

JANE AUSTEN AND THE FEMINIST TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

The casual reader of British literature often views Jane Austen as a genteel early nineteenth-century novelist whose works focus on a young woman in her quest for marriage. These same readers would consider as quite improbable, even blasphemous, any suggestion that Austen was a feminist who agreed on a number of issues with seventeenth and eighteenth-century female writers such as Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft.¹ A closer analysis of Austen's novels reveals that, despite popular belief and the self-depreciating "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" image of her writing that Austen portrayed, she was not a sheltered spinster unaware of events and thoughts outside her close-knit family circle. Jane Austen in fact possessed an appreciation for the feminist tradition of women writers like Astell and Wollstonecraft and incorporated it into her writing.

Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft, two radical seventeenth and eighteenth-century feminist writers, respectively, exposed the limiting nature of women's role and education in their contemporary society and adopted the rallying cry, "Women as rational creatures." Similarly, Jane Austen shows an awareness and criticism of the societal expectations of young women and "operates on the assumption that women are inherently as intelligent and rational as men" in her novels.² Austen sides with Astell and Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth and nineteenth century debate waged on the role and education of women, but places her own unique

seal upon their "feminist" tradition in the so-called woman-centered novel.

Each of Austen's witty novels centers around one heroine in her attempts to rise above and often to question early nineteenth-century attitudes and assumptions about women. Austen satirically depicts other women in her novels who are intended to contrast with the heroines while simultaneously ridiculing the courtesy-book and accomplishments notions of correct female education and conduct. She characterizes her heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot, as intelligent, often clever young women who are admired by the other characters for their use of reason. The heroines are accomplished in the traditional sense of possessing some knowledge of music, singing, dancing, or drawing, but they generally consider the cultivation of reason a superior pursuit.

In addition, Austen's heroines, in word if not in act, refuse to succumb to the conventional view of marriage for money or security. They do not feel that marriage, any marriage, should constitute the ultimate goal of happiness in a young woman's life. Although Austen admittedly ends each novel with the heroine's marriage, she makes it clear that the young woman has achieved happiness through increased self-knowledge as a result of her experiences in the novel, not solely through securing a man's fortune. An examination of Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion and their heroines' respective quests for self-definition and understanding will reveal these subtle traces of

Wollstonecraft and Astell-style feminist thought in Austen's novels.

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I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FEMINIST TRADITION

While discussing my thesis project with a number of individuals, I have encountered somewhat frequently the criticism that I have chosen an inherently anachronistic topic. I generally respond to this charge by granting that, according to twentieth-century feminist standards, I could hardly call Jane Austen a feminist writer. Austen and the major "feminist" British writers who precede her, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft, are probably more correctly labelled "pre-feminists" or "pioneers of feminism." Astell, Austen, and Wollstonecraft recognize the patriarchal nature of western civilization, the subordination of women to men, the weaknesses of female education, both formal and informal, and the male domination of literature. Unlike modern feminists, however, Austen and the feminists whose tradition she inherited do not concern themselves with more specific issues such as gender identity and non-gender-biased language, for example. Margaret Kirkham's definition of "feminist" thought and fiction as that which is "concerned with establishing the moral equality of men and women and the proper status of individual women as accountable beings" effectively captures many of Astell's and Wollstonecraft's major concerns, which are in turn reflected in Austen's novels.³

Mary Astell, a late seventeenth-century writer considered the "most outspoken feminist of her time," argued that women are accountable beings and should be educated as such.⁴ In "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies," published in 1692, Astell proposes an

educational, religious retreat for the "learned education of the women."⁵ Like Wollstonecraft and Austen, Astell believes that women are "as capable of learning as men are" and that they should be permitted to "expel that cloud of ignorance which custom has involved us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful knowledge."⁶ Astell asks,

For since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of thinking, why should we not ... employ our thoughts on himself ... and not unworthily bestow them on trifles and gaieties and secular affairs?⁷

By using an exercise analogy, Astell points out that "as exercise enlarges and exalts any faculty, so through want of using it becomes cramp and lessened; if therefore we make little or no use of our understanding, we shall shortly have none to use."⁸ In fact, the lack of a proper education for women which Astell perceives "renders the generality of feminine conversations ... insipid and foolish,"⁹ an observation Austen adopts and parodies in several of her satiric portraits of women. Astell rejects the conventional idea of accomplishments such as music and painting constituting an acceptable women's education, but she does not go so far as to maintain that women should teach in the Church or otherwise "usurp authority where it is not allowed them."¹⁰ In a similar manner, Austen upholds the economic status quo of early nineteenth-century English society yet also criticizes its conventional ideas about women and their innate reasoning abilities and intelligence.

Astell also foreshadows Austen's questioning of marriage

customs in her best-known work, "Some Reflections on Marriage," published in 1700. Astell examines the preponderance of unhappy marriages and criticizes both men and women for often making hasty marital attachments. She argues that women and men generally marry for such reasons as wealth or beauty, neither of which give "great hopes of a lasting happiness."¹¹ Women, however, should be held less accountable than men for their ill choosing, according to Astell, for "what poor woman is ever taught that she should have a higher design than to get her a husband?"¹² According to Astell, "a woman, indeed, can't be properly said to choose; all that is allowed her, is to refuse or accept what is offered."¹³ She argues that women should be educated to improve their understanding of the world and to recognize men's wiles, and that, above all, they should not be made to feel that they must aspire to marriage.¹⁴ Astell obviously practiced what she preached; like Austen, she never married.

