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Debating *Persuasion*

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Approaches to Teaching Austen's *Persuasion*

Edited by
Marcia McClintock Folsom
and
John Wiltshire

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*For our grandchildren
August, Lorenzo, and Alejandro Folsom
Oscar, Angus, and April Wiltshire*

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MATERIALS

Debating *Persuasion*

Melissa J. Ganz

“Was Anne Elliot right to listen to Lady Russell’s advice and to break off her engagement with Captain Frederick Wentworth?” I ask when I teach *Persuasion*. The question results in lively debates about the tensions between duty and desire, compliance and resolution, and prudence and risk. Students tend to respond to my question, at first, by offering their own views of Anne’s decision and explaining what they would have done had they been in her place. Such comments help students relate to Anne’s plight while highlighting important differences between Austen’s world and our own. But I lead us back to the text: “What does Austen show us about Anne’s decision in the novel?” I ask. Through the discussions that follow, students learn to articulate and defend nuanced arguments while grappling with the formal and ethical implications of Austen’s text. In this essay, I outline my strategies for teaching the novel through this lens.

I developed this approach in an introductory literature class for English majors. The course, *Critical Practices and Processes in Literary Studies*, seeks to hone students’ close reading and critical writing skills while offering an overview of British literature from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Subtitled *Protest and Rebellion in the British Tradition*, the class is loosely organized around the motif of dissent. We consider formal and thematic rebellions in literature, and the emphasis throughout the course is on respectful dialogue and debate. The class is small (capped at twenty students) and discussion-based and meets for seventy-five minutes twice each week. We read *Persuasion* early in the semester, right after the Romantic poets. Students thus come to the text with some basic understandings of literary and cultural developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The class is familiar, for example, with William Wordsworth’s and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s celebrations of feeling, impulse, and imagination as well as with the Romantics’ critiques of the materialistic values of the day. I ask students to keep these issues in mind as we turn to Austen’s novel.

In our first class on *Persuasion*, we look closely at the opening paragraphs. (I ask for volunteers to read these paragraphs aloud so that we can examine them in detail.) We consider Austen’s portrait of Sir Walter Elliot and his obsession with heritage, evident in his reading and rereading of his family’s history in the Baronetage. Right away, Austen exposes and undermines Sir Walter’s egotism. Next, we look at Austen’s account of Anne’s self-absorbed sister Elizabeth and discuss the neglected position that Anne occupies in the family after her mother’s death. Anne is “nobody with either father or sister,” the narrator explains (6; vol. 1, ch. 1). We consider the heroine’s surprisingly late appearance in the novel—although the narrator mentions Anne in passing in the first few pages, we do not hear her speak until the third chapter—and discuss how this formal choice registers Anne’s lack of agency. We examine, too, Austen’s satire of the Elliots’

overspending as well as the comically short-sighted sacrifices that Sir Walter and Elizabeth propose to make when faced with the need to “retrench” (10). And we look at Austen’s account of Anne’s trusted friend and adviser, Lady Russell. Though “a benevolent, charitable, good woman, and capable of strong attachments,” Lady Russell shares the Elliots’ “prejudices on the side of ancestry”; her “value for rank and consequence . . . blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them” (12; vol. 1, ch. 2). We find, then, at the outset, a mixed assessment of Lady Russell’s judgment and a sharp critique of the Elliots’ vanity.

With Austen’s satire of the Elliot family in mind, we turn to the romantic plot at the heart of the text. We read the narrator’s account of the brief engagement between Anne and Wentworth as well as Anne’s reflections on their relationship after learning that Wentworth’s sister, Sophia Croft, and her husband, the admiral, are interested in renting Kellynch Hall. Eight years earlier, in the summer of 1806, when Wentworth first visited Somersetshire, he and Anne fell in love. “A short period of exquisite felicity followed,” the narrator explains, “and but a short one. — Troubles soon arose”:

Sir Walter, on being applied to, without actually withholding his consent, or saying it should never be, gave it all the negative of great astonishment, great coldness, great silence, and a professed resolution of doing nothing for his daughter. He thought it a very degrading alliance; and Lady Russell, though with more tempered and pardonable pride, received it as a most unfortunate one.

Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind, to throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession; would be, indeed, a throwing away, which she grieved to think of! Anne Elliot, so young; known to so few, to be snatched off by a stranger without alliance or fortune; or rather sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependance! It must not be, if by any fair interference of friendship, any representations from one who had almost a mother’s love, and mother’s rights, it would be prevented. (28–29; vol. 1, ch. 4)

This passage sets up the central conflicts of the novel, and we look closely at it: Austen here pits prudence, security, and wealth against risk, uncertainty, and love. At the same time, we consider Austen’s experiments with narration and point of view. We discuss her use of free indirect discourse and examine the effects of blending third-person, omniscient narration with a limited, first-person perspective. In particular, we consider how the novel invites readers to identify with Lady Russell’s perspective even as it undermines her point of view. Some students find Lady Russell’s arguments compelling; they highlight the negative language that the narrator uses—a “throw[ing] . . . away,” a “youth-killing

dependance" (29)—to describe Anne's engagement. These students note the close connection Lady Russell has to Anne and her concern for Anne's welfare. Others, however, call attention to Lady Russell's alignment with the superficial Sir Walter, emphasizing the novel's relentless mockery of his judgment. In their reading, the passage undermines Lady Russell's interference and advice.

At this point, we consider the view that Anne takes of her decision to end her relationship with Wentworth. We carefully consider the language that Austen uses to describe Anne's changing perspective. "She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it," the narrator explains of Anne's decision to take back her pledge. It was, the narrator emphasizes, "not a merely selfish caution, under which [Anne] acted, in putting an end to [the tie]," for she imagined herself "consulting [Wentworth's] good, even more than her own" (30; vol. 1, ch. 4). Over the next eight years, though, Anne's opinion undergoes a marked shift: "Anne, at seven and twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen," the narrator reveals. "She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it" (31). When we look at these passages, we consider how Austen's use of the passive voice ("was persuaded" in the first instance and "had been made to think" in the last) evokes Anne's reluctant compliance with Lady Russell's advice. We look, too, at that crucial word "persuasion." Students note the shift in Austen's use of the word, from "persuaded" as in "swayed" to "persuaded" as in "certain." Austen's language tracks Anne's growing independence. Students comment, as well, on the deep regret Anne feels, her physical and emotional decline, and Wentworth's surprising good fortune, all of which suggest that breaking off the engagement was a mistake. We discuss, too, Austen's decision to set the novel in the summer of 1814 rather than in 1806, when Anne first meets Wentworth. Students note that this formal strategy serves to give Anne and Wentworth a second chance while inviting readers to question Anne's reliance upon Lady Russell's advice.

In the next class, we consider how Austen complicates the questions surrounding Anne and Wentworth's engagement. To prepare for this stage of the debate, I divide the class into groups and ask each group to look closely at two passages from the second half of the first volume. In particular, I ask students to examine the exchange that Anne overhears between Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove during their walk to Winthrop (chapter 10) as well as the climactic conclusion to the volume, in which the headstrong Louisa suffers a concussion after jumping from the steps on the Cobb at Lyme Regis (chapter 12). I ask all the groups to consider what these passages suggest about the value and limits of prudent decision-making and receptiveness to others' advice. After separate discussions, each group shares its ideas with the class. I keep track of the evidence by putting two columns on the board—one column for evidence

indicating the problems with cautious behavior and one column for evidence suggesting its benefits.

As evidence of the problems with prudence, students point to Anne's distress as well as Wentworth's own anger and despair during the walk to Winthrop. "I see that more than a mere dutiful morning-visit to your aunt was in question," Wentworth observes to Louisa during a pause in their walk, "and woe betide him, and her too, when it comes to things of consequence, when they are placed in circumstances, requiring fortitude and strength of mind, if she have not resolution enough to resist idle interference in such a trifle as this." "It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character," he continues, "that no influence over it can be depended on.—You are never sure of a good impression being durable. Every body may sway it . . ." (94; vol. 1, ch. 10). Although Wentworth ostensibly refers here to the uncertainty that Louisa's sister, Henrietta, feels about whether to proceed with her intended visit to her suitor, Anne perceives that his comments also refer to herself, and that Wentworth, too, remains troubled by their broken engagement. His subsequent questions about Anne, after learning that she rejected Charles Musgrove's proposal of marriage, confirm his continuing interest in her, leaving her struggling to control her emotions. Through Wentworth's bitter remarks and Anne's anguished response, Austen highlights the costs of prudent behavior.

