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Measuring Worth: Money, Debt, and Moral Judgment in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract: This article examines how Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) uses money as a measure of character. Through close readings of selected passages, it argues that the novel treats financial conduct as moral evidence. Sir Walter Elliot's debts expose a vanity that privileges the appearance of rank over the duty of managing an estate. The naval characters, whose positions derive from their profession rather than inheritance, provide a contrasting model; their tenancy of Kellynch Hall reverses the expected order of rank. Mrs Smith's story extends the inquiry from prudence to honesty, suggesting that polished manners and social standing can conceal a failure of responsibility toward others. The article situates these readings within recent scholarship on money and social credibility in *Persuasion* and concludes that, for Austen, the handling of money, one's own and other people's, is a better test of worth than inherited title, although the novel does not overturn the social order it examines.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Persuasion, money, debt, rank, merit, Navy*

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Introduction

Although Jane Austen's novels are often remembered as stories about marriage, they also demonstrate her close attention to the cost of things. *Persuasion* (1817), her last completed novel, opens with a vain baronet whose debts soon shape the course of the narrative. The narrator identifies the source of the problem directly: "Vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation" (Ch. 1). Unable to live within his income, Sir Walter faces a choice that drives the opening chapters: whether his family will economize or let the estate and leave. Money is not merely background to the romance; it provides the novel's first test of character.

This article argues that Austen uses money as a measure of character in *Persuasion*. Sir Walter's debts expose his vanity because he values the appearance of rank over the responsibility of managing it. By contrast, naval officers such as Captain Wentworth, who return from the Napoleonic wars with fortunes of their own, demonstrate a worth based on effort rather than inheritance. Characters' handling of other people's money, as in Mr Elliot's treatment of Mrs Smith, also reveals their honesty or lack thereof. Financial conduct consequently becomes a form of moral conduct. Pinontoan, Oroh, and Kamagi describe Sir Walter's financial ruin as the consequence of his self-indulgence (Pinontoan et al. [PAGE]).

Austen's interest in economic life has received critical attention. Robert D. Hume, for instance, argues that Austen was acutely conscious of money and that the incomes she assigns her principal characters place them among a very small elite, although he notes that critics have seldom asked what those sums were actually worth (Hume 289). More recent work on *Persuasion* treats money as more than material wealth. Abodohoui argues that financial standing in the novel marks discipline, responsibility, and social credibility, and interprets Wentworth's rise as evidence that merit is becoming a basis for social legitimacy (Abodohoui 1308). Om, in turn, reads Wentworth's naval success in relation to the economy of Atlantic slavery (Om). This article builds on that view while shifting the emphasis. Rather than asking how money and social pressure interact, it examines how the novel uses debt and the handling of other people's money as tests of character and how these threads form a single moral argument.

Written at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, *Persuasion* reflects the influence of the Navy's role in that conflict on the novel's economics. Britain's wars with France spanned Austen's adult life, from 1793 to 1815, and offered naval officers opportunities to acquire money as well as rank (Kindred and Kindred). Enemy ships and goods captured in wartime could be condemned as lawful prize in a Vice Admiralty court and sold for the benefit of the capturing ship's company, with shares divided according to rank (Kindred and Kindred). A successful captain could therefore rise from modest means to substantial wealth, as Captain Wentworth, who begins with no fortune (Ch. 4), does when he returns as a man of means. Austen knew this world through her brothers Francis and Charles, both naval officers, and Kindred and Kindred argue that Wentworth's daring success and swift promotion reflect Francis's prize-taking and rapid advancement (Kindred and Kindred).

The article first outlines the historical context of the wartime economy and the Navy's prize money. It then presents three close readings: Sir Walter's debts, the contrast between inherited rank and earned fortune, and the question of trust in Mrs Smith's story. Finally, it considers what these readings reveal about Austen's view of rank and merit.

