Jane Austen's Radical Side: a Feminist Reading of Jane Austen's Novels and Heroines

Lieke Westhoff

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Supervisor: Dr. M.S. Newton

Second reader: Prof. dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Providing a Historical and Critical Context to Jane Austen's Writing

1.1 Purpose of this Thesis

In this thesis, I am going to interrogate what might be meant by 'feminism' in the 1810s, what Austen might have understood by it, what we now understand by it and how we might apply those ideas to Austen's fictions. I shall argue that, although Austen uses the rather conservative genre of the courtship novel, or according to Marilyn Butler, the conservative partisan novel, she employs this genre to subversively express her radical ideas (Butler 3). I shall explore the idea that Austen rarely made her views explicit in her work, due to the prejudice that was attached to feminist opinions at the time due to the life story of Mary Wollstonecraft; I shall trace the effect of Wollstonecraft's biography on Austen in the next chapter. By investigating different aspects of the family in Austen's novels, I shall demonstrate how Austen did express her 'feminist' opinions through her works, albeit subversively. In particular, I shall examine the weakness of authority figures in her novels. The weakness of these authority figures allows Austen's heroines to exert more power and therefore have a greater sense of their own agency. I shall further argue that Austen employs the weakness of authority figures in her novels to inspire more feminist behaviour in her heroines, who are not the 'perfect' image of Georgian femininity but are nevertheless, as is clear to the reader, favoured over the other characters by Austen. I attempt to show that Austen's 'feminist' tendencies can be seen in her praising her heroines beyond all other characters while these are the characters that display the most agency and therefore are seen to possess 'masculine' properties.

1.2.1. Introduction

Jane Austen's novels are enjoyed by many to this day, but the popular image of Jane Austen is still that of the conservative lady author, even with the research that has been done into her books finding them to be more radical than was once believed (Harman 243). Even among scholars there is a great divide between those who see Austen as a conservative (or what in Austen's time would have been called 'reactionary') writer and those who see her as a progressive (or, in Austen's time, radical) author for her time. The most persistent opinion among scholars on Austen also still seems to be that she was a conservative writer, which might be because this for a long time was the only way Austen was viewed, not in the least because of her family's biographies of her, which I will discuss in the next chapter. As Tony Tanner argues: "The image or stereotype has some truth – as stereotypes often do. But as many writers about Jane Austen have realised it is an image that has to be re-examined in light of her work" (Tanner 1). I want to offer a different view on Austen than the most common opinion. In this thesis I want to present a portrait of Austen the 'feminist' writer.

It is important to note that in Austen's time 'feminism' had a completely different meaning and that the word 'feminism' did not even exist in the way it is used today with its modern meaning not found in use until late in the nineteenth century (Kirkham 3). Therefore, in this introduction I will explore the meaning of feminism in Austen's lifetime but also in the century leading up to it as this influenced Austen's work as well.

1.2.2. Feminism in Context

Applying the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' to works and authors in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century is problematic as the terms carry such a strong and well-known meaning in our time that it is hard to apply these retrospectively and not expect the same 'extent' of feminism then as now. Firstly, it is important to note that feminism in the eighteenth century was not focused on reaching equality for women in a political sense, as it

was in the centuries after as well as today. The 'movement' then was primarily concerned with countering the idea of the supposed inferiority of women's moral and spiritual lives as opposed to those of men's. In contradistinction to men, women were often presented as beings of feeling rather than of rationality. Women did not receive the same education as men did and it was because of this difference that a political aspect became part of the feminist debate. Women were convinced that by "increasing their powers of rational understanding and reflection" through education their position in society would improve (Kirkham 4). It was only then that women started to argue they should receive sufficient education in order to develop their sense and rationality. The moral argument made it necessary for women to start their political argument concerning the right, and need, for women to educate themselves.

This is exactly what Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) explores. She argued that women should have education if they are to be valuable wives:

> The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleaded a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. – One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives […]. (Wollstonecraft 4)

Wollstonecraft goes on to argue that rationality is also necessary for women to carry out their maternal duties sufficiently: "To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands" (Wollstonecraft 346). She then argues women should be educated in order to

achieve this sense of rationality: "I now only mean to insist, that unless the understanding of woman be enlarged, and her character rendered more firm, by being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have sufficient sense or command of temper to manage her children properly" (Wollstonecraft 347). Wollstonecraft "gives nearly all her attention to women as daughters, wives and mothers, since it is in these roles that the great majority of women play their parts in the secular world, and she shows that the education they receive does not equip them to acquit themselves creditably even here" (Kirkham 42). This way Wollstonecraft also makes her point relevant to her own society and gives it a more realistic chance of success, although she does affirm a statement made by Lord Bacon that "the best works and of the greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried and childless men" applying it to women too: "I say the same of women" (Kirkham 42). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft collects the feminist beliefs that had emerged and developed in the decades before into one work (Kirkham 41).

It has been argued that it is problematic to categorise Wollstonecraft as a feminist, in our modern sense, because she does not necessarily state that men and women are equal beings. However, for someone to claim women should have the same rights as men in terms of education was certainly a feminist statement at that time. This is one of those instances where we, as modern readers, should try to place ourselves in that particular time instead of projecting our modern views on to the matter. As Margaret Kirkham argues:

> Enlightenment feminism, with its emphasis on Reason and its preoccupation with the middle class, may not strike contemporary feminists as having much to do with liberation, but this is mistaken. The most orthodox beliefs, when applied to a class of persons previously excluded from serious moral and political discourse, may take on a new aspect. (Kirkham 5)

It has to be understood that the eighteenth century was still time in which people, men and women alike, more often than not believed that men were superior to women and that men therefore should be the ones in power. In such a time, women's claim to reason was a radical one which subverted the very foundations of society.

Men's claim to authority becomes problematic once women are to be considered rational creatures, like men. To acknowledge their right to schooling would mean an overturn of patriarchal society as they knew it. If women were rational beings and demanded a right to education, what would happen to the authority within marriage and family? Once women were in possession of as much sense as men, men's claim to superiority – and therefore their claim to authority – would be stretched very thin indeed. This would not only have implications for family unit and its patriarchal basis of authority. Considered on a larger scale, if it was possible to question the patriarchal authority within the family, it would also be possible to question that same authority within the church, or even the state (Kirkham 3-5).

Losing their claim to power was something that many men wanted to prevent and when the opportunity arose to cast aspersions on a woman closely associated with the claim for education for women, and with that on the claim itself, they grasped willingly at the opportunity, which would lead to the prejudices that were attached to 'feminism' during Jane Austen's career as a novelist.

1.3 The Wollstonecraft Scandal

At the time of Wollstonecraft's death there was no sign of any spitefulness towards her person even though her views were controversial. When her husband William Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) five months after her death, however, a sudden outburst of hostility against Wollstonecraft occurred. In his memoirs of his late wife, Godwin related the most intimate, and for that time

scandalous, details of her life. He revealed Wollstonecraft's affair with Gilbert Imlay, her sexual activity outside of marriage and her conception of a child before the marriage vows were spoken, and her attempts to take her own life. On top of that, he publicised, not completely truthfully, her dismissal of the Christian faith, perhaps projecting his own opinions on his late wife (Kirkham 48). It was no secret that Godwin rejected the Christian faith, but from Wollstonecraft's writing, and very notably from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it is clear she could not be regarded an atheist. The publication of the memoirs evoked a strong reaction in society, with people branding Wollstonecraft "a whore and an atheist" (Kirkham 49). The scandalous revelations not only had an effect on how people would remember Wollstonecraft: it had an extremely negative effect on the legacy of her ideas. As Kirkham argues: "The Scandal, which directed attention away from the perfectly respectable arguments of Enlightenment feminism to the 'Irregularities' of Mary Wollstonecraft's sexual conduct, had the effect of polarising women with any kind of public reputation into 'Unsex'd females' or paragons of sexual virtue, without a rebellious thought in their head" (Kirkham 48). To all women associated with similar 'feminist' views the prejudices connected to the Wollstonecraft scandal now clung. This was the climate in which Jane Austen wrote her books: a climate of extreme prejudice against 'feminist' women.

When reading Austen, it is important to remember that "everything written on the subject of female emancipation for the next two decades, if not for much longer, has to be understood in the light of public reaction to the *Memoirs*, and the violent personal abuse which they provoked" (Kirkham 49). I shall discuss the effects the Wollstonecraft scandal, as well as her ideas, may have had on Jane Austen and her novels in the next chapter. I shall place Austen's books in their historical (proto-feminist) context and in the context of Jane Austen's life. This way, I hope to show a more 'radical' and feminist side of Jane Austen and

her heroines to contend with the more conservative view more usually associated with Jane Austen.

1.4 Literature Survey and Methodology

Austen criticism has gone through a great change over the years. The first academic biography of Austen was written in 1890 and its writer, Goldwin Smith, claimed: “There is no hidden meaning in her; no philosophy beneath the surface for profound scrutiny to bring to light; nothing calling in any way for elaborate interpretation” (qtd. in Harman 199). If it had been up to Smith, it would seem Austen studies would have been at an end. Austen’s novels did end up in the literary canon, however, and many theories of ‘hidden meanings’ in her work would come to pass over the decades to come. Especially in the debate among feminist scholars, Austen would also become an important figure, as Claire Harman explains: “Austen was a gift to feminist theorists, and provoked intense debate among them as to the nature and degree of her own feminism” (Harman 234). I shall give an overview of Austen studies over the last few decades, focusing on the works important to my research both for and against my thesis statement. Furthermore, I will outline the methodology employed for this thesis indicating how I will employ the different studies of Austen and her works to inform my own research.

In her book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), a leading scholar in Austen studies in the 1970s, Marilyn Butler placed Jane Austen in her political and historical context more meticulously than ever attempted before. Butler’s work connects to several other scholars’ (such as Alistair Duckworth and Raymond Williams) views from the early 1970s which also linked Austen and her work to “forces of change and mobility during the Industrial Revolution” (Harman 234). Butler argued that Austen’s novels were “part of a conservative reaction to both the Jacobin novel and Jacobin politics” (Harman 233-234). Butler called

Austen "orthodox" and her novels "didactic" and "partisan" (Butler 3). Butler claimed the novels were "seen as relevant to contemporary issues" and asserted that in this regard Austen did not want to bring about a change in the ways of the world but in the behaviour of individuals (Butler 1-2). Butler placed Austen in her political context as this context could provide insights into Austen's novels, but she still insists, as many scholars before her, that Austen was a conservative writer, writing in the style of the "conservative Christian moralist of the 1790s," and did not express her political views in her work (Butler 164). In this thesis, I follow Butler in placing Austen in her political context, focusing on the 'feminist' ideas of her time and their political implications, but I shall argue against Butler, that Austen's sometimes radical political views are evident in her work, though not always clearly marked, which according to Claudia Johnson is typical for Austen: "she [Austen] […] often discusses politics all the time without making announcements about it beforehand" (Johnson xxv).

