
Volume 7

Issue 3 *New British Feminist Scholarship and
Contemporary Politics: Prizewinning and Short-listed
Essays from the Feminist and Women's Studies
Association (UK and Ireland) Essay Competition*

Article 3

Mar-2006

The Rationality and Femininity of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen

Rachel Evans

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evans, Rachel (2006). The Rationality and Femininity of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(3), 17-23.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss3/3>

The Rationality and Femininity of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen.

By Rachel Evans¹

Abstract

This essay addresses the issues of self-representation in women's writing of the early nineteenth-century British literary culture. I explore the subordination of women by a construction of femininity which did not allow them to be rational thinking subjects. Through the work of Mary Wollstonecraft I demonstrate how she provided a space for the rights of women to be discussed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the impact this had on a patriarchal society. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* serves as a fictional articulation of this, which illustrates the way in which women writers were disguising their political intent through fiction. I discuss the gender politics controlled by patriarchy which exclude women because of their lack of education. As pioneers of early proto feminist thought I argue that Wollstonecraft and Austen subvert the boundaries between constructions of masculinity and femininity. 'Masculine' and 'feminine Romanticism' are the terms coined by Anne Mellor which differentiate between the ideological construction of gender and the biological sex of the author. I engage with the argument Mellor provides for a gendered Romanticism which clearly defines the difference gender makes when looking at women's writing in the early nineteenth century. I discuss how the call for gender equality by Wollstonecraft and Austen is complicated by the specificities of the society they live in. Furthermore, I look at how women represented themselves through writing at this time in order to be emancipated from constructions of femininity and to position themselves as rational thinking beings.

Keywords: Rationality, Femininity and Romanticism

Anne Mellor posits that Romanticism as a literary movement was defined and constructed by a masculine discourse and ideology, a 'masculine Romanticism' (1993: 33). The gendering of Romanticism therefore articulates the cultural understanding of the literary movement being based on the writings and thought of six male poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Mellor's masculine Romanticism is the traditional understanding of the literary movement. She suggests that 'feminine Romanticism' then occurs to recover 'the erased and neglected voices of [...] women writers' (1993: 3) within this movement. The use of these terms aims to define clearly the difference gender makes when looking at women's writing within early nineteenth-century literary culture. However, using such a binary structure risks merging sex and gender into the same thing, therefore it is necessary to understand masculine and feminine Romanticism as the ideological construction of gender and not the biological sex of the author. Although problematic, it is necessary to examine women's writing in

¹ Rachel Evans wrote this piece for a nineteenth-century literature module during the second year of her English and French BA at Exeter University. She is currently in her fourth and final year of this degree following a year abroad studying in Brussels. She has recently received a conditional offer for postgraduate study at the Gender Institute of LSE and hopes to continue her interest in gender and women's studies within the field of International Development.

such a gender-biased construction to refocus our attention onto the specificities of nineteenth-century patriarchal society. I will here argue that women's writing percolated the boundaries of masculine Romanticism to establish a space for women to exist in the public sphere of early nineteenth-century British culture. Through an analysis of Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, I will explore the complexities of gender politics and suggest that their position within this literary movement is problematic because of their early proto feminist ideas.

Mary Wollstonecraft not only appropriated a space for the rights of women to be discussed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) but she also gave a literary reaction to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791). Through an analysis of her text I will assess the argument for the education of women which prevented them from entering into the public sphere of masculine Romanticism. The impact this had on female writers such as Austen is presented in *Mansfield Park* (1814) which articulates fictionally Wollstonecraft's concept of a rational woman in the figure of Fanny Price. Wollstonecraft and Austen both advocated women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality but this position is complicated by the specificities of their own early nineteenth-century culture, which tied the acquisition of equal rights for women to the issue of marriage and becoming better wives for men. I will examine in *Mansfield Park* the way in which women were contained by the marriage market and kept in this subordinate position through their own propriety. Finally I will argue that Austen and Wollstonecraft were presenting ideas which became the foundation for an early form of feminism by subverting the boundaries between feminine and masculine Romanticism whilst still contained within the patriarchal structures of early nineteenth-century culture. I will assess the way in which women's writing in the early nineteenth century dealt with the complexities of being read as representing 'woman', relating to what Teresa De Lauretis deems 'the question scarcely broached as yet within feminist theory, of the politics of self-representation' (1984: 7).

