Jane Austen Re-visited: A Feminist Evaluation of the Longevity and Relevance of the Austen Oeuvre

by

Elizabeth Kollmann

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Magister Artium in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Port Elizabeth

Supervisor:

Mary West

January 2003
I, Elizabeth Kollmann, hereby declare that:

- the work done in this thesis is my own original work;

- all sources used or referred to have been documented and recognised;

- this thesis has not been submitted previously in full or partial fulfilment of the requirements for an equivalent or higher qualification at any other recognised educational institution.

________________________________      January 2003

SIGNATURE        DATE
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, advice and encouragement of many individuals. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following people for their contributions:

To Mary West, my supervisor, for her guidance in the field of study

To Dr Michael Marais for his constructive comments and valuable recommendations

To Prof Chris Jeffery for his sound advice and words of encouragement

To my mother who typed the bulk of this thesis and who was always willing to help in any way possible

To Franz for his continued encouragement and support
Abstract

Although many might consider Jane Austen to be outdated and clichéd, her work retains an undying appeal. During the last decade the English-speaking world has experienced an Austen renaissance as it has been treated to a number of film and television adaptations of her work, including *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Film critics such as Bill De Lapp (1996) and Sherry Dean (1996) have commented on the phenomenal response these productions received and have been amazed by Austen’s ability to compete with current movie scripts. The reasons for viewers and readers enjoying and identifying with Austen’s fiction are numerous. Readers of varying persuasions have different agendas and hence different views and interpretations of Austen.

This thesis follows a gynocritical approach and applies a feminist point of view when reading and discussing Austen. Austen’s novels—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*—are re-read and re-evaluated from a feminist perspective in order to call attention to Austen’s awareness of women’s second-class position in her society. Women’s experiences in Austen’s time are compared to women’s experiences in society today in order to illustrate, in some way, the tremendous progress the feminist movement has made. In addition, by examining what Austen reveals about the material reality of women in her time, it is possible to explore the legacy that modern women have inherited.

Literary critics such as André Brink (1998), Claudia Johnson (1988), and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) believe Austen to create feminist awareness in her novels. There are critics, however, who do not view Austen as necessarily feminist in her writing. Nancy Armstrong writes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) that Austen’s objective is not a critique of the
old order but rather a redefinition of wealth and status. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Edward Said implicates Austen in the rationale for imperial expansion, while Barbara Seeber argues in “The Schooling of Marianne Dashwood” (1999) that Austen’s texts should be understood as dialogic. Others, such as Patricia Beer (1974), believe Austen’s fiction primarily to be about marriage since all her novels end with matrimony. My own reading of Austen takes into consideration her social milieu and patriarchal inheritance. It argues that Austen writes within the framework of patriarchy (for example by marrying off her heroines) possibly because she is aware that in order to survive as a woman (writer) in a male-favouring world and in a publishing world dominated by men, her critique needs to be covert.

If read from a feminist perspective, Austen’s fiction draws our attention to issues such as women’s (lack of) education, the effects of not being given access to knowledge, marriage as a patriarchal institution of entrapment, and women’s identity. Her fiction reveals the effects of educating women for a life of domesticity, and illustrates that such an education is biased, leaving women powerless and without any means of self-protection in a male-dominated world. Although contemporary women in the Western world mostly enjoy equal education opportunities to men, they suffer the consequences of a legacy which denied them access to a proper education. Feminist writers such as Flis Henwood (2000) show that contemporary women believe certain areas of expertise belong to men exclusively. Others such as Linda Nochlin (1994) reveal that because women did not have access to higher education for so many years, they failed to produce great women artists like Chaucer or Cézanne.

Austen’s fiction also exposes the economic and social system (of which education constitutes a major part) for enforcing marriage and for enfeebling women. In addition, it illustrates some of the realities and pitfalls of marriage. While Austen only subtly refers to
women’s disempowerment within marriage, contemporary feminist scholars such as Germaine Greer (1999) and Arnot, Araújo, Deliyanni, and Ivinson (2000) explicitly warn women that marriage is a patriarchal institution of entrapment and that it often leaves women feeling unfulfilled. The issue of marriage as a patriarchal institution has been thought important and has been addressed by feminists because it contributes to women’s powerlessness. Feminist scholars today find it imperative to expose all forms of power in order to eradicate women’s subordination. bell hooks comments in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (2000) on the importance of revealing unfair power relations in order to eliminate oppression of any kind.

Austen does not necessarily express the wish to eradicate forms of power or oppression in her novels. Yet, if we read her work from a feminist point of view, we are made aware of the social construction of power. From her fiction we can infer that male power is enshrined in the very structure of society, and this makes us aware of women’s lack of power in her time. Austen’s novels, however, are not merely novels of powerlessness but of empowerment. By creating rounded women characters and by giving them the power to judge, to refuse and to write, Austen challenges the stereotyped view of woman as either overpowering monster or weak and fragile angel. In addition, her novels seem to question women’s inherited identity and to suggest that qualities such as emotionality and mothering are not natural aspects of being a woman. Because she suggests ways in which women might empower themselves, albeit within patriarchal parameters, one could argue that she contributes, in a small way, to the transformation of existing power relations and to the eradication of women’s servile position in society.

In hierdie verhandeling word Austen se werke vanuit ‘n feministiese oogpunt beskou. Austen se grootste werke, naamlik *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, en *Persuasion*, word herlees en her geëvalueer in ‘n poging om Austen se bewussyn van vroue se tweede-klas posisie in die samelewing uit te lig. Vroue se ondervindings in Austen se tyd word vergelyk met hoe vroue in vandag se tyd die samelewing ondervind om aan te dui watter vooruitgang die feministiese beweging gemaak het. Daarbenewens kan ons, deur te kyk na wat Austen aan die lig bring oor agtiende-eeuse vroue en hulle probleme, insig kry in die tipe erfenis waarmee kontemporêre vroue gelaat is.


Indien ons Austen vanuit ‘n feministiese oogpunt lees, dui haar romans op die gebrek aan opvoeding vir vroue, die gevolge daarvan om van kennis weerhou te word, die huwelik as ‘n patriargale institusie van gevangenskap, en vroue se identiteit. Wanneer ons kyk na wat haar fiksie te sê het oor die gevolge van ‘n opvoeding wat vrouens op ‘n lewe van huishouding voorberei, blyk dit dat so ‘n opvoeding partydig is en dat dit vrouens magteloos en sonder enige middel van selfverteidiging laat in ‘n wêreld wat deur mans bestem word. Alhoewel die moderne vrou in die Westerse wêreld meestal gelyke regte het tot ‘n opvoeding as die man, ly sy onder die gevolge van ‘n erfenis wat haar van ‘n behoorlike opvoeding weerhou het. Huidige feministiese skrywers soos Flis Henwood (2000) wys dat vroue glo dat sekere studierigtings eksklusief aan die man behoort. Ander, soos Linda Nochlin (1994), is van die mening dat, omdat vroue vir baie jare toegang tot ‘n hoër opvoeding geweier is, hulle daarin misluk het om vroulike kunstenaars en skrywers soos Chaucer of Cézanne te produseer.

Austen se fiksie onthloot ook die ekonomiese en sosiale stelsel (waarvan opvoeding ‘n wesentlike deel opmaak) omdat dit ‘n getroude lewe op vrouens afdwing en omdat dit
daardeur vrouens verswak. Daarby illustreer dit die realiteite en valstrikke van die huwelik.
Waar Austen slegs subtiel na vroue se magteloosheid verwys, waarsku huidige feministe
dat die huwelik ‘n patriargale institusie van gevangenskap is en dat dit dikwels vrouens
onvervuld laat voel. Die kwessie van die huwelik as patriargale institusie word as belangrik
gear en word aangespreek, aangesien dit bydrae tot vroue se magteloosheid. Feministe
vandag vind dit van uiterste belang om alle vorme van mag bloot te lê sodat die onderdanige
rol van vroue beëindig kan word. bell hooks verwys in Feminist Theory: From Margin to
Center (2000) na die belangrikheid daarvan om onregverdige magsverhoudinge te openbaar
sodat onderdrukking van enige aard geëlimineer kan word.

Austen skyn nie te wens dat alle vorme van mag en onderdrukking geëlimineer word nie.
Nogtans, as ons haar werke vanuit ‘n feministiese oogpunt beskou, maak hulle ons bewus
van die sosiale konstruksie van mag. Ons kan van haar romans aflei dat die manlike mag in
die struktuur van die samelewing verweef is, en dit maak ons bewus van vroue se tekort aan
mag teen die einde van die agtiende eeu. Austen se romans gaan egter nie slegs oor
magteloosheid nie, maar ook oor bemagtiging. Deur geronde vroue karakters daar te stel, en
deur aan hulle die mag van onderskeiding, die mag om te weier en die mag om te skryf te
gee, daag sy die stereotipe van vrou as dominerende monster of van vrou as magtelose engel
uit. Boonop skyn haar werke vroue se identiteit te bevraagteken en stel dit voor dat
eienskappe soos emosionaliteit en moederlikheid nie ‘n natuurlike aspek van vrou-wees is
nie. Omdat sy maniere voorstel waarop vroue hulle-self kan bemagtig, al is dit binne-in die
patriargale raamwerk, slaag sy daarin, tot ‘n klein mate, om by te dra tot die transformasie
van bestaande magsverhoudinge en tot die eliminering van vroue se onderdanige posisie in
die samelewing.
# Index

## Introduction

1

## Chapter One – Women and Education

1. Sweet Orderings of Domesticity 20
2. Cultivating Accomplished Ladies 25
   2.1 Catching Men 27
   2.2 Laying Down the Harp 29
3. Self-knowledge 32
4. Privileged Education for Boys 35
5. Unequal Education Opportunities 38
6. Consequences of a Poor Education 39

## Chapter Two – Women and Knowledge

1. Empty Conversation, Trite Remarks and the Conduct Books 50
2. Finding a New Discourse 55
3. Investigating Knowledge 58
4. Self-Deprecation 60
5. Literariness 65
6. Silly Women and Men 71

## Chapter Three – Women and Marriage

1. Marriage as Entrapment 78
   1.1 Economic Security 83
   1.2 Escaping Home 88
   1.3 Approval and Acknowledgement 94
   1.4 Surviving Patriarchy 96
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four – Women and Identity</th>
<th>119</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Women’s Representation</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Male Texts</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Austen’s Texts</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rationality and Emotion</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Natural Mothers</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Women Empowered</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The Power to Judge</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 The Power to Refuse</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The Power to Write</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Domestic Power(lessness)</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Conclusion                       | 153 |

| Bibliography                     | 163 |
Introduction

There are hints, sometimes strong ones, that Jane Austen is dissatisfied with the traditional status of woman, but they keep disappearing. They do re-emerge, however, in a different guise: as the ambiguities, discrepancies and illogic of a creative artist…

(Patricia Beer, Reader, I Married Him)

…Austen makes us aware of gaps, omissions, and contradictions, stories that sense cannot tell, stories that do not make sense. By incorporating contradictions, Austen incorporates contrary discourses, thus giving us a glimpse of the polyphonic world that the dominant ideology…needs to repress.

(Barbara Seeber, The Schooling of Marianne Dashwood)

There is a paradox here in reading Jane Austen which I have been impressed by but can in no way resolve.

(Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism)

I had always considered Jane Austen to be an unequivocal advocate for women’s emancipation until statements such as the above decidedly confused me when I started doing my reading for this dissertation. I found that the ideology of Austen’s work is not clear-cut and that it has been interpreted in different ways throughout the years. While some scholars maintain that Austen’s novels are mostly concerned with matters of courtship and marriage, others have implicated her work in the rationale for imperial expansion. Yet others believe Austen to address women’s issues. Amongst them there are those who argue that Austen does not only display a feminist awareness, but that she hides this consciousness behind a decorous façade.
Indeed, Austen may have found it necessary in her time to hide her dissatisfaction with women’s status in a man-made and male-favouring world. Although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) may be considered outdated, their work remains seminal since it offers one of the first feminist readings of Austen’s novels. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Austen hides her feminist consciousness behind the façade of submitting to patriarchy. They suggest that she only adds the traditional elements of marriage and happy endings to her novels in order to hide her dissent (169). Rosalind Miles seems to agree when she writes in *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (1987) that “[m]arriage in all its variations is the cornerstone of [Austen’s] moral and imaginative structures, so much so that it may seem that she accepts quite uncritically the social prescriptions of her time” (43, my emphasis).

If we entertain the notion that Austen hides her defiance behind the façade of seemingly endorsing the status quo, then surely this does not mean that she accepts it. Those who support the theory of Austen’s concealment posit that, by appearing to submit to patriarchy, Austen manages to subvert existing power relations in society without arousing the suspicion of a literary world dominated by male publishers. While André Brink has referred to this as Austen’s “double play” (115) in *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino* (1998), Claudia Johnson has called it “double plotting” (xxiv) and “strategies of subversion and indirection” (19) in *Jane Austen: Women Politics and the Novel* (1988).

Johnson and Brink call attention to the fact that the society Austen was living in was one which favoured men. While Claudia Johnson has mentioned that women writers in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century often felt “too marginal as women in their society [so that they had to] smuggle in their social criticism” (1988:xxiii), André Brink has commented on
Austen’s “acute awareness of her position as a woman trying to demarcate her own space in a man’s world” (1998:112). Nancy Armstrong notes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) that Austen was fully aware of the fact that patriarchal society required women writers to produce “a non-aristocratic kind of writing that was both polite and particularly suitable for a female readership” (97). Because Austen knew that intellectual women in her time were treated with suspicion and that women novelists were ostracized from the community if they did not admit their writing to be a mere diversion (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:10), it is possible that she made a deliberate effort to conceal her dissent. In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977) Elaine Showalter comments on the necessity for late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century women writers to hide their intellectualism (21). They published anonymously, wrote under a male pseudonym or were self-deprecating, in the hope that “[their] female audience would both read the messages between [their] lines and refrain from betraying what they deciphered” (16). Owing to the “far-reaching and vigorous moral censorship upon [the middle class’s] chief entertainment, fiction” (Watt, 1971:465), it could very well be that Austen realised she too had to write within the patriarchal framework of marriage and women’s subordination in general, or else run the risk of not being published. In order, then, to have her work published, as well as protect herself from the kind of ostracism that Gilbert and Gubar suggest would be her fate, Austen may have concealed her feminist awareness.

As modern readers we should keep in mind, as Andrea Nye has pointed out in *Feminist Theories and the Philosophies of Man* (1988), that “the situations in which women struggle have a history, a familial history both social and individual, and [that] their reactions are shaped in that history” (115). Austen was struggling in the context of a patriarchal world
which, according to Jackie Stacey’s definition in “Untangling Feminist Theory” (1993), refers to “the systematic organisation of male supremacy and female subordination” (53). Claudia Johnson mentions that the society Austen was living in was one which dictated “fundamentally different codes of morality for men and women” (1988:14). André Brink writes that underlying a novel such as *Emma* is “the crude and inescapable fact that the social code by which all the characters exist and survive is different for men and women” (1998:123). The social code for women, as Judith Lowder Newton shows in “Women Power and Subversion” (1981), included submitting to patriarchal institutions such as marriage in order to survive financially (119-129). Jane Austen was not exempt from the code by which her women characters had to exist and survive. Another possibility then, and one which I would favour, is not so much that Austen deliberately hides her rebellion behind the façade of submission but that she submits to patriarchy because she has no other choice if she wants to survive in a male-dominated society.

There are quite a number of critics who disagree with the view that Austen is necessarily feminist in her writing. Nancy Armstrong clearly states that she does “not subscribe to the view of Austen as a proto-feminist rebel who thrashed against the constraints that bound an author of her sex unwillingly to convention” (1987:156). She believes “Austen’s objective is not to dispute the hierarchical principle underlying the old society, but to redefine wealth and status as so many signs that must then be read and evaluated in terms of the more fundamental currency of language” (138). Armstrong seems to suggest that Austen could not escape the ideology she was born into when she comments that Jane Austen “appeared more than willing to leave the rest of the world alone and deal only with matters of courtship and marriage”
In addition, she maintains that Austen’s work shows how social status has the power to define individuals and thereby disrupt the stability of the community (155).

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993:58-59) Edward Said argues that it is Austen’s interest in imperial England which comes to the fore in *Mansfield Park*. According to Said, Austen in this novel shows how colonies are important “to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England” (66). Though he focuses on *Mansfield Park*, he extends his findings to Austen’s work as a whole by suggesting that *Mansfield Park* “defines the moral and social values informing her other novels” (62). Said also mentions that authors are shaped by the history of their societies and by their social experiences (xxii). It is possible that Jane Austen was unaware of the ideology of her society and that she therefore remained a product of her times. This could possibly explain why her work, according to Said, consolidates the authority of the status quo, including the hierarchy of the patriarchal family, while only rarely challenging institutions such as private property and marriage (77-79).

Published in the mid-seventies, Patricia Beer’s *Reader I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Elliot* (1974) may have been superseded by the above readings by Armstrong and Said. Her work, however, provides us with yet another way in which Austen can be read. The seventies are of significance since Austen’s work had been regarded up to this time as that of an essentially conservative writer, as Isobel Armstrong shows in *Jane Austen: Mansfield Park* (1988:95). Patricia Beer does not regard Austen as being radically or even liberally feminist in her approach. She feels that Austen “not only accepted the limitations of women’s scope but seems in her own life to have found happiness within them” (1974:25). Though Beer mentions an occasionally “suspicious piece of bravado about husband-hunting” (2) in
Austen’s work, she believes Austen does not examine women’s role in society (46). In addition, she sees Austen’s ‘ambivalence’ as the result of a conflict between Austen’s ideals for women and her acceptance of a male-dominated society (82).

In “I See Every Thing As You Desire Me To Do”: The Scolding and Schooling of Marianne Dashwood (1999) Barbara Seeber makes a case for a dialogic reading of Austen’s work. Although she focuses on Sense and Sensibility in order to expose what she calls “Austen’s polyphonic vision” (225), she believes her interpretation of this specific novel “sets a precedent for dialogism in Austen” (223). Seeber notes that readers of Austen often place great emphasis on her heroines and believe their values to be those of Jane Austen herself. This, she feels, is unfortunate since it “obscures the text’s dialogism” (224) and restricts it to a single truth.

Isobel Armstrong concurs that there is no single truth when reading and interpreting Austen. She writes “[i]t is clear that there can be no single view about a novel of such complexity [as Mansfield Park]” (1988:10), and dedicates a section of her book to informing the reader “about the ways in which Jane Austen has been discussed and to strike a cautionary note” (95). Armstrong discusses the essentially conservative interpretation of Austen which was assumed, with some exceptions, up to the 1970s. She explains how this was followed by all kinds of interpretations, including Jane Austen as satirical writer and as feminist writer (101-103). She ends off by warning scholars “against the hubris of believing that ‘their’ historical methodology is the only one which will lead to a ‘correct’ reading” (102), and suggests that, alternatively, “it is possible to mediate between…opposing interpretations” (103).
This thesis will provide a feminist reading of Austen’s work. Being fully aware that this type of reading is one possible way of interpreting Austen, I do not want to suggest that it is the only way. One of my aims while writing this thesis was to emphasise the ways in which Austen’s novels address women. Often this entailed delineating - and accentuating - women’s subjugated position in society. While I reread and re-evaluated Austen’s work, I looked for signs of women’s subordination in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, and limited my field of study to Austen’s six novels – *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion* and *Emma*. In *What Does a Woman Want?* (1993) Shoshana Felman takes issue with the accentuation of feminist awareness in texts written by women. She states that, in order to amplify the intention of women writers, feminists need to enter old texts from new critical directions (5-6). To this end she suggests the “elaboration - and the reinvention – of new (feminist) strategies of reading…[and] new procedures of approach” (7). Claudia Johnson similarly calls attention to the necessity of adopting historical approaches to Austen’s work so that feminists may “reconceptualize the stylistic and thematic coherence of Austen’s fiction” (1988:xix). Toril Moi states in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) that feminists “strive to make explicit the politics of the so-called ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ works of their colleagues” (87), while Edward Said comments on the urgent need “to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present” (1993:66) in canonical texts.

As I examined Austen’s novels, trying to pinpoint which women’s issues she addresses, I found that Said offers further valuable insight into reading and interpreting texts. He believes that “none of us is outside or beyond geography” (1993:7), and that writers are shaped by their history and by the society they live in. He suggests that we as readers should keep in
mind the historical and social background of a writer and focus on drawing out or making explicit underlying meanings in texts (66-67). It was therefore important to keep Austen’s geographical and social background in mind while reading and assessing her work. This entailed remembering that Austen was a woman of European descent who lived and wrote in England at the end of the eighteenth/beginning of the nineteenth century. While being “a socially confident member of the landed gentry and, with that, the ‘ruling class’” (Johnson, 1988:xviii), she “wrote with an exclusively Western audience in mind” (Said, 1993:66). Hence, when I argue in this thesis that Austen addresses women’s issues, I am aware that her message comes across most loudly to white middle-class women of the Western world, and that her work first and foremost addresses them. One might wonder, then, how someone like bell hooks (from whom I shall be quoting quite a bit) can be used in support of my reading of the Austen oeuvre. Clearly, she has a very different political agenda to that of white Western women in academe. I shall consider white and black feminist perspectives in order to demonstrate that, despite the plurality evident in feminist discourse(s), there are points of common interest and relevance which can be used in identifying some of the ‘shared’ as opposed to ‘universal’ aspects of women’s experience. Because I believe there is a relevancy beyond the distinctions imposed by the academe, I shall be drawing from a number of disparate feminisms including popular best sellers such as the work of Germaine Greer as well as scholarly work by feminists such as Nancy Armstrong. Since this thesis aims at reconsidering the longevity and relevance of Austen’s work, I shall in addition be crossing discipline boundaries between feminist literary theory and sociology, and between popular culture (film adaptations) and ‘high art’ (canonised narrative fiction). Though it is apparent that Austen’s work is aimed at white women of the Western world and that it primarily
addresses their needs, there are areas that overlap in disparate fields of feminist study and I shall be drawing from these to illustrate some of the ways in which feminist politics has developed since Austen’s day.

While deconstruction in poststructuralist terms refers to the “‘free play’ of meaning in literary texts” (Weedon, 1987:19), and in feminist terms, to pulling apart “the ways in which the different meanings of femininity have been cemented together” (Stacey, 1993:66), I have used some of the principles of deconstruction, such as taking into account the historical, geographical and especially social background against which Austen was writing, in order to reveal what may be regarded as her feminist consciousness. Gayatri Spivak does something similar in her paper “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), which offers a re-reading and deconstruction of three novels written by women: Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea and Frankenstein. By applying her knowledge of the history of Britain’s imperialist reign, she is able to uncover and emphasise the underlying ideology of imperialism in these texts. She argues that “[i]t should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (896). Applying such a deconstructive approach leads her, for example, to consider the figure of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre as “a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism” (899) and not merely as Jane’s dark double, as she has been generally understood. Just as Spivak believes that an informed critique of imperialism will lead to new insight into novels such as Jane Eyre, I feel that re-reading Jane Austen against the background of the male-dominated and male-favouring world in which she was living and writing may lead to a new understanding of her awareness of the disempowerment of women in her society.
My reading of Austen takes into account that she not only lived in a male-favouring society, but that she had to confront an almost exclusively male literary tradition. In an article entitled “Women, Writing and Language: Making the Silences Speak” (1993) Gill Frith addresses that feminist criticism which asks what “men’s texts, and male mastery over the text, [have] done to women’s heads” (153). Despite being born into a world where women were at a disadvantage in more than one way, literature was for Austen and her contemporaries a medium through which they could express the need for change (Miles, 1987:35). The novel proved to be a popular site precisely because it was, as Claudia Johnson has suggested, “not already the territory of men” (1988:xiv).

Austen makes full use of the narrative structure of the novel in order to create feminist awareness. While she alternates between limited omniscience and limited third-person point of view, her novels are, to a large degree, seen from the heroine’s perspective. Austen thus employs the narrative technique of free indirect discourse, which can be described as a “‘dual voice’…in which the voices of the narrator and character are blended” (Schellinger, 1998:320). This narrative strategy “reinforce[s] the reader’s empathetic identification with a character” (320), and allows Austen to turn the reader’s attention towards her women protagonists and their needs. Claudia Johnson states that Austen employs the “device of centering her novels in the consciousness of unempowered characters – that is, women” (1988:xxiv).

According to the Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories (2000), edited by Lorraine Code, the practice of delimiting one’s field of study to exclusively women writers, applying specifically a woman’s perspective, and seeking “to interpret elements of authentic female experience in women’s writing” (235) is known as ‘gynocritics’. Following a gynocritical approach I have
included a wider consideration of Austen’s work. I have attempted to evaluate her fiction within the framework of her social milieu and patriarchal inheritance. Furthermore, I have drawn on current sociological and feminist theory since, essentially, this thesis seeks to relate her findings in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century to how women in our own time experience society. My primary undertaking is then to offer a re-reading of Austen’s oeuvre in order to account, in some way, for her continued relevance and popularity in the twenty-first century. In order to understand how Austen’s two hundred year-old work could have any impact on especially women in Britain, the United States and in former colonies of Britain, we need to consider the Austenian renaissance of the past decade. One only has to do a Jane Austen search on the Internet to be presented with loads of information on film and television adaptations of her work in the last ten years. Film critics such as Bill De Lapp (1996) comment on Austen’s extraordinary ability to compete with current film scripts:

Who's on the Hollywood fast track these days next to John Travolta, Alicia Silverstone and Sandra Bullock? None other than Jane Austen, the celebrated 19th-century author who's enjoying a brisk renaissance of her classic works: Last summer's teen hit Clueless was culled - believe it or not - from Austen's Emma, art-house audiences flocked to Persuasion last fall, and just last month TV's Arts & Entertainment channel broadcast an acclaimed British miniseries based on Pride and Prejudice.

CNN correspondent Sherry Dean (1996) writes “Hollywood…has made Jane Austen one of the hottest novelists of the ‘90s. Although Austen…died 179 years ago, many of her books are current movie hits”. She adds that the film adaptation of Sense and Sensibility was one of the contenders for the 1996 Best Picture Academy Award, while the BBC’s television production of Pride and Prejudice enjoyed “a phenomenal reception” in the UK. While Don Harlow notes that this production “follows the story with much faith and attention to detail
[and] never deviates from the general tone of the dialogue in the book”, some film critics have used what I call ‘Hollywood rhetoric’ to attract moviegoers. In the film review of *Fair Lady* of 26 April 2000 Karena du Plessis, for example, believes “the ruthless business of money, marriage and family fortune is brilliantly illustrated” (141) in the big screen adaptation of *Mansfield Park*. That South African women’s magazine *Fair Lady* should write a review on one of Austen’s works simply reinforces the appeal she has to white women of the Western world.

Here it needs to be noted that this thesis does not engage with reader response theory, neither does it offer statistics in support of Austen’s ‘comeback’. My supposition is based on continued academic research on Austen and on the spate of film adaptations in the last two decades. We know that Austen is enjoying renewed popularity. The question remains *why*. One possibility relates to the ‘comforting fiction’ and distance maintained in ‘period piece’ narratives. Another possible answer (and one which this thesis engages in particular) might be that Austen’s subject matter continues to be of interest. Emma Thompson, who wrote the screenplay for the 1996 film version of *Sense and Sensibility* as well as portrayed the role of Elinor Dashwood, believes “[Austen’s] work survives because she wrote about subjects that never die” (Dean, 1996). It would seem that contemporary women remain interested in the way in which women experienced society in Austen’s time. In this thesis I shall be comparing women’s position in the twenty-first century to that of women in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. Though such a comparison may be regarded as a futile exercise, I believe that it could give us *some* idea of the extent to which feminism has developed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. While there is a distinction to be made between fictional characters in novels and real life experiences of women, I believe
there are significant contrasts between the experiences of Austen’s women characters and the experiences of women living in today’s society. Moreover, investigating the role women played in society at the end of the eighteenth century could help us understand the legacy contemporary women have inherited.

After rereading Austen’s novels, I was able to identify four main issues that are of interest to readers of a feminist persuasion: women’s education; women’s access to knowledge; marriage as a patriarchal institution of economic and social entrapment; and women’s identity. In this regard I found Austen to be extremely subtle in her approach, and that I needed to make assumptions about women’s subjugation in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, for example that the male-favouring social system of the time often not only denied women the right to a proper education but also left them with no choice but to get married. In contrast to Austen’s subtle reference to women’s issues, the first great wave of feminist activity in the 1840s was characterized by an open discussion of issues such as property rights and marriage reform, as Andrea Nye (1988:5) reports, while during the twentieth century, feminist writers became explicit in their struggle to end sexist oppression.¹

Sally Alexander writes in *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (1994) that feminists from the seventeenth century up until the twentieth had similar starting points of dissatisfaction (101). Alexander lists, among others, the “lack of education,…‘domestic drudgery’, [and] the prohibitions on female labour” (141) as some of the key issues identified by feminist writers. In Austen’s fiction reference is made to some of

¹ bell hooks states in *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* (2000) that “[F]eminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives” (20-21).
these issues. Being made aware of women’s disempowerment in patriarchal society in the early nineteenth century could help us understand why women were dissatisfied and why they started insisting on equal rights later on in that century. It could also help explain the legacy contemporary women have been left with. If we look for example at what Austen’s novels reveal about women’s education in the late eighteenth century, it is evident that a decent education and certain areas of expertise were the prerogative of men. Comparing this to education today, it would appear that male-privileged education belongs to the past. In most of the contemporary Western world, men and women have access to equal educational opportunities. Yet signs of a legacy, which kept women from enjoying equal educational opportunities to men, can be seen in the present day. In scholarly feminist journals such as the February 2000 edition of The European Journal of Women’s Studies, edited by Magda Michielsens and Mary Evans, the ways in which modern women suffer the effects of having been deprived of an education equal to that of men are explored. In “Balancing Gender in Higher Education: A Study of the Experience of Senior Women in a ‘New’ UK University”, one of the articles which features in this journal, Sue Ledwith and Simonetta Manfredi comment on the marginal position of women in the higher educational sector. In another article, entitled “From The Woman Question in Technology to the Technology Question in Feminism: Rethinking Gender Equality in IT Education”, Flis Henwood mentions that patriarchal discourse excludes women from certain academic terrains.

