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Author Biography

Stephanie Russo is a lecturer in English at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She is the author of *Women in Revolutionary Debate: Female Novelists from Burney to Austen* (2012), and has published widely on women's writing of the late eighteenth century. She is currently working on a monograph on the novels of Mary Robinson.

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Kathryn E. Davis. *Liberty in Jane Austen's Persuasion*. Lehigh UP, 2016. x + 181pp. ISBN: 9781611462272

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Competing political readings of Jane Austen have been regularly appearing since the publication of Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* in 1975. In that respect, there is nothing novel about Davis's project: tracing the development of the theme of liberty in Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*. However, the approach that Davis takes is quite unique in that she examines the idea of liberty through a moral and ethical lens. The key to understanding Austen's representation of liberty, Davis suggests, is through the idea that "political liberty writ large depends, first and foremost, upon liberty of soul within individuals" (4). Davis's approach to understanding liberty in *Persuasion* is thus grounded in the idea of self-governance. It is through self-governance, she argues, that Anne Elliot both withstands her romantic disappointment and allows herself to speak at the crucial moment in the White Hart Inn in order to win back the man she loves. Davis's approach differs from that of Butler's conservative reading, as well as from that of the work done by Claudia Johnson and others, in situating Austen as politically radical in that she "bridg[es] the critical gap between what might be called the political and ethical readings of Austen's novels" (25). Davis's reading of personal liberty is, then, both personal and political for she aims to demonstrate that it is through self-governance, facilitated through persuasion as opposed to force, that true liberty for both the individual and the wider society is assured.

Davis, like many contemporary Austen scholars, is interested in Austen's *History of England* as a prism through which to read her politics. Davis argues that the *History* was the forum through which Austen first engaged with the "problem of the ruler who lacks self-governance," and that this theme would be "a problem she takes up again seriously in *Persuasion*" (3). Given *Persuasion*'s immersion in the world of the navy and the Napoleonic Wars, it does seem appropriate that it is in *Persuasion* that Austen works through complex ideas related to self-governance, liberty, and rational leadership. However, Davis's contention that Wentworth is poised, at the end of *Persuasion*, to take on an active political life is somewhat problematic. While Wentworth has a public role by virtue of his senior position in the navy, Davis seems to suggest that Wentworth has a future in party politics: "[B]y the end of the novel, [he has the] virtues, talents, and prospects suited to an active political life" (18). While the idea of Wentworth extending the model of benevolent community he has established with Anne at the end of *Persuasion* to the national arena is appealing, this assertion about Wentworth's future career prospects seems rather a stretch.

The first chapter aims to understand Austen's conceptualisation of liberty through close readings of a variety of religious and political works that Austen is known to have read. Limiting her focus to those texts that we know Austen has read is certainly a piece of sound reasoning, but this also means that Davis perhaps ascribes too much importance to these texts: just because we know that Austen has read them does not necessarily entail that these texts were foundational to her understanding of liberty. These texts are Thomas Sherlock's *Discourse XVIII*, Cowper's "Truth," Johnson's *Rambler* No. 32 and Charles Pasley's *Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire*. Davis's detailed discussion of these texts and the way they may have shaped Austen's moral and political thought is interesting and valuable. Less successful, perhaps, is her attempt to connect the specific ideas contained in these texts to incidents in *Persuasion*. For example, at one point Davis compares

Wentworth's actions in removing the child Walter Musgrove off Anne's back to the salvation of God. She does so in order to illustrate how Austen works with the ideas of Thomas Sherlock, but I would argue that such an explicit connection between Sherlock's ideas and specific plot points in *Persuasion* is unnecessary. What is far more convincing is Davis's explication of how writers like Sherlock informed Austen's moral and ethical compass, which is then reflected in the understanding of morality represented in the novel. The most persuasive section of this first chapter is Davis's discussion of Pasley's *Essay on the Military Policy*, which is the text that most directly seems to articulate what Davis describes as Austen's belief that "Liberty for Austen means freedom for excellence" (61). Davis persuasively describes how these ideas enable both Anne and Wentworth to rekindle their relationship as well as to provide a model for both an ideal marriage and an ideal community.

