

## Austen: Women's Role in Society

Monaghan, David. "Jane Austen and the Position of Women." *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, edited by Jessica Bomarito and Russel Whitaker, vol. 160, Gale, 2006. *Literature Criticism Online*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/ORUGAC230563083/LCO?u=txshrp100185&sid=LCO&xid=cf825c7b>. Accessed 9 Feb. 2019. Originally published in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, edited by David Monaghan, Barnes & Noble Books, 1981, pp. 105-121.

Women can rarely have been held in lower esteem than they were at the end of the eighteenth century. We might, for example, find the following statement, made in 1794, outrageous: 'You must first lay it down for a

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foundation in general, that there is inequality in the sexes; and that for the better economy of the world, the men, who were to be the lawgivers, had the larger share of reason bestowed upon them.' Nevertheless, as the speaker's tone of dogmatic certainty suggests, it is completely in tune with the spirit of the age, and it is not hard to discover echoes of its sentiments. Thus, James Fordyce observes that 'Nature appears to have formed the faculties of your sex for the most part with less vigour than those of ours', and Hannah More claims that women 'do not so much generalize their ideas as men, nor do their minds seize a great subject with so large a grasp'. The notion that women not only are but should be the intellectual inferiors of men was so fundamental to Dr Gregory's thinking that, in all seriousness, he advises any woman who might have offended against nature by cultivating her mind to conceal the fact: 'But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.'

The kind of education offered to girls during this period was such that few women could have had need of the stratagems advised by Gregory. Most governesses and academies for young ladies sought to avoid overtaxing the limited minds of their charges by substituting accomplishments such as piano-playing, drawing and dancing for intellectual pursuits. And even more ambitious educational schemes, including those proposed by the Evangelicals, discriminated sharply between what was proper for boys and for girls. Fordyce, for example, while disapproving of the emphasis placed on accomplishments, nevertheless asserts that 'I do not wish to see [the female world] abound with metaphysicians, historians, speculative philosophers, or Learned Ladies of any kind. I should be afraid, lest the sex should lose in softness what they gained in force.'

As adults women found their opportunities for self-assertion severely restricted. According to Hannah More, 'to women moral excellence is the grand object of education; and of moral excellence, domestic life is to a woman the appropriate sphere'. For Gisborne, too, a woman's life must be centred on the home, and according to him her main responsibilities involve 'contributing daily and hourly to the comfort of husbands, of parents, of brothers and sisters . . . in the intercourse of domestic life'. Even within this narrow domestic world women were, of course, expected to be subservient to their husbands. According to Lady Pennington 'A woman can never be seen in a more ridiculous light, than when she appears to govern her husband' because to do so 'invert[s] the order of nature, and counteract[s] the design of providence'. Outside the family the only role offered to the woman was that of arbiter of manners. Gisborne argues that she should be concerned with 'forming and improving the general manners, dispositions, and conduct of the other sex, by society

and example', and Mrs West that 'To these domestic duties and obligations, may be added what belongs to us in the aggregate, as the refiners of manners, and the conservators of morals.'

Since recognition of her inherent inferiority and suppression of whatever abilities she might possess were such integral parts of the woman's role, it is hardly surprising that at this time meekness was considered the major feminine virtue: 'One of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration.'

Demeaning as these views may appear to us, few women expressed any dissatisfaction with their lot in the final years of the eighteenth century, and Mary Wollstonecraft's call for the assertion of the Rights of Woman went almost entirely unheeded. It is tempting to argue that this was simply because women were so oppressed that they were not conscious of their situation. However, such a line of reasoning is not entirely satisfactory because it fails to account for the fact that, while she rejected many of her society's feminine stereotypes, so intelligent and sensitive a person as Jane Austen appears to have been almost entirely satisfied with the restriction of women to domestic and polite functions. It will be the aim of this chapter to establish why this was so.

Jane Austen's disagreements with the prevailing attitudes of her time are fairly apparent. Indeed, as Lloyd Brown argues, perhaps too forcibly, she often appears to be closer to Mary Wollstonecraft than to James Fordyce or Thomas Gisborne. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, Jane Austen operates on the assumption that women are inherently as intelligent and rational as men. The fact that, in the pedagogic relationship into which her lovers usually enter, the woman is as likely to be the instructor as the man, is indicative of Jane Austen's belief in female intelligence. Whereas in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma* it is Henry Tilney and Mr Knightley who teach Catherine Morland and Emma Woodhouse, in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, it is Fanny Price and Anne Elliot who provide guidance to Edmund Bertram and Captain Wentworth. Even Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, whom Jane Austen describes as clever, learns as much from Elizabeth Bennet as she does from him. [...]

Only slightly less radical than her faith in the power of the female mind is Jane Austen's belief that intellectual abilities are as desirable in the woman as in the man. This re-evaluation of standards of female worth informs the treatment of some of the main female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Bennet and Miss Bingley both have qualities which were regarded as marks of feminine excellence in an age which advised women to conceal any mental accomplishments. Jane has a benevolent attitude towards the world, and hers is a soft and yielding temperament; Miss Bingley is accomplished, elegant and physically attractive. Yet neither is judged the equal of Elizabeth Bennet because they lack her 'quickness of observation' and 'judgment' (63). This standard of excellence is made explicit by Darcy, who comments that while a woman should cultivate accomplishments such as 'music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages . . . , to all this she must add something more substantial, in the improvement of the mind by extensive reading' (85).

