"Manoeuvring" in Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT 'Manoeuvring' entered English as a term in the vocabulary of naval and military warfare and this article traces the further movement of 'manoeuvre' and its cognates into the language of society and literature, focusing on its use by Jane Austen in her novels, her letters and instances of 'manoeuvre' in her own life. Against this concept of social device or strategy at a human level the author places the concept of 'Providence', the divine ordering of human affairs and illustrates Jane Austen's recourse to 'Providence' in her writing; and finally, the interplay of 'Providence' and manoeuvre in *Persuasion*.

In Jane Austen's view of life, a conventional Anglican understanding, issues both great and small lay in the hands of Providence, the divine ordering of human affairs, described in *The Christian's Dictionary* (1775) as man's 'surest Guardian' and 'truest Friend'.[1] This was the beneficent hand of God that Jane Austen discerned in the war with America. In 1814, towards its end, she declared that her 'hope of better things', of eventual victory, was founded upon Britain's 'claim to the protection of Heaven' (*Letters*, p. 274). Providence also operated at a personal level. Enduring the fluctuations of her last illness in the early summer of 1817, Jane Austen attributed a recent improvement in her health to 'the Providence of God' (*Letters*, p. 341); just as in her very last letter, written a month or two later, in the final weeks of her life, in describing her confinement to the sedan-chair, the wheel-chair or the sofa, she brings herself to a halt. 'But I am getting too near complaint. It has been the appointment of God...' (*Letters*, p. 343).

Providence does not make an appearance in the novels until the penultimate chapter of *Mansfield Park*, where Edmund expresses his heartfelt relief that Fanny's affections have not been caught up with Henry Crawford, now disgraced in his elopement with Mrs Rushworth:

> 'Thank God!' said he. 'We were all disposed to wonder – but it seems to have been the merciful appointment of Providence that the heart which knows no guile, should not suffer.' (p. 455)

In *Persuasion*, the invocation of Providence is conderably less fervent, less religious in its intensity; and the principle of trusting to Providence is a virtue that Jane Austen awards to her heroine in a relatively relaxed tone. Mature, self-aware and self-knowledgeable, Anne is someone who could be 'eloquent ... on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence!' (p. 30). A further reference, this time very distinctly light-hearted, comes in the second of the Lyme Regis chapters, shortly before Louisa Musgrove's fall. Mary Musgrove is lamenting volubly at not having been introduced to Mr Elliot whose carriage she saw leaving the inn. His greatcoat, hanging over the side of the carriage, concealed the coat-of-arms, which would have identified him beyond question. Wentworth's comment is dryly ironic, a joke aimed over Mary's head and meant for Anne, standing by:

> 'Putting all these very extraordinary circumstances together ... we must consider it to be the arrangement of Providence, that you should not be introduced to your cousin.' (p. 106)

Finally, in the book's last chapter, Sir Walter Elliot is decisively characterised, in a smartly delivered judgement, as that 'foolish, spendthrift baronet who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him ...' (p. 248).

At the extreme end of the scale away from Providence, on the level of the lowly mundane, comes human manipulation: what Jane Austen knew as the social skill of manoeuvring, a device central to her style of social comedy. Its importance is succinctly conveyed by Mary Crawford:

> 'speaking from my own observation, it is a manoeuvring business. I know so many who have married in the full expectation and confidence of some one particular advantage in the connection, or accomplishment or good quality in the person, who have found themselves entirely deceived, and been obliged to put up with exactly the reverse! What is this, but a take in?' (p. 46)

Manoeuvring was a commonplace strategy for everyday events. As Johnson observed of Pope, he 'hardly drank tea without a stratagem' [2], and Jane Austen herself staged the ceremonial serving of tea to great effect in *Mansfield Park*. Promising 'relief', it affords a Fanny a line of escape from the pressing attentions of Henry Crawford:

> The solemn procession, headed by Baddely, of tea-board, urn, and cake-bearers, made its appearance, and delivered her from a grievous imprisonment of body and mind. Mr Crawford was obliged to move. She was at liberty, she was busy, she was protected. (p. 344)

