

“Dull Elves” and Feminists: A Summary of Feminist Criticism of Jane Austen

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Marriage is still the one career. Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen can see or imagine no other. In their novels they create personalities in a traditional social situation, but never examine the situation itself closely. Burney, Edgeworth, and Austen were not bold women; they are not critical of institutions, nor even of men in their character as men. (Steeves, 227)

The year was 1973 when Edna Steeves wrote that Jane Austen was not a bold woman, that she never closely examined the social situation. The year was also 1973 when Lloyd Brown found Jane Austen's themes “comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft” because they question “certain masculine assumptions in society” (324). While Steeves concluded that Austen's time had not been “ripe for rational and meaningful discussion of women's rights,” Brown gave more than a dozen examples of Wollstonecraft arguments dramatized by Austen females. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, is “Mary Wollstonecraft's ideal woman,” with what Wollstonecraft calls “precisely the kind of ‘wildness that indicates a healthy and independent mind’” (332). On the other hand, “to borrow Mary Wollstonecraft's remark about this ‘ornamental’ approach to education, the Bertram sisters have been rendered ‘pleasing at the expense of any solid virtue’” (331). The Steeves and Brown articles, published in the same year, illustrate that a fissure had opened between readers of Jane Austen; a shift in perception had occurred, and the way Jane Austen was to be read had been changed permanently.

Prior to the shift, Jane Austen was widely considered to be a master writer of witty domestic comedies, but her lack of consideration of the larger social issues of her time was a major, if not the major critical concern. By her own admission she saw her work as only a tiny painting on a bit of ivory. But in the past twenty years, a dramatically different view has emerged, for some readers are perceiving an Austen subtext characterized by and disguised behind the irony and laughter which have long been Austen's trademark. Was the little bit of ivory, too, ironic? Margaret Kirkham suggests that “Jane Austen learned to tell the truth through a middling irony which ‘dull elves’ might misread, but which she hoped readers of sense and ingenuity would not” (162). This new perception, which has led to what is arguably the richest vein of Austen criticism ever, is a feminist one. And perhaps more than any other author in the English language, Jane Austen is a beneficiary of feminist rereading. A number of excellent and well-known feminist critics have found it fruitful to study, historically and politically, the structure and influence of gender relations that were part of the environment in which Austen wrote. These critics have found that both Austen's style and her subject matter are responses, both overt and covert, to the patriarchal English gentry society in which women's lives were constricted in ways that men's

lives were not. The feminist critics have been particularly interested in the artistic strategies which enabled Austen to criticize or subvert the patriarchy without offending or incurring reprisals.

This article intends to provide a summary of the highlights of the feminist rereading of Jane Austen, with some attempt to relate these to each other. The initial work, as might be expected, focussed on proving that Jane Austen was aware of the larger political and social issues of her time, and that her opinions on these issues are expressed through an ironic subtext. Interestingly, the cornerstone of subsequent feminist inquiry, Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, concludes that while Jane Austen's works do, indeed, express opinions about current controversies, these opinions were not liberal, but reactionary, and Austen was not a feminist.

Jane Austen's novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative. Intellectually, she is orthodox. . . . Her important innovations are technical and stylistic modifications within a clearly defined and accepted genre. (3)

