

# “She gloried in being a sailor’s wife”: A Postcolonial Reading of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*

Carolin Wachsmann

## Abstract

The British Empire and imperialism are crucial parts of Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion*. To investigate how the novel represents and purports imperialism, this paper combines a structuralist with a postcolonial approach and applies Said’s method of ‘contrapuntal reading.’ In addition, the approach of cultural materialism is relevant for the novel’s representation of class. My argumentation first consists of an analysis of the character constellation, in particular the opposition of gentry and naval characters, and narrative situation before turning to the novel’s marriage plot. I argue that Austen’s realist novel *Persuasion* legitimizes British imperialism due to its use of narrative techniques, plot, and character constellation. The narrative does not question the represented empire which functions as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility for the characters. The marriage plot, in which the female protagonist chooses a naval captain over her cousin from the landed gentry, further corroborates the novel’s support of the British Empire and demonstrates the increasing importance of the navy as well as the professional classes for England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

## Keywords

Postcolonial criticism – Jane Austen – marriage plot – contrapuntal reading – class

## Introduction

“It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (243), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in her influential essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Although Spivak’s analysis focuses on the novels *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her statement is also relevant for the novels Jane Austen wrote around the turn of the nineteenth century. Ever since Edward Said demonstrated the method of ‘contrapuntal reading’ in his critical reading of Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park*, postcolonial criticism has investigated the representation of Empire, imperialism,

and Orientalism in English and European literatures. Concerning Austen's novels, *Mansfield Park* has remained the most studied novel in terms of postcolonial criticism as critics have discussed the implications of Sir Thomas's plantation in the Caribbean which probably employed slave labor. However, Austen's other novels also represent England and English society at the beginning of the nineteenth century and discuss Englishness and Empire, in particular *Persuasion*, Austen's last novel. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan summarizes, recent criticism has located Austen's novels "in a geographically expansive world, the world that European travel, exploration, commerce, military adventure and imperialism brought into being and redefined in terms of colonial relations of domination, raced, classed and gendered," and demonstrated that they "constitute a colonial discourse, not only by partaking in this changed world, but by actively marking its transformations in these ways" (4).

The novel tells the love story of Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth, who had broken off their engagement eight years earlier because her family had deemed him beneath their rank. Returning from the Napoleonic Wars with wealth and a higher social rank, Wentworth is now an eligible suitor for Anne. However, Wentworth has not forgiven her for ending the relationship, and Anne does not reveal that she has been in love with him all this time. Over the following months, Wentworth pursues Louisa Musgrove instead, while Anne is courted by her cousin William Elliot. In the end, Wentworth and Anne realize that they both still love each other and decide to marry.

Set in 1814, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the nineteenth century form the historical context for *Persuasion* and the representation of the British Empire. Since the 1600s, the national character and pride of the British were based, in part, on the strength and military victories of the British Navy (Fulford 163). In the wars with France, this sentiment was strengthened and accompanied by a patriotism connected to military prowess and its symbols, such as the navy (Newman). The military struggle ended with Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. The naval characters and the references to the wars with France make imperialism and its implications for England a central concern of the novel and the object of investigation of this article.

Austen's novels in general and their marriage plots in particular have often been read and discussed by feminist critics. Their opinions on the marriage plot in her novels remain ambivalent, as for example Julie Shaffer argues that the marriage plot empowers women because it questions male power, whereas Christien Garcia argues that the marriages in *Emma* exacerbate loneliness. Regarding *Persuasion*, Anne's silence regarding her romantic feelings for Wentworth has been read as female repression before she disrupts patriarchal traditions as well as an expression of the incompatibility of female desire with speech (Garcia 87). Furthermore, Michael Kramp has argued that the novel investigates how expressions of suffering are gendered and that it represents a new masculinity and Englishness in the naval characters (35).

This paper combines a structuralist and postcolonial approach to investigate imperialism in Austen's *Persuasion*. As the novel's representation of class is relevant to this analysis, I will also draw on the approach of cultural materialism. My argumentation first consists of an analysis of the character constellation, in particular the opposition of gentry and naval characters, and narrative situation before turning to the novel's marriage plot. I argue that Austen's realist novel *Persuasion* legitimizes British imperialism due to its use of narrative techniques, plot, and character constellation. The narrative does not question the represented Empire which functions as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility for the characters. The marriage plot, in which the

female protagonist chooses a naval captain over her cousin from the landed gentry, further corroborates the novel's support of the British Empire.

