Rhetoric and gender in Jane Austen’s Persuasion

Arthur E. Walzer

It is surprising that students of rhetorical history have not inquired into the relationship of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* to eighteenth-century rhetorical theory. Austen’s work has, of course, received its share of critical attention from rhetoricians, most prominently from Wayne Booth in his classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth’s intentions were, however, to identify how a rhetorical perspective could illuminate Austen’s art; neither he nor anyone else has investigated the relationship suggested by the title of her last novel to eighteenth-century accounts of the persuasive process. Might our understanding of the theory be deepened by close study of Austen’s reflections on persuasion? And would a sustained reading of *Persuasion* in light of eighteenth-century theory illuminate the novel? This essay had its origins in these questions.

Since literary critics have not agreed on *Persuasion’s* central theme, there is room for a reading by a rhetorician. What Michael Williams identified in 1986 as the “orthodox” interpretation takes the novel’s principal concern as the dramatization of the decline of the aristocracy and rise of the bourgeoisie—the decaying aristocracy represented in the person of the uprooted, bankrupt Sir Walter Elliot, the bourgeoisie in the energetic, dedicated naval officers, most notably Captain Wentworth (157). This view, first presented by Joseph Duffy over forty years ago, was effectively challenged by R. W. Chapman shortly after it appeared and subsequently by others (Butler; Morgan; Williams), but it persists in readings by Malcolm Bradbury, David Monaghan, Alistair M. Duckworth, and Tony Tanner, for instance. Perhaps its perseverance can be explained by its consistency with Ian Watt’s influ-

*Arthur E. Walzer* is an associate professor in the Rhetoric Department at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches courses in rhetorical theory and humanities. With Alan Gross he is editing an anthology, *Rereading Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, scheduled for publication in 1997.
ential *Rise of the Novel*. Watt's thesis, that an emerging bourgeois reading public found in novels a Puritan ethic and respect for individualism that mirrored its own values, would lend a retrospective credibility to a reading of *Persuasion* that saw the novel as dramatizing the rise of the middle class.

Recently, however, Nancy Armstrong has challenged Watt. Armstrong argues that the eighteenth-century novel gives expression less to the values of an emergent bourgeois than to the female voice and the values of the domestic household to counter the male dominance in the public realm. According to Armstrong, the novel as a genre translated "the complex and competing ways of representing human identity into a single binary opposition represented by male versus female" (253). For Armstrong, the novel was a central force in the Enlightenment in creating a bourgeois sense of self that was less shaped by class or race than it was by home or household—a realm set in opposition to the public, political world of men, a world created for women and by women in the novel (251–54).

My reading of *Persuasion* will differ from the interpretation Duffy inspired in two fundamental respects. First, it will bring Armstrong's thesis to bear on *Persuasion*. Armstrong's emphasis on gender (understood as culturally constructed, as a complex of ideas with a history) better explains the dialectic of *Persuasion* than does Duffy's emphasis on political economy. The implication of Duffy's thesis is that *Persuasion* embraces the values represented by the naval officers, but while Wentworth is clearly superior to Sir Walter, his values are nonetheless faulted in the novel (as I will show). If we look at *Persuasion* from Armstrong's perspective, Wentworth's redemption through Anne becomes apparent; the novel is less the story of the ascendency of Captain Wentworth than of his domestication into conventionally female ways of knowing.

Second, my reading will identify the dynamics of the persuasive process as central to *Persuasion*'s organizing intentions. This emphasis challenges such recent work as Roger Gard's (1992), which dismisses the title of the novel as limiting and misleading (186). And while mine is not the first reading to focus on persuasion as the novel's central theme (Rackin, Molan, and Kastely precede me), it is the first to read *Persuasion* through the lens of the eighteenth-century theory of persuasion—the first to interpret the novel in the context of the rhetorical theories of Francis Bacon, George Campbell, and Hugh Blair. Moreover, I maintain that Austen's treatment of persuasion in the novel contributes to our understanding of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory. The result is a reading that sees *Persuasion* as endorsing Anne's conventionally feminine values, her receptivity and sociality, over Wentworth's stereotypical masculine firmness and autonomy. Above all, *Persuasion* sanctions Anne's openness to persuasion, her persuadability, over Wentworth's aggressive resolve.
What did Jane Austen intend by the title of her last novel? How would she have understood “persuasion”? The most direct answers to these questions lie in the rhetorical theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth century in which the understanding of persuasion underwent significant change in the work of Francis Bacon and the “new” rhetorics of George Campbell and Hugh Blair.

The site for study of and theorizing about persuasion changed beginning with Bacon’s discussion of rhetoric in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605). In classical and Renaissance rhetoric, rhetoric is understood as a compositional art (in Aristotle, a tekhnê). The focus of rhetorical theory is on the writer-composer with rhetoric viewed as providing an arsenal for the art of verbal combat. With Bacon and, especially, with the “new” rhetorics of the eighteenth century, the focus of rhetoric shifts to the listener, as rhetoric becomes a principal site of an emerging science of discourse reception. In the taxonomy of scholarship that constitutes the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon classifies the study of rhetoric with other sciences and arts that employ reason to study the human mind itself, thus fashioning a conception of rhetoric as applied psychology; furthermore he presents the persuasive process in his expanded version of the *Advancement, De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623), not from the perspective of the speaker or writer, but as “negotiation” within hearers (9: 131–32). But Bacon is, of course, only a forerunner to George Campbell, who offers in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) the most definitive treatment in the eighteenth century of rhetoric as a study of the way the mind responds to symbols. In his introduction, Campbell maintains that the study of rhetoric “leads directly to an acquaintance with ourselves; it not only traces the operations of the intellect and the imagination, but discloses the lurking springs of action in the heart. In this view, it is perhaps the surest and shortest, as well as the pleasantest way of arriving at the science of the human mind” (lxiv).

