



Dance, Physicality, and Social Mobility in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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IN *JANE AUSTEN AND THE PROVINCE OF WOMANHOOD*, Alison Sulloway notes, “with the exception of Anne Elliot, all the heroines either meet their lovers at balls or their creator provides them with a crucial scene at a ball” (155). Austen scholars have noted the indisputable importance of dance in the novels, usually arguing that the prominent ballroom scenes stand as microcosms of Austen’s social world. However, in *Persuasion*, Austen appears to have abandoned dance and relegated Anne Elliot to the status of “heroine without a ball.”¹ While there is very little dancing in *Persuasion*, images and rhetoric of English country-dance appear at key moments in the text, enabling Austen to employ time, space, and physicality to advance a consideration of social mobility. Attention to dance highlights the tension between the body and the spaces within which it can move, and in turn reinforces Austen’s approach to social mobility in the novel—she uses a rhetoric of dance to explore the role desire plays in negotiating boundaries between the individual and society. In *Persuasion*, Austen depicts society as a set of separate closed circles, modeled on country-dance formations, and uses these to illustrate the possibilities for—and yet limitations of—individual mobility within established social structures.

I

Austen’s use of dance and the dance metaphor can most effectively be

understood if *Persuasion* is first situated within the landscape of Regency Era social dance. The country-dance with which Austen and her characters would have been familiar was “a social dance of English origin in which a number of couples perform a set pattern of figures” (“Country Dance” 254).² In its most inclusive definition, “country-dance” included square dances in which four couples stood in a square formation and the movement of the dance occurred in, around, and across the square. This square form, which illustrates the French influence on English country-dance, became increasingly popular in the second half of the eighteenth century: “the square form of the *contredanse*, or cotillon, gained some popularity in England through works such as G. A. Gallini’s *Critical Observations on the Art of Dancing* (c. 1770)” (“Country Dance” 256).³ These square dances were called “Contredanse Française,” and the longways dances became known as “Contredanse Anglaise.” Thus, “country-dance” was used comprehensively to signify most types of social dance and specifically to refer to longways dances.⁴ The “Contredanse Française,” known as the “cotillion” (or “cotillon”) in England, used the same steps as longways dances (Contredanse Anglaise), changing only the form (the arrangement of the dancers). In a dance manual, “a dance might be given in two forms so that it could be danced either as a Cotillon or as a Longways Progressive set” (Wood 95). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the longways dances and cotillions were phased out in favor of the quadrille—a dance that retained the square formation of the cotillion, but employed less energetic movements. Thus, the cotillion occupies a transitory place in the history of English social dance because it was adapted from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century longways dances and introduced the square formations that would characterize much of nineteenth-century social dance. The legacy of the cotillion was noted in the *Ball-Room Preceptor* (London 1843): “The *Cotillion*, that once universal favorite in the ball-room has now also, in great measure, been superseded, at least in name; but ‘even in its ashes live its wonted fires,’ for its figures have been cut up to form new quadrilles” (qtd. in Aldrich 145).⁵ Like the cotillion, *Persuasion* occupies a space between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the novel both structurally and thematically follows and deviates from eighteenth-century traditions.⁶

The role of the square formation in country-dance has been emphasized here because *Persuasion* is modeled on this dance form. Specific references to dances and dance figures in Austen’s writings are scarce, but both the prevalence of square dances in the late eighteenth century as well as the turn-of-the-century movement toward almost exclusively square dances suggest that

Austen and her readers would have been familiar with the cotillion. In addition, Austen makes some specific references to the cotillion. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland observes, “the cotillions were over, the country-dancing beginning” (74). Here, Austen uses the more exclusive definition of “country-dance” to refer to longways dances, which she differentiates from the square-based cotillions. Austen, an accomplished country-dance player, also illustrated her familiarity with popular forms of music and dance in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight: “Much obliged for the *Quadrilles*, which I am grown to think pretty enough, though of course they are inferior to the Cotillions of my own day” (20–21 February 1817). This note, probably written to acknowledge the receipt of some sheet music, suggests that the newly fashionable quadrille rapidly spread to the countryside.

In a cotillion, four couples change partners while moving through a series of set figures.⁷ Each couple has a place along one side of the dance square, and the dancers’ movements are dictated by that location. Eighteenth-century dancing master Thomas Wilson describes the formation as such: “The Top Couple is the Couple that commence the Dance; and the Bottom Couple is the Couple that stand opposite, or the Third Couple from the Top. The Side Couples, or the Couples right and left, are those Couples on the right and left hands of the Leading Couple; the Second Couple being on the right, and the Fourth Couple on the left” (29). Throughout the dance, the movements of individuals or couples would be dictated by their starting position within the closed set of eight dancers. In *The Quadrille and Cotillion Panorama*, Wilson provides illustrations that depict the proper arrangement of the set and emphasizes the importance of “always preserving the Figure of the Dance” (28). This particular formation is important to the structure of cotillion dances and to *Persuasion* because both the dance and the novel stress the importance of establishing and maintaining one’s place within the set.

