoward gravity of deportment,” his “cold address, and of Fanny’s “habitual dread of her uncle.” (MP, 218, 12, 33, & 176) His gravity contrasts with Edmund’s warmth and kindness towards the little girl. Overall, if Sir Thomas does not actively abuse Fanny, as does Mrs. Norris, he is guilty of letting others do so. Having agreed to take the child in, he makes little effort to make her feel at home, but rather insists on observing the difference between the children of privilege and the poor relation. Austen’s fiction is awash in parental inadequacy, but Sir Thomas
stands out among the bad fathers, because he is presented as thoughtful and caring, and nonetheless he fails. Despite his plans and considerations, everyone in his household turns into its opposite: his daughters are not thoughtful and principled, but vain, selfish, and amoral; his eldest son is dissipated and worthless, his wife a couch potato, and his sister-in-law vicious and scheming. His “benevolent plan” to take in Fanny is anything but benevolent, but rather a passive scheme of child abuse, worthy of *Jane Eyre*'s Mrs. Reed, taking on the responsibility for children out of a cold sense of obligation. As the good child, Edmund serves as a constant reminder of how badly all the others have turned out.

Sir Thomas is a peripheral character, a pasteboard patriarch absent most of the time, and as such it would be perverse to base a reading of *Mansfield Park* around him. Nonetheless, even in his absence Sir Thomas dictates much of the tone of the novel. Because our experience of the novel is filtered through Fanny, and through much of the narrative her timidity is her reigning characteristic, Sir Thomas in effect plays the heavy, the figure most responsible for Fanny’s sense of fear and insecurity. Mrs. Norris is more immediate and vicious, but she acts under Sir Thomas’s sanction, and her cruelty is almost always offset by Lady Bertram’s careless affection. Fanny’s inchoate fears of Sir Thomas are ultimately realized when he understands that she means to refuse Henry Crawford. In that White Room scene, Sir Thomas descends to the level of
a gothic Montoni-like brute, physically looming over his weeping, distraught victim. Like *Northanger Abbey* before it and *Jane Eyre* after, *Mansfield Park* suggests that gothic villains need not be Italian and Catholic, but are often one’s own father, brother or husband. Yet such an interpretation is surely exaggerated. Sir Thomas never murders, poisons or strikes anyone, or even rages, making him a poor excuse for a gothic villain. Moreover, all of the way through, he plainly wants what’s best for Fanny. Austen represents him as a basically decent, well-meaning, thoughtful character, which suggests that the problems lie in his office, in his station. It is his inherited patriarchal authority that is singled out for scrutiny. All those presumptions of unearned authority and obedience dictate that he should be obeyed without affection, without having to prove his rule is fair and just.

It is hard not to turn *Mansfield Park* into an example of Lawrence Stone’s formulation of family history, the Lockean lessons of liberalism, possessive individualism, applied to the microcosm of the family. In Stone’s schema seventeenth-century families are held together by force and threat until eighteenth-century affective individualism gives family members rights, privileges, respect, and affection. Despite this reductive formulation of Stone’s work, Sir Thomas really does seem to be invested with aspects of this transformation, for he comes to understand that he has failed to leaven duty with affection. Austen makes it easy to trace the consequences of cold and distant authority, precisely because she has
tightly constructed the family interaction. We see less of Sir Thomas’s orders and much more of his children’s’ response to him. Furthermore, in spanning a much greater time period than any of her other novels, *Mansfield Park* has a hint of the generations novel. Because we are shown all of Bertram and the Price children growing up, we are treated directly to the effects of paternal authority. Sir Thomas’s concluding moral, via the Price children, is an endorsement of labor, of earning one’s favor. In Susan’s

usefulness, in Fanny’s excellence, in William's continued good conduct and rising fame, and in the general well-doing and success of the other members of the family, all assisting to advance each other, and doing credit to his countenance and aid, Sir Thomas saw repeated, and for ever repeated, reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure. (MP, 473)

If Sir Thomas is a lesson in learning to appreciate labor over leisure, Henry Crawford offers a miniature study in privilege: “Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long.” (MP, 467) As Fanny and Edmund debate repeatedly throughout the novel, Mary too is essentially spoiled, ruined by privilege, just as Maria and Julia (and implicitly Tom)
have things too much their way. Mary uses the very term, though ironically, to describe her brother to Mrs. Grant: “I assure you he is very detestable; the Admiral's lessons have quite spoiled him.” (MP, 43) Austen does not directly address the nature/nurture divide, but nonetheless makes it perfectly clear that, as we would say, it builds character when one has to earn one's way.

