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# More Than a Lady: How Jane Austen's Works Impacted the Role of Women in English Society in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

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Eastern Kentucky University

More Than a Lady: How Jane Austen's Works Impacted the Role of Women in English  
Society in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

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By

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More Than a Lady: How Jane Austen's Works Impacted the Role of Women in English  
Society in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

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Abstract: In Jane Austen's works, the role and expectations of women in the 18th and 19th centuries are both reflected and questioned. My thesis outlines how Austen used her novels to represent the society in which she lived and how that society placed a sense of duty on women, specifically in terms of family, education, and marriage. Along with the representation of these duties, I also focus upon on how Austen uses her protagonists, primarily in the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Mansfield Park*, to question those standards and provide for her readers examples of women whom they could relate to and learn from as well. My major point of focus is how Austen challenges her readers to learn from the example set by her countercultural female protagonists. Finally, taking into account the ways which Austen reflects and challenges the roles of women, I conclude with a focus on how Austen emphasizes the importance of novels within her society, while also considering the impact that novel reading has in both the society in which Austen lived and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Keywords and phrases:* Jane Austen, 18<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup> century, undergraduate research, role of women, honors thesis, women's expectations

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Jane, this one's for you.

Novels play a significant role in societies around the world. From the very first novel to the novels that are being created into films today, authors have had this ability to take their readers into another “world,” where the words on the page create the scenes within the reader’s mind. The University of Cambridge conducted an interview in which they asked Trevor Byrne, novelist and co-founder of Hyland & Byrne Editing Firm, about the power of fiction. His response was, “Fiction brings you to places, emotionally and imaginatively, which you never otherwise would have visited. The psychologist Steven Pinker wondered once that, maybe, fiction is a kind of empathy technology. I like that” (Buxton 3). Authors’ ability to have their readers put themselves into the shoes of their protagonists is what creates the influence and the power of novels, allowing some novels to live on through centuries of history.

This is the case with Jane Austen’s novels. Since 1811 when Austen’s first book was published, her books have not left contemporary society. Within the classroom, Austen’s novels are frequently required readings for humanities or literature courses. In film, there have been 77 different adaptations to her six novels, whether they were motion pictures, television series, film adaptations or works based on her novels, producing more sequels, spinoffs and fan fiction than any other classic author. Some of these include a dog show called “Unleashing Mr. Darcy” based on *Pride and Prejudice*, a Spanish

“novela” of *Persuasion* and several comedy series such as “Emma Approved” based on *Emma* (Warren 2). In publishing, each of her novels have never been out of print since 1832. *Pride and Prejudice* itself, Austen’s most sold and well-known novel has sold over 20 million copies worldwide (Adam Frost 4). Her novels have been translated into approximately 40 different languages. All of that to say the test of time has proven that Austen’s works have been influential both in the English society she lived in and to her readers still today.

Born in 1775, Austen was the youngest of seven children and one of only two daughters. Her father was Reverend George Austen, a clergyman of the Anglican parish, and he consistently urged Austen to read the novels in their family study. Though they were a family of simple means, her father bought for her paper and ink to allow her to start her writing at a young age. In the 1790s, Austen finished the first three drafts of her first novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*; however, because of personal problems and failures in publishing, it was not until 1811 that her first novel was ever published. In 1797, when trying to publish *Pride and Prejudice*, which was titled *First Impressions* at the time, the publisher returned it to her, unread, with a stamp saying, “declined by Return of Post” (Kaci X 132). Along with other rejections and failures, Austen’s father died in 1805, forcing Austen to move with her mother and sister, Cassandra, to their family home where her brother, Edward, lived. Following these events, Austen finally successfully published *Sense and Sensibility* anonymously, then published *Pride and Prejudice* two years later. *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* were then published within the next two years (Kaci X 133-34).

At 41 years of age, Austen developed a disease that many think was Addison's disease. Despite her declining health, she continued writing until her condition made her unable to write any longer. She died in 1817 in Winchester, Hampshire, England. Throughout her lifetime, Austen never married. Henry, her brother, published her final two works, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, following her death, and, in these, released a special biographical note in which he revealed to the public her name. It was not until the 1920s when literary scholars began to distinguish and accredit Austen's works as masterpieces, causing her popularity to increase in the eyes of the public (Southam 5-6).

Though Austen's writings do not fit necessarily into a certain genre of writing, many literary historians consider her writing that of "romance" in correlation with "comedy of manners" (Southam 3). At that time when she was writing, romance literature referenced novels whose focus was "prioritizing human emotions and imagination – as well as emphasizing the beauty of nature" (Kincaid 2), which differs from the novels that are considered romance today. Austen's plots all consist of a courtship between her primary protagonists, so the theme of each of her books do have a major element of love and marriage, underscoring the genre in which her novels have been placed. The genre of comedy of manners refers to a satiric exemplification of the norms of society where the main purpose of the writing is to make fun of the social order and the complementary purpose is the happiness of the characters (Kincaid 3). Within Austen's writings, this reflection of the society that she lived in is clearly seen, along with her using satire to challenge it. Likewise, she outlines the expectations placed on women in her English society; using both satire and the situations in which she writes her



characters, she mirrors these standards that were set for women, while also questioning them within her text.

In my thesis, the primary areas of expectation that I focus on are the family structure and how that affected the livelihood of young women, the level of education required and available for women and the meaning and role of marriage in women's lives. In English society of that time, certain roles were typical for women. In Austen's novels, however, she pointedly addresses these expectations in the circumstances she creates for her female characters. Each novel has a female protagonist who has a certain circumstance that she was born with, typically including the family structure and their economic status, along with the ways that her social circle, her family and her culture has added pressure to the expectations that have been put on her. Like in society of that time, the female characters are hardly treated as strong, intelligent creatures who could think and choose for themselves; they were put in boxes and told not to break any of the rules of society. Therefore, Austen addresses the major issues that women faced with those daunting expectations. Austen provides her readers with circumstances similar to those which her readers may have faced in their lives; along with that, she writes her protagonists to adapt in her novels, but they always must go against their societal expectations, whether that be in a manner that is very extreme or just in a slight way. This is the primary method that Austen uses her novels to both reflect and challenge the standards placed on young women in her English society.

Within the family unit, young women had several areas of expectation, including marriage, beauty, duty and obedience. I will discuss how those standards affected the pressure that women felt to please and obey their families, together with what their sense

of duty was as well. The primary book I focus on in relation to the expectation of family is *Pride and Prejudice*, in which I look at Elizabeth Bennet as the protagonist and how she defies her family's expectations in what they desired for her future. Austen provides Elizabeth as a character who is bold and outspoken, challenging her readers to act in the same manner.

Secondly, I focus the standard for education for women, specifically how their level of education lacked equality with men in what was available to them. I address Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and how she used her work to call for equality between men and women in all areas of life, highlighting education as one of the key areas. Education, especially in that era, included virtue and morality, so I underscore how Austen reflects Wollstonecraft's ideas in her writing in causing her female protagonists to become more educated to, in turn, gain virtue of character as a woman, first and foremost. The books I primarily highlighted to exemplify Austen's value of education are *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Fanny Price, the protagonist found in *Mansfield Park*, is the key character whose education Austen focuses primarily on, consequently causing her virtue to make her firm in her convictions within the novel as well. In *Persuasion*, the protagonist is Anne Elliot who, as a single woman, acquires virtue and independence for its own sake, not for the sake of gaining a male suitor. Austen's use of these two women/characters is her way of questioning society's expectation for women's education.

