Jane Austen: A Feminist Voice.

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I dedicate my dissertation, "Jane Austen – A Feminist Voice", to the memory of my beautiful daughter Sadhbh Sheahan. Sadhbh has given me the courage and the strength to keep going and to stand tall on the days I felt like giving up.

Historian and Jane Austen biographer Lucy Worsley has suggested that Austen never acquired notoriety as a novelist in the nineteenth century because: "her books were dynamite" (Worsley, 2017, 5). Two hundred years after Austen's death on July 18, 1871, at the age of just forty-one, Worsley insists that Austen was in fact an early: "feminist icon ahead of her time" (Worsley, 2017, 5). Austen, she maintains, was a feminist thinker who inspired generations of women. Interestingly, there are many Austen scholars who challenge Worsley's argument and view Austen as a fundamentally conservative voice who ignored early feminist ideas in favour of a celebration of marriage, domesticity and traditional social conventions. I propose to contextualize the narrative voice of Austen within the socio-political constraints of eighteenth and early nineteenth century England. I will contend that in Austen's final novel *Persuasion*, she affirms her support of women's freedom. I will argue that Austen possessed an acute awareness of the patriarchal barriers which enclosed women and that parallels existed between her own perspective and those of First Wave Feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft. Austen, I believe, focused on women's struggles in a male dominated society, bestowing on Anne Elliot a subtle but compelling feminist voice. It is my contention that through her sharpness of mind and use of sarcasm, she conveyed in her novels her disapproval of the conservative ideologies of polite society and its indifference to the ambition of women. This dissertation will question the extent to which Austen was influenced by First Wave Feminism, in particular the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. It will also reflect on how Austen is read by contemporary feminist theorists. It will conclude with an analysis of *Persuasion* to assess whether or not we can read the character of Anne Elliot as a distinctively feminist voice.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published, almost twenty years before Austen's first novel *Pride and Prejudice*. When we consider the term feminism in the context of today's society we are speaking about something of our time, something contemporary. Therefore the question of whether or not Austen should be regarded as a feminist may sound a little farfetched (Sittenfield, 2016, np). We must begin by considering the historical timeframe within which Austen wrote. Miriam Wallace asserts that in late eighteen century England, criticism of the French Revolution and the reverberations following the publication and rhetoric of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* suffocated the growing feminist voices of her contemporaries. The disapproval with which Wollstonecraft met meant that female authors such as Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Austen were left powerless when it came to openly supporting female logic and individuality (Wallace, 2000**,** 695). Therefore it was essential that any feminist critiques of society made in Austen's works were communicated indirectly and with clever subtlety.

Miriam Ascarelli questions what Austen and Wollstonecraft the: "grandmother of modern feminism" could have in common (Ascarelli, 2004, 6). These two authors on the surface appear to occupy two very separate spheres. Wollstonecraft is recognised for her disapproval of marriage and was incensed at how the education system meant that women were kept in positions of unquestioning reliance on men and generated fragile feminine

[1] This dissertation was submitted in partial fulfillment of the BA(Hons) in Digital Humanities, May 2017.

hollow beings. Austen is best known for her romantic plots and quests by her young female protagonists to find suitable husbands. However, Ascarrelli argues that Austen can be read as a significant feminist voice. Certainly Austen's expression is milder and calmer with her happy ever after novel conclusions and her delightful sarcasm and wit. Even so, I believe that a resolute feminist perspective is apparent in Austen's writings, suggesting that Austen was more than aware of the contemporary issues of her time.

The history of modern feminism began with Wollstonecraft and her daring entreaties for women's assimilation into a public sphere controlled by men. Particular emphasis has been placed on Wollstonecraft's hypothesis of character-formation and the significance of women's education in fostering the female capacity for rational judgement. Wollstonecraft's forward-thinking social vision and her demands for liberal reform threatened to undermine the dominant powers of late-eighteenth century Britain (Ferguson, 1999, 427). Claudia Johnson writes in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft,* that: "Wollstonecraft always inspired controversy." Classified as an avant-garde rebel in a revolutionary era, she fought not only for women's equality and their right to education, but also for property ownership, classlessness, political egalitarianism, consensus within marriage, women's child bearing and child rearing concerns, to name but a few (Johnson, 2002, 1).

