Feminist Thought in Literary Works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen

Juretić, Karolina

Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

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Karolina Jurečić, 0122229956

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Abstract

Society's treatment of men and of women was, and still is, vastly different. Feminism, as a social and political movement guided by the female experience, fights for women's rights in order to make that difference non-existent. In the cornerstone of feminism titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft describes women's position in the society of her time by exposing an array of inaccurate beliefs regarding women's nature and their capabilities, simultaneously resulting in a poor treatment of women, cementing their subordinate position. Throughout this book, Wollstonecraft urges for an education reform as that would bring a necessary change in understanding women (and in women's understanding), and it would help girls recognize what they are capable of from an early age. A couple of decades later, Jane Austen became a published novelist, writing about the female experience in a society which puts men on the pedestal. That experience is tackled with a multitude of factors in mind, from the notions of beauty which flooded the public to the idea of what an accomplished woman must achieve in order to deserve such a title. The aim of this paper is to analyse Austen's novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* with regard to the ideas expressed in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Although never confirmed, it is believed that Austen was familiar with Wollstonecraft's work.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*

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Introduction

Although considered a derogatory term by some, *feminism* refers to an equalizing social and political movement whose supporters fight for women's rights without putting them on a pedestal; they merely want women to enjoy the same rights and privileges given to men. Literature has given many examples of what women had to go through in societies based on patriarchal principles, and one of those literary works is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) written by Mary Wollstonecraft. In this literary work, Wollstonecraft mentions different aspects regarding women's position in a society, from their superficial interests which are the result of a poor education to the belief that women are incapable of rational thought. Decades later, Jane Austen, another female author who is viewed as a representative of the feminist movement, became a published novelist, writing about the female experience in the male-dominated society. The aim of this paper is to read Austen with regard to Wollstonecraft's ideas.

In Austen's debut novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), the main story focuses on two sisters – Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. While Elinor represents sense, Marianne represents sensibility. These two terms can be closely connected to the ideas mentioned in *A Vindication* regarding reason and virtue. Wollstonecraft believes that women, in order to become virtuous, need to develop their reason by being educated. However, female education at the time focused on the most insignificant topics, as its main goal was to create the perfect wives out of the pupils. Clothing women with artificial graces instead of helping them expand their mind resulted in women who cherish emotions over respect. In addition, some other topics mentioned in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, such as criticism of the current practice of marriage, have deeply infiltrated *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel in which the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet represents the reason, which Wollstonecraft values immensely.

The opening chapter of this Master's thesis represents a brief overview of feminism until the appearance of Mary Wollstonecraft's works. It is followed by the second chapter which first deals with Wollstonecraft's life and literary work, and later focuses on the origins of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The third chapter provides an analysis of *A Vindication*, with each section focusing on different parts of the book. Furthermore, the fourth chapter is dedicated to Jane Austen, with additional sections focusing on her first two published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). What follows is an analysis of those two novels with regard to the ideas mentioned in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The final chapters provide the conclusion and a list of all the sources used to write the paper.

1. Feminism

"Feminism is a contemporary social and political movement, motivated by individual and collective experiences of women, which is based on the claim that a society is based on patriarchal principles, according to which men are privileged over women, which results in discrimination against women in public and private life" (Vukoičić 33). Accordingly, when one hears the word feminism, they might think that the supporters of such movement favour women over men, and they might think that feminists even hate men: "Surveys have found that, although many women claim to hold and endorse feminist beliefs, they are, simultaneously, hesitant to describe themselves as feminists precisely because of the stereotype that feminists are anti-male" (Anderson et al. 216). In her book *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Margaret Walters refers to the American feminist Estelle Freedman who argues that the word "feminist" has carried negative connotations from its origins (3). On top of that, Walters mentions Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, who argue that being called a feminist equals to being a disliked or a despised woman, "much as 'man-hater' or 'castrating bitch', 'harridan' or 'witch', were used before the 1960s" (3). In reality, the meaning of this term is not connected to hate of any kind, but to fighting for women's rights, with the aim of social equality.

Going back to the roots of feminism, one might find their origins within a religious framework because religion was not a taboo topic for women; it was the secular feminism which took longer to develop, as it was "one thing to act in 'unfeminine' ways if divinely inspired, not quite so easy to act unconventionally out of personal ambition" (Walters 17). As Walters explains, these unfeminine activities, such as writing or speaking in public, were accepted only when they were "in the Lord's cause" and, as such, were accepted as a "product of divine inspiration" (17). However, many early secular writers met with great difficulties, such as Lady Mary Wroth whose so-called "temerity to *publish* a prose romance . . . was greeted with hostility" and condescending comments advising her to leave writing alone (Walters 19-20). Not even Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, as Walters explains, was protected from spiteful gossip, even though one might have expected her rank to protect her. Cavendish urged women to spend time doing anything that brings honour to the female sex.[1] She was also aware of the fact that her sex will censure her just as badly as men because constraining women's talents resulted in their jealous criticism of each other's achievements (Walters 20-23).

[1] Despite our awareness of the contemporary distinction between sex and gender, the term "female sex" is occasionally used in this thesis in its historical sense to denote "women," or "sex" to denote "gender" because the authors discussed in the thesis use the terms in that particular meaning in their works.

Among female voices, Mary Astell is considered to be one of the earliest true feminists, perhaps "the first English writer to explore and assert ideas about women which we can still recognize and respond to" (Walters 26), as she identified with other women and acknowledged their shared problems. As Walter highlights, although deeply religious and profoundly conservative, Astell was quite radical in her viewing of women's lives as restricted by convention and their minds as undeveloped and untrained. At the age of twenty-one, she wrote a poem proclaiming her frustration with the idea of what life has in store for her as she believed that she will not live a life in which her talents are used or ambition satisfied. At one point, unable to get a livelihood, she wrote to William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, asking for help. In her letter, Astell shares her belief that women are just as intelligent as men, so they should not be forbidden to improve their intelligence in adequate ways. Archbishop Sancroft responded both with money and contacts, which resulted in Astell's familiarization with a circle of intelligent, progressive women (Walters 26-27). Soon after, Astell had written and published her first book in which she urges women to "take themselves seriously: they must learn to think for themselves, work to develop their own minds and skills, rather than always deferring to masculine judgement" (Walters 27). On top of that, she believed that women should be properly educated, "taught to think for themselves, to judge clearly and sensibly, rather than waste all their time in acquiring graceful social skills and accomplishments" (27-28). Most importantly, Astell believed colleges would provide the possibility of women's independence from men (29), which became a central notion of feminism.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, other women started speaking out and proposing just as powerful feminist programmes. Although it is crucial to mention that women had a hard time during the eighteenth century in many ways (for example, living independently or finding a husband without a dowry were daunting tasks), more and more women were getting educated, if nothing else, at least they learned to read and write, which consequently resulted in a higher number of women also writing and publishing (Walters 29-30). These were the so-called "Amazons of the pen," as Dr Samuel Johnson referred to them (Walters 30), one of the greatest being Mary Wollstonecraft, alongside Catherine Macaulay. Both were radicals who argued that women's apparent weaknesses were a product of their miseducation and not a natural occurrence. Even in private schools for middle-class girls, which flourished in the later part of the eighteenth century, the focus was on preparing the pupils for finding a good marriage; more precisely, they were taught how to be graceful and well-mannered. Accordingly, Wollstonecraft said that women were, in fact, inferior in her time, because they were oppressed, uneducated, and

insulated from the real world, and these factors inevitably made them ignorant and lazy. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft talks about the ways in which women are kept in their place, one of these tactics being masculine gallantry and flattery, on top of which is the belief that the most feminine woman is what men truly want (Walters 30-33). Indeed, Wollstonecraft's eloquent exposure of gender inequality, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* represents the beginning of modern feminism.

2. Mary Wollstonecraft

As recounted by Walters, born in 1759 in a "would-be middle-class family," Mary Wollstonecraft's childhood is a prime example of "how little education was available to girls in that period" (31). Girls were mostly taught at home, "either by their mothers, or by poorly trained governesses" (31). In private schools, as already mentioned, the goal was to teach young girls how to find a partner later on in life because marriage was believed to be women's primary goal. As Walter further explains, although Wollstonecraft briefly attended a day school in Yorkshire, she was essentially self-educated. Her desire for an education is clearly evident in the fact that she studied books rigorously (books lent from a neighbouring clergyman), and only those books which are addressed to the understanding (that is, the intellect), simultaneously forbidding herself poetry and books meant for mere amusement. Weak education did not provide her with many options to earn a living. After nursing her dying mother and taking in needlework to scrape by, she set up a school with her sister and her closest friend Fanny Blood. Not surprisingly, the school failed due to their lack of experience and training. Soon, Fanny married and moved to Portugal, but not long after died in childbirth. Wollstonecraft visited her during that time and was heartbroken by the event. Afterwards, she worked as a governess for an aristocratic family she despised, and nursed her sister who had broken down after childbirth (31-32). The childbirth deaths and depression of women she loved seem to have foreshadowed her own destiny.

Excruciatingly dejected, she was finally rescued by Joseph Johnson who offered her to work on his *Analytical Review* as a reviewer and translator. Through Johnson, she met other radical intellectuals. This gave her the confidence to write, and it was Johnson who published her first book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). It was soon followed by *Mary, A Fiction*, a book which is based on Wollstonecraft's own childhood and her difficult relationship with her parents. In addition, this book represents an attempt to explore the way in which women grow

up, as it also highlights how unresolved feelings from childhood often affect adult relationships. Wollstonecraft's engagement with politics begins around 1790 as *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was published, and in 1792 her well-known feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* followed (Walters 32-33).

With regard to Mary Wollstonecraft's love life, Walters recounts that, during her visit to Paris in 1793, Wollstonecraft fell in love with the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a daughter Fanny. However, he soon moved in with another woman. Despairing, she attempted suicide by drowning in the Thames, but survived and eventually married William Godwin with whom she briefly found contentment before she died while giving birth to her second child, Mary, in 1797. Mary grew up to marry the poet Percy Shelley and write the remarkable novel *Frankenstein* (Walters 38-40).

All things considered, Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the first English women to write "eloquently, and at times angrily, about the rights of women – and the wrongs they often experience. Her writings have never really gone out of fashion, and a great many modern women have responded eagerly, and gratefully, to her work" (Walters 37). After her death, Wollstonecraft left behind two *Vindications* – on the rights of men (1790) and women (1792), a semi-autobiographical novel *Mary*, three educational books, some translations, a large number of book reviews in the *Analytical Review*, a book on the French Revolution (written during her stay in France between 1792 and 1795), a published volume of letters from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, and some unpublished work, including the unfinished novel *Maria* (Bergès 1).

2.1. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

The main argument of Wollstonecraft's seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the need for an education reform. Namely, as Walters reiterates, in order for a real change to happen, which will lead to a society in which women will no longer feel the need to exploit their looks and charm, both men and women need to be educated in a great degree (Walters 35). The topic of education is especially important for the first wave feminists, as it plays the pivotal role in women's access to economic independence, power, and self-respect ("Education" 191). As Bergès explains, it is precisely because the public perceived *A Vindication* as a work on the reform of women's education, and not as a political treatise on gender equality, that they welcomed it with courtesy. Many books on that topic were already being published as it was

accepted that women's education needed reforming. Wollstonecraft's suggestions were considered sensible, and even the conservative crowd agreed that women should be healthy as well as that they should not be entirely occupied by frivolous activities (12). Bergès further clarifies that, fortunately, at least some readers were able to perceive that the feminist objectives of *A Vindication* are not aimed at just the educational reform, such as Mary Hays and Mary Robinson, who both proceeded to defend women's rights in their writings (12-13).

