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Ornamental Education and its Relationship to Marriage: The Connections Between Women and Slaves

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In Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she argues that the social circumstances, rather than the physical biology, of women promotes both bodily and intellectual weakness, and that this could be largely remedied through improved education. Throughout her novel, *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen also critiques female education and fragility, though draws these to larger themes of sex-based subordination and domestic colonization. Taken together, both authors add to a discourse that increasingly portrays women as slaves of the society and of the state, and it is accomplished using themes of education and marriage. However similar, their critiques do differ in one important aspect: Austen seems to view the marriage market as the ultimate determining factor in women's subordination (with lacking education as a symptom of that problem), whereas Wollstonecraft argues that lacking education forms the basis for all other oppressions. Using both Austen's novel and Wollstonecraft's theory, I hope to combine, expand, and complicate their arguments to illuminate the connections they draw between women, education, and slavery.

Wollstonecraft begins her argument with the premise that women's minds are, in fact, unhealthy, though she does not attribute this to any physical illness but rather to social circumstances. "[Women are like] flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty. . . One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false

system of education" (1). Wollstonecraft's use of flowers as an analogy for women serves a very particular purpose. Women, like flowers, are seen as weak, exotic (or artificial) and in need of cultivation, all assumptions that reinforce women's subjugation within the education system. The "soil" serves as a representation for ornamental education, and it is because of this that women, like flowers, are neither strong nor useful, but instead only beautiful. Women, unlike men, are forced into this environment and have relatively no options to escape it, which is why marriage ultimately serves as the only method of social advancement. Just as Wollstonecraft argues that genuine education must extend beyond the privilege of maleness, and that this extension must present women with options for social advancement beyond the realm of marriage, Austen critiques the false assumption that the privilege of wealth legitimizes ornamental education, a point which she demonstrates through comparisons of the Bertram sisters and Fanny Price.

The "false system of education" that Wollstonecraft references is regularly displayed throughout *Mansfield Park*, though never more vividly than through the actions and characters of Maria and Julia Bertram, and never more frequently than in comparison to Fanny Price. Upon Fanny's arrival, Maria and Julia make several feeble attempts to woo her with their intellectual superiority: they speak French, play a duet, and, when all other options have been exhausted, retreat to their current holiday hobby, which consists of "making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper" (Austen 15). Once again, a connection between women and flowers is drawn, though Austen's image of the Bertram sisters creating such "artificial flowers" goes further in that it implicates them as partially responsible for embracing their oppressive and ornamental education. The attainment and mastery of these specific skills is only necessary so that women can enhance their entertainment- and service-providing potential, but the Bertram sisters view

themselves as far superior to Fanny because she does not possess them. In fact, Maria and Julia even scorn Fanny because of what they interpret as her woefully embarrassing lack of education, even though theirs is based on rote acquisition of otherwise useless facts. They exclaim, "How long ago it is aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns" (Austen 19). This education, largely based on women's ability to memorize and recite information, paid no attention to the importance of either applying that knowledge or thinking critically about it, which ultimately had consequences for their morality as well.

Though morality served as a prevalent theme throughout *Mansfield Park*, there are few instances in which Austen draws specific connections between poor education and lacking morality, none more powerful, however, than Maria Bertram's disastrous affair with Henry Crawford. Maria's fated decision to abandon her husband and run away with another man serves as direct evidence of the consequences women and their families suffer when young ladies are poorly educated. Despite the fact that Julia and Maria "had been instructed theoretically in their religion," they were "never required to bring it into daily practice," which ultimately leads Sir Thomas to conclude that "principle, active principle, had been wanting" (Austen 430). In her article, "Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education," Jane Nardin argues that Austen specifically utilizes the principles from Hannah More's 1799 manual, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, to demonstrate how quickly and easily women with only ornamental educations can be led to demoralization and destruction:

> In the *Strictures*, More argues that the educational practices current in the fashionable world distort both the intellectual and the moral development of women. "The reigning system" teaches young ladies how "to allure and to shine," More writes, by stressing

> showy accomplishments that will boost their value in the marriage market. The equally showy rote learning in which girls are drilled "floats in the memory," but does not "contribute to form the mind and enrich the judgment."
>
> (Nardin 17)

This "reigning system" of instruction that More references is an exact representation of Julia and Maria's education; they were capable of chronologically listing monarchs and reciting poetry, but could not effectively weigh the consequences of their actions. In this passage, More specifically implicates the marriage market as one influence that encourages this rote and ornamental education, an argument that both Austen and Wollstonecraft launch, though in different manners.

