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Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2933003
Accessed: 15-01-2016 09:47 UTC

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Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition

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It has been customary in the past to approach Jane Austen, not only as a great novelist, but also as a representative of what critics have called the "feminist tradition" in the English novel. At first glance this seems appropriate enough. After all it has always been one of those "universally acknowledged" truths that Jane Austen's narratives center on love and marriage. But what, precisely, is the "feminist" tradition? Are there any significant connections between the "feminist" themes attributed to Jane Austen by a critic like Frank W. Bradbrook, Jr. and the "feminist" viewpoints of contemporary women's liberation movements? It is fairly clear that when Bradbrook speaks of the feminist tradition in the English novel he is not concerned with feminism-as-liberation in the revolutionist sense. He means, quite simply, that English letters have included a number of novelists (Burney, Edgeworth, Radcliffe, and Austen, for example) who happened to be female and whose themes (whatever their nature) happened to be similar.¹ In other words, this definition of the "feminist" tradition is the customary analogical thesis which is based, not on some concept of the novelist as a searching analyst of women's roles, but on what Inga-Stina Ewbank contemptuously dismisses as "a collective classification as a 'female novelist.'"²

On the other hand, more recent developments in Jane Austen criticism seem to assume that feminism in the novel should be ex-

amined not merely as a "collective classification," but as a coherent body of opinions held by the novelist on the identity and social functions of women. And insofar as this approach is based on the novelist's (assumed) analysis of female identity, it seems to respond to contemporary pressures, generated by the liberation movement, for thoughtful evaluation of female images in society and in literature. But even if we assume that the liberation movement has had this indirect influence, it does not follow that these recent approaches to "feminism" coincide with the liberationist philosophy itself, or that they even depart from those conventional notions of "womanhood" which are anathema to the women's liberation movement.

Sylvia H. Myers' study of "womanhood" in Jane Austen's novels is illustrative. The starting point of her paper is an objection to Ian Watts's view that in Jane Austen "feminine and adolescent values are painfully educated in the norms of the mature, rational and educated male world." But although Myers rejects Watts's thesis as a "bald dichotomy" that is unfair to women, her own subsequent analysis of "womanhood" in Jane Austen's novels is based on what she herself describes as a "post-Freudian" schema: "in terms of somatic existence each sex exists within its own bodily plan, woman is endowed with and aware of her inner structure and capacity to produce and nurture a child," and, according to this somatic scheme of womanhood, the maturation of an Emma Woodhouse is defined by Emma's discovery of her own need "for love, for physical fulfillment, for children." Curiously enough, Myers has attempted to rebut the pejorative implications of Ian Watts's "bald dichotomy" by appealing to those biologically based concepts of womanhood which have now come into disrepute as limiting and patronizing definitions of female identity. For it is important to

5 Myers, pp. 227, 230.
note that Myers is not merely *attributing* a certain (somatic) concept of womanhood to Jane Austen, but has actually postulated this "post-Freudian" thesis as the definitive standard by which feminism in Jane Austen should be judged. Similarly, an avowedly psychoanalytical study by Helen Storm Corsa sums up the significance of Emma Woodhouse's human growth by appealing to the conventional image of the woman as a being with "instinctual" needs for marriage and motherhood: "Her [Emma's] womanly instinctual needs, her desire for love, for marriage, for motherhood are all obvious in her role as matchmaker; her insistent playing out that role, leads her out of the game into reality." 7 Another psychoanalytical study by E. Margaret Moore differs from Myers' and Corsa's in that Moore perceives Jane Austen herself as a kind of unreformed Emma. But the underlying assumption about "ideal" womanhood is the same: womanhood means emotional fulfillment through (a) sexual "dependency" and (b) motherhood. Moore therefore sees Jane Austen as a "cynical" misogamist who hates being dependent in love and sex (due to an allegedly poor relationship with the novelist's mother) and who dislikes children (because "envy of the maternal role is to be expected in a childless woman").