Interestingly, despite its great importance and major influence that remains relevant even today,[2] *A Vindication* did not manage to keep its glory in the period immediately after the posthumous publication of Wollstonecraft's husband's memoirs. Namely, the memoirs directed the readers' focus away from the content of her work to Wollstonecraft's life, and caused the general public to lose all respect for her (Bergès 13) because her life seemed like a "romantic drama" (Bergès 15). However, because of their logic and truth, even with the lack of a wide reading audience, Wollstonecraft's arguments in defence of women's rights could not be ignored. They can already be found repeated in the works of Victorian writers, such as Harriet Taylor's "The Enfranchisement of Women" (1851) and J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), even though they do not refer to Wollstonecraft by name. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments were considered again with philosophical interest by women who struggled in their careers as writers. The Suffragettes in particular perceived Wollstonecraft as the mother of feminism. Specifically, Virginia Woolf and Emma Goldman tried their best to bring Wollstonecraft back into the public eye in order for others to perceive her as the mother of feminism as well (Bergès 15). Walters confirms this: "Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* may seem, at first glance, dated. But she is an effective writer; her prose is down-to-earth, lively, and often tart. The book is still highly readable, and it remains one of the foundation stones of contemporary feminism" (Walters 35).

Sanders points out that *A Vindication* is not a programme of practical reform. It is a book which calls for a revolution in manners. Wollstonecraft was aware of the fact that most middle-class women will marry and remain at home; however, it was crucial for them to get educated in order to prepare for the possibility of economic independence, which essentially means getting their freedom and dignity whilst removing the need to fascinate a potential husband. Ultimately, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that virtue is superior to elegance and that women should strive to build a character (16). Furthermore, the audience finds out, in the preface, that Wollstonecraft

[2] Even twenty-first century feminists, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, repeat the same arguments that Mary Wollstonecraft espoused in 1792 (see Adichie 2014).

dedicates the book to M. Talleyrand-Périgord, an important figure of the French Revolution, which she decided on after reading his pamphlet on post-Revolution educational reform in order to persuade him to reconsider the subject of women's rights and national education. Bergès explains that Talleyrand constructed a system of education from which girls were excluded, that is, they were to receive an education, but only focused on the acquisition of homemakers' skills, separated from the boys' education. Talleyrand followed Rousseau's thinking that women's nature is different from men's, which is why it is necessary to educate them differently and separately (22-23). In her dedication, Wollstonecraft addresses him directly, stating that she wishes to see a woman "placed in a station in which she would advance" (65). Moreover, Wollstonecraft mentions the disparity between the sexes: "even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their [women's] happiness? Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?" (67). Ultimately, Wollstonecraft states that men force women to remain confined in their homes by denying them civil and political rights. In order to achieve balance, society must be established without coercion (67-68).

When it comes to the title itself, it was probably inspired by Wollstonecraft's previous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, which she wrote as a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Wollstonecraft intended to write more on the subject of women's rights, as stated in the Advertisement: "Many subjects . . . which I have cursorily alluded to, call for particular investigation, especially the laws relative to women, and the consideration of their peculiar duties. These will furnish ample matter for a second volume, which in due time will be published, to elucidate some of the sentiments, and complete many of the sketches begun in the first" (69). However, the second volume never got published as Wollstonecraft died five years after the publication of the first volume. Between the two events, as Bergès recounts, she moved to France to write about the Revolution, took a trip to Sweden and Denmark, and gave birth. Some consider her unfinished novel, *Maria; Or the Wrongs of Woman*, to be the sequel in which she critiques women's legal situation, the fact that they have no right over their own person, no property right, and no legal entitlement to bring up their own children (20).

3. The Analysis of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

In order to understand Wollstonecraft's, and later Austen's, sentiments, one must first understand the ideas that circled within the society of that time. Namely, the society's perception of the

notion of women's education was largely negative. As McElligott explains, women with good sense had to temper it as not to appear as smart as men in their circle, and if their education went beyond what the standard was, it was regarded as a shameful secret. It was strongly believed that a woman's priority should be to secure a husband and maintain domestic felicity. Furthermore, it was believed that the God created each sex for specific duties and that men were formed to be more intelligent than women. If a woman displayed competence in areas outside the feminine sphere, she was viewed as someone who was unnatural in the grander scheme of God's plan. Another much-debated topic in the scope of women's education was wit. A witty woman, with her vivacity in speech, quickness in reply, and overall cleverness, was not desirable. Displaying wit and intelligence meant risking future happiness that arises from finding a husband (80-82). These issues become a central concern for Wollstonecraft and the subsequent subchapters will contain a more detailed analysis of her treatise.

3.1. Introduction

Although *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is full of feminist objectives, it was primarily perceived as a work on the reform of women's education. This should not come as a surprise since Wollstonecraft, in the Introduction, immediately identifies education as the most important social issue related to the position of women. She states that she has "turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore" (71). She also states that this false system of education has been moulded by men who do not view women as human beings, but as subordinates, and their main goal is to make women alluring mistresses rather than affectionate wives and rational mothers (71). As a result, there is rarely a woman whose centre of attention is not taken up by love, but rather by a nobler ambition. Women, intoxicated by men's adoration, do not seek to achieve a constant place in their hearts or to become their friends (72). On top of that, Wollstonecraft mentions the opposition to masculine women, namely women who imitate the so-called manly virtues (fundamentally, talents and virtues which ennoble the human character). Although against women joining activities such as hunting, shooting, or gaming, Wollstonecraft fully wishes for women to grow more masculine with regard to said "manly" virtues. In addition, Wollstonecraft mentions that her focus is on the middle class because they seem as the most natural, considering that the rich only live to amuse themselves, whereas their education tends to render them vain and helpless (73). Perhaps the

most important part of the introduction is the following quote in which Wollstonecraft clearly depicts how women are treated and why such treatment is not acceptable as it will have a negative impact on the way they are wrongfully perceived:

> My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists – I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. (73)

Wollstonecraft wants women to reject the treatment received so far, according to which they appear weak and childlike. Allowing such treatment will only result in both women's and men's continuous degradation. Moreover, she urges women to understand virtue's superiority over elegance as it is important for them to obtain a character. Wollstonecraft goes back to the topic of women's education stating that it has been more attended to than before; however, she criticizes the fact that women spend years acquiring (superficial) knowledge in many different areas in order to become accomplished, but strength of body and mind are subsequently sacrificed to the desire of establishing themselves by marriage (73-74). Women's focus on the so-called "accomplishments," such as dressing nicely, conversing pleasantly, or playing instruments, deter from proper education and have no long-term social value: "in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over" (Wollstonecraft 74-75). Overall, Wollstonecraft approaches femininity as an artificial construct which women, in the absence of any alternative, exploit. Women who behave like human beings, meaning rationally and virtuously, are frequently labelled as masculine. Many women found an issue with that because being considered unwomanly by men at the time was purely catastrophic. Wollstonecraft, of course, recommends growing more "masculine," but not before she questions the very term and what it refers to (72). Furthermore, throughout this treatise, Wollstonecraft continuously repeats her stance on the substandard education women receive and how it negatively affects their potential flourishing towards becoming rational individuals who are capable of governing their emotions and obtaining a virtuous character, as the chief purpose of their education is to render women "insignificant objects of desire" (Wollstonecraft 74). The

following subchapters discuss the treatise in its entirety, which will ultimately generate a clearer picture with regard to the societal mistreatment of women, fittingly coming from a woman whose first-hand experience of a poor education brought on many shortcomings in her early adult life.

3.2. Chapters I-III

After establishing the main idea of this treatise, the centre of interest now shifts to the first three chapters of *A Vindication*, in which Wollstonecraft elaborates on the importance of cultivating reason, which is neglected in women: "In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason" (Wollstonecraft 76). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft states that "from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow" (76). It was believed that women, in the acquirement of virtue, aim to achieve a very different character to men. However, the issue lies in the fact that women's insufficient strength of mind would not allow acquirement of any such thing which actually deserves the title of a virtue (Wollstonecraft 84). Accordingly, the virtues in question are those which do not exert the mind, such as patience, docility, and good-humour (Wollstonecraft 128). Wollstonecraft continues the chapter in the same manner, stating that women are taught from infancy how to obtain the protection of a man, especially if they are beautiful, in which case everything else is needless. Men expect docile, blind obedience and gentleness. Moreover, they try to keep women in a state of childhood, which is ultimately a state of weakness if talking about an adult. Education is mentioned again, more precisely an example of a perfect education which is, for Wollstonecraft, the one in which an individual is able to become independent by attaining habits of virtue; however, one cannot be virtuous if not exercising their own reason. This is, in fact, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim referring to men, which Wollstonecraft extends to women. She clearly states her disagreement with the society's treatment of her sex, as it results in artificial pleasant behaviour at the expense of virtues. She urges women to realize that accepting such treatment (showered with compliments, but in reality viewed as irrational subordinates) means degrading themselves, as men would, under the pretence of giving compliments, actually refer to women's apparent shortcomings: "as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, etc.?" (Wollstonecraft 100). Women must resign the power of beauty, and if they refuse to do so, they might not be as reasonable as men after all. In order to end the blind obedience to men, the female mind must be enlarged; however,

men, in want of power, prefer to keep women in the dark. Rousseau declares that a woman should not feel independent, but should act as a coquettish slave in order to become an alluring object of desire and an agreeable companion to a man, educated only to become pleasing. However, Wollstonecraft points out that, if one is presented with something daily, that something loses its specialty, so if a woman pleases her husband at all times, he will not cherish her for too long (84-93). Important questions ensue: "Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort . . . is it not more rational to expect that she will try to please other men. . . ?" (93). The answer to the former is most likely not, as women completely focus on men. Without one they are unfulfilled because the society teaches them to think in such a superficial manner, not because they are actually incapable of reason, virtue, or being independent. However, as their main goal is to find a husband and be pleasant, once their pleasantness is not appreciated, they might look for another source of fulfilment – a different man. Finally, at the end of the second chapter, Wollstonecraft superbly describes what it meant to be a woman during her time:

> they have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial graces . . . their sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breath the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must . . . be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature. (103)

In the third chapter, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that bodily strength gives men a natural superiority over women in that regard. However, she insists that virtue and knowledge of the two sexes should be the same, regardless of their physical strength, and they should be acquired through the same means (106). Women's mind-set during that time is the opposite of what Wollstonecraft preaches, as women "sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men; . . . but virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour" (107). This is where Wollstonecraft mentions education again, stating that parents should not destroy girls' constitution by mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence. The issue is, while boys are allowed to move freely in their childhood, girls are confined in their homes, pushed to play with dolls or listen to idle chats of their mothers and aunts: "men of the greatest abilities have seldom had sufficient strength to rise above the surrounding atmosphere" (109), as even men would have a hard time managing to achieve more than such surroundings allow. Wollstonecraft describes her own observing of the

female sex, expressing that it is those girls who were allowed to run around freely that now act as rational, intellectual adults (110). Being sensible should not be viewed as a weakness immediately; however, during Wollstonecraft's time, women were so focused on artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility that they were unable to endure bodily inconveniencies; they were slaves to their bodies, but they enjoyed it as it showed how weak, sensible, and feminine they were (111). Women's weakness, according to Wollstonecraft, arises from their single interest, namely, attracting a husband, which prevents their personal development: "Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour" (112).

