Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft: Feminists Redefining the World

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Dedication

For my mother who did not live to see the completed project, but who I know was, and continues to be, with me through this as well as every other challenge I have faced and success I have achieved. You never gave up on me, Mom. Thank you.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my committee consisting of my advisor, Kyoko Takanashi, as well as her fellow English professors Chu He and Lee Kahan. I know my schedule has not always been consistent, and I cannot thank you enough for 1) helping me through this and 2) offering flexibility, which went above and beyond on their parts. Without each of you, I would not be here today. Thank you so much.

Earning my master’s has taken me years. In fact, I am embarrassed to admit just how many. However, when I first met Kyoko Takanashi years ago, she told me something that stuck. I was attempting to explain why this experience had taken so long, and Kyoko said something simple: I was an example of perseverance, never giving up on achieving a goal that so many accomplished in a few years but for me had taken so much more time. Those words inspired me to see the end of this tunnel, which I had not contemplated before that spring afternoon.

Years later, when I had finally completed all of the coursework and I was working to complete the thesis, my mother died somewhat unexpectedly. I don’t want to say I had given up in the wake of that, but I had . . . until Kyoko reached out at the end of the first semester this academic year. I knew I could do this because Kyoko believed in me, telling me I could. She was so incredibly supportive, understanding, and beyond encouraging. Nor did she judge. She let me cry in her office, seemed to understand and, in so doing, helped me get off dead-center and reach this finish line.

Thank you, Kyoko. I don’t think I’d be here right now without you.
Table of Contents

Introduction and Thesis 1
Section 1: A Case for a Conservative Austen 2
Section 2: Wollstonecraft and a Case for the Progressive 7
Section 3: A Case for Austen Going Beyond Wollstonecraft 24
Conclusion 28
Works Cited 31
CV 32
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Introduction and Thesis

The ubiquitous warnings are there: Do not attempt a late-20th-century literary criticism of seeking connections between author and novel when exploring Jane Austen’s life and her novels. Her heroines marry. She did not. Some are quite wealthy (or soon will be), Austen not so much. Consequently, the lives of Jane Austen’s heroines seem replete with story-book, fairytale endings. Not Austen’s. Other than demonstrating a piercing sarcasm and bone-dry wit, we know little of her. There were possible loves, many flirtations, and at least one proposal said to have been accepted one night and rejected the next morning. Her politics? Ambiguous. This is not to set in stone—like Marilyn Butler has attempted to do—whether Austen was a Whig, Tory, or a closet Jacobin. However, she was much more radical than Butler, and many in the reading public, give her credit. Radical may not be the correct term here; certainly she was more progressive, more feminist. Yes, Elizabeth Bennet rides off north with Mr. Darcy, only to be joined a year or so later by her sister and Mr. Bingley, the latter of whom is everyone’s apparent object at the start of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005). It appears to be a traditional ending for a conservative novelist, as Marilyn Butler has asserted. However, it is in the character of Elizabeth Bennet where Austen seems to most closely mirror the teachings of the late eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Actually, Austen takes Wollstonecraft a step further. A near-embodiment of the latter’s feminist teachings, Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet is an upper-middle-class heroine whose brand of feminism alters the British aristocracy, making it much more useful and productive than anything Wollstonecraft envisioned.
And what does Wollstonecraft advocate that would make her such a late
eighteenth-century radical? In her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
(1988), she proposes co-educational experiences so as to equally (and fairly) develop the
minds and bodies of both boys and girls. Reason and intellect offer purpose to both
genders as well. Physical activity should play a part and be encouraged for everyone. All
of this could lead to a society, argues Wollstonecraft, that could bear witness to a world
in which women do not “waste life away the prey of discontent” but “who might have
practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by
their own industry . . .” (149). Staking such a claim in Wollstonecraft’s time was radical
and revolutionary as real-world expectations proved to be quite different. In *Pride and
Prejudice*, Austen assembles a cast of characters most of whom appear to oppose all that
Wollstonecraft holds sacred. Austen and her dramatis personae seem to support Butler’s
brand of conservatism. But not all. Two significant characters—Austen’s heroine and her
sometime nemesis / sometime lover—stand alone in defying societal norms of the day.
Rather than conforming to conservative expectations, Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet and Mr.
Darcy forge a new path for the aristocracy by challenging much of what it stood for and
actually was in practice.

Section 1: A Case for a Conservative Austen

In her *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler asserts that Austen is a
conservative writer who places her heroines in subordinate family roles, noting their
dutifulness, meditativeness, self-abnegation, and self-control, “were codes shared with
other conservative writers . . . such as Jane West and Mary Brunton” (xix). Even so,
Butler maintains that Austen, like her heroine Elizabeth Bennet, has experienced social rebuffs firsthand:

(Austen) is certainly no sycophant of wealth or rank, and she does not deal intimately with—or apparently much like—the great aristocracy. The class she deals with has local and not national importance: in eighteenth-century terms, she is a Tory rather than a Whig. She believes that the gentleman—as her words ‘consequence’ and ‘usefulness’ imply—derives his personal dignity from the contribution he makes at the head of an organic, hierarchical, small community.

