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ENGL 4505

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*Introduction: What’s Wrong with Mrs. Clay?*

In Jane Austen’s 1817 novel *Persuasion*, Mrs. Clay is a character that doesn’t get the respect she deserves. By Lady Russell’s estimation, she’s a “very dangerous companion” (Austen 13). Anne, too, thinks of the possible match between Mrs. Clay and Sir Elliot as an “evil” one (103). Even the narrator indicates that her greatest trait is her “art of pleasing” (12), which insinuates that Mrs. Clay is a flatterer or a flirt, neither of which are very admirable qualities.

My project is to provide a fuller view of Mrs. Clay. After all, for receiving such disdain she is not so unlike many of Austen’s other characters: She is a woman who wants to increase her means through marriage. If we set aside the prejudice of Anne, for who really wants their father to get remarried to someone around the same age as themselves, then it’s possible to view Mrs. Clay as a quite sympathetic character. She’s had what we understand to be an “unprosperous marriage” that has left her with two children to provide for (Austen 12). So, with no money and a large burden, why should we view Mrs. Clay with any less sympathy than we might an Elizabeth Bennet or an Elinor Dashwood? There is only one thing that suspends our sympathy: Mrs. Clay gives us no illusion that she’s in love. She’s playing a game, and it’s this very deviousness that makes her a great character to explore for fan-fiction.

As to the structure of the following fan-fiction, I’ve used a technique very common within the genre. Similar to, for instance, Eliza111’s fiction “Miss Bickerton and the Gypsies,” I’ve pulled an ambiguous situation out of the text to explore it in greater detail. Specifically, I focus on the secret meeting between Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay in Chapter 22. Anne speculates as to the contents of this meeting, but what if she misinterpreted the situation entirely? What if, instead of Mr. Elliot lecturing Mrs. Clay, as Anne supposes, the two are instead striking a deal, and a deal, no less, that Mrs. Clay is in full control of? The text itself doesn’t disallow such a jump. Indeed, somehow Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay are familiar enough to go back to London together by the end of the novel, so it’s probable that there is much more to this relationship than the novel allows us to see. Mrs. Clay, in addition to her ability to please, is also “clever” (Austen 12), and she’s even clever enough that her “cunning” may be a match for that of Mr. Elliot (177). This fan-fiction may actually be summed up quite nicely with the following quotation from Austen’s original text, though note how I’ve excluded the overt mention of a possible marriage between Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay so as to allow Mrs. Clay a larger degree of power and to maintain their competitive division: “…it is now a doubtful point whether his cunning, or hers, may finally carry the day…” (177).

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. 2nd ed., edited by Patricia Meyer Spacks, W.W. Norton and Co., 2013.

Eliza111. “Miss Bickerton and the Gypsies.” FanFiction.net. 19 Dec 2017. Web. 11 Apr 2018. <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12764586/1/Miss-Bickerton-and-the-Gypsies>>

*Mrs. Clay is Austen’s O.G.*

“Well, it’s clear that he’s afraid of me,” thought Mrs. Clay as she walked down the street. She was on an errand of Elizabeth’s to drop off a dinner invitation to an acquaintance for later this week. Truly, it was hard to keep track of Elizabeth’s many different acquaintances, but Mrs. Clay was not one to complain. Her frequent outings with Elizabeth were precisely the reason why she maintained the friendship. The want of connection and fortune, for a thirty-five-year-old widow, no less, made our dear Mrs. Clay grateful for such a companion as Elizabeth.

On arriving at the residence of a Miss-----, Mrs. Clay, instead of turning back up the road towards Camden-place, walked in the opposite direction. She had her own agenda to settle, now that she had discharged Elizabeth’s convenient errand. Just yesterday, Mr. Elliot had taken the advantage of a heated conversation between Sir Walter and Elizabeth – “His countenance, Elizabeth, is of the worst sort! We could never bring him, and especially not his sister, before Lady Dalrymple” -- to ask her for a meeting the following day. He quickly threw out a time and place, and then, turning his attention back to the party, revealed a coming departure to last for some few days.