Campbell is best known for his expansion of the province of rhetoric to include all types of discourse. He lists the principal types as four: discourse that convinces, discourse that pleases, discourse that moves, and discourse that persuades. Because his taxonomy is based on faculty psychology and distinguishes the types of rhetoric on the basis of a targeted faculty in the listener’s mind, the taxonomy itself further emphasizes the different ways in which each type of rhetoric acts on the listener’s mind. Most famous among Campbell’s distinctions and most important for an understanding of Austen’s view of persuasion is his distinction between persuasion and conviction.

Both Campbell and Blair distinguish persuasion as intended to lead to action, therefore as directed toward the will and requiring emotional appeal; they conceive of conviction as intended to instruct and directed toward the understanding. Blair puts the distinction succinctly: “Conviction affects the understanding only; persu-
sion, the will and the practice. It is the business of the philosopher to convince me of the truth; it is the business of the orator to persuade me to act agreeably to it, by engaging my affections on its side” (2: 3). The object of conviction is knowledge, and its character is judicial; the object of persuasion is action, and its character is ministerial. Because persuasion ends in action, the psychology that is the basis for the persuasion/conviction distinction requires that persuasion engage the listener’s desires. In De Anima, Aristotle maintained that human action (as distinguished from contemplation or speculation) required the engagement of the appetite soul, not merely the rational soul: we must want something to act (596–99). Although Aristotle seems not to imagine a will as an independent faculty, Bacon, Blair, and Campbell were among many who merged his psychology with Christian understanding of the will. According to Bacon’s psychology, the will is subject to the influences of three types of desire: appetitive (for pleasure), affective (for love), and moral (for good). These three types of desire or passions (for pleasure, affection, and moral good) comprise the necessary motives for action for Campbell as well (80). Since persuasion by definition is intended to lead to action, persuasive discourse must appeal to one of these non-rational motives: “To say that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions, is but at best a kind of specious nonsense,” Campbell asserts (77), and Blair similarly argues that in order to persuade, the orator “must address himself to the passions; he must paint to the fancy, and touch the heart” (2: 4). Because this psychology also maintained that the passions responded to sense impression, presenting an image of what was desired but absent was the way prescribed to move a hearer through speech (Campbell 80–81, for instance). According to both Campbell and Blair, then, the route to action and the will was through the imagination and the passions.

A new model of the persuasive process follows from this understanding of persuasion as an essentially non-rational form of discourse directed at the listener’s will. The new model is “motivistic” or “operational” (Conley), monologic and mechanistic (Weinsheimer). The agonistic debate model is replaced by an image of an essentially manipulating persuader influencing a passive listener. On this model, the persuader appeals to a vulnerable listener’s desire, thereby setting in motion a potentially involuntary process as the imagination triggers a desire that powers the will. In his introduction, Campbell describes the persuasive process as a kind of clockwork whereby the “instruments employed by eloquence” can perform their “operations” on the “springs of action of the heart” (lxxiv); at another point he compares it to a witch’s spell: the persuasive process “will not permit the hearers even a moment’s leisure . . . but as it were by some magical spell, hurries them, ere they are aware, into love, pity, grief, terror, desire, aversion, fury, or hatred” (4). Though the particular image varies, the persuader’s considerable power over the listener is emphasized: the orator’s “irresistible power over the thoughts and purposes of his audience” is “superior even to what despotism itself can bestow,” since the despot
can enslave the body only, whereas, from the dominion of the persuader, “nothing is exempted, neither judgment nor affection, not even the inmost recesses, the most latent movements of the soul” (5).

The new model is morally problematic for some, including Campbell and Blair. Both seem uneasy with the attenuated place this psychology allows for reason, an attenuation that gains momentum from Hume’s critique in his Treatise (1739) with its notorious sententia: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (II. iii. 3). Blair’s and Campbell’s response was to try to establish a salutary role for reason in persuasion, while still embracing the psychology that linked persuasion to action and action to the engagement of the passions only. One approach to this end was their effort to make reason prior to the persuasive process, setting its ends, and they could draw on Bacon’s famous definition of rhetoric in support: the “duty and office of Rhetoric ... is no other than to apply and recommend the dictates of reason to imagination, in order to excite the appetite and will. ... For ... the end of rhetoric is to fill the imagination with observations and images, to second reason, and not to oppress it” (9: 131–32). By making rhetoric the handmaiden to reason, Bacon would exploit rhetoric’s image-making capacity on behalf of the advancement of learning. A second approach focused on the means used, as distinguished from the ends—arguing that reason-based appeals should also be employed (while nevertheless acknowledging that appeals to emotion were necessary and in themselves sufficient). Both Campbell and Blair advocate a form of persuasion that first convinces, then persuades. Blair, for example, writes: “Conviction is, however, always one avenue to the inclination, or heart; and it is that which an Orator must first bend his strength to gain: for no persuasion is likely to be stable, which is not founded on conviction. But, in order to persuade, the Orator must go farther than merely producing conviction; he must ... address himself to the passions; he must paint to the fancy, and touch the heart” (2: 4). A third way Blair and Campbell try to make reason more prominent is by requiring appeals to reason after the more necessary appeal to emotion, as a way of convincing the listener of the relationship between the passion aroused and the action recommended. As Campbell writes, “But if so much depend on passion, where is the scope for argument [in persuasion]? ... [L]et it be observed that, in order to persuade, there are two things which must be carefully studied by the orator. The first is, to excite some desire or passion in the hearers; the second is to satisfy their judgment that there is a connexion between the action to which he would persuade them, and the gratification of the desire or passion which he excites. The former is effected by communicating lively and glowing ideas of the object; the latter ... by presenting the best and most forcible arguments” (77–78).