It is for such a community, ideally perceived, that her novels speak. (Butler 2 -3)

Butler would not concur with me placing a leading feminist and Austen in the same camp. She maintains Austen is in diametric opposition to progressives such as Mary Wollstonecraft, whom she calls out by name along with William Godwin, Robert Bage, Thomas Holcroft, and Mary Hays, as they feature heroines who insist “on thinking independently and speaking out” (xvi). Butler cautions against seeking politics in reading Austen, whom she labels conservative specifically because the protagonist is facing the most significant decision of her life, which will lead her to adopt a traditional role within that Regency world. She writes,

... after 1760, and especially in the 1790s, ... Both novels and poetry are invaded by partisans of both sides; plain, communicable signs mark a polarized political alignment, which is then picked up by reviewers and passed onto the readers as indeed the meaning of the book. (xv - xvi)

Butler describes this as a short-term strategy, “reacting to other strategies” and not something Austen readers should give into (xvi).
However, Butler herself is unapologetically uncompromising in her assessment of Austen as a conservative. “As it happens, Jane Austen’s novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative . . . Her important innovations are technical and stylistic modifications within a clearly defined and accepted genre” (3). By way of explanation, Butler notes that the 1760s saw a “radical change in narrative techniques” (14). The emphasis shifted from action—what a character does—to her response to that action:

With the fading of secondary characters within the world of the novel, a new relationship comes for the first time to the fore. The reader’s attitude to the central character becomes an active element, and even, in extreme examples, more important than relationships within the fictional world. (17)

This is a formula “to induce the reader to identify with the hero . . . Heroes and heroines are employed who readily attract identification” (17). And secondary characters fade in the shadows of favorite characters whom Butler delineates as “very young and inexperienced, and hence easy victims of the corrupt or designing” (17). She further describes these fictional souls as “warm-blooded and sympathetic . . . sometimes subtle and often extreme.” They place the reader into the “spirit of the action, with the same impulsive generosity” (18).

While Austen’s characters are no doubt relatable, they are universally recognized as being far from sentimental. Austen, Butler argues, was reacting against the (highly parodiable) sentimentalists, including Wollstonecraft and her husband, William Godwin:

. . . the opposition to sentimental literature which built up in the 1790s—when the apprentice Jane Austen formed her literary attitudes—centered its case on
sentimental attitudes to love . . . All Jane Austen’s stories concern a young girl’s choice of a partner in marriage, and all make the choice the occasion for a number of critical and far-reaching ethical decisions. (23)

Butler is no fan of the sentimentalists. Despite their energy and idealism, “the revolutionaries voluntarily limit themselves . . . their subversion—like their artistic achievement—only goes so far” (33). This sentimentalism devalued intellectual content, reducing “familiar characters, situations, and attitudes into clichés” (Butler 33). She goes on to argue the biggest trend in the English popular novel of the 1790s (excepting the French Revolution) is “its resolute rationality, its suspicion of the uncontrollable workings of the unconscious mind . . . Conservative critics of the novel, and conservative novelists too, see that the true threat to orthodoxy lies in the moral relativism implicit in the sentimental movement” (33). The theme that maturing means conscious self-restraint is familiar in Austen’s novels (54), argues Butler. In allowing action and character to speak for themselves (98), Austen joins ranks with other conservative writers of her day. “After reading The New Mortality it becomes clear that Jane Austen’s strong liking for the actual—that virtually moral distaste which she displays, from the juvenilia on, for the romantic gloss on truth—is a characteristic partisan position of the time” (93). Also typical for Austen and other conservatives, according to Butler, is the development of a clever heroine who attempts—not always successfully—for “a clear-sighted assessment of human weakness, including her own.” Hallmarks, says Butler, are “Scepticism about human claims to virtue, however specious, (and) real pessimism about the validity of individual human insights” (94).
Butler has found support for her Austen-as-conservative argument. In her “The Feminist Depreciation of Austen: A Polemical Reading,” Julia Prewitt Brown notes that it is because all of Austen’s heroines walk down that matrimonial aisle by novel’s end, the author is a defender of a woman’s traditional place locked securely in the home, subservient to her husband’s. Also, Mary Poovey in her *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* depicts Austen as an author for whom marriage is “the ideal paradigm for the most perfect fusion between the individual and society” (203). Such could arguably be the case for Austen’s Mr. Darcy, a model landowner and representative of the gentry. His strong moral compass is readily evident in everything he does for his family, Pemberley, and the surrounding area as brother, employer, and even benefactor. We learn all of this through his actions, not his sermons.

