

# *Jane Austen and Old Corruption*

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Most commentators have asserted that Jane Austen expresses no opinion about patronage, an institution intimately connected with corruption in contemporary debate. Claire Tomalin considers it 'the accepted jobbery of the time',<sup>1</sup> and Roger Sales suggests that Austen generally views patronage and family influence as 'entirely appropriate'.<sup>2</sup> Oliver MacDonagh, investigating the possible influence of Evangelicalism on *Mansfield Park*, finds only partial consonance with a creed which would eventually make pluralism and non-residence impossible: Austen 'could not or at any rate did not think outside the customary categories'.<sup>3</sup> Warren Roberts, while struggling to absolve Edmund of pluralism at the end of the novel, compares Austen to other Romantic writers in justifying *responsible* patronage. Relating her attitude to Burke, Roberts has to admit that Burke's ideological linkage of aristocratic power with responsibility had been broken for some time in historical actuality.<sup>4</sup> He refers to Harold Perkin, who draws particularly on the administration of the Poor Laws to illustrate the long-standing adoption of laissez-faire doctrines by landowners and their 'abdication' of social responsibility.<sup>5</sup> According to Perkin, landowners were faced with a twin-pronged assault on property and patronage during the Revolutionary period and in saving the first, relinquished the second.<sup>6</sup> The attack on patronage, dating from Pitt's efforts to curtail its abuse in the 1780s, reached a climax in the well-publicised impeachment of Henry Dundas after a Parliamentary Commission of 1805 investigating fraud and peculation in naval procurement. The proceedings of Parliament investigating profiting from the sale of army posts by the mistress of the Duke of York also occupied considerable

space in publications in 1809. No-one could be unaware of the sense of crisis at the accession of the Regent in 1811, when demands for reform of patronage went hand in hand with demands for the extension of the franchise. Radical journalists such as Hunt and Cobbett expected much of the new ruler, and bitterly registered their disillusionment when the Duke of York was reinstated in a resumption of business as usual. In 1812 a disillusioned Hunt reviewed the last Parliament as 'a very pleasant retrospect to the Jobbers, the Contractors, the Courtiers, the Sinecure-men, and all others whose interests are separate from those of the nation at large'. But for all others, from the 'middle-class' to the peasantry, 'the heart sickens'.<sup>7</sup> Cobbett took his more aggressively pessimistic tone from the personal address which Burdett managed to substitute for the 'official' reply to the Regent's opening of Parliament in 1812. This repeated attacks on oligarchy, corruption, and lack of representation, and also attacked the barrack system, the use of the militia in Ireland and the war against France, which Burdett saw as supporting despotism and superstition abroad. Cobbett, contrasting Luddite and other riots with the Loyalist violence of the 1790s, conjured up the spectres of insurrection and invasion. He expanded Burdett's ominous warning that on the continent 'the way of the conqueror was ... paved by corruption in the government ...'.<sup>8</sup> If *Mansfield Park* was begun in February 1811 and half-finished by January 1813<sup>9</sup> it reflects national fears and self-criticism in one of the darkest periods of the war. Before Wellington's victories in the Peninsular and Napoleon's reverse late in 1812, the fall of England, with its corrupt patronage, seemed as imaginable as the fall of Mansfield Park.

Philip Harling has studied the 'waning of old corruption' as a gradual process of whittling away the patronage of the Crown, a process in which Parliament reformed itself.<sup>10</sup> He points out that the Red and Black Books in which radicals itemised the sinecures, pensions, and offices of M.P.s and their families were often out of date, as the aristocracy and gentry bowed to the mood of the country. Hunt even maintained that the aristocracy was 'ashamed' and growing closer to 'the people'.<sup>11</sup> Harling, however, reveals the reluctance with which Whig and Tory grandees disgorged their sinecures and pensions, often only under the perceived threat of revolutionary violence, and the partial success of the process. Even the Evangelical prime minister Percival dealt in reversionary offices. Wade's *Black Book* of 1820, based on Parliamentary enquiries of the previous decade, provides a useful record of the abuses which yielded to pressure over the period of Jane Austen's publications. If Austen, like her heroines, picked up newspapers and periodicals on visits, she would have read of scandals and reports of reform meetings and among the gentry of her acquaintance the question would not have been discussed from one side. In the aftermath of the Duke of York scandal pro-reform meetings were held in many parts of the country. Among eighty county and borough meetings mentioned by Harling a meeting of county freeholders of Hampshire is reported by Hunt where a

motion for parliamentary reform proposed by Cobbett was passed with only four voting against. Among the supporters are the names Portal, Powlett, and Mildmay, all prominent families in the Austen circle. A meeting of Kentish freeholders at Maidstone brought the same message from the milieu of Godmersham, Jane Austen's 'second home'.<sup>12</sup> Among the 'die-hard' Tories attacked by Hunt, Cobbett, or Wade we find names and families to whom Austen shows 'inexplicable' coldness or prejudice. Her letters express derision for 'Heathcote and Chute for ever'.<sup>13</sup> She seems to have had an initial prejudice against the family connection with the Knatchbulls, Mrs Knight, her brother Edward's adoptive mother, whom she only came to value personally later.<sup>14</sup> Austen's meeting with young Edward's friend, Stephen-Rumbold Lushington, the M.P. for Canterbury, provoked a deeply satiric response:

I am sure he is clever & a Man of Taste. He got a vol. of Milton last night & spoke of it with warmth. – He is quite an M.P. – very smiling, with an exceeding good address, & readiness of Language. – I am rather in love with him. – I dare say he is ambitious and Insincere – he puts me in mind of Mr Dundas.<sup>15</sup>

Further on in the letter, referring to families such as the powerful Cravens, the phrase 'undue influence' pops out *à propos* the hereditary transmission of physiognomy. By such indirect means Austen hints at a political commentary highly inappropriate to her sex. Milton provides the touchstone for judging parliamentary hypocrisy, ambition, and 'undue influence'.

Some public scandals affected the Austen family more directly. In assembling various sources of family patronage to secure advancement for naval sons in 1798, the most influential proved to be Admiral James Gambier. Jane transmitted the news of their success with distancing irony as 'extract of the sweets of Gambier'.<sup>16</sup> In 1811 she writes of Frank's supersession in the Channel Fleet by a protégé of Admiral Pellew, who took over the task of blockading the French from Gambier. Whereas elsewhere in her letters she welcomes Frank's spells ashore, here Jane fears for Frank's future employment: 'what will he do? & where will he live?'<sup>17</sup> The letter was written from Henry Austen's house in London and he would have told her the cause of the ominous eclipse of their patron if she were not already aware of that storm in the political world.

In a battle off the Basque Roads in 1809 Gambier had forced a French fleet into port or onto shoals. He had failed to follow up his victory for fear of running aground and, it was suggested, to prevent further loss of life. Gambier's religious convictions, while making him a good patron to the similarly minded Frank, had always raised doubts as to his professional efficiency. He sent for Lord Cochrane, a specialist in deploying fire-ships, but before his arrival the French vessels had been either saved or stripped and abandoned.

Gambier was roundly criticized for holding off by Cochrane and by Admiral Hervey, commander of the flagship. These public insults also took the form of accusations of influence which, in Hervey's case, Gambier took as far as a court-martial in which Hervey was dismissed from the service. Such was the force of professional criticism, however, that Gambier had to order his own court-martial in order to be honourably acquitted. Cochrane, recently elected member for Westminster with Burdett, objected in the House to the customary vote of thanks after such a bungled victory, repeating Hervey's offence on a more public stage. 'By such means', Cobbett reports Cochrane as saying, 'Ministers might screen themselves from reprobation; and gain for a man, whose parliamentary influence they required, the highest honours they could render, however unworthy the object'.<sup>18</sup> Cochrane also defended Hervey, whose complaint was that his own services in the *Temeraire* at Trafalgar had not been given due reward by Gambier in his role of Lord of the Admiralty. Hervey's comment, as reported by Cochrane, was 'not that Lord Gambier was, but "I am no hypocrite, no canting Methodist, and no psalm-singer: I do not cheat old women out of their estates by hypocrisy and canting"'.<sup>19</sup>

The Herveys themselves had influence in the navy and perhaps constituted the better side of nepotism in a thoroughly professional commitment, accompanied with the profanity and bluntness associated with the service. *Persuasion* represents this less sophisticated breed, one of whom, beached before his time, though not dishonourably, bears the suggestive name *Harville*. Despite his exoneration, Gambier was damaged by this incident. After a suitable period he was recalled from active service and never raised his flag again. Jane Austen did not have to go too far from home to find models for the disgraced patron of *Mansfield Park*. Frank was appointed after the battle to Gambier's flagship, the *Caledonia*, whose master was accused of falsifying charts by Cochrane, but the incident did not then interrupt Frank's career. Frank had met Cochrane before. The latter executed a typically gallant, self-sacrificing manoeuvre in the battle off St Domingo, taking a broadside intended for the flagship, and Frank might have had divided loyalties over the Basque Roads affair.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1780s Austen's brothers had published a light, satirical sketch about parliamentary place-men in the second number of their Oxford periodical, *The Loiterer*. In 1809 Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* denounced a far more pervasive patronage-culture, citing the allegation that:

almost every third man is in possession or in expectancy of some public office; and that there is scarcely an individual above the rank of a common labourer, who does not look forward to some such appointment, as a part of his means of subsistence, or of elevation in society.<sup>21</sup>

