

## Jane Austen, Feminist Literary Criticism, and a Fourth “R”: Reassessment

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As those of us who are familiar with the last several decades of criticism on Jane Austen must know, a good deal of debate has centered around whether or not we should call Austen’s novels—or Austen herself—“feminist.” This is not, of course, a debate that is peculiar to Austen studies. Many women writers have become the focus of similar “identity crises.” Second-wave feminist literary criticism of the 1970s and 80s devised various litmus tests for discerning feminist authors in centuries past. As we reassess this literary critical work in the 90s, however, we can’t help but notice that those women writers who have been dubbed “feminists” may have had precious little in common. Strange and unlikely “sisterhoods” have been devised within and across generations. Grouped together for feminist study, for example, were the Royalist eccentric Margaret Cavendish and the pious Puritan Lucy Hutchinson; the unabashed usurper of so-called male territory, playwright Aphra Behn and the properly feminine poet Katharine Phillips; and finally vindicator of rights Mary Wollstonecraft and the self-professed writer of “little bits of ivory,” Austen herself. These unlikely pairings of feminist precursors would seem to imply that *any* woman who wrote is likely to be a feminist—and perhaps that she has more in common with any *other* woman who wrote than she has with any other man.

For those of us now studying British women writers from the Restoration to the Romantic era, questions about the “commonality” of women continue to provoke argument. Some critics remain lobbyists for the efficacy of the categories “woman author” and “feminist author,” often maintaining that these categories are necessarily synonymous during the period in question. Those espousing this line of argument would have it that *any* woman who wrote in the difficult cultural climate of the long eighteenth century in England (roughly 1660-1830) must *automatically* be classed a feminist. Picking up the pen—regardless to what end—is said to make the woman writer an activist of sorts; she is said to break with the strictures for “proper” gendered behavior in her day solely through the act of writing. As more early modern British women writers are read, studied, and (happily) taught, however, the differences among these authors strike today’s so-called “third-wave” feminist as much as the similarities did feminists of the second wave. Flattening woman writer into feminist writer no longer seems critically savvy, particularly as women writers come to the fore whose views appear patently anti-feminist to today’s sensibilities. In short, it is no longer *easy* to celebrate the achievements of a woman writer *solely on the basis of her sex*.

Though some might lament this lack of ease, I think we’d do better to welcome it. Feminist struggles over naming our historical authorial precursors demonstrate that we haven’t reached a consensus about what it means to

"do" feminist literary criticism on women writers—something that shows both the variety and vitality of our tasks. I think, however, that our feminist disagreements become even more acute when they occur over a writer like Austen, because she holds such a high degree of wider cultural attention. Austen's popularity, after all, endures in college courses, in her influences on Regency romances, as well as in her upcoming appearance on the big screen.

In the thriving industry of Jane Austen criticism, however, the driving force is arguably feminist. Park Honan, for one, has claimed that in recent Austen studies "feminism ceases to be an 'ism' and informs our way of understanding the novels" (417-18). I would not be so quick to consider feminism fully assimilated, however, or to see its use-value as a term in Austen studies as at an end. I think "feminism"—like other "isms," "New Criticism," "Marxism"—has altered the ways in which we are able to see Austen today. These "ways of seeing" are by no means settled, despite the fact that certain aspects of particular insights may have become mainstream.

June Dwyer has claimed that though much has been written on Austen, none of it is ridiculous. Scholarship on Austen tends to be of a high quality, and we can congratulate ourselves as well as Austen herself for this achievement; Austen continues to attract devotees who are willing to spend portions of our lives studying Austen's six novels, her juvenilia and letters, as well as her familial and cultural minutiae. My concern here, however, is not with the Jane Austen we praise uncomplicatedly for her "genius," with the Austen of twentieth-century popular cultural representations, or even with the Austen of the New Critics or the "Great Tradition." I am interested in the Jane Austen of feminisms and cultural studies. These latter Austens, though not without relation to the aforementioned groups of readers and readings, seem to stand alone, looking unlike the author that others have described. Not simply "genius" or "spinster," this Austen, as Janet Todd has suggested, "has been an awkward subject for feminist criticism to cope with" (71).

