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Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies

**A View from Confinement: *Persuasion*'s Resourceful Mrs. Smith**

By **Lynda A. Hall**, Chapman University

<1> Mrs. Smith appears at first to be a trivial character in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. She is a former school friend of Anne Elliot's. She married for money, was widowed early, contracted a crippling illness, and now supports herself with her needlework. Anne's father, Sir Walter Elliot, even with his myopic perspective, makes a valid observation: "a mere Mrs. Smith, an every-day Mrs. Smith, of all people and all names in the world . . . Mrs. Smith! Such a name!" (Austen 158). Mrs. Smith appears to be a nobody; however, she adds important thematic content to Austen's last completed novel. She may be "an every-day Mrs. Smith" to Sir Walter, but she fights her superfluity and serves to expose a harsh reality in the early nineteenth-century England for many women of the gentry and middle classes: single women were often desperate—trying to live without an income, a way of obtaining an income, or the legal means to claim what money and property might be rightfully theirs. Mrs. Smith is a unique character type in Austen's fiction: the superfluous female. Austen uses this character to reflect on a possible tragic life for the heroine while highlighting the plight of the poor widow and her lack of perceived value in the society reflected in *Persuasion*.

<2> Austen portrays Mrs. Smith in a predominantly sympathetic light, but she is not completely supportive of her actions. The poor, disabled widow is ultimately rewarded with improved health and a reclaiming of her husband's property, but since she first appears to encourage Anne to marry Mr. Elliot—a man Mrs. Smith later describes as "black at heart, hollow and black!" (Austen 199)—her motives are suspect, further emphasizing her widow's desperation. Even while questioning Mrs. Smith's ethics, Austen sympathizes with her plight while revealing several truths: making an imprudent marriage can have lasting repercussions, surviving in a genteel world as an unmarried invalid woman takes fortitude and guile, and living on the fringe of society allows one to carefully observe and manipulate. Ultimately, therefore, Mrs. Smith provides an important backdrop for Anne Elliot's romantic triumph even while subtly exposing the difficulties most widows faced in a world skewed against unmarried women.

<3> As a young widow, Mrs. Smith represents a type of character that Austen did not consider in her earlier novels. We meet the other widows in the later years of their lives and we observe them wielding some sort of power or eliciting the community's sympathy: Mrs. Jennings has money, a house in town, and two successfully married daughters; Lady Catherine has title, money, and property; Mrs. Norris has power over her nieces and position within her brother-in-law's estate; Mrs. Bates is patronized by the wealthier elite of Highbury; and even within *Persuasion*, Lady Russell has wealth, title, and a strong influence over Anne Elliot's behavior.

Mrs. Smith, however, is young and poor, and is actually one of two such widows in *Persuasion* (Mrs. Clay is the other). The young, poor widows serve as a warning to Anne Elliot regarding imprudent marriages since both widows must make major adjustments in order to survive in a world hostile to single women. Although Mrs. Smith's story is similar to Mrs. Clay's in that she is widowed and poor, and though she also resorts to a certain degree of manipulation and ethically-suspect behavior, Austen renders her more sympathetically. There are important similarities, however, between the two characters which serve to expose the ubiquitous social problem of widowhood in early nineteenth-century England. We find that Mrs. Smith's general conduct is similar to the "pleasing" manners of Mrs. Clay, since a "disposition to converse and be cheerful beyond her expectation" (Austen 153) is imperative to her survival. But Austen is not as severe in her censure of Mrs. Smith as she is of Mrs. Clay, perhaps because Mrs. Smith is merely trying to hold on to the class into which she was born, while Mrs. Clay is attempting to move up in the world.

<4> Since Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Clay are two similar minor characters within the same fictive space, we can examine the two young widows' "minority" using a paradigm established by Alex Woloch in his study of minor characters which "seeks to redefine literary characterization in terms of [a] distributional matrix: how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe" (13). Woloch examines "the importance of distributed attention" (14) by considering "two new narratological categories . . . the *character-space* (that particular and charted encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole) and the *character-system* (the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure)" (14). This paradigm reveals that various minor characters within the character-system of a novel inhabit particular character-spaces and interact with each other, ultimately reflecting the social place of these character types within the social structure represented by the realist novel. Therefore, each character might reflect his or her "minority" by functioning as either the *worker* or the *eccentric*: "the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative, and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot" (Woloch 25).