This debate plays out most often in Fanny and Edmund’s regular dissections of Mary Crawford's character:

I know her disposition to be as sweet and faultless as your own, but the influence of her former companions makes her seem--gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong. She does not think evil, but she speaks it, speaks it in playfulness; and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul.”


Edmund could not but agree to it. “Yes, that uncle and aunt! They have injured the finest mind; for sometimes, Fanny, I own to you, it does appear more than manner: it appears as if the mind itself was tainted.” (MP, 269)

Later, his final word on Mary is similar: “For where, Fanny, shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed? Spoilt, spoilt!” (MP, 455).
Towards the close, Susan functions as a kind of anti-Mary—she is not spoiled by a bad situation, but has a naturally good if untaught disposition:

Her greatest wonder on the subject soon became--not that Susan should have been provoked into disrespect and impatience against her better knowledge--but that so much better knowledge, so many good notions should have been hers at all; and that, brought up in the midst of negligence and error, she should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be; she, who had had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles. (MP, 397-8)

Here too Susan contrasts with the Bertram girls: “In everything but disposition they were admirably taught. Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him.” (MP, 19) “Disposition” is a malleable and tricky term in Austen, meaning something like nature or character, but it is clearly something that can be bent by indulgence.¹¹ Note also that in comparing the two Bertram sisters, good disposition is trumped by spoilage: “That Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered and less spoilt” (MP, 466). And finally, Susan is compared with
the other Price daughter: “Betsey, too, a spoiled child, trained up to think
the alphabet her greatest enemy, left to be with the servants at her
pleasure, and then encouraged to report any evil of them, she was almost
as ready to despair of being able to love or assist; and of Susan's temper
she had many doubts” (MP, 391).

In the end, Austen leaves us to wonder whether there is something
naturally or innately vicious in the Crawfords, a kind of amorality most
visible when Henry explains to Mary his “plan is to make Fanny Price in
love with me.” (MP, 229) They weigh the pleasures of this game as if the
object of it were of no consequence and it were not an exercise of the will
to power:

“‘It can be but for a fortnight,” said Henry; “and if a fortnight can
kill her, she must have a constitution which nothing could save. No,
I will not do her any harm, dear little soul! only want her to look
kindly on me, to give me smiles as well as blushes, to keep a chair
for me by herself wherever we are, and be all animation when I take
it and talk to her; to think as I think, be interested in all my
possessions and pleasures, try to keep me longer at Mansfield, and
feel when I go away that she shall be never happy again. I want
nothing more.” (MP, 230-31)

For all the banter and exaggeration, the exchange is marked by the
Crawfords' complete indifference to the well-being of anyone else. As
such, the exchange functions as the reverse of any sense of duty or obligation to others. It is perhaps too strong to call this amorality and certainly not anomie, but nonetheless the Crawfords are portrayed as if their amusement is paramount, and what happens to others matters not a whit. Indeed the great problem of Mansfield Park is close connection between Mary’s attractive wit and her selfishness, and how, if it is possible, to disentangle them. Her wit at Tom’s expense in the last letter to Fanny in Portsmouth is perhaps the most extreme example: “Fanny, Fanny, I see you smile and look cunning, but, upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life. Poor young man! If he is to die, there will be two poor young men less in the world; and with a fearless face and bold voice would I say to any one, that wealth and consequence could fall into no hands more deserving of them” (MP 434). This private exchange between the Mary and Fanny has a very different feel from the climactic one where careless indifference comes up again. When Mary meets for the final time with Edmund to strategize their cover-up of Henry and Maria’s affair, it is not so much a confrontation between amorality and priggishness or pragmatism and high moral standards that we see, but rather the signs of the dissolution of moral cohesion. Mary and Edmund come to this moment from non-intersecting planes:

“She saw it only as folly, and that folly stamped only by exposure. The want of common discretion, of caution: his going down to Richmond for the whole time of her being at Twickenham; her
putting herself in the power of a servant; it was the detection, in short--oh, Fanny! it was the detection, not the offence, which she reprobated. It was the imprudence which had brought things to extremity, and obliged her brother to give up every dearer plan in order to fly with her." (MP, 455)

As is clear from Edward in *Sense and Sensibility* on up thorough *Persuasion*, the only protection against spoiling is labor. In *Mansfield Park*, there are but two explicit means of male labor: the clergy (Edmund's path) and the navy (William's). Henry Crawford, the spoiled child of privilege is triangulated against both, the three males who vie for Fanny's love. It is, as I have suggested above, in the contrast between Henry and William that Austen plays out the difference between traditional and charismatic authority. William's description of his naval service—which invests him with a heroic and charismatic aura—reflect poorly on Henry's own life of leisure and indulgence:

