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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful for the tutelage of Dr. Lisa Vargo, who guided me on my own walk through Jane Austen's Persuasion.

JASMINE REDFORD

What, then, is the Walk?: Reflecting on Pedestrianism in Jane Austen's Persuasion

Only once in recent memory do I recall reading a novel for the first time and finding myself shocked by how ambulatory the characters are. Regarding a contextual reflection of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, I find myself drawn towards all the leisurely walking parities—pedestrians for pleasure!—undertaken by Anne Elliot and her upper-class compatriots.¹ When I noticed how often Austen's characters engage in social walking, I realized that I had not devoted much consideration to the effect of *the walk* in my own post-millennial life until prompted to do so through an Austenian lens. Accordingly, this activity in Austen's world feels far removed from my own geosocial—and chronological!—location: a settler on Treaty 6 territory, in a prairie province otherwise known as Saskatchewan, who, by geographical necessity, drives in her car, isolated, from location to location. Austen's characters engage in the walk as they have the time and money to do so, in addition to having their locations within walking distance; for myself, the demands of onsite employment and the distance(s) between locations in Saskatchewan render *the walk* an impossibility. What is the cultural history of nineteenth-century pedestrianism in England, and why was it so important in literature and polite society alike? What, then, is *the walk*? Alternatively, why is there an absence of *walk* in my own life? Why indulge, with relish, in a city stroll, a promenade, or a pastoral ramble? How does this sociocultural pedestrianism reinforce the distinction between the classes? Within the framework of “the walking party,” *Persuasion* addresses leisure, elitism, manners, mobility, sexuality, and gender—and not all in a linear fashion from “Point A to B”—to both join with and part from “the ceaseless buzz of persons walking” (193). Perhaps Austen's walk, both an exercise in active networking and comfortable independence, is not as far removed from me as I once suspected.

By the end of the eighteenth century, walking narratives had become an established form of literature to not only present the destination as it was, but also to celebrate the writer's experience there—both walking to the desired location and arriving there. These journeys had as much to do with class as they did with adventure, as Alison O'Byrne notes in “Walking,

¹ *Persuasion* was published posthumously in late December of 1817 (sometimes credited as 1818). I am using the 1965 Penguin Books edition featuring a supplemental biography of her life by her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh.

Rambling, and Promenading in Eighteenth-Century London: A Literary and Cultural History”: “Regency rambles were young sporting gentlemen with an appetite for pleasure, idling in the new arcades and shops in Bond Street catering to their fashionable tastes, and lounging by the window of prestigious clubs” (70). O’Byrne asserts that “the new incarnation of the Rambler [was] a gentleman of pleasure idling away the hours in pursuit of pleasure, gallantry, and fashionable entertainment,” and that the ramble itself was “a pursuit of sexual pleasure” (71), such as we see with the fall of *Persuasion*’s Louisa Musgrove after the “ill-judged, ill-fated walk to the Cobb” (Austen 171). Both Louisa’s headstrong jump and Captain Wentworth’s careful cradling of her unconscious body fall within a spectrum of contemporary scandal. As a proper noun, The Ramble is, famously, one of the woodland features of New York City’s Central Park—a picturesque, if not pastoral, landscape that the Central Park Conservatory notes is designed to “evoke the wilderness and provide opportunities for a more intimate and immersive experience of nature” (“The Ramble”). Notably, Central Park is also associated with spheres of physical intimacy, both consensual and non-consensual in nature. O’Byrne’s observation of the ramble as pursuit of leisure and desire is echoed in Austen’s text: “Just as [the ladies] were setting off, the gentlemen returned. They had taken out a young dog, which had spoilt their sport, and sent them back early. Their time, and strength, and spirits were, therefore, exactly ready for this walk, and they entered into it with pleasure” (106).

In *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (1989), Jeffery Robinson states that the walk is “primarily dialectical about mind and images and secondarily about action (or politics) and contemplation (or art)” (41). Pedestrianism, a term Robinson reserves for those who walk “out of choice” (23) and not out of necessity, draws a distinct line between the classes, as, throughout *Persuasion*, Anne and her class-contemporaries often *do* have choice of or access to a vehicle: the carriage. In *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (1997), Robin Jarvis notes that pedestrian tourism gained in popularity by the late 1700s among the educated classes “with the texts it generated being consumed and reviewed in the same way as other travel literature” (12). Less privileged classes have more restrictions imposed on their time and less money, which limits opportunities for leisurely strolls; thus, walking for pleasure is enjoyed by those born to upper-class stations or by those who have made it to those stations on luck and moxie, like the Admirals and Captains of *Persuasion*. Today, the pleasure walk or pastoral ramble is similarly enjoyed by those with the time and/or resources to walk their dogs, sightsee, or chat with their contemporaries while enjoying good weather.