Other students argue, however, that Louisa's accident on the Cobb shows the dangers of possessing too impetuous and unyielding a disposition. Louisa insists on jumping down a steep flight of steps even though Wentworth advises her against it. The consequences are devastating: she is "too precipitate by half a second," the narrator explains, and she ends up falling on the pavement and knocking herself unconscious (118; vol. 1, ch. 12). Louisa's head injury provides a fitting reminder of the problems that result when individuals act without stopping to think. Anne alone remains calm during the crisis; Wentworth himself looks to her for advice. His opinion of her character, Anne realizes, begins to undergo an important change. In contrast to the risky and obstinate Louisa, Anne appears to possess both flexibility and fortitude. What initially appears to be weakness now begins to look like strength.

In subsequent classes we continue to debate the value and limits of prudent behavior. We focus particular attention on Austen's treatment of Lady Russell. I ask why we hear so little of Anne's influential friend in the first volume of the novel, given the central role that she plays in Anne's life. The question prompts us to consider how and why Austen undermines Lady Russell's authority. We then discuss Lady Russell's attempt to persuade Anne to marry her seemingly upstanding cousin, William Walter Elliot. In the second volume, Austen develops the central conflict of the first: Anne again faces a choice between marrying for love and marrying for wealth and status. A match with Anne's cousin, Lady Russell advises, would not only be a "most suitable connection" but would also be "a very happy one." Anne, however, thinks otherwise: "Mr. Elliot is an exceedingly agreeable man," she replies, "and in many respects I think highly of

him . . . but we should not suit" (173; vol. 2, ch. 5). We consider Anne's growing willingness to disagree with her friend and to defend the importance of compatibility in marriage. We look, too, at Austen's account of Anne's walk with Lady Russell down Pulteney Street in Bath, when Anne sees Wentworth and eagerly observes her friend's reaction. Austen's irony is brilliant: Anne is "perfectly conscious of Lady Russell's eyes being turned exactly in the direction for him, of her being in short intently observing him" (194; vol. 2, ch. 7). Yet, as it turns out, Lady Russell utterly fails to notice Wentworth, so preoccupied is she with looking at the window curtains across the street. We discuss Austen's humorous commentary on Anne's absorption with Wentworth as well as the novel's keen satire of Lady Russell's limited perception. Like so many other narrow-minded people in the world of the novel, Lady Russell sees only surfaces and appearances. Previously, she judged Wentworth based on superficial markers; now she does not see him at all. Austen's satire of Lady Russell supports the argument that Anne made a mistake in listening to her friend's advice.

We contrast Lady Russell's view of Anne's rival suitors with that of Anne's old friend the invalid Mrs. Smith, who tactfully (or strategically) waits to disclose the truth about Mr. Elliot's character until she is certain that Anne has no intention of marrying him. Where Lady Russell imposes her own (misguided) views upon Anne, Mrs. Smith goes out of her way to avoid unduly influencing her friend. ("You must allow for an injured, angry woman," she explains. "But I will try to command myself. I will not abuse him. I will only tell you what I have found him. Facts shall speak" [215–16; vol. 2, ch. 9]). Unlike Lady Russell, Mrs. Smith does not rely upon superficial judgments. She presents Anne with objective evidence—a letter written by Mr. Elliot to her late husband that reveals Mr. Elliot's heartless character—and allows Anne to assess this evidence for herself. We spend time considering the differences between Anne's relationships with Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith. Austen, it seems, cautions against possessing too malleable a disposition: Anne errs when she substitutes Lady Russell's judgment for her own. But Austen does not suggest that one should completely ignore others' advice. Through Anne's exchange with Mrs. Smith, Austen shows the need to consult other people in order to test—or, at least, to verify—one's own judgment.

In our last class, we consider the renewal of the engagement between Anne and Wentworth and Anne's reassessment of her earlier decision. First, we look at Anne's debate with Captain Harville concerning men's and women's fidelity; then we read Wentworth's letter and consider its significance. "I can listen no longer in silence," Wentworth writes to Anne. "I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you" (257–58; vol. 2, ch. 11). Students suggest that the form of the letter helps to convey Wentworth's urgency

and passion; indeed, it is one of the few times in the novel that Austen gives us direct access to Wentworth's consciousness. We compare Wentworth's passionate epistle with Mr. Elliot's brief quasi-proposal. ("The name of Anne Elliot," Mr. Elliot tells Anne during their exchange at a concert a few days earlier, "has long had an interesting sound to me. Very long has it possessed a charm over my fancy; and, if I dared, I would breathe my wishes that the name might never change" [204; vol. 2, ch. 8].) Whereas these remarks confirm Mr. Elliot's shallowness and egotism, the letter from Wentworth reveals his utter sincerity and devotion. We consider Anne's reaction to Wentworth's epistle as well as Anne's subsequent encounter with Wentworth in the aptly named Union Street, where the two exchange "again those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure every thing, but which had been followed by so many, many years of division and estrangement" (261; vol. 2, ch. 11). The third-person narration here evokes the sense of surprise and relief that Anne and Wentworth both feel at this unexpected and much longed-for reconciliation. Anne seems, at last, to have made the right choice.

