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In Pursuit of Independence: Feminist Heroines in the Romantic and
Early Victorian Fiction
Master's Thesis

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English Philology

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Olomouc 2020

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Podolí dne 23. 4. 2020

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Děkuji Mgr. Emě Jelínkové, Ph.D. za poskytnutí pomoci při zpracování této práce a její odbornou asistenci.

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INTRODUCTION

The turn of the eighteenth century was marked by anti-revolutionary sentiments in Britain. The 1789 revolution in France resulted in the emergence of radicals in the kingdom, demanding political and social changes, and the government responded by issuing severe punishments on those who would attempt to upset the order of the society. Among one of those progressive thinkers demanding change was Mary Wollstonecraft; aware of the injustice of the position of women in contemporary society and inspired by the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft had a vision of an equal British society, in which women would benefit from the rights that men demanded for themselves in France. While there were earlier women's rights advocates who called for equality, Wollstonecraft nonetheless gave the cause a strong voice, linking women's subordinate position in society to their lacking education, the inability to distinguish themselves in professions that were exclusively intended for men, and the social construct and stereotypes of the weaker sex.

It is unfortunate that her call for equality in society was silenced by Wollstonecraft's untimely death; furthermore, her radical ideas concerning the woman question were abandoned on the account of her scandalous life. The publication of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) provided a convenient excuse to induce anti-feminist sentiments in society, preventing other women to step up and take Wollstonecraft's place as the women's advocates, lest they should be suspected of leading the same sinful lives.

What did not changed were the conditions of women; still considered the weaker sex in both body and mind, women were severely disadvantaged in all aspects of life. Daughters were overlooked in favour of sons, sisters were deprived of the same education their brothers received, young women were forced to marry to improve their status, wives suffered for being thought as one with their husbands, having no legal identity or chance to escape an unhappy marriage if their husband turned out to be a brute, an adulterer, or a profligate.

The predominantly patriarchal British society did not consider women to be capable of reason in the same capacity as men; from the young age, girls were taught to depend completely on their fathers, brothers and their future husbands. Women were confined to the inside of their homes, having no means to enter the

public sphere reserved for men. Their rationality would not be confirmed and their education improved, as women had no political representation. As such, the laws regarding property and marriage were severely disadvantageous to women. A wife became a property of her husband upon their marriage and anything she possessed transferred to the care of her husband. Her dowry was oftentimes squandered and she had no legal way of protesting. When her husband turned brutal, she could not legally abandon her husband; the luckier wives were granted separation by their husbands, the unlucky ones were bound to a man they could neither respect nor love for life. Before 1857, a wife could not petition for a civil divorce; the 1857 Act of Parliament provided women with the possibility, however, its scope was severely limited.¹ Furthermore, before the reforms in 1830s, women were unable to claim custody of their children; like the wives, the children became the property of their fathers.

Women born around the turn of the century were aware of the disadvantaged position of a woman in society, yet they had no means of protest. Women novelists who wrote and published their works during the Romantic and early Victorian period—in this thesis represented by Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Charlotte and Anne Brontë—had to conform to the societal norms in order to be published; however, it did not stop the authors from creating strong female protagonists, who subtly challenge the order of the contemporary patriarchal society.

Feminist criticism, among other topics, addresses the problem of creating a feminist heroine. Wollstonecraft herself thought such a woman, be it a literary character or real, impossible to exist. Cynthia Watkins Richardson asserts that “to be heroic, the woman must prove exceptional for her time, in many ways more advanced than her female contemporaries. Yet to be a feminist heroine, she must continue to view her own destiny as intimately, even inextricably, linked to the fates of the same contemporaries.”² Yet, a feminist heroine cannot be too powerful, too exceptional, lest she should appear unreal and unnatural, thus harmful to feminism.

¹ See Jill Matus, “‘Strong family likeness’: *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 108.

² Cynthia Watkins Richardson, “The Making of Feminist Heroines,” review of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, by Barbara Taylor, *H-Women*, March 2004, 1.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the female protagonists in the selected works of Jane Austen, Frances Burney, and Charlotte and Anne Brontë, exploring the characters in terms of their opinions, behaviour, circumstances and their uniqueness, which is reflected in contrast with other female characters in the novels. The above-mentioned criteria will be considered in order to establish these female characters as literary feminist heroines. Furthermore, this thesis examines the possibility of these women writers being influenced by the works and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft, an early English feminist; to prove the influence despite the lack of direct evidence or reference, this thesis suggests specific instances which connect the novels of the first half of the nineteenth century with Wollstonecraft's legacy.

1. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Mary Wollstonecraft was born on 27 April 1759 in London, as the second of seven children of Edward John Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, née Dickson. Her father inherited a large fortune from Mary's grandfather, a successful businessman, but what he did not inherit was his hard-working spirit and business mind. Due to her father's failure to establish himself as a gentleman farmer in Epping, the Wollstonecraft family was forced to move repeatedly, declining into financial and social ruin.

Mary never experienced a happy family life while she was living under the parental roof. Her father was an abusive alcoholic, who abused not only his wife, but his children as well. When she was older, Mary tried to defend her mother, but to no ends. It is not surprising that Wollstonecraft appears very cynical in her portrayal of parents in her works. It was seeing the unhappy marriage of her parents, as well as the blind subordination of her passive mother, that undeniably led to her resolution never to marry.

Wollstonecraft received very little education; in fact, it was only her older brother Edward who was formally educated, which led to his successful career as a lawyer. Mary was largely self-taught, but it did not diminish her intellect in any way. She strove to improve herself by extensive reading and exercising her reason. In 1774, she found a second home and her first experience with a happy marriage with the family of Reverend Clare, who cared for her and instructed her in order to further her education. It was around this time that she met Frances Blood, her one true friend.

Mary left the parental roof in 1778, at the age of nineteen, to work as a lady's companion to Mrs. Dawson in Bath where she stayed for three years, before returning home to nurse her dying mother. Wollstonecraft moved to live with her friend Fanny soon afterwards and together they started to work on their project of opening a day-school in Islington. However, for strategic reasons, they decided to move the school to Newington Green. This time, her sisters Everina and Eliza, whom Wollstonecraft had persuaded to escape from her cruel husband, joined the efforts of Mary and Frances. It was in Newington Green where Mary Wollstonecraft first encountered the Dissent and made the acquaintance of Reverend Richard Price.

Fanny's bad health separated the two close friends, as Fanny moved to Portugal. Fearing Fanny's time was nearly over, Wollstonecraft appealed to her friends for financial support in order to go to Lisbon and be with Frances, who, in the meantime, got married and got pregnant. In November 1795, Fanny and her newborn child died following a complicated delivery, which left Wollstonecraft devastated. The Newington Green school project failed due to bad financial management and Wollstonecraft's absence, and this forced Mary to accept the offer to be a governess in Ireland, in the family of Lord Kingsborough, where she wrote her first fictional work, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788).

After being dismissed, Wollstonecraft determinedly returned to London and decided to pursue the career of a professional writer, hoping to financially support not only herself, but her family as well. She succeeded in becoming the first of "a new genus,"³ a woman fully supporting herself with her writing. Maria J. Falco points out that near impossibility of Wollstonecraft's ambition, as even the later great women novelists such as Austen and the Brontës could not fully rely on their writing to support themselves.

Wollstonecraft became immersed in the publishing world; she worked as an assistant to Dr. Joseph Johnson and she greatly contributed to his periodical *Analytical Review*. Apart from writing reviews, she also supported herself and her family by writing, notably on the education of young girls, and she taught herself French, German and Dutch in order to translate several books from those languages. It was in London where she first met her future husband, William Godwin, a meeting which failed to leave either of the radicals impressed.

Mary Wollstonecraft was fascinated by the French Revolution and she decided to witness the Reign of Terror for herself. Following an unsatisfying emotional attachment to a painter Henry Fuseli, Wollstonecraft left Britain to visit revolutionary France in 1792; it was here where she met her lover, an American businessman Gilbert Imlay. For her own protection, as France was a dangerous place for a British subject at the time, she claimed Imlay as her husband; however, the two never married. Their scandalous affair resulted in Mary giving birth to her first daughter, named Frances after her beloved friend, on 14 May 1794. Wollstonecraft, who was always more attached to Imlay than he was to her,

³ Maria J. Falco, *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 4.

attempted suicide twice in the following year, unable to deal with Imlay's affairs with other women and their failing relationship. Following a trip to Scandinavia on his behalf, which resulted in her personal travel narrative *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), Wollstonecraft was left by Imlay for the last time, refusing his financial support. Soon afterwards, Mary resumed her acquaintance with William Godwin, who became her lover. Godwin, like Wollstonecraft, did not believe in marriage; however, the two got married on 29 March 1797, for the sake of Mary, who was at the time three months pregnant. Their new union revealed the fact that Mary was never, in fact, married to Imlay. On 30 August 1797, her daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who later became a celebrated author, was born; ten days later, on 10 September, Mary Wollstonecraft succumbed to a puerperal fever, leaving behind her newborn daughter, a husband, and several unfinished manuscripts.

During her short life, Mary Wollstonecraft—a feminist writer, an intellectual, a female thinker, a political commentator, a female philosopher, “a bluntspoken philosophical radical”⁴—published several works on education, politics, the French Revolution, a book of stories for children, as well as a short novel, *Mary: A Fiction*. Among her major works are *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), her Scandinavian *Letters*, or *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). Nevertheless, none of these works is as progressive, revolutionary, daring, or as associated with Wollstonecraft as her second vindication—*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she argues for the equal right to education and where she challenges the traditional subordination of women in society.

Mary Wollstonecraft left behind a considerable legacy, and had Godwin not published his unfortunate *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's theory would surely influence an earlier emancipation and perhaps initiate the “revolution in female manners”⁵ that she called for. However, with the publication of the memoirs, Wollstonecraft became infamous; her works were dismissed on the basis of her scandalous life, as her affair with Gilbert Imlay, her *faux* marriage to him, as well as the illegitimacy of

⁴ Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31.

⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 84.

her firstborn daughter Fanny, became public knowledge. Moreover, Godwin further damaged Wollstonecraft's reputation by implying that she was an atheist, a claim that was not necessarily true. The publication of the memoirs resulted in Wollstonecraft's condemnation; no woman would associate with the manifesto of a fallen woman, no scholar would regard her work seriously. Therefore, Wollstonecraft was nearly forgotten, until the beginning of the twentieth century brought forward a renewed interest in her work.

The following parts of this chapter deal with the ideas which Mary Wollstonecraft presented in her second *Vindication* and in her unfinished novel, *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), in order to provide a background for later analysis of the works of Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Charlotte and Anne Brontë, and to establish the influence which Mary Wollstonecraft had on these women novelists.

1.1 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft dedicated her feminist manifesto to M. Talleyrand Perigord, late Bishop of Autun; Talleyrand, a French diplomat, was at the time working on a new concept of education of boys. In her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft appeals to him to include girls in the concept, as there is no rational reason to deny women the same education. Wollstonecraft bases her claim on her notion that women possess the same reason that men do, and therefore, they should not be disadvantaged in their education. Her claim was at the time very radical; not only were girls not to be educated in the same subjects as boys, but no European country of the time educated the children in the way she proposed. The education of children relied heavily on private tutors or boarding-school for boys of wealthy parents.

Mary Wollstonecraft challenges the subordinate position of women in society, and in her second *Vindication*, she provides arguments for the improvement of their situation, which will, according to her, lead to improvement of their domestic lives and inevitably to the advancement of the society as a whole. She is a fierce advocate of the equality among the sexes, arguing that women possess a soul as well as men do; as this soul is unsexed, it is the source of ungendered reason, which was given to both men and women equally. She insists

on women being rational; in the introduction, she states: “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures,”⁶ and she develops further arguments for the rationality of women. As a moral being, a woman should not be subjected to a man’s reason.

Wollstonecraft early on concedes that men are superior to women in their physical strength; however, later on, she claims that girls and boys should grow up together, that girls should not be confined to the inside of their homes; instead they should be able to play outside with their brothers, in order to attain the bodily strength that differentiates women and men. Furthermore, “familiarity . . . breeds respect rather than contempt;”⁷ therefore, by allowing them to play together and by educating them in the same room and in the same subjects, the sexes become accustomed to one another and the girls and boys will eventually become better wives and husbands.

She calls for the reform of women’s education, because as Sandrine Bergès argues, “unless [women] have equal access to education, they will effectively be slaves.”⁸ Wollstonecraft frequently makes the analogy between the position of women and slavery, and she challenges the notion of the natural inferiority of women in order to “restore them their lost dignity.”⁹ Wollstonecraft believes that once there is equality among the sexes, the society as a whole will be more virtuous, and unless this equality is instigated, the society can never cease to be immoral and ignorant.

“It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are, in some degree, independent of men.”¹⁰ Wollstonecraft demands some independence for the women in order to improve the society; if women are not subordinated to men, they can improve themselves and exercise their reason and effectively become better citizens. Wollstonecraft was strongly influenced by the French Revolution and she makes use of revolutionary vocabulary. She takes the rights that the Revolution demands for men and applies them to women in British society.

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 59.

⁷ Sandrine Bergès, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 26.

⁸ Bergès, *Routledge Guidebook*, 23.

⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Complete Works*, 84.

¹⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Complete Works*, 153.

She connects the issue of women's independence with motherhood when she claims that oppressed women inevitably become bad wives and even worse mothers. An oppressed woman will fight her husband for any semblance of power and she will tyrannise over her inferiors—that is, her children and servants—to prove her seeming superiority. By behaving so, she will give her children bad example and they will later treat their inferiors in the same way. Furthermore, weak women and children, the victims of the patriarchal society, will be cruel to animals and Wollstonecraft warns against losing one's humanity.

If women are not educated, they do not exercise their understanding; without sound understanding, they cannot comprehend the importance of virtue. An ignorant woman is therefore a threat to the society that strives to be virtuous. Women are taught to acquire “manners before morals”¹¹ and their lives of indulging romantic sentiments by music and reading novels and poems make them weak. Furthermore, an ignorant, uneducated woman is an easy prey for charlatans, eager to have their future read by fortune-tellers, believing the tricks of hypnotists and pseudo-doctors. The women who indulge their sensibility will inevitably fail as mothers, indulging and spoiling their children.

Moreover, weak, ignorant women who have the “romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed *sentimental*”¹² are also an easy prey for the advances of rakes and libertines. Flattered by their constant attention and easy charm, they prefer them over virtuous and sensible men, who do not share the same sentiments with them, and the uneducated women endanger their virtue by the association with these men of pleasure.

Wollstonecraft exploits the double standard that prevails in society regarding the importance of reputation, which is the result of the exercise of one's mind. A woman who has “fallen” cannot return to virtue and restore her reputation; yet the society is full of men who live their lives full of vice, whose reputations are never harmed by their sinful ways. It may seem that Wollstonecraft—having rejected the idea of marriage on the basis of it being a legal slavery, or worse, a legal prostitution—encourages women to live in sin;

¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 69.

¹² Wollstonecraft, *Complete Works*, 183.

however, it is not the case, as she warns women against succumbing to fleeting passion.

Women are rendered weak and inferior by their subordinate position in society. The lack of proper education, as well as the fashionable sort of education which only allows them to pursue superficial accomplishments, render them further dependent on the men in their lives. The female education, limited as it is, is oriented purely on achieving fashionable accomplishments which were thought necessary to find a wealthy husband.

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives.¹³

In the education of a woman, everything else is inferior to beauty. Women learn to be vain as children, developing a foolish fondness of dress, and they will inevitably become bad wives and mothers. If a woman's only merit is being beautiful, she is injurious both to her family, as well as to the female sex in general. A mother who does not exercise reason is unnatural and will neglect or indulge her children, particularly her daughters' vanity, furthering their ignorance.