Debt as Vanity

Persuasion begins with a portrait of a man preoccupied with his own image. The narrator states Sir Walter Elliot's

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priorities plainly: he "considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy," and the Sir Walter Elliot who combined the two was "the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion" (Ch. 1). His principal concerns are rank and appearance, to which he subordinates the rest of his life. His finances are no exception. His expenses have exceeded his income, and the novel presents the resulting debt as a failure of character rather than bad luck. By valuing the appearance of grandeur over the duty of managing an estate, he spends to maintain that appearance while neglecting his responsibility.

The advice Sir Walter receives exposes the extent of this failure. Lady Russell, planning with Anne how the family might economize, insists, "We must be serious and decided; for after all, the person who has contracted debts must pay them; and though a great deal is due to the feelings of the gentleman, and the head of a house, like your father, there is still more due to the character of an honest man" (Ch. 2). Her statement places the gentleman's feelings against the honest man's character and gives priority to the latter. Debt is therefore a moral obligation as well as a financial problem. Sir Walter cannot bear the loss of status that retrenchment would signal, rather than poverty itself, and prefers to leave his home instead of reducing his display. Letting Kellynch Hall and removing to Bath offers an acceptable solution because it preserves his self-image.

This episode establishes the standard by which the novel assesses other characters. Although Sir Walter holds the title and the property, he cannot afford to maintain them. The narrator's tone reinforces this judgment. By comparing his delight in his position to that of "the valet of any new made lord" (Ch. 1), the narrator gently mocks him and invites readers to regard his pride as faintly absurd before its financial cost becomes apparent. Rank without prudence is hollow, and the novel locates moral worth elsewhere. This judgment prepares the contrast with the naval officers in the next section, whose wealth is earned and managed rather than inherited and squandered.

Earned Wealth and Inherited Rank

Where Sir Walter demonstrates what money reveals about a man who inherits everything and manages nothing, the naval characters present the opposite case. When Kellynch Hall must be let, Admiral Croft, whose position derives from his career rather than his birth, becomes its tenant. The family's lawyer, Mr Shepherd, recommends him to Sir Walter, explaining that "in the way of business, gentlemen of the navy are well to deal with. I have had a little knowledge of their methods of doing business; and I am free to confess that they have very liberal notions, and are as likely to make desirable tenants as any set of people one should meet with" (Ch. 3). His recommendation rests on practical and financial considerations: naval men pay well and deal fairly. Sir Walter's resistance to the Navy, by contrast, rests on rank rather than conduct and appears unconvincing beside the lawyer's testimony.

Captain Wentworth reinforces this contrast. As the narrator records, "Captain Wentworth had no fortune. He had been lucky in his profession; but spending freely, what had come freely, had realized nothing" (Ch. 4). He begins with no inheritance and no standing acceptable to Anne's family, and the novel acknowledges that his early money came easily and was spent just as easily. Instead, he possesses confidence that his profession will provide: he "knew that he should soon have a ship," and that she would take him to "everything he wanted" (Ch. 4). His later fortune derives from his service rather than his family. Abodohoui interprets this rise as evidence that merit is becoming a basis for social legitimacy (Abodohoui 1303), a reading supported by the money plot. Austen does not present Wentworth's wealth as unaffected by luck; nevertheless, it is earned through a profession, whereas Sir Walter's debts result from his failure to manage what he inherited.

Pinontoan, Oroh, and Kamagi similarly interpret Anne and Wentworth's early separation as a consequence of class and finance, contrasting Wentworth's unstable means with Anne's higher standing (Pinontoan et al. 668). Om complicates this interpretation. Reading the novel against the Navy's history after the 1807 Slave Trade Act, Om argues that Wentworth can be understood as implicated in the economic networks of the Atlantic slave trade, linking his naval success to the broader ethical framework of the imperial economy (Om [PAGE]). If accepted, this reading makes Wentworth's fortune more than a straightforward reward for individual merit and renders his contrast with Sir Walter less clear-cut. The present argument can accommodate this point. The novel continues to test conduct against inheritance, while also asking readers to consider the sources of money as well as its management.