## Postcolonial Criticism, Contrapuntal Reading, Class, and the Marriage Plot

Most postcolonial critics agree that the English novel and imperialism are closely linked. For Edward Said, the novel is imperialist because it is a “cultural artefact of bourgeois society” and thus interconnected with imperialism (88). As Firdous Azim argues in his study *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, “the novel is an imperial genre, not in theme merely, not only by virtue of the historical moment of its birth, but in its formal structure – in the construction of the narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together” (29). These ideas constitute some of the premises of postcolonial criticism. Based on this approach, critics re-read canonical English literature to examine past representations of colonial discourses, analyze the representation of colonized subjects in colonial texts, and read the new literatures from former colonies (McLeod 26-31). To investigate the representation of Empire, I employ Said's contrapuntal reading. This method seeks to re-read literature, especially canonical English literature, “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said 63), and to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent and marginally present or ideologically represented in such works” (82). Another relevant method is colonial discourse analysis which situates the text in history and exposes how “ideological and historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts, and how literary representations themselves have the power to influence their historical moment” (McLeod 46). Essential to this analysis are the concepts of imperialism and Empire. As Elleke Boehmer states, “imperialism was a thing of mind and representation, as well as a matter of military and political power and the extraction of profit” (23). She differentiates between imperialism and colonialism, the first being the “the authority assumed by a state over another territory” expressed, for example, in symbolism, military, or economy, the latter being involved in “the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force” (2).

Another key concept in this analysis is class, which I will approach through the lens of cultural materialism. Similar to postcolonial criticism, this approach intends to relate literature to history and considers texts as indivisible from their historical context (Ryan xi). Cultural materialists understand texts as “the vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formations” (Brannigan 3). Raymond Williams offers three definitions of class: it is either a “group (social or economic category),” a “rank (relative social position),” or a “formation (perceived economic relationship; social, political and cultural organization)” (34). The first and second definitions in particular are relevant here. Besides the stratification of society into upper, middle, and lower class, I will also employ the older differentiation between aristocracy, gentry, and professional classes.

This article employs a structuralist approach to analyze the plot, narrative situation, and character constellation. Structuralism is a text-oriented approach that defines the system of literature itself as *langue* and the generation of actual texts as *parole* which allows for analyzing an individual text as a realization of the deep structure of its genre (Meyer 171). Structuralist approaches focus on the techniques of representation and “the processes of constituting meaning”

over the meaning or contextual aspects of a literary text (Nünning 40). In combination with narratology, which focuses on narrative and textual structures over content (Barry 233), structuralism establishes a detailed system of narrative voice and focalization, time, and the function of characters and plots (Meyer 174).

I will read *Persuasion* as a realist novel with a marriage plot. Realism is based on the presumption that “the novel imitates reality, and that that reality is more or less stable and commonly accessible” and employs accuracy and detailed descriptions of “the physical minutiae of everyday life – clothes, furniture, food, etc. – the cataloguing of people into social types or species and radical analyses of the economic basis of society” (“Realism”). In postcolonial criticism, the perspective and integrity of the realist novel are questioned or even criticized. Azim identifies the novel’s formal structure, in which the narrative voice controls the narrative structure, as evidence for the novel being an imperial genre (29). He furthermore criticizes the realist dichotomy between subject and object of representation in which ‘reality’ is seen as objective and “as something external to the narrating subject” (20).

Lastly, there are various definitions of the marriage plot. Lisa O’Connell offers a more general definition of the marriage plot as a “literary genre centred on courtship and marriage in the context of everyday life” (3) or “any narrative that ends, or simply ends, in a marriage or marriages and that is largely concerned throughout with courtship” (5). As an alternative, she proposes the concept of the modern English marriage plot, popularized in the novels of Samuel Richardson, for example, which are realist novels with “narrative and interpretative closure, marked in an Anglican proper wedding ceremony that legitimises simultaneously social status, states of feeling, Christian virtue and moral worth” (5). This plot purported middle-class ideals as it focused on family status, demonstrated human progress in their happy endings, and “reinforced readers in both their hope of a personal reward for good social behaviour and their faith that public progress promised the stability and continuity of their way of life” (198). Patrick Parrinder also suggests a national aspect of the marriage plot as it offers a potential national allegory in which the joining of two families in marriage symbolizes the “reconciliation of national differences” (32). This article will build on Parrinder’s idea and read the marriage plot in an imperial context.

