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The Mother's Unnarratable Pleasure and the Submerged Plot of *Persuasion*

What do we know about Anne Elliot's mother? The narrator's extremely brief account seems to leave little room for speculation, as she appears never to have deviated far from the norms associated with the time, place, and circumstances in which she lived. Yet even before Anne is introduced to us as a woman disappointed in love, a woman who, "forced into prudence in her youth . . . learned romance as she grew older" (29), she is introduced to us as a motherless daughter, one in whom Lady Elliot's closest friend "could fancy the mother to revive again" (7). In fact, the marriage plot of *Persuasion* is constantly influenced by a submerged plot in which Anne seeks her absent mother's story and finds it by repeating her mother's experience. The little we are told about Lady Elliot gives a glimpse into this crucial submerged plot, crucial because it significantly affects our understanding of the family situation Anne must negotiate and of her own reactions to and decisions regarding Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth. Tracing the submerged plot reveals that Anne's quest is to discover that which, in the world of this novel, cannot be narrated: her mother's experience of pleasure. Indeed, one way of understanding why the pleasure Anne ultimately experiences must be delayed is to recognize that, before pleasure can be hers, she must find validation for it in her mother's unnarratable story. In this essay, I shall offer a theoretical account of this concept of a submerged plot and how it relates to other work in narrative theory on plot and progression, relate the submerged plot of the mother's pleasure to previous work on the unnarratable, and build on these theoretical accounts to trace the submerged plot's substantial effects on the surface plot of *Persuasion*.

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THE SUBMERGED PLOT AND NARRATIVE PROGRESSION

The model for reading narrative spatially proposed by Susan Stanford Friedman provides a framework in which to locate the submerged plot of the daughter's engagement with the unnarratable, even as the concept of the submerged plot suggests ways to augment the model. Friedman's subsequent work, including her 1998 *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, advocates a "spatial poetics" that is focused on actual geography, but her 1993 essay on "conceptualizing narrative in spatial terms" ("Spatialization" 19) offers an image of a narrative as a graph. The horizontal axis of the graph is "the sequence of events, whether internal or external, that 'happens'" (15), and the vertical axis is "the space and time the writer and reader occupy as they inscribe and interpret what Kristeva calls the 'subject-in-process' constituted through the 'signifying practice' of the text and its dialogues with literary, social, and historical intertexts" (14). Reading narrative, then, "involves an interpretation of the continuous interplay between the horizontal and vertical narrative coordinates" (14). Friedman characterizes the vertical axis as a complex interweaving of the writer's and the reader's awareness of genre conventions and literary traditions, sensitivity to "repressed political scripts" (17), and recognition of "the interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic" (18). These are instrumental in creating the narrative of the text we read, which of course is the one on the horizontal axis. This axis "follows and is constrained by the linearity of language—the sequence of the sentence that moves horizontally in alphabetic scripts is repeated in the horizontal movement of the plot from 'beginning' to 'end'" (15). For Friedman, then, "the single textual surface of the horizontal narrative" is in contrast to the vertical axis, which is made of up three distinct strands and has "many superimposed surfaces, layered and overwritten like the human psyche" (15). I would suggest, however, that the horizontal axis may be as complex as the vertical axis. Austen's *Persuasion*, I will argue, is a text that demands a re-conceptualizing of the horizontal narrative and reveals that it has distinct strands, as well. Friedman's vertical axis intersects not with a unitary horizontal axis but with at least two horizontal strands: the surface plot tracing Anne's gradual movement toward reunion with Wentworth and the submerged plot of Anne's search for her mother's pleasure. These two horizontal strands intersect at some points and influence one another, and elements of the progression that are not entirely explained by the main character's response to the circumstances in the surface plot are frequently more fully understandable in light of the submerged plot in which the character is also engaged.

Feminist narrative theory, after an initial phase in which critics such as Nancy K. Miller, Susan Winnett, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis focused on plot, has tended over the last twenty years or so to focus more on matters of discourse than of story. Susan Sniader Lanser, in her 1986 essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology" and in the introduction of her *Fictions of Authority* (1992), explains that feminist criticism at the time focused too much on plot and "With a few exceptions . . . does not ordinarily consider the technical aspects of narration" (*Fictions* 4). Lanser concludes her introductory chapter with the idea that "'how?' is a scientific question but 'why?' is not," and she explains that she has "sought . . . to show how particular writers and

texts may have come to use particular narrative strategies” (23–24). Robyn Warhol maintains this view in her *Gendered Interventions* (1989), noting that feminist criticism tended to “[concentrate] on what narratologists would call the ‘story’ (*histoire*) in men’s and women’s novels, or, as Seymour Chatman puts it, ‘the *what* in a narrative that is depicted,’” and she made it her project to “[scrutinize] the ‘discourse’ (*récit*) of mid-nineteenth-century novels, the precise ways in which those stories get told” (viii). Warhol explains, “I propose no new way of understanding *what* Victorian novels are trying to communicate. Instead, I am looking at *how* they try” (viii). Alison Case notes their unity on this issue: “Warhol has joined in Lanser’s appeal to feminist critics to turn from the analysis of *story* (plots, characters, etc.) to that of *discourse*” (8), and explains of her *Plotting Women* (1999) that “my primary focus on narration, on the *how* rather than the *what* of narrative presentation” aligns her work with that of her predecessors (6, original emphasis).

