When a Slave Island Does Not Mean Slavery: An Audit of Mrs. Smith's Encumbered Funds

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No doubt buoyed by slavery subthemes in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, supportive commentators seek to put Jane Austen on the right side of history by asserting that the author continues to flex her abolitionist muscles in *Persuasion*, her final novel. Its several references to Mrs. Smith's West Indies investments are supposed to demonstrate Austen's subtle attacks on the heinous practice. These references, however, do no such thing. Instead, they instruct readers on something entirely different: the difficulties of constructing realistic fiction and the care that a serious writer such as Austen will exert to establish, in the smallest of ways, the convincing realism of a work of art. To wit: Mrs. Smith's investments are in the West Indies because they have to be. Her predicament falls apart if they are located any other place.

Slavery was a major controversy during Austen's life. The anti-slavery movement gathered momentum as she grew up, and abolitionists succeeded in ending the slave trade (the capture and sale of Africans) in March 1807, just a few months after her thirty-first birthday. Slavery itself carried on for another two decades after her death. Slave-related issues surface in Austen's last three novels. By far, the most important appear in *Mansfield Park*, involving the Bertram family, whose wealth rides upon slave labor at an Antigua sugar plantation. When the heroine, Fanny Price, asks her uncle, the family patriarch, about the slave trade, she is met with "'dead silence!'" (198). Paula Byrne, Brian Southam, and Claire Tomalin lead a stable of commentators who

say that the inability of Sir Thomas to answer Fanny thereby demonstrates Austen's abolitionist views. (A very small set of critics, led by Edward Said, disagrees.)

Emma features an important contretemps between Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax, when the vicar's wife tries to bully the penniless Miss Fairfax into accepting a distant governess position. Jane responds in anger and panic that being a governess is a form of intellectual slavery. Mrs. Elton, who hails from a Bristol family with possible connections to the slave trade, reacts with oversensitive hypocrisy that, if Jane means a "'fling at the slave-trade,'" her family is "'rather a friend to the abolition'" (300). In *Persuasion*, Mrs. Smith owns property in the West Indies, which ties her also to slavery. Most reviewers treat her situation as a passing reinforcement of Austen's sympathies set out in the two previous novels—that the mere mention of the topic in the 1810s would be an indictment. Gabrielle White and Sheila Johnson Kindred, though, see more deliberate anti-slavery commentary in the work.

Life for the widow in *Persuasion* is distressing, to say the least. The antithesis of Emma's handsome, clever, and rich, Mrs. Smith is sick, crippled, and poor. She barely survives in a tiny "'sick chamber'" (156) in Bath. Anne Elliot still feels warm gratitude toward Mrs. Smith, who had befriended her when she had gone "unhappy to school" on "the loss of a mother whom she had dearly loved" (152). Mrs. Smith has now been left penniless by the "general and joint extravagance" of her previous married life and the poor investments brought about by the "easy temper, careless habits, and not strong understanding" of her late husband (209).

Mrs. Smith's one hope for financial salvation is the recovery of "some property of her husband in the West Indies," which has encumbrances that, if paid, would leave her "comparatively rich" (210). Being in the West Indies, the property probably involves sugar plantations, rum, cotton, rice, or related trade—all based on slavery. The nature of the encumbrances is not described. Possibly, another person has made claims on the property that prevent a sale. Or the assets might be burdened with debt requiring a sale of some part or refinancing to free up her interest. Her "particular irritation" is that "there was nobody to stir in it." Mr. William Elliot, Anne's would-be beau, is the executor of her estate. Between his inaction and her "bodily weakness" and "want of money," Mrs. Smith is thwarted (210).

In *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition*, White says that "this link to the West Indies is a striking feature of the novel; there appears to be an authorial intention to keep issues that could be associated with abolition before the

reader's eye." Austen's placement of the property in the West Indies, she argues, would likely "involve a contemporary reader in abolition-specific thinking" (78–79). Kindred, in *Jane Austen's Transatlantic Sister*, quotes White while adding that Austen, a known abolitionist by the 1810s, "obliquely" raises the issue in *Persuasion*. It is likely, as Kindred posits, that Austen and her sister-in-law Fanny, the subject of Kindred's book, discussed slavery during Fanny's three years in England. Fanny, who died young in childbirth, was the only close family member who had been part of a slaveholding household. Kindred's book is a smart, meticulously researched, and well-written history of the short life of this intelligent, charming naval wife. But on slavery, Kindred may be too sympathetic toward the lovely Fanny and her family. Kindred claims that Austen "appears to be drawing a distinction" between the "more humane" conditions in Bermuda, where Fanny grew up with household slaves, and "the far more brutal and despicable West Indies." Even Captain Wentworth's effort to recover Mrs. Smith's money, Kindred says, "is besmirched by the implicit moral questions about its administration" in the West Indies (202–03).

