

Captain Wentworth, British Imperialism and Personal Romance

SUSAN MORGAN

Department of English, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056

In his fascinating book on *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*, Roger Sales opens his chapter on *Persuasion* with the claim that “*Persuasion* debates the question of who will, and who deserves to, win the peace after the ending of the Napoleonic Wars.”¹ One evocative power of this claim for me is that it emphasizes approaching the novel within the framework of British military interests at the beginning of the nineteenth century.² I want to extend Sales’s point by saying that to talk about British military interests is also to talk about its imperial interests. Moira Ferguson and Edward Said have published critiques of *Mansfield Park* as a novel which, at least implicitly, supports the British government’s policies of conquering and economically exploiting other countries.³ Although I don’t agree with their readings, I do agree with their premise: that it is important to consider Austen’s work in the light of larger British international policies. Other critics, and I think of Frank Gibbon and, more recently, Joseph Lew, have looked in detail at the West Indian and anti-slavery allusions in *Mansfield Park* to argue that the book does not support British imperial enterprise.⁴ But what about *Persuasion*? In *Persuasion* Captain Wentworth and his fellow officers in the Royal Navy are presented as an admirable and desirable group. Yet it is undeniable that throughout the nineteenth century the Navy would make possible the expansion of the empire. Is *Persuasion*, then, a novel which in some implicit ways supports British imperialism? And even if we decide that the answer is no, I think we must still ask the question of the political significance of the Royal Navy’s presence in Austen’s novel.

We could, of course, decide that this is a question that doesn’t matter, a question which we don’t want to ask about such a wonderful novel as *Persuasion*. We could say that this book has nothing to do with early nineteenth-century England’s military, political and economic history, that this is a book about personal love and romance. And, of course, it is.

But for me there are two major reasons why it is important to think about *Persuasion* in terms of British imperialism. The first is that the topic *is* in the book. I think Jane Austen’s readers have long since abandoned the portrait of the novels and their author as small gems about a very small world, written by a spinster of great genius but little or no experience or larger historical and political awareness. It is not enough to conclude that *Persuasion* is concerned with discus-

sions about and portraits of the Royal Navy because Austen had two brothers in the navy and she loved them. I need only recall the explicit reference to how Captain Wentworth exerts himself at the end of the novel to make sure that Mrs. Smith will receive the income from her property in the West Indies. *Persuasion* seems to me very clearly to take as one of its major themes a representation of the navy as a national institution. Through its portraits of Admiral Croft, Captains Harville and Benwick, and Captain Wentworth, the novel offers some eloquent and complex arguments about what that navy should be like.

The second reason why I believe *Persuasion* should be looked at in terms of what it has to say about the British navy and thus about its nation's relations to other nations is that not to do so is to miss a whole dimension of what makes this novel so brilliant. *Persuasion* is a story of heterosexual love, not in some universal way but very much according to the possibilities and limitations of men and women of Austen's social class at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The novel offers a vision, as public and political as it is personal and romantic, in ways for nations as well as lovers to exist in the world. To read *Persuasion* as simply about a couple rather than about a couple and a country, is to fall back on an approach that would leave out much of Austen's achievement.

THE ROYAL NAVY

During the nineteenth century the Royal Navy was crucial to British takeovers of states and regions around the world, from the West Indies to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula.⁵ Seapower was why the British East India Company could pursue a very profitable policy of exporting opium to China in spite of the strict laws of the government of China.⁶ And when that government finally moved in 1839 to stop the flow of smugglers bringing this illegal and debilitating drug into their country by confiscating the supplies, it was the Royal Navy that attacked China's coast cities, blew away its fragile navy and much of its gathered army, and forced China's surrender. It was the threatening guns of the Royal Navy that forced China in 1842 to accept the appalling terms that England would not only have the right to export opium into China but would even get to keep the island of Hong Kong as a port for its ships and a depot for their cargoes of opium. And it was Royal Navy guns again at the end of the second Opium War that forced an extremely reluctant Chinese government in 1858 to accept British terms and sign the Treaty of Tientsin, actually legalizing opium in China.