A feminist reading of Austen sheds some light on the ways in which women were kept from empowering themselves, such as being denied access to a proper education and

---

2 Rosalind Miles mentions that, while women in the nineteenth century lost their educational advantage, women in the twentieth century generally had access to free public education (1987:27).
knowledge, thereby ensuring an imbalance of power. In addition, it would seem that Austen questions general assumptions about women’s identity. She, for instance, seems to subvert the view that all women are born natural mothers and that they find fulfillment in marriage. Once again Austen is not blatantly critical, and therefore her dissatisfaction with gender roles needs to be inferred. Today, in contrast, feminists are very outspoken when it comes to pre-determined gender roles and are constantly warning women against having their identity prescribed for them. Contemporary feminist scholars such as Patricia Waugh in Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern (1989) focus on the social construction of gender and reject assumptions about the ‘natural’ predisposition of women (3-8). In Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge (1992), the first of a series of four books on women and society published by Polity Press, Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit point out that society expects women to play a specific role and in this way determines their identity for them (17-18). Barbara Darby comments in an article entitled “The More Things Change: ‘The Rules’ and Late Eighteenth-Century Conduct Books for Women” (2000) that today women’s identity is often prescribed, or at least partly determined, by society and the media (333-343). Mary Eagleton writes in Working with Feminist Criticism (1996) that women novelists and theorists are able to re-construct and re-define the subject ‘woman’ by what they write (189).

From Austen’s novels we can infer that women were rendered weak by being relegated to wife- and motherhood and by being subjected to patriarchal institutions such as education and marriage. In addition to creating an awareness of women’s disempowerment, possible ways in which women might empower themselves are hinted at (as I shall show in this study). The kind of power available to women, Austen seems to suggest, can only be exercised within patriarchal parameters. This type of moderate empowerment differs greatly from current
feminist writing which emphasises the importance of bringing to an end women’s subordination. Toril Moi defines feminism as “a struggle mainly concerned with social and political change” (1985:23), “a political criticism, sustained by a commitment to combat all forms of patriarchy and sexism” (52). bell hooks - though she is writing against white Western feminist discourse which seeks to homogenise women’s experience - stresses in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (2000) that feminism needs to aim at eradicating domination and at transforming society (26).

Austen’s texts could be read as questioning male domination and as subtly suggesting women’s empowerment. Some scholars may argue that Austen hardly succeeds in offering women the prospect of empowerment since all her heroines end up submitting to their traditional role and to patriarchal authority when they marry. It is possible, however, that Austen lets her heroines marry for the sake of her own survival in a male-favouring society. This does not mean that we should discard her feminist awareness. Instead, it would seem useful to infer from Austen’s novels women’s second-class position in society in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. By doing so, we may begin to see the ways in which feminism has progressed as well as start to understand the kind of legacy contemporary women have inherited.
Chapter One – Women and Education

Introduction

Recently I was watching a German documentary on women’s education in post Second World War Germany. As if it were a concept alien to modern viewers, the narrator patiently explained that women at this time were enrolled for special household courses that would teach them the finer art of home-making. The idea was that such wives would transform their homes into a refuge, which in turn would boost the morale of their soldier husbands who had returned from the war. Included in the programme was archival footage of a television commercial broadcast at the time, featuring women stuffing turkeys in home domestic classes and the voice of a man in the background reminding the ladies that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.

Perhaps, in contemporary society, such blatant propaganda encouraging women to lead a life of domesticity, no longer exists. Today, women in the Western world are not educated to lead exclusively domestic lives but mostly have access to the same type and level of education as their male counterparts. In addition, women have increasingly become part of the world’s workforce and have started sharing household duties with their husbands or partners. Despite this type of progress, traces of a legacy, which would have women believe

---

3 In Women’s Almanac (1997), edited by Linda Schmittroth and Mary Reilly McCall, the point is made that although women and men enjoy equal levels of education, salaries for men continue to be significantly higher than salaries for women who are doing the same work (405).
4 Janet Chafetz mentions in the Handbook of the Sociology of Gender (1999) that in 1999 women represented almost one half of the labour force in industrial nations, and refers to the “increasingly important role [women] play as economic providers for families/households” (321).
5 The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women’s Issues and Knowledge (2000) is edited by Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender, and states that although “small changes” (410) have been recorded in men’s domestic services, “men’s involvement in domestic labor has not increased to match women’s involvement in the labor market” (410).
that it is their duty and calling to take care of the home and the family, can be found. An article in *Fair Lady* of 25 April 2001, entitled “Dust Your Way to Nirvana”, features an extract from a book written by Gary Thorp called *Sweeping Changes* (2001). According to the writer, housework should not be regarded as some mundane activity but seized as an opportunity to come to oneself. Sweeping the floor, for instance, is seen as a very efficient, cost-saving form of therapy:

Next time you sweep a floor, move with deliberation, feeling both the support of the floor beneath your feet and the protection of the ceiling overhead. Notice the qualities of light and the variations of shadow. And experience the fragility and strength of your own body as it goes about its work. The uncomplicated act of moving a broom back and forth across the floor can contain all the grace, purpose and ease of motion that is exhibited in a timeless piece of choreography.  

(58)

Even if Thorp’s ‘theory’ that domestic chores are fulfilling might be dismissed by those who read this dissertation as quite silly, the point is that he has managed to have it published in one of South Africa’s most popular women’s magazines and that it has been read by thousands of women all over the country.

One might wonder what this has to do with Jane Austen. In this chapter I shall be investigating the late eighteenth-century practice of educating women to lead a life of domesticity. In addition, I shall be positing that traces of such a practice can be seen in contemporary society. While it is clear that women today are no longer explicitly encouraged to develop their domestic talents in order to attract a husband (as they were in Austen’s day), there are still some individuals who would have them believe that overseeing the housework is their responsibility.
I believe Austen’s novels, if read from a feminist point of view, create an awareness of the consequences of educating women for a life of domesticity. It will be argued that her work reveals such an education to be biased and debilitating, leaving women powerless and without any means of self-protection in a male-dominated world. In addition I shall be suggesting that, as an alternative to the existing education system, she advocates one which will help women discover who they really are and one which in this way will empower them.

Not all critics would agree that Jane Austen encourages women’s education. Patricia Beer maintains that “Austen distrusted intelligence in women and the learning which an intelligent mind can hardly help acquiring” (1974:26). More recently, Nancy Armstrong posited that Austen is not critical of Emma’s failure to observe “the strictures of female education…[and of] her failure to read” (1987:149). Rather, she believes Austen regards Emma’s lack of diligence in this respect as “a virtue, a refusal to be written by culture” (149).

Austen’s work seems to lend itself to different kinds of interpretations. One way of interpreting Austen, and which I shall be focusing on, is that she shows a concern for women’s education in her novels. Upon closer examination of Austen’s depiction of the educational system in her time, it may become apparent that modern women have inherited a particularly compromised educational legacy. Moreover, by looking at what feminists are currently writing about, we may begin to understand the effects that such a legacy has had, as well as become aware of just how much things have changed from Austen’s period until our own.
1. “Sweet orderings of domesticity”

Training women for their domestic role is one of the results of an inequality of education and one of the causes of an inequality of intellectual achievement. Barbara Horwitz provides valuable background information on the state of women’s education in Austen’s time in her essay “Women’s Education During the Regency: Jane Austen’s Quiet Rebellion” (1994). She notes that influential eighteenth-century educational writers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted that “the goal of education for women [was] the development of good nature” (135). They believed that because the business of a woman was marriage, she should be taught those things that would attract a husband. Nancy Armstrong argues that these men assumed in their writing that “an education ideally made a woman desire to be what a prosperous man desires…[and that] her desirability hinged upon an education in frugal domestic practices” (1987:59). They were of the popular and entrenched opinion that women were to be educated “to please men and to be mothers” (Nye, 1988:6) and that they should receive a practical and religious training for their domestic role. The general attitude towards women’s intellect seemed to be, as John Ruskin so quaintly put it, that it was meant to function “not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings of domesticity” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:24).

It is the notion of education as preparation for a domestic life and its effects that Austen appears to expose. In her novels we are presented with women whose minds have not been enhanced by their education. The narrator in Sense and Sensibility (1811) seems to be critical of Lady Middleton whose only resources are her children and her home:

Lady Middleton piqued herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements…

and
Lady Middleton seemed to be roused to enjoyment only by the entrance of her four noisy children…

(33)

Although her traditional education prepares her for a life of domesticity, it appears neither to enhance her mind nor teach her social skills. We are told that “though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most common-place inquiry or remark” (29).

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Mrs Bennet’s education helps her only to find a husband. It fails to improve her understanding which, in turn, places a strain on the couple’s relationship. We are told that Mr Bennet was captivated by his wife’s “youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give” (262), but that her weak understanding had soon put an end to any affection he had for her. Mrs Bennet then is subjected to the double bind of ‘femininity’: first she is deprived of an education, and then she is punished for not having one. Judith Lowder Newton, however, seems neither to hold Mrs Bennet, nor the type of education she received, responsible for her being unhappily married. Instead, she believes Mr Bennet is to blame and writes that “Mr Bennet’s own imprudence must account for his unhappy domestic life” (1981:128).

Emma’s sister, Isabella Knightley, provides the perfect example of a woman’s “sweet nature” that Locke and Rousseau were writing about. Her education has made her a specimen of the ideal wife for she is described as “a pretty, elegant little woman, of gentle, quiet manners, and a disposition remarkably amiable and affectionate; wrapt up in her family; a devoted wife, a doating mother” (*Emma*, 1816:72). Yet, as is the case with Mrs Bennet, her education does not improve her mental abilities, rendering her a woman of weak
understanding. Her slow wit leads to irritations in her marriage and verbal abuse by her husband:

[Mr John Knightley] had all the clearness and quickness of mind which [his wife] wanted, and he could sometimes act as ungracious, or say a severe thing.

(73)

In *Northanger Abbey* (1819) we are presented with another couple who are not intellectually matched. Although Mr Allen does not explicitly get irritated with his wife’s “vacancy of mind, and incapacity for thinking” (48), the narrator apparently does. She comments that Mrs Allen “had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner” (7), and argues that “[t]he air of a gentlewoman, a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind, were all that could account for her being the choice of a sensible, intelligent man, like Mr. Allen” (7-8). Mrs Allen’s lack of insight and weak understanding may be attributed in part to the limited education to which she, as a middle-class woman living in the late eighteenth century, had access. When Catherine and Mr Allen discuss the propriety of young men and women driving about the country in open carriages, Mrs Allen is not able to follow the conversation (92). She seems incapable of having her own opinion, while often thinking Mr Allen’s expression “quite good enough to be immediately made use of again by herself” (222).

Mary Musgrove’s education appears to be a double disaster in *Persuasion* (1818): she not only lacks understanding (33), but fails to achieve domestic happiness. While her husband uses any excuse to go hunting (34) or dine out (49-50), leaving her home alone, her children (though they may love her) respect her sister Anne more (39). Her education, then, does not seem to have equipped her, in particular, for her domestic life.
All these examples serve to illustrate the shortcomings of an education aimed at teaching women how to take care of their family and home. Although such an education belongs to the past, it remains of interest since it is part of women’s heritage. If we compare women’s education in the twenty-first century to women’s education in Austen’s time, we can appreciate the progress women have made. Today women are no longer formally educated to be home-makers and mothers. Girls have the same subject choices as boys do, at school, and attend the same universities. Despite these crucial steps forward, feminist writers believe women not to be wholly liberated from their domestic role. Feminists seem concerned about the fact that many women are primed at an early age to accept a life of domesticity. This means that they will end up taking responsibility for the household and the children one day while their husbands will further their own careers. Germaine Greer believes this to be true and argues in *The Whole Woman* (1999) that, as a result, women are not only kept from climbing the rungs at work, but that they earn less than their male counterparts. She seems to assign it all to gender role socialization which starts at home:

> When I was a little girl, little girls were kept in to do the housework while little boys were sent out to play.

(155)

Feminists aim at raising awareness among contemporary women that they (mostly) believe it

---

6 Writing a century after Austen, Cicely Hamilton openly states in *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) that “[t]he insistent and deliberate stunting of woman’s intellectual growth is…the best proof of her essentially servile position in the household” (39).

7 Kramarae and Spender argue that “[a]lthough girls and boys in coeducational schools usually begin their schooling in the same classrooms and study the same curriculum, as they get older, and as options become available in the school system, they move into different curriculum ‘tracks’ or ‘streams’ or ‘programs’” (2000:498). They also mention that, despite the fact that women are often enrolled in subjects like languages and the humanities, in wealthy industrialized nations such as the United States and Australia, and in parts of Europe, female university participation in recent years has matched or slightly exceeded that of men (500).
is their duty to do the domestic chores. In the early nineties feminist scholar Stevi Jackson published an essay entitled “Women and the Family in Introducing Women’s Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice” (1993) in which she comments that “even today…the idea persists that a woman’s purpose in life is to care for home, husband and children” (182). In an article entitled “Identity in Transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women” (2000), which appeared in the sociological journal *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, Irene Gedalof ascribes this state of affairs to so-called identity narratives which “repeatedly position ‘Woman’ as place, as the pure space of ‘home’” (339). In her study on the displacement of Kosovo women refugees across Europe she found that these women were expected to sacrifice themselves in order to re-create a home for their family:

> Women’s domestic responsibilities mean that their activities are bound up with materially creating and recreating that home/place, even when violence, migration or dispersal oblige them to make that place in the context of displacement.  

(339)

Paula Wilcox maintains in an article published in “Women’s Studies International Forum and called ‘Me Mother’s Bank and Me Nanan’s, You Know, Support!’: Women who left Domestic Violence in England and Issues of Informal Support” (2000) that “[w]omen’s lower status in the gender hierarchy leads them to experience greater pressure to conform to social norms, such as keeping the family together” (36).

In Austen’s time women were explicitly told to be selfless and to take care of their home and their family. Over the years, the practice of having overtly prescriptive norms for women, fortunately, died out. This may be attributed largely to the efforts of feminist scholars who created an awareness of an education which, in the words of Nancy Armstrong,
“subordinate[s] the body to a set of mental processes that [guarantee] domesticity” (1987:76). Though the world is yet to experience an overall transformation of attitude regarding women’s role as domestic caretaker, the efforts of feminists over the years have paid off. While women in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century seemed to casually accept their domestic role, women today are (mostly) aware of their right to decline such a life. Contemporary life sees wives increasingly sharing the household chores with their partners, especially when these women manage a full-time job. However, many women still choose to give up their careers and become housewives, a fact that may, in part, be attributed to the legacy which persistently prepared women for domesticity.

2. Cultivating ‘accomplished’ ladies

In addition to training women for a domestic life, education of the ‘genteel’ classes in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century was often the acquisition of ‘accomplishments’, such as the ability to draw, sing, play music, or speak modern languages. The aim of such a ‘curriculum’ for girls was to produce marriageable daughters by making them desirable to men (Armstrong, 1987:19-20). Austen seems to be critical of the notion of accomplishments

---

8 Chris Weedon writes in Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (1987) that Liberal feminists “argue that family life and the decision to have children should result from free, individual choice” (16), while Rosemary Gillespie notes in an essay entitled When No Means No: Disbelief, Disregard, and Deviance as Discourses of Voluntary Childlessness (2000) that “[i]n the United Kingdom, Western Europe and the United States, although most women continue to become mothers at some time in their lives, women are having fewer children and having them later in life” (23).
9 The Encyclopedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender (2001), edited by Judith Worell, states that “[f]rom 1970 to the present, attitudes regarding gendered family roles have become increasingly egalitarian” (678-679). It reminds us of the variability in couples’ domestic work sharing, and states that “[f]indings from a representative sample of dual-earner households showed that while 29% of the sample, labeled ‘drudge-wives’, had full-time jobs and did more than 60% of the housework, another 38% were in ‘two-housekeeper’ couples in which wives were employed full time and did 60% or less of the unpaid work” (679).
in her work. Judith Lowder Newton writes that Austen’s novels show that women “are prepared for nothing but display [since] their goal is not to accomplish but to be ‘accomplished’” (1981:120). John Halperin mentions in The Life of Jane Austen (1984) that Austen takes “an impatient swipe” (85) at ladies’ accomplishments in all of her novels. This she achieves by illustrating the tradition of using one’s accomplishments to attract suitors, and then subverting this convention by making her heroines indifferent to being accomplished.

Given that the notion of accomplishments was limited to women of the Western world and of the middle class, it was necessarily a strategy in preserving white, Western, middle-class interests. Whereas nineteenth-century readers of Austen’s fiction in all probability were oblivious to the intersectedness of gender, race and class politics we, as twenty-first century readers, should be aware of their interrelatedness and of the implication that these narratives foreground the predicament of the (rising) middle-class woman at the expense of the working classes, and other cultural groups. During the past two decades debates in feminist theory have highlighted the unavoidable intersectedness of class, race and gender, as Chow, Wilkinson and Baca Zinn (1996) point out in Race, Class & Gender (1996):

Feminist scholarship has illuminated the significance of gender as a basic principle of social organisation and as a central category in theoretical analysis. Since the 1980s, critiques of feminist scholarship have provided intellectual challenges to reassess the salience and influence of race and class, as well as gender, in all spheres of social life.

(xiii, my emphasis)

10 Here it would seem necessary to account briefly for quoting from what may be considered an outdated source. Firstly, Halperin does make some valid points (such as the one mentioned above). Secondly, his views on Austen’s endings provide insight into the traditional way of reading Jane Austen’s fiction.
Since we live in a society characterised, as Douglas Kellner points out in “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture” (1995), “by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic and national strata” (7) we can no longer separate class, sex and race. In an article entitled “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class, and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism” (1985) Cora Kaplan argues that a feminist literary criticism which privileges gender in isolation from class and race offers only a “partial reading of the role played by sexual difference in literary discourse” (957). This is because, according to Kaplan, “class and race ideologies are, conversely, steeped in and spoken through the language of sexual differentiation” (957). According to bell hooks, feminists have the task of making society aware of their interrelatedness in an attempt to end all forms of oppression:

Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression…The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression.

(2000:33)

2.1 Catching Men

Patricia Beer states that accomplishments were “all aimed at catching men” (1974:64), and this appears to be a central concern in Austen’s novels. In Mansfield Park (1814) Mrs Rushworth feels that of all the young ladies she has ever seen, Maria Bertram seems “by her amiable qualities and accomplishments, the best adapted to make [her son] happy” (38, my emphasis). Similarly, Mrs Grant thinks Julia Bertram would make Henry Crawford very happy if he married her for she is “a nice, handsome, good-humoured, accomplished girl” (42, my emphasis). Mary Crawford realises that of all the accomplishments music especially can
be construed as a “sexual gesture” (Miles, 1987:64) between the sexes when she courts Edmund by playing his favourite pieces on the harp:

The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good humour; for she played it with the greatest obligingness…Edmund was at the Parsonage every day, to be indulged with his favourite instrument…

(Mansfield Park, 65)

The narrator concludes tongue-in-cheek that a woman as well accomplished as Miss Crawford will inevitably succeed in catching “any man’s heart” (65). The practice of using one’s accomplishments to attract a husband is illustrated when Edmund Bertram visits his friend, Mr Owens, and when Mary is anxious to know from Fanny whether the Miss Owens are very accomplished, presumably for fear of Edmund’s being attracted to one of them (292-293). Possibly because John Dashwood wants to see his sister marry and settle in life, he calls Brandon’s attention to Elinor’s drawing skills in Sense and Sensibility (229). In effect, Mr Dashwood is trying to make a sale, even if he thinks he has Elinor’s interests at heart.

Having illustrated the convention of using one’s accomplishments to attract suitors, Austen seems to challenge this very convention by making her heroines indifferent to being accomplished. Catherine Morland for example shows no interest in drawing, music or learning French and shirks her lessons whenever she can (Northanger Abbey, 2), while Fanny Price is ridiculed by her cousins for not wanting to learn either music or drawing (Mansfield Park, 17). Similarly, the otherwise talented Emma Woodhouse never achieves excellence in either drawing or singing, and is “not much deceived as to her own skill either as an artist or a musician” (Emma, 35). In Persuasion Anne Elliot indicates her indifference to appearing accomplished when she professes to be “a very poor Italian scholar” (165).
Although the narrator in *Sense and Sensibility* draws our attention to Marianne’s musicality (33) she does not omit to mention that Marianne practises music for the love of it (45). It is therefore likely that Marianne does not see music as a means of catching a husband. While Marianne loves music, her sister Elinor is “neither musical, nor affecting to be so” (243). Likewise, Elizabeth Bennet’s music performance in *Pride and Prejudice* is judged to be “pleasing, though by no means capital” (71). The narrator comments, however, that despite her sister Mary’s effort to be accomplished, Elizabeth “had been listened to with much more pleasure” (71). Being accomplished, then, had taught Mary “neither genius nor taste” (71). Furthermore, even though Miss Bingley says that “[a] woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages” (85) in order to be accomplished, and therefore desirable to men, Darcy chooses Elizabeth to be his wife. Austen appears to be suggesting that accomplishments can neither guarantee any woman a husband, nor do they necessarily contribute to enhancing her mind.

2.2 Laying down the harp

Austen shows that often women who only use their accomplishments to catch a husband, stop practising them once they are married. Lady Middleton is admonished for giving up singing after her marriage:

…the chief of the songs which Lady Middleton had brought into the family on her marriage…perhaps had lain ever since in the same position on the pianoforte; *for her ladyship had celebrated that event by giving up music…*  
*(Sense and Sensibility, 33, my emphasis)*

The narrator also seems to be critical of schools in which girls (like Mrs Palmer) are taught *only* to be accomplished, when she states that the room which Elinor and Marianne are given
in London, features “a landscape in coloured silks of [Charlotte’s] performance, in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect” (154, my emphasis). In *Emma* Mrs Elton seems to imply that women should master music and drawing for their own sakes when she comments that “there is a sad story against [married women] in general [that they] are but too apt to give up music” (209).

Judith Lowder Newton comments on women’s obsession with men as portrayed by Austen, and writes that in a novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* “the action in almost the entire first volume of the novel consists of very little but women talking or thinking or scheming about men” (1981:129). In comparison with this kind of pre-occupation with finding a husband, women today appear to be less compromised. While in the late eighteenth century, it was believed that women needed to marry in order to lead a meaningful life, contemporary studies show that being married does not ensure women of a fulfilled and happy life. Yet many women seem to be obsessed with men and especially male attention. I do not mean to elide the history of feminism by comparing women’s obsession with male attention in Austen’s time to our own. Not only has two centuries passed since Austen wrote her last novel, there remains a difference at the level of representation when one compares the ways in which Austen’s fictional characters and women in real life experience society. What I am suggesting is that, despite the tremendous strides the feminist movement has made, women still show some signs of a legacy which taught them they needed men in order to survive in this world. Feminists are currently concerned with women’s preoccupation with cosmetic

---

11 Judith Worell writes that, in twenty-first century studies on married life and life satisfaction, married men as well as single people of both genders “reported greater positive affect than did married women” (2001:674). In addition, “having children does not appear to increase people’s life satisfaction…for those who have children, the quality of their relationships with their children is highly related to their level of satisfaction with their life overall” (674).
surgery because they believe it is an indication of their obsession with male attention. Germaine Greer is critical of contemporary women who spend their time and energy making themselves attractive for men. These women, according to Greer, undergo cosmetic surgery and have their breasts enlarged in an attempt to attract male attention:

Women are illusionists. They fake light-heartedness, girlishness and orgasm; they also fake the roses in their cheeks, the thickness, colour and curliness of their hair, the tininess of their waists, the longness of their legs and the size and shape of their breasts. Men do not seem to have demanded this of them; rather women seem to have bedizened themselves in an all-out last-ditch attempt to grab the attention of otherwise uninterested males. (1999:33)

Wesely, Alison and Schneider comment in a sociological essay entitled “The Lived Body Experience of Domestic Violence Survivors: An Interrogation of Female Identity” (2000) that women have become preoccupied with their bodies. They add that patriarchy is largely to be blamed for this:

The female body is made object, a spectacle for (hetero)sexual voyeurism; the male spectator’s gaze upon her becomes her own critical gaze upon herself. Women then become, absurdly, both estranged and obsessed with their bodies. (212)

It is possible that Austen illustrates how in her own time the female body is made an object of male desire when Mary Crawford plays the harp obligingly and Edmund watches her with indulgence (Mansfield Park, 65). Making oneself attractive for men seems to be an age-old custom among women. By making her heroines indifferent to being accomplished and by criticising married women who “celebrate their marriage by giving up music altogether” (Beer, 1974:65) Austen appears to show contempt for this convention. Instead of acquiring
skills in order to be desirable to men, she seems to suggest that women should practise the art of music or of drawing for its own sake.

3. Self-knowledge

Catherine Belsey states in “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text” (1985) that the cultural construction of women’s subjectivity is one of the central concerns for feminism. She argues that women’s ‘self’ is inevitably constructed and that, owing to contradictory discourses, women struggle with identity:

Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses…can create intolerable pressures.

(661-662)

Belsey, living and writing in the twentieth century, and having many feminist precursors to refer to, clearly has the confidence and the freedom to speak plainly on the need for women to discover their own identities. In Austen’s novels there are subtle references to what could be interpreted as her encouraging women to discover their own identities, against the prescription imposed on them by patriarchy. In Mansfield Park it appears that she perceives education to play a role in this regard: instead of teaching young girls how to become wives it should, partly at least, aim at equipping them with self-knowledge. The narrator in Mansfield Park comments that, “it is not very wonderful that, with all [Maria’s and Julia’s] promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility” (18). According to her, “in everything but
disposition, they were admirably taught” (18). While Edmund believes “the most valuable knowledge we could any of us acquire [is] the knowledge of ourselves” (464), Sir Thomas realises too late that “elegance and accomplishments [have] no moral effect on the mind” (468). In addition, Julia’s misery, when Henry Crawford prefers Maria to her, is attributed to the fact that “knowledge of her own heart…had not formed any essential part of her education” (92).

Barbara Horwitz writes that in Austen’s novels “it is the heroines who do not know their own hearts who are blind to the emotions of others” (1994:142). In Sense and Sensibility Elinor Dashwood knows her own heart and realises how much she loves Edward Ferrars. Possibly because she herself loses the man she loves to another woman, she shows compassion and understanding for Marianne’s suffering (180-184). Fanny Price sees Henry Crawford for what he is and resists his charms because of her deep-rooted love for Edmund (Mansfield Park, 353-358). Emma, on the other hand, only realises that she loves Mr Knightley right at the end of the novel. The want of self-knowledge causes her to misinterpret Mr Elton’s affections and blinds her to Frank Churchill’s and Jane Fairfax’s conspiracy. Elizabeth Bennet does not know her own heart either. This makes her misjudge both Darcy and Wickham (Pride and Prejudice, 294-295). Although she is an intelligent girl, she fails to see their true intentions.

While Austen possibly attributes the lack of self-knowledge to an inadequate education, much research by feminist scholars in the twentieth century has shown that rigid socially-constructed gender roles are responsible for women and men not knowing themselves. In 1967 in an essay entitled “Sex Roles and the Socialization Process” Sverre Brun-Gulbrandsen
explained the ways in which little boys and girls are first introduced to their gender roles at home:

Children must learn to behave in certain ways in certain situations. They learn these norms through innumerable environmental influences but particularly from their rearers as these ‘norm-senders’ encourage certain forms of behaviour on the part of the ‘norm-receivers’. Behaviour conforming to these norms is rewarded; behaviour deviating from these norms is punished.

(61)

When they grow up these children, now young men and women, “fit into the structures of society, into the particular positions allocated to each sex in any specific way” (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992:18). Feminism, whether as a social/political practice, or as a literary/theoretical enterprise, aims at making women aware of their socially-constructed gender roles. Toril Moi writes “‘[f]emininity’ is a cultural construct: one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one” (1985:65). This view is echoed by Shoshana Felman:

_Becoming_ a feminist is undertaking to investigate what it means to be a woman and discovering that one is not a woman but rather becomes (somewhat interminably) a woman; discovering, through others’ reading and through the way in which other women are addressed by one’s own writing, that one is not born a woman, one has become (perhaps never quite sufficiently) a woman. (1993:12)

In the Spring/Summer 2000 issue of the journal _Women: A Cultural Review_, edited by Isobel Armstrong, Regenia Gagnier argues in her article “The Functions of Class at the Present Time: Including Taste, or Sex and Class as Culture” (2000) that we are all gendered as male or female, and socialized into being men or women. She points out that “[g]ender is a role, masculine or feminine, or a relationship of inequality between things that might not on the surface have to do with masculine or feminine” (37). Feminist writers of varying persuasions
and from many discipline bases expose gender roles and patriarchally-constructed norms that dictate to women how they ought to behave, and that in this way prevent them from developing a sense of self.

