

Gender Inequality and the Influence of Mary Wollstonecraft in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*⁶⁸

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Abstract:

The conception of gender and sex traditionally divides society into two. The establishment embraces this sexually gendered binarism creating a patriarchal *status quo* where the masculine dominates the feminine. The subordination of the feminine has then been consistently denounced by women, but their criticism began to be noticed in the eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). As a mirror of society, literature has also captured gender disparity and has sometimes counterattacked it. This research delves into Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a novel where women are at the centre of the narration. It addresses the possibility of Austen agreeing with Wollstonecraft's proto-feminist postulates and subtly denouncing the foundations of the patriarchal system through her characters. For this purpose, the study dissects the Austenian female characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, focusing on the stereotypes that are historically associated to the traditional sex-gender binarism. Through this analysis, it also attempts to unveil whether said characters may or may not accept their role in Georgian society. In the end, this project will try to determine if Jane Austen may have been a revolutionary or may just be considered a master writer of romance.

Keywords: sex, gender, female characters, inequality, Austen, Wollstonecraft.

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1. Introduction

“On ne naît pas femme: on le devient”⁷⁰

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published *Le Deuxième Sexe*, where she reflected on the unresolved inequalities between men and women. With her abovementioned famous quote, de Beauvoir opens the debate about the conceptions of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, terms which are often interchanged but also associated to different realities. This traditional division in Western feminism distinguishes ‘sex’ as the inevitable biological classification of the species, where there exists a male-female dualism based on what is seen as binary genitalia, either penis or vagina.⁷¹ Nowadays, sex may not be considered dichotomous because “there are all kinds of variations in sex development that lead to a diverse range of outcomes,”⁷² such as intersex traits, which have recently been socially acknowledged. Nevertheless, were the mentioned universality of biological sex contested, the definition of ‘gender’ would distance itself from the idea of ‘sex’ while maintaining sexual binarism. In terms of socially systemic structures, gender traditionally refers to a cultural construction.⁷³ In other words, it would be the establishment that determines how people behave and live as either women or men, assimilating again gender to sex. Gender would be “the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the conceptual and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes.”⁷⁴ Therefore, there is this image of members of society unconsciously performing according to their socially assigned and sexually gendered box,⁷⁵ which creates a debate between biological determinism and gender constructionism that may delimit Gender Studies “by creating false oppositions.”⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Gallimard, 1949), 7.

⁷¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 8; Brian D. Earp, “What Is Gender For?,” *The Philosopher* 108, no. 2 (2020): 94-5.

⁷² Earp, “What Is Gender For?,” 95.

⁷³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1999), 10; Earp, “What Is Gender For?,” 95-6.

⁷⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Macmillan Press, 1989), 5.

⁷⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv-xv; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 17.

Throughout history, this sexually gendered dualism of the *status quo* has likewise distinguished between the dominating masculine and the subordinate feminine,⁷⁷ creating the patriarchal belief that there is a universally fixed hierarchy that cannot be changed. According to Bourdieu, this social system lays its foundations on a binary gender which is also based on the visible differences between bodies, on genitality,⁷⁸ providing different spaces and activities for each gender.⁷⁹ In this sense, people may be attributed their own characteristics depending on the social image – masculine or feminine – they better fit. These characteristics consolidate the impression of being either a man or a woman and separate the “norm” from the queer, a community often socially marginalised and constructed as “hated community, which splits the nation, [sliding] into a construction of the nation as ‘being’ hated by others.”⁸⁰ This is what Butler used to address as performativity⁸¹ – although she currently regards the idea of ‘performativity’ as questionable, especially in relation to trans-criticism.⁸² That is, being a man or a woman, having certain traits, may not be intrinsically part of humankind but a phenomenon that is acquired and reproduced over time.

Gender representations may be often linked to stereotypes that have been taught from generation to generation. Gender then distinguishes between masculine and feminine, being respectively related to maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity;⁸³ that is, “those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated” with the socially accepted image of either men or women.⁸⁴ In the female case, private

⁷⁷ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 9.

⁷⁸ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 22.

⁷⁹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 11.

⁸⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 157-8.

⁸¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv-xv.

⁸² Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Allen Lane, 2024), 23.

⁸³ Barnaby J. W. Dixon, "Masculinity and Femininity," in *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, ed. Todd K. Shackelford and Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 4816.

⁸⁴ Stephen M. Whitehead, Frank J. Barrett. "The Sociology of Masculinity," in *The masculinities reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Polity Press, 2001), 15-6.

spaces – the family home – are reserved for women and their gestational ability,⁸⁵ reserved for a softer task.⁸⁶ Thus, women are limited and supposed to accept their social restrictions. Within their limitations, they must learn to properly behave and deliberately obey, submitting to certain imperatives.⁸⁷ For instance, smiling, looking down, accepting interruptions, etc. Hence, they are described as physically and mentally controlled, subjected to their male counterparts as children in need of supervision. This control may be presented in how women are educated to marry and bear children, relegating them to the margins when they turn unsuccessful.⁸⁸ Furthermore, women may be also judged emotional compared to men, as well as unable to participate in more academic or scientific tasks. In this respect, they are portrayed as more sensitive and intellectually fragile.⁸⁹