Manoeuvring is a far from neutral activity and Jane Austen employs an equally critical tone in *Emma*, a novel with manoeuvrings at its core: Emma manoeuvres in search of a husband for Harriet Smith and Frank Churchill manoeuvres to conceal his friendship with Jane Fairfax, using Emma as his decoy. Manoeuvring, with its 'shifts and expedients' (p. 147), its 'professions and falsehoods' (p. 149), its 'motives, whether single, or double, or treble' (p. 166), its 'schemes, and hopes and connivance' (p. 343), stands at the heart of the novel, provides much of the plot and directs much of the action. Perception belongs with Mr Knightley. Seeing Jane Fairfax blush at *'blunder'*, his suspicions arise:

> Disingenuousness and double-dealing seemed to meet him at every turn. These letters were but the vehicle for gallantry and trick. It was a child's play, chosen to conceal a deeper game on Frank Churchill's part. (p. 348)

Eventually, Emma too comes to share in this understanding. Her judgement falls heavily on Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax:

> 'What has it been but a system of hypocrisy and deceit, - espionage, and treachery? - To come among us with professions of openness and simplicity; and such a league in secret to judge us all!' (p. 399)

Yet Emma is herself a manoeuvrer, and proud to be so. In Chapter 10, for example, we find the single extended sequence of manoeuvre, comic both in its transparency and in its performance, where Emma detaches herself from Harriet, first in Vicarage Lane and then in the Vicarage itself, her purpose being to engineer the situation so that Harriet and Mr Elton are left together on their own. The 'lacing of her boot', the 'child from the cottage', the lace 'dexterously' thrown 'into a ditch', and the 'incessant conversation' she maintains with Mr Elton's housekeeper, all these delaying tactics and diversions contribute to the subterfuge (pp. 88-89). In the chapter's concluding paragraphs Jane Austen points up the full comedy of the scene, the outcome, as Emma understands it, of her own scheming and devising:

> The lovers were standing together at one of the windows. It had a most favourable aspect; and, for half a minute, Emma felt the glory of having schemed successfully. But it would not do; he had not come to the point. He had been most agreeable, most delightful; he had told Harriet that he had seen them go by, and had purposely followed them; other little gallantries and allusions had been dropt, but nothing serious.
> 'Cautious, very cautious', thought Emma; 'he advances inch by inch, and will hazard nothing till he believes himself secure.' Still, however, though every thing had not been accomplished by her ingenious device, she could not but flatter herself that it had been the occasion of much present enjoyment to both, and must be leading them forward to the great event. (p. 90)

Jane Austen's technique in handling an extended sequence of manoeuvre, again a sequence with a pronounced spatial dimension, can also be seen in the ball scene at The Crown. Mr Elton's public display in snubbing Harriet Smith is an elaborate performance intended to impress the world of Highbury with his own superiority and the gulf between them socially. At first, Emma mistakes his strategy, which then becomes clear:

> He would not ask Harriet to dance if it were possible to be avoided: she was sure he would not – and she was expecting him every moment to escape into the card-room.
> Escape, however, was not his plan. He came to the part of the room where the sitters-by were collected, spoke to some, and walked about in front of them, as if to show his liberty, and his resolution of maintaining it. He did not omit being sometimes directly before Miss Smith, or speaking to those who were close to her. (pp. 326-7)

This Emmas sees. Then she hears Mr Elton express his readiness to dance with Mrs Weston or Mrs Gilbert, a willingness which switches to a second snub the moment Harriet Smith is proposed:

> 'Miss Smith! – oh! – I had not observed. – You are extremely obliging – and if I were not an old married man. – But my dancing days are over, Mrs Weston. You will excuse me. Any thing else I should be most happy to do, at your command – but my dancing days are over.' (pp. 327-8)

All this to a background of 'significant glances' (p. 327) and 'smiles of high glee (p. 308) exchanged between Mr Elton and his wife, his accomplice in the girl's humiliation.