As the century turned, “the rise of domestic tourism in the eighteenth century was a result in part of better roads and an increase of disposable income among the wealthier middling sorts and gentry” (O’Byrne 23). But above these practicalities, the walk was “inextricably part of the political and patriotic education of polite young men” (23). Emphasis was placed on the enjoyment of domestic travel not only for leisure’s sake but for the demonstration of nationalism—know thyself as thy British and therefore colonial. Pleasure in knowing and discovering your own locality was emphasized and “[a]s a result, the young nobility abroad would be less likely to be ‘seduced’ by other cultures” (23).

Austen's Anne does not participate in *the walk* necessarily for nationalistic purposes and appears to be what Jarvis refers to as a cross between a philosophical walker (43) and an aesthetic walker (49). Arguably, Robinson would classify Anne as a pastoral walker as "Romanticism [had] made walking an idyllic pastime" (39). These walks, by their nature, eschewed urban, industrialized spaces. The Romantic/anti-industrial walk remains part of an imperial legacy in the colonial world and in carefully cultivated parks within newly gentrified neighbourhoods. For her part, Anne participates in the pleasures of pastoralism as found, and documented, on her walk: "Her *pleasure* in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn" (Austen 121). In this, and within Anne, Austen continues the tradition of walking literature—exercise, art, and naturalism. Today, Anne would no doubt be vlogging, or perhaps, Instagramming her observational pleasure by documenting and reflecting upon autumn's glory.

Robinson argues that the walk, certainly the Romantic walk, was less a travelogue and more an exercise in critical, biographical, and autobiographical reflection(s). With Anne operating as a sanctioned voyeur, through her shrewd observations not only of the environments around her but, more so, of the people and relationships around her, I find Robinson's perspective to be accurate. This reflection is also acknowledged by Joanna Guldi in "The History of Walking and the Digital Turn: Stride and Lounge in London, 1808-1851": "Walking became a manner of identity-making thanks to a variety of observational and representational practices inherited from the eighteenth century" (123). For men, walking was more akin to pursuit and conquest; for women, walking was a way to advance an otherwise static life—to otherwise, literally and figuratively, go on a journey. Notably, *safe walking*, then as now, is a gendered activity. Statistically, the isolated male walker is likely to enjoy a higher degree of safety, while reports of single feminine walkers, hikers, or joggers found assaulted or murdered in otherwise pastoral rambles have evolved from an unhappy statistic to a general trope.

Despite its near-centennial distance from *Persuasion's* publication, Bessie Putnam, writing for the *Journal of Education* in 1915, sheds some light on why a young lady might initiate her own ramble, as young ladies may arguably enhance their pleasure "not at the half-trotting pace of the professional pedestrian in his race from ocean to ocean, but at a leisurely gait, resting when tired, and noting the points of interest along the way" (74). Additionally, and most importantly, Putnam notes that it is "[o]nly the pedestrian [who is] really independent" (74). This observation serves Anne's untrammelled nature, as characterized by her "almost daily walk" (Austen 43) and her general wariness of sacrificing her walks for carriage rides. Here, Anne uses walking as a device of independence and an excuse to isolate herself and assuage her social anxiety: "The carriage would not accommodate so many. I walk: I prefer walking" (258). Yet, Anne's class and gender prevent her from otherwise walking alone. Here, women are expected to walk in groups with men to protect and steward them, as the mores and social restrictions of the era prevented unmarried folk on opposite ends of the gender binary from walking *alone together*. Yet, in opposition to my earlier observation (and the gendered sociocultural limitations facing Austen's walkers), while also walking to network and engage with one's fellow humans, the walk can be used to effectively remove oneself from hubs of social activity

and plunge the participant into desired isolation—alone in the proverbial, ambulatory crowd. Today’s pursuer of *alone time* may also employ the use of an additional shield: headphones.

Much of the action (relationship shifts between characters) takes place during the rambles, which piqued my interest in the sociological value of the walk. Additionally, the issues and feelings of the moment at hand colour the walk itself; vexed by her interactions with her family and Captain Wentworth, Anne “closed the fatigues of the present by a toilsome walk to Camden Place” (335). Yet walks, then as now, are also employed pragmatically for one’s health as Admiral Croft was “ordered to walk to keep off the gout” (245), and under this flag of health does Anne accompany Croft for a “a snug walk together” (247). This walk is a walk of camaraderie, and good things appropriately arise in the text shortly thereafter. The walking party in *Persuasion* operates then as the pastoral golf game (or impromptu parking lot meeting) operates today; it is a pleasurable, low-impact, sociocultural networking event engaged in by those who can afford the time. Or perhaps, like Anne, one would just like to play a game of golf on their own, for “life is broad or narrow, not in accordance with our surroundings so much as with our actual selves” (Putnam 74).

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