Jeffrey asserted that the 'spirit of liberty in the body of the people' was being destroyed by such thirst for dependency. This was the basis of the earlier

criticism of Wyville, Cartwright, and the 'Country' party and that of radical critics like Godwin, Paine, Cobbett, and Hunt. J. G. A. Pocock has pointed out the uses of patronage in giving the government a basis of support in the (politically recognised) country, and that such criticism of corruption was the common cry throughout the century of Whigs and Tories, neither of whom possessed the political will to eradicate it.<sup>22</sup> There was a desire for reform in the early nineteenth century, but an indeterminacy of motives. Jeffrey, as Perkin comments, wished to 'attach numbers to property' and preserve its predominance.<sup>23</sup> Even Cobbett maintained that his demand for a householder franchise was a 'restorative' measure and that such an electorate would vote for men of financial independence rather than adventurers. Many, however, as Harling recognises, used 'restorative' language 'in order to justify deeply radical ideas'.<sup>24</sup>

The multiform patronage relationships in Jane Austen's novels reflect the ubiquity of the phenomenon at the time. J. M. Bourne, describing early nineteenth century Britain as a 'patronage society', sees its basis as a 'bargain' between a superior and an inferior, inflected particularly by the perceived 'duty' of patronage in family relationships and the more than etymological connection of 'pater' and 'patron'.<sup>25</sup> It can also be seen in the relationship of landlord to tenant and in many other relationships where there is an excess of interest above the contractual 'bargain'. Bourne draws attention to the vast increase in the opportunities for patronage in salaried offices in the wartime establishment and the survival of patronage in the enterprise culture of Victorian Britain. Like Cobbett and Wade, he sees it in the East India Company, the Navy, and the unreformed Church, but also in government commissions and local government. Edgeworth's *Patronage* (1814) deals with patronage in government offices and contrasts it with the growing independence of the professions. Austen is less sanguine about professional independence and more alert to the many forms which patronage may take. Even within the family the relationship of an 'adopted' child can be seen as one of patronage in an age when adoption had no legal basis.<sup>26</sup> In many ways her attitude seems similar to the radical critics of the 1790s. Patronage is to be condemned in its tendency to maintain 'artificial' distinctions and inequalities. It both 'bastilles' those who practice it from the common intercourse of moral equality and corrupts those who seek it. Her most pungent irony is reserved for those who do not recognise its force in their decisions. Nevertheless, the responsibility that is supposed to go along with patronage is the duty of all those who find themselves in a position to affect the lives of others. It is a position consonant with the obligations of Godwinian Justice and the doctrines to which Godwin, Hazlitt, and Shelley later compared his 'chimerical' scheme: those of the New Testament. Austen has been aligned with the ideologies of many contemporary groups, from traditional landowners and Evangelicals to middle-class professionals and the bustling 'pseudo-gentry', but she was always aware of the Burkean gap between

ideology and practice. Her strongest statements on behalf of Evangelicalism, the religious counterpart of Burke's justification of privilege by responsibility, appear in a letter to Fanny Knight: 'I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals.' But however much she might admire the purity of Evangelical tenets the passage ends ironically. She reassures Fanny that her suitor, though fervidly Evangelical, will be found to be made of common clay: 'don't be frightened by the idea of him acting more strictly up to the precepts of the New Testament than others'.<sup>27</sup>

Patronage as a term figures prominently in the endings of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*. Marianne, far from retiring from the cruel world, becomes patroness of a village. One trusts that she will not reduce it to tasteful, picturesque dilapidation. The state of 'the patronage of Mansfield Park' is the subject of the last sentence of Austen's first novel wholly written in the Regency period, and it begins with Sir Thomas's resolution to be 'the real and consistent patron of the selected child'.<sup>28</sup> This reinforces the fact that Fanny's relation to Sir Thomas is always one of patronage. She does not owe him a daughter's duty but a duty of 'gratitude'. The concentration on 'patriarchy' in recent criticism has tended to obscure this point, collapsing the play on the pater/patron ambivalence of Sir Thomas. The critique of gratitude in the novel, as Claudia Johnson observes, seems to refer back to the denunciation of gratitude and demeaning charity by such writers as Godwin and Wollstonecraft.<sup>29</sup> Some such radical perspective might well colour the presentation of patronage in the early novels. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a feminine version of Bage's Lord Grondale in *Hermesprong* (1796), a caricature of the 'bad' aristocratic patron who, united with an ecclesiastical toady, might be expected to deal with hardship by descending on villagers and scolding them into peace and plenty. Austen's early novels seem to make a virtue of the acknowledged defect of many radical novels of the 1790s. These, like *Hermesprong*, *The Old Manor House*, and *Hugh Trevor*, left their heroes occupying the places of power which the novels had attacked as corrupt and corrupting. Jane Austen redeems society by similarly producing 'good' patrons to outweigh the bad in Colonel Brandon and a reformed Darcy. Privilege might be justified on the grounds of recognised responsibility and a reformation of haughty manners. His housekeeper asserts that Darcy 'will be' (not 'is') 'affable to the poor'.<sup>30</sup> This potential 'affability', however, is downright 'patronizing' in his proposal to Elizabeth. Social behaviour of a 'patronizing' kind is usually marked out for criticism when manner is the index of moral attitude. The application of the word developed within the period as a more pejorative alternative to 'condescending' and 'affable', both capable of being used honorifically.<sup>31</sup>

