



A Feminist Connection: Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft

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WHAT DOES JANE AUSTEN, THE UNMARRIED DAUGHTER of a clergyman who penned six novels about young girls on a trajectory toward marriage, have in common with Mary Wollstonecraft, the grandmother of modern feminism?

The two would appear to come from very different places. Wollstonecraft is famous for her contempt for marriage, even though she did break down and marry the eighteenth-century radical William Godwin when she discovered she was pregnant with their child, the future writer, Mary Shelley. And Wollstonecraft's most cited book, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is a strident and indignant analysis of how the education system of her day kept women in a state of slavish dependence, turning them into weak-minded, vain coquettes.

Anger is not the word that comes to mind when one thinks about Jane Austen. But, as I hope to show, Austen is also a formidable feminist critic. Austen's voice is, to be sure, a gentler one, softened by end-of-the-book marriages and a wonderful irony and sense of humor. Nonetheless, a staunch feminist stance is there, suggesting Austen, like Wollstonecraft, was tuned into one of the hottest issues of her time: women's role in society. Such a conclusion would also suggest that Austen was familiar with Wollstonecraft's work, even though Austen never mentions Wollstonecraft in any of her novels or in the letters that have survived.

What makes the Austen-Wollstonecraft connection so fascinating is it helps situate Austen in the context of early feminism, or to use the proper scholarly term, proto-feminism. Literary critics have been debating this question since 1975 when Marilyn Butler published the first book that looked at Austen in the context of her times, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Butler concluded that Austen was a conservative propagandist because all of her heroines got married; thus, Butler argued, Austen was implicitly endorsing the established social order.

As Julia Prewitt Brown points out, it is precisely because Austen's heroines marry that feminist literary critics have had such an ambivalent relationship to Austen. Her analysis, which includes Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1975), notes Gilbert and Gubar gave Austen credit for educating readers about "grace under pressure," but found Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to be far more perceptive about the depths of the female psyche. Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984) acknowledges that Austen is aware of the limitations society imposes on women, but Poovey ultimately casts Austen as a defender of the status quo—a novelist who sees marriage "as the ideal paradigm for the most perfect fusion between the individual and society" (Poovey 203).

Claudia Johnson's influential book *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* moves Austen further to the left. Johnson concludes:

During a time when all social criticism, particularly that which aimed at the institution of the family in general and the place of women in particular, came to be associated with the radical cause, Austen defended and enlarged a progressive middle ground that had been eaten away by the polarizing polemics born of the 1790s. (Johnson 166)

Who is right in this debate about the woman question? To analyze this point it is useful to pay close attention to the Wollstonecraft-Austen connection. Wollstonecraft, by all accounts, helped set the standard for what it meant to be a radical in the 1700s. If it can be shown that Austen was in accord with Wollstonecraft on key points regarding women and the family, then we will have a better idea of where to situate her within her historical context. I believe that, placed in her historical context, Austen comes across as a realist, someone who knows that life is tough, especially for women. But rather than focus on how society's restrictions could cause someone to have a nervous breakdown, Austen focuses on the reasoning skills women need to survive, which, to me, is the ultimate feminist statement.

So what about Mary Wollstonecraft? In an era marked by the then-revolutionary idea that humans were rational beings capable of making good choices, Wollstonecraft was an indefatigable advocate of what was then an even more

radical idea: the idea that women, like men, were rational creatures. The book that lays out that position is *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Written in 1792, when confidence in the French Revolution was still high, the book was an appeal for women's rights after the new French constitution of 1791 gave men the rights of citizenship. It was also a critique of the French government's plans for a national system of education for boys and girls, which, while radical for its time, did not, in Wollstonecraft's view, go far enough because girls were to be educated for a subservient role.

Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a rambling, indignant, and forceful indictment of how the education system of Wollstonecraft's day conspired to keep women in a state of slavish dependency:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove their minds are not in a healthy state; for like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season they ought to have arrived at maturity. (Wollstonecraft 7)

For this state of affairs, Wollstonecraft blames men, who in her day were responsible for shaping female education:

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare firmly what I believe that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters than they would have otherwise been; and consequently more useless members of society. I might have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but I am afraid it would have been the whine of affectation, and not the faithful expression of my feelings, of the clear result, which experience and reflection have led me to draw. (Wollstonecraft 22)

Indeed, Wollstonecraft's message drips with sarcasm as she sums up the accepted Rousseauian view that women should be educated to become alluring mistresses and sweet companions for men. "What nonsense!" (Wollstonecraft 25), she sneers.