Much of Wollstonecraft's argumentation comes from her reaction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's problematic view of women as he believes women are so childishly immature that no proof of such a viewpoint is needed. According to him, women's nature makes them fond lovers of dolls, dressing and talking (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 109), but Wollstonecraft responds that "the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys, in short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference" (110). Women, brought up according to Rousseau's system, adorn their bodies and nurse a weak constitution (Wollstonecraft 117), while they simultaneously view their daughters as rivals who "drive her from the throne of beauty, who has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason" (Wollstonecraft 117). Wollstonecraft ends the chapter by describing a different woman, a woman that might appear as society's views change: constitution strengthened by exercise, mind expanding, virtuous, this woman marries from affection and secures her husband's respect. Even if she loses her husband, she will not feel the need to please other men, but her focus is on her children, who attain strength of character, never forgetting their mother's example (117-19).

All things considered, Wollstonecraft consistently highlights the importance of reason and virtue, and how their deficit in women's case, which is ultimately a product of a below par education, results in women being treated as lower-ranking subjects who are barely even viewed as citizens since their whole purpose should apparently be to please and to obey. These opinions outline the patriarchal principles which ruled the society during that time. Even today, some believe that women are the overly emotional, unreasonable half of the population which should stay at home and please their partners. As similar opinions prevail centuries later, one wonders whether a

change is truly possible when the foundation, which goes back largely before Wollstonecraft's time, is so deeply rotten.

3.3. Chapter IV

As Wollstonecraft uses the introduction and the first three chapters to provide a detailed description of a woman's insufferable position in the society, naturally she uses the fourth chapter as an opportunity to elaborate on the various reasons that cause women's social, intellectual, and moral degradation. She cautions women to be wary of men's attention and apparent respect, which differs from the civility often found in an exchange between men (Wollstonecraft 125). Furthermore, she uses the metaphor of a bird in a cage. Specifically, women are "[c]onfined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue, are given in exchange" (Wollstonecraft 125). They do not, however, mind the cage, as they strongly believe that their beauty and sexual privileges grant them sincere love and respect (Wollstonecraft 127). During Wollstonecraft's time, as Bergès states, women had no property or legal rights, they could be separated from their children,[3] and they could be locked up, raped, or beaten with impunity by their husband, father, or brothers (88-89). After all, it seems justified to describe a woman as caged in that case. The big difference is that, on the one hand, in their youth, men are prepared for professions and marriage is not considered a grand event in their life. Women of the same age group, on the other hand, do nothing to work on their ambition. Their sole focus is on finding a man who will give them the means to run from one pleasure to another (Wollstonecraft 129-30).

Moreover, after men enter a certain profession, they think about their future and possible goals and achievements, which results in the strengthening of the mind. To these men, pleasure can be found in relaxation, whereas women seek pleasure as the main purpose of their existence (Wollstonecraft 130). Again, Wollstonecraft mentions flawed education as the main cause of this issue. Education has a trivialising effect on women's conduct in most circumstances, which is noticeable in their anxious overthinking about secondary things and being enthralled by adventures rather than occupied by duties (130). As women are occupied by novels, music, and gallantry, their overstretched sensibility prevents intellect from "attaining that sovereignty which

[3] This actually happened to Wollstonecraft's sister who decided to divorce her husband, resulting in the death of the child (Bergès 89).

it ought to attain to render a rational creature" (131). In addition, Wollstonecraft exemplifies just how ridiculously women tend to behave in order to create an image of a frail being as they seek men's protection from old cows and other absurd entities (132).

She claims that the only way to change women's deep-seated tendencies to behave in such a way is to, firstly, allow them to exercise (instead of being confined in their homes), and secondly, to treat such behaviour as cowardice in boys. Their behaviour would change immediately and, although not described in the same way anymore (as sweet flowers or any collocation that emphasizes their gentleness), they would at least become more respectable members of the society (132-33). When it comes to the topic of childhood, it was widely accepted that children should be managed by women. However, Wollstonecraft believed that women of sensibility are unfit for this task as they will, carried away by their feelings, spoil the child's temper. Reason, rather than excessive emotion, is necessary to educate the child on how to manage their temperament. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft expresses dismay at how women's chastity is viewed in the society, as its loss means that anything worthy of respect in a woman is gone. Women's whole character depends on this one virtue (139-43).

To conclude, Wollstonecraft finishes the chapter by comparing "the vain fears and fond jealousies" (145) of love to "tender confidence and sincere respect" (145) of friendship, stating that both cannot exist simultaneously. It is only after love gradually dissipates that friendship appears. However, this change results in a void which women, with their beauty still present, must fulfil in order to enjoy life once more. Even if they are mothers and wives, they focus on their own pleasure. Such needs, which appear as their wavering feelings reject the shortage of passion, are the result of an understanding which is not at all exercised (Wollstonecraft 144-46).

Throughout the fourth chapter, the image of a woman during Wollstonecraft's time quickly deteriorates, as the lack of reason and virtue is now followed by the lack of rights and women's suffering at the hands of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, not just mentally, but physically as well. Once again, better education appears to be the solution for helping women become more valued members of the society. Sandrine Bergès reiterates Wollstonecraft's arguments by saying that the subpar quality of education during that time did not develop women's reason, which simultaneously resulted in their lack of wisdom. She states that women, deprived of wisdom, cannot become virtuous or even see such a quality as desirable. This is why Wollstonecraft's contemporaries did not seek to better themselves or to emancipate themselves, as they were entirely unaware of what they were missing (106).

3.4. Chapter V

The fifth chapter serves as Wollstonecraft's commentary on the misogynist writings and opinions on the female character and education, which circulated in the publications of her time. In the late eighteenth century, male writers were the ones who influenced societal opinions on women's education, and Rousseau is probably the most famous one. As Bergès explains, Wollstonecraft compared her views with Rousseau's throughout her career and admired his work as she believed it represented a perfect balance of intellectual rigour and emotional sincerity (109). In addition to him, Wollstonecraft dedicated a section in this chapter also to Reverend James Fordyce, and she mentions several other respected writers such as John Milton and Dr Gregory, exposing the ingrained patriarchal notions available in much of (English) literature. Although Wollstonecraft reviews opinions on the subject of women's emancipation by quite a few of her contemporaries (the chapter is divided into sections which focus on different individuals), the focus here will be mostly on Rousseau who "was Wollstonecraft's primary intellectual interlocutor" (Reuter 1145), and whose ideas on women are famously made known in *Emile.*

From the start, in his book *Emile, or On Education* (1762, English translation 1763), Rousseau matter-of-factly states his opinion that women ought to be weak and passive because they are not as strong as men, simultaneously believing that a man's superior strength over a woman proves that she is meant to please him, to make herself agreeable to her so-called master, this being the point of her existence (410). Using that belief as his foundation, Rousseau describes what women's education should be like. He states that men and women are different when it comes to their temperament and character, which proves that they should not be educated in the same manner nor engaged in the same employments. Men depend on women only with regard to their desires, while women depend on men both on account of their desires and their necessities, which is why women's education should be relative to men – to please, to be useful, to make love to them, to educate them when young, to take care when grown up, to make their lives easy. Rousseau believes these are the duties which women should be taught, starting in their infancy (418). Besides, boys love sports, noise, and activity, while women prefer mirrors, trinkets, and dolls. Girls learn to read and write with reluctance, but readily use the needle (421-22). Because of these opinions, women were made weak by the societal neglect of their education and their understanding. Moreover, Rousseau states that women should, for their own sake, have a mild

disposition in order to bear the insults and unjust behaviour from the imperfect men full of vices (425).

Wollstonecraft responds to all of this by saying that acceptance of men's unjust behaviour will only result in women's unjust behaviour as they will not be able to discern right from wrong (156). On top of that, she finds that the reason why men have better tempers than women is because they are occupied by pursuits which interest both the mind and the heart. As a result, the steadiness of the head makes the heart steady as well. Women of sensibility seldom have good tempers because they do not use their reason (156). In addition, Rousseau states that men speak of things they know, women of things that please them; one requires knowledge, the other taste (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 159). Wollstonecraft urges her female contemporaries to rise above these narrow prejudices. She earnestly persuades women not to confine their thoughts to petty occurrences of the day in order to strengthen their minds until they are balanced with their hearts, namely sensibility (166). Finally, she says: "Beware then, my friends, of suffering the heart to be moved by every trivial incident: the reed is shaken by a breeze, and annually dies, but the oak stands firm, and for ages braves the storm!" (166). But, Rousseau considers it a woman's fault for having such an education because if they disagreed with being taught these trivial matters, they would not teach them to their daughters (416-17). Also, he believes women's "pleasant easy wit" (417) allows them to learn many things, apparently in accord to men's education, but actually far from it, as its whole purpose is to cherish men. As Bergès states, what Wollstonecraft sees as a deformation of women's natural intellectual capacities, Rousseau sees as women's true expression of what suits them the best (111-12).

As stated previously, another writer critiqued by Wollstonecraft is James Fordyce, the author of *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), which was a book that many women at the time "had probably read, and heard read, aloud" (Ford). It is worth mentioning that Mr. Collins in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* insists on reading from Fordyce to the Bennet girls (48). According to Wollstonecraft, reading from Fordyce's sermons, a staple in a young woman's library of that time, meant "melting every human quality into female meekness and artificial grace" (167). His opinions overlap with Rousseau's views, as he emphasizes the importance of treating women with tenderness because they are timid, frail, and in need of protection (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 167). Wollstonecraft once more repeats that such statements which ultimately degrade women, while seemingly complimenting them, must be despised (168), as that is "not the language of the heart, nor will it ever reach it, though the ear may be tickled" (168). She wishes that men would

speak to women without the condescending endearment, as such empty words only lead to vanity and folly, stripping women of self-respect and rational thinking (168-69).

To sum up the fourth section of the fifth chapter, which discusses female writers, it can be said that Wollstonecraft disagrees with all of them, except with Catherine Macaulay. As Bergès states, perhaps Wollstonecraft felt this disagreement was needed in order to show the society that women are oppressed, no better than slaves, and that the society is contributing to that (115). Bergès continues with the belief, which was already established by Wollstonecraft, that women educated into this "slavery" cannot fight against such conditions until the education changes, which is when women will finally start demanding rights and liberty (115-16). However, she also says that it is somewhat understandable why women refused to accept Wollstonecraft's claim that they are degrading the whole female sex with their behaviour; namely, such conduct, as a product of their education, felt natural to them (125).

Overall, the fifth chapter depicts the anti-feminist stance which ruled during Wollstonecraft's time, highlighting that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is actually an unconventional example of reasonable thinking regarding women's nature and abilities. Patriarchy's dominance allowed for men's prejudiced viewpoint to be taken as a fact, simply because it was stated by them. Whether surprising or not, even today many women experience a similar injustice, as their ideas are often shut down in the work environment, but the same ideas are praised if stated by men. As the analysis expands, it is noticeable how the unfairness of the eighteenth century (and of the centuries before as well) still seems to appear in certain instances in today's society.