I will begin by looking at who Wollstonecraft was and ascertain the circumstances that shaped and formed her opinions. Wollstonecraft was born on 27 April 1759 in Primrose Street, Spitalfields London, close to where Liverpool Street Station stands today. She was the second child and first daughter of seven children born to Elizabeth née Dickson, the daughter of a Protestant wine-merchant from Ballyshannon, Ireland and Edward John Wollstonecraft (Todd, 2014, 1). Wollstonecraft's early years were tainted by her parents' modest social standing and the jealousy she felt towards her elder brother, who was much-loved and venerated by her mother and sufficiently provided for by a rich grandfather's estate. As a woman Wollstonecraft was not legally entitled to inherit property. Wollstonecraft's formative years were spent with her mother and siblings, trailing across England and Wales after her aggressive alcoholic father.

In 1778, when Wollstonecraft was aged nineteen, she left her family home and took up a position as a lady's companion to a Mrs. Dawson who resided in Bath (Todd, 2011, np). In 1781, Wollstonecraft returned to London after her mother fell ill. In 1784, her sister Eliza fell into a depression following the birth of her first child. Wollstonecraft encouraged her sister to leave her baby and her unhappy marriage. Naturally, Wollstonecraft was severely condemned for promoting such liberal fortitude in a married woman and she responded defiantly: "I knew I should be the ... shameful incendiary in this shocking affair of a woman's leaving her bed-fellow" (Todd, 2011, np). In order to sustain her sister Eliza, her companion Fanny Blood and Fanny's sister, Wollstonecraft established a school in Newington Green amongst the liberal Dissenting community (Todd, 2011, np). According to Professor Janet Todd, who has written extensively on the life of Wollstonecraft, the years that followed marked a period of significant intellectual evolution for Wollstonecraft who developed her disregard for family life to include the injustices of the general social order which prevailed at the time. Wollstonecraft's school closed in 1785 and she left London for Portugal to be with Fanny, who was now married but terminally ill (Todd, 2011, np).

In October 1786, following Fanny's death, Wollstonecraft then aged twenty-seven journeyed to Mitchelstown Castle, Co. Cork to commence a new position as governess to the three daughters of Lord and Lady Kingsborough, one of the most prosperous Anglo-Irish Ascendancy families. Wollstonecraft was presented as a suitable applicant for the position of governess following Lady Kingsborough's letter to a Mr. Prior, Master at Eton, noting that: "her daughters' minds had been neglected by governesses who had only attended to the ornamental part of their education" (McAuley, 2016, 22). This assertion that the development

of the female intellect and their academic potential were repeatedly and shamefully neglected by society, is a common theme found in both Wollstonecraft's own writing and similarly in Austen's novels.

Having just presented her first book, a collection of short treaties titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters,* to the enlightened London publicist Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft's post as a governess provided her with a particular understanding of the fortunate yet curtailed lives of upper-class women. It was a life that Wollstonecraft's own disadvantaged upbringing could never have provided her with. Wollstonecraft's time and experiences in Ireland, together with her studies in literature and philosophy and her subsequent interest in the ideologies of the French Revolution, ignited and primed her for her profound study of society and gender in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* (McAuley, 2016, 22). Wollstonecraft's contempt for Lady Kingsborough became central to her feminist thinking. Kingsborough represented all that Wollstonecraft despised in women: her flirtations, her overstated feebleness, her cunning powers of persuasion and most of all her reliance on a man for her personal identity (Todd, 2011, np). Wollstonecraft was discharged from her post as governess in Ireland in 1787 and returned once more to London. Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft's publisher, offered her a position as an editorial assistant for a new publication entitled *Analytical Review.* Wollstonecraft enthusiastically welcomed this role and amongst Johnson's colourful and scholarly group of friends her feminist opinions advanced quickly (Todd, 2011, np). Wollstonecraft recognised that the social injustices faced by women were the manifestation of patriarchal dominance. The privileged, educated men of society made up its singularly male constructed hierarchy. These men deliberately deprived women of education and prohibited a woman's personal autonomy.