Before de Beauvoir, eighteenth-century women authors started to write and advocate for the end of a patriarchal system based on socially constructed stereotypes. They demanded gender equality and political, social, and economic rights for women, at a time when the word feminism had not even been coined. Among them, Mary Wollstonecraft stands out due to the publication of her pinnacle work, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; 2017), an essay where she denounced the aforementioned historical role of women. Wollstonecraft raised her voice on behalf of women's rights and female writers who wanted a social change.⁹⁰ She stood up against the inferiority of women based on gender, denouncing how “their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength” moved ladies to think themselves “dependent on men in the various relations of life.”⁹¹ Considering that females were not allowed to inherit their birth right either, Wollstonecraft also condemned the infantilisation of women that led to the ban, as well as the masculine superiority complex which, disguised as

⁸⁵ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 11.

⁸⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 2.

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 28.

⁸⁸ Lina Meruane, *Contra los Hijos* (Literatura Random House, 2018), 8-9.

⁸⁹ Pilar Colás-Bravo and Patricia Villaciervos-Moreno, “La Interiorización de los Estereotipos de Género en Jóvenes y Adolescentes,” *Revista de Investigación Educativa* 25, no. 1 (2007): 39.

⁹⁰ Marian E. Fowler, “The Feminist Bias of *Pride and Prejudice*,” *The Dalhousie Review* 57, no. 1 (1977): 51.

⁹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of The Rights of Woman* (Amazon Classics, 2018), 14.

chivalry, pretended to protect ladies from ruin.⁹² Moreover, the British author introduced the concept of oppression. She wrote “I call women slaves,”⁹³ a quote with which she argued that the subjection of women was not voluntary. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft also criticised education for women as being “neglected”⁹⁴ and focused on learning to “blindly submit to [a male] authority.”⁹⁵ She described it as an “improper education,”⁹⁶ which was curiously encouraged by women. She even denounced literature for women, which was reduced to plain romances.⁹⁷ Even nowadays, the description of novels supposedly intrinsically related to women sometimes seems to follow the pattern described by Wollstonecraft and tend to be heavily criticised. Hence, education was then oriented to the creation of accomplished vain puppets moulded to appeal to but also to obey men. As a matter of fact, Wollstonecraft stated that girls’ education must not be described as such⁹⁸ because it did not cultivate the learners’ minds.⁹⁹ Only by receiving a proper education will women become independent and able to choose their own path.

As a reflection of society, literary works have captured gender disparity and have sometimes counterattacked it. This study focuses on Jane Austen’s most well-known novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; 2008), a story that gravitates around women who may or may not follow the established rules of the strict Georgian society. Although *Pride and Prejudice* is not as explicit as Mary Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminist postulates, it seems to also denounce the foundations of the patriarchal system. This study will explore the possibility of Austen following on Wollstonecraft’s steps. In this vein, it will analyse how Austen uses her female characters to subtly introduce her own criticism against conventional gender assumptions. For this purpose, the research will dissect the female characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, concentrating on the stereotypes that are historically associated to the abovementioned traditional sex-gender binarism.

⁹² Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 26; 76.

⁹³ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 224.

⁹⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 9.

⁹⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 32.

⁹⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 57.

⁹⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 247.

⁹⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 228.

⁹⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 219.

The ultimate objective will be to decide whether Austen is a proto-feminist herself or she should still be considered a master writer of the Georgian domestic unaware of the reality of her time.

2. Proto-feminist Criticism in *Pride and Prejudice's* Female Characters

Pride and Prejudice (1813; 2008) presents a realistic description of private spaces in the early nineteenth century. Most specifically, one must highlight its portrayal of female characters. The story revolves around the Bennet family, especially the five sisters. Each of them differs from the others, but all become an attempt to personify the gender stereotypes of the Georgian society.

At twenty-two, Jane Bennet is the eldest sister. Her physique is consistently praised as if it were her only quality. After all, she is “the most beautiful creature in the room.”¹⁰⁰ However, Jane does not seem interested in appearances, not obsessing over the “principle of self-preservation” which rendered women vain.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Jane is described as “really angelic.”¹⁰² She believes in kindness, showing an excess of naivety that sometimes makes her appear childish. Her gentle personality leads to her being seen as easy to control. As Brown puts it, Jane is “prisoner of [the] repressive image of womanhood,”¹⁰³ controlled by the traits of her gender.¹⁰⁴ For instance, someone tricks her into thinking that they are friends, while her true intention is to separate Jane from Mr Bingley.

As she is, Jane Bennet may fit into the traditional description of being a woman: modesty, delicacy and beauty.¹⁰⁵ She is the proper lady of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁶ In this regard she fits in the mentioned profile of the obedient woman who attempts to fulfil her parents’ desires – mostly her mother’s – before her

¹⁰⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Classics, 2008), 13.

¹⁰¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 251.

¹⁰² Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 132.

¹⁰³ Lloyd W. Brown, “Jane Austen and The Feminist Tradition,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (1973): 335.