Published in 1975, two years after the Brown and Steeves articles, Butler's work places Austen in her historical milieu midst the philosophical controversies that raged in England during and after the French Revolution. Ideas of individual liberty and independent thought, labelled "Jacobin," were espoused by many of the disenfranchised, including feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Members of England's gentry and landed aristocracy generally opposed and feared the Jacobin philosophy as they observed that across the Channel, the Revolution had turned into the chaos of the Reign of Terror. Butler reads the pairing of the sensible sister, Elinor, with the emotional sister, Marianne, in *Sense and Sensibility* and the pairing of meek Fanny Price with self-confident Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* as examples of the Anti-Jacobin tradition which refer human conduct to a morality based on settled principles of right and wrong rather than to an individual's internal judgment. Austen "never allows the inward life of a character . . . seriously to challenge the doctrinaire preconceptions on which all her fiction is based" (293-94). Elizabeth Bennet may be, as Lloyd Brown suggested, Mary Wollstonecraft's ideal, but Marilyn Butler does not find her among Jane Austen's exemplary heroines, for these are "meek, self-disciplined, and self-effacing." Furthermore, "the heroine who is fallible and learns [Elizabeth, Marianne, Catherine, Emma], and the heroine who is Christian and exemplary [Elinor, Fanny, Anne], are the standard heroine-types of reactionary novels of the 1790s" (294). Therefore, while *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* made it possible to assume Austen's partisan role in the larger issues of her day, subsequent feminist critics unanimously declined to concur in Butler's portrayal of Austen as a reactionary.

Four years later, in 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic*, devoting two chapters to an imaginative and groundbreaking feminist rereading of Jane Austen. They conclude, in direct opposition to the views of Margaret Butler, that "For all her ladylike discretion . . . Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited" (120). Jane Austen is subversive, they find, covering her "discom-

fort", her "dissatisfaction," and her "rebellious dissent" with conservative, conventional plot strategies, thereby attaining "a woman's language that is magnificently duplicitous" (169). The strength of the Gilbert and Gubar analysis is a rigorous insistence on the intentionality of an Austen subtext of dissent. Their examples open a whole new reading of Austen, and give new insight and purpose to Austen's famous irony. The weakness of the study is the authors' attempt to relate every Austen theme back to their thesis of patriarchal exploitation, female powerlessness, and camouflaged dissent. "[B]ecoming a woman," for example, "means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide" (154). The marriages at the close of each novel indicate the heroine's "submission" to her "subordinate position in patriarchal culture" (154). Emma, Elizabeth, and Marianne "stutter and putter and lapse into silence" (169) as the novels close. On the other hand, Mary Crawford is read as a subtextual heroine, whose "refusal to submit to the categories of her culture gains her the freedom to become whatever she likes" (168). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar maintain that Austen identifies with characters such as *Pride and Prejudice's* Lady Catherine and *Mansfield Park's* Aunt Norris as "more resilient and energetic female characters who enact her rebellious dissent from her culture" (169). Here, Gilbert and Gubar may be misreading the text, distorting the overall effect in order to support their thesis. A further problem is that their approach does not place Austen in a historical context other than as a closet rebel in an oppressive male-dominated society. At times, it seems Austen is being analyzed as though she were writing in the 1970s, not the 1790s. Yet despite these occasionally overreaching interpretations, Gilbert and Gubar's radical readings must be seen as important groundbreaking work. Their concepts, with modifications and balance, have figured in all subsequent feminist analysis of Austen. An excellent example of this legacy is Susan Fraiman's essay, "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet" published in 1989.

While Butler explored the historical background at the expense of the feminist milieu, and Gilbert and Gubar explored the feminist milieu and ignored the historical background, subsequent feminist readers were quick to synthesize and profit from both perspectives. Judith Newton's *Women, Power, and Subversion* published in 1981, includes a long chapter on *Pride and Prejudice* which argues that Austen saw women's lives as Gilbert and Gubar did, as restricted and lacking in autonomy. But Newton finds economic inequality, rather than the political patriarchy to be the cause. "It is the right of Austen's men to have work that pays and to rise through preference and education" (55), but women must marry for their fortune, or inherit it! And unlike Gilbert and Gubar's gloomy reading of "Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission" (G & G 154), Newton finds, instead, an optimism:

for all its consciousness of economic fact and economic influence, *Pride and Prejudice* is devoted not to establishing but to denying the force of economics in human life. . . . Men, for all their money and privilege, are not permitted to

seem powerful . . . and women, for all their impotence, are not seen as victims of economic restriction. (61)

Newton reads *Pride and Prejudice* as decoupling economics from power, and Elizabeth, “an unmarried middle-class woman without a fortune” as “the most authentically powerful figure in the novel” (62). Elizabeth’s intelligence mitigates her economic and social deficiencies, evidence that Austen supported “an individualism that had ties to the French and the Industrial Revolutions” (74). Thus Marilyn Butler’s thesis that Jane Austen was an Anti-Jacobin reactionary is reversed, and remains so for most subsequent readers.