Like these and other feminist narratologists, my objective is, as Case expresses it, to “[merge] feminist criticism’s attention to the politics of representation with the formalist analytic tools and terminological precision of narratology,” and to “reveal the ways gender is woven into the dynamic of novelistic narrative itself, and into our responses to it as narrative” (10). I would, however, like to interrogate the distinction between the “how” and the “what” and suggest that a narratological perspective can illuminate the latter as well as the former. Indeed, whereas story really is the “what” of a novel, plot is not so easily classified. Plot is a series of events narrated in a particular order, but, no matter how complicated the ordering or the telling, we tend to think of plot as narrative’s most transparent element. Though narrators frequently have something to hide, plot appears not to—at a novel’s conclusion, though we may still be pondering the implications of the point of view, forming judgments about character, and drawing conclusions about theme, we assume that the plot, at least, has been fully exposed. However, in his *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks argues, “‘Plot’ in fact seems to me to cut across the *fabula/sjužet* distinction in that to speak of plot is to consider both story elements and their ordering. Plot could be thought of as the interpretive activity elicited by the distinction between *sjužet* and *fabula*, the way we use the one against the other” (13). The word *sjužet* refers specifically, as Brooks explains, to the ordering of events in a narrative, but gestures toward what we call narrative, in contrast to story (*fabula*): Brooks reminds us that plot belongs to both.

Brooks defines plot as an interpretive activity, but a concept of plot that opens its interpretive possibilities even further is James Phelan’s “progression,” which foregrounds the reader’s experience of the events and their arrangement in a text. In *Experiencing Fiction*, Phelan defines progression as “the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics . . . that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics” (3). In his earlier work, *Reading People, Reading Plots*, Phelan explains, “The model of the text implied in my account of progression is double-layered. On this account, the text contains not just the patterns of instabilities, tensions, and resolutions but also the authorial audience’s responses to those patterns” (115). Phelan’s attention to the reader’s part in constituting a narrative connects his approach to Friedman’s, but, whereas Friedman locates the reader’s contribution entirely on the

vertical axis of the narrative, Phelan allows us to see how the reader participates on the horizontal axis as well. The idea of progression provides insight into the complexities of plot and offers a method for tracing submerged plots. At the same time, the idea of the submerged plot further complicates the concept of progression: as the case of *Persuasion* demonstrates, without a systematic way of approaching what lies beneath the surface of the main plot, we risk underreading the synthesis of the textual and readerly dynamics. Analyzing the progression of a novel with attention to the submerged plot enables us to identify the points at which it surfaces and, from those points, to understand that which remains submerged and its impact on the surface plot.

Frequently, elements of a narrative that appear to be expository, merely background, are signs of the submerged plot. These elements are underread or overlooked entirely only in accordance with our ingrained habits, specifically in accordance with what Peter Rabinowitz calls “rules of notice.” Rabinowitz explains:

[W]e know from experience that there are always more details in a text—particularly a novel—than we can ever hope to keep track of, much less account for. We have learned to tame this multiplicity with a number of implicit rules, shared by readers and writers alike, that give priority to certain kinds of details, and that thus help us sort out figures from ground by making a hierarchy of importance. (*Before Reading* 43–44)

Rabinowitz further observes that some writers, certain women writers, for example, may eschew the traditional rules of notice and employ others, and notes, “In a novel based on different rules, however, crucial details may well be invisible to the reader without the proper key” (218). This observation is relevant to *Persuasion*, as is Robyn Warhol’s argument, with reference to Naomi Schor’s *Reading in Detail*, that “The point of lingering in this way at the surface of a text is to take note of details that can be seen as falling into gendered patterns. Indeed, to attend to details is, according to Naomi Schor, particularly appropriate for feminist critics interested in recuperating the feminine” (“Narrating” 74). Warhol focuses on textual details to explain how the unnarratable in the nineteenth-century novel—the body and sexuality—are rendered through metonymy. Sexual pleasure, that of women generally and of mothers especially, remains unnarratable long after sex itself becomes narratable, and my similar approach focuses on details of the surface plot to reveal how this subcategory of the unnarratable is rendered through the interaction of surface and submerged plots.

THE SUBMERGED PLOT OF THE MOTHER’S PLEASURE AND THE UNNARRATABLE

Why, though, should a plot be submerged? Any evidence that material of critical importance to the textual dynamics remains submerged would, we might assume, create distrust between author and reader and between author and authorial audi-

ence, as unreliability creates distrust between narrator and authorial audience. On the contrary, the submerged plot is a means of communicating to the reader elements of the story that are otherwise unnarratable. When Gerald Prince coined the term “unnarratable,” he delineated three categories of unnarratability, the first of which is most relevant to determining the narrative status of the story of the mother’s pleasure in *Persuasion*: “that which, *according to a given narrative*, cannot be narrated . . . because it transgresses a law (social, authorial, generic, formal)” (“Disnarrated” 1). In her essay expanding and putting to new use Prince’s original definition of the unnarratable, Robyn Warhol isolates the transgression of a social law and names this instance “*The antinarratable: what shouldn’t be told because of social convention*” (“Neonarrative” 224). She explains, “Sex in realist Victorian novels, for instance, is always antinarratable,” and this applies to pleasure, as well. Deeply ingrained social values that appear to persist over time and across cultures invest the mother’s story with the power of the socially taboo: a mother’s sexual pleasure can be a threat, real or theoretical, to legitimacy and lines of inheritance, and thus is not to be told.

