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The Value of Female Reason

Echoes of Wollstonecraft in Jane Austen's
Pride and Prejudice and *Sense and Sensibility*

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Abstract

This essay examines the connection between Jane Austen's first two novels, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and the ideas represented in Mary Wollstonecraft's proto-feminist treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The thesis explores how Wollstonecraft's work likely influenced Austen, as many of the concerns raised in these novels closely correspond to the progressive topics addressed in Wollstonecraft's tract. Indeed, the essay analyses how the novels are not merely conservative Regency courtship plots because of their underlying critical tone that subtly critiques women's contemporary education. In particular, the primary focus of this essay is to discern the moments within *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* that support Austen's preference for reason. More specifically, by exploring the use of specific character types and the didactic tone throughout these novels, the thesis concludes that Austen presents a clear lesson that women's ability for critical thinking is of immense importance. First, women's status and the reductive constructions of womanhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are considered, to provide context for the unfair gender norms that Wollstonecraft and Austen, in their own way, rise against. Furthermore, the essay reviews how Austen implicitly argues for the benefits of teaching women to cultivate their rational thinking skills by showing how mindless adherence to empty propriety and sentimentality has a negative effect on her characters. Lastly, the essay demonstrates how Austen repeats one of Wollstonecraft's central arguments that society would largely improve by bettering women's education. In other words, Austen implies that the application of sound judgement, which her self-aware heroines adopt, protects women from unnecessary harm, contributes to true modesty, and produces self-reliant individuals. The overall conclusion is that Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* convey the message that without reason, women remain vulnerable and perpetuate ignorance.

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1. Introduction

The value of a good education is priceless. Not only does it enrich the mind, but it further encourages critical thinking and allows individuals to fulfil their potential as rational beings. Although Jane Austen has long been criticised for the limited scope of her subject matter, it is worth noting that the significance of reason does not go unnoticed in her works. Even though Austen's novels certainly deal with the lives and marriages of the landed gentry, she also deals with issues that go beyond those typically broached in romantic comedies of the Regency era (Brownstein 35). By exploring the ways in which Jane Austen's novels shed light on the detrimental effects of neglecting female education, it becomes clear how her novels simultaneously form part of a more radical debate.

Sir Leslie Stephen's 1876 article in *Cornhill Magazine* is a great example of how critics of Jane Austen have often failed to recognise this element of her oeuvre. He wrote: "There is not only nothing improper in her books, … but there is not a single flash of biting satire. She is absolutely at peace with her most comfortable world" (325). However, by solely considering Austen's first two novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), readers can see that Austen is far from being at peace with what Stephen calls the "delightful world of well-warmed country houses" (325). Throughout both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen exposes, albeit subtly and tactfully, the disagreeable reality that exists within the Georgian upper-class home. By challenging the prevailing gender norms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Austen draws attention to the absurdity of suppressing women's ability to reason.

The concerns in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* are in that way highly reminiscent of the ideas expressed in Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Interestingly, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were drafted in the 1790s, just a few years following the publication of Wollstonecraft's treatise in 1792 (Le Faye 4-5). The primary goal of Wollstonecraft's proto-feminist work is, as the title indicates, to vindicate women's rights, but especially

by elevating women's intellectual abilities and advocating for better education. Moreover, Wollstonecraft plainly denounces the unequal opportunities granted to men and women in the eighteenth century and directly addresses the disadvantages of the oppressive social demands placed on women. By reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in tandem with Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, clear parallels emerge between the authors' emphases in their critique of the social ethos. For instance, in her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft overtly condemns social conventions which favour unregulated emotion over reason. She states that since such values have led women to lose their natural dignity, a "revolution in female manners" is needed, which she argues will have a reformative effect on the world (132). Whereas Austen's critique is by no means as obvious, the content of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* still denotes that Austen shared many of Wollstonecraft's beliefs.

Jane Austen's implicit social commentary is, therefore, likewise important. Considering the genre of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, it is unsurprising that their political message is less prominent than that expressed in Wollstonecraft's non-fictional and overtly radical philosophical tract. Yet, Austen seems keenly aware of the opportunities that the medium of the novel has to offer (Brownstein 35, 56-57). Her brilliant use of irony and free indirect speech allows her to interweave political thought with her plotlines and create thought-provoking scenes. Brownstein argues that Austen's "playful and purposeful irony" is precisely what makes her critique so fascinating (34). Namely, while Austen embraces the traditional form of the heroine-centred courtship novel, she at once sheds light on the limitations of its tropes. Thus, much like the woman-centred courtship novels were in their essence didactic, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* reveal a clear message of model behaviour (Brownstein 35). However, in a progressive manner, they additionally mock contemporary notions of conventional femininity and favour reason and self-awareness by showing its benefits in a world where women's lives are highly constricted.

Therefore, contrary to Sir Leslie Stephen's claim, Austen's first two novels demonstrate how her works do, in fact, contain elements of sharp critique. Like the radical Wollstonecraft, Austen not only reflects the inequalities that women faced in Georgian England but, more importantly, she also dares to assert reason as a feminine

virtue. In fact, when considering the characterisation and the didactic nature of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, it becomes increasingly clear that Austen advocates for improved women's education.

2. Sociohistorical Context

2.1. The Restricted World of Women: Female Education in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Women's education in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England was extremely limited. Whereas men had access to university education and could pursue careers, women had little to no formal instruction and only had access to a few occupations (Sutherland, "Female education"; Lynch 219). Although the women who belonged to the emerging upper middle classes and the gentry had better chances of receiving some formal tutoring than those of a lower standing, it cannot be denied that women, irrespective of class, received worse education than men. In fact, women were mostly educated in the private space of the home, and the nature of their education differed drastically from that of their male counterparts (Sutherland, "Female education"). This disparity in quality can largely be attributed to the prevailing social constructions of the male and female sex. More specifically, in the eighteenth century, women were regarded as naturally inferior to men, not only physically but also intellectually. For instance, the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that women were incapable of abstract thought and that their role was to please men. In light of this belief, women's worth was measured relative to their usefulness to men, and their education was accordingly focused on their physical and sensual function (Okin qtd. in Kirkham 45; Kirkham 46).