These earlier studies are relevant here because they illustrate very well some of the problems which now arise whenever we attempt to describe "feminism" or "womanhood" in Jane Austen's writing or that of any other writer. And among these problems, two of the most pressing are terminology and critical approaches. First, the contemporary social movements now seek to revolutionize the woman's role by restructuring old images and descriptions of women, and, consequently, we need to be precise in our use of familiar terms like "feminism" and "womanhood." As I have already suggested, the "collective classification" of the old literary phrase, "feminist tradition," is not related to the specific, humanistic criteria (liberation and full equality, for example) which female revolutionists (i.e., "feminists") have applied to the term "feminism." Moreover, notwithstanding her apparatus of concern on behalf of women, and

versus male condescension, a critic like Sylvia Myers is using the words “feminine” and “womanhood” within a frame of reference which has been repeatedly attacked by the liberationists as restrictive and demeaning. And this, in turn, leads to the second problem—the issue of critical approaches. For once we recognize that there has been a long-lived “feminist tradition” in the liberationist sense, once we accept, as we must, that the revolutionist’s feminism was a significant fact of life even before Jane Austen’s work was first published, then it follows that the collective classification of the literary historian and the post-Freudian speculations of the psychoanalyst are not necessarily the only feasible approaches to “feminism” in Jane Austen’s fiction.

In other words, we need to examine female images in Jane Austen’s work in relation to the liberationist philosophy of that “feminist tradition” which preceded Jane Austen in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, and which, of course, has blossomed into the feminist revolt of our time. And, in the process, we should be able to answer some of the questions which have been raised about her female roles. Does the focus on marriage as a narrative goal in the novels mean that Jane Austen accepts the conventional notion of woman’s “instinctual” needs for sexual “dependency” and child-bearing? Is marriage presented as a sacrosanct, self-justifying goal, or does it symbolize the fruition, or failure, of certain human relationships? Conversely, is her satiric treatment of love and marriage in some works due to a pathological fear of sexuality or to spinsterly envy, as some critics would have us believe? Or does it arise from the feminist’s skepticism, not about sex and marriage per se, but about the way in which both have functioned in the woman’s identity? Finally, in linking Jane Austen with the feminist tradition of revolt in the eighteenth century we need not begin with the assumption that we must establish complete parallels with all facets of the twentieth-century feminists’ revolt. Obviously Jane Austen is not involved with questions of androgynous marriages, so-called “new” moralities in sex, or with the socioeconomics of equal opportunities. But, nonetheless, her themes are comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of a Mary Wollstonecraft insofar as such feminism questioned certain masculine assumptions in society.

In *Persuasion* Anne Elliot makes this kind of questioning fairly explicit when she remarks on the male domination of education and
literature: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (234). Moreover, Anne is equally frank on the subject of female dependency, especially in sexual relationships: “All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you [men] need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (Persuasion, 235). Anne Elliot’s remarks seem to be more than a protest against the male’s abuse of his socioliterary prerogatives. She seems, in her own quiet way, to be questioning the assumption that inequalities and differences in society and education are beyond regret, and redress. Her pointed emphasis on the woman’s unenviable capacity for tender and long-lived emotions is suggestive because its tone contradicts the main thesis of those male “experts” on the eighteenth-century woman who were familiar to Jane Austen. Thomas Gisborne’s Enquiry in the Duties of the Female Sex (1797) defines the “glory of the female sex” with such terms as “amiable tenderness,” “modesty,” “delicacy,” “warmth and tenderness.” And James Fordyce’s Sermons to Young Women (1766) links this principle of tenderness with the familiar biological thesis. Nature had formed women’s faculties “with less vigour than those of ours; observing the same distinctions here, as in the more delicate frame of your bodies.” Thus the woman’s natural area of influence “has its heart for its object, and is secured by meekness and modesty, by soft attraction and virtuous love. . . . It is not the argumentative but the sentimental talents, which give you that insight and those openings into the human heart, that lead to your principal ends, as women.”

Obviously there is a world of difference between Gisborne’s enthusiasm description of the “glory of the female sex” and the skeptical reserve of Anne Elliot’s understatements. And, at the same time,


Bradbrook, p. 26, thinks that Anne’s remarks are no more than a rejoinder to the patronizing treatment of women in The Tatler and The Spectator.

those distinctions which Fordyce adduces are of special interest here because they are identical to that biological analogy which Anne Elliot hears from Captain Harville: "I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings" (Persuasion, 233). Now Anne does seize upon this "spirit of analogy," as she calls it, in order to claim that, by the same token, a woman’s feelings are "most tender." But she does not appear to accept the biological analogy except as an ironic means of turning Captain Harville’s argument against himself. For when Anne does expand upon what she regards as the sources of female “feelings” and attitudes, she talks in terms of sociocentric influences rather than in terms of inherently female traits predetermined by biological destiny. In other words, those “unenviable” qualities which are supposed to be the “glory of the female sex” really result from the woman’s conditioning in a male-oriented world. And when she outlines this sociocentric interpretation of long-lived female emotions her language is anything but self-congratulatory: "It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us." As for men, their busy rounds on behalf of "home, country, friends" spare them the dubious glory of being the "prey" of constant feelings (Persuasion, 232, 233).