Traditionally, inheritance is associated with the father. The father’s past, his story, is the one that fixes the social standing of his offspring; the father’s legacy—usually to a son—might include a fortune, property, or at least a family name that commands respect. So the father’s story is the official, public story, and there are reasons for him to make it known. However, the one story the mother possesses uniquely is always the true story of the conception of her child. Lawrence Stone quotes the Roman jurist Gaius, who said, in essence, “Maternity is a fact, paternity is a matter of opinion” (7); or, as Hortense Spillers has put it, “Mama’s baby, Papa’s maybe.” Yet the mother, who does not, traditionally, have material benefits to bequeath, is only allowed, officially, one story: that she has been sexually faithful to her husband so that their children are legitimate and thus worthy to receive the father’s legacy. Only the mother knows for sure whether the child’s legal father is really the only candidate for its paternity. The mother’s story, though it is the most true account of the origin of the individual, is not the official story, and remains private. David Lloyd, with reference to Frederick Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, characterizes the mother’s story further:

[P]atriarchy never seeks to derive the truth claims of its lines of descent (or ascent) from any final biological certainty as to the identity of the male child, but rather from the legal fiction established by the performative ceremonies of marriage. Thus an appeal to a probability supported by legislative performance excludes the subversive possibilities of another performance, that of woman’s possibly unbounded pursuit of pleasure. (*Anomalous States* 80)

As Lloyd explains, the story of a woman’s sexual pleasure, particularly of a mother’s pleasure, is always obscured, as it might threaten the legitimacy of her children. If a woman finds in sex something more than a means to procreate, if she takes pleasure in sex, even with her own husband, that opens the possibility that she might seek that pleasure even outside of marriage, that she might have taken pleasure in sex even before she was married. The “probability” that she has been faithful, which Lloyd

refers to, seems to decrease, and her “possibly unbounded pursuit of pleasure” becomes a recognizable threat. The mother’s story is silenced because, even in the past thirty years, when the biological fact of paternity need almost never be in question, the long habit persists of considering it subversive.

For this reason, stories of pleasure are elided from the stories of mothers’ lives, yet *Persuasion*, as well as other novels of motherless daughters throughout the history of the novel in English, suggests that the story of the mother’s pleasure is indeed necessary and its unnarratability a problem with which these texts must contend. Friedman’s model is particularly useful in conceptualizing the location of the unnarratable in a text because she specifically posits that at the intersections of the narrative axes we find a “story” that is “‘narrated’ by the reader” (14). As she explains it, “every horizontal narrative has an embedded vertical dimension that is more or less visible and that must be traced by the reader because it has no narrator of its own” (16). Friedman, too, is concerned with that which is not narrated, though for her the focus is on what we generally think of as interpretation itself, or that which is unnarrated though not necessarily unnarratable. Nevertheless, her model opens possibilities for locating the unnarratable in a text as well.

The culture that categorizes the mother’s pleasure as unnarratable encourages the daughter’s complicity in the suppression of the mother’s story without rewarding it, and this encouragement without reward helps to explain why an author such as Austen represents the daughter as resisting that complicity and seeking her mother’s pleasure as well as her own. Although these authors (in the nineteenth century, Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens in *Bleak House* are other notable examples¹) accept the stricture that the mother’s story is unnarratable, they make it recoverable in the story of the daughter, who repeats her experience. Furthermore, when we attend to this recoverable story, we can recognize that it exerts considerable control over the progression of the novel. Even when the heroine appears to be reacting to stimulus generated by the novel’s surface plot—a removal to a new location, changes in her family, the loss or reappearance of a loved one—her actions can be understood fully only when considered in light of the submerged plot of her engagement with the mother’s story. The inaccessibility of the narrative she needs leaves the daughter only one way to know it: to repeat her mother’s experience in her own life. Therefore that unnarratable story is enacted in the daughter’s life, and the narrative of the daughter’s life accumulates layers of significance that are not immediately obvious but which help to explain seemingly anomalous elements of the progression.

THE SUBMERGED PLOT AND THE PROGRESSION OF *PERSUASION*

The submerged plot of Anne Elliot’s search for her mother’s pleasure is integral to the textual and readerly dynamics of *Persuasion*; recognizing its influence answers questions raised by the narrative and increases the nature and depth of our response to Anne’s difficulties and achievements. Indeed, each of Lady Elliot’s

daughters, while appearing entirely occupied with the struggle toward an acceptable marriage within the circumstances established in the surface plot, simultaneously pursues the mother's story, as best she can, with varying degrees of success. In the case of each daughter, the degree of completeness achieved in the submerged plot determines the degree of completeness achieved in the surface plot.² Our understanding of the novel's progression, as well as our resolution of some interpretive puzzles in the narrative, depend on our reference to the submerged plot. Why are Elizabeth and Anne not married? Why should both Elizabeth and Mary behave so differently from Anne? Why must Anne's marriage to Captain Wentworth be delayed for over eight years, and what has occurred in the interim to make it possible? Why should the breach in Henrietta Musgrove's understanding with Charles Hayter be so comparatively easily healed, and what can explain the marriage between Louisa Musgrove and Captain Benwick? These questions and others can be addressed by re-considering the progression of *Persuasion* in light of those moments in the text at which the submerged plot breaks the surface and in light of that which remains always unnarrated.

In his account of the novel's progression in *Experiencing Fiction*, James Phelan demonstrates the usefulness of focusing on what he refers to as the beginning and early middle of the narrative, identifying in them telling differences from Austen's other works. He notes that the launch of the first set of global instabilities is delayed, that it follows a surprisingly lengthy mini-narrative about Sir Walter's financial situation and happens only at the end of the third chapter, also the first moment when "the narrative unequivocally establishes Anne as the protagonist" (36), when the narrator describes Anne walking alone and thinking of an unidentified "he" (Austen 25). Phelan's analysis identifies the launch of the surface plot, "Austen's version of the marriage plot" (*Experiencing* 37), and reveals a great deal about the significance of the delay, but the mini-narrative itself bears more scrutiny, as in it we find the launch of the submerged plot.

The mini-narrative introducing Sir Walter and his indebtedness also describes Lady Elliot and the instability created by her absence. From one point of view, the novel is very much about filling the vacant social position "Lady Elliot." Lady Russell, on whom, we are told, Lady Elliot depended to act as a surrogate mother to her daughters, was the first possible candidate, but she "and Sir Walter, did *not* marry, whatever might have been anticipated on that head by their acquaintance" (7). We are further told of "one or two private disappointments" met by Sir Walter in "very unreasonable applications" (7). Mrs. Clay auditions for the parts of Lady Elliot present and future. Still, all of these possibilities, and the addition of Mr. Elliot's dead wife, are not enough to distract us from the most important contenders, Elizabeth and Anne. The instability created by the vacancy Lady Elliot has left may help to explain why, when we meet them, Elizabeth and Anne are unmarried at twenty-seven and twenty-nine.

