

The Nineteenth-Century Novel
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Lecture – 17
Jane Austen Seminar

So, the title “Companionate Romances: the Domestic and Narrative Virtues of Naval Homes in Austen's *Persuasion*” and I want to begin with a quote from our favourite novel of Austen *Pride and Prejudice*. This is the sister asking Elizabeth, “My dearest sister, now be serious. I want to talk very seriously. Let me know everything that I am to know without delay. Will you tell me how long have you loved him?”

“It has been coming on so gradually that I hardly know it when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.” So Jane and Elizabeth are talking about Mr. Darcy. If there was any one particular moment in a novel that initiated my research on spatiality and courtship plots in 19th century English novels, it is in this quip by Elizabeth Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The playful, far from perfect, and yet sensible Elizabeth is not a figure to be easily seduced by the trappings of wealth and grandeur symbolized by Pemberley house into accepting its master in matrimony.

Yet, in a double irony, the appearance of Darcy's home space in the narrative trajectory does act as a significant catalyst in her change of heart towards him. The heroine's tour of Pemberley and its environs are figuratively a tour of Darcy's mind and manners. The spatiality of Pemberley crucially reflects and constructs an attractive nobility of character of the hero.

The housekeeper at Pemberley is Elizabeth's guide, not only to the interiors of the house, but also to the domestic virtues of its master. Darcy, who apparently enjoys the power of doing what he likes, significantly refrains from an intrusive ordering or an unprofessional or awkward embellishment of the nature surrounding his home, and this case it also significantly reflected in his elegant domestic interiors which are neither gaudy nor uselessly fine.

The admirable social and domestic practices of Darcy, including his relations with his family and dependants, are discovered by Elizabeth Bennet almost as a first-hand experience through her reading of and her journey through Pemberley house. The strategic trip to Darcy's home is a

vital narrative element that is akin to what Pamela Regis in her book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* published in 2003 describes as “recognition” in a courtship narrative.

One that removes one of the key barriers, that is, the reasons that this hero and heroine cannot marry to romantic union. So it is removing the barrier, the recognition is removing that. The term recognition also evokes a similar narrative principle in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which he describes this complex plot component as effecting, I quote, “A change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing neither a close relationship or enmity on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune.”

For Regis, recognition is the new information that will overcome the barrier, and she highlights Darcy's letter to Elizabeth about the machinations of Wickham as important to the heroine’s comprehension of the real nature of the hero. Yet, it is Elizabeth’s recognition of Darcy's nobility of character, experienced through the spatial dynamics of Pemberley, that predominantly and more effectively breaks the barrier between the couple and thus prompting her retrospective comment that she dates her love for Darcy from her introduction to Pemberley.

John Ruskin, an influential Victorian art critic and intellectual, emphasized the effect of ideal architecture in his 1853 lecture on architecture when he asserted that “The proof of a thing's being right is that it has power over the heart, that it excites us, wins us or helps us”.

The spatiality of Pemberley with its attractive architectural characteristics containing and embodying ideal social practices inevitably has a profound effect on the heart of Elizabeth. After surveying Darcy's home and grounds and standing before the portrait of Darcy in the house, Austen writes that, “There was certainly at this moment in Elizabeth's mind a more gentle sensation towards the original that she had never felt in the height of their acquaintance.”

So, if the central problematic of this Austen novel is the quest of the heroine to find a house that she could live in, and that she finds in Pemberley ultimately, the search for and the nature of the ideal home for the heroine becomes more complicated in the context of the rise of industrialisation and the middle classes with its intense interest in the discourse of the place of women in 19th century Britain.

The vicissitudes in the influence of the country house trope in romantic plots can be traced even within the purpose of Austen. Her last complete novel *Persuasion* published in 1818 depicts the heroine Anne Elliot consciously deciding against a romantic union that will install her as the mistress to her beloved estate home, Kellynch Hall, if she marries the heir to whom the house is entailed.

So, the house is no longer the attraction for heroine. The ideal marriage partner or the hero is disassociated from the central country house, and Anne's first and ultimate choice of romantic partner in Captain Wentworth reflects the decline of the aristocracy and the concomitant power of the country house over the romantic choice of the heroine. Anne's choice also indicates the rise of the enterprising middle classes, and most importantly, the companionate marriage ideal.