Per Butler’s point of Austen avoiding sentimentality, *Pride and Prejudice* is much more a novel of action and speech than internal thought. The third-person narration rarely reveals Darcy’s unspoken thoughts. He and Lizzy Bennet largely express who they are by what they do and say, and often it is to disagree with each other and those around them. Most obvious differences are represented through speech, which betrays their individual animus. Lizzy “had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous” (19). In contrast, he comes off as “proud . . . above his company, and above being pleased” (18). She and her sisters are reminded almost daily that it is time to marry and that it had much better be for their economic benefit. He has no such concern—in fact, far from it. Being at Darcy’s disposal, Colonel Fitzwilliam, explains that his cousin has “at least great pleasure in the power of choice” (164) exactly because Darcy “is rich, and many others are poor” (164). Lizzy and Darcy initially clash as one would expect of two
people so temperamentally different finding themselves at such odds societally. His company includes his friend Bingley and the latter’s two conceited sisters, all of whom hail from the top echelon of British society. Thus, Mr. Bingley, being the desired object who moves into the neighborhood, is sought after by every eligible female within the Bennets’ socioeconomic class. Lizzy emerges from an upper-middle class, but Austen’s pragmatism is most evident when we discover the precariousness of the Bennet family’s long-term financial situation. Darcy and Elizabeth, however, do share an apparent dissatisfaction with the intellectual shortcomings of those around them, thus igniting a chain of events that includes formal balls and teas, pride, prejudice, lies, misunderstandings, hurts as well as spring and summertime travels. This ends with a very altered Darcy playing tour guide to his ancestral home and estate, Pemberley, with its charm and well-appointed, but not gaudy, rooms within and grounds without. Darcy, who has already proposed to Lizzy once, capitalizes on her serendipitous visit as a way to show the woman he loves that he is worthy of her. If Lizzy fails to pick up on this, given that she is generally unaware of his interest in the first half of the novel, we have her aunt and uncle as objective observers and the recipients of Mr. Darcy’s now-tamed manners, courteousness, and largess. In keeping with Butler’s conservatism, Elizabeth Bennet in the end becomes Elizabeth Darcy whilst her sister concurrently marries Bingley. The two couples are lifelong friends and ultimately live one county apart. It is an obvious traditional conclusion to a quintessentially British novel.

Section 2: Wollstonecraft and a Case for the Progressive

And yet any attempt to portray *Pride and Prejudice* as the Cinderella-esque facade of a mere love story irresponsibly sells Austen short. One example consists in the
myriad sequels to which Austen’s work has been subjected. Authors of such sequels commit grave errors in pigeon-holing Austen within their trite spheres of mere sexual or domestic concerns. This novel is so much more because while she is focusing on the individuals, Austen incisively examines the world they inhabit. Lizzy and Darcy are the products of their respectively-flawed environments. And what if Austen, like Wollstonecraft, is attempting to shine a light on that world to bring it out of a certain medieval darkness? In short, each is doing just that in utilizing her own medium: Austen as novelist, Wollstonecraft as societal critic. In her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft advocates for women to break away from home and hearth to practice medicine and run a shop. However, even she knows this is unrealistic, as evidenced by the amount of text she devotes to her gender ascending from its current state within the confines of a patriarchy, not outside of it. Wollstonecraft calls on a national conscience in using the term ‘patriot’ to describe a mother’s responsibility to her children and society. “. . . if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue . . . If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot . . .” (4). If British wives and mothers are the cornerstone of both Wollstonecraft’s world, Darcy’s Pemberley is its cradle. Rule, Britannia and even Western Civilization’s existence hinge upon a woman’s intellectual and emotional powers, and Wollstonecraft wants her sisters to know it as both an advantage and responsibility. Nothing short of a dictator can rival the vast strength a woman exercises within the domestic realm:

Women, as well as despots, have now, perhaps, more power than they would have if the world, divided and subdivided into kingdoms and families, were governed
by laws deduced from the exercise of reason; but in obtaining it, to carry on the comparison, their character is degraded, and licentiousness spread through the whole aggregate of society. (59)

The latter half of this citation pins the moral character of a nation as resting on her shoulders, so important is the female role. Can you imagine what reading this must have felt like to scores of trapped women, who spent their lives in utter self-sacrifice, thinking their ability to supply pleasure for others was all they could aspire to within this realm? The impediment in Wollstonecraft’s world was the situation in which women found themselves, and, at times, it was their own doing. An orderly train of virtues and love of mankind, can only “be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind . . .” (4). However, these were largely closed to half the population because “the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations” (Wollstonecraft 4).

A necessary component for women to be taken seriously, Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet refuses to let anyone intimidate her, and this takes place from start to finish within the novel. In keeping with her responsibility to mould the next generation, Lizzy encapsulates three elements Wollstonecraft points to as necessary for any woman: strong mind, temper, and body. First, let us look to the brains. It helps my argument that Austen has crafted a very smart character. Support for this comes from Miriam Ascarelli’s “A Feminist Connection: Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft.” She argues that Wollstonecraft’s thesis is “the idea that women, like men, were rational creatures.” Austen, she writes, “focuses on the reasoning skills women need to survive, which, to me, is the ultimate feminist statement.” Elizabeth Bennet has been gifted with a strong
intellect, of which she is well aware. She acknowledges as much at the Netherfield ball when admitting to Darcy that they each share "... a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with the éclat of a proverb" (89). After everyone in Austen's novel has sufficiently fallen in love and acknowledged those feelings to themselves and each other, Lizzy probes, asking Darcy to account how and why he first fell in love. "For the liveliness of your mind I did" (317). Indeed, one has only to flip back to the Lucas Lodge party where Darcy and Lizzy encounter each other only the second time. Austen's narrator informs us that at the start, Darcy scarcely allows her to be pretty and looks at her without admiration and only to criticize; he is excellent at communicating all of this to his friends, himself, and even the subject in question. "But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes" (31). The intelligence in her face first attracted Darcy, who never objectifies Elizabeth, to the point of always referring to her by her full Christian name and never utilizing a diminutive. He is the only character to consistently do so. As such, Darcy could not turn Elizabeth Bennet into a trophy because neither will allow it.

