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Keats and the Romantic City

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Riding the Wave of New Opportunities:

How Austen Demonstrates Gendered Mobility for Sea-faring Women in *Persuasion*

Out with the old, in with the new. That seems to be what Jane Austen had in mind when discussing the emergence of a “new order” of gentlemen in British society: The English Navy. After all, Austen’s *Persuasion* dwells on the fact that the British navy offers men a rare opportunity of upward social mobility, thereby giving them a chance to eventually replace the “old order” of land-owning noblemen in society. In a tone of resentment, the *Baronetage*-reading aristocrat, Sir Walter Elliot, even explicitly states, “[The navy] has the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their father and grandfathers never dreamt of...” (Austen 19). Clearly, the navy brought a tidal wave change to the masculine social structure at this time. But aside from the men, the navy also offered new opportunities for women as well. While this theme of social mobility for women is subtler, it is nonetheless significant. And to demonstrate the importance of gendered mobility in the novel, Austen glorifies the life of the sea-faring wife in *Persuasion*.

Perhaps the best example of this “new order of gentlewomen” is the Admiral’s wife, Mrs. Croft. Unlike the Musgroves or Elliots, Mrs. Croft and her husband share a

unique relationship based on spousal equality. After all, the Admiral encourages her to accompany him on his naval journeys, thereby giving Mrs. Croft greater opportunities to experience the world at first-hand. While conversing at a social gathering, the domesticated Mrs. Musgrove is shocked to discover how many countries the Admiral's wife has explored over the years. As Mrs. Croft proudly proclaims,

...In the fifteen years of my marriage, though many women have done more...I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and have been once to the East Indies, and back again, and only once; besides being in different places about home: Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar. But I never went beyond the Streights, and never was in the West Indies. We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies (Austen 73).

Mrs. Croft's extensive travel experience has helped provide her with increased knowledge and a broader perspective on life. Thus, when it comes to gendered social mobility, these attributes give Croft the upper hand over her domesticated sisters. And Mrs. Croft is well aware of that. In fact, when discussing her life, Mrs. Croft does not regret one-second of her time spent at sea, "'And I do assure you, ma'am,' pursued Mrs. Croft, 'that nothing can exceed the accommodations of a man-of-war; I speak, you know, of the higher rates. When you come to a frigate, of course, you are more confined; though any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy in one of them; and I can safely say, that the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship'" (Austen 73). Mrs. Croft is a smart woman. She knows that her greatest chance for gaining power and success cannot be found at home, but rather beyond the horizon.

And judging from her personal accounts, Mrs. Croft seems to have found her

niche in traveling the high seas. In fact, the Admiral's wife plays a pivotal role on the ship, serving her husband as a valuable helpmeet more than just a passive companion. In a friendly debate with Captain Wentworth, Mrs. Croft assertively defends her duties as a sailor's wife by arguing, "I would assist any brother officer's wife that I could, and I would bring anything of Harville's from the world's end, if he wanted it" (Austen 72). Furthermore, Mrs. Croft even goes so far as to ridicule Wentworth for his lack of propriety towards women by claiming, "I hate to hear you talking so like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days" (Austen 72). Mrs. Croft is a bold, yet levelheaded woman who is unafraid to speak-out on behalf of her gender. Although these could be natural attributes, it seems that Mrs. Croft's experience at sea has helped foster her sense of independence and strength of character.

In addition to her sea-faring authority, Mrs. Croft also commands attention and respect from other men within the domestic sphere as well. Unlike her timid female counterparts (such as Mary Musgrove), Croft is not afraid to speak her mind or display her intellect in front of her male peers. This is clearly demonstrated in her business negotiations surrounding the sale of Kellynch Hall,

...He had seen Mrs. Croft, too; she was at Taunton with the admiral, and had been present almost all the time they were talking the matter over. 'And a very well-spoken, genteel, shrewd lady, she seemed to be,' continued he; 'asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business (Austen 22).

Clearly, Mrs. Croft's level of autonomy at sea seems to manifest itself on land as well. She is as confident as she is authoritative. Granted, Admiral Croft shares a special relationship with his wife – one that embraces equality and fosters this type of behavior. Yet, it is also the sea-faring experience that has shaped her into this kind of clever businesswoman – one who is able to manage finances and successfully run a household on land as well as she can at sea.

The sense of dignity and independence that Mrs. Croft brings to the table for sea-faring women captures the attention of the protagonist, Anne Elliot. In fact, Elliot considers Mrs. Croft a mentor-like figure, admiring and emulating her brave actions throughout the story. She is especially receptive to the type of compatible and convivial relationship that Mrs. Croft shares with her husband. As Elliot notes,

There had been a time, when of all the large party now filling the drawing-room at Uppercross, they would have found it most difficult to cease to speak to one another. With the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs Croft, who seemed particularly attached and happy, (Anne could allow no other exceptions even among the married couples), there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in union, no countenances so beloved" (Austen 66).

The Admiral and Mrs. Croft are the prime example of a successful and functional marriage (something we rarely come across throughout the novel). But perhaps the most appealing thing about their relationship is the fact that Mrs. Croft, as a strong female figure, is able to strike the balance between marriage and professionalism. Her interactions with her husband reveal that their love is genuine. But despite being a devoted wife, Mrs. Croft also plays the role of devoted shipmate. She shares in both the

adventures and responsibilities of a “life at sea” with her husband; something that would never traditionally occur within the domestic sphere of land-holding elites. After all, the shallow and aristocratic Elizabeth Elliot has no way of progressing up the social ladder since she is bound by the inheritance restrictions on her father’s estate. Similarly, Mary Musgrove (who married for the wrong reasons) settles for a life of domesticity and permanent complacency at Uppercross.

That being said, it comes as no surprise that Anne Elliot steers clear from these confined domestic roles. Instead, she follows in Mrs. Croft’s footsteps by the novel’s end. After all, in deciding to wed Captain Wentworth, “She [Anne] 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” (Austen 271). It is interesting that Anne considers being a “sailor’s wife” a profession in and of itself. After all, it means that she will have duties on-board a ship that go beyond the basic responsibilities that she might possess as a domestic housewife. And the fact that she is so eager to embark on this new lifestyle and profession, despite its challenges, is further testament to the fact that she foresees a world of new adventures and opportunities in “going to sea” as a sailor’s wife. Perhaps author Nina Auerbach puts it best when she argues, “If the navy is Jane Austen’s vision of a brave new world, Mrs. Croft is her tactful and subtle portrait of the ‘new woman.’ The Crofts are the first happily married couple in Jane Austen’s novels to receive more than peripheral treatment [...] Their marriage is a naval marriage, different in kind from any other in Jane Austen’s

books, and it will set a hopeful pattern for Anne and Wentworth's" (Auerbach 123). All in all, Austen's *Persuasion* reveals that the Navy was a unique profession in the sense that it afforded both men *and* women a world of new opportunities for travel, prosperity, and social mobility in English society at this time. Of course, it is important to note that Austen, herself, had two brothers in the Navy, which may explain her pride and prejudice towards other professions in the novel.

Works Cited

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PAGE

PAGE 1

Moore