While Wollstonecraft eventually implicates the marriage market as encouraging women's poor education (which will be discussed later), her argument is constructed more thoroughly in terms of the correlative relationship between lacking education and lacking morality. The first chapter of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* offers some particularly descriptive connections between these two points; she argues that the deficiency in education and morality is destructive both to English women and to England itself:

> [Women] spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, --the only way women can rise in the world, --by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: - they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. - Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!
>
> (Wollstonecraft 1)

Wollstonecraft's use of deliberately provocative language cannot be ignored; she specifically conjures images that force the reader to consider women's education, morality, and even slave-like status. Her use of phrases like "smattering of accomplishments" and "act as such children" draw attention to the superficiality and uselessness of women's education, but her employment of words like "libertine" and "seraglio" evoke much more visceral reactions. Associating English women with libertines ("a person who leads an unrestrained, sexually immoral life") and seraglios ("the part of a Muslim household where wives or concubines live; a harem") implies a sort of cause-and-effect relationship between poor education and certain sexual misconduct, an implication even the most fervent critic of women's education would stop to consider (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*). It is this understanding of her audience that makes Wollstonecraft's arguments so appealing; she even goes so far as to explain why improved education for women would ultimately serve the marriage market positively.

Although Wollstonecraft critiques a sexist social system and lackluster educational opportunities that allow women social mobility only through the vehicle of marriage, she does articulate three ways in which the educational liberation of women would positively impact marriages (and male-female relationships in general). Building off her original argument that poorly educated women fall victim to depravity, she first proposes that educated women will increase their moral consciousness, saying that "Without knowledge there can be no morality" (Wollstonecraft 4). Second, she argues that, if educated properly, women will have less power over men because they will more closely resemble the male sex, important because of its impact on the power dynamic within marriages (ibid). Finally, Wollstonecraft argues that educated women are better able to undertake what she calls, "the moral art of pleasing," a skill which husbands undoubtedly saw as useful in terms of their marriages (3). By drawing a direct link

between women's lack of education with power and morality (and doing so within the scope of traditional marriage), Wollstonecraft's argument implies that female subjugation within marriage is a result of feminine ignorance, a problem that will be rectified with increased access to genuine education.

It is at this point when Austen and Wollstonecraft's parallel arguments seem to part ways. Both disagree with the ornamental education that women receive. Both acknowledge that women's primary form of social advancement is only through marriage. Both attribute moral consequences to poor education. Austen, however, argues that women's ornamental education is only a symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. Instead, she most strongly attributes feminine oppression to the marriage market, rather than the education system, which is Wollstonecraft's argument. While this may appear to be no more than a basic difference in ideology, it is important to consider Wollstonecraft's motivations in launching the argument she did. Miriam Ascarelli's article, "A Feminist Connection: Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft," lends particular insight into this issue:

> Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft was personally against marriage, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* does not advocate a complete transformation of the family. Perhaps because Wollstonecraft was simply being realistic and knew that most women would end up becoming wives and mothers, she gears her book toward imagining a system of education that enables women to become more self-reliant and, thus, become better daughters, wives, mothers and citizens.
>
> (Ascarelli 3).

This "realist" approach should not be thought of as evidence of Mary Wollstonecraft's compliance with the marriage market; she herself remained unmarried until pregnancy

effectively forced her into marriage. The manner in which Wollstonecraft constructs her argument is more an indication of how much radicalism society will tolerate than a reflection of her own personal beliefs. Just as some critics have been loathe to read Austen's works as feminist simply because so many of her heroines eventually marry, Wollstonecraft's commitment to greater social equality should not be compromised because she chooses to launch her critique from within the established system of the marriage market.