Wollstonecraft contends that not just the formation of the mind be started "very early," but it is "the temper, in particular," that "requires the most judicious attention" (151). Women who only love their children—lacking reason and seeking no further for the foundation of their duty than the feelings of a moment—are destined to become "... the most fond or most careless and unnatural mothers" (151). Good mothers must have
sense and an independence of mind, both sorely lacking in her time when women were
“taught to depend entirely on their husbands” (Wollstonecraft 152). This invariably leads
to unruly, spoiled, and entitled children with mothers who see themselves as objects,
playthings, and who are relegated to the status of a child themselves:

Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers . . . I now only mean to insist, that
unless the understanding of woman be enlarged, and her character rendered more
firm, by being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have sufficient
sense or command of temper to manage her children properly. (152)

Repeatedly Lizzy stands up to both Darcy and his family (in the form of Lady Catherine).
The latter is horrified not to receive prompt, direct answers as to Elizabeth’s age, her
family’s place in society, and even whether or not she has agreed to marry Darcy. Lizzy
brazenly refuses Lady Catherine’s request to deny Darcy’s hand in marriage. While
everyone else stands in awe of Darcy and his aunt, Lizzy will not be intimidated.
Harkening back to the Lucas Lodge party, she queries Charlotte about why Darcy
bothered to overhear a conversation she just had with Colonel Forster.

‘That is a question which Mr. Darcy only can answer.’

‘But if he does it any more, I shall certainly let him know that I see what he is
about. He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent
myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him.’ (31)

That never happens. Nor is she unnerved when he listens to her playing Lady Catherine’s
piano. Austen’s narrator tells us Darcy “stationed himself so as to command a full view
of the fair performer’s countenance” (156). Of course, she sees this and at the first pause
remarks:
‘You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me. But I will not be alarmed, though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.’ (156)

She pushes things further when admonishing him in front of his cousin, his aunt, and everyone else assembled. Following Darcy’s confession that he is essentially awkward in company and cannot, or does not bother himself to, catch the tone of a conversation or even appear interested in the concerns of others in social situations, she delivers what amounts to her first lesson to him:

‘My fingers . . . do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women’s do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault -- because I would not take the trouble of practicing.’ (157)

Just as capable of playing the piano well and with “superior execution,” Lizzy is saying it is her choice not to spend all day laboring at scales and sheet music just as it is his not to enter into polite conversation. Even so, perhaps the most poignant moment of this exchange is when Darcy concedes the point, illustrating the antithesis of objectification. “Darcy smiled, and said: ‘You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers’ ” (158). While there are numerous examples of Elizabeth Bennet asserting herself with her mother, Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Bingley, her own sisters, Mr. Collins, Charlotte Lucas, Mr. Wickham, and her father, it is certainly not necessary to provide explanations for each. Austen repeatedly demonstrates
that her heroine will have no problem standing up to her husband; never will she be relegated to the status of a "child" within that relationship.

Elizabeth’s future children will respect her as well and not just because their father will; Lizzy believes in herself. Here again, Austen illustrates in character form Wollstonecraft’s principle saying that women can and should be co-equals to men. “The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother” (145). Elizabeth Darcy will never be degraded, as Wollstonecraft puts it, to that of a “mere doll.” She will not be so radical as to work for a living (keeping in mind that men of her class, specifically her father, do not, either), but she will help her children to know their minds and to act ethically and virtuously. In this, Wollstonecraft would have lauded Austen’s protagonist and specifically in relation to the place Lizzy will soon assume: “The being who can think justly has sufficient judgment to manage her children, will not submit, right or wrong, to her husband, or patiently to the social laws which make a nonentity of a wife” (Wollstonecraft 177).

My last argument in relating Wollstonecraft directly to Austen deals with the matter of physical exercise. In her Vindication, Wollstonecraft devotes a substantial amount of print to the idea that not only should girls be educated in intellectual terms similarly to their male counterparts but also in physical terms. On this point, she is most adamant. To give us context, Wollstonecraft looks to Dr. John Gregory, who, in his A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters (1774), cautions against girls dancing with spirit lest she make herself (and her gestures) appear immodest. Wollstonecraft’s response is knee-
jerk. “In the name of truth and common sense, why should not one woman acknowledge that she can take more exercise than another?” (28). She admonishes this notion, saying outright no “sensible” mother ought to restrain “the natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent caution” (28). Again, we see sensationalist and ironic verbiage out of Wollstonecraft’s pen with use of the word ‘indecent’ paired with ‘caution.’ It helps to reinforce her point.

