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English Literature Q300

7th December 2018

The Politics of Control: Patriarchal Sensibility and Autonomy of Thought in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

In *A Vindication of* *The Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft critiques the cult of sensibility that was so important in the lives and literature of the 18th century. In the 18th century, sensibility was seen as the quality of being governed by emotion rather than reason. One way that patriarchy sustained its hegemony was by entrenching an idea of female sensibility. Painting women as beings of inherent sensibility, and men as beings of inherent rationality justified the sexist laws of primogeniture and coverture. Men were born socio-economic and political leaders by this understanding of the sexes. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft suggests that the 18th century cult of sensibility was a male ideological tool that robbed women of diverse experiences such as education, work and exercise that would develop them into autonomous thinkers. Wollstonecraft dedicates *The Rights of Woman* to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a French diplomat who submitted a report on public education to the French Constituent Assembly in 1791 which did not extend to women. Wollstonecraft harnesses the revolutionary atmosphere of a country experiencing radical social and political transformation and reasons that women’s rights must be at the forefront of this drive to build a fairer society that is now taking into consideration the natural rights of man.

Jane Austen’s novel, *Mansfield Park*, charts how Fanny Price, the heroine of the story, develops a strong autonomous mindset and her own moral code. Fanny is lifted from her life in a working-class home in Portsmouth and set down in the aristocratic setting of Mansfield Park in Northamptonshire. Fanny’s mother has sent her to live with her aunt, Lady Bertram, and her uncle, the wealthy Sir Thomas Bertram. Fanny’s first education is with a governess alongside her cousins Maria and Julia at Mansfield Park. Her second is from her cousin Edmund, an aspiring clergyman, with whom she discusses religion and furthers her belief in a Christian sense of duty and morality. Fanny’s third education comes from observing the aristocratic and self-indulgent family she is surrounded by. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen surrounds Fanny with characters who represent the dangers of selfish, narrow-minded sensibility. Unlike the heroines from the landed gentry in Austen’s other novels, in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s outsider perspective is grounded in a genuine class difference. In contrast to the heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor, who is introduced as an innately rational and autonomous thinker, *Mansfield Park* portrays Fanny’s growth into an autonomous thinker and decisive moral negotiator of her own life.

A comparison of *The Rights of Woman* and *Mansfield Park* highlights how both writers present rationality as offering women a sense of autonomy. Austen and Wollstonecraft portray the importance of education, exercise and work for women as this breadth of experience leads to more self-assessment and an individual development of what is right and wrong. Autonomous thinkers are portrayed as women who can acknowledge and resist the patriarchal ideology of men.

In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes that society could not progress if half of its members were held back. She calls for “Justice for one half of the human race” (4). Wollstonecraft focuses on how sensibility corrupts women as mothers and hinders the education of children. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s aunt, Lady Bertram, is shown to have succumbed to the sentimentality encouraged by the cult of sensibility. Lady Bertram takes a laissez-faire approach to parenting and is most often found lounging on a chair doting on one of her pugs. Austen portrays that Lady Bertram’s children, Maria and Julia, have been educated not in the skill of rational judgment but in wit and cleverness. Butler identifies that readers in 1814, many of whom would have been female, would recognise a critique of the superficial, accomplishment focused teachings which were “too narrowly aimed at giving a girl a higher price in the marriage market” (220). Wollstonecraft and Austen emphasise how the influential role of mother, when led in the self-indulgent style of the aristocratic cult of sensibility, is depoliticised. Rather than motherhood being an opportunity to raise independent, rational women, the cult of sensibility encourages the practice of a performative sentimental love. Fanny and the Bertram sister’s aunt, Mrs Norris, explicitly states to Maria and Julia that “it is not at all necessary that she [Fanny] should be as accomplished as you are;—on the contrary, it is much desirable that there should be a difference” (16). Aunt Norris, a character perpetually shown to be solely concerned with wealth and aristocratic performance, uses the word “accomplished” rather than educated or rational. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft critiques the way in which the 18th century cult of sensibility encouraged a focus on appearances rather than true self-assessment and broadening of knowledge. Mrs Norris typifies this focus on performance and accomplishment rather than understanding and self-assessment. Virginia Woolf writes of Wollstonecraft that “one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living” (163). In this way, Wollstonecraft embodies the education she puts forward in *The Rights of Woman*. Unlike Lady Bertram’s passive role in educating her daughters, Wollstonecraft was an active moral agent in her century and demanded that women receive equal rights to men.