Because of this cultural idea that considered women inherently passive and sweet, education mostly revolved around attracting husbands and underscoring women's consequent duties as wives and mothers (Kirkham 173). Hence, women like the educated Bluestockings who dared to assert their place in the public sphere were subjected to contempt as their behaviour was deemed unacceptable. Contemporary sermons placed emphasis on women's decorum, showing the cultural anxiety surrounding women threatening the masculinist realm of independent thought (Lynch 9). Consequently, women were merely taught accomplishments and superficial knowledge, making them appealing objects to satisfy male desires. In fact, Caroline

Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* perfectly captures the contemporary idea of the allegedly perfect female education. She states: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages, to deserve the world – and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the world will be but half deserved” (*Pride and Prejudice* 28-29).[1] Of course, such accomplishments that measured women’s worth according to how admirable and elegant they were, also perniciously maintained their dependence on men.

Rather than acknowledging women’s status as intellectual beings, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender norms sentimentally reduced women to the images of angels entirely reliant on men (Wollstonecraft 194, 131). The surface-level knowledge that ignored women’s understanding and solely took note of their outward conduct and appearance consequently hindered women from taking action and standing on their own. Kirkham claims that the very notion of women having equal powers of mind to men threatened the institution of marriage and the family. Namely, if women were granted access to the same resources as men and were believed capable of critical thinking and fair judgement, the basis of patriarchal authority would be turned upside down (4). Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrate this cultural belief. In these novels, Austen sketches a realistic image of the expectations placed on her female characters during the Regency era, and shows their vulnerability as this kind of education only subjugated women to men’s power. Since most women were dependent on their male relatives and were excluded from the public sphere, their education was deemed useless unless it increased the probability of securing a spouse. In fact, the personal relations of Austen’s female characters, and so many women of her time, were the closest thing to an occupation they could hope for (Lynch 9; Kirkham 173). In that way, the concept of women being fundamentally different from men, unfortunately, led to them being at a disadvantage regarding access to a good education.

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[1] All subsequent references to *Pride and Prejudice* will use the abbreviation *PP*.

2.2. Rethinking Femininity: Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and Its Influence on Jane Austen

Considering the male-centred attitudes towards education in the Georgian era, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* seems a feat in itself. Produced in the politically turbulent atmosphere following the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* not only responds to and rebukes the practice of denying women their basic human rights but overtly demands that such ideas be rectified. Instead of blindly accepting the status quo, Wollstonecraft denies the traditional view that women are in their essence weak and argues in her *Vindication* that women should be viewed as "rational creatures" and autonomous beings (81).

The view that women's education would benefit all members of society emerges as a key theme throughout Wollstonecraft's work. For instance, she argues that the neglected education of women wastes women's potential. Rather than producing noble mothers and wives, she maintains that it leads to their "barren blooming." She states: "like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity" (Wollstonecraft 79). Here, Wollstonecraft draws attention to how nonsensical it is to teach women to value external beauty and manners over practical knowledge. The cornerstone of her argument is to highlight that should women be taught adequately, their knowledge and thinking skills would prove much more useful in their roles as mothers and wives than superficial factors, such as propriety, sentiment, and docility (Wollstonecraft 160-61, 194-96). By stating that an education that is overly preoccupied with artificiality causes women to be infantilised and to wither away, Wollstonecraft confirms that she wants to redefine the way women are viewed to improve their intellectual status (81). In light of the misogynistic nature of the cultural environment in which Wollstonecraft worked, these ideas can be considered extremely radical.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* unsurprisingly aroused considerable controversy. The dispute concerning Wollstonecraft was, however, not limited only to her feminist

ideas. Kirkham contends that it was not until William Godwin, Wollstonecraft's husband, published *Memoirs of the Author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* a year after her death, in 1798, that "the full fury of the anti-feminist backlash was let loose" (53). As the memoirs revealed intimate details about her personal life that were thought scandalous, people who shared the opinions expressed in the *Vindication* were treated harshly merely by virtue of association with Wollstonecraft (Lynch 220-21; Kirkham 49). Thus, considering the common features between Wollstonecraft and Austen's critiques of their social milieus, it is not impossible that Wollstonecraft's treatise influenced Jane Austen. Frankly, it is very plausible that Austen's family purposely hid her controversial opinions to protect her reputation. For instance, it is known that Cassandra Austen censored her sister's letters, and Henry Austen additionally portrayed Jane as a subdued character in his biography of her life (Kirkham 61, 56-57). Without assuming a direct connection between Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, this information, in addition to the fact that many novelists made their works appear more conservative to avoid accusations of radicalism, indicates that Austen's novels might very well contain traces of radical thought (Johnson xxiii).

At the very least, both Austen and Wollstonecraft were Enlightenment feminists. Although the term *feminism* did not appear until the late nineteenth century, the ideas expressed in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, as well as those implied in Austen's first two novels, are undoubtedly feminist (Kirkham xxi, 3). Austen's prioritisation of reason shows that like Wollstonecraft she argues for the amelioration of women's position by way of their liberation from repression. Admittedly, Austen's moralist tendencies cannot be separated from her text. However, even though her novels all end in marriages, a patriarchal institution, Austen still advocates for women's freedoms to the extent she is able within such a restricted world (Sutherland, "Gender and morality"). Kirkham notes that Jane Austen's novels deserve to be called feminist because, amongst other things, they are concerned with "establishing the moral equality of men and women" (3). Exactly like Wollstonecraft, who stresses that sex distinction denies women their rights as human beings, Austen's characters denote that women should be granted the same opportunities as men and be taught as their equals (Wollstonecraft 82, 100).

Yet, although Wollstonecraft unquestionably goes further than Austen in her critique, the latter closely reflects Wollstonecraft's views in terms of her reprimand of the aristocracy. For instance, Wollstonecraft directs her argument towards middle-class women because she maintains that they have not been as spoilt by "false refinement" and vain education as the upper classes (81). Still, many aspects of Wollstonecraft's critique are directly reflected in Austen's personae. Not only do the value systems of Austen's genteel characters often reveal the follies of such an educational system, but her depiction of women who resist conforming to tradition even more strongly supports that she wholeheartedly agreed with Wollstonecraft's criticism of the trivial nature of aristocratic schooling. Interestingly, Wollstonecraft, moreover, respected traditional female roles. Rather than condemning motherhood and marriage as oppressive to women, Wollstonecraft concentrates on how improved education is imperative to their performance as mothers, wives, and daughters. Without it, they cannot earn the respect needed to acquire happiness, whether personal or in a marriage. Therefore, Austen, who is also concerned with upper-class women who either are or will be married, might have been influenced by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Kirkham 42-43).