Wollstonecraft warns about the transience of beauty; marriages which begin on the superficial qualities of a woman, like her beauty, will never be happy or successful. Wollstonecraft sees the ideal marriage as a union of two equal partners; she goes on to say that if a woman is educated, she will become her husband's companion when the beauty fades, and her marriage will not be over.

By educating women equally to men, the society will benefit not only from their virtue, but from their improved parenting as well. Wollstonecraft argues against blind obedience, be it of a woman to a man, or a child to a parent. She asserts that a child will not listen to an irrational parental advice; therefore, women need to be educated in order to be valuable guides to their children. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft claims that "would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship, instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful

¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 66.

wives, more reasonable mother—in a word, better citizens.”¹⁴ By granting women their God-given rationality, men would not upset the order of the society—they would improve it.

While Wollstonecraft’s insistence on never marrying may appear as her rejection of the institution of marriage, it is not a correct assumption. She criticises the marriages that prevail in the society of her time, formed on artificial qualities and not personal merit. Wollstonecraft proposes to view marriage as friendship; such a marriage will not be passionate, but the spouses will mutually respect and care for one another. She insists on the equality of the spouses; therefore, both of them need to be educated in the same way, which will inevitably result in a better marriage. She argues that if a woman in an equal marriage is widowed, she will be able to better provide for her children than a woman who has always been a meek wife. Moreover, she claims that an educated woman will be able to choose her husband better—or she may decide not to marry at all.

She argues that women possess reason as much as men do; however, their exercise of it is limited due to societal restrictions. She claims that a woman can only fulfil her duties as a wife and a mother if she is able to exercise her mind; and ultimately, it is the exercise of reason that brings her freedom and independence. She demands some financial independence for women, without which they can never attain self-governance.

Wollstonecraft calls for a reform in female manners, as well as for a change in marriage and property laws, which are unjust to women; nevertheless, the one reform that she strongly insists on is the educational reform. She is critical about the girls’ boarding-schools, where girls live too close together and wash together, thinking that it will lead to immodesty and overall familiarity when these girls marry. Instead, she proposes a new system of national education, which will be public and equal to all—the poor, the rich, the men, the women. She proposes for children to be taught together regardless of their sex or the wealth of their parents. She insists on both the exercise of the mind and the exercise of the body, and she believes that such an education will strengthen their character and will help them all become good citizens, regardless of their rank—as she perceives

¹⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 159.

rank distinction as unnatural and preposterous since it does not depend on one's merit. She proposes all children wear the same uniform in order to diminish the differences in wealth and to make them all appear equal.

Mary Wollstonecraft does not blame only the men for the oppressive position of women in society. She concedes that men prefer to keep women "always in the state of childhood,"¹⁵ and their patriarchal rule leads to folly in women; however, she is even more concerned about the effect of women who are content with their position in society, their ignorant state and their lack of education. For Wollstonecraft, these pose the biggest threat to the issue of the equality of the two sexes.

Had Wollstonecraft not died so early in her life, she might have initiated the necessary reforms in society. Her pointed critique of the important issues of the day and her insistence on achieving the same social station for women would have influenced many progressive thinkers of her time. The publication of the memoirs was rather unfortunate, as it overshadowed the necessity for the debate about the issues she discusses in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, as Maria J. Falco concludes, "the details of Wollstonecraft's life as revealed by Godwin were the excuse for, not the cause of, the repression and ridicule of her work for so many years."¹⁶ Had she lived longer, she might have demanded the change; however, along with her died the voice of a progressive early feminist, and no one could replace it.

1.2 *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*

Wollstonecraft's second novel is unfinished and had been posthumously published by her husband, William Godwin. It is often perceived either as the second volume of her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Wollstonecraft hinted there will be a sequel, or as its fictional version. While her premature death prevented her from finishing it, the injustice done to the eponymous Maria resonates all the more for its unfinished ending. By writing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft aimed to exhibit "the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of

¹⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 66.

¹⁶ Maria J. Falco, *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 6.

the partial laws and customs of society;”¹⁷ particularly, she exposes the unequal position of wives and points out the need for a reform, which would allow women to leave their cruel husbands. It is undeniably her most radical work.

In *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft challenges the patriarchal society which strives to oppress women of all social classes. By including the trial scene, Wollstonecraft underlines the legal implications of the unjust, discriminatory laws; while the charges against George Venables are dismissed, Maria cannot escape without punishment. Wollstonecraft’s story of a fugitive wife who leaves an immoral marriage resonates in later literary works, namely in Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer* (1814), and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).

The title of Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novels puts it into the stark contrast with her *A Vindication*—contrasting the *Wrongs* and *Rights of Woman*. In itself, the title is ambiguous, and at first sight, it appears as if the story features a woman’s wrongdoings; however, it immediately becomes evident that the wrongs from the title were done to the heroine, not done by her. Similarly, *The Wanderer* also deals with the ambiguity of wrongs; and like in *Maria*, Burney’s novel portrays wrongs done *to* a woman, not done *by* a woman.

The heroine of the novel, the eponymous Maria, suffers from grave injustice; nonetheless, the female suffering is not limited to her, as it is almost universally shared by every female character in Wollstonecraft’s novel. It is not only a fierce critique of marriage laws, but also of the abhorrent treatment of women. Similarly to her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft protests the fact that marriage is women’s only way to rise.

It is Maria’s marriage that is the source of all her misfortunes. Legally bound to a man whose understanding is inferior to hers, she is a victim of the society which gives women nothing to do but fancy themselves in love. Misled in her estimation of George Venables’s character, seduced by his libertine ways when he pursued a fortune of five thousand pounds promised to him by Maria’s wealthy uncle upon their marriage, and driven from her parental roof by a tyrannising step-mother, the former housekeeper of the family, Maria consents to marry a man who turns out to be a cruel, oppressive husband. Forced to repeatedly

¹⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, *Mary; Maria; Matilda* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 59.

endure marital rape, Maria becomes pregnant; and she later comes to regret the misfortune of having a daughter, who, like her mother, is bound to become a victim of the patriarchal rule.

Compelled to flee a husband who stoops as low as to offer her to his friend, Mr. S—, Maria is determined to provide for herself and her daughter, whom she takes with her. However, she is hunted down by her brutal husband; the law and the society are against her, as it is illegal to harbour a fugitive wife who, according to the law, abducted the child by taking her from her father. Both the wife and the child are the property of the husband, who snatches the child from Maria's bosom and imprisons her in a mansion that serves both as a mad-house and a prison.

While in the asylum, Maria struggles to prove her rationality, which is highlighted by her being surrounded by insane people, and she is yet again reminded of the wretchedness of a woman's position in society when she hear the story of one of her attendants. Jemima, a child born out of the wedlock, has only ever encountered ill fate in her life; being considered a slave by her father's new family, being raped by her new master and having to abort an unwanted baby, Jemima's difficulties were never ending. She had to reduce herself to being a prostitute in order to survive, and she later became a mistress of an old gentleman, where she sought to improve herself with hopes of being able to enter the society that considers her an outcast.

Jemima, having always been the victim of abuse of both men and women, has had to overcome the issue of her damaged reputation, as well as the difficulties facing a woman seeking employment.

This was a wretchedness of situation peculiar to my sex. A man with half my industry, and, I may say, abilities, could have procured a decent livelihood, and discharged some of the duties which knit mankind together; whilst I, who had acquired the taste for the rational . . . was cast aside as the filth of society. Condemned to labour, like a machine, only to earn bread, and scarcely that.¹⁸

Having been a nurse, a servant, a beggar, a prostitute, a mistress, a needle-worker, a washerwoman, Jemima never made enough money to be independent; a goal she strived for. When an injury prevented her from doing the washing, she resolved to

¹⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, *Mary; Maria; Matilda* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 89.

become a thief out of spite—and her bad luck continued when she was incarcerated and later forced into a work-house. It is in her last workplace where she meets Maria and where she relates her unfortunate story and laments the double standards in employing women and men, saying that a woman can only find an employment as a prostitute. By relating the story of Jemima, Wollstonecraft objects to the fact that there are no decent professions for women, not even for those who have talents, with the exception of becoming a governess; however, as she points out, a governess still struggles to make a living.

Wollstonecraft echoes her previous notions of indulgent mothers when Maria shares the story of her childhood. Maria's older brother, Robert, has always been her parents' favourite, and the indulgence and doting led to his spoilt nature and his cruel behaviour not only to his younger sibling, but to animals as well. The author criticises this preference for sons; moreover, she protests against primogeniture, repeating her belief that children of the same parents should inherit equally.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft explores the fact that it is never the firstborn sons who take care of the dying parents, but the daughters, who, sacrificing their own lives and their health, nurse their parents until their last moments and are turned out of the house immediately after the death of their fathers, being left nearly penniless. The duty to the parents is, according to Wollstonecraft, the same for sons as for daughters; however, it is a social convention that it is a daughter who aids her ailing parents, never a son.

Maria's escape goes to show how the prevalent opinions in the society are not to be challenged; in her search for a decent apartment, which is more difficult for a woman than it would be for a man, she encounters the opinion that "when a woman was once married, she must bear every thing."¹⁹ As a property of her husband, a woman is caged—"bastilled . . . for life"²⁰—and a man can do with her as he pleases. George Venables' attempt to sell his wife to his friend only further confirms Wollstonecraft's opinion of an unequal marriage as legal slavery, or worse, prostitution.

¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, *Mary; Maria; Matilda* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 126.

²⁰ Wollstonecraft, Shelley, *Maria*, 115.

In her novel *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft further explores the ways in which women are oppressed by men and society at large and harshly criticises the “absurdity of the laws respecting matrimony”²¹ and the state of women who are essentially born as slaves. And although it was not the author’s intention, the unfinished status of the novel and the uncertainty of the heroine’s faith only go further to show that the struggle against oppression and the fight for equality was, in the time of the novel’s publication, far from over.

²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, *Mary; Maria; Matilda* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 126.

2. FRANCES BURNEY'S *THE WANDERER*

Frances Burney's novels offer a valuable insight into the English society of the eighteenth century. She comments on the importance of social prominence and familial relations, or the lack thereof, in *Evelina* (1778), and she uses the plot of *Cecilia* (1782) to criticise the aristocratic values that completely disregard one's personal merit, and she faithfully portrays the foolishness of social conventions. The plot of *Camilla* (1796) emphasises the dangers of young girls' inexperience, and cautions against the issues which result from the lack of proper supervision. Although all her works are concerned with the precarious position of women in the society of Burney's time, this thesis will focus on the analysis of her last novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), since, unlike her previous novels, it can be considered to be a feminist novel, and since it "addresses most explicitly, and at the times brutally, the difficulties that face women who want (out of both desire and necessity) to attain some amount of independence and economic self-sufficiency."²²

Susan Osborne declares that "claims that *The Wanderer* is a feminist novel can hardly be doubted with its theme of the difficulties inherent in being a woman in the eighteenth century."²³ Of all of Frances Burney's novels, it is the last one, *The Wanderer*, which is the most revolutionary. It is not only due to the fact that Burney set the novel in the time of the French Revolution, but mainly because of the radical ideas that one of the female characters professes. Published in the time of the still predominantly patriarchal society, where feminist ideas were not widely favourably received, it is not surprising that *The Wanderer* is the least popular of her works. However, the precise subject that caused the poor reception of the novel in its own time is what makes it so appealing to contemporary feminist literary scholarship.

The lengthy novel, which catalogues the struggles and obstacles in a life of a brave young woman who is forced, by circumstances, to be on her own and provide for herself, brilliantly captures the hard reality that a woman faced in the society of the late eighteenth century. Despite the novel's setting within the revolutionary period of the century, it is clear that Burney's characters, mirroring

²² Debra Silverman, "Reading Frances Burney's "The Wanderer: Or, Female Difficulties": The Politics of Women's Independence," *Pacific Coast Philology* 26(1/2) (1991): 68.

²³ Susan Osborne, *Feminism* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 49.

the British society of the time, resist change and progress, as they seem content with their situations and refuse to change their old-fashioned notions and ways.

Even the subtitle of the book—*or, Female Difficulties*—hints that the protagonist, the eponymous Wanderer, will be subjected to numerous hardships; however, the hardships are not limited to her. Burney uses the Wanderer as a personification for the struggles of the female sex in general, and she uses Juliet Granville's harsh situation to show how challenging and complicated it was for a woman to find paid work, criticising, like Wollstonecraft, the limited opportunities for the women of her time.

The feminism in the book is two-fold; therefore, judging who the true feminist heroine of the story is, is not straightforward. On first glance, it is undoubtedly Elinor Joddrel who is the paragon of feminism in the book, particularly with her revolutionary thinking and her feminist outbursts. However, Miss Joddrel can hardly be considered to be a heroine, given her numerous antics and scandalous behaviour throughout the story, although her stance on the position of women is assuredly feminist. I will therefore argue that the actual feminist heroine of the story is the courageous Juliet, the Wanderer, despite the fact that she is not in fact striving for a change in the unjust British society, nor is she proclaiming revolutionary ideas; she is simply attempting to survive the hard situation she was placed in—or, rather, forced into. However, it would be detrimental to omit Elinor from the analysis, as she certainly possesses some clearly feminist qualities and ideas, which are evidently modelled on those of Mary Wollstonecraft. Therefore, a later part of this chapter will focus on the character of Elinor, her beliefs and principles, as well as her flaws and her subsequent position as a feminist “anti-heroine” of the novel.

2.1 Juliet Granville

Juliet Granville, the protagonist of the novel, is known under many names. She is the eponymous Wanderer, but she is also called the demoiselle, the Incognita, the frenchified swindler, the citoyenne, L.S., or Miss Ellis. Little is known of her, and for the most part, she conceals her true name, her true circumstance, her secret. She is a master of disguise; she speaks English with a foreign accent, but only as she pleases, she has a double face, one black and one white, she wears patches and

bandages to cover nonexistent bruises, scars and sores. She has been “bruised and beaten; and dirty and clean; and ragged and whole; and wounded and healed; and a European and a Creole, in less than a week.”²⁴ As the proverb goes, the necessity is the mother of invention; and Juliet is in dire need of being inventive for the whole of the novel.

Faithfully to the subtitle, Juliet’s life has never been lacking in difficulties. Born to the parents who were married in secret, her first problem arises with the death of her mother, when her father, the late Lord Granville, sends her to France with her grandmother. It is safe to say that it is this decision that her current unfortunate situation stems from. As Lord Granville was, at the time, too cowardly to openly legitimise the marriage and the birth of his eldest child, her identity was unknown even in the convent where she grew up. His premature death gave her little possibility of claiming her English relations, except for a marriage and birth certificate, along with a codicil of his will, sent to her guardian, the Bishop. However, her misfortunes did not end with the demise of her father; a fire in a mansion claimed the official documents confirming her parentage, and the only thing she was left with was a promissory-note from Lord Denmeath, the guardian of her half-siblings, where he demanded she be first married and settled in France before she could claim her portion of the inheritance, six thousand pounds sterling.

Alone in the world, only with the protection of her friends, she is exposed to a mercenary commissary, who is determined to gain wealth and fame, regardless of the cost. Juliet is an easy prey for the commissary, who, upon hearing and seeing the promissory-note for thousands of pounds, decided to usurp the money for himself. Using the power vested in him, he threatens the Bishop’s life, unless Juliet enters into a marriage with him. Juliet, who is not a weak, meek woman, refuses; but confronted with the sight of her beloved guardian at the execution place, so near the dreaded guillotine, she consents to marry him to save the Bishop, even if it means losing the last link to her English identity.