The "pre-feminist" thoughts expressed in Astell's writing effectively counter the conduct or courtesy-book standards for women maintained in such works as James Fordyce's immensely popular Sermons to Young Women. Courtesy books, considered "required reading" for eighteenth and nineteenth-century young women, "set forth the ideals of education and behaviour to which young persons were expected to conform."¹⁵ Like the traditional "boarding-school manner and accomplishments" education, they emphasized marriage as women's goal.¹⁶ First published in 1766, Fordyce's Sermons were reprinted fourteen times before 1813, the year of Pride and

Prejudice's first publication. Fordyce's series of sermons address such topics as "Modesty of Apparel," "Female Reserve," and "Female Virtue," all reinforced by applicable scripture verses emphasizing piety, decorum, modesty, and meekness in addition to "delicacy both of body and mind."¹⁷ Fordyce's opinion of the female intellect contrasts sharply with that upheld by his roughly contemporary feminists such as Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft. Using the same bodily and mental strength analogy which Austen criticizes in her novel, Persuasion, Fordyce argues that "... Nature appears to have formed the faculties of your sex for the most part with less vigour than those of ours; observing the same distinction here, as in the more delicate frame of your bodies."¹⁸ Concerning female education, he recommends the study of geography and memorization of Bible verses since, in his opinion, "... war, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and all the abstruser sciences, are most properly the province of men."¹⁹

Fordyce also emphasizes the traditional roles of women as daughters, wives, and mothers and argues against women's acquisition of wit, warning his female audience that "Men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female."²⁰ His attitude toward women authors and the novel is shown in his reference to women's "scraps of literature" which he describes as "truly insufferable."²¹ He tells his readers that novels "paint scenes of pleasure and passion altogether improper for you to behold, even with the mind's eye."²²

Fordyce's ideas assuredly antagonized women writers like Austen as well as radical eighteenth-century women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft. In her most famous book, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, Wollstonecraft attacks the presumptions and miseducation inflicted on women by the male-dominated culture. Her self-proclaimed "treatise ... on female rights and manners" argues that a "false system of education," derived from sources including the misogynistic writings of Milton and Rousseau and the conduct-book assumptions of writers like Fordyce, has "contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters."²³ Wollstonecraft points out that the typical women's education, whether derived from courtesy-books or from boarding schools, teaches women that their solitary ambition should be to "inspire love" when they should instead "by their abilities and virtues exact respect."²⁴

By contrast with the courtesy-book writers' view of women as "man's intellectual inferior,"²⁵ Wollstonecraft maintains that women, like men, are "rational creatures" who "are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties"--both physical and mental.²⁶ Like Astell, she criticizes the "accomplishments"-type education as well as the courtesy-books teachings. She argues that an emphasis on music, singing, and dancing, accomplishments frequently taught in boarding schools and by private tutors, leads to "false refinement, immorality, and vanity."²⁷ Wollstonecraft defines "the most perfect education" as

such an exercise of the understanding as is best
calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart.

Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent.²⁸

She encourages women to develop their powers of reason in order to acquire virtue instead of elegance and to exert influence over their lives, declaring, "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves."²⁹

As Wollstonecraft points out, the conventional female "accomplishments" education ignores the "cultivation of the understanding" and incites in women "the desire of establishing themselves,--the only way women can rise in the world,--by marriage."³⁰ However, a "propered" or "well stored mind," according to Wollstonecraft, will "enable a woman to support a single life with dignity."³¹ If they do marry, women should realize that "love and esteem are very different things."³² Wollstonecraft maintains that women should attempt to gain their husband's respect, not affection, since "Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship!." ³³

In 1798, Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, published "Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," an extremely truthful account of her life which includes depictions of her love affairs and suicide attempts. The candor of these memoirs and Godwin's publication of her Posthumous Works, which contained her letters to an American lover, outraged the late eighteenth-century reading public who had previously praised her ideas and subsequently led to Wollstonecraft's branding as a "whore and an atheist."³⁴

Although little concrete evidence exists, Austen undoubtedly was aware of the Great Wollstonecraft Scandal of 1798 surrounding Wollstonecraft's death and wanted to avoid being discredited by association with radical feminism. Claire Tomalin, in her biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, provided me with the only suggested link between the two women. She notes that

Sir William East, a neighbour of the Mrs. Cotton with whom Mary (Wollstonecraft) stayed in Berkshire in 1796 after her second suicide attempt, is said to have shown her much kindness. The son of Sir William East was a resident pupil in the house of Jane Austen's father.³⁵

Tomalin also points out that Austen's first published novel, Sense and Sensibility, planned and drafted in the 1790's, depicts a young woman, Marianne Dashwood, who considers suicide but later rejects it as self-destructive.³⁶ While this research indicates that Austen was familiar with Wollstonecraft's story, an examination of Austen's novels provides even greater evidence, in my opinion, that Austen was positively influenced by Wollstonecraft's feminist ideas.

Regardless, Austen clearly knew that the manner in which she presented any feminist thought in her novels would affect her ability to get the manuscripts published. Austen's First Impressions, the initial version of Pride and Prejudice drafted in 1796 and 1797 during the height of the feminist controversy in England, included:

an implied criticism of the practice of entailing property in the male line, a strongly satirical portrait of a clergyman, and a condemnation of such meal-ticket marriages as that made by Charlotte

Lucas, in terms reminiscent of the Vindication.³⁷

First Impressions, not surprisingly, was rejected for publication. Austen thus developed "strategies of subversion and indirection" in her later drafts which allowed her to combine "progressive ideas about the situation of women without seeming to recognize Wollstonecraft's sexual irregularities and her suicide attempts." Austen's subtle strategies also resulted in her manuscript's ultimate acceptance for publication.³⁸ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar refer to her "revolt against the conventions she inherited" as taking the form of "dissent under the cover of parodic strategies that had been legitimized by the most conservative writers of her time."³⁹ Austen's "radically ambiguous"⁴⁰ technique of subtle feminism was appropriate for her purpose in writing; Wollstonecraft expressed her feminist thoughts directly because she wanted solely to educate her readers, "to speak the simple language of truth,"⁴¹ while Austen wrote both to educate and to entertain. Austen must have known that blunt didactic feminism in her novels would repel her contemporary audience.

Austen succeeded in suppressing her feminist tendencies to the extent that critics for over a century following her death overlooked the possibility of feminist thought in her novels. F.R. Leavis, in 1954, was the earliest critic I located who even tentatively suggested Austen's criticism of women's education and role in society. In The Great Tradition, he notes her "preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones."⁴² With the rise of the Feminist movement in the

late 1960's, however, critics began increasingly to focus on the feminist aspects of Austen's works. I was pleased to find that a number of more recent critics such as Margaret Kirkham and Lloyd Brown agree that Austen's novels reflect many of Wollstonecraft's concerns. Brown argues that, like Wollstonecraft, Austen "questioned certain masculine assumptions in society."⁴³ Kirkham agrees and states that

her (Austen's) viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication.⁴⁴

--a position which an examination of Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion and their respective heroines will prove.

II. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Jane Austen opens Pride and Prejudice with the following satiric comment on the typical masculine perception of women as rewards for wealth: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."⁴⁵ Austen thus establishes the satiric tone of her novel, which criticizes this marriage "truth" along with many other conventional views of women's education and abilities. As Rosalind Miles argues, a "subtler reading of Jane's fiction shows how consistently she queries and even reverses the agreed social assumptions."⁴⁶ In particular, Austen criticizes the view of marriage for convenience upheld by Mrs. Bennet and several other women in the novel and maintains by contrast Elizabeth Bennet's more modern view of marriage for happiness and love, not convenience or financial security. In Pride and Prejudice, as in Emma and Persuasion, Austen's tracing of the heroines' attempts to escape the conventions that bind them owes much to the feminist tradition of Astell and Wollstonecraft.

Entailment, the practice which diverts property from the female to the male heir, serves as one of Austen's first subtle targets of feminist criticism. She couches her critique of entailment in comments made by two particularly unpleasant characters in Pride and Prejudice, Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mrs. Bennet reveals her disgust that the family estate is entailed to the ingratiating clergyman, Mr. Collins, by

exclaiming, "'I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children'" (61). She continues to "rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters" (62). The manipulative, patronizing Lady Catherine de Bourgh also argues against the restriction of property descent when she states, "'I see no occasion for entailing estates from the female line'" (164). I think that Austen places her criticism of entailment in the mouths of unlikable women such as these two because she was less concerned with this practice of property descent than with other issues. In effect, Austen saves her more "pressing" concerns with women's role and education for more popular, likeable characters such as the novel's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. Regardless, the criticism of entailment clearly exists.

Like the feminists who preceded her, Austen accepts women as "rational creatures" but argues that miseducation has warped reasonable women's views of marriage. Austen describes Charlotte Lucas, the first woman to marry in Pride and Prejudice, as "a sensible, intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven" (18). Although an "intelligent" woman, she has been reared to believe, as she professes to her friend Elizabeth, that "'Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. . . . it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life'" (23). Her close friend, Elizabeth, exclaims that this reasoning "'is not sound. You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself'" (23). Charlotte,

however, soon follows her own principles as she schemes to win Mr. Collins' addresses. Three days after Elizabeth rejects his proposal, he asks Charlotte for her hand in marriage, and she accepts "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment" (122). As she explains to Elizabeth, "'I ask only a comfortable home'" (125).

Surely Austen, as a spinster, understood the pressures placed on a twenty-seven-year-old woman to marry whoever chooses to ask her. Thus, although Miss Lucas marries for financial stability instead of personal happiness, Austen does not portray her as an irrational woman simply because she craves security. Indeed, Austen describes a letter Charlotte, now Mrs. Collins, writes to Elizabeth upon settling in her new home as "Mr. Collins's picture of Hunsford and Rosings rationally softened" (147). Elizabeth describes her as having "'an excellent understanding'," although marrying Collins may not have been "the wisest thing she ever did" (178). In her depiction of Charlotte Lucas, Austen demonstrates that women can possess reason and intelligence, although miseducation and the social realities of their day cause them to marry for the "wrong" reasons.

By contrast with Charlotte, Austen characterizes Elizabeth Bennet as a young woman not only intelligent and lively but also able to rise above conventional pressures to marry and unwilling to risk her future happiness for reasons of financial security and stability. Austen clearly admired her modern creation, referring to her "'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print.'"⁴⁷

Elizabeth, unlike Charlotte, vehemently rejects Mr. Collins' proposal before he ever asks Miss Lucas. Pleading with him to accept her refusal, Elizabeth argues, "'Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a **rational creature** speaking the truth from her heart'" (109, emphasis added). Reflecting Wollstonecraft's ideal, Elizabeth rejects the "elegant female" model and prefers instead to be considered a "rational creature." Her father, the well-read, sensible Mr. Bennet, mentions twice that his daughter "'has something more of quickness than her sisters'" (5, 15). When Elizabeth asks her father to allow Lydia to visit home after her elopement with Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth convinces him by urging "so rationally and so mildly" that he cannot refuse her request (314). These descriptions of Elizabeth prove Wollstonecraft's assertion that women possess the faculty of reason.

Austen depicts several other women of reason and intelligence in the novel. I think it significant that Austen often attaches the adjective "intelligent" to her descriptions of women from a variety of social classes. She defines Mrs. Gardiner, the wife of Mrs. Bennet's brother, as "an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman" (139). During the Gardiners' and Elizabeth's trip to Pemberley, Darcy's home, they meet the housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, an "intelligent servant" (250). Austen clearly feels that women possess the same mental capabilities as men, as seen in her pronouncement that the traveling group of Elizabeth and the Gardiners possess cheerfulness and "intelligence" (240). Notably,

she does not distinguish between the man and the women--she describes all three as equally intelligent.

Austen, however, does not characterize all of her female characters in the novel as intelligent. By contrast, she depicts Lydia and Catherine, the younger Bennet sisters, as lacking rational understanding. Mr. Bennet, their father, refers to them as "'two of the silliest girls in the country'" (29). Lydia in particular appears completely lacking in reason when she abruptly elopes with the sweet-talking officer, Mr. Wickham. Lydia does not seem to have considered the couple's compatibilities nor her family and friend's probable reactions to her sudden elopement; her action seems rather an ill-chosen accident. Revealing her own priority of happiness in marriage, the more astute Elizabeth muses that "'neither rational happiness nor worldly prosperity, could be justly expected for her sister'" (307, emphasis added). As Elizabeth predicts, Lydia and Wickham's passion quickly subsides and they fall into perpetual debt -- the implied fate to be expected for a woman who does not choose her husband reasonably.