Openly expressing such ideas that validated women's worth and challenged patriarchal norms was risky in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, authors were easily labelled as either conservatives or radicals depending on the language and sentiments expressed in their works (Johnson xxi). However, such a binary view seems overly simplistic. In view of Johnson's claim that Austen understood that the codes used by the opposing camps were not mutually exclusive, it is evident how she relies upon both traditions in order to achieve her purpose (xxi-iii). Thus, even though *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* are undeniably conservative novels, they are not exclusively so. Despite the politically sensitive atmosphere of the time, Austen was able to integrate controversial topics into the traditional courtship plot implicitly. By way of her witticism and free indirect speech, which reveal her critical view of normative restrictions, Austen could partake in the wider discussion on women's rights without being eliminated from it. In fact, Austen's humour allowed her to ridicule the ways of her immediate social environment in a way that she would otherwise not have been able to do (Kirkham 81-82, 161-62).

The implicit nature of Austen's social commentary allows her to depolemicise her novels, although they are far from being free of political thought (Johnson xxv). Furthermore, with the Wollstonecraft scandal in mind, the publication of Austen's first two novels seems even more impressive. Not only did she publish her first novel under the pseudonym "A Lady," proving that women were capable of rational thought, but her writing further illustrates her strong belief in the power of reason (Kirkham xxv).

3. What Constitutes an Accomplished Woman?

3.1. The Satirical Figures of the Vain Coquette and the Foolish Mother

Jane Austen's characterisation forms an integral part of her social commentary on Georgian cultural values. In light of Austen's detailed descriptions of her various characters' actions and oddities, in addition to the authorial judgment she makes about them, it is clear that she utilises certain character types as tools to aid her critique. For instance, the satirical figures of the vain coquette and the foolish mother, which emerge clearly in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice,* are essential for Austen to mock and find fault with the restrictive gender norms of the Regency era. Jane Austen's satirical representation of these character types distinctly depicts the harmful consequences of teaching women to solely value beauty and accomplishments while concurrently designating Austen's fondness for reason. However, as Kirkham states, Austen's narrative voice also instructs the reader "*not* to mistake what is represented for a straightforward imitation of life itself" (81). Hence, it can be inferred that Austen's characters direct readers' attention to firmly established beliefs but in a way that weakens their foundation and invites them to question their legitimacy.

Caroline Bingley and the two youngest Bennet daughters are prime examples of vain coquettes. Although Miss Bingley considers herself superior to the Bennets due to their lack of propriety and lower connections, they are interestingly more alike than she would like to believe. Whereas Miss Bingley might have had more lessons in French, geography, and suchlike, the instruction she receives consists of rote learning aimed to impress. Similarly, Kitty and Lydia have been conditioned to seek external gratification and are therefore more concerned with romantic adventure than anything else. Austen bluntly describes the sisters as "ignorant, idle, and vain," but their behaviour also demonstrates their highly flirtatious nature: "While there was an officer in Meryton, they would flirt with him, and while Meryton was within a walk of Longbourn, they would be going there for ever" (*PP* 151). However, Austen's dislike for their "rage for admiration" is evident (*PP* 164). Her view is made particularly clear as she underscores the folly of such superficial values, both by stressing their danger and by showing their artificiality. As Elizabeth Bennet makes explicit, a flirt can only establish a connection

based on attraction and youth, and will excite "universal contempt" and render herself and her family ridiculous (*PP* 163-64). Moreover, Austen's representation of Caroline Bingley's coquetry is extremely comic. For instance, the way in which she takes "a turn about the room," presumably in the hopes of charming Mr. Darcy with her figure, and selects a book not because she is interested in reading it but rather because she thinks reading the second volume to the book he is immersed in might dazzle him, only shows how similar she is to the women Wollstonecraft deplores (*PP* 40-41). Instead of being concerned with real substance, she cares more about appearing intelligent and meditative than actually possessing those qualities. Austen's narrative underlines how absurd such behaviour is and conveys the same message as Wollstonecraft, who harshly criticises the practice of teaching women that their only source of pleasure and power is obtained through men's admiration (Wollstonecraft 221). By depicting these women in an extremely comic light, Austen highlights how denying women proper education is ultimately harmful.

The characters of Lucy Steele and Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* also demonstrate how more of Wollstonecraft's emphases are reflected in Austen's works. In chapter 8 on "Morality Undermined by Sexual Notions of the Importance of a Good Reputation," Wollstonecraft draws attention to how women's limited influence in some ways forces them to turn to cunning. She claims that rather than being concerned with true virtue, women are taught to be primarily concerned with their reputation (Wollstonecraft 240-41). Interestingly, both Lucy Steele and Fanny Dashwood embody this idea. For instance, although Lucy is considered "beautiful, elegant, accomplished, and agreeable" and thus fulfils society's definition of the perfect woman, Austen reveals the opposite to be true (*Sense and Sensibility* 91).[2] The fact that Lucy is quick to transfer her feelings from Edward to Mr. Robert Ferrars once she knows the younger brother will inherit the mother makes her artful side very clear. By exposing Lucy's manipulative nature, Austen also emphasises that Lucy's concern with her image prevents her from establishing authentic connections with others. Similarly, Fanny Dashwood proves to be selfish and insincere as she manipulates her husband to believe

[2] Subsequent references will use the abbreviation *SS*.

that she is acting "out of the benevolence of her heart," rather than merely prioritising her own wants above the needs of the Dashwood women (*SS* 193-94). Although these characters' stories partly reveal Regency women's vulnerable position, since they can be understood to act in this way to exercise the little power they have, Austen's narrative treatment of them uncovers that she disapproves of such behaviour. Like Wollstonecraft, who associates virtue with reason and further suggests that craftiness in relationships leads to a passionate flame at best, which is doomed to expire, Austen represents Lucy and Fanny in a vastly negative light because of their lack of integrity (Wollstonecraft 138). In fact, neither woman is virtuous. As Austen demands that more is required than mere attraction or financial stability to obtain marital happiness, the reader assumes that they will eventually be punished with loveless lives (Kaufmann 402-03).