Yet while Anne now feels certain that Lady Russell's earlier advice was wrong, she suggests that she was right to listen to it. "If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once," Anne tells Wentworth, distinguishing her previous reliance upon Lady Russell's counsel from her present rejection of her friend's advice, "remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty; but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated" (265–66; vol. 2, ch. 11). Anne continues:

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, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. (267–68)

I ask the class to reconsider Anne's decision with this passage in mind. Based on this evidence, some students argue that Austen shows that filial deference is, in fact, more important than individual desire—at least, in the all-important matter of marriage. Anne, in other words, was right to listen to Lady Russell and to break off her engagement. Others, however, argue that in spite of Anne's reflections, the novel shows that she was wrong to yield to her well-meaning but

misguided friend. In a world filled with uncertainty, illness, and accidents, they suggest, Austen shows the necessity of love and fidelity. Anne's eventual marriage, in this reading, rectifies her earlier mistake and shows Austen to be a true Romantic. Still others argue that the novel is ambivalent and that Austen has it both ways, endorsing at once duty and desire, prudence and risk.¹

We conclude our debates about the novel by looking at the very end of the text. Anne's "spring of felicity," the narrator explains, "was in the warmth of her heart":

Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection. His profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance. (274–75; vol. 2, ch. 12)

We consider Austen's shift to the present tense at the end of this passage and her reminder of the risks involved in Anne's match. Students note that even now, in spite of Wentworth's good fortune, the union brings with it uncertainty and danger. Marrying a man in the navy—even a successful and wealthy captain—is a perilous choice. I ask students to consider whether this ending changes their view of Anne's decision to wed Wentworth. For some, the final paragraph provides further support that Austen shows the need to accept some risk as an inevitable part of life; others, though, emphasize the novel's continuing ambivalence on this point. After we review the different interpretations, I take a vote to see which argument students find most compelling. The vote prompts everyone in the class to take a position in the debate. Our discussions about Anne and Wentworth's vexed relationship ultimately help students practice articulating and defending nuanced arguments, while prompting them to think through difficult questions at the heart of the text.

This approach works well in the introductory class that I teach, but it could also be adapted for surveys of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century fiction as well as for courses on Jane Austen, Romanticism, and the marriage plot. In such courses, students could read contextual materials alongside *Persuasion* to further examine the implications of Anne and Wentworth's engagement. For example, students might consider the novel in relation to the controversies surrounding the French Revolution, discussions about the nature and value of consensual obligations, or contemporary ideas about love, courtship, and marriage. The novel takes on new meaning when read alongside Edmund Burke's assertions concerning "the evils of inconstancy and versatility" in society (*Reflections* 194), William Godwin's radical critique of the practice of promising (87–90), and Mary Wollstonecraft's defense of women's free choice and agency in courtship (*Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [Lynch]). These materials would enable

students to weigh in on longstanding debates about Austen's political and ethical commitments. To what extent does the novel support a Burkean investment in stability, tradition, and inherited wealth, and to what extent does it embrace a radical, Jacobin commitment to individual freedom? In what ways does the text endorse a traditional, patriarchal view of the family, and in what ways does it challenge that view? Such questions have sparked lively controversies among critics that would make for provocative discussions in the classroom.² By reading such materials, students could consider how Austen's account of Anne and Wentworth's vexed engagement contributes to the era's own social, political, and ethical debates.

NOTES

I'm grateful to the students in my Critical Practices and Processes in Literary Studies classes at Marquette University for their lively debates about *Persuasion*. Our discussions helped me think through the ideas and develop the strategies outlined in this essay.

¹Some students point to Louisa's surprising union with Captain James Benwick as further evidence that Austen shows the need to temper impulse and feeling with prudence and restraint. This union makes for an interesting comparison with the main love plot.

²See, for example, Butler; Duckworth; C. Johnson, *Jane*; Kirkham; Knox-Shaw, *Jane*; and Poovey.