¹⁰⁴ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 28; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Rachel M. Brownstein, “Jane Austen: Irony and Authority,” *Women’s Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 15, no. 1-3 (1988): 58.

own. *De facto*, Austen does not include much information about Jane Bennet's life expectations but an interest in "marrying [soon and] advantageously,"¹⁰⁷ as so should the oldest Bennet sister.¹⁰⁸ This fictional character wants to marry because she has been taught so, but also because she believes in love and wants to be loved in return. Nevertheless, she also knows the reality of the Georgian Era, where most well-off people had arranged marriages.¹⁰⁹ Thus, she is prepared to marry someone she does not love, hoping to, at least, respect him. Eventually, she falls madly in love with Mr Bingley and is reciprocated. Their relationship is not just the socio-economic transaction criticised in *Vindication*, but neither is it the fellowship Wollstonecraft demands. Jane is educated to see herself as inferior to Mr Bingley. Her happiness – and herself – depends on being with him and disappears as he does, proving Wollstonecraft's ideas on female dependence.¹¹⁰ Despite accepting said socially imposed role, Jane does not fully agree with it. Otherwise, she would not have followed Mr Bingley when he leaves for London, breaking the rule of waiting for a man's marriage proposal. Jane subtly evidences her initiative to change her path and her rejection to patriarchal conventions.

Moving on to Elizabeth Bennet, she is the protagonist and second daughter of the Bennet family. She is almost as beautiful as Jane, with a piercing dark look which reveals her strong personality.¹¹¹ It is this daring nature that makes her confront impertinent and offensive behaviours. As the heroine, Elizabeth is an uncommon woman, ahead of her time. She is intelligent but also stubborn and proud. Elizabeth is not interested in pleasing people around her, channelling her disgust through the sharpness of her words. She does not want to depend on any man or to be submitted to them. She, in turn, prefers having knowledge and freedom. In Wollstonecraft's words, Elizabeth would be described as "a woman who has dedicated much of her time to purely intellectual pursuits, and whose affections have been exercised by

¹⁰⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 80.

¹⁰⁸ Meruane, *Contra los Hijos*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Penelope J. Corfield, *The Georgians: The Deeds and Misdeeds of 18th-Century Britain* (Yale University Press, 2022), 77.

¹¹⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 14.

¹¹¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 258.

humane plans of usefulness.”¹¹² Hence, she refuses to fully perform as her gender demands of her.¹¹³

As she diverges from the traditional female role, Elizabeth is considered wild, obstinate and headstrong by those who surround her. She is sometimes even mocked and admonished,¹¹⁴ as when the Bingley sisters laugh at her when she arrives with a dirty skirt in Netherfield. In relation to this episode, “Lizzie” proves she is not the typical envious Georgian woman. Regardless of her mother’s commands, she walks to the great house to take care of her sick sister, no matter what others may think of her. It is a relevant moment, where the character reclaims the need for sorority, positioning herself against competition among women. She understands that women have to support each other in a totally male-oriented society. In this vein, Elizabeth states that “the distance is nothing when one has a motive.”¹¹⁵ Although she may only refer to her walk to help Jane, this quote may hide a bigger purpose. Dissatisfied with society, Austen may write Elizabeth’s words to exhort people to change the social model.

Rebelling against society, Elizabeth Bennet refuses to subject to men as her sex is supposed to do.¹¹⁶ Throughout the story, she even declines to marry two men to whom she would have been forcibly related. On the one hand, Mr Collins, a distant cousin who will inherit Mr Bennet’s estate, offers Elizabeth her first marriage proposal. He is described as a “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man” who looks for a wife in an attempt to please her patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.¹¹⁷ As a consequence of his ridiculousness, Elizabeth rejects him because he thinks of women as interchangeable: “Mr Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs Bennet was stirring the fire.”¹¹⁸ On the other hand, Mr Darcy proposes to Elizabeth twice. Regarding the first time, he determines that “in vain

¹¹² Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 76.

¹¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv-xv;10; *Undoing Gender*, 1.

¹¹⁴ Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” 332.

¹¹⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 32-3.

¹¹⁶ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 9.

¹¹⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 133.

¹¹⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 69-70.

[he has] struggled” to tell her “how ardently [he] admired and love [her],”¹¹⁹ proceeding to explain to Elizabeth that regardless of her inferior birth he still wants to marry her. Evidently, Austen’s protagonist rejects this proposal – although she eventually forgives and marries him. It goes without saying that the way Elizabeth turns her suitors down utterly displeases them. Wollstonecraft explains their reaction as false gallantry. That is, they think that offering Elizabeth an economically comfortable future is enough reason for her to accept their proposals, but they actually are trying “not [to] lose their rank in the distinction of sexes, ... [being] reckoned superior to women.”¹²⁰

Concerning the idea of marriage, Elizabeth’s perspective also varies from the rule. Despite being educated to marry well, she clearly challenges the whole institution, disapproving marriage as the socio-economic transaction described by Wollstonecraft.¹²¹ She would rather be a spinster than please someone and his family. Besides, she would like to wed not only a man that she chooses and loves, but also a man who respects her. Thus, Elizabeth’s conception of a romantic relationship is similar to that of Wollstonecraft, “where women by being brought up with men, are prepared to be [men’s] companions, rather than their mistresses.”¹²² Nonetheless, love is not Elizabeth’s priority. Her aspirations are always before any man. At the end, she marries Mr Darcy, because she does not need to change who she is. Thus, they become a couple, not a master and his slave.¹²³

As for her aspirations, Elizabeth is eager to learn. Being an intelligent person, she asserts herself “in a male-dominated world” and refuses to accept their dominance.¹²⁴ She “posits the ... new ideal offered by the feminists, wanting to be treated as a rational creature and subtly noting others’ absurd behaviours.”¹²⁵ She even mocks Mr Darcy’s idea of an “accomplished” woman, which omits any reference

¹¹⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 185.