Another character type which destabilises the Georgian construction of the accomplished woman is the figure of the foolish mother. Through this character type, Austen illustrates the harmful consequences of women being ruled by their emotions and desire for acknowledgement, as it negatively affects their marriages and their children. The most memorable of Austen's silly mothers is arguably Mrs. Bennet. As a woman of "weak understanding and illiberal mind," she is unable to maintain her husband's affection, suggesting that she, like Wollstonecraft's cunning coquettes, fooled her husband merely with her youthful charm and beauty (*PP* 167). In fact, Mr. Bennet becomes so fatigued with her raptures that he loses all respect for her (*PP* 6, 167). The Bennets' marriage, therefore, directly mirrors Wollstonecraft's idea that "Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship" (Wollstonecraft 112). Austen shows that without the respect Mrs. Bennet could have earned if she had been taught to act rationally, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet can hardly achieve conjugal felicity. Curiously, Mrs. Bennet exactly reflects the type of woman Wollstonecraft maintains is the product of poor education. She states that once women's ability to learn is overlooked, they become "the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (Wollstonecraft 151-52). Like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood is similarly overly sentimental. For instance, she does not distinguish between esteem and love and believes that "to hope was to expect" (*SS* 13, 16). By

suggesting that matters of love can be treated lightly, Mrs. Dashwood places her daughters in a vulnerable position. As Austen illustrates how foolish it is to forsake reason because it affects these women's duties as mothers and puts their daughters in unnecessary trouble, the author again exhibits that she is a staunch advocate for improved educational opportunities for women.

Another way in which Jane Austen makes this view clear is by underscoring how mothers who are taught the same values as Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Dashwood come to perpetuate imprudence. She underlines that as her female characters' education is largely informal, the environment in which they are brought up is paramount. Effectively, Austen's satire of various female characters' failings in their duties of motherhood emphasises that their current education is deeply flawed and needs improvement. Interestingly, Wollstonecraft maintains that children's upbringing is the most important "branch of education," and requires reason to avoid any form of indulgence or tyranny (Wollstonecraft 161). When reading *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* side by side with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it becomes obvious that Austen shares this idea. Lady Middleton, for instance, is rendered ridiculous for spoiling her children terribly. She is too yielding, excuses her children's naughty behaviour, and even rewards it (*SS* 89). However, Elinor Dashwood's response to their behaviour speaks for itself. She wittingly claims that she "never think[s] of tame and quiet children with any abhorrence," indicating disappointment with Lady Middleton's parenting (*SS* 90). The fact that Lady Middleton as well as the Steele sisters ignore the children's improper conduct also suggests that the pattern which prioritises emotion over reason will continue. In this way, Austen explores the faults of indulgence, but she also explores the faults of what Wollstonecraft calls tyranny. The overbearing manner of both Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* is depicted as equally foolish. As they try to manipulate the fates of their daughters' lives without care for their views and desires, Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine are shown to be more concerned with appearances than anything else. Thus, they ultimately expose their "ill breeding," and set a bad example for their children (*PP* 124). These characters who have been brought up to value superficial things cannot help but teach their children the same, which leads to women's inferiority being maintained.

Austen's satirical treatment of these foolish mothers is therefore highly significant to her critique of Georgian Era gender norms.

3.2. The Hopeless Romantic: The Dangers of Excessive Sensibility

Although Jane Austen's satirical mockery of sentimentalism is very poignant, it is not Austen's only means of critique. As becomes apparent throughout *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen didactically demonstrates how reason should always take precedence. By showing how losing sight of reason may lead to irreversible mistakes, these novels illuminate the value of being able to think critically. The figure of the hopeless romantic in each novel particularly accentuates this message by showing readers the detrimental effects of excessive sensibility.

Firstly, Marianne Dashwood, who is often considered the representative of feeling in *Sense and Sensibility*, shows how easy it is to be led astray by fancy when one forgets to exercise reason (Morgan 195). Marianne is consumed by romantic notions (*SS* 41). Unfortunately, her active imagination, which makes her believe, like her mother, that to wish is the same as to expect, only triggers Marianne's detachment from reality (*SS* 16). Wollstonecraft maintains that it is unsurprising that women, who are kept in an "infantile state," should desire a witty and graceful lover, despite being injudicious. "They want a lover, and protector," she says, "and behold him kneeling before them-bravery prostrate to beauty!" (225). It is exactly in this way that Marianne becomes so captivated by Willoughby, who appears to her as a dashing knight in shining armour that rescues her from peril. As he carries her back to Barton Cottage when she is unable to walk because of a twisted ankle, Marianne becomes blinded by the idea of Willoughby as this kind of protector, which leads her to ignore consequent signs that she might be getting ahead of herself (*SS* 31-32). Even though Willoughby seems to be "exactly formed to engage Marianne's heart," and in that way meets her criteria of an ideal lover, Austen underscores that her obsession with him is essentially harmful (*SS* 36). As Marianne allows her imagination to run away with her and fool her into believing that there exists a connection and not merely an attachment between them, Marianne puts herself at significant risk when she becomes involved with Willoughby without a formal confirmation of their bond. More specifically, he never directly tells

her that he loves her, although at first, his actions let her believe he intends to marry her (*SS* 136). Moreover, Austen underscores that Marianne's unrestraint in matters of the heart harms not only herself but also the people around her. Mullan asserts that Marianne's melodramatic and "determined self-torment" is what actually causes her first illness. But, as Austen further draws attention to the way Marianne's suffering selfishly hurts her kith and kin, it becomes apparent that the author sides against Romantic individualism (Mullan xiii; *SS* 133). While Marianne's judgement is clouded by her need to feel, her actions can only reap imprudent results (*SS* 138).

Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* can also be considered a hopeless romantic figure which confirms Austen's dislike of excessive sentimentalism. Like Marianne, the youngest Bennet daughter is enthusiastic about the idea of an exciting romantic adventure. She longs to be swept off her feet, which is why she makes a habit of going to Meryton, where the officers are stationed, and pleads with Mr. Bingley to host a ball to have a chance to mingle with plausible love interests (*PP* 21, 33). However, Lydia's eagerness to fall in love overrules any imperative to act prudently. Austen illustrates that because Lydia is more concerned with her outward image than her familial responsibilities, she submits to what Marcus calls "personal claims" at the expense of "social claims" (275-76). That is, she lets passion rule and ignores the consequences of her actions, all in order to fulfil her own desires. Whereas Lydia's romantic inclination fools her into believing that her match with Wickham brings her status, Elizabeth Bennet lucidly exposes her folly. For instance, on Lydia's wedding day, the narrator states that Elizabeth "felt for her probably more than she felt for herself," shedding light on Lydia's ignorance of the severity of the situation, as she seems blissfully unaware of the impropriety of her elopement and makes an effort to inform her neighbours of her marriage (*PP* 221-22). Multiple critics, such as Carole Moses, have pointed out that Elizabeth's voice and observations largely reflect Austen's views. With the merging of Elizabeth and the omniscient narrator's voices, Moses argues, Austen manages to carefully persuade the reader to side with her perspective (155). As Elizabeth bluntly expresses her distaste for her sister's reckless behaviour, while Lydia boasts about her marriage, Austen underlines how excessive sentimentalism prevents her from applying sense. In other words, Lydia becomes so captivated by the idea of Mr. Wickham that

she convinces herself that things are better than they truly are (*PP* 221-23, 273). Elizabeth notes that Wickham's affection for Lydia is not equal to hers for him, indicating that their marriage will not be one of marital happiness (*PP* 223). Especially because it is secured by external parties, it becomes clear that Lydia's naïve idealism is, unfortunately, delusional. This position becomes particularly apparent towards the end of the novel. In a letter to Elizabeth, she says: "If you love Mr Darcy half as well as I do my dear Wickham, you must be very happy." However, as it is revealed, just a few lines later, that they are struggling financially, which creates tension with her family, and that Wickham's affection for Lydia "soon sunk into indifference," Austen underlines that to wish, is in fact, not the same as to hope (*PP* 273). From this conclusion, the reader assumes that Lydia is denied marital happiness and the respect of her loved ones because of her irrational and impulsive behaviour. Elizabeth's realist viewpoint, in stark contrast to her little sister's rosy view of events, thus underpins Austen's moralising message that it is unwise to allow reason to be displaced by the impulses of feeling (*PP* 273-24).

The figure of the hopeless romantic accordingly allows Austen to clearly express her support of rationality and convey an idea that is distinct from contemporary definitions of what makes an accomplished woman. The characters of Marianne and Lydia, respectively, indicate that Austen, just like Wollstonecraft, identified "a romantic twist of the mind" with weakness (Wollstonecraft 305). Yet, even though Austen's portrayal of both women highlights the dangers of sensibility, as their romantic fancies almost lead them to ruin, the didactic message involving Marianne is somewhat more intricate than that of Lydia. Namely, both indirectly teach the lesson of how not to act. But the fact that Marianne additionally learns from her mistakes and finally adopts sense demonstrates how Austen drives this message home. Only when Marianne regrets her destructive behaviour and realises that she must change her ways is she granted an opportunity for genuine happiness (*SS* 254, 279). She enters into marriage with Colonel Brandon, which over time generates mutual love and respect, unlike Lydia and Wickham's marriage which is doomed to degenerate into indifference (*SS* 279; *PP* 273).

4. Austen's Portrayal of Sexual Morality

4.1. Cautionary Tales: The Deceptive Schemes of Rakes and Fortune Hunters

Austen's portrayal of the rake and the fortune hunter serves an equally important role. These character types, arguably realised most conspicuously in Mr. Willoughby and Mr. Wickham, reveal a variety of social and cultural ills that maintained women's inferiority. As Austen's narrator adopts the role of a friendly guide that, according to Booth, is a paragon of wisdom and virtue, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* have an admonishing tone, which reveals Austen's own notions on matters of sexual morality (264). Although Austen can by no means be considered as liberal about sexuality as Wollstonecraft, she plainly echoes the latter's belief that women's ignorance is what renders them vulnerable to the ploys of men. In fact, bearing in mind how Jane Austen repeats highly analogous plotlines involving women who fall prey to the deceptive schemes of rakes and fortune hunters, they are clearly imperative to exposing the vulnerability of women whose rationality is overruled by passion.

Firstly, the way Willoughby takes advantage of Eliza Williams, Marianne Dashwood, and Miss Grey underscores the theme that appearances can be deceiving, and further uncovers the unfair double standard regarding men and women's moral behaviour. As Willoughby seduces woman after woman and ends up marrying Miss Grey, he reveals himself to be both a rake and a fortune hunter, whose exploitation of his victims puts them in a precarious position. For instance, after Eliza has a child out of wedlock and is abandoned by Willoughby, she is left destitute, forced to move to the countryside and is thereby alienated from society (*SS* 153-54). However, as Austen shows that Willoughby can move on to his next victim without suffering any substantial harm, apart from the disfavour of Mrs. Smith, she issues a clear warning to women to be cautious of being swept away by artificial romantic promises. Specifically, as Eliza's story indicates, women sacrifice much more than their male charmers by having romantic affairs. By reiterating this message through Marianne's storyline, which shows how close she comes to ruin by engaging with Willoughby, Austen foregrounds the dangerous consequences that men's "libertine practices" can have for vulnerable,

sentimental women (*SS* 257). As Willoughby dishonestly never legitimises the love that he "every day implied," Austen shows that his promises are empty and confirms the theatricality of his actions (*SS* 136). Whereas Marianne has been made a fool and is left grief-stricken and helpless, Willoughby is able to marry Miss Grey, albeit fuelled by avarice, solely to secure her fortune of fifty thousand pounds (*SS* 135, 141). Thus, by incorporating these stories, which all show how costly it is for women to confuse illusion with reality, Austen implicitly argues for the importance of women being able to think critically and make decisions based on reason rather than emotion.