Therefore, when the newly married Anne, the most mobile heroine in Austen is given no marital home at the end of *Persuasion* but only an attractive laundaret, a carriage, the gesture is interpreted by Melissa Sodeman as a relocation of domesticity not in terms of household and courtship, but in more companionate and egalitarian structures such as the marriage of Anne and Wentworth and the circle of friends who they draw near.

While the companionate marriage largely becomes the ideal and the norm for the central romantic couple in successful courtship plots, Sodeman's argument that Austen detaches domesticity from the enclosed private home and imbues it with national importance is debatable. It is not the notion of the enclosed private home that is rejected, but that the ideal marital home, its location, size, shapes, organization and emotional attributes is increasingly malleable and open to new and hybrid spatial and structural possibilities particularly without losing its private nature in the 19th century novel.

The effective aspect of the home in theory if not in reality with familial love connecting its members is a cultural given. George K Behlmer writes that the idea of the "dear hearth or sweet home, this quintessentially English image, in fact stretches back at least as far as the mid-17th Century. However, the discourse of the ideal, happy, gendered home accrues a special significance in the context of 19th century Britain, when there is an especial need for safe and comfortable private space in the light of the dehumanizing commercial and competitive public spaces. The English came to be distinguished by their proclivity for privacy in homes."

Dr. Karras wrote in 1851 that, “The English dwelling houses stand in close connection with that long cherished principle of separation and retirement lying at the very foundation of its national character.” The 1851 British census reinforced the ideality in the possession of a separate house.

I quote, “The possession of an entire house is, it is true, strongly desired by every English man, for it throws a sharp, well-defined circle around his family and hearth, the shire, the village of his sorrows, joys, meditations.” The census defined a family that lives in a house as the persons ruled by “one head who is the occupier of the house, the householder, master, husband or father, while the other members in the family are the wife, children servants, relatives, visitors and person constantly or accidentally in the house”.

The conception of the home established by John Ruskin, this art critic and intellectual of the 19th century in his lecture of Queens Gardens published in 1865 compares the true home, I quote, “to a sacred place or vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love.” While the love that is conceived as the basis of home can be understood as familial love, that binds its members, in the context of Ruskin's definition of the home, it can be perceived as a marital or companionate love, as it is the husband and the wife who are seen as architects of the home.

Though the nuclear family might not have been the reality in 19th century society, as the registrar general of the 1851 census discusses and worries about, different variations on its conception of the family, what is of importance in this context is the agency of the husband and the wife, the man and the woman who construct or hope to construct an ideal and companionate domesticity.

In Austen's *Persuasion*, though Anne and Wentworth are surrounded by a large circle of friends, it is the relation of a couple to their home that is crucial to the structure of the courtship narrative. Now, in terms of the literary studies on romantic narratives and the functions of the central female protagonist, there have been radically oppositional readings. Laurie Langbauer, romance plot is seen as upholding the male order. And structure is used to transpose, I quote, “contradictions and problems of coherence by scapegoating women in a variety of contexts”. Katherine Sobba Green, on the contrary, in “The Courtship Novel, 1740 to 1820: a Feminised Genre” published in 1991, perceives a progressive feminist individualism in romantic heroines

who both subvert parental authority and the barriers of class and wealth through their choice of marital partner during the period of courtship.

Drawing on historical sources that signify transformation in attitudes towards marriage brought about by the new concept of individualism in the 18th century, Green makes a significant assumption about the genre and its theme of companionate marriage. It is a very interesting quotation, so I quote, “Social interests previously served by class, status and economic based negotiations inherent in the arranged marriage were jeopardized, because a companionate marriage could cross class, status or economic lines, and this ideological shift was dynamic enough to engender its own literary expression”. It is apparent that successful courtship is strongly associated with the companionate ideal in fiction. The subject of equality between the sexes in the realm of romance and courtship narratives is nevertheless quite complex, and the relative position of the lovers to each other is more layered.