3.5. Chapters VI-VIII

In chapters Six to Eight, Wollstonecraft discusses women's irrational standards in love, modesty, and the unhealthy fixation on the artificial "good" reputation. Women are, as Wollstonecraft states, generally captivated by a man who is full of suggestive nothings of politeness. In other words, they are drawn to a rake, a man who lives a stylish lifestyle, but is also morally lax. Unfortunately, a sensible gentleman rarely manages to seduce them, as they dislike his lack of elegantly expressed compliments and dull topics of conversation. Until women begin to exercise their understanding, they should not be judged too harshly for their attachment to rakes, as their education has taught them to please, so women consequently find enjoyment in pleasure and pleasing men. Wollstonecraft maintains that if women change in the direction she has suggested,

they will have both their emotions and reason available, which will result in women rejecting the rakes. Importantly, Wollstonecraft urges women not to look for the qualities of a lover in their husbands. A husband cannot remain a lover for long. If women were more rationally educated, they would accept the fact that passion will subside into friendship (192-95).

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft connects happiness in love with a strong education, stating that with good education, women would be contented to love once in their lives (195). Bergès believes that to be an overstatement, but says it is clear what Wollstonecraft means – once in a committed relationship, a woman will be contented to stay with that person for the rest of her life, without feeling the need to look for a better opportunity that might come along the way, as the well-educated woman wants to see her relationship grow (132). However, women's position in the society did not allow them to follow their emotions, but rather the possibility of comfort, even if it meant accepting a proposal from a man they are not passionately attached to. In such instances, a well-educated mind could not achieve the happiness in love necessary to fit Wollstonecraft's viewpoint.

In the seventh chapter, Wollstonecraft starts with "Modesty!" (198). She describes modesty as a soberness of the mind which teaches an individual not to think too highly of themselves, but the term should be distinguished from humility, which is essentially belittling of oneself. Modesty is a virtue and it is those women who have improved their reason that have the most modesty (198-200). According to Wollstonecraft, the woman "who has dedicated a considerable portion of her time to pursuits purely intellectual, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must have more purity of mind, as a natural consequence, than the ignorant beings whose time and thoughts have been occupied by gay pleasure or schemes to conquer hearts" (200). Finally, the chapter ends with a clear message to women: "ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or ye will still remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved whilst ye are fair! . . . modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection" (208-09).

In chapter eight, the topic of reputation is discussed. If a woman sleeps with a man before marriage, the society views her as permanently degraded. As Rousseau declares, reputation is just as essential as chastity. Women do not only need to behave well, but others must think of them well, too. He compares men and women stating that men view public opinion as the grave of virtue, whereas women consider it the throne of virtue (414-18). Wollstonecraft views public

opinion as a virtue only connected with those to whom reason has been denied. Moreover, she describes how ridiculous society's expectations are because as long as a woman is chaste, no matter if she neglects other social duties, for example ruining a family by vices such as gambling and extravagance, she is an honourable woman (212-16). According to Bergès, "[i]t seems that a good reputation is intrinsically linked to manners, in that it is gained or obtained on the strength of what society thinks of us . . . A reputation, like good manners, is what helps us maintain our place in society" (134). Bergès continues with the conundrum proposed to Socrates by Plato's brothers in Book II of the *Republic*. The question is whether it is better to be virtuous, but not considered as such by others (which results in a corresponding treatment to their belief) or is it better to lack in virtue, but to have an excellent reputation and be a social success. While Socrates chooses the former (he says that it is always better to be virtuous), Rousseau's point of view suggests that men should agree with Socrates, but women should strive for the second option as it was believed that women are not capable of proper virtue (Bergès 136).

Wollstonecraft dedicated the third section in the fifth chapter to Dr Gregory, stating his advice not to believe men's objections on women's reserve. Although men apparently wish to see women more frank and amicable, Dr Gregory says that this might be acceptable in the case of a companion, but it would make a woman less amiable (Wollstonecraft 173-74). Accordingly, women were expected to follow the rules of propriety when socializing. Refusing to do so by acting more freely would affect their reputation. According to Bergès, Dr Gregory is aware of reputation's importance in women's lives, as he states that men choose women in part with regard to their reputation, and bad reputation (even if unfounded) will cost women their happiness, namely comfort, because men will not marry someone who negatively affects their position in the society (136).

As education did not manage to enrich women's minds with reason, many aspects of their life become negatively influenced by women's unreasonableness, one such being love. Their expectations regarding relationships with men are utterly disastrous, as they would rather listen to artificial declarations of endearment than genuine, but guarded, feelings of an honourable man. A lack of reason also allows for women's complete subjection to other people's opinion of them, proving that their subpar education strips them not only of knowledge in general but also of the ability to think for themselves.

3.6. Chapters IX-XIII

Chapters Nine to Thirteen discuss numerous aspects which influence and mould women's position in the society. Wollstonecraft talks about motherhood, marriage, education, women's place in the work environment, and, finally, about interests which contribute to the weakness of a woman's mind.

To begin with, Wollstonecraft explains that "[t]o be a good mother – a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands" (Wollstonecraft 233). In order to achieve that, women's understanding must be enlarged and their character made firmer. That is achieved by allowing women to govern their own conduct. Otherwise, they will never be in the right state of mind to manage their children properly (Wollstonecraft 234).

When it comes to the upbringing of girls specifically, she dislikes the fact that they were often strictly controlled by their parents. In fact, the idea that girls should obey their parents until they are able to judge for themselves led to the weakening of women's character (Wollstonecraft 237). Namely, their subservience and lack of opportunity to make decisions on their own behalf have turned women into slaves: "The duty expected from them is, like all the duties arbitrarily imposed on women, more from a sense of propriety, more out of respect for decorum, than reason; and thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, they are prepared for the slavery of marriage" (Wollstonecraft 237). Because of that, parenting, that is, being a good mother seems to be particularly important.

In relation to motherhood, Wollstonecraft exhibits her belief that it is a natural vocation for women (233). In order to fulfil her role as a citizen, a woman must be the primary caretaker of her child (227). This is far from what feminism stands for today. But, Wollstonecraft also believes that before becoming a mother, a woman should achieve a level of independence equal to that of male citizens (221) because only an independent, reasonable woman can be a good mother. Namely, a weak and overly emotional mother is a poor role model to young girls as she promotes the idea of dependent women. With regard to marriage, she believes women should be able to enter into professions and support themselves, ultimately making marriage a choice, not an obligation which must be carried out because a woman is penniless. All in all, she firmly believes women should have a place in the society, whether married or not (229-30). However, as Bergès explains, women were expected to exercise only such accomplishments as amateur drawing, painting, and music (173); they were expected to become accomplished (mostly in

arts), but not to the point of expertise, which made it hard for women to break into the professional world. These accomplishments enabled marriageable and married women to "display the cultural distinction that demonstrated social distinction and advanced upper- and middle-class family interests . . . A woman lacking 'accomplishments' might be merely 'notable' – the period's term for a woman who knew little more than domestic economy and was consequently incapable of cultivated socialising" (Kelly 257-58).

Kelly also mentions other elements in female education – basic schooling, household management, and religious instruction. While basic schooling comprised practical skills such as literacy and numeracy, household management dealt with domestic needlework, food preparation, and taking care of the sick, the young, and the aged, among other things. Religious instruction inducted the young woman into the family's church. All of these occurred at home (basic schooling did sometimes occur at day or boarding schools), while accomplishments could be acquired at home, but usually from governesses and private tutors. Schools had to meet the parents' demands in order to get paid, so the leading accomplishments which were to be taught were dancing, singing, playing music, drawing, learning fashionable modern languages such as French or Italian, decorative needlework, letter-writing, and reading (256-57).

Although Wollstonecraft proposes an idea where boys and girls attend school together until they are nine years of age, which would also help children learn how to communicate with each other and respect each other regardless of sex, and which would then ultimately lead to healthier relationships once they are older, she believes they should be divided in the afternoon. During that time, "girls should attend a school, where plain-work, mantua-making, and millinery," (252-54) would occupy them. Another thing that Wollstonecraft criticizes, with regard to being a woman, is the custom of *coming out*, an event during which girls of seventeen years of age were taken to adult balls and parties for the first time. Wollstonecraft wonders what could be more indelicate than this practice of bringing freshly marriageable girls to the "market" (Wollstonecraft 255), which comes close to her describing it as a slave auction.

In her attempt to argue for rationality and the development of intellect, Wollstonecraft explains why it is problematic to force women into being interested only in romantic endeavours: "Another instance of that feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education, is a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed *sentimental*" (Wollstonecraft 271). Here, Wollstonecraft judges reading novels, which apparently corrupts the taste and draws the woman's heart away from everyday responsibilities (271). She believes that,

as women are taught to please (simultaneously restrained from entering into the political and civil spheres of life), they view sentiments as important events. As they are confined to trifling employments, they are unable to grasp anything significant so their disinterest in topics of any depth (such as history) is not surprising, which is why Wollstonecraft exclaims against novels (271-74). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft views women who are fond of dressing up as weak because she connects the lack of reflection, referring to the weakness of the mind, with the sedulous care for the body, as such interest most likely stems from the desire to please. Their sex is always in the back of their mind, reminding women to make themselves agreeable at all times (274-76). Ultimately, her book which serves as a cornerstone of feminism can be reduced to one final thought at the very end:

> Asserting the rights which women in common with men ought to contend for, I have not attempted to extenuate their faults, but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society. If so, it is reasonable to suppose that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense. (Wollstonecraft 283)

After having discussed Wollstonecraft's ideas about women and their social position, the thesis will turn to Jane Austen, who also recognizes problems related to the treatment of women at the time, and whose novels were greatly informed by Wollstonecraft's ideas.

4. Jane Austen

Robert P. Irvine begins his book *Jane Austen* by describing the life of the world-renowned author. Born on 16 December 1775 in South East England, Jane Austen was the seventh child in her family, followed by another sibling three years later. Her biographical data matches the description of female life as given by Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*, testifying to the accurateness of Wollstonecraft's observations. Namely, Austen and her sister Cassandra were educated at first by their mother, in reading, writing, and religion. The sisters continued their education for two years at boarding schools where they studied needlework, English, French, and Italian (possibly music, drawing, and history as well). These were the conventional topics taught to the girls of their rank. With the goal of entertaining family and friends, Austen started writing in her teens. Her first work comprised three volumes of stories and verses. This manoeuvre was met with family's full encouragement. Afterwards, in 1794, Austen wrote a novel that is today

known as *Lady Susan*. In 1795 and 1796 she wrote *Elinor and Marianne* and *First Impressions*, novels which, after some revision, appeared at the start of her career as a published author under the titles *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). By 1799, Austen wrote another novel, *Susan*, which got published posthumously as *Northanger Abbey* in 1817 (1-3).

