The reality of aristocratic facades

Jane Austen uses her novels to express her disdain for nineteenth century English marital practice. She herself defied convention by remaining single and earning a living through her writing. Austenâ s novels, including Emma, Pride and Prejudice, and Persuasion, frequently feature an aristocratic heroine who is torn between marrying for love or for security. While Austenâ s works do not call for a classless society, they do criticize the strict class stratificationsâ effects on marriages. Specifically, Austen laments that nineteenth century English women usually married within their own social class for convenience as opposed to love and that cross-class marriages were generally discouraged. In Persuasion, we meet Anne Elliot, a bright, attractive, upper-class woman who fell in love with a sailor, Captain Frederick Wentworth. However, Anne was successfully persuaded to reject Wentworth by her aristocratic family and friends, who failed to recognize Wentworthâ s fine character and saw only his shallow pockets. The central conflict in Persuasion is that of appearance versus reality. Anne can certainly see the superficiality that surrounds her while at Kellynch Hall with her family; however, she allow others, namely Lady Russell and her sisters, to interpret what she sees and force her to act according to their wishes. Thus, Persuasion, like several other Austen novels, deals with a young womanâ s coming of age. Anne is fully mature when she acts on her own desires and acknowledges that her newfound adulthood necessitates breaking away from her shallow and delusional family. Anne was raised in Kellynch Hall, a beautiful estate shrouded in prestige, wealth, and superficiality. Her father, Sir Walter Elliot, is a vain, foolish man, who spends his days rereading the Baronetage, a genealogy of the local aristocratic families. He values appearance over all depth of character; he refuses to

associate with anyone who is not physically pleasing. Admiral Croft, who rents Kellynch Hall, comically remarks on the extraordinary number of mirrors in Sir Walterâ€™s dressing room: â€œI should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life. Such a number of looking-glasses! Oh Lord! There was no getting away from oneselfâ€? (114-115). While in Bath, Sir Walter obsesses about the dearth of attractive women: He had frequently observed, as he walked, that one handsome face would be followed by thirty, or five and thirty frights; and once, as he had stood in a shop in Bond-street, he had counted eighty-seven women go by, one after another, without there being a tolerable face among them. (127)Such a fascination with outward appearance severely limits Sir Walterâ€™s prospects of finding another wife or intelligent friends and keeps him ignorant and self-deluded. Two of Sir Walterâ€™s daughters, Elizabeth and Mary, share his passion for appearance and rank. Mary, the wife of the moderately wealthy Charles Musgrove, believes that it is her duty and right to prevent her sister-in-law, Henrietta Musgrove, from marrying Charles Hayter, who is â€œnothing but a country curateâ€? and would bring â€œbad connectionsâ€? (68) to her family. Mary wants to end a relationship that will make Henrietta happy simply because she sees the union as a disgrace to the Elliot family: â€œIt would be shocking to have Henrietta marry Charles Hayter; a very bad thing for her, and still worse for meâ€? (69). Similarly, while in Bath, Elizabeth finds herself actually â€œsufferingâ€? in order to preserve the Elliotsâ€™ wealthy appearance: she wants desperately to invite the Musgroves to dinner at her house in Bath, but she cannot â€œbear to have the difference of style, the reduction of servants, which a dinner must betray, witnessed by those who had been always so inferior to the Elliots at Kellynchâ€? (193).

Austen clearly uses the theme of appearance versus reality to characterize the three Elliot sisters. She evidently believes that how a character sees others is a direct reflection of that characterâ€™s personality. Thus, we know that Anne Elliot possesses true depth of character and sincerity because her superficial family fails to recognize her fine qualities: â€œAnne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give wayâ€? (7). Anne is clearly the only Elliot who can â€œsee realityâ€?: she understands her familyâ€™s need to economize, laments the â€œelegant stupidityâ€? (160) of the lavish parties that her family attends in Bath, and recognizes Maryâ€™s frequent sickness as a call for attention. However, Anne initially suffers from great family loyalty, and is thus unable to distance herself from her superficial kin. She allows Mary to drag her to Uppercross cottage because Elizabeth reasons, â€œnobody will want [Anne] in Bathâ€? (30). When she does arrive in Bath, Anne follows Sir Walter and Elizabeth to various upper-class social gatherings and shows great respect to her cousin Lady Dalrymple, whom Anne really views as a foolish noble. Anneâ€™s maturity is thus evident when she rejects Lady Dalyrmpleâ€™s dinner invitation in favor of visiting her old and widowed friend, Mrs. Smith, whom her father views as â€œlow companyâ€? and a â€œdisgusting associationâ€? (140). In being Anneâ€™s genuine friend, Mrs. Smith hastens Anneâ€™s departure from the superficial world of Kellynch Hall and acts as Lady Russellâ€™s character foil. Unlike her shallow father and sisters, Anne is able to see past Mrs. Smithâ€™s shabby apartment and recognize the sweet person within. Mrs. Smith gradually