II

Balls and dances are significant occasions because they provide opportunities for socialization and courtship, and Jane Austen expresses the analogy between marriage and country-dance in Henry Tilney’s often-quoted speech:

“I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbors. . . . You will allow,

that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution.” (NA 76–77)

Henry Tilney’s comparison of marriage to a country-dance illustrates the function of dance in Austen’s works. One of the most significant characteristics of country-dance, which accounts for its status as a symbol of marriage and courtship, is its sexually charged nature. Country-dances are highly erotic events because they bring the dancers into close physical contact, which would have been otherwise inappropriate. As Sulloway suggests, dancing was “a socially sanctioned form of sexual display” (143). Numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious texts recognize the erotic nature of social dances and strongly chastise those who engage in such amusements. *May Christians Dance?* answers the title question with an emphatic “No,” listing a multitude of reasons for this prohibition including the dance’s ability to incite inappropriate passions:

Our accusation is that the dance, instead of affording an opportunity for mutually ennobling companionship between man and woman, inspired with a chaste and sweet interfused remembrance of their contrasted relationship to each other,—that the dance, instead of this, consists substantially of a system of means contrived with more than human ingenuity to incite the instincts of sex to action, however subtle and disguised at the moment, in its sequel the most bestial and degrading. We charge that here, and not elsewhere, in the anatomy of that elusive fascination which belongs so peculiarly to the dance, we lay our scalpel upon the quivering secret of life. Passion,—passion transformed, if you please, never so much, subsisting in no matter how many finely contrasted degrees of sensuality,—passion, and nothing else, is the true basis of the popularity of the dance. (Brookes 99–100)

Illicit ballroom behaviors are also criticized in a pamphlet published for the Tract Society of the Methodist Episcopal Society, which asks dancers, “And will any pretend that their minds can be in a devotional frame while stepping at the sound of the violin in the ballroom? Stop! and think a little. Would you be willing to go from the ball chamber to the judgment seat of Christ? But you are commanded to be always ready” (*A Solemn Warning to Dancers* 1).

Though Austen may not have been directly influenced by a Methodist tract, both the Methodist society's *A Solemn Warning to Dancers* and *May Christians Dance?* object to the ways in which dancing distracts individuals from loftier moral pursuits. Austen, however, reverses this situation by using dance to perpetuate a broader social and cultural commentary within her novel.

Despite the amount of attention given to dance in Austen's novels, *Persuasion* remains largely neglected, and for an obvious reason: it lacks the dance scenes that are so important in Austen's other works. Readers know only that evenings ended "occasionally in an unpremeditated little ball" in which the heroine, Anne Elliot, does not participate because "she has quite given up dancing" (47, 72). Indeed, Anne's refusal to dance is cited as a sign of her "sad slide toward spinsterhood" (Handler and Segal 92). Her role as accompanist has also caused parallels to be drawn between Anne Elliot and Jane Austen, who wrote to her sister Cassandra that she would "practise country dances, that we may have some amusement for our nephews & neices, when we have the pleasure of their company" (27–28 December 1808). Sulloway claims that dance plays a minimal role in *Persuasion* because Anne "thinks that her dancing days are over, just as her creator's were," and Joan Grigsby notes that though Austen still attended balls, by the time she reached her thirties, she "probably considered herself an onlooker" (157, 119). Thus, one reading of the lack of dance in *Persuasion* suggests that Austen's heroine does not dance because she is older and, at her age, Austen had probably "given up dancing" as well. However, Austen remained an active, though unlikely, participant in balls. One week before her thirty-third birthday, Austen wrote to her sister, "you will not expect to hear that *I* was asked to dance—but I was" (9 December 1808). Given the correlation between dance and marriage in Austen's novels, separating Anne from the dancers is yet another way for Austen to emphasize Anne's separation from society and the dance of courtship. Anne's unwillingness to join in places her in direct contrast to the young, lively, and marriageable Musgrove sisters who "were wild for dancing" (47).

Though analyses of dance in *Persuasion* focus primarily on the social implications of not dancing, the novel's conclusion has also received some critical attention as a metaphoric representation of dance. When Anne and Wentworth reconcile, the narrator's reference to "spirits dancing" is considered purely symbolic (240). Langdon Elsbree argues that dancing "figures prominently" in this scene and "is used as a metaphor which is made rhyth-

mic by Jane Austen's use of parallel structure among and within the sentences" ("Fidelity and Complaisance" 134). Elsabee refers to the passage in which Anne and Charles Musgrove meet Captain Wentworth on the street in Bath and Charles asks Wentworth to take Anne home. In Elsabee's analysis, it is the movement of the language, not the characters, in this passage that is dancelike. However, this passage in fact functions, as I will demonstrate, as the missing ballroom scene that brings together the elements of dance that have informed both the structure and themes of the novel.⁸