## “This peace will turn all our rich Naval Officers ashore”: Character Constellation and Narrative Situation

Class differences and the conflicts resulting out of these social distinctions are a recurring theme in Austen’s novels. Whereas most of Austen’s major characters are part of the landed gentry, the aristocracy, or the clergy, *Persuasion* introduces characters from another professional class: the navy. Unlike her previous novels, in which the country gentleman proved to be the most suitable partner in marriage to Austen’s upper-middle-class heroines (McMaster 114), Anne Elliot must decide between her cousin Mr. Elliot, the heir presumptive of the family estate Kellynch Hall, and Captain Frederick Wentworth, who acquired his fortune during the Napoleonic War. The plot navigates the differences between the English upper middle class, represented by the Elliots and the Musgroves, and the newly arrived naval characters. By contrasting the financially struggling and morally failing landed gentry with the characters employed by the navy, whose merits are their recently acquired riches and moral virtues, the novel supports the imperial ideal of the British Empire as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility.

The narrative situation in *Persuasion* is characterized by an authorial narrator and the frequent use of free indirect discourse. The narrator forms the narrative by deciding which aspects

to omit or which character's thoughts and feelings to narrate. This narrative technique can be read as a "discriminating subjectivity between readers and the romance story" (O'Connell 219). However, this article focuses on how the narrative situation purports the British Empire by representing the naval characters as heroes while omitting explicit references to imperialism as well as other subject-positions (Azim 29) outside the dominating colonial discourse. The narrator presents Anne as the focalizer and favors her ideas and attitudes over those of the other characters.

In the characterization of the Elliots as proud, prejudiced against lower-rank characters, and almost losing their estate due to mismanagement, *Persuasion* criticizes the landed gentry and their moral values, class rigidity, and aversion to change. Sir Thomas is introduced as "a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but for the Baronetage" (Austen 1) whose "vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and situation" (4). These descriptions combined with the fact that Sir Thomas is the first character that is introduced, indicates the narrator's intention to criticize the upper middle class by describing them in an ironical manner. His daughters Elizabeth and Mary are presented in the same way. Elizabeth decides not to invite the Musgroves to dinner at Kellynch Hall for fear that their social inferiors should discover that the Elliots cannot uphold the lifestyle deemed appropriate to the upper middle class (179). Mary, who in her marriage to Charles Musgrove had "*given* all the honour, and received none" (5) due to the higher rank of the Elliots, criticizes the choice of suitor for her sister-in-law as "bad connexions" (62) and proves herself to be as conscious of differences in class and rank as her father. Sir Walter's shortcomings which result in his exile from his estate can be read as a punishment for and critique of his behavior.

In contrast, Anne, albeit an Elliot herself, is described as having none of the Elliot pride or prejudice and instead represents a possibility for change of the landed gentry as she embraces connections with characters from various ranks and classes. Although she had to end her engagement with Frederick Wentworth as a young woman due to their difference in class, Anne entertains friendships with her social equals as well as her inferiors, such as the widowed Mrs. Smith. Sir Walter criticizes her preference of "a mere Mrs Smith [...] to her own family connexions among the nobility of England and Ireland" (129) and complains that "every thing that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations" (128) seems to interest her. In her own words, she admires Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove for their neglect of rank and status in the potential suitors (178) and values the company of "clever, well-informed people" (122) over people of a higher rank and status than herself, much to the chagrin of her cousin.

Nevertheless, Mr. Elliot, presented as corrupt and focused solely on his inheritance, continues the novel's criticism of the upper middle class. In his role as deceitful villain and antagonist to Captain Wentworth, the future owner of Kellynch Hall represents the decline of the landed gentry. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator informs the reader that Mr. Elliot had chosen money, in form of "a rich woman of inferior birth" (7) over a marriage with Elizabeth Elliot and thus a closer connection to his family, which lead to the end of the relations between the Elliots and their cousin. However, after his reunion with the family, the narrator emphasizes his manners, virtues and appearance which convince the Elliots of his good character (e.g., 114). His insistence on "rank and connexion" (120) and his later revealed schemes to prevent Sir Walter from marrying to maintain his inheritance, demonstrate the consequences of valuing appearances over morality and character. This is emphasized in the contrast between Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth, representing respectively the landed gentry and the navy.