The narrator presents us with relatively few facts of Lady Elliot's life, and even those we may overlook as purely obligatory background information. As *Persuasion* opens we are given an excerpt from the Baronetage; although Sir Walter finds in it "his own history" (5), the narrator communicates to the reader very quickly that what

goes unnoticed by Sir Walter may well be of most interest to us, as when we are told that he undervalues his second daughter, whose qualities “must have placed her high with any people of real understanding” (7), in which category the reader will hope to be placed. Also, by contrasting Sir Walter’s feelings about the “book of books” (8) with Elizabeth’s, the narrator alerts us to the fact that the entry contains the stories of several people. In it we may find not only the story of Sir Walter but also of Elizabeth Stevenson, daughter of a landed gentleman in Gloucestershire, who married Walter Elliot in the summer of 1784. One year later she gave birth to a daughter named Elizabeth, and subsequently to three more children, one every other year, the third of her children a still-born son. Ten years later she died, after seventeen years of marriage, when her daughters were sixteen, fourteen, and ten. The girls themselves are referred to as “an awful legacy for a mother to bequeath,” (6) and the idea of the mother’s legacy underlies the text. She has left three young girls “to the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father” (6), which is as much as to say that she has bequeathed to her daughters Sir Walter Elliot for a father, a bequest that requires, to say the least, some explanation—an explanation Lady Elliot can no longer give. The narrator, having introduced Sir Walter, anticipates our curiosity about what kind of woman would marry such a man by including the following, more direct, account of her:

His good looks and his rank had one fair claim on his attachment; since to them he must have owed a wife of very superior character to any thing deserved by his own. Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgment and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards.— She had humoured, or softened, or concealed his failings, and promoted his real respectability for seventeen years; and though not the very happiest being in the world herself, had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them. (6)

This passage begins with the narrator’s speculation as to why Lady Elliot chose this man to marry, suggesting his good looks and his rank as the primary reasons. The narrator assumes that Sir Walter’s rank “must” have been a factor in Lady Elliot’s decision, but also explains that she spent most of her married life trying to make Sir Walter worthy of his rank—that she does so honorably and sensibly suggests that she cannot value rank for itself but only for what it should ideally be. The use of the word “infatuation” in the next sentence seems to put more emphasis on Sir Walter’s “good looks.” We are told that her marriage was her only lapse in “judgment and conduct,” and we may well conclude that in a woman whose values were in all other ways above reproach, only infatuation, which implies the promise of pleasure, could have blinded her to her husband’s faults, however briefly.

Readers of *Persuasion* tend to assume that Lady Elliot’s story is one of suffering only and even exaggerate the unhappiness of her marriage. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Anne “realizes that her mother lived invisibly, unloved, within Sir Walter’s

house" (*Madwoman* 176), and Cheryl Ann Weissman asserts that Anne's legacy from her mother "includes her mother's terrible folly of marrying an unworthy man" ("Doubleness" 206). The narrator is unrelenting on the subject of Sir Walter's deficiencies but is equally insistent that Lady Elliot was well able to manage her unfortunate situation. She was by no means invisible in her own home until she died, and her error in judgment, which nevertheless made her the very capable and respectable mistress of a great house, does not deserve the designation "terrible folly." It seems likely, in contrast, that Lady Elliot's story is one that includes moments of pleasure—she married Sir Walter, as Lady Russell fears Anne will marry Captain Wentworth, because, despite other considerations, his appearance, his manner, and his behavior toward her promised pleasure. We are told that she was not "the very happiest being in the world," but she found comfort in many things, and the reader learns from Anne's own long experience that living with disappointment is not the thing most to be feared.

With close attention to several details that appear merely expository or else primarily to serve the development of another character, we come to understand that it is not Lady Elliot's admirable life that obscures the story of her pleasure, but her death. The insult to the excellent Lady Elliot is to have been, after her death, forgotten. Significantly, the coldness between the Kellynch family and the Dalrymples is solidified when the Dalrymples refuse condolences on the death of Lady Elliot. Thirteen years later, this refusal is entirely overlooked in Sir Walter's haste to rectify his own justifiable but "unlucky omission" on the occasion of a death in the Dalrymple family (139). Sir Walter also appears to have forgotten his wife in that, as the narrator tells us, those he has asked to marry him since her death were ill chosen (7); furthermore, he receives the attentions of the inferior Mrs. Clay with equanimity. Even more important than these proofs that she is forgotten is that, despite her years of care and planning, the family is now in such serious debt as to be forced to leave their home: "While Lady Elliot lived, there had been method, moderation, and economy . . . but with her had died all such right-mindedness" (10). Neither her memory, her standards, nor her example survive her in the mind of her husband.

Comparisons between Lady Elliot's experience and that of her two eldest daughters are established in the novel's first few pages; indeed, despite the fact that Elizabeth Elliot will prove to be a minor character, more than half of the first chapter is devoted to her. We learn a great deal about Elizabeth in these few pages—nearly as much, in fact, as we will ever know—and the effect of the placement of this information is not only the revelation of her character but also the establishment of a context for Anne's search. What we learn about Elizabeth is an encapsulation of her own pursuit of the mother's pleasure, which, though unsuccessful, nevertheless serves to reinforce the necessity of the search. Having inherited her name and, to the extent possible, her position, Elizabeth would seem well placed to know Lady Elliot's story best. We are told that "Elizabeth had succeeded, at sixteen, to all that was possible, of her mother's rights and consequence" (7). The narrator goes on to say that