The Chinese Opium Wars are only one historic moment where the navy was brought in to protect the profits, no matter how unjust or immoral, of British business. But the Opium Wars happened twenty

to forty years after Austen was dead and on the opposite side of the earth. Does that make them irrelevant to a discussion of *Persuasion*? Why bring them up at all? Part of what I will be suggesting is that later international events such as the Opium Wars are not at all irrelevant to reading Austen.

But closer to home, both in time and space, were the navy's activities in the Caribbean. When we look at the activities of the Royal Navy in the later decades of the eighteenth century and during the first two decades of the nineteenth, in Austen's lifetime, their ships were everywhere. The wars with the French were fought almost all around the globe, as much through control of territories and trade routes as through battles. There were British fleets in the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the Indian Ocean and Far East, North America and the Atlantic, and the West Indies.⁷ The West Indies was a major site of the ongoing battles with Napoleon throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century, both because neither the French nor the British were able to control the region and because its islands were so profitable.⁸ Indeed, the West Indian planters formed a powerful block, referred to as the plantocracy, in the British parliament.

The reference in *Persuasion* to Mrs. Smith's property in the West Indies and the possible income from it, almost certainly refers to a plantation, probably sugar, with the income probably gained from crops produced by slave labor.⁹ On the other hand, references to West Indian plantations were not automatically associated with support for slavery. On the contrary, in that first decade of the century, after the March 1802 Treaty of Amiens and the brief peace it brought, a standard argument in parliament against the planters' block was that, even leaving aside any moral question, West Indian businesses would improve their profits by replacing slaves with wage labor. Henry Brougham's 1803 pamphlet, *Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers*, explicitly opposed the argument of the West Indian planters' lobby that slavery was good for business, by claiming that in the West Indies abolition would help rather than hinder British business interests.¹⁰ This extremely popular pamphlet influenced the successful vote in the British Commons in 1804 to abolish the British slave trade (though a vote in the combined houses would not happen until 1807). The relations of slavery to British West Indian agricultural profits were a matter of visible public debate in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Austen's references to West Indian properties simply do not mean an acceptance of slave labor there.

In fact, it is more plausible that Austen's references imply the opposite. Another famous pamphlet was James Stephens's 1802 *The Crisis in the Sugar Colonies*. Stephens argued that the slave revolution on the French held island of St. Domingue not only

“showed the inherent fragility of the slave systems of the West Indies.” He predicted that “Napoleon would be defeated by black insurgency.” For Stephens, not only was West Indian slavery associated with that wicked Napoleon and the French. His greater claim was that winning the coming war against Napoleon actually depended on the British choosing to reform their own West Indian practices. For this abolitionist, the war with Napoleon would be won or lost in the West Indian theatre. Beating the French required eliminating an evil system employed by the French and establishing in its stead a British system of hired workers, thus removing “the motive for slave insurrection.”¹¹

Stephens’s argument was based on his reference to the island known on its west side as French Saint Domingue and on its east side as San Domingo, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. One of the largest islands in the West Indies, Saint Domingue was generally also considered the richest. The successful slave revolts against the French in Saint Domingue from 1791 through 1802, along with a few bungled British attempts to control the island in 1795 and 1796 had made it the most highly visible former possession of the French in the West Indies to the British public.¹² Just to mention St. Domingue was to invoke tales of enormous cruelty to slaves, loathing and contempt for their French masters, and a general anxiety that slaves, meaning British-owned slaves, might rise up in similar successful rebellions. The Rebellion in Saint Domingue, which included several takeovers of San Domingo, functioned not only in Stephens’s pamphlet but in the opinion of many in England as an event which argued for the practicality and patriotism as well as the humanity of abolishing slavery.

The slave rebellion wasn’t the only recent event on Saint Domingue which proved French infamy and French failure. In 1806 the Royal Navy fought a section of the French fleet off the coast of San Domingo, and destroyed or captured all five of their ships.¹³ This was an enormously popular victory, and it contributed to an image of the Royal Navy as a force for freedom and liberation by associating the navy’s achievement off San Domingo with the achievement of the peoples on San Domingo who had also beaten the French. That image was enhanced starting in 1806 when Parliament abolished the foreign slave trade. The navy’s role from 1806 on was not only to beat the French but to enforce the ban on foreign ships and, starting in 1807, British ships carrying slaves.¹⁴