In Austen’s *Persuasion*, the upper class Anne Elliot is in awe of the poor Wentworth even at their first meeting, 8 years ago. Though Austen’s comment in the final chapter of the novel is ironic about the idea of love, the rest would indeed notion, that romantic love disregards class and financial consideration, if not always at least in some cases. “When two young people take it to their heads to marry they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor or ever so imprudent or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort.” This is the ironic comment of the narrator at the end of *Persuasion*.

Writing about the nature of love in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's “*Lady Geraldine's Courtship*”, Glennis Stephenson argues that for the lower class poet Bertram, Lady Geraldine appears, I quote, “Superior, not because he is dazzled by her wealth and position, but quite simply because he loves her.” She places the character of Bertram in the context of the archetype of the troubadour, the poet lover singing to the beautiful lady, whose love he has no hopes of securing.

A narrative woven in the tradition of such archetypes, Stephenson argues, precludes any possibility of conviction of equality in romantic love. Yet, the superiority of Lady Geraldine is undercut by the intriguing fact that she is equally very much in owe of the poor poet. The same thematic parallel can be seen in the regard that Anne and Wentworth possess for one another before ironically, a strange sense of equality does exist from the ideal lovers of courtship narratives.

Charles H. Hinnant, in the context of the study of Austen's novels also reiterates the importance of the heroine's agency when he defines the courtship plot as depicting the eventual choice made by a young woman among competing suitors after having entered adult society. Further, waiting for the barrier to resolution in terms of bildungsroman of subjectivity, Hinnant refers to an unstated convention of the courtship plot.

The fact that the lovers must undergo a traumatic experience, a violent shift from innocence to self-knowledge before their union can be consummated. The crucial violent shift is akin to Regis' terminology of recognition that breaks the barrier to romantic unions. Both Hinnant's and Regis' references have their origin in Aristotle's notion of recognition, a concept that I just discussed.

The recognition that involves a reversal of either bad or good fortune for the central protagonists can also be associated in relation to inanimate and chance, objects and ideas that can be expanded to include the spatial elements. I now come to the section on Persuasion in relation to the domestic and narrative virtues to the naval homes, and with this section, I will be through.

In Persuasion, the parting comment of the narrator that the navy is more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance, is a telling one in the context of the traditional conflation of masculinity with the affairs of the nation. While Austen does not pursue the historical of national plot in Persuasion for us to evaluate the role of the naval men in the public context, their roles at home has significant implications for masculinity and domesticity.

The men who win the admiration of Anne, and consequently the readers, are those who play an active and constructive role in the domestic sphere. The rich Admiral Croft's personal intervention with the help of his wife in removing the numerous looking glasses, and his interest in improving the functionality of Kellynch Hall has a symbolic significance, especially the context of the landed gentry such as Charles Musgrove, whose sole interest in life is in pursuits of leisure such as shooting.

Sir Walter of course has an inability to think beyond his personal appearance and class position. Mr. Elliot's refusal to help the widow, Mrs. Smith, to retrieve the entangled property of her late

husband's is another illustration of a refusal to concern oneself with the affairs of women. The lack of effort in Charles Hayter, a clergyman and a gentleman, to come to the aid of Anne when the youngest son of Mary has a strong hold on her neck is an expression of the belief that children are the business of women, and as such are outside the purview of masculine attention.

When Captain Wentworth intervenes and remove the boys from Anne's back it is a potent gesture in the home of Charles Musgrove who thinks that looking after a child is quite a female's case. It is significant that Admiral Croft is the novel's only character who is shown as entertaining the two riotous boys of Mary Musgrove. Men also make inroads in the world of nursing, an activity that is identified with the feminine.

If providing shelves for Benwick's books is Harville's way of offering solace for the mourning Benwick, Wentworth's response to the news of the death of Fanny Harville takes the role of the comforter a bit further. Harville tells Anne that Wentworth "wrote up for leave of absence, but without waiting the return, travelled night and day till he got to Portsmouth, rowed off to the Grappler that instant, and never left the poor fellow for a week. That's what he did, and nobody else could have saved poor James Benwick."

Wiltshire points to the quick solicitude of Wentworth to Mrs. Musgrove, who is newly grieving for the death of her younger son Richard Musgrove in the navy years ago. This psychological nursing of Captain Wentworth also has a different manifestation, when years ago as his superior officer, he attempts to influence the habits of the same Richard, a thick-headed, unfeeling, profitable boy whom the Musgroves remove from home by sending into the navy.