The representation of the navy characters in *Persuasion* has been a continuous topic of debate. Kathryn E. Davis reads Captain Wentworth as a representation of a national hero (17),

Patrick Parrinder as a social ascendant symbolizing social change (193-4), and Tim Fulford argues that his “career exposes the narcissism of an overdomesticated landed class” (188), as Austen’s representation of the navy offers a new definition of what it means to be genteel. Similarly, others argue that this representation criticizes the traditional high regard for gentility (Morris 144) and that the naval characters are presented as the “image of changing social leadership” who are protecting the nation (Gay 67). In order to read the representation and function of the naval characters with a postcolonial approach and read contrapuntally, it is necessary to consider the novel’s historical context, especially in terms of the British Empire and its imperialism and fill the silences of the narrative. In this article, I will focus on the most important naval character in *Persuasion*: Captain Wentworth.

Captain Frederick Wentworth symbolizes the opportunity of social mobility and wealth offered to the professional classes through the navy and implicitly the British Empire and imperialism. I agree with Pam Morris that the navy in *Persuasion* can be read as a synecdoche, although more of the British Empire than of a community of equals. Before his position in the navy, Wentworth was lower in class than the Elliots, as can be discerned from Sir Walter’s comment that Wentworth was no gentleman, no man of property and had no family connections except for his brother who had the curacy of Monkford (Austen 20). This would mean that Wentworth was from the middle or professional classes when he made Anne’s acquaintance. The narrator describes Wentworth at that time as “a fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy” (22), who had no fortune or living parents but was made commander after the action in St. Domingo and had the hope of becoming rich by having a ship and high station. His return marks the beginning of the opposition between the gentry, who are failing to maintain their fortunes and estates, and the professional classes, who are rising economically based on their moral virtues. This is symbolized in Wentworth’s promotion to Captain as he has distinguished himself in the navy and risen in rank. Before his arrival, the narrator voices Anne’s thoughts, based on navy lists and newspapers, that he “must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune” and she “could not doubt his being rich” (25).

Because there are only few allusions to the manner in which Captain Wentworth acquired his fortune of £25,000 beyond his employment in the navy, it is essential to provide context for the proceedings of the navy at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wentworth enters the navy after his engagement with Anne in 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars between 1803 and 1815, which were preceded by the French Revolutionary Wars and the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. During the wars, the British Navy blockaded ports, interdicted maritime trade, and annexed French overseas colonies (Carpenter 274). Wentworth’s first station at St. Domingo in the Caribbean, at the time of Austen’s novel called the “West Indies,” hosted many sugar plantations which employed slave labor. The British military was stationed there “to extend the fortunes of Britain’s slaveowners or to deplete those of her enemies” (O’Shaughness 765) also after Britain’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807. *Persuasion* emphasizes the national importance of the navy and represents it as a possibility for social mobility while omitting the colonial and imperial aspects in Captain Wentworth’s career. Because of this, I agree with Elaine Jordan’s reading of the novel that Wentworth and the other naval officers appear as heroes in a “sphere of naval adventure, supporting colonial trade and imperial ambition” (39), which implicitly supports English commercial and imperial interests. In presenting the colonial territories as “realms of possibility” (Said 79) in which men can make their fortune, Austen uses a colonial trope of the realist novel that demonstrates the interdependence between the novel and imperialism.

Whereas the narrator presents the naval characters as the heroes of the British Empire and examples for the gentry, the upper-middle-class characters remain ambivalent toward the navy and demonstrate their changing attitude towards the Empire and the rising professional classes. Whereas some emphasize the economic strength and “many a noble fortune [...] made during the war” of the “rich Admiral” and “wealthy naval commanders” (Austen 15), Sir Walter, representing the conservative part of the gentry, advocates against the social mobility of the professional classes. He exclaims that “the profession has its utility, but I should be very sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it” (17), to demonstrate his opinion on the imperial merit of the navy but insists on keeping them lower-status and separate from the upper middle class. He supplies two reasons for his opinion, one being that the social rise of the lower classes would make them equal to the upper classes and diminish the status of his own rank, the other being that the navy ages men prematurely (17). Anne, on the other hand, appreciates the navy because they “have done so much for us” that would justify a comfortable home and privileges. As the novel discusses the social changes due to the navy, it tends to value Anne’s embrace of change over Sir Walter’s class rigidity.

