

Rhetoric and Women

Retoryka kobiet

2/2016 EDITOR: ANNA BENDRAT

MERRITT MOSELEY

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, ASHEVILLE
MOSELEY@UNCA.EDU

Jane Austen's Persuasion

Perswazja u Jane Austen

Abstract

The essay begins by asserting that fiction is persuasion—subtle, indirect, undogmatic, nevertheless it has designs on the reader and is a mode of communication. The example of Jane Austen gives particular illustrations of persuasion as a subject, including self-persuasion (in *Emma*); the easy persuasion of an unresisting subject (in *Sense and Sensibility*); and difficult and unwelcome persuasion (in *Persuasion*).

Esej rozpoczyna się od stwierdzenia, że fikcja jest perswazją – subtelną, niebezpośrednią, niedogmatyczną, a mimo to mającą wpływ na czytelnika i będącą formą komunikacji. Twórczość Jane Austen przedstawia perswazję jako temat w trzech odsłonach: perswazję wewnętrzną (w *Emmie*); łatwą perswazję wobec podatnego odbiorcy (w *Rozważnej i romantycznej*); oraz perswazję trudną i niepożądaną (w *Perswazji*).

Key words

persuasion, conviction, resistance, communication, rhetoric of fiction, Austen
perswazja, przekonanie, opór, komunikacja, retoryka literatury pięknej, Austen

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Poland. The content of the license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/>

Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

The novel is a rhetorical act, designed—among other outcomes—to persuade its reader. When considering this effort, as practiced by women novelists, the temptation to focus on the author of *Persuasion* is too tantalizing to resist. Fortunately Jane Austen is one of the most brilliant novelists in the English language, skilled in the rhetoric of fiction; and she subtly analyzes the forms of persuasion, including self-persuasion, practiced by her characters.

But I wish to take a moment to justify my opening generalization. The idea that novels are rhetorical constructions, that *they have designs upon the reader*, suffers from several crippling obstacles to acceptance. One is the fact that this belief appears old-fashioned, in a theoretical world that, longing to achieve the prestige of the natural sciences, privileges the recent, the innovative, over older interpretive schemes. Another, related difficulty with the rhetorical view of fiction is the oversimplification that rhetorical intentions must be didactic; that didactic intentions must be crudely moralistic; and that, therefore, a rhetoric of fiction must be a vector of preaching or moral exhortation. And no one wants that. It would be useful to sophisticate our notions of what and how a novel—a good novel, that is; of course there are crassly preaching fictions—communicates. Thackeray referred to himself as the “weekday preacher”; but his use of complex irony, even when he seems to be delivering a “moral,” undercuts any appearance that he is delivering straightforward ethical dicta. Communication need not be propositional: emotional states aroused by fiction are the products of authorial rhetorical undertakings, and though no one comments on its belief system, *Fifty Shades of Grey* communicates *something* to its readers.

The competing accounts of what literature or fiction is all seem more interesting than fiction as rhetoric. Consider the self-expressive theory, which is a Romantic persistence; this is embodied in author Mark Harris’s declaration “I write. Let the reader learn to read” (Harris 1957, xix).

Or the therapeutic understanding of the novel, which we can see when D. H. Lawrence writes that “one sheds ones sickness in books—repeats and presents again ones emotions, to be master of them” (Lawrence 1981, 90).

Or consider, more recently, post-modern theory—for instance, the claim that a fictional text consists of nothing more than shout-outs to other fictional texts. The most thrilling belief, for some thinkers, though it seems to me to undercut the motive for reading novels—or at least reading very many different novels—is the post-structuralist theory that, due to the features of language itself, a novel can communicate nothing but instead displays only the inexorable sliding of the signifiers.

