Jane Austen: Shaping the Standard of Women's Education

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"But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret."
John Gregory

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was a Romantic-era writer who published six novels and several other writings. She is well-known for her insightful social commentary, in addition to the incisive portrayals of the gentry's life in the late 1700s. Much of her writing centers on marriage plots, in which her main female characters undergo a transformation in order to achieve happiness in marriage. Austen published *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, and *Emma* in 1815; and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously in 1818. In her novels, Austen discusses taste, environment, auto-didacticism, wit, and social awareness, and illuminates how these different aspects of education combine to allow women to learn about themselves and improve their character. Scholar Barry Roth states that "[Austen] identifies self-knowledge as education's primary end" (112). Each novel portrays a different facet of education in order to create a more comprehensive view of women's education. Austen develops the women in her novels so that they educate themselves in order to achieve self-knowledge instead of simply achieving an advantageous marriage. Austen's novels also reveal a shift in perception from solely portraying society's perceptions of educated women to challenging the existing purpose of education as a means to gain a husband. Jane Austen engages with the social constructs of women's education and challenges societal perceptions by revealing the importance of self-awareness through an holistic education, which involves more than formal schooling and identifies self-knowledge as its end.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, numerous publications were available that explained what a woman's education should entail. Although many of these were written by men, several were also written by women who presented a traditional view of the ideal woman. The "female character" was a much-debated topic, with each writer positing his or her own views. Hannah More, a writer on religious and moral topics, wrote in "Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education" that worldly concerns such as education distracted women from spiritual concerns. Moreover, it disordered and sensualized women, diverting them from domestic concerns. Likewise, Thomas Gisborne, an

Anglican priest, discussed what a woman should do in order to become virtuous. He wrote that a woman's first concern was to comfort her husband, parents, other relations, and neighbors. The second was to improve the manners of men by setting a faultless example, and the third was to model and shape the human mind (487). This, Gisborne proposed, would "excite virtuous exertion." However, Gisborne did not elaborate on the duty of modeling, or forming, the human mind beyond stating that moral principles must be passed down to children.

Women were certainly not encouraged to improve their own minds; in fact, another moralist named John Gregory goes so far as to caution his daughters to hide their learning. Gregory wrote an epistle to his children, titled "A Father's Legacy to his Daughters." In this letter, he describes the ideal behavior his daughters should practice. He writes:

> Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company – 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 cultivated understanding. (405)

This shows that society's perception of women's education at the time was largely negative; to have a cultivated mind was to attract a "malignant eye." If a woman had good sense, she had to temper it to not appear smarter than the men in her circle, and if she had formal education beyond what a standard finishing school would provide, it was regarded as a shameful secret that was to be guarded at all costs. The view was that a woman's first priority in life was to secure a husband and maintain domestic felicity; a "cultivated understanding" not only interfered with that aim by distracting women from domestic tasks, but was detrimental in that it drove potential husbands from their company. Educated women, therefore, seemed almost unacceptable in Jane Austen's time.

An idea also existed during the time that men were simply formed to be more intelligent than women. The Creator had formed each sex for specific duties, and, therefore, had blessed each gender with the appropriate qualifications each would need in life. Gisbourne describes this in "An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex" and states that "other studies, pursuits, and occupations, assigned chiefly or entirely to men, demand the efforts of a mind endued with the powers of close and comprehensive reasoning . . . in a degree which they are not requisite for the discharge of the customary offices of female duty" (282). The idea that men were granted a greater capacity for learning was prevalent because it seemed natural that "the Giver of all good, after bestowing those powers on men with a liberality proportioned to the subsisting necessity, would impart them to a female mind with a more sparing hand" (283). Women, therefore, through no fault of their own, were not endowed with the brainpower required to perform comprehensive reasoning, or so many in society believed. If a woman displayed competence in areas outside the feminine sphere, she could be regarded as an aberration or even someone who was unnatural in the grander scheme of God's plan.

However, there were certain habits and characteristics a woman needed to learn to perform, most related to domesticity. Hannah More wrote various publications on the subject of women; another, titled "The Benefits of Restraint," describes what a woman should learn before marriage. She states that "habitual restraint" led to future happiness and that women "should be led to distrust their own judgment." Women should also acquire a "submissive temper and forbearing spirit" and aspire to perform their domestic tasks well, but receive little to no recognition for their success. However, More did claim that these feminine qualifications should stem from a desire to be obedient to Christ, instead of the simpler idea presented by Gregory that an educated woman would scare husbands away or defied God's plan entirely. She wrote, "…let them not be instructed to practice gentleness merely on the low ground of its being decorous and feminine, and pleasing, and calculated to attract human favor; but let them be carefully taught to cultivate it on the high principle of obedience to Christ" (489). More's quotation suggests that knowledge of domestic tasks was not only beneficial to women, but also pleasing to God. In this sense, a woman perhaps should mistrust her judgment in order to follow God's law, as More appears to suggest.