... The woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband ... In fact, if we revert to history, we shall find that the women who have distinguished themselves have neither been the most beautiful nor the most gentle of their sex. (29)

Despite the criticism she faces from her mother and Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth Bennet loves to walk and appears to take every opportunity to do so. “The distance is nothing when one has a motive” (38) is an oft-repeated quote from the novel. Lizzy says this to her mother, who is attempting to dissuade the former from seeing the recently ill Jane at Netherfield. Once there,

... her appearance created a great deal of surprise. That she should have walked three miles so early in the day in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley; and Elizabeth was convinced that they held her in contempt for it. (38)

Of course they did. These are the women whom Wollstonecraft questioned as to how they could possibly “supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the langour of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures ... ?” (28).
Exercise does more than just place females on a more equal physical footing with their male counterparts. Wollstonecraft argues that sedentary employments render the majority of women “sickly.” What’s more this “female excellence” encourages women to be proud of such delicacy, which results in cramping activity of the mind “... trifling employments have rendered a woman a trifler” (76). Man takes her body but leaves the mind to rust with her evolving into an object of contempt. Too many women, argues Wollstonecraft, are encouraged to look to men for protection, support and even “succour” if they see a mouse, a rat, or “an old cow frown... I am fully persuaded that we should hear of none of these infantile airs, if girls are allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not confined in close rooms till their muscles are relaxed, and their powers of digestion destroyed” (62). She advocates physical exercise for girls from infancy through their youth so they may “arrive at perfection of body, that we may know how far the natural superiority of man extends” (86). With such a challenge, it appears Wollstonecraft is saying that woman may not merely be the physical equals of man but his superior. Not so. She notes Rousseau argued “that women educated like men would more resemble ‘our sex,’ which would result in ‘the less power (women) will have over (men)’” (62). That, according to Wollstonecraft, is not her point. “I do not wish (women) to have power over men; but over themselves” (62).

Mind, temper, and body are three elements which Wollstonecraft contends women can and should control and develop for themselves. However, we cannot ignore society - the time and place - in which we exist. Such norms are not always within an individual’s power to change. One challenge women both in the late eighteenth century
and the Regency era faced was education, or the lack thereof. They were, writes
Wollstonecraft, raised with a singular purpose:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers,
that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of
temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of
propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be
beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (19)

Wollstonecraft phrases this in terms of an insult to her sex. Gross is the man who renders
women gentle and only that. “Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical
manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them
always in a state of childhood” (19). Wollstonecraft claims Rousseau and “a numerous
list of male writers” insist women should all their lives be subjected to the severe restraint
of propriety. “Why subject her to propriety—blind propriety, if she be capable of acting
from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality?” (144).

These Wollstonecraftian ideals, argues Ascarelli, set the standard for what it
meant to be a radical in the 1700s. Her real-world expectations proved revolutionary as
she took particular aim at Rousseau. He advocates that a woman should be governed by a
fear of exercising her natural cunning. She should be made a coquettish slave in an effort
to render her a more alluring object of desire. Obedience should be the grand lesson for
women. “What nonsense!” (26) counters Wollstonecraft, who further argues that a
woman taught only to please will never feel mutual love with her husband. Such
misguidance will most likely give way to jealousy and/or vanity and could lead to wives
trying to please other men or men seeking comfort with other women. A marriage brewing for similar conflict certainly belongs to Lydia and Wickham.

Lydia is a product of two failed systems—parental and educational—both of which are intertwined here. She falls into the trap of lowered expectations all the way around. Wollstonecraft is dismissive of this formula: “Pleasure is the business of woman’s life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings” (55). This weakness spawns a “short-lived” queen, Wollstonecraft notes, a person who feels rather than reasons. Her charm is derived from vanity and weakness, both traits Lydia is more than happy to exploit. Through this specific character, Austen gives life to the Wollstonecraftian argument that a deficient education will lead to certain misery and potential tragedy. This negligence—both societal and parental—results in a haphazard education, especially for females, even those within the same family. The Bennet girls did not receive similar instruction, and that was a matter of choice for the children to make, not their parents who appear to have abdicated this responsibility. The narrator, Mr. Bennet, Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth at separate moments each observe there is something of substance in Jane and Lizzy not found in the pedantic Mary or with the flighty Lydia and Kitty. In describing her education to Lady Catherine, Lizzy admits that she and her sisters were always “encouraged to read... Those who chose to be idle certainly might” (148). Clearly, the younger two girls elected the latter. This does not serve either Lydia or Kitty well, but Lydia will be the one to pay the most significant price for this failing in her upbringing. As her Uncle Gardiner questions whether Lydia could really be “so lost to everything but love of [Wickham] to consent to live with him on any terms other than
marriage," Lizzy is quick to note that her youngest sister has not been in any way adequately supervised. Sixteen-year-old Lydia has been left to her own devices, and those have not served her well both in terms of morals and intellect.