begins to replace Lady Russell as Anneâ€™s confidant because Lady Russell places so much stock in â€œrank and consequenceâ€? (12), that she is â€œblindedâ€¦to the faults of those who possessed themâ€? (12). Lady Russell is an appropriately overbearing advisor to the insecure and obedient Anne that we meet initially. Anne allows Lady Russell to persuade her to reject Frederick Wentworth on the basis of his poor appearance and dearth of â€œconnexionsâ€? (24). Moreover, Anne is encouraged to continue seeing William Elliot because Lady Russell fails to see his deception and instead believes he has â€œknowledge of the worldâ€? and a â€œwarm heartâ€? (131). Mrs. Smith, however, proves to be a better confidant because she sees through Williamâ€™s affected kindness and exposes his true intentions to Anne, thus preventing a potentially disastrous and unhappy marriage for Anne. After Mrs. Smith tells Anne of Williamâ€™s desire to marry for a noble title, Anne reflects on Mrs. Smithâ€™s ability to accurately gauge character: â€œHere is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received â€˜the best education in the world, â€™ know nothing worth attending toâ€? (139). Anneâ€™s transformation into a mature, self-governing woman, complete with a sincere friend, is clear when she acknowledges that she herself is sometimes a better judge of true character than Lady Russell is: â€œThere is a quickness of perception in some, a nicety in discernment of character, a natural penetration, in short, which no experience in others can equal, and Lady Russell had been less gifted in this part of understanding than her young friendâ€? (219). Anneâ€™s developing maturity, marked by her continued visits to Mrs. Smith and rejection of

William Elliot, is brought to fruition by Wentworthâ€™s declaration of love for her. As a character foil to the deceptive William Elliot, Wentworth genuinely wants Anne to be happy in marriage. When Wentworth first arrives at Uppercross, Anne is terrified, yet secretly delighted to see him again. Her continued love for him is evidenced by her frequent reflections on their past â€œhearts so openâ€¦tastes so similarâ€¦feelings so in unisonâ€¦countenances so belovedâ€? (57). Moreover, she is mortified by their current estrangement: â€œhis cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than any thingâ€? (65). Even though Wentworth has become a prominent member of the Navy and amassed a substantial fortune, Anne still resigns herself to Lady Russellâ€™s decision and does not pursue him. She consequently endures his growing affection for Louisa Musgrove and her own inability to change his view of her as one â€œso altered that he should not have known her againâ€? (55). Wentworthâ€™s passionate love letter, however, which declares to Anne, â€œyou pierce my soul, â€? (209) stimulates Anne to mature. For the first time in almost eight years, Anne feels complete, â€œoverpowering happinessâ€? (209). Instead of falling prey to her self-described â€œtimidityâ€? and â€œfeebleness of character, â€? (55) Anne decides to act on her own desires and according to her own principles by marrying Wentworth because she loves him. The discrepancy between appearance and reality that resonates through Persuasion gives rise to another theme common to Austenâ€™s novels: the corrupting effects of wealth. Characters in Austenâ€™s works who possess excessive, inherited wealth, such as Sir Walter Elliot, often suffer from megalomania. However, Austen distinguishes between the heir, represented in Persuasion by Sir Walter Elliot and William Elliot, and the self-made man,

represented by the men of the Navy. Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, Captain Benwick, and Captain Harville are all incredibly kind and genuine men. In contrast to Sir Walterâ€™s insistence that the tenant of Kellynch Hall not use his â€œpleasure-groundsâ€? (18), Captain Harville opens his house up to the entire Musgrove party after Louisaâ€™s accident. Austenâ€™s harsh portrayal of male aristocrats may stem from her own somewhat feminist views on women and marriage. She clearly believed that women are as intelligent and capable as men are. Thus, she was undoubtedly appalled at the nineteenth century English law passing all inheritance to a male heir. Persuasion, then, may mark Austenâ€™s attempts to marry her own radical views on women and marriage with those of the nineteenth century feminist movement.