

Women's Education During the Regency: Jane Austen's Quiet Rebellion

BARBARA HORWITZ

English Department, C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University, Greenvale, NY, 11548

One more universally acknowledged truth is that Jane Austen's novels concern education. D. D. Devlin noted her reliance on Locke's work. Marilyn Butler noted the similarity of many of her ideas to those of the deeply conservative writers of conduct books for women.¹ It seems to me, however, that while Jane Austen shares some of the ideas common to the more conservative writers of her time, she is far less doctrinaire than they are. She is also much more interested in using these ideas for their literary value, involving characterization, plot structure and the comic dynamic of her novels. In addition, she does differ from the other writers on education and conduct in that they insist the goal of education for women is the development of good nature, while she believes the goal of education for women to be identical to the goal of education for men: self-knowledge.

The eighteenth century took its ideas on the subject of education from John Locke. His *Some Thoughts on Education* (1678) was widely read and immensely influential. Locke's medical background assured that he would be considered an authority on the physical aspects of child care and his concern with perception and knowledge as evidenced in his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) made him an authority on intellectual development. Locke's work was designed to apply to the education of young gentlemen. He insisted, however, that in all essential respects, that is in everything relating to truth, virtue and obedience, his advice was equally applicable to the education of young ladies.² In his own library, however, he had a copy of the book his age considered the authority on the education of young women — Abbé Fénelon's *Traite Sur L'Education des Filles* (1687).

In 1772, the other seminal work on education appeared, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. This book concerns the education of a young man, but a substantial chapter is devoted to the education of a suitable mate for him. Rousseau's advice on the education of boys did in fact influence educational practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fortunately, his wholly misogynistic advice on the education of women did not.

Locke's work provided the theoretical basis for Sarah Fielding's *The Governess or Little Female Academy* (1749). The author was the sister of Henry Fielding, and the friend of Samuel Richardson, but her goals as a novelist were more limited than theirs. She meant to be read by both young girls and their mothers. The youngsters were supposed to enjoy and profit from her stories which showed how faults of temper in children such as disobedience or vanity cause misery. Their mothers were supposed to absorb Locke's educational theories on which these stories were based.

Books on education appearing during the 1770s tended to be religiously and politically conservative. Among the most widely reprinted were Dr. Gregory's *A Fathers Advice to his Daughters* (1774) and Hester Chapone's

Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Young Lady (1777). The subject was so popular that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote on female education in order to earn ten guineas quickly. Her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786) was published just before she came under the influence of Godwin and his circle and before she lost her religious faith. In consequence, it is far more conservative than her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1796). Clara Reeve, best known as the author of one of the first Gothic novels, *The Old English Baron*, (1777) produced her *Plan of Education* in 1792. Four years later, Mme. De Genlis' *Adèle et Théodore* appeared in England.³

Maria Edgeworth, with her father, wrote *Practical Education*, a detailed manual for teaching children (1798). Hannah More, best known for her efforts to establish Sunday schools in order to teach poor children to read, published her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* in 1800. Jane West, a prolific novelist, produced a three volume work on the education and conduct of women, *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806). Mme. De Genlis, Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More and Jane West are specifically mentioned in Jane Austen's novels or letters, but all these writers share what became the conventional wisdom on the subject of women's education.

They all agreed with Locke that the basic goals of education must be virtue, wisdom, breeding and learning, in that order. They agreed, and Jane Austen agreed with them, that one important manifestation of virtue consists of doing one's duty. Certainly Jane Austen's heroines do their duty just as soon as they recognize what it is. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Elinor Dashwood is able to cope with the weight of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy—she is in love with Edward herself—and the fact that her sister Marianne has been jilted and is distraught, because she knows she is doing her duty. Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion* does her duty even though the other members of her family never do their duty. She fulfills her father's obligations to his tenants when he must leave his estate and she takes care of her sister's injured child when Mary refuses to miss a dinner party. Her sense of duty is so strong that she has broken her engagement to the man she loves because she was persuaded that it was her duty to do so.