At the centre of *Emma*, there also sounds the opposing voice of correctness and conscience: the rational, Johnsonian, tones of the anti-manoeuvrer, Mr Knightley; his 'manner', as Emma recognises, 'downright, decided, commanding' (p. 34). Having listened patiently to Emma's defence of Frank Churchill, he sets about the dismantling of her self-deception, reminding her that Churchill has an obligation towards Mr Weston:

> 'There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty; not by manoeuvring and finessing, but by vigour and resolution. It is Frank Churchill's duty to pay this attention to his father.' (p. 146)

The opposition of terms is significant: 'manoeuvring and finessing', expressive of artfulness, cunning, subtlety, trickery and stratagem, versus the clarity and strength of 'vigour and resolution': the language and character of France opposed to that of England. To catch the full force of this contrast we need to understand that at the time Jane Austen was writing *Emma*, between January 1814 and April 1815, the word manoeuvring was still regarded as French. It

was seen as a technical loan-word, appearing in English books, but still carrying the nationality of its origin and its associations with warfare. For both the *idea* of manoeuvring, and the word itself, come from the language of military tactics, a manoeuvre being a carefully planned action or movement of troops or ships, of ships most of all. The specialised literature on the subject of naval tactics was French, followed very soon in the mid-eighteenth century by English versions adapted and derived from the French originals.[3] In these handbooks of naval warfare, a manoeuvre, or manoeuvring, were colourless technical terms within the vocabulary of conflict, used in connection with naval formations or movements, such as forming a line of battle, or establishing the best position for passing through an enemy fleet, or by conducting an orderly retreat.

These words soon began to enter naval correspondence. Employed informally and colloquially in letters, this technical vocabulary absorbed a new and flexible range of meaning, sometimes metaphorical and with a very modern ring. For example, in 1780 Admiral Kempenfelt described the French fleet as having 'out-manoeuvred' the English.[4] Fifteen years later, we find a Midshipman reporting on a trick pulled off by Admiral Cornwallis. When his small squadron was pursued and outnumbered by a powerful French force, Cornwallis ordered one of his vessels to raise the signal employed for sighting a friendly fleet. On spotting this, the French supposed that Cornwallis was about to be joined by the Channel Fleet, an even larger force than they were, and promptly turned tail. Writing home about these events, the Midshipman confessed that at first he had supposed that the French retreat was itself a trick, as he put it, 'only a manoeuvre'.[5]

This was in 1795, when Jane Austen had just finished *Lady Susan*. By this time manoeuvres could be met with at Bath. Thanks to Trevor Fawcett, we know of a recorded instance in December 1792. A young lady attending a ball at the Assembly Rooms for the first time and ignorant of the procedure, was left without a partner. However (as she reported to her mother) 'now that I know the Manoeuvres of it, I shall get them' (her chaperoning aunts) 'to look out for a partner earlier in the Evening, and then I shall have a better chance'.[6] Here 'Manoeuvres' carries a relatively neutral tone, whereas in *Lady Susan* – a story of social warfare – it comes with an aggressive edge, akin to the manoeuvres of naval warfare that Jane Austen is likely to have met at this time in the conversation and letters of her sailor brothers, Francis and Charles. When Mrs Manwaring arrives suddenly and unexpectedly, in pursuit of her husband, this is much to Lady Susan's annoyance: 'Silly Woman!' she exclaims, 'what does she expect by such Manoeuvres?'.[7] Lady Susan is writing to her confidante, Mrs Johnson, and she opens her letter by declaring 'This Eclaircissement' to be 'rather provoking' (*MW*, p. 303). In the proximity of these words – 'manoeuvres', 'eclaircissement' – we see Jane Austen employing French as the language of sexual intrigue and deception, a semantic coloration which re-emerges almost twenty years later in *Mansfield Park*. Once again she resorts to

French as the fitting language for scandalous behaviour: Mary Crawford dismisses her brother's adulterous elopement with Mrs Rushworth as no more than 'a moment's *etourderie*' (thoughtlessness); and a newspaper reports their escapade as 'a matrimonial *fracas*' (p. 437, 440). (In the original 1814 text of the novel, these words are in italics, their foreignness emphasised).