Johnson, who published her influential book on Austen *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (1988) in the decade after Butler's book, reflects the ongoing critical turn in Austen studies which endeavours to identify Austen's political views through her novels. I will follow in this tradition, focussing on the 'feminist' views Austen might have had which become clear from her novels. I shall explore Johnson's views on Austen's 'feminism' to inform my argument below. Johnson claims that Jane Austen's gender was "a crucially significant factor, not only in the formation of her social opinions, but also in the development of aesthetic strategies for writing about them" (Johnson xxiii). Although this is a very different view of the importance of Austen's gender compared to what had hitherto been presented by the majority of Austen scholars, Johnson argues that the idea of gendered literature was common knowledge in Austen's time and it would therefore be logical to apply this idea to Austen's novels (Johnson xxiii). I shall follow Johnson in this idea and argue that Austen's gender and position in society had an effect on her 'feminist' ideas and the way she

expresses them in her novels. Like Johnson, I emphasise the thought that Austen did not necessarily need explicit references to 'feminist' works or ideas for her audience to understand her own 'feminist' ideas. I shall explore the evidence of Austen's 'feminist' views that can be found in her "female characterization" and even in her subject matter – although it may seem conservative at first glance – as I shall explain below (Johnson xxiii).

Scale has always been one of the main points of debate among Austen scholars, in the very beginning of Austen criticism as well as in modern day criticism. Austen wrote on a very small, domestic scale, concerning her novels with a few families in a small village, which led to the assumption that Austen did not concern herself with tackling great themes in her novels. In her book *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical* (2016), Helena Kelly argues the opposite: it is our own reluctance to see Jane Austen as more than a writer who is "essentially writing variations on the same plot" that keeps us from recognising the political references she makes in her work (Kelly 12). Like Kelly, I believe that the idea of Austen as a writer of plots "that wouldn't be out of place in any romantic comedy of the last two centuries" has prevented Austen scholars to look beyond the plot, as they seem to have no problem doing with other writers even if their references are "veiled or allusive," and recognise Austen's subversive comments regarding the society of her day and even political issues (Kelly 12). I would argue that the apparently constricted world of Austen's novels, conversely, allows her to explore great themes – such as women's rights – in a safe way. In a way, it is similar to the claim for women's right to education. As discussed above, the right to education would lead to recognising women as rational beings, which would then overthrow men's claim to authority within the household, after which the claim to authority of men within the church and the state would be void as well. If we apply this to Austen's novels, it ceases to seem unlikely that Austen explored great themes through describing a few families in a single village.

Austen has often been categorised as a conservative writer, mostly, though not only, based on the fact that her novels revolve around courtship. This type of novel is often seen to promote the reactionary values of the time and to idealise courtship (Harman 235). According to Mary Poovey it is this "idealisation of courtship" in this type of novel "that persuade[s] women to accept and validate ideas which perpetuate their own repression" (qtd. in Harmn 235). Different explanations have been given for Austen's use of this conservative genre, ranging from her being very conservative and promoting female submission (as in Austen's time a married woman stood under full authority of her husband) to her working within a frame of what was possible for women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were on one side of the spectrum, arguing that Austen pleased her male readership by writing about "women of quality, spirit and intelligence" submitting themselves to men (Harman 234). It was their opinion that "Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture" (qtd. in Harman 235). It is Claudia Johnson who, in the next decade, offered the idea that Austen worked within a framework of what had been acceptable for a woman to write at the time: "the precondition of Austen's posthumous admittance into the canon was the apparent contentment to work artfully within carefully constricted boundaries which have been termed 'feminine'" (Johnson xiv). It was also Johnson who noted that, through writing within these 'feminine' boundaries, Austen was able to subversively express her critical view on society without standing the risk of being viewed as radical:

> During a time when all social criticism, particularly that which aimed at the institution of the family in general and the place of women in particular, came to be associated with the radical cause Austen defended and enlarged a progressive middle ground that had been eaten away by the polarizing polemics born out of the 1790s. (Johnson 166)

Looked at from this angle, it seems that Austen was merely being clever in her choice of genre to ensure publication but meanwhile employing her satirical style to undermine its very foundations. As Johnson argues: "Austen persistently subjected its [conservative fiction's] most cherished mythologies to interrogations from which it could not recover" (Johnson 166). In my research, I will follow Johnson's methodology of examining elements of the romance novel which are (ever so slightly) altered or satirised by Austen, in order to undermine it.

Another reason why Austen's use of the courtship novel does not have to mean her views were reactionary is that courtship does not necessarily signify female submission. It has been suggested by several scholars that, in Austen's days, courtship was actually the moment in a woman's life when she was most powerful (Harman 235). I want to take this idea a step further in my thesis, namely by exploring the question if courtship can be seen as women's most powerful moment, then does writing about this moment in a woman's life not empower women? In my opinion, Austen's choice to write about courtship, her heroines being the imperfectly 'feminine' heroines they are, could signify an urge to display women's power in society. The fact that Austen's novels end in marriage is often taken as a sign that Austen has conservative values. However, if that aspect of her novels is examined from the point of view that courtship empowers women, a very different conclusion could be drawn from this. Austen's novels end with the weddings of her heroines. We, as readers, are never allowed a glimpse into the actual married life of the new couple. It could be argued that Austen's novels end when the height of her heroines' power has been reached, as after marriage "the woman will never be so powerful, or so autonomous, or so desirable, again" (Harman 235). And even this can be argued not to be true in some Austen novels, as I will show in the chapter on *Emma*.

It has been suggested that the discovery of any modern perspectives on Austen, such as the 'feminist' Austen, can be shown to be 'historically' incorrect. This is something with

which I wholeheartedly disagree. The only thing that is certain is that there is almost no 'reliable' information on Jane Austen except for her novels and remaining letters. The biographies written by her families have been shown to present a picture of Austen that was untrue to the person she was according to her letters and Austen scholarship has long been one-sided as scholars merely found in Austen what they expected to find. It is as Johnson notes: "Historical and biographical Austenian scholarship, sometimes merely methodologically naive and sometimes irrecoverably entrenched in logical fallacies, has always been preceded by very definite ideas about what it would find there" (Johnson xix). In this thesis, I wish to 'break free' from the framework of expectation around Jane Austen, as other scholars have also done in recent years, and to present an image of Austen that is true to what can be found in her writing and not in what has been written of her historically. I will follow in the modern tradition in Austen scholarship which attempts to identify Austen's political and 'feminist' views through her novels. In this thesis, I do not wish to eschew all other visions of Austen but rather to explore a side of Austen that I think deserves attention in order to create a 'realistic' picture of Jane Austen as a person and, above all, as an author. This is a side of her which has been overlooked in the past and which more scholars have started exploring in more recent years. I hope to be able to follow in their tradition with this thesis.

1.5 Structure of this Thesis

Having given the historical context in this introduction, in the next chapter I shall place Jane Austen and her works in their historical context. I shall provide an insight into Jane's life and letters and argue that Jane Austen, her works, and her style of writing were very much a product of society's prejudices against 'feminist' women. In the next two chapters after that, through close readings informed by my knowledge of the cultural and

social context, I shall relate in what ways Austen's 'feminist' views become apparent from her novels, exemplifying this in her earlier and later works. I shall discuss her novels *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* and I shall highlight their 'feminist' aspects. I shall then come to my conclusion, presenting Austen as the 'feminist' writer I believe she was.

Chapter 2

"I Write Only for Fame"

Jane Austen Revisited, an Introduction

In order to situate my analysis on the ways in which Austen's 'feminism' informs her novels, it is necessary to show how one-sidedly Jane Austen has been examined by critics over the years. It is only in the last few decades that Austen has begun to be seen as more than a conservative lady author and I wish to follow this new development in Austen criticism of retrospectively attributing Austen with radical and even 'feminist' ideas. It is the presence of these ideas in her work, which I will focus on in this thesis. In the next chapters, I shall illustrate how Austen's 'feminist' ideas can be found in her novels, but in this chapter I will provide an overview of Jane's life and society in whose context I will then place her decision to veil her 'feminist' thoughts in her novels. I shall examine the connection between Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft and the effect the Wollstonecraft scandal of 1798 might have had on Austen's novels and their veiled 'feminism'. Furthermore, I shall apply the idea of subversive writing in Austen's letters to her novels, establishing that 'hidden meanings' can be found in her novels as in her letters.

2.1 Introduction

Jane Austen, one of the most-read English authors, is still often seen as 'only' an amateurish lady author whose labours "cost her nothing" as her ideas "came finished from her pen," if we are to believe her brother Henry Austen in his "Biographical Notice of the Author" that is (Austen-Leigh 140, 141). Much of this 'prejudice' has sprung from the various biographies published by her family after her death, which were meant to present Jane as exactly what many people less acquainted with her work and life now still see her as: a

conservative spinster author promoting reactionary values. Recently, however, a change has occurred in Austen studies. Blinded by her family's 'biographical notices' scholars for a long time believed that little could be known of Jane's life, but they were overlooking a treasure trove of insights into Jane Austen's life and, most importantly, her thoughts: her letters and, above all, her novels.

2.2 The Facts of Jane Austen's Life

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire as the seventh child and second daughter of Mr and Mrs Austen. Jane, her father being a rector, is brought up at the Rectory in Steventon where she will spend most of her life, interrupted by the two years she spent at two different boarding schools with her sister Cassandra. In 1801 Mr and Mrs Austen and 'the girls,' as Mr Austen used to refer to Cassandra and Jane, relocated to Bath upon Mr Austen's retirement. Aspiring the life of the gentry (being so-called 'pseudo-gentry'), but not quite up there in terms of their financial situation, after the death of Mr Austen, Mrs Austen, now widowed and without income, and Cassandra and Jane, both 'spinsters,' could not afford to maintain their Bath residence. In 1809, they relocated to Chawton Cottage back in Hampshire on the Austen's son Edward's estate. Jane Austen died on 18 July 1817 at only 41 years of age after a long period of illness.

Granted, the hard facts we have of her life tell us very little about who Jane actually was, but, although her letters sometimes seem to only concern trivial matters, it is through these letters that we can discover the 'true' Jane Austen, rid of the disguises provided by her relatives' 'cover-ups.'

2.3 Describing the Political through the Personal

The Jane described as having "perfect placidity of temper" and as one who would "never trust herself to comment with unkindness" seems to be an altogether different one than the Jane found in her letters (Austen-Leigh 139). Jane's personal correspondence shows a more mischievous side of her, as in the following passage:

> You scold me so much in the nice long letter which I have this moment received from you, that I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 9-10 January 1796)

Furthermore, the following passage cannot fairly be said to be spoken without unkindness: "Before I set out we were visited by Mrs Edwards, & while I was gone Miss Beckford & Maria, & Miss Woolls & Harriet B. called, all of whom my Mother was glad to see & I very glad to escape" (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 4 February 1813).

Although the above examples are quite outspoken, it was also very common for Jane to 'write in between the lines' as it were, masking her actual meaning. In Austen's time, letters were a form of entertainment. The letters Jane would have sent to her sister Cassandra, for example, would be read out to the family where Cassandra would have been staying at the time the letter arrived. Subversive writing was common practice for women in Austen's time as the letters would have to be able to be read out to family or guests – as is also seen in *Emma*, for example, when Miss Bates reads out the letter from her niece to her guests – but simultaneously it would have to convey information to the recipient that was meant for their ears only (Worsley 101-102). Austen's letters can be described as 'double-voiced,' as Deborah Kaplan has put it. Lucy Worsley explains this further: "At first sight, they look respectable, almost boring. […] But at the same time, the letters can also be secretly, subtly, subversive about rank and society and gender" (Worsley 102).

