Influencer of Estates: Women's Reorientation of the Patriarchal Estates in Jane Austen's Novels

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Abstract: This paper studies the heroines' interactions with Austen's much-famed houses. The common trope in all the novels where the heroine is transferred from a mismanaged household (marked by absent / failed fathers) to a well-patronised one (extension of the idealised hero) is reinvestigated to understand the role of women in recreating these great houses by focussing on the conclusions of the novels. The women, ultimately, become the *influencers* of these estates (already carrying very modern connotations). Applying Doreen Massey's threefold criteria to define space — interrelationality, multiplicity, and openness — the shifting nature of the domestic spaces of Austen's fiction can be recognised. In all of Austen's fiction, even in the end, the narrative does not end with static stability; it is a conclusion achieved out of constant movement, alteration, and improvement of spaces undertaken by the heroines — which only reaches its pinnacle in *Persuasion*.

Keywords: Domestic Estates, Feminist Studies, Jane Austen, Spatial Studies, Women's Movement

Austen's great houses — such as Pemberley, Northanger Abbey, Mansfield Park, Donwell Abbey, and so on — are the ultimate destinies promised to her heroines. This promise is further intensified by the *lack* of their original homes: failed / absent fathers, uncertain / missing homes, or ineffectual mothers. Except for Emma, all of Austen's heroines are either displaced from their parents' houses or have to face the threat of homelessness: Dashwood sisters leave Norland Park to inhabit a rented, makeshift space of a cottage; the Bennet sisters' lives are darkened by the looming threat of their father's entailed estate; Catherine Morland already begins her journey away from home; Fanny removes to Mansfield Park due to the socio-economic poverty of her parents' home; lastly, Anne Eliott is also ousted from the aristocratic certainty of Kellynch Hall as she navigates different social environments. Further, these heroines are almost without any commendable patriarchal figures. Patricia Meyer Spacks also remarks that most of the Austenian fathers absent themselves from heroines' lives either "psychically or physically" (303). In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood family is without any male support, with a dead father and selfish half-brother, making their situation extremely precarious; *Pride and Prejudice* portrays Mr Bennet as an indifferent and indolent father who, despite being an indulgent father, is not an appropriate patriarch; *Northanger Abbey* poses other negative models of father figures: aloof Mr Allen and tyrannical General Tilney; in a similar vein, *Mansfield Park* also recreates such ineligible (Mr Price) and stern (Sir Bertram) father figures; Emma's father is marked by his child-like frailty where it is Emma who needs to act as his guardian; and lastly, Sir Eliott, in *Persuasion*, becomes Austen's most scathing critique of father-figures who is characterised by only negative traits of vanity and profligacy. All of this combined with powerless mothers make it essential for Austen's women to find an alternative home through the end of the narrative.

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There is an equivalence drawn between the heroines' movement to a stable estate and a stable marriage as these estates come to represent their male owners.[1] This would imply that it is the men who solely imbue the estates with their personality and become an overarching influencing presence in the heroines' lives. This argument is further augmented by recognizing in female authority a disaster, a monstrosity, or an incapability to be qualified for any power.[2] However, it is the argument of this paper that women are key to the fulfilment of these estates, and Austen's comic conclusion is derived out of the happy union between the combined powers of both men and women — which Margaret Kirkham acknowledges as women's status of "co-inheritors and improvers" of estates (139).

This would only be possible by admitting the unfixed quality of space which can be changed, reformulated, and is always open. This makes these estates a Massey's space where she suggests a threefold criterion to comprehend them:

> First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny…Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity…Third, that we recognise space as always under construction. (9)

Massey's propositions, when applied to Austen's context, would provide a better understanding of the shifting concept of space. For Massey, space is, firstly, relational, in other words, it is constituted by different relations and interactions. Austenian estates would, therefore, benefit from the conclusive marital unions which would then get reformulated by these new relations, or the new presence of the heroine. Secondly, Massey allows the possibility of multiplicity in a space, which he terms a "coexisting heterogeneity", which can suggest that Austenian spaces are undefined: they can mean different things to different people. And finally, Massey focuses on the unfixed, fluid openness of space as it is constantly being made which is also true for Austen's estates. Her estates are not stable, even if their imposing presence gives them that impression, and such openness not only allows them to get influenced by the heroines' presence, but also suggests future possibilities for change, or for keeping up with modern times. The comic unions in Austen's fiction foster a new presence of the heroine in the traditional estates, who are not passively imbibing the qualities of their new homes and husbands but are imbuing (improving) both of them with their own individualities.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters are dispossessed of their paternal estate and forced into the dependability of a cottage — annexed to an aristocratic estate without the sense of a stable belonging. Yet, it is this cottage which is marked by completeness: unites tranquillity and access to nature, employment and utility, and mutual cordiality and understanding among its residents. It is the larger estates which suffer from a lack of purpose or familial bliss: Lacking in sense, Barton Park's residents are unable to find employment within Barton Park and are constantly moving outdoors to collect visitors; Combe Magna and Norland Park suffer from the moral deficiency of their owners; Colonel Brandon's Delaford estate is left almost abandoned marked by the emotional suffering of its past residents; the Ferrars' household is misgoverned for its preference of materialistic arrogance. Though Mrs Dashwood constantly feels the need for material improvement in her cottage (25), it is these other, materially superior yet spiritually inadequate, estates that need to change for the better.