Finally, the expectation for marriage is the concluding standard that I stress. A woman's duty was to get married, manage the household and raise the children. I focus on the negative marriages that Austen depicts in her novels that influence her female

protagonists, emphasizing the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*, contrasted with the content and equal marriage of the Crofts in *Persuasion*. These marriages are represented by Austen to show to her female protagonists either unhappy marriages based on marrying for economic stability or a positive marriage based on love and respect, challenging both her protagonists and readers to choose the latter.

#### Family: No Subsequent Connections Can Supply

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a class structure existed among English society. According to British historian Roy Porter, an Englishman gained his identity from where he was ranked socially, and this rank depended upon his profession, his assets and his economic status. An Englishwoman obtained her rank from the rank of her spouse (Porter 48). At the very top of the pyramid were the royals: the king, queen and their family. Below the royalty were the aristocracy, also called the peerage, consisting of dukes and duchesses, marquesses and marchionesses, earls and countesses, viscounts and vicountesses, and barons and baronesses. Aristocracy was primarily a hereditary title that came from birth; however, in some cases, women were able to achieve this status by marriage. Under the aristocracy were the gentry, broadly speaking “ladies” and “gentlemen,” including baronets, knights, squires, and dames. The aristocracy and the gentry constituted the “upper classes.” The gentry were landowners who typically did not earn money through manual labor. The exceptions for manual labor were officers of the army or the navy, people who worked in law or the clergy. If a woman was a lady, then she did not work for wages; in few special cases, a woman could

be a governess, but usually only if the family was in a hard stint economically (Smith 72-73). This did not include the regular household chores and duties of the woman of the house; she was expected to manage the house and the staff. However, this was not considered labor because she did not receive monetary compensation for her duties.

The lower classes consisted of both the trading class and the working class; these classes derived their income from manual labor, which caused upper class society members to oftentimes look down upon members of these classes. Members in the trading class could, very rarely, achieve the status of a gentleman in their lifetime. However, in Austen's time, the likelihood of a member of the working class to achieve a higher status was very low, though a woman might possibly be able to marry up one or two rungs to the status of trading class or even lady (Smith 73). This was frequently the goal of fathers, in order for his family to achieve greater economic stability and secure a prosperous future for his family after he is gone. Between the upper and lower classes, the disparity was extremely distinct and vast; consequently, members of the upper class oftentimes thought themselves to be superior to lower class members, causing upper class members to treat lower class members with less respect and dignity than members of their own class. A member of the peerage could live on rental income from his estate, interest on his investment and other sources of wealth that might total £10,000 annually, while a member of the working class might earn just £10 a year for his labor. This extreme distinction created an air of superiority from the upper class in many cases, "sometimes sealed by attitudes which almost denied that rich and poor came from the same species" (Porter 48). The very elite remained the English landowners with the aristocracy consistently being the most stable and the smallest group. In Austen's novels,

the characters in her books are all part of the upper classes, though primarily from the gentry rather than the aristocracy. Because of their high status, the issues they face related to family, education, marriage and their role in society are only what people in English society in the upper class faced.

In addition to economic status, another strong factor in defining a person during Austen's time period was their family. For women in particular, societal standards first began to be applied to them in the family unit. Legally and socially, a woman's rights belonged to her father from the day she was born. Before a woman was married, her legal protection and standing were found in her father; his economic, social and financial status was the same status that the woman would take on until the day that she was "out," meaning the time when a woman was in public circulation and ready to be courted for marriage (Sword 78). Family dynamics were typically different from what has come to be expected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because they were more focused on making advantageous matches for the children. In Austen's time, as her books represent, much of a young woman's life centered around her becoming a properly educated and well-behaved lady, which made it her family's desire as well. This remained the goal of the parents of a young woman, frequently because of the drive and need for stability for the future of the family (Barkley 215).

The kin of a family were seen as the means to preserve the social status of that family, which underlined the importance of the inheritance and dowry. For a family with male heirs, the greatest inheritance went to the eldest son, then younger sons received relatively less for their inheritance; the inheritance may consist of land and money or one or the other (Porter 56). In the case of entailed inheritance, a common practice among the

aristocracy and in the gentry, dowry was the only means of transferring parental property or money to a female heir. The goal of the family of a woman was to obtain for her a suitor that would maintain her family's status or, ideally, allow the family to move up in rank (Barkley 215).

Although in most cases parents and young women were focused on economic matters with respect to choosing a spouse, Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer and advocate of women's rights in the eighteenth century, argued that within family life, "warmer passions" were necessary, including both the care that parents have for their children and also for one another. Along with that, parents have a duty to fulfill to their children to raise them with extreme dedication, physically and emotionally (Wollstonecraft 113-118). The key with this, Wollstonecraft said, was that it was not merely the job of the mother of the children; men also had the duty to be a husband and a father who was virtuous, respectable and caring. Even more, she asserts that a husband and a wife head a team, their family, who should add to society in a beneficial and positive manner, which should allow them to become good citizens and less selfish humans (Wollstonecraft 89-90). In relation to women as mothers specifically, the need for children to be cared for when they are infants is integral to the strength and resiliency of the child later on in life. However, though this is the role of a mother, a father should not make this role the only purpose for his wife. This role, rather, is a means for a mother to establish a healthy and loving relationship with her child while also allowing her to gain wisdom and virtues, which should be encouraged by her partner (Wollstonecraft 113-115).

These ideals from Wollstonecraft were seen as radical during her time because it challenged the family dynamic as seen in most families in English society then. Austen represents this typical relationship between parents and their daughter within the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*. From the beginning of the novel, Austen displays Mrs. Bennet as a mother whose life goal is to find for each of her daughters a suitor who will give them the ability to have prosperous economic futures and to support her as well once Mr. Bennet dies and she, in turn, loses the right to live in their family home. In the novel, it is Mrs. Bennet who has more of a concern to get her daughters married than her husband, and she frequently address this in conversations with both her daughters and Mr. Bennet. In one conversation with Mr. Bennet, she describes their new neighbor as “A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!” (*Pride and Prejudice* 5). By creating Mrs. Bennet as a character who fulfills the typical relationship to a daughter that a mother had during this period, Austen uses this to sustain the idea that women were given certain standard to live up to within their family. Austen is asserting that all women were seen, even by their own families, as a means to maintain their family’s social and economic status. This is perpetuated in her novel in order that she could create a female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who would, in turn, refuse to accept this standard that was created by her mother and her society, challenge that norm by marrying in a greater part for love rather than solely for economic gain, and create her own future that would differ from her parents’ marriage, which was the norm for their time.

This is seen in Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal. Mr. Collins, being a clergyman, belonged to the upper class, and although clergymen were

not seen as extremely wealthy or successful, some were able to provide economic stability and a good fortune for their wife and family. To marry Mr. Collins would be deemed as an accomplishment in the eyes of people of the Bennets's status and especially to Mrs. Bennet herself. Most notably, Mr. Collins was the heir to Longbourn Estate, the Bennet family home, meaning that if Elizabeth chose to marry Mr. Collins, her family could remain in their home. However, Elizabeth, desiring a more enjoyable future and a loving marriage, turned down Mr. Collins's proposal, going against the desires of her mother and the expectations of her society to marry a suitable man that could provide a secure future. In creating this situation in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen challenges these standards for women by representing Elizabeth as a woman who came from a family with a dynamic that was typical to that of her day, but Elizabeth refused to concede her desires simply to remain obedient to her family. Elizabeth was determined to marry for more than a stable future for her and her family; she longed for love.