Lloyd Brown points out that Austen's depiction of Lydia as the "sex-seeker ... miseducated female" who marries Mr. Wickham, a militia officer, illustrates Mary Wollstonecraft's military analogy in the Vindication. Wollstonecraft argues that women and soldiers possess several similarities, especially the inadequacy of their respective educations. She maintains that both groups only "acquire a little superficial knowledge"--insufficient for them to act rationally.⁴⁸ As Lloyd Brown aptly perceives, Lydia's marriage

to a military man underscores Wollstonecraft's parallels "between the biological norms of 'corporeal' accomplishments for women, and the anti-intellectual training of the sensual red-coat."⁴⁹

Lydia and Wickham's marriage effectively contrasts with her sister Jane's marriage to the wealthy Mr. Bingley. Unlike Lydia and Wickham, Jane and Bingley can expect both "rational happiness" and "worldly prosperity" (307). They possess compatible personalities; for example, they are both perpetually cheerful. As Elizabeth tells Jane, "'You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes'" (14). Austen similarly depicts Bingley as "extremely agreeable" (9). When Elizabeth and Bingley get engaged, Elizabeth exclaims that this is "'the happiest, wisest, most reasonable end!,'" for the couple are perfectly suited for each other (348). As Susan Siefert argues, Elizabeth's "ideal criteria for happiness in marriage" are "rationality, understanding, and a similarity of feelings and tastes," all attributes which apply to both Jane and Bingley.⁵⁰

Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins proves that she will not marry someone with whom she feels incompatible. Echoing Astell and Wollstonecraft's arguments, Elizabeth declares, "'I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my opinion, constitute my happiness ... '" (358). Unlike her friend, Charlotte, Elizabeth will not define herself as a future wife and finds little attraction in marriage without love. Susan Siefert attributes this to her positive sense of self-worth:

Viewing herself as an inherently valuable and unique person, Elizabeth rejects her society's stereotyped

expectations and its depersonalizing assessment of herself as an available commodity on the block of a social marriage market.⁵¹

In addition to refusing Mr. Collins, Elizabeth rejects the wealthy gentleman Darcy's first proposal, one which almost any other young woman in her position would have gladly accepted. Unlike the generality of women as presented in literature, Elizabeth cannot marry someone she perceives as proud, conceited, and prejudiced against her family, which does not circulate in the same social spheres as his own.

Of course, Elizabeth is not an all-perfect heroine; like Austen's other heroines, she possesses her fair share of faults. For one, she misjudges Darcy's character and, only after she reads his letter of explanation, realizes that she has "been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (208). "'Till this moment, I never knew myself'," Elizabeth exclaims as she reaches her own moment of maturation and self-knowledge (208). She realizes that she loves Darcy and that marriage to him will constitute her happiness, for "In Darcy she has found a partner who respects her definition of herself as a unique person with the potential for growth and happiness."⁵² Darcy reveals his respect and admiration for Elizabeth throughout the novel, most notably in the Netherfield Park accomplishments debate. The second time Darcy proposes, Elizabeth graciously accepts.

Elizabeth's answer to what Patricia Spacks labels the "tempting superficialities of marriage,"⁵³ as we have seen, is a rejection of conventional reasons for marriage in exchange for a

more personal one, her own happiness. I agree with Siefert's assessment that Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy "is an outward sign of an interior victory: the fact that she has employed her intelligence and sensitivity to attain a self-definition which is at once true to her own best self and acceptable to her society."⁵⁴ Marriage to Darcy will presumably increase Elizabeth's happiness as well as ensure her stability and greater social standing, Austen's concession to traditional marriage goals. Ironically, Mrs. Bennet displays overwhelming joy at Elizabeth's prospects for money and the luxuries it can buy, not for her daughter's happiness.

In Pride and Prejudice, Austen criticizes traditional ideas of women's education as well as conventional views of marriage. Through characters like Mary Bennet, Caroline Bingley, and Louisa Hurst, Austen reveals the inadequacy of both courtesy-book and accomplishments educations for women. For example, Austen's depiction of Mary Bennet, one of Elizabeth's younger sisters, reveals her criticism of the Fordyce courtesy-book ideal for women. Although she reads a great deal and clearly possesses a mind much less vacant than Lydia's and Catherine's, Mary seldom thinks for herself and remains content to quote from "respectable authorities" when giving advice to her sisters. In her false piety, she represents the female equivalent to the ingratiating clergyman, Mr. Collins. Austen also comically criticizes the courtesy-book standards for women in one particularly telling scene when Mr. Collins chooses to read excerpts from Fordyce's Sermons to Young Women to the Bennet daughters. Soon after Collins begins reading

a sermon, Lydia Bennet interrupts him, clearly representing Austen's own dismissal of his limiting view of women and their proper conduct.

Austen also rejects the accomplishments-type education for women as reflected in her characterizations of the "proud and conceited" upper-class women, Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst. Although "educated in one of the first private seminaries in town," (15) these women illustrate the miseducated rich ladies Wollstonecraft criticizes. In the famous Netherfield Park drawing room debate, Miss Bingley adopts the usual view of a proper women's education by arguing that an accomplished woman "'must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word'" (39). She continues to explain that "'she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved'" (39).

Darcy, seeming to adopt Wollstonecraft's standards, adds that "'to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading'" (39). Interestingly, Elizabeth has been reading throughout this conversation, and Miss Bingley and the other women had previously scorned her for reading instead of joining their card game. The following evening, Miss Bingley pretends to get absorbed in the second volume of Darcy's book. She quickly places the book aside, however, and comments to Darcy that "'there is no enjoyment like reading'" (55). I think that Miss Bingley chooses to read to

enhance her standing with Darcy, whom she wishes to marry. In another instance, Caroline walks around the Netherfield Park drawing room not for exercise but rather to show off her "elegant figure" to Darcy, who humorously recognizes her motive (56). Unlike Elizabeth, Miss Bingley focuses solely on gaining male affection.

Miss Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and the other upper-class women portrayed in the novel as "the generality of female minds" (223) prove Wollstonecraft's assertion that a focus on acquiring accomplishments renders women "vain and helpless."⁵⁵ These women through word and act appear pleased to admit to what they see as the natural inferiority of women and to accept the general view of women as constantly bickering among themselves. For example, Miss Bingley writes to Jane that "'a whole day's tete-a-tete between two women can never end without a quarrel'" (30). Through her depiction of these "accomplished" women who adhere to masculine stereotypes of women and focus on attracting men over obtaining personal happiness or greater self-awareness, Austen clearly satirizes the typical boarding-school education.