Moreover, when we link Anne’s remarks with a major thematic argument in Persuasion as a whole, it is clear that Jane Austen is rejecting a biologically inspired concept of human perception and feeling. Thus Anne’s own maturation involves a progression from the vulnerable “tenderness” of an overly persuadable youth to the firm, but humane, feelings of her adulthood. And, of course, this synthesis of strength and feeling is intensified in the self-reliant Mrs. Smith, who survives because she is more than a merely “submissive” or “resigned” woman: “this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only.—A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven" (Persuasion, 154). Conversely, Captain Wentworth, who embodies that kind of “strength” by which Captain Harville defines the “male character,”
matures on the basis of acquiring the "elasticity" and "tenderness" which the Gisbornes and the Fordyces of the eighteenth century restrict to the woman's "sentimental talents."

In effect, Jane Austen perceives "special" female emotions, not as a natural "talent," but as the unenviable results of social roles. Thus women like Anne Elliot mature by breaking away from rigidly dichotomous concepts of male and female emotions. And when Jane Austen challenges such concepts her position is comparable with that of Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Consequently, Anne Elliot's skepticism about the so-called glory of female tenderness is anticipated by Mary Wollstonecraft's insistence that this tenderness is merely a damaging result of social conditioning:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man... How grossly do they insult us who advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!12

As for long-lasting or long-lived affections, Mary Wollstonecraft is more scornfully direct than Anne Elliot, but her argument is essentially the same. Female constancy is a result of social conditioning, rather than inherent "sentimental talents": "A mistaken education, a narrow, uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men."13 And, looking even further ahead to the twentieth century, we find that Mary Wollstonecraft's attack on conventional notions of tenderness and constancy anticipates the modern liberationist's rejection of passivity as the "feminine" ideal.14

To sum up, the textual parallels between *Persuasion* and *Rights of Woman* suggest that there is a significant connection between Jane Austen and writers like Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject of

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13 Ibid., p. 64.
female "feelings," or to borrow a current label, on the "psychology of women." Moreover, Jane Austen's profeminism on this subject is comparable with her treatment of another female "question"—the education of women—especially in Pride and Prejudice in which the subject is more extensively debated than in any of the other novels. Of course the introduction of Catherine Morland's character in Northanger Abbey does make it clear that Jane Austen is conscious of female education in that novel; and the same is implied by the education themes in Mansfield Park or by the direct references to schools and the teaching profession in Emma. But it is in Pride and Prejudice that we are most aware of a conscious, and extended, preoccupation with conflicting concepts of education for women—and the relationship between that education and marriage. The conflicts are explicit in the differences between the Bennet sisters, in the parents' incompatible attitudes towards their own roles as mother and father, and in the spirited debate on "female accomplishment" at Netherfield. And in this discussion of female education Jane Austen's skepticism places her closer to Mary Wollstonecraft and more at odds with male "experts" like Fordyce and Gisborne than has usually been assumed. Frank Bradbrook, for example, claims, rather arbitrarily, that (a) Wollstonecraft's feminism is "extreme" and (b) that Jane Austen "despised" it accordingly. At the same time, the critic sees the ridicule of James Fordyce's Sermons in Pride and Prejudice as merely an emphasis that fiction (which the Bennet sisters prefer to the Sermons) is entertainment not to be confused with a sermon. And Jane Austen's expressed pleasure with Gisborne's Enquiry (Letters, 169) is assumed, again arbitrarily, to mean that she approves of his philosophy. But there is no documentary evidence that Jane Austen "despised" Mary Wollstonecraft; and in view of the similarities between Persuasion and Rights of Woman it seems perverse to assume that Jane Austen disliked Mary Wollstonecraft merely because she did not refer to her by name. The attack on biologically based definitions of female "feelings" in Persuasion also suggests that the ridicule of the Sermons in Pride and Prejudice is more than an absurdly obvious distinction between the novelist's art and Fordyce's dogmatism. And, by a similar token, Jane Austen's skepticism in Persuasion about

15 Bradbrook, pp. 5, 26, 33-34.
Gisborne’s view of feminine “tenderness” may be extended to his concept of female “accomplishments.”