<5> From this perspective, Mrs. Clay functions as an *eccentric*, in that she "grates against . . . her position and is . . . , as a consequence, wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed (within the *discourse*, if not the *story*)," (1) and Mrs. Smith seems to function as a mere *worker* since she is somewhat "smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine, at the cost of his or her own free interiority" (Woloch 25). Mrs. Smith, however, fights against her "single functional use" (Woloch 25) as *worker* or even as *dues ex machina*, is not "smoothly absorbed" in the narrative, and even possesses many traits of a classical villain. She is also not an *eccentric*, since she is only temporarily wounded (we know she recovers her health at the end of the novel), and is ultimately not "exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed" (Woloch 25). In fact, she is rewarded with the recovery of "her husband's property in the West Indies" and is the "earliest visitor to the newly married Captain and Mrs. Wentworth" (Austen 251), placing her within the main gaze of the "narrative machine." I would like to argue that Mrs. Smith's role in *Persuasion* moves outside the realm of the typical minor characters Woloch describes. She moves beyond her *worker* role to expose a new category I will call the *superfluous* character, one

who fights the superfluity she has found within the story and the society that story reflects, exposes the forgotten place and pitiful state of the poor widow within early nineteenth-century English society, and ultimately warns the heroine of a plight she might have realized had she married a poor and unsuccessful Wentworth.

<6> Mrs. Smith first appears to play a typical *worker* role, providing Anne Elliot the information she needs to make the right choices about Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth. Paul Zeitlow argues that her existence “serves to remind us that only good luck can prevent the Mrs. Smiths of this world, whose improvident, short-sighted husbands leave them penniless, from spending the rest of their lives in poverty” (195). She therefore provides Anne Elliot, and the reader, a reflection of a likely but pitiful life for women for whom social circumstances change in ways beyond their control. Her character provides the ground from which the heroine can emerge as a romantic exception to the norm.

<7> Mrs. Smith’s function as a *worker* with a “single functional use” is promising but short lived. K. K. Collins astutely questions why the widow must reveal her story of the black-hearted Mr. Elliot to Anne, since “Anne resolves that she will marry Wentworth or no one before she learns of her cousin’s unsavoury past; and before she can share what she has heard, Mr. Elliot spirits Mrs. Clay from Bath, making Anne’s news quite useless” (“Prejudice” 40). Mrs. Smith’s position as *worker*, or as a mere plot device, therefore, is dubious. As Collins also explains, she serves a greater function: “Precisely because of her courage in the face of deprivation we sympathize with Mrs. Smith’s resentment of an unnecessary poverty and with her wish to regain her rightful property: she is, after all, no powerful goddess but a helpless victim of mortgages” (“Mrs. Smith” 395). Thus, beyond the mere plot device of giving Anne information about Mr. Elliot, Mrs. Smith shows Anne the reality she might have faced as a widow without money or family support.

<8> Mrs. Smith’s representation of the poor widow, however, is only a façade of her real function within the character-system of the novel. As a forgotten woman—a widow living on the fringe of polite society—her desperate actions also reveal her helplessness within a social system that was ever willing to forget the poor, unmarried (or unmarriageable) woman. As Karen Bloom Gevirtz argues, Mrs. Smith’s mercenary actions—her willingness to encourage Anne to marry a man whom she knows to be a scoundrel—are grounded in her desperation as a woman with limited legal means to regain her lost property. Mrs. Smith takes a risk by attempting to support Anne’s potential marriage to Mr. Elliot, since she cannot be sure that Anne could convince Mr. Elliot to retrieve her lost West Indies property. This gamble “simply underscores the commercialism of Mrs. Smith’s plan: it is risky, it is self-interested, it is profit-oriented, and it commodifies others” (Gevirtz 157). From this perspective, Mrs. Smith borders on villain status. But Mrs. Smith’s risky choice is quickly mitigated by Anne’s revelation that she has already decided against marrying Mr. Elliot. Anne does not really need her information, but Austen’s depiction of the widow’s potential for villainy reflects the desperation of the poor, unmarried woman in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English society. Although Mrs. Smith may be a potential villain, since she does not intend at first to reveal the truth about Mr. Elliot, once she *does* reveal her information, she is forgiven, and at the end of the novel she is not merely absorbed or exiled but is actually restored to a more visible social place. Mrs. Smith’s

character thus emphasizes the widow's superfluity as she fights against it, eventually reclaiming a vital space in the discourse—moving from potential (and desperate) villain to potential heroine.

