Gender, Culture, Politics: Readings Of Jane Austen

‘[S]he was no sooner arrived than she ordered the Coachman to turn around & drive her back again’ (‘The Beautifull Cassandra’). Write an essay discussing forms of female mobility in Austen’s writing.

The placement of Jane Austen within feminist discourse is complicated by the ongoing struggle between those critics that consider Austen as an authoress who is confined to, as Charlotte Brontë put it, a ‘carefully fenced, high-cultivated, garden with neat borders and delicate flowers,’[footnoteRef:1] and those that recognise Austen’s ability to construct a careful, neat and highly-cultivated piece of work – whilst engaging with the politics of her age in such an intricate way, that they could be overlooked by the ordinary reader. Whilst Margaret Kirkham very confidently argues that Austen was influenced and guided by Mary Astell (1688-1731), an early participant in the feminist controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and more famously places her in the same school as Mary Wollstonecraft, Marylin Butler would rather associate Austen with the eighteenth-century moralists; as Kirkham puts it ‘as indicative of strongly conservative, if not downright reactionary political commitment,’[footnoteRef:2] than that of the feminists. Despite seeming politically absent throughout her publications, it is through her use of irony and carefully constructed plots that allows for Austen to be recognised as a feminist writer and an advocate for female liberation, and it is through these constructions that this essay will explore the forms of female mobility that occur throughout Austen’s writing. [1: Ian Watt, Introduction, in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Ian Watt, (Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey: Prentice-Hall: 1963), p.4] [2: Margaret Kirkham, Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction, (London: The Harvester Press Ltd: 1983), p. xii]

Throughout her work, Jane Austen presents her female characters within the confines of an oppressive, patriarchal society. We see this in her first novel, Sense and Sensibility (1811)[footnoteRef:3], all the way up to her final completed novel, Persuasion (1817)[footnoteRef:4]. Whilst patriarchal order is very apparent throughout Austen’s writing, so is female mobility – as her female characters strive for freedom and attempt to destruct the patriarchal order. In Pride and Prejudice (1813)[footnoteRef:5], Elizabeth Bennet makes reference to John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693)[footnoteRef:6], and Mary Wollstonecraft[footnoteRef:7] when responding to Mr Collins’s insistent proposal, stating; ‘do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart.’[footnoteRef:8] Wollstonecraft’s ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex. This is echoed by Austen throughout her corpus as exemplified in Elizabeth’s speech here. Austen is concerned with supporting female moral independence and a woman’s ability to form her own judgement, and this scene between Elizabeth and Mr Collins and Elizabeth’s final utterance on the matter displays this. Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr Collins is indicative of her refusal to adhere to the patriarchal oppression and marry a man that desires her because she needs him to be financially stable; this rejection of patriarchy is seen several times throughout Austen’s novels. Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot are all women who consider the possibility of remaining single and unmarried rather than accepting the commonly held belief that they are the subordinate sex that may only exist viably as married women. For each of these women, remaining unmarried is not a desirable choice, but rather an assertion of a female’s existence

as a ‘rational creature’, one that need not submit to the demands of a patriarchal society. [3: Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. by James Kinsley and Margaret Anne Doody, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2008)] [4: Jane Austen, Persuasion, ed. by James Kinsley and Deidre Shauna Lynch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004)] [5: Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, ed. by James Kinsley and Fiona Stafford, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2008)] [6: John Locke, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, (Dublin: S. Powell: 1728)] [7: See introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects (London: J. Johnson: 1792)] [8: Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 83]