Furthermore, Austen raises the same concern with the individual plotlines of Lydia Bennet and Georgiana Darcy. As these women both fall victim to the schemes of the despicable Mr. Wickham, Austen once again gives particular importance to exposing the danger that the rake imposes. Interestingly, the affluent, fifteen-year-old Miss Darcy is by no means less at risk of being fooled by Mr. Wickham than Miss Lydia Bennet. As naïve young girls, they are preoccupied with trivial vanities and are equally excited at the opportunity to find genuine love. However, as Austen makes blatantly clear, Mr. Wickham is only concerned with his own welfare and the appearance of affection on his part is far from genuine. As he conspires to seduce and elope with Georgiana to obtain her fortune of thirty thousand pounds, Mr. Wickham exposes Georgiana's vulnerability on account of her gender (*PP* 144). Without her brother's intervention, Georgiana's reputation would have been ruined, or she would have been at Mr. Wickham's mercy since property was transferred to husbands with marriage (Gevlin 1061-62). Similarly, as Mr. Wickham goes on to seduce Lydia, not motivated by money but rather unrestrained lust, Austen illustrates how vulnerable Lydia is compared to Wickham himself. Elizabeth states that "loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable" (*PP* 202). By highlighting the double standards in matters of morality and further indicating that Lydia's situation presents a clear lesson, Austen reinforces her caution to women that they can never be too careful regarding their virtues. Again, as Darcy must rescue Lydia from "endless ruin," Austen shows her powerlessness as a woman (*PP* 202). Had it not been for Mr. Darcy, Lydia's failure to see through Mr. Wickham's ploys would have brought about the ruin of her own reputation as well as that of her family.

4.2. Looking Beneath the Exterior: Modesty as the “child of reason”

Throughout Austen’s first two novels, the repeated representation of women’s vulnerability against the subterfuge of dishonest men suggests that the topic of women’s morality must have been important to Jane Austen. Although Austen’s female characters are not radically liberated from the social mores that condemn their behaviour as morally unacceptable, neither *Sense and Sensibility* nor *Pride and Prejudice* can be deemed entirely conservative with regard to their treatment of morality. Contrary to Poovey’s claim that Austen’s novels warn against unrestrained desire to preserve the existing social order, her novels actually contribute to exposing the injustice of the differential treatment that men and women received in this context (qtd. in Gevlin 1056).

When viewing Austen’s narratives alongside the *Vindication*, which suggests that virtue is incompatible with ignorance and vanity, Austen’s texts are opened to an enlightening interpretation. Just as Wollstonecraft inherently links modesty with reason, Austen’s female characters seem to indicate the same. Wollstonecraft states: “modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection” (Wollstonecraft 239). This conclusion seems to apply astonishingly well to Austen’s novels considering how self-control emerges as a key virtue in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* (Stove 4). The title of Austen’s first novel alone is indicative of its concerns with the tug-of-war between rationality and emotions. But, as Kirkham asserts, it also refers to an older tradition that presented sense as a much better guide to moral principles than sensibility (xxiii). Jane Austen continues to use this dichotomous pattern in her next novel, and as Austen argues for the value of reason, her depiction of Mr. Willoughby and Mr. Wickham’s easy manipulation of her female characters becomes principal to her commentary on sexual morality.

Indeed, with this notion in mind, these characters seem to underscore further Austen’s critique of the flawed system of education in the Regency era. Although it is never explicitly stated, it can be inferred that had the aforementioned women not grown up in an environment which largely excludes them from the realm of reason, they might have avoided being exposed to harm. Like Wollstonecraft, who maintains that women

cannot be made virtuous by encouraging their pursuit of frivolous pastimes or by imprinting ideas of romance and aestheticism on their minds, Austen suggests that modesty can only be achieved by cultivating reason (Wollstonecraft 239). Namely, had these women not been consumed by romantic sensibilities, they might have been more hesitant to accept the facades that Mr. Willoughby and Mr. Wickham present to the world as authentic representations of their characters. In particular, by comparing the women beguiled by their charms with the more sensible heroines of Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet, the notion that "elegance is inferior to virtue" emerges clearly as one of Austen's themes (Wollstonecraft 82). For instance, Elinor's sceptical attitude towards Mr. Willoughby's extravagant and inappropriate gift of a horse to Marianne is an excellent example of the significance of rational thinking in questioning appearances. Whereas Marianne is unaware of the strangeness of this act, Elinor doubts its propriety (*SS* 43). Thus, according to the logic that morality is directly connected with reason, Elinor proves her moral worth. Similarly, Elizabeth appears more virtuous than her flirtatious little sister. Although Elizabeth at first certainly mistakes Mr. Wickham's narratives for fact, she is shown to be morally righteous as she gains knowledge of the truth and admits her mistake (*PP* 147-48). According to Booth, who claims that Austen uses the method of "apology-by-comparison" to didactically express value judgments on her characters, Elizabeth demonstrates that virtue consists of rational thinking (262-64).

5. Self-Aware Heroines: Austen's Sentinels of Reason

5.1. Elizabeth Bennet

Austen's choice of heroines is significant to reveal her preference for rationality. By foregrounding the actions and beliefs of sensible women, and further representing them in a more favourable light than those of characters devoid of reason, Austen ultimately vindicates women's intellectual capacity, in addition to evincing its consequence. For instance, Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, clearly indicates this notion. Her experiences and way of thinking convey that self-knowledge, control, and integrity are more important than conformity to cultural conventions. As Elizabeth resists fitting the traditional mould of the courtship plot heroine, her character reveals a hidden, subversive element within *Pride and Prejudice* (Brownstein 35).

Serving as her family's voice of reason, the novel's protagonist advocates for self-control in a way that underscores its value as well as virtue. Firstly, because Elizabeth is the one who must identify the impropriety and risk involved in allowing Lydia to go to Brighton, her symbolic role as a guardian of sense becomes apparent. Not only does she disagree with her indolent and indulgent father's methods, but she must plead with him to see sense: "If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment" (*PP* 163). This statement alone not only shows that Elizabeth is critical of her parents' irrational leniency but it also reveals a sharp critique of women's education. Here, Elizabeth highlights her father's failure as an educator since Lydia has "never been taught to think on serious subjects" and "has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity" (*PP* 198). Moreover, as Elizabeth warns against the dangers of letting one's emotions rule one's actions, her statement suggests that she supports a vision of education akin to that of Wollstonecraft, which aims to sharpen understanding and regulate passion (Wollstonecraft 102). Elizabeth's journey towards self-knowledge becomes consequential to her role as an exponent of reason. Not only does Elizabeth seem more admirable than the ignorant Lydia when she acknowledges how she let prejudice hinder fair judgment, but her self-awareness also demonstrates how reason is necessary for

women to navigate a male-centric society. This newfound consciousness allows Elizabeth to see Wickham for what he truly is, which is made clear when she explains to Mrs. Gardiner that a profligate man like him who lacks honour and integrity deserves no sympathy (*PP* 198). Considering Elizabeth's resistance to being emotionally swayed by charm, she emerges as a self-reliant individual who is less vulnerable than her closest relatives. Sutherland claims that as Austen attributes moral worth to intellect and understanding, the heroine's self-knowledge is what differentiates her from other female characters ("Female education"). To put it more simply, Elizabeth Bennet demonstrates the benefits of applying reason but also becomes a model of commendable behaviour.