It would seem that for feminist scholars in the twenty-first century, knowing oneself and realising that one is constituted out of different discourses, over time and space, is of great importance. In Austen’s work we can find early signs of what may be regarded as the concern for the lack of self-knowledge among women. It could be argued that Austen is critical of domestic education, not only because it produces dull-witted women whose sole interests are their homes and their families, but also because it keeps women from knowing their own minds. It is therefore, as Barbara Horwitz puts it, by “stressing women’s education for its own sake, rather as a preparation for motherhood [that] Jane Austen may be considered as a feminist writer” (1994: 145).

4. Privileged education for boys

I believe Austen to expose the late eighteenth-century educational system for women as unfair by focusing our attention on the biased nature of higher education. While girls were mostly taught at home either by their parents or a governess, middle class boys had the opportunity to attend educational institutions. Austen seems aware of women’s educational deficit when she has Anne Elliot say that “[e]ducation has been [the men’s] in so much higher a degree” (Persuasion, 206). She constantly refers to the fact that higher education is a man’s prerogative by mentioning that many of her male characters attended either a university or a private school. Whereas Henry Tilney went to Oxford (Northanger Abbey, 96), Catherine Morland received her education from her parents (2). The inequality of education leads to
Henry’s pedantic attitude and enables him to correct Catherine’s grammar constantly (96-98). In 
*Sense and Sensibility* we learn that Edward Ferrars was “entered at Oxford” (100). His brother, 
Robert Ferrars, introduces the debate as to whether a private or a public school aids a man best (244). 
The underlying implication, of course, is that women enter neither.

Isobel Armstrong argues that although Austen’s critique “of women’s education is oddly 
akin to that of a more radical writer” (1988:10) it remains an “indirect concern” (9, my emphasis) in 
*Mansfield Park*. In this novel Austen seems to imply that being a woman means being deprived of a decent education. Sir Thomas, a staunch patriarch, sends money only for Mrs Price’s sons to be educated, and not her daughters (19). While he sends Edmund to Eton and then to Oxford, his own daughters receive their education at home. He does not encourage them as he does his sons when he listens to them enacting Julius Caesar and wishes them “as schoolboys, to speak well” (130). By having Edmund and Henry discuss the neglect of reading in “the ordinary school-system for boys” (343) Austen implicitly draws attention to the absence of such a system for girls. She emphasises the informal education girls receive at home by making Lady Catherine react in utter disbelief to the fact that the Bennet sisters had no governess (*Pride and Prejudice*, 199). But the narrator also points out that even though Mr Collins attended one of the universities, “the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education” (114). Here Austen may be implying that though a tertiary education does not guarantee quick understanding, the lack of one guarantees a subordinate role in society.

Though the educational bias of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century has been eradicated, it would seem to have had some long-term effects on women and their position in society. Because they were deprived of a higher education equal to that of men, women did
not feature in literature for many years. Germaine Greer points out that women were only fairly recently granted equal educational opportunities and allowed to attend universities. In an essay entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Linda Nochlin (1994) asks why the Western world has failed to produce women writers, philosophers, composers and mathematicians equivalent to male artists like Chaucer or Cézanne. She comes to the conclusion that discrimination based on class, race and sex works effectively to keep women from developing their artistic capabilities:

…things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and education…

(96)

Since Austen’s novels provide us with an account of the biased nature of education in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, her work may help us understand the ways in which women were kept from developing their intellectual abilities. It would seem plausible that contemporary women have no legacy of great women artists precisely because they were subjected to a prejudiced education system for many years.

5. Unequal education opportunities

In Mansfield Park Austen calls attention to the patriarchal grand narrative of her time which would have it that extensive education creates vanity in women. Sir Thomas expresses the

12 This was such a novel idea to some patriarchal stalwarts that “when women were admitted to King’s College, Cambridge, a don was heard to sardonically remark, ‘Now the men will get their laundry done free’” (Greer, 1999:155).
generally held viewpoint that “self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit…in young women is offensive and disgusting” (320-321). When Edmund mentions to Fanny that Mary Crawford’s conversation and opinions sometimes have a tinge of wrong, Fanny answers it is “[t]he effect of education” (272). In *Emma* Austen refers to the fact that because education is believed to lead to vanity, women are prevented from a proper education. The narrator’s observation regarding Mrs Goddard’s “old-fashioned Boarding-school” (17) could be a condemnation of the patriarchal system for preventing women from receiving a decent education:

Mrs Goddard was the mistress of a School - not of a seminary, or an establishment, or any thing which professed…to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality…- and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity - but a real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price and where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.

(17, my emphasis)

Austen seems to suggest that men deliberately keep women from an extensive education in order to render them weak. In the years that followed Austen’s writing, feminists increasingly demanded equal educational opportunities. Today, women and men of the Western world mostly enjoy an equality of education. While the male monopoly has been eliminated in most

---

[13] Chris Weedon points out that although “[m]any of the social and political gains made by women over the last 100 years have been the result of struggles to include women in the rights and privileges which men have instituted to serve their own interests…women’s inclusion in education, the franchise, public life and the labour market have been on terms designed to meet the needs of individual men…” (1987:2).
of the educational realm, feminist writers believe it has spilt over into the workplace.\textsuperscript{14} Linda Schmittroth and Mary Reilly McCall show in \textit{Women’s Almanac} (1997) that women with similar levels of education to men still earn less than their male counterparts (405). Germaine Greer found as recently as 1997 that “across all types of work in higher education…62 per cent of the jobs done by women were consistently undervalued as against 37 per cent of the jobs done by men” (1999; 157). Because men had the educational monopoly for so many years they now, as Lorraine Code remarks, “tend to predominate in higher-level occupations…while women tend to be concentrated in lower professional and clerical jobs” (499). Biased education, then, appears to have had far-reaching consequences: it not only favoured boys at the time but weakened girls for many years to come.

\textbf{6. Consequences of a poor education}

I believe Austen illustrates the consequences of an inadequate education for women in her novels. However, since only women belonging to the middle-class had governesses or attended schools (Levine, 1987:26-27) her criticism, once again, is class specific. Throughout the following section, it should be kept in mind that Austen writes with a specific readership in mind. Seeing that the effects of a poor education would be felt by the \textit{middle-class} women of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, Austen is almost exclusively addressing their needs. Nevertheless, her criticism of women’s limited education creates a consciousness of

\textsuperscript{14} Margaret McFadden writes in \textit{Ready Reference: Women’s Issues} (1997) that by 1990 “[m]ost professions remained under male control…[and that] women still faced a glass ceiling…barring them from higher-level authority positions, particularly in the industrial sector” (268).
the type of legacy contemporary women have inherited and an awareness of some of the ways in which this has affected them.

Being rendered powerless is one of the first consequences of a poor education. Because men had privileged access to writing and producing knowledge (as I illustrate in Chapter Two), they were able to keep women subjugated and to maintain their powerful position in society. In *Mansfield Park* Austen comments on the god-like powers of the author when she informs the reader that she personally likes restoring her characters to reasonable comfort (466). She shows how writing can establish a woman’s subordination by quoting a single line of poetry: it is clear that when the poet compared a wife to “Heaven’s last best gift” (42), he was assuming her subordinate position in society.

That men had privileged access to writing has further consequences. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen may be implying the absence of a women’s literary canon by listing male poets only, including Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare (3-4). Austen’s findings show an awareness of what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has identified as ‘the law of the father’. In *Ecrits* (1966) he states that the phallus represents the law of the father – *la loi primordiale* – and fixes meaning in language (277). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see the pen as “an instrument of generative power like [the] penis” (1979:6) and therefore as “essentially a male ‘tool’” (8). Austen herself appears to see the pen as a symbol of power when she equates a person’s writing to strength of character in *Emma* (224).

It would seem that men in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century experienced the act of writing as threatening. By reserving education solely for men, they were able to control
what was written and in so doing keep women subordinated. Though in our own time women have just as much right to the act of writing as men, they have been left with a very different type of literary inheritance to that of their male counterparts. Feminist writers have identified some of the consequences that women’s literary legacy has led to. Lorraine Code comments that since Western ideology, which associates men with mind and women with emotionality, prevails in the educational realm, contemporary schoolgirls continue to suffer the consequences of what she calls an “education-gender system”:

Feminist research and scholarship has uncovered many elements of this education-gender system, among them: a chill coeducational classroom climate for girls and women…the androcentric bias of the subjects of the liberal curriculum, the sexual harassment of schoolgirls, a hidden curriculum in misogyny and anti-domesticity, the under-representation of women in the higher ranks of the professorate. Despite the advent of women’s studies programmes, it has proved extremely difficult to improve the plight of girls and women…

(2000:161)

Flis Henwood contributes to Code’s findings when he argues that the falling number of women entering computer science courses is due to dominant discourse which offers women “only marginal or outsider status within technological cultures” (2000:213), and to modern society in which “the acquisition of technical skills by women is perceived by many as a threat to the masculinity of men and to the gender order more generally” (210). bell hooks comments on the implications that this type of patriarchal discourse has for women:

---

15. Writing on the theoretical and political influences which have helped constitute current poststructuralist theory, Chris Weedon argues that “women’s absence from the active production of most theory within a whole range of discourses over the last 300 years…[is] a mark of the particular conditions under which prestigious and powerful bodies of knowledge were and are produced” (1987:13, my emphasis).

16. Rosalind Miles writes that by the late twentieth century “[t]housands of women [were] writers who would previously have thronged with the ranks of the illiterate” (1987:27).
As a group, women have been denied (via sex, race, and class exploitation and oppression) the right and privilege to develop intellectually. Most women are deprived of access to modes of thought that promote the kind of critical and analytical understanding necessary for the liberation struggle. This deprivation leads women to feel insecure about intellectual work and to fear grappling with new ideas and information.

(2000:114-115)

Sue Ledwith and Simonetta Manfredi express their concern about the under-representation of women in the higher education sector in general:

The poor showing of women in the higher reaches of universities across Europe is seen as being among the worst in the labour market. There has been much presentation of data and increasing feminist analyses and commentary on the position of women in the higher education sector.

(2000:7-8)

Diane Reay writes in “‘Drim Dros’: Marginalised Women both Inside and Outside of the Academia” (2000) the reason for the academic status quo is that the higher education sector is “a territory ruled by men; where the vast majority of women if they count at all count for less” (14). She goes on to argue that many women are employed as contract researchers only, which becomes “reconstituted as a low-level activity…in which women undertake invisible labour which services men and contributes to relations of ruling” (15). Contributing to the idea of the invisibility of women, Elaine Showalter comments in “Laughing Medusa: Feminist Intellectuals at the Millennium” (2000) that women rarely come up in debates about the dilemma of the intellectual in society since the woman intellectual “is camouflaged by her gender” (132). Though women have managed to eradicate male-dominated education and despite the fact that they enjoy equal education opportunities to men (Schmittroth and Reilly McCall, 1997:362; Weedon, 1987:2), it would appear that they suffer the consequences of a
male-dominated education legacy. These include a male-favouring education system, being under-represented in the higher education sector and the belief that certain academic terrains are the prerogative of men.

Another aspect of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century education which Austen seems concerned about is the view held by most women of the time that they need only study until they ‘come out’, which was usually around the age of seventeen (Cruse, 1931:78). The Bertram sisters in Mansfield Park feel there is a great deal for them to learn, but only up to their seventeenth birthday (17). By then, it would seem, they would know everything a girl needed to know in order to fulfill her domestic role. Their lack of interest in acquiring knowledge is partly their mother’s doing. She pays their education “not the smallest attention” (18).

In Northanger Abbey Austen more directly addresses the issue of girls studying only until their seventeenth birthday when the narrator comments that Catherine’s mind is “about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is” (6). Because of the inattention to academic development, ignorance and deficient grammar were often found among women of the middle class. In Northanger Abbey Henry Tilney believes women to display in their usual style of letter-writing “[a] general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar” (15). In Sense and Sensibility we are told that Lucy Steele, though she is naturally clever, remains ignorant and illiterate precisely because “her powers had received no aid from education” (123-124).

Where an inadequate education does not cause ignorance, it may be responsible for women being bored. Judith Lowder Newton, however, does not believe women’s boredom, as illustrated in Austen’s novels, to be caused by the lack of a proper education. Instead, she
sees it as a result of “women’s usual state [which] is not to move at all but to hear news or to read letters about the arrivals and departures of males” (1981:126). We are told that Emma suffers from “intellectual solitude” (Emma, 6) since her father cannot provide stimulating conversation. She is easily bored and even gets agitated with Frank Churchill and Harriet for being “dull” (278). To alleviate the boredom, Emma relishes gossip (130) and enjoys meddling in other people’s affairs. She admits that playing matchmaker to people like the Westons “is the greatest amusement in the world” (10). Educated for domesticity, it is no wonder that she finds amusement in the domestic and the mundane.

Elizabeth Bennet admits to being a “studier of character” (Pride and Prejudice, 88) to keep herself amused. She has a lively disposition and delights “in anything ridiculous” (59). She welcomes new inhabitants to the country for she has grown used to the absurdities of people like Sir William Lucas whom she has known all her life. Newcomers like the Bingley sisters provide welcome entertainment for Elizabeth whose “quickness of observation” (63) enables her to recognize their superciliousness (68), and to laugh at especially Caroline Bingley’s desperate attempt to attract Darcy’s attention (92).

Austen draws our attention to the intellectual loneliness of married women by having Mrs Elton say that even if a woman has “ever so many resources, it is not possible for her to be shut up at home” (Emma, 269). In Mansfield Park Mrs Grant is pitied for the monotonous duties that make up a married woman’s life. The narrator comments that Mrs Grant welcomed the news that Mary was to come and live with her “for Mrs. Grant, having by this time run through the usual resources of ladies residing in the country without a family of children – having more than filled her favourite sitting-room with pretty furniture, and made a choice collection of plants and poultry – was very much in want of some variety at home”
(40). We see that Mrs Grant’s main concerns in life consist of nothing more than cultivating her plants and deciding on which meal to cook her husband (214). Mary Crawford’s response to her sister’s plight possibly reflects that of the narrator:

‘The sweets of housekeeping in a country village!’ said Miss Crawford, archly. ‘Commend me to the nurseryman and the poulterer.’

(215)

Austen’s novels depict a world in which men enjoy the privilege of having access to a higher education, and a world in which women are subjected to an inferior education. The consequences of such an education system for women include not having access to the power of the pen, being ignorant and deficient in grammar, not being intellectually stimulated, being interested in only the domestic and the trivial, and finally being bored - especially within the marriage state. It can therefore be argued that by showing how a limited education debilitates women in many different ways, Austen creates an awareness of the importance of an equality of education between men and women.

In addition to investigating the type of education women receive and the effects thereof, Austen could also be read as exposing the access that women have to knowledge (or the lack thereof). In the following chapter it will be shown that Austen seems to be aware and critical of the fact that knowledge has been produced by men for centuries, and that it has always excluded women.
Chapter Two – Women and Knowledge

Introduction

In Austen’s day women were not expected to know about politics or history – these topics were reserved for men – nor were they expected to make intelligent conversation. Barbara Horwitz mentions that renowned eighteenth-century educational writer Fenelon “had declared woman’s intellect was normally feeble less than a man’s [and] that learning would make a girl vain” (1994:137). She adds that girls were allowed to study the classics, provided they did not display their knowledge. In the early nineteenth century, then, “it was not thought proper for a young lady to study very conspicuously” (Cruse, 1931:15). The narrator’s observation in Northanger Abbey that “if [a woman] have the misfortune of knowing anything, [she] should conceal it as well as she can” (99) may be interpreted as tongue-in-cheek. It is possible that Austen is being critical of a society which, as Patricia Beer has shown, expected women to be ignorant and to “minister men’s conversation” (1974:65).

These social prescriptions may seem very far removed from the twenty-first century, and not at all applicable to our modern world. In contemporary society women are not forbidden to display their knowledge. Instead of being told to agree with men, they are encouraged (and often praised) for displaying assertive and independent characters. Yet feminist scholars have found that women today often defer to men in conversation. It is not

---

17 In 1987 Chris Weedon wrote that “[t]he last fifteen years [had] seen the beginnings of a radical shift in the degree to which women are represented in knowledge production and in the production of theory both inside and outside official education and research” (13-14).

18 The Handbook of the Psychology of Women and Gender (2001), edited by Rhoda Unger, states that “American society today is more accepting of women who display assertive and independent characteristics” (413). Kramarae and Spender comment that assertiveness training, which was popular in particularly the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, “can offer women alternative perspectives on negotiation techniques and communication styles...[and] can educate women to be more expressive and candid” (2000:95).
implausible that the reluctance of women to disagree with male arguments and views has its origins in the conduct books of the late eighteenth century. There are also other explanations for women’s reluctance to speak out, however. Andrea Nye suggests it is on account of men generally wielding more power than women in relationships that women feel they have to “listen, make comments, and further develop [men’s] ideas” (1988:173). Burniston, Mort and Weedon postulate in their article “Psychoanalysis and the Cultural Acquisition of Sexuality and Subjectivity” (1978) that owing to “the social structuring of the unconscious through language” (115) women are silenced, while Mary Eagleton suggests that “social and cultural pressures…undermine [women’s] confidence and make them hesitant about speaking” (1996:16). Sally Alexander believes “[w]omen are subordinated and silenced because they live in a world shaped in the interests of and dominated by men” (1994:101), and Shoshana Felman argues that by “the oppressive gesture of representation…man has reduced the woman to the status of a silent and subordinate object, to something inherently spoken for” (1993:24). While Catherine Belsey refers to the “feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition” (1985:662), Germaine Greer points out how this discourse expects women to exist in relation to their husbands only:

The politician’s wife is expected to display all the wifely virtues, that is, she must look good, but not too good, dress well but not too expensively, speak when she is spoken to, come when she is called and laugh at her husband’s jokes.

(1999:322, my emphasis)

Barbara Darby, writing on the ways in which women’s identity is determined by society, mentions that in our own time women are advised by certain writers not to start up a conversation with men but, instead, to appear quiet and mysterious (2000:343). Arnot, Araújo, Deliyanni and Ivinson suggest in “Changing Femininity, Changing Concepts of
Citizenship in Public and Private Spheres” (2000) that women today are not operating “on the same terms as men” (152). In their study on women’s subordination in society, they found that men and women regard the male sex as having more control over decision-making in various areas (2000:153). In accordance with their findings, Janet Saltzman Chafetz comments in *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender* (1999) that “the mere knowledge of another’s sex…has been shown to affect willingness to accept influence from that person” (263).

While contemporary feminist scholars openly blame society for women keeping quiet when men speak, Austen never overtly challenges patriarchy for rendering women silent. However, from her novels we can infer that she lived in a society which rendered women ignorant and which expected them to be passive when conversing with men. In *Northanger Abbey* we see that such a society enables a man like Henry Tilney to abuse his privileged male education. When he talks to Catherine and arrives at the subject of politics, the narrator comments that from there “it was an easy step to silence” (100). Whereas Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that, as Henry moves on from discussing the landscape to politics, “the narrator, like Catherine keeps still [because] etiquette, it seems, would forbid such discussions” (1979:134), I would argue that the narrator is critical of Henry’s abusing his power. The narrator’s disapproval of his dominating the conversation is evident in her rendition of the rapid and illogical progression of his discourse:

…by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment, and the withered oak…to oaks in general – to forests, the enclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government – he shortly found himself arrived at politics…

*(Northanger Abbey, 100)*
Nancy Armstrong argues that women narrators of Austen’s time were identified by their gender as having no claim to especially political knowledge and power (1987:29). Indeed, it was just a few decades earlier that Mary Wollstonecraft posited in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that women were politically incompetent because they had not been educated like men (265).

I believe Austen to show an awareness of the fact that many women in her time were uninformed about subjects beyond their domestic sphere (such as politics and current affairs). It would seem possible that women’s ignorance led, partly at least, to empty conversation among them. Austen vividly illustrates the type of conversation generally found among women, and there is some evidence to suggest that she is critical of empty women-talk. In addition, Austen appears to encourage stimulating conversation among women by creating intelligent women characters who yearn for interesting conversation and who are not afraid to disagree with what men have to say.

There are critics, however, who seem to disagree with the above-mentioned view. Nancy Armstrong believes Austen’s writing to support gossip and conversation among women. She argues that Austen thereby manages to grant “priority to the verbal practices of women, women who may never carry out programs of reading literature” (1987:150). Whatever her intent may have been, conversation makes up an essential part in Jane Austen’s novels. My aim is not to speculate about Austen’s personal views, but to show that depicting the type of conversation generally found among women raises an awareness, amongst feminist scholars at least, of women’s general ignorance during the time in which her novels were written and of the dire need for intelligent conversation among them.
1. Empty conversation, Trite Remarks and the Conduct Books

By contrasting topics of conversation generally found among men and women, Austen alerts us to the lack of stimulating discourse among women in the early nineteenth century. In *Emma* Mr John Knightley and his brother talk about the law and about farming (78). In contrast, Isabella and Mr Woodhouse, whose conversation can be classified as ‘typically female’ owing to his hypochondria (Horwitz, 1994:140), discuss their respective apothecaries (*Emma*, 78-79). In *Sense and Sensibility* the narrator is undoubtedly critical of women who busy themselves with uninteresting conversation:

> When the ladies withdrew to the drawing-room after dinner, this poverty was particularly evident, for the gentlemen had supplied the discourse with some variety – the variety of politics, inclosing land, and breaking horses – but then it was all over, and one subject only engaged the ladies till coffee came in, which was the comparative heights of Harry Dashwood, and Lady Middleton’s second son, William, who were nearly of the same age.

(228)

While Lucy Steele criticises her sister Anne for talking “of nothing but beaux” (120), she ironically thinks she is faring better herself by talking about the house and the furniture. When Elinor dines with the Miss Steeles and Lady Middleton she feels that their meeting “produced not one novelty of thought or expression, and [that] nothing could be less interesting than the whole of their discourse” (137).

In *Northanger Abbey* Austen shows that to talk does not mean to be having a conversation. Once again Austen contrasts ‘men-talk’ to ‘women-talk’. While men discuss political and news-making events, the women talk about people and fashion (59). The narrator seems to be critical of women’s “maternal effusions” (19) when Mrs Thorpe and Mrs Allen meet in Bath, and to laugh at girls who can talk of nothing but “dress, balls, flirtations and quizzes” (20).
To her, a conversation in which there is “scarcely ever any exchange of opinion” (23) is hardly a conversation at all.

The lack of intellectual conversation among women may be linked to the kind of literature available to them. The notorious conduct book of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century - ironically often written by women19 - was prescribed to women and dictated what they should say. This often led to empty conversation among them, as Patricia Beer points out:

Women were allowed, even encouraged, to show in their conversation that they had read. The various lists of books recommended for them in Jane Austen’s day, stereotyped, limited and dreary, were published alongside other details of required behaviour. Literary allusions, as long as they were not too far-ranging or assertive, were held to be perfectly feminine…

(1974:66)

Austen’s work illustrates the effects of these prescriptive books on women. We see how even an intelligent girl like Emma Woodhouse at times indulges in trite remarks. When the Knightley brothers discuss legal issues Emma does not partake. When she eventually does join in, it is not to add her own view but merely to stop Mr John Knightley from making any further hurtful remarks to Isabella (Emma, 81). Even Emma’s allegorical interpretation of Elton’s poem is, as Nancy Armstrong puts it, “perfectly in keeping with the conduct book’s suggestions about the proper use of classical mythology and history within a female curriculum” (1987:146). Furthermore, when Mr Knightley declares he loves her, Emma says “[j]ust what she ought [for a] lady always does” (Emma, 326). While one might expect Austen’s heroines to be more defiant of patriarchal convention, they often evince attitudes

---

19 Nancy Armstrong writes that the conduct books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “often written by women and directed at female readers…rewrote the female subject for an eighteenth century audience” (1987:94).
other than a feminist sensibility, though one could argue that Austen allows her heroines to utter clichés and empty remarks in order to illustrate that even spirited women know what they have to do and how they have to behave in order to survive in patriarchal society.

In *Northanger Abbey* Austen most overtly criticises the conduct books and their effects. The narrator refers to the abundance of trite remarks (very possibly a result of having recommended books) when she says the heroine of any story should supply her memory “with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing” (3). She seems to ridicule clichéd idioms like “Despair of nothing we would attain” and “Unwearied diligence our point would gain” (18), and appears to be critical of Catherine’s use of “pretty expressions” (20). When Catherine and Elinor meet in the Pump Room, the narrator comments that “in all probability not an observation was made, not an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before” (60). In addition, one cannot but notice that the narrator ridicules Mrs Allen for not being able to utter little more than a few standard phrases. When they first arrive at Bath she keeps on repeating “I wish we had a large acquaintance here [in Bath]” (10). This changes to “How glad I am we have met Mrs Thorpe” (23) by Chapter Five. While the narrator refers to Mrs Allen’s “remarks and ejaculations…vacancy of mind, and incapacity for thinking” (48), Henry Tilney describes having only her as company as “a picture of intellectual poverty” (67).

Nancy Armstrong has noted that in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen mocks those novels which observed “all the same sense-making procedures as the conduct book…when she [has] Mary Bennet speak the conduct-book clichés in all their tiresome perfection” (1987:108). Barbara Horwitz writes that Mary “demonstrates her own obtuseness by parroting Mr Villar’s speech
from Fanny Burney’s ‘Evelina’ (1994:139). Mary prides herself on being bookish yet has nothing sensible to say, as Mr Bennet is quick to point out:

‘What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.’ Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

(Pride and Prejudice, 55)

It would seem that, while the conduct books occasionally enabled women to make an appropriate remark, they did not ensure that they would always have something sensible to say. Patricia Beer has made the point that in Mansfield Park Fanny Price recites a speech on memory which comes “almost straight from Dr Johnson” (1974:66). It is possible that Mary Crawford’s evident boredom with Fanny’s speech (Mansfield Park, 210-211) reflects the narrator’s irritation with hackneyed expressions. In the same novel, Lady Bertram is characterized by speaking “entirely by rote” (196). In Sense and Sensibility Austen challenges empty expressions. Gilbert and Gubar point out that “Marianne is extremely sensitive to language, repelled by clichés, and impatient with the polite lies of civility” (1979:156). Marianne admits that she abhors “every common-place phrase by which wit is intended” (Sense and Sensibility, 43) and that she detests “jargon of every kind” (94). She has her own ideas and would rather say nothing at all than use “worn and hackneyed” (94-95) language. Colonel Brandon makes a case for young people having their own opinions, rather than repeating what they have been told, when he states that “there is something so amiable in the prejudices of a young mind, that one is sorry to see them give way to the reception of more general opinions” (54). In this novel, as in the others, we see that women often fail to have their own views. Lady Middleton for example has “nothing to say for herself beyond the most common-place inquiry or remark” (29). This renders her incapable of making
interesting conversation (52-53) and of understanding popular clichés, though it does not deter her from using them:

Because [Elinor and Marianne] neither flattered herself nor her children, [Lady Middleton] could not believe them good-natured; and because they were fond of reading, she fancied them satirical: perhaps without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical; but that did not signify. It was censure in common use, and easily given.

(240)

In Mansfield Park the idea is expressed that women often do not have their own views. When Fanny contemplates whether being married to Edmund would change Mary Crawford’s character, we read “impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford’s nature that participation of the general nature of women which would lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected as her own” (372). Lady Bertram provides a good example of a woman who has adopted the opinions of the man she loves. She is so dependent on Sir Thomas’s views that she even lets him decide which game she should play (241) and whether or not she can do without Fanny (219). In Northanger Abbey Mrs Allen, in addition to her trite remarks, has no views of her own but uses those of her husband (222). Since her “youthful female mind [is] fearful of hazarding an opinion of its own in opposition to that of a self-assured man” (35) Catherine Morland accepts the views of Henry Tilney and Mr Thorpe. She echoes what Thorpe says (52-53), and starts to see things from Henry’s perspective (100) because she assumes that he “must know best” (137).

Austen’s depiction of women’s deferral to men provides us with insight into the powerful position men held at the time. In addition, it creates an awareness of the devastating effects of prescribing reading material for women, material which dictates what they ought to do, think
and say. The effects include women engaging in empty conversation, uttering trite remarks, not having anything sensible to say, and failing to have their own views.

2. Finding a new discourse

Austen not only depicts empty talk among women, she also shows that there are women who engage in stimulating conversation. I would agree with Patricia Beer who believes that Austen manages to create “considerable equality between the sexes in conversation” (1974:66). She achieves this by introducing intelligent conversation among women and by having her heroines argue with men. Elinor Dashwood is one of Austen’s women characters who yearns for intelligent conversation (52). Elinor, who feels that “nothing could be less interesting” (*Sense and Sensibility*, 137) than typical women-talk, enjoys Brandon’s company. She finds him “capable of giving [her] much information on various subjects” (49) and derives “more satisfaction from conversing with him than from any other daily occurrence” (162).

Austen challenges the view that women should not argue with men by having women characters like Anne Elliot disagree with the opposite sex. In addition she makes Anne *au fait* with public affairs, which contradicts the ideology of the time that women should not know about politics. When Sir Walter and Mr Shepherd talk about the rich Navy Officers returning to England, Anne adds her own view on the navy (*Persuasion*, 18-19). Anne’s idea of good company is “clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (134). She remarks that women of any class who are intelligent, “may well be worth listening to” (139). Anne’s ability to make intellectual conversation comes to the fore especially when she converses with members of the opposite sex. When talking to Captain Benwick her “seniority of mind” (90) puts her in a position to recommend that he read more prose. While Frederick
Wentworth values her sound advice (105), she successfully defends women against Captain Harville’s view on women’s fickleness (206).