Ultimately, both Marianne and Elinor's presence becomes influential to these places: injecting at times liveliness, or at times moral sense to the improvement of these estates. Primarily, through their marriages, Elinor and Marianne alter the spaces they now inhabit: Marianne brings liveliness and domestic felicity to the barrenness of Delaford and its owner's life (296); and while Edward and Elinor are not physically admitted to the Ferrars' house, the household itself is robbed of its elitist pretensions as it has to accommodate the not-so-affluent new members in Elinor and Lucy. The other spaces, however, remain as absurd (Barton Park), as dissipated (Combe Magna), and as selfishly money-minded (Norland Park) as before. In fact, the narrative underlines the negative effect on Norland Park after the removal of the Dashwood sisters: the enclosure of Norland Common driven

solely by monetary greed, and the destruction of natural beauty and picturesque by cutting down of trees for ostentatious purposes. An optimistic potential is only reserved for these novel households which allow the altering presence of heroines.

Pride and Prejudice deposits the fresh energies of a vivacious heroine and her bourgeoise relations to the traditional, ordered estate of Pemberley. The narrative concludes with an emphasis on "that pollution which its [Pemberley's] woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city" (262). And it is this, what Austen calls sarcastically "pollution", which becomes integral to the improvement of Pemberley. Elizabeth's presence in Pemberley is in fact pivotal to the whole novel: in the first place, it forwards the Elizabeth-Darcy love plot, and afterwards, it becomes radical in its class transgressions. Elizabeth attributes her initial attraction towards Darcy to Pemberley, she remarks: "I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (252). Her visit to Pemberley does multiple things: it validates Darcy as a patriarchal / paternalistic figure who is deemed as a good landlord, master, and elder brother (167) which can further qualify him to be an appropriate husband; for the plot, it facilitates the reunion of Elizabeth and Darcy; but, most importantly, it acts as a shifting agent for Pemberley as it foreshadows the existence of Elizabeth and her relations in an otherwise exclusive space. Elizabeth moves through the halls and grounds of Pemberley, viewing and judging its various aspects, and she finally comes across a picture of him, gazing at which she arrives at a definite conclusion about her feelings for Darcy: "There was certainty at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance" (167). This is the decisive moment when she chooses Darcy and Pemberley as her future destiny, which would then enable the transformation of both the master and the estate.

Elizabeth and Darcy's final confession of love is followed by a humbled self-explanation from Darcy: he reproaches himself for his proud behaviour and self-centred opinions (247-48). The novel explicitly shows that it is not just Elizabeth whose mistaken beliefs are corrected through the course of the novel, but, it is primarily Darcy who is cured of his class snobbery and haughty behaviour after meeting Elizabeth. Pemberley estate is not limited to being the embodiment of Darcy's virtues, instead, as Alistair Duckworth suggests that Darcy's preservation of social order and Elisabeth's subjective spirit are combined in the novel for establishing a perfect union at Pemberley (315). Elizabeth's playfulness infects Pemberley where she instils liveliness in Darcy, becomes a co-guardian to Georgiana acquainting her with her "lively, sportive, manner" (261), and makes the space of Pemberley more permeable through the entrance of her bourgeoise relations.