Critics such as Janet Todd and Jane Stabler (xii, xxi) have pointed out that the political content of Wollstonecraft and Austen’s works does mirror that of the conservative Evangelical writers of their time like Hannah More. More was popular for her instructional behaviour pamphlets for women in the 18th century. In contrast to Wollstonecraft and Austen, More accepted that a different capacity for reason was held by women and men. Nonetheless, similarly to Austen and Wollstonecraft, More disliked the amoral self-indulgence inherent in the idea of feminine sensibility. Barbara Taylor writes that from the mid-18th century on “preachers of all stripes could be heard arguing that female religious feeling was intrinsically more powerful than that of men” and that “the cult of feminine sensibility, evident in both fiction and moral literature, derived largely from this source” (104). Both Wollstonecraft and Austen draw on the Christian ideas present in the 18th century. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserts that the soul is unsexed and uses this as a way to further her case for women’s rights on the ground they have the same God-given rights as man. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price learns much about the qualities of humility and self-criticism from her devout cousin Edmund.

Austen and Wollstonecraft’s ideology primarily diverges from More’s in that they present a closeness to God not through sensibility but through a God-given ability to use reason and rationality to distinguish a strong moral sense of right and wrong. By suggesting women are close to God in the same way as men, Wollstonecraft and Austen push back against the patriarchal logic of the cult of sensibility that regards women as people who feel strongly rather than think deeply or have the capacity to do both. Patriarchy is entrenched by the proliferation and repetition of the idea that women are not equal to men and by laws that support this idea. The cult of sensibility frames women’s emotional intuition as a power that men do not possess. Wollstonecraft and Austen show how the idea that a woman’s power is to feel deeply plays into the established patriarchal laws of primogeniture and coverture which render women economically and politically powerless. In 18th century Britain the Church of England and political establishment were tightly interwoven. Both church and state were dominated by male members of the landed gentry. Only men, who were capable of rationality and reason, were trusted with these kinds of power. Under the laws of primogeniture and coverture, property was handed down from father to eldest son and during marriage a woman lost her autonomous legal rights to her husband who became the legal representative for both people. Christianity played an influential role in developing the idea of sensibility and gave it extra heft and power in 18th century Britain where church and state were close allies.

Both writers show that a religious education is not enough to give women the breadth of knowledge they need to become empowered rational thinkers. Butler writes that *Mansfield Park* is Austen’s first novel in which she sustains her stylised deployment of the characters around the heroine. Austen maintains the “triple contrast, of three kinds of education, three kinds of moral attitude” (Butler 223) in every early scene of *Mansfield Park*. When Edmund’s older brother, heir to the Mansfield estate, and his friend, Mr Yates, suggest staging the play ‘Lover’s Vows’ whilst Sir Thomas is away, Fanny remains the only character who refuses to take part. Fanny observes how the people of Mansfield Park use the play as an opportunity to indulge in their individual desires. Maria and Henry Crawford use the play as an opportunity to conduct their affair. Maria’s sister Julia is hurt by this as she herself likes Henry Crawford. Likewise, Fanny is “full of jealousy and agitation” (125) during the days of the amateur dramatics as Edmund and Mary are acting together. Still Fanny observes this anger and frustration in Julia and pities her. The narrator writes that despite Fanny’s pity for Julia there was “no outward fellowship between them…Julia made no communication and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny’s consciousness” (128). Austen’s narrator emphasises how the moral lives of the characters that surround Fanny provide Fanny with a way of developing her own moral sense of what is right and wrong. Julia’s frustrations about her sister result in her flirting with Mr Yates whilst for Fanny the play is an experience in which she becomes aware of the moral lives of those around her. Jocelyn Harris writes that Austen develops a “narrative voice so coloured by a character’s thoughts that it might just as well be called an unspoken soliloquy” (40). In *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses free indirect discourse to portray the moral lives of all the characters in the novel and how Fanny learns to be an autonomous thinker from observing them. From a more child-like and unformed portrayal of Fanny’s mind in the first volume, Austen develops Fanny’s presence in the narrative to be ever more discerning.