Forced into an undesirable marriage, the brave heroine flees to England under the disguise of a poor wretch. However, being in her homeland, her difficulties do not cease to exist. She must constantly fight against prejudice,

²⁴ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

without any resources or the ability to use her name, if she wants to stay hidden from her brutish husband. She is not fazed in the face of difficulty; she rises to the challenge and is determined to use her accomplishments and her strong will to provide for herself. It is in this aspect that she most resembles a feminist heroine. Juliet does not shrink from hard work, she is determined not to take charity, and she is fully prepared to earn her own independence.

However, she lives in the world previously portrayed by Mary Wollstonecraft—a world where women are against other women, where there is no female solidarity, only rivalry; a world of men, who do not allow women to be successful in their pursuits; a world where women, who are otherwise oppressed, will do anything to have even a semblance of power over their supposed inferiors—and due to her limited resources, she cannot escape this mercenary world. Being unable to claim her connection to the Granville family, she is left without a friend or ally; because even those who try to help her either have a hidden agenda, or they undermine her attempts at reaching independence.

Whenever she tries to use her exertions to support herself, she is unsuccessful; she is forced to cease her efforts, either for the lack of funds and energy, or because others are sabotaging her. Most notably, it is Miss Arbe, a young woman who is pursuing all the female accomplishments without the ability to be brilliant in any of them, who takes advantage of the unfortunate Juliet. Unable to pursue her chosen profession of a governess yet, Juliet heeds the advice of the supposedly generous Miss Arbe to pursue a career in musical instruction. Her great accomplishments in singing and playing the harp allow her to become a music teacher, and with Miss Arbe as her patroness, she is deemed respectable enough to find several pupils. However, this grand scheme does not grant Juliet the desired self-dependence, as all the fashionable upper-class, genteel or even aristocratic women refuse to pay for the lessons—the only person who proves to be honourable is the lower-class factory owner Mr. Tedman, who pays more for the lessons of his daughter than is due—and Juliet is again left destitute.

Juliet's other pursuits are always stopped by circumstances or by simple misfortune, and she goes from using the accomplishments of a woman of good birth, supporting herself with singing, playing and delicate needle-work, to lower-class professions, trying her hand at being a milliner, a mantua-maker, a nurse and a haberdasher, respectively. By portraying Juliet's difficulties in obtaining work

and showing how insufficient the accomplishments a woman is allowed to pursue are in providing financial independence, Frances Burney criticised the circumstances of women in her time.

Juliet frequently bemoans the fact that everything seems to be against a woman who tries to depend solely on herself; not only the circumstances limiting the work she can do, but also the attitude of people toward working women.

How insufficient, she exclaimed, is a *female* to herself! How utterly dependant upon situation—connexions—circumstance! How nameless, how for ever fresh-springing are her *difficulties*, when she would owe her existence to her own exertions! Her conduct is criticised, not scrutinized; her character is censured, not examined; her labours are unhonoured, and her qualifications are but lures to ill will! Calumny hovers over her head, and slander follows her footsteps!²⁵

However hard Juliet tries to use what she was taught and what she knows, she is always doomed to fail; as Sarah Salih says, “to try to earn a living is a ‘Female Difficulty’ indeed.”²⁶ Juliet’s attempts and failures show that the difficulties the subtitle refers to are economic difficulties, and they rise from the fact that women are excluded from pursuing talents and accomplishments which would be useful in a profession; women are purposely not taught these so they will turn to men to provide for them.

It is not only women who undermine Juliet’s desired independence by sabotaging her or trying to maintain their supposed superiority. The men in the story are just as damaging to her efforts, particularly those who attempt to help her by giving her unwanted charity. However honourable their intentions are, they only further ensnare her into the patriarchal ties, threatening or even ruining all her pursuits of independence. It is evident that she is trying to escape this patriarchal prison, as she is not reluctant to accept and use money given to her by Elinor or Lady Aurora. However, driven by circumstances, she is forced to use the money given to her by Albert Harleigh, and to become indebted to Sir Jaspar Herrington; her wish of learning to suffice solely on herself and her own exertion is simply not to be granted. She is determined to owe her independence to no one

²⁵ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

²⁶ Peter Sabor, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

but herself, her own exertions and industry, and the gentlemen's offers of help only further drive her to dependence.

Juliet is not only at a disadvantage of her unfortunate circumstances and her inability to find a profession that will allow her to support herself; what is more, it is also the society that is against her. There are several male characters who speak against women; most notably Admiral Powel and Mr. Scope. The Admiral calls her poor and weak; he renders her even poorer by giving her some money. He strongly believes women ought to learn how to be good women and good wives, reducing them to mere providers of domestic comforts; more importantly, he is firm in his opinion that men are undoubtedly superior to women. He insists that Juliet must go back to her husband, even though he knows that he must have treated her poorly for her to escape the undesirable marriage. Similarly to the Admiral, Mr. Scope also sees women as inferior, and he accounts their defective understanding to nature. Yet, women were not born with faulty understanding; it is the society they live in that renders them inferior in understanding by not allowing them the same education as men, as Wollstonecraft would remark. Mr. Scope cannot comprehend the mere idea of a reasonable, rational woman; for him, such a woman would be an abomination and simply does not exist. Men like him make it challenging for Juliet to find her place in the world that is already disadvantageous to her as a woman.

It is important to note that Juliet herself does not protest the fate of women who are forced to depend fully on men by the society they live in. While she strives to be independent, she is only forced to independence by her peculiar situation. It is evident in the ending of the novel, when she is content to become part of the patriarchal community, embraced by her newfound uncle, her half-brother, and her new husband; she willingly gives up the independence she so desperately fought for, and she accepts her position as a niece, sister and wife. Juliet's complicated circumstances of being forced into marrying a brute are what drove her to seek self-dependence; given the fact that she cannot be found, she cannot rely on anyone but herself. She is not the perfect feminist heroine; Elinor, who firmly believes in feminist principles of equality, even if she does not always behave accordingly, speaks against Juliet's misguided worry of offending men "who would keep us from every office, but making puddings and pies for their own precious palates . . . who render us insignificant; and then speak of us as if

we were so born!”²⁷ She admonishes Juliet for having the ability to break the prejudice against women, yet not doing so. While Juliet does not have any feminist agenda or the makings of a great feminist heroine, her toils in the face of misfortune, her determination to succeed on her own, and her creative use of her talents to provide for herself make her a feminist heroine nonetheless.

2.2 Elinor Joddrel

Despite the fact that Elinor Joddrel could never be considered a heroine of the story, she certainly plays a significant part in the novel; it is due to her protests against the oppression of women that Juliet Granville’s difficulties resonate. Elinor is undeniably the most feminist, liberated and defiant character in all Frances Burney’s works, and she is very vocal about her progressive and, at times, shocking ideas. While ordinary eighteenth- or nineteenth-century readers were appalled by her revolutionary thinking, those familiar with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft could not have been surprised by her radical notions. As Tara Ghoshal Wallace asserts, “*The Wanderer* rather crudely parodies Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary fervour in the character of Elinor Joddrel.”²⁸ While Frances Burney could not openly identify with Mary Wollstonecraft’s philosophy—and she probably would not even if she could, as Wollstonecraft’s life and conduct were certainly too scandalous for the more conservative Burney—the ideas of the latter are certainly projected into Elinor’s feminist speeches; for that reason, Elinor is often identified with the adjective “Wollstonecraftian” or the phrase “Wollstonecraftian (anti-)heroine” by scholars. Her advocacy of women’s rights not only links her to Maria, the extremely radical heroine of Wollstonecraft’s posthumously published novel *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, but to Mary Wollstonecraft herself. Scholars, above mentioned Tara G. Wallace included, declare Elinor to be modelled on Wollstonecraft; not only on her reformist ideas, but on her personal life as well.

Elinor Joddrel’s political views come from the same source as Mary Wollstonecraft’s; from the ideas of the French Revolution. Elinor, faced with an

²⁷ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

²⁸ Tara Ghoshal Wallace, “Rewriting Radicalism: Wollstonecraft in Burney’s *The Wanderer*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24(3) (2012): 487.

undesirable marriage to Mr. Dennis Harleigh, is overcome with consumption and sent to the Continent to recover. In France, she is exposed to the revolution—both the good sides, which bring forth her modern thinking, particularly concerning the issue of rights, and the bad sides, when, along with her aunt and under the risk of imprisonment or death, she is forced to flee the country and the Reign of Terror. “The French Revolution has opened our eyes to a species of equality more rational, because more feasible, than that of lands or of rank.”²⁹ While we cannot judge Miss Joddrel’s opinions prior to the Revolution, it is safe to say that being exposed to the radical ideas of the importance of human life itself, regardless of rank, fortune, or gender, awakened Elinor’s inner philosopher to life. She is not hesitant to show her disdain towards aristocracy, and she refuses to be submitted to any more oppressions—or “worldly slavery,”³⁰ as she calls it.

Elinor possesses an admirable, powerful mind, and other characters in the novel are not afraid to acknowledge it. However, they are not always appreciative of her modern way of thinking. Her aunt, in particular, is ever so worried about what absurd plan her independent mind will produce. Mrs. Maple is determined to keep an eye on Elinor by keeping her in her house until her nuptials because she thinks that, if left alone, Elinor “shall adopt some new system of life.”³¹ Her worry is not unwarranted; ever since Elinor came of age, she only does what pleases her, regardless of the public opinion—a principle she tries to persuade Juliet, and through her other women, to follow as well. Like her old aunt Maple, Albert Harleigh, the man Elinor admires the most, seems rather contemptuous of a woman with equal, if not superior, reason and understanding. After the first of Elinor’s public displays of folly, he is quick to describe her as misguided and possessing “a terrible perversion . . . of intellect! . . . a confusion of ideas! . . . an inextricable chaos of false principles, exaggerated feelings, and imaginary advancement in new doctrines of life!”³²

Miss Joddrel herself calls her ideas revolutionary, and she considers herself “intellectually, as well as personally, an equal member of the

²⁹ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

³⁰ Burney, *The Wanderer*, epub.

³¹ Burney, *The Wanderer*, epub.

³² Burney, *The Wanderer*, epub.

community.”³³ Her stay in France during the revolutionary years taught her to break from the prison of an oppressed mind, and she is now able to think for herself, without succumbing to other people’s opinions or prejudices. She thinks herself equal with the men in the community; her person, mind and fortune are independent. She thinks it is a duty of a woman to think for herself, if she was given sense. She is dissatisfied with the notion that only men had been said to possess power for action and defence, as well as taste, for centuries; she is determined to prove that women have the equal right to these qualities.

In her conversation with Albert Harleigh, she breaches the precarious subject that “every man that breathes, wished exploded, the Rights of woman: Rights, however, which all [his] sex, with all its arbitrary assumption of superiority, can never disprove, for they are the Rights of human nature; to which the two sexes equally and unalienably [sic] belong.”³⁴ She openly advocates the revolutionary notion of the equality of the two sexes, as the members of both are essentially the same—human beings. She disapproves of the submission of the female sex, and she does not understand how a man could look down on his mother, sister, wife, or daughter as an inferior being. She also protests the exclusion of women from the public sphere, from the exercise of qualities assigned only to men; and furthermore, she is against the restrictive rules the society imposes upon women, which confine them into oppressive golden cages of appropriate conduct, rendering them essentially powerless. The following passage contains her probably most pointed outburst and sharp criticism:

Why, not alone, is woman to be excluded from the exertions of courage, the field of glory, the immortal death of honour,—not alone to be denied deliberating upon the safety of the state which she is a member, and the utility of the laws by which she must be governed:—must even her heart be circumscribed by boundaries as narrow as her sphere of action in life? Must she be taught to subdue all its native emotions? To hide them as sin, and to deny them as shame? Must her affections be bestowed but as to recompence of flattery received; not of merit discriminated? Must every thing that she does be prescribed by rule? Must everything that she says, be limited to what has been

³³ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

³⁴ Burney, *The Wanderer*, epub.

said before? Must nothing be spontaneous, generous, intuitive, spring
from her soul to her lips?³⁵

Her powerful rhetoric, along with the way she is passionate about the subject, makes even a man, who is supposedly superior not only in nature, but in understanding as well, speechless; he cannot argue with the arguments she puts forward, either because he is too shocked a woman would dare to speak such radical words, or because she is correct in her assertions and he cannot effortlessly oppose them. While she is to be praised for her forward thinking—and Burney for creating such a powerfully outspoken female character—it is eventually to her disadvantage. As Debra Silverman says, “it is precisely because she is seen as independent, and thus threatening, that she cannot be loved (by a man).”³⁶ Silverman’s statement proves to be true; Elinor’s love interest is not attracted to her noble but “masculine spirit”³⁷ and wherever she fled to, she is certainly alone.

Ultimately, it is not just Elinor’s independence, but also her strong will and impressive mind that are her downfall. Upon meeting her fiancé’s older brother, Albert Harleigh, she becomes infatuated with him, and over time, her attraction to Harleigh grows into a passionate love bordering with obsession. She is entirely overcome with feelings; the excess of feelings clouds her judgment, she breaks the engagement with Dennis and makes her feelings known to Albert. However, Harleigh, who is fascinated by the mysterious Wanderer, rejects her advances, particularly since he cannot understand her reasons for hurting his younger brother Dennis, and Elinor, now controlled by her emotions, cannot handle his refusal. His repeated rejections lead to her altered mental state; her mind becomes fragile, delicate, unstable, and she resorts to the most desperate deed—attempting suicide. While she is never successful in her effort to take her own life, she is certainly public, as she never harms herself without an audience. This leads me to believe that she never intended to kill herself; her suicide attempts were just a cry for attention, particularly from Harleigh. Yet, it never worked, and her plan proved to do the opposite—Albert disappearing from her sight. Her rationalisations of suicide, and her overly dramatic performance of the act itself, also prove that she was not, in fact, suicidal. Be it as it may, her suicidal

³⁵ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

³⁶ Debra Silverman, “Reading Frances Burney’s “The Wanderer: Or, Female Difficulties”: The Politics of Women’s Independence,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 26(1/2) (1991): 74.

³⁷ Burney, *The Wanderer*, epub.

tendencies are another link to Mary Wollstonecraft, as the philosopher herself attempted to take her own life two times, and she did so for the same reason as Elinor—for love, for passion.

Elinor’s public displays of weakness, combined with the shock the self-murder attempts induced in the community, undermined her otherwise strong mind. No longer taken seriously, and treated as if she was insane, Elinor compromised her cause of helping women escape the slavish prison that the societal rules create for the female sex. The world thinks her mad—which is a convenient excuse that the society of her time would make for anyone with ground-breaking ideas calling for unwanted change—and she cannot excite the revolution in women’s rights anymore, she cannot rid the British society of the double standard between men and women when it comes to acceptable behaviour. Her mind, controlled by romantic feelings—“and judgment has no guide so dangerous”³⁸—led her to believe that suicide attempts are the way to Harleigh’s heart; and her reason was misguided, as the only thing it brought was a political suicide of sorts. She is, perhaps, a feminist in theory; but she does not practice what she preaches, nor is she motivated by the desire to help her own sex; instead, she is motivated by her own gain. The truth of her statements is overshadowed by her irrational behaviour, and Elinor ultimately placing feelings above sense, as well as her willingness to submit to Harleigh completely, are exactly the reason why she cannot be a true feminist heroine.

2.3 Wollstonecraftian influence

The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminist philosophy, and even the influence of her life, is clearly evident in the story. Elinor’s powerful radical speeches are clearly Wollstonecraftian in nature, and she uses similar, if not the same, captivating diction that Wollstonecraft created in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. While it was undesirable to openly express any association with the scandalous Mary Wollstonecraft in the time *The Wanderer* was published, “by having Elinor use the words ‘Rights of Women <sic>’, [Burney] makes a direct

³⁸ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

reference to Wollstonecraft's work."³⁹ Frances Burney creatively placed Elinor into the position of having been exposed to the ideas of the French Revolution; therefore, even when Elinor uses the words of the disgraced philosopher, it can be dismissed on the basis of her simply being influenced by the demand for rights in France.