Todd's insight about the awkwardness of Austen for feminism is echoed in the recent statements of other prominent critics. Claudia Johnson has claimed that, "Jane Austen enjoys a peculiar status in academic studies. Her position in the canon is secure, but she is beloved in part because she seems to invite us to suspend our customary critical procedures." (Rev. of Wiltshire 532). Johnson claims that Austen's novels "are one—perhaps the only—place where academics may enjoy high art without suffering the rigors and risks of thought, as if criticism were somehow uncouth, like spitting or smoking in front of the ladies" (Rev. of Wiltshire 532). As Johnson would agree, however, just because readers have resisted using recent literary and cultural theories on Austen's texts does not mean that our readings of her novels wouldn't be enriched by these critical endeavors.

A burning question—both among those who align themselves with "critical theory" and those who do not—has been whether or not feminist theories are appropriately brought to bear on Austen's works. The version of Austen that was handed down from one critical generation to another—from the late Victorian period up until the work of Marilyn Butler in the mid-1970s—is that of an apolitical author. Most of us are, I'm sure, quite

familiar with this school of thought. Austen was said to be uninvolved and perhaps uninterested in the historical events of her day. She was presented as a woman who lived a life in which nothing happened. If we agreed with these portraits, feminists would seem to have a *misplaced* interest in such an apolitical, uninteresting author. Fortunately, these versions of Austen have been widely debunked and have allowed for conversations quite different from those that scholars of twenty or more years ago might have envisioned.

These changed conversations are not simply in the "new and improved" category of today's brightly-packaged supermarket commodities. These changes bring about difficult—often painful—questions, not simply more precise, more beautiful, or more clean than those discussions of yesteryear. Evidence of the difficulty of discussing Austen in today's cultural climate can be found in the poem, "The Stranglehold of English Lit." (1961) by Felix Mnthali—a poet and a professor of literature at the University of Botswana. Mnthali wonders if some had questioned why Jane Austen's people "carouse" and "do no work," would colonialism ("Europe in Africa") have lasted as long as it did? At some level, I think it is unfortunate that Mnthali has chosen Austen to stand in for what is obviously a much larger tradition and curriculum of British imperialist practices. However, I think we have no choice but to take Mnthali's visions and versions of Austen quite seriously. They provide serious charges. And feminists, interested as we are in issues of social justice, must also enter into these difficult conversations.

"The Stranglehold of English Lit." (1961)

by Felix Mnthali (1933- )

For Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie)

These questions, sister,  
these questions

stand  
stab  
jab  
and gore

too close to the centre!

For if we had asked  
Why Jane Austen's people  
carouse all day  
and do no work

would Europe and Africa  
have stood  
the test of time?  
and would she still maul  
the flower of our youth  
in the south?  
Would she?

Your elegance of deceit,  
Jane Austen,  
lulled the sons and daughters  
of the dispossessed  
into a calf-love

with irony and satire  
around imaginary people.

While history went on mocking  
the victims of branding irons  
and sugar-plantations  
that made Jane Austen's people  
wealthy beyond compare!

Eng. Lit., my sister,  
was more than a cruel joke—  
it was the heart  
of an alien conquest.

How could questions be asked  
at Makerere and Ibadan,  
Dakar and Ford Hare†—  
with Jane Austen  
at the centre?  
How could they be answered?

† Cities where major African universities are located.