Thirteen years had seen her mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding and directing with a self-possession and decision which could never have given the idea of her being younger than she was. For thirteen years had she been doing the hon-

ours, and laying down the domestic law at home, and leading the way to the chaise and four, and walking immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country. (8)

Elizabeth appears to feel that her life will follow her mother's in other respects just as easily. We are told that "soon after Lady Elliot's death" Sir Walter insisted upon being introduced to William Walter Elliot, Esq., his "[h]eir presumptive" (9, 6). Her father's kinsman, a man who shares his name and will inherit his house and his title, is the man Elizabeth chooses even before they have met: "She had, while a very young girl, as soon as she had known him to be, in the event of her having no brother, the future baronet, meant to marry him" (9). Elizabeth's firm belief in the appropriateness of this connection is evident when she forgets that he has disappointed her and insulted her family and welcomes his renewed attentions as soon as he deigns to pay them in Bath. Elizabeth repeats a less pleasant aspect of her mother's experience when she is confronted by her father's debts and attempts to make plans for retrenchment. Her rights as eldest daughter should give Elizabeth the advantage over her sisters in understanding her mother's story, but she takes the superficial elements of rank and connection for the whole of the story and thus misinterprets it even as she zealously seeks it. Elizabeth's experience is very like her mother's, but instead of finding in it a fuller understanding of her mother's story and, subsequently, moving forward in a new direction of her own, Elizabeth moves backward, confusing learning her mother's story with living her mother's life.

As she steps into her mother's place, Elizabeth appears to be in a kind of denial of her mother's death, even a denial of the passage of time. The reader wonders at Elizabeth's assumption that her father will not marry again, and at her insistence that he is in no danger from Mrs. Clay; indeed, according to Anne's friend Mrs. Smith, there is "among Sir Walter's acquaintance . . . general . . . surprise that Miss Elliot should be apparently blind to the danger" (193). Elizabeth seems to think of her father as still married; to some degree, she thinks of him as married to herself. Her response to Anne's warning is to insist haughtily, "as I have a great deal more at stake on this point than any body else can have, I think it rather unnecessary in you to be advising me" (34). Elizabeth thinks of herself as more or less settled, as well; we are told that "she had the consciousness of being nine-and-twenty, to give her some regrets and some apprehensions" (8), yet she does not hurry to marry, although "the men are all wild after Miss Elliot" (167). Elizabeth is puzzling because, although she is not free from anxiety about the passing of time, she nevertheless behaves as if she has all the time in the world. She is encouraged in this feeling by her own appearance; the narrator explains,

It sometimes happens, that a woman is handsomer at twenty-nine than she was ten years before; and, generally speaking, if there has been neither ill health nor anxiety, it is a time of life at which scarcely any charm is lost. It was so with Elizabeth; still the same handsome Miss Elliot that she had begun to be thirteen years ago; and Sir Walter might be excused, therefore, in forgetting her age, or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever . . . (8)

Despite her awareness of “her approach to the years of danger” (8), Elizabeth seems to feel that time has stood still, and this feeling is only enhanced by the fact that she finds herself back in the company of, and with exactly the same intentions toward and hopes regarding, her cousin Mr. Elliot, whom she last saw when she was sixteen or seventeen and “in her first bloom” (9). Her feeling that time has been suspended and her inability to distinguish Lady Elliot from the position she has vacated help to account for Elizabeth’s indecision as to which Lady Elliot she intends to be—the present or the future. In this way she is comparable to her friend, Mrs. Clay; that she is blind to Mrs. Clay’s intentions makes Elizabeth’s confusion the more evident. Elizabeth tries to create her own situation in the style of her mother’s—to experience for herself what her mother experienced before her. Elizabeth is dedicated to the pursuit of her mother’s story, but she is a poor interpreter of it, and her failure to find pleasure, inside or outside of marriage, implies that she has been unable to find it in her mother’s story, which she does not know how to value. Elizabeth’s regard for rank and social forms leads her into the misapprehension that her mother’s place can be filled, encourages her attempt to deny that time is passing, and stymies her in her quest for pleasure of her own.

We are guided to judge Elizabeth’s character harshly, and the explicit contrast between Elizabeth and Anne in the course of the first three chapters encourages us to hope that Anne may yet be more successful than her elder sister in this regard. Still, Elizabeth’s example reveals the difficulty of the quest and the dangers of failure, as does the example of Anne’s younger sister, Mary, who is introduced at length when Anne arrives in Uppercross in the fifth chapter. The characterization of Mary Elliot Musgrove as, in Jan Fergus’s terms, “a relentless whiner” (“Mary Musgrove” 69) contributes to the humor of Austen’s novel, but also raises the question of why she whines. Fergus finds causes of Mary’s imagined suffering in the particularities of her own life: each of her sisters was favored by a parent, but Mary was neglected; Mary was the youngest when her mother died; Mary is less attractive than Elizabeth and Anne, and even finds herself to be Charles Musgrove’s second choice after Anne. These are indeed likely causes, but the primary cause may well lie in what the sisters share: a truncated version of their mother’s life story in which Lady Elliot appears an under-appreciated and misused wife who died young and was then forgotten by those closest to her. Mary, the only one of the sisters who has followed her mother’s example and become a wife, is not, apparently, ill, but she certainly feels her complaints deeply. In direct contrast to Elizabeth, who makes the mistake of imagining that time stands still, Mary is always moving forward in imagination to her own end, and her main concern is how others, especially her husband, will respond to her illness and death.