<9> Mrs. Smith is a *superfluous* member of her society since she is no longer a part of the marriage market and is no longer a “functional” female within the patriarchal system. She is unable to wield any power she might have gained from her marriage since she is no longer attached to a man and no longer has the money that would allow her any authority. She also lacks the vital female function of motherhood, and she is an invalid—in many ways not a *valid* being—“with no possibility of moving from one [room] to the other without assistance” (Austen 154), separating her physically from society and seemingly rendering her *superfluous* status complete. But even as Mrs. Smith struggles within her “minority,” she is a formidable character since she resists her superfluity and insignificance within the narrative and the society which the novel reflects.

<10> Mrs. Smith subtly though poignantly reflects the economic reality for women of her status and class: she married for money, lost her husband, her wealth, and her health, and has resorted to physical labor—even possibly extortion—to support herself. In contrast, Anne Elliot, although she turned down a marriage proposal for social and economic reasons, regrets that decision. Anne is reminded, then, through her interactions with Mrs. Smith, that others have a more mercenary view. After Mrs. Smith has explained her former acquaintance with Mr. Elliot, and Anne is surprised that her cousin would have married solely for money, Mrs. Smith reveals her understanding and acceptance of such arrangements. Living in “the world” as she did, Mrs. Smith understands the transactions and “saw nothing reprehensible” in marrying for money (Austen 201-2). Once her extravagant lifestyle was over, however, she found herself with few options. Thus her mercenary marriage was not successful, as it did not result in long-term stability, and it serves as a reflection of Anne's potential fate.

<11> Through Mrs. Smith's story, Austen is also revealing the legal quagmire faced by widows of her class in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. As Stephen C. Behrendt explains, the law was not in a widow's favor: “Despite the existence of relatively egalitarian inheritance laws, property laws relating to marriage in Romantic-era Britain (c. 1780-1835) had grown less (rather than more) accommodating to the needs of widows and their children than they had been even a century earlier” (481). Using data drawn from “two major industrial towns of industrializing Britain, Birmingham and Sheffield” (416), Maxine Berg explains that substantial statistics on widows is scarce and is always limited to those widows with enough money or property to necessitate a will. Widows who died intestate or with nothing to bequeath often left no records; in fact, during the later part of the eighteenth century only about ten percent of the wills were left by women (237). The lack of legal records implies that most unmarried women had no property to bequeath, and underscores the lack of value a woman like Mrs. Smith represented within the space of the novel: an unmarried woman with no money and no children was rendered a “nobody,” or superfluous to her society.

<12> Mrs. Smith's version of the widow character, however, is unique in Austen's fiction (as well as in most fiction of the time). *Persuasion*, written late in Austen's life, depicts a more

sympathetic, younger widow than is seen in her earlier novels, and as Laura Fairchild Brodie writes, Austen contrasts the young widows in this novel with the wealthier dowagers readers are used to seeing in her fiction, “remind[ing] us that money, not sexuality, often proves to be the more permanent source of women’s power. And as her heroines progress toward the altar, poor widows in the wings foreshadow difficult realities that lie beyond a woman’s wedding day” (699-700). By depicting the plight of a widow without money Austen shows us just why her other widows are so eager to wield their power—they know just how nebulous that power really is.

<13> Although many of the widows in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction are depicted as wealthy and perhaps even despotic in their monetary power, these women were not the norm. Widows, in general, were seen as socially freer than were unmarried women or spinsters, but widows without money or the social capital concomitant with that money were much more common than wealthy dowagers in Austen’s society. Bridget Hill explains that the few widows who were left with financial independence found some freedom,

But the number of widows who could exercise those rights was strictly limited. Many who could failed to do so. Most widows enjoyed no security. Whether from the terms of their husband’s wills, or from their habit of relinquishing what they had to their children, the majority possessed little status and no independence. Often they were dependent on the continued tolerance of their children for a home and support. (257-58)

Mrs. Smith has no children, and she is “not one-and-thirty,” so any children she might have had would have been young enough to be a financial burden. Mr. and Mrs. Smith lived beyond their means during their marriage, and since he “had left his affairs dreadfully involved” (Austen 152), upon his death, she had little to sustain her. With no money, she had no power. This type of widow, however, was more common in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English society than is reflected in the literature of the time. As Peter Earle explains, throughout early-modern England, “only a small proportion of widows and single women were living well, a fact that is no surprise, despite the literary emphasis on the wealthy widow” (167). The financial circumstances for widows grew even worse throughout the eighteenth century as kinship protections dwindled and entailed estates began to override the dower, or one-third of the dead husband’s estate a widow could expect under common law.