In what follows, I attempt to chart these questions of Austen, discourses of feminism, and history. A review of second-wave feminist arguments about Austen provides a necessary starting point. At least five critical positions, often intersecting and overlapping, might be charted for scholarship on Austen and feminism. First, there is an Austen who has been linked more closely to what Juliet Mitchell has called "The Longest Revolution" (the women's movement) than to the French Revolution. This feminist position maintains (as I suggested earlier) that any woman writing in early modern England must—as a matter of course—"be" a feminist, as a result of her rebellious foray onto the manuscript page or into print. The woman author's lack of ostensible political involvement doesn't matter in the face of her writing, which is seen in itself as a political act. Austen, though she published anonymously, is labelled a feminist because of the risks to which she was exposed in seeking an audience for her writings. This Austen inherited and perpetuated the feminist tradition of a long line of women authors, until recently unrecognized. This is the version of feminist literary history offered by the likes of Dale Spender in her *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Writers Before Jane Austen*. This version, I think, has seen its heyday of critical fashion come and go, primarily because of its inattention to certain kinds of historical detail. It is perhaps ironic that critics like Spender, in the name of increased attention to history, created feminist ahistoricisms of their own. As Janet Todd has noted, this critical paradigm "made sisterhood across time but not within it" (71).

A second version of Austen's feminism provides a reversal of the first. Some have argued that we cannot rightly use the word "feminist" in early modern British contexts because it would be anachronistic. The OED shows the emergence of the word "feminism" in 1851, but the word "feminist" doesn't come into the language until the 1880s and 90s. This adherence to linguistic history, then, would exempt *all* authors of the so-called

Romantic era and earlier from being considered for the label "feminist," though we might still talk about the development of these ideas in the work of seventeenth-century writer Mary Astell or in the late eighteenth-century Bluestocking circle. This version, however, has attracted little support, and most of us today refer to Enlightenment feminisms with relative complacency.

A third feminist paradigm involves those who have located Austen's feminism as far more surreptitious. In this version of Austen's gender politics, she is seen as a sort of "sneaky feminist," using traditional romance plots to soften her ironic and perhaps more radical feminist messages. Austen's feminism is guarded, but it is the job of this critic to find these traces under the surface of the text. This Austen just plain doesn't say what she means (Todd 71). In general, when feminists have made this argument for Austen, it hasn't been to see her as a lone example but rather to see her as part of a tradition of partially-expressed feminism, of madwomen's languages. The feminist critics most associated with the version of Austen's subversive feminism include Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as Mary Poovey's early work. Again, this method has by and large been discredited for its ahistoricism. As Christine Marshall writes of Gilbert and Gubar's work, "their approach does not place Austen in a historical context other than as a closet rebel in an oppressive male-dominated society" (41). Too much from Austen's works needs to be created between the lines or simply explained away to make her fit this mold.

A fourth feminist version of Austen gives her to us as a Tory proponent of the political and cultural status quo—a picture that does not see her novels as particularly liberatory for women. Austen's insistence on marrying off and domesticating her heroines runs counter to these critics' ideas about what feminist literature is or should be. What is now labelled "the marriage plot" is seen as inherently patriarchal. Austen, therefore, is deemed a partial or an unrealized feminist at best and a patriarchal pawn or a sell-out at worst. For Virginia Woolf, Austen's conservatism and lady-like qualities show us that she had simply not yet come into her own strident, feminist voice, at least in part because of the influences of her conservative society and her close-knit family. These critics often point to Austen's elegant, confined stylistic qualities as well. We might think here of Charlotte Brontë's disdain for Austen's "carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers." Elaine Showalter uses this 1848 quotation to note that by mid-century, "Austen's name had become a byword for female literary restraint" (102). Such a restrained quality, for some, is part and parcel of a conservatism not likened to forthright or proper feminism, such as Wollstonecraft's. This image of Austen, according to LeRoy Smith, has been discarded as well (19). Evidence of its once holding critical sway still abounds—though perhaps not so much among feminists.