The 1790s influence can be seen in the role property assumes in forming the perceptions and attitudes of patrons and supplicants. Darcy's assumption of superiority affects his perception of the relationship of Jane and Bingley. Anxious for a match between his rich protégé, Bingley, and his sister, Darcy

is all too ready to persuade himself that Jane is indifferent (238). Austen's most outstanding example of the corrupting influence of patronage in the vein of the 1790s is Charlotte Lucas. Her need for security might be regarded sympathetically but the 'dangers' of an unequal marriage in her case are not those of Harriet Smith, whose romantic propensities have been awakened. Charlotte gives an example of the capacity of the wife to identify with the views of her husband, mentioned as an optimistic estimate of Mary Crawford's improvement as the wife of Edmund in *Mansfield Park*. Charlotte seems to have adopted a sharper-eyed version of Collins's servility, and at the end of volume 2 chapter 9 decides that she would rather have Elizabeth marry Darcy than Colonel Fitzwilliam since Darcy 'had considerable patronage in the church' (161).<sup>32</sup> After the match is announced it hardly needs Mr Bennet's crude message to cause Charlotte's immediate desertion of Lady Catherine and the installation of her husband in Lucas Lodge to lay siege to Darcy.

Emma has long been seen as guilty of 'patronising' behaviour, and Frederick Wentworth is similarly over-impressed with his own attributes and achievements, and prepared to subtly belittle those who do not share them. Both have to learn humility, but whether they should no longer act as patrons is problematical. Anne and Frederick will not have the scope for patronage that an estate would provide, but Captain Wentworth will still owe the duty of patron to other Dick Musgroves. Emma is rebuked for misusing her patronage, but Knightley, despite his advocacy of self-determination, is intensely interested in members of his estate to whom he feels more than a contractual duty. Many critics see Knightley as representative of the traditional landowning class, as does Emma. Emma, however, objects to his derogations from traditional dignity, such as walking rather than using his carriage. He is clearly a 'new', improving landowner, who farms commercially for the London trade, and his values of truth, openness, sincerity, and independence can be seen as 'traditional' or alternatively as connected with the radical ideals of the 1790s. He combines the virtues of these ideologies but the issue of patronage shows his one blind spot.<sup>33</sup> His own privileged position blinds him to the incapacities of others for independent action. He fails to see the difficulty of moral independence for those, like Miss Taylor, Jane Fairfax, and Frank Churchill, who are materially dependent. 'One law for the ox and the lion is oppression' and Knightley's attitude verges on the laissez-faire doctrines that his benevolent interference contradicts. A pointed heteroglossia, an intrusion of a recognisable public discourse, also links the issues of patronage in the 'match-making' sense with the large question of Poor Relief. After Emma and Harriet visit the poor Emma discusses with Elton 'what could be done and what should be done'.<sup>34</sup> When her best efforts to bring the two supposed lovers together have failed, her thoughts echo contemporary debate on the treatment of the poor: 'There are people, the more you do for them, the less they will do for themselves' (73). Independence

might be an ideal, but in a complex, unequal society the conditions of independence have to be managed. Highbury obviously had not taken advantage of Knatchbull's 1723 Act to delegate care of the poor completely to an overseer. Neither workhouse nor house of correction are alternatives to 'outdoor relief' and a community involvement that extends from meetings of prominent citizens to Miss Bates's concern for an ostler's father. Emma, who pays her visit to the poor, comes off rather better than Elton, who defers his visit to pursue Emma, or Knightley, who, in the transports of his anticipated marriage, forgets parish business and fails to keep an appointment with Elton. In Knightley, however, Highbury has a progressive landlord, who also exercises a benevolent patronage. A patronage that is exerted to enable its objects to exercise their independent views (he speaks for Martin though he disagrees with his choice of Harriet) is very different from one that exerts its power to overawe and direct.