<14> Mrs. Smith’s income is meager—not more than £50 per annum, according to Edward Copeland (27).(2) And if there is money from her husband’s land holdings abroad that she can recover, as a woman she has few legal rights to claim that property. Usually, the widow of a man of means had some kind of guaranteed income as long as she stayed single. But, as Hill points out, “the widow left in comfortable circumstances was the exception, and few could opt for the independence of widowhood rather than remarriage. Often the third of her husband’s estate to which she was entitled under common law was insufficient to give her economic security” (Hill 250-51). If her husband were to die intestate, however, and if his affairs were “involved,” the widow without male representation had few options. Therefore, Mrs. Smith’s resorting to selling her needlework and relying on Nurse Rooke to extort money from her sympathetic patients is understandable. Rather than rendering a villainous or ridiculous wealthy widow as was the

tendency, Austen chooses to depict a poor widow's struggle against her superfluous state, fighting to remain viable in a world that gives her no value. Since Mrs. Smith's character is a relative anomaly in early nineteenth-century British fiction, and her poor, widowed status was not uncommon in the society reflected by the novel, Austen is emphasizing the forgotten plight of the superfluous female within her society.

<15> Mrs. Smith's character represents the woman who found herself navigating between the gentry class to which she was born and the servant-less working woman she had become. This struggle was vital; in order to retain her place as a part of the gentry, Mrs. Smith must not appear to be working for her keep even though she needed some income to survive. Additionally, in order to retain her place as a lady, she needs to appear idle—a consumer rather than a producer. As Gervitz explains,

The realities of widowhood . . . conflicted with developing definitions of female sexuality and maternity and intensified the sense of widowhood as a transgressive state. The old discomfort about the connection between female sexual experience and appetite lingered, as did concerns about the connection between sexual and material rapacity. These concerns were now exacerbated by the idealization of woman as the passive enabler of capitalism—the consumer and homebody rather than the producer. The business-minded widow was problematic, defying as she did the construction of woman as recipient of the fruits of empire, and a plethora of measures were adopted to restrict widows' rights and opportunities. (20)

Through Mrs. Smith's enterprising behavior, Austen exposes the struggles of this superfluous character: she must make enough money to sustain her life while appearing to be sewing items that can be sold to help the poor. She must remain in the background of the society (and the background of the narrative) in order to provide cover for her capitalistic venture. And, she discovers, by remaining somewhat superfluous, ironically, she can wield more power.

<16> Mrs. Smith's positioning in the background also provides Austen's readers with a glimpse of another type of superfluous female, the poor but shrewd working woman. Through Mrs. Smith's description of Nurse Rooke, Austen reveals the need for women in these superfluous roles to find their own kind of power:

“She is a shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman. Hers is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation, which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received ‘the best education in the world,’ know nothing worth attending to. Call it gossip, if you will, but when Nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure to bestow on me, she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable: something that makes one know one's species better.” (Austen 155)

Anne agrees, “Women of that class have great opportunities, and if they are intelligent may be well worth listening to. Such varieties of human nature as they are in the habit of witnessing!” (Austen 155-6). But Anne romanticizes Nurse Rooke's role: “What instances must pass before them of ardent, disinterested, self-denying attachment, of heroism, fortitude,



patience, resignation: of all the conflicts and all the sacrifices that ennoble us most. A sick chamber may often furnish the worth of volumes” (Austen 156). Mrs. Smith’s retort, however, reveals the young widow’s pragmatism:

“Here and there, human nature may be great in times of trial; but generally speaking, it is its weakness and not its strength that appears in a sick chamber: it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude, that one hears of. There is so little real friendship in the world! and unfortunately” (speaking low and tremulously) “there are so many who forget to think seriously till it is almost too late.” (Austen 156)

Anne cannot be easily shaken from her romantic views since she has not experienced the real suffering of Mrs. Smith. Through this contrast between Anne and Mrs. Smith, Austen exposes the plight of the superfluous female fighting for existence within the narrative and fighting for a meager living within her society. Mrs. Smith reveals the true nature of suffering—a type of suffering that Anne might have encountered had she married Wentworth before he was rich, especially if she too were to become widowed and poor—quite a real danger for the wife of a Navy man.