'Improvement of the mind' is in fact so important to Jane Austen that in considering how girls should be educated she grants rather less importance to accomplishments than does Darcy. Almost all of her heroines are deficient in the superficial virtues. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse both neglect their piano practice and hence are no more than moderate performers; Catherine Morland learnt the piano for only a year before ceasing to play altogether and has little taste for drawing; and Fanny Price has no knowledge of either music or drawing. Yet none of them is called upon to improve in these areas. Their education is complete so far as Jane Austen is concerned once they have corrected certain failings in judgement and/or feeling.

Jane Austen's view of marriage is also at odds with the mainstream of contemporary thought. For her, the proper marriage is one in which the two parties operate on a basis of mutual respect. The reader is offered a symbol of this ideal in the description of the way in which Admiral and Mrs Croft handle their carriage:

But by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage.

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What Jane Austen suggests here is that the Crofts manage to stay upright, in their married life as much as in their carriage, because, rather than blindly obeying her husband, Mrs Croft corrects his faults and supports his endeavours. Whenever a wife is overindulgent towards her husband in Jane Austen's novels we get the kind of imbalance that characterises the Palmers' relationship in *Sense and Sensibility*. The more Mrs Palmer remains good-natured in the face of her husband's displays of childish bad temper, the more excessive and self-indulgent his conduct becomes. [...]

Jane Austen is equally hostile to the view that meekness is the major feminine virtue. So far as she is concerned, Elizabeth Bennet behaves far more admirably when she ignores decorum and tramples across muddy fields to visit the sick Jane, than does the young Fanny Price when she creeps timidly around Mansfield Park. Indeed, in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen goes so far as to argue that meekness is a fault rather than a virtue. [...]

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Yet, for all Jane Austen's sense of female worth, nowhere in her novels, with the significant exception of *Persuasion*, to which I will return later, does she follow Mary Wollstonecraft in expressing discontent at the woman's restricted role. None of her heroines has any ambition to be admitted into the professions, to manage an estate or to join the army. Instead, they concentrate their energies into the world of manners until, at the conclusions of the novels, they add to this the concerns of marriage. Only one of Jane Austen's major characters, Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, is faced with working for a living, and the prospect is viewed with horror: "I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade", replied Jane, "governess-trade, I assure you, was all I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies" (300-1). A paradox thus seems to emerge. However, it can be resolved once we realise that, for Jane Austen, the restrictions imposed on the woman's social role do not diminish its importance. Rather, basing her case on contemporary conservative philosophy, she argues that those who control manners and the home have a crucial role to play in preserving the *status quo*.

The conservative vision sprang from the assumption that society is a divine creation in which things are so beautifully ordered that each person living in it is a microcosm of the whole. Thus, although some have larger roles to play than others, the conduct of every member has a direct bearing on the health of the total organism. Consequently, we find in the eighteenth century a great interest in the individual's moral performance, which, since this was a very formal society, frequently manifested itself ritually in a display of manners. By behaving politely, the individual was considered to be carrying out the single most

important social function of demonstrating an awareness of, and an ability to serve, the needs of others. The act of opening a door for a lady was thus, in a sense, as vital to the preservation of English society as serving in Parliament or administering justice. Indeed, since the demands of the code of politeness were subtle, unremitting and entered into every aspect of life, it could be argued that displays of good manners were more important than the performance of the larger social duties, which made infrequent and obvious demands. The link between manners and social stability is made explicit by Edmund Burke:

Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex and soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarise or refine us. . . . They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.'

Granted this link, considerable prestige should have accrued to women from their role as preservers of manners. And, even though they did not seem aware of the contradictions inherent in admitting that people they regarded as second-class citizens were of importance to society, the conduct-book writers frequently praised women for performing such a function. Mrs West says of women as 'the refiners of manners' that, 'in these cases every judicious statesman readily allows our relative importance. No nation has preserved its political independence for any long period after its women became dissipated and licentious'. [...]

Because her novels are primarily concerned with young, single heroines rather than with married life, Jane Austen tends to place her main emphasis on the part played

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by women in preserving manners and morals. Nevertheless, she is also very much concerned with demonstrating the larger social consequences of their familial functions. [...]

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The lives of Jane Austen's heroines, who spend much of their time at balls, dinners and on extended visits, should not, therefore, be considered trivial. Essentially they are engaged in receiving an education in manners, the subtleties of which can be fully explored only in the context of the formal social occasion, and are thus being prepared for their role as arbiters of manners and preservers of morals. By undergoing this process, and by eradicating the deficiencies in manners from which all but Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot suffer, the heroines eventually become as useful to society as any politician, soldier or clergyman. [...]

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Jane Austen's attitude to women, then, while growing directly out of the social and philosophical environment in which she lived reveals the workings of a keen individual intelligence. She may be committed in general to the *status quo*. Nevertheless, she is not prepared to go along with prevailing views about innate female intelligence and abilities. The fact that her contemporaries' view of women was demeaning does not, however, tempt her

to follow Mary Wollstonecraft in demanding a complete reorganisation of society. Instead, she takes a clear-sighted look at the functions performed by women and finds that, regardless of the very low esteem in which their sex is held, they are given a role substantial enough to satisfy the needs of such intelligent and capable people as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Emma Woodhouse. Only when the society changes does Jane Austen look for a change in the woman's area of activity.