¹²⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 31.

¹²¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 14.

¹²² Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 222.

¹²³ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 28.

¹²⁴ David Herbert, “Place and Society in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*,” *Geography* 76, no. 3 (1991): 206.

¹²⁵ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 61.

to cleverness and basically responds to courtesy-book standards for ladies. After his long list of conditions for a woman to be suitable, she answers: “I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.”¹²⁶ I believe Austen is subtly denouncing the lack of a proper education for girls and women. Therefore, she agrees with *Vindication*, where Wollstonecraft criticises that “everything conspires to render the cultivation of the understanding more difficult in the female than the male world.”¹²⁷ Additionally, Elizabeth seems to consider books her primary source of knowledge. She is described by Bingley as “a great reader, and has no pleasure in anything else,”¹²⁸ meaning that she does not enjoy stereotypically female activities. Nevertheless, she affirms that there are many other things that please her.¹²⁹ In spite of lacking specificity, her words may indirectly highlight that women also have different and multiple interests and dreams.

After this dialogue, Austen pivots the conversation to reveal that men were the owners of books because they inherited them. In Mr Darcy’s words, his family library “has been the work of generations.”¹³⁰ In other words, men were the heirs of culture throughout history. Moreover, Elizabeth exposes the differences between readings for men and for women: “Books—oh! no. I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings.”¹³¹ She condemns how literature is primarily addressed to a male readership, linking – once again – *Pride and Prejudice* to *Vindication*, where Wollstonecraft affirms that men can own and read any book – novels, history, philosophy, etc. – whilst the ladies’ choice is reduced to romances, frivolous novels that only increase their vanity.¹³²

Regarding Mary, she is the third Bennet sister. Being considerably different to the rest, she is sometimes left out due to their lack of affinity. In other words, she is not really close to any of her sisters, who commonly appear as pairs in the novel: Jane-

¹²⁶ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 39.

¹²⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 72.

¹²⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 37.

¹²⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 37.

¹³⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 38.

¹³¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 92.

¹³² Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 248.

Elizabeth, Catherine-Lydia. She is just alone in the middle. Mary does not stand out for her beauty or her accomplishments and intelligence. However, it is said “wisdom” is what characterises her personality. She constantly tries to prove to everyone that she is clever, aspiring to make up for her not so agreeable physical appearance: “Mary, ... in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments.”¹³³ Nevertheless, Austen made her actually vain and empty, a foolish pedant, and thus nobody takes her seriously.¹³⁴ Even her father ridicules her when she is unable to quickly answer a question: “What say you, Mary? For you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books and make extracts. ... While Mary is adjusting her ideas ... let us return to Mr Bingley.”¹³⁵ In spite of the mockery, her conceited behaviour leads Mary to truly see herself as an accomplished woman, showing her naivety to the reader.

Throughout the novel, Mary also seems to live up to several precepts of Georgian gender stereotypes.¹³⁶ She argues about the relevance of attending “evening engagements ... intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable to everybody.”¹³⁷ Then, she approves of balls as a way of disinhibiting, a way of breaking with a monotonous life, but mostly a way of finding a husband. Nonetheless, her “intellectual” attitude leaves her without suitors. Austen exaggerates Mary’s image to critically portray how patriarchal stereotypes caricatured and derided bright women in an attempt to drown female knowledge and education. In fact, Mary’s ridiculous intellectual pretensions may be used to reflect on the absence of a proper female education, supporting Wollstonecraft’s proposal of a new educational model based on the precept of rationality and equality. Regardless of their intelligence, these women were continuously treated as fools who knew nothing and were forced to accept their role as women. But society would never let them marry. Hence, they were eternal spinsters and their families’ carers.

¹³³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 25.

¹³⁴ Brownstein, “Irony and Authority,” 63.

¹³⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 9.

¹³⁶ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 57.

¹³⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 86.

On their part, Catherine, referred to as Kitty, and Lydia are the youngest Bennet daughters. Both are beautiful and good-humoured young ladies, but also “ignorant, idle, and vain.”¹³⁸ They seem to be an inseparable pair, unable to exist as individual units. They are superficial, wandering around thinking only about trivial matters. Their biggest concern consists in finding the best ribbons for the next ball.¹³⁹ Their mother, Mrs Bennet, identifies with and prefers them rather than Elizabeth or Mary. Kitty and Lydia may be a hyperbolic portrait of the description of the stereotypical Georgian woman. Despite this description, it is relevant to highlight that both young ladies are still teenagers experiencing life. Albeit women were forced to age earlier due to the social necessity of marrying a man who would economically provide for them,¹⁴⁰ Kitty and Lydia prove they are not mature enough because they are not old enough and, consequently, behave according to their age – 17 and 15 respectively.