By contrast, there is a sturdy tradition in literary study of treating the novel as a rhetorical act. Wayne Booth, whose classic book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) makes clear its allegiance, sets out his foundational propositions in a preface:

In writing about the rhetoric of fiction, I am not primarily interested in didactic fiction, fiction used for propaganda or instruction. My subject is the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers--the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader. (Booth 1961, Preface)

Booth understands the claims of authorial self-expression, but insists that

In treating technique as rhetoric, I may seem to have reduced the free and inexplicable process of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers. [. . .] The success of an author's rhetoric does not depend on whether he thought about his readers as he wrote; if 'mere calculation' cannot insure success, it is equally true that even the most unconscious and Dionysian of writers succeeds only if he makes us join in the dance. (Preface)

"Joining in the dance" is a way of acknowledging the active role of readers in the rhetorical transaction that occurs in the novel. The communication is, in an important way, a dialogue rather than simply a novelist's monologue, much less a diatribe.

If I may cite another classic source, this one an article on "Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction" published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* in 1962, its author, D. W. Harding, insists on the cooperative or collaborative nature of the novel's communicative activity.

Fiction has to be seen, then, as a convention, a convention for enlarging the scope of the discussions we have with each other about what may befall.

The "discussion" may seem a one-sided affair since the reader is unable to answer back. But he is none the less active in accepting or rejecting what the author asserts. In the first place, the author offers what he claims to be a possibility of experience; the reader may in effect say 'No: that action of the hero is inconsistent with what he has said or done before; that monster of iniquity isn't humanly possible; that sudden repentance could never have happened. . . .' Secondly, the author conveys what he regards as appropriate attitudes towards events, characters and actions. He is constantly—but of course tacitly—saying: "Isn't this exciting. . . . He's attractive, isn't he. . . . Wasn't that tragic. . . . Isn't this moving . . . ?" Again the reader accepts or rejects the implied assessments.

He may not consciously formulate his agreement and disagreement, but these are the underlying processes that show themselves eventually in enthusiasm for an author's work or disappointment with it (Harding 1962, 139-140).

Proving that the novel is rhetorical is not, however, my main aim, which is instead to discuss the representation of persuasion in the works of Jane Austen (Booth's chapter on "Control of Distance in Jane Austen's *Emma*" is an excellent example of his approach to criticism).

A quick word count suggests that Jane Austen may be obsessed with persuasion. The word and its related forms appears only 24 times in her early novel *Northanger Abbey* but 65 times in *Emma*. *Persuasion* itself is on the low side, at 37 uses. A closer look complicates it a bit, since "persuade" is often used in such constructions as ". . . such expressions of gratitude and concern for the pain you are inflicting as propriety requires will present themselves unbidden to *your* mind, I am persuaded" (Austen 2005, 54). Does this mean "I have been persuaded"? or is it simply a synonym for "I am certain"? Perhaps it is somewhere in the middle, partaking of both meanings; and *Emma* (65 uses) is the most "persuasive" of the Austen novels, with its main character, as we shall see, the most easily persuaded that the truth is coterminous with her own preferences. This example comes from an episode in which she persuades her young and silly protégé Harriet to reject an attractive and advantageous offer of marriage from a man Harriet actually loves, since Emma snobbishly thinks it would be shameful for Harriet, as her friend, to be married to a farmer.

I do not have space to provide numerous examples, but I do want to distinguish three different rhetorical situations Austen depicts artfully, and persuasively:

- 1) Self-persuasion.
- 2) Persuasion of a not-entirely-unwilling subject.
- 3) Difficult persuasion against the subject's own will.

Emma Woodhouse is the great specialist in self-persuasion. As we have seen, she rather easily persuades herself that preventing Harriet's marriage is the right course though, as readers recognize, she is acting in her own interests. On another occasion we are told of her reluctance to visit Mrs. And Miss Bates, two single ladies—a widow and a spinster—living in modest circumstances.

She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency [that is, never paying proper attention to the Bateses] but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of its being very disagreeable, a waste of time—tiresome women—and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever, and therefore she seldom went near them. (Austen [1815] 2005, 165).