Elizabeth, by contrast, represents a woman untainted by the courtesy-book and accomplishments miseducation of women. Claudia Johnson argues that from a twentieth-century viewpoint, we tend to overlook "Elizabeth's outrageous unconventionality which, judged by the standards set in conduct books and in conservative fiction, constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety."⁵⁶ Miss Bingley, however, cannot ignore Elizabeth's differences and

asserts that "in her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion" (271). Although upper-class women like Miss Bingley consider this self-sufficiency inappropriate, Austen certainly seems to uphold it and the use of reason as Elizabeth's most praiseworthy attributes.

In one particularly telling scene, Miss Bingley reveals shock that Elizabeth trudged through three miles of mud and dust to visit her ill sister, Jane. Caroline Bingley exclaims that Elizabeth's walk made "'Her hair so untidy, so blowsy!'," and Mrs. Hurst criticizes her "wild" appearance (35-36). Miss Bingley and her friends think that Elizabeth's excursion reveals a "'conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum'" (36). Austen, however, describes Elizabeth's physical activity quite matter-of-factly in the following passage:

Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise. (32)

Elizabeth's physical exertion in order to nurse her ill sister is clearly more commendable than Miss Bingley's prancing about the drawing room to attract Darcy's notice. Elizabeth proves herself no semi-invalid home-body like Lady Catherine's daughter; she is an active woman not afraid of muddying her stockings or of raising her pulse rate. In her depiction of Jane's walk, Austen supports Wollstonecraft's argument that women should be "allowed to take sufficient exercise" as one half of their efforts to attain "strength of body and mind."⁵⁷

As shown, Austen "clearly rejects the norms of her society for elegant females and courtesy-book girls, and posits the same exciting new ideal offered by the feminists: 'woman as rational creature.'"⁵⁸ Austen reveals this most positively in her contrast of Elizabeth with women like Lydia and Miss Bingley, whom she makes "the objects of her satire."⁵⁹ In Elizabeth's eventual marriage to Darcy, Austen seemingly accepts marriage as a woman's goal but proves that a young woman does not have to adhere to courtesy-book standards to achieve it.⁶⁰ Instead, "she can, like Elizabeth Bennet, be herself: candid, unaffected, and utterly charming."⁶¹

III. EMMA

Lionel Trilling describes Emma, Austen's third published work, as "a very difficult novel."⁶² Much of the novel's difficulty lies in its heroine, Emma Woodhouse. Unlike her characterization of the well-loved Elizabeth Bennet, Austen feared that in Emma she had created a "heroine whom no one but herself would like."⁶³ Although Austen characterizes Emma as an intelligent, witty young woman, much like Elizabeth, Austen also depicts her as differing in many respects from her previous heroines. Like Elizabeth, Emma lacks a strong parental authority which gives her increased freedom of self-definition.⁶⁴ Unlike Elizabeth's refusal to define herself as a daughter or as a future wife, however, "Emma chooses to define herself according to the expectations of her society: She is a gentleman's daughter"⁶⁵ whom Austen describes as "the pampered darling of her father, the pride of her doting governess and the acknowledged queen of Highbury society."⁶⁶ Emma's seeming adherence to her expected social position as a rich daughter is in actuality "a defense against another stereotyped function: society's definition of her as a potential wife."⁶⁷ Both Elizabeth and Emma struggle to overcome their character flaws and to gain self-knowledge and understanding, before they marry their respective heroes. Although the heroines and the stories differ in many respects, Austen continues her subtle critique of conventional views of women's education and natural abilities in Emma.

Austen reveals in the novel a painful awareness of women's

limited rights and standing in English society. For example, in a description of Jane Fairfax's family, Austen mentions that Jane's mother inherited her fortune upon marriage, although "her fortune bore no proportion to the family-estate" (15). Like Mrs. Bennet's and Lady Catherine's criticisms of entailment in Pride and Prejudice, this comment illustrates Austen's subtle willingness to incorporate a feminist thought into the novel, especially one that serves no plot or character development function. Austen's implied mention of the disproportionality of primogeniture laws also portrays her awareness of women's limited valuation in English society. Austen attributes her heroine, Emma Woodhouse, with a similar understanding of women's lack of power with which to control their lives. One day, "the contrast between Mrs. Churchill's importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax's, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing -- and she sat musing on the differences of women's destiny" (384). Although she leads a privileged, sheltered existence, Emma nonetheless betrays a feminist perception of the unfairness of women's economic standing in her contemporary society.

Like Astell and Wollstonecraft, Austen recognizes that most women possess the capacities for reason and understanding, and, as in Pride and Prejudice, she often portrays her heroines and favorite female characters as intelligent women. In Emma, she depicts Miss Taylor, Emma's former governess and her closest friend, as "intelligent" and "well-informed" (6). By noting Miss Taylor's intelligence at the beginning of the descriptive passage,

Austen implies that women can possess a superior mind and should be recognized for such.

Emma Woodhouse, like her governess, boasts reason and understanding and is able to apply them when she chooses. As Emma tells her young protégé Harriet Smith, "'mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources'" (85). Emma illustrates her intelligence by her ability to solve a variety of riddles and conundrums. She appears to enjoy these word games much more than the traditional accomplishments like piano and singing, perhaps subtly revealing Austen's own disdain of these latter pursuits. Instead of boarding-school accomplishments, Emma displays intelligence and reasoning abilities, seen in her arguments with her future husband, Mr. Knightley. She debates on an equal level, clearly Austen's suggestion that her mind is worthy of being considered on the same elevation as his. Austen thus upholds, again, the feminist view "that women's innate reasoning abilities were in no way inferior to man's."⁶⁸

Emma illustrates the use of reason in one particular scene when she reflects about the harm she has inflicted on Harriet and Jane Fairfax and makes a number of resolutions concerning her future conduct. She especially hopes the future will leave her "'more rational, more acquainted with herself'" (423). Austen's pairing of these two particular phrases suggests that reason can lead women to a better understanding of themselves, a proposal Wollstonecraft makes in the Vindication. Emma's comment also illustrates that women do not have to direct their lives toward

marriage; rather, they can seek to increase their self-awareness, a gender-indifferent quest.

