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Moral Pursuit of Love in *Persuasion*

Most of us growing up in contemporary societies have believed that marrying a partner on the basis of true love provides a solid foundation for a life well-lived and that individual happiness should take precedence over financial security with regard to marriage. Contrary to such a common belief nowadays, the idea of a marriage born out of love was prevalently shunned by society at large in England during the Regency era, a period in which the story of the novel, *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, takes place. The protagonist, Anne Elliot, a member of the upper class, is persuaded to break off her early engagement with the young and undistinguished Frederick Wentworth for whom she loves, and remains unmarried before they meet again almost a decade later. Staying true to her affection and conviction against family pressure and social conventions at the time, Anne decidedly embraces the rekindling of a committed relationship with Frederick in the end. Given the backdrop of the particular class norms and societal expectations in Regency England, the moral significance of the central character's actions lies with her unwavering self-determination for a fulfilling marriage based on true love, a radical idea often considered as unwise, even dangerous in that time period.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was experiencing a harsh economic contraction under the prince regent's reign in his father's stead. Despite the popular perception of extravagance and grace associated with the lives of the nobility and the gentry alike, the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars coincided with a natural disaster in 1816 causing

devastation in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, all of which contributed to the public's worries over the means of livelihoods (Ruesch, par. 4). It was the same time when the Romanticism movement swept across Europe spreading new ideas of emotion, individualism, and freedom from rules (Ruesch, par. 3). While people of all classes welcomed the improvements of the mind, they did not directly result in financial betterment for anyone in need including Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall, father to Anne Elliot.

The Elliots' household faces financial hardship, due to Sir Walter's mismanagement of money for years after their mother's passing, and is forced to make living adjustments by renting out the family's estate, Kellynch Hall, and moving to Bath, a less prestigious area in England. This slow-motion familial degradation not only brings embarrassment to the family as a part of the high society but also puts Anne in doubt, again, of her father's past judgment against her marrying Frederick Wentworth and of similar advice by Lady Russell, her mother's best friend, and Anne's most trusted advisor. Her objection to their engagement at a young age is centered on Anne's exposure to all kinds of risks associated with Frederick's lack of social connections, financial inability, and career immaturity (Austen, 20-21). Cold-hearted and insensitive Lady Russell's advice may sound in contemporary ears, but it is entirely reasonable to prudently examine potential marriage partners' financial background and social standing and to reject partners with comparatively poor finance in nineteenth-century England.

For much of recorded history, marriage was about long-term security and wealth protection between two families as if it was a business arrangement. Primogeniture, the bequeathing of a family's entire estate to the eldest son, was enforceable by law in the Regency era, which left the daughters at the mercy of their brother, and worse yet, potentially made them homeless if an estranged male cousin turned out to be the inheritor (Bailey, par. 3-4). In light of

such a disadvantageous circumstance for women, affection and emotional needs are not even remotely considered in Lady Russell's influential counsel to Anne who is persuaded to give up on the love of her life.

With eight and a half years gone by, Anne discovers in the inner sanctum of her heart—she still loves the man she let go. Regrets and guilt for the engagement breakup weigh down Anne like hailstones raining down on blooming flowers. However, these emotions alone do not justify her turning down the marriage proposal by Charles Musgrove, whose family wealth and social class are compatible with those of the Elliots', since this time, the proposer secures the approval from both Sir Walter and Lady Russell. In hindsight, Anne, who is past her prime and single, increasingly believes that she should have been happier had she proceeded with the engagement (Austen, 22). In other words, Anne's emotional attachment to Frederick remains alive. It is her continuing love that leaves her heart with no room for another man.

While it is clear that Anne does not wish to marry Charles who in turn successfully pursues marriage with her younger sister Mary, Anne's determination to act on her own will draws her to men with agency and capacity for achievement. Having been exposed to Enlightenment ideas as well as educated in the heyday of Romanticism, Anne's preference for the independence of the mind over the vanity of the social ranking is undoubtedly reflected in her view of the two Miss Musgroves, sisters to Charles. Although the good nature of the two sisters' characters is pleasant and joyous, Anne thinks that the deficiency in the cultivation of their minds leads to the incapacity for mutual understanding of love in deciding on marriage partners (Austen, 32). Nothing of criticism is to be inferred from her opinion, but it reveals Anne's values and thoughts about true love—the connection of the minds—as the necessary prerequisite to a fulfilling marriage.