When the clergyman, Mr. Elton, having proposed to Emma and been rejected, then having contemptuously rejected Emma's plans to marry him to Harriet, leaves the village and comes back with a wife, Emma's complex emotions produce another easy self-persuasion: "as to connection, there Emma was perfectly easy, persuaded, that after all his own vaunted claims and disdain of Harriet, he had done nothing" (Austen 2005, 196). Later she convinces herself that the mysterious Frank Churchill is in love with her and "this persuasion, joined to all the rest, made her think that she must be a little in love with him" as well (282-83).

Why is Emma so easily persuaded by herself? One answer is that she easily persuades others, starting with her somewhat feeble-minded father, continuing with her governess, Miss Taylor (a paid employee) and Harriet, a dependent younger woman rendered almost helpless by awe and stupidity. The narrator sums Emma up on the first page of the novel: "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments" (3-4). Having rather too much her own way empowers her persuasion of others, while thinking too well of herself inclines her to think that her own arguments are conclusive. Of course her smooth course of self-convincing cannot last and comes to a convulsive end when she is forced to acknowledge how wrong she has been, again and again:

"How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practicing on herself, and living under! The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!"—and her self-reflections lead to acknowledge her own love for old family friend Mr. Knightley, beyond which "every other part of her mind was disgusting" (334, 449).

Arguably self-persuasion is the easiest kind. An intermediate form is persuasion of something one already halfway believes, or wants. This may be thought of as assisted self-persuasion. One classic example is the seduction of Emma Bovary by Rodolphe Boulanger at the Agricultural Fair in Part II, Chapter 7 of *Madame Bovary*. This is brilliantly captured by Flaubert, and the way Emma's raging dissatisfaction with her husband, ennui, unsatisfied longing for a kind of gentility to which she considers herself entitled, and literature-inspired belief that a woman should have a lover, combine with Rodolphe's natural advantages (particularly by contrast with husband Charles), and his profound rhetorical strategy of self-deprecation, pretended helplessness in the presence of the beloved, and declarations of romantic freedom from the constricting demands of society. We are to understand that Emma is prepared to be persuaded—or, in Rodolphe's phrase, on their first acquaintance, she is "gaping after love like a carp on the kitchen table after water" (Flaubert [1856] 2005, 106). He assists her to persuade herself to do something that she already longs to do.

A parallel episode appears in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* when the callow and selfish John Dashwood tries to decide how to fulfill his dying father's request that he take care of his half-sisters and stepmother, who are left very poor while he is rich. His minimal sense of honor makes him likely to fulfill his father's desire, against his own wishes. But fortunately his wife is available to harden the characteristics the narrator assigns him—he is “cold hearted, and rather selfish” and his wife is “more narrow-minded and selfish” (Austen [1811] 2006, 5-6). So begins an elaborate gavotte in which, having begun by resolving to give each of his three sisters a thousand pounds, he is step-by-step argued, without too much resistance on his part, to giving them each five hundred pounds; then to buying an annuity on the life of Mrs. Dashwood worth a hundred pounds a year; then to “whatever I may give them occasionally,” quickly explained as “a present of fifty pounds, now and then”; then to “presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season” (13).

The narrator sums up the result of this hypocritical rigmarole: “This argument was irresistible” (15) (Fanny Dashwood has been arguing that because the Dashwood ladies will be living on such a modest, reduced scale, they will actually have very few needs at all; and she even resents their retaining their own handsome furniture and plate.)

It gave to his intentions whatever of decision was wanting before; and he finally resolved, that it would be absolutely unnecessary, if not highly indecorous, to do more for the widow and children of his father, than such kind of neighbourly acts as his own wife pointed out (15).

In the end, even this small response to his father's recommendation that John Dashwood protect “the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters” (5) proves impossible; when they move to Devon, he is prevented “from being of any service to her in removing her furniture. He really felt conscientiously vexed on the occasion; for the very exertion to which he had limited the performance of his promise to his father was by this arrangement rendered impracticable” (30)

His vexation is slight and of short duration.

Like Emma Bovary, John Dashwood has been seduced; his interlocutor finds the arguments which will move what she recognizes are already his unacknowledged motivations, in order to bring about the end he desires without his having to acknowledge them. He can retain his self-respect, as Emma can her own, while being “persuaded” to do what each already longs to do.