As far as those “accomplishments” are concerned, Fordyce and Gisborne are agreed that women should avoid what are defined as masculine areas. According to Fordyce, “argumentative” talents are only sought by those “masculine women” who seek to share the male “province” of education;¹⁶ and Gisborne defines “accomplishments” as “ornamental acquisitions” (dancing, French, Italian, music) which are “designed” to supply “innocent and amusing occupations” and to keep the mind “in a state of placid cheerfulness.” Now this ornamental design on behalf of female placidity is hardly the “middle way” between what Bradbrook calls “reactionary” male views and “revolutionary . . . new women.” It is clearly a frank attempt to define women (through education) in terms of intellectual as well as social dependency. And as such, Gisborne’s Enquiry represents those views of women’s education which Mary Wollstonecraft attacks when she refers to “those books, which tend, in my opinion, to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.” Her idea of the “perfect education” is “such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart.” But, in her view, the prevailing standards of education encourage “contempt of the understanding in early life among women.”¹⁷ And when Wollstonecraft elaborates on the effects of this inferior education her conclusions anticipate Betty Friedan’s twentieth-century complaints about the manner in which sex-oriented media and popular male notions of “femininity” have created the “sex-seeker,” the woman who “bases her whole identity on her sexual role.”¹⁸ According to Wollstonecraft, “in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishments.” Indeed, this neglect of the understanding places women’s education on the same level as military training—with significant results: women naturally have “a passion” for the scarlet coat because “education placed them more on a level with soldiers than any other class of men”; and for

¹⁷ Wollstonecraft, pp. 52, 53.
¹⁸ Friedan, p. 254.
both soldiers and women gallantry is the "business" of life.\textsuperscript{19}

When these two contrasting views of women's education are applied to the characters and themes of \textit{Pride and Prejudice} it is not difficult to determine where Jane Austen's real sympathies lie. At first glance, Mary Bennet's erudite absurdities seem to imply that Jane Austen accepts James Fordyce's attack on those masculine women who seek argumentative rather than sentimental talents. But Mary Bennet's intellectual pretensions are absurd precisely because she lacks that strong understanding which Wollstonecraft attributes to a sound education. In the absence of that kind of education Mary collects trite aphorisms and pompous clichés from all those limited handbooks on moral philosophy, history, and biography which Fordyce would allow to women for the shaping of their "principal ends as women."\textsuperscript{20} And like Gisborne's ideal woman Mary Bennet displays these limited intellectual pickings as "ornamental acquisitions" which compensate for her lack of "corporeal" accomplishments. She wears her "little learning" like Lydia and Kitty displaying their newest ribbons, or like Miss Bingley parading her figure through the Netherfield drawing room for Mr. Darcy's benefit. Mary's intellectual absurdities are therefore a form of vanity (or improper pride), like her sisters' and Miss Bingley's: "though vanity had given [Mary] application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner" (\textit{Pride and Prejudice}, 25). Their self-centered aggressions are all based on a superficial, or largely physical, estimate of their own worth. We therefore have ironic links, not only between Mary's intellectual display and Lydia's "animal spirits," but also between the snobbish Miss Bingley and the Bennet sisters whom Miss Bingley so heartily despises. Miss Bingley, Lydia, and Kitty are all sex-seekers, determined to complete their identity within a narrow concept of sexual roles—a concept that is embodied, on the parental level, by Mrs. Bennet, whose "business" in life is getting her daughters married (\textit{Pride and Prejudice}, 5). And it is significant that, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen reinforces this sex-seeker image of the miseducated female by bringing up the military analogy in Lydia's "passion for a scarlet coat." Indeed, from a certain point of view, the eventual marriage of

\textsuperscript{19} Wollstonecraft, pp. 54, 56.
\textsuperscript{20} Fordyce, p. 162.
Lydia and Wickham is a ritualistic confirmation of the parallels which Mary Wollstonecraft underscores between the biological norms of "corporeal" accomplishments for women, and the anti-intellectual training of the sensual red-coat.