'... she has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and for the last ... twelvemonth, she has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way. Since the ---shire were first quartered at Meryton, nothing but love, flirtation, and officers have been in her head.' (240)

Lizzy is not alone in her assessment of the youngest Bennet sister. Austen’s narrator warns us that Lydia—in advance of her Brighton trip—"saw herself the object of attention to tens and to scores of (officers) at present unknown. ... she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once" (205). Rather than Lydia employing her hours productively, the youngest Bennet sister has been free to give into "thinking and talking on the subject, to give greater—what shall I call it?—susceptibility to her feelings; which are naturally lively enough" (240), as Lizzy informs her uncle. Such sensibility and emotion prove dominant over productive reasoning, the latter of which both Austen and Wollstonecraft clearly advocate.

All of this leads to what Austen’s narrator implies will be a less-than-ideal marriage. In detailing exactly how and why Lydia and Wickham were always to be short of funds, the narrator in the novel’s conclusion provides one last observation on this union. "His affection for her soon sank into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and; in spite of her youth and manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her" (322). Far from a formula for lifelong domestic felicity, this
situation—again—gives life to another of Wollstonecraft’s arguments. Responding to Fordyce’s *Sermons* and Hervey’s *Meditations*, she observes that nothing in a person such as Lydia has been geared for substance. Such cajoling “into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments” (94) amounts to fleeting passions, folly, and vice.

Even were Lydia to have applied herself in her world, there is no assurance that education would have benefited her at her time of moral crisis:

> Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire. (Wollstonecraft 61)

Such a regimen relaxes the power of mind and prevents “a rational creature” from being useful to others. Late eighteenth-century education critics, including Rousseau and his followers, concluded “the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point: -- to render them pleasing” (27). However, Wollstonecraft counters that rather convincingly. Once the husband of such a pleasing female tires of someone whose entire education has been suited to keep her “always in a state of childhood” (20), common sense dictates how that marriage will likely play out.

And after that education has been dispensed, there is really only one clear path. The principal goal in the late eighteenth-century for “well-bred” girls of social distinction, according to Wollstonecraft, was to ensure that as women they marry well (wealthy men). “To rise in the world . . . (women) must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted” (60). We see this most pointedly in *Pride and Prejudice* with Charlotte Lucas. The narrator tells us
Charlotte is composed in accepting the proposal from a man who is “neither sensible nor agreeable,” whose society is “irksome,” and whose “attachment to her must be imaginary” (114).

... but still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or of 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. (114)

Charlotte is 27 “without having ever been handsome” and, for herself, feels “all the good luck of” making such a match (114). Arguably one of the most objective voices in the novel, the narrator is describing a marriage and future family, where, in fact, the wife does all she can to avoid interacting with her husband as is evidenced by which room the newlywed Charlotte chooses as her own in the parsonage.

Elizabeth had at first rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining-parlor for common use; it was a better sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement. (151)

Wollstonecraft depicting a character like Charlotte as “prostituting herself” would certainly be sensational; Austen’s narrator appears to bear witness to that truth. This does not come up once in the novel but thrice. We are witness to the proposal and their daily marital life with Austen placing Lizzy in her now-married friend’s home. In fact, it is not
left there. When Lizzy leaves Collins’ residence at the end of her visit, the narrator further observes:

Poor Charlotte! it was melancholy to leave her to such society! but she had chosen it with her eyes open; and, though evidently regretting that her visitors were to go, she did not seem to ask for compassion. Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charm. (192)

There is little doubt as to the future. While it is strongly implied that Charlotte is pregnant by the end of the novel, there being an “expectation of a young olive-branch” (304) on the way, here we know that beyond the parish, poultry and progeny, at least two of these elements will yet lose their charm for Charlotte. She is not forced to marry Collins; however, there is no denying the intense societal pressure for her to do something with her life. Regarding Sir William and Lady Lucas, the narrator tells us Mr. Collins’ situation makes it “a most eligible match for their daughter, to whom they could give little fortune” (114). Her brothers as well are relieved that Charlotte is avoiding the fate of dying an old maid (translation: they would have to one day provide for her materially if she never marries). Charlotte’s future financial prospects—through her husband’s anticipated inheritance—are “exceedingly fair.” This is all too clear when “Lady Lucas began directly to calculate, with more interest than the matter had excited before, how many years longer Mr. Bennet was likely to live” (Austen 114). Such base maternal machinations prevented women from acquiring independence from men, in effect prostituting themselves. Marriage would have been far less transactional had women
supported themselves rather than looking for that from their husbands. In this respect, Charlotte was not alone.