<17> It is also important to note that Mrs. Smith is in Bath “living in a very humble way . . . almost excluded from society” (Austen 152-53). Alistair Duckworth considers Mrs. Smith’s exclusion as indicative of her social as well as physical separation:

[S]he is unable on account of her sickness to visit the Assemblies in Bath. But the phrase may also be read to mean that society, considered as a support and protection for the self, as a body of public manners and conventions in accordance with which the self may act, is denied Mrs. Smith. In such a contingency, the reduced self may resort to subversive stratagems to ensure survival. (4-5)

Austen shows Mrs. Smith’s exclusion; she even hints at her desperation, but she does not portray her as pathetic. She depicts the young widow as cunning and resourceful. Mrs. Smith’s exclusion from society, her invalidism, and her humble living quarters actually provide a front for her to gain valuable information and to plot to regain her lost wealth. Mary Poovey explains that Mrs. Smith’s withdrawal and seclusion, which again reminds us of her superfluous role in the narrative, is something she struggles against: “Given the fact that living together in society necessarily requires dependence and compromise, the belief that one can withdraw or simply gratify oneself is morally irresponsible, psychologically naïve, and, finally, practically untrue. Even Mrs. Smith has Nurse Rooke to connect her to the public world of Bath” (237). Mrs. Smith is not *physically* present in the pump rooms and assemblies. She gathers valuable information, however, through the peddling of her wares, and she seems to have more information about the social scene than the physically present Anne, thus again fighting her superfluous role.

<18> A prime example of Mrs. Smith’s ability to gather news and manipulate it to her advantage is demonstrated in her conversation with Anne the day after the concert. Mrs. Smith shows that an observer, even one who is not present at an event, might notice much more than a participant. A poor, forgotten invalid (not unlike the author in the years she composed *Persuasion*), might be

able to gain more significant information than a woman being sought after by two eligible men. Here Austen demonstrates her own perceptivity—her ability to observe human nature and collect information that will be valuable to her own industry (her novels) even from her sick chamber.

<19> Since no one of supposed fashion and influence notices “a mere Mrs. Smith,” she can operate beneath the social radar and provide a valuable service to her old school friend, Anne Elliot, while ultimately helping herself to regain wealth and influence. Mrs. Smith, like Nurse Rooke, is not worth the notice of the social elite. Anne demonstrates this dismissal of the poor and the working classes as she enters Mrs. Smith’s rooms, looking past the women who work and serve. Robyn R. Warhol details the virtual invisibility of working class women in Anne Elliot’s gaze:

The housekeeper, the maid, the nurse are interchangeable for Anne: being outside her class, they have no distinguishing physical features. . . . These moments of looking (or not looking) across class lines bring forward further details about the limits of the feminine language of looks in *Persuasion*: workers, like elite women, have license to look, but, unlike the women, they do not become themselves the object of an intra- or extradiegetic gaze within the text. (14-15)

The women who work are invisible to the elite. Austen reveals, however, the unique power of that invisibility. Because she is not noticed as an actual being, because she is not seen as a part of society, as a working woman, Nurse Rooke (and through her, Mrs. Smith) can gain valuable information and extort pity and money that most likely would have been kept from her if she were considered a recognized female presence. Mrs. Smith is isolated, but she has devised a way to utilize the influence of the social world. She has learned to exploit sympathy to sell her needlework and capitalize on her nurse’s accessibility to the more noble houses to gather valuable information. Even as her invalidism isolates her, so does it enable her to participate in society. In this way Austen demonstrates the resiliency necessary to navigate through a difficult life and fight against the superfluous role the poor widow must play.