It is this last fact which is most crucial in the improvement of Pemberley. As Susan Fraiman argues, Elizabeth's marriage performs a dual function: it mutually benefits the enfeebled aristocracy (as "Elizabeth pumps richer, more robust blood into the collapsing veins of the nobility") and socially inferior bourgeoise (by increasing her relations' social position), and it smooths "class antagonisms" to promote "political stability" (75). Elizabeth's influence, thus, becomes wide-ranging, however, it is her direct interaction with the Pemberley estate which is of monumental concern here. Elizabeth brings vitality and novelty to the otherwise cold order and declining value of such noble houses — a threat embodied in Rosings Park: marked by a sickly heiress, shallow ostentations, and class arrogance. Austen is aware of the flux in society which is witnessing the diminishing importance of the feudal world as new channels of money and power are emerging such as the Bingley family or the Gardiners. It is to prevent the obscurement of these great houses that a coalition between different classes is required which, in Pemberley's case, is enabled by Elizabeth whose subjective individuality is necessary to prevent the estate from getting sterile.

Northanger Abbey provides its heroine with a quasi-gothic estate: dangerous and mysterious. Though deprived of any ghostly presence, Northanger Abbey is still disturbing in its suffocating control over its residents. Catherine's reading of a gothic fancy in the Abbey is not far away from the reality of the space where General Tilney surfaces as a gothic monster threatening to the domestic

happiness of the Tilney siblings and Catherine. Catherine's initial movements in the Abbey are already restricted and uneasy due to the dominating presence of the General (181). She even resorts to stealth to escape the almost panoptical gaze of the General while attempting to uncover the secrets of her new habitat (189). General's strict law and order in the Abbey, pervasive control over its residents, and mercenary conceit prevent the Abbey from becoming a hospitable home and reduce it to an oppressive structure.

Catherine's visit to the Abbey proves fruitful for its improvement as, though unknowingly, Catherine is able to puncture the General's unqualified authority. Henry Tilney actively defies his father's wishes to pursue Catherine, Eleanor breaks away from General's control in an independent marriage, and General's mercenary motivations are ultimately humiliated — what the novel alludes to as "descent of his pride" (248) — as he's persuaded to give his consent to Henry and Catherine's marriage. This blow to his pride is twofold: he gives up both his monetary egotism and absolute decision-making power. Though not a direct agent, Catherine acts as a catalyst to bring a transformation in the household of Northanger Abbey: resulting in liberated children and a humbled father. Austen also makes it imperative that Catherine is not placed in the actual space of Northanger Abbey which is still somewhat under the tyrannical control of the General even if his power can no longer extend to his children. Instead, she acquires a more fluid home in the parsonage. Still in making, the parsonage provides Catherine with an unfixed space which, as the General notes, "may admit of improvement, however" (209). Ultimately, Catherine occupies a curious space: she is now part of the Northanger Abbey household and thus qualified to continue bringing the progressive changes she had already brought to the Abbey, yet she resides outside the actual physical space of the Abbey in a work-in-progress space which would allow her to retain her subjectivity more fully, untainted by the General's insidious influence. The heroine's occupation of a liminal space — occupying the extension of the larger feudal estate — acts as a safeguard against the patriarchal tyranny while at the same time admitting the influencing capacity of the heroine on the estate concerned. Moreover, positioning her heroine in such a fluid home, Austen refuses to give a final closure to her heroine's trajectory: her final home is still in making, still under construction (both literally and figuratively). This trend is taken again, more extensively by Austen, in *Mansfield Park*.

Another of Austen's novels named after an estate, *Mansfield Park* ultimately records the movement within the structure of Mansfield Park: the reorientation of family, threatening influence of outsiders, a shift in the value system, and eventual recovery after a socio-moral downfall. Mansfield Park is initially presented as a fraud: preserving the outward markers of respectability, familial affection, and morality, while in deed, vacant of all these. This is a comment on the (mis)management of Sir Thomas Bertram, who serves as another authoritative figure, commanding fearful respect from his children, but no genuine affection. Joseph Lew applies the analogy of his rule of his colonial estate to his rule at home, where both are marked by "absentee landlordism" (510) as there exists a gap between the abstraction of paternalistic governance and the reality of distant despotism. This is evident in Sir Bertram's creating of only accomplished women out of his daughters, and not principled ones (333); Sir Thomas can only manage the external attainments of his children, unable to perceive their inner lacks.