Elinor echoes Wollstonecraft on many occasions; be it in her ideas about the equality between the sexes, or the need for reform. Another instance in which she directly references *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is when she calls for raising "our oppressed half of the human species,"⁴⁰ as those are the exact same words that Wollstonecraft uses. Like her model, Elinor Joddrel is contemptuous of women who do not strive for proving their equality because they believe themselves dependent on men. Both Elinor and Wollstonecraft blame these women for the dependent circumstance of the entire female sex.

Elinor's opinions, her insistence on equality of her own sex, her radical, revolutionary stance and openness about the political matters are what best connects her to Mary Wollstonecraft. However, it is also her proneness to suicide, whether ending her own life was her intention or not, that serves as a blatantly obvious link between the two. Like Wollstonecraft, who, according to her memoirs written by her husband, resolved to suicide twice, Elinor's attempts were unsuccessful, and both of them were motivated by their failed relationships. It is safe to say that Elinor is a fictionalised Wollstonecraft; however, given that Frances Burney was conservative and rather conventional, she omitted, in creating Elinor Joddrel, the controversial parts of Mary Wollstonecraft's life, those she could not condone. Therefore, while Elinor is certainly progressive, she does not have an affair, nor does she give birth to an illegitimate child.

Burney was certainly influenced by the plot of *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*. It is obvious in that both novels are based on the oppressive marriage laws, which make the wife the property of her husband. Tara G. Wallace asserts that "Burney replicates Wollstonecraft's representation of a woman enslaved by

³⁹ Victoria Kortés-Papp, "Madness as Shelter for Feminist Ideas: Elinor's Role in Frances Burney's *The Wanderer*," *Lumen* 18 (1999): 100.

⁴⁰ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014), epub.

institutionalized patriarchy.”⁴¹ In both these novels, the heroines are forced to flee their primitive husbands, whose sole motivation for the marriage was monetary gain. Unlike Maria, who mistakenly chose to marry George Venables on her own, Juliet Granville was not given a choice at all. The marriage ceremony was imposed on Juliet, and the fact that she did not give her consent, along with it being only a civil ceremony, and an interrupted and hurried one at that, leads Albert Harleigh and Sir Jaspar Herrington to believe that the marriage is simply not valid. Juliet herself seems to think so; however, despite knowing that, she cannot and will not do anything until the marriage is dissolved by the commissary’s timely death.

Both Juliet and Maria are faced with the difficulty, if not impossibility, of hiding from their respective husbands. It is not only the laws that disfavour women, but also the society itself that is against them, although they are justified in their escapes. The advertisements are posted in local newspapers, announcing the intention of the husbands to find their fugitive wives, the agents are employed to help find them, and the people who are supposed to provide a safe haven for these unfortunate women end up being their betrayers. What is even more disturbing is the fact that Maria as well as Juliet were betrayed by women; women, who should be sympathetic to the fates of other women.

It is in this regard as well that *The Wanderer* resembles what Mary Wollstonecraft preaches. She talks about women who, since they are oppressed themselves, strive to make others their inferiors. It is evident in the way Juliet is treated by Mrs. Maple, Mrs. Ireton, or even Mrs. Howel. Since they believe she is beneath them, they do not need to treat her nicely, and they make it their mission to better themselves at the expense of reducing Juliet to a lesser being. *The Wanderer* is full of tyrant, seemingly powerful women, who—since they are themselves inferior to the men in the story—oppress those they deem their inferiors: their servants and Juliet.

Mary Wollstonecraft speaks against indulging children; it spoils their temper and nature. While there is only one child in the story, *The Wanderer* addresses her point about indulgence as well. Mrs. Ireton’s nephew, Master Loddard, is undoubtedly a spoilt child. He cannot do any wrong in the eyes of his

⁴¹ Tara Ghoshal Wallace, “Rewriting Radicalism: Wollstonecraft in Burney’s *The Wanderer*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24(3) (2012): 499.

aunt, and someone else is always blamed for his destructive nature. He torments Juliet, his new favourite, when she stays with Mrs. Ireton as her companion and later Loddard's nurse of sorts, and he is praised for that. The double standard is shown later; when he is being mischievous with Lady Barbara Frankland, he is admonished for that—yet, when he harasses Juliet, he is getting affection and praise for his cruel behaviour instead of being punished.

Like Wollstonecraft, Frances Burney criticises the education of women, which only teaches women the fashionable accomplishments like painting, singing, playing an instrument, or needle-work. As she proves with the difficulties that Juliet encounters, those “accomplishments” are not enough to support a woman. Such an education is injurious to a woman rather than helpful. While Juliet first sees her talents as useful, she soon realises how mistaken she had been in that estimation.

In conclusion, despite Mary Wollstonecraft being an undesirable woman to be associated with, Frances Burney masterfully managed to include some of her ideas as well as parts of her life into her novel *The Wanderer*. She did it with such brilliance that even the most conservative readers could not find the work distasteful for being Wollstonecraftian. However, the radical message of the novel is rather suppressed, as Elinor Joddrel fails to be the feminist heroine she had the potential to be, and as a Revolutionary feminist, Wollstonecraft would surely be dissatisfied with the novel's ending, where Juliet, the one female who actively seeks independence, returns to the oppressive patriarchal system.

3. JANE AUSTEN

The debate on whether to consider Jane Austen's works as feminist is neither recent nor resolved. Scholars and critics have examined her novels carefully, considering a wide range of factors; the historical circumstances of Austen's time, her life and background, the social circumstances and her access to the works of contemporary authors, as well as the effects of the scandal surrounding one of leading feminist figures of the late eighteenth-century, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose scandalous life became public knowledge a year after her death following the publication of her memoirs. The memoirs provoked public outrage, prohibiting any connection to the disgraced author and her feminist theory, lest a woman wanted to fall into disrepute as well; with one publication, William Godwin essentially buried all Wollstonecraft's efforts, which were now completely disregarded on the account of her being a fallen woman, spurring a wave of anti-feminist sentiments and ensuring that no female author, or simply a woman, would openly associate with her ideas. Unlike Frances Burney, who could attribute Elinor Joddrel's feminist outbursts to the Revolution, Jane Austen had to hide her feminist sentiments behind a veil of irony; and she did that so masterfully that it may be difficult to find the elements of feminism in her works. Nevertheless, they are there, typically hidden in a strong female character who protests against the established order, often commenting on the exact same subjects which were relevant to feminists of her time.

Particularly in the scholarship of late twentieth century, Jane Austen is portrayed as a feminist moralist and an understated feminist, and the feminist elements in her novels are made evident due to numerous feminist analyses of the texts, which, among others, reveal textual parallels between her novels and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, noting the similarity of their arguments as well as their themes. Particularly Austen's stance on female education—or rather the lack thereof—links her to Wollstonecraft; a subject matter which is discussed in the later part of this chapter.

One of the central arguments against considering Jane Austen's novels as feminist is the “unfortunate” resolution of all of her novels. All of Austen's strong female characters—most, if not all, of them could be considered to be feminist heroines—inevitably marry at the end, supposedly assimilating themselves back

into the patriarchal system they were fighting against with their pursuits of independence. The concluding return back to the norm, marked by the independent woman entering the marriage state, could be seen to mark Austen's content with the established order in society, rather than as challenging it, as the feminist interpretations suggest. However, the marriages between the heroes and heroines of Austen's novels are those of equals; rather than a patriarchal marriage of a superior husband and an inferior wife, Austen challenges the conventional marriage and features women capable of being companions to their respective husbands, a notion that Mary Wollstonecraft supported as well.

Furthermore, Lloyd W. Brown claims that "marriage in Jane Austen's fiction is primarily a literary convention which symbolises the successful maturation of human relationships within each novel"⁴² and argues that the lack of Austen's portrayal of the married life of her heroines suggests that marriage is not central to her fiction, nor to her heroines. Those marriages that Austen does portray are exploited to show marital discord and parental failure; to omit further details about her heroines' married lives apart from the brief mentions at the end of her novels is to suggest that the marriages of the protagonists are different from those she exploits. Therefore, for Austen to marry a heroine is to challenge the convention, not to go back to the patriarchal ties, as Juliet Granville in *The Wanderer* does.

Margaret Kirkham argues that "Jane Austen's heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct."⁴³ While all of Jane Austen's novels feature strong heroines notable for their rationality, independence, strong opinions or their challenge to the established notions and conventions, the purpose of this thesis is to analyse the female protagonists of her first two published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), in terms of them being feminist heroines, and to find connections linking Austen's works with the ideology of Mary Wollstonecraft.

⁴² Lloyd W. Brown, "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28(3) (1973): 338.

⁴³ Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 84.

3.1 *Sense and Sensibility*

Elinor Dashwood, the protagonist of Jane Austen's first published novel, embraces the word "sensible." When the world of the Dashwoods falls apart with the death of Mr. Henry Dashwood, it is Elinor who must rise to the challenge and maintain the household duties. From that moment, she becomes the manager of the Dashwood household, as her mother and Marianne are too grief-stricken to be rational, and her youngest sister Margaret is too young to understand the situation. She is the one who must be reasonable about their new dwelling, since she is the only practical person in the family, and she understands the implications of their limited income.

The loss of a husband and a father is amplified by the loss of their home. Their estate is entailed on Mr. Dashwood's son, John Dashwood, and while he invites them to stay with them, Norland Park is no longer their home, nor are they welcome by John's wife Fanny. While other novels this thesis analyses also refer to the entail, namely *The Wanderer*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, this issue is never as pronounced as it is in *Sense and Sensibility*. It is safe to say that the entail is one of the primary themes in the novel, as all the difficulties in the lives of the protagonists stem from their father's failure to sufficiently provide for his daughters. Jane Austen is openly critical about primogeniture, and she voices her opinion through the characters not only in *Sense and Sensibility*, but also in her other works. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet is understandably displeased with their entailed home, and Lady Catherine de Bourg sees "no occasion for entailing estates from the female line;"⁴⁴ it is evident that Austen shares Wollstonecraft's belief that all children should be provided for equally.

The two sisters, Elinor and Marianne, echo the title of the novel, Elinor representing reason—sense—and Marianne sensibility. However, that is not to say that Marianne is only sentimental; as Margaret Kirkham asserts, "both sisters have superior abilities, neither being totally lacking in either sense or sensibility, and [Austen] introduces a range of other characters against whose defects Elinor and Marianne shine."⁴⁵ In comparison to other features female characters, Marianne is not as foolish; however, she still possesses excessive sensibility and

⁴⁴ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 159.

⁴⁵ Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 86.

she is fully governed by her emotions and violent passions—for that reason, she embodies sensibility in this novel.

Elinor . . . possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence.⁴⁶

Elinor, unlike her younger sister, is anything but sentimental. She is never overwhelmed by her feelings, and she rarely allows her emotions to be shown. She knows how to control her emotions by reason, and she can be perceived as cold-hearted—“and ashamed of being otherwise.”⁴⁷ Marianne, who is her exact opposite when it comes to feelings and showing affection, does not understand Elinor’s conduct and her presumed lack of feeling; in turn, Elinor criticises Marianne’s sensibility and her romantic mind.

Elinor is said to possess “unusual strength and clarity of mind”⁴⁸ that distinguishes her from the other female characters in the novel, and she has admirable self-control. She grieves and mourns in secret; not because she is ashamed of her feelings, but because she is reasonable and she knows she cannot afford to grieve and neglect the management of the household or to show that she was emotionally attached to Edward Ferrars, whom she now knows to be engaged to Lucy Steele.

Elinor “was stronger alone, and her own good sense so well supported her.”⁴⁹ She has a mind of her own, and she is not afraid to speak it. Her rationality is often praised by other characters, and Lucy Steele, her rival in love, even goes as far as to say that she values Elinor’s judgment over that of other people. Her understanding is undoubtedly superior, and Austen uses her sense to reveal the folly in thinking that men are above women in their abilities to reason. Elinor is put into stark contrast with John Dashwood, her half-brother, whose “want of sense, either natural or improved”⁵⁰ is evident. Similarly to Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, he thinks himself superior to Elinor on the account of her being a woman, when it is him who is the foolish sibling. Like Wollstonecraft, Austen

⁴⁶ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 6.

⁴⁷ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 21.

⁴⁸ John Wiltshire, “Elinor Dashwood and concealment” in *The Hidden Jane Austen*, by John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 32.

⁴⁹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 133.

⁵⁰ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 221.

reveals that women have as much claim to reason as men do, and it is only a matter of education and experience, as well as the exercise of said reason, that differentiate people.

Above all, Elinor is prudent; she realises her peculiar situation, yet she will not pursue the relationship that her brother John favours, that is, a marriage to Colonel Brandon, as she knows he is already attached to her sister and sees him only as her friend. However, she praises him for his good sense, which is a quality that she greatly admires—and one she often misses in people in her community. She is composed and she always appears calm, even when she feels strongly; she masterfully conceals her affections, and only allows herself to reflect on them when she is alone. She disapproves of Marianne being open about her imprudent emotions and her indulgence of feeling, and later, given her undeniable rationality, she “assists emotional Marianne in her moral education.”⁵¹ However, her prudence when it comes to showing affection leads to mistaken beliefs of her indifference, and complicates her relationship with Edward.

Lucy Steele is clearly Elinor Dashwood’s rival; yet Elinor overcomes her resentment and treats her politely, although never as a close friend or confidante. Lucy is the product of contemporary society; she lacks proper education, experience and common sense; she is foolish and weak, and she strives for improvement of her lot by marriage. Elinor cannot hide her dissatisfaction with Lucy’s ignorance, and she notes that Lucy’s “want of instruction prevented their meeting in conversation on terms of equality.”⁵² Elinor is perfectly aware of her superior sense, and she can be rather condescending in revealing it. When she reflects on Lucy and Edward’s secret engagement, she says: “Edward will marry Lucy; he will marry a woman superior in person and understanding to half of her sex; and time and habit will teach him to forget that he ever thought another superior to *her*.”⁵³ Not only does she establish herself as Lucy’s better, but she also expresses her scepticism about the female sex and the ability of women to be rational, as they were never taught to be so.

However prudent she is or thinks herself to be, however superior she is to other young women in the novel, Elinor is still human; therefore, she is capable of

⁵¹ Christine Marshall, ““Dull Elves” and Feminists: A Summary of Feminist Criticism of Jane Austen,” *Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America* 14 (1992): 42.

⁵² Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 122.

⁵³ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 249.

being misled by her emotions. Her folly shows in her mistaken belief in Edward's strong attachment to her; thus, she is "horrified to discover that for all her cautious management of her emotional life, she has fallen prey to her desires, seen what she wants to see."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, when she reflects on their relationship, she concludes that he did care for her at Norland Park, even if the hair in his ring was Lucy's and not hers; she is certain of his previous affection for her once she is capable of thinking rationally.

Elinor seems fully in control of her life; "I will be mistress of myself,"⁵⁵ she proclaims, and while she refers to her ability to govern her feelings, her comment summarises her life and asserts her independence. Unlike Lucy, she does not depend on a man to make her happy or improve her lot, and when she thought she lost Edward Ferrars, she was grieved, but remained practical; contrary to her sister Marianne, who fell ill after her indulged romantic feelings were crushed by a man who would never marry her due to her lack of fortune. Similarly, the issue of fortune is one that oppresses otherwise independent Elinor too. While she certainly possesses an independent mind and spirit, she is not fully independent because her portion of the inheritance is too small; her careful management is, however, a useful tool to provide her and her family with domestic comforts even on small income.