By 1983 a more balanced scholarship began to assimilate, probe, and refine the groundbreaking works. Margaret Kirkham’s *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, for example, explores the historical milieu described by Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, but in adding a feminist perspective, she comes to a very different conclusion:

If we miss Austen’s engagement with fiction and words as a distinctly feminist engagement, we find it difficult to give a coherent account of the development of her art. (xvii)

In addition to providing a chapter on each novel and a useful summary of the critical tradition, Kirkham makes two conceptual contributions to the feminist project. First, she places Austen as an Enlightenment feminist, which means that because Austen believed that reason is a better guide than feeling, it was imperative that she “show that women were no less capable of rational judgement than men” (xiii).

The essential claim of Enlightenment feminism was that women, *not* having been denied powers of reason, must have the moral status appropriate to ‘rational beings,’ formed in the image of a rational God. (4)

Heroines such as Elizabeth and Emma demonstrate that they are “capable of learning morals through experience and the exercise of their own judgement” (83), while rational Elinor assists emotional Marianne in her moral education. Kirkham’s second contribution is her historical explanation of Austen’s ironic subtext. She points out that Austen’s novels

appeared belatedly, in the aftermath of the anti-feminist reaction which followed Mary Wollstonecraft’s death, a time when open discussion of feminist ideas, however unexceptionable they might seem to modern readers, was almost impossible. (161)

Wollstonecraft’s companion and lover, Godwin, had published her memoirs, revealing her sexual improprieties and her suicide attempts, with the result that feminist ideas “were liable to provoke violent hostility and abusive personal attack” (xv-xvi). Kirkham also points out the obvious that had been overlooked: Austen’s experience in attempting to publish her first novel.

In *Northanger Abbey*, she had openly criticized sexist bias in literary works and in reviewers, and the novel had been suppressed by the publishing house to which she had sold it. The avoidance thereafter of any open statement of a similar kind is not surprising. (162)

Austen's irony, therefore, was a way to "say what was unsayable in public otherwise" (162).

For the reader who would like one single work that typifies the current state of feminist Austen studies, Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*, published in 1988, is the ticket. While each Austen novel has its own chapter, the Introduction and the first chapter, "The Novel of Crisis," provide an overview that clarifies and expands previous criticism. Johnson first establishes that Austen's limited subject matter reflects neither a limited political understanding nor an acquiescence to a male-dominated culture, but rather, "a consciousness of how the private is political" (xx). She mentions Godwin's publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's memoirs and the French Revolution as creating a "pressure of intense reaction" (xxi) which force Austen and other progressive writers to

smuggle in the social criticism, as well as the mildest of reform projects, through various means of indirection—irony, antithetical pairing, double-plotting, the testing or subverting of overt, typically doctrinaire statement with contrasting dramatic incident. (xxii-xxiv)

Austen uses "apparently conservative material in order to question rather than confirm" (21) and "politically charged material in an exploratory and interrogative, rather than hortatory and prescriptive, manner" (xxi). For example, meek, obedient, and dispossessed heroines such as Anne Elliot and Fanny Price demonstrate that

beneath the nominally conventional surfaces of [Austen's] novels, truths about the absence or arbitrariness of fathers, the self-importance of brothers, and the bad faith of mentors which, if not daring or sweeping, are still as disturbing as any of the indictments made by radical novelists. (26)

Like Kirkham, Johnson finds that central to Austen's point is that women are capable of reason and thereby responsible for their choices. While unapologetic heroines such as Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet defy every "dictum about female propriety and deference" (xxiii), their rationality and responsibility for their mistakes is the truly radical concept.