The structure of *Persuasion* employs the cotillion's complexities of time and space. Like a cotillion, in which eight dancers move through four locations and execute steps in sets of four or eight beats, Austen's novel also centers on patterns of four and eight. Most notable is the period of eight years that Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth have been separated—only one of the multiple references to the importance of time which prompts Claudia Johnson to call *Persuasion* "a calculated tangle of years and dates" in which "the passage of time itself is foregrounded" (147). In addition, there are eight single people around whom the romantic storyline moves: Anne Elliot, Elizabeth Elliot, Louisa Musgrove, Henrietta Musgrove, Frederick Wentworth, William Elliot, Captain Benwick, and Charles Hayter. From these eight young people, eight different couplings are suggested over the course of the novel: Anne and William Elliot, Anne and Benwick, Anne and Frederick, Louisa and Frederick, Louisa and Benwick, Henrietta and Frederick, Henrietta and Charles Hayter, and Elizabeth and William Elliot. This interchange of partners parallels the way individuals combine and recombine as couples over the course of the dance. At the end of the dance, four couples are established; similarly, at the end of the novel, the characters have arranged themselves into four couples: Anne and Frederick, Louisa and Benwick, Henrietta and Charles, and Mrs. Clay and William Elliot. William Elliot has changed partners during the course of the dance and brought Mrs. Clay, whose social standing and previous marriage distance her from the others, into the set. In doing this, William Elliot violates the rules of country-dance, which state that dancers must remain with their original partners for the duration of the set: "No gentleman will leave his partner standing alone after having taken the floor" (Bonstein 4). This basic element of ballroom etiquette echoes the social rules concerning the appropriate procedures for making and breaking engagements.

The cotillion formation established by these individuals and their romances also corresponds to the novel's use of place. The characters move

between four major locations: Kellynch, Uppercross, Lyme, and Bath, and, appropriately, each of these locations is primarily associated with one of the couples. Kellynch saw the flirtation of Elizabeth and William Elliot, Uppercross was the place of courtship for Henrietta and Charles, Lyme brought Louisa and Benwick together, and Bath was the site of reconciliation for Anne and Frederick. These four places, each “home” to one couple, parallel the four positions within the cotillion figure, each of which is “home” to one couple and the place that the dancers come together at the end of the dance. In the dance, as in the novel, individuals and couples are characterized by their location within the circle.

III

Austen structures *Persuasion* around country-dance patterns to draw attention to the role of individual bodies and their ability to move between physical locations in the novel and to foreground issues of social mobility. Moreover, the use of dance draws attention to the treatment of the body in the novel. In social dancing, bodies are spectacularized; they are put on display in the middle of a room to be viewed by others. For example, dancing together is one way to announce budding romances. Aware of the publicity of dance-floor courtship, Austen uses this device in *Pride and Prejudice* to announce the potential relationship between Jane Bennet and Mr. Bingley, “he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time” (13), and in *Mansfield Park* to explain the marriage of Maria Bertram and Mr. Rushworth, “After dancing with each other at a proper number of balls . . . an engagement . . . was entered into” (39). Successful performance at a ball required an individual to both navigate the social territory and display considerable skill in dancing. Dance manuals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contain illustrations and discussions that explain the minutiae of proper physical deportment. These may appear humorously complicated to contemporary readers, but an awareness of the particulars of physical carriage and movement was an indicator of decorum and gentility—those who could not dance, such as Mr. Collins, were thought unbearable: “A person well skilled in graceful and classic, steps, and unacquainted with figures, would certainly make a ridiculous appearance, beside confusing others in the set” (*Ball-room Instructor* [sic] 6). *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Dancing* provides anxious dancers with detailed advice on how to move the hand when presenting a card or letter to a lady: “The hand must be waved in a Serpentine line, but care must be taken that the line of movement be but gentle, and not too S-like and twirling, which excess would be affected and

ridiculous,” and regarding the movement of the arms in dancing, *Elements of the Art of Dancing* advises, “the arm should be kept near the body, the hand brought gently before it, the elbow kept forward, and, without raising the shoulder, the arm is to be raised to the height of the breast, allowing the elbow to fold a little, in order to bring the hand before the breast, always taking care to hold the arm in a rounded form” (qtd. in Aldrich 93, 94). As in a country-dance, physical movement and placement are important in *Persuasion* because characters relate to one another on a physical level, through describing bodies and engaging in physical contact.

Austen uses the character of Sir Walter Elliot to help the reader see the bodies around which she structures her dancelike narrative. Sir Walter functions as a vehicle of what Judith Butler terms “formative discourse.” Butler explains, “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (10). Thus, Sir Walter’s references to his own and others’ appearance repeatedly bring the characters’ bodies to the attention of the reader: “caught in Sir Walter’s gaze, Austen’s characters take on a more vivid physicality than her narrators ordinarily give them” (Warhol 10). Sir Walter’s hyperconscious awareness of the body and its appearance is looked down upon by Austen, who fills the novel with his unattractive observations about unattractive bodies, such as “there certainly were a dreadful multitude of ugly women in Bath; and as for the men! they were infinitely worse” (142). However, though Sir Walter’s focus on physical appearance reflects negatively on his own character, it provides the reader with valuable (though subjective) information about others and allows individuals, such as “bloomless” Anne Elliot and “weather-beaten” Mrs. Croft, to become visible.