Elinor's superior understanding and sense, her prudence, her strength in the face of a challenging situation, and her independent thinking make her a feminist heroine. She does not conform to the societal idea of a weak woman, despite the circumstances which are against her; she seems to grow wiser, stronger and better in the face of conflict, and she is capable of providing her family with a new home. Even though she makes a rather imprudent match at the end, she retains her rationality; while she believes that happiness is more important in a marriage than high income, both she and Edward are aware of their limited prospects. Nevertheless, she makes the right choice for herself, and she does not let anyone dictate what she should do. Like her sister, she undergoes a transformation toward the end of the novel; while Marianne loses her innocent eagerness, ceases to indulge her passions, learns to govern her feelings and

⁵⁴ John Wiltshire, "Elinor Dashwood and concealment" in *The Hidden Jane Austen*, by John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 35.

⁵⁵ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 338.

improves her understanding by regular study, Elinor learns to be vulnerable in showing her feelings, as long as they are reasonably controlled, and the story concludes as the victory of reason over feeling, a resolution that Mary Wollstonecraft would certainly be content with.

3.2 *Pride and Prejudice*

Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice*, is certainly one of Austen's favourite heroines, and undeniably one of her most outspoken characters. Elizabeth knows her own mind and is open in voicing her opinions. With her stubborn determination, keen intellect, independent ways and sharp wit, she challenges everything a young woman her age should blindly support, particularly the contemporary idea of marriage, and she has the makings of a great feminist heroine. While her feminist ideas are not as apparent as that of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818), they are still evident in her behaviour as well as in her strong opinions on important matters.

Elizabeth is one of Austen's most rational heroines. Her good sense shows in the way she does not let others do the important decisions for her; she decides for herself and accepts the consequences of her choices. Even when she is wrong in her opinions, as is the case with Fitzwilliam Darcy and George Wickham, she is guided by reason, and she is able to rationally reflect on the situation and admit she was wrong. While her mother thinks her to be too headstrong for her own good, a quality that makes her the least favourite daughter of her mother, her sense serves her well, and, unlike her mother, Elizabeth's more reasonable relatives expect her to use it.

Elizabeth's strong qualities of independent personality, wit and intelligence—qualities not desirable in young women—are admired by some, notably her father and Darcy, but unacceptable for most. Miss Bingley, who feels threatened by Elizabeth, does not see anything agreeable in her; "her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no style, no beauty . . . she has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker."⁵⁶ She is also accused of showing

⁵⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 33.

“an abominable sort of conceited independence.”⁵⁷ Elizabeth Bennet is not a typical young woman of her time, and Miss Bingley, who is exactly the type of woman that both Austen and Wollstonecraft mock, tries to establish her superiority over Elizabeth, unaware of the fact that it is, in fact, Elizabeth’s unconventional nature that recommends her to and captures the attention of Fitzwilliam Darcy, who seems almost bored with the ideal of a woman, which Miss Bingley represents.

Elizabeth Bennet is by no means an “accomplished woman” by the standards of Miss Bingley, whose opinion is based on that of contemporary society. “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression, or the word will be but half-deserved.”⁵⁸ Caroline Bingley’s words show the qualities a young woman should possess and those that women in Austen’s time were taught. However, as Frances Burney has previously proven in her novel *The Wanderer*, these accomplishments are impractical for anything but finding a pretentious husband.

Mr. Darcy’s position on the matter of female accomplishments is even more interesting: “All this she must possess . . . and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”⁵⁹ He is not disputing that a woman should have those fashionable qualities; however, he clearly values a strong mind in a woman more highly. Brown asserts that “Elizabeth herself is obviously intended to approximate the Darcy (and Wollstonecraft) ideal.”⁶⁰ Not only does Elizabeth prefer to read instead of playing cards with others, but her understanding seems far superior to that of all the fashionable people around her. As such, she appears sceptical that such a woman as Darcy described could exist; it is Austen’s clever way of subtly criticising the female qualities that prevailed in society. Elizabeth is equally sceptical about human nature, and she believes that there are not many people in society that have either sense, or merit.

⁵⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 33.

⁵⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 36.

⁵⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 36.

⁶⁰ Lloyd W. Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28(3) (1973): 332.

While Elizabeth's strong sense is firmly established, it is often undermined by others. Wickham's lies about his past disagreement with Darcy make her look foolish for having believed him based on prejudice instead of experience and deeper knowledge on the matter. Her mother disapproves of her rationality, as it disrupts the scheme of keeping the entailed estate within the family and keeps Elizabeth from accepting Mr. Collins' proposal. Mr. Collins peculiarly attempts to compliment Elizabeth; however, he achieves the exact opposite. "My dear Miss Elizabeth, I have the highest opinion in your excellent judgment in all matters within the scope of your understanding,"⁶¹ he says, essentially deeming her ignorant of the ways of society, when he is the ignorant one; and what is more, he dismisses her well-meaning advice on the account of being more educated—"in the case before us I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady like yourself"⁶²—succeeding not only in calling her education insufficient, but rendering his ineffective too, as he clearly does not know what is proper. She disagrees with the notion of superiority of a man in understanding on the mere account of being born a man.

It is Elizabeth Bennet's continuing insistence on being rational that distinguishes her from the other female characters, who in comparison appear as weak and powerless. However, it is often perceived as misguided stubbornness, particularly by those whose abilities to reason are inferior to hers. "Do not consider me now as an elegant female, intending to plague you, but as a rational creature, speaking the truth from her heart."⁶³ She insists on being treated as a human being rather than a woman, as she believes understanding is not dependent on one's sex. Still, her rationality is dismissed by Mr. Collins, a man who embodies the society's notion of the inferiority of the weaker sex. Ironically, he is guided by the word of a woman himself; however, that is not to say that he necessarily thinks Lady Catherine to be his superior in understanding, merely in rank.

Given Elizabeth's rationality, it is not surprising that she is ashamed of the obnoxious behaviour of her mother and her younger sisters. She even goes as far as to openly disagree with her mother; she is not a blindly obedient daughter,

⁶¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 94.

⁶² Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 94.

⁶³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 104.

she is a rational being who cannot support the folly of her mother in indulging Lydia at every turn, particularly when her irrational decisions can be—and will be—injurious to the reputation of not only Lydia, but the whole family as well, making the prospects of the other Bennet daughters for advantageous marriages lower.

Elizabeth challenges the authority of her mother on several occasions, and she does not blind to her father's faults either, as she is aware that he fails both as a husband as well as a father, "exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children"⁶⁴ and being aware of the folly of his wife and younger daughters, yet doing nothing to change that and being too impatient to educate but his two oldest children. Thus, he is as much to blame for Lydia's improper behaviour, Kitty mistakenly following Lydia's example in mischief, as well as Mary's bizarre pursuit of knowledge. The marriage of the Bennet's is one of those that Austen exposes as a failed marriage—and parenthood, as neither is the proper parent, Mr. Bennet being an absent and indolent father and Mrs. Bennet an indulgent, foolish mother.

The issue of marriage certainly deserves to be discussed, as it is yet another subject that differentiates Elizabeth from other characters. In the still oppressive time of Austen's life, marriage was the only way for a woman to rise in society; her only chance at improving her lot was to "make a conquest" of a wealthy husband. Charlotte Lucas' refreshingly sober view of marriage as a purely practical match somewhat copies this prevailing opinion; marriage, "the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want."⁶⁵ At her age already being a burden to her family, she accepts the offer of a man she can never respect, a prospect that offers her neither happiness nor content, as she is marrying merely to have a place of her own. She does not believe in marital happiness—as "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance,"⁶⁶—nor does she have any romantic notions about love; therefore, she has no objections to marrying a ridiculous and pompous man. She achieves what she had hoped for—her own establishment—and she uses her sense to find

⁶⁴ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 229.

⁶⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 118-119.

⁶⁶ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 21.

strategic ways of avoiding her husband—purposely choosing a room that is unacceptable to his for her sitting-room, and encouraging his walks and gardening.

In contrast to her friend Charlotte Lucas, who married purely for practical reasons, Elizabeth refuses to marry to secure herself financially. She refuses not one but two suitors, both of which would provide for her handsomely, particularly Darcy with his ten thousand a year, in favour of pleasing herself in her choice of a husband, if—when—she marries. As her father asserts, “[she] could be neither happy nor respectable, unless [she] truly esteemed [her] husband . . . [her] lively talents would place [her] in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage.”⁶⁷ However, he is mistaken in his thinking that she needs to regard her husband as her superior—her husband must, and will, regard her as his companion, as his equal.

Elizabeth is very opinionated, and in her openness about her opinions resembles *The Wanderer*'s Elinor Joddrel; both of the female characters do not hesitate to voice their contrasting beliefs, challenging the established notions. However, Elizabeth, not having the excuse of being exposed to the Revolution, cannot be quite as radical as her literary predecessor, nor does she have such a dramatic flair. When dining at Rosings, she disagrees with the snobbish opinions of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, challenging the rank distinction which Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* calls unnatural. Austen seems to agree with the notion that higher rank does not necessarily mean superiority in understanding, not only in the character of Elizabeth, but in Darcy as well, as he changes his previous insistence on good birth and realises that some trade people have more merit and sense than those of high birth; while he still places importance on proper behaviour, he is now aware that rank and social standing have simply nothing to do with it.

Elizabeth particularly shows her independence when she rejects two offers of marriage—both advantageous to her, as she is only entitled to get a small portion after her mother's demise—even though “it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made [to her]. [Her] portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of [her] loveliness and amiable

⁶⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 362.

qualifications.”⁶⁸ However unfortunate her financial prospects may be, she will not be forced into an undesirable match, neither by persistent Mr. Collins nor by her insistent mother.

Elizabeth’s decisions show that she would rather become a spinster, like her literary creator, rather than enter into a marriage to a man who could not respect her, and more importantly, a man she could not respect, for despite being a man, he is inferior to her understanding, while still thinking her inferior on the basis of her sex. When she does allow herself to think about marriage, it is to someone whom she considers her equal—and it is exactly how she feels about Mr. Darcy when she discovers the truth of the past and sees past her prejudice. In her conversation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, which spurs the final proposal to Elizabeth, she tells her: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal.”⁶⁹ Here she does not consider herself inferior, not by her social standing nor by her being a woman; they are equal in everything but fortune, and that is why their marriage can and will be successful. Elizabeth not only offends Lady Catherine’s notions of rank superiority, but she challenges the society that would think her unequal on the account of her birth. She is independent of the narrow-minded opinions forced on weak-minded people in the society; she thinks for herself, she forms her own opinions and will not let others, not even the society, dictate her conduct.

In agreeing to marry Fitzwilliam Darcy, Elizabeth, unlike Juliet Granville in *The Wanderer*, does not reduce herself to a mere figure in the patriarchal world; they will be equal in their marriage as they are equal before entering it, and what is more, they will complement each other, they will learn from their respective spouse, and they will respect and admire one another. In their match, Jane Austen effectively paired her heroine with the only person who fully embraced her being different, and who valued her for it. Therefore, Elizabeth’s beliefs will not suffer by getting married, and even some of her independent ways may continue, as the author hints that Elizabeth will “take liberties with her husband.”⁷⁰

It is her rational mind, her independent behaviour and spirit, her insistence of relying on herself, and even the fact that she does not need a man to provide for

⁶⁸ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 104.

⁶⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 343.

⁷⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 373.

her despite her unpleasant financial situation, that distinguish her as a feminist heroine. While she does enter the conventional institution of marriage at the resolution of the novel, there is no reason to believe she will be rendered inferior in her married life when she would not allow it as a single woman. She is marrying to please herself, not to please anyone else—and Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage is sure to raise many objections, not only by Mr. Collins who impeccably follows the opinions of his esteemed patroness Lady Catherine, but by the society as well. Their marriage is anything but conventional, and it challenges the acceptability of marriages of the Bennets or Collinses, the former for having started on superficial grounds of Mrs. Bennet’s beauty, which results in Mr. Bennet humiliating his wife at every possible moment, the latter formed purely on a misguided, blind obedience and desire for own establishment. Since these marriages are shown as faulty and ineffective as they do not fulfil their primary function, Austen subtly hints that it is the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy that is desirable, both for the sake of the spouses as well as the society.

3.3 Wollstonecraftian influence

“Austen’s novels appeared belatedly, in the aftermath of the anti-feminist reaction which followed Mary Wollstonecraft’s death, a time when open discussion of feminist ideas, however unexceptionable they might seem to modern readers, was almost impossible.”⁷¹ This certainly accounts for the lack of reference to Mary Wollstonecraft; however, while there is no direct link to Wollstonecraft, it would be mistaken to assume that Jane Austen was not familiar with Wollstonecraft’s works, particularly with her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as their opinions on the matters of female education, nature and position of women in society, marriage and family are strikingly similar. Margaret Kirkham claims that “Austen’s subject matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism”⁷² and argues that Austen’s novels provide sufficient evidence to support the claims of Austen’s knowledge of and shared beliefs with Wollstonecraft. Although the influence is not as pronounced as in *The Wanderer*, where Burney had the available excuse of the Revolution, and while Austen does

⁷¹ Christine Marshall, ““Dull Elves” and Feminists: A Summary of Feminist Criticism of Jane Austen,” *Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America* 14 (1992): 42.

⁷² Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), xxi.

not directly echo Wollstonecraft—perhaps with the exceptions of Elizabeth Bennet insisting on being treated as a rational being, and the inheritance of property—there are certain indisputable similarities between the two authors.

Undeniably, Austen’s treatment of education *Pride and Prejudice* is comparable with, and at least in part influenced by, Wollstonecraft and other philosophers calling for an educational reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues for education which is “such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart.”⁷³ The embodiment of sound understanding and exercised reason is Elizabeth Bennet, who is Wollstonecraft’s ideal woman, as Lloyd W. Brown claims.⁷⁴ She likes to read; nevertheless, she is not as studious as Mary, who believes that “every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason,”⁷⁵ which sound seemingly Wollstonecraftian. Mary spends her time pursuing knowledge; however, as Brown points out, her “intellectual pretensions are absurd because she lacks that strong understanding which Wollstonecraft attributes to a sound education.”⁷⁶ So while Mary Bennet strives to improve herself by extensive reading, she does not exercise her reason to comprehend new ideas like Elizabeth does, and therefore her intellectual pursuits are, in the end, pointless.

Like Wollstonecraft, Austen speaks about parental failures, and she uses Elizabeth’s parents to point out the deficiencies of parenthood in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mrs. Bennet perfectly represents Wollstonecraft’s notion of an indulgent mother, who is vain and foolish, a little more than a child herself in understanding, and as such, she cannot lead her daughters towards improvement of their minds. She indulges her younger daughters, having little patience with Elizabeth’s independent spirit and not seeing any merit in Jane other than her exceptional beauty; the youngest, Lydia, is a typical spoilt child. Mrs. Bennet’s misguided indulgence leads to Lydia’s scandalous affair, and emphasises her failure as a mother. Similarly, Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* indulges Marianne’s romantic feelings, and

⁷³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 67.

⁷⁴ See Lloyd W. Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28(3) (1973): 332.

⁷⁵ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2010), 30.

⁷⁶ Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” 330.

she fails in her duty as a parent to provide for her children after the death of her husband, and it is Elinor, a girl of only nineteen, who must manage the household and their relocation to a new abode.

Nevertheless, it is not just the mothers who fail as parents; it is the fathers too. Ruth Abbey asserts that “just as marriage and motherhood are duties for women . . . marriage and fatherhood are men’s duties.”⁷⁷ In both of Austen’s novels analysed in this thesis, the father is unable—and possibly unwilling—to break the entail, which renders his daughters almost penniless and reduces their prospects of a good match, as their lack of fortune makes them undesirable brides. Furthermore, *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Bennet fails to do his duty of helping educate his daughters. While he instructed his older daughters, he did not have the patience to teach Mary, Kitty and Lydia, creating a rift between the sisters and allowing Mrs. Bennet to instil her ignorant ways and misguided opinions in her younger daughters.