This is further aggravated by Mansfield Park's marginalization of Fanny — the harbinger of religious morality and familial values — which adds to Mansfield Park's corruption. Allotted the peripheral space of "the little white attic, near the old nurseries" (8), Fanny's material and social position is always governed by the consciousness of "who and what she is" (107) in the Mansfield household. She is actively belittled by Mrs Norris, occasionally patronised by Edmund, ignored by other Bertram siblings, reduced to a useful commodity by Lady Bertram, and distantly supervised by Sir Bertram. It is only when Fanny leaves the space of Mansfield, and the house is thrown into a state of moral chaos, that Fanny emerges out of her invisibility. While Sir Thomas may have beforehand realized Fanny's social importance in forming an alliance with Henry Crawford, her moral

superiority, necessary for the revival of Mansfield, is only recognized after Mansfield experiences its moments of highest distress. In Fanny's absence, the moral frailty of Sir Bertram's other children — inducing loss of reputation (Maria), loss of health (Tom), and temporary loss of family (Julia) — creates a household of "all solitary, helpless, and forlorn alike" (322). Fanny's ethical superiority is doubly asserted in the face of her parents' home which is "the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety" (278), and in the face of Mansfield Park which finally discards its pretence of aristocratic perfection to reveal the need of a strong moral agent like Fanny. Since the focus of the narrative is Mansfield Park, Fanny leaves her parents' home as it is, to facilitate the regeneration of Mansfield.

Vivien Jones argues that the novel's conclusion places Fanny with "an unpredictable edge to socio-moral debate" where "her influence has started a process of moral renewal" for Mansfield Park (17-18). This is evident by Sir Thomas not only approving but desiring a match between Fanny and Edmund; he is anxious to secure Fanny to Mansfield as he also improves in his opinions by privileging "the sterling good of principle and temper" over "ambitious and mercenary connections" as the basis of happy marriages (339). With the recognition of Fanny as the true heir of Mansfield and acquiring a central position in its social landscape, Mansfield is cured of all its immoral tendencies: ousting of vainly unprincipled Maria and her indulgent flatterer, Mrs Norris (334), moral sobering of Tom who understands his filial responsibilities and adopts a righteous lifestyle (332), and happy realization of Sir Thomas and Edmund in valuing Fanny as integral to their domestic felicity (339). Similar to *Northanger Abbey*, the final arrangement of *Mansfield Park* places Fanny in a potent, liminal position of the Mansfield parsonage; while no longer subjected to Lady Bertram's wishes and free from the awe-inspiring intimidation of Sir Bertram, Fanny can more fully realise her personality and build an independent household. Yet, her proximity to Mansfield ensures the moral regulation of the estate which is further affirmed through Susan — the natural successor of Fanny. Occupying this in-between space, Fanny remains the overall moral guide of Mansfield, yet, at the same time, Austen does not reduce Fanny to just that role by providing her with an independent home of her own.

Emma Woodhouse is so completely attached to Hartfield that it is "very, very seldom" that she has been "ever two hours from Hartfield" (274). The only heroine of Austen who is neither displaced from her parental home in the beginning nor is keen to replace it with its moral superior. This is solidified by Emma's authoritative claim on the management of Hartfield; replacing her infantilised father as the head of the household, she becomes the patron of this great house. This is supported by Emma's own remark:

> I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry…And without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield. (74-75)

D. A. Miller exclaims that Austen has no equivalent of herself in her fiction, that "[a]mid the happy wives and pathetic old maids, there is no successfully unmarried woman" (28). While Emma does eventually marry Mr Knightley, yet she is not one of Miller's "pathetic old maids", instead, she is impelled to marry *out of love* as she asserts, and not for any socio-economic reasons. Her unmarried life does not have the usual emptiness of an unstable home which torments Austen's other heroines, and even though she is not truly like Austen, yet she does attempt to author other people's lives. Emma has a significant social and literary authority: she can conjure narratives about people and can exercise her power to realise them. Even if Emma's narratives are mostly proven erroneous and she is taken under the socio-moral guardianship of Mr Knightley, yet the influence of her power is not negated by the novel. Claudia L. Johnson argues that the novel ultimately validates Emma's "female power" (not confined by subservience or dependence) as she is "responsive to the morally corrective influence of public opinion" (404) and her unobtrusive, effective way of ruling is commendable (408). Emma's social power does numerous social good: Emma provides a social space for the

otherwise marginal women such as Mrs Bates in her home and is mindful of their comfort despite her father's eccentricities as a host (20); she uplifts Harriet from obscurity and ultimately promotes her intellectual growth; she takes pains to provide some comfort to Jane during the period of her illness; and, unlike Mrs Elton's monetary boasts, Emma has respect for moral and intellectual superiority as she values Mrs Weston. Emma is not a monstrous matriarch; it is the combined power of Mr Knightley and herself that the conclusion expounds.