By presenting Sir Walter’s obsession with his own physical appearance at the opening of the novel, Austen sets the stage for Anne and Wentworth, whose relationship develops through a series of encounters that are designed to draw attention to the characters’ bodies. The estranged lovers navigate their placement in several scenes where they seem to desire physical proximity. In these scenes, Anne and Wentworth’s inability to speak much to one another keeps the focus on their physical actions because their bodies are not “displaced” by language.⁹ After an evening of dancing at the Musgrove home, Wentworth takes Anne’s seat at the piano for a moment. When Anne returns, they have an awkward encounter in which Wentworth begins, “I beg your pardon, madam, this is your seat; and though she immediately drew back with a decided negative, he was not to be induced to sit down again” (72). Neither

Anne nor Wentworth wants to return to the site that, quite literally, represents their physical union—a place occupied at different times by each of their bodies. Indeed, the picture of Anne and Wentworth being in the same place at different times recalls their disjointed relationship and their inability to move on the same plane of time and space long enough to affect a real union.

This scene is replicated later where it is complicated by the presence of William Elliot; Wentworth appears to be somewhat jealous of William Elliot's attentions to Anne, and William Elliot's presence prevents Anne and Wentworth from connecting. The Bath party is at a concert when the issue of seating arises once again. For the first half of the concert, Anne is placed next to William Elliot who "had manœuvred so well, with the assistance of his friend Colonel Wallis, as to have a seat by her" (186). After the interval, the seats are shuffled, and with "a little scheming of her own, Anne was enabled to place herself much nearer the end of the bench than she had been before, much more within the reach of a passer-by . . . with a vacant space at hand" (189). Anne has made herself available to Captain Wentworth, and her efforts are rewarded when he approaches her to converse about the concert. Their conversation becomes almost comfortable, and "he even looked down towards the bench, as if he saw a place on it well worth occupying" (190). However, as Wentworth contemplates seating himself next to Anne, they are interrupted by William Elliot who demands Anne's assistance in reading the program, causing Wentworth to leave in jealous anger, and Anne to despair, "it was misery to think of Mr. Elliot's attentions.—Their evil was incalculable" (191). Throughout this scene, Austen's language draws attention to the importance of self-directed mobility—Anne, Wentworth, and William Elliot make very deliberate decisions about where they would like to be physically located, but only William Elliot's desires are fulfilled. Like the instructions for performing a country-dance, the social rules depicted in *Persuasion* challenge an individual's ability to direct her own movements. Once again, Anne and Wentworth have had a "near miss"; they have brushed by one another, but are not yet in step.

Of the other courtship scenes, two in particular approximate the close physical contact Anne and Wentworth would have had if they had been dancing together. Indeed, without a ballroom scene to bring the lovers into physical contact, Austen must invent a series of equally intimate, yet innocent, encounters. In both instances, Wentworth rescues Anne, first by removing

her clinging nephew from her neck and then by realizing she is tired and assisting her into the Croft's carriage. In these situations, Anne is unnerved by the erotic arousal that results from their close physical contact. Sexual desire plays a large role in Anne and Wentworth's courtship; Robyn Warhol writes, "Anne's physical desire—frustrated and finally gratified—is the motor that drives the narrative's movement to its happy-ending closure in her sexual union with Wentworth" (15). After Wentworth lifts the child from her neck, Anne is "perfectly speechless" and experiences "most disordered feelings" (80). Similarly, after being placed in the carriage by "his hands," Anne "was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her" (91). These scenes again invoke the idea of displacement because the relationship between Anne and Wentworth is so awkward that they can only unconsciously and indirectly experience their desire for one another. Butler explains, "the materiality of bodily relations, prior to any individuation into a separable body or, rather, simultaneous with it, is displaced onto the materiality of linguistic relations" (70). Anne and Wentworth illustrate the opposite of this phenomenon—their bodies are more articulate than their words and (often unintentional) physical interactions displace verbal communication. Thus, their mutual desire is replaced with a strained and silent courtship.

Austen unfolds the narrative of Anne and Wentworth's romance through a series of scenes in which their physical bodies are centralized; however, the emphasis on the physical does not objectify the body, but rather speaks to the sexual charge that underlies Anne and Wentworth's relationship, just as it underlies the steps of a country-dance:

For it is no accident that the dance is what it is. It mingles the sexes in such closeness of personal approach and contact as, outside of the dance, is nowhere tolerated in respectable society. It does this under a complexity of circumstances that conspire to heighten the impropriety of it . . . there is the strange, confusing sense of being individually unobserved among so many, while yet the natural "noble shame" which guards the purity of man and woman alone together is absent,—such is the occasion, and still, hour after hour, it whirls its giddy kaleidoscope around, bringing hearts so near that they almost beat against each other, mixing the warm mutual breaths, darting the fine personal electricity across between the meeting fingers, flushing the face and lighting the eyes with a quick language, subject often to gross interpretations on the part of the vile-hearted. (*May Christians Dance?* 100–01)

The writer of this ostensibly critical passage appears to be intimately familiar with the effects of dancing on the physiognomy of men and women, and Austen suggests that similar emotions result from the physical contact between Anne and Wentworth, which is as erotic as the dancing of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy or Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley. Anne and Wentworth's interactions always have a purpose other than sexual interaction, but, as in a dance, the attention to the physical body suggests that sexual desire is lurking just below the surface. In her first meditations on Wentworth's impending arrival, Anne walks alone in the garden and wonders, "a few months more, and *he*, perhaps, may be walking here" (25). This scene, in which Anne's steps are placed alongside Wentworth's, parallels the end of the novel when they finally express their mutual attraction while walking side by side along the streets of Bath.