Much the same can be said of her books, because although to an inattentive reader unaware of the social circumstances of Austen's time they may seem to be simply about love and marriage, to a reader who can pick up on the "intermittent *sotto voce* comments" Austen is known to use in her letters, it is clear that Austen is not merely writing about daily life; she is showing us the influence of the political circumstances on the personal lives of ordinary people. (Kaplan 157) This is not to say that her books are not clearly about love and marriage, too, but this is not the full extent of Austen's novels; the novels are an attempt to illustrate the shortcomings of society through the use of love and marriage.

The political layer in Austen's novels can be seen, for example, in the heavy presence of the militia in *Pride and Prejudice*; the officers who bring so much excitement to Kitty and Lydia were a realistic presence during England's war with France in Jane Austen's lifetime, not merely a device to bring some excitement into the novel. Similarly, the constant presence of the effects of enclosure – the practice of landowners restricting access to their lands and putting a stop to 'common use' of these lands – in *Emma* is an example of this. The process of enclosure was at its height in the twenty-year period from 1795 to 1815. Indeed, "these twenty years of intensive enclosure – and intense debate – coincide, almost exactly, with Jane's writing career" (Kelly 227). Like Austen's letters, the novel can be read without any realisation of the subversive presence of enclosure by a reader unaware of the practice, but to a reader familiar with the circumstances of the time Mr Knightley's discussions with his brother concerning moving "a right of way" and the presence of the gypsies who are probably responsible for "pilfering" livestock from the "poultry-yards" in the neighbourhood clearly demonstrate the effects of enclosure. (Kelly 235, *Emma* 508)

In *Northanger Abbey*, the following passage also subversively discusses the state of women's rights in Britain in Austen's time. In the passage, Henry Tilney reacts to Catherine Morland's gothic idea of what really happened to the General's wife:

> What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? (*Northanger Abbey* 186)

Firstly, this is interesting because 'feminist' writers, most famously Mary Wollstonecraft, had been promoting the importance of female education. Even though men and women did not receive similar education Henry Tilney still refers to "our education" and expects Catherine to possess the same "sense" that he has acquired through education (*Northanger Abbey* 186). Austen might have meant this as a subversive allusion to Wollstonecraft's work. What follows is a seemingly harsh rebuttal of Catherine's fantasies:

> In the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist. (*Northanger Abbey* 188)

Although the passage could be read as a rebuttal of Catherine's ideas, and she is in fact rebuffed on the account of her suspicion of the General having killed his wife, the account of the marriage between the General and his wife is all but happy "for General Tilney is allowed by the laws of England and the manners of the age to exert near absolute power over his wife and daughter, and he does so as an irrational tyrant" (Kirkham 89). Kirkham argues that it is clear that the questions which Henry Tilney believes are rhetorical are actually up to discussion. Are wives protected as "equal citizen[s]?" Moreover, how can a wife be

differentiated from a slave if she is “her husband’s property” by law? (Kirkham 90) Austen’s commentary on society seems very clear once we place such a passage in its historical context, but Austen’s own schema prevents – and possibly protects – her from this commentary becoming too obvious for her heroine is prevented from fully understanding it by the schema.

Especially in *Sense and Sensibility*, it becomes clear that this subversive style of writing was taken from the style of writing of letters. It is commonly believed that Austen first wrote *Sense and Sensibility* as an epistolary novel but later altered the structure to suit the writing fashion at the time of publishing. However, the ‘double-voicedness’ taken from the letters can still be found in the resulting novel, as it can be read with two very different meanings. Worsley argues that it can on the one hand be read as a “didactic tale” in which “the over-emotional Marianne is taught a lesson and learns to control her feelings”, while sensible Elinor is rewarded for holding hers in check; but on the other hand “Marianne, although socially wrong, is also a speaker of truth” (Worsley 102). It is important to note that the first version of the story comes across as quite conservative and moralising, whereas the second, subversive, version seems to exude more radical ideas. As novels are dialogic, they can present several meanings to a reader and we can never be sure which meaning Austen hoped her readers would find in her novels, if not both. Nevertheless, it is crucial to be aware of the different meanings and underlying comments on society in her novels in order to understand her work fully.

If Austen discusses political issues such as the war with France and enclosure in her novels in such a subversive way, then would her feminist views not be present in her work in a similar manner – as in the two meanings that can be seen in the story of *Sense and Sensibility*? It is precisely Austen’s style of writing that causes many readers and scholars to have such different views of Jane Austen. I believe this is what happened in Austen research

for many years. A conservative writer is what scholars believed her to be and so she was presented as one. In recent years a change has come about in Austen scholars, with an increasing part of them that does now argue feminist views can be found in Austen's novels, if only the reader has adequate knowledge of the period (and the meaning of feminism at the time) and is willing to look beyond what Austen is actually saying towards what she is implying.

2.4 Jane the Professional Writer

It is in Jane's double-voiced letters that we can also find very non-subversive comments which indicate it was not the case that "neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives" but that Jane was intent on publishing for fame from very early on. (Austen-Leigh 140) In one of her earliest letters to Cassandra that are available to us, Jane writes: "I write only for Fame, and without any view to pecuniary Emolument" (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 9-10 January 1796). That earning money from her labours did become important to Jane later in her life is clear from a much later letter to Fanny Knight in 1814: "But tho' I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter* too" (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Fanny Knight 30 November 1814). Although this may seem logical to us in modern times, at the time it was not 'decent' for a woman of the gentry or middling classes to work. This might be the reason why Jane Austen published her works anonymously; she wanted to protect herself and her family from any shame adjoined to her career as a writer. This does not mean however, that Austen was not serious about her career as a writer which her family later claimed in her biographies. The fact that Austen longed for fame and a means to sustain herself, regardless of succeeding in this, could, in fact, be viewed as a longing for independence, a radical idea for women in Austen's time.

This claim from her family most likely had everything to do with the reputation of women writers at the time and their treatment by society, such as that of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose influence upon Austen I shall discuss below. (Kelly 21) However, these statements have been taken for Austen's opinion by many Austen scholars even though her letters display a very different view on her own authorship. The same has happened to Austen's 'decision' not to marry. Not until recently has any serious thought been put into the fact that Austen might have decided to stay single for the sake of her work, this being quite a 'feminist' perspective. After all, in Austen's time a husband would have possessed the intellectual rights to her novels and could even have prevented her from publishing. This thesis is not the place to go into this matter any deeper, but the idea that Austen might have actually made the decision to remain unmarried to preserve her intellectual and even physical freedom invites us to examine a whole new side to Austen, which I shall attempt in this thesis. For now, it is important to provide a historical context to Austen's novels by examining the span of literature at the time and its associations with 'feminism', as I believe that it is in Austen's novels that her 'feminist' ideas are most clearly found although veiled.

2.5.1. Literature and Feminism in Austen's Time

Novels in England underwent a massive change in their span of topics throughout the eighteenth century. There were many new themes that were allowed to be discussed in new ways. As Kirkham states, this resulted in authors broadening their scope of moral discourse. This was especially true for authors who would not have felt able to otherwise, the woman writer for example. "Among the new topics, the moral nature and status of women was one of the most important" (Kirkham 3). It seems only natural that many of the writers who felt interested in these topics and who now emerged were women. This then resulted in a change of the reading demographic: women became voracious readers who could influence the book

market because they were important as the buyers of the books as well as keepers of subscriptions to circulating libraries. (Kirkham 3) Women held much more power in the publishing world than ever before, both as writers and readers, and this was a climate in which Jane Austen could emerge as a literary influential moralist, as Kirkham argues:

> Jane Austen became a publishing novelist in 1811, but her novels are the culmination of a line of development in thought and fiction which goes back to the start of the eighteenth century, and which deserves to be called *feminist* since it was concerned with establishing the moral equality of men and women and the proper status of individual women as accountable beings. (Kirkham 3)

As discussed in the introduction, ‘feminist’ thought had been developing over the eighteenth century and literature and its themes had been developing along with it.

2.5.2. Jane Austen and the Influence of the Wollstonecraft Scandal

Although ‘feminism’ had been in development for decades before Austen began to write and there were even works containing ‘feminist’ ideas being published, the scandal surrounding Mary Wollstonecraft’s life which occurred some months after her death deeply influenced the way women expressed their ideas on ‘feminism’. Having discussed the implications of the scandal in general in the introduction, I will now explore the effect it might have had on Austen’s work as well as exploring the effects of the state of war England was in might have influenced Austen’s work.

We may assume that Austen, who was born in 1775, would have been well aware of the scandal which occurred in 1798. Moreover, Claire Tomalin suggests a connection between Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen which makes it likely that Austen had heard about the Wollstonecraft Scandal: “Sir William East, a neighbour of the Mrs Cotton with whom Mary stayed in Berkshire in 1796 after her second suicide attempt, is said to have shown her much kindness. The son of Sir William East was a resident pupil in the house of Jane Austen’s

father" (Tomalin (no page number available in used version, last note on 'fiction')). Austen was already a fervent writer, although yet unpublished, and had already attempted to publish her novel *First Impressions* (the later *Pride and Prejudice*) which had been rejected. Austen, already intending to publish, would have been well aware of the publishing industry and its limitations. Moreover, the England of Austen's lifetime was at war with France and although the fighting took place on the other side of the channel Britain was bracing itself for an attack. "Throughout Jane's late teens and twenties the government built coastal batteries and forts to defend Britain against invasion from France, and it brought in a number of measures designed to protect the country against the spread of danger from within" (Kelly 22). Kelly describes Britain as developing into an increasingly "totalitarian state" over the course of Austen's life "in which any criticism of the status quo was seen as disloyal and dangerous" (Kelly 21-22). An overhaul of the justice system took place to, for example, include "thinking, writing, printing, reading" in the definition of treason. The new system was meant to inspire fear in publishers and authors alike to print anything criticising the regime. When we remember that 'feminist' ideas were seen as threatening the patriarchal nature of society, as discussed in the introduction, it is not illogical to conclude that Austen might have wanted to avoid being associated with those feminist ideas as "to question one aspect of the way society worked was to attempt to undermine the whole" (Kelly 22).

This might already have been enough encouragement for Austen to not openly discuss her political opinions in her novels. But I believe the reason why she might have kept quiet about her 'feminist' opinions can be led back to the Wollstonecraft scandal. The connection between Austen and Wollstonecraft has been made by several scholars with Kirkham even claiming that "the resemblance between Wollstonecraft and Austen as feminist moralists is so striking that it seems extraordinary that it has not always been recognised" (Kirkham 48). Many of these scholars refer back to the Wollstonecraft scandal to explain Austen's

reluctance to openly share her ‘feminist’ opinions. (Kirkham 48, Kelly 21, Johnson xxiii) Women writers were already eyed with suspicion about their moral conduct but the dishonouring of Mary Wollstonecraft was the event which inspired fear in many lady novelists to openly express any ‘feminist’ opinions in their works or to refer to Wollstonecraft’s ideas. (Kelly 21) As discussed in the introduction, due to the scandal ‘feminist’ ideas had become associated with moral indecency and scandalous behaviour. The effect of the scandal was that “no woman novelist, even among the most progressive, wished to be discredited by association with Mary Wollstonecraft” (Johnson xxiii). This was not just the case for novelists. Even women who did write explicitly on ‘feminist’ subjects toned their arguments down in order to come across as unradical as possible: “Among the women who wrote on the sensitive subject of female education after 1798, many were at pains to deny that their wish to see girls taught to think carried any radical political implications” (Kirkham 49). Although it cannot be known for certain, this was possibly because of the impact of the Wollstonecraft scandal. (Kirkham 50) If other female novelists as well as political women writers weakened their own arguments and avoided association with Mary Wollstonecraft, the claim that Austen would not have agreed with Wollstonecraft or had no ‘feminist’ ideas merely because she did not mention her or her works suddenly falls flat. Johnson even argues that, “as the reaction [to Wollstonecraft’s memoirs] intensified, the fear of being branded a treasonous Jacobin obliged moderately progressive novelists to appear more conservative than they really were” (xxiii).