Austen of course realizes that not all women can possess superior intelligence or understanding, and she presents several women with less-than-average abilities in Emma. For example, Austen writes that Emma's older sister, Isabella Knightley, "was not a woman of strong understanding or any quickness" and then notes "this resemblance of her father" (92). Austen's additional remark reveals that Isabella inherited her feeble intelligence from her father, not from her mother. Austen thus suggests that a lack of "strong understanding" is not a strictly female trait (92). In a further description, Austen comments that "poor Isabella, passing her life with those she doated on, full of their merits, blind to their faults, and always innocently busy, might have been a model of right feminine happiness" (140, emphasis added). By including the qualifying term "might," Austen ironically implies the opposite--that Isabella's qualities do not, and should not, serve as a correct model for female happiness.

Emma's informal education of Harriet works in much the same way as Austen's description of Isabella. Emma's attempts at raising her young friend from a parlor boarder to a woman equal to marriage with an upper-class man such as Frank Churchill end up doing her friend more harm than good, as Knightley predicts. The education sub-plot serves as a parody and criticism of the typical way in which women of the early nineteenth century were educated, with the eventual aim of marriage. Knightley argues, "'I am much

mistaken if Emma's doctrines give any strength of mind, or tend at all to make a girl adapt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life.--They only give a little polish'" (39). By asserting what Emma's education of Harriet does not do, Austen, through Knightley, states what the education of women should do--give "strength of mind" and teach women to act "rationally," as both Astell and Wollstonecraft argued in their respective feminist tracts. Alison Sulloway argues that Emma's limiting of her intelligent mind primarily to such matters as match-making illustrates the manner in which women are educated to focus on marriage matters--with the result that "her analytical mind has nothing more to feed itself upon than curiosity about who will marry whom."⁶⁹

Emma's personal view of marriage, however, reveals her agreement with feminist criticism of the institution. For example, Emma notices that men cannot understand "'that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her'" (60). Austen also adopts Astell's criticism of typical masculine reasons for marriage through Mr. Knightley's comment that a pretty face attracts a man first. He also notes that "'till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl, with such loveliness as Harriet, has a certainty of being admired and sought after'" (63). Emma observes that women have their own not-so-lofty inducements to marry. The typical reasons for marriage that Emma cites, such as being "'settled in the same country and circle'" or to obtain a

"'comfortable fortune,'" "'respectable establishment'" and "'rise in the world'," completely ignore the idea of marriage for love (76). Emma's secure social standing leaves her with "'none of the usual inducements to marry'," and she concludes that "'without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine'" (84). Indeed, Emma promptly rejects Mr. Elton's offer when he unexpectedly proposes to her. Later in the novel, Emma rationally examines her flirtation with Frank Churchill and decides that "'he is not really necessary to my happiness'" (264). Although Emma eventually marries Mr. Knightley, she recognizes that female happiness is not intrinsically tied to marriage. Emma's statements assuredly reflect Austen's own belief that marriage should not constitute women's solitary goal in life.

Notwithstanding Austen's adoption of many of Astell and Wollstonecraft's concerns in Emma, the novel obviously does not read as an all-inclusive feminist tract (that was not her purpose in writing), and some problems exist which seemingly contradict Austen's feminist tendencies. For instance, why does Emma marry Knightley if she realizes that it is not necessary for her happiness? As Carol Francone argues, "Perhaps a combination of wish-fulfillment and unwillingness to tackle the emotions of tragedy explain the final bow to convention" in the novel's culmination in marriage.⁷⁰ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar more persuasively refer to Austen's adoption of a traditional plot ending as her "cover story," intended to mask her feminist ideas.⁷¹

Both Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet's marriages

illustrate that the heroines have matured to the point where they are ready for an equal love relationship with a male. Indeed, the fact of their maturation makes this narrative movement toward marriage possible. I agree with Lloyd Brown's argument that "marriage in Jane Austen's fiction is primarily a literary convention which symbolizes the successful maturation of human relationships within each novel."⁷² As Brown maintains:

the role of marriage in Emma's experience is typical of its positive function in Jane Austen's fiction as a whole. It is not merely some predefined goal for which education and the individual will must be molded. Instead it celebrates the union or eventual compatibility of personalities that have been freed from (a) the perceptual and moral failings of their individual selves ... and (b) conventional, restricting notions of 'female feelings,' education, and sexual passion. And such a liberationist principle is the essence of the eighteenth-century feminist tradition within which Jane Austen writes.⁷³

Austen unquestionably adopted Astell and Wollstonecraft's feminist concerns, yet she also originated their adaptation into the woman-centered novel. An examination of the threads of feminism in Emma clearly leads the way to a deeper understanding of the novel as more than a description of a young woman's preparation for marriage. Perhaps Emma's blunders illustrate that women do not have to "ready themselves" for marriage, except in the sense of gaining a better understanding of themselves, as Emma does. Regardless of interpretation, Emma proves an accomplished, well-crafted work which succeeded in entertaining its conservative nineteenth-century reading audience while also incorporating the Wollstonecraft and Astell radical feminist tradition into the framework of the novel.

IV. Persuasion

Persuasion, written in 1816, constitutes Austen's last completed novel before she died of Addison's disease the following year. The novel's action centers around the Elliot family, an "ancient and respectable" family of the landed gentry class, as contrasted with the nouveau-riche naval family, the Crofts, who had recently won fame and fortune at sea.⁷⁴ Persuasion's title reveals its central theme of persuasion, a theme reflected by the external family pressures and the internal inclinations that have shaped its heroine's young adulthood. At age twenty-seven, when the novel opens, Anne Elliot is several years older than the heroines of Pride and Prejudice and Emma, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, perhaps reflecting Austen's need to create a story about a more mature unmarried woman, like herself, rather than a young lady.

Although their ages differ, Anne, Elizabeth, and Emma possess several similarities. As Austen establishes in Persuasion's opening chapters, Anne, like Elizabeth and Emma, lacks a strong parental figure to help shape her behavior and to guide her actions during adolescence. Anne's mother died when she was fourteen, leaving her with a self-centered father, Sir Walter Elliot, a silly, society-oriented older sister, Elizabeth, and a hypochondriacal younger sister, Mary, all of whom virtually ignore her. Austen praises Anne while simultaneously criticizing her family by characterizing her as possessing an "elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any

people of real understanding" (5). However, she is "nobody with either father or sister"--to them she was "only Anne" (5).