The entail is closely connected to the issue of inheritance, and upon careful examination, there is an apparent connection between Wollstonecraft and Austen. Wollstonecraft comments on the situation accordingly:

Girls, who have been thus weakly educated, are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision; and, of course, are dependent on, not only the reason, but the bounty of their brothers. These brothers are . . . good sort of men, and give as a favour, what children of the same parents had an equal right to . . . But, when the brother marries, a probable circumstance, from being considered as the mistress of the family, [a sister] is viewed with averted looks as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house, and his new partner . . . The wife . . . is jealous of the little kindness which her husband shows to his relations; and her sensibility not rising to humanity, she is displeased at seeing the property of HER children lavished on an helpless sister.⁷⁸

The situation of the Dashwoods is very similar, if not identical, to that described by Wollstonecraft; Fanny Dashwood is certainly displeased with the idea that John should give any money to his sisters—and sisters he only shared one parent with at that—and she sees them as imposers in her new home. She manipulates

⁷⁷ Ruth Abbey, “Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Hypatia* 14(3) (1999): 83.

⁷⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 99.

John into thinking that they would benefit more if he helped them relocate, rather than by being given a sum of money; or, what is worse, an annuity.

Helena Kelly argues that Austen “probably borrowed the set-up for *Sense and Sensibility* from Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*;⁷⁹ the emphasis on reason—sense—as opposed to fashionable sensibility, the qualities the heroines of the story represent, along with the startling similarity of Wollstonecraft’s critique of unequal right to inheritance to the circumstances after Mr. Dashwood’s unfortunate passing, sufficiently prove that Jane Austen was, in fact, influenced by Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* in creating her first published novel. Furthermore, Marianne’s romantic sentiment when she visualises Willoughby as a romantic literary hero echoes Wollstonecraft’s scepticism about the usefulness of reading novels, which only further reduce a foolish woman to a mere sentimental being.

Both Wollstonecraft and Austen are rather apprehensive about the conventional marriage. Wollstonecraft believes that “the only way women can rise in the world [is] by marriage;⁸⁰ similarly, Austen, through the character of Charlotte Lucas, voices the opinion that for women of poor means, marriage is the only option. Austen, like Wollstonecraft, sees the folly in starting a marriage based on the beauty of the youthful bride; it is evident that such a marriage is doomed to fail in time, as is the case of the Bennets. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft prefers the idea of a marriage as friendship, as a companionship; this notion can also be seen in Austen’s novels, particularly in Elinor’s attachment to Edward. Neither is overly passionate, as is the case with Marianne’s affection to Willoughby, and their relationship has the “calmness of friendship”⁸¹ that Wollstonecraft favours.

While Burney was more of a commentary than a reformist, Austen seeks to reform the circumstances of her female characters, and consequently women in general, by attacking conventional notions. Despite the fact that her diction does not resemble Wollstonecraft, a detailed examination of her novels can reveal the excellently hidden connections to the female thinker; while she never refers to her,

⁷⁹ Helena Kelly, *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical* (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2016), epub.

⁸⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 60.

⁸¹ Ruth Abbey, “Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Hypatia* 14(3) (1999): 79.

Austen “appears to endorse many of [Wollstonecraft’s] views, and . . . seems to be borrowing from the characters in Wollstonecraft’s novels.”⁸² Therefore, even in the time where any association with the scandalous author was undesirable and damaging to a woman’s reputation, Wollstonecraft’s legacy could continue and resonate with the readers for centuries in the works of other women novelists, Jane Austen included.

⁸² Sandrine Bergès, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 187.

4. CHARLOTTE AND ANNE BRONTË

Feminist literary scholars have long considered the Brontë sisters as feminist authors, and their novels have been subjects to feminist literary criticism probably since its start. Not only their novels, but also the lives of the Brontës resonate with the feminist thought—unmarried professionals striving for excellence in their chosen line of work. Neither Emily nor Anne had a chance to marry, as they both died young; however, like Jane Austen, they were already old enough to be considered spinsters by the time of their untimely deaths. Charlotte Brontë lived slightly longer, and like Frances Burney, she married later in life; she was thirty-eight when she accepted a proposal of Arthur Bell Nicholls, and died soon after.

The novels of the Brontë sisters inevitably deal with the position of a woman in society, challenging social conventions and laws which seek to oppress women, rendering them weak and ignorant. However, all of their heroines are women not content with their situation, and they seek to improve it, to break the patriarchal tie that rules their conduct and the whole of their lives. Their novels deal with the difficulties a woman seeking herself and her independence faces in predominantly patriarchal society, and their attacks on traditional notions resonates even today.

The Brontës lived in the time where the deviation from the norm was undesirable, particularly when it came to the woman question. They were born in the time when society was slowly forgetting Mary Wollstonecraft's existence, as discussing either her life or work became a taboo after the publication of her memoirs in 1798. By the time the sisters could read, Wollstonecraft was long forgotten; and even if she were not, "Wollstonecraft's was not a very commendable influence for any authoress aspiring to literary recognition in the 19th century, and, therefore, we should not expect Victorian woman writers to acknowledge publicly that they knew, in case they did, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*."⁸³ To associate with Wollstonecraft would risk not being published; therefore there will be very little mentions of her name or her ideology in nineteenth century works.

Furthermore, the Brontës lived in a difficult time for a woman to succeed as a professional writer. In their time, women writers were still being disregarded,

⁸³ Beatriz Villacañas Palomo, "Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Case of Sisterhood," *Estudios ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 1 (1993): 199.

and their works were not as valued as the works of their male counterparts. For that reason, and perhaps to afford themselves the possibility of talking about topics unsuitable for a woman to discuss, all the Brontë sisters wrote under male pseudonyms. In her Preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne protests against the need for pseudonyms: “if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be.”⁸⁴ However, she too wrote under a male name to attract more readership.

The Brontë sisters frequently portray heroines praised for their independent spirit, sound understanding, rational and principled behaviour, heroines who are not indifferent to the subordinate position of women, who attempt to transcend the boundaries of traditional gender roles, and who challenge social order. Having all been governesses, they are aware of the precarious position of a young educated woman who exists, in a way, in between. Both Anne and Charlotte penned novels featuring a governess as a protagonist, as popular female character in nineteenth century fiction.

While there can be no explicit connection to Mary Wollstonecraft, the likeness of their subject matters to Wollstonecraft’s manifesto and the similarity of their arguments bridges the distance between the female philosopher and the Brontës. Beatriz Villacañas Palomo concludes that “we certainly cannot deny that Wollstonecraft’s works may have been, if not widely, at least privately read by some Victorian women, in particular by those so much concerned with woman’s position as the Brontë sisters.”⁸⁵ Merely by analysing their novels—represented by *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in this thesis—it would be impossible to disprove that they were not at least vaguely familiar with Wollstonecraft’s progressive thinking, which in some aspects mirrors theirs.

The following chapter of this thesis deals with establishing Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë’s *Helen Huntingdon/Graham* as feminist heroines. Later part of this chapter focuses on the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought in their novels, and specific instances which connect two of the famous sister to the radical Wollstonecraft.

⁸⁴ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 5.

⁸⁵ Beatriz Villacañas Palomo, “Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Case of Sisterhood,” *Estudios ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 1 (1993): 199.

4.1 *Jane Eyre*

Margaret Homans claims that “Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* has long been understood to represent feminism in fictional form,”⁸⁶ and it is difficult to dispute the fact. Jane Eyre, an orphan, never had anyone she could depend on but herself; her exertion and toils only further her position of an independent woman, as her independence is then well-deserved. Her dependent position on the goodwill of the Reeds initiated her pursuit of independence, which is symbolic of Jane being a feminist heroine; and as an independent heroine, she influenced the nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist thought, as well as the heroines of later Victorian fiction.

Jane, even as a young child, was exceptionally intelligent; she improved herself by reading, and she exercised her reason by forming her own opinions, as was the case while reading Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*. However, her intelligence and sharp wit are often to her own disadvantage; not only is she aware of the injustice of her situation, both as a dependent and later as a woman, but she is open in voicing her beliefs, which resulted in her being abused by the members of the Reed family.

As an unwanted member of the Reed household, Jane was sent to a charity school at the age of ten, where she remained for six years as a pupil and for two more years as a teacher. It is there she learned more about injustice; but it also provided her with a seemingly excellent education. She was instructed in fashionable—yet not always useful, as the case of Juliet in *The Wanderer* proves—female arts of drawing and reading, and more useful knowledge of languages and geography, which made it possible for her to pursue a different way of living. However insufficient her education was at making her a rational being, Jane needed no aid, as she was dependent on her exercise of reason from early childhood. The experience of being a teacher was even more valuable, as it taught her to seek liberty, and inevitably a different establishment.

Becoming a governess was the most common way for a young educated woman to earn her own living; three of the authors whose novels this thesis analyses had the experience of being a governess themselves, namely Mary

⁸⁶ Margaret Homans, “Jane Eyre, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and the Varieties of Nineteenth-century Feminism” in *Literature and the Developments of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 27.

Wollstonecraft, and Charlotte and Anne Brontë. As it was the most, if not the only, respectable position for women of little means, novels of the nineteenth century frequently make use of the character of a governess. In *The Wanderer*, it was Juliet Granville's original plan to pursue the career of a governess, before she was forced by circumstances to apply for lower jobs. Jane Eyre is not the only governess Charlotte Brontë features in the eponymous novel; the Rivers women, Diana and Mary, are both governesses as well. Brontë is perfectly aware of the precarious situation of governesses, who are considered by the family members as servants, yet they do not fit in with the domestic servants, and while they earn wages, they are not fully independent either.

Brontë's portrays Jane Eyre as one of the lucky few who managed to find a good home; her employer "treated her kindly, and [she] was content."⁸⁷ Yet, Mr. Rochester's treatment of Jane is not commonly shared—neither by the characters in the novel, nor by contemporary society in general. The assembly at Thornfield Hall completely dismisses the merit of governesses, led by Lady Ingram and her daughter Blanche. "My dearest, don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice. I thank Heaven I have now done with them!"⁸⁸ She sees faults in a governess, yet not in herself; that is to say, if she took care of the education of her children on her own, the employment of a governess would not have been necessary. Blanche completes the image of utter disdain the society has for governesses, who are the only thing standing between children and complete idleness and folly.

Jane Eyre's rationality and her admirable control over her emotions resemble that of Elinor Dashwood in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Jane is guided by her sense, not by her feelings; she is practical and not easily overwhelmed with great passion, nor does she strive to be. It is those qualities that differentiate her from weak-minded women, her attitude and determination to do well, that brings forth the admiration of Mr. Rochester; similarly as in *Pride and Prejudice*, the hero is not attracted to someone with inferior understanding, but to a woman who knows and speaks her own mind. Jane certainly challenges the conventional notion of a Victorian woman, and she is victorious over the ideal, as later heroines are modelled on her.

⁸⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992), 200.

⁸⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 154-155.

Jane thinks herself to be Edward Rochester's equal; "and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are!"⁸⁹ Furthermore, it is also Rochester who believes they are equals but in age and experience, resonating Wollstonecraft's notions of the equality between the two sexes and the unsexed soul and reason. Therefore, even if Jane's independence is restricted by her later marriage, it will be a marriage of equals; unlike the marriage she could have with St. John, who "as a man . . . would have wished to coerce [her] into obedience."⁹⁰ By refusing St. John's offer of marriage, she challenges the convention of the inferiority of a wife, and in concluding the novel with the marriage to Mr. Rochester, Jane's equal, Brontë makes it clear which kind of marriage she favours. Furthermore, Rochester's blindness affects the dynamics of their relationship, as he is now in the position of a dependent, reversing the traditional roles. As Terry Eagleton claims, "[Jane's] ultimate relation to him is a complex blend of independence . . . deference and control."⁹¹ If anything, given Rochester's disability, Jane would assume the role of the superior spouse; however, their marriage is based on the Wollstonecraft's ideal of higher friendship, and as such, they are equal.

Unlike *The Wanderer's* Elinor, Jane's agenda is not purely selfish; she does not seek independence only for herself, but for her whole sex. She presents herself as a fierce advocate of women:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.⁹²

In her progressive speech, which, at the time of the novel's publication, would not be favourably looked at, Jane echoes Wollstonecraft's belief that men and women are the same, in both their understanding as well as their feelings. Jane, like

⁸⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992), 223.

⁹⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 362.

⁹¹ Jessica Bomarito, Jeffrey W. Hunter, eds., *Feminism in Literature: Volume 2* (Farmington Hill: Thomas Gale, 2005), 403.

⁹² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 95.

Wollstonecraft, asserts that only exercise of reason can lead to the improvement of an individual, and consequently the society as a whole.

Jane's thinking is overall rather revolutionary, and it is safe to say that Brontë was well-versed in the issue of the French Revolution and in Wollstonecraft's theory of equality. When Jane inherits a large fortune from her deceased uncle, she follows the major principles of the Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—and she splits her newly-gained wealth into four portions, sharing her inheritance with her cousins. She places the utmost importance on family, as she never had any until now; while the Rivers are not her brother and sisters, they are as close to real siblings as is possible, therefore, she believes they have an equal right to John Eyre's fortune, dividing the money in Wollstonecraftian fashion—equally.

Furthermore, like Wollstonecraft, Burney and her sister Anne, Charlotte Brontë is a great critic of the contemporary marriage laws, which render the wife a mere possession of her husband, giving him complete power over a rational being capable of thinking and acting for herself. Brontë's critique is portrayed in the circumstances of Mr. Rochester's marriage.

A nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society a part of me – and I could not rid myself of it by any legal proceedings: for the doctors now discovered that *my wife* was mad—her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity.⁹³

Charlotte Brontë not only comments on the notion that wife becomes a part of her husband, as they are one in the eyes of the law—one being, the husband—but she also expresses her disdain over the fact that a man, tricked into a marriage under false pretences, cannot legally separate himself from his wife, who is more like a beast than a human now.

Bertha Mason's imprisonment on the third-floor of Thornfield Hall resonates “the patriarchal rule that confines and oppresses”⁹⁴ not only the female characters in the novel, but women in the society in general. It was common for a husband whose wife displeased him to pronounce her mad and confine her to an asylum, even if she was not necessarily mad. It is what happened to the

⁹³ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992), 270-271.

⁹⁴ Margaret Homans, “Jane Eyre, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and the Varieties of Nineteenth-century Feminism” in *Literature and the Developments of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 32.

eponymous heroine of *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*. However, in the present case, Bertha is in fact mad; and to conceal her existence from the world, Edward Rochester resolves to keep her secretly hidden on the upper story of the house. As Bertha is undoubtedly dangerous to other people, her confinement is justified; however, her imprisonment is inflicted by a man who has complete power over her as his wife, and were it a lesser man than Rochester, she might not have been insane to be stuck in the attic.

Jane, similarly to other feminist heroines featured in this thesis, has to overcome the difficulties that she faces in her pursuit of self-dependence; mainly, the opposition of people who strive to keep her in her proper inferior place. The most prominent figure in dismissing Jane's capabilities is St. John Rivers. Like many others, he praises her mind and principles, and he even helps her pursue the career of a village school-mistress, which is a position affording her more independence than being a governess in a rich household; nevertheless, he inevitably undermines her pursuit of equality by thinking himself worthier for being a man. "Though you have a man's vigorous brain, you have a woman's heart."⁹⁵ St. John clearly does not believe that a woman can possess high intellect, for having it would make her masculine; similarly, Harleigh in *The Wanderer* claims that Elinor possesses a masculine spirit. These instances show that qualities that are thought to be masculine are not desirable in women; particularly in young women of marriageable age.