Interestingly, Elizabeth's behaviour does not fully match contemporary notions of propriety. As her character condemns conformity to social, behavioural norms that devalue women's rational abilities and agency, she draws attention to their restrictions and depicts their subversion in a positive light. For instance, by walking to Netherfield, even if it means arriving in a dirty petticoat and appearing untidy, Elizabeth achieves her kind goal of visiting Jane despite contravening demands of decorum (*PP* 24-26). Interestingly, Elizabeth's escapade, deemed an "abominable sort of conceited independence" by Miss Bingley, directly reflects one of Wollstonecraft's concerns (*PP* 26). The radical authoress criticises the fact that while boys are allowed to "frolic in the open air," girls are confined to sedentary lifestyles and made weak. She consequently calls for an education that would strengthen girls' bodies as well as their minds to "enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent" (Wollstonecraft 128, 103). Correspondingly, the "excellent walker" Elizabeth overturns the ideal of the passive woman and demonstrates that when women are released from the yoke of traditional gender norms, they gain autonomy (*PP* 26). This belief is again emphasised in Elizabeth's opinion of Charlotte's marriage. Mediated through the heroine's language and Austen's use of free-indirect speech, her disappointment with her friend's decision to marry for convenience is made evident. Kirkham argues that the free-indirect style is essential to this end because it accentuates Elizabeth's analytic capabilities (91). Whereas Charlotte accepts the foolish Mr. Collins' proposal because it would prevent her from becoming a financial burden to her family, Elizabeth sheds light on the imprudence of her decision because she sacrifices integrity for "worldly

advantage" (*PP* 92). In fact, Austen's bias towards reason is not only expressed through Elizabeth's descriptions of the match as "unaccountable," and her reflections that show she considers it "unsuitable" and humiliating, but also through Austen's narrative treatment of Charlotte (*PP* 97, 91-92). That is, Austen didactically stresses that because Charlotte enters marriage for external reasons, she is excluded from personal fulfilment (*PP* 89, 92). Woloch notes that Charlotte is therefore marginalised from narrative attention and "denied characterological depth and interiority" (qtd. in Moe 1076). Notably, an implicit value system emerges in *Pride and Prejudice*, which prefers independent thought over conformity to social claims.

Similarly, the proposals of marriage which Elizabeth receives reinforce the novel's message that self-awareness and rational thinking are of extreme value. Firstly, by rejecting Mr. Collins' proposal, despite the advantages that their marriage would secure for her family, Elizabeth proves that she is a woman of principle and avoids being doomed to a loveless, ill-matched marriage like Charlotte. In the end, Elizabeth's understanding prevents her from going against her moral standards and entering an unequal marriage coloured by shame and scorn. Unlike Charlotte, who, whenever her husband says something embarrassing, must pretend she does not hear him, Elizabeth risks waiting for the kind of marriage that Wollstonecraft advocates for, one of equal respect and friendship (*PP* 112; Wollstonecraft 112, 235). Likewise, Elizabeth repeats this pattern when the wealthy Mr. Darcy initially asks her for her hand. Although the match would bring the Bennet family status and financial freedom, it would simultaneously be irrational because of the imbalance created by the lack of mutual affection and respect (*PP* 137). Although Elizabeth, at this point, still does not know that Wickham's narratives of Darcy are fictitious, her self-awareness and self-worth prevent her from succumbing to the social pressures of marrying just because she should. Because she resists marriage until it is on her terms, Elizabeth is rewarded, which further confirms the novel's prioritisation of critical thinking. Curiously, she is promised happiness by marriage to Darcy, but not until they have both learnt a valuable lesson and can wed based on the idea of friendship. In effect, the traditional ending does not undermine the novel's progressive message but shows Austen's skill at intertwining the traditional romance novel with her social commentary.

5.2. Elinor Dashwood

The heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* also advocates for the cultivation of sense. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood is a voice of reason throughout the novel and is moreover considered its "sentinel of propriety" (Stove 5; Kaufmann 386). But, contrary to many critics' belief that Elinor's promotion of propriety simply upholds the social order in a conservative manner, it divulges a crucial message about the importance of women being active thinkers (Morgan 201). Margaret Kirkham observingly notes that the formal structure of *Sense and Sensibility* that evokes the debate of the Head/Heart question also more generally applies to the Man/Woman question (xxv). In light of her statement, Elinor's practice of rational reflection can be understood to question firmly established gender norms since the protagonist's self-awareness clearly demonstrates that she has a right to the traditionally male realm of reason.

Elinor's sense of decorum largely contributes to the novel's underlying radical lesson. Rather than imitating the ways of ladies such as Lady Middleton and the Steeles, which merely obey rules of propriety for superficial reasons, Elinor values propriety only as long as it is guided by reason (Morgan 200-201). Like Wollstonecraft, Elinor regards reason as the ultimate virtue, which becomes clear in her conversation with her younger sister in chapter 17. Whereas Marianne initially thinks her sister subscribes to a mentality that accepts codes of socially acceptable behaviour to please "the opinion of other people," Elinor is quick to correct this misunderstanding and clarify her deep respect for rationality (*SS* 69). She claims:

> My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. You must not confound my meaning. 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 judgment in serious matters? (*SS* 69)

This response elucidates Elinor Dashwood's position and proves she does not perpetuate empty decorum. Instead, Elinor's mindset closely reflects Wollstonecraft's idea that sentimental behaviour should not be allowed to usurp "the sceptre which the

understanding should ever cooly wield" (Wollstonecraft 110). Namely, Elinor is fully aware that sentiment and ignorance put women at risk (*SS* 42). Her attempts to influence her sister's behaviour do, in fact, not suggest that she blindly supports adherence to social values but instead that she views propriety as a means to avoid causing and incurring hurt (Stove 5-6). For instance, when Elinor condemns Marianne for going unchaperoned with Willoughby to Allenham, her main purpose is not merely to make her sister feel shame but to protect Marianne and inspire her to think rationally (*SS* 51). By stressing the value of acting prudently, Elinor proves the practical use of being able to control one's emotions.