By comparison, the accomplishments of the Bertram sisters in *Mansfield Park* are clearly modeled on the ideals of Gisborne's "placid cheerfulness" and Fordyce's "sentimental talents"—as we may gather from the narrator's comment: "with all their promising talents and early information they [were] entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught" (*Mansfield Park*, 19). As their adult escapades with Henry Crawford demonstrate, they are being educated to become sex-seekers. Or, to borrow Mary Wollstonecraft's remark about this "ornamental" approach to education, the Bertram sisters have been rendered "pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue." Finally, Emma's matchmaking schemes are a vicarious form of sex-seeking which may be linked with the deficient education that Mr. Knightley deplores: "I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding" (*Emma*, 37).

When we turn from Jane Austen's exposé of defective education to her presentation of less "ornamental" accomplishments, her affinities with Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism are equally clear. To return to *Pride and Prejudice*, the discussion of "accomplished" women, at Netherfield, centers on a contrast between the ornamental ideal and the moral and intellectual excellence demanded by Mary Wollstonecraft. As a spokesman for the latter viewpoint, Darcy is satisfied neither by Charles Bingley's naïve concept of accomplished women ("they all paint tables, cover skreens and net purses"), nor by Miss Bingley's snobbery (a "thorough knowledge" of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, together with "a certain something" in appearance). Darcy's retort emphasizes standards which place him closer to the Wollstonecraft tradition of feminism, and in the process he displays a sensitivity that belies his forbidding manners: "All this she must possess . . . and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the
improvement of her mind by extensive reading.” Elizabeth’s rejoinder is skeptical: “I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance . . . united” (Pride and Prejudice, 39–40). However, her skepticism is not really a rejection of Darcy’s standards as such, but an ironic confirmation of the dominance of ornamental and snobbishly superficial accomplishments in the world as it is. For if the marriage of Lydia and Wickham combines the ornamental talents of the mere sex-seekers, then the eventual union of Darcy and Elizabeth emphasizes the superiority of the truly accomplished mind as it is defined by Darcy. Elizabeth herself is obviously intended to approximate the Darcy (and Wollstonecraft) ideal. The “quickness” which her father admires and the “liveliness of . . . mind” which attracts Darcy are similar to that superior understanding which Mary Wollstonecraft attributes to sound accomplishments. And it is noteworthy that when Mrs. Bennet refers scornfully to Elizabeth’s intellectuality, at Netherfield, her language is a striking indication of the similarities between Jane Austen’s heroine and Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideal woman. Thus Mrs. Bennet admonishes her daughter not to “run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home” (Pride and Prejudice, 42). But in Mary Wollstonecraft’s view this is precisely the kind of “wildness” that indicates a healthy and independent mind: “most of the women, in the circle of my observation, who have acted like rational creatures, or shown any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild—as some of the elegant formers of the fair sex would insinuate.”

To sum up, the experiences and statements of Jane Austen’s heroines, especially in Persuasion and Pride and Prejudice, suggest that Jane Austen is sympathetic to the eighteenth-century feminist revolt against narrow male definitions of female personality and women’s education. In turn, this clear interest in “female feelings” and in the limitations of sex-oriented education brings up the vexed issue of Jane Austen’s attitude toward sexuality, especially in relation to the identity and conduct of women in her fiction. It is still fashionable to portray Jane Austen as the frustrated spinster who is afraid of dealing with sexual passion (with what Sylvia Myers delicately calls the “senses”) or, according to Margaret Moore’s sensa-