In *The Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft writes “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men, but over themselves” (63). Here, Wollstonecraft is responding to her contemporary, the philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau. Rousseau claimed that women had power over men because they were sexually attractive and physically weak. Rousseau’s patriarchal ideology presents a system in which men enjoy the subordination of women whilst claiming that this is an empowering state for women to live in. Anna Despotopoulou states that when Wollstonecraft writes that she wants women to have power over themselves not over men she “attacks those women who construct their outer and inner selves according to the male gaze, and who are preoccupied more with their social projection than their private education and improvement” (575). Mary Crawford constructs her outer identity according to the male gaze. The narrator, with dry irony, depicts the scene in which Mary sets her harp up next to the window to put on a pleasing performance for Edward. Fanny does not construct her identity according to the male gaze. In contrast to Mary, Fanny does not want to be seen and recoils from Edmund, Mary, Sir Thomas and Henry’s insistence that she must get used to being looked at. Austen portrays how Fanny is more concerned with the improvement of her mind and education than her place in the minds of the men around her. Both Wollstonecraft and Austen show how the cult of sensibility implied that sexual desirability was a form of female power. When Mary performs her harp in front of Edmund she gains his affection. However, Austen shows that this is merely fleeting and that a solid foundation for a relationship between women and men cannot be built on the understanding of each other as beings with inherently different natures. Austen and Wollstonecraft debunk the idea that women’s sexual hold over men is a form of tangible socio-economic power. Instead, both writers suggest that an understanding of women as rational beings will allow them to gain real traction in social, political and economic spheres.

Poovey writes that "Wollstonecraft intends to strip the maturation process completely of its sexual character; but if she succeeds in making the sexes equal, she fails to eliminate the sexual component which is the source of her ongoing anxiety” (77). Wollstonecraft argues that “pleasure is the business of woman's life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings” (55). In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft cannot imagine a form of liberated female sexual desire. Instead, Wollstonecraft tries to hide women’s sexuality away completely to convincingly make the shift away from patriarchal sensibility. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not eliminate the sexual component of the maturation process. Fanny reacts to Edmund in an embodied way signalling underlying sexual tension. In a passage where Edmund is teaching Mary to ride, Austen portrays how Fanny cannot help but imagine the erotic potential of the distant scene:

“Edmund was close to her [Mary], he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach.” (54)

Edmund taught Fanny to ride when they were younger, and Fanny’s body offers up the intimate sense memories to aid in this process of Fanny imagining her worst fears. Stabler writes that it is with the same perversity that Fanny hopes that Edmund will settle the proposal to Mary “at once! (333). Fanny experiences Edmund’s praise of Mary as a “stab” (207). Stabler writes that Fanny’s “inner conflicts produce a drama of consciousness in which the reader shares the effort of repression” (xvii). Austen shows how complex the issue of female sexual desire is.

*The Rights of Woman* is “suffused with metaphors and imagery of an appetitive body” (Badowska 283). Women must “eat the bitter bread of dependence” (66) and become “standing dishes to which every glutton may have access” (142). Despite Wollstonecraft’s critique of the overt sexualisation of women’s bodies encouraged by the idea of patriarchal sensibility, the language of the *The Rights of Woman* returns to the imagery of the body to create an emotive and persuasive argument. Within the content and form of *The Rights of Woman* there is a tension in the way Wollstonecraft critiques the patriarchal cult of sensibility whilst using highly emotive language to get her point across. Similarly, in *Mansfield Park*, the underlying sexual jealousy and violent bodily sensations Fanny experiences contrast with Austen’s portrayal of Fanny as the ultimate rational heroine. However, this tension in both Austen and Wollstonecraft’s work is suggestive of the difficulty for women writers of the time to critique the patriarchal hegemony of the day without reflecting some of it. Wollstonecraft does not hold herself to ideal standards of rhetoric. Austen does not portray Fanny to be a character without strong emotional reactions either. Both texts are written in the context of rethinking of the rights of man and Austen and Wollstonecraft are expanding that space to include the literary and philosophical considerations of women.