Elizabeth Bennet similarly manages to hold her own with men. She disagrees with Darcy on what makes an accomplished woman (Pride and Prejudice, 85) and exchanges erudite arguments on poetry (90). Once married, the narrator informs us that Elizabeth continued to engage in a “lively, sportive, manner of talking” (395) to her husband. She also mentions that although Georgina at first “listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at [Elizabeth’s] manner of talking to her brother…[she] by Elizabeth’s instructions…began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband” (395). While Elizabeth joins in Darcy’s and Bingley’s conversation and offers her own views, the Bingley sisters remain silent (94-96). They, of course, subscribe to the tradition that women should be seen and not heard, and not argue with men. Tony Tanner writes in Jane Austen (1986) that Elizabeth also “disconcerts Wickham with a nice irony” (115), and he is never quite sure what to make of her words (Pride and Prejudice, 260-261). Although Nancy Armstrong agrees that Elizabeth has been endowed with “rational intelligence…and especially a command of the language” (1987:50), she argues that Elizabeth renounces all her pertness and liveliness of mind the instant she agrees to marry Darcy (51). Armstrong believes that this apparent discontinuity within Elizabeth’s character “demonstrates this novel’s reliance on the figure of sexual exchange” (51). Though Armstrong’s point is valid, Elizabeth’s outspoken, self-assured repartee throughout the novel remains memorable.

In Mansfield Park we see the heroine fitting into convention by being quiet and modest and by not arguing with men. Although Edmund Bertram ostensibly asks Fanny’s advice and wishes to confide in her, what he really wants is for her to agree with everything he says and
to quiet his conscience (156-157). Fanny is not used to opposing people, especially when they are men. For this reason she offers her judgement and opinion very modestly (158). When she openly disagrees with Henry Crawford, the experience is so foreign to her that she trembles and blushes “at her own daring” (228).

Austen appears to create some equality between the sexes in *Emma* when she presents us with good-humoured bantering between Emma and Mr Knightley. As Rosalind Meyer shows in “Mr Knightley’s Education: Parallels in *Emma*” (1998), Emma discusses Harriet’s refusal of Robert Martin and talks to Knightley about women’s issues with “all the familiarity of an equal” (223). At times she purposefully disagrees with him, just for the sake of arguing (*Emma*, 111). That they enjoy quarrelling is clear:

Mr Knightley loves to find fault with me, you know – in a joke – it is all a joke. We always say what we like to one another.

(9)

By creating women who argue with men and who yearn for intelligent conversation, Austen shows that not all women subscribe to the view that they should be ignorant and fail to have their own opinion. In addition to making us aware of the fact that women in the beginning of the nineteenth century had limited access to knowledge, Austen’s work also gives us a good idea of the type of knowledge women could obtain. In the following section I shall show that by asking *how* knowledge was produced and by *whom*, we are able to gain insight into the ways in which women were restricted in the past. I believe that if we read Austen from a feminist point of view, her work exposes knowledge to be man-made and leads us to consider how this has affected women’s lives.
3. Investigating ‘knowledge’


> If [a child] is to participate in the society into which it is born, to be able to act deliberately within the social formation, the child must enter into the symbolic order, the set of signifying systems of culture of which the supreme example is language.

(1985:660)

Michel Foucault’s work on the plurality and ‘differance’ of meaning suggests that language is not neutral but that it constructs reality. According to Foucault “all knowledge rests upon injustice…there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation of truth” (1977:163). Discourses are, as stated by this theory, “ways of producing knowledge, and ways of shaping the world according to that knowledge” (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1982:237) so that “no text is capable of representing determinately, far less of demonstrating, the ‘truth’ about any subject” (Abrams, 1988:203). Toril Moi’s contention that “the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning”
Chapter Two: Women and Knowledge

(1985:158) implies that men have used language to produce knowledge - a knowledge that passes itself off as truth, a knowledge that excludes women.

If we read Austen from a feminist point of view it becomes possible to perceive a society in which men shaped knowledge and ‘truth’. André Brink comments that in *Emma* “Knightley’s privileged access to truth is based on his position in society as a *male*” (1998:114). Taking a strong stance when arguing about women’s fickleness with Captain Harville, Anne Elliot points out that books prove nothing since *all* stories have been written by men:

Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. *Men have had every advantage of telling us their own story.* Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.

(*Persuasion*, 206, my emphasis)

As Toril Moi has rightly suggested, “we all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors” (1985:43). This means that each group of people will have its own interpretation of the past and, in Edward Said’s words, “its own perspective, historical sense, emotions, and traditions” (1993:11). Catherine Morland, it could be argued, anticipates poststructuralist and feminist theory that aims at deconstructing the master narrative of history when she ascertains that a great deal of history “must be invention” (*Northanger Abbey*, 97). She suggests that, although Mr Tilney, Mr Allen, her father and two of her brothers like history, she herself finds it tiresome because it features “quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and *hardly any women at all*” (97, my emphasis). Sally Alexander points out that women’s history has to be argued for:

---

59
It is well known that women receive little or no attention in traditional history writing, but even among radical and socialist historians they are all too often mentioned as an afterthought, if at all, tagged on rather than present in their own right. As recently as 1971, when the suggestion was made at a History Workshop session that people working on women’s issues should meet later in the day, there was a roar of laughter.

(1994:141)

Language, history, literature and, by extension, knowledge have historically worked together to keep women subordinated. Because men were in the powerful position of writing (producing) knowledge, they managed to hold on to their authority in patriarchal society. If we read Austen with a feminist agenda in mind, her novels (especially *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*) make us aware of the fact that women in Austen’s time were left powerless by, amongst other factors, having been denied the right to produce knowledge.

4. Self-Deprecation

Early nineteenth-century women were left with the belief that writing was a man’s domain, and that it was ‘unnatural’ for women to write. Women were in this way discouraged from writing literature and history, and hence excluded from producing knowledge:

…by the nineteenth century, the idea that the novel was man’s ‘proper sphere’ was so entrenched that the very idea of a ‘lady novelist’ was enough to rouse suspicion, scorn, surprise or roguish gallantry on all sides.

(Miles, 1987:6)

In fact, the fear of the intellectual woman was so great that she was labelled a freak. Barbara Horwitz mentions that “learned ladies who exhibited their knowledge were made to appear unnatural and therefore ridiculous” (1994:137). Claudia Johnson writes that fiction by women writers was expected to be “modest, delicate, wispy, delightful” (1988:xv). Gilbert
and Gubar comment that, because it was believed that it was not normal for women to write, women writers were ostracized if they did not acknowledge their writing to be a mere diversion:

If [the woman writer] refused to be modest, self-deprecating, subservient, refused to present her artistic productions as mere trifles designed to divert and distract readers in moments of idleness, she could expect to be ignored or (sometimes scurrilously) attacked.

(1979:61-62)

Austen, being an early nineteenth-century woman novelist herself, must have been aware of the fact that intellectual women were treated with suspicion. One cannot therefore be sure whether her well-known response to James Stanier Clarke, that because of her ignorance she cannot accept his suggestions for the hero of her next story, was intended sincerely or not:

Such a man’s conversations must at times be on subjects of science and philosophy, of which I know nothing; or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations and allusions which a woman…like me…would be totally without the power of giving…and I think I may boast myself to be…the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.

(Lascelles, 1939:41)

Her statement that “imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms” (Northanger Abbey, 99) could, in light of the above, be meant ironically. Some critics believe that in Austen’s novels self-deprecating remarks are often made in relation to the heroines themselves. Patricia Beer has remarked that “[Austen’s] heroines react in the same way [as Austen], quite undermining their claims about the attractiveness of mind” (1974:50). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe Austen endows many of her women characters with intelligence and/or strong imaginative powers for which they are later apparently “mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense” (1979:159), and that this is all part of her cover story
Critics such as Judith Lowder Newton and Claudia Johnson do not agree that Austen renounces her heroines or their deeds. Lowder Newton writes that “[w]hen Austen allows Elizabeth [Bennet] to express critical attitudes and to act upon them without penalty, she is moving against early nineteenth-century ideologies about feminine behaviour and feminine fate” (1981:135). Claudia Johnson similarly believes that Austen is not being deprecating when she endows Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse with “rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence” (1988:xxiii). Rather, she considers Austen to defy, in her intelligent and attractive heroines, every cliché about women and decorum that was advocated in the conduct books (xxiii).

It would seem that Austen’s heroines do err from time to time and that they are shown to suffer the consequences. The narrator in Northanger Abbey appears to reprimand Catherine Morland for her “raised, restless, and frightened imagination” (39), a result of her ardently reading Gothic novels. John Halperin believes that in this novel Austen “attacks the distortions of an overactive imagination” (1984:105). We see Henry Tilney making fun of Catherine’s gullibility and fanciful expectation of what the Abbey should look like (Northanger Abbey, 142-145). In addition, we witness Catherine’s double humiliation. Her first disappointment comes when she discovers nothing more than a washing-bill in the old cabinet (157). She, however, only fully realises the dangers of a wild imagination when she wrongfully assumes the General had killed his wife. When she finally discovers the truth, her humiliation is exacerbated as Henry (whom she wants to impress) realises what she has been thinking all along (181-182).

Even though Emma is praised for being a clever girl (Emma, 5), she is shown to make quite a number of mistakes. No less than three times does her fancy blind her to the truth and
cause her to make blunders. Knightley’s concern that Emma “will never submit to…a subjection of the fancy to the understanding” (29) is justified when she wrongfully assumes that Mr Elton and Harriet are in love. As a result Emma has to ward off Elton’s attentions and also needs to tell Harriet that he has no intention of marrying her. Emma also errs when she assumes with “an ingenious and animating suspicion” (120) that Jane Fairfax and Mr Dixon are in love, and even more so when she makes this suspicion known to Frank Churchill. When it is finally revealed that Frank and Jane are in fact engaged, Emma is deeply embarrassed (299). Finally Emma wrongfully assumes Harriet to be of honourable descent. She manages to convince Harriet that she is too good for Robert Martin and to refuse his proposal. Only once Harriet falls in love with Mr Knightley, and almost costs Emma her future happiness, does Emma fully realise the possible consequences of her vanity and over-active imagination (312-313).

In Sense and Sensibility Marianne Dashwood acts emotionally and irrationally and has to suffer the consequences of her actions. We are told that Marianne is “sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation” (5). Marianne is made to feel the consequences of her “imprudence and want of thought” (55) most severely when Willoughby betrays her (170). Austen seems to contrast Marianne’s rashness to Elinor’s cautiousness and good sense. Although her abilities are “quite equal to Elinor’s” (5) Marianne lacks, according to the narrator, Elinor’s prudence (5). Barbara Seeber has written on the “parallel situations” (1999:231) and the juxtaposing of Elinor and Marianne. She believes the key to making sense of Sense and Sensibility is reading it as a dialogic text. According to Seeber, Austen’s novel presents the reader with two heroines who experience the world very differently, and in so doing “illuminates a world of contesting ideas” (223).
addition, it “does not side with Elinor, or even Marianne; [but] instead…explores the struggle to achieve ideological dominance” (223). By doing so, Austen may be suggesting that women ought not to be reduced to comforting stereotypes.

Anne Elliot is another heroine whom Austen seems to approve of. Though she might have erred when she broke off her engagement to Frederick Wentworth, she seems to have suffered enough for it. The narrator informs us that “[Anne’s] attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect” (Persuasion, 26). It would appear that the narrator feels sorry for Anne. What is more, she seems to regard her highly. Anne is praised for her “elegance of mind and sweetness of character” (7) which she puts to good use: she gives sound financial advice (13-14), keeps her wits about her when Louisa is injured (98-99), and is able to alleviate Captain Benwick’s pain by recommending prose (90-91). Anne is described by Mr Elliot as being “in her temper, manners, mind, a model of female excellence” (142). Even when she disagrees with Captain Harville, he says he cannot argue with her for she is “a good soul” (207).

Elizabeth Bennet is known and loved for her intelligence (Pride and Prejudice, 63), her outspokenness on social conventions (200), her stubbornness (363-368), her literariness (90), and for arguing with men (102). Yet she too seems to make mistakes and to be reprimanded for them. When she discovers the truth about Wickham, and when she realises how grossly she has misjudged Darcy, the narrator comments:

[Elizabeth] was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though she hardly knew of what.  
(325)
Austen’s work features heroines who make mistakes. Perhaps she is illustrating the complexities of human responses in order to critique the damaging stereotypes inherent in the binary logic of ‘sense’ and ‘sensibility’, ‘pride’ and ‘prejudice’.

5. Literariness

In her novels Austen appears to encourage literariness among women. In *Northanger Abbey* the narrator claims to have a “wild imagination” (227) and encourages women novelists to display their imaginative powers\(^{20}\). She states that women writers are “an injured body” (24) and, as Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, gently criticises them for being embarrassed about their status as novelists (1979:146). She insists that women writers should stand together, and makes a case for the novel as a literary genre in its own right:

[The novel is], in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

*(Northanger Abbey, 25)*

In addition to urging women novelists to write, Austen seems to be encouraging literariness among women in general when she reprimands some of her women characters for *not* being bookish. The narrator appears to be critical of Catherine Morland who prefers “cricket, base-ball, riding on horseback, and running around the country…to books, or at least

\(^{20}\) “Yes, novels; for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with novel writers, of degrading…the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding…Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure…let us not desert one another…for our foes are almost as many as our readers” *(Northanger Abbey, 24).*
books of information” (*Northanger Abbey*, 3). In *Persuasion* Elizabeth Elliot is not only shown to be arrogant and selfish (16) but also to lack the patience to read:

‘Very well’, said Elizabeth, ‘...you may take back that tiresome book she would lend me, and pretend I have read it through. I really cannot be plaguing myself for ever with all the new poems and states of the nation that come out. Lady Russell quite bores one with new publications.’

(190)

The narrator in *Emma* seems wary of Emma’s preference for riddles as opposed to reading (54). Here it is worth mentioning that Nancy Armstrong is of a different opinion: she believes that Austen is not critical of Emma’s ignorance as a reader. Instead, Austen has Emma renounce her novelistic practices in order to purify women’s speech of all traces of writing (1987:150).

Patricia Beer has suggested that Austen “consistently makes her male characters in speech put greater value on [women’s] minds” (1974:47) than on their beauty or domestic talents. This could be interpreted as Austen encouraging intelligence and literariness among women. In *Persuasion* Frederick Wentworth pictures the ideal wife as having “[a] strong mind, with sweetness of manner” (55), while Mr Knightley feels “[m]en of sense…do not want silly wives” (*Emma*, 50). He is disappointed that Emma is not interested in steady reading (29) and wishes Little Emma to be “infinitely cleverer” (77) than her aunt. In *Mansfield Park* Edmund is attracted to Mary’s “lively mind” (65) and feels that, when a man has known sensible women, silly ones would bore him (359). Mr Darcy values a woman whose mind has been improved “by extensive reading” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 85). Whereas, at their first meeting, he judges Elizabeth’s features as being “tolerable” (59), he gradually begins to regard her appearance as “uncommonly intelligent” (70). When Elizabeth asks him why he
had fallen in love with her, he answers for the liveliness of her mind (388). An implication which cannot be overlooked is that Austen, living and writing in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, cannot get away from the patriarchal ideology that it is all about what men want and that it their right to choose. Toril Moi states that any writer will inevitably carry with her some of the ideology according to which she was raised, and that there “will always be unstated blindspots, fundamental presuppositions and ‘pre-understandings’ of which [they] are unaware” (1985:44).

Despite displaying this type of inevitable blind spot at times, Austen on the whole appears to encourage women to read and study. She shows that she is intellectual and well-read herself by referring to other writers in her novels. In *Persuasion* she displays a familiarity with the poetry of Scott and Byron (90), while *Mansfield Park* affords her the opportunity to refer to Cowper (56), Shakespeare (134), Pope (164), and not to mention Mrs Inchbald.21 In *Northanger Abbey* she adds the genre of Gothic novels to her list by mentioning Mrs Radcliffe (36). In addition to referring to other artists, Austen focuses on *herself as a writer* and on the *storytelling process*. Katrin Burlin notes in “‘The Pen of the Contriver’: The Four Fictions of Northanger Abbey” (1975) that especially in this novel Austen “comes to terms with her art in a single, complex treatment of the theme of fiction” (89). She directly addresses the reader (*Northanger Abbey*, 5; 7; 231; 234), refers to her god-like power as authoress (7; 227; 231), exposes the fictionality of her characters (7; 17; 227), and draws attention to the art of writing novels (24-25; 234; 235). In *Mansfield Park* she displays what Edward Said has called “a bit of meta-fictional impatience” (1993:91):

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.

(Mansfield Park, 466)

Although such artistic self-awareness is usually not ascribed to nineteenth-century writers of fiction, there is much evidence to suggest that the novel has always been a self-conscious genre to some extent. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) Patricia Waugh argues that “although the term ‘metafiction’ might be new, the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself” (5). Similarly, André Brink writes that “what has so persistently been regarded as the prerogative of the Modernist and Postmodern novel…namely an exploitation of the storytelling properties of language, has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception” (1998:6-7). While metafiction is often associated with postmodern writers such as John Fowles and Italo Calvino, Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) traces self-aware narrative as far back as Cervantes, Richardson and Defoe (9). She argues that even though it has become more evident in the postmodern era, the novel has always displayed an element of self-consciousness:

The “narcissistic” change is one of degree, not kind. Narcissus has always been self-aware; he merely became more physically conscious of his own existence and charm, as seen in the still water-mirror – “the shadow of a reflected form”.

(13)

---

22 John Fowles calls attention to the fictionality of his characters and to his god-like powers as author in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).

23 In *If Upon a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1993) Italo Calvino especially focuses on the process of writing novels.
While Austen calls attention to the process of writing, and appears to encourage literariness among women, she also seems to ridicule people who display sentimental attitudes towards literature. In *Mansfield Park* she gives a comic account of the amateur actors fighting over which piece to enact (124-139) and of Mr Rushworth struggling to learn his lines (168).

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth ridicules sentimentalists like Darcy who consider poetry as “the food of love”:

‘I have been used to consider poetry as the *food* of love,’ said Darcy.
‘Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Every thing nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.’

(90)

In *Persuasion* we are told that Captain Benwick and Louisa “had fallen in love over poetry” (149). While for Anne Elliot the “idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection, was amusing” (149), the narrator is clearly making fun of Benwick’s mawkishness when she says:

…he shewed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet…he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imagined a broken heart…and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that [Anne] ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry…

(90)

It appears that Austen in her novels creates, albeit implicitly, an awareness of the general lack of interest in literature among late eighteenth-century women, and in examining a variety of responses to reading, uncovers some of the ways in which women are often alienated from literary and textual production and engagement.
6. Silly Women and Men

Judith Lowder Newton believes that because Austen undermines the force of economic realities in her novels she makes “most women, in their helpless fixation on men and marriage, look perverse and merely silly” (1981:132). Austen counterbalances intelligent women with silly ones. Though she creates many ignorant women, she often ridicules their silliness. What is more, she features men who are just as silly, and by so doing seems to subvert the view that stupidity is solely a woman’s trait.

*Pride and Prejudice* features many silly characters of both sexes. In the first chapter the narrator informs the reader of Mrs Bennet’s dull wit (53). She has a “weak understanding and illiberal mind” (262), and finds enjoyment in marrying off her daughters (51). Lydia Bennet resembles her mother in more than one way. Elizabeth especially is critical of Lydia’s “emptiness of mind” (258) and of her being “idle and vain” (241). In addition we are told that Lydia and Kitty “could talk of nothing but officers” (75). When the regiment is to leave Meryton, Mrs Bennet shares Lydia’s disappointment and remembers “what she had herself endured on a similar occasion, five and twenty years ago” (256).

Collins’s character illustrates that men can be just as silly as women, if not more so. Mr Collins is laughed at for being “not a sensible man…[but] a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility” (114). His excessive servility (119) provides so much entertainment especially to Elizabeth and her father that one begins to understand why she believes “stupid men are the only ones worth knowing” (189).

We are presented with another stupid man in *Emma*. Even though Isabella Woodhouse is said to be “slow and diffident” (29), Harriet to be “certainly…not clever” (21) and Miss Bates to have “no intellectual superiority” (17), none of them is mocked like Mr Elton. Although, to
many, Elton seems a gentleman, Austen reveals what a silly man he really is. His marrying into some money does not enhance his reputation but, instead, makes him more laughable (133). The narrator is clearly making fun of Elton when she relates his marriage to Miss Hawkins, ostensibly from his point of view:

…the story told well; he had not thrown himself away – he had gained a woman of 10,000£ or thereabouts…He had caught both substance and shadow – both fortune and affection, and was just the happy man he ought to be; talking only of himself and his own concerns – expecting to be congratulated – ready to be laughed at – and, with cordial, fearless smiles, now addressing all the young ladies of the place, to whom, a few weeks ago, he would have been more cautiously gallant.

(137)

In *Sense and Sensibility* the narrator seems critical of women like Mrs Jennings and Mrs Palmer for finding their solace in gossip and visiting, and especially for embarrassing friends and acquaintances by saying silly things (58-62; 111-112). The women however are not the only ones to bear the brunt. Sir John is presented as silly because he is overly-gallant and friendly and perseveres to a point “beyond civility” (28). Although he has good intentions he is not exempt from stupidity when he fails to understand Marianne and yet laughs “as heartily as if he did” (43).

A phenomenon that today is known as socially-reinforced gender roles seems to have been prevalent in Austen’s time. Once again, it is not necessarily what she writes but what we may infer from her writing which remains of interest. Judging by her novels, it would seem that gender roles in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century dictated that men were smart

---

24 bell hooks has investigated the role women are expected to play and has noted that many women “passively absorb sexism, and willingly assume a pre-determined sex role” (2000:87). Likewise, Margaret McFadden has pointed out how gender roles “impose second-class status on women” (1997:794).
and women stupid. By saying men and women are stupid at times Austen manages to subvert rigid gender roles. In *Persuasion* she seems to reverse the typical masculine and feminine role: while Sir Walter Elliot is described as silly and conceited (6-7), his wife is said to have been “of very superior character to any thing deserved by his own” (6). Whereas, while Lady Elliot lived, “there had been method, moderation, and economy” (10), Sir Walter displays little financial sense and incurs great debts.

In the same novel, the Musgrove sisters are shown to be incapable of serious thought (Halperin, 1984:303) and extremely silly. Henrietta and Louisa both aim at finding a husband, and both fall in love with Frederick Wentworth (*Persuasion*, 58-64). But the sisters are so much alike that it is “quite doubtful” (67) which of the two he prefers. Admiral Croft seems to be just as confused by their resemblance when he says that a person can “hardly know one from the other” (83). The fact that Croft and Wentworth are ‘unable’ to distinguish between the two sisters, has the possible implication that these women are not regarded as individuals but are reduced to objects of male desire. Wesely, Alison and Schneider have suggested that the “female body is…fetishized in its reduction to an object of (hetero)sexual desire” (2000:211). Luce Irigaray claims in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) that women are denied their subjectivity because they subject themselves to objectivization (133). Feminist scholars, such as Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit, have consistently called upon women to acknowledge this practice and to “claim their status as persons, as people capable of self-definition, as subjects and not objects” (1992:183). Perhaps, to some extent, the silliness of some of Austen’s characters is related to the rigid gender roles they are forced to play out, making them either the unsuspecting victim or the uncritical perpetrator of the male gaze.
Chapter Two: Women and Knowledge

Mrs Allen is a good example of a woman who has *not* yet discovered her own subjectivity. She is known for her “vacancy of mind, and incapacity for thinking” (*Northanger Abbey*, 48), and is presented as almost dysfunctional, capable of retaining and uttering only a couple of standard sentences (18; 23). Being silly does not, however, pertain to women only. The narrator is clearly irritated with John Thorpe for making unintelligent remarks:

> [Mr Thorpe’s] discourse now sunk from its hitherto animated pitch, to nothing more than a short, decisive sentence of praise or condemnation on the face of every woman they met…

(35)

While the narrator refers to Thorpe’s discourse as “rattle” (53) and as “idle assertions and impudent falsehoods” (53-54), Catherine notices his shallowness and concludes with a “bold surmise” (55) that his company is not completely agreeable.

In *Mansfield Park* Mr Rushworth is depicted as an extremely silly man. Edmund Bertram feels that if Rushworth “had not twelve thousand a year, he would be a very stupid fellow” (39). Rushworth manages to confuse himself when trying to please Lady Bertram (55) and struggles enormously to learn his forty-two speeches for the play (168). Sir Thomas realises that he is “an inferior young man as ignorant in business as in books, with opinions in general unfixed, and without seeming much aware of himself” (201). Ironically, Sir Thomas’s own wife is characterized by “incompetency and languor” (342). Lady Bertram shows no interest in anything much, and spends her days “sitting, nicely dressed, on a sopha, doing some long piece of needlework” (18). Her languor not only makes her incapable of remembering anyone’s dress or place at supper during the ball the night before, it also prevents her from making interesting conversation (286-287).
From Jane Austen’s work we can deduce that women and men in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century were subjected to rigid gender roles. Because Austen presents the reader with foolish women and men, it could be argued that she dismisses the perception that femininity is aligned with ignorance and masculinity with intelligence. By doing so, she manages to challenge the view that women are intellectually inferior to men. By showing how stupidity can manifest itself in either sex, her work subverts the rigidity of patriarchally-constructed gender roles. In the following chapter I shall be looking at what Austen’s work reveals about women’s role within marriage.
Chapter Three – Women and Marriage

Introduction

And she pours herself another cup of coffee
As she contemplates the stain across the wall
and it's in between the cleaning and the washing
That's when looking back's
The hardest part of all

And she always did her best to try and please him
While he always did his best to make her cry
And she got down on her knees to stop him leaving
But he always knew one day he'd say goodbye

Where are your friends
Where are your children
Is this your house
Is this your home
Does nothing ever last forever
Does everybody sleep alone

And he tears the business tags from his old suitcase
As he packs away the pieces of his life
They all love him but they always try to change him
That's what happens when a girl becomes a wife

And she pours herself another cup of coffee
As the pictures leave a clean space on the wall
and it's in between the leaving and the loving
That's when looking back's
The hardest part of all

Where are your friends
Where are your children
Is this your house
Is this your home
Does nothing ever last forever

Does everybody sleep alone

Don't look back
Don't give up
Pour yourself another cup

(Mike Rutherford, “Another Cup Of Coffee”, 1995)
A song like the one quoted above by popular artist Mike Rutherford illustrates that to many it remains a mystery that women opt to get married. Much recent feminist scholarship focuses on the fact that marriage is a patriarchal institution of entrapment and that it more than often leaves women feeling unfulfilled. Stevi Jackson argues that marriage “binds many women into unequal relationships with men...[and that it] is linked to wider social and economic structures and is sanctioned by the power of the state” (1993:182). Margaret McFadden claims in Ready Reference: Women’s Issues (1997) that since wives are often expected to do the housework as well as maintain a full-time job, and since husbands seem to receive more psychological support from their wives than they return (545), marriage in most cases is an institution which favours men. Sarah Gamble is in agreement when she maintains in The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism (1999) that marriage remains an “enduring institution...a form of compulsory heterosexuality, and the means by which the oppression of women is perpetuated sexually, economically, and socially” (269).

A possible reason for contemporary women favouring marriage may be found as far back as Austen’s time. Looking at what Austen’s fiction tells us about women and marriage could help us understand the legacy of women wanting to get married. There seems to be, to some extent at least, general consensus among critics that Austen’s novels deal with marriage. Nancy Armstrong feels Austen’s novels “bring to culmination a tradition of ladies fiction that concentrated on the finer points of conduct necessary to secure a good marriage” (1987:134). André Brink argues that Austen shows how marriage describes women’s fortune in Emma (1998:125), and Claudia Johnson believes “Austen to expose and explore those aspects of traditional institutions – marriage, primogeniture, patriarchy – which patently do not serve her heroines well” (1988:xxiv). Judith Lowder Newton argues that Austen’s work shows an
awareness of the necessity for women to marry. Basing her argument on Austen’s letters, she considers Austen’s personal attitude towards the pressure on women to marry as “amused and uncomplaining” (1981:123).

Austen’s novels illustrate some of the reasons that most women of that time decided to get married. Mary Evans argues in *Jane Austen and the State* (1987) that Austen’s work reveals marriage to be enforced upon women by the type of society they live in:

> Jane Austen…vividly represents the point which many social historians have made: that marriage, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was an economic necessity for women. Far from being a matter of romantic or personal choice, the constraint on women to marry was very considerable. (46)

In this chapter I shall examine the ways in which Austen’s work reveals the male-favouring social and economic system women were living in. It will be shown that this system often enforced marriage on women and rendered them passive recipients of male largesse. I shall also investigate Gilbert and Gubar’s contention that Austen conceals her ideas on matrimony by ending her novels with having the hero and heroine live happily ever after (1979:169). I shall examine the notion that Austen may be suggesting perfect matrimonial bliss to be highly improbable, and that her fairytale endings should not be taken seriously.