The late eighteenth-century ideas impacting on nineteenth-century culture stretches the nineteenth-century literary period from 1780 until 1914 when the First World War drastically changed the structure of society. During this period 'woman' was regarded as a capturable essence of definable characteristics, which *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* addressed as patriarchal gender politics. Wollstonecraft asserted the right of women to exist outside the ideological conception of 'woman' constructed by patriarchal society, propounding 'an equally revolutionary ideology [...] grounded on a belief in the rational capacity and equality of woman' (Mellor 1993: 33). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's writing appropriated a space for women to exist as rational thinking subjects rather than the objects of masculine discourse. She argued that true political freedom implied equality of the sexes and condemned the 'disorderly kind of education' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 26) women received which prevented them from entering into the rational discourse reserved for men. Wollstonecraft was criticised for conveying her ideas through a masculine discourse because it implied that feminine discourse was inadequate for such rationality. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *The Rights of Woman* (c.1795) is an example of the aggressive reaction Wollstonecraft received because of this. However, the structure of Wollstonecraft's writing was a necessary subversion of the belief that the gendered discourse of literary Romanticism was tied to the sex of the author. She argued that women were unable to enter masculine Romanticism because they lacked the

education to do so, not because being biologically a woman made them incapable of it. Wollstonecraft enabled a space to exist in nineteenth-century literary culture which interrogated the way masculine Romanticism attributed rationality and reason exclusively to men. She exposed women's lack of education, as controlled by patriarchal society, to be responsible for this.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman highlights how early nineteenth-century culture possessed a male and female way of writing, behaving and thinking which subordinated women. Wollstonecraft stressed that women who lack education will 'do today what they did yesterday, merely because they did it yesterday' (1995: 26) without questioning why. This is because early nineteenth-century society believed that 'in the education of women, the cultivation of understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 26.) Wollstonecraft 'recognised that the denial of education to women was tantamount to the denial of their [...] participation in the natural and civil rights of mankind' (Mellor 1993: 33.) She confronted this through a rational discourse, writing from a female subject position which permeated the boundaries between masculine and feminine Romanticism and questioned the necessity of their existence. This literature did not represent a universal female view of life but did exactly what women were told they could not do; have a political voice in the public sphere of nineteenth-century patriarchy. However, her work would not be endorsed by patriarchal society because she used her position as a woman writer to call for the education of women in their advancement towards emancipation and equality. Wollstonecraft therefore threatened masculine Romanticism by including women in gender politics and refusing to support the notion of women's writing as a specifically feminine Romanticism. Her attempt to exist as a female subject in masculine Romanticism left Wollstonecraft vulnerable to the misinterpretation and debasement of her character in the public sphere of men. This illustrated the precarious position women held when trying to be heard in rational discourse in the early nineteenth century. Wollstonecraft did not aim to give 'a woman's view of life,' but used the structure of her writing to interrogate the foundations of nineteenth-century literature which constructed women in essentialist terms. She posited that lack of education in women explained their position in this ideological concept of a subordinate woman. Any 'natural sagacity' women may have possessed was soon turned 'into life and manners' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 26) in order to survive in patriarchal society. Women in the early nineteenth century were therefore only educated in matters of the body and emotion so that the 'dominant constructions of femininity were used to justify women's exclusion from political power and public space' (Bland 1995: 48.) This left them enslaved in their own ignorance, destined for the private sphere of house and home. Furthermore, it perpetuated a type of behaviour that was 'a weak substitute for simple principles' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 27) and kept them subordinate to men.

According to Mellor, the term feminine Romanticism articulates the space in which women could enter the public sphere through writing. The term itself is also indicative of the containment women suffered so that they could not participate in the rational discourse of masculine Romanticism preserved for men. Wollstonecraft may not have been able to observe this paradox in such terms but she asserted that the lack of education for women meant they did not have the means to engage in rational discourse and so it was continually propounded as exclusive to men. Pursuing this assertion, Jane

Austen predicated the ideas for many of her novels on the education of women usually 'in which an intelligent but ignorant girl learns to perceive the world more fully' (Mellor 1993: 53.) *Mansfield Park* presents this in the character of Fanny Price as a young girl with a rational mind who is uneducated but has the capacity for an intelligent understanding of the world around her. Although Fanny appeared 'prodigiously stupid' (Austen 1994: 16) to her cousins because she lacked an education in behaviour and manner to match theirs, she compensates for this with an acute sense of observation. She 'looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which [...] seemed to govern them all' (Austen 1994: 134.) *Mansfield Park* offers to nineteenth-century writing the new element of a rational female mind. We are not simply being offered a woman's view of life through Fanny Price but a questioning of the structures which gender rational discourse as masculine and therefore exclusive to men. The other women depicted in *Mansfield Park* are those ideological constructions of women by masculine Romanticism who offer 'a woman's view of life.'

Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* could initially be read as the familiar Austen heroine. She even flirts with such radical ideas as marrying Edmund for love, although these are soon dispelled when she 'looked almost aghast under the new idea' (Austen 1994: 90) that he was to be a clergyman. Mary is rapidly revealed as 'all talk' and 'stands out as a fraud' (Neale 1985: 96) in her attempts to appear unaffected by affectations. She is as much driven to marriage by property as Maria Bertram, through whom Wollstonecraft's argument is expressed that a woman's survival in the early nineteenth century depended on her making a good marriage which provided money and property. Maria Bertram settled for a marriage to Mr Rushworth because it 'would give her the enjoyment of a larger income [...] as well as ensure her the house in town' (Austen 1994: 37.) Both the Bertram sisters and Mary Crawford feel they must marry for property because it ensures their survival. Without education and the possibility of owning property themselves, they have nothing. Women therefore had to rely on the marriage market for survival, which was perpetuated through the propriety of women such as the Bertram sisters and Mary Crawford. These women became complicit in selling themselves for property by choosing to behave in a way which made them a desirable commodity for men to buy and sell on the marriage market. The parallel this has with slavery is drawn implicitly in *Mansfield Park* with reference to Sir Thomas' plantation in Antigua. The two ideas are juxtaposed when Edmund explains to Fanny how pleased Sir Thomas is with the development of her character, alluding to her making a good wife. Fanny appears to change the subject in her question 'did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade?' (Austen 1994: 199.) The complicit relationship between women and marriage as a form of slavery maintains their subordination. Patriarchal society is reinforced with the way their own 'propriety would keep everyone in [their] right place and ensure that everything would be done as it ought to be' (Neale 1985: 95.)

Maria Bertram's perversion of propriety through her affair with Henry Crawford highlights the precarious position women were in regarding property and marriage. According to Neale, the patriarchal structure of early nineteenth-century society ruled that 'women can only be what property makes them' (1985: 98.) Therefore their survival relied on the adherence to a certain kind of propriety which flattered men and gained women property through marriage, but in turn kept them subordinate and uneducated. Maria's affair with Henry Crawford was improper and so it left her 'in banishment

from both the husband she abandoned and her family home' (Mellor 1993: 58.) The threat of being left with nothing was ever present for women in the early nineteenth century, which manifested itself in a type of behaviour that made them slaves to men to ensure that they would never be abandoned. *Mansfield Park* depicts the negative effects of the indoctrination of such behaviour in women through Lady Bertram and Aunt Norris as the creation of inconsistent mothers and indolent wives. This critique of the master-slave relationship between men and women shows how Austen engages with Wollstonecraft's argument that there is a master-slave relationship implicit in gender politics. Fanny is shocked into silence by the first and only piece of advice given to her by Lady Bertram on Crawford's proposal, 'that it is every young woman's duty to accept such an unexceptionable offer as this' (Austen 1994: 336.) Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford is regarded as another perversion of propriety but unlike Maria, 'hers is an exercise of will' (Austen 1994: 321) in which she 'refuses to sell herself to landed property' (Neale 1985: 102.) Fanny's reaction to Crawford's proposal is reprimanded by Sir Thomas as 'wilful and perverse' (Austen 1994: 321) and yet by being 'firm as a rock in her own principles' (Austen 1994: 335) Fanny rebels against propriety and the marriage market. Although she is contained within the boundaries of her social status, gender and lack of education she has her rational mind and strong principles to prevent her from becoming ensnared in the marriage market. Fanny does not sell out to propriety to survive but demonstrates that 'the survival of women inside and out of marriage depends upon rational resolution' (Mellor 1993: 58), highlighting the 'impropriety of propriety' (Neale 1985: 102.) Finally Sir Thomas realises the mistake he made with a 'most direful plan of education' (Austen 1994: 468) for his children. Although lacking education, Fanny brings her rational mind and strong principles to the Bertram family. Her qualities are only recognised by Sir Thomas at the end of the novel, when in despair of 'ambitious and mercenary connexions, [he prized] more and more the sterling good of principle and temper' (Austen 1994: 477.) He comes to recognise that 'Fanny was indeed the daughter he wanted' (Austen 1994: 477) and the only deserving wife of Edmund. Austen fictionally expresses the ideas of Wollstonecraft to engage in 'a subtler form of gender politics' (Mellor 1993: 61) which implicitly interrogate the precarious position of women in early nineteenth-century culture. By reflecting on the folly and vice of women in *Mansfield Park*, Austen brings to early nineteenth-century literature the cautious mind of Fanny Price as an endorsement of rationality and reason in women to subvert patriarchal society.