“Really, he must think me a threat,” she said under her breath as she made her way to the appointed spot. It made her smile to think about how Mr. Elliot, a man of such consequence, should be threatened by her. Hard work, it seems, does bear fruit after all.

She rounded a corner to see Mr. Elliot leaning with his back up against the wall of the White Hart Inn. Upon seeing her, he pushed off the wall and closed the distance between them such that they came to rest in front of the inn’s street-side windows.

“I’m sure you understand why I asked you here.”

“Indeed, Mr. Elliot, I haven’t the slightest idea. I thought I had made it clear to you previously that I had no intention at present of leaving off Sir Walter.”

“Yes, right. Very clear.” Mr. Elliot looked down for a moment and, once he met her eyes again, Mrs. Clay thought she detected a hint of dissatisfaction in his look. “But I have reflected more upon your last intimation that it would take a very large change in circumstances for you to quit your current design upon Sir Walter.”

At this, Mrs. Clay became much more interested in the man before her. She had been preparing herself much of last night to intimidate Mr. Elliot, to set the fear of losing his baronetcy just a little bit deeper. It was, in her mind, her game to lose, and she did not plan on losing it. She had far too much at stake.

“I sent a letter to make sure of my accounts. That letter has since been returned with an answer that I think will satisfy us both.”

“Go on.”

“I have come to believe that your hold over Sir Walter is not one that I can break myself, though I have tried. So the last option at my disposal is to change those circumstances which force you to make your advances upon Sir Walter.”

“Are you offering marriage, Mr. Elliot? To save your baronetcy – No, to *try* to save your baronetcy, for there is no certainty even in this attempt, you would marry me?”

In her astonishment at such a perceived advance, Mrs. Clay could hardly keep from laughing. Sir Walter was a catch, but Mr. Eliot was a step above what she could have imagined for herself.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mrs. Clay. I would hardly stoop so low.” His countenance held the image of such disgust that Mrs. Clay had to check her previous enthusiasm. “What I intend,” continued Mr. Elliot, “is to set you up somewhere. Not in Bath. You would certainly need to move out of Bath so that Sir Walter would not be tempted to continue his affections. But I can assure you that if you will leave now, close off your association with Sir Elliot, and go out to the country somewhere, then I will make sure that you and your children are comfortable.”

As he finished he gave her a nervous look of expectation. His anxiety was well placed. To be sure, he knew her well enough now to know that her mind resisted anything that did not suit her perfectly.

“London.”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Elliot replied.

“If we do this, I want to stay in London.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. London will increase the expense ten-fold. It’s out of the question.”

“Are you so sure, Mr. Elliot? I think that settling anywhere else would depreciate my value. You, perhaps, are not so sure of yourself. I, however, am very confident in my success with Sir Walter. Why should a small cottage in the country satisfy me when I could have Kellynch? It’s seems to me, Mr. Elliot, that it’s about time for you to decide how much a baronetcy is worth to you.”

She gave him a devious smile. Another woman, perhaps, might have felt for his position. Mrs. Clay, though, had been through much to harden her to the so-called plights of the fortunate. Mr. Elliot’s petty struggles over titles was of concern to her only insofar as it allowed her to twist his greed into an establishment for herself and her children.

“Fine. London it is.”

“Excellent, Mr. Elliot. You mentioned you were going out of town on business yesterday. Draw up the agreement while you’re away, and we can put the matter to rest.” Mr. Elliot nodded his assent and turned to go on his way.

Mrs. Clay stopped by the post office on her journey back to Camden-place to drop off a short line to her father about her discourse with Mr. Elliot. She thought that he may be of service. It would not surprise her in the slightest if Mr. Elliot tried to find some way to edge her out of a true deal, and she would do everything in her power to get what was hers.