2.5.3. Subversive Feminism in Jane Austen’s Novels

In fact, “no allusions [to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*] were necessary to remind audiences that [Austen’s] female characterization, such as Emma’s or Fanny’s, was already a politicized issue in and of itself” (Johnson xxiii). This is to say, Austen did not need to include any references to Wollstonecraft by name; her very style of writing

conveyed her 'feminist' ideas. The fact that Austen chooses to portray her heroines as having "a moral life as a man has a moral life," as Lionel Trilling described Emma Woodhouse as having, was progressive in itself. (qtd. in Johnson xxiii) Johnson explains that "the extent to which women have or ought to have moral lives was very hotly and accessibly debated in Austen's time, as were other issues pertaining to female sexuality in particular and sexual difference in general" (xxiii). This is certainly not the only way in which Austen exhibits her 'feminist' opinions in her novels, but "in endowing attractive female characters like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet with rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence" Austen makes her opinions on the question of women's moral lives very clear. (Johnson xxiii) The heroines in Austen's novels seem to develop a stronger sense of their own agency and values than their mothers are portrayed as having. In the following chapters I will explore this in detail in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Johnson notes that "Austen defies every dictum about female propriety and deference propounded in the sermons and conduct books which have been thought to shape her opinions on all important matters," which shows Austen in an increasingly less conservative light than she is often shown in. (Johnson xxiii) That references to these kind of books do not immediately signify a person's conservativeness becomes clear when we notice that Wollstonecraft quotes the *Book of Common Prayer* more frequently than Austen and quotes of Dr Johnson, who was seen as a great conservative influence on Austen, "in clearly more favourable contexts than can be found in Austen" (Kirkham 41). The fact that Austen quotes these books in her novels has often been seen as a sign that she agreed with what was described in these books and thus as a sign of Austen's conservativeness. Nothing could be farther from the truth, in my opinion. The fact that Austen has Mr Collins read out Fordyce's sermons in *Pride and Prejudice* while his character is ridiculed by almost the entire Bennet

family throughout the novel, seems to me to be a clear sign that she does not fully agree with these texts. It seems to encourage readers to question these texts, instead of glorifying them.

According to Kirkham it is "our habit of thinking of Mary Wollstonecraft as a Jacobin, and Jane Austen as a Lady Novelist praised by Scott, [which] makes it difficult for us to see connections between them" (Kirkham 40). But she argues that "attention to the 'feminist tradition' of the eighteenth century, in its widest sense, shows that it is by no means bizarre to look for such a connection. (Kirkham 40-41) I will argue, likewise, that the connection between Austen and 'feminist' thought is often still not made merely because we are used to approach Austen as a conservative author instead of a 'feminist' moralist. Moreover, our own contemporary feminist ideas influence our understanding of eighteenth century 'feminist' ideas and could render us incapable of recognising the veiled 'feminist' ideas in novels of the time, in this case Austen's. In this chapter, I hope to have exposed the possible reasons for Austen's subversive 'feminism' and to have placed it in the context of her life. By doing so, I have attempted to paint a more radical picture of Austen than is often presented. In the next chapters, I shall identify Austen's 'feminist' ideas in two of her novels *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* and show how the 'true' Austen can be found in her novels.

2.6 Conclusion

As demonstrated above, Jane Austen scholars are increasingly focussing on the 'personal' Jane: Jane as she shows herself in her personal correspondence as opposed to the Jane that we find in the early biographies. I am taking this a step further and claiming that the 'true' Jane Austen can also be found in her novels, which Helena Kelly has also argued in her research on Austen. (Kelly 33) Albeit in a subversive way, Austen expresses her views on politics and society throughout her novels. Even "after all her family's efforts at concealment," "it [i]s here, in the novels, that we find Jane. (Kelly 33) Kelly focuses on

Austen's political views but for my research, I want to focus on the feminist views Jane Austen expresses through her heroines.

In the next chapters, I shall do this by examining the family relationships in the novels and especially the parent-daughter relationships in her novels. Family life plays a significant part in Jane Austen's novels, but the relationships between parents and daughters are especially interesting. The overbearing presence of a mother in one novel (such as in *Pride and Prejudice*) and the poignant lack of one in another (such as in *Emma*) have an unmistakable effect on the heroine as well as any other daughters in the family. I shall connect this with the theme of weak authority figures found throughout her novels, which includes the weakness of the authority of the heroine's parents. I shall argue that the daughters develop a stronger sense of their agency and value than their mothers and that the presence or lack of a mother, as well as other forms of weak authority figures, influences her feminist views. I shall also focus on the differences between sisters in Austen's novels and on the fact that the less 'feminine' and more 'feminist' sister – the heroine – is shown to be superior to the more 'feminine' sister to the reader.

Chapter 3

“It is a truth universally acknowledged…”

‘Feminism’ in *Pride and Prejudice*

3.1 Introduction

Elizabeth has an extremely overbearing, and often embarrassing, mother, in contrast to Emma, as we will see in the following chapter. Even though Elizabeth’s mother is present, she does not seem to be able to exert much power over her children. Mr Bennet, likewise, is a weak authority figure, favouring peace above family issues, such as getting his daughters married off well. The weakness of authority figures does not stop there, however. Rather than the ‘natural’ authority figures, there are many supposed subordinates who are actually the ones pulling the strings. As we will see in *Emma*, the weakness of authority figures inspires the heroine to approach matters in a more feminist way; this heroine, not being perfectly ‘feminine,’ is favoured over the other characters by Austen. In *Pride and Prejudice* we also witness the emergence of a new type of Austen-heroine; a type of heroine that we will also see in *Emma* but whose transformation is manifested in Elizabeth Bennet. It shall also be shown that Austen’s use of a conservative genre (the courtship novel), and possibly more conservative schemas, only underlines her, at the time, radical opinions concerning women and their place in society. It shall also be shown that Austen uses the weakness of authority figures to underline her heroines’ feminism.

3.2 Radicalising a Conservative Genre

Austen is often seen as a conservative writer and this would at first glance be confirmed by the schemas Austen employs to tell her stories. Austen uses conservative schemas for her stories, drawing on plays and novels she had seen and read. A keen theatre-

goer, Austen drew on several plays by August van Kotzebue, employing their schemas in her novels in which she satirises them, especially regarding his treatment of women (Gay, Byrne, Kirkham 93-95). Kirkham argues that "as a feminist moralist, Jane Austen criticises sexist pride and prejudice as embedded in the laws and customs of her age" (Kirkham 82). In other words, Austen challenges the conventions of male and female roles in society. Austen, being aware of the presence of these same flawed conventions operating in literature, draws attention to the conventions in the schemas she applies by slightly altering them or by writing subversive or sarcastic dialogues and comments. It can therefore persuasively be argued that "in fact, the 'conservatism' of *Pride and Prejudice* is an imaginative experiment with conservative myths, and not a statement of faith in them as they had already stood in anti-Jacobin fiction" (Johnson75). So although Austen's work may at first seem conservative, when we examine her work more closely, it becomes clear that Austen is making a point exactly by drawing attention to the conventions of the art and 'conservative myths' and through this showing "that they must be questioned critically if true understanding is to be achieved" (Kirkham 82).

Often the modern reader of Austen's novels lacks sufficient understanding of the conventions, which would have been apparent to her first readers. It is therefore that Austen's most subtle, radical thoughts are often lost upon the modern reader, reinforcing the stereotype of Austen as a conservative writer. Austen's later novels, that is in the order of writing not publishing, are more subtle, relying more on the intellect of the reader (as Austen said herself, she did not write for "dull elves") (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 29 January 1813). This change in her style is often wrongly attributed to Austen becoming more conservative as she aged, while in fact it can be shown that the opposite is true.

It is in *Pride and Prejudice* that this change in Austen's writing appears in transition, namely in her heroine Elizabeth. *Pride and Prejudice* was constructed over a long period of

time. It started out as *First Impressions*, which probably sported a "burlesque" schema "in which the heroine's romantic confidence in first impressions (a common article of faith in such heroines) was corrected by experience" (Kirkham 91). This can still be seen in *Pride and Prejudice* as we have it in Elizabeth readily accepting Wickham's made-up story about Mr Darcy. Upon his introduction Wickham is described as "of most gentlemanlike appearance." His description continues to praise his appearance as well as his conversation skills: "His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" and possessed "a happy readiness of conversation […] at the same time perfectly correct and unassuming" (*Pride and Prejudice* 71). Conversely, Mr Darcy at his first introduction, although at first described positively from afar: "Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien" is soon "discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased" (*Pride and Prejudice* 13). Comparing the two, it is obvious Wickham makes a far better first impression than Mr Darcy, although once we know the true personality of each believing Wickham's story without checking the facts does seem rather short-sighted.

Once the novel was finally published as *Pride and Prejudice*, its schema had been radically altered by Austen to display a heroine who is "the central intelligence through whose eyes and understanding events and characters are mediated to the readers" and the former schema can only be seen in instances as the above (Kirkham 91). Elizabeth takes on this role typical of Austen's later heroines form one particular point in the novel: the reading of Mr Darcy's letter. Elizabeth is, in this particular scene, shown as able to make her own moral decisions, which was at the time seen as a male attribute, and is from that moment on the most intelligent character in the novel. It is in Elizabeth that we see the transition into Austen's later heroines, such as Emma, who "has a moral life as a man as a moral life" (Trilling qtd. in Johnson 123). Even though in modern times this does not seem like much of a feminist

statement, at the time it certainly was as the question whether women had a similar moral life to men was up to debate. It was seen as a “sexual peculiarity” which, in Emma’s case, is “more subversive than a mere passing disinterest in marriage” (Johnson 123). Lionel Trilling called Emma’s moral life “the extraordinary thing about Emma,” implying the rareness of female characters having such moral lives in novels. (Trilling qtd. in Johnson 123)

3.3.1 Contrasting the Sisters

As we will see with Emma and Isabella Woodhouse in *Emma*, the Bennet sisters can be contrasted with one another. The most obvious pairing would be Elizabeth and her elder sister Jane. Whereas Jane is more perfectly ‘feminine’ and less outspoken than Elizabeth, Austen still shows us Elizabeth is superior to her. I shall compare Jane and Elizabeth to their younger sisters, emphasising the contrast between them and the effect this has on how the reader views the character of Elizabeth. I shall then examine the contrast between Elizabeth and Jane which Austen makes explicit and the effect this has on how the reader views these characters. I shall then discuss how Austen shows her less conservative ideas and might even be trying to influence her readers’ ideas through presenting the readers with a positive image of Elizabeth.