Yet there is nothing in the text to suggest that Austen makes any slavery comparisons between Bermuda and the West Indies. The only reference to both is when Mrs. Croft, the admiral's wife, says that the happiest part of her life was when she traveled on board a ship with her husband. She mentions her four trips across the Atlantic, a voyage to India, and a posting at Bermuda. "'We do not call Bermuda . . . the West Indies,'" she explains to Mrs. Musgrove. This is not, however, a nod to slavery, but a geography lesson, for Bermuda lies in the Atlantic 1,200 miles north of the West Indies. The explanation befuddles Mrs. Musgrove, who has no idea where either one is located (70).

In support of her contention, Kindred leans heavily on Frank Austen, Jane's brother and a naval officer like Fanny's husband, Charles. In an 1808 letter that Kindred cites, Frank, an evangelical and ardent abolitionist, attacks "the harshness and despotism so justly attributed to the land-holders or their managers in the West India Islands." In the same letter, though, he also compares it to another "mild" form of slavery on the island of St. Helena off Africa. On St. Helena, the master could not "inflict chastisement at his own discretion" upon a "refractory" slave. He could only appeal to civil authorities for help. "This is wholesome regulation as far as it goes," Frank says, but "slavery no matter how it be modified is still slavery, and it is much to be regretted that any trace of it should be found to exist in countries dependent on England, or colonized by her subjects." Jealous of its own liberty, Frank says,

England "should pay equal attention to the inalienable rights of all nations, of what colour so ever they may be" (Hubback 192; Doody 418 n44).[1] Kindred is undoubtedly correct that Jane was influenced by her older brother, but he would not have drawn distinctions between the relatively easy life of house slaves and the harsher life of field slaves. In Frank's view, there is no "humane" vs. "inhumane" slavery. There is only slavery.

Nor does *Persuasion*'s storyline support the position that Austen's social commentary involves slavery. The underlying theme for Mrs. Smith is Austen's common one of the economic dependence of a woman in a man's world. She is Austen's ubiquitous single woman with a dreadful propensity to be poor. Her dire circumstance is used to demonstrate the difference in character between Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth. The self-indulgent Mr. Elliot "would not act" to help recover her funds (209), while Wentworth, once he becomes Anne's mate, does.

Indeed, Elliot's involvement very likely ran deeper than just encouraging the Smiths' profligate lifestyle, as shown by Mrs. Smith's invective:

> "Mr. Elliot is a man without heart or conscience; a designing, wary, cold-blooded being, who thinks only of himself; who, for his own interest or ease, would be guilty of any cruelty, or any treachery, that could be perpetrated without risk of his general character. He has no feeling for others. Those whom he has been the chief cause of leading into ruin, he can neglect and desert without the smallest compunction. He is totally beyond the reach of any sentiment of justice or compassion. Oh! he is black at heart, hollow and black!" (199)

This man—"cold-blooded," "guilty of any cruelty, or any treachery," "black at heart, hollow and black!"—sounds very much like the individual who led them into the disastrous investments to begin with. That these ventures involve slavery is at best a glancing blow at his character. The bigger indictment is that he was "the chief cause of leading [them] into ruin" and now, just as nonchalantly, "can neglect and desert [her] without the smallest compunction."

This neglect takes us from general critical commentary to the particular problems of novel writing. An author of realistic fiction must create a plausible situation to motivate a character to act or to otherwise drive the plot forward. Austen requires a significant obstacle to Mrs. Smith's economic well-being. If the financial difficulties were centered in London—or in Birmingham, where entrepreneurial money was flowing into technology, or even perhaps in bustling Southampton—Mr. Elliot would possibly have roused himself to help.

He is already having to respond to her "urgent applications" (209). It might have been easier to deal with Mrs. Smith's property than to continue writing her letters of "cold civility" to say he won't take "fruitless trouble" about the matter (209). Or, she might have pursued the matter herself. Though Austen says that Mrs. Smith had "no natural connexions to assist her even with their counsel, and she could not afford to purchase the assistance of the law" (210), this needed advice or legal help had to do with the recovery of funds from far-off Jamaica or Antigua. The effort might well have been feasible if the money were close by in England. As a comparison, Eliza de Feuillide, the Austens' cousin, took control of her personal finances in England—the trust left by Warren Hastings, her godfather (and rumored natural father). She had to do nothing more than issue demand letters to the trustees, one of whom was Jane's father. At this same time, Jane's brother Henry Austen handled financial matters in London for rural banks, military officers, minor aristocrats, and others. Henry was typical of the many financial men who would have been eager to help for a modest cut of the take.

From a plot standpoint, the property had to be so far away and the finances so complicated that a woman alone would not be able to deal with them directly—difficulties created by distance, time, local law and custom, etc. Mrs. Smith's holdings had to be outside England, and there were only two real possibilities: India and the West Indies.

India was too remote. It took at least nine months each way for travel and communication, effectively putting it out of reach. This fact is something Henry and the entire Austen family were learning painfully as *Persuasion* was being written. Lord Moira, who had assisted in the careers of both Frank and Charles Austen, defaulted on a £6,000 loan from Henry's bank, substantially contributing to his bankruptcy in early 1816. Moira, a spendthrift but influential companion to the Prince Regent—and whose entire debt was estimated to be between £150,000 and £1,000,000—used his appointment as Governor-General of India to abscond from his creditors. If Mrs. Smith's money were tied up in India, it would be as irretrievable as Henry's. Jane's brother never recovered Moira's funds, despite winning a court judgment and, decades later, pursuing the matter with Moira's son.