Focusing on their interests, neither Kitty nor Lydia has any of their own but only aspire to fulfil the established role for women: marriage and children.¹⁴¹ They are taught to worry just about their physical appearance and concentrate their efforts on spending money to look stunning. Their fixation with youth and beauty lies in the social importance it has for women.¹⁴² In the end, female youth was notably valued in Georgian marriages because it was explicitly associated with beauty, but also because it was intrinsically linked to the ability of procreating and giving heirs to their husbands, which was women’s ultimate life goal. All in all, they willingly accepted to “sacrifice every other consideration to render [themselves] agreeable to [men]”¹⁴³ in an attempt secure economically advantageous marriages. That is, Kitty and Lydia accept the open objectivation of Georgian women and their bodies to fulfil the duty of their sex. In this vein, both sisters – especially Lydia – are “sex-seekers determined to

¹³⁸ Austen, 206-7.

¹³⁹ Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” 330.

¹⁴⁰ Amanda Vickery, “Mutton Dressed as Lamb? Fashioning Age in Georgian England,” *Journal of British Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 860.

¹⁴¹ Meruane, *Contra los Hijos*, 8-9.

¹⁴² Colás-Bravo and Villaciervos-Moreno, “La Interiorización de los estereotipos de género,” 39.

¹⁴³ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 193.

complete their identity within a narrow concept of sexual roles.”¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Kitty and Lydia know nothing about love or sex. They just recklessly fool around, flirting with any man.¹⁴⁵ They do not appear to understand the relevance of respect or self-respect in a romantic relationship. In regard with their unrestrained obsession with men, both teenage girls want to marry a good-looking and rich gentleman, even though Lydia ironically marries Wickham, a broke soldier. They also chase soldiers and are constantly around them. The infatuation with the militia may have been related to a kind of preference or even a fetish, but I would doubt Austen wanted to be sordid. The explanation may be simpler. On the one hand, soldiers embodied the virtues traditionally considered virile and attractive, which were widely depicted in Georgian romance novels. On the other hand, Kitty and Lydia need a husband who will economically support them in the future. Even though soldiers were not particularly well-paid, they always received their wages and were therefore wealthy enough to maintain a wife. Consequently, marrying a soldier would be a good option for them both. Hence, *Pride and Prejudice* exposes both gender roles and “the economic base of social behaviour.”¹⁴⁶

As for their education, both Kitty and Lydia see themselves as accomplished girls, without realising the actual meaning of accomplishment. Although they bully Mary, they are not better than her. This lack of proper education presents them as “uncommonly foolish.”¹⁴⁷ Their father, Mr Bennet, considers his children “two of the silliest girls in the country,” but never takes responsibility for their stupidity.¹⁴⁸ According to Wollstonecraft, the tyranny of men, the established control of men over education, resulted in the inexistent formal education for women, as well as in their consequent silliness and folly.¹⁴⁹ Regardless of their idiocy, neither Kitty nor Lydia seems interested in being intelligent. In my opinion, their reason for their disinterest lies in that they have learnt that Georgian men liked marrying women who followed

¹⁴⁴ Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition,” 330.

¹⁴⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 207.

¹⁴⁶ Herbert, “Place and Society,” 207.

¹⁴⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 30.

¹⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 260.

the aforementioned female-like behaviours, instead of being involved with bright and educated women.

Although *Pride and Prejudice* mainly focuses on the Bennet sisters, Austen's story also portrays other women who help recreate the patriarchal structure of the Georgian era. Among these characters, one may find Mrs Bennet. She is the mother of the Bennet clan but a complete mystery, as there is not much information about her. In fact, she does not even have a first name; her identity, the surname Bennet, is given by her husband. Thus, Mrs Bennet has nothing of her own and even lacks the freedom and attitude to be who she really wants to be, which means that "she was formed to please and to be subject to [men]; and that it is her duty to render herself *agreeable* to her master-- his being the grand end of her existence."¹⁵⁰ Briefly, Mrs Bennet is nothing without a man, symbolising how patriarchy oppressed Georgian women, by reducing them to another property of their husbands.¹⁵¹

Mrs Bennet displays pettiness and vanity, only interested in the pursuit of men. The evident lack of a proper education present in some Bennet sisters seems to be aggravated in their mother. She is not good at doing anything, and is portrayed as someone who pretends to be better than she is in an attempt to network with higher-class people, such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Nevertheless, she is clearly unsuccessful in her endeavours. Moreover, Mrs Bennet is a simpleton that sticks to the role of dumb wife for which she was "born," lacking ambition aside from having her daughters married.¹⁵² Along with her foolishness come Mrs Bennet's nerves. She alludes to them several times throughout the book, particularly when something disturbs her. For example, when Mr Bennet refuses to speak to Mr Bingley¹⁵³ or when Elizabeth rejects Mr Collins's marriage proposal.¹⁵⁴ In this respect, Mrs Bennet shows that she has not been taught to handle her own emotions and does not want to learn, preferring to indulge them. Her nerves may also try to hide a shortage of both academic and emotional education. Besides, linked to the supposed frailty of women,

¹⁵⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 104.