IV

In the text of *Persuasion*, as in a cotillion, individuals are mobile, yet they are confined by a prescribed set of movements to a limited number of locations and a particular group of individuals. The patterns of the novel, which move the action between four different locations, speak to the importance of self-directed movement and promote an individual's ability to move beyond the personal and geographic limitations of social circles and dance squares. In a dance square, dancers move in a set of fixed patterns; similarly, most of the characters in *Persuasion* move within confined spheres—social placements they cannot escape. The influence of these social sets results in behaviors, such as Anne's initial rejection of Wentworth, which are informed by the heroine's social position and relationship to other members of her circle.¹⁰ Austen aligns the characters' social movements with the movements of country-dancers, and the dance's combined attention to individual bodies and fixed group movements corresponds to the tension between individual desires and the established social hierarchy. An exploration of this tension reveals Austen's simultaneous support and critique of the existing set-based social system; she recognizes the function of social sets, yet argues that these groups should have flexible boundaries that allow for the fulfillment of individual desires through social mobility.

Social groups form and re-form over time, and individuals or groups of individuals can locate and re-locate themselves within different social groups.¹¹ The two largest social groups in *Persuasion* are the landed gentry, represented by the Elliot family (including the Walter Elliots, the Musgroves,

and their various connections) and the navy (including the Crofts, the Harvilles, and Benwick). There are subdivisions within these sets, but most of the characters belong to one of the two circles, and those who do not, such as Mrs. Smith, are noticeably marginalized. In *Persuasion*, evidence of Austen's interest in social mobility is illustrated by her exploration of Sir Walter's position as a financially distressed gentleman and the articulation of Mary's fears that Charles Hayter's social status renders him an inappropriate match for Henrietta. However, the most dramatic example of Austen as a socially-conscious writer is Anne's permanent transition from the landed gentry to the navy.

The novel's opening chapters clearly illustrate Austen's interest in social structures as well as the presence of distinct circles, and the attention to self-definition through physical placement initiated here recalls the descriptions of dance formations in which the dancers' roles and movements depend upon their physical placement in the set. Sir Walter Elliot's Baronetage connects economic and political achievements to geographical location: "Then followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family, in the usual terms: how it had been first settled in Cheshire; how mentioned in Dugdale—serving the office of High Sheriff, representing a borough in three successive parliaments, exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II., with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married" (4). Through this description of the family history, Austen establishes the importance of social standing to the Elliots and emphasizes the connection between social position and physical location.

The opening of *Persuasion* continues to explore the function of social positionings by introducing Sir Walter's financial distress. Given the established importance of estate ownership and location, moving away from Kellynch Hall takes on additional significance—without the family's "Principal seat, Kellynch hall, in the county of Somerset," part of Sir Walter's identity will be missing, and his eldest daughter Elizabeth will be forced to expand her interests beyond those of "one country circle" (9). By aligning the class-conscious and ungracious Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot with the security offered by well-defined and closed social circles, Austen can express her own distaste for this structure. Austen also uses Sir Walter's financial distress to illustrate how excessive emphasis on preserving the hierarchy of social circles and the sanctity of land-ownership directly conflicts with individual, in Sir Walter's case economic, needs. However, Sir Walter chooses to continue to espouse the old values of the landed gentry; thus, the need to retrench and

move to Bath is treated as “a profound secret; not to be breathed beyond their own circle” (15).

Austen also introduces a second social set in these opening chapters—the navy. From the perspective of the landed gentry, the navy is an inferior set because, Sir Walter argues, it is “the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of” (19). As this statement illustrates, Sir Walter objects to the profession because it challenges the Baronetage, which privileges land ownership and heredity. In contrast, Anne Elliot views the navy as a valuable group of individuals: “The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give” (19). Anne challenges her father by claiming that the comforts and status of Kellynch are not reserved for members of the landed gentry alone. Austen establishes the existing social hierarchy in the opening chapters of *Persuasion* and continues to explore the implications of these social sets and the conflicts between them throughout the novel as she moves her characters around within, and eventually across, different social groups.

Though Austen structures *Persuasion* around two primary social circles, she remains aware that divisions exist within those circles. For example, the Musgroves are part of the landed gentry and an extension of Sir Walter’s family, but their lives and concerns are considerably removed from those of the Elliots as Anne comes to realize:

Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea. She had never been staying there before, without being struck by it, or without wishing that other Elliots could have her advantage in seeing how unknown, or unconsidered there, were the affairs which at Kellynch-hall were treated as of such general publicity and pervading interest; yet, with all this experience, she believed she must now submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her. (42)

Although Anne remains within her social circle when visiting the Musgroves, Austen allows her heroine this mobility and the awareness that accompanies it to prepare both Anne and the reader for Anne’s subsequent move to the circle of the navy. In addition, by depicting the landed gentry as

a social circle consisting of diverse subsets, Austen reminds her readers that social groups are not completely homogenous and should not be treated as such. The dance image applies here as well because though sets of dancers appear as uniform units within the context of the ballroom, within the sets themselves, each couple and each dancer has distinct roles—individuals are permitted to move around, but only within the limited space of the set and in patterns dictated by their original physical placement. This is the situation of the landed gentry in *Persuasion*. Nominally, they are a single group, characterized by a particular social standing and way of life, but within this social group, families and individuals exhibit different, and sometimes conflicting, characteristics.