Though Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* does not blatantly address the marriage market as a site of female oppression, Austen regularly critiques women's treatment in the marriage market, a system she argues mandates poor education for women. This is particularly prevalent when, after teasing Fanny because of her ignorance, the Bertram sisters are chided by their aunt, Mrs. Norris. "And remember that," says Mrs. Norris, "if you are ever so forward and clever yourselves, you should always be modest; for much as you know already, there is a great deal more for you to learn" to which one of the girls replies, "Yes, I know there is, till I am seventeen" (Austen 19). This passage illuminates the importance of the marriage market in determining a young woman's fate. The intellectually lacking, purely ornamental education that women receive is abandoned at the prospect of marriage, not because it is no longer required to entertain or please the husband, but because the education itself is designed only for seeking out a marriage, not for the marriage itself. From the point of birth, the Bertram girls are effectively groomed for marriage, a privilege bestowed upon them because of wealth. Fanny Price, however, does not receive the same education because, as Nardin argues, "[she] seems intuitively to realize that rivaling her cousins in brilliant accomplishments could endanger her position in the family" (18). All of the young women in the house are subject to the marriage market, but because Fanny is unequipped with even the rote, ornamental education that Maria and Julia

possess, the process even further disenfranchises her. It is through Fanny in particular that Austen draws the strongest connections between womanhood and slavery, a correlation made stronger by Fanny's lower class and conflicted status in Mansfield Park.

As a penniless, uneducated, outsider, Fanny embodies the traits of the most powerless victims of the marriage market, but Austen begins to construct Fanny as a slave long before her coming out. In fact, the entire premise upon which she enters Mansfield Park is predicated upon the expectation that she has suffered an immoral and barbaric upbringing, a justification often used to defend the enslavement of Africans (Ferguson 122). Once this fact has been acknowledged and accepted, it is much easier to recognize Austen's construction of Mansfield Park as a slave plantation. Sir Thomas fulfills the role of the slave master, Mrs. Norris the cruel overseer, and Fanny the paralyzed and silent slave (Malone 33-34). Austen even openly references British colonization and subsequent slavery, particularly when Fanny relays to Edmund her brief conversation with Sir Thomas on the subject. She says, "Did not you hear me ask [Sir Thomas] about the slave trade last night? . . . There was such a dead silence!" (Austen 184). This silence, Kuwahara argues in the essay, "Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Property, and the British Empire," is important because it creates a pause, but does not disturb the "domestic circle" of the house (107). That is, Sir Thomas's role as the moral authority in Mansfield Park is challenged, but not usurped, an authority he displayed immediately upon his return home from attending to his slave interests in Antigua. Engaging in an inappropriate theatrical production of an overly sexualized and scandalous play, Sir Thomas's family (excepting Fanny) has become so unruly and undergone such a moral transgression that he must set them right immediately:

> Sir Thomas saw all the impropriety of such a scheme among such a party, and at such a time, as strongly as his son had ever supposed he must. . . [and] after the house had been

> cleared of every object enforcing the remembrance, and restored to its proper state. . . the reproof of an immediate conclusion of every thing, the sweep of every preparation would be sufficient.
>
> (Austen 174)

This scene represents a pivotal moment in the novel: much as the slave master assumes physical and moral responsibility for his plantation, Sir Thomas exacts similar authority over his household and family, a behavior he expects to replicate with Fanny after her coming out.