In 1801, Austen's family moved to Bath, and some biographers, such as Halperin (1996), Tomalin (1999), and Spence (2007), believe that one of the reasons for that move was to increase Jane's and Cassandra's chances of finding a husband (Irvine 3). However, it was not in Bath, but on a visit to her eldest brother James at Steventon that Austen met the man who will propose to her. This man was Harris Bigg-Wither, the eldest son of a wealthy local landowning family. The family was old friends with the Austens. Jane first accepted the proposal, but then withdrew her acceptance the next morning. Although this marriage would have provided a substantial financial comfort, she realised that she could never love him; in fact, in one of her letters from 1814, she claims that anything can be endured, but marrying without affection (Irvine 3). It was also while living in Bath that Austen sold a novel, *Susan*, to a publishing firm Crosby & Co, receiving only ten pounds. Although not much, this was an expected sum for a two-volume novel from an unknown writer (Irvine 3).

After her father's death in 1805, Austen moved to Southampton with her mother and sister Cassandra, but soon after she settled at Chawton Cottage, on the Hampshire estate, where she had grown up[4]. This is where Austen lived for the rest of her life and where she not only revised *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey* for publication, but also wrote three more novels (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*), and began a fourth one called *Sanditon*. In 1817, Austen took lodgings in Winchester in order to be near her physician who was treating her for an illness, probably a glandular disorder called Addison's disease. This condition made her progressively weaker for a year. The treatment produced no results and Austen died there on 18 July 1817. She was forty-one years old (Irvine 3-4).

Reading Jane Austen's novels in the context of Mary Wollstonecraft's work, one is reminded that Austen "also lived through and wrote about the crisis of values that dominated late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English society" (Poovey 21), as she wrote about the process of a young girl's maturation and the relationship between women's desires and the imperatives of propriety (Poovey 21). Indeed, "Austen's youthful writing shows an increasing awareness of the economic realities of life for women on the fringes of the gentry, realities that

[4] Today, this cottage is an independent museum dedicated to Jane Austen.

channel money and land to men, bypassing women like her mother or herself" (Fergus 6), issues that are tackled in detail by Wollstonecraft too, albeit in a different genre. The following chapters will discuss her first two published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to illustrate how they reflect feminist ideas expressed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

4.1. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

Sense and Sensibility, the novel which marks Austen's first emergence as a published author (although published anonymously), was first drafted in 1797-98, then revised for publication between 1809 and 1811, to finally get published in 1811 by Thomas Egerton on commission. The first edition of this novel sold out and received a positive review both in the *Critical Review* and in the *British Critic*, the former being a liberal and the latter a conservative journal (Irvine 53).

The story goes as follows: After Henry Dashwood's passing, Mrs. Henry Dashwood and her daughters (Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret) are left with barely any money, and the estate where they lived is passed on to John Dashwood, Henry Dashwood's son from a previous marriage. Love-wise, Elinor falls in love with John's brother-in-law Edward Ferrars, but later finds out that he is engaged to another woman, Lucy Steele. Marianne falls in love with a charming stranger John Willoughby, but that love also suffers as Marianne finds out Willoughby is to marry a wealthy heiress. In addition, Colonel Brandon, a family friend, reveals to Elinor that Marianne is not Willoughby's first victim of seduction. After Marianne almost dies from risking her health (after having been abandoned by Willoughby), she marries Brandon. Edward's fiancée runs off with his brother Robert and he is finally at liberty to marry Elinor. Whereas Elinor is characterized in opposition to Marianne and her mother, Marianne and the mother are characterized in alignment to one another. According to Irvine, the events tend to coincide with Elinor's perspective, as readers find out things at the same time as her. Furthermore, her vocabulary is often used, which represents Elinor's subjective response to what is happening, rather than an omniscient account (Irvine 57). "This use of characters' language to represent their subjectivity, even though they are not actually speaking those words, is called free indirect discourse, and is increasingly characteristic of Austen's prose as her career as a novelist progresses" (Irvine 57).

4.2. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

Austen completed the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, known as *First Impressions*, in 1796-97, but revised it under the new, now world-famous, title in 1811-12 and sold the manuscript to Thomas Egerton for one hundred and ten pounds. The *British Critic* and the *Critical Review* repeated the praise already given to *Sense and Sensibility* (Irvine 62). The story revolves around the Bennet family and the marriage prospects of their five daughters. Namely, due to strict patriarchal inheritance laws, if Mr. Bennet dies, they will be left with very little money as his estate will be passed on to his nearest male relative, Mr. Collins. Jane falls in love with a wealthy man, Mr. Bingley, who has rented a neighbouring manor. His distinguished friend Mr. Darcy gets Bingley to leave the manor to go to London in order to prevent Jane's and Bingley's relationship from further progression since he believed Jane's tame nature was actually a sign of disinterest in his friend. Darcy also considered Jane's family (except Elizabeth) improper as their behaviour went against the society's expectations of propriety. However, Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth despite his opinion on her family. He proposes to her, but she rejects him; she is also proposed to by Mr. Collins, whom she refuses as well. Her opinion on Mr. Darcy has been moulded not only by his reticent behaviour, but by charming George Wickham's recollections of apparent past experiences with Mr. Darcy, who was a family friend. All of this resulted in Elizabeth's prejudices against him. Darcy soon reveals to Elizabeth the truth, more precisely Wickham's bad character, which is confirmed once he elopes with the youngest Bennet sister, the irresponsible Lydia. Although Elizabeth rejected Darcy, his feelings remain unchanged, so, in order to help the Bennets restore some of their reputation, he decides to find the fugitive couple, gets them married, and finds Wickham an income. Finally, Darcy finds out that Elizabeth has, over time, fallen in love with him. He proposes again and is accepted. Also, Bingley is, at last, content as he marries Jane.

According to Irvine, it is worth mentioning that Wickham appears in the novel as the militia regiment settles in the small country town that is the setting of this novel. The presence of militia sets this novel in a specific historical context as the militia were mobilised in the 1790s in direct response to the threat of invasion by the revolutionary France (such specific time context is only given in *Persuasion*, besides this novel). Furthermore, this novel largely focuses on the ability of polite society to accommodate the different types of wealth. This is noticeable in the example of the Bennet family, in which some have mastered these codes of propriety (Jane and Elizabeth), while others have not (Irvine 62-63). Both of these points, a reference to the frivolous nature of soldiers and a reference to how wealth affects women, are explicitly dealt with in *A Vindication*.

Although all five sisters are mentioned in the novel, Halliday asserts that *Pride and Prejudice* is Elizabeth's story, which is clear by the sheer amount of attention the storyteller pays to her. For example, it is only after Elizabeth goes to visit sick Jane at Netherfield that the readers get an insight into the Bingley household (60). Today, *Pride and Prejudice* is considered Austen's most popular novel. It is also her most-translated novel and it has never gone out of print. Even Austen considered this novel to be her favourite, even if she judged it as being too light; in a letter to her sister Cassandra, she refers to it as her child (Bloom 13-14).

5. The Analysis of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* with regard to the Ideas Mentioned in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

5.1. The Analysis of *Sense and Sensibility*

In Austen's debut novel, the main focus is on Elinor Dashwood and her point of view, although a large portion of the story is dedicated to Marianne Dashwood's experiences as well. Elinor is an exceedingly sensible and rational character. She is described as an individual who possesses a "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement . . . her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them" (3-4). Contrary to that, Marianne is a very emotional individual ready to share those emotions, which ultimately makes her an immensely demonstrative character. Austen describes her as "sensible and clever, but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent" (4). Austen also mentions that the resemblance between Marianne and her mother was "strikingly great" (4), which is highlighted in the following quote: "They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow . . . Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance" (4).

The stark difference between the sisters in this regard might deceive other characters to think of Elinor as cold and reserved, but Elinor's "normative 'sense' consists in powerful impulses governed but not repressed, in a critical respect for social conventions, and in a behavioral subordination of self to culturally derived principles with no necessary concomitant subordination of intelligence or examined personal judgement" (Shoben, Jr. 536). Marianne, occupied by music and books, overstretched her sensibility, according to Wollstonecraft, who

states that such occupation prevents intellect from attaining authority (131), which ultimately negatively affects Marianne's reason. Marianne is so enthralled by these different forms of art that she, at the beginning of the novel, says that she could not be happy with a man "whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both" (Austen 11). By the looks of it, Elinor is the virtuous woman whom Wollstonecraft praises, while Marianne is the overly emotional young woman who romanticizes everything and is the object of Wollstonecraft's criticism. However, despite her emotionality, she has proven to be educated through her artistic interests. Although the Dashwood sisters make their judgements so differently from one another, Jane Nardin says that their opinions about their acquaintances are quite similar, as they are both able to similarly estimate the worth of their brother and his wife Fanny, of the Middletons, Palmers, and the Miss Steeles (30). This shows that Austen is less critical of the influence of art (and novels) than Wollstonecraft.

As already mentioned, women at the time were meant to be pleasant (Wollstonecraft 93), and although Elinor tries to be agreeable, she does not go overboard with pretending to be someone she is not. It is a case of being a civil, socially adept individual who knows what is appropriate and what is not, as she "simply recognizes the reality of social connections, understands the necessity for honouring them by courteous conduct, and thereby accords to others the same right of personal distinctiveness that she claims for herself" (Shoben, Jr. 534). Unlike Lady Middleton (the wife of a relative), who is polite only to appear as elegant and superior (Morgan 201), proving Wollstonecraft's claim about a lack of relationship between good reputation and a person's morality (216), Elinor makes a deliberate choice to uphold decorum as a social principle (Morgan 202). Many situations in the novel highlight this difference between her and Marianne, who is not as civil; for example, on their journey to London, Marianne only addresses her sister and ignores Mrs. Jennings (Lady Middleton's mother). Because of that, Elinor "took immediate possession of the post of civility . . . behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her" (Austen 111). According to Nardin, as Elinor deeply believes it is her duty to obey the rules of propriety, her personal judgements are expressed less often than Marianne's, considering that Marianne views personal judgement, and not conventional propriety, as the ground of action. Marianne's possibility to withdraw from an unpleasant society is due to Elinor's excess of social martyrdom, as she, by the excess of civility on her own part, tries to conceal Marianne's deficiencies (35-37). Marianne shows what it means to go against society's expectation of being a pleasant girl, as she would often disregard forms of

general civility by, for example, refusing to share her opinion on matters which she did not care about: “Marianne, when called on for her’s, offended them all, by declaring that she had no opinion to give, as she had never thought about it” (Austen 166). Marianne’s behaviour required from Elinor to tell “lies when politeness required it” (Austen 86), but generally Elinor shows that it is possible to be polite without being artificial: “Elinor, having once delivered her opinion on William’s side, by which she offended Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny still more, did not see the necessity of enforcing it by any farther assertion” (Austen 166). The two sisters illustrate how the society’s view of decorum influences women’s behaviour as well as their reputation; their choices about this also show that a middle way seems to be the most appropriate one. To be able to choose the middle way, a woman must be reasonable, which is precisely a virtue praised by Wollstonecraft.