<20> Mrs. Smith survives not only with her pragmatism, but also with extreme fortitude and guile. Anne notices that she still has “good sense and agreeable manners” (Austen 153). This is what draws Anne to her friend and what helps the reader to overlook Mrs. Smith’s faults. She does not seem bitter or vindictive. The narrator, through Anne’s perspective, observes: “Neither the dissipations of the past . . . nor the restrictions of the present, neither sickness nor sorrow seemed to have closed her heart or ruined her spirits” (Austen 153). Anne is shocked by this resilience, and through her observations Austen reveals the difficult life many women led:

She had been very fond of her husband: she had buried him. She had been used to affluence: it was gone. She had no child to connect her with life and happiness again, no relations to assist in the arrangement of perplexed affairs, no health to make all the rest supportable. Her accommodations were limited to a noisy parlour, and a dark bedroom behind, with no possibility of moving from one to the other without assistance, which there was only one servant in the house to afford, and she never quitted the house but to be conveyed into the warm bath. (Austen 154)

Anne is perplexed by her friend's optimistic attitude, and concludes that it must be the reflection of an extraordinary individual:

[T]his was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only. A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and Anne viewed her friend as one of those instances in which, by a merciful appointment, it seems designed to counterbalance almost every other want. (Austen 154)

Here Austen shows her support of Mrs. Smith's plight, even though her ethics might be questionable. Mrs. Smith has met with difficulties, but she retains a positive spirit, an "elasticity of mind." Austen also shows Mrs. Smith's humility:

There had been a time . . . when her spirits had nearly failed. She could not call herself an invalid now, compared with her state on first reaching Bath. Then she had, indeed, been a pitiable object; for she had caught cold on the journey, and had hardly taken possession of her lodgings before she was again confined to her bed and suffering under severe and constant pain; and all this among strangers, with the absolute necessity of having a regular nurse, and finances at that moment particularly unfit to meet any extraordinary expense. She had weathered it, however, and could truly say that it had done her good. (Austen 154)

Mrs. Smith is redeemable because she is able to find the good in a bad situation. She is also resourceful and willing to learn how to occupy her time and support herself. Austen does not completely vindicate Mrs. Smith for the licentious living that led to her plight, but she does allow her to reclaim her former social position, as Emily Auerbach argues, through "her ability to work hard and think of others" (247).

<21> Throughout her ordeal, Mrs. Smith clearly holds onto her genteel upbringing, since she does not *appear* to be working for her keep. As Gevirtz notes, she does the needlework (clearly a proper lady's employment) but she does not handle the money: "Austen gives her an infirmity precisely designed to keep her in pathetic but genteel seclusion and thereby to avoid engaging in the crassness of actually exchanging goods and cash" (Gevirtz 155-56). Mrs. Smith thus reflects the straightened circumstances that result from poor choices and unforeseen occurrences while manipulating the perception of her role in order to retain whatever cultural capital she can.

<22> Mrs. Smith's enterprise shows her struggle against her superfluity. She says that she is selling her needlework to help some poor families, but as many scholars note, with such a meager income herself, it would not be unreasonable to believe that some of the money from the sale of her work is going to support herself. Gevirtz argues,

Either Mrs. Smith is giving knitted card racks to "very poor families in the neighborhood," a generous but probably not very useful impulse, or she is using the proceeds from the sale of her card racks to do "a little good" to those families. In that case, Mrs. Smith is not simply

helping herself, although it is imaginable that she is also using those profits for herself; she is also helping those more unfortunate than herself. (156)

This action gives Mrs. Smith the “proper benevolence” (Gevirtz 156) required of her to remain in her original social class while also exposing her precarious financial situation. Where this information shows Mr. Smith’s humility, it also shows her proclivity to manipulate others for her own gain as she explains Nurse Rooke’s method of selling her wares: ““She always takes the right time for applying. Every body’s heart is open, you know, when they have recently escaped from severe pain, or are recovering the blessing of health”” (Austen 155). Nurse Rooke and her resourcefulness might even be considered an extension of Mrs. Smith’s character. Marc Cyr argues that Mrs. Smith’s connection to Nurse Rooke reveals the widow’s invisibility in addition to her struggle to remain a part of the genteel ranks:

It would be passing strange for someone so poor as to be servantless to pass on the desperately needed money to others, and her use of the phrase “*my profit*”(3) reinforces the impression. And the only reason I can see for her lying in this case is that to do otherwise, to admit that she lives even partly on money acquired by, literally, her own hands would knock her a rung or so down the social ladder in the general view, and more importantly, possibly Anne’s. (199-200)

Austen problematizes the widow’s validity as Mrs. Smith navigates an unstable position between genteel disinterest and rugged exertion.