Amongst Jane Austen's contemporaries, the other leading novelist to explore the social use of manoeuvre was Maria Edgeworth. She first used the word 'manoeuvring' in *Belinda* (ii. 122) in 1801 and again as the title of the last of her five *Tales of Fashionable Life* published in 1809. In *Manoeuvring* (which occupies the third volume of *Tales*), the prime exponent is the match-making Mrs Beaumont. Unsuccessful in her attempt to marry off her daughter to a rich baronet, she decides to salvage what she can by marrying the baronet herself. Her 'system of artifice' [7], her 'duplicity' (p. 268), 'her plan of operations' (p. 295) are effected by way of 'manoeuvres' 'multiplied' (p. 134) and 'perpetual' (p. 153). The book's theme is hammered home in the novel's closing words, an authorial comment in the style of an actor delivering the cast's farewell to the audience, 'I only say – Thank Heaven, we've done with *Manoeuvring!*' (p. 388)

On this evidence, we can say with some confidence that while manoeuvring still maintained its specialist military and naval application, it was firmly established in the minds of Jane Austen's contemporary readers as a term for social trickery and manipulation and that they were alert to the word's continuing French flavour. This national aspect is underlined in Maria Edgeworth's half-apology, very early in *Manoeuvring*, for having to call Mrs Beaumont a '*manoeuvrer*. We can't well make an English word of it!' (pp. 4-5).

Jane Austen suffered manoeuvres in her own life. To one of these she was a most unwilling victim. This was the move from Steventon to Bath announced by Mr Austen quite out of the blue, in December 1800. On his part it was a calculated step, remembering that by then he was a man of 69, with a hypochondriac wife, and with husbands to be found for his two unmarried daughters, by now aged 25 and 27, this alongside the character of Bath as a notorious marriage market, and Marianne Dashwood's declaration that 'A woman of seven and twenty ... can never hope to feel or inspire affection again' (*S&S*, p. 38) and the desperation in twenty-seven-year-old Charlotte Lucas's decision to become Mrs Collins. As we know, for better or for worse Mr Austen's manoeuvre came to nothing. Mrs Austen's complaints persisted and his daughters remained unmarried. But Jane Austen was more often the manoeuvrer than the victim. One constant need was for peace and quiet for her own writing and she was well-practised in the art of finding privacy: what she describes in a letter as 'getting away by myself'. On that occasion, in November 1814, it was a matter of securing herself the space to read a letter from her favourite niece, Fanny Knight: 'Luckily', Cassandra was invited to dine with her brother Edward up at Chawton House, and 'therefore', Jane Austen adds with dismissive

humour, 'I had not to manoeuvre away from *her* - & as to anybody else, I do not care'. (*Letters*, p. 279)

Jane Austen was also an amused observer of manoeuvring around her. During one mealtime she watched the progress of love, or rather its *lack* of progress, between a young man and a young lady, she with 'an empty plate, & even asked him to give her some Mutton without being attended to for some time. There might be Design in this, to be sure, on his side; – he might think an empty Stomach the most favourable for Love'. (*Letters*, p. 199)

But sometimes securing herself from visitors, even from her own family, was a strategy she found necessary to survival, an escape, indeed, from manoeuvring itself. She enjoyed 'Edward's company very much', she wrote to Cassandra from Chawton, '& yet I was not sorry when Friday came. It had been a busy week, & I wanted a few days quiet and exemption from the Thoughts & contrivances which any sort of company gives' (*Letters*, p. 321). On another occasion she was staying with Henry at Hans Place. She proudly reported to Cassandra that it was 'By Manoeuvring & good luck' that she 'foiled all the visitors' attempts' to make conversation with her – this time with a genuine excuse, as she was suffering from a cold. (*Letters*, p. 303)

These are some of the strategies, the petty deceits and devices, what she called her 'Thoughts & contrivances', that Jane Austen employed as a means of self-preservation. In the novels themselves, however, manoeuvring is largely set to the purposes of marriage. Although the word itself occurs only once in *Pride and Prejudice*, in this novel the practice of manoeuvring is discussed and enacted in its most blatant form. The prime exponent is Charlotte Lucas. When Elizabeth tells her of the growing affection between Bingley and her sister Jane, Charlotte takes a totally pragmatic view of the situation. She is particularly critical of Jane's self-composure, her concealment of affection: ' it is sometimes a disadvantage', she says, 'to be so very guarded ... In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better show *more* affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on' (pp. 21-22). 'When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chuses' (p. 22). Elizabeth goes so far as to agree that Charlotte's 'plan is a good one' but insists that her sister is no manoeuvrer: 'she is not acting by design' (p. 22).