One of the factors that points to Elinor’s developed reason and virtue are the qualities she notices in a man; for instance, she describes Colonel Brandon as a “sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and . . . possessing an amiable heart” (Austen 36). This differs from Marianne’s idealistic and overly romantic expectations from an ideal partner, who is expected only to share the same taste in art as her. Wollstonecraft states that women are generally captivated by men who are rakes. These men tend to be extremely polite as they excessively compliment women who, at the same time, cannot be seduced by gentlemen whose more disciplined behaviour does not ignite the same excitement. Marianne, at the beginning of the novel, proves this as she insults Colonel Brandon right before Elinor praises him, saying that he “has no brilliancy, his feelings no ardour, and his voice no expression” (Austen 36). One may notice that Elinor recognizes those qualities which will one day make Colonel Brandon a good husband, while Marianne only looks for the qualities of a lover. Wollstonecraft recommends women not to look for a lover, because a husband cannot remain a lover for long. She mentions education and exercising understanding as key components for having both one’s reason and emotions available (as Elinor does), which will ultimately lead to women rejecting the rakes (195). Marianne had to go through an extremely painful experience of falling for the unstable charmer Willoughby and losing him to understand this.

Contrary to that, Elinor, even as she experiences feelings of vexation and anger because of Edward’s coldness and reserve, manages to “regulate her behaviour to him . . . she avoided every appearance of resentment or displeasure, and treated him as she thought he ought to be treated” (Austen 63). Instead of augmenting her sorrow by “shutting herself up from her family, or leaving the house in determined solitude to avoid them, or lying awake the whole night to

indulge meditation" (Austen 74), like Marianne, who employs these methods judiciously, Elinor "busily employed herself the whole day" (Austen 73). Refusing to be idle helped her grief stay in place, rather than allowing it to increase. The difference between the sisters is clear – Elinor represents the titular "Sense," while Marianne is "Sensibility."

The difference can also be exemplified with regard to propriety which was extremely cherished during Austen's time. While Elinor recommends her to be a bit more reserved, Marianne sarcastically responds that she realizes how her behaviour "erred against every common-place notion of decorum" (Austen 33) because she was not "reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful" (Austen 33), stating that, if she had talked with Willoughby only of the weather and the roads once every ten minutes, Elinor's reproach would not have happened. Unlike the reasonable Elinor, Mrs. Dashwood views Marianne's behaviour as a "natural consequence of a strong affection in a young and ardent mind" (Austen 37), showing herself to be incapable of guiding her daughter properly. Wollstonecraft, as one might remember, states that a woman must have sense in order to be a good mother (233); however, it has already been shown that both Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood still need to work on improving theirs. It seems that Elinor is the one guiding her mother to become the woman Wollstonecraft wants to see in the society, as she advises her parent in different areas (financially, for example), and not the other way around.

Another important female character in this novel is Lucy Steele, Edward's secret fiancée whom Austen describes as "naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing . . . but her powers had received no aid from education: she was ignorant and illiterate . . . Elinor saw, and pitied her for, the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable" (90). Wollstonecraft believes that good education would make women contented to love once in their lives; that is, once in a committed relationship, they would not seek for better opportunities that might come along the way (195). Typical for women of the period, Lucy's goal was to secure herself with a wealthy husband. She achieves that by leaving her fiancé Edward for his brother who is much richer, most likely in order to run from pleasure to pleasure in the future. Eberle states that romantic readers will view Lucy's actions as ludicrous because she treats marriage as a mercenary exchange (9). However, marriage did have a mercenary nature at the time, since upper- and middle-class women did not have any other opportunity to earn a living.

Furthermore, in order to achieve her goal of marrying rich, Lucy must appear pleasant at all times, considering that pleasantness was one of the most valued qualities in women during that time. Therefore, stating false opinions so as not to offend others is inevitable; for example, Lucy,

when commenting on the children's height, not wanting to displease anyone, says that "the boys were both remarkably tall for their age" (Austen 166), even though that is not the case. At such instances, Elinor echoes Wollstonecraft's claims about charm being the only desirable – even though useless – quality in women: "the sweetest girls in the world were to be met with in every part of England, under every possible variation of form, face, temper and understanding" (Austen 84). Wollstonecraft finds that this artificial "sweetness" occurs at the expense of virtues, so she advises against it (87). Furthermore, Lucy's sister, Anne Steele, is an example of what vulgar freedom and folly look like in a woman. Her only topic of conversation is men, and even Lucy makes the following remark: "'Lord! Anne,' cried her sister, 'you can talk of nothing but beaux; – you will make Miss Dashwood believe you think of nothing else" (Austen 88). By the looks of it, Wollstonecraft would perceive Anne as a woman who does not work on her ambition as she entirely focuses on finding a man and the only thing that makes her perfectly happy is "to be teased about Dr. Davies" (Austen 165). In that, Anne is a typical girl, rather than an exception.

The next significant female character is Lady Middleton. She is described as someone who "had nothing to say for herself beyond the most common-place inquiry or remark" (Austen 21), and who "piqued herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements; and from this kind of vanity was her greatest enjoyment in any of their parties" (Austen 22). This proves Wollstonecraft's sentiment that, while men have various employments which help build their character, women's thoughts are directed to insignificant topics as they are often confined in their homes, pushed to play with dolls and listen to idle chats of their female relatives (109). This point is apparent quite a few times in the novel as Elinor thinks to herself that the company of the ladies was as she had expected, "it produced not one novelty of thought or expression" (Austen 100), and later on the difference between men and women, with regard to discourse, is amplified: "the gentlemen *had* supplied the discourse with some variety – the variety of politics, inclosing land, and breaking horses – but then it was all over; and one subject only engaged the ladies till coffee came in, which was the comparative heights of Harry Dashwood, and Lady Middleton's second son William, who were nearly of the same age" (Austen 165-66).

As already mentioned, Rousseau believed that men and women have different natures, which proves that they should not be educated in the same manner nor engaged in the same employments (418). His influence during that time allowed for his opinions to be taken as facts, and served as confirmation for the disgraceful treatment of women. Wollstonecraft, however, urges women not to confine their thoughts to petty occurrences of the day in order to allow their

minds to become balanced with their sensibility (166). What amplifies these day-to-day meaningless conversations is the fact that women spend their time on ludicrous hobbies, in addition to an appalling education. According to Bergès, women were expected to exercise only such accomplishments as amateur drawing, painting, and music (173); they were expected to become accomplished, but not to the point of expertise. This made it hard for them to break into the professional world. Austen would most likely agree with Wollstonecraft that these accomplishments "left women dependent on men's judgement and authority, consequently incapable of using God-given reason to guide desire to good rather than evil and therefore barred from spiritual salvation" (Kelly 258). Upon reading the novel, readers find out that Marianne plays the pianoforte, while Elinor draws, and none of the female characters work. Because Elinor is not, and could not be, a "professional person and is the heroine of one troubled love story and the anxious monitor of another, the domain of application for her intellect is almost entirely the actions, circumstances, and feelings that figure in affairs of the heart" (Perkins 14). This must change in order for women to have a place in the society, but also to view marriage as an option and not a necessity.

To be sure, women's dependence on men is clear from the very beginning of the novel as Mrs. Dashwood's late husband, before he passed, asked his son from a previous marriage to take care of her and their daughters (Austen 2). During that time, many women hoped to find a match in a rich man and, as previously stated, Lucy is one of them, as her behaviour "may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently obstructed, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience" (Austen 268). The topic of marrying for money is a common theme in the Austen canon, according to Eberle. In this novel, Willoughby regrets choosing money over Marianne, while Elinor and Edward, on the contrary, marry even with a poor financial situation (Eberle 9). However, Austen tends to mix romance with reality, and readers find out that Willoughby does not spend the rest of his life suffering, rather he "lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself" (Austen 271). Even Elinor and Edward are not "quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a-year would supply them with the comforts of life" (Austen 263). It is clear that money is a determining factor (Eberle 9) in the lives of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century women (and families).

Unlike other female characters in this novel, Mrs. Jennings, a wealthy widow, is an independent woman: "Because of her status she is able to get away with saying things that other characters cannot, providing the inappropriate yet all-too-true commentary of an experienced woman and

mother" (Eberle 8). As such, she is not the typical woman one may find in the society during that time. Still, her main topic to converse about is the subject of lovers and husbands, and as both her daughters have married respectably, "she had now therefore nothing to do but to marry all the rest of the world" (Austen 25). Her views regarding marriage are not progressive as she states that she "never was very handsome – worse luck for me. However, I got a very good husband" (Austen 114). Evidently, the goodness of her husband lies in his wealth. Wollstonecraft also mentions society's view on the importance of beauty, especially to secure a husband, and this novel exemplifies such a belief on multiple occasions, one of them regarding the heartbroken Marianne: "But, my dear Elinor, what is the matter with Marianne? – she looks very unwell, has lost her colour, and is grown quite thin . . . She was as handsome a girl last September, as I ever saw; and as likely to attract the man . . . I question whether Marianne *now*, will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost..." (Austen 161). In order for this mind-set to change, women must become equals to men and the only solution for that is an education reform.

Finally, another premise given by Wollstonecraft which appears in the novel is concerned with the opinion of others. Rousseau finds reputation to be exceptionally important for a woman. It does not only matter what a woman is like, but what others think of her as well. Wollstonecraft disagrees with that, stating that opinion as a virtue is only connected with those to whom reason has been denied (212). In the novel, Elinor realizes that, sometimes, she perceives people differently from what they truly are and wonders from where that deception originates, possibly from the fact that "one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge" (Austen 66). Marianne responds in disbelief, saying that she thought the right thing was "to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people . . . This has always been your doctrine, I am sure" (Austen 66). Elinor corrects her: "No, Marianne, never . . . I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or to conform to their judgement in serious matters?" (Austen 66). For example, Elinor misjudges Mrs. Jennings at first, but due to decorum – that is, being polite – she realizes what Mrs. Jennings is actually like. Austen has given Mrs. Jennings "a special kind of thoughtfulness" (Morgan 193), as she offers a number of remedies for Marianne's broken heart. "Not only has she offered an alternative to Marianne's determined rudeness and to manners without heart, but the gradual revelation of her character combined with Elinor Dashwood's constant civility to her help define and justify the kind of politeness Jane Austen does value"

(Morgan 194). Elinor judges for herself, regardless of what others have said about someone or something, and she advises Marianne to do the same, which ultimately means that Elinor is the embodiment of a woman who, with her character and conduct, rejects Rousseau's beliefs. Ultimately, the brief analysis of female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* has shown that Austen's literary representation of women matches Wollstonecraft's social observations and that the two writers share the view on how the current position of women could and should be improved.

5.2. The Analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*

The thesis now turns to Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, which places one family in the very centre of the story – the Bennets, a family of seven whose majority is comprised of five daughters. Following this fact, the plot unsurprisingly revolves around the daughters' marriage prospects. Like the previous novel, *Pride and Prejudice* will provide an array of women characters with varying degree of education, manners, beauty, and wealth to show how these factors influence women's lives.