If there is any personal view being silently expressed in the Smiths' monetary situation, it does not involve Austen and slavery but her own unfolding family financial crisis. The bad investments, Mrs. Smith's inability to retrieve anything from them, and the involvement of at least one uncaring associate all carry a direct psychological parallel to Henry's bank failure, in which he lost

unsecured loans to Moira and other worthies. Henry's conduit was a Major Charles James, Moira's financial agent and Henry's dubious banking partner. Jane Austen's anger at other men "black at heart, hollow and black!" (199) may have bled through into Mrs. Smith's outburst, one of Austen's all-time great diatribes.[2]

Though a man of understanding, Henry, like Mr. Smith, was also a man of "easy temper" and "careless habits." His trust in others, and his belief in himself, not only destroyed three banks in which he was involved but also cost the Austen circle many tens of thousands of pounds—brothers, sisters, uncles, friends, associates. E. J. Clery's *Jane Austen: The Banker's Sister* provides absorbing details about Henry's financial debacle and its devastating impact on all around him. Clery alludes to some kind of "financial skullduggery" in *Persuasion* (288). She does not describe what she means, but the placement of this comment in a passage about Moira implies that she too sees a connection between Elliot's treatment of the Smiths and the callous James–Moira disregard of the debt to the Austens.

Jane Austen's only other choice for Mrs. Smith's money was for it to be invested in West Indies businesses—far enough away that no woman of ordinary circumstance would be able to deal with distant male agents, or to travel there alone; complex enough to daunt anyone but the most resolute; yet also close enough (four to six weeks to cross busy trade routes) that at least some funds might be accessible through dogged negotiation.

In the end, it is the redoubtable Captain Wentworth who comes to the rescue, recovering her husband's property in the West Indies "by writing for her, acting for her, and seeing her through all the petty difficulties of the case, with the activity and exertion of a fearless man and a determined friend" (251–52). Wentworth demonstrates his character by pursuing the matter as only a man—and especially a naval officer—would have been able to do. The latter is a critical, overlooked item. As Kindred recounts, Charles Austen, Jane's youngest brother, was a captain in Bermuda and Nova Scotia during much of the Napoleonic Wars. His naval friends circulated throughout the British holdings in North America. In marrying Fanny Palmer, he became the brother-in-law of the Bermuda attorney general. His previous commander, now Admiral Sir John Warren, returned from England to command the North American Station during the time of the events in *Persuasion.* Having served in the West Indies, the fictional Wentworth would very likely have had similarly well-placed friends in the region to call upon for help. Routinely socializing with the movers and shakers in every port town, naval officers were men

to be reckoned with. Imagine how easy it would be for a merchant not to act on a request from distant England to straighten out tangled finances that might require a monetary outgo at the end. Now imagine how the merchant would respond if the captain of a mighty warship were to drop in and politely announce that, since he would be escorting the merchant's goods safely home, he felt honor-bound to also pick up the payment due a struggling widow back in Bath!

Critics have long pointed out that Austen, battling to finish this novel as her health collapsed, left some characters and situations less than fully developed. But she is as careful and precise with this one detail, likely worked out very early, as she is with her well-documented handling of the streets and locales of Bath. One could imagine Austen placing Mrs. Smith's difficulties in London and having her sharp-eyed sister or banker brother point out the speed with which Mrs. Smith would unravel that knot. Or, after five mature novels and regular discourse among family involved with finance and flotillas, she might have recognized instinctively the need to set Mrs. Smith's difficulties at a three-thousand-mile remove.

By the time of her later novels, and likely earlier, Austen was an abolitionist, but her handling of this situation does not involve subtle signals about slavery. Her authorial need was for a complicated financial entanglement. Only the West Indies would serve. The siting of the investment there serves two strategic goals, neither related to slavery: to reiterate her recurrent theme of female dependency; and to delineate the characters of Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth, the bad and good contestants for Anne Elliot's heart. Long before a critic arrives to tease out greater meanings from the patterns in fiction's warp and weft, the author must use the material at hand to solve immediate, practical problems. Here, Austen ties up the threads in the only manner that would complete this subplot in a practical, believable way.

NOTES

1. Hubback and Hubback quote only the first part of the selection from the letter; Doody adds the reference to the rights of nations of "colour."

2. E. J. Clery paints Major Charles James as something of a scoundrel; Stuart Bennett shows him doing the best he could to juggle Moira's convoluted financial messes. No doubt the Austen family felt indebted to Moira for his earlier help with the promotions of the sailor brothers. Frank, who became a partner in Henry's bank for several years, approved one loan for Moira on his own signature. Bennett paints Moira as a kind-hearted man and brave military officer but also one so casual about money and the harm to his creditors that he could not stop himself from running up these enormous debts.

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