¹⁵¹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 28.

¹⁵² Brown, "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition," 337.

¹⁵³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 5-7.

¹⁵⁴ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 109-10.

the nerves may be a sign of the stereotypical “mad woman in the attic.”¹⁵⁵ Recurrent in literature, this female archetype is related to women being medically diagnosed with hysteria, seemingly unable to restrain their emotional displays and behaving erratically. Showalter determines that the diagnosis turns into a caricature of traditional femininity, as well as into a hyperbolic image “of the cognitive and personal styles” encouraged in women to become attractive to men.¹⁵⁶ These women were medically enclosed for being crazy while many of them were just trapped in their marriages – a famous literary character being Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. They were victims rather than heroines in their own stories. Showalter also adds that, nowadays, hysteria is studied from a more feminist perspective (herstory), being unveiled as the consequence of how societal gendered roles have historically constrained and limited women’s expression.¹⁵⁷ In the end, Mrs Bennet seems to be stuck in a marriage that does not provide her with anything but her husband’s mockery: “I have a high respect for your nerves ... I have heard you mention them with consideration these last twenty years at least.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, neither Mr Bennet nor society takes her seriously due to her behaviour, maybe due to her personifying those women that used to stick to their gendered conventions.

Mrs Bennet’s lack of education leads to her neglecting her daughters’ own learning. According to Mrs Bennet, it is irrelevant whether or not her children go to school or have a governess,¹⁵⁹ but they only need to learn to become experts at seducing men.¹⁶⁰ She is absolutely obsessed with marrying off her daughters for their own good, showing her love “in the most brutal manner, and [sacrificing] every relative duty to promote their advancement in the world.”¹⁶¹ Ultimately, Mrs Bennet

¹⁵⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2020), 76-9.

¹⁵⁶ Elaine Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. Sander L. Gilman (University of California Press, 1993), 287.

¹⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” 287.

¹⁵⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 161-2.

¹⁶⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 6-7.

¹⁶¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 199.

understands marriage as a way of making women “agreeable and useful” to men.¹⁶² Shortly, marriage is not based on love and respect, but rather business. It is the interdependent union of property and propriety.¹⁶³ Then, she teaches her children to “have such perfect power over their hearts as not to permit themselves to fall in love till a man with a superior fortune offers.”¹⁶⁴ Besides, she encourages competition among women for their male audience, feeding their envy and insulting the “enemy”: “The Lucases are a very good sort of girls. It is a pity they are not handsome! Not that I think Charlotte so very plain—but then she is our particular friend but you must own she is very plain.”¹⁶⁵

Despite Mrs Bennet wanting her daughters to be happy in wealth, the reason for her obsessive insistence may lie in how their marriages may raise her social rank at all costs. For instance, she hates Mr Darcy but blindly accepts him in the family when he proposes to Elizabeth: “My sweetest Lizzy! How rich and how great you will be! [...] Such a charming man!”¹⁶⁶ Thus, Austen may create Mrs Bennet to embody – and agree with – Wollstonecraft’s criticism on how society compelled girls to get married. Curiously, the author of *Pride and Prejudice* also opens the novel with this famous quote: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”¹⁶⁷ Austen’s subtle irony stands out within these words. Whilst she seems to reflect on how men need to find wives, Austen actually wants to highlight that it is women who suffer the pressure of getting married, as it happens with the Bennet sisters.¹⁶⁸

On the other hand, Charlotte Lucas is an interesting secondary character in Austen’s novel. Although seemingly a minor character, she is important to understand women who had no choice but to surrender to established Georgian conventions. Being a 27-year-old woman, Charlotte is the eldest child in her family. She lacks the

¹⁶² Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 211.

¹⁶³ Herbert, “Place and Society,” 207.

¹⁶⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 100.

¹⁶⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 44.

¹⁶⁶ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 357.

¹⁶⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Brownstein, “Irony and Authority,” 64.

beauty worshipped in women,¹⁶⁹ as Mrs Bennet kindly notes: “however, he did not admire her at all; indeed, nobody can, you know.”¹⁷⁰ Society regards her as too old and unattractive to marry anyone, unworthy of having a husband. She is clearly undervalued due to her looks, which inevitably means that she has less – or no – prospects. Therefore, her unmarried destiny would have been to become both the nursing spinster daughter and the burden to her family.

Charlotte knows that she does not fit the image of the perfectly beautiful Georgian woman, but accepts her features, understanding her limitations.¹⁷¹ That is, she is aware of the difference between beauties, like between Jane Bennet and herself, but never manifests irrational jealousy, refusing to increase hatred and confrontation between women. Thus, Charlotte’s personality completely diverges from those of other characters’, such as Lydia or Caroline Bingley. In spite of caring about being less physically fortunate, Charlotte celebrates others’ luck and tries to help them, proving that she is nice and sensible.¹⁷² For instance, she is glad Jane finds Mr Bingley but also recommends Elizabeth to urge her sister to show her feelings to the gentleman.¹⁷³ With her advice, she attempts to prevent anyone from separating the couple, but fails because Elizabeth does not listen to her. Even then, Charlotte demonstrates the importance of sorority that is also displayed in Wollstonecraft’s criticism of female competition.