The analysis of character constellation and narrative situation has demonstrated that a central concern of *Persuasion* is to construct a dichotomy between the crisis of the landed gentry and the newly acquired wealth and social mobility of the naval characters, who represent the professional classes. I do not completely agree with Todd’s argument that the novel’s central contrast is between “the Elliot family, obsessed with their genealogy but oblivious to the wartime combatants who have just returned to Britain after helping bring about the defeat of Napoleon” (335) because Anne Elliot, the novel’s heroine, distances herself from her family’s class rigidity and represents a changing attitude of the gentry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The constructed dichotomy in the character constellation is later deconstructed in the marriage plot which unites Anne, a woman from the landed gentry, and Captain Wentworth, who has risen in rank and status through the navy. Reading Captain Wentworth’s character contrapuntally has demonstrated, however, that *Persuasion* supports the imperial mission of the British Empire by presenting the navy as an opportunity for social mobility and the acquisition of wealth without acknowledging the imperialism that enabled it. The novel thus participates in British colonial discourse and creates a national identity based on an idealized representation of the navy.

## Choosing the Naval Hero: The Marriage Plot and the British Empire

The importance of the marriage plot for Austen’s novels is exemplarily expressed by William H. Galperin’s statement that “it is a truth universally acknowledged that Austen’s narratives are arrayed on the scaffolding of the ‘marriage plot’” (25). *Persuasion* offers variations on some of its conventions. Magee points out that the novel contains two courtships between Wentworth and Anne, the first being six years before the story is set, and that Anne also has other possible suitors in the form of Charles Musgrove, Captain Benwick, and, most importantly, Mr. Elliot (203). Lisa O’Connell argues that “the marriage plot’s professionalisation in Austen reflects England’s militarisation during the Napoleonic wars” (221), which also offers the genre to be read as a “moral basis of national life” (220). In contrast to Austen’s previous novels, *Persuasion* ends in an exogamous marriage, which Patrick Parrinder defines as a “union of opposites” outside of their own family or class with the potential to “humanize the aristocracy” (189). While I disagree with Parrinder’s last point, I will investigate how his idea of the “national marriage plot” (32) functions in *Persuasion* as an allegory for the British Empire. As the female protagonist chooses the naval hero

over her cousin and heir to the family's landed estate, the marriage plot corroborates the novel's support of the British Empire.

The opposition of Anne's main suitors, Captain Wentworth and Mr. Elliot, demonstrate how the novel discusses the future of the English nation and the British Empire. Wentworth, rejected six years earlier for his lack of money and family connections, returns as a wealthy naval captain and eligible bachelor to Anne, a woman from the landed gentry. Anne's first rejection can be read as the landed gentry trying to uphold the status quo, whereas after Wentworth's acquisition of wealth and rank, he is considered almost equal in rank to the landed gentry. The novel thus discusses the importance of the navy and poses the question in moral terms of who offers the better future to Anne, the landed gentry and England.

Upon Captain Wentworth's return to England, he is questioned about his life in the navy, especially by the Miss Musgroves. The representation of the British Empire and the men that uphold it does not question colonialism as much as it "celebrates (as a meritocratic alternative) the British navy that made it possible" (Fraiman 814). The novel contrasts the landed gentry with limited knowledge about the navy and possibly the extent of the British Empire with the worldly professional classes upholding the Empire through their service, such as their "touch with the Great Nation" (Austen 54), France. The Miss Musgroves reveal their ignorance about navy life, which Anne remembers from her own youth when she "had been accused of supposing sailors to be living on board without anything to eat, or any cook to dress it if there were, or any servant to wait, or any knife and fork to use" (53). In contrast, Captain Wentworth and the Crofts recount their employments all over the Empire, such as Gibraltar, the Mediterranean, Lisbon, and the East Indies. This scene demonstrates both the idealization of the navy in their merit for England and the British Empire as well as how passing remarks in English literature to the Empire and colonies reiterated a colonial discourse and supported the British imperialist project.