The fifth and final version I'll locate today emerged with the notion that Austen's central focus on women characters—and intelligent, strong women at that—proved her feminism. Any author who could create an Elizabeth Bennet or an Emma Woodhouse, it might be argued, must be

promoting a feminist cause. This idea of a feminist Austen, however, in its more recent formulations, at least, has worked from far more historically-based critical ground. Here, we might think of the fine work of Margaret Kirkham, who likens Austen to Wollstonecraft and says that both writers were committed to principles of Enlightenment humanism. These principles, as we know, included the belief in women's capacity to reason and the need for women's education.<sup>1</sup>

Also in this camp might be placed Claudia Johnson and Alison Sulloway, both of whom highlight Austen's possibilities and place in the aftermath of Wollstonecraft's fallen reputation. Johnson and Sulloway argue for an Austen who—as a result of what we might now be tempted to call the “backlash” of the 1790s and afterward—fashioned a message that was of necessity far less didactic in its tone. These critics do not see these less didactic messages as covering up Austen's “true feminism” (presumably a dubious, static category, especially as it is understood by the proponents of the subversive Austen). Rather, this version seeks to label Austen in a far more historically-based manner. Some of these feminist critics continue to place Austen in a politically conservative camp; others, such as Mary Evans, prefer to label Austen a social critic—perhaps even a proto-Marxist. Arguments for Austen's Marxism, however, have not seemed to take hold. All told, it is this fifth version, and the permutations, additions, and revolutions it has been spawning, that seem to me to be leading us to newer answers to the “Is Jane Austen a feminist” issue—as well as to different questions.

Rather than simply weighing the pro and con arguments of these five positions or the merits of the divisions I've outlined, I think it would be more productive to step back at this point and to ask what is at stake in formulating answers to these questions, in taking positions on Austen and feminism. What are the ramifications of asking and answering the question “Is she or isn't she a feminist?” Of course, as with every critical revolution, lives—and careers—may hang in the balance. This would be one level on which to examine the effects of Austen and discourses of feminism, to be sure. There have been and will be Internet flame wars waged, book contracts gained and lost, and tenure won or denied over such seemingly moot questions as Austen's feminism. In the greater scheme of things, then, whether or not this generation or the next deems Austen a feminist matters most to only a few lives—those of professional academics and of other interested readers. I raise this point, not just to be clever or to abuse ourselves for not talking instead about the “real world” but rather to try to contextualize and characterize these debates over Austen even further. To step away one remove from these professionalized critical effects involves asking why these questions have become so important *now*.

The matter of Austen's feminism is one that generates a good deal of critical anger. Only last year, John Halperin published a scathing review of Deborah Kaplan's *Jane Austen Among Women in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Kaplan's book fashions an Austen who is a feminist not just because she wrote about strong women but because she participated in what Kaplan calls a “women's culture.” Kaplan describes Austen's relationships with her

sister Cassandra, with her nieces, and with other important female confidantes as what drives her artistic productions. Halperin calls Kaplan's book "a good (or perhaps a bad) example of what happens when ideology and the politics of the moment are allowed to take over and control the critical act. Something always goes wrong" (99).

I think it is important that we not take up Halperin's critique by accepting his own divisions and definitions. Halperin's statements might rather lead us to ask if there are indeed non-political or non-ideological ways of reading Austen. If there are not, as many maintain, then are we always, as Halperin puts it, "going wrong"? To some extent I take Halperin's point in that it is a bit misleading to downplay the importance of the men in Austen's life by accentuating the importance of the women. Halperin's statement rangles, however, in that it seems to exclude *itself* from ideology and politics. It is certainly not a new critical maneuver to note that Halperin's response is a political statement of the moment as well. His contribution is perhaps best characterized as one that laments the increasing *visibility* of ideology and politics in criticism on Austen—and one that longs for the day of its *unacknowledged presence*.