As forceful as the book is on the question of female education, it is also important to keep in mind what the book is not. Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft was personally against marriage, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* does not advocate a complete transformation of the family. Perhaps because Wollstonecraft was simply being realistic and knew that most women would end up becoming wives and mothers, she gears her book toward imagining a system of education that enables women to become more self-reliant and, thus, become better daughters, wives, mothers and citizens. She writes:

Do passive indolent women make the best wives? Confining our discussion to the present moment of existence, let us see how such weak creatures perform their part? Do the women who, by the attainment of a few superficial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to amuse them? And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children? So far from it, that, after surveying the history of woman, I cannot help agreeing with the severest satirist, considering the sex as the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species. (Wollstonecraft 34-35)

Furthermore, despite the fact that Wollstonecraft was vilified as a prostitute after her death and her husband's publication of his memoirs, she was, by modern standards, a conservative on matters of human sexuality: "I have contended, that to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail, and that chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized . . ." (Wollstonecraft 4). I point out Wollstonecraft's ideas about chastity and sexuality because they help define what constituted a feminist (or perhaps more accurately, a proto-feminist) worldview in the 1700s. As Wollstonecraft's example clearly indicates, proto-feminism at the end of the eighteenth century does not always coincide with the precepts of today's feminism, which puts a high premium on female autonomy and sexual freedom.

So how do Austen's ideas compare with Wollstonecraft's? A close reading of Austen's work reveals that she, like Wollstonecraft, was very aware of marriage as an economic institution. She also cared passionately about the two issues at the core of Wollstonecraft's work: the concept that women are rational creatures and the belief that, in order for women to fulfill their potential as human beings, they must learn how to think for themselves.

Austen's stories are about the reality of women's lives, which, for women in the eighteenth century, meant living in a straightjacket of propriety. Women's education consisted of a smattering of "accomplishments," a variety of ultimately useless skills that Wollstonecraft said only served to "sacrifice women's strength of mind and body in exchange for "libertine notions of beauty" (10). Austen, too, was interested in how the education of her day shaped both men and women's personalities, and, while her tone is comic—not strident like Wollstonecraft's—the picture she presents is not a pretty one. Austen's books are filled with small-minded people like Fanny and John Dashwood, whom Austen describes in less-than-flattering terms:

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted and rather selfish, is to be ill-

disposed: but he was in general, well-respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties. Had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was: — he might even have been made amiable himself; for he was very young when he married, and very fond of his wife. But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself more narrow-minded and selfish. (5)

The scenario in which the pair justify catapulting the recently widowed Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters into poverty on the grounds that the money is needed for their four-year-old son, could be exhibit A in Wollstonecraft's analysis of how insidious a false education can be because it turns women into jealous, ungenerous wives and men into weak-minded, pompous fools.

Austen's antidote to Fanny Dashwood's narrow-mindedness is independent thought. Austen's heroines navigate through the minefields of their lives by using their heads. Thus, Catherine Morland, the naïve country girl, develops critical thinking skills as she fumbles her way through Bath and Northanger Abbey; Emma Woodhouse, the clever heiress, learns to use her mind responsibly by reflecting on the lessons learned from her botched attempts at match-making and her misbehavior at Box Hill; Anne Elliot, the invisible member of her own family, comes into her own after her abilities are tested at Lyme.

Austen's interest in women's ability to reason is also evident in what has been deemed her greatest technical achievement: free indirect discourse. The technique enabled Austen to portray her heroines maintaining the public appearance of propriety while privately evaluating the true nature of a situation, a clear mark of a thinking person. Thus, through free indirect discourse that we learn that Fanny Price is no dummy; she pegs Henry Crawford as a selfish cad long before he shows his true colors and has an affair with Maria Bertram as this conversation between Sir Thomas and Fanny reveals:

"Have you any reason, child, to think ill of Mr. Crawford's temper?"

"No, Sir."

She longed to add, "but of his principles I have;" but her heart sunk under the appalling prospect of discussion, explanation, and probably non-conviction. Her ill opinion of him was founded chiefly on observations, which, for her cousins' sake, she could scarcely dare mention to their father. (*Mansfield Park* 317)

Sir Thomas's eagerness to see Fanny married reveals another reality of Austen's day. Middle- and upper-class women could not work, so marriage was truly a meal ticket for women—economic security is one reason why Mrs. Bennet was anxious to see her five daughters married. Austen chose to make women's economic anxiety a dominant theme in her work, be it through cautionary tales of fallen women who have gone down a slippery slope into abject poverty (e.g., the two Elizas), Jane Fairfax's fear of becoming a governess, or the careful economy of Mrs. Smith, left penniless because of the profligacy of her late husband.

While all of Austen's heroines marry, not all of Austen's marriages are good ones. Granted, Elizabeth Bennet got lucky and ended up with a rich and honorable husband, but her friend, Charlotte Lucas, did not. Charlotte, who had neither Elizabeth's good looks nor her charm to trade on, knew an economic life raft when she saw one. Her marriage to Mr. Collins reveals Austen's clear-eyed assessment of the economic underpinnings of marriage:

[Charlotte's] reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. — Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want (*P&P* 122-23).