Austen portrays the idea of sensibility as bleeding into all aspects of women’s lives. Confined to domestic spaces, Austen highlights how for middle class women the move from a father’s house to a husband’s house was one of the only times in their lives in which women had some, albeit limited, scope to change their circumstances. Austen portrays how for both Maria and Julia, the decision of who to marry is based primarily on their desire to escape from their father’s home. Maria marries the dull Mr Rushworth because “she was less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed…She must escape from him and Mansfield as soon as possible” (158). When Maria’s marriage to Mr Rushworth breaks down after her affair, her sister Julia imagines that “its certain consequences to herself would be greater severity and restraint” and she experiences an “increased dread of her father and home” (366). Austen portrays how both Bertram girls make hasty decisions to marry based on reactive feelings. The Bertram sisters exhibit the quality of sensibility that they have taken on board from their aristocratic feminine education.

M.A.R. Habib writes that for Wollstonecraft the “injurious consequences of women being given such a haphazard education … [include] that women are unable to act as genuine moral agents: without the power of reason, they cannot make moral choices and are disposed to blind obedience of whatever power structure can claim authority over them” (342–43). In *Mansfield Park*, Austen portrays the injurious consequences of the combination of Maria and Julia’s internalised logic of sensibility and the power that the patriarch, Sir Thomas, has over the home despite it being the women who most often occupy the space. Through free indirect discourse, Austen shows the reader Maria and Julia’s deep-rooted fear of spending the rest of their lives unhappy under the rule of their father or husband. Maria’s affair and Julia’s elopement appear as acts of disobedience against the strict patriarchal roles they are assigned. But via a comparison of their acts of disobedience and Fanny’s disobedience Austen shows how the patriarchal cult of sensibility only leads the Bertram sister’s into other roles of obedience and reliance.

Fanny refuses the proposal of the rich and eligible bachelor Henry Crawford. Furthermore, she must tell her uncle, Sir Thomas, on whom she is financially dependent, that she has refused this proposal. Sir Thomas reacts angrily and states:

“You have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character the very reverse of what I had supposed. … But you have now shewn me that you can be willful and perverse; that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you—without even asking their advice. You have shewn yourself very, very different from anything that I had imagined. (248-249)”

Sir Thomas’ reaction inadvertently reveals how Fanny has grown from a meek, young girl into an independent young woman who trusts her own judgement. In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes that young men receive an education in what profession they may pursue “whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties” (60) than that of marriage. In contrast to the Bertram sisters, Fanny has sharpened her faculties via her three educations in religion, information and reading and, most importantly, via observing those around her from whom her separation of rank afforded her an autonomous and outsider perspective. When the governess who is teaching at Mansfield Park leaves, Fanny replaces her in a symbolic move to the East room. Wollstonecraft critiqued individual aristocratic teaching like this but also had her own experiences as a governess that inspired her demands for a school education for boys and girls. Austen shows how in one of the most pivotal decisions of women’s lives in the 18th century, Fanny asserts herself as a moral agent that is worthy of standing up to the patriarchal power of her uncle. Rather than her uncle’s preferred wish that she defers to the patriarchal powers in her life Fanny defers to her own sense of reason. Sir Thomas attempts to invoke the power of sensibility by sending Fanny back to Portsmouth in the hope that it will be so emotionally trying for her that she will succumb to the idea of the self-indulgent, domestic comfort that awaits her if she marries Henry Crawford. Austen shows how patriarchal hegemony is preserved by encouraging women to fear what would happen to them without the support of a husband or father.

In conclusion, in Austen’s novel and Wollstonecraft’s polemic, both writers portray how the patriarchal idea of sensibility contributes to the way women think about themselves and how they are treated. Autonomy of thought and rationality are shown as the ultimate guarantors for both Wollstonecraft’s rights for women and Austen’s recipe for a happy marriage and life. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft suggests that both men and women are products of their society. Any mastery of rationality and independent thought that women are short of and men possess is learned from a patriarchal drive to sustain a system in which men are at the head of family and state. *Mansfield Park* follows Fanny Price’s development into a strong independent thinker as she learns from the environment around her. Within Austen’s social commentary on the lives of those at Mansfield Park is political critique on the cult of sensibility and how it encourages women to be reactionary performers rather than serious moral agents of their own destiny. Austen and Wollstonecraft critique the 18th century cult of sensibility as a patriarchal form of control.

3526 Words

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