Very soon after this, manoeuvring appears in a comic light. Mrs Bennet, like Maria Edgeworth's Mrs Beaumont, is an *arch*-manoeuvrer and happy to admit it. When Jane asks if she can have the use of the carriage to dine with the Bingley sisters at Netherfield, she unashamedly directs the strategy: 'No, my dear, you had better go on horseback, because it seems likely to rain; and then you must stay all night'. (p. 30) Mrs Bennett is fully capable of answering objections – from Elizabeth, that the Bingley's might offer to send Jane home by carriage; from Jane, that she could travel in the Bennet's own coach. At this,

Mrs Bennet turns to her husband for support: the horses 'are wanted in the farm, Mr Bennet, are they not?' (p. 31)

> Jane was therefore obliged to go on horseback, and her mother attended her to the door with many cheerful prognostics of a bad day. Her hopes were answered; Jane had not been gone long before it rained hard. Her sisters were uneasy for her, but her mother was delighted. The rain continued the whole evening without intermission; Jane certainly could not come back.
> 'This was a lucky idea of mine, indeed!' said Mrs Bennet, more than once, as if the credit of making it rain were all her own. Till the next morning, however, she was not aware of the felicity of her contrivance. Breakfast was scarcely over when a servant from Netherfield brought the following note for Elizabeth... (p. 31)

The news of Jane's sore throat and headache leads Mrs Bennet to the happy conclusion that 'As long as she stays there, it is all very well' (p. 32). Her second opportunity, a named manoeuvre, arrives at the conclusion of the Netherfield ball:

> The Longbourn party were the last of all the company to depart; and by a manoeuvre of Mrs Bennet had to wait for their carriages a quarter of an hour after every body else was gone, which gave them time to see how heartily they were wished away by some of the family. (p. 102)

The comedy of manoeuvring is also woven into Mr Collins' declaration of marriage. In preparation for meeting the five Bennet daughters, he comes to Longbourn having studied a well-known lady's conduct manual, *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) by James Fordyce. With Fordyce under his belt, he feels ready to deal with female wiles and stratagems: when it comes to a proposal of marriage, the first time round he will be refused, and only then accepted. And so, up to a point, it goes according to the book. His rejection by Elizabeth he puts down 'to the usual practice of elegant females' (p. 108). But Elizabeth resists this pigeon-holing. She asks him to consider her for what she is, not 'an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart' (p. 109). In other words, on this occasion, a female Mr Knightley, a non-manoeuvrer.

This episode, swiftly drawn, leads on immediately to the harsher comedy of Charlotte Lucas, with whom Mr Collins promptly 'spends the rest of the day'. Her 'civility', as Jane Austen calls it – and for civility, it soon becomes clear, we can read manoeuvre – her 'civility in listening to him was a seasonable relief to them all, and especially to her friend' (p. 115). And again, during most of the following day 'was Miss Lucas so kind as to listen to Mr Collins'. Upon Elizabeth thanking her,

> Charlotte assured her friend of her satisfaction in being useful, and that it amply repaid her for the little sacrifice of her time. This was very amiable, but Charlotte's kindness extended farther than Elizabeth had any conception of; – its object was nothing less, than to secure her from any return of Mr Collins's addresses, by engaging them towards herself. Such was Miss Lucas's scheme; and appearances were so favourable that when they parted at night, she would have felt almost sure of success if he had not been to leave Hertfordshire so very soon. (p. 121)

When, the next day, Charlotte catches sight of Mr Collins approaching Lucas Lodge 'to throw himself at her feet', she 'instantly set out to meet him accidently in the lane' (p. 121): a minor manoeuvre within her larger 'scheme'. The remainder of this chapter 22 is given over to Charlotte's clear-headed assessment of her circumstances. Now aged twenty-seven, one of a large family, and possessing neither a fortune nor good looks, 'Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony', she embraces marriage as her 'pleasantest preservative from want' (pp. 122-123). This is a calculated decision, coolly arrived at, coolly carried through, a manoeuvre which leaves Elizabeth depressed at the prospect of seeing her closest friend sacrificing 'every better feeling to wordly advantage', and pained at the sight of Charlotte 'disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem' (p. 125).