The plot's turning point occurs when the minor character Mrs. Smith, the widowed and impoverished friend of Anne, reveals Mr. Elliot's true character and his responsibility for the loss of her husband's property in the West Indies. Galperin understands Mrs. Smith as a manipulator whose main objective is to reacquire her plantation, which probably employs slave labor (233). While this is possible, the character can also be read as a plot device to criticize the landed gentry's moral values and management of their estates, which could lead to the demise of England and the British Empire. Captain Wentworth, however, symbolizing the professional classes, can retrieve Mrs. Smith's property "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 determined friend" (205). Said argues about *Mansfield Park* that "morality in fact is not separable from its social basis" and that the novel "affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion [...] that predated, underlies, and guarantees the morality" (117). This is also in some ways applicable to *Persuasion*. After Mrs. Smith's revelation, Mr. Elliot turns into Captain Wentworth's antagonist. The former's loss of land and deceitfulness stand against the latter's involvement in the return of Mrs. Smith's colonial possession and the expansion of the British Empire through his position in the navy. The novel thus affirms colonial expansion by presenting Captain Wentworth as morally superior over Mr. Elliot.

Using plantations in the West Indies as a mere device to advance the plot is the implicit corroboration of Empire that Spivak and Said identify in canonical English literature. According to Fulford, the landed gentry, like Mrs. Smith and her husband, has generated profit from slave colonies, but Austen does not discuss this further in her narrative. Instead, "the immorality of profiting from West Indies sugar plantations only briefly disturbs the moral and social harmony



that Austen attributes to Captain Wentworth's profession" (Fulford 189). The novel does not supply any information about the property except for "though not large, [it] would be enough to make her [Mrs. Smith] comparatively rich" (Austen 171). This passing reference presents the relationship between England and its overseas territories as being characterized solely by the wealth that can be extracted from plantations and slave labor for the English upper middle class. Because the novel characterizes the naval characters as heroic and admirable for their virtues, *Persuasion* constructs a social change in favor of the rising professional classes that profits from the British Empire and thus supports imperialism.

Finally, the marriage at the end of *Persuasion* has inspired many different readings in terms of its implications of class. Whereas some read it as Anne's desertion of the landed gentry in favor of a "new social milieu" (Magee 203), others view it as Anne's initiation into the "active, hard-working and prosperous pseudo-gentry rank" (Copeland 139). The narrator expresses their opinion on the marriage quite directly and welcomes their union:

Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody. He was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him, and who could give his daughter at present but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds, which must be hers hereafter. (202)

In addition to Anne's feeling of inferiority due to her lack of family to welcome her new husband, her sister Mary reflects that Anne is now "restored to the rights of superiority, and the mistress of a very pretty landaulette" but would not own a landed estate or be head of a family (203). Due to the lack of a landed estate, Anne thus leaves the landed gentry and marries into the wealthy and socially rising professional classes. Reading this marriage as Parrinder's "national marriage plot," Anne and Captain Wentworth's union represents the union of the landed gentry and the navy as a synecdoche of the professional classes. In the courtship of the two characters, the difference between the classes has been bridged due to the social rising and new wealth of the professional classes as well as their national importance for the British Empire. By representing the naval characters as morally virtuous, in contrast to the corrupt landed gentry who cannot manage their estates properly, the novel presents the navy as a viable alternative and protector of the Empire. Anne's cousin and heir to Kellynch Hall, Mr. Elliot, remains unmarried. By constructing a naval captain as a suitable partner in marriage over a cousin from the landed gentry, *Persuasion* partakes in British Empire and imperialism.

## Conclusion

By reading *Persuasion's* marriage plot with a postcolonial approach and Said's method of contrapuntal reading, this article has demonstrated how the novel legitimizes British imperialism and supports the British Empire. The narrator does not question the Empire the novel represents but frequently alludes to its existence and thus participates in the colonial discourse. This supports Azim's argument that the novel is an imperial genre due to its narrative voice that pretends to create an 'objective' reality but suppresses other subject positions. The contrapuntal reading demonstrates which information the novel chooses to omit. How the characters profit from their service in the navy or their property in the British colonies is excluded from the narrative's representation of the naval characters as heroes. The character constellation creates a dichotomy