When Austen chooses in *Persuasion* to introduce Wentworth by having him earn the rank of Commander through his valor against the French in the 1806 action off St. Domingo, her choice carries significant political as well as personal meanings. It has been all too easy to offer just the personal. Cassandra’s fiancé, while a chaplain

with a British naval force, had died of fever in San Domingo in 1792. Even more intimately, Jane and Cassandra's brother Frank had fought in the 1806 Battle of San Domingo.¹⁵

But I want to emphasize that Austen's choice of background for Captain Wentworth deserves to be read as being about more than private history. The choice certainly carried meanings for the Austen family. But it also invoked a whole network of associations with St. Domingo for Austen's audience which had to do with national rather than family history. These associations would mark Captain Wentworth as having fought not only a particularly important and dangerous sea battle but one particularly linked for British audiences with arguments for the cause of liberty. His enemies were explicitly the French, but also—as inextricably tied with the French through the mere mention of San Domingo—the cruelties of the slave trade and of the plantation slavery system.

REMAKING CAPTAIN WENTWORTH

Captain Wentworth is an action hero, returning in victory from a noble war. Nonetheless, in Austen's narrative that role does not absolve him, or the Royal Navy, of the need for change now that the war is over. I return to Roger Sales's remark that *Persuasion* is about who should win the peace after the Napoleonic wars. It will be England, of course, for Napoleon had already suffered his final defeat at Waterloo when Austen was writing *Persuasion*. But what kind of England will it be? Surely that question must have fascinated Austen during the summer of 1815, as she, and everyone around her, saw the end of a war that had lasted, with the brief official respite in 1802 and 1803, almost continuously from 1792 to 1815. Peace, and what it might mean, needed to be defined and constructed anew. The opening premise of *Persuasion* is precisely that Captain Wentworth, and the values he represents at the beginning of the book, would be the wrong choice, indeed are not fit, to win that peace.

It has long been accepted that the dashing naval hero of *Persuasion* undergoes an education in the novel on the value of being persuadable. Many readers, including myself, have written what seem to me compelling analyses about Captain Wentworth's failings and mistaken ideas, and about the process of his education.¹⁶ I want to approach the issue a little differently, and consider Captain Wentworth's failing specifically in the light of his profession as an officer in the Royal Navy.

Captain Wentworth's failing as the novel begins is in one sense easy to describe: he does not appreciate Anne Elliot. He may well still love her, whether he admits it to himself or not. But loving Anne, as with Fitzwilliam Darcy first loving Elizabeth Bennet, is not enough. His happiness, his future, and, I would say, the meaning of

the peace and thus the very future of England, depend on Captain Wentworth being able to appreciate Anne.

At the end of the novel Captain Wentworth is himself eloquent on his mistakes, when he describes himself as having been "proud, too proud" to have proposed again after the first two years of separation. He goes on to say that "I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards" (247).

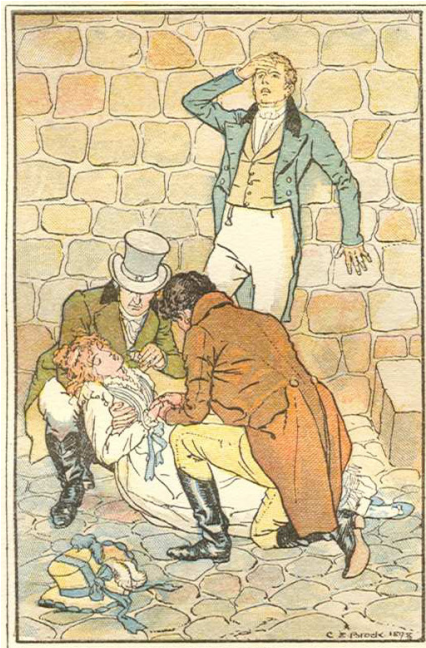
One way to explain Captain Wentworth's inability to appreciate Anne is that his values and principles were those of a man at war and he must change them to fit the peace. Captain Wentworth has seen the world according to a concept of fixed justice, a world of clarity where there is a correspondence between what you are, what you do, and what happens to you. Thus who you are, and who anyone else is, is a measurable and an observable quality. Like so many of Austen's characters who need to be educated, Captain Wentworth understands the world in simple terms, and his version is a duller, more rigid, and more schematic universe than the one the narrative offers.