In 1792, Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman, a text long regarded as a masterpiece of Enlightenment philosophy, in which she outlines her thoughts on gender equality (Berges, 2013, 6). W*ollstonecraft wrote the text in reaction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* written in 1762, which asserted that the education of young girls ought to concentrate on preparing her for her role as devotee to her reasonable and wise husband (Todd, 2011, np). A close reading of Wollstonecraft's text emphasises the following: It is first and foremost a confirmation and validation of the rationality of women. The text represents a defensive assault against the opinion offered by Rousseau who considered women to be fragile, contrived and not qualified to partake in any form of cognitive rationality. Wollstonecraft thoroughly rebuffed Rousseau's theory on education. Rousseau advocated in *Emile* that: *"*A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to a man. To be pleasing to his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of a woman for all time" (Rousseau, 2013, 393). In contrast, Wollstonecraft maintained that a woman should possess intellectual insight and individuality and never suppose that her husband will have sufficient intelligence for them both. Wollstonecraft strongly contended that this did not contradict or oppose in any way the function of a woman as a mother or a custodian or jeopardise in any manner her position in the home.

Wollstonecraft proposed that: "to be a good mother – a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are in general foolish mothers" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 168). Wollstonecraft was arguing for equal education rights for women, while maintaining the significant value of the role of motherhood in the life of a woman. Wollstonecraft's observations of Lady Kingsborough and all that she typified in women reinforced her principles. Wollstonecraft reviled corrupt class distinctions and gender constructions, as does Austen's character Mrs. Croft in *Persuasion*. She regarded Lady Kingsborough as a futile mother, who epitomised the frivolous female, preoccupied with her façade and her desire for

her husband's admiration (Todd, 2011, np). Wollstonecraft proposed: "make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers, that is if men do not neglect their duties of husbands and fathers" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 412). Rationality formed the premise of Wollstonecraft's argument. Our ability to be rational, according to Wollstonecraft, defines our capacity to comprehend truth and in doing so gain understanding of what is right and what is wrong. This is what demarcates the human race, and separates us as ethical and civil beings.

Wollstonecraft lived in a male dominated society, and her intention seems to have been to insist that the fundamental ideals of Enlightenment theory include women and extend Rousseau's principles on how to educate boys and girls. Wollstonecraft's quarrel was contrary to the common belief of the time, that women could not be defined as rational beings and that they were purely slaves to their own desires. Wollstonecraft outlined the manner by which parents of daughters raised them to be both deferential and domesticated. She contended that girls should be taught from when they are very young to nurture their intellect: Young girls should be treated as rational beings and afforded equal opportunities to their male counterparts in respect of education and personal development: "I have already inveighed against the custom of confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 189). Women, she argued, should be encouraged to take up the same professional roles as men. Wollstonecraft's legacy defines her as the foremost supporter of controversial but forward thinking vision in respect of equal rights for women. She maintained that women could reach the same levels of moral, rational and political merit as men, provided they were given access to education. She cleared the way for civil and political communication on the equal rights of women (Botting and Carey, 2004, 707).