Young as he was, William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean; in the West Indies; in the Mediterranean again; had been often taken on shore by the favour of his captain, and in the course of seven years had known every variety of danger which sea and war together could offer. With such means in his power he had a right to be listened to. . . . To Henry Crawford they gave a different feeling [than to Lady Bertram]. He longed to have
been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much. His heart
was warmed, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a
lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily
hardships and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of
usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of
selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he
had been a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his
way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and
happy ardour, instead of what he was! (MP, 236)\(^{12}\)

This is an extraordinary passage, mixing, with characteristically
Crawford-like indifference, residual and emergent virtues; military
heroism leads on to domestic and even commercial virtues, usefulness
and exertion, the last as we shall see, serving as Elinor Dashwood’s
characteristic term for virtue. For one whole paragraph, Henry Crawford
is enabled to imagine an alternative to his idle pursuit of pleasure: a life
of purpose and service, but it is shortly over.

These same contrasts are played out over the clergy in the initial
conversation when Mary first understands at Sotherton that Edmund is
bound to for the Church, and denounces orders as “nothing”:

“The nothing of conversation has its gradations, I hope, as well as
the never. A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must
not head mobs, or set the ton in dress. But I cannot call that
situation nothing which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally, which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. No one here can call the office nothing. If the man who holds it is so, it is by the neglect of his duty, by foregoing its just importance, and stepping out of his place to appear what he ought not to appear.” (MP, 92)

In these debates about the social value versus the social status of the clergy, Edmund’s ideals are consistently set against the debased example of Dr. Grant’s practice of self-indulgence, indolence, and sloth. In this lengthy exchange at Sotherton, Fanny keeps interjecting the example of William, entangling sailors and clergy as the exempla of worthy labor and self-advancement, against the laziness of Dr. Grant, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Crawford’s debauched Admiral uncle. From first to last in her writing, Austen is consistently hostile to a leisured class of privilege (played out most extensively in Sense and Sensibility’s Edward, whose life is directionless until he takes orders, assumes a living and parish, and so has something worthwhile at which to work). For Austen’s male characters it seems to matter little whether one signs on as a cabin boy or takes orders after his degree: what connects both paths is an earned station, an earned authority. From the perspective of authority, the subject of this chapter, we might observe that Edmund takes orders,
as do the Price sailors; Sir Thomas gives orders; you can’t be born to it, but you have to take orders before you are allowed to give orders

Sir Thomas makes the same point in a much later conversation with Henry over Thornton Lacey:

“Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park: he might ride over every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey; and that if he does not live among his parishioners, and prove himself, by constant attention, their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.” (MP, 247)

Only that which is personally earned is valuable, a point that is made in the following striking passage early on in Fanny’s tenure at the Park that summarizes everyone’s character in light of Sir Thomas’s ambitions for them. In light of all the subsequent disappointments, this may be the most brutally ironic paragraph in the oeuvre:

From about the time of her entering the family, Lady Bertram, in consequence of a little ill-health, and a great deal of indolence, gave up the house in town, which she had been used to occupy every
spring, and remained wholly in the country, leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence. In the country, therefore, the Miss Bertrams continued to exercise their memories, practise their duets, and grow tall and womanly: and their father saw them becoming in person, manner, and accomplishments, everything that could satisfy his anxiety. His eldest son was careless and extravagant, and had already given him much uneasiness; but his other children promised him nothing but good. His daughters, he felt, while they retained the name of Bertram, must be giving it new grace, and in quitting it, he trusted, would extend its respectable alliances; and the character of Edmund, his strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness to himself and all his connexions. He was to be a clergyman. (MP, 20-21)

Sir Thomas is in the end disappointed in almost all his hopes, with the exception of the last. Despite the opening disclaimer, the last penitential chapter of *Mansfield Park* does dwell on guilt and misery, distributing with a certain glee more punishment than reward. Nonetheless, it holds out the hope of remedy. Traditional, paternal authority is not overthrown, for it is reparable: Sir Thomas, we are told at length, sees the error of his ways, and so will wield his authority more warmly and wisely in future, just as Tom and Julia will presumably act
more responsibly and dutifully. This is what distinguishes *Mansfield Park* from *Persuasion*, because the last novel holds no hope of improvement. Sir Walter remains a repugnant mixture of ignorance and absolutism, leaving no hope whatever that the gentry will remember how to do their duty or that Kellynch Hall will ever again be managed responsibly. The small naval community here serves not simply as extended compliment to her sailor brothers, but also as a utopian alternative to traditional, landed gentry. Throughout *Mansfield Park*, naval discipline and naval authority serve as a shadowy contrast to the aristocratic corruptions at that undermine Mansfield Park and the Bertram family. While Admiral Crawford remains a figure of debauchery, William and his brothers evoke a working and effective hierarchy. What is shadowy in the former novel is fleshed out in *Persuasion*, where Captain Wentworth and his fellow officers instantiate an authority that is earned by service and by valor.