Austen makes it obvious Jane is the most perfectly ‘feminine’ sister. She is described as the most beautiful of the sisters as well as thoughtful and kind. Besides Lydia, she is the favourite of her mother whose “business of her life was to get her daughters married” (*Pride and Prejudice* 7). Elizabeth is her father’s favourite, however, which goes beyond Mrs Bennet’s understanding as “she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia” (*Pride and Prejudice* 6). Elizabeth, much like Austen’s other heroines, is not at all presented as being perfect: she is not quite as handsome as Jane, nor quite accomplished. She only plays and sings “a little” and admits she does not draw “at all” (*Pride and Prejudice*

161). However, she was always "encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary" (*Pride and Prejudice* 161).

This is not unlike her sisters, of whom only one plays and sings: her sister Mary. It is clear that Mary is the most accomplished of all the sisters, were it not for the fact that her accomplishments fall flat because she does not understand the meaning of them. As for Jane and Elizabeth, it is clear they are superior to Kitty and Lydia in their accomplishments and their good sense. Elizabeth explains about her and her sisters' education to Lady Catherine: "Those who chose to be idle, certainly might" (*Pride and Prejudice* 161). With the lack of a governess and their mother not having been "quite a slave to […] [their] education" it was through the books that they were encouraged to read that the Bennet sisters were educated. As Johnson argues, "Austen orchestrates opposites and analogues, not to clarify, but rather to embarrass judgements" (Johnson 77). The fact that the Bennet's "parental neglect […] somehow turns Lydia into a thoughtless flirt" whereas it "turns Jane and Elizabeth into independent and responsible moral agents" is meant to reinforce the theme of 'opposites':

> By linking Elizabeth and Lydia, Austen eludes rather than reiterates conventional moral codes, and the carefully elaborated cross-referencing of other characters, qualities, and relationships throughout the book functions in the same way: not to serve some neoclassical taste for balance but rather to impede generalization. (Johnson 77)

In my opinion, this becomes especially clear in the comparison of the eldest Bennet sisters with Lady Catherine's daughter for whose education no expenses were spared but who is nonetheless not very accomplished, due to her sickly nature, whereas the elder Bennet sisters had no such resources for their education and are still more accomplished. It is also interesting to note that Austen never records Miss De Bourgh in direct speech. Her utterings are described as "very little, except in a low voice" and we are only ever indirectly told of her

speeches. By pairing Elizabeth with Lydia, as Johnson argues, on the one hand and Miss De Bourgh on the other hand, Austen cleverly makes the reader insensitive to Elizabeth's moral indecencies and therefore might be said to promote behaviour not in accord with the conduct described in the conduct and sermon books critics have been so keen to equate with Austen's views on conduct. I would argue, furthermore, that the triangle of Lydia, Elizabeth, and Miss De Bourgh makes the reader unwilling to empathise with either extreme – Lydia or Miss De Bourgh – and leaves the reader to like Elizabeth, forgetting her flaws in the wake of Lydia's and Miss De Bourgh's behaviour.

In a way, "Lydia is a decoy who attracts the disapproval to which Elizabeth herself could otherwise be subject, and by lamenting Lydia's glaring excesses, Elizabeth is cleared of her less egregious but still 'improper' rambles, conceit, and impertinence without arousing our discomfort or incurring our censure" (Johnson 76-77). Although we as modern readers might tend to fail to take in the full impact of Elizabeth's unorthodox behaviour, it would have been noticeable to readers in Austen's time. As Johnson argues, "judged by the standards set in conduct books and in conservative fiction," Elizabeth's behaviour "constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety" (Johnson 75). This is why Austen introduces Lydia as a 'decoy': she uses Lydia's extremely improper behaviour in order to lead away the attention from Elizabeth's improper behaviour. This technique even seemed to have worked in Austen's own time as, even though readers did notice "her independence of character" and "sprightliness", in one review it is said to be "kept within the proper line of decorum," while Lydia's behaviour is condemned ("ART. X.-Pride and Prejudice, a Novel, in Three Vols" p 323).

As mentioned above, critics have often described Austen's ideas on women's behaviour as identical to that outlined in the conduct books which prescribed how women should behave. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen has Mr Collins read out *Sermons to Young*

Women (1766) by Reverend James Fordyce to the Bennet family on his first visit. In this instance, it seems as if Austen clearly distances herself from this kind of books and the ideas of how women should behave described therein. As several critics, such as Claudia Johnson, have argued before me, I would argue that it would be illogical for Austen to promote Fordyce's ideas on women's behaviour through a character such as Mr Collins (Johnson 75). Mr Collins is ridiculed, not in the least by Elizabeth, throughout the novel and therefore cannot serve as a moral influence on the reader. As Johnson argues, "Collins's approval of such 'books of a serious stamp' in and of itself signals Austen's disaffection with the rules about women promulgated in them" (Johnson 75).

Furthermore, the heroine Austen so clearly favours displays behaviour blatantly in conflict with the behaviour that Fordyce describes as proper behaviour for a woman. The extent of Elizabeth's improper behaviour can be put into perspective by comparing her behaviour, as described in the novel, to the behaviour that was prescribed by women in conduct books. When we compare Elizabeth's behaviour throughout the novel to the guidelines described in these conduct books, it becomes clear that Elizabeth's behaviour – even though it might seem perfectly acceptable to the modern reader – is in fact at odds with women's behaviour promoted in conduct books. Johnson illustrates this by comparing Fordyce's teachings on women's behaviour to Elizabeth's behaviour in the novel.

> His reproof of "briskness of air and levity of deportment" would fall harshly on a heroine famed for "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous." His disapproval of women who "betray a confidence in [their] charms" would reflect ill on one who assures her modest sister, "Compliments always take *you* by surprise, and *me* never" (Johnson 76).

Likewise, a man promoting the biblical expression "let your speech be always with Grace", would hardly approve of Austen's heroine's harsh words on Mr Collins (and many others for

that matter): “his friends may very well rejoice in his having met with one of the very few sensible women who would have accepted him, or have made him happy if they had” (Fordyce 8, *Pride and Prejudice* 174).

Although Fordyce’s teachings were thought to be outdated in Austen’s time and his work had declined in popularity, his *Sermons to Young Women* enjoyed continual reprints until early in the twentieth century. William St Clair even argues that “the archives show extraordinarily long print runs for reprints” of *Sermons to Young Women* among other conduct books. Therefore, it is safe to say that his and other conduct books were still read and possibly still abided by (St Clair 275). It is interesting that Austen should so blatantly criticise Fordyce’s views in her novel, as Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, also criticised Fordyce’s ideas on proper behaviour for women.

3.3.2 Less Feminine and Sensible Rewarded

What reinforces Austen’s rejection of the behavioural roles of women described in conduct books, is that Austen does show Elizabeth to be superior to Jane even though she is not the perfect image of ‘femininity’ as Jane certainly is. It is Jane’s lack of seeing the world and people for who they really are that prevents her from having a clear view of society. Jane always sees the best in people and this is constantly criticised by Austen through Elizabeth. This happens for instance when Jane keeps defending Caroline Bingley when it is already clear to Elizabeth that she is not being honest towards Jane. This ability to ‘read’ people, maybe even common ‘sense’, is part of what makes Elizabeth superior to her.

On the other hand of the spectrum we have Lydia, who is inferior to Elizabeth but also to Jane. Lydia elopes with Wickham, who is, importantly, Elizabeth’s former love interest. The difference between the two sisters is that Elizabeth realises there is no realistic way for their union to work out as neither of them have enough money to sustain themselves, while Lydia does not realise Wickham could not really have had the intention to marry her without

the incentive of money. Elizabeth accepts this situation and even defends Wickham for turning his attentions towards another girl who had just inherited a small fortune: “If it was not allowable for him to gain *my* affections, because I had no money, what occasion could there be for making love to a girl whom he did not care about, and who was equally poor?” (*Pride and Prejudice* 151) Lydia elopes with Wickham in spite of the situation and is only saved from being ruined by Darcy who offers Wickham money to marry Lydia. These two situations illustrate that Elizabeth is sensible, while Lydia is certainly not. Lydia is even more outspoken than Elizabeth and might even be said to have a greater sense of her own agency than Elizabeth but her actions are followed through without ‘sense’. By illustrating how Elizabeth and Lydia react to these situations, Austen might be emphasising the importance of ‘sense’ in women, which could be an allusion to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

I would argue that Jane Austen seems to reward her less perfectly ‘feminine’ but sensible female characters. Elizabeth’s sister Jane is the more perfectly ‘feminine’ character. She comes close to the ‘ideal woman’ described in conduct books and in, for example, Fordyce’s sermons: she is modest, speaks with ‘grace’ and is not outspoken like Elizabeth. Although Jane does end up in a happy marriage, it is Elizabeth who marries the wealthiest man, as well as the most critical one; even in the critical Mr Darcy’s eyes, Elizabeth is superior to her sister who he had at first branded “the only handsome girl in the room” (*Pride and Prejudice* 13). Naturally, it is not Elizabeth’s aim to marry the wealthiest man, but rather the man she loves. However, in Austen’s time, as I will discuss in more detail in the chapter on *Emma*, as a woman one of the only things you had power over was who you would marry and the more prosperous the man in question was, the more successful you were deemed to be as a woman. Therefore, Austen’s choice to have Elizabeth, not Jane, wed the wealthiest man can indeed be seen as an affirmation of Elizabeth’s superiority, even though the novel is not

preoccupied with financial gain. Following from that, Lydia lacks sense and is therefore inferior to Elizabeth. She ends up in a marriage where there is no money and which is, furthermore, an unhappy marriage, as it seems in the novel. I would argue that Elizabeth's superiority to her sisters is illustrated in the quality of their marriages. Lydia, who is most inferior to Elizabeth, ends up in an unhappy and poor marriage; Jane, who is presented as only slightly inferior to Elizabeth, ends up in a happy and rich marriage, although Bingley has less money and status than Darcy; and Elizabeth ends up in a happy marriage with the richest man of all. This is reminiscent of *Emma*, in which, as I will discuss in the following chapter, Emma marries the heir instead of her sister, who was so perfectly 'feminine', but has married his younger brother. Again, Emma's sister, like Elizabeth's sister, does not end up in a bad marriage at all, but I believe with this difference Austen emphasises Emma's and Elizabeth's superiority respectively.

3.4.1 The Weakness of Authority Figures

The weakness of authority figures is a theme that runs through the course of *Pride and Prejudice*. The weakness of the authority figures is emphasised by the strength of the characters that should be subordinate to them. In light of unveiling Austen's feminist approach in her works, it is important to note that these shifts in authority are more often than not in favour of the female characters.