Captain Wentworth not only understands the world in fixed terms which make it easy for him to evaluate and judge. He absolutely insists on that fixity. During the long autumn walk from Uppercross to Winthrop, Captain Wentworth explains his philosophy to Louisa Musgrove. Character should above all be firm, not "yielding and indecisive" (88), qualities which for him are indistinguishable. A person, in his famous metaphor, should be a "Beautiful glossy nut," completely and permanently encased in its hard shell, "blessed with original strength," and "not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere." For Captain Wentworth change is understood as damage, a loss of "original" strength, happiness is stasis, and other people are threats which may puncture your glossy shell.

These are the beliefs of the man who reacted to Anne's being persuaded against an official engagement before he went to sea with opinions "totally unconvinced and unbending" and with the choice of a "final parting" (28). Captain Wentworth is a man who believes himself to shun compromise, and in that belief broke off all connection with the woman he loved. He refused to allow himself to be persuaded. But we could also say that Captain Wentworth's anger at Anne was caused not because she was too persuadable but because she was not persuadable enough, because, finally, she kept to what she believed to be right rather than succumbing to his persuasions. Captain Wentworth may admire firmness, but not as a quality in others which interferes with him arranging the world his way. His own firmness looks awfully like willfulness or, to paraphrase Austen's line about Emma Woodhouse, like the power of having

rather too much his own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of himself.

The comic beauty of Louisa's fall at Lyme is that if character is a beautiful glossy nut, Louisa's willful firmness, taught to her by Captain Wentworth, literally causes her to crack open her head. More seriously, we witness the firm Captain Wentworth in a practical crisis, and his principles are not able to give him the presence of mind to act decisively. "Is there no one to help me?" were the first words which burst from Captain Wentworth, in a tone of despair, and as if all his own strength were gone" (110). The man who believes that right makes might, that his inner strength is an earned armor against the world, has nothing to draw on when he loses the conviction of his own rightness and must see instead his human frailties. When the unconscious Louisa is taken to the Harville's home, Anne can never forget the sight of Captain Wentworth, "as he sat near a table, leaning over it with folded arms, and face concealed, as if overpowered by the various feelings of his soul, and trying by prayer and reflection to calm them" (112). This is hardly the portrait of a decisive man of action. But the point is surely that Wentworth's virtual collapse in a crisis will be the fate of a too rigid perspective confronting the



Oh God! her father and Mother!

C. E. BROCK, 1898

complexities and ambiguities of a peacetime world. Without the clarity of an external enemy, Wentworth is paralyzed.

Anne Elliot has known not only for the past eight years but perhaps since her mother died and certainly since she came to understand her father and her sister, that people are flawed, that enemies are more often within than without, and that honourable toils may not, often do not, bring just rewards. But in Austen's novel such knowledge is a cause for neither cynicism nor sadness. If the world and his own character are less morally ordered than Captain Wentworth has understood, if there is more careless selfishness and fewer clear victories and defeats, there is also more depth and more joy. The narrative tells the story of Anne Elliot's second chance, but she is not the only character so blessed. Captain Wentworth too receives a second chance, and for him it may well be an even greater gift. He is given a second chance to see and understand and learn to value qualities in Anne which were, after all, there to be seen the first time as well.

LOVE AND THE ROYAL NAVY

If I may rephrase Roger Sales's point, *Persuasion* is a novel about what kind of qualities its people will need if England is to be as victorious in peace as the nation has been in war. Admiral Croft represents an earlier naval generation, and his friendliness and straightforwardness function in the novel as a tribute to the retiring sailors who had fought so long in the wars against the French. Captains Harville, Benwick and Wentworth are the new generation, part of the final decade of the long struggle against Napoleon, but also the generation which will shape the future. And it is through the story of Captain Wentworth that the desirable qualities of that generation are presented.