To start with, the eldest daughter, Jane Bennet, is a sweet, well-meaning girl with pleasing manners and unsurpassed beauty, which her mother cannot stop talking about. Jane unites a "great strength of feeling, a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner which would guard her from the suspicions of the impertinent" (Austen 14). On many occasions described as angelic or as the embodiment of loveliness and goodness, Jane is the quintessential example of an ideal, beautiful, agreeable woman who was, as such, irresistible at the time. She is also self-educated, "her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating" (Austen 131). However, Jane's emotionally reserved nature almost cost her marrying Bingley as she, "acquiescing to the rules of 'guarded' female behaviour" (Chang 79), failed to convince both Mr. Bingley and those around them of her love. "Through her compliance with expected female behaviour, Jane confirms her conventionality in the belief that women must modify themselves for men" (Chang 79). Wollstonecraft has touched upon this subject as she judges the overly strict control of women during their upbringing, which thus results in a timely preparation for their slavish submission to their husbands later on in life (237). This guarded behaviour, which conceals the affection to an extent, was considered (in the words of Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet's friend) as a possible obstacle to marry, and to marry rich in this case: "In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show *more* affection than she feels.

Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on" (Austen 14), to which Elizabeth, the second Bennet daughter, responds that if she were determined to find a husband, she would adopt this mind-set. Chang states that Charlotte's advice, although it advocates scheming, was correct in Jane's case (79).

The topic of marriage runs throughout the entire novel. The idea of marrying rich appears on the first page already, as Mrs. Bennet says that a single man of a large fortune is a "fine thing for our girls" (Austen 1), and whatever the feelings of this man, the idea that he shall marry if he is single is "so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their neighbours" (Austen 1). This is not surprising considering the fact that men were expected to get married in order to fulfil their social role of a father and a head of a family (Wollstonecraft 265). For women, the imperative to marry is more related to finance, or more bluntly, to survival. Since the upper- and middle-class women, who are the focus both of Austen's novels and Wollstonecraft's treatise, are denied education, the right to work, and the right to handle money or enter into contracts (Matek 64), marrying a well-off man is the only way that they can avoid being destitute and, in radical cases, homeless. These social realities, in fact, instigate the novel's plot.

Namely, once Mr. Bennet dies, the rest of the family, which is comprised only of women, will lose their home as it will be passed on to Mr. Bennet's closest male relative, Mr. Collins, and since neither the daughters nor their mother are employed, marriage must happen. Wollstonecraft says that women should be able to enter into professions in order to support themselves; otherwise, they will end up with no home and no means to survive (229). Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's friend, embodies this sentiment as she accepts Mr. Collins' proposal, even though she was not his first choice. She never thought highly of men and matrimony, but "marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it" (Austen 87). Her acceptance of an offer from a man who is described as "neither sensible nor agreeable, his society . . . irksome" (Austen 87) comes solely from a desire of an establishment: "I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's 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" (Austen 89). Elizabeth believes Charlotte marrying Mr. Collins will result in "no real

confidence" (Austen 91) between them from that point on. "Charlotte is willing to sacrifice her true opinions to ensure she is financially secure, a choice Elizabeth cannot accept" (Chang 81).

Today, many would agree with Elizabeth, as the majority views the presence of affection as the necessary component prior to entering into such an engagement that is marriage. However, as suggested earlier, poverty that came with losing one's father meant that marriage was seen as an economic deal for many women. Eberle mentions that, unlike Elizabeth, Charlotte does have brothers, but her father's estate will not provide her with enough money to live comfortably (11). It is obvious that women's position in the society did not allow for today's viewpoint, particularly not if you were poor or considered unattractive, which will be discussed later. "Charlotte serves as a foil to bolster the romantic idea of the perfect Elizabeth-and-Darcy marriage, but she also functions as a reminder of the eighteenth-century economic realities" (Eberle 11). Just like Elizabeth (and Austen, who turned down a rich suitor), Wollstonecraft is against marrying without affection, as she refers to it as "legal prostitution" (229). Namely, if a woman is in a poor financial situation, refusing someone's proposal will most likely not happen, regardless of sentiments. Securing oneself is the principal objective and it does not matter who will become the provider of the new establishment: "Many women did not consider what constituted a good marriage at that time, but rather focused on the material benefits" (Chang 81).

This point of view contradistinguishes Charlotte from Elizabeth as Elizabeth refused not one, but two proposals (one from Mr. Collins, the other from Mr. Darcy). Mr. Collins could not comprehend how he could possibly be rejected considering his "situation in life . . . and circumstances highly in my favour" (Austen 77). Mrs. Bennet pushes Elizabeth to accept the proposal as its refusal means losing the family fortune. Consequently, Mrs. Bennet tries to justify her daughter to Mr. Collins saying that Elizabeth is a headstrong girl, to which he replies that she would, in that case, most likely not be the desirable wife as he is looking for happiness: "if liable to such defects of temper, she could not contribute to my felicity" (Austen 78). Mr. Collins is the type of a man who, according to Wollstonecraft, only wants a pleasant woman who will show docile blind obedience and gentleness (84). On top of that, Mr. Collins loves to "offer those little delicate compliments which are always acceptable to ladies" (Austen 47), while he simultaneously views women as irrational subordinates. However, even Elizabeth admits that the marriage between Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins could be considered somewhat fortunate as "in a prudential light it is certainly a very good match for her" (Austen 125).

Namely, Charlotte Lucas, as stated in the novel a couple of times, is not considered attractive: "he did not admire her at all; indeed, nobody can, you know" (Austen 8). This could have potentially played an important part regarding her view on matrimony and the belief that "it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life" (Austen 15), which is, again, quite different from today's viewpoint. If a woman was beautiful, nothing else mattered, as Wollstonecraft says (84). To illustrate, Jane, although educated and virtuous, is the designated pretty sister and her mother only notices that aspect of her, telling her not to doubt a man's interest in her as she is "about five times as pretty as every other woman in the room" (Austen 9). It was Rousseau who said that women's power over men is due to their looks, but Wollstonecraft fought back demanding women to have power over themselves and over their own minds by training reason and moderating their emotions (133).

Furthermore, the typical married couple during Wollstonecraft's and Austen's time was the husband who was only attracted to the beauty of his partner and the wife who only cared about raising emotion without inspiring respect (Wollstonecraft 103). In the novel, such a couple are the Bennets, as Mr. Bennet "captivated by youth and beauty, and the appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence has vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown" (Austen 164-65). This is where Wollstonecraft would mention how respectability of life is sacrificed to the triumph of an hour (107). The goal is to acquire a man, what follows does not matter. The general idea of Mrs. Bennet's disposition is clear – she is a woman Wollstonecraft advises against becoming, as weak understanding and illiberal mind grace her; she is a woman of "mean understanding . . . and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (Austen 3). Mrs. Bennet is everything Wollstonecraft judges, as she simultaneously embodies a number of typical, yet to Wollstonecraft undesirable, characteristics mentioned in *A Vindication,* from the lack of knowledge to the despised sensibility which is in need of a stronger mind.

For instance, she wholly supports Lydia's marriage to the rake that is Mr. Wickham and, although her youngest daughter almost lost her reputation which was of the highest importance during that time for a woman, once everything was settled, Mrs. Bennet only cared about the wedding clothes and the new neighbourhood for her daughter: "She was more alive to the disgrace which her want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense

of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham a fortnight before they took place" (Austen 216). Jane was the one who persuaded Mrs. Bennet to take a step back, as Mr. Bennet should be consulted regarding the matter (similarly, Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* advises her mother). Indeed, Mrs. Bennet is the example of a woman not fit to be a mother, according to Wollstonecraft, as her lack of sense and understanding cannot allow for proper management of her own children, especially the problematic Lydia. The Bennet household, overall, did not follow society's expectations of proper parenting. While Wollstonecraft describes (and criticizes) the belief that girls should obey their parents' strict control, the Bennet sisters had the freedom to do as they please: "We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might" (Austen 116). Many would have found this to be unacceptable during that time and a governess would be thought to be absolutely necessary in a family with five daughters.

The vivacious Elizabeth Bennet who leans towards sense rather than sensibility, just like Elinor Dashwood, represents a desirable model for women at the time. She is described as having a "lively, playful disposition" (Austen 7), which explains her witty remarks. Although often mentioned paired up with her sister Jane, the two are noticeably different. "Jane meticulously observed what she perceived to be the proper actions of a woman pursuing marriage by passively displaying her thoughts and sentiments. In contrast, Elizabeth's bold and assertive demeanor is representative of feminist qualities not found within a stereotypical Regency-era woman" (Chang 80). Also, while Jane tends to be blind to the follies and nonsense of others (which even Elizabeth mentions as surprising since Jane is sensible; however, she is clearly naive), Elizabeth notices these drawbacks and "with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister" (Austen 9-10) does not easily approve of such individuals' behaviour. Her refusal of adhering to society's expectation of the already mentioned artificial sweetness does not sit well with those who actively feign modes of pleasantness.

For example, Caroline Bingley and Luisa Hurst (née Bingley) say the most agreeable things to one's face, but talk badly behind their back: "Miss Bingley began abusing her [Elizabeth] as soon as she was out of the room. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no style, no beauty . . . Her hair, so untidy, so blowsy! . . . I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud" (Austen 24). Regardless of their status, Elizabeth is not bothered by their opinion of her as she is aware of their true nature. Accordingly, reason provides her with enough sense not to go beyond what is necessary regarding social customs while conversing with the Bingley sisters (unlike Jane). Elizabeth

shows the readers that education is not the only important factor in the process of acquiring a husband, as her social skills helped her attract Mr. Darcy and, generally, navigate the high society. Elizabeth even counsels Mr. Darcy to practice his conversing skills just like she practices playing the piano. This interaction demonstrates that "auto-didacticism is integral to a universal understanding of society" (McElligott 85). The combination of her disposition and self-education allows her to reside in the society of the higher rank without allowing the social difference to affect her composure and good sense; even Elizabeth herself states that her courage "rises at every attempt to intimidate me" (Austen 122), and her refusal of achieving praise by speaking and thinking for approbation of others interested Mr. Darcy as she was "so unlike *them*" (Austen 267), namely all the other women.

Caroline Bingley, in contrast, represents the traditional woman who aims to please men. She says what she believes Mr. Darcy will find appealing as she deceptively adopts those characteristics he may find valuable in a woman. Elizabeth's behaviour sets her apart and, although aware of Mr. Darcy's social standing, she maintains her own opinion and expresses it truthfully. While Caroline seeks Mr. Darcy's approval because of his affluence, Elizabeth gives no thought to gaining financial security through marriage, simultaneously reinforcing her feminist stance against Caroline (Chang 78). Furthermore, reason allows Elizabeth to control her emotions, even when anger takes over. Such a situation occurs during Darcy's first proposal, when Elizabeth makes it clear that his interference in Jane's happiness with Mr. Bingley is something she cannot forgive. Although a majority of women during that time would jump at the opportunity of marrying rich, it is proven again that reason and a well-educated mind cannot allow such wickedness. In representing brave and moral women, Austen echoes Wollstonecraft's ideas and functions as a brave writer herself: "This portrayal of women as active agents in their own lives was groundbreaking for its time and helped challenge prevailing attitudes towards women's roles and capabilities" (Kademani 4). Standing her ground secures Elizabeth Darcy's respect, and respect is exactly what Wollstonecraft highlights as crucial in a relationship (261). Furthermore, Elizabeth's reason allows her to recognize her wrongful behaviour regarding Darcy and Wickham as she calls herself "blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (Austen 145). This leads to the change in her character, which only the acquired strength of mind will allow. Elizabeth also manages to impact Mr. Darcy's perceptions, which is why *Pride and Prejudice* is often proclaimed by scholars to be a feminist text, according to Chang (77).