Although she is now hailed as the founding voice of First Wave Feminism, Wollstonecraft's ideas were not positively received by her contemporaries (Taylor, 2004, 125). Following her death in 1797, her name was disparaged and her philosophies vilified. Wollstonecraft had given birth to her first child out of wedlock and died from a post-partum infection ten days after the birth of her second child, the author Mary Shelley. In writing her first biography shortly after her death, her husband William Godwin destroyed any redeeming qualities with which her reputation and legacy may have been regarded. Goodwin recounted her close friendships with other women, her suicide attempts and the birth of her illegitimate daughter. The outrage that followed his exposure of her eccentric lifestyle meant that her name became scandalous. The repercussions were enormous and long-lasting. Horace Walpole, the Whig politician, was most critical and disparaging in the language he used to define her following her death, calling her a "hyena in petticoats" (Rowlatt, 2015, np). Wollstonecraft's own friends and supporters were silenced by such revelations, and her reputation was destroyed.

In 1801, author Mary Hays wrote: "the penalties and discouragements attending the profession of an author fall upon women with a double weight" (Kelly, 2016, 21). Such commentary insinuates that society was not ready to acknowledge female authors. Charlotte Smith suggested that some readers might regard the: "political remarks" in her 1792 publication *Desmond* as: "displeasing" (Kelly, 2016, 21). In 1801, Maria Edgeworth was required to amend her novel *Belinda*, due to her description in the novel of a marriage between a black and a white character. It is important, therefore, to note the historical context in which Austen wrote. Between 1793 and 1815 Britain and France were at war, with brief interludes between 1802 and 1803 and again between the summer months of 1814 and February 1815. Britain was also at war with America from 1812 to 1815. During Austen's teenage years and her twenties, the British establishment erected forts around the coastline of Britain to secure it from potential attacks by the French. Britain became not unlike a

totalitarian state, with British publishers fearful and reluctant to publish anything which challenged the status-quo (Kelly, 2016, 22). It is not surprising, therefore, that Austen concealed her own political opinion and feminist thinking behind the cleverly contrived romantic dalliances of her novels, but hidden among the allure and passion of her love affair lies her shrewd but discreet critical social commentary.

F. R. Leavis astonished the world of literature in 1948 when he acclaimed Austen as one of the five greatest English novelists, in his publication *The Great Tradition*. The greatest English novelists he declared are: "Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad," because they encourage an "awareness of the possibilities of life" (Leavis, 1948, 2). Whether or not Austen is worthy of her place in the literary canon will forever remain open to academic debate, as will her position in what Johnson has termed the "feminist canon" (Johnson, 1988, 186). Johnson points out that whilst Austen has not definitively been omitted from this "feminist canon", literary critics remain in two minds when it comes to classifying Austen's work as feminist (Johnson, 1988, 186). The next section of this dissertation will appraise how Austen is read by contemporary feminist theorists. Opinion remains divided, with some critics perceiving her as a profoundly conservative writer who advocates social institutions such as marriage. Others contend that within the social limitations of her era, Austen highlighted the restrictive control of such institutions and the prevailing sentiments surrounding them.

Theorists appear indecisive and hesitant when it comes to definitively classifying Austen as a feminist writer. In 1973, Edna Steeves suggested that Austen was not a forthright author, insinuating that she never observed or questioned the prevailing social conditions of women. Steeves surmised that Austen's era was not: "ripe for rational and meaningful discussion of women's rights" (Steeves, 1973, 227). Contrastingly, in the very same year, Lloyd Brown proposed that the themes found in the novels of Austen were similar to the views of eighteenth century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, as they query: "certain masculine assumptions in society" (Brown, 1973, 324). Published two years after Brown and Steeves, Marilyn Butler wrote in her 1975 publication *Jane Austen the War of Ideas* that Austen was not a feminist and suggested that while Austen wrote about and voiced a view on contemporary contentions, her judgements were not open-minded but were in fact conservative (Butler, 1975, 3). Butler asserts that Austen: "never allows the inward life of a character …seriously to challenge the doctrinaire preconceptions on which all her fiction is based" (Butler, 1975, 3).