Just as Elizabeth Bennet outwardly rejects Mr Collins’s proposal, so does Fanny Price reject Henry Crawford’s proposal in Mansfield Park [footnoteRef:9]. Fanny Price’s refusal is more significant due to her lower social status, and such a match would be seen to elevate Fanny’s place in society as she would be represented by a man of enormous wealth and status. Such is not enough for Fanny, however, who had ‘the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure.’[footnoteRef:10] As a result, Fanny has grown into a moral adult who cannot lower herself to Henry Crawford’s lack of virtue. It is not only Henry who Fanny refuses in the refusal of the proposal, however, as she is also refusing her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, who embodies the patriarch in the strictest sense throughout Mansfield Park, and arguably stands out as the most patriarchal figure in all of Austen’s novels. Fanny’s rejection of Henry Crawford and the wishes of her uncle (who was acting as father), would be considered quite radical at Austen’s time of writing. This rebellion rejects the social norms, and in Sir Thomas’ opinion hinders Fanny’s mobility into a higher class, thus affecting his respectable family’s continued affiliation with those of considerable status. Austen demonises the character of Sir Thomas Bertram throughout the novel, and his response to Fanny Price’s lack of desire to marry Henry Crawford is shocking and horrific both to Fanny herself and to the readers of the novel. Through the passionate passage constructed by Austen[footnoteRef:11], the reader is invited to feel an array of emotions. Sir Thomas’s explosive anger creates a fearful atmosphere, for both the reader and especially for Fanny Price. Fanny’s belated response to such anger, her ‘crying so bitterly’[footnoteRef:12], encourages sympathy; she is abused and has her judgement questioned for not wishing to marry a morally corrupt suitor. Austen’s representation of male power which is nakedly and ashamedly represented through Sir Thomas Bertram in this scene reiterates exactly what women were up against when making the brave decision to rebel against such acts of power. As Virginia Woolf observed of Austen’s construction of characters: ‘sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off.’[footnoteRef:13] It is moments like this in Austen’s writing that it is clear that Austen is pushing the boundaries; she is challenging the role of both the father figure and the husband, and the role of the female as a subordinate to male dominance. It is even more striking that Austen chooses to challenge these ideals through one of her most timid characters, who whilst being emotionally drained due to the attack of her uncle, remains determined in her own moral judgement and successfully rejects male order. [9: Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, ed. by James Kinsley and Jane Stabler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2008)] [10: Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, pp. 371-372] [11: See Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, pp. 243-250] [12: Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 250] [13: Virginia Woolf, ‘Jane Austen’, in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Ian Watt, (Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey: Prentice-Hall: 1963), p. 20]

Just as Fanny Price longs for (and succeeds in) liberation from the patriarchy felt at Mansfield Park, Maria Bertram also longs for this, as well as eventually longing for liberation from her marriage with Mr Rushworth. Whilst Maria is ‘punished’ by Austen in the novel, it is

nonetheless important to consider Austen's construction of a character who fails to be kept within the constraints of any male figure, as she breaks away from the two men in her life that she feels restrained by. Maria chooses to rush her marriage with Mr Rushworth, as 'Independence was more needful than ever; the want of it at Mansfield more sensibly felt. She was less and less able to endure the restraint from which her father imposed. She must escape from him and Mansfield as soon as possible, and find consolation in fortune and consequence'[footnoteRef:14]. Marriage acts as a social contract for Maria here – unlike Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, Maria conforms to a marriage that is a social contract as a means of establishing herself as a woman in society and to free herself from imprisonment at Mansfield. What Maria mistakes for a desire to escape from the restraints from her father at Mansfield Park however, instead becomes a need to escape commitment with male figures altogether – as she eventually leaves her husband for flirtations with Henry Crawford. What Austen presents through Maria, is a character who can be considered as a rebellious female figure who strives for female mobility by breaking social contracts with male figures in her life – and this is further supported by her disappearance from both Sotherton and Mansfield and her failure to marry Henry Crawford. Maria's strictly sexual endeavour with Henry Crawford is very progressive of Austen's time of writing. Whilst it is demonised in the novel, it is perhaps Austen's fight for the female to emancipate from oppressive patriarchy through their use of moral, rational judgement. [14: Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 158]

In conclusion, throughout her novels, Austen explores the oppressive nature that women are subjects of, and in doing so constructs characters who wish to and successfully reject the notions of oppressive patriarchy. By representing realistic familial settings of eighteenth-century England, Austen explores gender, marriage and social conduct and challenges the status quo to reach out for female mobility. Whilst Austen does not reject marriage as an institution and as a means of achieving female mobility, she presents the women of her narratives as morally independent and shows that personal autonomy can be achieved through the acceptance and adherence to a sense of values and moral principles.

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