Thus the new model of the persuasive process has ethical implications for judging both hearers and persuaders, implications that Austen exploits in Persua-
sion. Because Campbell sees the will as an instrumental faculty propelled by a desire that the rhetorician potentially controls, susceptibility to persuasion is associated with a weak will, a character flaw. The only weapon the listener has to resist the process the persuader sets in motion is critical reason, which, while incapable of moving the will to act, can slow or halt the movement toward persuasion and action. Of course, some listeners have a more active critical faculty than others, are less persuadable. Campbell equates low resistance to emotional appeals with “rude and ignorant” hearers (78; 97), and Blair similarly maintains that reasoned arguments are required in speeches addressed only to hearers of “sense” whose reason may need to be placated (2: 3). Thus, persuadability becomes in the rhetorics synonymous with a weak understanding and pliable will.

II

What familiarity with rhetorical theory Jane Austen had is difficult to know. Readers of Austen’s letters, with their pervasive concern with household affairs interspersed with stinging observations of human foibles, will not be surprised that there are no references to Bacon, Campbell, or Blair in them. Reading the letters would lead one to conclude that if Austen were to mention anyone’s “philosophy of rhetoric” or any description of the “operations of the mind,” it would be to mock such pretension. But we also know that in Northanger Abbey she refers specifically to Blair (108). Moreover, a passage in Pride and Prejudice makes clear that Austen was aware of the “conviction/persuasion” distinction that Campbell and Blair made famous. This bit of technical rhetoric is the subject of one of the debates that Darcy and Elizabeth have while Elizabeth stays at Bingley’s estate caring for her sister Jane, who is ill. The passage is important not only to Pride and Prejudice—it foreshadows Bingley’s sudden decision, largely on Darcy’s persuasion, not to propose to Jane and to leave Longbourn—but also to Persuasion because it expresses in epitome ideas central to the later novel:

[Darcy to Bingley]: “When you told Mrs. Bennet this morning that if you ever resolved on quitting Netherfield you should be gone in five minutes, you meant it to be a sort of panegyric, of compliment to yourself—and yet what is there so very laudable in a precipitance which must leave very necessary business undone, and can be of no real advantage to yourself or any one else?”

[Bingley]: “Nay . . . this is too much, to remember at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning. And yet, upon my honour, I believed what I said of myself to be true, and believe it at this moment . . .”

[Darcy]: “I dare say you believed it; but I am by no means convinced that you would be gone with such celerity. Your conduct would be quite as dependant on chance as that of any man I know; and if, as you were mounting your horse, a friend were to say, ‘Bingley, you had better stay till next week,’ you would probably do it, you would probably not go—and, at another word, might stay a month. . . .”
[Elizabeth]: “You have only proved by this... that Mr. Bingley did not do justice to his own disposition. You have shown him off now much more than he did himself.”

[Bingley]: “I am exceedingly gratified... by your converting what my friend says into a compliment on the sweetness of my temper. But I am afraid... that gentleman... would certainly think the better of me, if under such a circumstance I were to give a flat denial, and ride off as fast as I could.”

[Elizabeth]: “Would Mr. Darcy then consider the rashness of your original intention as atoned for by your obstinacy in adhering to it?”

[Darcy]: “...you must remember, Miss Bennet, that the friend who is supposed to desire his return to the house, and the delay of his plan, has merely desired it, asked it without offering one argument in favour of its propriety.”

[Elizabeth]: “To yield readily—easily—to the persuasion of a friend is no merit with you.” [Austen’s emphasis]

[Darcy]: “To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either.”

[Elizabeth]: “You appear to me, Mr. Darcy, to allow nothing for the influence of friendship and affection. A regard for the requester would often make one readily yield to a request, without waiting for arguments to reason one into it. I am not particularly speaking of such a case as you have supposed about Mr. Bingley. We may as well wait, perhaps, till the circumstance occurs, before we discuss the discretion of his behaviour thereupon. But in general and ordinary cases between friend and friend, where one of them is desired by the other to change a resolution of no very great moment, should you think ill of that person for complying with the desire, without waiting to be argued into it?”

[Darcy]: “Will it not be advisable, before we proceed on this subject to arrange with rather more precision the degree of importance which is to appertain to this request, as well as the degree of intimacy subsisting between the parties?” (49–50)

Darcy’s remark that “To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either” the persuader or the person persuaded not only shows awareness of Campbell’s taxonomy, it also reflects the eighteenth-century rhetorical theorists’ suspicion of persuasion: Darcy faults those who are persuaded without being first convinced and those who persuade without first convincing and so Bingley’s hypothetical hasty acquiescence to a friend’s persuasion is evidence of a weak will, a character flaw, he implies. But Elizabeth counters with a more complex test for judging the relationship between persuadability and character. The question is not only dependent on the nature of the appeal but also on the import of the request and, most importantly, the relationship between the persuader and the one advised.