The 'universal benevolence' that had played a major part in 1790s radicalism has echoes in the early novels. Colonel Brandon provides an unknown Edward Ferrars with a living on the strength of his virtues and need. John Dashwood's 'respectable' fulfilment only of 'his ordinary duties'<sup>35</sup> and the restriction of his benevolence to his immediate family recalls Wordsworth's portrait of those content with 'inevitable charities' in 'The Cumberland Beggar' and Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism of restricted family love as an aspect of selfishness. In *Mansfield Park* Sir Thomas seems aware of principles, yet his interpretation of them often goes awry. His own elephantine sentences fail to contain contradictory impulses and the narrator's description imitates them:

Sir Thomas Bertram had interest, which, from principle as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert for the advantage of Lady Bertram's sister; but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach; and before he had time to devise any other method of assisting them, an absolute breach between the sisters had taken place. (2)

This sentence-structure, in which the hoped-for Johnsonian balance loses its poise, is used again in *Persuasion* to imitate Lady Russell's tortuous attempts to give precedence to both virtue and rank. In Sir Thomas's case it also enacts the ponderousness of a scrupulosity often overtaken by events or the quick-wittedness of Mrs Norris. Incompatible principles wrestle inconclusively. Doing right in a 'general' sense, uncomfortably balanced by pride, is quickly replaced by 'doing right by' his family, which is alarmingly subsumed into the category of 'connections'. Sir Thomas's desire to make a difference between Fanny and his daughters places her in the position of protégée, like the more clear-cut situation of Jane Fairfax in the Campbell family, to be returned to her own connections when appropriate. After the

lonely rigours of his voyage to Antigua she becomes his 'dear Fanny' and even dearer when found to be valuably attractive. In the conclusion he looks on her as a daughter for the comfort she brings him but she only achieves the relationship by marriage. How different from the whole-hearted adoption of Frank Weston by the Churchills or of Edward Austen by the Knights!

Patronage connections overpower any scruples when Sir Thomas considers marriages that offer him the opportunity of increasing his political patronage by introducing the wealthy Rushworth to Parliament (his politics are registered by the *Quarterly Reviews* at Sotherton) and of extending his family patronage into the important sphere of the navy through Crawford. Power and full moral responsibility seem incompatible. Patronage confers a power that may itself confer patronage from questionable motives. Sir Thomas delegates power to Mrs Norris, who is irked by her own relationship of patronage to the family of her younger sister. Bolstering her self-importance by avarice, she flatters her self-image of benevolence by acquiring a protégée, or sub-protégée, in Fanny, over whom she can exert despotic control. Just as Mrs Norris is felt as part of himself by Sir Thomas, so Henry Crawford relies on his steward, but feels compelled to return to Everingham to prevent him exercising his own patronage in disposing of a mill. More importantly, Sir Thomas has to intervene personally in Antigua. In the period between the cessation of the trade and the abolition of the institution benevolent treatment in excess of contract was essential for the maintenance of slave populations. They had never bred as well under British as under American masters. Sir Thomas's intervention is, as usual, compromising. The conflict between profit and morality is fudged, leaving the old, morally bankrupt structures standing. Fanny's questioning of Sir Thomas on the subject meets silence, a silence perhaps not wholly explained by Fanny's reluctance to follow up her question, as Edmund suggests. Like Henry Tilney, Edmund is always ready to palliate what he cannot defend. The old system of power and patronage has led to a Spenglerian spectacle of unsustainable alliances and moral decline as the imposing 'patronage of Mansfield Park' implodes. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are left anxious only to secure domestic tranquillity and pathetically dependent on Susan Price, a sub-protégée of Fanny, who learned her doctrines of morality and order in a harder, less traditional school.

Patronage plays a prominent and equally compromising part in other aspects of the novel. William Price's promotion at the behest of Crawford has been linked to the patronage scandals of the period by Roger Sales,<sup>36</sup> though on such a sensitive family issue Austen is at pains to allow the dissolute Admiral a full evening to become thoroughly acquainted with William's virtues. Ecclesiastical patronage is equally a concern of the novel, equivalent to the granting of government offices in reversion, a practice that was being gradually whittled away. In *Mansfield Park* Austen presents characters as not fully in command of self-knowledge. This allows the reader to

fathom motives of which the characters are unaware or only half-aware. Edmund's ingenuous acknowledgement that the availability of a rich family living possibly motivated his choice of profession does not diminish the probability of the motive. Other layers of self-deception are uncovered by the praise of residence by Sir Thomas and Edmund, followed by Edmund's later acceptance of an additional living. Many critics have put this down to Austen's inadvertency or suggested that Edmund gave up Thornton Lacey on his appointment to the Mansfield Park living. Austen's suspicions of professions of virtue (even of an Evangelical nature) and her knowledge of widespread, almost insensible laxity is given more point by a detail of family concern. Her eldest brother James was a pluralist, even holding a military appointment whose duties were performed by a curate. A fox-hunting crony of William Chute and the Prince of Wales, he had nevertheless refused a living offered him by Lord Craven on the condition that he give it up to another protégé when the latter was qualified to hold it. This violated the promises made on accession to the office and in James's opinion constituted simony. Such a glorious inconsistency was seized on by his sister to provide one of her more esoteric indices of virtue. John Dashwood suspects Colonel Brandon of offering Delaford to Edward on similar terms, but his error confirms Brandon's probity. In *Persuasion* Charles Hayter takes advantage of such an offer. Sir Thomas rebukes Tom for depriving Edmund of more than half of his intended income by his extravagance, thus revealing his intentions with regard to both livings. He had planned to install a temporary incumbent in the post until Edmund was ready (19), but has been compelled to realize the value of the living as a reversionary office.