Austen begins the last chapter of *Persuasion* comparing the two male characters, but also two social systems:

Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody. He was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him, and who could give his daughter
at present but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds which must be hers hereafter. (P, 248)

Captain Wentworth is a self-made man, distinguished by his own merits and achievements, while Sir Walter has managed to squander almost all of the considerable estate that he has inherited. There is a whiff here of the Nichomachean mean, between prodigality and avarice: the Captain earns and the baronet spends. But there is an equal hint of Locke from the Two Treatises of Government: the sensible and productive accumulates, and eventually the other half has to come to work for him. Sir Walter is Austen's cruelest caricature of an aristocrat, completely removed from the patrician hero in the tradition of Burney's Lord Orville. He is incapable of stewarding his estate, and ends up landless, renting in a resort town, a sycophant sucking up to distant relatives with more distinguished (if Irish) titles. We know from the novel's first sentence that he is intellectually ill equipped for reading, but is rather devoted to all things insubstantial and vain:

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did, nor could the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered
the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion. (P, 4)

Sir Walter, in short, is a horribly debased Darcy: a bad landlord, master, and father, proud in the pejorative sense of the word. He is the kind of pompous ass that Austen delighted in with Mr. Collins, but Sir Walter is presented without the leavening humor. As a figure of traditional, inherited authority, Sir Walter is the worst possible holder of the office, incapable of the most basic self-preservation. He lives beyond his means, values only his hateful child, and neglects or abuses the other two, and remains a patsy to any sharper willing to ply him with an empty compliment. As a weak link who has inherited a position of importance, his weakness underscore the dangers of the system of patrilineal descent. If the estate can be handed over automatically to Sir Walter or to Mr. Elliot, then it doesn’t deserve to be preserved. (Mr. Elliot himself functions as a kind of throwback to the fortune-hunting aristocrats of Restoration and eighteenth-century drama, devoted on the one hand to an aristocratic hierarchy, but willing to marry the rich heiress of an hostler.) In other words, in between Mansfield Park and Persuasion, by severing traditional authority from principle, Austen provokes a legitimation crisis. Again, this scathing critique of primogeniture is underscored by presence in the novel of a whole different system, one in which individuals earn their place and distinction. In Persuasion, the Navy
functions as a rebuke to the landed gentry, for the former is a system where worth is recognized and rewarded, while in the latter idiocy is tolerated and even respected. Sir Walter in short embodies an empty, outmoded, and debased authority, one whose orders are always bad. Indeed his first objection to the Navy is that it values ability and achievement above birth:

“I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and secondly, as it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man. I have observed it all my life. A man is in greater danger in the navy of being insulted by the rise of one whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to, and of becoming prematurely an object of disgust himself, than in any other line.” (P, 19)

As I have argued elsewhere, courtship plots are always on some level about evaluation, about the detection of worth. In Austen’s oeuvre, *Pride and Prejudice* explores this process of evaluation most thoroughly, from first impressions to final conclusions about the value of the other. There, the process is almost wholly individualized and internalized: “till this moment, I never knew myself.” And, as a whole generation of feminist critique observed, from Newman to Poovey, the process of
evaluation in *Pride and Prejudice* is individual and not social or political. Judith Lowder Newton argued long ago that the appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* is that an entire class system can be overturned for one clever, witty, and lucky girl—and so Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage represents an aristocracy of the plucky. In *Persuasion*, however, it much harder to take this narrow view, for evaluation is consistently placed in a social context. Even if Anne and Wentworth are shown struggling with personal attraction and private history, everyone around them, from Sir Walter and Lady Russell to Mrs. Smith is evaluating them in terms of status, position, and wealth. The Elliots devalue Captain Wentworth as a common upstart, while the Musgroves evaluate him as a naval hero. The Elliots devalue Anne as a spinster, while the Musgroves and the Harvilles value her for her kindness and efficiency. If over the course of the century, the patrician hero loses some of his luster in an increasingly bourgeois world, at the same time, the novel insists more and more on internal, invisible values of character, nature, and disposition. Austen's protagonists succeed, she insists, on their character, not on their beauty. In a clever twist, she turns her last fictional father into one who values only externals—beauty and status, and sets him against Anne and Wentworth, the achievers. While Darcy and Mr. Knightley are shown to be good stewards of their estates, and presumably Edward and Edmund will be good, conscientious clergymen, only Captain Wentworth makes his way in the world by his own achievement, without title, inheritance, or the gift of
a Delaford living: “I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards.” (P, 247) The original objection to Captain Wentworth as suitor for Anne is “he had nothing but himself to recommend, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession.” (P, 26-7) (It is, I think, significant in this regard, that Sanditon, the text that Austen was working one when she died, is one about commercial activity, real estate development, and so business itself is no longer relegated to the last generation (Mr. Bingley’s father made their fortune in trade), or the shadows (Mr. Weston works in trade until he can afford Randalls, Mrs. Weston, and a place in Emma’s neighborhood and story.) The professionalized middle class, as Harold Perkins has in, has moved from the periphery to the center of Austen’s final manuscripts. Of all Austen criticism, the most famous and still the best short characterization of her social formation is Raymond Williams’:

To abstract this social history is of course to describe only the world of the novels within which the more particular actions begin and end. Yet it must be clear that it is not a single, settled society, it is an active, complicated, sharply speculative process. It is indeed the most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive, high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by
inherited titles and the making of family names. Into the long and complicated interaction of landed and trading capital, the process that Cobbett observed—the arrival of ‘the nabobs, negro-drivers, admirals, generals’ and so on—is directly inserted and is even taken for granted. The social confusions and contradictions of this complicated process are then the true source of many of the problems of human conduct and valuation, which the personal actions dramatize. An openly acquisitive society, which is concerned also with the transmission of wealth, is trying to judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement.¹⁹

Williams’ and Cobbett’s new comers, arrivistes, the parvenus—‘the nabobs, negro-drivers, admirals, generals’—appear in Persuasion seen as Crofts, Wentworths, Harvilles, and Benwicks, and as such the novel stages the monumental conflict of the nineteenth century: between inherited and achieved status, between traditional and charismatic authority.

Just as Austen moves her alternative system, the Navy, from the periphery to the center of her narrative from Mansfield Park to Persuasion, so too Austen has moved management from the periphery to the center. In the former novel we only see the barest glimpse: “Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs.” (We might note that in Pride and Prejudice,
Darcy has no affairs—beyond the housekeeper's sentence we never hear anything about what Darcy does for his £10,000 a year.) Mrs. Smith may be an awkwardly sketched and clumsily introduced character whose presence buttresses the theme of Christian stoicism, but she also serves as one who needs help for the better arrangement of her affairs, here too off-shore:

She had good reason to believe that some property of her husband in the West Indies, which had been for many years under a sort of sequestration for the payment of its own incumbrances, might be recoverable by proper measures; and this property, though not large, would be enough to make her comparatively rich. But there was nobody to stir in it. Mr Elliot would do nothing, and she could do nothing herself, equally disabled from personal exertion by her state of bodily weakness, and from employing others by her want of money. She had no natural connexions to assist her even with their counsel, and she could not afford to purchase the assistance of the law. This was a cruel aggravation of actually straitened means. (P, 210)

It is Captain Wentworth who acts for Mrs. Smith, in the novel's second to last paragraph, serving as the last example of his capability to act:

Captain Wentworth, by putting her in the way of recovering her husband's property in the West Indies, by writing for her, acting for
her, and seeing her through all the petty difficulties of the case with the activity and exertion of a fearless man and a determined friend, fully requited the services which she had rendered, or ever meant to render, to his wife. (P, 251-2)

I am not trying to turn Captain Wentworth into a superhero, but this description is unique among her male protagonists: “the activity and exertion of a fearless man.” This is not the language connected with Henry Tilney or Edward or Edmund or even Darcy or Mr. Knightley. It remains abstract but is implicitly physical. This is the same character that made his fortune in prize money by capturing French warships in battle. Ever since Gorer’s famous psychoanalytic essay, it has been obvious that the six novels compare the protagonists’ fathers with their suitors: Darcy finds and saves Lydia where the lazy Mr. Bennet fails; Mr. Knightley is healthy and vigorous where Mr. Woodhouse is hypochondriacal and pathetic. But never before has Austen made the side by side comparison so blatant as in Persuasion, where Wentworth is “worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him.” Sir Walter is Austen’s weakest parent and Captain Wentworth her strongest suitor. To recur one more time to Weber, in a summary on the mixed nature of all kinds of authority, he concludes: “the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons
exercising authority are lent prestige” (382). The overall point is less about what kind of prestige and authority Captain Wentworth embodies, than that Anne loses belief in Sir Walter and the system for which he stands. I think that this is a different moment from Elizabeth’s late recognition of her father’s weakness, a recognition that has more to do with maturation than with the replacement of one régime with another. Here Anne repudiates Sir Walter, William, Elizabeth, and Mary Elliot’s value of birth over worth; furthermore, the last two chapters, involve a similar repudiation of Lady Russell’s values of entitlement, lineage, and continuity. There is no need to construe this moment as a political statement about the state of England and its social hierarchy. Nonetheless, *Persuasion* is saturated with a sense of transition: “Anne could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch Hall had passed into better hands than its owners.” (P, 125)