In *Mansfield Park* manoeuvring takes a sharper turn – a three-pronged attack on Fanny Price. This begins from the moment that Henry Crawford, bored with country life and with time on his hands, decides 'to make Fanny Price fall in love with me' (p. 229), a pursuit which provides the dramatic strand for the central section of the novel. What upsets his plan is the arrival of William Price and the sight of Fanny blooming in her brother's company. For the first time Crawford sees her not merely as a pretty girl, unattached, and therefore vulnerable as a plaything, but as a woman, fully capable of love, and he finds himself drawn to her. But instead of trusting to time and the natural growth of affection, Crawford chooses to force the issue, in an attempt to compel Fanny's feelings. He does this by a way of a manoeuvre which belongs to this specific historical period. The early years of the nineteenth century were still a time of favours and patronage, when it was expected that men in a position of power – social or political or military – would use their influence to help others younger or socially inferior into a profitable or advantageous appointment: a rich clerical living, or a well-paid sinecure, a seat in Parliament, command of a ship or a military posting. Patronage, as it was known, had its recognised and accepted place in society. But the mechanism was not a one-way process. The beneficiary, now indebted to his benefactor, was expected, in turn, and over the course of time, to repay his debt, to provide a *quid pro quo*, perhaps by way of a helping hand to a member of the benefactor's family or support in Parliament or whatever. More onerous than mere gratitude, and more enforceable, this was a debt of honour that could be called in; it went under the

name of obligation; and the burden of obligation is what Henry Crawford sets out to place on Fanny Price. The repayment he seeks is her hand in marriage.

Towards this end, Crawford carries out a number of minor manoeuvres of obligation. These include making sure that he alone is the person to bring Fanny the news of her brother's promotion; another calculated device is tricking Fanny into wearing William's gift of the amber cross on a necklace – a necklace that he has himself newly-purchased, under the pretence that it is a mere 'trifle' borrowed from his sister Mary (p. 260). His major manoeuvre is a classic piece of obligation: introducing William to his uncle, Admiral Crawford, a patron able to place the young Midshipman on the path to promotion. This is a real service, since the rapid expansion of the Navy in the early years of the war meant that by 1812, the very time of William's return to England, there was a log-jam in the system, with almost two thousand Midshipmen waiting for commissions, in many cases without hope. So once the introduction has been made, it seems that Fanny is trapped. To quote the text: Crawford's 'kindness to William' leaves her 'more obliged' to Crawford, as she says, 'than words can express' (p. 302). Crawford duly asserts his claim: 'that every thing he had done for William was to be placed to the account of his excessive and unequalled attachment for her' (p. 301). On this divided note – William happy and commissioned, his sister assailed and distressed – Jane Austen brings the second volume to a close.

For a month Crawford keeps away, leaving Fanny face-to-face with the unpleasant reality of Portsmouth: all the 'noise, disorder, and impropriety' (p. 388) of her family home, its 'bad air' and 'bad smells', and a father who drinks and swears, who is 'dirty and gross' (p. 389). Crawford's further manoeuvre is well-calculated. He leaves any question of gratitude and obligation unmentioned; and he abandons his Mansfield role as a sophisticated man-about-town, someone of polish, wit and wide reading. Instead, he plays a moral part, adopting a persona he believes Fanny will find both admirable and appealing, making a 'well-aimed' representation of himself as the caring landlord, doing 'good', being 'useful', 'the friend of the poor and oppressed'. For the future, as he describes it, one thing only is missing: 'an assistant, a friend, a guide in every plan of utility or charity' (p. 404). However, Henry Crawford as the benevolent squire, leaves her as unmoved and as untempted as before. Perhaps, at the back of her mind, sounds Mary Crawford's account of marriage as 'a manoeuvring business', a sharp and warning observation.