The boy, due to the influence of Wentworth, produces the only two disinterested letters to his family, while the rest were demands the money. While a Captain might have had similar feelings to the boy's character as his family, his exertions towards a reclamation of the boy contrasts with the easy solution of the family in removing him from their domesticity. When Admiral Croft meets Anne in a street in Bath, he asks Anne, I quote, "Can I go anywhere for you or with you? Can I be of use to you?"

His words are expressive of his essentially democratic nature indicated in his choice of words 'for' and 'with', and are connected to the novel's thematic of utility that weaves together comforting, assisting, nursing, knitting and writing which re-joins broken relationship and

retrieves entangle properties in foreign countries. The domesticity of the Crofts or of the Harvilles in Lyme is ideal not because of the physical mobility associated with it, though that is significant too to a certain extent, but because their homes are formed on the basis of principles different from the ones on which the Kellynch or the Uppercross domesticities function. the Crofts do not erase the concept of the stable or settle home on land, nor does a mobile home illustrate a state of unsettledness or instability. Persuasion does not redefine the home as the no longer spatially enclosed site associated with the nuclear family or as an open porous place linked to and constituted by local, national or even global concerns.

On the contrary, the novel offers a different kind of spatially enclosed home from the one constructed out of selfish, innate and ultimately profitless concerns that constitute the domesticity in the Elliot and the Musgrove households. The alternate, hybrid, spontaneous homes in ships, lodging houses and the symbolic homes in gigs and laundret suggest the strong possibility of the stability of unsettled indeterminate and mobile homes.

The admirable practices of the Crofts are reflected in the companion way in which they conduct their affairs. Anne's first experience of the Crofts' domesticity is through her carriage ride with them. When Wentworth places her in the gig, as it is as if he has given her a significant opportunity to read the family dynamic between an ideal couple. When the Admiral's control of the gig falters and there is a real possibility of it crashing into a post, Mrs. Admiral by "coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger, and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage." So Anne herself does a symbolic reading of the domesticity which is very, very significant there.

The gig, Anne rightly deduces, is a symbol of the domestic management of the Crofts. Though the Admiral is in charge of the gig, Mrs. Croft has the strength of character to take over the reins in order to protect its safety, and the husband allows her do so. There is clearly a companionate nature of the manner in which they conduct their lives. Austen thus suggests that the safety and happiness of the family depends on the joint efforts of the couple presaging the views of Ruskin about the active role of both partners in preserving the sanctity of the home.

So, she is kind of presaging it, Austen. The happiest part of Mrs. Crofts's life have been those that she had spent on a ship not because of her love of travel but because while they were together there was nothing to be feared. She has experience both the comfortable and the uncomfortable accommodations on board a ship, but spatial aspects of a mobile domestic structure ultimately becomes secondary.

Yet, it is also obvious that Mrs. Croft's mobile domesticity is an exception rather than the rule, as she has no children to encumber her choice of a vote. As if realizing her unique circumstances, the narrative provides another illustration or a glimpse of a naval domestic life through the Harvilles. So if you do not want to take Mrs. Croft as the model, go to Mrs. Harville, that is what Austen seems to say there.

Mrs. Croft refers to captain Wentworth's transporting Mrs. Harville and her extended family from Portsmouth to Plymouth to meet Harville. Mrs. Croft specifically mentions the three children on board to point out that a measure of domestic life or a family is possible briefly on a ship. Wentworth might insist on women's right not to be comfortable on a ship that Mrs. Croft argues that it is possible for rational women to be as comfortable on board as in the best house in England.

Mrs. Croft makes the above comment while residing in one of the best houses in England, the comforts are better, nevertheless not beyond there was she had in most of the ships. Once again, to complement Mrs. Croft's more luxurious domesticity, be it on a man of war or in Kellynch Hall, Austen introduces Anne to a different domesticity based on a much smaller scale and of a more settled nature, but containing an equal measure of comfort and happiness. In Lyme, Anne witnesses a picture of repose and domestic happiness in the tiny lodging house at the Harville's, whose small home could also effectively be a metaphor for a small ship, pointing perhaps to his domesticity's past mobility.