That being said, Elizabeth's father was not as strongly in favor of Mr. Collins as his wife was. It was quite the opposite. In his conversation with Elizabeth following Mr. Collins' proposal and Mrs. Bennet's insistence that the two marry, he says, "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" (*Pride and Prejudice* 56). Though their family dynamic was not necessarily warm and extremely loving, Mr. Bennet does show his desire for his daughter's happiness, and that is more than is evidenced by his reaction.

In doing this, Austen is showing to her readers that their sole duty in life is not to appease their parents. Austen, in actuality, is underscoring quite the opposite. Her



characterization of Elizabeth establishes an example for her readers of a woman who does feel pressure from her family to support them and be obedient to their desires for her future. However, she chooses her own longings over the approval of her family. This choice was not the norm for women in Austen's time, which is why she creates a protagonist for women to be able to look to, and possibly follow, in their own lives. Her goal in writing Elizabeth as a character who is determined, passionate and somewhat rebellious is to give her readers a first-hand account, although fictional, of a woman who does not settle and fall into dutifully obeying her family. She creates Elizabeth as a woman who would rather never marry and become a spinster than get married to a man she does not love, even if that meant disobeying her own mother.

Austen reinforces her point in the character of Elizabeth's closest friend, Charlotte Lucas. After being rejected by Elizabeth, Mr. Collins proposes to Charlotte, and Charlotte accepts. As a woman who is in her late twenties, Charlotte felt much pressure from her family to secure her and her family's economic future, so, consequently, she accepts the first proposal that she receives. Charlotte says, "I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins' character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (*Pride and Prejudice* 62) Though pressure was felt by both women, Charlotte, being several years older than Elizabeth and from a family whose income is lower than the Bennets's, had stronger reasons for feeling the need to marry soon and marry the first, and quite possibly only, man who asked for her hand. That pressure left Charlotte with few options, including marrying Mr. Collins, a man who she may not love or even enjoy but who could provide for her and her family a

secure and stable future. Knowing that he could be her only option to secure this destiny, Charlotte agreed to his proposal, disappointing Elizabeth and setting aside her own happiness for economic security for herself and her family. Austen shows Charlotte as a character whom her readers may see as a familiar reality because of Charlotte's age and growing need for socioeconomic stability in her future, knowing that Charlotte's situation will likely be a miserable one; however, she does so to show that her choice to marry Mr. Collins is a greater fate than ending up alone. Austen offers a critique and alternative for her readers through Elizabeth's decisions as an opportunity for social change to show that love is the most important element, though not the only element that matters.

#### Education: Introduced Properly into the World

Oftentimes, in Austen's day, this need and desire for economic stability was a primary purpose of marriage. However, in order for a woman to get married, she would need the education it took to attract the attention of a suitable man. Between the age of 15 and 19, a woman was said to be "out," meaning that she could be courted by a suitor. Once a woman was out, her economic, social and educational statuses became extremely important to a man who was seeking a wife that would suit his lifestyle and benefit him economically in the future. The daughters of fathers with wealth, consequently, were oftentimes the targets of men who longed for a future of prosperity because once a woman was married, her fortune belonged to her husband. Therefore, in order for a woman to retain any fortune from her family or have an economically stable life, marriage was the only reasonable choice (Swords 78). For many women, that meant that much of her life revolved around developing skills and abilities that would make her "an

accomplished woman” (*Pride and Prejudice* 21), so well-respected men would be attracted to her and interested in courting her when that day came.

Austen describes this idea of a woman developing certain skills primarily to be appealing to a future husband in a conversation amongst Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley. This ideal woman would have “a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, 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.” In this scene, Austen pokes fun at these highly valued “skills” that seemed to be fairly trivial. The skills mentioned in this conversation are not those of managing a house or raising children, capabilities that women were expected to have as a wife and mother. However, the skills that Miss Bingley describes were genuine expectations of women in English society, and these were the skills that men looked for in a future wife with the thought that those are what made a woman a good wife and, later a good mother. Therefore, becoming an accomplished woman was not for the sake of her own self but for the sake of a man to first be attracted to her then to, secondly, have the skills necessary to be a “pleasing” spouse.

Therefore, women’s education during Austen’s day consisted of “drawing, dancing, piano playing, penmanship, grammar, spelling, elementary arithmetic, sometimes French” (*Swords* 79). In most cases, young women were taught these limited skills by their mothers at first, then, as they grew older, they would either attend a boarding school or were taught by a governess in their family home. For young men, elite schools and universities, such as Winchester, Oxford or Cambridge, were available for

education; however, young women had no public school or university to attend. Other than being taught by their mothers, a governess or at a boarding school, the only other way a young woman could educate herself was by reading in her own time. Her family home might have a library, especially for the father and sons of the family, but it was likewise available for the daughters to have access to for further education, if the father and mother allowed it.

Austen's novels contain many examples of the educational expectations, or lack thereof, of the female characters. For example, education and novel reading are heavily addressed in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland's mother tries to teach her as she is growing up but makes Catherine less of a priority once her younger children need to be taught as well; therefore, Catherine, interested in activities like baseball, riding horses and playing cricket, does not care for learning from educational books when she would rather be reading novels containing heroines with exciting lives (*Northanger Abbey* 5). Her lack of education comes to haunt her when her novel-reading and ignorance causes her to believe outlandish stories about Northanger Abbey, stirring up trouble within the household. Though this is a prevalent theme in the novel, several novels contain more forthright examples of women's education and the situations her protagonists face make Austen's prevailing ideas clear.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth addresses the Bennet girls' lack a governess while speaking with Lady Catherine, who believes that Elizabeth and her sisters' educations were neglected because of the fact. In response, Elizabeth says, "Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were

necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might” (*Pride and Prejudice* 79). Austen addresses the social issue of women not being properly educated or receiving the same access to education as men by using Elizabeth Bennett as a woman who chose to use the resources that she had to educate herself, which, in turn, set Elizabeth apart from other women of her time.

Austen uses her protagonist as a countercultural agent to invite her readers to use the potential resources that they have at their disposal to educate themselves to be more than just an “accomplished woman.” She calls her readers to be like Elizabeth, to read and learn more than just the minimum requirements to find a suitor of merit and wealth. Using Wollstonecraft’s idea of women being “rational creatures” (Wollstonecraft 11), Austen’s underlying theme of women being intelligent, though different than men, and having the ability to learn and be educated is what lies behind her plot. Austen uses her protagonists as examples for her readers to look at and follow in their own lives because it was likely that her readers were facing circumstances similar to her characters, and that is no coincidence. It was an intentional choice that Austen made to underscore her society’s lack of education for women – a choice that called her readers to attention. Though Austen was not necessarily a radical, her protagonists were clear examples of ways that her female readers could make small choices to stray away from the expectations that have been always placed on them. In this case specifically, educating themselves and making that a priority was a good place to start.