Years after her refusal to marry Charles, Anne declines yet another marriage proposal from Mr. Elliot, her cousin and the rightful inheritor of her father's estate, despite the practical meaning that such a proposition entails. Since marrying cousins is lawfully permitted in Regency England, not only does a marriage between Mr. Elliot and Anne surely restore her family's lifelong living in Kellynch Hall but also, more importantly, she can succeed her mother, whom Anne still loves most dearly, in rights and virtues as Lady Elliot (Bailey, par. 15; Austen, 134). Tempted and exhilarated at first, Anne nonetheless admits to never having "any burst of feeling" toward Mr. Elliot before being informed about the ulterior motive of his active courtship (Austen, 135-173). The prospect of a prosperous marriage is enough for most, if not all, women to accept a proposal, let alone the importance of meaning in family history. Anne's refusal to conform to societal norms is nothing if not evidence that the moral significance of her actions stems from the will to decide for herself in regard to marriage.

Furthermore, marriage was everything for women at the time. Unlike welfare benefits that modern-day society provides for less well-off people to live on if things have gone bad in their lives, marriage was about livelihood, companionship, and long-term security for nearly all women. Many believed in marriages structured around family approval, long-term safety, and shared values could lead to a supportive and loving arrangement and long-term companionship. However, none of these considerations plays a role in her decision to break up with Frederick. "When I yielded, I thought it was to duty," reveals Anne (Austen, 210). That is to say, her self-sacrifice of the engagement out of seemingly self-interested reasons is actually an act out of duty to keep the family intact. After all, Sir Walter might have disowned her together with her snobbish sister, Elizabeth Elliot had she dared to proceed with the engagement when she was just 19 years of age.

By a bittersweet twist of fate, a second chance to pursue love falls into Anne's lap with the reappearance of Captain Frederick Wentworth. Through their mutual social circle with Mr. and Mrs. Croft, tenants of Kellynch Hall, Captain Wentworth, who returns to England with his hard-earned fortune, unexpectedly crosses paths with Anne on a visit to Uppercross where the Musgroves live (Austen, 41). Subsequently, a series of events present both of them with opportunities for interactions and observations and, in the meantime, give rise to mutual affection once again. Except this time around, Captain Wentworth, a self-made naval officer, holds all the cards in the courtship market. With tremendous wealth and laudable traits such as sense of purpose and generosity, professionals alike quickly ascend in social prominence and even overtake the gentry class as preferred male characters (Wheeler, par. 5).

Although Captain Wentworth's achievement is no small feat, what is at the core of Anne's undiminished attraction to him remains to be the qualities of a man she passionately loves. A confident and knowledgeable Frederick explaining seafaring matters reminds Anne much of the old days when she admires his dedication to all things naval (Austen, 52-53). In the process of revitalization of their romance, admiration goes both ways. "No one so proper, so capable as Anne," says Captain Wentworth (Austen, 97). While they continue to encounter obstacles in their relationship development, in the end, the two are able to tie the knot together once and for all. By following her conscience, Anne Elliot defies expectations in her own way.

The love story in *Persuasion* is one that teaches us individual agency triumphs over handicapping circumstances. Nineteenth-century marriage laws in England were heavily tilted in men's favor, creating a social phenomenon where women had to bury their emotions and affection for the sake of their future. But romance and love cannot be a nonfactor whatsoever in marriages according to the central character. That is precisely the morality of her actions

lies—charting her own path toward a genuine and fulfilling marriage based on true love in spite of the pressure and otherwise persuasion. Women throughout history face undue constraints and moral dilemmas more often than what is documented. Societal norms, marriage laws, and many more institutions predispose women to disadvantageous circumstances. It must be incumbent upon all of us to continuingly improve social conditions for the benefit of every member of our society.

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