Susan Morgan's *Sisters in Time*, published in 1989, and Deborah Kaplan's *Jane Austen among Women*, published in 1992, are more focussed than the previous feminist studies. Susan Morgan's chapter, "Why There's No Sex in Jane Austen's Fiction," brilliantly argues that the absence of sex in Austen's work represents not a conservatism or limitation but a literary and a political innovation (50). Morgan examines Austen's "literary inheritance" and finds "a landscape littered with endangered virgins" (28), for "eighteenth-century novels constantly invoke the dynamic of male sexual aggression and female sexual powerlessness" (29). A heroine's identity in these novels has only two forms: virgin and whore, so that sexuality and identity are one and the same (28). Furthermore, the passage from virgin to whore is the metaphor for the passage from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge. Austen's innovation is to sever the connection between virgin and ignorance, whore and knowledge by introducing "an entire canon of brilliantly visible, imaginatively influential women characters for all of whom it is effectively insignificant that they have never been laid" (40). Because Austen's heroine

is not defined in biological terms, she is “not excused on account of those terms” (50); instead, she is to be responsible for herself and her growth, “an active participant in, an active creator of, her own education, her own changing self” (27). Failure to do so is treated virtually as a crime (50). As for sex, Austen’s heroines do love their men, but not within the male dominant/female submissive pattern that had passed as “truth of nature” (38). That archetype Austen revealed “as a cultural convenience and a literary cliché” (52).

In the most recent addition to our growing canon, *Jane Austen among Women*, Deborah Kaplan borrows the concepts of “cultural duality” and “women’s culture” from the social sciences and used them to examine what, in the face of difficulty and discouragement, enabled Jane Austen to write.

What made it possible for [her] to take up writing at all and to transcend imaginatively, in [her] representations of women in particular, the narrow range of feeling and experience assigned to [her]? (2-3)

Kaplan’s approach was to examine as many letters as could be found that had been written by Austen, her family, her friends, and her neighbors in order to establish that Austen was a member of two cultures, the male-dominated gentry to which she was born, and a women’s culture that existed within it. Kaplan finds that the ideology of genteel domesticity “virtually defined the female” (19) within the gentry. Marriage was the center of this ideology, along with childbearing and childcare. With little hope of independent financial support in the form of inheritance or work, it was a universal assumption that women would and should marry. The average wife raised seven children, and it was not highly unusual for woman to bear twenty children. In these circumstances, “the domestic wife cannot participate in the public sphere, in part because her family circle needs her constantly” (29). Kaplan then examines, in the same manner, the circles of support within the women’s culture. She finds women sometimes support the ideal of domesticity, and other times oppose it, but always cherish and support their close female friends. Kaplan focuses especially on letters supporting Austen’s writing, showing that her closest friends shared intimately in the novels as they progressed. Most interesting is Kaplan’s hypothesis that in 1802 Austen turned down the marriage proposal of Harris Bigg-Wither, “the brother of two of Austen’s closest friends and the eldest surviving son of a much respected, wealthy landowner” (109) in order that she could preserve her freedom to write.

By 1802 Austen had already written three novels and had tried to publish one. In 1803, less than a year after she had turned Bigg-Wither down, she had Henry Austen send another of her works to the publishing firm of Crosby. She wanted to write. Wouldn’t she have thought about her writing and about her chances of being able to continue it when considering Bigg-Wither’s marriage proposal? (116)

The woman Bigg-Wither did marry, Anne Howe Frith, bore ten children in the next eighteen years. Perhaps, Kaplan argues persuasively, Austen chose to put on spinsterhood as an identity which allowed her to write. And the enabling factor that made it possible for Austen could turn down a financially

desirable marriage proposal in order to write in genteel poverty was the emotional support of her women's culture.

In conclusion, it is clear that Austen fanciers, feminists and non-feminists alike, benefit from this watershed of Austen feminist criticism. It is remarkable, and a tribute to the author's intelligence and originality, that after nearly two hundred years, rereading Jane Austen generates so many ideas relevant and fresh today.

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