During her adolescence, Anne turns for friendship and guidance to her late mother's best friend, Lady Russell, to whom "she was a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend" (6). Austen describes Lady Russell as possessing a "cultivated mind ... rational and consistent" (11). Even Sir Walter Elliot defers to her for advice when his overspending leaves the family in danger of losing its estate, Kellynch. Similarly, Anne, at age nineteen, naturally relies on Lady Russell's valued opinion on whether or not to accept her first proposal of marriage from Captain Wentworth. Just as susceptible to misjudgment of character as Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse and as fearful of Anne's loss of established rank by marrying a naval officer, Lady Russell persuades Anne to reject Wentworth. Eight years later, as the novel opens, Anne is still pining away after Wentworth, her one true love. Austen clearly agrees with Wollstonecraft's assertion that women prove "more constant than men."⁷⁵

Unlike Lady Russell, her father, and her sisters, Anne cares little about social rank. While living in Bath, Sir Walter and Elizabeth ingratiate themselves with some Irish cousins of higher social status than their own baronetcy. Anne, however, finds little pleasure in socializing with this family, which she considers boring. Anne defines good company not as high-ranking people but as "'clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation'" (150). Similarly, in a discussion regarding

whether or not to rent Kellynch to a wealthy naval officer and his wife, Admiral and Mrs. Croft, Anne argues that they "'have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and privileges which any home can give'" (19). On this occasion, Austen, through Anne, appears less accepting of the privileges held by the landed gentry class and more open to the parallel rights of the newly-risen class of naval officers. This must in part reflect Austen's pride in her own brothers' accomplishments in the British navy.

Although Austen admittedly depicts the adolescent Anne as more easily persuadable than either Elizabeth or Emma, her depiction of the older Anne nonetheless presents her, in my opinion, as Austen's most outspoken critic of the traditional subordination of English wives to their husbands. Austen reveals this through Anne's admiration of the marital relationship between Admiral and Mrs. Croft. In the Crofts, Austen presents a strong female and an equal marital relationship on which Anne, and Austen's readers, can attempt to model themselves and their own marriages. Austen introduces the reader to Mrs. Croft through Mr. Shephard's description of her as a "'well-spoken, genteel, shrewd lady'" who, during negotiations to rent Kellynch estate, "'asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business'" (22). Wollstonecraft certainly would have praised this portrayal of a woman's ability to intelligently discuss traditional male subjects.

In Austen's earlier novels, she characterizes no female

characters as capable and as strong as Mrs. Croft. Austen presents her few dominant women, such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as objects of satire. In Persuasion, however, Austen depicts Mrs. Croft as an entirely commendable woman, unscathed by criticism from other female characters. As the wife of an admiral, Mrs. Croft has lived on five ships and crossed the Atlantic Ocean four times, and she asserts that "'any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy'" living on a boat (70). Wentworth, her brother, attempts to contradict her argument. Mrs. Croft, echoing Wollstonecraft's language in the Vindication, refutes his depiction of women as "'fine ladies instead of rational creatures'" (70). Clearly a "rational creature" herself, Mrs. Croft converses easily with her husband's sea-faring friends, "looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her" (168). Austen describes the couple's walks as "happy independence;" a phrase that can just as aptly characterize their marriage as a whole.

Mrs. Croft's equal standing with her husband in their marriage is symbolized by Austen's description of the Crofts' style of carriage driving. While Admiral Croft generally directs the horses, Mrs. Croft remains alert for danger, at which time, she takes the reins herself (92). Austen's positive depiction of the Crofts' marriage of mutual respect clearly shapes the type of marital relationship Anne Elliot seeks for herself, revealed in Anne's decision to become a naval wife like Mrs. Croft by marrying Captain Wentworth at Persuasion's conclusion.

Like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet, Anne does not feel

the usual female obligation to accept just any marital offer that comes her way. Indeed, she rejects the proposal of Charles Musgrove, heir to the Uppercross estate, because she knows that she loves Captain Wentworth instead. Unlike her older sister, Elizabeth, who fears her "approach to the years of danger," Anne does not seem to notice her approaching spinsterhood (7). Perhaps Elizabeth Elliot's concern with marriage stems from her earlier disappointment by the man whom she had been expected to marry, William Walter Elliot, the heir to the family baronetcy. Like Elizabeth, Anne has also faced adversity in her family's refusal to allow her to accept Wentworth's first proposal. Unlike Wentworth, however, whom Anne clearly loves, Mr. Elliot attracted Elizabeth primarily "for being her father's heir" (7). In a manner Wollstonecraft would admire, Anne not only cares much less about securing a husband than either of her two sisters, she also proves much more capable and "completely rational" (110). When Louisa Musgrove falls and injures her head during a sea-side walk along the Cobb, all the women in the party panic except Anne, who acts with "the strength and zeal" of "instinct" (111). Even the men look to her for directions, advice, and comfort (111). Later, Captain Wentworth asks Anne to confirm his plan for breaking the news of Louisa's accident to her family. As seen, Anne's behavior during the Cobb incident effectively demonstrates Astell and Wollstonecraft's assertions of the rationality of women.

Anne possesses other talents and attributes which distinguish her from many of the other women in the novel. Unlike her

hypochondriacal sister Mary, Anne enjoys physical exercise in the form of breakfast strolls, one of which causes Wentworth and Mr. Elliot to admire her brightened complexion (104). Significantly, Austen presents men admiring female physical activity instead of a sedentary pursuit like knitting. Wentworth in particular admires Anne for her use of reason and her physical capabilities. On one occasion, he describes the woman he wishes to marry, with Anne in mind, as possessing "'A strong mind, with sweetness of manner'" (62).

Anne's sister, Mary, however, lacks the "strength of body and mind" which Wollstonecraft deems necessary for the proper regulation of a family and education of children.⁷⁶ Mary often looks to Anne, the stronger, more capable sister, for guidance in controlling her children. Mary also succumbs to conventional views about women's choice of a spouse, arguing that women cannot make "a choice that may be disagreeable and inconvenient" to their family (76). In her opinion, women must not choose a husband who might prove incompatible with their families, even if they love the man.