So, Harville home becomes the metaphor for a ship or its connection to his past as a sailor. The different types of the sailor homes act as metaphors as well as as representations of real boats, the implication in this study of domestic contrast is clear - true domestic happiness is not in direct proportion to the size or form of the home, it is the character and domestic practices of the couple who construct their domesticity decides its measure of contentment.

The injured and retired Captain Harville contributes to his domesticity through his craftsmanship, which turns the actual space, to the best possible account to supply the deficiencies of lodging house furniture and defend the windows and doors against the winter storms to be expected. When there is a medley of objects in the house, the furniture provided by the owner of the lodgings contrasting with the ones that Harville has constructed from the wood acquired from foreign lands, there is not an element of the ludicrous. It does not bring a smile.

It is to be remembered that the narrator describes the purposeless interior design of the Musgrove girls as indicative of an air of confusion, here that is not the case. In Harville's home Anne observes the interiors bear a connection to his profession, I quote, "the fruit of its labours, the effect of its influence on his habits, the picture of repose and domestic happiness it presented, made it to her a something more, or less, than gratification."

The emphasis here is not so much on the naval profession as being the most suitable to the creation of an ideal domestic structure, but on the constructive occupations of the husband to improve the comforts and security of his home, a characteristic that cannot be seen either in the Elliot or the Musgrove men. This contrasts with the attitude of Sir Elliot who fails to defend his family from eviction from the family home.

Moreover, not only does Harville make netting needles and pins, activities that are overtly linked to the feminine pursuits, but he also knits fishing nets, paints, varnishes and constructs toys for children. His activities contain both the domestic and the aesthetic coding, the functional and the self-expressive aspect. Monica Cohen in reading the shipshape homes of *Persuasion*, writes that sailor homemakers are good to have around the house because they are so good with their hands.

She is right in emphasizing the significance of the domestic utility rather than their martial deed which takes place offstage and has no greater relevance to the novel's plot. However, what is significant is that the domestic utility connotes a re-orientation of masculinity in terms of domesticity. The participation of *Persuasion*'s ideal men in the feminine sphere is a literal and symbolic gesture of breaking the walls between the gender, private and public spheres.

Therefore, the domesticity of the retired Croft and Harville need not be perceived as what Cohen calls "an occupation of the Navy during peacetime". So, they are at home for the

vacations, so they are, you know, happily doing all this, we do not have to see it that way. Therefore, the domesticity of the retired Croft and Harville need not be perceived as what Cohen calls an occupation of the Navy during peacetime, as it implies their exit from domestic activity when they returned to sail.

It is important to remember the sea is a chief emblem of the world of work itself, and so we need to; so we need not expect the men to quit their interest in domestic work and in a point of time. Also it will be pertinent to remember that the landed gentleman in this novel, who are technically in the position of the retired naval men, do not possess a mind of usefulness and constant employment, qualities which characterize Harville and which are one of the criteria in close relation for a positive evaluation of both its men and women.

Thus the significance of the Harville home and Anne's astonishment lies not in the virtues of the naval profession but in a husband's contribution to the picture of repose and happiness in the domestic sphere. The final words of the narrative about the naval profession's importance resting on its domestic virtues rather than in its national importance, rejects any notion of the reorganization of domesticity taking place in *Persuasion* to include national or global concerns.

All the naval men in *Persuasion* are rooted to the land and the life at sea is kept off the pages of the narrative. Thus, the spatial representation of the Harville home and glimpses into the mobile naval homes of the sailors has a profound impact on Anne. The young Anne who had rejected the sailor Wentworth did not possess such valuable insights into the different possibilities of domestic structures.

The introduction to these crucial domestic homes of the naval circle effectively and subtly make certain that Anne Elliot will not reject Captain Wentworth in the sequel to their aborted courtship narrative. Anne's "domestic tourism" in *Persuasion* allows her the opportunity to study the functioning of various homes among which the literal and figurative homes associated with the naval men also provoked the recognition in Anne that a companionate marriage will give her the flexibility to create domestic happiness in new and flexible homes.

Her choice of marriage partner in *Persuasion* ultimately depends on the spatial dynamics of

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