The manoeuvring novel *par excellence* is *Emma*. Deception abounds: Frank Churchill is practised in his form of manipulative lying, what he calls 'a civil falsehood' (p. 234); and, via Mr Knightley, and towards the end of the novel, via Emma herself, manoeuvring is exposed to a direct and outspoken attack. At the same time, we know that Jane Austen was not unaccommodating. Some manoeuvres are advantageous, and only involve the slightest of deceptions; some can be well-intentioned or, at least, forgiveable. And in *Emma*, Jane Austen

enters a persuasive plea: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken' (p. 491). This goes for Mr Knightley as well. Even he, manoeuvre's declared enemy, is forced into manoeuvring strategies in devising a way to marry Emma 'without attacking the happiness of her father'. It was a problem which, he tells Emma, 'my mind has been hard at work on'; which, Jane Austen tells us, 'He had been thinking ... over most deeply, most intently' (p. 448). His solution is to begin their married life under her father's roof.

Other manoeuvres, innocent, laughable or forgivable, are not difficult to find. Consider the situation of Mr and Mrs Morland of *Northanger Abbey*, living unpropitiously in the remoteness of a Wiltshire village with seven daughters still at home and no eligible young man in the neighbourhood. We can hardly blame them for sending Catherine, their eldest daughter, now aged 17, off to Bath to be chaperoned by Mr and Mrs Allen. The 'complete ... disclosure', to use Jane Austen's terms, would point to Bath as a marriage market, to Catherine as a guileless trophy waiting a successful suitor, and to Mr Morland as a practical parent. Or take Elizabeth Bennet and her rambles in Netherfield Park, the day she 'unexpectedly' (Jane Austen's word) bumps into Mr Darcy out walking:

> She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought; and to prevent its ever happening again, took care to inform him at first, that it was a favourite haunt of hers. – How it could occur a second time therefore was very odd! – Yet it did, and even a third. (p. 182)

A manoeuvre identical to Charlotte Lucas's earlier meeting with Mr Collins 'accidently in the lane' (p. 121).

The same generosity of mind, the same allowance, and friendliness of spirit, are evident in the innocent manoeuvres of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's in particular. On one occasion, a manoeuvre brings on a minor crisis of conscience. Sheltering from the rain at Molland's, the confectioner's in Milson-street, Anne, seated near the window, catches sight of Wentworth 'walking down the street'. For a moment, Anne is 'lost' in 'confusion'. Then she comes to her 'senses':

> She now felt a great inclination to go to the outer door; she wanted to see if it rained. Why was she to suspect herself of another motive? Captain Wentworth must be out of sight. She left her seat, she would go, one half of her should not be always so much wiser than the other half, or always suspecting the other of being worse than it was. She would see if it rained. (p. 175)

A few pages later we come to the scene at the 'concert room' (p. 185). Jane Austen conveys a very precise sense as to how the characters are positioned. In

this case, 'Mr Elliot had manoeuvred so well, with the assistance of his friend Colonel Wallis', as to find a seat next to Anne (p. 186). But after the interval, Mr Elliot is invited elsewhere, 'and by some other removals, and a little scheming of her own, Anne was enabled to place herself much nearer the end of the bench than she had been before'; and sure enough, just as she had anticipated, Wentworth hoves 'in sight' and 'by very slow degrees came at last near enough to speak to her' (pp. 189-190).

A more serious note is struck on the following day during Anne's visit to Mrs Smith. The conversation turns to Mr Elliot. Mrs Smith uncovers the reality of his plotting and his intentions, his true motives in seeking to be accepted again within the Elliot family. None of this surprises Anne and she pinpoints his behaviour in the very terms it deserves:

> 'Yes', said Anne, 'you tell me nothing which does not accord with what I have known, or could imagine. There is always something offensive in the details of cunning. The manoeuvres of selfishness and duplicity must ever be revolting, but I have heard nothing which really surprises me. I know those who would be shocked by such a representation of Mr Elliot, who would have difficulty in believing it; but I have never been satisfied. I have always wanted some other motive for his conduct than appeared'. (p. 207)

By contrast, the final manoeuvre of *Persuasion* is inspired by a worthy 'motive'. At the White Hart, Wentworth has written his letter to Anne, a declaration of love, having overheard her discussion with Captain Harville about the pangs of absence, the difference in feelings between men and women, and the pangs of separation. He leaves the room without handing the letter over, but returns almost instantly. 'He begged their pardon, but he had forgotten his gloves'. Retrieving the letter from the papers under which it lay on the writing table, he 'placed it before Anne ... and hastily collecting his gloves, was again out of the room ...' (p. 236). Wentworth's 'gloves' manoeuvre is allowed to speak for itself.