Regardless of not being considered “marriage material,” Miss Lucas marries the aforementioned Mr Collins. Charlotte accepts his proposal without the slightest hesitation.¹⁷⁴ Austen makes clear that Charlotte does not love him, but her motivation lies in her fear of a financially insecure future, as well as in the social humiliation of spinsterhood. Miss Lucas acquiesces in her fate, sacrificing any chance of true love for

¹⁶⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 2.

¹⁷⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 14.

¹⁷¹ Salma Haque, “Charlotte Lucas’s Practical Approach to Marriage and The Conditions of Women of Her Society in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 7, no. 4 (2013): 39.

¹⁷² Haque, “Charlotte Lucas’s Practical Approach to Marriage,” 39.

¹⁷³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 23.

¹⁷⁴ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 122-3.

the sake of her family and her own stability.¹⁷⁵ By marrying Collins, Charlotte characterises herself as more practical than romantic, and unveils love as secondary or non-existent in marriages during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to her, “Happiness in marriage [is not about love but] is entirely a matter of chance.”¹⁷⁶

Once married, Miss Lucas becomes the perfect submissive wife. As Haque explains, she adapts to her new life and never complains about anything, not even about Collins’s pompous behaviour and his obsession with pleasing aristocrats.¹⁷⁷ In fact, she prefers to satisfy him, instead of caring about his multiple flaws: “It is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.”¹⁷⁸ Charlotte’s position was not uncommon in the Georgian Era. Nonetheless, Elizabeth condemns her friend’s choice, lacking comprehension and sisterhood. The heroine of the novel may voice Wollstonecraft’s thoughts while she believes that Miss Lucas loses her dignity due to her marriage. However, Charlotte angrily reprehends her for feeling morally superior. Not only is she aware that she is marrying an idiot, but also knows that this is her only opportunity of having a content future.¹⁷⁹ Whilst Austen apparently agrees with Wollstonecraft/Lizzie, she may use Charlotte to slightly criticise the excessive display of moral superiority. The author may want to lecture proto-feminists, reminding them that their aim is not to admonish women with no choice, but to fight patriarchy to reach equality for all women.

Finally, *Pride and Prejudice* presents the reader with two characters which are two sides of the same coin: Miss Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. They represent different ranks within the Georgian higher classes. As Fowler explains, Caroline is beautiful and snobbish.¹⁸⁰ Her fortune comes to twenty thousand pounds, making her one of the wealthiest ladies in the novel. She has been educated in the best private seminaries, where she learnt how to be an accomplished woman. These elitist institutions are heavily criticised in *Vindication*, where Wollstonecraft condemns

¹⁷⁵ Haque, “Charlotte Lucas’s Practical Approach to Marriage,” 40.

¹⁷⁶ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 24.

¹⁷⁷ Haque, “Charlotte Lucas’s Practical Approach to Marriage,” 41.

¹⁷⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 24.

¹⁷⁹ Haque, “Charlotte Lucas’s Practical Approach to Marriage,” 42.

¹⁸⁰ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 50.

how schools separate high from lower ranks, increasing social inequality. In her essay, the British author also denounces the growth of social misbalance between women belonging to different social classes and proposes the creation of schools that “ought to be absolutely free and open [and mixed] to all classes.”¹⁸¹ In short, although admired by women like Mrs Bennet, the elitist education Miss Bingley receives turns her into a shallow, selfish and childish human being.¹⁸² Additionally, Caroline learns to be “entitled to think well of [herself], and meanly of others,”¹⁸³ especially of those who she considers inferior to her rank. That is why she ridicules the Bennet family. Unsurprisingly, she feels fulfilled whenever she mistreats someone. In other words, honour and virtue do not come along with high rank. She enjoys pretending to befriend Jane Bennet but actually cannot stand the idea of her marrying her brother.¹⁸⁴ Hence, Austen may include this character to suggest the need for universal education that Wollstonecraft demands, in order to avoid said elitism and to create a more egalitarian society. Furthermore, Miss Bingley’s education also leads her to be in need of a husband, and she apparently chooses Mr Darcy as her perfect match. In the end, she does understand marriage as a transaction between families, and they are socially equal. Nevertheless, she may be the elegant courtesy-book lady, but shows “to be sadly deficient [...] [and] empty-headed”;¹⁸⁵ lacking the characteristics that Darcy wants in a woman.

Likewise, Caroline is an advocate of female competition. She needs to be better than any other lady and dislikes whenever other women outshine her. She may embody the characteristic envious behaviours among girls that is described in *Vindication*. Fowler notes that she is mostly jealous of Elizabeth because Mr Darcy falls in love with her.¹⁸⁶ That may be the reason why she endeavours to denigrate her in front of him. For example, when Miss Bennet walks to Netherfield to take care of her sick sister, she laughs at her for wearing a stained dress: “To walk three miles [...] or

¹⁸¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 225.

¹⁸² Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 55.

¹⁸³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 17.

¹⁸⁴ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 56.