3.4.2 Mr Bennet and Mrs Bennet

Mr and Mrs Bennet are the main weak authority figures in the novel as they are the parents of the heroine. Whereas in *Emma* Emma's mother is deceased and is therefore absent from Emma's life, Mrs Bennet is a very present figure in Elizabeth's life. In spite of this, she is not able to exert much power over her daughter. Elizabeth is "the least dear of all her children" and likewise the child with which her authority runs short the most (*Pride and*

Prejudice 101). An example of this can be found in her failed attempts to arrange a marriage between Elizabeth and Mr Collins, whom Elizabeth despises but who could be the penniless Bennet sisters' saviour because, due to the entailment of the Bennet's estate, he is the heir of said estate. When Mrs Bennet first hears of Elizabeth's refusal to marry Mr Collins, she is sure she can turn Elizabeth's head:

> "But depend upon it, Mr. Collins," she added, "that Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself directly. She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will *make* her know it." (*Pride and Prejudice* 108)

Incidentally, Mrs Bennet single-handedly creates the possibility that Mr Collins might "change his mind and not have *her*" by exposing her daughter's "defects of temper," as Mr Collins terms them (*Pride and Prejudice* 109). Doing so, Mrs Bennet actually undermines her own plans. Instead of speaking to Elizabeth herself, she calls on Mr Bennet to "make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins" (*Pride and Prejudice* 109). Mr Bennet's proposed "unhappy alternative" underlines Mrs Bennet's weak authority: "From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. – Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*" (*Pride and Prejudice* 109, *Pride and Prejudice* 109-110). Mr Bennet trusts his daughter's choice and supports her, rather than his wife. Mr Bennet's reaction to this affair emphasises her weak authority even more. Even though she vows to "never speak to you [Elizabeth] again" she breaks her own vow immediately: "She talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns" (*Pride and Prejudice* 111, *Pride and Prejudice* 110). The fact that all her efforts to influence Elizabeth's decision are in vain only emphasises the weakness of her authority. The fact that Elizabeth is described as correcting her mother on several occasions – "For heaven's sake, madam, speak lower." –

creates the idea that the authority structure between mother and daughter is actually inverted (*Pride and Prejudice* 97).

This brings us to Mr Bennet as a weak authority figure. Mr Bennet is supposed to be a strong authority figure as a father and the head of the household, or so it should be according to the societal rules in Austen's time. However, he does not exert much power over his wife and daughters. His authority seems at its weakest concerning Elizabeth, his favourite. It is also Elizabeth who is aware of "the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband" and of "that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum" (*Pride and Prejudice* 228). It is clear that Elizabeth is also aware of his shortcomings as a father, when she questions his decision to allow Lydia to join Mrs Forster on a trip to Brighton and even "secretly advising her father not to let her go" (*Pride and Prejudice* 222). Her father, who "heard her attentively," is shown as a weak authority figure here (*Pride and Prejudice* 222). It is Elizabeth who 'teaches' her father about the role he should play in his children's upbringing in this instance: "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" (*Pride and Prejudice* 223). Again, it is Elizabeth who is aware of her father's shortcomings and of what role he should play in their household. Elizabeth, in short, is not the dutiful, obeying daughter as described in conduct books of the time. In fact, Elizabeth is shown to be a very undutiful daughter.

3.3.3 Elizabeth's Undutifulness

Likewise, Elizabeth shows no deference to Lady Catherine De Bourgh. When Lady De Bourgh insists that Elizabeth should not pursue a marriage to Mr Darcy, Elizabeth does not answer with the deference and humility expected of her by Lady De Bourgh: "Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this" (*Pride and Prejudice* 335). Instead, she meets with a confident woman who is interested in her own

happiness rather than in others' "wishes" or "propriety and delicacy" (*Pride and Prejudice* 336). When told of the planned union between Mr Darcy and Miss De Bourgh, Elizabeth simply replies:

> But what is that to me? If there is no other objection to my marrying your nephew, I shall certainly not be kept from it, by knowing that his mother and aunt wished him to marry Miss De Bourgh. […] If Mr. Darcy is neither by honour nor inclination confined to his cousin, why is not he to make another choice? And if I am that choice, why may I not accept him? (*Pride and Prejudice* 336)

Elizabeth stresses her own importance in this paragraph. She makes it clear that she shall act according to what brings herself happiness instead of acting in a way which will please others; in a way, she grants her own wishes more importance than she does the wishes of society. Elizabeth's use of language emphasises her progressiveness; she emphasises the importance of "choice" instead of that of "honour," "inclination" or "propriety", words which fill Lady Catherine's speech (*Pride and Prejudice* 336). Kelly argues that "Elizabeth is, fundamentally, a radical. She knows her own mind; she reserves the right to decide questions for herself" (Kelly 161). The mere idea of having a 'choice' in this matter, for Mr Darcy as well as for Elizabeth herself is radical though not unusual as in Austen's time there was a change in the moral understanding of marriage: compatibility overtook financial matters as the deciding factor in marriage arrangements. This change occurred from the eighteenth century onwards, according to Stephanie Coontz, who claims that "the older system of marrying for political and economic advantage remained the norm until the eighteenth century" in her book *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (2005) (Coontz p1 ch. 8 (no page numbers available in used version)).

3.4 Changing Moral Understanding of Marriage

As indicated above, the moral understanding of marriage was changing in Austen's time from financial gain being the ultimate goal towards the importance of the compatibility of the marriage partners. Elizabeth will not settle for a man merely because he has a decent living, or even a large amount of money. Elizabeth will only marry someone she truly loves. In fact this is quite reminiscent of *Emma* and Emma's opinion that "a woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write a tolerable letter" would not have been out of character if it were, in fact, a quote from Elizabeth Bennet (*Emma* 57). Elizabeth believes that she must marry for love, albeit with sense: she cannot marry someone she loves but who has no funds, like Lydia, as such a marriage would not end well. On the other hand, she cannot marry someone who would be an advantageous match, but whom she does not love, as Charlotte does. In a way, it could be said the novel demonstrates two radical values: the emphasis on compatibility rather than money in the selection of a spouse and the importance of 'sense' in women and therefore the need for their education.

Mrs Bennet is mostly motivated by money, while Elizabeth is motivated by love but not without sense. This can be seen in the instance where Mrs Bennet tries to force Elizabeth into marrying Mr Collins, knowing full well that Elizabeth could never find happiness with him, and Elizabeth refusing in spite of Mr Collins' ability to guarantee her family's financial security. Elizabeth is shown to be more radical than her mother here, implying Elizabeth is less conservative than her mother.

Elizabeth is, in fact, more progressive in the way she conducts her developing relationship with Mr Darcy than we, as readers, often realise.

> We're so familiar with what happens between them that we fail to register quite how wholly improper much of their behaviour is. Theirs is an astonishingly frank,

> astonishingly intense relationship, and almost no one, except for the two of them, knows that it's happening at all, certainly not the true extent of it. (Kelly 160)

Elizabeth keeps her developing feelings for Darcy and, perhaps most importantly to her family, his first proposal a secret. Her family's amazement at their proposed engagement testifies to the secretive nature of their relationship. "Are you out of your senses, to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him?" is her father's initial response to their proposed union. (*Pride and Prejudice* 355) Her mother, financially inclined as she is, is not so much concerned with Elizabeth's feelings but "can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more!" (*Pride and Prejudice* 358)

Once married, Elizabeth has a radical influence on Mr Darcy's sister Georgiana. Although we are told Georgiana "at first […] often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at her [Elizabeth's] lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother," Elizabeth soon becomes an example to her. (*Pride and Prejudice* 366) Austen tells us that "by Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband" (*Pride and Prejudice* 366). Elizabeth's progressiveness is openly recognised at the end of the novel and her influence on Georgiana is presented as beneficial to Mr Darcy's sister. This might be seen as an affirmation of Austen's 'feminist' opinions and an indication that she hoped her Elizabeth would have such an influence on her readers.

3.5 Conclusion

In the next chapter, we shall see that *Emma* is quite similar to *Pride and Prejudice* in the points discussed. Both employ an ostensibly conservative schema, which is tweaked to place importance on questioning society. Elizabeth is contrasted with her sisters, Jane and Lydia especially and the less feminine but more sensible one is presented as superior. Furthermore, the theme of weak authority figures, primarily the heroine's parents, is

employed to underline the heroine's progressiveness and 'feminism.' I have also shown that Elizabeth's progressiveness is more present than we, as modern readers, sometimes notice. Elizabeth, being "constructed to be a conservative's nightmare," with her "undutifulness as a daughter, her laughter, her lack of reverence for Mr Collins, her lack of respect for Lady Catherine De Bourgh," which are all condemned by Fordyce, can be seen as the reverse of what reactionaries stood for and therefore might be seen as evidence of Jane Austen's own radical views (Kelly 161).

Chapter 4

"My being charming, Harriet, is not quite enough to induce me to marry"

Feminist Ideas in *Emma*

4.1 Introduction

Emma can perhaps be called the most autonomous of Austen's heroines. "[H]andsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" and "mistress" of Hartfield, she has none of the usual inclinations to marry and, in fact, has "very little intention of ever marrying at all" (*Emma* 5, 90). Emma is an interesting heroine to consider in the light of feminism. Unlike Austen's other heroines, she does not need to marry for financial security or to relieve her parents of the burden of supporting her; she does not even have to marry in order to provide for a sister, as both she and her sister are already provided for by their inheritance and her sister has already married well. Even though some would argue that Emma's reason for not marrying is that she feels she cannot leave her father, her already privileged position as Lady of the House and her "disposition to think a little too well of herself" equally add to her inclination not to marry (*Emma* 5). Her financial independence and the power she exerts in the household but also outside of it place her in an unusual position for a young woman in Austen's time, which makes her extremely interesting to examine in a study focussing on the 'feminist' qualities of Austen's heroines. The weakness of the supposed authority figures in her life allows Emma to exert authority over Hartfield's and even Highbury's inhabitants, at least in Emma's mind although the other characters do seem to accept Emma's authority. Emma's power allows Austen to explore the boundaries of 'femininity' and the 'masculine' aspects of her heroine's personality.

4.2 Weakness of Authority Figures

Another factor which makes Emma an interesting heroine to consider is that she grows up without her mother. The lack of a mother in *Emma*, as opposed to the presence of an overbearing mother in *Pride and Prejudice*, has a particular influence on our heroine's disposition. As we are told on the very first page of the novel, "[h]er mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses" (*Emma* 5). Although Emma was raised by a governess "who had fallen little short of a mother in affection," we are told she interacts with her governess rather more like a sister than like a mother which means Emma has never experienced being part of a mother-daughter relationship (*Emma* 5). What with her mother deceased, her governess being more like a sister to her, her older sister married, and a sickly father, Emma acquires full authority over the household from a very young age. Quite a lonely girl, Emma has never learnt to deal with other people being in power besides herself. In a way, she has taken over the authority of her mother and father at the same time, leaving Emma in charge.

In addition to this, she is not 'checked' by anyone in this authority, as Mr Knightley notes in the novel: "In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother's talents, and must have been under subjection to her" (*Emma* 39). Although Mrs Weston says, "I consider myself, you know, as having somewhat of the privilege of speech that Emma's mother might have had," she does not seem to realise Emma has always done "just what she liked: highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgement, but directed chiefly by her own" (*Emma* 42, 5). The reader is informed that "even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint" (*Emma* 5). It is made clear that Emma, with her more 'masculine' dominant personality, has the upper hand in her relationship with the meek, 'feminine' Mrs Weston regardless of both their positions in the household. Again, Emma seems to be taking on her role as mistress of the house, who would have authority over the governess, even though at

the time Mrs Weston is the governess, it was actually Emma's sister who was mistress of the house. Through Emma's more 'masculine' treatment of power, she seems to be able to overpower even those above her, be they female or male.