Austen frames Anne and Wentworth's courtship with the tensions between the social circles of the navy and the landed gentry. In "Knowing One's Own Species Better: Social Satire in *Persuasion*," David Groves acknowledges that Austen was influenced by early nineteenth-century society but suggests that, despite the novel's "satirical attacks" on the privileged classes, Austen ultimately "advocates a cautious acceptance of social hierarchy and established traditions" (15). Although I argue that Austen was somewhat more critical than accepting of society in *Persuasion* and wrote with a forward-looking social consciousness, she does reproduce and show the value of a social structure in which individuals are assigned to and identified by their location within a particular social group. The situation of an individual in conflict with her social group, such as that of Anne Elliot, is preferable to the situation of an individual completely excluded from social groups, and the contrast between Anne and Mrs. Smith illustrates Austen's support of a set-based society. Anne is part of a social circle and can move around within the parameters defined by her set; however, Mrs. Smith lacks such an affiliation and is stationary, both physically and socially:

She had had difficulties of every sort to contend with, and in addition to these distresses, had been afflicted with a severe rheumatic fever, which finally settling in her legs, had made her for the present a cripple. She had come to Bath on that account, and was now in lodgings near the hot-baths, living in a very humble way, unable even to afford herself the comfort of a servant, and of course almost excluded from society. (152–53)

"Of course" Mrs. Smith is separate from the rest of society, states Austen's narrator, which proves that lacking a well-defined place in society, as Mrs. Smith does, necessarily causes an individual to be cast into complete social

oblivion. Just as Mrs. Smith's economic situation results in her exclusion from society, her physical situation would relegate her to the sidelines at a ball. If the characters in *Persuasion* are dancers moving within cotillion-like sets, then Mrs. Smith is, at best, a solitary onlooker. Thus, when placed alongside Mrs. Smith, Anne appears to be in an enviable position. Though Anne is not content in the world of the landed gentry, her position provides her with the material comforts and opportunities for social interaction (which eventually lead to her escape) that are not accessible to Mrs. Smith. Indeed, if Anne were to strictly observe social boundaries, she herself would be inaccessible to the "every day Mrs. Smith," who Sir Walter finds unworthy "to be the chosen friend of Miss Anne Elliot, and to be preferred by her, to her own family connections among the nobility of England and Ireland!" (158). Sir Walter's reaction to his daughter's friendship with a poor invalid suggests that Austen also uses Mrs. Smith to illustrate the plight of those consigned to the fringes of society and to further the contrast between the social views held by Anne and Sir Walter. However, though Austen uses Mrs. Smith to demonstrate the function of social circles, she continues to stress the need for alterations within the existing structure by showing that, for Anne, the rigid boundaries of the circle of the landed gentry can be as crippling as Mrs. Smith's rheumatism.

Austen's experimentation with social mobility can also be seen in the situation of the Crofts who move from living on a ship to living at Kellynch Hall, the symbolic center of the landed gentry's circle. The Crofts' situation is only temporary, but by bringing them physically into Sir Walter's world, Austen reinforces the idea that social mobility should be possible within a fluid society in which social boundaries are less restrictive and individual desires can dictate mobility. The Crofts' mobility upsets the reliance that both the cotillion and the Baronetage place on individual definition through physical location, yet Austen's favor toward the navy and depiction of the naval men's upward social mobility foreshadow and support the disintegration of a land-based social structure. In addition, Austen uses the situation of the Crofts to emphasize her disagreement with current social hierarchies, employing her characteristic irony to depict the movement of individuals from a nominally "lower" class into a house temporarily abandoned by a financially distressed gentleman. Although this situation may imply that Austen wants to present the navy as potentially threatening to the position of the landed gentry, readers remain aware that this is only a temporary situation—the characters frequently discuss Sir Walter's eventual return to Kellynch as

well as the possibility of another war, which would see the navy's return to sea. The transient nature of the Crofts' stay at Kellynch combined with their lack of desire to enter the world of the landed gentry helps dispel any fears that the navy could usurp the position of the landed gentry. However, the permanent act of social mobility in *Persuasion*, Anne's decision to leave Kellynch and enter the circle of the navy, suggests that in carving out a social niche for themselves the naval men may disrupt the lives and set social structures of the landed gentry.