The final category of persuasion is the sort that may most merit the name—that is, the consequence of one person providing grounds for another deciding to do something she does not want to do, or refrain from doing something she does want to do. That is, overcoming genuine resistance and disinclination.

A good example from another 19th century woman's fiction concerns Jane Eyre. Having strongly rejected a powerful appeal from Mr. Rochester to become his mistress after she learns he is married, having relocated, found work, discovered some family, and even inherited a small fortune, Jane comes under almost irresistible pressure to accompany her cousin, the icy St. John Rivers, as a missionary's wife to India. He appeals to her Christianity; to her sense of duty; to her gratitude (he has helped to save her life); to her altruism. Most importantly he exercises all the advantages of his situation; she is a woman, young, small, habituated to agreeing with others, while he is a man, older, more educated, entirely self-assured.

The climax of his effort to persuade comes in Chapter 35:

I was tempted to cease struggling with him—to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own. I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. . . . I stood motionless under my hierophant's touch. My refusals were forgotten—my fears overcome—my wrestlings paralyzed. The Impossible—i.e. my marriage with St. John—was fast becoming the Possible. All was changing utterly, with a sudden sweep. Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded—life rolled together like a scroll—death's gate opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second. (Brontë [1847] 1962, 416)

The artful rhetorician then (almost for the first time) tries softness. “‘Could you decide now?’ asked the missionary. The inquiry was put in gentle tones: he drew me to him as gently. Oh, that gentleness! how far more potent is it than force! I could resist St. John's wrath: I grew pliant as a reed under his kindness” (416).

Jane never quite surrenders; at all times she knows that she should refuse. But she is grimly aware that she may give up her resistance anyway. Rivers is a force—she has earlier responded to his blandishments with “You are killing me now” (410). Finally she agrees to accept his proposal if she can receive some sort of divine sign; and instead of a voice from Heaven telling her to submit, she gets a voice transmitted across space, supernaturally, calling her back to her first and only love. That she could no longer have resisted by her own efforts, that she has entrusted the decision to Providence, is testimony to the power of St. John Rivers's rhetoric.

A less tumultuous persuasion, one unrelieved by uncanny voices or Providential intervention, motivates the plot of *Persuasion*, Jane Austen's last novel.¹ The spring of the plot is revealed in flashback and in summary. Anne Elliot, the protagonist, fell in love with a naval officer, Frederick Wentworth, a “remarkably fine young man,” and they were mutually and deeply in love, “she, in receiving

1. Sadly for my argument, *Persuasion* was not the title chosen by Jane Austen, but by her brother and sister, who arranged for the publication of the novel after she had died. She was apparently planning to call it *The Elliots*.

his declarations and proposals [and] he in having them accepted” (Austen [1817] 2006, 28) But their happiness is brief. Sir Walter Elliot, Anne’s father, objects; we later learn that he objects to the navy, partly on the grounds that its service damages the complexion, and his snobbery is such that the alliance seems degrading. But it is the persuasion of old family friend Lady Russell which convinces Anne to break off the engagement.

The narrator sums up the terms of the argument:

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 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. (29)

Lady Russell was the close friend of Anne’s deceased mother.

Such opposition, as these feelings produced was more than Anne could combat. Young and gentle as she was, it might yet have been possible to withstand her father’s ill-will, though unsoftened by one kind word or look on the part of her sister;—but Lady Russell, whom she had always loved and relied on, could not, with such steadiness of opinion, and such tenderness of manner, be continually advising her in vain. She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it.” (29-30)

We should note that Anne’s persuadability is almost entirely emotional. Arthur Walzer has related the presentation of persuasion and persuadability in Austen’s novel to new rhetorical theories arising in the 17th and 18th centuries. The new model, he explains, “follows from this understanding of persuasion as an essentially non-rational form of discourse directed at the listener’s will” (Walzer 1995, 691). Anne is persuaded not by any reasoning that marrying Wentworth is wrong, but by love for Lady Russell, love for her mother *through* Lady Russell, and response to her tenderness of manner.