Jane Eyre believes herself to be "a free human being with an independent will,"⁹⁶ and throughout the whole of the novel, she proves and further consolidates her independence. Being "an independent heroine who claims her rights to self-determination and to sexual self-expression,"⁹⁷ it is undeniable that she has the makings of the ideal feminist heroine; she is an exceptional woman who rebels against the restrictive notions of appropriate female behaviour and whose main primary in life is to improve herself and the position of her fellow women in society. "I am an independent woman now . . . I am my own mistress."⁹⁸ Jane succeeds in her pursuit of independence, and it is further emphasised by the fact

⁹⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992), 361.

⁹⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 223.

⁹⁷ Margaret Homans, "Jane Eyre, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and the Varieties of Nineteenth-century Feminism" in *Literature and the Developments of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 28.

⁹⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 385.

that she is the one to propose marriage to Mr. Rochester, leaving no doubt that they both are equal partners in their marriage.

4.2 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Like her older sisters, Anne Brontë did not shy away from challenging the social order and principles prevalent in society or from pointing out the difficulties of women who are resolved to rely solely on themselves. Her second—and last—novel is a biting criticism of the circumstances of a woman imprisoned in a demeaning marriage, trying to manage on her own when even the law is against her. Furthermore, Brontë excellently challenges the separation of the spheres and the expected gender roles in the early Victorian era.

Of all the female writers featured in this thesis, Anne Brontë is the one who was most evidently exposed to Mary Wollstonecraft's work. Her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shares numerous textual parallels with Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*. Each heroine is trapped in a marriage with a profligate husband, unable to separate herself from his less than virtuous ways, and reduced to such circumstances that justify the most radical step—an escape. Beatriz Villacañas Palomo asserts that “Wollstonecraft and Brontë share the same consciousness of social and legal injustice towards their sex and neither of them hesitates to expose it.”⁹⁹ Both Maria and Helen Huntingdon are the victims of the laws which oppress women, who cease to exist as individual beings, but become one with their husbands in the eyes of the law.

Furthermore, Helen and Maria are mothers, and they both leave their husbands in order to escape the corrupting influence of the father on their child. In leaving their husbands, they willingly forfeit their husband's name; separating themselves from their unworthy husbands in the only way they can. In comparison to Wollstonecraft, Brontë is not as radical in the treatment of her heroine; Helen neither loses her child, nor her freedom. Similarly to Helen and Maria, Juliet in *The Wanderer* is also forced to flee her marriage. But unlike Wollstonecraft, Brontë and Burney succeeded in creating a sympathetic heroine,

⁹⁹ Beatriz Villacañas Palomo, “Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Case of Sisterhood,” *Estudios ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 1 (1993): 201.

who is justified in her escape; Wollstonecraft's radicalism at times prevents the reader from relating to her unfortunate heroine.

Unlike Juliet in *The Wanderer*, Helen chose to marry her husband; despite her superior understanding, she was seduced by a charming profligate, and while she knew him to be less virtuous than her, she believed she could change him. Against her better judgement and her aunt's reminder of Helen's previous words—"you should never be tempted to marry a man who was deficient in sense or principle, however handsome or charming in other respect he might be, for you could not love him; you should hate—despise—pity—anything but love him"¹⁰⁰—she decided to accept Arthur Huntingdon's proposal, and her later difficulties stem from her romantic sentiment.

Helen Huntingdon is an exceptional woman of almost superhuman strength, as she is determined to endure the wicked ways of her husband; what she is not prepared to endure is her husband's bad influence on her impressionable little son. She raises him to be a virtuous being, but her instruction is being undermined by the indulgence and vice of his father. She is deeply virtuous and religious; and by creating such a noble character, contrasted with her corrupt husband, Brontë "challenges marriage laws . . . that require a woman to stay with an abusive husband, just as she criticises the norms of the separate spheres that prevent women from raising their male children virtuously."¹⁰¹ When Arthur publicly renounces her as his wife and proceeds to offer her to whichever of his friends will have her, he—at least ethically, if not legally—loses his claim to Helen; yet, he does not lose the claim to his son, which was the issue that Wollstonecraft fiercely opposes in both *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her novel *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*.

Like Juliet Granville in *The Wanderer*, Helen uses her accomplishments to support herself and her child; but unlike Juliet, she succeeds in her pursuit of financial independence. Helen improves herself and becomes a professional painter, blurring the line and inevitably entering the male public scene. Her work allows her to live alone, under the disguise of being a widow, as the community would never harbour a fugitive wife, as proven previously in *Maria; or The*

¹⁰⁰ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 116.

¹⁰¹ Rachel Carnell, "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53(1) (1998): 23.

Wrongs of Woman, and she is content with leading a quiet, isolated life, if it means her duty as a mother will be fulfilled. Like Wollstonecraft, she faces the challenge of balancing her duties as a professional with those of a mother.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, like all the previous analysed works, features indulgent mothers to criticise misguided and failed parental roles. Early on, Helen proclaims that “if ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this crime of over-indulgence,”¹⁰² as, according to Wollstonecraft, indulgence in children leads to bad temper and spoilt nature. However, as Helen is unwilling to be separated from her child, she is perceived as an indulgent mother by the community, and she is accused of spoiling Arthur’s temper. Helen is certainly a careful and practical mother, and her fear of being discovered and having her child taken away is mistakenly seen as indulgence. It is the women who protest her way of bringing her son up who are indulgent mothers. Mrs. Markham undeniably prefers her sons over her daughter, and she spoils her oldest son Gilbert, indulging his every whim, even the unspoken ones. Her daughter Rose protests against her inferior position within the family, but she ultimately conforms and never challenges the prevalent state of things like Helen does. It is, therefore, due to women like Mrs. Markham and Rose, who seem content with their lot, that the female sex can never rise to be equal to the male sex; according to Wollstonecraft, women like that are the greatest enemy to the cause of sex equality and just society.

Helen is criticised for choosing to educate her son on her own; Mrs. Markham thinks her insufficient and is certain of Helen’s failure. However, it is likely that Helen’s rationality will serve Arthur better than the knowledge of a private tutor or a governess. Helen believes that she is better suited at educating her son, and she instructs him in both the exercise of reason as well as the exercise of the body. She strongly believes that the upbringing of girls and boys should be the same and strive toward the improvement of virtue, mind, and body, a notion that other women in the community disagree with and criticise her for. Here, Helen strongly resembles Wollstonecraft’s notion about child-rearing, as Wollstonecraft believed that men and women must grow up alongside one another in order to become familiar with the other sex.

¹⁰² Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 177.

Although Helen is able to make use of her female accomplishments, other female characters fall short in comparison. Jane Wilson wished to be educated at a boarding-school; there, she “acquired considerable elegance of manners, quite lost the provincial accent, and could boast of more accomplishments than the vicar’s daughter.”¹⁰³ Despite receiving formal education, Jane Wilson is a silly, weak woman, whose ignorance is evident in her conduct, and while her manners are said to be elegant, they are certainly not good manner. On the contrary, Helen represents a strong woman capable of providing for herself and her son, with a superior ability to reason and steady moral principles; she serves as a model not only to her young friend Esther, whose good nature and sound understanding is more due to the influence of Helen than her own mother, but also to other women in society.

Unlike most female characters featured in the novel, Helen possesses an extremely good sense, and she is a keen observer, which helps in her pursuit of making a living. She is far superior to other characters in the novel, both in intellect and goodness of her nature. Having her romantic hopes for a happy marriage crushed, she becomes sceptical about the advantages of marriage; in her conversation with Esther Hargrave, she asserts that “marriage *may* change your circumstances for the better, but in my private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result,”¹⁰⁴ reminding her friend that marriage is a bond for life—and she cannot remove that bond even with her escape, as is proven later when she returns to nurse her husband in his final months. It is puzzling that she would, contrary to her words, choose to marry again; yet it is Gilbert’s progressive attitude toward marriage—as he does not want his wife to serve him; he wants to serve his wife—that entices her and allows her to re-marry, this time to her own advantage, to please herself.

Jill Matus¹⁰⁵ implies that the ending of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not as optimistic as it may seem. She faults Gilbert Markham for giving Helen’s diary to his friend Halford, to whom he relates the story that happened years ago. In doing so, he breaches Helen’s privacy and essentially breaks his promise not to

¹⁰³ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 16.

¹⁰⁴ Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 293.

¹⁰⁵ See Jill Matus, “‘Strong family likeness’: *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 104.

reveal Helen's secret. Matus suggests that his actions may hint at the "novel's scepticism or even pessimism about the authority and voice women retain in marriage."¹⁰⁶ Here I disagree with Matus; firstly, Gilbert was sworn to secrecy only so Helen's situation would not be revealed and Helen discovered—it is no longer injurious to her character for someone to know her secret, as is proven by the fact that she allows Gilbert to relate her story to his mother and sister, who are sure to spread the gossip around the community; an action that makes the secrecy oath moot in itself. Secondly, if Gilbert is guilty of breaching confidence, so is Helen, as she showed Hattersley Millicent's letter; and while Millicent is his wife, the letters were written in the strictest confidence, and it is safe to assume that since she never could tell him about her anguish, she would never consent to show the letters to him. A letter is almost as private as a diary; and since Helen has no objection to showing Millicent's private letters to someone else, she should not object to having her diary read by her brother-in-law.

Brontë criticised gender roles in early Victorian society, as well as the double standard in treatment of women. When Helen discovers her husband's affair with Annabella, Lady Lowborough, she is unable to do anything about it; however, when the liaison is later made known to Lord Lowborough, Helen admits to having known for some time, and she declares that "two years hence you will be as calm as I am now, and far, far happier, I trust, for you are a man, and free to act as you please."¹⁰⁷ Because she is a woman, she can neither renounce her husband, nor entertain the idea of having a lover of her own; as a man, Lord Lowborough can do either of these things, revealing the double standard. Moreover, Brontë develops the severely disadvantaged position of wives when she asserts that "deceased husband, with his usual selfishness, might have so constructed his will as to place restrictions upon her marrying again,"¹⁰⁸ ultimately denying his widow the opportunity to find happiness.

Rachel Carnell¹⁰⁹ argues that while Helen Graham/Huntingdon was successful in entering the public sphere typically reserved to men, she willingly

¹⁰⁶ Jill Matus, "'Strong family likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 104.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 268.

¹⁰⁸ Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 353.

¹⁰⁹ See Rachel Carnell, "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53(1) (1998).

renounces her claim to participate in it by agreeing to marry Gilbert Markham. After her second marriage, the closest she can come to engaging in the public sphere is to instruct and improve her husband and sons morally, making them better citizens. While that may be the case, it does not signify that Helen loses her independence; she still remains Gilbert's superior in understanding, and her new husband is aware of it. Helen is likely to take part in all major decisions—that is, if she is not the one deciding—that involve their new family; as Brontë shows, it is up to Helen to decide where the family will live, and whether her aunt Maxwell is allowed to live with them. While her inheritance may legally transfer to her husband, in both her and Gilbert's mind she remains its owner. As she retains her superior abilities and is able to exercise her self-dependence even within the marriage, for all intents and purposes, she remains the feminist heroine that she has always been.

4.3 Wollstonecraftian influence

The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's works is undeniable in the novels of the Brontë sister. Although Mary Kirkham points out that “by 1840s Mary Wollstonecraft's works had become difficult to obtain,”¹¹⁰ the Brontës must have been already familiar with her thought, or they managed to find the few copies still available. To avoid tarnishing their reputations, they could not openly associate or agree with Wollstonecraft, which makes it hard to trace where they may have encountered her ideology; however, their novels make it evident that they identify with some, if not all, of her progressive ideas, being proofs that the Brontës were, in fact, well-versed in Wollstonecraft's work.

One of the major points in Wollstonecraft's philosophy that they both agree with is the issue of education and upbringing of children. Previous section of this thesis already comments on the insufficient education of girls in boarding-schools in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where, like Wollstonecraft, she criticised the pursuit of superficial accomplishments. Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre is educated at a boarding-school, where she is instructed in some useful subjects as well; she is not raised as a fashionable girl, but, seeing as Lowood

¹¹⁰ Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 168.

Institution is a charity school, it is crucial that she learns something that will make her a valuable member of the society. What is more important about Jane's stay at Lowood Institution is that Charlotte's description of the boarding-school faithfully mirrors Wollstonecraft's theory in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. At Lowood, the girls sleep together in beds, they wash together in the same room, which, according to Wollstonecraft, could lead to them acquiring indelicate, "nasty, or immodest habits."¹¹¹ While Jane is not spoilt by this experience, as Wollstonecraft feared, Brontë's criticism of boarding-schools, particularly those like Lowood, where children are cold and not given sufficient meals, is evident. Furthermore, Jane is forced to learn whole passages by heart, which does not help with developing the ability to reason and forming one's opinions. It is exactly for this reason that Wollstonecraft and many other philosophers call for an educational reform toward the end of the eighteenth century, and as Brontë's novel hints, the educational reform had yet to happen in her time, only coming into effect toward the end of the nineteenth century.

What *Jane Eyre* openly exploits is Wollstonecraftian notion of indulgent mothers; the effect of such bad mother is made prominent by the fact that unlike other analysed works, Charlotte Brontë's book features more children. The prototypical coddling mother is Mrs. Reed; her oldest child, John, is as spoilt as possible. It shows in the way he behaves not only to Jane, tormenting her, but to animals as well; furthermore, he aims his vicious attacks at his mother as well, while she blindly dotes on him. John can do no wrong in Mrs. Reed's eyes and it is typically Jane who is blamed for his vicious acts; similarly, Mrs. Reed has ruined the tempers of her daughters Eliza, who grew up to be selfish and ruthless, and Georgiana, whose only merit is being beautiful. Apart from Mrs. Reed, it is also Lady Ingram who indulges her children's whims.

To make Jane's unfortunate situation even more apparent, Brontë creates the character of Adèle Varens, who is an orphan as well. Nevertheless, unlike Jane, she is an indulged, spoilt child. In her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft challenges Dr. Gregory's remark on girls being fond of dress; and Brontë features this challenge in the character of Adèle, who, despite being a child, is already a vain creature obsessed with her dress and overall appearance.

¹¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 143.

However, like in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the parental failure is not exclusively a mother's failure. The late father of the Rivers siblings failed to provide for his daughters, who are now forced to seek employment as governesses in order to provide for themselves. However, unlike Austen's fictional fathers, it was not due to inaction, but due to bad luck. Be it as it may, Brontë exploits the parental failures from both sides.

Charlotte Brontë goes even further with utilising themes and ideas from Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. When Mr. Rochester is entertaining guest at Thornfield Hall, a gipsy fortune-teller comes to the house. In her list of women follies, Wollstonecraft mentions that ignorant women "are very anxious to peep into futurity, to learn what they have to expect to render life interesting;"¹¹² so when the gipsy appears at Thornfield, Blanche Ingram does not hesitate to seize the opportunity, and other young women follow her example and have their fortune read. Jane is too rational to believe in the obscure; she is curious, but not foolish enough to see the merit of fortune-telling. Moreover, she is the only female to recognise something odd about the gipsy, who turns out to be Mr. Rochester, furthermore distancing herself from the weak-minded, ignorant women currently residing at Thornfield.

There are many similarities to be found in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Diedrick even goes as far as to argue that Jane Eyre "can be read . . . as a fictional counterpart to Wollstonecraft's manifesto."¹¹³ Whether it was intended as such, the truth remains that *Jane Eyre* is undeniably inspired by Wollstonecraft's philosophy.