Although More encourages women to be gentle, decorous, and feminine, she states that a woman's highest aim should be to please Christ, not a future husband. However, More contradicts herself in another publication and states that the highest aim women should aspire to in life is marriage and pleasing a husband, which presumably would be a woman's duty in pleasing Christ. Any education women receive should be to prepare them for the duties involved in marriage. In "Comparison of the Mode of Female Education in the Last Age with that of the Present Age," she writes:

> ...yet it does not seem to be the true end of education to make women of fashion dancers, singers, players, painters, actresses, sculptors, gilders, varnishers, engravers, and embroiderers…. The profession of ladies, to which the bent of their instruction should be turned is that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families. They should be therefore trained with a view to these several conditions, and be furnished with a stock of ideas and principles, and qualifications ready to be applied. (500)

More claims that women should be trained throughout their lives and prepared with certain ideas and thoughts in order to enter into marriage. Although she states a woman should place Christ first, More acknowledges the social necessity of obtaining an advantageous marriage. She recognizes that importance of training for matrimony and places emphasis on undertaking an education that will prepare a woman specifically for duties required of a wife and mother.

Another much-debated topic in the scope of women's education during the late 1700s and early 1800s was wit. Austen does not engage with this topic often, although several of her characters display wit. However, it is important to understand what precepts women faced in order to fully comprehend the lack of appreciation for educated, autonomous women. The term "wit" encompassed qualities such as vivacity in speech, quickness in reply, and overall cleverness of the woman. Far from being qualities that were sought out and

appreciated by men, wit in a woman was something that was undesirable. James Fordyce, in "Sermons to Young Women," directs commentary at women to warn them "against the affectation and the abuse" of wit. Fordyce writes, "the faculty termed Wit is commonly looked upon with a suspicious eye . . . It is especially, I think, dreaded in women." He then elaborates: "Men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female . . . men who understand the science of domestic happiness, know that its very first principle is ease." Fordyce asks, in the face of wit, "who would not flee? Protect us, ye powers and gentleness and decorum, protect us from the disgust of such a scene – Ah! my dear hearers, if ye knew how terrible it appears to a male ear of the least delicacy, I think you would take care never to practice it" (394-402). Even Gregory comments that "wit is the most dangerous talent that [a woman] can possess. It must be guarded with great discretion and good-nature, otherwise it will create many enemies" (406).

This perception of wit paints a bleak picture for the woman who was clever in conversation and talented with words. Instead of displaying intelligence, showing wit appeared to be a guaranteed way of driving men away. It is evident that a woman was not encouraged to educate herself in order to be clever and witty; it was, in actuality, a skill that was detrimental to the success of finding a domestic partner. That Fordyce comments on a male ear of the "least delicacy" demonstrates that even men who were of lower class were repulsed by a woman who displayed wit. For a woman of low class whose only hope of advancement was through marriage, displaying wit and intelligence could be deadly to her future happiness, if she followed the ideas presented by moralists. Even though not all men may have responded to witty, intelligent women in the same manner of the moralists, it was risky for women to display intelligence in public.

Women's education during Jane Austen's time was defined primarily by these moralists, who commented on specific habits and characteristics a woman must practice to be dutiful to their husbands and to God. Women often did receive a small education at a finishing school, but this traditional education largely provided women only with skills necessary to attract men and become wives. The traditional portrayal of a woman's education did not extend beyond the realm of her domestic duties. However, Jane Austen's novels provide a comprehensive social commentary on the state of women's education and a progressive view of what a woman's education should include. Her six novels, when examined chronologically in a larger context, reveal an holistic interpretation of what a woman's education should be in order for the woman to improve herself and her society.

Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, largely emphasizes the importance of taste. Good manners are also accentuated, as is correct behavior in certain social situations. Elinor Dashwood emerges as the heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* largely because of her preservation of good manners and her presentation of a calm face even though she is suffering privately (Markovits, 779). She interacts with sense in all situations, in contrast to her sister, Marianne, who generally reacts with strong emotion. Over the course of

the novel, Marianne must learn to steady her emotions, recognize that tastes other than her own have merit, and improve herself through reading more than romance novels. Elinor serves as her example because of her steadiness in action and emotion.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, emotional control is paired with taste to demonstrate how an important part of a woman's education is knowledge about navigating social situations. Taste seems to be defined by Austen as the ways a person is trained and prepared to appreciate the world. Being sincere and unaffected is also an important part of taste, although a woman must have enough control that she is proper in her sincerity and not overly forward. Marianne is often carried away in raptures in her vibrant expression of taste, which demonstrates an immature understanding of how to express herself. Her taste aligns exactly with John Willoughby's, which is a large reason for her attachment to him. As scholar Beth Lau states, "maturation begins with a state of passionate attachment to a heroic, larger-than-life figure" (65). Marianne becomes attached to Willoughby after he rescues her from the rain and carries her home, tending to her sprained ankle. This attachment to Willoughby and the ultimate loss of his acquaintance is what helps Marianne grow. She holds Willoughby in higher esteem than Edward Ferrars, Elinor's friend, because her tastes align better with Willoughby's than Edward's. For example, when Edward, Elinor, and Marianne walk through the country, Edward states that he disagrees with the typical views on the picturesque that women like Marianne hold (127). After Edward professes his atypical opinions, "Marianne looked with amazement at Edward, with compassion at her sister" (128). Marianne believes that since Edward's taste does not align with hers, Elinor could find no happiness in a match with him, which exemplifies Marianne's naïve perception of taste. Her obvious credulity also serves as a stark contrast to Elinor's calm demeanor. However, Elinor admires Edward for reasons other than his descriptions of nature, and she is able to ignore Marianne's gaze.