The picture of the moribund traditional estate given by Charlotte Smith in *The Old Manor House* (1794) has been brought up to date. Instead of memories of Waverley-like emotional attachments to sublime royalty or scarcely less sublime patriarchy, Mansfield Park is sustained only by patronage-relationships and a frail, residual sense of the emotional bonds upon which family loyalty is supposed to rest. Sir Thomas, unsure how to forge such bonds, appeals unavailingly to his family's emotions in a situation where traditional loyalties do not exist separately from the personal advantages accruing to family membership. Sir Thomas himself pays the price of thinking of his family in terms of 'connections'.

Sales is right to suggest some similarities between Tom and the Regent, but Tom seems to figure less in the novel than his status as heir seems to warrant. His own future assured, he is less involved in the business of finding a place that agitates the major characters. A sobering bout of illness may be Austen's prescription for him, but such conversions are the stuff of fiction, and in a distanced, summary conclusion it fails to convince. One may also feel that the benefits of disaster bring a too easy reform to the depleted House. It has enlarged its constituency and found in Susan a decisive reformer who judges by the 'natural light of the mind' rather than 'Mansfield' values but who

nevertheless manages to become more beloved than Fanny. Such a conclusion could hardly be hoped for in the case of Britain. An alternative, 'radical', meritocratic ideal comes under scrutiny in *Persuasion*.

The St Domingo action, in which Frank won his consolation prize for missing Trafalgar, plays a vital part in Frederick Wentworth's career in *Persuasion* and Frank's background, including the ships he served on (but not the *Caledonia*), contributes much to the book. Perhaps the irony that plays about Wentworth is similar to the irony that attaches to Frank's exploit. Well-known for his opposition to slavery, Frank returned home loaded with honours and gifts from the grateful British slave islands. Wentworth is seen by Anne and by many critics as an example of the new professional man of talent, even genius, independent of the old patronage regime.<sup>37</sup> The novel, however, reminds us of the inescapable forms of patronage and influence (or 'persuasion') that have to be negotiated and the perils of ignoring them in proud self-sufficiency.<sup>38</sup>

The navy, where rank could not be bought, as in the army, was a critical site of the conflict between patronage and merit. Patronage was dominant, but in wartime it became politically as well as practically vital to reward merit. Victories must be fulsomely celebrated and the plaudits of the newspapers backed by promotion of heroic officers. Frederick thinks of himself in terms of newspaper paragraphs as much as Anne consults the navy list, a counterpart to Sir Walter Elliot's fondness for the *Baronetcy*. The myth of the navy as the arena of talent was fostered by Nelson's self-publicising as the poor clergyman's son risen to admiral and lord. Austen's free indirect style seems to adopt this myth as she describes Wentworth as a genius who commanded his own destiny in his meritocratic rise:

All his sanguine expectations, all his confidence had been justified. His genius and ardour had seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path. He had, very soon after their engagement ceased, got employ; and all that he had told her would follow, had taken place. He had distinguished himself, and early gained the other step in rank – and must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune . . . <sup>39</sup>

This view appears suspiciously like a heteroglossia from the world of naval heroics. It seems to be that of Anne Elliot, who has only 'navy lists and newspapers for her authority'. Jane Austen, however, had read Southey's *Life of Nelson*, which reveals the patronage that facilitated Nelson's first, vital promotions. Later, a more detached narratorial voice comments that Wentworth was 'as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him' (234). Perhaps, like Frank, unaided by influence, he faces a long period of unemployment in the peace-time establishment. Austen draws attention to the political implications of Wentworth's adoption of the values of the 'carrière ouverte aux talents'. His statement of contrition and humility in the

conclusion includes the somewhat contorted expression: 'Like other great men under reverses ... I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve' (233). The historical reference to Napoleon implicitly criticises the heroic individualism which Wentworth had aped without realising his implication in a world of patronage, nor questioning his own independence of its moral responsibilities.