Similarly, her sister Anne took inspiration from Wollstonecraft's work as well; and unlike Charlotte, she was not influenced merely by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, but by Wollstonecraft's fiction too. Like her sister, Anne Brontë favours marriage as companion, a Wollstonecraftian notion challenging the prevalent marriages in society of her time, where the marriage starts on the shallow basis of beauty and admiration, and when the superficial basis is gone, the marriage ceases to fulfil its function of bringing up rational children.

¹¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 180.

¹¹³ Margaret Homans, "Jane Eyre, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and the Varieties of Nineteenth-century Feminism" in *Literature and the Developments of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 28.

Connected to the issue of marriage is the fact that “rational and virtuous men are . . . disadvantaged, for women are not educated to value their minds and merits.”¹¹⁴ Wollstonecraft assesses that until women are allowed to exercise their reason and are better educated, they will always choose the easy charm of a rake over the merit of a decent man. This can be seen in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, when Helen rejects the suit of an older but decent man, Mr. Boarham, because she enjoys the attention of a rake who is more pleasing to her romantic sentiments. However, her inexperienced folly is soon revealed when she is forced to regret choosing Arthur Huntingdon as her husband.

Wollstonecraft does not believe in the separation of the spheres, and Anne Brontë proves to be a critic of the unnatural division as well. By having Helen enter the public sphere as a professional artist, she challenges the notion that the public sphere is not suitable for women, and she argues for the inclusion of more women into the sphere of men. However, in comparison to Wollstonecraft, Brontë is never nearly as radical or open about the issues of inequality in her work.

Anne Brontë’s second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is indisputably influenced by Wollstonecraft’s *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*. Although she could never publicly defend or identify with Wollstonecraft’s ideas, her novel can be considered to be a tribute to the revolutionary thinker. Brontë uses the same plot to point out the injustice that befalls an unlucky wife; however, being better at fiction-writing than Wollstonecraft, she creates a more relatable heroine. Helen, who is by far the most virtuous character in the book, stands strong in face of temptation, and unlike Maria, she never allows herself to be fully emotionally invested in Gilbert while she is still married to another man. As her novel develops, she is able to display Arthur’s slow dissipation, and after witnessing Arthur’s affair as well as his cruel treatment of his wife, Helen is more than justified in fleeing the unhappy marriage.

In her Preface to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that “till men become attentive to the duty of a father, it is vain to expect women to spend that time in their nursery.”¹¹⁵ Caring for the children has always been assumed to be a mother’s duty, and Wollstonecraft

¹¹⁴ Ruth Abbey, “Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Hypatia* 14(3) (1999): 82.

¹¹⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 57.

exploits the double standard of this assumption. Fathers, fictional or real, will amuse the child, but they will not take care of it when it is hurt. This can be seen in Anne Brontë's novel; Ralph Hattersley, who is fond of his daughter Helen and likes to play rough with her, immediately gives little Helen to her mother when she gets hurt, not caring to be around a crying child. Similarly, Arthur Huntingdon leaves for London because he is "worn out with the baby's restless nights, and [he] must have some repose;"¹¹⁶ when it is, in fact, Helen who cares for the child at night, and she is in need of rest as much, if not more, as the indolent father.

Although there can be no reference to Mary Wollstonecraft in the Brontë sisters' works, nor can there be any direct link due to the undesirable implications of the connection, it is indisputable that the Brontës were exposed to Wollstonecraft's ideology, and that her progressive ideas about the equality among the sexes greatly influenced their work. This can be proven by the textual parallels, common themes and ideas, as well as by the nearly Wollstonecraftian diction that the Brontës make use of.

¹¹⁶ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 192.

CONCLUSION

The position of women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was unfavourable when compared to the position of men. The predominantly patriarchal society of the nineteenth century Britain afforded women severely limited rights to own property; and the women themselves became the property of their husbands when they eventually married. Women writers were aware of the conventional notions that rendered women inferior to men; however, they were already disadvantaged as women when it came to the publication of their novels. Therefore, the novelists who dared to challenge the social norms were in minority.

Among those who refused to conform to the conventions were Frances Burney and her successor Jane Austen, and later, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, they were succeeded by the Brontë sisters. These women writers can themselves be called exceptional; however, to overcome the difficulties connected to publication, they began publishing their works anonymously, as was the case with Burney and Austen, or under male pseudonyms, like the Brontës.

This thesis aimed to analyse and establish the female protagonists of above-mentioned female novelists as feminist heroines; for this purpose, the criteria constructed by Cynthia Watkins Richardson¹¹⁷ are used. The second purpose of this thesis was to establish connection to the ideas and opinions of Mary Wollstonecraft, which are present in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her unfinished novel, *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*.

In my analysis of Frances Burney's feminist novel *The Wanderer; or Female Difficulties*, I took into account the revolutionary setting of the novel, which allowed the author to create a female character with almost Wollstonecraftian qualities, who openly criticises the society which seeks to oppress women and deny them their natural rights. The backdrop of the revolution allowed Burney to associate with the idea of Wollstonecraft; however, while Elinor Joddrel openly speaks for the rights of women, she cannot be considered a feminist heroine, as she fails to prove to be exceptional and her motives are selfish, as Elinor does not seek the improvement of the position of the whole sex, but only of herself.

¹¹⁷ See Cynthia Watkins Richardson, "The Making of Feminist Heroines," review of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, by Barbara Taylor, *H-Women*, March 2004.

In stark contrast to Elinor, Burney created the virtuous Juliet Granville, whose continuous efforts to achieve independence and her exceptional determination to depend solely on herself differentiate her from Miss Joddrel. Juliet, unlike Elinor, does not limit her lamentations only to herself; she is aware of the difficulties of her sex, and by trying to succeed in her pursuit of independence, she sets a model for other women to follow. As she has to overcome many obstacles and she fails short in her endeavours, she does not appear to be too powerful, too perfect, which would be injurious to feminism as a whole; as Sara Lyons mentions, if a woman “appears too powerful, triumphs too completely, she can make feminism seem superfluous.”¹¹⁸ This is not the case with Juliet Granville, who is not infallible; therefore, Juliet Granville has the making of the perfect literary feminist heroine. While Juliet ultimately conforms to the patriarchal rules, only highlighting her shortcomings, she should not be forgotten in the discussion of feminist heroines, as her pursuit of independence is exemplary.

Whereas Burney had the available excuse of the revolution, Jane Austen had to be subtle in her critique of society. She masterfully hides her admonishment of men who try to assert superiority over women on account of their superior reason; however, in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, she creates exceptionally rational heroines who serve to exploit the foolishness of such a claim. Both Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet are undeniably superior to their contemporaries; while Elizabeth’s dismissal of conventions is put into contrast with Miss Bingley who represents the societal norm of a young woman, Elinor is contrasted with Lucy Steele, who is lacking both in her understanding and in her education. Although Austen challenges the norm and celebrates the unconventional female behaviour, neither of her heroines is openly advocating for change; however, in creating independent protagonists who do not depend on men for their opinions or happiness, she promotes the idea of a strong, independent woman.

Unlike Burney or Austen, Charlotte and Anne Brontë did not live in the time where Wollstonecraft was celebrated for her daring yet pointed critique of inequality in society. In the time of the Brontë sisters, Mary Wollstonecraft was

¹¹⁸ Sara Lyons, “On Heroines, Heroine Worship and the Heroine in Feminism,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26(4) (2016): 462.

long condemned for her disgraceful conduct, and she was mostly forgotten by the time the Brontës learned to read. It is therefore surprising that it is in their works, and not in the works of Wollstonecraft's near contemporaries, Burney and Austen, that the influence of the early feminist is extremely prominent. The diction of both Anne and Charlotte resembles in some aspects the words of the radical Wollstonecraft and the similarity of the topics they deal with is, at times, startling.

The situation of Jane Eyre in Charlotte most well-known novel is unparalleled; as an orphan with no one to help her, Jane cannot but strive to be independent. She is by far superior to other female characters in the novel; unlike Blanche Ingram, she is Mr. Rochester's equal, and, furthermore, she advocates for equality for her fellow women as well. Helen's fate in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* copies the fate of Wollstonecraft's Maria and criticises the unfavourable position of wives who have no means of escaping a cruel marriage; moreover, it calls for the rights of mothers to have custody of their children. Brontë was writing the novel in the time where the custody laws were being changed; however, by setting her novel ten years earlier, she further highlights the injustice done to women by society as a whole. Similarly to Jane Eyre, Helen Huntingdon aspires to improve the female sex; however, she does so by helping to improve individual women, not by openly calling for change. Helen shows exceptional strength in the face of difficulties and with regards to her understanding, she is superior not only to her fellow women, but to the male characters as well.

The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft, however undesirable it was to be directly linked to her, is evident in all the analysed works in this thesis. While there is no reference to her name or works in the novels, the similarities in topics and opinions of the heroines are evident upon closer inspection. Wollstonecraft's particular impact can be seen in the novelists' treatment of education, which is shown as lacking and insufficient for women's independence, and the critique of the same notions that she condemned, specifically relating to the issue of marriage and inheritance. Like Wollstonecraft, these women writers consider the inferior position of women in society as unnatural and their strong heroines and their ability to reason are put into stark contrast with foolish men, proving that reason needs to be exercised in order to be effective, be it in a female or a male character.

If one word sums up the features literary heroines, it is “exceptional”. In all featured novels, all the protagonists strive to depend wholly on themselves, be it financially or in their understanding. Their superiority is emphasised by the defects of other characters, who are, in comparison, perceived as ignorant and lacking. The heroines are all unconventional; and their eventual marriages do not demean them—they only further highlight the appeal of a strong character and sound understanding, essentially celebrating independent women. Juliet Granville, Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, and Helen Huntingdon, they all pursue independence and they all, in a way, succeed. However, they all fail short in at least one of the Lyons criteria for a feminist heroine. Taking into account the fact that the criteria are modern and pertain more to real women rather than literary characters and that the novels were written in a time when it was unacceptable for a woman to openly and directly criticise the conventional norms in society, it is reasonable to consider these female protagonists to be literary feminist heroines, despite their shortcomings in implementing the change in society. After all, it was Mary Wollstonecraft, the advocate for the radical change in British society of the time, herself who said: “I wish to see women neither as heroines nor brutes; but reasonable creature;”¹¹⁹ and Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë as well as her sister Anne undoubtedly succeeded at least in portraying rational female characters, if not in creating the perfect literary feminist heroines. It is in this way, by emphasising rationality in women, that Wollstonecraft’s legacy has lived on.

¹¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2015), 107.

RESUMÉ

Diplomová práce je zaměřena na feministické hrdinky v románech Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë a Anne Brontë a na vliv názorů a děl Mary Wollstonecraft na tvorbu těchto autorek. Diplomová práce se zabývá analýzou hlavních ženských postav coby feministických hrdinek a pro tento účel jsou použita kritéria stanovená Sarou Lyons.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na život Mary Wollstonecraft, který ovlivnil její tvorbu a následně i postoj společnosti k jejímu dílu. Kapitola komentuje vývoj po její smrti, kdy po publikaci memoárů napsaných jejím manželem byla Wollstonecraft slušnou společností pro své skandální vztahy a nemanželské dítě zavržena, což vedlo k úpadku zájmu o její pokrokové myšlenky. Následně je rozebrána její *Obrana práv ženy*, kde Wollstonecraft sepsala své argumenty pro rovnost pohlaví ve všech ohledech a navrhla nový systém vzdělávání, který by podle jejích slov prospěl jak mužům, tak i ženám, tedy v konečném důsledku společnosti jako celku. Poslední část kapitoly se zabývá jejím nedokončeným románem, kde Wollstonecraft opakuje některé své argumenty a zdůrazňuje znevýhodněnou pozici žen ve společnosti.

Další kapitola zkoumá ženské hrdinky feministického románu Frances Burney *The Wanderer* (do češtiny nepřeloženo) a analyzuje situaci Juliet Granville, která se snaží dosáhnout finanční nezávislosti s použitím dovedností, které jsou typické pro ženu osmnáctého a devatenáctého století. Překážky, kterým čelí, jen utvrzují názor, že ženy byly v dané době ve značné nevýhodě, pokud se snažily uživit samy. Analyzována je také postava Elinor, která prosazuje práva žen, ovšem jen ke svému vlastnímu užitku. Zmíněna je také podobnost s *Obranou práv žen*, především s ohledem na revoluční jazyk Elinor, kritiku vzdělání žen a existenci žen, které podrývají jiné ženy.

Třetí kapitola je věnována dvěma románům z pera Jane Austen, konkrétně hrdinkám knih *Rozum a cit* a *Pýcha a předsudek*. Důraz je dán na podobnost s ideologií Mary Wollstonecraft, a to konkrétně na nový model manželství, které je založeno na principu přátelství, kritiku stávajícího vzdělávání, které vede k pouhé umělecké zručnosti než k poznání; a také na kritiku systému dědictví, kdy majetek připadne nejbližšímu mužskému příbuznému namísto dceři.

Poslední kapitola analyzuje nejznámější díla Charlotte a Anne Brontë a jejich hrdinky, které jsou i přes časovou propast nápadně podobné ideálům Mary Wollstonecraft. Román mladší Anne doslova kopíruje děj románu *Maria* od Wollstonecraft a stejně jako jeho předloha zavrhuje manželské zákony té doby. V obou románech je zřetelná kritika stávajícího systému vzdělávání, také pošetilosti žen a matek, které rozmazlují své děti.

Diplomová práce analyzuje vybraná díla autorek, které psaly v době romantismu a v rané viktoriánské době. Je zaměřena na výklad hlavních ženských postav coby feministických hrdinek, které se snaží být nezávislé na mužích v jejich životech. Romány zdůrazňují racionálnost žen, která je podryvána nebo dokonce úplně přehlížena společností, které vládnu muži. Analýza hrdinek poukazuje na jejich chování a názory, které jsou spojeny s jejich cestou za svobodou a úzce také s feminismem. Každá kapitola se také zabývá otázkou vlivu Mary Wollstonecraft v těchto románech a poukazuje na konkrétní příklady, které dokazují, že autorky byly s její tvorbou seznámené a do jisté míry se s jejími názory ztotožňovaly. Diplomová práce je zakončena myšlenkou, že není důležité, jestli nebo jak moc hrdinky usilují o změnu společenského postavení žen, protože jejich existence sama o sobě poukazuje na existenci ženského rozumu, který byl dlouho popírán.

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ANNOTATION

- Author: Bc. Marika Ruprechtová
- Department: Department of English and American Studies
- Title of Thesis: In Pursuit of Independence: Feminist Heroines in the Romantic and Early Victorian Fiction
- Supervisor: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.
- Number of Pages: 80
- Year of Presentation: 2020
- Key Words: feminist heroines; Mary Wollstonecraft; *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; Frances Burney; Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë; Anne Brontë; Wollstonecraftian influence
- Abstract: This thesis focuses on the analysis of heroines in the selected novels written by Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Anne Brontë. The aim of this thesis is to establish the female protagonists as feminist heroines and to connect these novelists to the theory of Mary Wollstonecraft, acknowledging the influence of her ideas on some women writers.

ANOTACE

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| Autor: | Bc. Marika Ruprechtová |
| Katedra: | Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky |
| Název práce: | Cesta ke svobodě: feministické hrdinky romantismu a rané viktoriánské prózy |
| Vedoucí práce: | Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D. |
| Počet stran: | 80 |
| Rok obhajoby: | 2020 |
| Klíčová slova: | feministické hrdinky; Mary Wollstonecraft; <i>Obrana práv ženy</i> ; Frances Burney; Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë; Anne Brontë; vliv Mary Wollstonecraft |
| Abstrakt: | Diplomová práce se zabývá analýzou hlavních hrdinek ve vybraných románech Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë a Anne Brontë. Cílem práce je ukázat hlavní ženské postavy coby feministické hrdinky a prokázat vliv Mary Wollstonecraft a jejích názorů na díla některých spisovatelek. |