Education in *Sense and Sensibility* also revolves around the idea of self-improvement through reading. Formal education is not portrayed in a manner that is useful to people later in life; Edward's formal education prepared him only for a life of idleness, and Charlotte Palmer's seven-year education endowed her with the skills to embroider. Charlotte Palmer laughs heartily while admiring the Dashwoods' house, but after admiring different aspects she "very soon forgot that there were any such things in the room" (136-139). In contrast to Charlotte Palmer's inattention, the Dashwood family is quite unprepared to handle Charlotte's energy. The Dashwoods seem much steadier and calmer and emphasize reading to improve their minds. Edward states on page 123 that he knows the Dashwoods would buy more books to improve the house if they were richer, which shows they value books and self-improvement through reading. Although Marianne pursued Romantic literature on her own, out of her own self-interest, later in the novel she states that she will read to improve her mind and pursue books "beyond mere amusement." She claims, " By reading only six hours a-day, I shall gain in the course of a twelvemonth a great deal of instruction which I now feel myself to want" (348). She realizes that

Romantic literature had affected her taste and expression of emotion, and recognizes that different novels will improve both her taste and her self-control.

A woman's education in *Sense and Sensibility* revolves mainly around the ideas of taste and self-improvement through reading. Not many other accomplishments are emphasized as the central part of women's education, such as singing, playing the piano, or needlework, although Marianne does play and sing quite well. Austen offers in her first novel that women must mature into their understanding of taste and expression of emotion. Elinor Dashwood's taste is refined, and her steady countenance, despite personal struggle, serves as a mirror through which Marianne's lack of maturity is reflected. Only through a development of taste and control of emotions, enabling self-improvement after Marianne's attachment to Willoughby, does Marianne find happiness and a steadiness of character.

Although *Sense and Sensibility* did not emphasize accomplishments as integral to a woman's education, Austen's second novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrates the benefit of accomplishments to women. She provides social commentary on the idea that accomplishments were methods to ensnare quality husbands, and ultimately demonstrates that the goal of education is social mobility and the ability to improve one's place in society through gaining respect.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, taste is only mentioned in relation to Lady Catherine's love of music and her boast that she has excellent taste. Instead, the novel centers around the idea of accomplishments as tasks that women perform to demonstrate their superiority in society. Lady Catherine interrogates Elizabeth Bennet about her various accomplishments and is stunned to learn that she never had a formal governess to teach her drawing, piano, or other skills deemed necessary to genteel ladies. Lady Catherine declares, "'I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it'" (191). While Elizabeth appears to have the bare minimum of accomplishments necessary to interact with those of a higher status, she is judged harshly by other women in the novel with formal educations because she never had a governess of her own.

Louisa and Caroline, Mr. Bingley's sisters, are "entitled to think well of themselves and meanly of others" because they "had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town" (54). Their formal education molded them into accomplished women, which enables them to maintain their higher standing and superior self-regard. However, Austen also emphasizes the negative effects of a formal education. She creates antipathy toward formal training in a woman's life and, instead, portrays the Romantic idea that education enabled snobbishness, which is especially evident in Bingley's sisters. Austen also demonstrates that a substantial education can be just as bad as an inconsequential one. After all, George Wickham attended Cambridge for his education and serves in the militia. His only hope for social improvement is to marry a rich woman.

However, much like *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen stresses the idea of self-improvement through reading. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are frequently reading

novels and educating themselves. They improve their intellect and their ability to interact in social situations. In fact, Elizabeth even counsels Mr. Darcy to practice his conversation much like she practices the piano (199). Through Elizabeth, Austen demonstrates that auto-didacticism is integral to a universal understanding of society. Conversation and the practice of speech allows Elizabeth to interact with ease with all classes in society. Wider interaction in society displays a broader knowledge; Elizabeth not only reads to improve her mind, but also to improve herself in order to better navigate social situations. Georgiana, Mr. Darcy's younger sister, is receiving a structured education, but lacks the social skills necessary to function in society. Her inability to navigate social situations is seen as detrimental as not being able to perform specific tasks or accomplishments. Likewise, Mrs. Bennet has a "weak understanding" and "illiberal mind," which do not inspire affection, respect, or esteem in Mr. Bennet, who states that due to Mrs. Bennet's folly, "all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown" (250). Elizabeth's ability to examine her prejudices after reading Mr. Darcy's letter demonstrates a solid understanding of her own nature and faults. Through novels, conversation, and the analysis of one's own behaviors, a woman can learn not only accomplishments, but also the method of interacting in society, which will enable her to earn respect and esteem. These qualities combined enabled women to be displayed at their best advantage in society; ultimately, in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, to attract a husband of a higher class.