Mary Poovey also suggests that Austen was conscious of the restraints society inflicted on women, however she conclusively classifies Austen as a champion of convention and an author who regarded marriage: "as the ideal paradigm for the most perfect fusion between the individual and society" (Poovey, 1984, 203). However Helena Kelly counterargues that whilst convention was important in Austen, this was because the acceptance or rejection of a marriage proposal was the only decision a woman might make for herself in her entire lifetime, so on that basis marriage mattered, it mattered a lot (Kelly, 31, 2016). Although it is undeniable that Austen's novels focus on the domestic rather than the political world: "It has always been one of those 'universally acknowledged' truths that Jane Austen's narratives centre on love and marriage" (Brown, 1973, 321), such themes can be read as having a political significance. Marriage, as Austen understood it, was far less about romantic love than a woman giving herself entirely to her husband, her money, her physical being, her very presence as a legitimate adult. Husbands were legally permitted to hit their wives, rape them, confine them to the home, remove their children from them, all of which was lawfully acceptable (Kelly, 2016, 31). Openly feminist authors of the time, such as Wollstonecraft and the novelist Charlotte Smith, were starting to study such inequalities during Austen's life. As Kelly contends, when we consider how critical the subject of

marriage was at this time, then storylines and plots on courtship and marriage take on a very different meaning and the novels become the means of addressing difficult social issues of the day (Kelly, 2016, 31).

Brown highlights Austen's feminist ideas with close reference to Anne Elliot in *Persuasion.* Austen allows Anne to comment on patriarchal control of education and literature: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Austen, 1965, 237). Anne is similarly honest on the matter of female reliance in marriage: "All the privilege I claim for my own sex it is not a very enviable one, you (men) need not covet it" (Austen, 1965, 238). Brown suggests that the reader should scrutinise female identities in Austen's novels in contrast to the liberal theories of what has been termed the: "feminist tradition" heralded in the texts of Wollstonecraft. In doing so Brown believes it should be possible for the critic to determine answers to queries that have been raised about Austen's female characters. For example, does Austen's emphasis on marriage in each of her novels suggest that she recognised and approved of the established ideal of a woman's instinctive necessity for sexual reliance and procreation? Brown reasons that her motivations are similar to those of Wollstonecraft, in that Austen's themes of courtship and marriage challenged the patriarchal conventions within society (Brown, 1973, 324). Kelly proposes that Austen was inviting the reader to read between the lines and to determine the hidden messages in her novels. Austen's technique was never to be too candid, too forthright, that was not Austen's style. The trickery lay in never giving the critic the opportunity to point to obvious or explicit statements in the narrative. For example, the reader should not be able to point directly at the text and state this is where Austen condemns the trappings of marriage or the dominance of men in society. Austen's messages were concealed, veiled beneath the eloquence of her prose (Kelly, 2016, 30).

Until Browne and Steeves put forward the idea of a more radical reading of Austen, she had long been simply regarded as the author of amusing domestic satires. However Marshall argues that there has been a sizeable shift in the reader's attitude to Austen. Readers are now recognising a more suggestive subtext hidden behind the narrative of Austen's characters and acknowledge a social agenda masquerading amongst the sarcasm and humour of Austen's genteel domesticity (Marshall, 1992, 39). Critics now contend that Austen's storylines, her themes and her retorts, whether they be exposed or hidden, were created to censure the patriarchal hierarchy of upper class England, a society in which women's very existence was limited in ways that a man's was not. The feminist reader is especially attentive to the methods Austen used to disparage and undermine the patriarchy that existed, yet in such subtle ways that she never affronted her contemporaries or suffered retribution for her writing (Marshall, 1992, 40).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar put forward the following argument in their 1979 publication *The Madwoman in the Attic*: "that for all her ladylike discretion…Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, 120). Unfortunately, however, at the close of each novel, the marriage of Austen's heroines reveals her: "submission" to her "subordinate position in patriarchal culture" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, 154). Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge Austen's dalliance as a subtle feminist activist and recognise her credentials to be considered as such, but as far as they are concerned, she falls at the final hurdle. Austen allows her female heroines to conform without any apparent prejudice to the social norms by marrying their suitors, Gilbert and Gubar contend that this is the point with which feminists find fault (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, 154).