between the landed gentry and the professional classes employed by the navy to discuss the latter's role in and importance for the Empire. The novel's protagonist Anne functions as mediator between the two classes. Captain Wentworth represents the social mobility and new wealth of the professional classes at the beginning of the nineteenth century, illustrating how this class profits from the imperialism supporting British Empire. The Elliots are presented as prejudiced against the social rise of the middle classes and want to preserve their rank and status but are ultimately exiled from their estate. Mr. Elliot functions as a representation of the landed gentry as corrupt and, together with Sir Walter, unfit to manage their property. As Anne chooses Captain Wentworth over her cousin, the novel chooses the advantages of the professional classes over the landed gentry. Due to the character construction, the naval characters are presented as morally superior to the upper middle class and therefore the better leader and protector of the British Empire. Furthermore, the plot substitutes a colonial discourse and supports imperialism. *Persuasion* presents the colonies and the navy as opportunities for wealth and social mobility in passing remarks to the colonies and in the character construction of Captain Wentworth. However, the underlying imperialism is not questioned and other discourses are excluded. Mrs. Smith's property in the West Indies is used as a plot device which functions both as a turning point in the marriage plot because it reveals the corruption of Mr. Elliot, and as an example for the corroboration of Empire in canonical English literature. Finally, the marriage of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth symbolizes the union of the gentry and the professional classes. This marriage plot is a national allegory for the British Empire which emphasizes the increasing importance of the navy and the professional classes as England is in the process of relocating its global position at the turn of the nineteenth century. In conclusion, *Persuasion's* form and content support the British Empire which demonstrates the importance of literature in cultural representation and, in Spivak's words, the "continuing success of the imperialist project" (243), which legitimized the expansion of the Second Empire.

## Author Biography

**Carolin Wachsmann** studies the double degree Master of Education (English and History) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2021, she received her bachelor's degree in English and History. Her research interests are English literature, popular culture and fan studies, and postcolonial theory. When she is not reading or writing, she is often found discussing feminist literature with her book club.

## Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. 1818, edited by Pat Rogers, Everyman, 1994.
- Azim, Firdous. *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*. Routledge, 1993.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed., Manchester UP, 2009.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2005.
- Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. MacMillan, 1998.
- Copeland, Edward, and Juliet McMaster, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. 2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Copeland, Edward. "Money." Copeland and McMaster, pp. 127-43.
- Davis, Kathryn E. *Liberty in Jane Austen's Persuasion*. Leigh UP, 2016.

- Fraiman, Susan. "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1995, pp. 805-21. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1344068](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344068). Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Carpenter, Stanley D. M. "French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815)." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 274-76.
- Fulford, Tim. "Romanticizing the Empire: The Naval Heroes of Southey, Coleridge, Austen, and Marryat." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1999, pp. 161-96.
- Galperin, William H. *Historical Austen*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.
- Garcia, Christien. "Left Hanging: Silence, Suspension, and Desire in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 59 no. 1, 2018, p. 85-103. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/ecy.2018.0004. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Gay, Penny. "Emma and Persuasion." Copeland and McMaster, pp. 55-71.
- Jordan, Elaine. "Jane Austen Goes to the Seaside: *Sanditon*, English Identity and the 'West Indian' Schoolgirl." Park and Rajan, pp. 29-55.
- Kramp, Michael. Introduction. *Jane Austen and Masculinity*, by Kramp, Bucknell UP, 2018, pp. 1-24.
- Magee, William H. "Instrument of Growth: The Courtship and Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's Novels." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 198-208. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/30225182](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225182). Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Manchester UP, 2010.
- McMaster, Juliet. "Class." Copeland and MacMaster, pp. 111-26.
- Meyer, Michael. *English and American Literatures*. 4th ed., UTB, 2012.
- Morris, Pam. *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism*. Edinburgh UP, 2017.
- Newman, Gerald. "Nationalism." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 489-94.
- Nünning, Vera und Ansgar Nünning. *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature*. Transl. Jane Dewhurst, Klett, 2009.
- O'Connell, Lisa. *The Origins of the English Marriage Plot. Literature, Politics and Religion in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge UP, 2019.
- O'Shaughness, Andrew J. "West Indies." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 764-66.
- Park, You-me and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds. *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*. Routledge, 2004.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. "Austen in the World: Postcolonial Mappings." Park and Rajan, pp. 3-25. "Realism." *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, edited by Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 198-200.
- Roberts, Warren. "Nationalism and Empire." *Austen in Context*, edited by Janet Todd, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 327-36.
- Ryan, Kiernan. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. Arnold, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.
- Seeber, Barbara K. "Loneliness and the Affective Imperative of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's *Emma*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 52 no. 3, 2020, p. 233-45. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/sdn.2020.0042. Accessed 11 August 2021.

- Shaffer, Julie. "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the Marriage-Plot. The Novels of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen." *Criticism*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1992, pp. 51-73. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23113581](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23113581). Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243-61. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1343469](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469). Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2015.