Austen portrays education as a route to a better life through marriage, allowing women to self-improve both their minds and their social position. Education is viewed largely as a way to attract men, which is a stark contrast to the distasteful way the moralists explained what women should do to gain a husband. When Lydia takes Jane's place at the table as a married woman, Austen demonstrates that society valued marriage as a greater achievement than intelligence and honor (322). Similarly, Charlotte Lucas demonstrates that marriage was the main objective in society. Austen writes, "Without thinking highly of either men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (152). An education could not provide for a woman; marriage was consequently valued in society in a greater sense than education, and even education and accomplishments were only means to achieve an advantageous marriage. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen demonstrates that accomplishments are performed simply to attract male attention. They are not particularly good or bad, but simply allow women a chance to improve their social position by ensnaring a husband in a higher class. Although Austen satirizes the snobbery that often coincides with being an accomplished and educated woman, as seen in Louisa and Caroline, she embodies the notion that accomplishments enabled social mobility through marriage. A woman's education needed to develop accomplishments as marketable skills in addition to providing opportunities for reading and reflection, which ultimately enabled personal growth. However, Elizabeth's reading and conversation skills do not drive men away as

moralists would caution; Mr. Darcy seems attracted to Elizabeth's personality as revealed through her conversation ability, in addition to her humble supply of accomplishments.

Austen's third novel, *Mansfield Park*, further elaborates on the idea of self-improvement, but also demonstrates that education can be found in a woman's surrounding environment. In this novel, the term education includes the environment in which a woman was raised, and incorporates a development of a moral compass and correct mannerisms to interact with society. In an early conversation with Edmund, Fanny remarks that one learns morals through example. She questions Edmund: "'Do you not think . . . that this impropriety is a reflection upon Mrs. Crawford, as her niece has been entirely brought up by her?'" Edmund responds, "'Yes, we must suppose the faults of the niece to have been those of the aunt; and it makes one more sensible of the disadvantages she has been under'" (90-91). This demonstrates that the influence Miss Crawford grew up under was what caused her to misspeak about her uncle since she never learned proper decorum from her aunt. At Mansfield Park, Fanny grows and matures under Edmund's example and discusses propriety and social opinions with him. Her experience introduces the idea that one must learn from one's elders in the environment. Another example supporting this idea is revealed when the play Lover's Vows is discussed. Edmund believes that acting out this play would be indecorous and urges Maria to put a stop to the play by using her status to influence others around her. On page 161, Edmund states, "'You must set the example.If others have blundered, it is your place to put them right... In all points of decorum, your conduct must be law to the rest of the party.'" Edmund's statement illuminates the fact that others in the party will learn from and follow Maria's example if she declares they should choose another play.

A further instance that provides evidence of how much the environment of a woman affects her is illuminated in another conversation between Edmund and Fanny when they discuss Miss Crawford later in the novel. Edmund states, "'I know [Miss Crawford's] disposition to be as sweet and faultless as your own, but the influence of her former companions makes her seem, gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong.'" Fanny replies ironically, "'The effect of education'" (278). Her comment illuminates the importance of environment in a woman's education. Fanny also learns to ride a horse better when she joins her cousin's world in a higher class and receives opportunities that would not have otherwise been available to her. In fact, the environment that she would have grown up in presents a sharp contrast to *Mansfield Park*, where Fanny resides for most of her young life. Sir Thomas Bertram even sends Fanny back home when she initially refuses Mr. Crawford's proposal in the hopes that she will appreciate the environment available to higher classes (371).

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen depicts formal education in an apathetic manner, revealing that it does not always provide the best situations through which women can learn. Austen does not support a claim that a formal education is especially beneficial; instead, she demonstrates that one learns more and im-

proves more if she simply follows the example of people with a high moral character. Henry Crawford himself had a formal education, but one that perhaps lacked in moral direction, as his education failed to eradicate his improper tendencies that later led him to entice Maria into adultery. In addition, Sir Thomas Bertram laments his daughters' upbringing and education; despite their childhood, his daughters still did not hold true to social propriety in their marriages. Maria leaves her husband for Henry Crawford and Julia marries Mr. Yates seemingly in reaction to the scandal that follows, knowing that her chances of a beneficial match are slim due to her sister's actions. Austen describes Sir Thomas Bertram's reaction:

> …Though the anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters, was never to be entirely done away. Too late he became aware how unfavourable... the treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity. (458)

It is clear that Sir Bertram blames his daughters' impropriety on the environment in which they were raised.

On the other hand, although Fanny received a similar education as Maria and Julia, she was guided more often by Edmund and coddled less by Mrs. Norris. Her environment encouraged moral discipline and strengthening of values, which is evident in Fanny's refusal of Crawford's proposal. She understands that he is not a man of the highest virtue and is unwilling to submit to the environment that would ensue from such a match. Although her refusal confused those around her, Fanny's relatives lauded her discretion after the scandal involving Mr. Crawford, shortly after his attempts to persuade Fanny he had changed.

In fact, Fanny takes action herself to create the best possible environment for her learning. She often takes refuge in the old schoolroom, which is full of books and teaches herself as she reads. She later takes great pride and pleasure in teaching Susan, her younger sister, when she visits home. Fanny and Susan subscribe to a circulating library and Fanny thinks, "…to be a renter, a chuser of books! And to be having any one's improvement in view in her choice! But so it was. Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself" (400). Fanny recognizes that her reading helps her improve her own character and that she can set an example for Susan and provide an environment to nurture Susan.

Fanny's character develops through this process, which illustrates how environment affects education. For Fanny, education is not about mastering knowledge, but more about strengthening and solidifying her morals and values. She learns from the poor examples of Maria and Julia and conducts herself in a more proper manner than their example illustrated. She also learns from Edmund and values their relationship because it allows her to improve her character and her understanding of good principles. This education from her environment and the people around her empowers Fanny and allows her to

stand for what she believes. Lau states that Austen, like many other women writers of the Romantic period, constructed her characters' identities according to an "ethic of care that privileges relationship and community over autonomous individuality" (65). Fanny demonstrates personal growth and self-discovery throughout the novel, which allows Austen to support the idea that a moral compass and strong sense of personal principles are essential for an educated woman.