As Walzer relates, by “presenting other instances of the persuasive process, Austen complicates the reader’s understanding of persuadability and therefore of Anne’s putative weakness and Wentworth’s vaunted resolve” (697). Wentworth thinks himself unpersuadable, his feelings still pained by Anne’s rejection, and he flirts with another young woman whose stubbornness he approves until she almost kills herself by insistence on having her way. As Walzer sums it up, the later plot movements, particularly Sir Walter’s mulish insistence on having his own way at all times, “provide the first suggestion that unpersuadability is not indicative of reasonable, virtuous manly integrity but rather of selfish, egotistical solipsism” (697). Walzer highlights a later effort by Lady Russell to persuade Anne, in this case to marry William Elliot, her cousin and the heir to her father’s estate and title. When the company all assembles in Bath, Lady Russell goes to work to advance

William Elliot's claims, and Anne is briefly tempted to accede to her persuasion once again. "Anne was obliged to turn away, to rise, to walk to a distant table, and, leaning there in pretended employment, try to subdue the feelings this picture excited. For a moment her imagination and her heart were bewitched" (173). But, older now, still emotionally attached to Captain Wentworth and (though the novel does not stipulate this motive) perhaps no longer so willing to take Lady Russell's advice, Anne is unpersuadable.

Readers familiar with Austen or with the marriage plot will understand that Anne and Wentworth will be happily reunited at novel's end. An unusual feature of such endings comes when Captain Wentworth raises the question of Anne's earlier rejection and its causes. And Anne, somewhat surprisingly, refuses to second-guess her earlier actions. She acknowledges that Lady Russell was wrong; but she declares that she was right to accept her advice:

"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. . . . 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 if giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience" (267-68).

Persuadability, then, is good or bad as conditions dictate, rather than having any absolute valence. Persuasion may be wrong, when being persuaded is not: Lady Russell was wrong to persuade Anne, while Anne—in a matured judgment on the basis of hindsight—considers she was right to give way to that persuasion.

Walzer points out some of the "encompassing gender stereotypes that have migrated into the rhetorical concern with persuadability and firmness" (694-5). These rely on "the association of persuasion with emotion and of rationality with conviction"; but the two are not clearly separate, and even Wentworth, whom we might suspect of a martial, stereotypically masculinist set of motives, is initially unbending toward Anne for emotional causes, his feelings having been wounded by her rejection. And his final persuasion to change his mind, while indirect and not consciously managed by Anne (he overhears her conversation with a third party) is a function of passion not intellect: as he writes to her, "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 had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine" (257-58). Whether this be persuasion or conviction, in 18th century rhetorical terms, it is driven by emotion.

Persuasion provides the most thorough examination in Austen's fiction of how persuasion works, when it is appropriate and when it is not, and what the nature and limits of persuadability are. Perhaps women are culturally encouraged to be more interested in, or vulnerable to, persuasion—though Jane Austen's fiction

gives ample illustration of men's persuadability—but it is clear that to her, persuasion, and the rhetorical strategies and means that produce it, are among the most important aspects of social and romantic life and thus of an intense and searching realistic fiction.

References

- Austen, Jane.** (1815) 2005. *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austen, Jane.** (1817) 2006. *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austen, Jane.** (1811) 2006. *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Booth, Wayne.** 1961. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Brontë, Charlotte.** (1847) 1962. *Jane Eyre*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Flaubert, Gustave.** (1856) 2005. *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen; trans. Eleanor Aveling Marx and Paul de Man. Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Harding, D. W.** 1962. "Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2, 133-47.
- Harris, Mark.** 1957. "Preface: Easy Does It Not." *A Ticket for a Seamstitch*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Lawrence, D. H.** 1981. "Letter to Arthur McLeod, 26 October 1913." *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. 2, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walzer, Arthur E.** 1995. "Rhetoric and Gender in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*." *College English* 57: 688-707.