When Anne arrives at Uppercross, summoned there because Mary was “foreseeing that she should not have a day’s health all the autumn” (32), Mary complains, “So, you are come at last! I began to think I should never see you. I am so ill I can hardly speak” (36). She is especially angry at Charles, who has gone out shooting: “He would go, though I told him how ill I was” (36). Mary desires constant proof that her life has meaning for those around her, that she is thought of, that her needs and concerns are strong enough to influence the actions of others. Anne is the confidante of both husband and wife, and even as Charles tells her, “I wish you could per-

suade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill," Mary tells her, "I do believe if Charles were to see me dying, he would not think there was any thing the matter with me" (42). This last is the crux of the matter: Mary is compelled continually to reassure herself that Charles would miss her, would remember her, if she died. Her correct but incomplete understanding of her mother's story leaves her with this comic but also debilitating mental habit of wondering, as it were, who would come to her funeral. In Mary, the impulse toward the mother's story is a fixation on her death without a true understanding of her life. She mistakenly assumes that if she can escape the ignominy of being forgotten, as her mother was, that in itself will afford access to pleasure. Therefore, she demands constant attention, and she fears nothing more than being left behind or left out.

These early accounts of Mary's and Elizabeth's failed quests provide context for Anne's quest, which also includes elements puzzling to readers. Given that Anne found pleasure at the age of nineteen with the man she loves, and that both pleasure and love prove lasting and real, what does it mean that Anne was once persuaded to reject that pleasure? Why is it necessary that she and Wentworth be separated at all, and, if only for the explicit reasons, why could they not have been reunited just two years after their broken engagement, when Wentworth had made his fortune? What is it that has changed after eight and a half years, and what is gained in the interval? These matters, which are difficult to account for with reference to the surface plot alone, are more fully explained by the submerged plot of Anne's engagement with her mother's story. In his reading of *Persuasion*, Phelan concludes that "the layered rhetorical communications of the progression show Austen, while ultimately committed to her narrative comedy, exploring a deeper sense of pain, loss, undeserved misfortune, and the irrevocable quality of some mistakes than she ever has before" (*Experiencing* 50). In support of this conclusion, he notes of the separation between Anne and Wentworth that "those eight years are far from being a necessary route to the happy outcome" (*ibid.* 50). Phelan's model does not account for what is gained during the eight years—they are only to be regretted, the result of an error. Further, Phelan's reading emphasizes that, given the narrative situation as Austen defines it, to some extent Anne "can only be herself and wait" (39): she is constrained by circumstances from acting to bring about the change she desires even while her mind and heart are fully aware of what she has lost and has yet to lose.³ He argues that one distinctive characteristic of the novel is that "Austen is working with a progression in which her protagonist has no internal instability that she needs to overcome"; that is, Anne need undergo no change of feeling or of character (38–39). Phelan observes that this challenges Austen to find ways to "make Anne a significant agent of her own happiness," which is crucial for an "aesthetically satisfying" progression (39). Attention to the submerged plot suggests that Anne is less passive than she at first appears, that she is actively engaged in a quest on which the events in the surface plot depend. Indeed, Anne need not change in character, nor in her feelings for Wentworth, but her feelings about pleasure need, if not alteration, then at least validation. Before she can be reunited with Wentworth, she must recover the story that has been denied her; her successful quest for that story is as necessary for the novel's completion as the change in Wentworth's feelings.⁴

Anne learns her mother's unnarratable story by repeating elements of it.⁵ As Anne comes slowly into focus as the novel's main character, she lives in her mother's house, surrounded by the people who surrounded Lady Elliot. Anne's closest friend is Lady Russell, who was also her mother's closest friend. As her mother has been forgotten since her death, she herself is consistently overlooked and forgotten by her father and Elizabeth. Neither of them appears to remember her attachment to Frederick Wentworth, neither would think to consult her regarding plans for retrenchment, neither considers her feelings as they demonstrate their preference for the company of Mrs. Clay. These conditions have long been familiar to Anne; new opportunities to know her mother's experience are opened when Anne, like her mother, feels the shame of Sir Walter's debts and makes plans for the discharging of them. As readers, we are likely to assume these similarities function primarily as characterization, establishing Anne as, like her mother, admirable and longsuffering among people who are unworthy of her. Yet these details convey not only static character traits but events that Anne lives every day: they are also matters of progression.

The resolution of the initial mini-narrative is that Anne expects to leave Kellynch for Bath, a trip she has made twice before—once immediately after her mother's death, and once following the end of her engagement to Captain Wentworth (15)—and which she dreads. Happily, Anne is reprieved at the last moment when "Something occurred . . . to give her a different duty" (32): Mary requests that Anne come to stay with her. Further, her trip to Uppercross is "diversified in a way which she had not at all imagined" when she accompanies the others to Lyme (88). That Anne's visits to Uppercross and Lyme are presented as interruptions of Anne's true course, interludes in which she may well feel herself more observer than actor, may help to explain why, as Phelan describes the Uppercross section of the novel, "Consistent with the narrative situation in which it is Wentworth rather than Anne who must change, Austen's approach to the voyage is to show Anne's essentially static situation as she watches Wentworth become increasingly involved with Louisa Musgrove" (*Experiencing* 40). Indeed, Anne's progress in the surface plot is minimal in this section, but her progress in the submerged plot is more substantial.

In her role as an observer, Anne is forced to witness the man she loves take a considerable and very public interest in another woman, but this is not all. She also witnesses the courtships and engagements of two sisters, which progress rapidly and, to all appearances, successfully. The reader is struck, as Anne must be, by the relative ease, compared to Anne and her sister Elizabeth, with which Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove manage their attachments. We may be tempted to think of the Musgroves as less complex, but in fact the two sets of sisters have a good deal in common. The eldest sisters both feel an attachment of very long standing to a cousin, and the younger sisters both admire and are admired by the same men—Captain Wentworth and Captain Benwick. In Henrietta's relationship with Charles Hayter, as in Anne's relationship with Wentworth, an understanding is breached but healed later to the satisfaction of all. What they have in common heightens the contrast between the Musgroves' early marriages and the Elliots' deferred ones. Differences of character and even of age account for the contrast to some extent, but more than this Henrietta and Louisa manifest an openness to and a confidence in pleasure that remains