Wentworth believes that his own talent has earned all its rewards. He presents his first command, the *Asp*, as an equivocal gift from the Lords of the Admiralty, a floating death-trap, a vessel fit only for a gallant death. Admiral Croft's rejoinder that he was lucky to get it with so little influence might carry some personal pique, since he might have been part of that influence (65). Wentworth is obviously a good patron to Dick Musgrove, but gets rid of him as soon as he can, and he cannot easily overcome his patronising derision for those who fail to measure up to his own standards. Austen cumber-somely tries to derive a general moral from Wentworth's reactions to the 'large, fat sighings' of Mrs Musgrove, but the voice in which she half-excuses Wentworth is elusive. It is the more aloof narrator that points to human fallibility and laments that there are some things that reason 'patronises in vain' (68). The senior Elliots' attention to rank and appearance similarly draws a Byronic sneer from one too convinced of his own personal worth and attractiveness. Unlike the less physically attractive Henry Crawford, Wentworth does not have to exert himself to captivate two sisters. He 'receives' their attentions as a worthy tribute but at the cost of 'impeaching his own honour' (76). His self-glorifying, devil-may-care attitude to war is carried over into his social life as he cruises for female prizes. His ships are memorialised like mistresses ministering to his triumphs: 'those were pleasant days when I had the *Laconia*. How fast I made money in her' (66). Overtones of promiscuity in the description of the *Asp* as passed around his naval friends and appreciated only as a temporary resource suggest the thoughtlessness that might have been punished with commitment to Louisa. Above all, however, his behaviour to Anne betrays a patronising aloofness until the threat of William Walter Elliot throws him into Byronic despair. Indications of a more feminine side to his character are given by others, such as Harville's account of his care of the bereaved Benwick. A full reversal of commanding masculinity is reserved for the revised ending in which, instead of virtually demanding Anne's confirmation or denial of her engagement to William Walter, he is reduced to silent, feminine indirection of communication and humiliating supplication.

Critics have often maintained that Austen's female characters are brought to a recognition of their 'proper' place of dependence on men in the progress of courtship.<sup>40</sup> This does little justice to the uncertainty of the men. Knightley's wish to see Emma in love and in doubt of a return backfires with an irony worthy of Evelyn Waugh, and Darcy is properly humbled with equally satisfying results. Anne Elliot's certainty is in direct contrast to Wentworth's

growing doubts. Indeed she contributes to them in delightfully ambiguous allusions and unconscious snubs. As they pass in a Bath street, Anne is too busy looking for Lady Russell's reaction to him to acknowledge him herself.

Anne is still looking for the approval of Lady Russell, her surrogate mother. She may think that 'influence' past, but perhaps it is only the events of the book that thoroughly emancipate her. In *Persuasion* merit and cunning produce a general reversal of the patronage-relationships of superior/inferior. Sir Walter is prey to the cunning of Mrs Clay and the dissimulation of William Walter. Anne, once the protégée of Mrs Smith, becomes her defender. Instead of playing the role of the patronised, unmarried sister in Uppercross and Lyme, Anne achieves a superiority over Mary acknowledged by all but her. Anne's resourceful, tactful exertions go beyond any description of patronage, just as the familial camaraderie of the navy goes beyond distinctions of admiral, captain, and lieutenant. In appreciating Anne's and Austen's adroit fashioning of a path between the patronage of complacent pride and self-aggrandisement, the demeaning self-abasement of supplication, and the self-abnegating service role, one may almost swallow Austen's idealisation of the Crofts' marriage of partnership and the final claims for the domestic virtues of the navy.

Jane Austen's novels engage in criticism of 'Old Corruption', both that of the early period and that of the period during and after the Napoleonic Wars when, Harling asserts, such criticism 'was more sustained, widespread, and threatening to the elite'.<sup>41</sup> She shared with radical commentators the recognition that 'Old Corruption' was a 'metaphor for politically determined social injustice that obviously went very far beyond the grant of sinecures, reversions, and unmerited pensions' and her focus on patronage made the 'broader point about the pervasiveness of elite privilege'.<sup>42</sup> In patronage she might also have found a metaphor for varieties of identification and favouritism within her own medium just as difficult to evade as those of family and sex, and just as liable to reversal. In print Cobbett could be said to have patronized Lord Cochrane as one of his favourite M.P.s. Cobbett was embarrassed when Cochrane was apparently caught out in a stock market scam and discovered to be an 'adventurer'. Jane Austen is equally aware of the novelistic narrator's patronage of a character. Fanny Price becomes 'My Fanny' just when she is at her least attractive, triumphant in her routing of Mary Crawford and hiding an unholy glee at the collapse of the Mansfield establishment (420). Even Austen's 'good' patrons become implicated, often unconsciously, in modes of patronage that affect their judgements and actions. Despite her comic or cynical suspicion of idealistic professions, Austen's romance-plots work towards an optimistic faith that it is possible to become conscious of such motives and at least glimpse a moral equality that transcends the inequalities of society.

