

Feminism in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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By Sara Whitecotton

In the excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," she responds to Dr. John Gregory's "A Father's Legacy to His Daughters," where he discusses his view of proper womanly behavior. Wollstonecraft echoes Austen's view that women are individuals with intellectual and creative capacities equal to that of men's. In both *Northanger Abbey* and "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," the two female authors question common social customs and assert that women should act rationally for themselves instead of simply attempting to impress the opposite sex.

Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is not outrightly depicted as a feminist novel, but by portraying Catherine in the way she does, Austen questions the literary ideal female type. Catherine's individuality manifests itself within the very first page of the novel where Austen depicts the main character as anything but a heroine. Catherine "was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket...to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" (Austen 5). The hyperawareness the novel has of itself here in mocking common gothic literary conventions emphasizes the point that Catherine is not the typical heroine and that Austen rejects female conformity. Although Catherine seems very dissimilar to many of Austen's heroines in that she is not especially clever, she shows good judgment at different points in the novel. By disliking John Thorpe, Catherine makes it known that she can think for herself and will not succumb to the social pressures to be with him. Also, Catherine believes marrying for money is a revolting practice. Because this was so common in her time, this also shows that Catherine has the capabilities to form her own opinions and reject the aristocratic conventions she believes to be wrong. This ability reveals itself when she refuses to go on the carriage ride with the Thorpe's and her brother. She doesn't allow herself to be manipulated and shows real characteristics of a heroine when she states, "if I could not be persuaded into doing what I thought was wrong, I never will be tricked into it" (Austen 68). By portraying Catherine as a non-conventional female character, Austen rejects the normal social customs for women and attempts to change them with her writing.

The extremely important message of asserting women's rationality is apparent in *Northanger Abbey* through Austen's mockery of the praise for stupidity in women. The narrator's voice serves as the platform from which Austen can state her views. Although the narrator seems to agree with other author's views that women should hide their intelligence, the statements in the novel mean exactly the opposite of their words. The famous quote that "a woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can" (Austen 76) of course does not really reflect Austen's views. By saying things such as this, Austen mocks other authors who actually believe that nonsense. She directly addresses this when she states, "the advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author" (Austen 76). Austen discounts the advice that women of her time received from men such as Dr. John Gregory and asserts that women should utilize their minds. In addition, by depicting Mrs. Allen as a materialistic and stupid female character, Austen only further ridicules this kind of woman. Mrs. Allen is the perfect portrayal of the submissive, dependant wife that men advised other women to become. Her "vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking" (Austen 40) allows her to interact with the opposite sex with an ability of "administering to the vanity of others" (Austen

76). Men, such as Henry Tilney, delighted in ignorance because it allowed them to showcase their knowledge and to teach the naïve woman. Austen's views on women's intellectual capacities in *Northanger Abbey* were only further emphasized by Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

Because Mary Wollstonecraft's text is not in novel form as Austen's is, she has the power to directly say what she wants in response to Gregory's "A Father's Legacy to His Daughters." Taking her own voice, and not that of a narrator, Wollstonecraft rebukes Gregory's advice that women should "be even cautious in displaying...good sense" (Gregory 221). Like Austen, Wollstonecraft believes in women's rational capacities for thinking and their right to exercise them. She also rejects many aristocratic conventions that prevent women from acting as they wish, such as "decorum [which] is to supplant nature, and banish all simplicity and variety of character out of the female world" (Wollstonecraft 224). By far her most compelling argument that coincides with *Northanger Abbey* is Wollstonecraft's argument that women should not cater to all men's vain wishes. Gregory states that some men may "look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding" (Gregory 221) however, "a man of real genius and candour is far superior to this meanness" (Gregory 221). Wollstonecraft argues that if men of no real merit will only behave this way, there is no point in all women hindering themselves from applying their intelligence around "fools, or men...having little claim to respect" (Wollstonecraft 224). Instead of always trying to please men, women should speak how they desire and act as they desire, and a man who is worthy will not dislike them simply because they have functional minds. Wollstonecraft echoes Austen's view that women don't need to constantly act in a certain way for different people, "it would be well if they were only agreeable or rational companions" (Wollstonecraft 225).

Both Austen and Wollstonecraft hold views not common for women of their time. Proper behavior for a woman seemed illogical and exhausting to them. They argued in favor of women's rational capacities and believed strongly in a woman's right to exercise them. Austen uses literary techniques, such as characterization and point of view, to emphasize her views in *Northanger Abbey* while Wollstonecraft simply uses her own voice. Despite the manner which the two authors go about establishing their opinions, both strongly oppose female conformity to social norms and believe women to be equal to men in their rational capacities.

Works Cited

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One Response »

1. **George Justice** on **February 9th, 2010 at 2:57 am**:

Very nicely done! You'll have to take Dr. Looser's class later on in your career at MU. Or mine!

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