out of Elizabeth's reach and that is unavailable to Anne until she completes her quest. Dispiriting though the contrast must be to Anne, and painful as it is to see Louisa the object of Wentworth's attention, Anne may, obliquely, learn something of her mother's story as she observes them. An implicit comparison of their families on the narrative's first page suggests that Louisa may be positioned quite similarly to the young Elizabeth Stevenson herself. Louisa's father is described as "Charles Musgrove, Esq. of Uppercross, in the 'county of Somerset,' and Elizabeth's as "James Stevenson, Esq. of South Park, in the county of Gloucester" (5). If Louisa's upbringing and home life repeats Elizabeth's in some respects, then Louisa's obvious pleasure in Captain Wentworth may reveal something to Anne about the pleasure that encouraged Elizabeth Stevenson to become Lady Elliot; as Judy Van Sickle Johnson reminds us with reference to Louisa, "This is a novel in which a young woman leaps off a sea wall because the sensation of being in a man's arms is delightful to her" ("Bodily Frame" 60).

Anne is afforded more direct knowledge of her mother's experience as her good judgment, practicality, and compassion become more efficacious and more appreciated—by those who are capable of doing so—throughout the episodes in Uppercross and Lyme. At Kellynch, Anne's suggestions for retrenchment are disregarded entirely, and the situation seems little better at Uppercross, where her attention to Mary is as much taken for granted as her piano accompaniment to the dancing of the Miss Musgroves. Her nursing of her nephew after his fall is no more appreciated than her other contributions, but she herself admits its importance, and "her usefulness to little Charles would always give some sweetness to the memory of her . . . visit" (87). Her usefulness is perhaps first appreciated by Captain Benwick, and by Captain Harville on his behalf, who tells Anne "you have done a good deed in making that poor fellow talk so much" (100). Anne's clear-headed behavior following Louisa's accident earn her Wentworth's earnest plea that she stay in Lyme and the Musgroves' "dread" of her leaving Uppercross (114). In her usefulness to others Anne is the opposite of her sisters, of Elizabeth, whose idea of retrenchment is to curtail charitable giving, and of Mary, who regards her child's accident as an imposition on her dinner plans and Captain Benwick's melancholy silence as a personal insult. Like her mother, Anne learns to make use of her own gifts even in service of those who cannot value them and to find friendship with those who can.

Arriving in Bath offers Anne an opportunity to repeat a final, crucial part of her mother's experience: her acquaintance with Mr. Elliot provides her with the experience of being courted and honestly admired by a man who is charming and agreeable, who is fortunate in having "something of the Elliot countenance" (99), who shares her father's name and who will inherit her father's title and land—a man, in fact, like her father. Anne is sensible of the great advantage of a marriage with Mr. Elliot voiced clearly by Lady Russell:

I own that to be able to regard you as the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot—to look forward and see you occupying your dear mother's place, succeeding to all her rights, and all her popularity, as well as to all her virtues, would be the highest possible gratification to me.—You are your mother's self

in countenance and disposition; and if I might be allowed to fancy you such as she was, in situation, and name, and home, presiding and blessing in the same spot, and only superior to her in being more highly valued! (150)

Lady Russell is still very persuasive, and her effect on Anne is strong: "For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched. The idea of becoming what her mother had been; of having the precious name of 'Lady Elliot' first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it her home again, her home for ever, was a charm which she could not immediately resist" (150). Here the submerged plot breaks the surface: not only does Anne consider marriage with her cousin because she believes Wentworth to be out of reach forever, or because her cousin is an eligible match, but also because to feel drawn to Mr. Elliot is to feel what her mother had felt before her. When Anne learns her cousin's true character from Mrs. Smith, her shock may be akin to what her mother experienced when, a married woman, she was forced to face the serious shortcomings of her husband: the faults of both Sir Walter and Mr. Elliot manifest themselves in their handling of money, among other things.

Yet Anne has not needed Mrs. Smith's revelation to distrust her cousin: what she does know of her mother's story has prepared her to recognize what is wrong in him. This is a man whose wife has been dead for only seven months, yet who is steadily courting another woman. Anne observes that Mr. Elliot, like her father, will not sufficiently value his wife, and he has demonstrated already that he will not remember her. Indeed, Anne finds herself the object of the attention of two men who have, it appears, forgotten their past attachments even while still in mourning. Other characters take such matters more lightly than Anne. When Anne reminds Mrs. Smith that "Mr. Elliot's wife has not been dead much above half a year. He ought not to be supposed to be paying his addresses to any one" (184), Mrs. Smith dismisses her objection. Even Lady Russell is willing to suspend her judgment of Captain Benwick for his similar behavior; she tells Mary that she must see Captain Benwick for herself before judging whether "[s]uch a heart" is worth having (123). But Anne stands by her own judgment, and she learns from their attentions to her that, whether one is the "low woman" (189) Mr. Elliot has married and lost or the saintly Fanny Harville, apparently forgotten by Benwick, one cannot depend upon being remembered for even a year after one's death.

Thus, Anne experiences the charm and pleasure of her mother's attachment to her father, the disillusionment of such an attachment, and the pain of knowing oneself to be forgettable. This is the story Anne needs to learn before giving herself completely to Wentworth. Given what she learns, we are not surprised that for Anne the mark of a great love is "loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (221). She regrets that her mother was not the object of this kind of love, and values her love for Wentworth in part for its very longevity: love, in their case, has nearly outlived hope. Anne feels secure in Wentworth's ability to value her, and to remember her. He says, and means, "A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!—He ought not—he does not" (173). Eight years have not made him forget Anne, even though "he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done" (226). We are to understand that in her relationship with Wentworth Anne will not have to pay for her pleasure by being forgotten.