In Austen's next novel, *Emma*, she further explores the idea of women learning from those around them and, in addition, focuses on sense and self-reflection. Particularly in *Emma*, Austen presents the idea that growth can only happen when one learns from her own mistakes. Although Emma often looks to Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightly for guidance, she often makes decisions and judgments by herself. In some cases, she blunders in social situations, but she reflects later and rectifies her behavior, similar to the way that Elizabeth remedied her preconceptions in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Austen opens the novel by introducing Emma and the neighborhood in which she lives, focusing on a description of Mrs. Goddard's boarding school. Austen writes, it was a "real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, where the girls . . . [had no] danger of coming back prodigies (68)." This criticizes the idea that accomplishments were marketing devices for women to ensnare husbands and demonstrates that there should have been more to a woman's education than learning skills for matrimony. Austen supports this idea often through Emma's declarations that she will never marry; her knowledge is, therefore, for gains other than those existing through marriage. Instead of focusing on accomplishments, Emma must learn about herself and how to interact with others in different classes in society to improve her education. In the beginning of the novel, she is not focused on self-improvement, which is evident on page 79 when Mr. Knightly and Mr. Woodhouse discuss Emma's friendship with Harriet Smith. Mr. Woodhouse declares, "'As Emma wants to see [Harriet] better informed, it will be an inducement to her to read more herself.'" Mr. Knightly retorts, "'Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old... She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding.'" Here, Austen establishes Emma as a character who must undergo self-improvement throughout the novel in order to receive a more rounded education that enables personal growth rather than simply an advantageous marriage.

Further on in the novel, Mr. Knightly cautions Emma to have more sense in the way she behaves in society. He tells her, "'Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do'" (99). Emma must learn common sense and the knowledge of how to act in certain social situations, and she does learn from her experiences over the course of the novel. For example, after Emma and a group of her friends travel to Box-Hill, Knightly criticizes Emma's behavior toward Miss Bates and scolds her for being insensitive to Miss Bates' feelings (325). Emma examines her actions, and eventually she understands that she behaved improperly and apologizes to Miss Bates. As scholar Stefanie Mar-

kovits claims, Austen's heroines almost always undergo a moral fall and mortification before entering the "blessed state of matrimony," which demonstrates that some self-learning must be involved before a woman can marry (779). Emma is mortified to have displeased Mr. Knightly to such an extent, which causes her to regret and make amends for her actions. Through experience, Emma develops sense and emerges with a greater understanding of herself.

In *Emma*, formal education is portrayed in a number of ways. It can lead to independence for lower classes, so it is beneficial to the lower class (172). However, a woman using her education for a profession is portrayed in a miserable style. Jane Fairfax must become a governess in order to make her way in life, which is described as a sacrifice, penance, and mortification – a duty that is honorable, but pitiable (173, 175). For Mrs. Elton, who is of a higher class in society, education was merely a means to gain a husband. However, her education does not necessarily make her a better partner for Mr. Elton; in fact, Austen declares that a woman of a lower class with more sense would have made a better match. Austen writes:

> Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school . . . that if not foolish she was ignorant, and that her society would certainly do Mr. Elton no good. Harriet would have been a better match. If not wise or re fined herself, she would have connected him with those who were. (249)

Mrs. Elton also believes that once she gains a husband, she no longer needs to practice her accomplishments. She discusses her married friends who have given up piano, and states, "'I begin now to comprehend that a married woman has many things to call her attention.'" Austen then writes, "Emma, finding her so determined upon neglecting her music, had nothing more to say" (254). Austen portrays in this situation that accomplishments only prepare a woman to find a husband, not for the role of a wife, and that good sense and wisdom are better qualities in a match than the classic education Mrs. Elton received.

Mrs. Elton also acts as a foil to Emma, providing a backdrop against which Emma's change throughout the novel can be viewed. On page 288, Emma is jealous of Mrs. Elton for opening the ball, wishing that she was married as well and could open a ball of her own. However, she changes her opinion and decides she does not want to be married so that she can maintain the independence she has in her house with her father. She also changes her opinion about Mr. Martin. In the beginning of the novel, Emma practically forbids Harriet from accepting a marriage proposal from Mr. Martin because he is a farmer. Although Emma concedes that Mr. Martin's sisters "are quite as well educated as me," she states that "Mr. Martin looked as if he did not know what manner was" (75). She learns, however, that Mr. Martin reads novels and that he has true regard for Harriet. After learning more about how well he conducts himself from Mr. Knightly's counsel, Emma approves a match between Mr. Martin and Harriet. This demonstrates Emma's self-reflection and knowledge of self she gains that allows her to change her opinions. Whereas Mrs. Elton maintains the same beliefs she was instilled with in her traditional education, Emma

demonstrates that she thinks for herself and can create and change her own opinions, which is a skill she learned to do without an education at a finishing school.