Julia Prewitt Brown points out that it is because: "Austen's protagonists marry that feminist literary critics have had such an ambivalent relationship to Austen" (Brown, 1990, 203). Margaret Kirkham offers two specific ideas in support of Austen as a feminist. Most

significantly, she positions Austen as an Enlightenment feminist, implying that Austen acknowledged that judgement and reason were a more superior guide than sentiment and emotion. For Kirkham it was apparent that Austen believed that women in society were just as capable as men and equally as prudent, discriminating and balanced as men in their thoughts. Kirkham focuses on highlighting similarities between Austen's beliefs conveyed through concealed or disguised references in her novels with the philosophies of English Enlightenment feminists (Kirkham, 1983, 14). It might be suggested, therefore, that Austen's practice of concluding her novels with weddings does not take away from her credentials as an early feminist voice. Ascarelli also argues that Austen's novels echoed Wollstonecraft's ideas. She recognises that these two women came from two very different positions: where Wollstonecraft was renowned for her disdain of marriage, Austen appears to have celebrated it (Ascarelli, 2004, 6). Ascareli points out, however, that Austen gives nothing more than a fleeting mention of the marriage ceremonies at the end of her novels, and not the extravagant lavish consideration one would expect from a singularly romantic novelist (Ascarelli, 2004, 6). In other words, it is what leads up to the wedding: the young girl's growth in confidence and self-awareness that is the central focus of the story and not the wedding ceremony which functions simply as a close to the novel.

As we have seen, some critics have insisted that Austen is a defender of the traditionalist ideals of her generation and should not be classified as a feminist, while others maintain that the author uses satire to convey her disapproval of the tenets of her era and its indifference to women and their competences (Judge, 2001, 39). In attempting to define Austen as an early feminist, the most obvious source of controversy is the predominance of the: "marriage plot" in her novels which, according to Laura Mooneyham White, continues to be an impediment to many feminists. Was Austen simply being realistic about the manner in which women of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were controlled? Or was she portraying through her courtship narratives the limited options available to women? As we have seen, some feminist critics struggle with this recurring theme of marriage in Austen's novels (White, 1995, 71). However, contemporary readers of her novels have frequently regarded *Persuasion* and the characterisation of Anne Elliot as the defining moment in which Austen's personal feminist opinions reach maturity (Judge, 2001, 39).

I contend from my reading of *Persuasion,* written by Austen in 1816, that the novel like all of her earlier novels, mocks the silly girls whom Wollstonecraft despises in favour of strong rational heroines such as Anne Elliot. *Persuasion* was the last novel written by Austen and was published posthumously in 1817. The story begins eight years after a broken engagement between Anne and Commander Frederick Wentworth. Anne was only nineteen when she accepted a marriage proposal from Wentworth, a young naval officer of no financial fortune. Anne's father Sir Walter, her elder sister Elizabeth and an intimate family friend Lady Russell dissuaded Anne from such a marriage, due to Wentworth's lack of wealth and social standing. In the intervening period Anne's affections for Wentworth remain unaltered. In spite of this, Anne is a dependable, self-determining woman, free to think her own thoughts and master of her own destiny. Anne is mindful of and attentive to her self-worth, her integrity and to the mistakes she has made in the past. It is undeniable that *Persuasion* contains comparable themes and social arguments to those addressed in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* principally through the character of Anne. In Anne, Austen cleverly and delicately supports feminist ideals and obscured among her narrative lies the rhetoric of her cunningly defiant social criticism. Wollstonecraft advocates the concept of the rational educated woman and comparably Austen epitomises these qualities in her representation of Anne in *Persuasion.*