A major source of education and societal guidelines for young women in the eighteenth century was conduct books written for women to outline the “desired model” of a woman (Hasley 431). British historian William St. Clair projected that in the years

between 1785 and 1820, between 59,500 to 119,000 copies of advice or conduct books were sold to British families (Ford 2). These books, often called manuals, instructed women in the values that the writers thought women should have, including the particular “accomplishments” that they should possess, the purpose of reading, the potential dangers of unrestrained emotions and of thinking freely versus respect of religious authority, and sensible occupations for women. Manuals stressed educating women in the home because educational seclusion from the world would create women with more virtues and higher character (Hasley 431).

In 1774, a series of letters to the daughters of Dr. John Gregory, titled *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, was published, and it quickly became a well-known and strongly followed example of a conduct book for women to read and abide by in their daily lives. Gregory had letters covering the topics of religion, conduct and behavior, amusements, friendship, love and marriage, each including the expectations that he had for his daughters to follow after he died. These expectations, once published and circulated, became expectations for women across English society to follow. Gregory claimed, “Modesty, which I think so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company, especially in a large one” (Gregory 7). Similarly, “Wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess...Wit is so flattering to vanity, that they who possess it become intoxicated, and lose all self-command” (Gregory 7). Gregory's collection of letters is one of the many books of conduct that was included in the education of women during Austen's day and, in turn, led to the creation of the standard of women's behavior and conduct at home and in public.

In *Northanger Abbey*, the use of conduct manuals as the means to improve a young woman occurs when the young Catherine Morland finds herself in a conflict after she wrongfully assumes that General Tilney is a murderer. The riveting, descriptive novels that she reads leads her to this conclusion. After the Tilneys realize what Catherine has been imagining, she returns to her family home and falls into a depressed and sullen state. Mrs. Morland, noticing her state, suggests a conduct manual, *The Mirror*, thinking that Catherine was dissatisfied with their less extravagant home and challenging her to learn how to behave in a more lady-like and respectful manner (*Northanger Abbey* 163).

Although not necessarily a means of education, sermons directed towards women were also very common during Austen's day. The purpose of these sermons was to teach women what was expected of them, in terms of how they should act, what they should discuss and even how they should dress and walk when in public. James Fordyce, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and the author of *Sermons to Young Women*, took a passage from the Bible and asserted that the words of women should "appear most graceful, and prove most acceptable; being tempered by courteousness and modest, seasoned with wisdom and discretion" (Fordyce 4). Fordyce continues his sermon by underlining the idea that women should never indulge themselves by using humor or wit because those hold no value or purpose in the life of a lady. Likewise, Fordyce uses the phrase "accomplished woman" in his sermon, affirming, "If aught on earth can present the image of celestial excellence in its softest array, it is surely an accomplished Woman, in whom purity and meekness, intelligence and modesty, mingle their charms... need I tell you, that men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a

witty female?” (Fordyce 4) In this assertion, Fordyce is both discouraging women from showing her true personality and wit and encouraging men to shy away from women who dare choose to do so. It was from these sermons that women were supposed to learn the manner in which they should act, especially in the presence of well-respected men, never daring to show their humorous side in fear of being deemed a woman that may not be worthy to wed.

Fordyce’s sermon was published in 1766; however, many of its ideals still rang true and its expectations for women still existed in Austen’s society. This is exemplified in *Pride and Prejudice* when clergyman Mr. Collins reads from Fordyce’s sermons to the Bennet sisters. Austen chose this book to be read because it was widely circulated and would be very familiar to her readers. Mr. Collins sits down with the sisters and reads three of Fordyce’s pages, then, when noticing Lydia’s lack of attention, says, “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess;—for certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction” (*Pride and Prejudice* 36). It is important to note that not only is Fordyce universally respected because of his popular sermon, but he is especially respected in this situation because Mr. Collins is also a clergyman. In his bold statement directed towards Lydia, Mr. Collins underscores the widely expressed thought by many men during this time that women were not capable of thinking for themselves, and, therefore, they needed instruction to be told how to act and present themselves (Ford 2-3).

Donald A. Bloom’s article, *The Romantic Power of the Witty Heroine*, addresses Austen’s opposing view to sermons like Fordyce’s with her use of witty heroines in her



novels, most particularly Elizabeth Bennet. Bloom's argument focuses around the idea that heroines like Elizabeth are essential during this time period to show that their male counterparts needed them in order to achieve "personal wholeness," meaning "she has, or is, what he lacks most" (Bloom 72). It is through Elizabeth's outspokenness and ability to counter Darcy's comments with her wit that, in turn, challenges him and helps him to grow into the man that he becomes towards the end of the novel, a man who is less arrogant and judgmental and more understanding and humbler. However, that is not to say that Elizabeth was lacking some of the characteristics that Fordyce underlines that women should have. Elizabeth, Bloom emphasizes, is kind, tender-hearted and highly intelligent; the difference is that she is aware of her opinions and not afraid to express them to Darcy. As a result, her freedom in expression, humor and wit are ultimately what attract Darcy to her, which goes against exactly the claims of Fordyce in the type of woman that a man like Darcy is looking for as his wife (Bloom 76).

However, it was Elizabeth's education, thanks in part to her own reading, that allowed her to have the intelligence and wit that she had in her conversations with Darcy. Wollstonecraft was one of the women who was deemed as a radical for her beliefs that women deserved the same level of education of men, and it was that education, she argued, that would grant them the ability to achieve the same status as them (Wollstonecraft 49). A great inspiration of Wollstonecraft was Catharine Macaulay, an eighteenth-century British historian, philosopher and advocate for women's rights. Macaulay's ideas challenged the leading belief that men were naturally superior to women; she argued that education is what helped women gain a status equal to men. She went as far to say that women were on the same level as men in every facet, excepting

physical strength, and that a woman's innate abilities were just as sound and intelligent as men. It was the fault of lack of education and socialization in society that caused the inequality between the two sexes. Finally, Macaulay asserted that this lack of access to education was a form of "repression of women and girls, and the only means of correcting this travesty would be to give equal access to education to all men, women, boys and girls" (*Catherine Macaulay: British Historian* 2-3).

Similarly, Wollstonecraft argued that the blame goes to society's construction of these gender differences, accusing it of degrading women to the role of "mere dolls" (Wollstonecraft 145). Her primary argument remained that men and women should have the same expectation in every aspect of life, including education, but also including chastity, virtues, character and duty. Rather than putting men down or insulting them, Wollstonecraft argues that the two sexes need to depend on one another, and it is that dependence that will allow them to make each other better versions of who they once were. "The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue" (Wollstonecraft 140). Simply stated, she believed that if women were expected to remain chaste, then men should be expected to do the same. If men were expected to develop their virtues to improve their character in order to be viewed in a higher manner in society, then women should be improving their virtues as well (Kerry 4-7).

As a philosopher as well as a writer and advocate for human rights, Wollstonecraft also had ideas for the development of virtue, another aspect to her writing that set her apart. The premise of her beliefs were that men and women should have the same duty and responsibility, which included the growth of character. Wollstonecraft

believed that a restriction existed for women's ability to develop virtue, which, in turn, has negative consequences for society (Wollstonecraft 76). This lack of development of virtue thus leads to women only desiring to please men, causing their actions at times to lack virtue. She argues that this also leads to women prioritizing external beauty, making their focus solely to gain the attention of a man. Wollstonecraft goes as far to say that this is a woman who is wasting her life away, in a state of "perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone" (Kerry 15). Therefore, her stance, expressed in the following passage, is that virtue is essential to the development of women in society, so they can contribute as more than just a subservient figure.

Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast thou created such a being as woman, who can trace thy wisdom in thy works, and feel that thou alone are by thy nature exalted above her,—for no better purpose?—Can she believe that she was only made to submit to man, her equal, a being, who, like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue?—Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him; merely to adorn the earth, when her soul is capable of rising to thee?

(Wollstonecraft 67)

The ideas written in her works were seen as very radical for this time period, and they give her the title of being one of the first feminists.

Though she never explicitly cites Wollstonecraft in her writings, many of Austen's ideals for the heroines of her novels follow these ideals of Wollstonecraft. Two of her heroines in particular represent this idea of women being creatures who can grow in their virtue as a woman without doing so for the sake of a man. Her first example of this is with *Mansfield Park's* protagonist, Fanny Price. Fanny differs from many of

Austen's other protagonists in that she is very reserved and fearful, especially at the start of her novel. Austen's own family discouraged the novel because of their dislike of Fanny as the heroine. Her mother called Fanny "insipid," while her sister blatantly told her to change the plot, allowing Fanny to marry Henry Crawford rather than the man she marries at the conclusion of the novel, her cousin Edmund (Reiff 275). However, with Wollstonecraft in mind, Fanny can be seen as a heroine who truly becomes a virtuous and thoughtful woman.

At the start of the novel, Fanny arrives at her uncle's home, Mansfield Park, extremely shy, uneducated and not in tune to the society in which her aunt and uncle live. Her uncle, aunt and cousins, with the exception of Edmund, make it their chief duty to show Fanny how to behave, while also reminding her of her inferior status any chance they can get. Through this, Fanny becomes the sort of woman that many of the conduct manuals describe, being "modest, quiet, delicate, passive, religious and dutiful" (Sturrock 13). As Fanny is being taught by her governess how to behave according to a woman's duty, it would seem that Fanny is becoming just the woman that Wollstonecraft deems as integrated into society, following the norms and, not one who is developing herself, both mentally and physically, or growing in her virtue as a rational, contemplative person. However, as the novel progresses, Fanny is taken care of by her cousin, and future husband, Edmund, who sees to it that her education is not slighted. Through reading his suggested books and being encouraged to have intelligent conversations with him, Fanny develops her education and knowledge outside of simply what her governess was teaching her and her cousins. Because of her becoming more educated, like Wollstonecraft argues, Fanny, in turn, can likewise develop her virtue and morality.

The other side of her personal development is her increased physical strength and abilities. Wollstonecraft dedicates a chapter in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to the unpopular idea that women are meant to be physically healthy and fit, just as they are to be intellectually sound. She believes that “strength of mind has, in most cases, been accompanied by superior strength of body, natural soundness of constitution, not that robust tone of nerves and vigour of muscles, which arise from bodily labour...”

(Wollstonecraft 36) As for physical strength as a comparison between the two sexes, Wollstonecraft asserts, “I will allow that bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over woman; and this is the only solid basis on which the superiority of the sex can be built” (Wollstonecraft 37). In highlighting the need for exercise and physical strength for women, Wollstonecraft argues that the mind is influenced by the well-being and strength of the body. On the other hand, men do have superior strength biologically; however, an increase in physical capabilities of women will allow them, in turn, to begin to reach the quality of virtue that comes from education that only men are granted.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Fanny gets easily fatigued doing ordinary activities like picking flowers for her aunt and climbing steps (*Mansfield Park* 101, 115). However, when Edmund notices this, he schedules Fanny to horseback ride each day as a means to exercise. Along with this, Fanny’s growing friendship with Mary Crawford allowed her to go on walks with Mary on several different occasions, which added to Fanny’s physical strength. It is through the development of her mental and physical capabilities that Fanny begins her transition from a meek and timid woman who knows her place in society to an assertive and courageous woman who, on several different

instances, chooses to stand up for her convictions, even if that meant speaking out against a man or being disobedient to authority.

A pointed instance when Fanny does have to make the choice to defy an authority figure or stand firm in her morals is when each of the members of the Bertram household are taking part in the play, *Lovers' Vows*. Fanny opposes the play taking place because she believes it to be immoral and wrong. At the time, her Uncle Bertram was in Antigua, and she firmly believed that if he were home at the time of the rehearsal of the play, he would not approve. Her cousin, Tom Bertram, was put in charge over the household while his father was away, and he is the one who desired to hold the play and have his family and friends be the cast. Tom tries to give Fanny a role, but Fanny, with her newfound and growing independence and virtue, tells her cousin that she will not partake in the play. Even after being urged by Mrs. Norris, an authority figure, to act in the play, Fanny holds her ground and stays true to her convictions (*Mansfield Park* 166-168). Finally, Fanny shows how truly strong her convictions are when Edmund, her only true comrade in her home, asks her for her approval of his acting in the play, when he originally had opposed the play like Fanny. Despite her respect of and fondness for Edmund, Fanny refuses to give her approval because of her firm belief that the play was in itself wrong and against her values (*Mansfield Park* 174).

This situation is an example of how, because of the development of Fanny's education and her physical health, her ability to use morality and virtue in her decisions allowed her to remain certain of her convictions despite pressure from authority. This is the premise of Wollstonecraft's argument of developing virtues and why Austen created Fanny to be the heroine that she is. Fanny's development in character and courage as the

novel progressed represented how Austen's readers, too, could change from being a woman who was dutiful and obedient into a woman who had her own thoughts and convictions and acted in light of those rather than acting as she was expected to act. Austen created Fanny as a character who her readers could relate to, in a manner that they may not have been able to relate to her stronger, more assertive characters, like Elizabeth Bennett or Catherine Morland. Fanny is more conservative than Austen's other heroines, which is why this novel received the most criticism. However, Austen chose to create Fanny in this way to show her readers that, like Fanny, they had the ability to develop their mind, their body and their virtues to become a woman who could stand strong in their beliefs, not wavering even when pressure arises.

At the conclusion of the novel, Sir Thomas Bertram, Fanny's uncle and authority figure, cannot see past "the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters" (*Mansfield Park* 463). Sir Thomas does not mean in terms of formal education but in moral education and elements of disposition and character. In the beginning of the novel, Austen illustrates the Bertram daughters lack of ambition to learn and how what they do learn is seemingly useless and unimportant information (*Mansfield Park* 18-19). Sir Thomas feels as though they were taught, solely by their governess, information that was not beneficial or transferrable to their daily lives or to their own character. "He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which alone can suffice" (*Mansfield Park* 463). Because this sentiment came about towards the end of the novel, after Fanny sticks up for her convictions against what Sir Thomas says, it could be said that Sir Thomas comes to this conclusion about his own daughters'

education because he sees that Fanny had the same formal education as them, if not less, yet seems to have more moral education, meaning she is firm in her beliefs and convictions to the point that she is not afraid to stand strong in the face of authority. In this assertion, Austen is hinting at the missing elements in women's education of her day, with the greatest missing component as the lack of moral education of women.