Unlike Mary, Anne cultivates a knowledge of British prose and poetry, from which she judiciously quotes to help ease the suffering of Captain Benwick, Wentworth's friend who is suffering from the recent death of his beloved (101). She even establishes a reading program for him, "feeling in herself the seniority of mind" (101). In addition, Anne reads and speaks Italian, a fact revealed in her translation of an Italian love-song during a music concert she and her family attend (186). Austen effectively

contrasts Anne with her sisters-in-law, Louise and Henrietta Musgrove, who "had brought from a school at Exeter all the usual stock of accomplishments" and live "to be fashionable, happy, and merry" through their occupation with "house-keeping, neighbours, dress, dancing, and music" (43). Anne sees their happiness but "would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments" (41). Austen portrays Anne as an accomplished piano player, but she is careful to note that Anne plays only to give pleasure to herself, not to attract the admiration of a future husband (47).

Like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse before her, Anne clearly possesses the strength of mind Wollstonecraft, Astell, and Austen admire, but she similarly displays occasional lapses in wisdom. Throughout Persuasion, Anne questions her feelings for Wentworth and attempts to understand the nature of his feelings for her. After seeing him again in Bath, Anne laments that "She hoped to be wise and reasonable in time; but alas! alas! she must confess to herself that she was not wise yet" (178). Of course, Anne's admittance that she has not yet achieved wisdom leaves room for Austen's simultaneous implication, proven elsewhere, that Anne exhibits reason, if not wisdom. Austen thus suggests that women naturally possess reasoning abilities but must acquire wisdom through maturing experiences.

Unlike Anne's desire to reasonably ascertain Wentworth's and her own feelings for each other and their compatibility as a couple, Austen admits that most men and women are far less careful

in their selection of a mate. With realism, she recognizes that when most couples choose to marry, "they are pretty sure by perseverance to catch their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort" (248). In Persuasion Louisa Musgrove and Captain Benwick, like Lydia and Wickham in Pride and Prejudice, represent men and women who blindly jump into marriage with little real knowledge of their long-term compatibility.

Anne and Wentworth, by contrast, do not become engaged until they are "fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment" (240-41). Austen argues that, with the possible exception of the Crofts, "there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved" as Anne's and Wentworth's (63-64). Unlike Benwick and Louisa, Anne and Wentworth have the "advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them," as Austen admits in a light-hearted concession to the convention of marrying for money (248).

In Persuasion Austen openly criticizes conventional views of women and their derogatory depictions in literature through a conversation between Captain Harville and Anne regarding male and female constancy. Anne argues that it is in men's nature to be inconstant and that their professions and other pursuits outside the home also contribute to their inconstancy, while women remain constant because they are confined to home, where "'our feelings prey upon us'" (232). Harville, on the other hand, adopts the same

bodily and mental strength analogy that Fordyce makes in his Sermons by arguing "'that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather'" (233). Anne reverses his analogy, not to argue for women's weakness but to prove their tenderness over men, whose robustness naturally places them in risky situations where they may forget their feelings for a woman (233).

In an extension of their argument to literature, Harville argues that history will refute Anne's argument that women prove more constant than men. He states that books, songs, and proverbs all have much to say about "'woman's inconstancy'" and "'fickleness'" (234). Anticipating her rebuttal, Harville admits, "'But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men'" (234). Anne's response must represent Austen's own opinion, that "'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands'" (234). In Persuasion, however, Austen now clearly holds the pen, and she implements it to question and refute, primarily through her depictions of Mrs. Croft and Anne, the conventional masculine assumptions made about women's nature.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion clearly reflect the respective influences of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century feminists Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft on her writing. Like these writers, Austen argues that women are inherently as rational and intelligent as men but have been miseducated by courtesy-books and boarding-schools. Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot, however, display Austen's subtle adoption of the feminist ideals for women in their attempts to rise above many of the conventional assumptions about women's proper conduct, education, and role in society. In particular, Wollstonecraft refutes the traditional belief that women's education should prepare them for marriage. She argues instead that women's education should enable them to gain autonomy and power over themselves. Austen adopts this argument in her depiction of Elizabeth, Emma, and Anne, each of whom gain independence and better self-understanding as a result of their real-life experiences in the novel.

Of course, Austen does not limit her subtle incorporation of feminist thought to Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion. I chose to focus on these three novels, nevertheless, because I felt that in them Austen depicts her strongest heroines and the most overt feminist thought, providing me with the clearest evidence for Wollstonecraft's and Astell's influence on her writing. Austen's other novels admittedly also contain threads of feminism. Sense

and Sensibility, as its title implies, explores the head and heart dichotomy, satirizing the two extremes of reason and feeling for women which are represented by the two Dashwood sisters. Austen also implements satire in Northanger Abbey to criticize the masculine representation of women in literature, especially seen in the work's parodying of the gothic novel. As in Emma, Austen often poses a generality to imply a criticism of this well-known "fact." For example, Austen admits in Northanger Abbey that, for many men, "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms."⁷⁷ However, Austen's portrayal of intelligent heroines who marry equally clever men clearly implies that men can and should be attracted to reason rather than ignorance in women.

Other eighteenth-century feminist writers in addition to Wollstonecraft and Astell undoubtedly influenced Austen's writing. Indeed, my latest research points to the possible influence of other 1790's feminists, including Catherine Macaulay Graham. The destruction of many of Austen's letters and papers after her death provide us with no way of knowing for certain exactly what Austen read and which women writers she most admired.

Nonetheless, I find it interesting to speculate as to the manner in which Austen's adoption of the "feminist tradition" would have affected her nineteenth-century readers had her subtle feminism been uncovered. I know that for myself, as a modern fan of Austen, my "discovery" of Austen's pre-feminist ideas in her novels has presented Austen in an entirely new light, as a writer who admittedly affirms much of the social structure of her society

while simultaneously criticizing many of its conventions and assumptions about women. Although I have not uncovered all of Austen's subtle illustrations of Wollstonecraft and Astell's feminist thought, I hope I have presented a large enough number for her admirers to view her in a new perspective as a social critic, not simply as "gentle Jane."

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