The second chapter examines what Davis describes as "counterfeits" of liberty in *Persuasion*. Sir Walter Elliot and his daughter Elizabeth place too much emphasis on social status and personal beauty, while Wentworth, Davis argues, mistakes personal mobility with liberty. Davis is especially persuasive in her discussion of Sir Walter Elliot's lack of liberty. He has failed to model excellence or morality to the community around him, and as a consequence, he loses his capacity to manage Kellynch Hall. Further, his personal mobility is limited because he cannot be trusted to either remain in the neighbourhood or remove to London, so even his ability to choose a new place to live must be curtailed by those wiser heads who surround him. Davis is also very convincing on Wentworth's failure of self-governance and how this leads to a restriction in liberty. Wentworth allows his resentment over his failed relationship with Anne to drive him to flirt with Louisa Musgrove and acts without properly considering his actions. In other words, as Davis explains, "Wentworth's failure in self-governance in the first volume of the novel—manifested in unpremeditated movements—brings him dangerously close to the bondage of a marriage without love" (81). Ironically, Davis is perhaps at her strongest in this chapter about the *lack* of liberty. In demonstrating how failures of self-governance, perception, reason, and morality impede upon the liberty of the characters, she argues that Austen imagines a new political order based on virtue and merit rather than on hereditary privilege.

Davis then discusses the dichotomy between prudence and romance that Austen establishes in *Persuasion*. While prudence is seen as a positive virtue in Austen's earlier fiction, in *Persuasion* there seems to be a shift in the way the term is used. Davis attributes this shift in the use of the term as a mistaken understanding (at least by the characters in the novel) as signifying "an excessive concern with financial security or social propriety" (90). Real prudence, Davis suggests, requires "dramatic action," or "deliberate choice and action" (93). Davis then goes on to argue that the definition of "romance" that Austen relies on does not derive from the kinds of Romantic poetry that Anne reads, but instead is an allusion to Shakespearean romance, and, more specifically *The Winter's Tale*. As Davis acknowledges, hers is not the first work to compare *Persuasion* to *The Winter's Tale*, citing Jocelyn Harris's discussion of the resonances of the play within the novel as well as Tony Tanner and Lynn Rigberg. Ultimately, Davis argues, what Anne and Wentworth have done is learn to integrate prudence and romance: a synthesis of (seeming) opposites that allows them to act both rationally and with a full understanding of their emotions. Davis's discussion of both prudence and romance is compelling, but this section of the work is perhaps less dynamic than the previous discussion of counterfeits of liberty as much of this material is well-covered in the critical literature.

The next section of the book examines the rhetoric of *Persuasion*, focusing especially on the central idea of what it is to persuade. Davis examines two central acts of persuasive rhetoric in the novel: Lady Russell's successful attempt to talk Anne out of her engagement to Wentworth and Anne's speech about feminine constancy in love to Captain Harville in the White Hart Inn, which brings about the denouement of the novel. Lady Russell, Davis argues, suffers from a "lack of self-possession," and this failure of leadership points to "how complicated and difficult the responsibilities of governance can be" (123). Anne's act of persuasion, however, is a pathos-driven mode of persuasion, a mode of persuasion so convincing that both Wentworth and Harville are moved to ponder the extent of Anne's goodness. Anne's "liberty of soul," then, is manifested through persuasive speech (136). This conceptualization of liberty builds on Davis's earlier discussion of prudence as an active virtue and thus represents the synthesis of prudence and romance: Anne is acting prudently in asserting the constancy of her belief in romance.

The final section of *Liberty in Jane Austen's Persuasion* concerns the limits of human liberty. Davis argues that the narrator of *Persuasion* exists in a world beyond and above social convention. The narrator unbound by social mores allows the reader to understand that a respect and appreciation for social convention does not limit human liberty, but in fact facilitates proper action: "[S]ubmission to social mores—in this case, to the conventions of courtship and marriage—does not make seeing, knowing, and acting impossible, provided one allows them to serve their original purpose" (146). Davis also uses this section to go some way towards modifying the impression that she is arguing that Anne represents a paragon of perfection. However, given that Davis has spent the majority of the book arguing for Anne's moral and ethical superiority to all those who surround her, including Wentworth, this section comes perhaps too late in the volume to be as persuasive as it might be. Where Davis is much stronger is in her discussion of the way in which Anne considers the nature of conscience in light of the doctrine of original sin. As imperfect human beings, we can only achieve the liberty of soul that Austen posits through reason and constancy as well as a clear-sighted evaluation of our weaknesses. Anne's belief in the clearness of her conscience, despite the essential fallibility of human nature, suggests that she can be seen as "the paragon of human liberty in *Persuasion*" (156).

Davis's work is a challenging, intellectually rigorous account of the way politics, morality, and ethics intersect in Austen's *Persuasion*. While some of the material in this volume builds on earlier scholarship, Davis's unique and thoughtful approach to the idea of liberty, rooted as it is in ideas about self-governance, renders *Liberty in Jane Austen's Persuasion* a fresh and exciting reading of the novel. Moreover, Davis's central thesis, that Austen represents liberty as self-governance and the freedom to move towards excellence with all its associated implications for thinking about governance and the political liberty of a nation, represents a new opportunity for scholars to pursue this theme in other writings by Austen.