Fanny's relationship with Sir Thomas drastically changes following her refusal of Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage, a sudden shift that illuminates Fanny's second-class status in the house. It is at this point when Austen most clearly draws together the themes of education, morality, and slavery in the marriage market. I argue that it is exactly because Fanny did not receive the same ornamental education as Maria and Julia that she is able to refuse Henry Crawford's proposal and her uncle's wishes. Maria and Julia were raised with the specific purpose of marriage in mind, an understanding they acknowledged when they argued that they only needed to learn until age 17. Fanny, however, received a different education, largely because of her class, but also because "she [did] not want to learn either music or drawing," perhaps a symbol of Austen's unwillingness to sacrifice Fanny so easily to the marriage market through ornamental education (Austen 19). As a result, her refusal to be treated as a traded good to the highest bidder manifests itself not only as an indictment of the marriage market, but also of the correlating moral structure that demands her acquiescence. "If Fanny rejects Henry she will be immoral in a system where morality is tied to the opinion of the patriarch and the gratitude due to him" (Malone 32). Though she does not draw an explicit connection between women's

status as slaves and the marriage market, Wollstonecraft, like her argument against ornamental education, connects slave status with immorality.

As referenced earlier, Wollstonecraft clearly plays upon concerns of morality when referencing libertines and seraglios, but this latter term also carries with it the element of sexual slavery, a theme that is regularly referenced throughout *Vindication.* Arguing against the blind obedience and immorality that ornamental education encourages, Wollestoncraft contends, "tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing" (Wollstonecraft 2). By constructing her argument to include both the despot and the sexual perpetrator, she plays upon society's inclination to despise the latter for moral objections, a sentiment that is then also associated with the former. Although these arguments about women's moral and intellectual subjugation is constructed as a result of poor education, they can be extended beyond simply the system of ornamental education, especially when considered in tandem with Austen's arguments about women as slaves within the marriage market. Wollstonecraft writes, "Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel?" (Wollstonecraft 4). If, as Malone argues in "Patriarchy and Slavery in *Mansfield Park,*" the "marriage market is analogous to the slave market," and "the underlying message is that the dependent woman in patriarchy is a slave and that she has as much power over her destiny as a slave," then it seems as though Wollstonecraft's arguments can be seen to equally critique the system that perpetuates that dependence: the marriage market (Malone 35).

Just as Wollstoncraft's critique of the marriage market is subtly offered, Austen's own arguments of the marriage market as the primary site of female subjugation are complicated by Fanny's ultimate fate. While Austen does manage to orchestrate Fanny's narrow escape from

the violently encouraged marriage to Henry Crawford, she does not entirely avoid the victimization of domestic colonization. Her eventual marriage to Edmund demonstrates the depth of female subjugation in society; their engagement occurs outside of the traditional realm of parental bargaining and formal proposals, but Austen still leaves us with the notion that Fanny has somehow been colonized. Edmund, perhaps learning from his father's role as a strong, moral, authoritarian, and male figure, and understanding the importance of that role (because of his sister's moral transgressions), seems to apply this paternalistic logic as a justification for his conquest of Fanny. His regard for her, which was "founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and completed by every recommendation of her growing worth" was the "natural" step in their relationship (Austen 436). After ten years of guiding her, protecting her, and forming her mind, only a formal recognition of Fanny's colonization is required, and it comes in the form of a marriage for which she had hoped.

Whether the marriage market or lack of genuine education serves as the basis for women's subordination, both Wollstonecraft and Austen consistently draw connections between female oppression and slavery. The comparison is not unfounded; in the same way that slaves are dehumanized and infantilized, women are consistently othered and subjected to male paternalistic authority. Austen's *Mansfield Park* is perhaps the more convincing of the two in terms of representing women as slaves of civilized society because it incorporates class as well as gender issues. Although both demonstrate the parallel strategies of international and domestic colonization, Austen's representation of Fanny as a literal victim of that colonization through marriage is particularly compelling in its illumination of women as domesticated slaves. However, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* provides a strong theoretical

basis for Austen's argument, and, taken together, they provide a powerful example of feminist theory and its application in 19th century England.