Education in *Emma* is also about interacting with others in society and building relationships with other people. If Emma had befriended Jane Fairfax instead of Harriet, for example, she would have benefitted from Jane's society. Emma "bitterly regretted not having sought a closer acquaintance with her" and realizes that most of the negative feelings she associated with Jane stemmed from jealousy (359). Although she did not befriend Jane, Emma's attentions to Harriet also provide evidence for this statement. Mr. Knightly credits Emma for Harriet's education on page 325, which emphasizes that education revolves around relationships with other people.

Throughout the course of the novel, Emma gains wisdom through her self-reflection which enables her personal growth. Her new knowledge of self through the education she received from interacting with others is what draws Mr. Knightly's attention. Although Gregory suggested in his letters that any display of knowledge would drive men away, it is, in fact, Emma's education about herself and her actions that cause her to rise in Mr. Knightly's esteem. Emma is also the first of Austen's women to represent a progressive view on what women were entitled to in society. Far from practicing numerous accomplishments to gain a husband, Emma declares she is satisfied with becoming an old maid. Although she marries Mr. Knightly in the end, she maintains a portion of her independence by not leaving her own home to move to her husband's house. Alice Drum describes in "Pride and Prestige: Jane Austen and the Professions" that "Emma supports both tradition and reform, depending on the subject and the circumstances. For example, Emma will not break with tradition: she will marry, but Mr. Knightley will break with tradition and move to his bride's home" (428). Emma breaks tradition, and even though this may not seem revolutionary, it illuminates an important shift in Austen's consideration of women, education, and marriage.

Austen's last two novels, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, further elaborate on the shift in Austen's evaluation of educated women. While her first novels interact with the existing sentiments of women's education, Emma represents the first challenge to these ideas as Austen allows her female character to defy tradition and have power over her choice of residence after marriage. Austen's final novels build on the non-traditional portrayal of women's education. Her later novels represent women's education in more progressive manners than Austen's earlier novels, which demonstrate a shift in Austen's perception of women and present Austen's idea that women deserve a rounder education than traditional finishing school provides. *Persuasion* focuses largely on good sense and learning and a strong sense of self that guides one's actions. It evaluates how novels are a large part of a woman's education and how women, particularly Anne, use their power to manipulate social situations around them. *Northanger Abbey* also elaborates on the importance of novels and reading in education and provides the most comprehensive example of personal growth through experiences. Far from focusing merely on taste, ac-

complishments, or the chance of growing up in a better environment, these novels build on these ideas and depict self-knowledge as education's ultimate aim. Austen challenged society's opinions on formal education, when a woman's only goal was to marry advantageously.

In *Persuasion*, education is introduced as something that makes good company into great company, suggesting that it provides superior knowledge of how to interact in social situations. However, the term education does not refer to formal schooling, but to knowledge, sense, and understanding of human nature. Anne comments to William Elliot, "'My idea of good company, Mr. Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people.'" Elliot responds, "'That is not good company, that is the best. Good company requires only birth, education, and manners, and with regard to education is not very nice. . . . A little learning is by no means a dangerous thing in good company, on the contrary, it will do very well'" (171). This demonstrates that learning, not necessarily education alone, improves company. In fact, Mrs. Smith, Anne's old governess, values her nurse's compassion and good sense above any other qualities. She states:

> She is a shrewd, intelligent, and sensible woman. Hers is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received 'the best education in the world,' know nothing worth attending to. Call it gossip if you will, but when nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure… she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable... (175-176)

Mrs. Smith illuminates the idea that education involves far more than schooling and benefits women in the degree that it makes them more valuable in society and the company of others.

However, Austen also focuses on the role of novels in education. Captain Benwick reads voraciously and the fact that Anne can recommend books for him to read displays her taste and knowledge. Benwick is grateful to her, which supports the idea that a woman who had developed taste in novels could become a treasured companion (128-130). Anne also knows enough poetry that she is able to describe landscapes using quotations. When she is not entertained enough by the company she is walking with, she thinks of poems in her head that describe the various scenes in nature. Her learning allows her to amuse herself and take comfort in her own company instead of simply relying on others for entertainment (114). Elizabeth, Anne's sister, does not value reading as much as Anne does, as evidenced in her statement to Anne before Anne visits Lady Russell: "'You may as well take back that tiresome book she would lend me, and pretend I have read it through. I really cannot be plaguing myself for ever with all the new poems . . . that come out'" (227). Anne emerges as a sympathetic character in contrast to Elizabeth, who has no intention of broadening her knowledge or lessening her ignorance of literature.

Anne also serves to provide a woman's perspective on the many novels that were published by men. It is arguable that Anne could serve as Austen's proxy when she discusses the negative portrayals of women in novels. On page

243, Captain Harville remarks that he has never opened a book in his life that did not debate woman's inconsistency. Anne retorts, "'If you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing.'" Here, Austen is able to make a proto-feminist statement that deplores the current state of women's education. This demonstrates that education matters beyond simple schooling; it gives control to represent topics in writing. This is a power that women typically do not have, which is why Anne refuses to accept the portrayal of women's inconstancies from novels written by men. Education allows men to control the representations of women since they receive more education and, therefore, are seen as more credible sources. However, Austen seems to declare in this instance that if women cannot represent themselves, a reader should not always trust the judgment of the author. This sheds light on a possible reason for Austen's shift in the portrayal of women's education, as if she realized that her novels gave her the control to represent women in an innovative manner.