Encoded in Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s exchange are encompassing gender stereotypes that have migrated into the rhetorical concern with persuadability and firm-
ness. The work of such feminist literary scholars as Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, LeRoy W. Smith, and Alison G. Sulloway has taught us that conduct books for women are a rich source for understanding the construction of gender in the eighteenth century. Books like Reverend Bennett's *Strictures on Female Education* (1795) and Thomas Gisborne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1806) inscribe the ideological equation that makes man's greater physical strength somehow a mark of a putative "superiority of strong judgment" and "abstract thinking and reasoning" that suits him perfectly for the public role in court, assembly, business, and navigation that Providence has ordained (Bennett 83–88). Women, by contrast, "so far as the qualities of the heart are concerned . . . have every claim to a marked superiority" (Bennett 95). The "softness of their nature" and the "delicacy of their frame," the "timidity of their disposition and the modesty of their sex" may "disqualify them for the difficulties and exertions" of a public role, but their "amiable tendencies and affections" and their "sympathizing sensibilities" suit them perfectly for their role as "sister, daughter, and wife" (Gisborne 22–23) in their province in the household "superintending domestick concerns" (Bennett 94–95).

By the association of persuasion with emotion and of rationality with conviction, these gender stereotypes are manifest in rhetorical theory. In *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition*, Miriam Brody argues that at least since the eighteenth century, good writing has been characterized as "manly" writing: writing that depends for its effect on the muscle of argument, supported by healthy tissue of real evidence—the discourse of conviction. Bad writing is "feminine," depending for its effects on the seductive beauties of ornament that meretriciously insinuate by false appeals to the imagination that awaken the passions and overpower reason—the discourse of persuasion (3). These generalizations recall the peculiarly Enlightenment turn that John Locke gives to the traditional association of Dame Rhetoric with the glittering, false appeals of persuasion in his notorious condemnation of rhetoric in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). In overtly sexist terms, Locke will eventually conclude with a chivalrous tolerance of rhetoric: "Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against" (147). But his patronizing concession does not much restrain his portrait of persuasion as a woman of pleasure who dangerously intrudes within the male domain. In discourses "where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement," rhetoric can be tolerated. But in "all discourses that intend to inform or instruct" and where truth and knowledge are considered, rhetoric is to be forbidden as a "powerful instrument of error and deceit" (146). Persuasion is feminine and persuadability is womanly. As Reverend Bennett remarks, if women "were constituted to have our firmness and our depth . . . they would cease to be women" (88).

If it is, at one level, a weakness for honorable manly men such as Darcy and Wentworth to yield to persuasion, at another level Austen complicates such naïve
patriarchal certainties. In the concluding section of Darcy and Elizabeth’s discussion of conviction and persuasion, Elizabeth makes a notably feminine defense of persuadability. In a voice gendered in a way that honors attributes traditionally identified as feminine, Elizabeth judges Bingley’s hypothetical dilemma by a table of values quite different from Darcy’s. For her, openness to persuasion is not necessarily a sign of weakness; it may be a sign of love or benevolence. The moral response depends not on maintaining a logical or principled consistency but on honoring a relationship to another: a “regard for the requester would often make one readily yield to a request without waiting for arguments to reason one into it,” she insists. For her the morality of a choice is at least as much a question of feeling, of being open to the concerns of others, of recognizing others’ needs, as it is of reason and self-control. The issue of Elizabeth and Darcy’s debate is the dialectic of *Persuasion*.

III

*Persuasion* is the story of the twenty-eight-year-old Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. The crucial event in Anne’s life was that at the age of nineteen she was “persuaded to believe” by Lady Russell, a surrogate mother, that she should refuse Wentworth’s marriage proposal, that their “engagement [would be] a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it” (27). The aristocratic Lady Russell judged Wentworth, a naval officer with “no connections,” “alliance,” or “fortune” (27), a poor match for the daughter of Sir Walter, a baronet; furthermore she could not brook Wentworth’s “confident temper” (27). Eight years have passed since Wentworth, angry, hurt, and disgusted over Anne’s refusal, went off to sea. Since then, Anne has lived a miserable life, unloved and unappreciated by her vain father and her snobbish older sister Elizabeth. Anne’s spirits awaken when she learns that Wentworth, fresh with successes at sea, has returned. He comes in search of a wife but makes clear that Anne, whose earlier refusal he sees as proof of a weak, pliable character, a persuadable temper, is not among the eligible. Instead, he flirts with Louisa Musgrove, a sister of Anne’s brother-in-law. When Louisa is injured in an accident while trying to impress him, Wentworth feels honor-bound to marry her, just at the time that he realizes he loves Anne, that he has suppressed his love under his pride and anger at her rejection. Another obstacle to their union is William Elliot, Anne’s cousin, and heir to Sir Walter’s title, whose interest in Anne inspires Lady Russell to another attempt at persuasion of Anne, this time to accept an expected proposal from him, a persuasion which Anne resists. Anne’s challenge is to bring Wentworth to the persuasion that she loves him so that he can overcome his fear of rejection and propose. This she does; he proposes again; she accepts; and the two discuss at length how they came to be separated and reunited. Thus, *Persuasion* begins in the shadow of one
persuasive situation (Anne’s refusal on the advice of Lady Russell), reaches a climax with another (Anne’s resistance to her second effort to persuade her), and ends with a discussion between heroine and hero about the ethics of giving and taking advice.