The Bennets themselves place their children in the unenviable position of taking into account a man’s financial wherewithal rather than just considering a love match. Mrs. Bennet repeatedly bemoans the fact that her girls must marry and marry well if they are to die in the same class to which they were born. She encourages Jane’s interest in Bingley as much for his pounds as his love; she sets the scene for Collins’ proposal to Lizzy; and she is the one threatening never to see Lizzy again should the latter continue to refuse him, potentially denying her second-born a lifetime of happiness. Clearly, here, Austen is telling us that had Lizzy been more compliant, she would have sacrificed a far greater love simply so that her family could hold onto a house. While Elizabeth’s mother overtly places her daughter in opposition, Mr. Bennet covertly (and just as effectively) does the same. Yes, in his inimitable fashion, he supports Elizabeth’s firm stand against accepting Collins. “An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do’” (104). However, Austen’s narrator informs us that as a parent, he neglects his responsibility by leaving all of his girls financially vulnerable. “Mr. Bennet had very often wished, before this period of his life, that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum for the better provision of his children, and of his wife, if she survived him. He now wished it more than ever” (261). We see Wollstonecraft’s thesis that women must marry to survive in Mr. Bennet’s expectations, which at times appear to be not all that different from his
wife's given his status and social class; he does, after all, visit Bingley at the start sooner rather than later.

While finances dictate so many characters' motives within *Pride and Prejudice*, it is not universally dominant. One such illustration is Mr. Bennet's response to Lizzy after Darcy informs him of the proposal. Point blank Mr. Bennet asks Elizabeth if she is out of her senses to be accepting a man she has always hated, and then he arrives at a very perceptive point. "'He is rich, to be sure, and you may have more fine clothes and fine carriages than Jane; but will they make you happy?" (314) At this moment, Mr. Bennet breaks ranks with not only someone like his wife but his class specifically and society in general. He proves to be a dynamic character when he acknowledges more than just a passing concern for his daughter but admission of his own failed marriage as well: All this, despite the fact that such an arrangement would more than take care of any future financial concerns, particularly for Lizzy as well as her still-unmarried sisters.

'... But let me advise you to think better of it. I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable unless you truly esteemed your husband, unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage: you could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life.' (314)

This, of course, is excellent advice, which is not at all needed. Although a contributing factor, we know now Darcy is not the proud, conceited villain; rather, it is much more appropriate to frame it in a different context. Lizzy Bennet has never needed this from
anyone in defying societal customs, and that is both how and why she truly embodies Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideals.

Section 3: A Case for Austen Going Beyond Wollstonecraft

It is striking when one compares what Wollstonecraft is preaching against the context of Austen’s writing. The latter’s Elizabeth Bennet will not only help her husband with his estates and support of the local economy, she will be the vehicle through which the Darcy family literally survives into the future, the bearer and educator of future Darcys. At the very least, Elizabeth will be her children’s first teacher, something which Wollstonecraft espouses as a foundation for the future of her country. As I previously discussed, the education and formation of young children, she writes, are exclusively the mother’s responsibility, arguably her most important obligation. This is particularly interesting when we look to Darcy relating his own childhood experience to Elizabeth. In declaring his love for her, he comments on how his own upbringing and early education fell short.

‘I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I was spoiled by my parents, who, though good themselves . . . allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing . . . What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous.’ (308)

So important is this early construction that it nearly costs Darcy lifelong happiness. He acknowledges this in telling her, “‘By you I was properly humbled. I came to you without
a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (308). Darcy’s children will most likely avoid that same fate with Elizabeth as their mother, and Darcy knows it. He is a man used to getting what he wants and telling others what to do primarily because of how he was reared. Bright and assertive, Elizabeth will not only be an excellent role model for her children, she will challenge Darcy both intellectually and emotionally. In choosing Lizzy as his wife, Darcy will witness his children begin life with a solid foundation enabling them to think critically and act rightly. In choosing Lizzy as his wife, Darcy rejects the expectations and traditions of the aristocracy that Wollstonecraft found so objectionable.

Wollstonecraft directly addresses the middle class, whom she sees as virtuous and able, while rather judgmentally disparaging the wealthy. The middle class dispatches itself with dignity, she writes, because such exertions “really improve a rational creature” (57). Wollstonecraft exhibits little patience for the idle rich. Their education, she writes, renders them “vain and helpless, and the unfolding mind is not strengthened by the practice of those duties which dignify the human character” (9). They live almost exclusively to amuse themselves. Hereditary wealth and titles produce habitual idleness. “For man is so constituted that he can only attain a proper use of his faculties by exercising them, and will not exercise them unless necessity, of some kind, first set the wheels in motion.” Virtue is acquired when one discharges his duties, all leading to Wollstonecraft’s conclusion that “There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground . . .” (140-141). Wollstonecraft, however, allows for one exception regarding the upper-class. There is an existence of “loop-holes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself” (141). Darcy fits into this category.
His housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, cannot keep from gushing, “He is the best landlord and best master that ever lived . . . There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name” (216). Austen “uses” Mrs. Reynolds to demonstrate the approval Darcy has won among the locals.

The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant. As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship; how much pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow; how much of good or evil must be done by him. (217)

The Pemberley housekeeper cheerfully explains away those who mistakenly label Darcy proud, distinguishing him from his wealthy, rambunctious peers. His affability to the poor suggests a young man wise beyond his years, focused on serious matters. And it is here that Lizzy falls in love with and discovers a kindred spirit in Darcy, specifically because, like her, he does think and act so honorably and independently from everyone else around him.