21 Wollstonecraft, p. 81.
tionalist rhetoric, that Jane Austen is in "flight from heterosexual passion." But the myth of the asexual Jane Austen novel is more revealing of our surfeited twentieth-century "senses" than it is of Jane Austen's work. The implications of Lydia Bennet's "high animal spirits" and her "elopement" with Wickham should be clear enough. So should be Maria Bertram's indiscretions, or Miss Steele's obsessive interest in "beaux." Marvin Mudrick at least recognizes that she does not avoid the subject of sexual passion, but he deduces her standards from a discredited view of Jane Austen's social morality: she attacks "sensibility" and passionate love in Love and Freindship because she "prefers a world in which the ego, disciplined against expression, may be safely treated as a constant of inadequacy . . . incapable of fulfilling its social requirements." But what is really being attacked in Love and Freindship is the hypocrisy which enables Laura and her kind to pretend that their "sensibility" is an emotional and moral ideal which is opposed to a selfish and materialistic world. Laura's so-called sensibility is really a narrow self-interest in matters of money (she and her friends steal or refuse to repay debts), family ties (contrived rebellions against obviously reasonable parents), and, of course, sex (casual, instantaneous affairs disguised as idealistic love). Indeed, terms like "love," "friendship," and "sensibility" are ironic partly because their normally idealistic connotations are undercut by the selfish sexuality of Laura and her friends.

Once again the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft shed some light on Jane Austen's themes, for the use of "sensibility" as an ironic euphemism in Love and Freindship may be compared with Wollstonecraft's criticism of the sexual obsessions of superficially educated women:

In fact, from the education, which [women] receive from society, the love of pleasure may be said to govern them all. . . . In short, women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and

22 Myers, p. 231; also, see Moore, pp. 574, 575.
vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit. . . . Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling.

In other words, quite apart from all the well-known burlesque themes in *Love and Freindship*, Jane Austen’s satire on sensibility is explained by her affinities with the feminist tradition of the eighteenth century rather than by neo-Freudian urges to “flee” from “heterosexual passion” as such. And the severe treatment of Lydia Bennet’s sexual escapades in *Pride and Prejudice* should be perceived in the light of these affinities rather than on the basis of what Marvin Mudrick describes as Jane Austen’s “fogbank of bourgeois morality.”

Indeed, far from being a prisoner of the bourgeois “fogbank,” Jane Austen attacks the male’s self-serving definition of sexual morality, especially Samuel Richardson’s notorious views on female modesty. According to Richardson, it is “an heterodoxy” that a woman should be in love with a man before he declares his love. Jane Austen first takes issue with this assumption in *Lady Susan* when Lady Susan herself ridicules her daughter’s love for Reginald De Courcy by echoing Richardson’s masculine morality: “I shall ever despise the Man who can be gratified by the Passion, which he never wished to inspire, nor solicited the avowal of” (*Minor Works*, 282). This kind of illogic is uncharacteristic of the usually cold-blooded Lady Susan, and this incongruity points up Jane Austen’s satire on Richardson’s dogma. Lady Susan’s outburst also reveals that, despite all the trappings of the libertine, Lady Susan is still dominated by male notions of morality and female sexuality. Or, more precisely, Jane Austen implies that Lady Susan’s aggressive and domineering libertinism is not a rejection but actually an acceptance of the status quo in which the woman’s conduct, and even assumptions about her sexual responses, are predetermined by male prejudices and phobias disguised as “morality.” For as Lady Susan herself is at pains to emphasize, she is the accomplished coquette,

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24 Wollstonecraft, pp. 104–5.
25 Mudrick, p. 120.
one who hungers for sexual and social power: "There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority." And when she does "subdue" Reginald, "my desire of dominion was never more decided" (Minor Works, 254, 258). But Reginald's subsequent desertion to her daughter Frederica and the masculine morality with which Lady Susan reacts to it suggest that Jane Austen is underscoring the falsity of the coquette's ethos of power—that this "power" is short-lived at best and generally illusory in that the coquette's ground rules accept the male's restrictive definitions of the woman's role and responses. Or, to return to Mary Wollstonecraft:

Women . . . sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men; and they may well glory in their illicit sway, for, like Turkish bashaws, they have more real power than their masters; but virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour.

Women, as well as despots, have now, perhaps, more power than they would have if the world, divided and subdivided into kingdoms and families, were governed by laws deduced from the exercise of reason; but in obtaining it, to carry on the comparison, their character is degraded, and licentiousness spread through the whole aggregate of society.27

Jane Austen returns to the attack in Northanger Abbey when she concentrates on the psychological unrealities of Richardson's view of women's sexual experiences. Catherine Morland has obviously been guilty of a Richardsonian heterodoxy for she has fallen in love with Henry Tilney before he has declared his passion:

They danced again, and, when the assembly closed, parted, on the lady's side at least, with a strong inclination for continuing the acquaintance. Whether she thought of him so much, while she drank her warm wine and water; and prepared herself for bed, as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained; but I hope it was no more than in a slight slumber, or a morning doze at most; for if it be true, as a celebrated writer has maintained, that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her. (Northanger Abbey, 29–30).