The next Bennet sister is Mary. She is the third, middle, sister, and described as the only plain one, so she tries to make up for that deficit with knowledge and accomplishments. "Mary had

neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manners, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached" (Austen 16). Mary admits society's claim on everyone, so allowing amusement on occasion is something she finds desirable; however, she distances herself from the pleasures which generally captivate the female mind as they "have no charms for *me* – I should infinitely prefer a book" (Austen 155). Unlike the more balanced two elder sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, Mary is too intellectual, but this still seems to be a less undesirable trait than excessive emotionality.

Finally, the two youngest Bennet sisters, Catherine (Kitty) and Lydia, are far from being considered accomplished (unlike Georgiana Darcy, Mr. Darcy's sister, who is similar in age to them): "their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening . . . They could talk nothing but officers" (Austen 19). Although Jane and Elizabeth often tried to dissipate their imprudence, Mrs. Bennet's support prevented their improvement. They were "ignorant, idle, and vain" (Austen 149), and could only offer youth and good humour to a potential husband. Lydia's marriage to Wickham is an example of a matrimony in which passion takes precedence over friendship and respect; the question arises as to how happy such a couple may be as their passions "were stronger than their virtue" (Austen 217). Wollstonecraft believes that a rational mind would allow the passion in marriage to subside into friendship (195), but Lydia and Wickham losing that passion lose everything as the foundation upon which they built their marriage is non-existent: "If Charlotte Lucas is the foil that shows how Elizabeth puts the proper amount of stress on economics, then Lydia is the foil that displays how she places the right amount of importance on passion" (Eberle 12). Luckily, Lydia's marriage resulted in a move across the country which meant that Catherine (also known as Kitty), surrounded by the sensible Jane Bingley and Elizabeth Darcy in a society superior to what she had known prior, finally improved: "She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia; and, removed from the influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid" (Austen 271).

Overall, reason and virtue found their place in this Austen novel as well. The distinction based on the degree of intelligence and reasonableness between the Bennet sisters is made already on the second page, as their father says that "they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters" (Austen 2). However, as the audience gets to know the sisters a bit better, they find out that only Kitty and Lydia are truly silly and ignorant.

Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary, although having certain personality drawbacks (like conceit in Mary's case), are proper examples of educated women who are thus reasonable and virtuous. Lydia, however, showcases what it means to irretrievably lack reason and virtue: "she has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and for the last half-year, nay, for a 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 . . . nothing but love, flirtation, and officers have been in her head" (Austen 196). No interests besides men and running from pleasure to pleasure are the foundation of every uneducated woman, as Wollstonecraft states (130), and Lydia is no different. After her reputation-ruining escapade, Mr. Bennet tells Kitty that she is never to "stir out of doors till you can prove that you have spent ten minutes of every day in a rational manner" (Austen 208).

However, Eberle says that Lydia's predicament happens because her father "fails to protect her from herself, Colonel Forster fails to protect her from others, and Wickham fails to protect her from the ills of society. If it is the man's job to preserve women under the ideology of the domestic sphere, then Lydia has slipped through the cracks" (13). Eberle's arguments are certainly plausible, since men at the time were highlighted as moral and reasonable beings responsible for women's both livelihood and behaviour. Consequently, all of these men failed in their designated roles. Moreover, reason and virtue are closely related to propriety. Throughout the novel, it is those without reason and virtue that act improperly: "In vain did Elizabeth endeavour to check the rapidity of her mother's words, or persuade her to describe her felicity in a less audible whisper" (Austen 70). Elizabeth, however, does not attach sharing one's honest opinion to propriety in general, as she gives her opinion "very decidedly" (Austen 116), but this might be perceived as improper to some. She does not allow others, men or women, to treat her as a subordinate. One instance which proves this is the conversation between her and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, during which Elizabeth tells her that the Lady is not entitled to her concerns and that she will act in a manner which will constitute her happiness, without reference to Lady Catherine or anyone who is unconnected to her. Accordingly, Elizabeth shows that, although aware of the importance that a woman's reputation carries, she will not surrender to artificial pleasantness, again echoing Wollstonecraft's views on this matter. The opinion of others might matter (Lydia's recklessness shows just how immense the consequences of lost reputation are both for the individual and those closest to them), but Elizabeth's contentment with herself matters more.

When it comes to intellectual pursuits, Wollstonecraft says that women are confined to trifling employments, which results in their inability to grasp anything of significance (272). They are disinterested in topics of any depth. Conversely, men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention and give them character (112). Women, having their thoughts directed to the most insignificant aspects of life, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour, as proven by Caroline Bingley: "How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of a year! Letters of business, too! How odious I should think them!" (Austen 32). She "represents the stereotypical Regency-era woman who has been well educated according to societal expectations, but she does not value intellectual achievements" (Chang 78). Unlike Caroline, Elizabeth values intellectual pursuits even without the formal education. "Her lack of educational training is juxtaposed with Caroline's traditional female upbringing to accentuate foil contrast" (Chang 78). Trimming hats and talking of the balls which are soon to be held are just some of the daily employments of the female characters in the novel. Moreover, Mr. Bingley paints an accurate picture of the ladies' accomplishments during Austen's time, stating that all of them "paint tables, cover screens, and net purses" (Austen 26). Caroline Bingley adds to the list music, singing, drawing, dancing, and learning modern languages, with an additional proper manner of walking, tone of voice, and expressions (to which Darcy adds being well-read). Elizabeth disagrees with their list as she believes it to be overinflated. In one instance, Elizabeth reminds the audience of Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, as she finds herself entertained as never before while talking about travelling, new books, and music with Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy's cousin. "Elizabeth's feminist view on female achievement reflects the understanding that a woman's sense of accomplishment should not rest on the standards determined by Caroline and Mr. Darcy" (Chang 79). Wollstonecraft finds these accomplishments as a way to sacrifice strength of body and mind for the sake of establishing oneself by marriage, as these accomplishments do not allow cultivation of understanding (74), while Austen shows that, in some cases (for example, in the case of Caroline and Louisa), accomplishments are followed by snobbery. Women are, therefore, made ridiculous and useless once their beauty is gone.

Wollstonecraft also judges women who are fond of dressing up, as this interest accentuates women's desire to please by making themselves agreeable to men (276). Lydia, of course, mentions fashion throughout the novel (next to the topic of men, which occupies her mind at all times), and specifically mentions how it does not matter what "one wears this summer, after the ----shire have left Meryton" (Austen 152). Lydia's interests are listed in one of the letters to her mother, as she mentions officers, ornaments, and clothing. Furthermore, her reason and virtue

are nowhere near developed, let alone strengthened by any sort of stimulating activity, and all of this is followed by a lack of propriety. Of course, Lydia is not the only one obsessing over the regiment, as the majority of young ladies in the neighbourhood often exclaimed in the bitterness of woe: "Good Heaven! what is to become of us? What are we to do?" (Austen 159), once the militia left. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft mentions how, regrettably, physical activity was not common for a lady (109); however, Elizabeth often indulges herself in air and exercise. "Elizabeth, through her rejection of traditional Regency female behaviour, such as her enjoyment of exercise . . . portrays a want for the autonomy that was unavailable to women of the time" (Chang 77). A woman without reason would consider her silly, such as Mrs. Bennet, who sees walking as a way to appear unfit afterwards; again, in the mind of a foolish woman, appearance takes precedence over everything else. Wollstonecraft believes it should be acceptable for women to be physically active as it would help strengthen their constitution and it would stop them from behaving like frail beings, which would ultimately lead to respect from the male half of the population (132-33).

In addition, Wollstonecraft's belief that novels overstretch women's sensibility and draw them away from daily duties, as those are the books of no apparent depth, is represented in the character of Mr. Collins, who connects the serious stamp with proper instruction for the young ladies. Susan J. Wolfson says that Wollstonecraft viewed novels as "junk-reading" (114), as she believed them to be the type of fiction which makes women "restless and anxious" (131) and which "prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station" (131). With regard to the last part, as in being content with its own station, Elizabeth happily marrying up the social scale is the type of a plot point which Wollstonecraft worried about regarding novels (Wolfson 121), as such scenarios would most likely implant an improbable idea in a woman's mind. However, Mr. Collins' character is seen as ridiculous and it seems that Austen tries to show just how absurd the general belief regarding novels is, as she makes it out to be a "rational pursuit in *Pride and Prejudice* . . . saving her lash for 'accomplished' ladies such as Miss Bingley, to whom a book is no more than a prop of self-promotion" (Wolfson 114). Indeed, rather than being written for the purpose of romanticizing women's lives, Austen's novels are "satirical" and critical of "social circumstances that cause a women's [sic] dependence on marriage for social and economic security" (Matek 51). Austen's opinion is firmly proven in the fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, which she dedicated to the "defence" of reading novels (Matek 52).

Conclusion

The aim of this master's thesis was analysing Jane Austen's novels from the viewpoint of Mary Wollstonecraft's attitudes about the position of women in late-eighteenth-century society as well as her ideas on how to improve it, and to show that the two writers shared their views on problems that cause women's subordination and on possible solutions to this problem. By this point, it is clear that Wollstonecraft has a clear idea of what women should strive for and, in every chapter (although all of them discuss different topics), she comes back to the same proposal: that exercising the mind is crucial, and that sensibility alone distracts women from achieving what they are capable of because they are occupied by inessential topics which hinder the achievement of the strength of mind necessary to realize that their position in the society is unacceptable. Thus, the main aspect that needs to change is their education.

With that in mind, this "Amazon of the pen" was, without a doubt, a radical who strongly believed that women's apparent weaknesses are actually a product of their miseducation, not a natural occurrence, and with such statements, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) represents the beginning of modern feminism. In it, Wollstonecraft approaches femininity as an artificial construct – a radical, pioneering notion proven later in the twentieth century thanks to the development of gender theory – which women exploit, simultaneously indirectly consenting to their inferior position. She advocates against education which focuses solely on making a pleasant wife out of a woman, while disregarding all her other qualities and potentials, and fights for the education which will provide women with reason and virtue.

A couple of decades later, Jane Austen emerges with her novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* that share the same notions. As Poovey has put it, reading Austen's novels in the context of Wollstonecraft's work, one is reminded that Austen also lived through and wrote about the crisis of values in the society as she wrote about the process of a young girl's maturation and the relationship between women's desires and the imperatives of propriety (21). In her debut novel, Austen places the focus on the Dashwood sisters Elinor and Marianne, the former representing sense and the latter sensibility. This can be closely connected with the reoccurring idea of reason and virtue in Wollstonecraft's founding feminist text. A series of dialogues between the sisters allows their characterization in opposition to one another. Furthermore, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, from the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, are the second pair of sisters worth mentioning, in which the eldest obediently submits to the society's rules of pleasantness, while Elizabeth represents a more modern woman. The topic of marriage

dominates in this novel, as characters such as the frivolous Lydia Bennet and the conventional Charlotte Lucas function as foils to Elizabeth who only wants to marry out of affection.

Overall, Austen's novels revolve around the idea that a woman should "reflect on her actions and thoughts and learn her own mind instead of simply focusing on pleasing men" (McElligott 94). After a thorough analysis, it is evident that Austen wrote novels which align with the ideas mentioned in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, proving their pioneering roles in feminist literature.

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