Another heroine of Austen's who develops as a woman in her early life is Anne Elliot, the heroine in *Persuasion*. Unlike with Fanny, readers do not get to see the development of Anne; however, Austen does tell her readers about Anne's past and her decisions in the first few chapters of the novel. When Anne was 19 years of age, Captain Wentworth proposed to Anne and was rejected after Anne was persuaded by her friend and maternal figure, Lady Russell, to not marry him. Wentworth tries to convince Anne to marry him against Lady Russell's wishes, yet he fails. Throughout the novel, which is set eight years following that event, Wentworth continuously refers to how much he values women, like Louisa Musgrove, who have "a strong mind" (*Persuasion* 62). In his reference to this attribute in Anne's presence, he is explicitly referring to Anne's lack of firmness in her decision to reject his proposal simply because she was following the advice of Lady Russell.

However, what Wentworth fails to realize is that in his many years away from Anne, she has developed her mind and her ability to think and stand up for herself. When Louisa Musgrove has an accidental fall while they are all on a walk, Anne's decisiveness in response shows that Anne has been developing as a thoughtful, independent and assertive woman. In their years apart, rather than developing herself and her abilities to gain the attention of a man, Anne has been developing for her own sake. Wentworth



spends most of the novel angry and frustrated, still holding on to his grudge against Anne for being persuaded into not marrying him. However, as the novel progresses, he begins to realize that Anne was acting in a manner that she thought was best at the time. He begins to see Anne's virtue and her character, and those are the qualities that begin to soften his heart towards her, eventually leading their love to be rekindled and his respect for her to grow.

In Sarah Emsely's book titled *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, she highlights Anne as being Austen's most virtuous heroine, with Austen saying in her own letters that "she is almost too good for me" (Emsely, 145). Anne's character, Emsely says, is what sets her apart as an Austen heroine. With a situation like hers, where she lost her love and, seemingly, her only chance at happiness, rather than developing a hardness and bitterness towards life, her attitude remains hopeful, which justifies her virtuousness. Austen describes Anne as having "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding..." (*Persuasion* 5). Despite her loss in life and her family's mistreatment, Anne continues to grow in her character.

In creating Anne in this way, Austen is painting a picture of a woman who actively chooses to develop her virtue for the sake of virtue. Like Wollstonecraft underlined, women are able to and should develop as humans, just like men; virtue and character were the most important elements that a person can grow in, in and of itself. When Anne refuses the proposal from Wentworth, she does not expect that in the future, there would be another possibility for them to wed. However, Austen shows Anne's independence and kindness for their own sake, challenging her readers to see that the

development of character is supreme. Developing abilities should not be only for the end goal of obtaining a husband and, in turn, future stability. Rather, like Anne, the development of character traits like kindness, hope and love for others is more important than developing skills merely to gain the attention of a suitor. The idea of firmness is also challenged because, though firmness of mind and conviction is valued by Wollstonecraft, the development of virtue means that flexibility may also be a part of that. Firmness cannot be exchanged with stubbornness because stubbornness is not a virtue, as exemplified by Louis Musgrove's stubbornness that caused her accident (Emsely, 157). Therefore, the character of Anne is Austen's way of providing for her readers a protagonist who is not necessarily outspoken or bold, but nonetheless a woman of extreme virtue and independence. In Anne Elliot, Austen shows her readers a woman of character, underscoring Wollstonecraft's ideals of virtue and morality for women in society.

Though in a theme of virtue and morality for women regardless of their situation in life is evident in each of her works, in Austen's English society the expectation of women to secure a stable future with a husband remained her chief end, whether a woman possessed a "proper" education or not. For women who did not marry, their options for future stability were few. A negative stigma was heavily attached to women who earned a wage through labor; this was deemed as "indelicate" and masculine during a time that delicacy and femininity were supreme traits to be found in a sophisticated woman (Halsey 432-35). Typically, women who came from a family with low fortune who struggled to find a suitor because of their economic situation were the women who sought work. Unmarried women had the option of becoming a governess, but this

position was viewed as shameful for women who came from the middle or upper class, like the women in Austen's novels. Another option was for a woman to direct and teach at girls' private schools, but, because of the lack of education available for the majority of women, many did not have the qualifications necessary to hold this position. There were rare cases of women who worked in their husbands' businesses, bookstores or dressmaking stores or as a midwife, but even those jobs were more likely to be held by men. (Sword 77).

Women who did face the fate of never getting married earned the title of "spinster." Spinsterhood meant that a woman would be left out of many aspects of society and lose much esteem and standing in the eyes of the public. Though single women did legally have the right to own property, oftentimes they would encounter much prejudice from society if they chose to exercise their legal privileges in this manner (Neubauer 126). This prejudice existed because if a woman did not get married and, in turn, manage the household of her husband and oversee the private home life, she was seen as not fulfilling her expectation and duty as a woman. The one opportunity that single women did have was their ability to make and spend money in the ways they wanted to use it. Austen, being a spinster herself, was able to write and publish her own works as a single woman; likewise, because her time was not taken up by duties that a married woman had, she had the availability and opportunity to pursue her writing, giving her some independence over married women. However, that being said, the majority of women still longed to marry to gain the security that spinsters did not have (Neubauer 126-27).

Austen's depiction of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is a prime example of how spinsters in her day were treated and what their time consisted of on a daily basis. At the very start of the novel, Austen describes Anne as a woman whose "bloom had vanished early" and who had become "faded and thin" (*Persuasion* 5). Her family, in turn, treats her poorly because of how her appearance has changed as she has gotten older. Had Anne been married by this point, those aspects of her physical appearance may not have been as significant to her family, but, instead, they have such importance that it changes the way that they see Anne. Anne was 27 years old, so her possibility of getting married was decreasing day by day in her family's perspective. As a spinster, she was given the task of taking care of family members' children when they go out or when the child is sick, managing the household in place of the woman of the house at times, and conducting any other duties that family members' home she is residing in need her to do (Neubauer 130).

Throughout the novel, the manner in which Anne's family treats her shows that she is already seen as a spinster in their eyes. They are not overtly harsh towards her, but her words and requests usually fell on deaf ears. Neubauer describes her familial situation as Anne living a "life of unappreciated usefulness, forever at the beck and call of her disdainful family" (Neubauer 131). Despite the negative aspects and treatment that Anne faces in her situation of being unmarried within her family, she gains abilities that she would not have had, like her firmness of mind and maturity in decision-making, as exemplified in the accident with Louisa Musgrave. Anne has also gained the ability to discern the character of others because, throughout all of her time as a single woman, she has been growing in her own character and observing the motivations of others and their integrity as well. This is clearly shown in her meeting of William Elliot. At first, Anne is

fairly curious about him as a person and intrigued by his interest in her; however, as she gets to know him, she grows suspicious of his nature and decides to let go of any ideas of a future with him (*Persuasion* 106).

Austen gives Anne this ability to read others so well as a demonstration of the positive attributes that Anne has gained as a result of her singleness. While spinsterhood was seen as a negative end for women during Austen's day, Austen creates Anne as a heroine who, despite a lackluster home life, is wise and discerning, showing her readers that marriage does not have to be the only goal in their lives. Anne may end up getting married at the end of the novel, but throughout the entirety of the first half of the novel, she has accepted her fate as likely never getting married and, instead, has chosen to make the most of where her lot has taken her. Austen, as a single woman authoring this novel, is a reliable testament to this fate as well, having never married. This also underscores her credibility in creating Anne as a spinster at the start of the novel because she can create a heroine who is living in a similar situation as herself. Austen's depiction of a spinster-like character in Anne allows her readers to see that spinsterhood may not be as negative a lifestyle as society has deemed it to be. However, even to Austen, marriage is still seen as the more favorable option – marriage between two people who mutually love and respect one another, that is.