Upon arriving back at Camden-place, she set about making herself as pleasing as possible to Elizabeth and her father, which had been her principal duty for quite some time now. She couldn’t put as much energy into the act as usual, however. The meeting with Mr. Elliot sat at the front of her mind still. To think that she might finally be resettled. Oh, what a change of fortune!

She wondered how her late husband would feel if he could see her now. She smirked at the idea. Often, she had heard her father describe how unfortunate it was that she should have such an unprosperous marriage. Even he didn’t know the extent of her sufferings. To be left without a fortune, worse yet with debt, and with two children to care for, her situation appeared bad enough. At least she had some recourse to fix those misfortunes. Not much, granted, but some. Sir Elliot was to be her way out, and now his heir, just as he ought, had supplanted him.

Anne’s return to Camden-place broke through her thoughts. Mrs. Clay had never received much kindness from the young woman, try as she might to work on her as she did the rest of the family. Lady Russell had poisoned her, no doubt, with thoughts of her own significance. The Elliot pride, in all of its manifestations, was insufferable. Despite her lack of civility, however, Mrs. Clay had never before discerned so much interest in herself from that young woman as at the current moment. It seemed as if Anne studied her face intensely. For what, Mrs. Clay knew not.

At a time when Elizabeth and Sir Elliot were occupied in one another’s conversation, Anne made her way over to Mrs. Clay.

“I was surprised to see you this morning, Mrs. Clay. I spotted yourself and Mr. Elliot in deep conversation from the window of White Hart.”

Mrs. Clay couldn’t hide her initial shock, but she composed herself enough to reply tolerably.

“Yes, Miss Anne. I had the pleasure of running into Mr. Elliot on my way back from completing an errand for you sister.”

“And I hope you found him well. Not too severe?”

The conversation lapsed for a brief moment. Mrs. Clay did not quite understand how to respond to such an enquiry. It appeared that Anne had come by some dubious knowledge as to what had occurred during their conference.

“No, not at all Miss Anne. Mr. Elliot was as generous and obliging as usual.”

“Was he truly?” Anne’s face showed a degree of skepticism. “Well I guess he does have a great capacity for acting how he will.”

With a slight bow of her head, Anne moved away, leaving Mrs. Clay in a state of confusion. Anne’s interpretation obviously erred in some critical area. Why should Mrs. Clay care, though? As long as Mr. Elliot kept his end, she had secured herself. Anne could keep her opinions. It was nothing to her.

In the following days, Mr. Elliot managed to find her alone in the sitting room.

“I have the papers for you,” he said drawing near, “I think you will find I have been generous.”

“I would hope so, Mr. Elliot,” said Mrs. Clay, taking the papers from his reluctantly outstretched hand. “I’m not sure what other recourse you have. You must have heard of Anne’s engagement to Captain Wentworth.”

At that, Mrs. Clay saw his jaw set. “I have,” he replied, and then added, “She will regret the match.”

Mrs. Clay let the comment linger.

They quickly agreed on a new time to meet to finish their settlement before anyone entered the room. Once the articles were set, Mr. Elliot left for London. Mrs. Clay followed shortly after. It wasn’t long before her situation, or at least part of it, reached the ears of their general acquaintances. Rumor had it that she had become his mistress. A mistress of some type might not be far off the mark, but nevertheless Mrs. Clay did not oppose the more scandalous implication. She felt, rather, that if she was careful, she could use it as leverage over Mr. Elliot. Indeed, she still loved her little game, and needed it too, as she couldn’t hope to hold Mr. Elliot by their original agreement alone. So, she kept playing, sometimes by leaving around letters of her secret correspondence with Sir Elliot when Mr. Elliot called, or by stirring up the rumors about the relationship between herself and Mr. Elliot. For that man, at least, Mrs. Clay’s cunning was a constant source of anxiety and bewilderment. Hers was not a game that he was likely to win.

The End.