1. Marriage as entrapment

The effects of “an education which fitted women exclusively for marriage and the pleasures of men” (Alexander, 1994:102) are not restricted to repressing women’s intellectual growth (as I show in the first chapter), but have far-reaching consequences. As Judith Lowder Newton (1981:119-123) has shown, women did not have access to the same level of education
as men, and were not expected to have their own career. As a result they were left economically and socially powerless. Since they could not support themselves financially, most middle-class women realised the importance of marrying a man who had either inherited some money or who had a profession that did not pay too badly. Women therefore often had to submit to patriarchal institutions such as marriage if they wanted to survive financially. Ironically, within marriage, many women found they had less power than before since the man was traditionally held to be master over his wife, as Chris Weedon has noted:

...in the nineteenth century, the law defined married women as the property of their husbands, denying them the benefits of legally constituted, autonomous subjectivity. (1987:114)

Nancy Armstrong points out that eighteenth-century Puritan treatises on marriage did not only claim sovereignty for the husband over his home, but also “represented the family as a self-enclosed social unit in whose affairs the state could not intervene” (1987:18). In Emma we are confronted with male power within the marital state. Mr John Knightley seems to be aware of his own powerful position as patriarchal head of the family. Irritated by his wife’s hypochondriacal and fragile nature, he often makes rude and hurtful remarks (73; 81). What is worse, Isabella seems to be oblivious to her husband’s meanness. We are told that while Emma “was quick in feeling the little injuries to Isabella…Isabella never felt [them] herself” (73). In the same way Mrs Palmer patiently endures her husband’s occasional rudeness in Sense and Sensibility. His indifference does not seem to bother her in the least but rather it appears to amuse her:

The studied indifference, insolence, and discontent of her husband gave her no pain; and when he scolded or abused her, she was highly diverted. (109)
In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth professes she does not know “any body who seems more to enjoy the power of doing what he likes than Mr Darcy” (216, my emphasis). Judith Lowder Newton comments that the first two sentences of this novel illustrate the mobility men used to have. She states that “[s]ingle men appear at liberty; they can enter a neighbourhood and presumably leave it at will” (1981:120), while women are ‘fixed’ by their economic situation. In *Emma* the narrator draws our attention to women’s immobility by having Emma react in disbelief to Frank Churchill’s claim that it is impossible for him to spend a week with his father:

…one can hardly conceive a young man’s not having it in his power to do as much as that. A young woman, if she falls into bad hands, may be teased, and kept at a distance from those she wants to be with; but one cannot comprehend a young man’s being under such restraint, as not to be able to spend a week with his father, if he likes it.

(95)

In *Northanger Abbey* we see that women are physically rendered powerless when men will not allow them to do as they wish. Austen seems to comment on the forceful nature of men’s power when she refers to “the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farmhouse” (6). We see how John Thorpe abuses his power when he deters Catherine from keeping her engagement with Elinor Tilney. Being a man enables him to own a carriage and to come and go as he pleases. It also gives him the power to keep on driving when Catherine pleads with him to turn back. The narrator states that Catherine had “no power of getting away, [and] was obliged to give up…and submit” (75).

Across the ages, women have felt the consequences of being rendered physically powerless, but it is only recently that women have started speaking openly about it, as Linda
Schmittroth and Mary Reilly McCall report (1997:446). Whereas Austen only touches on the tremendous domestic power men have, feminist scholars in the current century reveal its damaging effects in an effort to eradicate it altogether. One could say that, although domestic violence is not a new phenomenon, contemporary society is much more aware of its existence and sensitive to its devastating effects than society in Austen’s time (446-447). This is partly owing to concerted efforts by dedicated feminist activists, as Barbara Schulman points out in “The Unsettling Subject of Violence in Women’s Lives: Encouraging Notes from the Classroom Front” (1999):

Nearly three decades of feminist activism and research have demonstrated that some form of gender-related violence is present in the autobiographies of what may be a majority of women around the globe.

(1999:167)

Violence against women has received so much attention in the last two decades that, according to Paula Wilcox, it has “increasingly been seen world wide as an important public policy issue” (2000:35). Wesley, Allison and Schneider believe domestic violence against women to be “a social problem born of patriarchy” (2000:211), a means by which men maintain control over women, while Linda Schmittroth and Mary Reilly McCall argue that in the past, authorities often turned a blind eye to domestic violence owing to “the old and mistaken notion that the man is master of his family and his home” (1997:446). Germaine Greer points out that often in contemporary society “husbands are meant to take over the role of fathers and assume authority over their wives” (1999:283).

For these reasons amongst others, recent feminist scholarship has identified marriage as a means of subjugating women and leaving them weak. Janet Saltzman Chafetz argues that women today lack power since they are “relegated to the subordinate world of home,
domestic labour, motherhood, and family” (1999:156). Women are, as Arnot, Araújo, Deliyanni and Ivinson point out, “subordinated not just to individual men through the marriage contract, but to all men through political and economic dominance” (2000:152). Since male authority is so deeply entrenched in patriarchal society, some feminists regard the abolition of marriage as the only way to end women’s oppression, as Helen Tierney reports in *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia* (1999:892).

The work of feminists to eliminate oppression within marital relations, is hindered by popular (male) discourses which dictate women’s role as mother and wife. Patricia Waugh believes gender roles are “a mode of social control” (1989:9) for men whereby they might gain autonomy and marginalise women. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit are of the same opinion:

…it is women’s mothering and nurturing activities, and the social beliefs which support them, which are crucial to the maintenance of women’s general subordination and economic dependence.

(1992:33, my emphasis)

Since “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself” (Weedon, 1987:121), men have, albeit sometimes unconsciously, reinforced the metanarrative that being a mother and a wife is ‘natural’ for women. Coaxing women into wife- and motherhood means keeping them in a subservient position and, in turn, ensures male dominance. For these and other reasons marriage today is generally considered to restrain women, as Rosalind Miles points out:

Marriage has in general posed a major threat to the flowering of female talent. In the nature of the institution women are required to surrender that autonomy essential to the practice of any art.

(1987:22)
Whereas contemporary feminist scholars explicitly link women’s powerlessness to marriage, we need to reread Austen from a feminist point of view in order to infer that women were weakened by patriarchy and by the institution of marriage. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe Austen’s work shows that “women have been imprisoned more effectively by miseducation than by walls and more by financial dependency...than by any verbal oath or warning” (1979:135). Reading Austen from a feminist perspective means being made aware of the necessity for women to get married. From her writing it can be inferred that marriage is enforced by patriarchy and its laws: women feel compelled to get married in order to have economic security, to escape the confinement at home, or even to acquire society’s approval, in short, simply so that they may survive in a male-dominated world.

1.1 Economic Security

The economic conditions of Austen’s time upheld women’s oppression, as Judith Lowder Newton (with specific reference to *Pride and Prejudice*) explains:

> Elizabeth Bennet has no decent fortune whatsoever. She *must* marry; she must marry with an eye to money; and the reason she must marry is that the family inheritance has been settled on a male. It would be hard to make a more central point of the fact that the conditions of economic life favoured men and restricted women.

(1981:120)

The “conditions of economic life” in Austen’s time included an inequality of career opportunities between men and women. Elaine Showalter reminds us that in the late eighteenth century women “were not accustomed to choosing a vocation [since] womanhood was a vocation in itself” (1977:21). While it was not considered proper for women to have a
career, and while “almost the only way in which a gently born woman could earn her living was by teaching” (Cruse, 1930:80), men had a number of occupations to choose from.

From Austen’s novels we can construe that men and women did not have equal access to career opportunities. In Sense and Sensibility Edward Ferrars lists the church, the law and the navy as some of the occupations he as a man can choose from (99), and in Northanger Abbey Mrs Thorpe, while mentioning only the beauty of her daughters, claims that her three sons are all “beloved and respected in their different stations” (19). Judith Lowder Newton mentions that Austen illustrates that men “no matter how hapless and undeserving, must be provided for, must be given every opportunity to earn their way [while] women…are prepared for nothing but display” (1981:119-120).

In Austen’s time, then, it was almost impossible for women to achieve financial prosperity on their own. As a result they were obliged to marry:

The only opportunity for achievement for a middle-class woman was to marry and have children, and then she had to be totally subservient to her husband. If she did not marry, then her life became totally useless, for it was not considered proper for a respectable woman to have a career.

(Potter, 1987:236, my emphasis)

We see how circumstances can render women powerless and how a woman’s life can become “totally useless” in Emma. Jane Fairfax, being an orphan, is left with no choice but to become a governess. Nancy Armstrong mentions that although in Austen’s day the governess “belonged to the cast of respectable women…[she] was commonly represented as a threat to the well-being of the household” (1987:78-79). As Tony Tanner has noted, Jane Austen indicates she herself is “fully alert to the social miseries and injustices of her age – including the acute miseries of the governess situation” (1986:186) when she describes the bleak future awaiting Jane the day she will no longer be in the Campbell’s care and will have to eke out an
existence (*Emma*, 124). The narrator seems to wonder at fate’s fickleness as Miss Campbell manages for no apparent reason to secure a comfortable future by marrying a wealthy man, while Jane faces having to be paid a pittance and earning little respect as governess. That the narrator has empathy with her is clear:

> [Jane] had long resolved that one-and-twenty should be the period. With the fortitude of a devoted noviciate, she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification forever.

(124)

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Jane Austen explores “the specific ways in which patriarchal control of women depends on women being denied the right to earn or even inherit their own money” (1979:136). *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates the injustice of the inheritance laws, which generally left the bulk of the estate to the eldest son, and which necessitated that women marry. It is possible that Austen comments on the senselessness of a convention which would have John Dashwood as the only son inherit almost everything *despite* the fact that he is already wealthy and that his sisters are in far greater need of their father’s money (1-2). In *Pride and Prejudice* the Bennet girls are in a financial predicament since their father’s estate is “entailed in default of heirs male, on a distant relation” (75). The mere fact that Collins may, on Mr Bennet’s demise, turn the Bennet family out of their own home (106) reinforces the tremendous power patriarchy gives men. Roger Gard justifiably refers to Collins in *Jane Austen’s Novels: The Art of Clarity* (1992) as a symbol of “the reality of male oppression” (100). It is clear that Collins realises the power with which patriarchy has endowed him when he proposes to Elizabeth. He points out that if she refuses him and gets no other offer of marriage, she is likely to end up poor and forlorn (*Pride and Prejudice*, 106).
150-151). Juliet McMaster notes in “Emma Watson: Jane Austen’s Uncompleted Heroine” (1994) that Austen’s novels draw our attention “to the unjustly difficult plight of the single woman who is not in possession of a good fortune” (227). The plight of the single woman is illustrated, for example, in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr Bennet firmly states Lydia will not be “an object of prey” (258) to any man since she is of no great fortune, and when Charlotte Lucas marries Collins since it is “the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune” (163). It thus gradually becomes apparent in this and Austen’s other novels why it is “a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (51).

It could be argued that Austen’s fiction demonstrates that a woman’s inheritance can make or break her. In *Sense and Sensibility* a woman’s eligibility is defined in terms of her fortune. Lucy Steele realises that, because she has no fortune, Mrs Ferrars would never approve of a match between her and Edward (129). Mrs Ferrars is so determined that her sons marry well and not be drawn in by any woman (21) that she tries to persuade Edward not to marry Lucy, and even threatens to disinherit him (258-259). In *Northanger Abbey* it is possibly Isabella Thorpe’s small fortune (108) which makes her so determined to find a husband. After having secured James Morland she - disappointed with his four hundred pounds (121) - almost succeeds in laying her hands on the Tilney fortune by marrying Frederick Tilney. On account of her “want of consequence and fortune” (192) the General, however, prevents the marriage from taking place.

*Persuasion* illustrates the sad reality that a girl needed a dowry in order to attract good offers of marriage. If she had none and failed to find a rich enough husband to provide for her, the chances were she would end up like Mrs Smith, “living in a very humble way, unable
even to afford herself the comfort of a servant, and of course almost excluded from society” (136). The Elliott sisters could easily share Mrs Smith’s fate since their father’s estate is to be inherited by their cousin, William Elliot. Elizabeth, Sir Walter’s eldest daughter, realises that it is her duty to marry her cousin in order to keep the money in the family:

She had, while a very young girl, as soon as she had known [her cousin] to be, in the event of her having no brother, the future baronet, meant to marry him…

(8-9)

Economic consideration ensured that marriage in Austen’s time was, as David Cecil remarks in *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (1978), “an institution involving lifelong and serious obligations” (16). Since many women were not economically provided for, marriage had to make financial sense. In *Mansfield Park* we see that women’s destiny often depends on how well they marry. The three Ward sisters illustrate the consequences of a good, a reasonable and a poor match. While the eldest, Maria, had the good fortune of marrying Sir Thomas and was raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady (1), her sisters were not so lucky. The middle sister (Mrs Norris) had married “on a narrower income than she had been used to look forward to” (6) so that strict economy in her marriage was necessary. Fanny, the youngest, made the mistake of marrying a man with neither education, fortune nor connections. As a result, she had to endure poverty and hardship (1-3). Fanny compares the destinies of Lady Bertram and her own mother, and wonders at the fact “that where nature had made so little difference, circumstances should have made so much” (414).

Throughout *Mansfield Park* Austen seems to create an ironic awareness of the reality that it is every woman’s duty to marry as well as she can. Marriage is seen by some of the characters as a business transaction from which both parties should benefit. The match between Maria Bertram and Rushworth is viewed as advantageous by Sir Thomas. Not only
would it ensure Maria of a large income (37) and Rushworth of a beautiful and accomplished wife (37-38), but also add “respectability and influence” (203) to the Bertram name. The “true London maxim, that everything is to be got with money” (59) is illustrated when Maria agrees to marry a man she finds terribly annoying and dull. While Sir Thomas tells Fanny that “it is every young woman’s duty to accept a very exceptional offer [such as Henry Crawford’s]” (336), we are told that “[m]atrimony was [Mary Crawford’s] object, provided she could marry well” (41). Mary argues that “everybody should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage” (43). Since she believes a “large income is the best recipe for happiness” (215), she cannot comprehend how Fanny could reject Henry. Neither would she ever consider marrying Edmund since he would most probably stay a penniless clergyman his whole life (Donoghue, 1968:43).

A feminist reading of Austen draws our attention to the economic injustices suffered by women and the consequences thereof.25 One of the consequences of the male-favouring economic and social system of Austen’s time was that women felt forced to marry. Economic dependency was, however, not the only reason women decided to marry. In the next section I shall examine the ways in which stifling parental authority, and thus the need to escape from home, motivated women to marry.

1.2 Escaping Home

Judging from Austen’s novels it would seem that young women often married in order to escape the confinement at home. In Northanger Abbey Eleonor Tilney’s marriage to a man of

25 Marilyn Butler mentions in Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (1987) that Austen exposes “[women’s] terribly limited opportunities for employment, the low wages of governesses, [and] the wife’s loss of property rights” (127).
her choice is seen as a “removal from all the evils of such a home as Northanger” (234). Similarly, Maria Bertram is “prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home” (Mansfield Park, 204). For Anne Elliot marrying means escaping the “imprisonment” (Persuasion, 123) at home brought on by her father’s favouring of Elizabeth. In Pride and Prejudice Elizabeth and Jane would be spared the embarrassment of their mother’s tactlessness if they were to be married (141-3; 355).

In Austen’s time middle-class parents had tremendous power over their children, especially their daughters. Young women, for instance, would be forced into marriage by fathers and mothers who cared less about their daughters’ needs or wishes (Johnson, 1988:26). In Emma we see that Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill are prevented from getting married while Mrs Churchill lives (301). In Sense and Sensibility Mrs Jennings decides that her daughter should not marry Colonel Brandon (113) but Mr Palmer. In the same novel Brandon’s cousin Eliza is forced by her guardian to marry his eldest son (198-199), while Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars keep their engagement a secret for fear of Edward’s mother (127-129). When the wealthy Miss Morton is traded off between the Ferrars brothers, Elinor cannot help but laugh at the absurdity of parents who see women as objects that are to be pawned and swopped at will:

‘We think now,’ said Mr Dashwood, after a short pause, ‘of Robert’s marrying Miss Morton.’ Elinor, smiling at the grave and decisive importance of her brother’s tone, calmly replied – ‘The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair.’

(289)

The number of patriarchal bullies that feature in Austen’s fiction focuses our attention on the enormous power men (and especially fathers) used to have. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a bully as “a person who uses strength or power to coerce others by fear”,

88
and it is this coercive force that Austen’s work exposes. In *Mansfield Park* the authority men automatically assume as head of the family is neatly illustrated by Sir Thomas. When Yates comes to visit he professes to have “known many disagreeable fathers before…but never…[one] so infamously tyrannical as Sir Thomas” (193). Being the head of the family entitles him to make all the decisions. Even when he is abroad his family is governed by his rule. When Edmund wants to buy Fanny a horse, for example, Lady Bertram wants him to wait until his father returns so that “Sir Thomas might settle it all himself” (35). Similarly, when the young people want to put on a play, they know their father would not approve, even though they try to convince themselves otherwise (128-130). When Sir Thomas unexpectedly arrives at Mansfield Park they realise that it means the end of their show:

> …but every other heart was sinking under some degree of self-condemnation or undefined alarm, every other heart was suggesting, ‘What will become of us? what is to be done now?’ It was a terrible pause…

(176)

After returning home, Sir Thomas quickly re-establishes his powerful position when he resumes “his seat as master of the house at dinner” (192). The narrator comments that “[u]nder his government, Mansfield was an altered place” (197, my emphasis).

It is especially the women in the family who suffer Sir Thomas’s tyranny. When he persuades his wife to let Fanny visit her family, it is “rather from submission…than conviction” (375) that Lady Bertram agrees. His daughters are also made aware of his power from an early age and are said to be “in greater awe of their father” (11) than their brothers are. When he leaves for Antigua they are delighted to be freed from his tyranny for a short while. The narrator seems to use this opportunity to criticise all fathers who do not wish to love their daughters but only to govern them:
The Miss Bertrams were much to be pitied on the occasion; not for their sorrow, but for their want of it.

(31)

Because they fear their father, the month of his return to England is described as a “black month” (109) for the girls. Maria especially is pitied “for to her the father brought a husband” (109). Although Fanny is not his daughter, Henry Crawford believes Sir Thomas “to stand in the place of her parents” (316). She fears her uncle from the very start (14) and is probably more relieved than her cousins when he leaves for Antigua (31). Patriarchy has made him powerful, and indeed he expects her to obey him at all times (279). The narrator comments on his powerful hold over Fanny when she remarks that his was no ordinary advice but “the advice of absolute power” (285).

Mary Crawford as an outsider immediately notices the power Sir Thomas has over his family. She consequently blames him for Edmund’s decision to become a clergyman (251). She makes fun of his powerful hold when talking to her sister, possibly because she realises that his power is patriarchally-engendered:

‘Sir Thomas is to achieve many mighty things when he comes home,’ said Mary, after a pause. ‘Do you remember Hawkins Browne’s “Address to Tobacco”, in imitation of Pope? -

Blest leaf! whose aromatic gales dispense
To Templars modesty, to Parsons sense.

I will parody them –

Blest Knight! whose dictatorial looks dispense
To Children affluence, to Rushworth sense.

Will not that do, Mrs. Grant? Everything seems to depend upon Sir Thomas’s return.’

(164)
When Austen later on has Mary say that Sir Thomas “is just what the head of such a family should be” (363) it is likely that she is being critical of men like himself who take their resolutions “in quiet independence” (255), who consider it their sole right to be “happy and indulgent” (187) at home, and who enjoy being the one “on whom all [depends]” (435).

General Tilney similarly abuses his power as head of the family. He is constantly “a check upon his children’s spirits” (*Northanger Abbey*, 140), and dictates to them whom they should marry (192-193; 228). Eleanor especially bears the brunt of her father’s tyranny. She is not allowed to make any decision on her own and is even told *when* to go for a walk (161) and *which* route to take (163). Because she in all probability fears her father and feels powerless, she obeys his orders. Eleanor realises that she is “but a nominal mistress of [Northanger], that [her] real power is nothing” (209).

Once at Northanger, Catherine quickly realises that the General is not to be contradicted and grows “every moment more in awe of him” (140). While his presence appears “to lengthen…two hours into four” (140) and makes her feel fatigue (151), his departure for London gives her “the first experimental conviction that a loss may be sometimes a gain” (203). When she and Eleanor disobey him as they snoop around the forbidden chambers, Catherine is filled with “terror upon terror” (176) at the sight of the General himself in the gallery.

Austen’s novels do not only depict fathers and husbands who abuse their power but also show that even all-important men like Sir Thomas and the General are at times rendered powerless. Edward Said makes the point that “Sir Thomas’s infrequent trips to Antigua as an absentee plantation owner reflect the diminishment in his class’s power” (1993:94). While all Sir Thomas’s clout cannot re-establish the Bertram family name when Maria runs off with
Crawford and Julia with Yates, General Tilney is thwarted when Henry marries Catherine. Austen comments tongue-in-cheek that it is up to the reader to decide whether “the tendency of [her] work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny or reward filial disobedience” (*Northanger Abbey*, 236).

In *Persuasion* we are presented with a less forceful (but just as effective) bully. One could say that Sir Walter Elliot renders Anne powerless by what he does not do. Together with Lady Russell’s opposition, his “professed resolution of doing nothing for his daughter” (24), should she marry Wentworth, induces Anne to call off the engagement. When he decides the family should move to Bath, Anne has no say in the matter and is forced to abide by his decision (14). Although Mr Woodhouse in *Emma* loves his daughter he loves himself even more. Despite his delicate disposition, he always manages to have his way. He has such a hold on Emma that she believes her future not to belong to her alone:

> Marriage, in fact, would not do for her. It would be incompatible with what she owed to her father, and with what she felt for him. Nothing should separate her from her father. She would not marry, even if she were asked by Mr Knightley.

(314)

Claudia Johnson mentions that Austen was living in a society which “[prohibited] women from making choices about their own lives” (1988:14). That women had a limited choice when considering a partner for life can be seen in Austen’s novels. Since almost the only way a woman could escape her parents’ authority was to marry the man they had chosen for her, women had less free will than is generally assumed. Ironically, women who married in order to get away from home inevitably subjugated themselves to a substitute form of authority.

Being made aware of the immense power men have means, in most cases, being made aware of women’s *powerlessness*. Claudia Johnson believes Austen’s commentary on
patriarchal bullies is, in fact, an attack on ideological state apparatuses (a concept borrowed from Louis Althusser to which I shall return later in this study) which enable men to abuse their power:

Considered from within the compelling rhetorical structures conservative novelists build, to suggest, as Austen, among others, frequently does, that fathers, sons, and brothers themselves may be selfish, bullying and unscrupulous, and that the “bonds of domestic attachment” are not always sweet, *is to attack the institutions which make morality possible* and so to contribute to the dissolution of the government.

(1988:10, my emphasis)

Austen’s novels feature a number of elopements, possibly a consequence of women trying to escape the confinement at home. In *Sense and Sensibility* Lucy Steele is secretly married to Robert Ferrars (358), while Lydia Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) causes her family much embarrassment by eloping with Wickham (291-294). The Bertrams are dealt a double blow in *Mansfield Park* when Maria (a married woman) runs off with Henry Crawford (444-445), and Julia elopes with Yates (447). It can be argued that, by introducing fathers who bully their daughters into marriage, and by featuring women who elope, Austen depicts a society which forces young women from one institution into the next. Though these women believe they have escaped the confinement at home they have in fact merely exchanged it for the enduring confinement of marriage.

1.3 Approval and Acknowledgement

For most women in Austen’s time marriage was, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted, the only way of achieving affluence and thereby society’s approval:
[Austen’s] implication is clear: marriage is crucial because it is the only accessible form of self-definition for girls in her society. (1979:127)

In *Mansfield Park* Henry Crawford views marriage as the only way for women to acquire “happiness, comfort, honour, and dignity in the world” (301). Just as her mother gained prestige by marrying Sir Thomas and becoming Lady Bertram (1), Maria intends becoming Rushworth’s wife in order to achieve “fortune and consequence” (204). In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor states that if Lucy had married Edward, she would have gained “consideration among her friends” (361), while Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* imagines how marriage would win her “the gaze and admiration of every new acquaintance at Fullerton” (111). In *Persuasion* the narrator remarks tongue-in-cheek that “Mary had acquired a little artificial importance, by becoming Mrs. Charles Musgrove” (7). In *Emma* our attention is drawn to the fact that women often need to be married in order to enjoy esteem when Emma jokingly considers getting married so that she no longer has to stand second to Mrs Elton (245). In addition, the narrator seems to be ironic when she comments that Miss Bates “enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married” (17).

If one considers the important role marriage used to play in women’s acceptance in their society, one might begin to understand where the stigma surrounding spinsterhood comes from. Though today it may be quite ‘normal’ for women to remain single, contemporary

---

26 Margaret McFadden reports that “[t]he 1960s saw a rise in the number of American women who remained single. As the women’s movement gained momentum, ‘singlehood’ included feminists, lesbians, unmarried mothers, and those women who were in relationships but who chose not to marry. The average age for women to marry increased, and the divorce rate rose dramatically” (1997:805).
women often feel pressurized to marry in order to avoid being associated with spinsterhood (Greer, 1999: 312-313). Many women see marriage as the easiest means of integration into the community, as Sarah Gamble reports (1999:269). According to Gamble, women who remain single are often regarded as not fully integrated into the community, and have even been described as “wastage” (269). Although some feminists have tried to reclaim the image of the spinster, she remains, according to Margaret McFadden, to be culturally stereotyped as “the unchosen woman who is unattractive to men, incapable of finding a husband or respectable work, and a potential threat to society in her freedom” (1997:819). For fear of being labelled as such, many women feel compelled to marry, even if it means being placed under male authority.

1.4 Surviving Patriarchy

In keeping with the prerequisite that most women, no matter how strong or independent they are, still need to marry in order to manage financially and be accepted socially, all Austen’s heroines get married: Elizabeth and Darcy, Emma and Knightley, Anne and Wentworth, Fanny and Edmund, Catherine and Henry, Elinor and Edward, Marianne and Brandon are all shown to tie the knot. By making her heroines marry, Austen is possibly showing that even strong-willed girls do not live in isolation, but need to adhere to social conventions in order to survive. This has been noted by André Brink:

…no amount of ‘success’ can essentially alter a woman’s fortune: even for Emma with her fierce if often misguided and deftly ironicised sense of independence, marriage describes her horizon.

(1998:125)
While, at times, Austen’s heroines can get away with covertly challenging some of patriarchy’s traditions, they know that an open defiance would have them ostracized. Isobel Armstrong has referred to “Jane Austen’s delicate and probing exploration of the psychology of the dependent woman and the social and emotional constraints upon her” (1988:10). A feminist reading of Austen’s fiction creates an awareness of the fact that women were left with no choice but to follow social convention in order to survive in a male-dominated world. We see Austen’s women characters adhering to convention not only when they decide to marry but also when they wait for the men they are interested in to initiate a relationship. Anne Elliot, for instance, does not openly declare her love for Frederick Wentworth but merely hints at it when she is talking to Captain Harville and is certain that Wentworth is listening (Persuasion, 205-207). This may not indicate that she believes this is the way things should be done, as much as it shows that she knows how to protect herself in a world dictated by male convention. We also see other women waiting for men to make the first move. Maria Bertram is in “a good deal of agitation” (Mansfield Park, 193) as she impatiently waits for Henry Crawford to declare himself. Fanny shares her predicament because she has to wait for Edmund to forget Mary Crawford, and to consider whether “a very different kind of woman might not do just as well, or a great deal better” (475). In Sense and Sensibility Elinor Dashwood keeps her feelings for Edward a secret until he declares his love for her (37; 352-356). In Pride and Prejudice both Jane and Elizabeth wait for the men they love to propose. Jane has to infer from Bingley’s absence that he has lost all interest in their relationship (184). When he finally returns, she patiently waits for him to take it up again (356-357). Elizabeth, who first rejects Darcy (221-222), does not approach him when she realises that she has erred but waits for him to propose (374-375). Similarly, when Emma
realises she loves Knightley, she dare not mention it, but leaves it up to him to make the first move (Emma, 325-326). In Northanger Abbey the conventional view that “no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman’s love is declared” (17) is illustrated by having Catherine remain silent about her feelings for Henry Tilney. She only admits that she loves him once he assures her of his affection (227).

Modern women have inherited a legacy of waiting to be asked. Some of them have managed to shed this legacy completely, and have initiated relationships and, by extension, marriage and families \(^{27}\). Others still wait for the man to make the first move, as recent popular feminist writing, such as that of Germaine Greer, has illustrated:

> As recently as August 1995 Imogen Edwards-Jones agonized in The Times over the fact that a woman still cannot ask a man out for a date.

> (1999:316)

In an aforementioned article, Barbara Darby draws parallels between eighteenth-century conduct books (which prescribed women’s role in society) and a book written in 1995, The Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right \(^{28}\). The Rules clearly stipulates the role men and women play in society, as seen, interestingly enough, by its women writers. These writers believe that it is “the male prerogative to say hello first, make the first phone call, arrange the date, pay for it, bring presents, and propose” (2000:343). Judging by its popularity, it seems that many twenty-first century women identify with and

---

\(^{27}\) Kramarae and Spender note that, although traditional gender roles prevail in dating relationships, there are observable changes to old norms. They posit that “[s]exually experienced women are more likely to be independent and to take the initiative in dating and sex…[and to] use strategies previously reserved for men” (2000:244).