From the outset of the novel Anne stands out from those that surround her. Anne is reserved, but with a deep rationality; she is capable of being swayed by the opinions of

others, yet is constant; is the perfect example of self-restraint yet is full of vibrant passions. Anne is singularly distinct from the leading ladies of Austen's five other novels (Muller, 2010, 20). Anne requires no advancement in her education. For example, Captain Benwick is evenly matched with Anne in their conversations on literature and poetry. Austen through Anne supports greater educational rights for women, an assertion which unequivocally correspondences to Wollstonecraft's philosophies. With age Anne has learned clearer judgement of people, their behaviours and of the situations she finds herself in. Anne is not a self-pitying character, she does not wallow in her own misery, she is perceptive with sharp observations (Muller, 2010, 20). Austen portrays Anne as a woman of regard, a respected dependable woman, on whose thoughts and interpretations the reader can rely (Mudrick, 1970, 62). As Kirkham has contended Anne is: "strictly too old and too wise to play the part in what is still conceived as a comedy" (Kirkham, 1983, 154). Of Anne, Austen herself wrote in a letter to her niece Fanny that Anne was: "almost too good as a heroine" (Le Faye, 2011, 350). In *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth declares her to be: "Too good, too excellent creature" (Austen, 1993, 186).

Anne possesses many of the qualities of her deceased mother, who equally typifies the values Wollstonecraft identifies in the ideal wife and mother: "Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable, whose judgement and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards" (Austen, 1993, 4). Austen is almost apologetic for the earlier flaw in Elizabeth Elliot's character and her judgement in marrying Sir Walter Elliot, blaming it on the naivety of youth. Elizabeth was a more frugal woman than her excessive husband, she was: "of very superior character than anything deserved by his own" (Austen, 1993, 4). This focus on the older women in *Persuasion* is a surprising technique by Austen which we have not observed before. She continues by defining Lady Russell, as a: "sensible, deserving woman," (Austen, 1993, 4) and the late Elizabeth Elliot's closest friend. Elizabeth's death left the Elliot girls to the: "guidance of a conceited, silly father" (Austen, 1993, 4). Elizabeth relied on Lady Russell's: "kindness and advice … for the best help and maintenance of the good principles and instruction which she had been anxiously giving her daughters" (Austen, 1993, 4). Austen deems Lady Russell and Mrs. Croft: "a couple of steady, sensible women" (Austen, 1993, 89). Mrs. Croft is clever, regarded by Mr. Shepherd to be a better businesswoman than her husband. When her brother Captain Wentworth suggests that women should be pardoned from the severity of life at sea, she retaliates by declaring that women are: "rational creatures" and that: "we none of us expect to be in smooth waters all our days" (Austen, 1993, 54). Austen, through Mrs. Croft, is voicing opinions similar to those of Wollstonecraft: "My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 5).

Austen contrasts such rational women with the senseless and dizzy silly girls that Wollstonecraft ridicules in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "they only live to amuse themselves" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 5). All of Austen's other novels are presented in a lively, mischievous tone and introduce young unmarried upper-class girls, whose sole preoccupation is dancing, entertainment and the pursuit of suitable husbands. They endure what they believe to be arduous hardships and tormented affliction, until they finally overcome life's irritations and win the ultimate prize of a commendable young gentleman. For example, Elizabeth Elliot, is the eldest daughter of Sir Walter and Lady Elliot, she possess an arrogant haughtiness: "She was fully satisfied of being still quite as handsome as ever" (Austen, 1993, 6). Despite her beauty she remains unmarried, her conceited vanity is perhaps to blame or what Wollstonecraft considers: "artificial notions of beauty" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 44). Mary Musgrove, the youngest of the Elliot girls, is self-centred and out of sheer boredom with her marriage and life in general has a tendency towards hysteria: "Mary, often a little