Locke and the writers on education believed virtue is based on learning to use reason to master passion and appetite. Jane Austen agreed in principle, but as we shall see, she saw the subject as a highly complex one. In connection with virtue, Locke also discussed vices such as gluttony, avarice and deceit. The writers on education offered all sorts of advice on how to cure children of these vices, but Jane Austen saw them as problems of adults, not children. Dr. Grant, a minister, in *Mansfield Park*, actually dies of overeating. The Dashwoods in *Sense and Sensibility* exhibit avarice and the Thorpes in *Northanger Abbey* exemplify deceit.

Locke defined wisdom as learning to make one's way in the world, to manage an estate if the young man had one; to earn his living some other way if he did not. The writers on women's education agreed that since the business of women was marriage, it was only practical to teach young women the things they should know in order to attract husbands and to keep

them. Conventional wisdom stated that when beauty fades, the only way to keep a husband is to bring up his children properly and manage his household efficiently. Jane Austen did not disagree; she praises Mrs. Norris, in *Mansfield Park*, of whom she otherwise disapproves strongly, for being able to manage a household on a small income. Jane Austen certainly demonstrates, however, that a happy marriage requires more than good housekeeping skills.

The writers on female education took for granted that marriage and motherhood were a woman's natural vocation. Ironically, only Jane West, of all the women writers on education, was married when she wrote on the subject. Not surprisingly, all these writers, except Jane West, write movingly on the subject of the single woman who was likely to be both poor and lonely. Jane West who not only was married, but poor, and the mother of a large family, wrote about the joys of celibacy. Emma echoes her thoughts when she insists that because she is wealthy—she has many interests with which to occupy her time and she has objects of affection in her sister's family—she will never marry. "I shall often have a niece about me," she declares to the reader's amusement.⁴

Locke's definition of breeding was accepted by the writers on education and by Jane Austen. They all believed that children must be taught not only good manners, but genuine consideration for others. Jane Austen carefully points out that "fine ladies" like the Bingley sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* who are rude to those they consider their inferiors and who do not pay their bills lack breeding.

Academic learning for women was far more problematic to those who wrote on education. Fénelon had declared that a woman's intellect was normally feebler than a man's. He also believed that learning would make a girl vain. In fact, he insisted that girls were even more likely to be vain about their knowledge than about their looks. He admitted, however, that it might be better for girls to read the classics than the fiction of the day. He finally concludes that well-disposed young women might be permitted to study the classics, if they would promise never to display their knowledge.⁵ This became the conventional wisdom on women and learning. Learned ladies who exhibited their knowledge were made to appear unnatural and therefore ridiculous. However, learning itself had some value as a way of filling time cheaply and safely. Dr. Johnson warned Mrs. Thrale about the dangers of idleness recommending reading, sewing or sweeping the floor as apparently equally valuable antidotes to it (Letter 24, July 1783). Lady Mary Wortley-Montague approved of study for women but advised them to hide their knowledge as if it were a physical disability (Letter to Lady Bute, January 1783).

Later writers on education, the Edgeworths, Hannah More, and Jane West agreed and added that women should be educated because properly educated women would know better than to demand their rights (West I, 129).⁶

John Locke discussed methods of education as well as goals, stressing that a parent should familiarize himself with his child's nature in order to improve it. Jane Austen and the writers on education agree. They all believed

that parents must spend time with their children to know them thoroughly. They also felt that parents should not intimidate their children because that would make their children less than frank and open. Sir Thomas Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*, an intimidating father, failed at educating his children because he did not know them.