\(^{28}\) The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets For Capturing the Heart of Mr Right (1995) is by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider. Nearly a million copies of the book were in print shortly after its publication, while sequels are in progress.
adhere to this type of prescribed behaviour in the hope that it might attract a husband. Nancy Armstrong mentions that ‘conduct books’ continue to exist in the modern era. Though they might have a different appearance they still manage to dictate women’s identity:

And although today we find authors neither designing curricula to educate young women at home nor writing fiction to demonstrate the properties of feminine conduct, the conduct book is still alive and well. Besides all the books and advice columns telling women how to catch and keep a man, and besides numerous magazines imaging the beautiful home, there are also home economics courses that most women must take before graduating from high school.

(1987:62)

It is possible that contemporary women are embarrassed to initiate a relationship because they have inherited a legacy of leaving the courting up to men. The tradition of waiting to be asked is illustrated in Austen’s novels. I have argued that Austen’s fiction presents us with women who presumably know what they need to do and how they need to behave in order to secure their financial future and be accepted by the society they live in. Even strong-minded women, it would seem, need to follow certain conventions, such as marriage and leaving the courting up to men, in order to survive in a male-dominated world. By “[d]ramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:154), Austen’s work seems to account for most women’s eventually succumbing to patriarchy.

2. Dissident views on marriage

Austen’s fiction offers ideas on marriage that deviate from the (patriarchal) norm: it appears to be critical of marrying for money, shows that wives are often unfulfilled women, and portrays women who chase after men as ridiculous. Despite these criticisms Austen appears to support domesticity by ending her novels with marriage. While it is possible that Austen,
as Edward Said points out when referring to authors in general, is still “very much in the history of [her] society” (1993:xxii), and therefore encourages women to lead a domestic life, it is also possible that she, by doing so, submits to patriarchy in order to survive. Another plausible explanation for her apparent inconsistency, which is favoured by critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, is that Austen’s endings serve as a “blotter” (1979:169). This argument entails that when Austen makes her heroines live happily ever after they do so in perfectly dubious matrimonial bliss.

2.1 Marrying for money

In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen states that women should have the right to marry for love at least once in their lives (Halperin, 1984:299). This romantic notion of ‘mutual love’ may be a metanarrative that Austen fails to acknowledge as a patriarchal construct\(^{29}\) but at least she is not endorsing the view that marriage should make economic sense.

Though the marriages of all Austen’s women protagonists are only ever hinted at as a possibility since the novels end before they are enacted, these women apparently agree to marry because they are in love. Anne Elliot falls in love with Wentworth despite his having no fortune (Persuasion, 24-25). Even though she is persuaded to end the relationship, she does not stop loving him. Because she refuses Charles Musgrove, she is free to marry Wentworth when he proposes a second time. In Mansfield Park love is said to make up an essential part of a happy marriage. Here it is worth mentioning that although Anhalt’s character from Lovers’ Vows is quoted as saying “[w]hen two sympathetic hearts meet in the

\(^{29}\) Sarah Gamble comments on the popularity of the notion of romantic love in today’s society and states that “marriage remains an enduring institution…[which] is shored up by the ideology of romance, which enshrines it as the fitting end for all narratives, from fairy tale to film” (1999:269).
marriage state, matrimony may be called a happy life” (362), we are never actually shown these ‘happy marriages’. Fanny seems to value love in a relationship. She wishes that her uncle would realise “how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how wicked it [is], to marry without affection” (327). She loves Edmund so sincerely that she repeatedly refuses Henry Crawford, despite his promises of fortune. Austen’s novel seems to illustrate the strength and the “enthusiasm of a woman’s love” (268-269) when Fanny keeps on loving Edmund, despite his being hopelessly in love with Mary.

In Sense and Sensibility a loveless marriage is seen as emotional entrapment. When Lucy marries Robert Ferrars, we read that Edward “was released...from an entanglement which had longed formed his misery, from a woman whom he had long ceased to love” (354). In addition, women who marry, knowing their partners do not love them, are seen by Willoughby as deserving no compassion (322). Marrying for love is also supported by other characters in the novel. While Mrs Dashwood wants to see her daughters engage in loving relationships (13), Marianne is concerned that she will never find a man whom she can truly love (16). Edward, in turn, does not marry Miss Morton, despite her large fortune. The narrator endorses love as the only reason to marry by having Edward (although he is poor) happily married to Elinor (371).

Even the no-nonsense Mr Darcy seems to believe in marrying for love. Because he feels Jane is indifferent, he persuades Bingley not to marry her (Pride and Prejudice, 228). While Darcy wants Elizabeth (who has neither money nor connections) to be his wife, Elizabeth herself appears to be resolute in her commitment to marrying for love. Seemingly for this reason she rejects Collins and initially even refuses Darcy. She is ready to accept Darcy’s hand in marriage only when she realises that she loves him (375). In Emma Austen deviates
from her own norm when she creates a heroine with a large fortune. Because Emma has enough money she does not need to marry for any other reason than love (66). Despite her firm resolution to remain single (66-67), she falls in love with Knightley and agrees to marry him.

The idea that “[w]here people are really attached, poverty itself is wealth” (Northanger Abbey, 108) is echoed throughout Austen’s novels. In addition we are shown that marrying for any other reason ruins relationships. Although Sir Thomas initially feels that being “eligibly, honourably, nobly settled” (Mansfield Park, 321) in life brings happiness, his daughter’s unhappy marriage compels him to reconsider his views on matrimony. Towards the end we are told that he became “[s]ick of ambitious and mercenary connexions, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper” (477). It may be argued that partly as a result of Lady Bertram’s marrying Sir Thomas for his money (1), she is “not disturbed by any alarm for his safety” (31) when he goes to Antigua, and does not seem anxious for him to return (129). Sir Thomas’s own attitude to his wife, as when he ponders that “it would not much amuse him to have her for a partner” (242) when playing whist, further reveals their loveless relationship. Like her mother, Maria marries for money and social prestige (37). Because she neither loves nor respects Rushworth their marriage is doomed to fail.

In Persuasion it becomes clear that a loveless marriage can make one miserable. Despite Sir Walter’s good looks and his station in life, Lady Elliot is said to have been “not the very happiest being in the world” (6). Similarly, in Northanger Abbey, although she might have gained money and esteem by marrying the General, Mrs Tilney often “had much to bear” (182). In Pride and Prejudice we once again see how money cannot make a person happy. Charlotte Lucas, who marries for financial security (162-166), is pitied for being entrapped in
a loveless marriage. Though Elizabeth feels sorry for Charlotte, she realises that she had chosen such a life “with her eyes open” (244). Money also leads to unhappiness in Sense and Sensibility. Owing to her mother’s mercenary motives, Mrs Palmer does not marry Brandon (113). Austen implies that domestic happiness is out of the question when one marries for money by showing how Mr Palmer verbally abuses his wife, and how he at times completely ignores her (107-110).

Austen’s fiction often presents us with matches between two people of different fortunes, and may therefore be implying that love, and not money, should be the most important consideration when choosing a partner for life. Rosalind Miles feels that Austen “endorses…marriages which are not really so acceptable or respectable” (1987:44). She suggests that in Persuasion Austen demonstrates how wrong a ‘right’ marriage could be since this enables her “to make some of her sharpest and most derogatory comments on the hollowness of rank and position” (1987:45). Nancy Armstrong has made a good case that for Austen “status seems to matter as much as the essential qualities of a person” (1987:141). In Northanger Abbey Catherine assures Isabella that “the difference of fortune can be nothing to signify” (108). Austen seems to dispute the view that an “inequality of situations” (193) should keep two people from getting married when she has Henry offer Catherine his hand in marriage (232). In Pride and Prejudice the convention that it is disgraceful to marry beneath one’s station in life is undercut when Darcy proposes to Elizabeth. Although Darcy knows that by marrying Elizabeth he will acquire relations “whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath [his] own” (224) he still wants her to be his wife. In Sense and Sensibility Edward Ferrars realises that marrying a girl “inferior in connections” (134) will bring about difficulties and could ruin him (291). Yet he goes ahead and marries Elinor. Similarly, when
he proposes to Fanny, Henry Crawford must be aware, like his sister is, that he will be “marrying a little beneath him” (*Mansfield Park*, 295). Although Fanny refuses Henry, Austen still manages to unite two people from different social backgrounds when she has her marry Edmund. Though the implication that women need to marry into financial security cannot be overlooked, Austen is at least creating an awareness of some of the class constraints affecting her heroines’ choices in marriage partners. By having them marry men of superior rank Austen could be suggesting that difference of fortune should not keep any two people from getting married, and that she really does not know, as Mrs Jennings says, why people make “such a to-do about money and greatness” (*Sense and Sensibility*, 251).

Austen’s work seems to imply that marriage should not necessarily make financial sense and that marrying for money is, in Catherine Morland’s words, “the wickedest thing in existence” (*Northanger Abbey*, 113). It could be argued that, by showing how marrying for money ruins relationships, Austen is suggesting that a marriage based on financial consideration only more often than not leads to unhappiness. It would appear that, while women need to marry in order to secure their financial future, this should not be the only consideration when choosing a partner for life.

2.2 Unfulfilled wives

In most of Austen’s novels the narrator and even some of the characters seem to display a cynical attitude towards the notion that marriage for women means ultimate fulfillment. In *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte Lucas believes “[h]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (69) and that “it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with
whom you are to pass your life” (70). Charlotte appears to have a pragmatic, cynical view of marriage and only to have married Collins in order to secure her financial future (165).

While Mr Knightley describes matrimony as “submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid” (Emma, 30), Mary Crawford believes most married people to be unfulfilled when she claims to “look upon the Frasers to be about as unhappy as most other married people” (Mansfield Park, 365). Mary sees marriage as a business transaction in which either of the sexes is usually taken in. To her it is a “manoeuvring business” (45) which invariably leaves one of the partners disillusioned. In Northanger Abbey Henry Tilney destroys all romantic illusions about marriage by asserting that married people have a duty to persevere and that they “can never part, but must go and keep house together” (65). His explanation seems to account for the “strange unsuitabilities which often [exist] between husband and wife” (Sense and Sensibility, 114) and which Austen illustrates with relish.

In Mansfield Park Mary Crawford pities her sister for having to endure a fastidious husband (113-4), while Edmund notes the “desperate dull life [Mrs Grant’s] must be with the doctor” (122). Being married to a selfish man has brought Mrs Grant no joy but a life of entrapment, as becomes evident when she is kept from coming to see the young people’s rehearsal of Lovers’ Vows:

> They did not wait long for the Crawfords, but there was no Mrs. Grant. She could not come. Dr. Grant, professing an indisposition, for which he had little credit with his fair sister-in-law, could not spare his wife.

(174)

While Mrs Grant manages to console herself by believing “[t]here will be little rubs and disappointments” (46) in most marriages, Maria Bertram cannot stand being unhappily married. Because she in all probability feels unfulfilled she deserts her husband and runs
away with Henry Crawford (444-446). Charlotte Lucas, on the other hand, accepts her fate and handles being married to Collins by finding her solace in “her home and housekeeping, her parish and her poultry” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 244).

Patricia Beer has suggested that Austen’s novels depict marriage as “a state where women often struggle and endure” (1974:81). It is possible that, by depicting wives who are unfulfilled, Austen is suggesting that being a wife does not necessarily mean being content. If this is indeed the case, and if Austen is offering a critique of marriage as an institution, then she could possibly be considered as one of the forerunners of nineteenth-century feminists who sought to reform this institution. Helen Tierney writes that:

> [t]he condition of subordination in America and Europe in the nineteenth century was such that marriage reform was a priority of the feminist movement that began in mid-century. Some gains were made, but marriage reform remains a major concern of second-wave feminism.

(1999:892)

It would seem indeed that contemporary feminist writers are concerned with reforming marriage and that they pay special attention to the reasons that many women believe being someone’s wife will make them happy. Patricia Waugh reveals how “myths of femininity” (1989:40) are reinforced by psychoanalysis which states that, owing to woman’s anatomy, it is only ‘natural’ that she should become a wife. The prevailing assumption that being a wife ensures happiness is challenged by Germaine Greer:

> Many of the women who will this year shed a husband who thinks that he has behaved as well as could be expected will do so because he is just too much trouble.

(1999:163)

Feminists have found that women are lured into marrying, following standard media representations of the patriarchal nuclear family as a perfect unit, the ultimate goal for any
woman to achieve. Even when women, be it consciously or subconsciously, realise the entrapping possibilities of matrimony, they still enter it in an attempt to find fulfillment. Chris Weedon explains:

[The patriarchal family] is immensely seductive. It signifies warmth, happiness and emotional and material security, and every year, despite their experience of the families in which they were children, and the much publicized evidence of the break-up of families in Britain today, thousands of women willingly set out to create conventional family life.

(1987:16)

Obviously, Austen never challenges patriarchy so blatantly. Yet it would appear that she at times suggests marriage does not always leave women feeling fulfilled. In addition, she gently mocks the predicament of unfulfilled wives who pretend to be happy. In Sense and Sensibility we see how women lie to themselves when Mrs Palmer states that she is happily married and that her husband is just the kind of man she likes (114). Elinor comments that women are deceived if they think their happiness depends on their husbands:

…and all that can be said of one’s happiness depending entirely on any particular person, it is not meant – it is not fit – it is not possible that it should be so.

(255)

By showing that marriage can be disappointing, Austen’s fiction examines what we can now refer to as ‘social constructedness’. Because society and language “construct our experiences in ways which we then reify as ‘natural’, ‘universal’ and ‘the way things have to be’” (Code, 2000:451), women expect to find fulfillment in marriage. In Austen’s novels we find many examples of husbands who regard and treat their wives as their property, which seem to refute the socially-constructed expectation that being married means being content.
In the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century the man was seen as the undisputed head of the household and therefore as master over his wife (Nye, 1988:6). Nancy Armstrong mentions in “Captivity and Cultural Capital in the English Novel” (1998) that English law was so one-sided that it “generally considered violence a man’s prerogative” (37). In *Mansfield Park* Sir Thomas subscribes to the view that the man is the head of the family. For this reason he means “to recommend [Fanny] as a wife by shewing her persuadableness” (285). A good wife, to Sir Thomas, is one like his own who will never challenge her husband’s authority. Austen seems to relish portraying men who believe women are subordinate as arrogant and stupid, and could therefore be displaying a dissident attitude towards patriarchal convention. When Collins proposes to Elizabeth, for example, his presumptuousness in thinking such an offer to be irresistible and a great honour is met with amusement and derision by Elizabeth (*Pride and Prejudice*, 147-148). *Emma* highlights the arrogance of men like Frank Churchill who believe finding a wife is simply a matter of choosing one you like (282). When pondering on Mr Elton’s marriage to Augusta Hawkins, Emma says that “it is not every man’s fate to marry the woman who loves him best” (204), given that there are other more important things to consider when selecting a wife. In order for prospective husbands to make an informed choice, Frank Churchill suggests that they see “women in their own homes, among their own set, just as they always are” (281).

In other novels Austen is possibly subverting the idea that husbands ‘own’ their wives by the way she uses language. In *Pride and Prejudice* a single man in possession of a large fortune is considered as “the rightful property” (51) of a single woman, while in *Emma* a man is seen to be “the prize of a girl who would seek him” (313). It could be argued that Austen is reversing what has become known as ‘sexist language’. Sarah Gamble writes that feminist
critique is pitched at “the semantic system of English and its usage [for example] the pseudo-generic usage of man [which] enshrines the male-as-norm” (1999:142). Other feminist scholars such as Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit have commented on the power of language, and have shown that feminists found “within language an underlying bias against women” (1992:183). Toril Moi believes that although sexism dominates the English language, it has no inherent sexist essence (1985:158). Society in other words attributes certain connotations to certain words. Andrea Nye points out that even pairs of words, supposedly similar in meaning but denoting a difference in gender, empower men while they keep women in submission:

‘master’ implies dominance and control, but ‘mistress’, instead of dominance and control, suggests a kept women or sexual object...‘spinster’ has none of the sophisticated, satisfied air of ‘bachelor’, but indicates unattractiveness and failure. It would seem that there are no neutral words in which one could even attempt to indicate a male/female relation in which the woman was dominant, or even equal. (1988:174)

It would seem that gender and language work together to shape opportunities and determine certain roles for men and women. Traditionally, women have played the role of being subordinate to their husbands. This included doing the housework without any compensation. Janet Chafetz writes that “the division of labor in early industrial societies was such that married women often performed uncompensated work in or around the home” (1999:321). She mentions that with industrialization, some groups of women began to work for pay outside the home. Over the course of the century, more and more women started to participate in paid work. Today, according to Lorraine Code (2000:499), women make up almost half of the labour force in the industrial world. Yet they continue to be responsible for
most of the household chores. Sarah Gamble writes that “[e]ven in an era in which feminism has won many more social and professional opportunities for women, marriage remains an enduring institution” (1999:269). Stevi Jackson suggests the reason that many women get married and “spend much of their adult lives performing housework for men” (1993:190) is that they believe marriage will provide financial security. Feminist studies reveal that most men expect their wives to do the majority of the housework and take care of the children. Germaine Greer points out that contemporary husbands often treat their wives as their servants:

A man who marries expects his house to be kept clean, whether he says so or not. Many a woman is harassed by her husband’s expectations of order.

(1999:171)

Given that Austen wrote her novels two centuries ago, one cannot expect her to write as openly about the realities of married life as feminist scholars do today. However, her novels do appear to imply that becoming a wife does not necessarily ensure happiness. From this, coupled with the fact that her fiction at times appears to be openly cynical about the institution of marriage, we can infer that Austen may not have been an advocate of matrimony. One might wonder then why all her novels end with the hero and heroine

---

30 Despite the fact that women increasingly became part of the world’s workforce during the twentieth century, women in the United States, according to Margaret McFadden still “had to cope with cultural assumptions about their ‘place’ and with men who failed to do their share at home” (1997:268).

31 Schmittroth and Reilly McCall mention that “[o]ne 1994 study found that women employed full-time outside the home do 70 percent of the housework while full-time homemakers do 83 percent of the housework. This study suggests that while both partners may have full-time jobs, the woman still does the large majority of housework” (1997:443). Margaret McFadden states that “marriage appears…to be more advantageous for men…[since] wives are expected to perform more housework without compensation, often performing these duties as well as maintaining full-time employment” (1997:545).
entering nuptials and living happily ever after. This apparent inconsistency will be investigated towards the end of the chapter.

2.3 Husband-hunting
Though a married life might ensure one being financially secure\(^{32}\) it certainly has its disadvantages (as I show in the preceding section). Women who chase after men, in desperate pursuit of a husband, could therefore be considered as naive. The narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* seems to be critical of Mrs Bennet for hunting down husbands. We are told “[t]he business of her life was to get her daughters married” (53) and shown to what lengths she would go to see that they were settled in life. When Collins proposes to Elizabeth, Mrs Bennet insists that they get married (151-152). She also makes it known to the world that a match between Bingley and Jane would be most advantageous (140-141). Like their mother, Lydia and Kitty have men only - and especially officers - on their minds (75-76). When Lydia succeeds in ‘catching’ Wickham she and her mother are equally thrilled that she has been able to secure a husband at such a young age (320; 329).

In *Sense and Sensibility* Mrs Jennings feels proud that she has managed to marry off both her daughters and now wants “to marry all the rest of the world” (34). While Marianne abhors notions such as ‘setting one’s cap at a man’ and ‘making a conquest’ (43), the narrator appears to be critical of women like Mrs Jennings who chase after eligible husbands for pretty girls:

> [Mrs Jennings] was remarkably quick in the discovery of attachments…and this kind of discernment enabled her soon

\(^{32}\) Judith Lowder Newton points out that husband hunting had an economic base. She feels that although a novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* emphasizes this idea, “we are never allowed to feel that [economic] base as a determining force in [women’s] experience” (1981:130).
after her arrival at Barton, decisively to pronounce that Colonel Brandon was very much in love with Marianne Dashwood…The immediate advantage to herself was by no means inconsiderable, for it supplied her with endless jokes against them both.

(34-35)

As is the case with the two youngest Bennet sisters, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove (Persuasion) fall in and out of love effortlessly. While Henrietta imagines herself to love Charles Hayter, he is soon forgotten when Wentworth arrives at Uppercross (67). Wentworth, who seems to show some interest in Louisa, is quickly put out of the sisters’ minds when Louisa gets together with Benwick and Henrietta (once again) with Hayter. In Mansfield Park the Bertram sisters display their accomplishments while “looking about for their future husbands” (33). Both Maria and Julia fall in love with Henry Crawford. But, because he will not have them, Maria settles for Rushworth while Julia runs off with Yates. Harriet Smith (Emma) is shown to be equally fickle and content with any man who would marry her. In the space of one year she falls in love with Mr Martin, Mr Elton and Mr Knightley. When Robert Martin proposes for the second time she accepts because she is, according to Knightley, a woman “not likely to be very, very determined against any young man who told her he loved her” (358).

In Northanger Abbey Eleanor Tilney does not seem to be a husband-hunter and attends balls “without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her” (43), while Isabella Thorpe literally runs after good-looking young men (29-30). It could be argued that Austen illustrates the sad reality that many women, like Isabella, so desperately want to be married that they are prepared to forfeit their dignity and self-respect. The irony is, while they dream of happiness, chances are they will end up feeling unfulfilled.
3. Fairytale endings

Despite illustrating the reality and dangers of marriage, all Austen’s novels end as the hero and heroine are united in matrimonial bliss. It may be argued that Austen submits to patriarchy and endorses marriage as a patriarchal institution in order to continue living and writing in her society. At the same time she is possibly showing that her heroines, no matter how individualistic they are, also need to succumb to patriarchy in order to survive in a male-favouring world. Another argument is that Austen uses the façade of happy endings in order to hide some dissident views on matrimony. Simone Murray explains in “‘Deeds and Words’: The Woman’s Press and the Politics of Print” (2000) that since the literary world was composed (up until World War One) of male publishers only, the woman novelist had to be extremely careful what she wrote:

Precisely because [the woman writer’s] foothold upon literary respectability [was] so precarious, she [had to] be on her best behaviour, walking warily so she [would] ‘not too much displease [the male publishers]’.

(198)

Judith Lowder Newton has argued in “Power and Ideology of ‘Woman’s Sphere’” (1981) that since Austen lived in a male-dominated society, she must have “felt the pressure of ideologies which required circumscription of power as rigorously as they required marriage (and more loss of power) as a ‘happy’ ending” (1981:884-885). Furthermore, Nancy Armstrong mentions that by the late eighteenth century “it had been established that novels were supposed to rewrite political history as personal histories that elaborated on the courtship procedures ensuring a happy domestic life” (1987:38). She adds that, especially in novels featuring a woman protagonist, “a successful conclusion could be none other than a life free of physical labor and secured by the patronage of a benevolent man” (42). There are critics
who believe that Austen deliberately ends her novels in the conventional way in order to conceal her unconventional views on marriage. André Brink, referring specifically to *Emma*, mentions that in Austen’s work there is “the existence of another system of meanings behind the façade [but that] because of distortions of the surface these hidden meanings are invariably misread” (1998:115). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe that Austen’s ‘happy endings’ are all tongue-in-cheek:

Many critics have already noticed duplicity in the “happy endings” of Austen’s novels in which she brings her couples to the brink of bliss in such haste, or with such unlikely coincidences, or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut.

(1979:169)

The way in which Austen portrays married life in her novels would seem to concur with the view that she did not necessarily believe in matrimonial bliss herself. Although the narrator invariably assures the reader at the end that the protagonists live happily ever after, a very different picture of marriage is depicted in the marital relations enacted throughout the novels. André Brink shows how this is the case in *Emma*:

It may be argued that, however paradoxically, towards the end, marriage offers Emma a prospect of liberation…but this appears to be contradicted by all the preceding evidence from other marriages. At the very least one has to bear in mind that from very early in the novel marriage is viewed, as far as women are concerned, as no more than domestic service…

(1998:121)

Although we are told that Darcy and Elizabeth are happily married (*Pride and Prejudice*, 393-396), we are shown Mr and Mrs Bennet’s stressful married life. While Mr Bennet soon has “all his views of domestic happiness…overthrown” (262), Mrs Bennet has to endure her husband’s condescension and constant teasing (51-52; 262). Other newly formed attachments
that seem doomed to fail include the marriages of Lydia to Wickam and Charlotte to Collins. In light of the array of unhappy marriages we find in *Mansfield Park* - that of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, Dr and Mrs Grant, Maria and Rushworth - the happy ending reached at the end of the novel seems highly doubtful. Of the almost five hundred pages written, Austen uses only the last four to unite Edmund and Fanny in matrimonial bliss. Moreover, by focusing our attention on the fictionality of the ending and even letting us decide on our own dates, the narrator may be implying the ending should not be taken seriously:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people. I only entreat everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire.

(475-476)

In *Sense and Sensibility* both Elinor and Marianne find happiness under very unlikely circumstances. It is hard to believe that Lucy Steele would leave Edmund for his brother (which would allow him to court Elinor) and even more unlikely that Marianne would find happiness being married to Brandon, as Barbara Seeber points out:

Austen presents [Marianne’s] conversion as unlikely and anything but voluntary. That Marianne’s ‘whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband as it had once been to Willoughby’...is something we never see. What we do witness is the rather violent process which brings about the endings.

(1999:226)

Given the unhappy marriages of the Tilneys and the Allens in *Northanger Abbey*, it is possible that the narrator is being ironic when she comments that for Henry and Catherine
“[t]o begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen is to do pretty well” (236). Her remark that “we are all hastening together to perfect felicity” (234) could signal that we are not supposed to take the ending seriously. It seems plausible that the endings are deliberately over-hasty and improbable and that we are expected to question their probability.

Critics seem to have different views on Jane Austen’s endings. While John Halperin believes Austen’s abrupt endings to be her “one overriding fault as a writer” (1984:78), Barbara Seeber feels that “Austen’s closures are full of gaps that speak of the inadequacy of the endings which fail to fulfill everyone’s desire” (1998:233). A standard response to Austen is to be found in the work of Patricia Beer who maintains that Austen endorses marriage in a patriarchal society (1974:46). More recently, the conclusion reached by Edward Said would seem to concur that Austen’s endings (like most of the novels produced in the late eighteenth century) “confirm and highlight an underlying hierarchy of family” (1993:79). While Nancy Armstrong believes that by marrying off the eligible members within the fictional world of the novel Austen manages “to fix them to a role within a household among households, thereby stabilizing the community” (1988:135), Karen Newman writes in “Can this Marriage be Saved: Jane Austen makes Sense of an Ending” (1983) that:

[far from acquiescing to women’s traditional role in culture, Austen’s parodic conclusions measure the distance between novelistic conventions with their culturally coded sentiments and the social realities of patriarchal power.]

(208)

A possible reason that Austen’s endings find appeal among women today is that many women yearn for happy endings in their own lives. Sarah Gamble remarks that the so-called ‘romance novels’ – which typically see the hero and heroine united in heterosexual bliss -
“retain an undeniable appeal” and condition women to accept patriarchal authority (1999:307). In a paper entitled The Readers and their Romances (1984) Janice Radway explains why so many women want to see the hero and heroine get together at the end of a story:

> When current reading habits are examined…it becomes clear that the women think that it is the romances that are especially necessary to their daily routine. Their intense reliance on these books suggests strongly that they help to fulfill deeply felt psychological needs.

(584)

Jane Austen ends her novels in the tradition of the romance novel. Since she lived and wrote in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, and not in the early twenty-first, she was not at liberty to be as openly defiant of convention as women writers today. When one takes into account the numerous unhappy couples Austen creates (by showing rather than by telling), and when one considers that Austen may be implying that we should not take the endings seriously, a very real possibility is that she neither believes in uncomplicated matrimonial bliss nor in fairytale endings. It could then be that she ends her novels with marriage, not necessarily because she endorses it herself, but because this is what is expected of her. Comparing Austen’s Mansfield Park to Mrs Inchbald’s Lovers’ Vows, Isobel Armstrong argues that:

> “[w]here Mrs Inchbald speaks out, Jane Austen does not. But that does not mean that she was less concerned with questions which were profoundly important to her culture.

(1988:7)

It is also possible that Austen writes according to tradition and succumbs to patriarchy, not because she wants to conceal her views on matrimony, but because she needs to continue living and operating in patriarchal society. Because her novels create an ironic awareness of
the necessity for women to get married, and since we cannot be sure whether her happy endings are intentionally traditional, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide if she in facts submits to patriarchy in order to survive or whether she opposes patriarchy and hides her dissent behind a decorous façade. Since we may never know the answer, it would seem useful - when reading Austen from a feminist perspective - to concentrate on issues that are of importance to women. What seems to be important is that, regardless of what Austen’s personal views were, her novels create an awareness that patriarchy renders women economically and socially dependent on men, and that it thereby enforces marriage. It could therefore be argued that Austen’s subject matter contains more than what Karl Kroeber refers to in “Pride and Prejudice: Fiction’s Lasting Novelty” (1975) as “middle-class girls getting married” (144). At the least, Austen’s novels make us re-think the reasons that women get married. In addition, they seem to create an awareness of the identity that women inherit in patriarchal society, as I shall show in the next chapter.
Chapter Four – Women and Identity

Introduction

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it’s important to be more...On the stroke of midnight as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world...thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate – at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn’t even wipe my nose at the time.

(Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*)

The above passage by Salman Rushdie illustrates how our sense of ourselves is often determined by external factors over which we have no control. Like his character Saleem, women have been “mysteriously handcuffed to history” and have had their identity determined by the society they have been born into. Because patriarchy places men in such a powerful position, “men have always told [women] what [they] are” (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992:33). Paula Nicholson comments in “Motherhood and Women’s Lives” (1993) that dominant male discourses have traditionally determined how women see themselves and have defined their social role for them (207-208). Nancy Armstrong has shown that in the past “language...was dismantled to form the masculine and feminine
spheres that characterize modern culture” (1987:14). Men have, in other words, used language - “the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, 1987:21) - to formulate an identity for women that would suit them and their own needs (Kanneh, 1992:135). Nineteenth-century male novelists, for example, denied women their subjectivity altogether by defining them in terms of interiority and dependency.33 Barbara Darby explains that in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century the conduct books along with the so-called ‘novel of manners’ constructed a very specific image of femininity – one which suited the male half of the population. By the mere act of writing, men were able to mould women’s identity as domestic overseer of the activities of the house (women’s interiority), while at the same time as not working (women’s dependency). Women were, in short, expected to lead an asexual, passive existence, while constantly being encouraged to a life of submissiveness (2000:335-336).

Contemporary women have inherited a legacy of being told who they are, a legacy of having their identity prescribed. Today, of course, women in the Western world are no longer explicitly told how to behave. The conduct book in turn has ceased to exist34 and women are more liberated to uncover their own identities. However, there are feminist writers who believe that women’s identity is strongly influenced by the way in which women are portrayed by the media. Edward Said believes that today more than ever we “live...in a world

33 Patricia Waugh notes that “it has been argued that the identification of women with ‘interiority’ or ‘sensibility’ in the realist novel tradition precludes ‘their becoming autonomous’…The male hero may act in the world to assert his subjectivity and autonomy, but the woman character may only provide the domestic world of feeling in which he may…recognize his own inner life” (1989:28).
34 Elsewhere I mention that Nancy Armstrong believes the conduct book to be alive and well, and that it appears as magazines, books and advice columns telling women how to catch and keep a man (1987:62).
not only of commodities but also of representation” (1993:56). Germaine Greer has noted that the media plays a key role in shaping women’s identity:

In commercial after commercial the performer of mindless routine tasks is an inanely smiling woman, unless some inanely smiling man pops up to demonstrate a new and better way of using even more of the product by dint of making her look a complete fool.

(1999:167)

Though women might have realised for some time that they had been portrayed in a certain way, it was not until the early twentieth century, as Simone Murray reports, that suffragists first reacted against women’s representation in the media by “seizing control of their own image-making in the press and in the booming popular print culture of the day” (2000:198). In an attempt to eradicate women’s identity as constructed by the media, feminists have aimed at making women aware of the “dominant image of the family which confronts us in adverts, magazines, the cinema, television and family portraits, from the royals to our own photo albums” (Weedon, 1987:14). Barbara Darby comments that “[t]elevision advertisements package and sell versions of femininity at the same time as they feature consumer goods” (2000:333). In an interesting article entitled “The Whore and the Other: Israeli Images of Female Immigrants from the former USSR” (2000), Dafna Lemish reports that even today women in Israel are represented by the media as “marginal to society…[and] often associated with their traditional roles as caregivers or dependency roles as the ‘wife’ or the ‘daughter of’” (338).

Feminist scholarship aims at forging a new identity for women. The Women’s Liberation Movement explored women’s identity by asking, in Chris Weedon’s words, “the very question what it is to be a woman, how our femininity and our sexuality are defined for us and
how we might begin to redefine them ourselves” (1989:1). The view that women’s image is defined for them was thoroughly examined during the 1970s by feminist writers such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who stated that for the woman artist the “essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions [of what it is to be a woman]” (1979:17). More recent writers continue to point out the “wide discrepancy between how women see themselves…and how they think they ought to be” (McFadden, 1997:780). Rachel Bowlby writes in “Walking, Women and Writing: Virginia Woolf as flâneuse” (1992) that in order to define themselves, women first need to distinguish between the male way of representing them, and how they see themselves (33). There is therefore, as Nancy Armstrong points out, a distinction to be drawn between “essential human nature and the aspects of individual identity that have been imposed upon us by culture” (1987:12). Lorraine Code emphasises the importance of “uncovering fundamental processes of patriarchal power in shaping [women’s] sense of [themselves]” (2000:451). While Judith Fetterley maintains in “Introduction: On the Politics of Literature” (1978) that feminist writing needs to “exorcise the male mind that has been implanted in [women]” (570), Shoshana Felman asks how women should “come…in possession of [the] female mind as distinct from the male mind into which [women] have been coerced” (5). She argues that women as yet have not found their own identities, but need still need to write them:

…none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but must become a story. (1993:14)

Laura Marcus states in “Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism” (1992) that in order to re-think and re-define women’s identity, subjectivity should be “central to women’s writing”
(19). In the nineteenth century some women novelists used their writing to redefine what it is to be a woman (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:44). All of Charlotte Brontë’s novels, for example, deal to some extent with “a woman in search of her identity” (Miles, 1987:39). In this chapter I shall be looking at the ways in which women are represented in Austen’s texts, and how this portrayal of women differs from women’s representation in male texts. Jane Austen, it would seem, questions women’s inherited identity and creates women protagonists who display rounded characters. In addition her work, if read from a feminist perspective, creates an awareness of the way in which women’s identity has been constructed in male literature, and a consciousness that women have artificially been endowed with qualities such as emotionality and natural mothering.

1. Women’s Representation

1.1 Male texts

In Austen’s day the image of women was created and maintained by men. According to Nancy Armstrong, the educational curriculum introduced by the (male-dominated) government in the eighteenth century aimed at producing a specific view of what it meant to be a desirable woman (1987:21). Woman’s image as so-called “Angel in the House” (Showalter, 1977:14), as “custodian of the moral values” (Miles, 1987:11), and as a sweet and subservient being made her believe that her purpose on earth was to please men and that by surrendering the self, she would find fulfillment (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:25). She was encouraged to remain fragile and told that her dependence was “a tribute to the man’s strength and competence” (Miles, 1987:149). Nancy Armstrong has argued that in the nineteenth
century “the dynamics of the sexual exchange [were] apparently such that the female [gained] authority only by redeeming the male, not by pursuing her own desires” (1987:55).

While the conduct books advocated that women should behave as ‘angels’, they labelled all those who failed as ‘monsters’. Toril Moi believes that because patriarchy sees women as representing “the necessary frontier between man and chaos…male culture [has sometimes been able] to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon” (1985:167). Angela Leighton explains the sexual binary according to which women have often been judged in “‘Because Men Made the Laws’: The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet” (1992):

…woman…is the chief upholder of morality, and also its most satisfying symbol. Thus, angel or demon, virgin or whore, Mary or Magdalen, woman is the stage on which the age enacts its own enduring morality play. The struggle between good and evil…takes up its old story on the scene of woman’s sexual body.

(343)

Sarah Gamble mentions that canonical texts present women as part of a crude sexual binary, namely as virgin or whore (1999:130).

Stereotyping women by means of the written word is not, however, restricted to canonical texts but can also be seen in modern fiction. The difference is that today feminist writers make women aware of how they are stereotyped and, in addition, suggest alternative images of women. Patricia Waugh points out that “[t]he ‘splitting’ of women characters into idealized and asexual or highly sexualized objects is the norm in much modern fiction”

---

35 Barbara Darby writes that the conduct books “constructed a Proper Lady who oversaw the activities of the house…ensured that her husband had a retreat from his work…and reared children…The compensation for this domestic, passive, asexual existence was a view of women’s moral superiority and their importance as mothers…and guardians of domestic happiness” (2000:336).
Investigating the role of newspapers in constructing images of Russian immigrant women in Israel, Dafna Lemish was able to identify three major images, namely that of ‘Whore’, of the ‘Other’ and that of the ‘Exceptionally Successful’. Interestingly, the image of whore was by far the most dominant of the three (2000:339). This type of stereotyping has also been investigated by other feminists, as Gill Frith points out:

Feminist critics dissected the sexual stereotyping pervasive in male-authored texts in the literary ‘canon’, in children’s literature, magazines and popular fiction. In contrast to the dominant, negative images – such as passive woman and active man, self-sacrificing virgin and predatory whore – feminists sought to identify and encourage alternative, positive images of women…

(1993:153-154)

In the following section I shall be looking at the way in which women are portrayed in Austen’s texts. It would seem that against certain stereotypes of women Austen depicts complex women characters. Although Austen does not explicitly challenge women’s portrayal in male texts, her fiction promotes the idea that women are not one-dimensional and predictable. One could therefore argue that, in her own way, Austen identifies alternative images of women.

1.2 Austen’s texts

The women in Austen’s fiction challenge the stereotypes associated with ‘femininity’, particularly in exhibiting contradictory traits. In Northanger Abbey Catherine Morland seems to be a mixture of naivety and perceptiveness. She is naïve because she believes men always to be in the right (36; 137) and because she holds herself accountable for failing to keep her appointment with the Tilneys. It is clear that the narrator is unhappy with Catherine who is prepared to accept all the blame just in order to win back Henry’s favour:
Instead of considering her own dignity injured by this ready condemnation; instead of proudly resolving...to shew her resentment towards him...and to enlighten him on the past only by avoiding his sight, or flirting with somebody else, she took to herself all the shame of misconduct...

(81)

Yet Catherine is also perceptive. Despite the fact that she enjoys Henry Tilney’s company, for instance, she quickly notices an imperfection in his character. When Henry and Mrs Allen are discussing the qualities of muslin gowns, we are told that “Catherine feared...that [Henry] indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others” (16). Catherine also notices John Thorpe’s vanity. The narrator informs us that “the extreme weariness of [Thorpe’s] company...induced [Catherine] in some small degree...to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure” (55). In addition, Catherine realises that Isabella is not a true friend. In order to make Catherine call off her engagement with Eleanor Tilney so that she may accompany the Thorpes to Clifton, Isabella resorts to accusing Catherine of having more affection for Eleanor than for herself. That Isabella would reproach her in this manner makes Catherine realise that she is not a true friend but, instead, appears to her “ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification” (86).

In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price’s character appears to develop as the novel progresses. Edward Said believes that “[f]rom frightened and often victimized poor relation [Fanny] is gradually transformed into a directly participating member of the Bertram household at Mansfield Park” (1993:87). In the beginning, Fanny herself believes that she can never be important to anyone because of her “situation, [her] foolishness and awkwardness” (*Mansfield Park*, 25). She is frightened of Sir Thomas (12; 14) and, according to the narrator, “quite overcome by Mrs. Norris’s admonitions” (13).
Fanny always seems to do as is expected of her. She tries to convince Maria that it is improper to climb over the gate with Henry’s help (101-102) and is firmly set against performing the play (156-158). As time moves on, however, Fanny seems to become more outspoken. Whereas, in the beginning, Fanny hardly manages to speak for herself (11; 72), she later remains firm in her refusal of Henry. Neither Edmund’s aversion to her being “so very determined and positive” (351), nor her fear of her uncle, can make her change her mind. Her concern that she might not always “be able to appear properly submissive and indifferent” (220) is warranted when she is “forced by the anxiety of the moment even to tell her uncle that he [is] wrong” (317).

At first Sir Thomas feels Fanny is “[s]elf-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful” (322) because she will not heed him and marry Henry. When both his daughters elope, however, Sir Thomas begins to realise and to value Fanny’s good nature. What is more, he welcomes the news that she and Edmund are to marry for she is “indeed the daughter that he wanted” (477). Sir Thomas realises how much his opinion of Fanny has changed:

[Sir Thomas] had pondered with genuine satisfaction on the more than possibility of the two young friends finding their mutual consolation in each other…and the joyful consent which met Edmund’s application, the high sense of having realized a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter, formed just such a contrast with his early opinion on the subject when the poor little girl’s coming had first been agitated…

(477)

Not only is Fanny valued by Sir Thomas towards the end of the novel, but she herself believes she could be useful and “of service to every creature in the house” (437) when she hears about Maria eloping with Henry Crawford. Fanny proves to be very useful indeed as she helps Edmund to forget Mary Crawford (467) and consoles Lady Bertram (454). Though
her ‘usefulness’ is questionable in relation to gender (and class) politics, that she asserts herself in this way is commendable.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor Dashwood features a rounded character. While she at times seems to be critical of the society she is living in, she values propriety. For this reason she expresses her unhappiness with Marianne’s indecorous behaviour (51-56) and differs from her mother when she believes there is a proper way of being engaged (77-78). Elinor always behaves as she knows she ought to behave. Even when she is deeply hurt by Edward’s indifference she remains civil and treats him “as she thought he ought to be treated from the family connection” (86-87). Though Elinor values decorum, she notices the silliness of certain social conventions and does not have her judgement clouded. When Marianne asks whether “our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours” (91), Elinor answers that one should never subject the understanding to the opinion of other people, and that all she has ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour (91). Because Elinor applies good judgement, she notices the absurdity of women like Mrs Ferrars who want their sons to marry someone with connections (289). Her ability to think and judge for herself also makes her realise how empty and monotonous women-talk often is (137).

We see another of Austen’s complex women characters in Emma. From the outset we are told that she does what she likes (5) and that she always has her own way (30). Once she has made up her mind, there is no persuading her otherwise (11; 20). She stubbornly persists in her convictions (51) and is not afraid to challenge Knightley (49; 76; 115). She clearly enjoys arguing with men (11) and bravely ascertains that they are only really needed for their money (66-67). Emma’s confidence is reflected in her strong handwriting (224) and straightforward way of speaking (300). To pass the time, Emma enjoys playing games and solving riddles
(54-59). In addition, she loves meddling in other people’s affairs and playing matchmaker (10; 27; 120). There is, however, a more serious, unselfish side to Emma. She, for instance, displays a selfless nature when she takes care of the poor (65) and when she shows concern for her father’s well-being (7; 159; 314). Furthermore, Emma gets to know her own heart towards the end of the novel. She realises that Knightley is very dear to her and that she does not want to lose him. She also admits that she has acted inconsiderately and improperly towards Harriet (308).

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet is proud (72), headstrong (151; 208) and snubs decorum by being, instead of fragile and weak, physically strong (78-82). Furthermore, she does not seem to believe in the superiority of men but joins in their discussions (93-95) and argues with them (90). Elizabeth however also displays an unselfish and loving nature - she is shown to have a great capacity for loving and for being loved in return. Being the heroine of the novel in most cases means that the reader identifies strongly with the character. Toril Moi mentions that the ‘feminist’ reader of the realist period “not only wants to see her own experiences mirrored in fiction, but strives to identify with strong, impressive female characters” (1985:47). Elizabeth is also loved by characters within the fictional world of the novel: she is the apple of her father’s eye, her sister Jane’s confidante, Georgina Darcy’s idol, and Darcy’s beloved. Moreover, Elizabeth displays love and compassion herself, as when she devotedly nurses Jane back to health (*Pride and Prejudice*, 79-81). In Elizabeth, Austen thus succeeds in creating an unforgettable woman character who displays a mixture of strength and compassion, and as such a multi-faceted identity.

Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is described as having “elegance of mind and sweetness of character” (7). While she is “nobody with either [her] father or sister” (7), she is “a most dear
and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend” (7) to Lady Russell. She is respected by Mary’s children (39), and valued by Captain Benwick for her gentle nature (90). Mr Elliot thinks she is “a most extraordinary young woman; in her temper, manners, mind, a model of female excellence” (142). Anne, despite her seemingly docile character, is not weak. The narrator mentions that “Anne Elliot was not out of [Frederick Wentworth’s] thoughts, when he more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with [as having a] strong mind, with sweetness of manner” (55). We see that she has a strong mind when she does not hesitate to argue with men about issues such as women’s loyalty (205-207). Anne also shows strength of character when Louisa falls and is seriously hurt. We are told that, when Henrietta fainted, Anne attended to her “with all the strength and zeal and thought which instinct supplied” (99). In addition, Anne shows courage when she is slighted by her father and her sister. When Sir Walter engages Mrs Clay to accompany him and Elizabeth to Bath, apparently because she would be of more use to them than Anne, the narrator tells us that “Anne herself was become hardened to such affronts” (31).

It would appear that women like Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet display natures that incorporate a variety of character traits, and that they therefore cannot be stereotyped. I believe that because Austen’s fiction features women with complex, rounded characters, it identifies alternative images of women. Nancy Armstrong rightly notes that:

> …one can observe the shift in Austen’s emphasis away from natural virtue as the quality a woman exemplifies to a more complex understanding of subjectivity.

(1987:154)

If indeed it was Austen’s intention to explore and even suggest a multifaceted identity for women, then surely she was not being prescriptive. Toril Moi’s criticism of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray who come to “analyse ‘woman’ in idealist categories” (1985:148)
illuminating in relation to Austen whose work resists essentialist definitions of what women should be, and offers alternative possibilities of what they might also be.

2. Rationality and Emotion

In addition to having classified women as either angels or monsters, men have portrayed them as emotional creatures in speech and in writing (Moore, 1992:72). Nancy Armstrong writes that in nineteenth-century fiction “the difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of mind...[which] made men political and women domestic” (1987:4). Lorraine Code points out that “Western culture has historically tended to...associate both mind and reason with men and masculinity; and to devalue body and emotion while associating both with women and femininity” (2000:160). Margaret McFadden notes that not only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also “[i]n many other historical periods, women have been considered illogical, irrational, less intelligent than men, and prone to emotional outbursts” (1997:831).

On occasion Austen’s novels appear to subvert the master narrative of her time that all men are rational and all women emotional. In *Persuasion* Mrs Croft vehemently objects when Frederick Wentworth talks “as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (63), while Anne Elliot’s depiction illustrates that women are often more sensible than men. Because she has the ability to remain objective Anne makes wise decisions. When Sir Walter experiences financial difficulties, for instance, Anne realises they have no alternative but to quit Kellynch-hall. While her father bases his decision on emotion and needs to be persuaded to move (13-14), Anne’s favouring of “more vigorous measures, a more complete reformation, a quicker release from debt” (13) seems much more rational.
In *Mansfield Park* we see that if emotion only is one’s guide one can easily be led astray. Because Fanny applies reason she is not persuaded by her cousin to change her mind about Henry Crawford. Though Edmund thinks it is unlike her “rational self” (351) to reject Henry’s marriage proposal, she turns out to have been the only one ‘rational’ enough to recognise Henry’s intentions (444). On the other hand, Maria ostensibly bases her decision to go away with Henry purely on emotion and later has to endure shame and scorn (470).

In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland often seems to act on emotion only. Because she becomes emotionally involved and loses objectivity, she is convinced that General Tilney murdered his wife (181-182). Henry’s irritation with women who rely solely on their fancy possibly reflects the attitude of the narrator:

> And you, Miss Morland – my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London; and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured a mob of three thousand men…

(101)

Possibly because she is not emotionally involved with Collins, Elizabeth Bennet is able to recognise his true character and knows to reject his marriage proposal (*Pride and Prejudice*, 148-149). When Darcy rejects her as a dancing partner, however, Elizabeth’s pride is hurt, and she loses her objectivity and misjudges Darcy’s character (59; 121). Austen seems to be saying something interesting here about the limits of rationality and the limits of an emotional response, and under what circumstances these manifest themselves. In contrast to Elizabeth, Jane is able to regard Darcy rationally and make a more accurate judgment (128). For the same reason, when Charlotte marries Collins, Jane advises Elizabeth not to judge her friend so
harshly and sensibly argues that a match between them is not as bad as Elizabeth would make it out to be (174).

*Sense and Sensibility* illustrates the benefits of applying reason *as well as* emotion by contrasting the Dashwood sisters. While Elinor applies both, Marianne’s actions are based on emotion only. She is shown to esteem passion (16; 35; 37; 44) and to display an “indulgence of feeling” (81). It is partly Marianne’s unrestrained emotionality which induces her to fall hopelessly in love with Willoughby, whose “person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story” (41). When Willoughby betrays her love, it becomes clear that responding from the heart only can have disastrous effects. The narrator comments that “the imaginations of…people will carry them away to form wrong judgments” (241), and ascertains that Marianne “was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself” (80).

In contrast to Marianne, Elinor possesses “a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment” (4). She is prudent (12), rational (19) and discreet (24), and reprimands Marianne for judging Brandon solely “on the strength of [her] own imagination” (50). Elinor admits that she herself enjoys Brandon’s company for he is “a sensible man; and sense will always have attractions for [her]” (49). Elinor never lets her feelings cloud her better judgment. Even though she is emotionally involved she retains the utmost self-command when Edward seems cold and reserved (86-87) and when she learns about his engagement to Lucy Steele (126). While women like Fanny Dashwood fall into “violent hysterics” (250) and others like Lucy are driven into “a fainting fit” (250), Elinor remains calm and in control. The narrator comments that Elinor did not need her family’s support for she “was stronger alone, and her own good sense so well supported her, that her firmness was as unshaken, her appearance of
cheerfulness as invariable, as…it was possible for them to be” (135). Though Elinor suffers as great an emotional loss as Marianne she is able to bear it “with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude” (349). Her ability to remain rational and objective, even where matters of the heart are concerned, thus empowers her.

Austen’s fiction features women who remain objective under difficult circumstances. In this way I believe it shows that rationality is not solely a man’s faculty. In addition, it seems to suggest that if a woman is governed by reason, and not only by emotion, she will be able to judge better and will remain strong when faced with life’s adversities. Since Austen’s writing contradicts the popular belief that women are born emotional creatures, it could be argued that she challenges the identity which patriarchy has created for women. In the following section I shall show that her novels reveal another myth of women’s identity, that it is natural and rewarding for all women to be mothers.

3. Natural Mothers

Much feminist writing has shown that women generally accept the identity society defines for them. Chris Weedon argues that the way “we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects…depends on the range and social power of existing discourses” (1987:26). These discourses reinforce specific perceptions of women’s identity and “appear natural to the subjected individual” (121). Because patriarchal discourse is camouflaged, as Nancy Armstrong points out, the subject (woman) does not notice how she is constantly shaped and subjugated:

If knowledge is to become power, then, it cannot appear to be so. Above all, it cannot appear to operate in the interests of a political group.

(1987:35)
A popular belief is that, because of women’s anatomy, they are only fulfilled once they have borne children. Rosemary Gillespie reveals how this discourse has established women’s identity in an essay entitled “When No Means No: Disbelief, Disregard, and Deviance as Discourses of Voluntary Childlessness” (2000):

Constructions of femininity and women’s social role have historically and traditionally been contextualised around the practices and symbolism surrounding motherhood. Motherhood has predominantly been perceived as natural for women, the desire for it inevitable…

(223)

Paula Nicholson investigates in her study on motherhood why many women in contemporary society believe they need to become mothers in order to be fulfilled. She states that, despite motherhood being “the key means of women’s oppression in patriarchal societies” (1993:201), many women see it as a way of escaping their dreary employment. What is more, society treats women who are not mothers as failures and as unfeminine (201-202). It can therefore be said that “women are socialised into wanting children” (209). Popular women’s magazine *Fair Lady* contributes to the debate. In the 25 April 2001 edition Deborah Hutton asks in an article what happens when “mothers lose that loving feeling” (64). She writes that despite the “glossy images of lovey-dovey new-baby bliss” mothers sometimes feel an aversion to their babies. In part she blames society for constructing the expectation that motherhood is bliss, and hence for leaving women disillusioned when they realise they do not love their children unconditionally:

The bonding principle looms large in every new mother’s consciousness as the emotional superglue that will weld her and her infant together. We expect to fall irrevocably in love with our babies, but it doesn’t always happen quite like
that...women feeling less than total love for their children are depicted as, and feel they are, maternal monsters.

(64)

Shoshana Felman similarly exposes the myth that in patriarchal society women want nothing more than to be a mother, a daughter and a wife (1993:73), and states that the feminist struggle is one “toward a new feminine awareness fighting sex discrimination and redefining male and female sex roles” (69).

In order to understand the origins of the legacy that motherhood is natural, it is useful to have a look at what late eighteenth-century writers such as Jane Austen have to say (explicitly or implicitly) about women as mothers. The eighteenth century is significant since it signals the rise of the domestic woman, as Nancy Armstrong (1987:59-69) reports. Armstrong writes that up until the seventeenth century, the great majority of conduct books represented the male of the dominant class. It was only by the second half of the eighteenth century that the conduct books prescribed the ideal of womanhood (61). Armstrong maintains that the conduct books “rewrote the female subject for an eighteenth century audience” (94) and that “it is reasonable to claim that the modern individual is first and foremost a female” (66).

If we look at the way in which Austen depicts women as mothers, we see a number of women who apparently find motherhood fulfilling. In Emma Isabella Woodhouse plays the role of self-sacrificing mother (72-73). Although at times the narrator ostensibly praises her for her womanly ‘worth’, she does not appear to be sincere in her commendation. In fact, it would seem that she is critical of Isabella who is oblivious to the social role she is playing:

…poor Isabella, passing her life with those she doated on, full of their merits, blind to their faults, and always innocently busy, might have been a model of right feminine happiness.

(107)
Mrs Morland in *Northanger Abbey* purportedly finds happiness in motherhood. The narrator, however, seems to ridicule the social discourse that childbirth is rewarding when she incredulously comments that Mrs Morland enjoyed health and prosperity after giving birth to ten children:

[Mrs Morland] had three sons before Catherine was born; and, instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

(1)

In addition the narrator mentions that, because Mrs Morland was pregnant so regularly, she inevitably neglected her children (3). In *Sense and Sensibility* we see that motherhood dulls one’s perception. While Mrs Dashwood is a good mother and wants what is best for her children, she is blind to their shortcomings (51-52). Lady Middleton is similarly incapable of seeing her children’s mistakes. The narrator appears to be irritated with the children for being rowdy and mischievous, and critical of Lady Middleton for being blind to their faults:

…a fond mother, though, in pursuit of praise for her children, the most rapacious of human beings, is likewise the most credulous; her demands are exorbitant; but she will swallow anything…

(117)

Austen depicts motherhood as unfulfilling when she, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown, focuses on mothers “who fail in their nurturing of daughters” (1979:125). While Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* fails to love her daughters equally (145) and is a constant source of embarrassment for Elizabeth (143) and Jane (354-355), Mary Musgrove in *Persuasion* does not seem to earn the respect of her children (39). *Mansfield Park* possibly suggests that mothering is not natural to all women and that bearing children does not mean
one knows how to take care of them. Although Lady Bertram is Maria’s and Julia’s biological mother, Mrs Norris is the one who takes responsibility for displaying their accomplishments and the one who helps them find their future husbands (33). The narrator comments that:

Lady Bertram did not go into public with her daughters. She was too indolent even to accept a mother’s gratification in witnessing their success and enjoyment at the expense of any personal trouble, and the charge was made over to her sister…

(33)

Despite her being childless, Edmund believes that his aunt is “much better fitted” (25) than his own mother for having the charge of Fanny. (Here it needs to be mentioned that since Edmund makes this claim while trying to persuade Fanny that going to stay with Mrs Norris will not be that bad, it is not clear whether he genuinely believes his aunt is more capable of taking care of his cousin or whether he merely says this in order to reassure Fanny). Fanny’s own mother, in turn, has so many children that she cannot provide for them all (3). By portraying her as impoverished, despondent and worn-out (2-3), Austen is possibly commenting on the enormity of the task of raising children as well as on the consequences of having so many children.

Although Austen’s work features wives and mothers, I do not believe it can therefore be said that she endorses women’s social role as defined by patriarchy. Instead, her work at times seems to contradict the discourse that motherhood is fulfilling. While we do encounter women who accept their patriarchally-engendered social role, the narrator’s approval of them at times seems doubtful. In addition, some mothers are depicted as failures and as women who have not found fulfillment in motherhood. When the narrator comments that being a
mother like Isabella Knightley includes having “maternal solicitude for the immediate enjoyment of her little ones, and for their having instantly all the liberty and attendance...which they could possibly wish for” ([*Emma*], 72) it is not clear whether she is commending or exposing motherhood. What is clear is that Austen’s work raises questions regarding women’s identity and that it in this way creates, amongst feminist scholars at least, a consciousness of the constructedness of ‘natural’ motherhood.

4. Women empowered

Because late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century men believed woman’s power to be “not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect not for invention or creation” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1974:24) women in Austen’s day mostly remained powerless. Austen’s fiction seems to reflect the powerless state of women in her time. Possibly owing to the male-favouring educational, economic and social system, many women characters are shown to be without real power, and to display a weak and fragile nature. However, we are not only made aware of the fact that patriarchy renders women powerless but are presented with signs of women’s empowerment. To this end I shall argue that women are shown to have the power to judge, to refuse and to write.

In contrast to the subtle ways in which Austen’s heroines are empowered, nineteenth-century feminists wanted to obtain power for women by seeking equality within the existing social structure, as Janet Chafetz reports:

Nineteenth century feminists believed that if they obtained the right to an education, the right to own property, the right to vote, employment rights – in other words, equal rights under the law – they would attain equality with men.

(1999:151)
Chafetz explains that contemporary feminists, on the other hand, believe women lack power because they are not allowed to compete with men in male-dominated economic and political spheres, but are relegated to staying at home and raising children (151). Helen Tierney argues that “[a]uthority in patriarchal societies…resides ultimately in the male” (1999:892). Paula Wilcox suggests that the very structure of our society is conducive to the oppression of women (2000:36), and Patricia Waugh sees:

…women’s second-class position in patriarchy [as] reflected in their psychology: lack of confidence, powerlessness, overdependence, insecurity, leading to competitiveness with other women, self-condemnation, and an inability to feel whole.

