

# Hierarchy and privilege in jane austen



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Jane Austen novels tend to exhibit a certain kind of life: parties, walks in the park, trips to London or Bath, posturing for a particularly advantageous marriage – in a word, privilege. In addition, this world is structured according to a relatively stringent code of hierarchy. Of Austen's six novels, they all are set in this relatively small, elite social microcosm of eighteenth century British society, and, for the most part, all of the players are insiders. Austen spends little time discussing the lower classes. Indeed, the only times those of lesser rank are introduced are to stand in counter-distinction to the landed class who are the central figures in all of her works. Nevertheless, Austen herself was not of this class. Irene Collins writes: "Jane Austen [. . .] was on visiting terms with the local gentry: but visiting is not living. She depended a good deal on observation in the early stages of her novel-writing" (ix). And, indeed, all of her heroines, who in the course of establishing a secure future for themselves through marrying well, eventually come to embody what it means to be an informed and aware woman, are likewise outsiders: Emma Woodhouse, though at the zenith of Highbury society, is not necessarily secure in her position; and Anne Elliot, though born to privilege, eventually loses all of her privileges. By telling her story through the mouth of an outsider, Austen is able to portray the inevitability, superficiality, and vivacity of this world that has captivated so many readers. One of the most engaging of Austen's characters, Emma Woodhouse captivates the reader with her vivacity, self-awareness, and prosperity. Indeed, within the first sentence we read that she is "handsome, clever, and rich" (7). Though at the height of Highbury society, she is fixated on social structure: maintaining her own, raising Harriet's, keeping an eye on the Cole's, and watching out for competition from Jane Fairfax. Such a portrait appears to

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undermine the premise outlined previously that all of Austen's heroines are in some sense not of this elite world. However, Shinobu Minma argues that "[i]t is clear, therefore – as it was no doubt clear to the contemporary reader – that, although [the Woodhouse's] have settled in Highbury 'for several generations' and are now admitted to be 'first in consequence' there, the Woodhouse's in fact stand in almost the same positions as the Weston's, the Cole's and the Suckling's of Maple Grove" (62). Thus, the Woodhouse's are not members of the landed gentry; though they possess many of the privileges, they lack the lands or titles of the insiders. And thus, because she has no special claim to her place in society, Emma must play the game of maintaining her place, keeping others in their own, and occasionally helping a friend whom she has chosen raise a level or two. It is not necessarily the game itself, but the way in which Emma plays it that the reader often finds distressful. Her attempts to thrust Harriet and Mr. Elton together – fixing her boot, taking up portraiture again, demeaning Robert Martin – though well intentioned, are often quite distasteful. "As a member – or, 'mistress' – of a family who are 'first in consequence' in Highbury, Emma is aware that she is expected to offer gracious attentions to the underprivileged, and she believes that she understands her duty well" (Minma 58). Minma then goes on to argue that Emma's misunderstanding of her duty, "her moral inadequacies[,] are highlighted in order to lay the blame on the non-landed gentry" (63). However, this very conservative view of the matter seems to place too much emphasis on the rather obscure argument that the Woodhouse's are part of the non-landed gentry. Rather, Emma's moral inadequacies highlight the short-sightedness of the means necessary to secure a privileged future in a world that is inevitably structured according to

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hierarchical moral codes. While Emma follows the Austen mould and secures her privileged future by marrying into the landed gentry (and finding a partner in Mr. Knightley who complements her), Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion*, in many ways breaks the mould. Unlike Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennett, or Catherine Morland, Anne was born the daughter of a baron. However, despite her placement in the hierarchy, Anne has lost many things: her mother has died, Kellynch Park has been rented out, she has turned down one offer of marriage and has been snubbed by another possible suitor. Consequently, Anne finds herself, despite her birth, in much the same place as Austen's other heroines. However, there is much less humour in this novel than the others. While Mr. Collins' selfishness is funny, Mr. Elliot's is disdainful. Where the muddy but otherwise unhurt Marianne is rescued by Willoughby after falling down a hill, Louisa suffers serious injuries after Captain Wentworth fails to catch her jumping off the cobb. Virginia Woolf has suggested that many of these diversions from the stereotypical Jane Austen novel in this, her last, work are a consequence of her increasing maturity and proximity to the world of which she wrote: "[Austen] is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious and more romantic than she had supposed" (152). She goes on to suggest that "[h]ad [Austen, who died at the age of forty-two) lived a few years longer [. . .] she would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends, read, traveled and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure" (152). The degree to which one can extrapolate the reasons for the changes in *Persuasion* from Jane Austen's biography is arguable. However, it is clear that the typical Austen heroine has evolved from the early archetype, characterized in this essay by Emma.

This evolution is most striking in the conclusion of the novel. While Emma, like all of her counterparts, finds herself in a secure, upwardly mobile marriage by the end of the novel, Anne, though promised to be wed to Captain Wentworth, has yet to get hitched. Furthermore, there is little advantage in the match; Wentworth has no estate nor sizable income, and thus, their future together, which presumably will come to pass, will be spent without much security. The world of privilege and hierarchy is the world of which Jane Austen writes. Though the cast is relatively small, and the story somewhat predictable it is a joy to watch the lives of “handsome, clever, and rich” women unfold. Nevertheless, there is a tinge of criticism in the way in which Austen portrays this community. The way in which Emma consciously manipulates the people around her, specifically Harriet, is often detestable. However, the criticism is not all encompassing. Emma eventually marries well, both in terms of wealth and complement, and appears to live a privileged happy ever after in a secure social position. Though *Persuasion* essentially deals with the same community and the same themes as previous novels, there seems to be an evolving notion of what it means to have a privileged, secure future. No marriage takes place in the novel, and the one that presumably will in the future is not the kind of upwardly mobile arrangement one would expect from Austen. It appears that in the last of Austen's novels her world is beginning to change.

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