Austen’s depiction of the persuasive process is an instance of her more general interest in the operations of the mind, dramatized typically as a conflict between what one wants to be true (desires or wishes) and what is. For mistaking a wish for reality, the Austen heroine often pays dearly. The tension in the persuasive process between desire and reality is an instance of this broader theme, a process in which the will, under the influence of the imagination, is moved to act. As such Austen’s depiction of the process follows in its basic mechanics the account provided by the theorists. But while for Austen reason is often an effective critical faculty disciplining judgment to attend to what Bacon calls the “nature of things,” reason is generally an instrumental (rather than an independent) faculty in the persuasive process, a function of desire in the case of characters such as Sir Walter and Elizabeth, who are in the grip of their appetites, or of the moral passions in the case of Anne. That persuasion is under the sway of the passions does not, however, make persuadability a sign of weakness, for the novel complicates the simple dichotomy of the rhetorics between a non-rational, weak, feminine persuadability and a strong, rational, masculine conviction. The novel invites the reader to subject the ethical questions the theory raises to Elizabeth Bennet’s more complicated test—whether a persuadable temper might indicate an affectionate heart, rather than a weak will, and a mind characterized by a discriminating moral sensibility rather than by a timid susceptibility.

Though it occurs prior to the depicted action, Lady Russell’s persuasion of Anne to refuse Wentworth’s proposal is determinative of Persuasion’s plot because Wentworth has allowed this incident to define Anne for him, and his interpretation can influence the reader. 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. The “other” Elliots—Anne’s father Sir Walter and her sisters Elizabeth and Mary—provide the first suggestion that unpersuadability is not indicative of reasonable, virtuous, manly integrity but rather of selfish, egotistical solipsism.

Persuasion opens with a telling example of persuasion—the effort to persuade Sir Walter, “distressed for money” (9), to adopt a way to cut expenses and increase his income. The first attempts to persuade him, by Anne and Lady Russell, fail because these attempts do not engage Sir Walter at the level of his ruling passions. Lady Russell’s insistence that meeting his obligations would bring credit to Sir Walter as an “honest man,” a “man of principle” (12), and Anne’s appeal to “justice and equity” (12) speak to moral values entirely foreign to Sir Walter: “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character” (4). Sir Walter’s solicitor, Mr. Shepherd, is successful where Anne and Lady Russell fail because he regards
Sir Walter’s vanity as constitutive of his person and no more pliable than his creditors’ demands. Building on a hint Sir Walter himself drops, Shepherd proposes that Sir Walter lease Kellynch to a naval officer as a way to increase Sir Walter’s income, but, building on Sir Walter’s suggestion that occupying Kellynch should be the “greatest prize of all” for even the most decorated officer (17), Shepherd strokes Sir Walter’s vanity by making “it appear as if [the Crofts] ranked nothing beyond the happiness of being the tenants of Sir Walter Elliot” (24). A naval officer is the perfect foil to set off the glory of Sir Walter: “An admiral speaks his own consequence, and, at the same time, can never make a baronet look small. In all their dealings and intercourse, Sir Walter Elliot must ever have the precedence” (24). While Shepherd and Sir Walter do find terms that enable Sir Walter to take action he cannot, in any case, avoid (the debts are real), it would be misleading to say that reason controls the process, for Shepherd’s art is to find a way for Sir Walter to do what he must without confronting his own culpability. By reading, echoing, and reinforcing Sir Walter’s vanity, Shepherd indulges Sir Walter’s delusions. The office and duty of persuasion is, in Sir Walter’s case, to echo and evoke desire.

A minor example of the self-persuasive process shows us how the same process is manifest in the internal negotiation of self-persuasion. In this instance, Anne’s older sister Elizabeth deliberates whether to invite to dinner her sister’s husband’s family visiting Bath. Elizabeth is strongly inclined not to do so because a dinner would make conspicuous to those familiar with the lavishness of Kellynch the relatively modest appointments of the quarters at Bath to which Sir Walter’s debt has brought the family, and Elizabeth would be embarrassed by the comparison her guests would silently make. The purpose of the self-persuasion is to heighten this inclination by finding general reasons to support it:

Elizabeth was, for a short time, suffering a good deal. She felt that Mrs. Musgrove and all her party ought to be asked to dine with them, but she could not bear to have the difference of style, the reduction of servants, which a dinner must betray, witnessed by those who had been always so inferior to the Elliots of Kellynch. It was a struggle between propriety and vanity; but vanity got the better, and then Elizabeth was happy again. These were her internal persuasions.—“Old fashioned notions—country hospitality—we do not profess to give dinners—few people in Bath do—Lady Alicia never does; did not even ask her own sister’s family, though they were here a month: and I dare say it would be very inconvenient to Mrs. Musgrove—put her quite out of her way. I am sure she would rather not come—she cannot feel easy with us. I will ask them all for an evening; that will be much better—that will be a novelty and a treat. They will be delighted to come to-morrow evening. It shall be a regular party—small, but most elegant.” (219–20)

Elizabeth’s self-persuasion begins by acknowledging a moral imperative—that she “ought to” invite them—but this moral passion quickly gives way to her desire, her vanity. Reason enters not to check but to support this ruling passion. Slighting one’s in-laws is accepted, even expected, in Bath, a persuasion she supports by the prece-
dent of Lady Alicia's even greater rudeness. Assured that others will approve, Elizabeth wants to be persuaded that even Mrs. Musgrove, the victim of the slight, will not fault her. She easily finds reasons to support this inclination: Mrs. Musgrove would be "put quite out of her way" by a dinner invitation in which she would suffer a painful and proper sense of her inferiority at table with the titled Elliots. It is obvious that here reason, rather than setting the end of the persuasive process or slowing the appeal to pleasure (the two roles the theorists assign it), actually finds ways to serve desire. It rationalizes desire. As Austen notes in another context, "How quick come the reasons for approving what we like" (15).