(1989:86)

In “Exiles From Power:  Marginality and the Female Self in Postcommunist and Postcolonial Spaces” (2000) Maria-Sabina Draga-Alexandru metaphorically refers to women as “exiles from power” (356). She believes women as a group are not only marginalised culturally but also politically.

Austen, in contrast to contemporary feminist scholars, does not openly criticise patriarchal society for keeping women powerless. However, if we apply a feminist perspective when reading her novels, we are made aware of the fact that in the late eighteenth century, institutions such as education and marriage rendered women weak. Austen herself is aware of women’s powerlessness and of the dire need for self-empowerment when she creates strong women protagonists who exercise the power to judge and to refuse.

4.1 The power to judge

Austen empowers her women characters, as Judith Lowder Newton has suggested, “by quietly giving emphasis to female capability” (1981:883). This includes making women good judges
of character. Although Fanny Price is modest and introverted, she has the ability to judge people and assess situations. She is, for example, the only one to condemn the young people’s “selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all” (*Mansfield Park*, 134). She is amused by their childish behaviour when they decide to put on a play (134-140), and even refuses to condone Edmund’s decision to partake (162). She knows her uncle better than his own children do (198) and firmly believes that he would not approve (158). Fanny also notices a sort of fault in Mary right from the start (66). Although at times she enjoys Mary’s company she realises that it is “often at the expense of her judgment” (209). Because she ascertains that Mary “loves nobody but herself and her brother” (429), she is not fooled by her seemingly sweet exterior. The ability to judge thus protects Fanny from being hurt by people like the Crawfords. Fanny, who observes with “wonder and censure” (118) the game Henry is playing with her cousins, immediately recognises him to be a flirt and is probably not surprised that he never intended to marry Maria. She resists his charms because although she “was quiet [she was] not blind” (367). When she rejects Henry, Mary suggests that Fanny enjoyed “having it in [her] power to pay off the debts of [her] sex” (367).

Anne Elliot is similarly not deceived by people but quickly recognises their intentions. When Mrs Musgrove suddenly mourns the death of her “troublesome, hopeless son” (*Persuasion*, 45), simply in order to impress Wentworth, Anne can hardly suppress a smile (58). She is also sensitive enough to realise that Henrietta and Louisa do not like Mary and really do not want her to join them on a long walk (75). On another occasion, Anne’s power of discernment enables her to recognise Elliot’s true intentions. Despite his being “rational, discreet, polished” (143) she does not trust him, is consequently not taken in by him, and finally she is not hurt. Her ability to study characters further proves to be useful when it
makes her realise that Frederick Wentworth is not in love with either of the Musgrove sisters (74). This, in turn, gives her new hope that he might still love her. In addition, she is not blind to the faults of her own family but wonders at their false sense of pride and at their foolishness (124).

I have mentioned that Catherine Morland, “[l]ittle as [she] was in the habit of judging for herself” (*Northanger Abbey*, 54), notices how vain John Thorpe really is. She boldly contradicts what James and Isabella have told her about him and finds his company tedious. Also, although Catherine can at times be extremely naïve, she does not fail to see that Isabella is selfish, and not a true friend at all. Similarly, although Emma regards Elton as a suitable match for Harriet, she cannot help but recognise and laugh at his superfluous gallantry (*Emma*, 65). She realises that she had been right in assuming he only wanted to marry her for her money when she learns the “amusing and…very welcome piece of news” (133) that he has married Miss Hawkins, scarcely four weeks after professing he loved Emma.

Elinor Dashwood believes it is important to give oneself “time to deliberate and judge” (*Sense and Sensibility*, 91). This enables her to detect in Willoughby “a want of caution” (47) and to distrust him when he suddenly takes leave of Marianne (74). Her power of discernment also induces her, after a single encounter, to form a “most unfavourable opinion” (290) of Robert Ferrars. Elinor similarly notices a “thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind” (124) in Lucy Steele.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet’s “quickness of observation…[and] judgment” (63) enables her to see through people. She recognises the vanity and superciliousness of Bingley’s sisters and is restored “to the enjoyment of all her original dislike” (81) when they act ungraciously towards Jane. Elizabeth’s ability to assess situations not only makes it
possible for her to recognise silliness but also provides a means of self-protection when the sisters refuse to share Darcy’s company with her and she is able to laugh it off (97). Because she is a good student of character she immediately notices Collins’s obsequiousness. Elizabeth judges him to be a “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man” (174) and feels sorry for Charlotte for being his wife. Despite being young, Elizabeth is not swayed by Collins’s reverence for Lady Catherine de Bourgh but, instead, feels “all the impertinence of her questions” (198) and recognises her for the bully she is. Elizabeth, however, also judges her own family. While she condemns Lydia’s “unguarded and imprudent manner” (257), she feels she has “never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behaviour as a husband” (262).

Nancy Armstrong argues that *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates the truth of the sexual contract, which aims at providing women with security in exchange for their submission to a traditional role. She argues that the novel “maintains the continuity of traditional political authority while appearing to broaden its social base by granting Elizabeth authority of a strictly female kind” (1987:53, my emphasis). Armstrong stresses that “we must see Austen’s novels striving to empower a new class of people - not powerful people but normal people” (136). Though Austen’s heroines may exhibit ‘authority of a strictly female kind’, they represent the possibilities of the power of discernment which enables them to defend themselves in an unfair world of ‘normalising practices’. Instead of being left disabled by society they find amusement in its follies, and in so doing manage, albeit in a compromised way, to empower themselves.
4.2 The power to refuse

The belief universally accepted “that every man is refused – till he offers” (*Persuasion*, 173) appears to be subverted in many of Austen’s novels. We see how her heroines time and again exercise their right to refuse some proposals and to accept others. Here I would agree with Patricia Beer who argues that although these women recognise the need for marriage, they “do not allow themselves to be utterly trapped by it” (1974:60). Mary Evans has suggested that even though refusing a proposal means risking their financial security, Austen’s heroines would rather “live unmarried than enter into marriage solely in response to the assumption of society that for women this is the only viable existence” (1987:45), albeit in a manner requiring some compromises and concessions, to empower themselves whilst retaining their integrity.

In *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney states that “man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (65). We see Catherine exercising her right to refuse when she rejects Thorpe (129-130). In *Persuasion* Anne Elliott is portrayed as being silently determined when she refuses marriage on two occasions. She first breaks off her engagement to Frederick Wentworth and then declines Charles Musgrove (25-26). Elizabeth Bennet is also shown to reject two suitors. She not only vehemently refuses Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*, 148-149) but also Darcy (222). When she later realises that she loves Darcy, she assumes she has the right to change her mind and agrees to marry him (375). In *Mansfield Park* Fanny stubbornly refuses Henry Crawford. Although she is told that it would be a wonderful match for her, she remains steadfastly unwilling to marry him. Even the fear of her uncle is not enough to make her change her mind (317). When questioned about her stubbornness, Fanny answers that a woman should not be obliged to accept any man who may
happen to like her (357). A number of critics, however, argue that Fanny displays only *marginal* power, or even no power at all. Patricia Beer believes Fanny is not one of Austen’s spirited heroines but one of the “supine ones…who employ[s] the technique of lying down and going limp” (1974:46). Edward Said feels that although Fanny acquires status during the course of the novel, she remains “in her assumption of authority…relatively passive” (1993:85). Isobel Armstrong points out that Fanny’s power of refusal is limited. Though Fanny refuses Henry Crawford her new-found independence, according to Armstrong, is not equal to the power of her uncle (1988:52). Because Sir Thomas wants Fanny to realise the value of a good income (such as she would be assured of by marrying Mr Crawford) he sends her home to Portsmouth. Since he is master at Mansfield Park, Fanny has no choice but to do as her uncle says (*Mansfield Park*, 373-375).

Emma Woodhouse strongly feels a “woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked” (*Emma*, 42). She expresses her abhorrence of men who imagine “a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her” (47) and believes that it is the “female right” (51) to reject suitors such as Robert Martin. She exercises this right herself when she jilts Elton (101-102) and when she flirts with Frank Churchill while not ever intending to marry him (188). Emma also makes a case for women to remain single by maintaining that because married women are only nominal mistresses in their homes and have no real power, it would be better for single women of large fortune never to marry (66-67). In the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century “a strengthening discourse of femininity” (Darby, 2000:336) propagated the idea that women should marry and take care of their husband and home. When Emma (and therefore possibly Austen) suggests staying single as an alternative to marriage, she implies that men are dispensable and thus seems to defy the convention of her time. Nancy Armstrong
however suggests that despite Emma’s bravado she, towards the end of the novel, “subjects herself to Mr. Knightley’s standard of conduct” (1987:153). It could be that Emma, realising she needs to live and survive in a patriarchal world, accepts her husband’s authority and thereby relinquishes some of her own.

Judith Lowder Newton argues that in Austen’s novels “[i]t is in relation to the marriage choice that men’s potential autonomy is brought into most conscious focus, and it is in relation to the marriage choice that their autonomy is most emphatically subverted” (1981:126). It could be argued that Austen challenges patriarchy, which gives man the power to choose, by allowing her women characters to reject certain suitors and to accept others. Women’s power seems limited, however. Although some of Austen’s women characters snub male authority by rejecting certain men, all of them end up marrying the male protagonist. Once again, it may be that Austen is illustrating that women often enter the patriarchal institution of marriage in order to survive. At the same time she shows that women need not say yes to the first marriage proposal that comes along but have the right to reject and to accept whomever they wish.

4.3 The power to write

I have shown in previous chapters that women were prevented from writing and in this way from producing knowledge. As a result, they remained powerless in a male-dominated society. Judith Fetterley notes that because women have been kept from telling their story, they have been rendered powerless:

> Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature
that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness…

(1978:565)

The reverse, fortunately, is also true. Edward Said warns that while writing is a way for the oppressor to keep a minority group in subjection, it is also a way for the oppressed to “assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (1993:xii). Feminist scholars argue that they can empower women by what they write. Judith Lowder Newton states that “[t]o write subversively…is a form of struggle – and a form of power” (1981:892). Dale Spender comments in “Women and Literary History” (1989) that by writing women are able to change existing power relations:

This is the argument of many women: that in the broadest possible sense, the knowledge of women’s contribution could make a significant difference to the judgments and practices of the whole society…male dominance means women’s silence and…society can no longer afford to neither hear nor heed the voice of half of humanity.

(32, my emphasis)

Writing new discourses means challenging existing ones. Chris Weedon believes reverse discourses to be “the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge” (1987:111). Shoshana Felman comments on the need for women to write their own story:

The need to speak to women without the intermediary of a man, to listen more attentively to women, and to address more urgently the community of women, has imposed itself as a corollary of my growing sense that the feminine predicament of “the absence of a story”…can be truly grasped, and perhaps remedied, only through the bond of reading, only through a female sharing and exchange of stories; that only women can empower women’s story to become a story, and that each woman’s story can become a story only through women’s collective perception of themselves.

(1993:126)
When early nineteenth-century women writers such as Jane Austen took up the pen they took up, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested, a “quest for [their] own story” (1979:76). Writing for Austen is, in Nancy Armstrong’s words, “a form of power in its own right” (1987:156). By allowing women to tell their story she defies the male authority manifest in literary texts of her era and opens up new possibilities for women. In addition, she shows that women can claim specific forms of power such as the power to judge and to refuse.

4.4 Domestic Power(lessness)

Austen seems to be equating (paradoxically at first glance) domestic power with powerlessness by depicting women characters who appear to be formidable as having no real power. Though women such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs Ferrars, Mrs Churchill, Lady Russell and Mrs Norris might believe that they wield domestic power, they are shown to have little power really, or none at all. Austen’s novels illustrate that manipulating one’s family and friends brings women no real power when women who exercise this type of power have their authority undercut.

The issue of domestic power in Austen’s time has been addressed by current feminist scholars. Nancy Armstrong argues that the domestic power of women in this time was ironically symbolic of their powerlessness. She notes that the conduct books, which “were attuned to the economic interests that they designated as the domain of the male” (1987:94), propagated the idea of ‘domestic power’ in order to ensure that women would effectively manage the home, and in this way were “a form of social control” (91).
The idea of what constitutes real power has changed considerably since the early nineteenth century. Today, women (for the most part) are no longer under the illusion that domestic power is real power. Mostly, in contemporary society, power is money. Germaine Greer recently investigated a current phenomenon called ‘girlpower’, and showed that, despite what especially younger women may believe, this type of power is not real power (1999:410-411). Advocated and exploited by the media, young girls at school are invited to partake in excessive drinking and casual sex (399-402), and encouraged to match men in any lewd behaviour (409). Pointing out the consequences of such behaviour (unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease to mention but two), Greer illustrates the destructive effect girlpower can have (399). Instead of empowering women, it appears to leave them vulnerable and helpless.

While the issue of real power in the twenty-first century is overtly addressed by feminist writers, Austen merely hints at its existence. A feminist reading of Austen reveals a concern with what constitutes real power in her time, and shows an awareness that domestic power is a sham. Judith Lowder Newton believes that some of the women characters in Pride and Prejudice aspire to a kind of power which is “manipulative and indirect and [which] is further diminished by the fact that obsession makes them ineffective and unreflecting” (1981:130). Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is shown to be overbearing and manipulative, provides a good example of a woman seeking such power. Her “dictatorial and insolent” (Pride and Prejudice, 127) nature coupled with the awe she inspires from people like Collins (111), Sir William (196) and Maria Lucas (196) make her a figure to be reckoned with. Austen however illustrates that dictating people’s lives provides a false sense of power. She shows that this

---

36 The Social Science Encyclopedia (1996), edited by Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper, states that “if an individual has high status, wealth [will] follow, although they usually overlap, both being products of the distribution of power” (842).
type of power can easily be destroyed in showing Lady Catherine helplessly standing by and watching as Darcy and Elizabeth are married (395).

In *Sense and Sensibility* we encounter a seemingly powerful mother-and-daughter pair. Fanny Dashwood, who plays the part of the wicked stepdaughter-in-law, is shown to ‘wear the breeches’ when she cleverly manipulates her husband into giving his stepmother and sisters, instead of three thousand pounds, nothing at all (3-11). The narrator seems critical of this type of ‘power’, however, when Fanny is admonished for her narrow-mindedness and selfishness (3). Like her daughter, Mrs Ferrars is the undisputed head of her family. Elinor describes her as “a very headstrong, proud woman” (142), and she is shown to control her family with an iron fist. She presides not only over her husband but also over her sons. Because they realise their fortune depends “on the will of [their] mother” (13) their decisions are influenced by her approval. For fear of how she might react Edward, for example, keeps his engagement to Lucy Steele a secret (129). Austen once again seems to be critical of such manipulative ‘power’ when she portrays Mrs Ferrars as a “piece of nastiness” (Halperin, 1984:85), and when she has Elinor condemn “her pride, her meanness, and her determined prejudice” (*Sense and Sensibility*, 231). Austen indicates that Mrs Ferrars has no real power when she marries off both her sons to women with neither money nor connections (352-354).

In *Emma*, Mrs Churchill always gets her own way. She manipulates Frank’s life by often feigning illness (195) and by expecting him to capitulate to her every whim (231; 273). We are told that she “was a capricious woman who governed her husband entirely” (14) and that Frank’s coming to Highbury always depended “entirely upon his aunt’s spirits and pleasure…upon her being willing to spare him” (94).
In the same way that Lady Catherine, Mrs Ferrars and Mrs Churchill run people’s lives, Lady Russell controls Anne Elliot’s choice in marriage when she is young (Persuasion, 25). She is shown to be formidable and is known “as a woman of the greatest influence with every body…able to persuade a person to any thing” (93). Manipulation is, however, shown to contain no real power when Anne and Wentworth marry and the narrator concludes that Lady Russell, while “suffering some pain…must learn to feel that she had been mistaken…and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes” (219).

Mrs Norris belongs to the same category of women as Lady Russell and Lady Catherine. Of all the inhabitants at Mansfield Park she is the only one who is not afraid of Sir Thomas (Mansfield Park, 181). She is so skilled in twisting words and manipulating people that the Bertrams end up taking full responsibility for Fanny even though it was her idea in the first place (27-29). She is portrayed as cruel and scheming, and especially enjoys making Fanny’s life miserable (74; 80; 108; 169). She is criticized for “her love of money…[and] her love of directing” (6). Mrs Norris seems to get her due reward when Maria, her favourite niece, runs away with Henry Crawford and leaves her “an altered creature, quieted, stupefied, indifferent to everything that passed” (452). Manipulating one’s family, then, seems to bring less power, instead of more.

Judith Lowder Newton argues that “[r]eal power in Pride and Prejudice…involves having the intelligence, the wit, and the critical attitudes of Jane Austen; and Elizabeth Bennet…is essentially an Austen fantasy, a fantasy of power” (1981:133). It could be argued that by showing how manipulation leads to powerlessness, and by contrasting this to real power such as Elizabeth’s, Austen is implying that so-called ‘domestic power’ is not real power. This suggests that Austen is interested in women’s true empowerment. To this end she appears to
encourage women to re-think and re-evaluate their inherited identity, including the notions of women as emotional creatures and as natural mothers. In addition, Austen presents the reader with complex women characters who are given the power to judge and the power to refuse. The power to write thus enables Austen to contribute to women’s empowerment, not only because she suggests ways in which women may empower themselves but also because she identifies alternative identities for women.
Conclusion

Reaching the end of this thesis and looking back at what I have written, I ask myself to what extent we can categorise Austen as an early nineteenth-century feminist writer. To what extent, in other words, does she address the issue of achieving equality with men? I am, of course, not the first to ask this question. Over the years there have been many conflicting interpretations of Austen, as Claudia Johnson shows:

Austen has appeared to us in a number of contradictory guises – as a cameoist oblivious to her times, or a stern propagandist on behalf of a beleaguered ruling class; as a self-effacing good aunt, or as a nasty old maid; as a subtly discriminating stylist, or as a homely songbird, unconscious of her art.

(1988:xiii-xiv)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that when Austen was “not rejected as artificial and convention-bound, she was condemned as natural and therefore a writer almost in spite of herself” (1979:110). Which of these views, then, indicates the ‘real’ Austen? In an attempt to answer this question, I would like to refer to Edward Said’s understanding of interpreting texts. He points out that Austen’s novels have no one singular meaning but are open to a myriad of interpretations. To him, the understanding of Austen’s fiction “depends on who does the interpreting, when it is done, and no less important, from where it is done” (1993:93).

Shoshana Felman believes “reading has historically been a tool of revolutions and of liberation…a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance” (1993:5). Evaluating my own reading of Austen, it is clear that I followed a

37 Janet Chafetz states that “[t]he first wave of women’s movement in the nineteenth century was…a liberal feminist reform movement [which] sought equality within the existing social structure” (1999:151).
gynocritical approach, while endeavouring to emphasise her feminist awareness. My argument takes into account the premise that we cannot separate a writer and the social system in which she/he lives. When we, for instance, see that all Austen’s heroines get married, we should keep in mind that these women protagonists, much like Austen herself, ‘lived’ in an emphatically patriarchal society and that they realised the need to adhere at least to some of its conventions if they wanted to survive. Alternatively, there are indications that the endings should not be taken seriously. The “consciousness of how the private is political, and a sensitivity to the problems women writers encounter living and writing in a male-dominated culture” (Johnson, 1988:xx) enables us to understand that Austen had to end her novels in the conventional way. For this reason literary critics have suggested that she might have hidden her social criticism behind the façade of endorsing marriage in patriarchal society.

If we merely reduce Austen’s work to tales about marriage without even considering that she had a socially critical agenda, or if we do not at least acknowledge that her novels create an awareness of women’s subordinate position in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, I believe we fail to take “seriously our intellectual and interpretative vocation to make connections, to deal with as much of the evidence as possible…to read what is there or not there” (Said, 1993:96). The fact that Austen does not overtly challenge patriarchy does not mean that we can discard her input in achieving an overall awareness of women’s subordinate position in patriarchal society. No matter how compromised her politics may have been, Austen’s novels reveal a consciousness of women’s powerlessness. I believe it to be the duty of literary and cultural critics and theorists to uncover and amplify this awareness.
By looking at some of the issues which Austen’s fiction addresses, and by comparing them with the concerns of contemporary feminist scholars, one is made aware of the significant developments in gender politics between Austen’s time and our own. Moreover, by considering what Austen’s novels reveal about women’s position in society in the early nineteenth century, we are given insight into the legacy modern women have inherited. The idea, for example, that women should (often in addition to managing a full-time job) take responsibility for their home and for raising the children, can be traced back to the conduct books, which “elaborate[d] all of the tasks that can be called domestic duty” (Armstrong, 1987:79), and to men such as Erasmus Darwin who, in his conduct books, “tried to think of a way of instilling in women the idea that their work was its own reward” (92).

Austen’s novels show that women were deprived of an equal education to men and reveal that writing and producing knowledge was a male prerogative. When Anne Elliot states the pen has always been in male hands she exposes history, language and literature to have traditionally been male domains. Possibly as a consequence of this legacy, women for many years believed that certain areas of expertise belonged to men exclusively.

Another part of women’s inheritance is the old and mistaken notion that women need men in order to survive. In Austen’s time, women were rendered financially and socially dependent on men by a biased economic and social system. As a result, they often felt compelled to cultivate their ‘talents’ in the hope that they might find a husband. These women, then, realised the need to marry in order to survive financially. Though contemporary women are often permanently employed, and therefore not nearly as dependent
on men’s financial support as they used to be, they often opt to marry. Feminist writers have held social discourses responsible for coaxing women into marriage and motherhood. These discourses, which declare unmarried women to be failures, seem to have had their origins in the late eighteenth century.

Austen’s novels make us aware of the fact that women in her time had their identity prescribed for them. I have mentioned that the conduct books afforded men the opportunity to keep women subjugated by creating an identity for women which would suit their (male) needs. While Austen’s novels create an awareness of women’s pre-determined identity and subordination, they do not seem to suggest that any drastic measures should be taken. This differs vastly from contemporary feminists who demand that women take action. In order to appreciate the extent to which the feminist ideal has progressed, it would seem useful to take Austen’s feminist awareness as a starting point, and then to explore some of current feminist theory’s suggestions for transformation.

To begin with, Austen’s exploration of the effects of masculine power and authority suggests an inequality inherent in the society she was living in. Her novels reveal male power to be enshrined in patriarchal institutions such as education and marriage, and indicate that by enforcing marriage on women, men were able to keep them submissive and powerless. These findings, which were made two centuries ago, in many ways foreshadow the work of French Marxist Louis Althusser who identifies in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1971)

---

38 Lorraine Code reports that by 2000 “about 41 per cent of the world’s women aged fifteen and over [were] economically active. In industrialised countries, women’s work opportunities were increased after the Second World War as a result of higher educational achievement, a need for the type of labour women could provide, increased control over fertility and heightened social expectations about women’s roles” (2000:499).
that ideological State apparatuses such as schools, the church, the family, the law, the political system, trade unionism, the media and culture support existing (oppressive) social relations. Edward Said attributes the consolidation of an oppressive system like imperialism in part to the authority of such cultural institutions:

\[
\text{…the processes of imperialism occurred beyond the level of economic laws and political decisions, and...[were manifested] by the authority of recognizable cultural formations, by continuing consolidation within education, literature, and the visual and musical arts...}
\]

(1993:12)

Although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe that Austen is aware “that male superiority is far more than a fiction” (1979:154), this needs to be inferred from her novels. While she does not openly express any discontent with the fact that authority in patriarchal society resides ultimately in male persons, feminists today call for an explicit examination of the domination of women by men. Sandi Cooper writes in an article entitled “Women and the World Order” (1999) that male power, albeit destructive, has given rise to feminist literature:

\[
\text{The assertion that women’s history has ignored the exercise of power is the precise opposite of reality; indeed, were it not for the way power has been exercised, women’s history might not have evolved. In the past half dozen years, the ways in which elites, largely male, have controlled power and the discourse of rights and wrongs...have shaped a cottage industry of literature.}
\]

(98)

According to Jackie Stacey, “[o]ne of the significant roles of feminist theory has been to try to account for women’s subordination in society” (1993:52). Similarly, bell hooks believes

---

39 Althusser states that “it is indispensable to take into account not only the distinction between State power and State apparatus, but also another reality which is clearly on the side of the (repressive) State apparatus, but must not be confused with it. I shall call this reality by its concept: the ideological State apparatuses” (1488-1489).
feminists are “compelled to examine systems of domination and [women’s] role in their maintenance and perpetuation” (2000:27). One of the characteristics of feminist literature is, as Laura Marcus has stressed, “a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position …however this is expressed” (1992:11). Sally Alexander argues emphatically that contemporary women need to do more than merely show that men have kept them subordinated:

Since the seventeenth century feminists have railed against the tyranny of men, male power, male domination and in the idiom of the 1970s, sexism and patriarchy, but those categories, while retaining a polemical conviction, I believe, have to be transcended too in any full history of women or feminism.

(1994:101)

If power relations in society can be defined in terms of gender (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992:37) and if patriarchy is to be understood as “a fundamental organisation of power on the basis of biological sex” (Weedon, 1987:127), it becomes imperative for feminists to eliminate all forms of power, as bell hooks notes:

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.

(2000:26, my emphasis)

In addition to exposing patriarchal institutions for keeping women submissive in society, Austen’s work seems to suggest some of the ways in which women can be empowered. The novel (the power of the pen) has provided women writers with a means of expressing desire for change. Rosalind Miles writes that “the novel has been the only literary form in which
women have participated in numbers large enough to make their presence felt” (1987:2). Austen, it would seem, makes good use of the act of writing and of the novel as a genre when she empowers some of her women characters. Heroines such as Fanny Price and Elinor Dashwood are given power, though it is necessarily a form of power to be used within patriarchal parameters. In contrast, contemporary feminists expose the ways in which patriarchal practice encourages women to apply their power within man-made limits, and urge women to transcend patriarchal parameters. Judith Lowder Newton remarks that patriarchal society requires women “to lay aside any desire for the power to achieve, especially outside the domestic sphere” (1981:882, my emphasis). Recently, bell hooks commented that the efforts of a group of white bourgeois women, who set out to obtain power, “had tremendous appeal for ruling groups of white males who were not threatened by women in feminist movement validating the status quo” (2000:86, my emphasis). Although Lowder Newton and hooks may have different political agendas, both contribute to making women aware of how they unwittingly play into men’s hands. Only once women realise the ways in which they are kept from self-empowerment can they be liberated and empowered, and only then can feminism hope to achieve an overall transformation of existing power relations.

In order to transform power relations in society, feminists encourage women to compete with men in male-dominated economic and political arenas. Since motherhood and domestic responsibilities often keep women from competing with men and gaining economic equality, some feminists regard the abolition of marriage as necessary in achieving equal power relations in society. Others such as Shoshana Felman argue that “feminism [should be] an enabling inspiration [and] not…a theoretical orthodoxy or…an authorizing new institutionalization” (1993:8). She is of the opinion that writers are able to inspire women by
addressing them and that this in itself is an act of empowerment (127). Given that “we perceive ourselves, our lives, as narrative, as story” (Brink, 1998:14), it is imperative that women share their stories with other women, if they want to attain self-empowerment.

Another way of empowering women is to eradicate gender roles. Judging by Austen’s novels, women in the late eighteenth century had their identity prescribed (mostly by the notorious conduct book) as emotional creatures who could only find fulfillment as wives and mothers. At other times they were stereotyped by canonical texts as either angels or monsters. Austen seems to question women’s man-made identity by featuring, instead of stereotyped women, heroines with complex identities. By creating women protagonists such as Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, who display a variety of character traits, she manages to suggest an alternative identity for women. In addition, Austen seems to question certain assumptions about her own sex, as when she shows that being a wife more often than not is tedious, or indicates that motherhood does not necessarily provide a sense of fulfillment.

While Austen only hints at women discovering their own identity, feminist writers today overtly challenge women’s socially-constructed identity in an attempt to empower them. bell hooks argues that “women need to know that they can reject the powerful’s definition of reality” (2000:92) so that they might be liberated from the debilitating social role in which men have entrapped them in, and can develop alternative senses of themselves as women. Jackie Stacey points out that feminist theory investigates the reasons for women’s acceptance of their man-made role in society:

In answer to the question of why...women ‘accept’ their subordinate opposition in society, many feminists typically provide one of two replies: either women are forced into it by violence, or the threat of it, which is sometimes the case,
but often is not; or women learn to accept their position through social conditioning and role models.

(1993:65)

Chris Weedon mentions that feminism rejects stereotyping of women and “questions the assumptions about women which social theories posit as true” (1987:6). Irene Gedalof discusses how feminist theory can challenge the positioning of women in male discourses. In particular, she focuses on that feminist theory which offers positive redefinitions of models of women’s identity, and asks how effective they have been in dealing with women’s dislocation and with questions of women’s embodiment (2000:339-340).

Two final questions need to be posed. Does Jane Austen qualify as a feminist? It would seem that she was aware of women’s position in society and that her novels expose masculine domination. This, however, is not enough to transform society. Where, then, is Austen lacking? The answer is quite simple, for it is not Austen who is lacking in commitment, nor are contemporary feminist writers, sociologists or theorists, for that matter. It is ourselves, the readers who continue to read Austen and relate to her work. What I am suggesting is that the onus does not rest upon any particular writer to determine women’s future or fate, but upon women themselves. They need to decide whether they are going to accept their socially-dictated gender roles, or whether they are going to question them and attempt to discover other ways of being and responding to one another. Jane Austen and others have done their part, and continue to do so. It is now up to every woman to offer her contribution so that gender roles may be challenged and self-development may start.
Bibliography


Bibliography