Perhaps weddings seem to get such short shrift in Austen's work because, as Charlotte reminds the reader, happiness is a matter of chance and marriage provides a state of security. One would think that a writer intent on celebrating the institution of marriage would lavish a tremendous amount of ink on the actual ceremony, but that is not the case with Austen. All of the weddings take place in the last chapter and action is dispatched with quickly, often in as little as a paragraph, as we see in the last paragraph of *Emma*:

The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own. — "Very little white satin, very few white lace veils; a most pitiful business! — Selina would stare when she heard of it." — But in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (484)

Clearly, then, the wedding, while it signals the end of the story, is not that important to Austen. Instead, what matters is the reality of women's lives, which is very much in sync with Wollstonecraft's ideas about how a false system of education denies women the skills they need to make good choices for themselves and their families.

Why, then, does Austen fail to give Wollstonecraft any credit for contributing to her thinking?

I think it was simply too dangerous.

Let us consider the facts. The 1790s were critical years for Austen. Austen began working on *Elinor and Marianne* (the first draft of *Sense and Sensibility* and the first of the novels) in 1794 and began writing *Susan* (later *Northanger Abbey*) in 1798. All of her other novels were written after the turn of the century; the last (and unfinished) book *Sanditon*, was written in 1817, the same year she died.

The 1790s were also a hyper-politicized time in English history. The French Revolution had put social change on the agenda, and the British lived in fear of a French-style revolution in England. That climate of hysteria was reflected in the passage of the Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Act of 1775, which made it illegal for anyone to criticize the English government, and in the publication of the highly partisan *Anti-Jacobin Review*, which helped turn the pursuit of the jacobinical into “a national pastime” (Butler 89). Conservatives demonized reformers by casting them as revolutionaries intent on destabilizing the nation by putting individual rights to happiness ahead of the common good and casting them as dangerous characters out to ruin English families by seducing their daughters. As a result, female modesty—and other issues traditionally relegated to the domestic sphere—suddenly became a question of national security (Johnson).

In the midst of all this, Wollstonecraft’s husband, William Godwin, published his memoir about Wollstonecraft’s life. *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) detailed, among other things, Wollstonecraft’s affair with the American businessman Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft’s suicide attempts, and the fact that Godwin and Wollstonecraft conceived their child before marriage. Suddenly Wollstonecraft, who until then was not seen as particularly radical (Johnson 14), was listed in the *Anti-Jacobin Review’s* index under “p” for prostitute and her defenders slandered. Claudia Johnson points out that

as Wollstonecraft’s unconventional sexual conduct became public knowledge, conservative audiences were shocked to realize that if women were indeed educated and permitted to act like “rational creatures,” they might consider themselves entitled, as free agents, to frame their own desires and pursue happiness on their own terms, rather than to be content as dutiful daughters or submissive wives. (15)

How could a young Jane Austen not take notice? Austen biographer Claire Tomalin offers some convincing biographical evidence that Austen is likely to have known of Mary Wollstonecraft and her work. She notes that Sir William East, the father of one of George Austen’s former pupils, was a benefactor of Wollstonecraft. Furthermore, Sir William was a neighbor and friend to Austen’s uncle, James Leigh-Perrot. After Wollstonecraft attempted suicide in 1796, Sir William was credited with being particularly kind to her during her recovery. While this does not specifically link Austen and Wollstonecraft, it makes it plausible that the Austen family knew of Wollstonecraft and her ideas (Tomalin 158).

Jane Austen probably made a mental note to stay away from partisan politics and to keep her thoughts about Wollstonecraft to herself. Thanks to her skills as a writer, her balancing act worked. She managed to infuse her books with a Wollstonecraft-like feminist critique that is less politically charged but just as potent.

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Jane Austen may have died 200 years ago, but the famous novelist is having a big week. The Bank of England announced yesterday that Austen’s portrait will appear on the new £10 note beginning Sept. 14, the bicentennial of the author’s death. Some have argued Austen and the characters in her novel may not fit the feminist idea men and women have today. Austen was well aware of the expectations and norms of the women of her time. Women were expected to marry, and their living situation depended largely on their male relatives. But the author herself lived a conventional life. Up until Wollstonecraft’s novel, female characters and their stories

were written by men. Their desires, point of view and experiences were told through men's perception of the woman's experience. via GIPHY. Subscribe. Jane Austen Centre. About Us. Buy Tickets. Mary Wollstonecraft remembered her loss ten years afterwards in these Letters from Sweden and Norway, when she wrote: "The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath." Mary Wollstonecraft left Lisbon for England late in December, 1785. The publisher of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* was the same Joseph Johnson who in 1785 was the publisher of *Cowper's Task*. With her little story written and a little money saved, the resolve to live by her pen could now be carried out. Yes, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792, almost 20 years before Austen's first novel, but when we discuss feminism today we are referring to something much more modern, so the question of Austen's feminism sounds a bit ridiculous. Yet as I began writing my version of *Pride and Prejudice*, set in 2013, which I eventually titled *Eligible*, it began to feel inevitable and important that the women would have more agency, and for that matter, more fun. In *Pride and Prejudice* the pressure to marry is a given. I personally might wish to picture Austen exchanging her empire waist dress and bonnet for a "This is what a feminist looks like" T-shirt. But in the end, we must let her novels speak for themselves. Topics.