Contrast these instances of persuasion and self-persuasion with Lady Russell's unsuccessful second effort to persuade Anne—to accept an expected proposal from her cousin, Mr. William Elliot. Lady Russell, the model persuader, proposes what to her appears the reasonable, prudent course, marriage to Mr. William Elliot, by appealing to Anne where she is most vulnerable, her moral passions—her sense of duty, especially to her family's future, her mother's memory, and her sense of obligation to Lady Russell herself:

"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! My dearest Anne, it would give me more delight than is often felt at my time of life!" (159–60)

The text emphasizes Anne's vulnerability to these emotional appeals. Pointing out directly that Lady Russell's persuasions work on Anne's "imagination and her heart," Austen emphasizes the impact of the persuasion—as Anne struggles "to subdue the feelings this picture excited" (160). Austen compares the process to witchcraft: Anne is "bewitched"; Lady Russell's images work as a "charm which she could not resist" (160). The spell is cast; the associations and the movement from image to heart to will to action are almost automatic as Lady Russell leaves "the matter to its own operation" (160). But the reverie is interrupted when Lady Russell's persuasions evoke not only an image of a desired future but also a mental picture of Mr. Elliot, which evokes an immediate feeling of distrust. Consistent with eighteenth-century theory, Anne's reason now clicks in to slow the movement from imagination to desire to will by questioning the relationship of the end desired to the means proposed (Campbell 77). Her moral sense resists Mr. Elliot and reason has served its ends. The process is halted, the persuasion resisted.

As these examples show, Austen's understanding of the mechanics of persuasion conforms to the account in the rhetorics: persuasion is a process by which desire moves will to action. But the place of reason and the moral import of the
process are quite different in her presentation from the rhetorics’ account. In Austen, reason does not necessarily function as an independent faculty capable of directing an instrumental will; reason is, rather, an instrumental faculty in the service of either a desire for good or a desire for pleasure. In Anne, we see in a conflict between two goods critical reasoning in the service of moral passions functioning to slow the movement from wish to action. But in the cases of Sir Walter and Elizabeth reason comes to the support of desire, promotes, does not impede, the pleasure principle. Ironically, a will totally under the control of selfishness, such as Sir Walter’s or Elizabeth’s, is so closed off to others that it becomes resistant to emotional appeal and invulnerable to genuine persuasion, while a will such as Anne’s, open to both the stirring of the affections and the moral claims others make on her, is persuadable.

But the most interesting dialectic between persuadability and resolution in *Persuasion* is not between Anne and the other Elliots but between Anne and Wentworth. These two lovers complement each other in a decidedly gendered way: Anne is paradigmatic of female sensitivity and receptivity and Wentworth of male assertiveness and resolve. “He was . . . a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit, brilliancy; Anne an extremely pretty girl with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling” (26). Anne is, furthermore, the embodiment of the female ethic of service to others—a model “daughter” to Lady Russell, sister to Mary, aunt to her nephew. She rushes to console when Mary needs cheering, to serve as a nurse when a child needs care, and willingly plays the piano when others wish to dance and flirt. But her disciplined subordination of self to the needs of others does not bring her what the conduct books call “compensations” for women who fulfill their ordained role. She is used by those who should love her, dismissed as someone who doesn’t count: Anne “was nobody with either her father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne” (5). From the Elliot perspective, Anne is virtually a nonentity. Though Wentworth should (and at some level does) know better, the way others regard and treat Anne would seem to license his inference that her refusal of his proposal was a manifestation of “feebleness of character” and an instance of “overpersuasion” (61).

But the organizing ironies of *Persuasion* are that Anne, who is perceived as the weakest character in the novel, is in fact the strongest and that her strength evolves from stereotypically feminine qualities. Indeed, it was precisely her strengths—an affectionate heart and a strong, resilient will—that made her persuadable by Lady Russell. Anne was attempting to meet a range of obligations that she felt. She “imagined herself consulting [Wentworth’s] good” (28) because the poverty that Sir Walter promised as her dowry if she married Wentworth would have impinged on his career: the “belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for his advantage was her chief consolation” (28). That the persuasions came from Lady Russell, who had been “in place of a parent” (246), her one “truly sympathizing friend,” a
friendship she regarded as an “extraordinary blessing” (42), also influenced her. In part, whether to yield to Lady Russell’s persuasions or not depended, in Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy’s terms, on the “degree of intimacy” with and the “regard for the requester,” not merely the strength of her own commitment to Wentworth. In summary, Anne’s sense of connectedness to others makes her see morality not primarily as a question of personal integrity but as one of nurturing and sustaining relationships; her commitment to good leads her to act on this moral discernment; and her resiliency in the face of hardship (what the novel terms “elasticity of mind”) enables her to accept conditions, sustain hopes, avoid indulging in the petulance that characterizes Wentworth’s response, and remain open to others. These, then, are the lessons that Wentworth has to learn—why Anne yielded and how her doing so is not weakness but strength. And, as the novel makes clear, to learn it, he must experience this reality—must open himself to the animating power of love for others and learn the value of resiliency in the face of disappointment, must himself come open to persuasion by others and by events.