More specifically, Elinor's prioritisation of reason over emotion can be understood as a protective measure which provides her with some agency. Despite being the novel's representative of sense, Elinor is far from being devoid of feeling. However, it is the way in which she decides to respond to her emotions that truly matters regarding the novel's underlying message. Elinor's attitude, which aims at minimising suffering, is like Morgan highlights a mindful and deliberate choice (Stove 5; Morgan 202). By guarding her emotional life against becoming public knowledge, Elinor manages to hide her weak spots and appear strong. For instance, Elinor is understandably hurt when she hears the news of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele. Nonetheless, her sense prevents her from revealing her state of mind to the world, ultimately protecting herself and her family from being exposed to criticism (*SS* 102-103). Anderson and Kidd confirm that Elinor's sense, in that way, implies a resourcefulness that conduces to survival in a restrictive social landscape (139). Especially in contrast to Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne's emotional way of life, Elinor's reason emerges as superior because it grants some leeway to turn situations otherwise out of her control to her advantage. For example, Elinor knows that if the uncertainty about Marianne and Willoughby's relationship were eliminated, and Marianne were directly asked whether they were engaged or not, future suffering could be avoided. However, as "common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood's romantic delicacy," the opposite course of action is unfortunately initiated (*SS* 62-63). Furthermore, by later warning Marianne, at the party in chapter 28, to "be composed" and careful not to betray her feelings for Willoughby to the guests, Elinor

again shows her preference for reason as a guide to behaviour. She regards the display of emotion, in Wollstonecraft's words, as an "epithet[] of weakness" (*SS* 128; Wollstonecraft 82). Namely, Elinor's attitude suggests that if Marianne were more cautious with her feelings, she could avoid being placed in a position which could leave her destitute and alone.

In addition to stating the value of reason in this way, Elinor's character provides a didactic standard against which other characters are measured. Like Elizabeth Bennet, who demonstrates the folly of neglecting reason in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor Dashwood contributes to the novel's favouring of reason and its dismissal of irrationality. Firstly, Austen rewards Elinor's persistence and virtue (understood according to Wollstonecraft's meaning as the product of reason) with her marriage to Edward Ferrars by resolving previous hindrances that prevented their union. Considering how she is promised profound marital happiness, the novel's hidden instructional message, which implies the benefits of women's cultivation of reason, can easily be identified (*SS* 276, 280). Compared to Elinor, Marianne seems foolish until she gains an understanding of the consequences of her conduct, and only then, as previously stated, is she able to acquire genuine contentment (*SS* 254). This conclusion indicates that Austen was an advocate for women's critical thinking, explaining why she depicts the remaining female characters' conformist behaviour with mockery. Moreover, when Elinor criticises Willoughby for his ungentlemanly disrespect of his wife, her rational observation reveals that his marriage is unhappy and presumably doomed, like the marriage of Wickham and Lydia, whose regard for one another is by no means equal or authentic (*SS* 242). Elinor's rational abilities not only indicate which behaviour Austen deems appropriate and, on the contrary unacceptable, but her character also reveals Austen's belief that reason is crucial for gaining individual moral happiness (Kaufmann 402).

6. Conclusion

The ideas expressed in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* regarding women's roles and education in the Georgian era so closely reflect the primary emphases in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that a connection between these works seems almost irrefutable. At the very least, acknowledging their similar focal points makes it clear that a subtly radical thread indeed runs throughout Austen's first two novels. Beneath the layer of the romantic comedy, which ends in a joyous and hopeful manner, there lies an additional narrative of sharp critique exposing the harmful consequences of neglecting women's schooling. From the actions and considerations of Jane Austen's characters in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, a clear lesson emerges that the capacity to reason should not be regarded as exclusively male.

Reflecting a time in which women's freedoms were extremely constricted, Austen's novels make an important contribution to the discussion of women's rights in the nineteenth century. Keeping in mind the Wollstonecraft scandal, which inhibited the free discussion of women's dependency on men and advocacy for change, it is significant that Austen's characters implicitly suggest what Wollstonecraft directly demands in her political tract. More specifically, Austen's character types show, by example, the need for a redefinition of traditional womanhood. By satirising her female characters' behaviour and the way they are mindlessly ruled by sentimentality, in addition to contrasting them with smart and successful heroines, Austen implies that reason is a quality that benefits not only women but also society as a whole. By underscoring the value of reason in order to discard superficial morals and avoid unnecessary suffering, Austen, like Wollstonecraft, highlights women's need for reason. Furthermore, Austen's female characters vividly demonstrate that without the capacity to think independently, women will, unfortunately, remain weak and dependent.

The fact that the figures of the ignorant coquette, hopeless romantic, foolish mother and the self-aware heroine appear not only in Austen's first novel but also in her second also underlines the importance Austen grants to sense as the best guide to behaviour. Apart from the last character type, all reveal the shortcomings of

underestimating the value of teaching women more than surface-level knowledge. These characters contribute to making explicit Austen's message that women's ignorance not only leads to artificiality but may also have severe repercussions. In that way, Austen echoes the arguments raised in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* that highlight the same concerns and paint reason as the greatest virtue. Additionally, when considering Austen's representation of Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood, which makes a case for the benefit of sense, Austen's partiality to reason becomes unmistakable. Both women, in their own ways, challenge the established view that women are, in their essence, not rational beings. As they highlight the virtue of critical thinking, they concurrently are represented as exemplary characters.

Thus, despite being set within a highly conservative social framework, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* are far from being limited to orthodox ideas about education and gender. Even though the content of these books might be considered old-fashioned by modern standards, the notions expressed in Austen's novels are undoubtedly progressive. As the evidence presented in this thesis shows, Austen challenges established views of what constitutes the ideal woman, which proves her awareness of the unjust gender dynamics of her time. Because Austen contradicts this idea and suggests a better alternative, her novels cannot be dismissed as simple Regency comedies. Instead, they should be appreciated for their complex and tactful argument for the value of female reason. By granting importance to women's intellect, Austen's novels reverberate a message that is still relevant to this day. For women to be able to flourish as individuals and reach their full potential, access to proper education is vital. Namely, no one should be excluded from the opportunity of acquiring education based on their gender. It is a fundamental human right.

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