The result is a quiet reversal. The baronet, despite his title, cannot afford to remain in his own house, whereas the officers he looks down on can take it. Austen need not state the lesson explicitly. The plot's arrangement, in which the Crofts become the tenants of Kellynch, makes the argument.

This reversal has limits that the argument must acknowledge. Austen does not reject rank outright. Anne herself belongs to the gentry, and the novel concludes with her marriage into a circle of naval friends rather than a break from her own class. Although the novel tests rank against conduct and gives greater weight to conduct, it does not abolish the social order it examines.**Money and Trust**

The first two sections examine what money reveals about a person's own character. This section considers what the handling of other people's money reveals. Anne's friend Mrs Smith, a widow in poor health, lives in poverty in Westgate Buildings, and Sir Walter responds contemptuously to Anne's visits: "A widow Mrs Smith lodging in Westgate Buildings! A poor widow barely able to live, between thirty and forty; a mere Mrs Smith, an every-day Mrs Smith, of all people and all names in the world" (Ch. 17). His objection concerns her name and address rather than her character. The passage demonstrates the extent to which he judges worth by rank and appearance, while highlighting Anne's loyalty to a friend who has nothing to give her.

Mrs Smith's poverty has a financial cause, and the question of responsibility for it becomes a test of character. In Chapter 21 the narrator reports that she "had good reason to believe that some property of her husband in the West Indies, which had been for many years under a sort of sequestration for the payment of its own incumbrances, might be recoverable by proper measures; and this property, though not large, would be enough to make her comparatively rich. But there was nobody to stir in it" (Ch. 21). The passage identifies the absence of anyone willing to act on her behalf. Mr Elliot, who knew her husband's affairs, could have acted, and the novel counts his failure against him. Abodohoui argues that financial standing signals responsibility and moral integrity (Abodohoui 1303), whereas Mr Elliot's conduct illustrates

their absence. While Sir Walter's vanity damages mainly himself, Mr Elliot's indifference leaves another person poor. The novel's financial inquiry moves from prudence to honesty: solvency alone is insufficient without fairness.

This episode connects with the preceding sections. Mr Elliot possesses the polished manners and standing that Sir Walter admires, yet he fails the test passed by the naval characters. The pattern remains consistent across the novel. Those most attentive to appearance, Sir Walter and Mr Elliot, are the least reliable with money, whereas those valued least by that standard, the Navy officers and the widow in Westgate Buildings, are the people the novel asks readers to trust. Good manners and high rank can conceal a lack of integrity, which becomes visible through financial conduct.

Conclusion

A close reading of *Persuasion* reveals a novel concerned with what people do with what they possess. Sir Walter Elliot inherits a title and an estate but cannot afford to keep either because vanity outweighs his sense of duty. The naval characters, whose positions derive from their profession rather than inherited standing, occupy a contrasting position, and the Crofts take over the house the baronet must leave. Mrs Smith's story extends the inquiry from prudence to honesty, suggesting that a person's treatment of another's interests can expose a character concealed by good manners. Across these three episodes, financial conduct serves as moral evidence.

This argument does not imply that Austen rejects rank outright. Anne remains a member of the gentry, and the novel's resolution leaves the social order intact. Instead, the novel tests rank against conduct and allows readers to judge their relative worth. The baronet who inherits everything cannot manage it, the officers who made their way in the Navy can, and the polished Mr Elliot proves wanting beside the people he overlooks. Even here, the novel is not uncritical, since the source of naval wealth is itself open to ethical question (Om). This supports Abodohoui's view that financial standing in the novel signals more than wealth: it marks responsibility and credibility (Abodohoui 1304). For Austen, then, a person's handling of money, their own and other people's, is a better measure of worth than the title they hold.

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