Donwell Abbey is presented as a quintessential English estate with its "English verdure, English culture, English comfort" — an obvious ideal to be attained by the heroine. John Wiltshire draws a contrast between the boredom posed by Hartfield and the unstructured freedom offered by Box Hill where the appropriate balance is achieved in the ordered liberty of Donwell (434–35). However, the conclusion of the novel doesn't unequivocally transfer Emma to this estate and its owner, instead, Mr Knightley is also forced out of his home and illusions to form an equal union with Emma: he decides to move to Hartfield after their marriage (396), he acknowledges Emma's influence on him (407), and he also accepts his flawed opinions about Frank Churchill and Harriet. Emma's power is not discarded in the narrative, instead, it is improved through the correction of her opinions and scope of movement beyond the space of Hartfield: beginning from a sea-side tour with the future possibility of becoming the mistress of Donwell Abbey.

Persuasion provides multiple potential models of a household arrangement: Kellynch Hall, the Great House, and Harvilles' seaside home. It is, however, only one model of domestic management that is approved by the narrative which is the naval household. Kellynch Hall is initially under the patronage of aristocratic ostentation — lacking in feeling and order — it is drowning in economic insecurity and moral vacuity. Crofts emerge as the revivers of the place with their genuine affection, naval discipline, and good management, while the Elliots are banished to replicate their failed domesticity in a rented accommodation in Bath. The Great House, too, despite its abundance of filial attachment, is reprehensible for its chaos, or "such an overthrow of all order and neatness" (42). It is in the small, fluid home of Harville's that the ideal of domestic happiness is identified. Harville household benefits from the naval practices of Captain Harville which are then applied to domestic management, as Austen shows a close relationship between the ethics of the navy and the ones at home: Captain Harville with "a mind of usefulness and ingenuity" is bent on effecting household improvements (100). Utility, compassion, and presence of mind are recognized as the commendable characteristics of the navy — all of which are also closely associated with the novel's heroine, Anne Elliot. Austen's last heroine gains "no landed estate, no headship of a family" (247), instead, she is placed in the society of naval brotherhood. Her abilities are not matched to a feudal estate (to be influenced / improved by the heroine) but to the new social world of the navy which would benefit from acquiring someone like Anne who can complement their national utility with her civil one, who can support their naval companionship with her filial feelings, and who can, finally, match their skilful naval management with her sensible domestic one.

It is the fluidity associated with the sea and the naval life which infects the conclusion of Austen's last novel as it is built on an unstable ground promising uncertainty and movement to her heroine. Anne is threatened by "the dread of a future war" (248) which could disturb the marital bliss of the Wentworths, but it would also allow Anne to become another Mrs Croft who can then move beyond the space of the home to accompany her husband on board. Anne Elliot's final abode is rendered unfixed by Austen: flexible and fluctuating as a true symbol of navy life which again resists giving any definitive closure to the heroine's arch. Melissa Sodeman associates *Persuasion*'s home with mobility (which she argues continues in *Sanditon*): "In her final works, then, Austen redefines what home itself means: no longer spatially enclosed site associated with the nuclear family, the domestic is conceptualized as an open and porous place" (788). Sodeman's idea of a reformed home encompasses "local, national, and even global concerns" (788) which ultimately means that Anne Elliot has no specific home as her scope has been enlarged indefinitely, and unlimitedly.

In the end, Austen's women come close to that modern category of influencers which validates both their potency of informing the new homes they acquire and the fluid changeability of these spaces. Austen's heroines are not radically altering the places they come to occupy, instead, it is the inevitable influence of their individual subjectivity on the set ways of different estates which is upheld by Austen. Vivien Jones identifies this as Austen's "conservative reform" (285) where the social structures are not dismantled but the women "reform those structures from within" (288). It is only when we reach *Persuasion* that Austen gives up the attempt to situate the heroine in a changeable, yet stable, feudal estate; it is as Monica F. Cohen argues, "*Persuasion* documents an early instance of the idealized, small, impermanent home, and shows its likeness to naval quarters" (353). In *Persuasion*, the heroine has found a home which already mimics her own valuable qualities, and which is already extremely open, plural, and relational — a modern, Massey's space — in its lack of a landed estate and being formed by just naval society and its practices.

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Notes

[1] Austen's rich landowners are equated to their moral and social superiority as a link between "property, morality, and authority" is established by Sandie Byrne, "The Land and the Big House", 220; Estates become "indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners" according to Alistair Duckworth, "*Mansfield Park*: Jane Austen's Grounds of Being", 434.

[2] See D.W. Harding, ""Regulated Hatred": An Aspect in the Work of Jane Austen", 298; Austen's "mad matriarchs" argued by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Jane Austen's Cover Story (and Its Secret Agents)", 174.

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