In fact, *Emma* is centred on female power. This does not end with Emma's own authority, but it is reflected in almost all of the authority positions in the novel. In fact, as Johnson argues, Mr Knightley is the only man with true authority in the novel; the rest of the authority positions are filled by women with varying levels of power, with Mrs Churchill at the one and Mrs Elton at the other end (Johnson 126). Nevertheless, all these women exert power in their own ways and their authority is, most interestingly, not opposed to by any of the men in the novel. Emma's father, Mr Woodhouse, completely accepts his daughter's authority over the household and is, as we are told, "no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful" (*Emma* 7). It is Emma he turns to when there are decisions to be made in the Woodhouse household, for example concerning sleeping arrangements for their guests: "Have you thought, my dear, where you shall put her – and what room there will be for the children?" (*Emma* 84) Furthermore, it is made perfectly clear throughout the novel that Emma has inherited her talents from her mother, mostly so by her father: "Ah! it is no difficulty to see who you take after! Your dear mother was so clever at all those things! If I had but her memory!" (*Emma* 83)

Some people might argue that Emma is simply a bossy woman who enjoys telling people what to do and (wrongly) attributes authority over the villagers to herself. They would be glancing over the fact that Emma's authority seems to be recognised by several characters, however. In the above examples, we have seen that two people who should exert authority over Emma are actually under Emma's authority: her governess and her father. Furthermore, Harriet does not question Emma's authority over her for a moment and is only awed by her.

Mr Knightley openly disputes her authority throughout most of the novel, but further on in this chapter I shall show how he too seems to recognise her authority in the end.

4.3.1 Contrasting the Sisters

Just as Emma is likened to her mother throughout the novel, her sister Isabella is likened to her father:

> She was not a woman of strong understanding or any quickness; and, with this resemblance of her father, she inherited also much of his constitution; was delicate in her own health, over-careful of that of her children, had many fears and many nerves, and was as fond of her own Mr Wingfield in town as her father could be of Mr Perry. (*Emma* 98)

The reader will note that Emma and her mother are identified as strong and intelligent, while Isabella and her father are described as weak and slightly dim-witted. Isabella is described as "passing her life with those she doated on, full of their merits, blind to their faults, and always innocently busy" (*Emma* 147). Isabella is a representation of what was seen by the Georgians as the ultimate woman: a doting mother who occupies her time with 'innocent' hobbies. Austen makes it clear, however, that she does not believe Isabella to be the picture of "feminine happiness" (*Emma* 147). The way Isabella is described is reminiscent of a passage in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she describes many mothers' shortcomings:

> The formation of the mind must be begun very early, and the temper, in particular, requires the most judicious attention—an attention which women cannot pay who only love their children because they are their children, and seek no further for the foundation of their duty, than in the feelings of the moment. It is this want of reason in

> their affections which makes women so often run into extremes, and either be the most fond or most careless and unnatural mothers. (Wollstonecraft 346)

Isabella must of course be counted as a "most fond" mother, but according to Wollstonecraft this is not enough without "reason," which Isabella, "not a woman of strong understanding," does not possess (Wollstonecraft 346, *Emma* 98). Isabella's lack of reason as a loving mother becomes especially clear in the following passage:

> There is something so shocking in a child's being taken away from his parents and natural home! I can never comprehend how Mr Weston could part with him. To give up one's child! I really never could think well of any body who proposed such a thing to anybody else. (*Emma* 102)

Although taking away a child from its parents does seem quite shocking, in Austen's time this was not an uncommon practice. Transferring the care of one's child to a wealthy relative or patron could ensure the child's prosperous future – a future which many parents (especially those with many children) could not provide. Austen's own parents, for example, allowed their own son to be taken into the care of the Knights, wealthy relatives of Jane's father, who made him their legal heir. The same advantage is seen in the case of Frank Churchill, which Isabella is reacting to in the passage above, who is adopted by Mr and Mrs Churchill and stands to inherit all their possessions. What with the possibility of gaining such advantages, it would be nonsensical not to consider such a proposal. Giving up your child might not necessarily be a good idea, but not even considering it, while there were obvious advantages at the time, presents Isabella as the "most fond" mother without sense (Wollstonecraft 346). This is exactly how Austen wants to present Isabella.

Austen seems to echo Wollstonecraft's ideas. Although Austen, after describing how Isabella passes her days, admits that Isabella "might have been a model of right feminine happiness" – note the use of 'might' here – as Austen cleverly puts it, Austen's description of

her and her choice of words reveal that she is not Austen's own image of 'perfect femininity' (*Emma* 147). The use of 'might' instead of 'was' turns what would be a conservative statement into a progressive questioning of that same statement. The use of 'might' is subtle enough to avoid detection by reactionaries – an example of Austen's 'double-voiced' style of writing – but it also urges the more inquisitive reader to question their own "model of right feminine happiness" (*Emma* 147). Austen expressed her radical opinions through the genre of conservative courtship novels by subtly questioning those very conservative values within that same genre. Johnson goes as far as to claim that "conservative fiction was Austen's medium because it very quickly became the only fiction there was, other voices being quelled, and Austen persistently subjected its most cherished mythologies to interrogations from which it could not recover" (Johnson 166). Although it is true that books were subjected to a great deal of censure in Austen's time, due to the war with France, some more 'radical' books were still being published. I would argue that Austen rather used conservative fiction in order to have access to a great number of readers as conservative fiction was read abundantly. She could then question its conventions in order to undermine it from within and that way get her readers to question it.

4.3.2"Highbury afforded her no equals:" Emma's superiority over other female characters

As Emma is likened to her mother and Isabella to her father, the two sisters are presented as opposites and it is clear who Austen presents as the 'best' of the two: her heroine, Emma. Although Emma is by no means presented as 'perfect' it is as Johnson argues: "in the character of Isabella, Austen shows that the good little wife cannot hold a candle to Emma" (Johnson 142). A device employed in conservative fiction, and so also in Austen's, is poetic justice: good characters come to a good end, while bad characters come to a bad one. It is interesting though that, although Austen does employ this device to reward the characters that are morally good, she favours her less perfectly 'feminine' but more sensible characters,

mostly her heroines, over the other female characters. I shall elaborate on how this is shown in *Emma* below.

Austen always presents her heroines as not quite perfect, either in looks or accomplishments or both, by adding these kind of insertions to the narrative: "Her performance was pleasing, though by no means capital;" "she knew the limitations of her own powers too well to attempt more than she could perform with credit" (*Pride and Prejudice* 25, *Emma* 236). Austen does not represent Emma, or any of her other later heroines, as the 'perfect' Georgian woman. It is probably Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, whose character comes closest to the obedience and naivety that was preferred in Georgian women. Emma is very outspoken, "quick and decided in her ways" and is described as "doing just what she liked" (*Emma* 27, 5). Besides this, Emma is not perfectly accomplished. It is implied she could be but Emma is described as not having the patience – a quality highly prized in Georgian gentlewomen who had only their accomplishments to entertain themselves during their long spells of free time – to learn something perfectly. Emma's judgement is also lacking, a much disputed point among scholars, which becomes clear in her continuous efforts at matchmaking for the wrong couples. In spite of this, Austen still tells us that "Highbury […] afforded her no equals," implying that Emma, even with her imperfections, is superior to the other characters (and not only women, for that matter) (*Emma* 7).

Emma herself knows she is not the perfectly 'feminine' heroine and more than once resolves to be more like Harriet, whom Emma describes as having a "thorough sweetness of temper and manner, a very humble opinion of herself, and a great readiness to be pleased with other people" (*Emma* 67). Emma asserts, rather slightingly, that this is what men look for in a woman: "I am very much mistaken if your sex in general would not think such beauty, and such temper, the highest claims a woman could possess" at least "till they do fall in love with

well-informed minds instead of handsome faces" (*Emma* 67, 66). Emma seems to argue that men should fall in love with "well-informed minds" and not just silly girls without any sense, which echoes Wollstonecraft's ideas again. In the novel, they actually do. The men who are Harriet's love interests are not actually interested in Harriet but rather in Emma herself. It might be argued that Austen is confirming that men should fall in love with women like Emma, instead of obedient and humble women.

Even though Emma thinks this way, she more than once believes Harriet to be superior to her, but Emma's opinion on this does not seem to be shared by Austen. Whether Emma genuinely believes herself to be inferior to Harriet is irrelevant; what is relevant is that Emma believes she *should* be more like Harriet because this is what society implores her to be. Marilyn Butler argues that "Harriet is a primitivist's heroine, seen with a satirical eye. She is innocent, and in all her instincts 'good'; but the shortcomings of such goodness are apparent in her speeches, ill-judging, indecisive, beneath rationality" (Butler 267). When Emma is "really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two – and that to resemble her would be more for her own welfare and happiness than all that genius or intelligence could do" (*Emma* 149). Austen, with her "satirical eye", debunks this idea with: "It was rather too late in the day to set about being simpleminded and ignorant; but she left with every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life" (*Emma* 149). In this statement, Austen confirms it is Emma's intention to behave more like Harriet but she is also stating that Emma is far superior to her. Even though Emma acts more masculine, her being nurtured into acting femininely by society makes her feel she should act more like Harriet (Johnson 123, Brown 326). However, Austen, unlike Emma, does not assert that Emma should act more like Harriet; she denies that it is even a possibility and presents it as a deterioration to Emma were it to happen.

What Emma does have is sense, unlike her sister and Harriet. Although Mr Knightley warns her to use her sense better – "better be without sense, than misapply it as you do" – he is still asserting she has sense, a quality highly prized by Wollstonecraft but which she also thinks rare in women (*Emma* 67). That Emma misapplies the sense she has is not necessarily a problem to Emma's superiority. As Marilyn Butler argues, "Emma makes mistakes in the first instance because, like all other human beings, she is fallible" (Butler 266). Butler furthermore argues that "Emma's is a character of real moral superiority" despite the mistakes she makes (Butler 267). It is not the essence of feminism to be perfect and Emma is certainly not, but that there is room for improvement within Emma's character does not mean that she is presented as an inferior being to men in general or Mr Knightley in particular.

4.4 A Feminist Approach to the Novel's Ending

"The conclusion of *Emma* shares the polyvalence characteristic of the endings in Austen's later novels," argues Johnson (Johnson 142). In this section I am going to examine different aspects of the novel's ending which are often not given much consideration as they are overlooked in favour of the (seemingly) conservative aspects of the ending. The novel typically ends with marriage – three marriages to be exact – and it is often read as an end to Emma's authority. It is my opinion that the ending can, conversely, be read as an affirmation of Emma's authority and, therefore, be seen as a feminist statement of the author. It is not that authority is the ultimate goal in the novel, rather it represents the equality of men and women when both partners in a marriage exert power. I feel that the conclusion the marriage ends Emma's reign leaves many multifaceted aspects of the marriage and the ending unexamined and another conclusion would be more logically arrived at it if these aspects were examined.

First of all, Emma chooses her partner, Mr Knightley because she realises, upon the risk of losing him, that "her happiness depended on being *first* with Mr Knightley, first in

interest and affection" (*Emma* 435). It could be said that Emma only changes her mind on marriage, when she realises not marrying poses a risk to her happiness. As Emma herself has argued before "a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else" (*Emma* 91). Emma, being rich, has no need to marry to remain respectable. It is when she realises that she stands the risk of losing Mr Knightley's regard if she is replaced by his future wife that she realises she has to marry him to secure that regard.