At the outset of the novel, Wentworth appears a challenging student for lessons in the value of suasibility and resiliency by virtue of both his generally manly character and his willful determination to be in control. If Anne is mistakenly perceived as the epitome of womanly weakness—someone who doesn’t matter—Wentworth is presented as the avatar of masculine will, a naval officer who shapes life by the force of his decision and action. He is described as “full of life and ardour,” “fearless,” and especially “confident,” a word repeated in reference to him (27), and presented in Napoleonic fashion (the novel is set in 1814) as a figure who commands destiny, Austen’s version of that nineteenth-century type, the extraordinary man: “All his sanguine expectations, all his confidence had been justified. His genius and ardour had seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path. . . . All that he had told her would follow, had taken place” (29). As a result of his success, he has come to identify himself as resolute and decisive, is proud even of being sometimes impetuous. When he returned from sea to take up domestic life, he was determined “to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow,” to marry “any pleasing young woman who came in his way, excepting Anne Elliot” (61), whose “feebleness of character,” his “decided, confident temper could not endure” (61). His only criteria for a wife were “strength of mind and sweetness of manner” (62). The reader, realizing that his description fits only Anne, thus understands the distance between Wentworth’s conscious intentions and his subconscious desires and receives intimations of Wentworth’s fall.

It is precisely Wentworth’s overconfidence that leads him to deliver the hazelnut speech on which his fate takes its ironic turn. The speech is prompted by Louisa Musgrove’s claim that she, in contrast to her sister Henrietta (with whom she competes for Wentworth’s affection), has the decisive, resolute character he likes. Louisa makes Henrietta’s apparent acquiescence to her aunt’s resistance to a plan-
ned visit to the Hayters indicative of a weak character that she contrasts to Wentworth with her own:

"And so, I made her go. I could not bear that she should be frightened from the visit by such nonsense. What! — would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I know to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person? — or, of any person I may say. No, — I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it. And Henrietta seemed entirely to have made up hers ... and yet, she was as near giving it up, out of nonsensical complaisance!" (87)

Louisa's resolves wins Wentworth's praise:

"Happy for her, to have such a mind as yours at hand! ... [W]oe 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. Your sister is an amiable creature; but your is the character of decision and firmness, I see. ... It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on. ... [L]et those who would be happy be firm. — Here is a nut. ... To exemplify, a beautiful, glossy nut, which blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot any where. — This nut," he continued with playful solemnity, — "while so many of its brethren have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of." Then, returning to his former earnest tone: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm." (87–88)

The exchange is richly ironic. The distinguishing values Louisa declares are not her own but reflect Wentworth's, making her claim to a masculine resolution rather an instance of a stereotypical type of feminine suasibility. As for Wentworth's response, its enthyemmatic character reflects stylistically the praise of the masculine virtues of fortitude and strength of mind over the feminine virtues of amiability and suasibility that is his theme, but its didactic, pompous tone recalls the conduct books: Wentworth is opposed to young women being open to influence — except of course by him. Furthermore, while he likes to preach self-determination, in this case doing so contributes to his losing his freedom to act. When Louisa later attempts to impress Wentworth by shouting, "I am determined; I will" (109) and jumping nearly fatally from the wall at Lyme, Wentworth, thinking himself responsible for the accident and committed by his flirtations, feels honor-bound to marry Louisa if she chooses, just as his love for Anne re-emerges. Feeling trapped, Wentworth withdraws, leaving Louisa to Bennick's care and Anne with her family. The irony could not be more evident: the man who boasted of being the master of his destiny will let events decide his marital fate.

The last third of the novel is comprised of the elaborate ritual by which Anne persuades Wentworth to act on his feelings for her. Later, in a retrospective discussion with Anne of the events that the novel relates, Wentworth analyzes the
causes of his reluctance to act by providing a psychic history that has decided Baconian overtones. He tells her that he had attempted to subdue his affections for her by filling his imagination with reason-inspired images of her as a weak character to whom he could be indifferent: he "had meant to forget her and believed he had done so," though in fact he had "imagined himself indifferent when he had only been angry" (241). Once his love for her had resurfaced and Louisa had become engaged to Benwick, he was free to act, but fear of rejection and jealousy of Mr. Elliot prevented him from doing so. Anne, acting as persuader, through indirection, counters his fear of rejection with hope of acceptance by subtly planting clues of her love for him. As Wentworth says, his fear of rejection and his jealousy had "been gradually yielding to the better hopes which her looks or words, or actions occasionally encouraged" until she finally persuaded him to act on his hopes instead of his fears and he seized "a sheet of paper, and poured out his feelings" for her (241).