It is in this respect that scholarship dealing with Austen—feminist and otherwise—must come to terms with contemporary literary theoretical innovations concerning gender, history, genre, authorship, resistance, and complicity in order to give us a more sophisticated picture of the possibilities for understanding Austen's texts in a critical frame. Amidst all of the arguments—or what Alistair Duckworth has called Austen's "conflict of interpretations"—what feminist criticism offers us is a way to talk about the gendered implications of Austen's writings and of our readings of her. A focus on gender politics is the strength all feminist work on Austen exemplifies—and it's a strength that one also finds in Austen's own writings. I'd like to suggest that one reason for critical conflicts, however, concerns Austen's own historical situation: issues of gender are not the only struggles in which Austen's texts are embroiled.

It seems important here to offer at least one example. The defense of novels that the narrator offers at the end of chapter five in *Northanger Abbey* has intrigued and even puzzled literary critics for decades. Some have read it as a straightforward position statement. Others have seen it as loaded with doses of Austen's masterful irony. Still others have criticized its inclusion in critical discussions at all—calling it representative of the immature Austen and therefore not worthy of much comment. I think that the narrator's comments here continue to be worth our attention. Austen writes:

Yes, novels;—for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their

work toward describing more intricately the workings of gender politics in her novels—without a primary troubling over what to label her. Feminist literary critics have more pressing tasks today than determining whether or not Austen (or any author, for that matter) was or is a “proper” feminist. Furthermore, whether or not Austen’s feminism seems “proper”—seems worth celebrating or worth taking to task—depends very much on where one is standing when viewing Austen’s world. As Said puts it, “interpreting Jane Austen depends on *who* does the interpreting, *when* it is done, and no less important, from *where* it is done” (161). From where I stand, it appears that there remains important work to be done on Austen and gay studies, on Austen and masculinities, on Austen and the performance of everyday life, and on Austen and colonialisms or Orientalisms. Finally, I think retrospective work on Austen’s fluctuating authorial reputation during the last two centuries would be of value as we travel with her and her texts into the twenty-first century. I would consider each of the above endeavors to be potentially feminist ones.

As I’ve alluded, however, future discussions of Austen’s politics (or of the discourses of feminism emergent in her culture) should be considered in tandem with the discourses of other identities at issue in Austen’s own time—as well as in our own. Unlike Halperin, I am not bothered by the fact that “politics and ideologies of the moment” shape the questions that we bring to literature. In fact, I do not think it could be any other way. The ways in which “we” (and here I am invoking a more global “we” than I have so far in this article)—the ways in which “we” define feminism—both historically and in our own time—are crucially important not just to a handful of academics but to lives more generally. How will feminism be represented to and/or taken up by subsequent generations? Our readings of Austen and discourses of feminism are not completely unrelated to these questions.

At a time when a book titled *Who Stole Feminism?* is getting a lot of press, it is worth troubling over precisely what “feminism” is and does as a contemporary and as a historical term. That there is widespread fear of feminism today seems to propel remarks like Halperin’s. Feminists have long shown the inadequacies and partiality of those who arrogantly claim objectivity, a project that Austen (regardless of how we label her) seemed to share. Feminists—those who are concerned with the ways women have been and are still devalued and caricatured in literature and in life—must continue to articulate how we got where we are today and where we hope to move in the future. Reassessing these questions of Austen’s feminism shows this articulation to be both more simple and more difficult than it may first appear. History writing, as Catherine Morland naively suggests, may be partially rendered and tortuous. Our ability to speak about the histories of gender politics in partial truths, however, should not stop our conversation—because, finally, how we see feminism in history has everything to do with how we see the “evolution” of feminist studies, of Austen studies, and, ultimately, of their respective (and, I trust, productive) futures.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the history of Austen's connection to Wollstonecraft, see Kirkham "Jane Austen and Contemporary Feminism" in *The Jane Austen Companion* (157).
- <sup>2</sup> Of course, I do not mean to suggest that issues of gender are separable from issues of genre. Readers today see them as intimately linked. I only mean to suggest that perhaps Austen didn't "intend" to link them in her references to fellow female authors.

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