To manoeuvre or not to manoeuvre? This is a question which faces the heroines from time to time, but hardly, if ever, as a matter for internal debate. Sometimes Jane Austen plays with the idea, almost as pure entertainment. We see this in *Northanger Abbey*, with Catherine Morland, the innocent abroad, a heroine whose distresses, innocuous as they are, are a direct consequence of a trusting nature exposed to the world of Bath, with all its codes and conventions, its social deceptions and half-truths; and exposed, too, to General Tilney. Having assumed Catherine to be an heiress ripe for disposal, when he discovers the reality of her situation, that she arrives at the Abbey fortuneless, General Tilney feels himself deceived and exploited. Within such a story the opportunities for manoeuvring are endless. Jane Austen's joke is that Catherine, wholly ingenuous and entirely free from subterfuge, misleads the world by her very innocence. The point is underlined during her visit to Beechen Cliff in company with Henry and Eleanor Tilney. Having climbed the hill, the brother

and sister describe the view in the language of "real taste" and in the terminology of the picturesque (p. 110).

> Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing – nothing of taste; - and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her. The little which she could understand however appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day. She was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame. Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can. (pp. 110-111)

Jane Austen warms to this theme: 'The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl'; that 'imbecility in females is a great enhancement to their personal charms'; and that men 'reasonable' and 'well informed' may seek nothing 'more in women than ignorance'.

> But Catherine did not know her own advantages – did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward. In the present instance, she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge; declared that she would give any thing in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. (p. 111)

In Jane Austen's social world, both Providence and manoeuvre play their part: manoeuvre, as a powerful mechanism of comedy; Providence, as a concomitant of wisdom and resignation, of letting events take their course, or, rather, the course divinely ordained. Sometimes, almost imperceptibly, the two merge. There is a moment towards the end of *Persuasion* when Harville and Wentworth enter the dining-room of the White Hart, where Anne is already seated. Wentworth's manoeuvre, if we call it this, is no more than to stand apart: 'He did not seem to want to be near enough for conversation. She tried to be calm, and to leave things to take their course ... ' (p. 221). In this instance, at least, the path towards marriage is not, as Mary Crawford declared, invariably 'a manoeuvring business'.

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Notes

Page references given in the text are to the Oxford edition of the novels edited by R.W. Chapman, including the *Minor Works* volume (1954, revised B.C. Southam, 1967); and to the edition of the *Letters* (Oxford University Press, 1995) edited by Deirdre Le Faye.

[1] *The Christian's Dictionary; or Sure Guide to Divine Knowledge* (1775), from engraved verses facing the opening of the entry for 'Providence'; unnumbered pages, and no named editor or author.

[2] *Lives of the English Poets* (1905), iii. 200, ed George Birkbeck Hill.

[3] For example, P. L'Hoste, *L'Art des Armées Navales* (1697) translated Christopher O'Bryen as *Naval Evolutions: or, A System of Sea-Discipline* (1762).

[4] Letter dated 18 January 1780, quoted in *Select Naval Documents* (Cambridge University Press, 1922), eds. H.W. Hodges & E.A. Hughes, p. 162.

[5] Letter of June 1795, quoted in Alfred Friendly, *Beaufort of the Admiralty: The Life of Sir Francis Beaufort* (Hutchinson, 1977), p. 71.

[6] Letter to the *London Review of Books*, issue 4 June 1998.

[7] The second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary fails to record the appearance of 'manoeuvre' in *Lady Susan*, c. 1793-94, its earliest recorded literary use.