In between Captain Wentworth, the man of action, and Sir Walter Elliot, the caricature of the decadent, inbred aristocrat, stands Anne Elliot, a figure of a kinder, gentler authority, a moral authority whose suasion comes also through example, through action, but of a different sort. We can see in Anne the prefiguration of the connection between femininity and care giving that will be ineluctably cemented together over the course of the century and mythologized in figures such as Florence Nightingale. Anne nurses children and young women; visits the sick;
soothes complaints of all sorts. Aside from her idiot father and nasty 
elder sister, everyone in the novel turns to Anne for help and advice of all 
sorts, from her selfish younger sister to sophomoric Captain Benwick, 
and even sensible and austere Captain Harville acknowledges the power 
of her argument. As one of Austen’s three less assertive protagonists 
(including Elinor and Fanny), Anne moves from margins to the center of 
the action, as other characters gradually recognize her worth. Louisa’s 
fall on the Cobb at Lyme simply cements Anne’s status as the most 
capable, the one everyone turns to in a crisis: “Anne, Anne,” cried 
Charles, “What is to be done next? What, in heaven’s name, is to be done 
next?” Shortly thereafter Wentworth asserts this basic fact: “But as to 
the rest, as to the others, if one stays to assist Mrs Harville, I think it need 
be only one. Mrs Charles Musgrove will, of course, wish to get back to her 
children; but if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne.” (P, 
114) In a novel still populated with moribund and feebly self-absorbed 
aristocrats, the word “capable” assumes large proportions. Aligned with 
Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Harville, Anne is presented as anything but 
ornamental (as is her elder sister) or idle (as is her younger sister), but 
rather as a woman of action. Much is made throughout the narrative of 
the gentleness that tempers her action, and eventually enables her advice 
to succeed with the Musgroves and with Benwick.

Over the course of the narrative, Anne is shown as one who is at 
first ignored and standing on the edges—playing while others dance, an
observer rather than an actor in her own right (much like Fanny)—to one who becomes more active and one whose opinion is sought and valued. Over this same arc, Anne is gradually distinguished from her champion, the forthright and firm Lady Russell. Over her suitors, Anne is shown to be more discerning about both Wentworth and Mr. Elliot, less prejudiced, and more just in her evaluation of them, while Lady Russell, like Sir Walter, is too distracted by externals, by status and manners. The most complex crux of *Persuasion* revolves around Lady Russell’s persuading the younger Anne to give up Wentworth seven years ago:

Young and gentle as she was, it might yet have been possible to withstand her father's ill-will, though unsoftened by one kind word or look on the part of her sister; but Lady Russell, whom she had always loved and relied on, could not, with such steadiness of opinion, and such tenderness of manner, be continually advising her in vain. She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing: indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it. But it was not a merely selfish caution, under which she acted, in putting an end to it. Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up. The belief of being prudent, and self-denying, principally for his advantage, was her chief consolation, under the misery of a parting, a final parting; and every consolation was required, for she had to encounter all the additional pain of
opinions, on his side, totally unconvinced and unbending, and of his feeling himself ill used by so forced a relinquishment. (P, 27-8)

The whole of *Persuasion* is determined by this decision and its aftermath. More than any single action in the six novels, this one is the most carefully anatomized, and the various dimensions of its mechanism exposed, for Austen does not portray this as an internalized, individual decision, but one made within a whole social matrix of conflicting considerations, persuasions, opinions, and authorities. Anne is shown to consider others’ views and to weigh their authority, as if *Persuasion* were a carefully constructed thought experiment about duty. Furthermore, and this is what makes *Persuasion* unique, this is a decision that the narrative revisits and reevaluates repeatedly:

Anne, at seven-and-twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen. She did not blame Lady Russell, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her; but she felt that were any young person, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good. She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays, and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been
in the sacrifice of it; and this, she fully believed, had the usual share, had even more than the usual share of all such solicitudes and suspense been theirs, without reference to the actual results of their case, which, as it happened, would have bestowed earlier prosperity than could be reasonably calculated on. (P, 29)

The willingness to abide by the wishes of others is of course thematized everywhere in the novel. Anne overhears Louisa Musgrove (who of course later will not yield in her wish to leap off the Cobb) in conversation with Captain Wentworth on the walk to Winthrop:

“And so, I made her go. I could not bear that she should be frightened from the visit by such nonsense. What! would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I knew to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person, or of any person I may say? No, I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it; and Henrietta seemed entirely to have made up hers to call at Winthrop to-day; and yet, she was as near giving it up, out of nonsensical complaisance!” (P, 87)

And Wentworth responds with his nut conceit:

It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on. You are never sure of a good impression being durable; everybody may sway it. Let those
who would be happy be firm. Here is a nut,” said he, catching one
down from an upper bough, “to exemplify: a beautiful glossy nut,
which, blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of
autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere. This nut,” he
continued, with playful solemnity, “while so many of his brethren
have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all
the happiness that a hazel nut can be supposed capable of.” Then
returning to his former earnest tone--”My first wish for all whom I
am interested in, is that they should be firm. (P, 88)

Indeed *Persuasion* stages an ongoing debate between yielding and
firmness, how and when to be influenced by others. Often this debate
narrates to the interaction of Lady Russell and Anne:

“I have always heard of Lady Russell as a woman of the greatest
influence with everybody! I always look upon her as able to
persuade a person to anything! I am afraid of her, as I have told
you before, quite afraid of her, because she is so very clever; but I
respect her amazingly, and wish we had such a neighbour at
Uppercross.” (P, 103)

Earlier Louisa tells Wentworth, “We should all have liked her [Anne] a
great deal better; and papa and mamma always think it was her great
friend Lady Russell’s doing, that she did not [marry Charles]. They think
Charles might not be learned and bookish enough to please Lady Russell,
and that therefore, she persuaded Anne to refuse him” (P, 89). In short, the novel explores how weak, pliable or considerate Anne is in weighing the wishes of others. Another way to put this is that the novel explores the social dimensions of individual decisions, the social context in which individuals make their choices. When Anne and Wentworth later talk in Bath about Louisa’s ill-considered decision to leap off of the stairs of the Cobb, Anne “thought it could scarcely escape him to feel that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness as a very resolute character.” (P, 116) Is Lady Russell an evil influence who ruins Anne’s chance at happiness, or was Anne right to yield to one who holds the authority of a parent? After Mrs. Smith’s revelations of Mr. Elliot’s perfidy, Anne reflects that she “could just acknowledge within herself such a possibility of having been induced to marry him, as made her shudder at the idea of the misery which must have followed. It was just possible that she might have been persuaded by Lady Russell!” (P, 211)

The central choice is of course revisited one last time in the penultimate chapter:

“I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love
better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion." (P, 246)

Here Talcott Parsons’s discussion of Durkheim’s amendment of Kant provides a useful gloss on Anne’s analysis of her original decision to obey her elders:

At this state of Durkheim’s thought duty or constraint is not the only leading characteristic of morality. While accepting the central importance of the idea of duty, he criticizes the Kantian ethics as one-sided on account of only paying sole attention to duty. There is, he says, also the element of the good, of desirability. A moral rule is not moral unless it is accepted as obligatory, unless the attitude toward it is quite different from that of expediency. But at
the same time it is also not truly moral unless obedience to it is held to be desirable, unless the individual’s happiness and self-fulfillment are bound up with it. Only the combination of the two elements gives a complete account of the nature of morality.\textsuperscript{22}

Anne heeds the advice of Sir Walter and Lady Russell not only because their advice is prudent, but also because her well-being is contingent on her obedience. Anne Elliot is Austen’s most mature and most sensible heroine. Her judgment is not marred by inexperience (as is Catherine Morland’s), by egoism (as is Elizabeth’s and Emma’s) or by over-protectiveness (as Elinor’s and Fanny’s often is). While not a figure of perfection—she can be petulant, self-pitying, and ever so slightly masochistically submissive to the demands of her family—nonetheless, Anne’s voice is the closest in all six novels to the narrator, the closest to an objective eye that sees things as they are. Anne in short is the antitype of Emma, the “imaginist.” As such, Anne is the gold standard of judgment in Austen’s novels. Whether modern readers like Anne’s final assessment of her decision seven years ago or not, I think that we have to accept it as kind of social fact, a given—this is the final judgment. As such, this passage offers a kind of anatomy of action tempered by judgment within a social context. As a character, Anne is invested with the moral authority to know when to yield and when to resist. As she tells Wentworth earlier when he recounts his jealousy over Mr. Elliot:
“You should have distinguished,” replied Anne. “You should not have suspected me now; the case is so different, and my age is so different. If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty, but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated.” (P, 244)