The argument of the novel is that England's future, which is to say Captain Wentworth and Anne's future, requires those qualities of flexibility and openness to different and even opposing points of view which Captain Wentworth has learned this second time with Anne. The national future requires a vision of the nation not as a hard-shelled glossy nut committed to battling and repelling external influences. It requires a vision of international relations perceived not as a balance of hostile powers but as an interdependence of nations who are capable of acknowledging shared as well as opposing purposes. It requires a navy capable of the kind of practical decision-making which comes from a spirit of compromise rather than a rigid adherence to self-images of dominance or to internal rules.

Understanding *Persuasion* as at least in part a vision of relations between nations as well as between two young people who have

taken it “into their heads to marry” (248), illuminates for me that last, and somewhat odd, sentence of the novel. The ending offers more than a sentimental tribute to the sailor’s profession and to Anne’s being a “sailor’s wife” (252). Rather, this final sentence summarizes the kind of navy the novel has been arguing for: one “which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.” The point is not that British sailors are good husbands and fathers. Austen’s claims are much greater: that the Royal Navy, precisely because it is distinguished by values usually considered to be domestic—the values of flexibility and understanding and tolerance—is also distinguished as of invaluable national and international importance.

Which brings me back to the Chinese Opium Wars. Finally I would say that *Persuasion*, an alluring love story, is also an alluring vision of the future of the Royal Navy and of a nation whose warriors will have learned the strength in bending as well as the strength in standing fast. But that future did not come to pass. In Austen’s novel, the kind of self-satisfied aggressiveness which made Captain Wentworth believe that he knew best and which led to blindness and intolerance, was a quality he learned to turn away from. As a lover and an officer, Captain Wentworth came to understand the satisfactions and the real practical usefulness of a mind and heart more attuned to the rights and needs of others, more open to outside influences and possibilities. In the novel learning that lesson is the requirement for winning the peace, for directing England toward the future. But historically that was not the lesson the officers in the Royal Navy would learn. The navy which fought so long to stop Napoleon’s bid for domination in the Napoleonic Wars would go on fighting in other wars, often not against the aggressor, all too often as the aggressor. Less than twenty years after Austen wrote *Persuasion*, British admirals would order a fleet to sail to the coast of China and bombard its boats and its coastal cities to force its people to allow the trade in opium. I would hardly call that “the profession more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.” The Royal Navy, indeed the British nation, should have learned from *Persuasion*.

† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the online edition of this essay. – C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager

NOTES

- ¹ Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London: Routledge Press, 1994) 170.
- ² For a book-length discussion of Austen’s links to the French Revolution see Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979).

- ³ Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender," *Oxford Literary Review* 13, 1-2 (1991): 118-39; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
- ⁴ Frank Gibbon, "The Antiguan Connection: Some New Light on *Mansfield Park*," *The Cambridge Quarterly* XI, 2 (1982): 298-305; Joseph Lew, "'That Abominable Traffic': *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery," *History, Gender and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Beth Fowkes Tobin (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994).
- ⁵ See J. R. Hill, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); Lieut.-Cmdr. P. K. Kemp, ed., *History of the Royal Navy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969); Fletcher Pratt, *Empire and the Sea* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1946).
- ⁶ For a discussion of the Opium Wars, see J. R. Hill, ed., *The Oxford History of the Royal Navy*. See also, Nicholas Tarling, ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume Two: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).
- ⁷ See G. J. Marcus, *Heart of Oak: A Survey of British Seapower in the Georgian Era* (London: Oxford UP, 1975), 20-28. See also N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986).
- ⁸ P. K. Kemp, *History of the Royal Navy*, 150.
- ⁹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. (Oxford UP, 1954), 210. All further references to *Persuasion* are from this edition.
- ¹⁰ I am indebted throughout this discussion to Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988, particularly the chapter, "British Slave Trade Abolition: 1803-14.") See also James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1823* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1986); and Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ¹¹ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 300-01. For an extended discussion of British tracts about San Domingo see Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- ¹² Fletcher Pratt, *Empire and the Sea*, 108-26.
- ¹³ For an account of the battle, led by Vice-Admiral Sir John Duckworth, see G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy 1793-1815* (New York: Viking Press, 1971) 295-96.
- ¹⁴ Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949).
- ¹⁵ George Holbert Tucker, *Jane Austen the Woman: Some Biographical Insights* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 74-77.
- ¹⁶ See Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980); also *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Oxford UP, 1989), "Why There's No Sex in Jane Austen's Fiction."