<23> Mrs. Smith also capitalizes on her invalidism in subtle ways. By banking on her illness, as Gloria Sybil Gross points out, Mrs. Smith “peddles her wares in the rather shady underground network of medical gossips at Bath, at last to preside over the crucial action affecting everyone’s future” (190). Gross interprets Mrs. Smith’s actions as a “greedy, grasping rage for power” (193). She sees Mrs. Smith as one of a network of women, playing the role of the “care-taker” or “care-needy” and whose “pious sincerity and profusions of solicitude and concern merely mask the central issue of out-and-out mercenary advantage” (193). Mrs. Smith’s invalidism, therefore, could be a ploy; she might just be using her virtually invisible position to gain a small measure of power over her life. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, interpret Mrs. Smith’s illness as a reflection of a sick society: “Mrs. Smith participates in the moral degeneration of the place when she selfishly lies to Anne, placing her own advancement over Anne’s potential marital happiness by withholding the truth about Mr. Elliot until she is quite sure Anne does not mean to marry him” (182). Mrs. Smith’s illness, then, can be understood as a metaphor, reflecting the sickness that can result from a social structure that places women in such desperate confinement.

<24> Although Anne forgives her friend, she is not completely convinced of her ethical behavior. Anne is not only concerned about her friend’s method of conveying information, but she is also wary of the foundation. When she realizes that Mrs. Smith’s source for news is Mrs. Wallis, Anne’s protest about the absence of her friend’s authority is important to note. First, she recognizes a deficiency in the logic—Mr. Elliot was in the process of reconciling with her father before Anne arrived in Bath. Why was he suddenly interested in her family if he was not

familiar with Anne? And why is he so keen on marrying her now? Second, she questions the authenticity of the information: “Facts or opinions which are to pass through the hands of so many, to be misconceived by folly in one, and ignorance in another, can hardly have much truth left” (Austen 205). Finally, the information Austen transmits through Mrs. Smith might be important, but her methods of obtaining and passing on the information are unethical. Although Anne is shocked, she comes to believe Mrs. Smith, once she learns of the Smiths’ history with Mr. Elliot, and reads his letter from the past berating her family and denouncing his assumed future title:

“I have got rid of Sir Walter and Miss. They are gone back to Kellynch, and almost made me swear to visit them this summer; but my first visit to Kellynch will be with a surveyor, to tell me how to bring it with best advantage to the hammer. The baronet, nevertheless, is not unlikely to marry again; he is quite fool enough. If he does, however, they will leave me in peace, which may be a decent equivalent for the reversion. He is worse than last year.” (Austen 203-4)

Although the information conveyed in the letter is interesting to Anne, she is still concerned: “She was obliged to recollect that her seeing the letter was a violation of the laws of honour, that no one ought to be judged or to be known by such testimonies, that no private correspondence could bear the eye of others” (Austen 204). Through Anne, we can assume we are receiving Austen’s views about the sharing of private information, again problematizing Mrs. Smith’s ethics while emphasizing her desperation—her struggle to be viable in a society that has deemed her superfluous.

<25> But as Austen questions Mrs. Smith’s ethics, she rewards Anne (and the reader) with important facts. Mrs. Smith is not portrayed as sinister, perhaps because her motives are valid. She is determined to regain her position in society; she is not trying to climb above her station. Austen is navigating between conservative class politics and radical gender criticism, showing us that although Mrs. Smith is clearly a desperate woman taking desperate measures for survival, she deserves to retain the social position and financial security wrongly taken from her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Smith must adjust to her circumstances. Her stint at double-dealing shows us her desperation, and by association, the desperate position of the invalid but deserving widow in Austen’s society. She is not able to control the world around her, but she has learned to survive within the conditions she finds herself.

<26> By the end of the novel, perhaps because Austen empathizes with the invalid widow’s position, she allows Mrs. Smith to explain and excuse her previous manipulations:

[S]he had hoped to engage Anne’s good offices with Mr. Elliot. She had previously, in the anticipation of their marriage, been very apprehensive of losing her friend by it; but on being assured that he could have made no attempt of that nature, since he did not even know her to be in Bath, it immediately occurred, that something might be done in her favour by the influence of the woman he loved, and she had been hastily preparing to interest Anne’s feelings, as far as the observances due to Mr. Elliot’s character would allow, when Anne’s refutation of the supposed engagement changed the face of everything; and while it took

from her the new-formed hope of succeeding in the object of her first anxiety, left her at least the comfort of telling the whole story her own way. (Austen 211)