As Markovits states, Austen wants to both entertain and educate her readers. She wants her women characters to have self-knowledge, but she also wants to give her characters and readers happy endings. Markovits states:

> Austen's letters point to a constant balancing act between a desire to educate her readers (to make them good) and to delight them (to make them happy), and she thinks of her novels comparatively according to which of these ends she has focused on achieving, a distinction based in turn upon the form of happiness with which she blesses her heroines in conclusion. Anne Elliot and Fanny Price are the only two Austen heroines who begin their narratives knowing not only the objects of their love but also their own minds. (18)

Austen allows Anne to be the master of her own mind, which allows her to take action to win the love of Captain Wentworth. As Fordyce discusses in "Sermons to Young Women," virtuous women have a degree of power over men. He describes the "very great and extensive influence" women have over men (400). Anne displays this power in her actions toward Captain Wentworth; she is able to manipulate certain situations to appeal to his favor.

When Anne and Captain Wentworth were on the verge of marriage years before the novel took place, Anne allowed Lady Russell's and her father's influence to affect her decision. This ability to be easily persuaded showed "a feebleness of character." Captain Wentworth states, "She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity" (95). However, by the end of the novel, which is over ten years after Anne gave in to persuasion, Anne is able to act of her own accord. She is persistent in her pursuit of Captain Wentworth; she maneuvers opportunities to speak with Wentworth and makes sure that her meaning will be grasped by him. She knows what she wants and takes action to gain it, which is a progressive view of what a woman of strong character can achieve. Anne's actions are also evidence that with experience and learning, a woman can improve her

situation after gaining a better understanding of self, contrasting with Austen's earlier depiction of women in *Pride and Prejudice*, such as Charlotte Lucas, who views the purpose of education to become wives rather than self-directed individuals. Anne trusts her judgment and acts of her own accord, which challenges More's earlier conception that a woman should not depend on her own judgment.

Northanger Abbey also provides strong evidence that self-learning, self-education, and learning from mistakes and experience are essential in the education of women. Of course, Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* largely to satirize Gothic novels and Gothic heroines; however, she still continues to demonstrate that women's education is important. Catherine Morland has very little success with accomplishments; she was not dedicated in her studies and does not display developed taste or skill in drawing. Her lack of education is evident in her numerous misquotes of famous texts (39-40). Catherine believes she has great knowledge of heroines and Gothic novels, but her own pursuits have not taught her enough about society. She travels to Bath and reads even more Gothic novels, but also learns new lessons from the Tilneys. Before Catherine goes to Bath, "her mind [was] about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (42). This suggests that Catherine's upcoming experiences will inform and shape her education.

In *Northanger Abbey*, education and courtship also are paired hand in hand. Education is revealed through conversations between characters who are courting, which demonstrates distinct, transformative change. Catherine's conversations both with Henry Tilney and Edward Thorpe allow her to gain wisdom over the course of the novel and provide her with new experiences through which she grows and changes. Catherine's education is not only about facts and knowledge, or even accomplishments, but experiences that will cause her to reflect on her actions and character.

For example, Mr. Thorpe's ignorance of the novels that Catherine reads emerges as a character flaw. He states that he would never read The Mysteries of Udolpho or any other Gothic novels, except those written by Mrs. Radcliffe. Catherine hesitantly corrects him, stating that Udolpho was written by Mrs. Radcliffe. She discovers that they do not share similar interests, and she does not even entertain the possibility that he attempts to court her. Instead, she takes great pleasure in discussing novels with Tilney. Mr. Tilney decidedly states, "'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid'" (120). Although Tilney also mocks Catherine's obsession with Gothic novels, their conversations teach Catherine that she should not simply depend on knowledge from what she reads, but that her experiences will help her better understand society. Over the course of her stay at Northanger Abbey, Catherine learns to control her fancy. Although she still takes pleasure in reading Gothic novels, she understands that her own life is not similar to a Gothic text. Her growth is evident on her last night at the abbey when she hears a noise at the door. Catherine "trembled a little at the idea of any one's approaching so cautiously; but resolving not to be again overcome by trivial appearances of alarm, or misled by a raised imagination, she stepped

quietly forward, and opened the door" (216). Catherine realizes that her earlier fears in the abbey were influenced by her reading and understands now, after reflection, that she can master her own emotions. Her personal growth is enabled directly by her experiences at the abbey.

Austen's earlier novels emphasize taste, sense, and education from the environment, while her later ones stress the importance of growing and changing with knowledge gained from experiences. However, each of Austen's six novels revolves around the idea that a woman must reflect on her actions and thoughts and learn her own mind instead of simply focusing on pleasing men. Through her collective novels, Austen provides a comprehensive definition of what a woman's education should include. She creates the universal idea that one can benefit from those around her by learning from their example, must self-examine and reflect on experiences, and learn more about the self in order to gain power. This can be described as a proto-feminist idea because it gives value to educated women and allows them power in their decisions in life outside marriage. Although Austen provides a progressive view in this sense, she does acknowledge certain qualities that women who will be married should possess. She understands the merits of society's perception of women and supports the idea that women should be cheerful, have a good temper, be obedient to their elders, and be able to comfort, counsel, reason, feel, assist, sooth, and strengthen those around them (More Comparison, 501). Fordyce states that a woman's chief recommendations are a "sober mind, steady attachment, gentle manners, and good understanding" (399). While Austen does highlight the benefits of these qualities, she also provides a much more progressive view of women in education.