It is only when her other reasons not to marry are reduced by her need for Mr Knightley's regard that her father becomes her main reason not to marry. It is her "filial piety" – which Johnson argues "proves her to be reassuringly devoted to precisely those relationships which political conservatives wanted to protect" – which then makes her doubtful of marrying (Johnson 142). But as it seems her other reasons for not marrying were more important than her loyalty to her father, this does not necessarily mean that Austen promotes the conservative values of the time in *Emma*.

Emma knows that by marrying she would go against her father's wishes. It is interesting to note that although Mr Woodhouse does not want anyone, let alone his daughters, to marry and considers especially the woman as 'poor' creatures for having married, his first daughter Isabella is married. He still does not seem to fully accept this marriage, but, as Isabella's father, he would have had to give his consent. This could illustrate his weakness as an authority figure: even though he had the authority to prevent Isabella from marrying, he gave her his consent. Although he wishes his daughters would stay with him, he is a loving father and therefore gives his permission. However, the 'loss' of Isabella does make Mr Woodhouse cling to Emma even more. Therefore, in Emma's case, the weakness of his authority has to take a more extreme form. Once Emma has resolved to marry, regardless of her father's wishes, it is up to her and Mr Knightley to figure out how to convince Mr

Woodhouse of their plan. Firstly, they resolve to have Mr Woodhouse move to Donwell Abbey, but, as this plan is soon found unfeasible, it is resolved Mr Knightley should move to Hartfield. All of this is resolved without consulting Mr Woodhouse on the subject. Note here that this respect for Mr Woodhouse's comfort is not based on their respect for his authority but on "the risk [it might pose] to her father's comfort, perhaps even of his life," which illustrates how weak a person Mr Woodhouse is taken to be (*Emma* 470). It is the reason why Mr Woodhouse finally, "with a much more voluntary, cheerful consent than his daughter had ever presumed to hope for at the moment," consents to their marriage and Mr Knightley moving to Hartfield, that is the epitome of the illustration of Mr Woodhouse's weakness as an authority figure: his need for protection caused by his fear of "pilfering" and "*housebreaking*" (*Emma* 507). His constant need for protection stands in sharp contrast with his ascribed position as male head of the house and as a prominent person in Highbury's society – a position which he does not fulfil properly throughout the novel. Mr Woodhouse's weakness is emphasised by its contrast with the strength of the Knightley brothers: "The strength, resolution, and presence of mind of the Mr Knightleys, commanded his [Mr Woodhouse's] fullest dependance" (*Emma* 508).

Although it is Mr Knightley's plan to move to Hartfield and Emma takes some time to accept it, the following passage shows that it is Emma who finds the most advantage in this arrangement:

> This proposal of his, this plan of marrying and continuing at Hartfield – the more she contemplated it, the more pleasing it became. His evils seemed to lessen, her own advantages to increase, their mutual good to outweigh every drawback. Such a companion for herself in the periods of anxiety and cheerlessness before her! – Such a partner in all those duties and cares to which time must be giving increase of melancholy! (*Emma* 471)

It is crucial that Emma only accepts Mr Knightley's proposal when she is sure "her own advantages […] increase" and "their mutual good to outweigh every drawback" (*Emma* 471). Some might argue that Emma only accepts his proposal when she knows her father will be caused the least discomfort, but I would argue this passage illustrates Emma is thinking about not only thinking of her father, but mostly about her own happiness too. She speaks of "her own advantages," not her father's (*Emma* 471). Furthermore, "his," in "his evils seemed to lessen," must refer to Mr Knightley as he is the only one mentioned in the sentence or even the paragraph before and not to a decrease of her father's discomfort (*Emma* 471). Of course Emma does want to make sure of her father's wellbeing, but I only wish to argue that it is truly Emma's choice to accept Mr Knightley's plan.

It has often been argued that Emma's authority is taken away by her marriage to Mr Knightley and this is seen as a confirmation of Austen's reactionary ideals. Although Emma's marriage to Knightley does put an end to her "reign[...] alone," her marriage might not represent such a straightforward end to Emma's authority as some scholars like to present (*Emma* 76). As Emma and Mr Knightley are of similar social standing, their marriage only places them on equal footing. Mr Knightley accepts Emma as his equal, elevating her from the girl he was trying to improve, but even then Emma already says of their conversations: "We always say what we like to one another" (*Emma* 11). This statement seems to present Emma and Mr Knightley as equals; something which is enhanced by Emma constantly referring to many male characters as friends, placing her in a position of equality to them. As I mentioned earlier, throughout the novel it is mostly women who are shown to have power. In the case of Mrs Churchill it is even the case that she exerts power not only over her adopted son but also over her husband. Marriage, in the world Austen created in Emma, then, does not need to represent the conservative values scholars usually attach to it or to confirm the superiority of male rule. What with Emma and Mr Knightley being equals as married

partners, Mr Knightley then, by moving into Emma's home is actually playing the woman's role, as it was usual at the time for the woman to move to her husband's home. As Johnson puts it: he is "placing himself within her domain" and, by doing so, "gives his blessing to her rule" (Johnson 143). In this way, female rule is actually glorified by the ending and through Emma's marriage to Mr Knightley and it cannot be seen as an unproblematic exaltation of conservative values when all multifaceted aspects of the marriage are taken into account. Again, authority is used as a model for male and female equality here. Going back to the argument I made earlier in this chapter that Austen uses a conservative genre to question its conventions and with the conventions of society, this glorification of female rule can be seen as an example of that. The novel seems quite conservative as it ends in marriage (which has been seen as indication for conservativeness by many scholars) but actually the authority-relationship is turned upside down by giving the woman, Emma, most authority.

4.5 Conclusion

Emma represents Austen's, at the time, radical values. We have seen that Austen employs similar techniques in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* to underline her heroines' 'feminism'. The absence of Emma's mother and the weakness of her father, allow Emma to take on the responsibility for the household and to develop more 'masculine' properties. Emma is presented as being superior over the other characters and contrasted with the most perfectly 'feminine' characters who are presented as insensible, much the same as Elizabeth. In the 'feminist' reading of the ending of the novel, I have shown that even after marriage, Emma can be seen as retaining her power and the ending as a whole confirms Emma's authority to rule.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“How I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know.”

Jane Austen and her Heroines, a Conclusion

As we have seen through the course of the chapters in this thesis, Jane Austen’s novels have led to many different and sometimes opposing views on her work and on her authorship, with many readers reading her novels as either conservative or radical. In this thesis, I have attempted to identify the ‘feminist’ ideas Austen might have had and to highlight the ‘feminist’ aspects that can be found in Austen’s work, as well as the possible reasons for her not to have discussed her ‘feminist’ ideas openly. With this, I hope to have presented a radically different view on Austen than the conservative writer she is still often seen as. I also hope to have shown that Jane Austen and her works cannot simply be branded as either conservative or radical, but that her dialogic novels display elements of both.

5.1 Jane Austen and her Heroines

In this concluding chapter, I would like to combine what has been discussed throughout this thesis all the while connecting Jane Austen’s books and heroines to Jane Austen the woman and writer. I want to take Austen’s own opinion on her heroines as an illustration of who she was as a person, because perhaps the most convincing indication that Jane Austen cannot be seen as a completely committed reactionary is her own opinion on her most radical heroines: Emma Woodhouse and, above all, Elizabeth Bennet.

Austen makes her opinion of Elizabeth clear in one of her letters by saying: “I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know” (Le Faye, Jane Austen to

Cassandra Austen 29 January 1813). Austen was, in fact, so fond of her heroine that a compliment to Elizabeth was almost felt as a compliment to herself: “I long to have you hear Mr H’s opinion of P&P. His admiring my Elizabeth so much is particularly welcome to me” (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 15-16 September 1813). Aware of the fact that Elizabeth was quite an unconventional character, she was pleasantly surprised other people also “admire[d]” her Elizabeth: “She was amused, poor soul! *that* she could not help you know, with two such people to lead the way; but she really does seem to admire Elizabeth” (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen 29 January 1813).

James Edward Austen-Leigh states in his memoirs of Jane Austen that “she was very fond of Emma, but did not reckon her to be a general favourite; for, when commencing that work, she said, ‘I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like’” (Austen-Leigh 158). Although we cannot be sure Austen actually said this as the expression is not recorded in any of her own writing, it can be deduced from her letters that she was indeed very fond of Emma. For instance, she writes to Anna Lefroy: “As I wish very much to see *your* Jemima, I am sure you will like to see *my* Emma” (Le Faye, Jane Austen to Anna Lefroy ? December 1815 – January 1816). Austen refers to Emma in an equal fashion as she refers to Jemima, Anna Lefroy’s daughter, suggesting she was as fond of Emma as she would have been of a daughter. It was not uncommon for Austen to refer to her books as her children and this indicated her fondness of the characters she created in them.

So Jane Austen was very fond of her own heroines, but she was not too sure whether the world around her would be too. This might have been because she knew her heroines were radical and unconventional and that she believed the world around her would not be pleased with their unconventionality. As it turns out, some people who Austen did not expect to ‘admire’ her heroines did, as seen in the example above, and her heroines were actually well loved among her readers. It would be interesting to examine the public’s fondness of Austen’s

heroines further in future research. For now it can be concluded that Kelly's view that "Elizabeth is, in short, constructed to be a conservative's nightmare" combined with the fact that Austen was so fond of Elizabeth, and Emma and her other heroines, then implies that Jane Austen could not have been quite so conservative as she is often thought to be (Kelly 161).

5.2 Future Research

There are extensive possibilities for future research on Austen and feminism. First of all, the novels I have not researched in this thesis could be examined specifically on their 'feminist' aspects, as I have done for *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* in this thesis. Although I have chosen to focus on the heroines of the novels, further research could be conducted into 'feminist' aspects in other characters in the novels. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, with her powerful position in society, would be a very interesting character to examine in connection with 'feminism'. Jane Fairfax, who takes her life into her own hands by planning to become a governess when she is unsure of Frank Churchill's intentions, would be another example of a character whose 'feminist' aspects would be worth consideration.

It would also be very interesting to conduct research into adaptations of Austen's work, such as film version of her books or stories inspired by her work (such as the book *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) and the film based on said book). It would be interesting to examine the degree of 'feminism' in these adaptations compared to Austen's books and to thereby attempt to examine what degree our own views on 'feminism' or Austen's 'feminism' influence recent adaptations of her works.

5.3 End Note

We shall never truly know what Austen's exact views on society were and how far her 'feminism' extended. Too many of her letters have been lost and too much of her life has been unrecorded. We may, however, find clues as to her views in her letters and her books. Some people might conclude that she was a conservative writer after all, but I for one am convinced that there are too many clues in especially her books that suggest she was more radical and 'feminist' than is often believed of her. Our different views of Jane Austen will always be tailored to our own personal views as well as Jane's and we will all place most importance in other things or find different clues as to what her views were in her works. Precisely because Jane Austen cannot be specifically said to be a reactionary or a radical – or maybe a bit of both –she is such an interesting author to discuss. With this thesis I, like other scholars who have researched Jane Austen's 'radical' side before me, hope to have motivated readers to look beyond the conservative frame Austen has long been placed in and to experience her books in a whole new way.

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