A conversation between Harville and Anne that Wentworth overhears is climactic because it persuades him to propose, and its significance is the more apparent for its parallels to the earlier scene of the hazel-nut speech. The subject of Anne and Harville's conversation is the relative constancy of men and women. Anne, whose view is influenced by her desire to signal to the overhearing Wentworth her continuing love for him, claims that women are the more faithful and speculates, in language that directly echoes the conduct books (see Bennett 88–89), that women's fate is the explanation—a life "at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us," while men have lives that take them "back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions" (232). Harville's defense of men culminates in an emotional appeal drawn from his own experience. "In a tone of strong feeling," he beseeches, "if I could but make you comprehend what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children, and watches the boat that he has sent them off in . . . and then turns away and says, 'God knows whether we shall ever meet again!' " (235). Anne, moved by the sincerity of his feelings, responds, "I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you . . . All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest, when existence or hope is gone" (235). This last observation is intended less as the decisive point in convincing Captain Harville than as the crucial point in the persuasion of the overhearing Wentworth.

In Wentworth's earlier hazel-nut speech, constancy and firmness were associated with masculine resolve and reason; here constancy is a question of sensibility—of the strength and duration of feelings. Here Anne and Harville instruct; Wentworth overhears and learns. And in style, too, this dialogue is a contrast to the earlier scene. Genuine exchange was impossible in the earlier scene because Louisa was an anticipatory echo of Wentworthian resolution, a mere prompt for his monologue; here Harville and Anne argue with deference and respect, open not only to rational but to emotional appeal, in a genuine dialogue, in which each party, while
attempting to win over the other, nevertheless remains open enough to turn debate into mutual exploration. And all of this is subordinate to the scene’s dramatic purpose, in which Anne is both Wentworth’s persuader and his mentor, for she brings him not only to act on his feelings for her but also to confront the more complicated, dialogic world that his new domestic role ashore presents.

_Persuasion_ is, then, nearly as much Wentworth’s story as it is Anne’s, and as such it is a gendered tale. C. S. Lewis’s observation that _Persuasion_ is an exception to a pattern that characterizes four of Austen’s other novels in which the heroine experiences an “undeception” (27) is misleading in this important regard: the same pattern characterizes _Persuasion_, but the pattern applies to Wentworth. He sounds much like Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, or Emma Woodhouse in regretting “the pride, the folly, the madness of resentment” which had kept him from acting justly and in his own genuine interests (242). Moreover, what Wentworth learns he comes to know by conventionally women’s ways and by sharing, if only temporarily, women’s fate. When Wentworth realizes that he loves Anne but is committed to Louisa and retreats to his brother’s home, he has assigned himself a woman’s role in the making of his marriage: powerless to refuse Louisa if she wants him; powerless to ask Anne, whom he loves (Poovey 232). Wentworth’s willful adherence to a masculine code of honor has, in a sense, emasculated him. Furthermore, in the courtship that follows, Anne leads and he can only react. In the domesticity of the parlor, which is his new place, Wentworth learns the value of watching others, listening to others, overhearing others, rather than preaching to others. And what the reader observes in following Wentworth’s progress is also a difference in rhetorical style: between, on the one hand, the domestic and “feminine” ways of overhearing and being overheard; of receptivity and persuadability; of the open hand of a dialogic rhetoric; and, on the other, Wentworth’s public, “masculine,” monologic style of reason and the cold fist of logic.

**Conclusion**

My argument makes three distinct but related claims. The first is that we need look no further than to the theories evoked by _Persuasion_’s title to identify the unifying concerns of the novel. For Austen, the dynamics of persuasion as understood in eighteenth-century rhetorics and its characteristic occasions were paradigmatic of her theme—the moral development of the mind. In my view, the basic plot of _Persuasion_ probably originated in the ironies of suasibility and firmness, in the hypothesis that a character such as Anne’s would be persuadable precisely because of her strengths—a disciplined will, a heightened moral sensitivity, and an affectionate heart.

My second claim is that _Persuasion_ participates in and fosters the dialectics of gender in the eighteenth century. I grant that it is possible to cast the extreme op-
positions in *Persuasion* in other terms—spiritual (Anne's ethic of love and service) versus secular (Sir Walter's selfish vanity) comes quickly to mind. But the more important tension is between Anne and Wentworth. His moral code, with its emphasis on personal integrity, adherence to high principles, consistent, objective judgment, is a second, more masculine voice of morality, not its opposition. More importantly, the climactic discussion Anne has with Harville points us in the direction of the binary opposition Armstrong identifies between public/masculine values on the one hand and domestic/feminine values on the other. *Persuasion* clearly belongs among those novels that empowered the "rise of the domestic woman and established . . . her dominance over . . . the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations" (Armstrong 3).

Finally, *Persuasion* has a justifiable claim to at least a minor place in the rhetorical canon (as well as the literary one). The novel enacts the psychology of persuasion set forth in Bacon, Campbell, and Blair and accepts as morally problematic a psychology that features desire and imagination as necessary and sufficient cause for persuasion. But *Persuasion* does not bear out the confidence the theorists express in reason as a remedy to persuasion's problematic psychology. Although it is true that reason in Austen plays a salutary role as a reality check, that Anne's critical reason, in Bacon's terms, "buckles and bows down the mind to the nature of things" (8: 441), reason is not in itself a sufficient safeguard because it is for Austen an instrumental faculty that can serve Sir Walter's vanity and Wentworth's anger, as well as Anne's morally inspired self-command. Furthermore, the arguments of Elizabeth Bennet and, more importantly, the example of Anne Elliot suggest that persuadability may signal a sympathetic, loving heart informed by a moral imagination rather than a weak will and a dormant reason. *Persuasion*, then, offers in a distinctly feminine voice a counter to a rhetorical theory grounded in a rationalist ethic.

**Works Cited**