¹⁸⁶ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 56.

whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone. [...] It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.”¹⁸⁷

Concerning Lady Catherine de Bourgh, she is even more snobbish than Caroline but cleverer. As a satirical portrait of aristocracy, she assesses people “from their income.”¹⁸⁸ All in all, I believe that she represents the Georgian gendered establishment. She shares her table with lower class people but never mixes with them, letting her guests know that she is superior. This behaviour is presented with the power relation between her and Mr Collins. In this sense, she is an authoritative person. She actually thinks that everyone must submit to her, and manipulates those who are around her – a quality traditionally seen as unwomanly. She seemingly wants to control their lives as if they were puppets: “I am almost the nearest relation he has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns.”¹⁸⁹ Moreover, she gets upset when someone challenges her wishes, as Elizabeth does when she refuses to promise her not to marry Mr Darcy.¹⁹⁰

Lady Catherine defends education for girls as long as it deals with creating accomplished and obedient women. Her view on education consists of teaching drawing and music.¹⁹¹ Moreover, she is appalled by the Bennet sisters’ lack of accomplishments,¹⁹² and does not understand how her mother – never their father – did not properly care about such a tremendous issue. Neither does she share their mother’s allowance to be all out in society when the eldest sisters are not married yet. Besides, she also uses a specific paternalistic tone when “educating.”¹⁹³ However pretentious her airs and reputation are, her education is quite poor, and it is said that “she derives part of her abilities from her rank and fortune.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 36.

¹⁸⁸ Herbert, “Place and Society,” 205-6.

¹⁸⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 338-9.

¹⁹⁰ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 338-9.

¹⁹¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 169.

¹⁹² Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 56.

¹⁹³ Fowler, “The Feminist Bias,” 58.

¹⁹⁴ Austen, *Pride and prejudice*, 82.

As Caroline Bingley, Her Ladyship also considers marriage a transaction. Nevertheless, she favours endogamy to avoid unworthy suitors/suitresses entering the family. Consequently, she wants her sick daughter to marry her nephew, Mr Darcy. Lady Catherine affirms that she has two main reasons for this wedding to be celebrated. First, she believes that she knows what is better for her own family. Second, she does not want to break the agreement she had with her late sister: “From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of his mother [...] and [...] to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family!”¹⁹⁵ These words are clearly reminiscent of arranged marriages and keep proving that weddings were mere transactions.

3. Conclusion

*“As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking”*¹⁹⁶

In her 1928 novel *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf reflects upon the idea of gender and women’s position in her society. More than one century later, Woolf was able to summarise both the plot of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s standpoints in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This research has been articulated around one enquiry. It aimed to demonstrate that Austen uses her female characters to subtly introduce proto-feminist criticism against conventional gender assumptions, maybe influenced by Wollstonecraft’s essay. In other words, the objective of the study was to prove that not only are Austen’s women a faithful portrait of Georgian ladies, but also that they denounce eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century patriarchal Britain. After having conducted a meticulous analysis of most female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, the following main conclusions are obtained.

From the Bennet sisters to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Austen’s female characters are constrained to social conventions, specifically to the stereotypes

¹⁹⁵ Austen, *Pride and prejudice*, 335.

¹⁹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Rosetta Books, 2002), 160.

associated to a traditional sexually gendered binarism. Despite their aspirations, most of them stick to the conventional role of women, devoted to pleasing people. As Lydia or Miss Bingley, they are educated to focus almost exclusively on beauty and obedience as the first steps to chase a good match. That is, they have to be beautiful and compliant to become the elegant woman that will marry a wealthy gentleman. Throughout the book, Austen describes these ladies as completely vain, selfish and foolish; neither accomplished nor perfect. The writer clearly notes how the lack of a proper education has turned them into ridiculous, petty and irrational creatures. Thus, Austen stands up for changing the conception of female education. In this vein, *Pride and Prejudice* condemns education that was solely designed to teach girls how they were expected to behave.

Austen caricatures some of her characters. She describes several Georgian female stereotypes, women who are mostly satisfied with their established role; through them, the novelist introduces a subtle criticism which echoes Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. The literate – pedantic – woman is constantly mocked and never taken seriously, showing how female intellectuals were considered worthless. The housewife/mother is obsessed with having her daughters married to whoever has enough money. The envious girls lack sorority. The classist aristocrat understands marriage as a transaction. Besides, the novel also includes a non-caricatured character that submits to conventions because the patriarchal society does not give her another choice.

Furthermore, Austen creates a character that raises her voice against inequality: Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine. As Wollstonecraft does in *Vindication*, Elizabeth condemns sexist behaviours. She likes expressing her opinions. She refuses to marry a man that she does not love only because she is ordered to. In fact, she rejects marriage as her only concern in life, but has aspirations and wants to pursue her dreams regardless of what people might say. Moreover, she encourages women to read beyond courtesy books, to pursue their dreams regardless of the rules. She is a modern woman who fights for being listened to.

In conclusion, the analysis ratifies the opening hypothesis. Through the female characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen denounces the Georgian patriarchal system, addressing themes discussed by Wollstonecraft in *Vindication*. She raises awareness of the poor situation lived by women back then, showing her readership the need for changing, for achieving equality. Jane Austen proposes a timeless discourse that can be applied to any period, even nowadays, where people claim to have reached equality while many women are still mistreated all over the world for the mere reason of being born female and, consequently, inferior to men.

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