Austen is supportive of Mrs. Smith's duplicity because she is not interested in gaining someone else's wealth, only in regaining her own. Therefore, Austen allows Captain Wentworth to assist the woman who assisted his wife, and Mrs. Smith is also rewarded with a recovery of her health. Ultimately, however, Mrs. Smith's story reminds Anne (and the reader) of the bleak side of an unfortunate marriage. With one or two different choices, Anne Elliot could have become a "mere Mrs. Smith." And without the ground which Mrs. Smith provides, the figure of the romantically triumphant Anne Elliot could not fully emerge.

<27> Jane Austen uses Mrs. Smith both to facilitate the plot and to convey various messages in *Persuasion*, and most scholars agree that she is a notable reflection of what life might have become for Anne Elliot. In fact, Duckworth speculates that her story reflects the potential for many of Austen's heroines:

[S]he is the possible outcome of a Marianne Dashwood, an Elizabeth Bennet, or a Fanny Price. For this is the danger facing many of Jane Austen's heroines, that present security may become total isolation, that residence "in the centre of their property" in the enjoyment of "the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance" may be exchanged for life "in lodgings" without the money even "to afford...the comfort of a servant." (3)

Although we are led to believe the stable life will continue for the heroine as the novel's last chapter ends, the "happy ending" may not endure. Brodie points out that Mrs. Smith probably believed her carefree life would continue after she married Mr. Smith, but things changed drastically: "Miss Hamilton leaves Anne's life [twelve years before the narrative begins] as many heroines depart from Austen's novels—newly married and anticipating a bright future. In *Persuasion*, Anne witnesses one sequel to the marriage plot; widowhood becomes a tangible possibility for a young woman's future" (716). And that future, no matter how rosy it begins, is fragile for a woman with no personal fortune. Even though *Persuasion* ends with a seemingly happy marriage of Anne Elliot to Captain Wentworth, we also learn that another war will soon call him to battle. Widowhood is a distinct reality for all women, especially wives of military men. And Anne has learned from Mrs. Smith's story that widowhood can very well bring hardships beyond the grief of losing a husband.

<28> Anne, however, may fare better since she has already weathered one storm. As Brodie explains, "She enters the novel as a metaphorically 'widowed' heroine—a woman who has lost her fiancé and who now shares the company of widows" (699). The heroine in *Persuasion* is thus very different from the heroines in Austen's previous novels. The novel opens with Anne Elliot "on the shelf" because she has turned down two proposals and "lost her bloom." Anne begins the novel as *superfluous*, but regains her place and prospers in the marriage market. The widow's story, then, not only reflects the possible plight Anne might have faced had she married a poor and then unsuccessful Wentworth, but it also reminds Anne of her superfluous state of being, even as it projects a life that she could possibly lead should Wentworth's career at sea not continue as prosperously as it has so far.

<29> Throughout *Persuasion*, we observe characters who adjust to various losses, and by considering this important motif, Mrs. Smith's story becomes noteworthy. Anne Elliot is prepared for an uncertain future since she has learned throughout the novel how to cope with such losses—especially through her interaction with Mrs. Smith and “that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good” (Austen 154). Mrs. Smith, then, as a minor character in the novel, is more than Woloch's *worker* or the “every-day Mrs. Smith” Sir Walter believes her to be. She fights her minor space in the novel just as she fights her superfluous state within her society. She becomes a model for Anne, as she demonstrates her ability to adjust to change and loss with an “elasticity of mind” that is not portrayed in Austen's earlier novels. She portends a future that will be fraught with change and demonstrates through her fortitude and enterprising spirit that women might just capitalize on their small amount of power. Although Mrs. Smith also demonstrates the dark underbelly of exploitation that is often requisite to this kind of resilience, she is also exposing the desperation that results from a social, economic, and legal system that displaces and discards women whom it deems superfluous.

#### Endnotes

(1)Woloch distinguishes between discourse and story, explaining, “Discourse refers to the actual language and structure of the narrative, story to the fictional events that we extrapolate from the discourse” (Woloch 345n.)(^)

(2)Copeland explains that her inability to afford a servant, the necessity of taking rooms in a bad part of town, and her concerns about her medical bills all indicate such a low annual income.(^)

(3)Cyr's emphasis.(^)

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