Notes

- 1 Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London, 1997), p. 104.
- 2 Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London, 1994), p. 110.
- 3 Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (New Haven and London, 1991), p. 17.
- 4 Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London, 1979), p. 63. C. B. Macpherson, in *Burke* (Past Masters Series, Oxford, 1980), comments that Burke 'forgot himself' when he inveighed against economists (p. 5). Irene Collins, in *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London, 1993), suggests that Austen valued Church patronage as demonstrating 'a caring attitude on the part of local elites' (p. 34).
- 4 Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern British Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), p. 183.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- 6 *The Examiner*, 250 (11 October, 1812), p. 643.
- 7 *Cobbett's Political Register*, XXI (January–June, 1812), pp. 42–49.
- 8 William Austen-Leigh and Richard Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, expanded and revised by Deidre Le Faye (Boston and London, 1989), p. xxii.
- 9 Philip Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption'* (Oxford, 1996), p. 120.
- 10 *The Examiner*, 233 (14 June, 1812), p. 371.
- 11 *The Examiner*, 70 (30 April, 1809), p. 276; 148 (30 December, 1810), p. 652.
- 13 See Tomalin, *op. cit.*, p. 96; p. 137 for comment on Austen's dislike of the Tory M.P. Tomalin also discusses Austen's view of her brother James, who profited by the Chute patronage and is criticized for being easily influenced (p. 201). Cobbett attacked Chute and Heathcote for their support for all the ministry's oppressive measures in *Cobbett's Political Register*, XXII (June–December, 1812), p. 545. The election slogan was first used in an outstandingly expensive campaign in 1790 against parliamentary reform and relief for Catholics and Dissenters (Collins, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–15).
- 14 The Knatchbull patronage network is displayed in Wade's *The Black Book; or Corruption Unmasked* (London, 1820), II, p. 168. Hunt attacks Sir Edward Knatchbull in *The Examiner*, 152 (25 November 1810), p. 737.
- 15 Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deidre La Faye (Oxford, 1995), No. 92, p. 240.
- 16 *Letters*, No. 15, p. 29. For Gambier's illustrious connections, support for the ministry's most unpopular measures, and patronage network see the entry in the DNB and Wade, *op. cit.*, I, p. 394; II, pp. 184–85.
- 17 *Letters*, No. 70, p. 181.
- 18 *Cobbett's Political Register*, XVII (January–June, 1810), p. 186. Also *Parliamentary Debates*, First Series, 15 (January–March 1810), p. 221.
- 19 *The Examiner*, 74 (28 May 1809), p. 351.
- 20 J. H. Hubback and Edith C. Hubback, *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers* (London, 1905), p. 173.
- 21 *Edinburgh Review*, 14 (July 1809), p. 418.
- 22 J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 289, 295.
- 23 Perkin, *op. cit.*, p. 311.
- 24 Harling, *op. cit.*, p. 99. Mark Philp also questions the 'paradigmatic' consistency of the criticism of corruption in 'The Fragmentary Ideology of Reform' in Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 54–55.

25 J. M. Bourne, *Patronage and Society in Nineteenth-century England* (London, 1986), pp. 4–8.

26 MacDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

27 *Letters*, No. 109, p. 280. On the subject of Evangelical attitudes to patronage Wilberforce supported sinecures as a reward for services to government (Harling, *op. cit.*, p. 109).

28 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford, 1970), p. 6. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

29 Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London, 1988), p. 107.

30 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford, 1970), p. 219. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

31 The OED cites Mrs Radcliffe and Hazlitt for this new pejorative sense of ‘patronize.’

32 See Macdonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

33 For Johnson Knightley is ‘a fantastically wishful creation of benign authority’ (*op. cit.*, p. 141), one of the means by which Austen can show ‘conservative ideology working at its best’ (p. 130). David Spring, in ‘Interpreters of Jane Austen’s Social World’ in Janet Todd (ed.), *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (New York, 1983), sees Knightley and the ‘typical’ landowning class as ‘agrarian capitalists ... economic modernizers’ (p. 64). The chivalric associations of his name show Austen’s concern for continuity, but are, in part, a family joke referring to her brother Edward on whom the character is loosely based. He was a very new-made ‘Knight’.

34 Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Robert Clark (London, 1995), p. 70. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

35 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford, 1970), p. 3. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

36 Sales, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

37 Marilyn Butler has given influential support to the view that Austen was turning towards these ‘professional’ values in ‘History, Politics and Religion’ in J. David Grey *et al.* (eds), *The Jane Austen Handbook* (London, 1986), pp. 190–208. David Spring has taken literary critics to task for creating a false historical dichotomy between landed gentry and professionals, claiming a homogeneity of ‘pseudo-gentry’ values in Austen’s world, values which he expresses using a phrase by which Marvin Mudrick had described a ‘bourgeois’ ethos: ‘confidence, aggressiveness, daring, an eye for money and the main chance’ (‘Interpreters of Jane Austen’s Social World’, p. 67). This might be historically true, but minimises the role of contending ideologies and tells us little about Austen’s attitude, which he acknowledges to be critical.

38 Historically the ‘Ministry of All the Talents’ (1806–07) had taught the same lesson, belying its rhetoric in its squabbles for the perquisites of office. In the family circle Henry Austen, engaging, like Jane, in a profession outside traditional patronage society, showed a remarkably flexible sense of responsibility, especially over the failure of his banking enterprise.

39 Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. J. Davie (Oxford, 1980), p. 33.

40 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London, 1979), p. 154. Robert Clark puts a Lacanian gloss on the humiliation of Emma in his introduction to the Everyman edition.

41 Harling, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

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