Still, to accept Anne's judgment and Wentworth's declaration raises questions about his reaction to Louisa Musgrove's accident at Lyme. Wentworth's flirtation with Louisa cannot be comparable in seriousness to Mr. Elliot's marriage or Captain Benwick's engagement, but the fact remains that when Louisa is in a state resembling death, Captain Wentworth cannot get away fast enough. We understand clearly his motives: he realizes he has "entangled himself" (227) at the same time that he realizes that he cannot love Louisa. But what is the weight of his forgetting Louisa in the context of Anne's search for reassurance that she herself will not be forgotten? An element of Louisa's situation that we are likely to underread without the guidance of the submerged plot is that she lies unconscious and then recovers in the Harvilles' home. When Louisa falls from the sea wall and Henrietta faints at the sight, the surrounding crowd spread the word that there are "two dead young ladies" (103), so Louisa's lifeless form is doubled from the start. When she is recuperating, we may detect another, subtler, doubling, this time with Fanny Harville, whom Captain Benwick's mourning has kept in everyone's mind. The effect of this on Captain Wentworth, who calls Fanny "a very superior creature" (173), is to turn his mind to the superior woman he has lost.

The similarity between Benwick and Fanny's relationship and Wentworth and Anne's is pronounced. Although Benwick and Fanny are not prevented from being engaged, they also cannot marry immediately: "They had been a year or two waiting for fortune and promotion. Fortune came, his prize-money as lieutenant being great,—promotion, too, came at *last*; but Fanny Harville did not live to know it" (90). This is an eventuality Wentworth and Anne might also have faced; indeed, Wentworth's remark that Anne is "[a]ltered beyond his knowledge" (57) may signal his fear that this Anne Elliot, no longer blooming, is unwell. With Louisa lying in the Harville's household, as Fanny must have lain not so long before, Wentworth realizes what it means to him that his loss of Anne may not be irrevocable. This doubling of Louisa and Fanny also helps to explain Captain Benwick's reaction to Louisa's fall, which seems incomprehensible to those who know him, and to many readers, including Loraine Fletcher, who asserts that Benwick's "mourning is mainly if unintentionally fake" ("Time" 84). In attaching himself to Louisa, he is moving backward to a version of his beloved Fanny who has miraculously come back to life.

Even when Wentworth has succeeded with Anne, he still dwells fruitlessly on fantasies of intervening in the past, as when he asks her whether, two years after their broken engagement, when he had fulfilled his promise in his profession, "if I had then written to you, would you have answered my letter? would you, in short, have renewed the engagement then?" (231). He tends toward remorse, remembering an action he might have taken had he not been ruled by resentment born, then too, of remorse. However, Wentworth benefits from Anne's example. She never entertains the idea that she can change the past, and never considers the future to be unduly shadowed by it. She tells him, "I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right" (230). Certainly, Anne might as well believe that she was right, for the power to change her decision is long past, but her willingness to believe is a sign that she is not afraid of the very idea of what might have happened.

She teaches him in general, as she teaches him with regard to the incident at Lyme, that “when the pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure. One does not love a place the less for having suffered in it, unless it has been all suffering, nothing but suffering” (173). Anne is willing to search for traces of pleasure amid suffering, and she recognizes them when she finds them. In the years of her separation from Wentworth and in the course of the narrative, the submerged plot of Anne Elliot’s successful quest for the unnarratable story of her mother’s pleasure makes possible her reconciliation with Wentworth and the completion of the surface plot.

ENDNOTES

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1. My essay “Jane Eyre and the Pursuit of the Mother’s Pleasure” traces Brontë’s similar recovery of the mother’s story in Jane’s.
2. “Completeness,” as Phelan defines it, is “the degree of resolution accompanying the closure” (*Reading* 18). Degree of resolution, in turn, refers to the degree to which the main instabilities (between and among characters) and tensions (between narrator and authorial audience) are worked out.
3. Robyn Warhol also analyzes the constraints on Anne’s ability to act. She finds that looking is a “source of power and control” for Anne (“Look” 30), but also that Anne’s position as focal character forces her to be present and experience painful emotions without being able to seek relief: “By making Anne’s the central consciousness and by placing her body always on the narrative scene no matter how ‘painful’ or ‘agitating’ to Anne the circumstances, the novelist subjects her heroine’s body to a kind of textual violence” (*ibid.* 24).
4. Elizabeth Dalton, in her application of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” to *Persuasion*, reaches conclusions that are opposite to mine and argues that the daughter must reject what her mother stands for in order to access her own pleasure. Dalton establishes the mother as an obstacle between the daughter and her pleasure: “Like the self-sacrificing Lady Elliot, Lady Russell stands for the renunciation of pleasure; she and her persuasion suggest the repressive superego founded on feelings of guilt toward the dead parent” (“Mourning” 52). Dalton concludes that Anne is reunited with Frederick because “she has finally freed herself from the persuasion of Lady Russell, and more important, from that of the dead Lady Elliot” (*ibid.* 59). One problem is that this reading relies on Anne’s final happiness to prove that she has freed herself from the guilt and repression of the mother, but does not explain what has changed to make this freedom possible.
5. Other scholars have noted that Anne repeats her mother’s experience in some respects, but ultimately rejects the opportunity, afforded by the prospect of marriage to her cousin, of living in her place. Susan Peck MacDonald observes that Anne “can and does arrive at a sort of private recreation in which she becomes a wife and (potentially) a mother—like her own mother but not a copy of her mother” (“Absent Mother” 66). Diana Postlethwaite also identifies Anne’s motherlessness as the central problem, and asserts that “Anne Elliot can affirm that she ‘is her mother’s self’ without ‘becoming what her mother had been’” (“Sometimes” 45). For both, repeating her mother’s experience is a temptation that Anne must resist in order to find her own life; I argue, in contrast, that repeating her mother’s experience is a process Anne must go through in order to embrace her own life when she finds it.

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