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27 Wollstonecraft, p. 77.
Or, as the narrator observes sarcastically, "I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought" (Northanger Abbey, 243). Conversely, Jane Bennet's inscrutability and the "modest" concealment of her regard for Bingley are perfectly in accord with Richardson's prescription, but they simply convince Bingley, and the watchful Darcy, of her indifference (Pride and Prejudice, 197).

In effect, Jane Austen's satire on Richardson's illogical notion of modesty raises questions about the male's attitude toward female sexuality—especially the man's assumption that sexual instincts in women are, or should be, suppressed to a purely responsive level. In their own different ways both Lady Susan and Jane Bennet are prisoners of this repressive image of womanhood. And in "liberating" Catherine Morland from this image, Jane Austen anticipated the modern feminists who attack Puritan and Freudian conventions which have restricted the woman's identity by denying her the right (even the natural ability) to express her sexual desires on terms of equality with men.28

Finally, Jane Austen's treatment of marriage in her work is best understood in relation to her skepticism about male definitions of female emotions, sexuality, education, and modesty. The similarities with Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas and the feminist tradition as a whole suggest that such skepticism questions conventional assumptions about marriage, insofar as those assumptions are rooted in a restrictive view of the woman's identity. On the whole Jane Austen seems to be little concerned with marriage as a socially sanctified and self-justifying goal. And this apparent indifference to marriage in such terms complements her consistent reserve about male definitions of women as marital partners whose "business," according to James Fordyce, "chiefly is to read Men, in order to make [themselves] agreeable and useful."29 Consequently, we need to distinguish between the importance of marriage as a symbolic event in the denouement of each novel and the relative lack of emphasis on the marital experience as such. When Jane Austen does examine

29 Fordyce, p. 162.
marriage as an institution she concentrates on the failures, and most of her parents are unsuccessful in their roles. Moreover, the feminist criteria by which parental failures are judged are rather explicit in the portrayals of Mrs. Bennet and Lady Bertram.

As I have already suggested, Mrs. Bennet is the conventionally educated woman whose sex-oriented view of women's roles limits her ambitions in her own marriage, and, eventually, in the marriages of her daughters. And her narrowly female expectations of marriage as a self-justifying end are matched by and implicitly attributed to the male's proprietary view of women as possessions: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 3). Similarly, the opening paragraph of *Mansfield Park* is not only a satire on excessively materialistic standards in marriage, but also an exposé of the assumption that marriage is a totally fulfilling goal—for women: "About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to capture Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park. . . . She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage" (*Mansfield Park*, 3). As for Lady Bertram, the "easy and indolent" temper which makes her such an ineffective mother recalls those women whom Mary Wollstonecraft despises because their education (especially in sexual and intellectual passivity) has "destined" them to be wives: "They were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine." And her contempt is even more direct in the series of rhetorical questions that follow: "Do passive indolent women make the best wives? . . . And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children?"

In the absence of any enthusiastic endorsement of marriage as the woman's sacrosanct destiny, it appears that marriage in Jane Austen's fiction is primarily a literary convention which symbolizes the

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31 Wollstonecraft, p. 69.
successful maturation of human relationships within each novel. Hence Emma Woodhouse’s misogamy is satirized, not because Jane Austen has anticipated the post-Freudian’s “somatic” concept of womanhood, but because the novelist, quite simply, is dramatizing one of several ways in which Emma’s foibles blind her to truths about herself and about her relationships with others (in this case, her love for Mr. Knightley). Moreover, the role of marriage in Emma’s experience is typical of its positive function in Jane Austen’s fiction as a whole. It is not merely some predefined goal for which education and the individual will must be molded. Instead it celebrates the union or eventual compatibility of personalities that have been freed from (a) the perceptual and moral failings of their individual selves (Catherine Morland’s Gothic naiveté, Marianne Dashwood’s emotionalism, Elizabeth Bennet’s pride and prejudice, and so forth) and (b) conventional, restricting notions of “female feelings,” education, and sexual passion. And such a liberationist principle is the essence of the eighteenth-century feminist tradition within which Jane Austen writes.