Austen's depiction of movement between social circles again illustrates her incorporation and manipulation of country-dance etiquette as it is depicted in nineteenth-century dance manuals. Anne and Wentworth directly disobey the advice offered by "Professor Bonstein" in *Dancing and Prompting, Etiquette and Deportment of Society and Ball room*: "No lady and gentleman will leave the set once formed for another set, unless requested by the manager, for it is a gross insult to those you leave" (4). The title of Bonstein's manual suggests that the rules of society parallel those of the ballroom, and Austen's direct attention to the particular social infractions that are most reminiscent of ballroom situations, those concerning physical intimacy, individual mobility, and the formation and movement of sets and circles, allows her to present *Persuasion* as a carefully choreographed work that draws some of its structural and thematic elements from dance manuals. Well-versed in the particular rules of the ballroom, Austen uses these rules to make a social statement in *Persuasion*, thereby emphasizing the parallels between the behaviors of the ballroom and of society in general as well as betraying her own familiarity with these rules of conduct. The social codes Austen examines and comments on in *Persuasion* directly parallel the rules of the ballroom; thus, Austen reveals her ability to employ her particular domestic knowledge for the purpose of expanding the scope of her novel beyond the concerns of the Elliot family and making a statement concerning social hierarchy and mobility.

Austen reaffirms the value of the individual within the established social order by showing Anne's preference for the navy and by giving Anne the opportunity to choose her own social circle based on this preference. Again, Austen advocates a social structure that moves beyond established rules of both society and the ballroom. In dancing, as Henry Tilney reminds Catherine Morland, women are not afforded the luxury of choice, but have only the power to refuse or accept the man who invites them to dance. However, Austen allows Anne to choose her destiny based on her own preferences. Anne is instantly attracted to the naval society she encounters in Lyme. Upon

meeting the Harvilles, she is struck by the “bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality so uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display” (98). The appeal of this set is then further emphasized: “‘These would have been all my friends,’ was her thought; and she had to struggle against a great tendency to lowness” (98). Though the navy is still a social circle, it is a less rigid circle, which has been created by its members; the naval men and their families have a newly established and evolving place in society, unlike the landed gentry who remain confined by old codes. For example, Claudia Johnson explains one feature of the new circle inscribed by the naval society, saying of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, “far from presiding over a neighborhood, they live most contentedly at sea, unconcerned with the production of heirs or the reproduction of ideologically correct values” (147). Johnson continues, “Mrs. Croft’s example as a wife suggests that life on the high seas, for all its dangers, is to be preferred to the ‘safety’ of helpless immobility she experienced when she lived conventionally, as most wives such as Mrs. Musgrove do” (160). Though Johnson does not specifically invoke dance in her discussion of female immobility, because the country-dance was one of the few instances where female mobility was encouraged and admired, it is natural that Austen should have employed this motif in structuring *Persuasion*. Austen rewrites the Baronetage, which emphasizes the connection between masculinity and place, with her favorable depiction of feminine desire and individual mobility in *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot takes advantage of this dance-inspired mobility and removes herself from the circle of the landed gentry, which allows her to avoid “the culturally induced idiocy and impotence that domestic confinement and female socialization seem to breed” and enter a world in which she is valued as an individual (Gilbert and Gubar 183).

Critical views of Austen’s social consciousness vary, and though I argue that Austen illustrates the importance of individual mobility in *Persuasion* and advocates a society more accepting of this freedom, Austen’s version of social reconstruction is also read as more comprehensive. David M. Monaghan believes that Austen recognizes the changing social landscape and depicts “the decline of the gentry” in *Persuasion*. Austen’s gentry, suggests Monaghan, has reached a point at which it has become an empty shell of extravagance, suggested by the situation of Sir Walter, who would never allow his external appearance to betray his financial straits. Likewise, the surface show of manners among the landed gentry is not necessarily indicative of an individual’s true moral character. Thus, Austen shows the breakdown of this

social group, and *Persuasion* is “a testament to Jane Austen’s attempts to deal with the painful truth that that closely-knit community built upon the framework of a universally comprehended system of manners which she has praised throughout her literary career is falling apart” (Monaghan 87).

Issues of mobility in *Persuasion* are foregrounded by the dance motif, and Austen in turn synthesizes these into the larger social implications of the novel concerning class mobility and social structure. However, though the nature of her social commentary is a subject of critical discussion, the necessity of such analyses has been debated as well. Sarah Morrison questions the tendency of critics like Groves and Monaghan to emphasize the social implications of Austen’s texts: “the regrettable tendency in much Austen criticism to stress the role of individual characters as representatives of a particular class or social orientation is born of the desire to make Austen’s subject matter more significant and comprehensive” (338). Although Morrison effectively defends Austen’s domestic interests, the construction of *Persuasion* in a way that presents the landed gentry and the navy as, essentially, opposing social units, suggests that, in this novel, Austen was consciously painting a particular social portrait, though she may not have intended social commentary to be the focus of the text. Indeed, examining how Austen structured the social commentary of the novel in a way that mirrors the microcosm of the ballroom combines the views of Austen as social critic and Austen as domestic writer and presents her interests as complementary, not competitive. The treatment of dance in *Persuasion* also shows how Austen was expanding her artistic techniques. Whereas her earlier novels use self-contained ballroom scenes to represent some of the greater tensions in the novel, in *Persuasion* Austen allows dance to inform the entire novel and to highlight the social commentary in the text—she uses the rhythms of the familiar sphere to construct a larger social commentary.¹²

When considered in terms of social mobility, the tensions between an individual and her/his set, and the dance motif that pervades the text, the “reconciliation scene” between Anne and Wentworth takes on additional significance:

“Are you going as high as Belmont? Are you going near Camden-place? Because if you are, I shall have no scruple in asking you to *take my place*, and *give Anne your arm* to her father’s door. She is rather done for this morning, and must not go so far without help.” . . . There could not be an objection. There could be only a most proper alacrity, a most obliging compliance *for public view*;

and smiles reined in and spirits *dancing* in private rapture. In half a minute, Charles was *at the bottom* of Union-street again, and the other two *proceeding together*. (240, emphases mine)

The italicized phrases highlight the dance imagery. At this moment, in the appropriately named “Union-Street,” Wentworth is finally able to take the place beside Anne that he has been pursuing throughout the novel, and the consensual physical contact in this scene foreshadows their impending sexual union. The publicity of the walk is also significant because it corresponds to the publicity of dancing together at a ball—Anne and Wentworth are wordlessly announcing their engagement. In addition, Charles moves to “the bottom” of the street, just as he would move to the bottom of the dance set after changing partners, and Anne and Wentworth continue on together. Social mobility is implicated as well, as the scene literally shows Anne passing from Charles Musgrove, who is part of the landed gentry’s circle, to Wentworth, who represents the new circle she will enter. The facility with which Anne moves from Charles to Wentworth and Austen’s decision to set this scene on a crowded street amidst a variety of people not only reinforces the importance of increasing social mobility to *Persuasion*, but also allows Austen to present a final commentary on the importance of individual desires over set-based social structures as Anne and Wentworth “slowly paced the gradual ascent, heedless of every group around them” (240).

The rhythms of the country-dance, familiar to Austen, her characters, and her contemporary readers, are subtly woven through *Persuasion*. In this novel, Austen appears to be more concerned with the elements of the dances themselves—i.e., the movement of physical bodies, individual mobility, and the nature of closed and structured sets—than with the social situation of the ballroom. Anne and Wentworth’s relationship develops quietly amidst the chaos of others’ lives—it is not a centralized spectacle—and hence publicizing their courtship in a ballroom scene would be inappropriate. Instead, the dance motif underlies and illuminates the novel’s social commentary, gracefully moving the characters through social situations while testing the limits of their mobility. Removing her trademark ballroom scenes, Austen concentrates on the nature of the dance itself and lets its character inform her novel, which moves like the kaleidoscopic patterns of a country-dance.

NOTES

1. The lack of dance and ballroom scenes in *Persuasion* is just one of the features that cause *Persuasion* to be identified as different from Austen's other novels. See Mary Bonwick, "Sisterhood and Sibling Rivalry in *Persuasion*"; Charles J. Rzepka, "Making it in a Brave New World: Marriage, Profession, and Anti-Romantic ekstasis in Austen's *Persuasion*"; and Joshua J. Masters, "The Reversal of Gender Roles in *Persuasion*."
 2. The name "country-dance" does not have rustic associations, but is a translation of the French "Contredanse," so named because men and women lined up across from one another (Wood 92; "Country Dance" 255).
 3. The square form evolved in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when the French adapted English country-dances to suit their dancing spaces, which were generally smaller and more square than the long English rooms (Wood 93).
 4. Longways dances were progressive dances for "as many as will" in which men and women stood opposite one another in two lines and couples danced up and down the line.
 5. The cotillion and quadrille were very similar; consequently, though the quadrille was "officially" introduced to London society in 1815, the terms "quadrille" and "cotillion" were used interchangeably for some time: "as late as 1840 the quadrille was still erroneously referred to as the *cotillion*, even though the older *cotillion*-form had passed out of fashion" ("Cotillon" 253). For the purposes of this paper, I will use "cotillion" to refer to the square dances on which the discussion is focused and "quadrille" to denote the nineteenth-century square dance that descended from the cotillion. "Country-dance" will be used in its most general definition to refer to all kinds of Regency social dance, and "longways dance" will signify line dances.
 6. For a critical analysis of the relationship between *Persuasion* and the nineteenth-century novel, see Joanne Wilkes, "'Song of the Dying Swan?': The Nineteenth-Century Response to *Persuasion*."
 7. Although many couples could "stand up" for a cotillion, only four danced at a time.
 8. This passage is quoted in full on pages 72–73.
 9. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler undertakes an extensive discussion of the relationship between bodies and language. One aspect of this relationship, she argues, is a form of displacement: "Insofar as language might be understood to emerge from the materiality of bodily life, that is, as the reiteration and extension of a material set of relations, language is a substitute satisfaction, a primary act of displacement and condensation" (69).
 10. I use the terms "set" and "circle" interchangeably, as Austen does, to denote a group of individuals characterized by a particular feature. In *Persuasion*, the primary basis for distinguishing between the sets is social standing—most of the characters are members of either the navy or the landed gentry.
 11. For a more extensive discussion see Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England*.
 12. For example, Marianne and Willoughby's refusal to dance with anyone else in *Sense and Sensibility* is a negative comment on the exclusiveness and intensity of their quickly formed relationship. Likewise, Elizabeth and Darcy's tenuous navigation of emotional and physical spaces while dancing together establishes the pattern that their relationship will follow.
- I am extremely grateful to Maria Frawley for her support and valuable feedback on this essay.

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