The traditional view of women in the late 1700s and early 1800s was difficult to challenge. As stated in "The Practical Uses of Female Knowledge," another moralist text by More, "Each sex has its proper excellencies, which would be lost were they melted down into the common character by the fusion of new philosophy. Why should we do away distinctions which increase the mutual benefits and enhance the satisfaction of life?" Society, in general, did not want to change. Most people did not want women to gain power due to a more comprehensive education; the existing view was that "an advantageous settlement on marriage is the universal prize." A woman's only duty in life was due to her husband, in "sharing the cares of her husband, perhaps in consoling him under misfortunes, and in bearing patiently the inequalities of his temper, ruffled by adverse accidents; that so far from shewing discontent, it will be her part to soften these asperities, by a steady command over her own passions" (Wakefield, 288). A woman did not need a thorough education in order to perform these duties, simply a way to develop her morals and virtues.

Other sources of literature that would have been circulating during Austen's time also demonstrate that society was not likely to alter its perceptions of educated women and did not provide a hopeful outlook of change. Maria Edgeworth, another novelist during Austen's time, wrote in "Prudence and Economy" that women "must trust to the experience of others, they cannot always have recourse to what ought to be, they must adapt themselves to what

is." However, some women writers in addition to Jane Austen also examined the state of women's education and found fault with it, suggesting a need for adjustment. In "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," Mary Wollstonecraft describes how "strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty," and how women were like flowers that were disregarded before they reach maturity:

> One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false sense of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (503-504)

As Austen introduces in *Persuasion*, Wollstonecraft explains how society's understanding of women is biased due to the lack of material presented by women. Instead of being viewed as people, women were creatures whose only ambitions should be to inspire love.

As scholar Alice Drum describes, Jane Austen is "a balanced social critic, who is able to promote the positive values of traditional gentry life, while showing at the same time and in the same novels that gentry life is evolving" (92). Austen's ability to show that life was evolving also applies to her portrayal of women's education. She is able to acknowledge the traditional perceptions that exist, but also provide a more progressive look at what women's education should entail. Education can become a way for women to improve their own individual status and regard in society, rather than marrying to advance in class. Drum calls this idea "vertical ascendance," in which women attract men of a higher class to marry in order to enter a higher societal circle. However, Austen demonstrates with her later novels that women are more in charge of their own minds and have the power to affect situations around them. Reflection and self-knowledge become the cornerstones of women's education for Austen, the qualities that enable women a slightly greater degree of power. For Austen, "education's aims include instilling a sense of one's duty and the ability to behave rationally, as well as inculcating wisdom, good breeding, and learning . . . she identifies self-knowledge as education's primary end" (Roth, 112).

Austen engages with and challenges societal perceptions of women's education primarily through her main female characters.Throughout her six published novels, Austen allows her main characters to become educated in ways other than traditional finishing schools. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne learns about taste and control, and in *Pride and Prejudice*, accomplishments and wit serve to educate Elizabeth in her interactions in society. Fanny, in *Mansfield Park*, learns by example from her environment and develops a strong set of principles that allow her to make her own decision about matrimony. *Emma*, Austen's next novel, highlights a shift in Austen's portrayal of women, as Emma learns more about herself and the people around her through self-reflection. Her display of self-knowledge contrasts with the moralists' idea

that showing any sort of cultivation could be detrimental to finding a husband. Emma not only marries Mr. Knightly, but defies tradition in that she remains in her own house as a married woman, and Mr. Knightly moves to join her and her father. Anne, in *Persuasion*, also uses self-reflection to gain knowledge and understanding about herself. She is able to overcome any previous weakness from letting others persuade her into decisions, and instead uses her own judgment and influence to manipulate situations in order to talk with and win Mr. Wentworth's affection. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine learns from her new experiences that she can control her emotions, which demonstrates further that self-reflection and different experiences in life contribute to a greater sense of self.

These six women ultimately gain self-knowledge throughout Austen's novels, although each woman's journey is different. Self-knowledge as the ultimate goal, contrasted with the perception existing in Austen's time that marriage was a woman's aim and anything beyond a simple education at a finishing school, repulsed potential husbands. Austen creates a universal view of women's education that includes not only book learning, but learning from experience and environment. Women, after reflecting on their experiences, could learn more about themselves, which would enable them to make their own decisions and maintain their own power. Austen's women demonstrated a challenge to social precepts and provided a proto-feminist picture of women. Austen wanted to not only please her readers, but also show them that a woman could learn in all aspects of life and use this knowledge to become a stronger individual. Each main female character progresses further away from societal standards and the picture presented by the moralists, and closer to a representation of an autonomous woman. These women are educated in different aspects throughout their lives and learn that marriage is not the highest goal in life, but that self-knowledge gives them independence in a way that traditional education could not. Austen demonstrates in her novels that society is, in fact, changing and that women are driven more by a desire to have self-knowledge and independence instead of marrying a man of a higher class to improve their situation. Throughout these six novels, Jane Austen challenges the moralists' views on women's education and reveals the importance of self-awareness through an holistic education, which results in self-knowledge and a stronger sense of individuality.

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