As the closest thing to an idealized heroine as Austen ever composed, Anne Elliot embodies what Sir Thomas, Sir Walter, and even Captain Wentworth (and probably Fanny Price as well) lack: moral authority that is played out in a fully social field, with the capacity and willingness to understand how action will affect all those around her. Anne Elliot is Austen’s final and most through analysis of the self / society dialectic, of the balance between what is owed to others and what is owed to the self, of the relation between duty or obligation and will or desire. In Act IV, scene 6, King Lear asks Gloucester, “Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?” And Lear continues, “And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office.” 200 years later, Austen is pondering the same questions in Mansfield Park and Persuasion: does one obey the man or the office; must admirals always be obeyed; are the titled automatically entitled to respect; must one obey her parents or their surrogates when her parents are absent or foolish or incompetent? These are of course not concerns
on which Austen held a patent, for they would continue on through
Gaskell, Dickens, Trollope, Elliot, Hardy, Forster, Woolf and beyond.

In the end, as Sir Walter’s residual model of traditional authority is
derided and rejected, Captain Wentworth’s model of charismatic
authority is proportionately dominant. But at the same time as Anne
escapes from her father’s house and from her father's values and control,
so too she emerges as complete and autonomous character who governs
her own actions, is her own (emergent) moral authority. Because she is
fully adult at the opening of the narrative, it is easy to miss that
*Persuasion* is, in an oblique way, a bildungsroman, over the arch of the
eight years that it covers. And as such, it is a liberation narrative as Anne
passes from confinement and oppression to freedom; at the close, as a
full-fledged member of the naval community, Ann has all the world
before her. Tom Jones was ejected from Paradise Hall into the lower
world of London before returning to paradise with his bride Sophia, in a
quintessentially male adaptation of the Miltonic paradigm. Anne Elliot
too is ejected from the ancestral home, but she refuses the opportunity
to return in the company of Mr. Elliot, and instead makes the paradise of
“two souls dancing in private rapture.” Almost a century and half after
Milton, in 1818 Austen presents Anne's paradise as the ability to decide
and act for herself—freedom and autonomy.
Thompson, Modernization


3 Jürgen Habermas, Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 13

4 Though he is writing specifically of Pride and Prejudice, Michael McKeon’s remarks about the ideology of free indirect discourse fit the conflict between Sir Thomas and Fanny quite neatly: “These several scenario [of FID presenting the private] bespeak a historical moment when the collectivity of positive freedom, devolving to the ‘absoute’ authority of the state apparatus, comes uncertainly into conflict with the


6 Weber’s theory of modernization is woven through out his writings, most notably in *The Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic* (1905). But it undergirds his *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (ed. Talcott Parsons [New York: Free Press, 1964]) in which modernization or enlightenment entails disenchantment and rationalization: “One of the most important aspects of the process of ‘rationalization’ of action is the substitution for the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom, of deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest.” (p. 123). And ultimately, the end of modernization / rationalization / progress is capitalism: “It is only in the modern Western World that rational capitalistic enterprises with fixed capital, free labour, the rational specialization and combination of functions, and the allocation of productive functions on the basis of capitalistic enterprises, bound together in a market economy, are to be found” (p. 279).


Kate Ellis in *The Contested Castle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) and more recently Nancy Armstrong in *How Novels Think* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) demonstrate how the logic of the domestic novel is foundationally dependent on its spectral, gothic, horrid other.


See Tave, *Some Words*, pp. 175-182 for a lengthy discussion of “disposition.”

See Brian Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 193 for a reading of the details of this scene; this study is the last word on Jane Austen’s relation to her sailor brothers and to the navy as such.

Edward Copeland observes that “*Persuasion*, however, has the distinction in Austen’s novels of celebrating the professional ranks frankly and openly, of placing them above the aristocracy and the gentry as responsible economists, but such celebration is no more than a secondary issue in the novel.” “The Austens and the Elliots: A Consumers Guide to *Persuasion*,” in *Jane Austen’s Business*, p. 150.

See Kenneth Moler, *Jane Austen’s Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1968), for the connection between Darcy and the patrician heroes, Richardson’s Sir Charles Grandison and Burney’s Lord Orville.

*Models of Value*, pp. 19-21

Thompson, *Modernization*

will be successful in material terms, but she earns the right to do so precisely because Elizabeth’s first fantasy of personal power is not rewarded. *Pride and Prejudice*, in other words, legitimizes the reader’s romantic wishes by humbling the heroine’s vanity. At the level of the plot, power is taken from egotism and given to love; at the level of the reading experience, power seems miraculously both to emanate from and to reward individualistic desire” (p. 201) I take “aristocracy of the plucky” from E. M. Forster’s “Two Cheers for Democracy.”


21 Galperin, *Historical Austen*, p. 227 notes how impotent Wentworth becomes upon Louisa’s fall