Fanny Price develops into a desirable young woman who unwittingly permeates the boundaries of masculine Romanticism through her rational mind and strong principles. Ironically, it is Fanny's decisive rejection of the marriage market which makes her a desirable candidate for it and for Edmund. Elizabeth Fay argues that 'the Austen heroine must be actively in command of the set of limitations she is given' (1998: 35), which is why Fanny's rebellion in refusing to take part in the play and refusing Henry Crawford's proposal seem to be relatively small subversions but they are all she can do within patriarchal boundaries. Similarly, Wollstonecraft claims in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to 'respect marriage as the foundation of almost every social virtue' (1995: 81.) She advocates a revolution in the behaviour of women to make them good wives, which pinpoints the fact that, as women writers, Wollstonecraft and Austen can only transgress boundaries within certain limitations. This is because 'in the nineteenth

century to become a professional writer was to enter a territory implicitly defined as masculine' (Michie 1993: 2.) Therefore, when Wollstonecraft breached the divide between the public sphere of men and the private domain of women with the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* it left her vulnerable to the misinterpretation of her person. Under this threat there was a decline in the willingness of many women writers 'to speak out publicly, except through literary works that obscured their real political intent' (Fay 1998: 59.) This meant that the way in which women writers such as Austen 'chose to mask, justify or apologise for those transgressions color our reception of their writing, and have influenced us to perceive their politics as essentially conservative' (Mellor 1993: 61.) Far from being conservative, many female writers were dealing with the restrictions imposed upon them by patriarchal society. The form of social critique which Austen adopted was seen 'as another version of Romanticism that many women writers chose to employ as a way of taking part in the Romantic Movement' (Fay 1998: 9) without compromising their character in the public sphere.

Women's writing was accepted into early nineteenth-century patriarchal society as the manifestation of a woman's view of life, a feminine Romanticism. The intention of women's writing was not to offer a woman's view of life but to bring to nineteenth-century literature a social critique. In the writing of Wollstonecraft and Austen this included the interrogation of patriarchal structures which bound literature to a gendered Romanticism. On refusing to support the notion of gendered writing, the rational rather than masculine discourse of Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was an appropriation of a space for women to exist as literary writing subjects within masculine Romanticism. This posited the foundations of gendered Romanticism as constructions which could be subverted by women writing in rational discourse. Women's writing may have been received by masculine Romanticism as merely a woman's view of life, but literary works such as *Mansfield Park* engaged in the gender politics of the early nineteenth-century which questioned the way gendered Romanticism was collapsed into the sex of the author.

Mellor's use of a gender continuum in order to begin understanding the difference gender made to nineteenth-century literary culture is still polarised by masculine at one end and feminine at the other. This highlights how in current British society and culture the representation of women is still essentially defined through masculine discourse, which women such as Austen and Wollstonecraft began struggling against in the nineteenth century. Contemporary feminist thought proposes that 'the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it' (De Lauretis 1984: 7), which women writers of the early nineteenth century sought to do through fiction. The works of Wollstonecraft and Austen manifest this struggle and they became precursors to early feminist thought, calling for the equality of women through education. They propounded women as rational beings through an interrogation of the patriarchal gender politics which subordinated them. Therefore, women's writing brought to nineteenth-century literary culture the question of how women were represented through writing and an awareness of the impact society had on how they wrote. Under the patriarchal rule of nineteenth-century culture this was located within the incessant struggle which has faced generations of feminists since; to be 'at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it' (De Lauretis 1984: 7.)

Bibliography

- Austen, Jane. 1994 *Mansfield Park*. 1814 London: Penguin.
- Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. *The Rights of Woman*. C.1795. Ed. Duncan Wu, *Romanticism An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. pp. 25-26
- Bland, Lucy. 1995 *Banishing the beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914*. London: Penguin.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. 1984 *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. London: Macmillan.
- Fay, Elizabeth. 1998 *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Mellor, Anne K. 1993 *Romanticism and Gender*. London: Routledge.
- Michie, Elsie. 1993 *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference and the Victorian Woman Writer*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Neale, R.S. 1985 *Writing A Marxist History: British Society, Economy and Culture since 1700*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Paine, Thomas. 2003 *The Rights of Man*. 1791. Ed. Duncan Wu, *Romanticism An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 15-16
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1995 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. 1792. London: J.M. Dent.