### Marriage: Only the Deepest Love

Prior to Austen's day, marriage had been primarily seen as economic and social agreements between families made by the parents of the pair to be wed, and the

preference of either member of the pair was not taken into account, especially the woman. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, radical changes had begun to take place as Austen's England came into being. Sword describes this change and this newfound basis for love in her essay:

Marriage was coming to be regarded as a lifetime, intimate, happy companionship based upon love, esteem, and compatibility, and both woman and man were to have voice in choosing the spouse. As positive as this new attitude seems, however, the woman was still subordinate to her husband legally and economically, and now as Rogers emphasizes, the woman was further bound to her husband by love as well. (Sword 80)

The desire for love and companionship to be a part of a marriage relationship was coming into being during Austen's time, but it still did not constitute the primary component of a marriage. Amanda Vickery addresses this comradery within marriage in *The Gentleman's Daughter*, where she describes the idea of marriage being a companionship between two people who have affection and respect for one another (Vickery 41). Vickery also asserts that this companionship, during the early nineteenth century, did not mean that the marriage had to necessarily have equality between the two people. Rather, couples merely presumed that the husband would be the master, and, when this was the case, marriages were the strongest. With this mastery, however, Vickery underscored that the belief was that the husband would not have an aura of dominance or dictatorship; his temper would be kind and respectful, maintaining that ambiance for his family and his household (Vickery 86).

Though the construct of marriage had begun to change at the turn of the nineteenth century, Austen displayed many different examples of both positive and negative relationships between husbands and wives. Each of Austen's novels are centered around a courtship plot, where her primary female protagonist is facing a conflict of who to marry or what expectation to follow for her future marriage, and at the end of each novel, that protagonist makes a choice in regard to her matrimony. Her readers do not see the outcome of these marriages between her protagonists, but Austen provides insight to these differing marriage relationships.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* are an example of what many marriage relationships looked like prior to Austen's day. It is evident that, throughout the novel, Elizabeth is keenly aware of the problems within her parents' marriage. Mr. Bennet continuously pokes fun at his wife, making it very clear that he does not have high respect for her. Likewise, Mrs. Bennet is constantly seeking companions for her daughters and is not particularly concerned with what her daughters' feelings are towards the men she tries to pair them with (*Pride and Prejudice* 5-7). Their relationship is not presented as one where love and respect exist and flourish. This may explain why, as Elizabeth is looking for a man with whom to spend her life, she is not as concerned with the economic status of the man as she is with whether she respects, regards and is challenged by him. This meant that Elizabeth was willing to go against her mother's wishes in refusing the proposal by Mr. Collins, holding out hope that she would find a man worthy of her respect. To Elizabeth, rather than following the norms presented to her by her society and family, it was more important to find a man of her choosing, whom she loved and regarded.

In *Mansfield Park*, the marriage relationship between the Bertrams is not one of fondness or respect. Lady Bertram, who gained her title through her marriage with Sir Thomas, is depicted as a somewhat lazy, careless and uninterested maternal figure. Austen goes so far as to say that she cares more for her dog than for her own children (*Mansfield Park* 277). Even when her husband announces that he will be leaving for Antigua for a period of time, though she is displeased, she does not show much emotion towards him or the situation. Oftentimes, Lady Bertram chooses to stay at home, causing Fanny, too, to stay home to keep her company, instead of going out with her family. As for Sir Thomas, he is a seemingly adequate and, at times, loving father who wants the best for his children and Fanny; however, he is also very stern and unapproachable, seen in his daughters' feelings that they cannot be honest with their own father. There is not much evidence for much regard for his wife. Rarely do they spend time together throughout the novel and for a large portion of the novel, he is away on business, showing that his primary interest, above his wife, is likely his work (*Mansfield Park* 35).

While Fanny lived with Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, she later visits her mother and father, and the marriage example they set for her even worse than the relationship of her aunt and uncle. Fanny's mother, like her sister Lady Bertram, has a similar disposition and attitude. Austen says that, "a situation of similar affluence and do-nothing-ness would have been much more suited to her capacity than the exertions and self-denials of the one which her imprudent marriage had placed her in" (*Mansfield Park* 395). In the Prices, Austen also gives an example of what a marriage looks like when it is based solely upon physical attraction or a desire to thumb one's nose at one's family (*Mansfield Park* 4). The imprudence of the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Price is



repeated throughout Fanny's visit, underlining the idea that Mrs. Price's marriage to Mr. Price was unfit and caused her life to be much more difficult than it should have been. Mrs. Price, by necessity, cares for her children but clearly favors certain children over others. Mr. Price, on the other hand, is a rude drunk who hardly notices when Fanny returns home after being away for years, making Sir Thomas seem like the better father figure to Fanny of the two options.

Austen does not include what occurs after the courtship and beginning stages of the marriages of her protagonists, but, as exemplified in the marriages of the Bennets and the Bertrams, she does display what can occur if two people get married solely for economic or social gain and future stability. Though Austen does not hold that a good marriage overlooks elements like socioeconomic status, she does hold those elements should not be held above happiness and affection. For both marriages, Austen makes it undeniably clear that both parties in the relationship do not have high, if any at all, regard for one another, and neither Mr. Bennet or Sir Thomas have respect for their wives or their role in their household. These marriages are key portions in these two novels because Austen is showing how negative marriage relationships can be if mutual respect and love is lacking. In this, Austen is providing these marriages as a cautionary tale to her protagonists and to her readers. In her novels themselves, the Bennets are an example to Elizabeth of what she does not want her future relationship to consist of, which is the reason behind why she declines the proposal from Mr. Collins and chooses to wait for a man whom she can honor and love. Because Austen demonstrates the mutual respect and love that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth have for one another, Austen offers her readers the

hope that, due to their feelings, their future marriage will not look the same as her parents' marriage.

As for Fanny Price, Austen provides her with two strong examples of what an ideal marriage does not look like, allowing Fanny to see the importance of loving the person that you marry. From the start of the novel to the end, Fanny has deep regard for Edmund, and, though it takes him the majority of the novel to realize his feelings, he eventually comes to see Fanny as more than just a younger sibling to take care of; he sees her character and virtue, and those traits are what draw him to her and make their relationship end in marriage. As with the marriage between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, Austen gives her readers the optimism that Fanny and Edmund's relationship is founded on care and respect for each other, along with the poor examples given to both Fanny and Edmund to learn from, so their marriage can have a much more positive end than the other marriages provided in these novels.

Despite the prevalent undesirable marriages found in Austen's novels, there is one marriage that is depicted by Austen as a respectable companionship between two people who deeply care for one another. In *Persuasion*, Austen exemplifies a marriage relationship unlike any of the other marriages: the Crofts. The Admiral and Mrs. Croft are within the social circle of the Elliots, and Anne develops an admiration for Mrs. Croft. The Admiral commands a ship, and, rather than leaving his wife at home to manage the household, he tells Anne and others that he has brought her along with him for several of his voyages (*Persuasion* 49-50). Similarly, it was custom for the wives and other women to sit in the back of the carriage while traveling; however, rather than following these

social norms, Mrs. Croft sits next to her husband at the front of their carriage, even taking the reins to help guide him from time to time (*Persuasion* 90).