Austen’s Darcy defies societal norms by inviting the middle class—through such a bright, strong-willed, feminist as Elizabeth Bennet—into this aristocratic world that Wollstonecraft eschews. Darcy does this fully aware of how much this goes against the hopes and expectations of his social class and family, in the form of Lady Catherine De Bourgh and even from his past self. Even Marilyn Butler describes Austen as no sycophant of the aristocracy, which is illustrated in rather negative terms throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy’s first proposal fails so miserably, in large part, due to his snobbish pride and prejudice against Lizzy’s family and their “inferiority of connections”
in relation to his. “Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related; they were natural and just .
. . to congratulate myself on the hope of relations whose condition in life is so decidedly
beneath my own?” (172) Yes, we are with Lizzy when she angrily informs him he would
be the last man on earth she “could ever be prevailed on to marry” (172). We hate him
for this, as does he himself in the end.

Even so, Lady Catherine’s indictment of Lizzy and her family is much stronger
when she informs the latter that should Elizabeth marry her nephew, Darcy, “You will be
censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a
disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us” (298). Lady Catherine
is incensed that “a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world” would
dare break up “his tacit engagement with [her daughter] Miss De Bourgh” (298). Lady
Catherine references a proposed marriage between first cousins as consisting of “every
feeling of propriety and delicacy” (298) when clearly Austen is communicating that such
a union is anything but that. We see Darcy pay scant attention to his cousin who is
described as “a little creature . . . so thin and small.” In fact, he offers Caroline Bingley
much more notice. Indeed, we are as unimpressed with Lady Anne as Elizabeth, when the
latter comments, “She looks sickly and cross. Yes, she will do for him very well. She
will make him a proper wife?” (143). Anne De Bourgh—like so many of her class—may
be the product of too many cousins-marrying-cousins; however, Jane Austen is shouting
from the rooftops that any Darcy-De Bourgh marriage would compound the error, likely
resulting in more children who would be perpetually ill, unmotivated and lacking in any
intellectual prowess. This shows us just how aligned Austen is with Wollstonecraft. The
former’s male protagonist is the walking embodiment of Wollstonecraft’s loop-hole just
as his future wife is aligned with her feminist and progressive agenda, illustrating to what extent Austen actually builds on and advances Wollstonecraft’s social theories into a new century.

Conclusion

Whether Austen was indeed a feminist - and to what extent - may never be answered fully given that the author never spoke nor wrote of Wollstonecraft publicly. One reason, according to Claudia Johnson, may have to do with Wollstonecraft’s “unconventional sexual conduct [that] became public knowledge” (15). Vilified as a prostitute after her death and in response to her husband’s publication of his memoirs, Wollstonecraft had at least one child out of wedlock and married Godwin when pregnant with her second (Mary Shelley). However, as Ascarelli notes, “... she was, by modern standards, a conservative on matters of human sexuality.” A reading of Vindication reveals that Wollstonecraft encouraged friendship between parents, not passion. Johnson argues that conservatives may have feared their own daughters becoming educated and acting like ‘rational creatures.’ This could have encouraged these women “to frame their own desires and pursue happiness on their own terms” (15).

Regardless, Mary Jacobus in “Jane Austen in the Ghetto” asserts that literature is one avenue through which we advance the way we think about ourselves. Given the similarities between Wollstonecraft’s feminist principles and Austen’s strong female lead in Pride and Prejudice, it does not seem that far-flung to see Austen’s brand of feminism staring us in the face 200 years later. And that ideology clearly matches up with
Wollstonecraft’s in an age now when women identify as the lawyers, doctors, and shopkeepers she once envisioned for her sex.

Perhaps more than any other figural system, literature offers a rich vocabulary of affects, aesthetics, and even ethics, as well as its focus on language and subjectivity, narration, and symbolization. I want to argue that it also provides an especially fertile ground of analysing [sic] the constitutive role of gender in consciousness (how we think about ourselves) as well as in unconscious fantasy (how we unwittingly act it out). (Jacobs 71-72)

Jacobs is not saying that there is something subversive taking place here. To the contrary, “That would be absurd” (Jacobs 72). But what literature makes happen depends on how it is used. “Literature represents the detour via illusion that allows us to encounter our singular and collective realities” (Jacobs 72).

For my part, it is not a stretch to see Austen supplying a bread-crumbs trail right back to Wollstonecraft. The principles the latter espouses run rampant through Pride and Prejudice in the form, manner, and speech of its protagonist/heroine Elizabeth Bennet. Even Wollstonecraft’s disdain for the aristocracy is evident in the form of Lady Catherine and the initially-conceived and -supercilious Darcy. Austen presents a new world for a new century in which perceived “upstarts,” such as Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, find a ready place within an aristocratic class structure sorely in need of expanded thought, manners, and even gene pool. And Austen does this through characters like Lizzy and Darcy who value the reason that Wollstonecraft argued must predominate. The latter’s fear was women of her day would not listen to the singular truth that a “being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason” (191). She
writes that her conclusion is obvious. “... make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers ...” (178). Yes, indeed, Elizabeth Bennet Darcy personified.
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