unwell, and always thinking a great deal of her own complaints, and always in the habit of claiming Anne when anything was the matter" (Austen, 1993, 25). Her marriage to Charles Musgrove is an unhappy union, principally because as Wollstonecraft has suggested she has no intellectual stimulation to offer either herself or her husband: "Women are everywhere in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them, and they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy, that beauty is woman's spectre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seek to adorn its prison" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 45). Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove are characterised as being foolish and naïve when it comes to matters of the heart, they are pretty and vivacious, and spend all their time alternating their attentions between a variety of young men. When Louisa agrees to marry Captain Benwick, it is Captain Wentworth who states: "I confess that I do think there is a disparity, too great a disparity, and in a point no less essential than mind. I regard Louisa Musgrove as a very amiable, sweet tempered girl, and not deficient in understanding; but Benwick is something more. He is a clever man, a reading man – and I do consider his attaching himself to her, with some surprise" (Austen, 1965 192). Austen's thoughts on the union between a man and a woman are comparable to those of Wollstonecraft and Louisa will not be able to intellectually satisfy her husband. Finally there is recently widowed Mrs. Clay, confidant to Elizabeth, who is shrewd, guilefully charming her way into Elizabeth and Sir Walters loyalties. Wollstonecraft contested that: "such a women is not a more irrational monster than some of the Roman Emperors" (Wollstonecraft, 2013, 44).

Ascarelli's fundamental premise is that within the context of nineteenth century England, Austen was a pragmatic author who knew that life was difficult for women, but instead of concentrating on the limitations women faced, she directed her attention on the qualities women needed in order to endure. Austen recognised that marriage was an: "economic institution" (Ascarelli, 2016, 7). In *Persuasion*, for example, Anne describes the Croft's marriage as: "a most attractive picture of happiness" (Austen, 1993, 119), but recognises that the union between Captain Benwick and Louisa Musgrave is likely to become wearisome. Austen was fundamentally concerned with two areas which were central to Wollstonecraft's philosophies; the belief that women were rational beings and that it was imperative that they think for themselves (Ascarelli, 2016, 7).

In conclusion, I assert that Austen was indeed a thought provoking early feminist voice of nineteenth century literature. A recent study which scanned the use of the words "he" and "she" in one hundred classic novels, half of which were written by men and half by women, found that Austen was the only female author who never allowed her use of the word "he" to surpass her use of the word "she" (Mills, 2017, np). It is undeniable that her feminist declarations were gentler and more muted than those of Wollstonecraft. Her rhetoric was calmed by the marriages she allowed to take place at the end of her novels and through her delightful use of satire. In spite of this, Austen's writes from a resolutely feminist perspective. She concentrates on the rational and intellectual competencies women need in order to deal with the social constraints of their lives. Ascarelli defines this as the: "ultimate feminist statement" (Ascarelli, 6, 2004). Notwithstanding Wollstonecraft's personal opposition to marriage, she does not promote a thorough revision of the concept of family. Instead she focuses her ideas around the education of women, affording them the opportunity to become more self-assured and accordingly better wives and mothers.

Austen's novels focus on the everyday details of her character's lives. While her novels include frivolous female characters like Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, she also reveals a woman's capacity for rational reason, and like Anne Elliot, women who can think for themselves. Each of Austen's six novels close with a marriage but she imparts no pomp or

ceremony to such occasions. The marriage ceremony does not appear that significant to Austen. What is evidently more important is the lives these women lead. This is no different to Wollstonecraft's own thinking of how fictitious educational structures prevent women from acquiring the proficiencies they need in order to make suitable choices. Asscarelli contends that Austen does not openly acknowledge Wollstonecraft, as she was clearly afraid to do so in such an autocratic period of English history (Ascarelli, 6, 2004). Claire Tomalin, suggests that it is likely Austen knew of Wollstonecraft and her ideologies and asserts that it was her talent as a writer that allowed her to implant her novels with a feminist assessment not unlike Wollstonecraft's (Tomalin, 2004 158). Austen's feminist voice is less belligerent but just as powerful.

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