Works Cited

Ascarelli, Miriam. "A Feminist Connection: Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 25:1 (2004 Winter), p. [no pagination]. Electronic publication. Ascarelli's article primarily argues that the prominent thematic elements in Jane Austen's work mirror several of the arguments which Wollstonecraft launches in her book, *Vindication of the Rights of Women.* She is particularly concerned with the ways that both Austen's and Wollstonecraft's works have been traditionally read; although Austen is often categorized as conservative because her heroines marry, "a staunch feminist stance is there, suggesting Austen, like Wollstonecraft, was tuned into one of the hottest issues of her time: women's role in society" (1). The article is excellent in that it establishes some direct connections between Austen and Wollstonecraft as radicals sharing a similar ideology, but is so broad that some of the elements of her argument are only superficially discussed.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park.* London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Ferguson, Moira. "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender." *The Oxford Literary Review*, 13:1-2 (1991), pp. 118-39. Ferguson argues that the gender politics in England that Austen is addressing are actually mirroring more global concerns of imperialism and colonization. "European women visibly signify the most egregiously and invisibly repressed of the text – African-Caribbeans themselves" (118). She, like Malone, draws several connections between Mansfield Park and its inhabitants and slaves on a plantation. Her essay culminates in a discussion of *Mansfield Park* as both an abolitionist text and as a critique on the patriarchal system that victimized Fanny. She

ultimately reaches the conclusion that the novel is unsuccessful as an emancipation text, but that Austen eventually achieves this with *Emma*.

Kuwahara, Kuldip Kaur. "Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, Property, and the British Empire." *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 17 (1995 Dec), pp. 106-10. The stated purpose of Kuwahara's article is to explore the reactions of a native Antiguan to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, though far more attention is given to analyzing Austen's use of the slave trade throughout the novel. Kuwahara argues that Austen leaves the issue of slavery unresolved in *Mansfield Park* "simply because she cannot resolve it," and instead chooses to operate "within an accepted paradigm of patriotism [and] nationalism"(108, 110). Unfortunately, Kuwahara does not employ a close enough reading to either *Mansfield Park* or *Persuasions* (which she also references), instead primarily using Edward Said's book, *Culture and Imperialism*, and Ruth Perry's article, "Austen and Empire: A Thinking Woman's Guide to British Imperialism," as a basis for her study. Her brief explication of Fanny's (and Sir Thomas's) silence surrounding the issue of slavery was useful, however.

"Libertine." *Webster's New World College Dictionary*. 4th Edition. 2001.

Malone, Maggie. "Patriarchy and Slavery and the Problem of Fanny in Mansfield Park." *Essays in Poetics: The Journal of the British Neo-Formalist Circle*, 18:2 (1993 Sept), pp. 28-41. Malone's article argues that Austen utilizes the character of Fanny Price as a way to share her attitudes about patriarchy, slavery, and poor women. After establishing the connections between Fanny as a slave, Sir Thomas Bertram as a slave owner, Mrs. Norris as an overseer, and Mansfield Park as a plantation, Malone devotes the rest of her article to analyzing these relationships in terms of Austen's political and moral beliefs. Her

argument eventually develops into one, central principle coalescing women, patriarchy, and slavery: "The underlying message is that the dependent woman in patriarchy is a slave and that she has as much power over her destiny as a slave. The marriage market is analogous to the slave market" (35). Malone's discussion of the marriage market is interesting, but also conflicted; she constructs Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford as Fanny's refusal of the patriarchal system which enslaves her, an argument that ultimately ignores Fanny's colonization through marriage to Edmund.

Nardin, Jane. "Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education." *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 20 (1998), pp. 15-20. Using Hannah More's advice manual, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, Nardin argues that Austen utilized More's basic concepts as a model for Fanny Price's education. She eventually modifies this argument and instead proposes that Austen is critiquing Sir Thomas Bertram as a "well-intentioned, but monumentally unsuccessful pedagogue" (18). The article is particularly persuasive when explicating More's underlying principle (that "showy rote learning" does not help women to develop their moral judgment) and paralleling it with the educations and consequent actions three of Austen's characters, the Bertram sisters and Fanny Price.

"Seraglio." *Webster's New World College Dictionary.* 4th Edition. 2001.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Vindication on the Rights of Women.* 1792.