The marriage between the Crofts is one of companionship and the closest to a portrayal of equality that Austen provides in relation to the importance of the different roles in a marriage of husband and wife. Anne, herself, calls the relationship “a most attractive picture of happiness” (*Persuasion* 119), which was evidenced by those around the couple. However, the key component to their happiness within their marriage is the way gender roles within the Crofts’ marriage differed from society’s expectations. Rather than having the husband as the culturally dominant one within the marriage, both husband and wife have a role, and within each of their roles, no superiority exists. Unlike the negative examples that other protagonists of Austen are given to see, Anne is provided with an example of a marriage that is built on respect and a countering of the culture they live in by the companionship that persists in their marriage. Because Anne is unmarried as she witnesses the interaction between the Crofts, she is learning from them what she would want her future marriage to look like.

In her life before her eventual marriage with Captain Wentworth, Anne has been building her independence and her capacity to function, speak and succeed on her own. With the example of Mrs. Croft, Anne attains the ability to encounter a woman who has remained independent and unconventional even after getting married. Mrs. Croft has a “weather-beaten complexion” and “seems to have lived some years longer in the world than her real eight-and-thirty” (*Persuasion* 34-35). In the standards of society, her physical appearance would have been unattractive; however, Anne’s noting of this attribute of Mrs. Croft’s is evidence that she admires Mrs. Croft’s life experiences,

intellect and independence over her physical appearance. Even more deeply, Anne admires her subversion of the standards set by society for women to be dainty and fair and to remain within the household. Notably, Mrs. Croft also references Wollstonecraft's ideas when she compares "fine ladies" with "rational creatures," taking Wollstonecraft's own words (*Persuasion* 50). This implies that, like Wollstonecraft, Mrs. Croft believes that men and women should have equality in society, along with the idea that women are not treated as the intelligent and strong individuals that they are. Her attitude and beliefs are reflected in her marriage, and, with Anne admiring Mrs. Croft in the manner that she does, Anne likely holds similar beliefs in regard for greater equality for women in their world (Mullally 1-3).

In creating this marriage built on respect, love and equality in the Crofts, Austen gives her protagonist a model to follow. In reflecting Wollstonecraft's ideas of equality between men and women, Austen is, likewise, calling her readers to seek marriages that are built on these same qualities. Austen represents the Crofts' marriage as one that differs from their society's convention of marriage, especially in comparison with the other marriages found in *Persuasion*, but that is the point of emphasis. Their choice to be countercultural with their gender roles in their marriage is what sets them apart, but it is also what gives their marriage the success and happiness that it has. Austen offers this suitable model for marriage for her readers to witness and, like Anne, desire to model their future marriages upon, inferring that when a marriage's foundations are equality and respect, it is successful and happy.

### Conclusion: No Enjoyment Like Reading

With these many expectations that Austen reflects and challenges, Austen is demonstrating the power that she believes novels can have on her society. She emphasizes that even authors of fiction can use their characters to disrupt and question the norms for the social circle in which they live. This idea is reflected in *Northanger Abbey*, when Austen addresses the importance and value that novel reading has on people, including women.

“Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. “It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda’; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.” (*Northanger Abbey* 21)

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, novel reading was perceived as a means of self-indulgence for women; women only read to entertain themselves, and the activity of reading was merely seen as a form of relaxation (Vogrincic 104). Some, including Reverend Fordyce, went as far to say that novel reading had dangerous adverse psychological effects on the readers, causing them to have unrealistic thoughts that would give them the wrong view of life, especially the wrong view of love. Others said that novel reading, though not as extreme as causing negative psychological effects, was harmful because the books were simply a “waste of time, damaging not only the mind and the morale of readers, but also their eyesight and posture” (Vigrincic 109).

With her bold stance in favor of novel reading in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen counters those who did claim novel reading to be a damaging practice for ladies with ideas that novel reading was beneficial to women, while novels were also beautiful works of literature. One contemporary critic asserted that Austen “glorifies what a novel should be: the unrestrained expression of words conveying the wide range of raw human emotion” (McCormick 2). Rather than being a work that simply provided women a source of pleasure and entertainment, Austen positions herself against the perception that novels were corrupting for women; rather, they were a resource for women to grow their minds, to develop emotion and to relate to others.

This idea of novels being a method for humans to develop emotion has been seen in recent studies on novel reading. According to a study by David Comer Kidd, a PhD candidate and Emanuele Castano, a social psychologist, reading literary fiction increases a person’s capacity for empathy. The two researchers divided a collection of people into four separate groups with each group getting an assignment. Three groups were assigned to read a type of book, either popular fiction, nonfiction or literary fiction, while one group was assigned to not read anything at all. Following this assignment, the groups were tested on the measurement of their capability of interpreting the feelings of another person. Those that read nonfiction or did not read at all did not have significant results. The same occurred with the group that read popular fiction. It was the group that read literary fiction whose results improved greatly after reading their assignment, meaning that their volume for empathy increased following the completion of their literary fiction (Chiat 2-3).

Kidd and Castono believed the reasoning for this to be the situations that occur within the differing genres of fiction; in popular fiction, the circumstances described typically have the goal of providing readers with a wide range of feeling and experiences while they are reading, tending to “affirm the reader’s expectations of others” (Chiat 3). Within literary fiction, however, readers are not given all the thoughts of the characters, so they have to make suggestions on what is going to occur next, frequently causing readers to be unsure of the motives of characters. The expectations of the reader are constantly being changed, which “support and teach us values about social behavior, such as the importance of understanding those who are different from ourselves” (Chiat 4). This element is what is found in Austen’s novels. They contain elements of the reader’s inability to know what will happen next, surprise at the changing values of the protagonists and a capability of them to relate to the characters, allowing them to see that if they, too, made the choices and had the attitudes of the protagonists, their fates could be one in the same.

Here-in lies Austen’s belief about the value of novels. Because she believed them to be important to society and of value to women, Austen wrote in such a way that would do more than entertain her readers. She wrote novels that would impact them, challenge them and force them to see the growth that their society did need, making them question how that growth would take place. Austen did not choose to write outlandish or otherworldly stories; Austen saw the potential impact of a story containing a female protagonist who dared to go against the society in which she lived. Whether she knew the impact that her stories would still have in today’s society, one will never know. However,

what she did know was that her novels would be a call to action for her readers. Her novels played a key role in the world then and even the world we live in now.

In each of the three aspects of expectation and duty, in the family, in education or in marriage, Austen provides her readers with female characters who are faced with expectations for a “lady.” Though she may have not been a radical, Austen saw that women were so much more than the conventional roles that they were placed in. They were more than “accomplished.” They were even more than “rational creatures.” She saw their capability of becoming intelligent, of becoming powerful, of becoming equal. The true impact of her novels cannot be measured. However, what I can measure is how her novels affected me personally and how it is evidenced in her novels that she was reflecting how society did place women in a box of what their expectations and duties were. Through that, she also challenged those expectations, attempting to tell her readers that they were more than those standards. With Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Austen represents women as independent, strong, intellectual, wise and bold – and as more than just a lady.



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