Locke further insisted that a child should never be indulged. He would freely give a child whatever he needed, but he would not give him anything he asked for. He was insistent on this point because he firmly believed that children who were denied nothing would never learn to deny themselves any gratification and would grow up vice ridden. Many of the villains in eighteenth century novels, Richardson's Lovelace, for example, in *Clarissa* (1747-1748), are villains because they have been spoiled by their mothers. The writers on women's education agreed with Locke. They insist that it is much healthier for a child to experience cruelty than indulgence. Here too, Jane Austen's view is far less simplistic and far more humane than theirs. She allows Julia and Tom Bertram as well as Mr. Yates to be rehabilitated at the end of *Mansfield Park*. In *Emma*, Mr. Knightly reminds us that the Weston's baby daughter will survive being spoilt, just as Emma did.

Locke believed that children were best educated at home under the supervision of their parents and a tutor. He admitted that at a "public" school, a school open to any boy whose family could pay the fees, a boy would lose his shyness and learn Latin, but he feared that at such a school a boy might become prey to vice, as even the most conscientious schoolmaster could not supervise the moral development of large groups of boys adequately.

Most of the writers on education, as well as the educated public, agreed with Locke that virtue is best learned at home, although poise and confidence are gained at school. Since few parents, however, were prepared to educate their children themselves, or could afford a qualified tutor, small private schools were established. An educated gentleman, usually a clergyman, would take a few boys into his home and make himself responsible for their moral development as well as their intellectual accomplishments. Possibly the best-known fictional schoolmaster of this type was Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews* (1742). George Austen, Jane Austen's father, ran such a school as did the fathers of several other women who wrote. (Girls whose fathers ran schools seemed more likely to become educated than other girls.)

Jane Austen used the discussion of the relative advantages of public and private schools in *Sense and Sensibility*. Edward Ferrars, a typical graduate of a private school, Mr. Pratt's, is well-read, virtuous but extremely shy. His brother Robert, on the other hand, who attended Westminster, is a completely self-confident, overbearing fool. Lucy Steele met Edward at Mr. Pratt's school; since she was related to the family, she spent a great deal of time there and managed to snare Edward. Unfortunately, she did not become educated, and like Edward, readers think less of her on that account.

The writers on women's education discussed moral issues that Locke ignored because he was dealing with the education of children. Jane Austen does not ignore these issues, but she is never moralistic. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* lamented the fact that young women

who misbehaved sexually were ostracized for life because of one mistake that they were probably lured into making by some unscrupulous villain taking advantage of their innocence and inexperience. Wollstonecraft advocated the social rehabilitation of these girls. Hannah More and Jane West were horrified by the very idea, insisting that if such sinners were readmitted into a normal social life, the very fabric of society would be destroyed. Jane West asserted that a woman who was truly penitent would never wish to be admitted into the company of decent people (I, 242-47).⁷

Jane Austen considered the situation of the fallen woman in her novels and treated it differently each time. Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* runs away with Wickham, a cad, but through the efforts of Darcy, they are soon married, and Lydia is restored to society. Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park* runs off with Henry Crawford, but she is separated from him and forced to live in "guilt and misery," shut off from the world, presumably for the rest of her life. Her father refuses to allow her to return home in language that echoes Hannah More (465).⁸

Obviously Jane Austen is not taking sides on this issue. What she does do is use it for its literary value by concentrating her attention on the reactions of the other characters to these examples of sexual misconduct. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary Bennet, who wants to be considered an intellectual because she is not pretty, demonstrates her own obtuseness by parroting Mr. Villar's speech from Fanny Burney's *Evelina* about the fragile beauty of a woman's reputation. There may be nothing wrong with the sentiment, but she is talking to her own sisters about another sister and she sounds ridiculous (289). Mr. Collins demonstrates his own fatuousness when he insists that the family will never recover from Lydia's disgrace (297). We can see that Mr. Collins has read Locke. He attributes Lydia's immorality to the fact she had been a spoiled child or to her nature which must have been innately bad, but which could have been altered by a conscientious parent.

Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park* is not as fortunate as Lydia, but again Jane Austen evokes a comic response to her situation by focusing on the reactions of the other characters to her elopement rather than the elopement itself. Lieutenant Price, consistent with his own coarseness and British naval tradition, insists everyone involved should be flogged. His wife feels sorry for her sister, Maria's mother, but she is too busy searching for a box which she can't find because her own daughter has ruined all the boxes, to worry about anyone else's problems. Even the worthy characters react comically. Edmund Bertram, who is not only Maria's brother but a clergyman, does not worry about his sister's temporal well-being or her spiritual welfare because he is concerned only with the fact that this affair has wrecked his relationship with Mary Crawford, the sister of the man with whom his sister has eloped. His sister's life is ruined forever, but he can only plead, "Fanny, think of me" (466).

As a matter of fact, Fanny is thinking of him, particularly of how her chances of attracting him have now increased markedly. She, at least, has the decency to regret such thoughts. In fact, she is so agitated by Maria's elopement that she is certain the entire Bertram family will never be able to

support life or reason under the disgrace. She is entirely wrong, of course. Although Sir Thomas is upset by Maria's conduct, and the fact that his system of educating her must have been at fault, the situation allows him to get rid of Mrs. Norris, thus making his home more comfortable.

Jane Austen uses other moral issues for their literary value in much the same manner. While the writers on education insist on the importance of teaching children to tell the truth, she insists, in *Northanger Abbey*, that the young must learn to distinguish the people around them who tell the truth, from those who do not. She also extends the terms of the discussion to include another favorite subject of the time, the dangers to the young of reading fiction. Rather than harp on the evils of fiction, however, she makes the distinction between novels which merely imitate Mrs. Radcliffe's implausible tales, and those novels "in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (38).

Just as most of the writers on education shared certain ideas on the harmfulness of fiction, they shared conventional ideas about the faults of women. Indeed, a large part of the books on education is devoted to the eradication of these faults. Jane Austen, to great comic effect, assigns these faults to men. For example, it was feared that learned women would be so absorbed in their studies, they would hide themselves in their libraries and neglect their families. In Jane Austen's novels, only Mr. Bennet does that. Vanity, too, was supposed to be a female vice, one to which young women were particularly vulnerable. The vainest character in the novels, however, is Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*. He keeps so many mirrors in his bedroom, that its new tenant, Admiral Croft, is embarrassed.

Vanity was regarded as being connected with an undue regard for social status; this is Sir Walter's other obsession. He divides his attention between his copy of the *Baronetage*, and his looking glass. We are also told that the one group of men Sir Walter truly despises are naval officers. This is because they win promotion on merit rather than family background, and they allow their complexions to be roughened by exposure to the elements. Sir Walter manages to accept Captain Wentworth as his son-in-law, because the Captain is handsome.

Hypochondriasis was another fault conventionally assigned to women. It was often connected with feeling neglected and unappreciated. Mary Musgrove, the bored young housewife in *Persuasion*, is an example the writers on women's education would have understood immediately. However, the most hypochondriacal character in the novels is Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*, who constantly worries not only about his own health, but about everyone's health. He will eat only specifically prepared gruel and tries to prevent his neighbors from eating asparagus or wedding cake which he believes are unhealthy. Sir Walter and Mr. Woodhouse are great comic characters, but their gender would make them even more amusing to the nineteenth-century reader.

Jane Austen shows a far greater regard for the complexity of human behavior than the other writers on women's education. They, for example, insisted on teaching children kindness towards animals because they connected it with kindness towards human beings. She, however, realized that kindness towards animals could mask much less desirable behavior. Lady Bertram is devoted to Pug, but she neglects her family. Her sister, Mrs. Norris, is mean and cruel, but she thinks she is benevolent because she interests herself in everyone's concerns, medicates the servants, and worries about the horses. When Sir Thomas reproaches her gently for allowing the young people to put on a play in his absence, she changes the subject and tells how hard she has labored to promote the match between Rushworth and Maria and how she has always sympathized with the servants and attempted to spare the horses (189-90). Even Fanny, the novel's heroine, and certainly a far more admirable character than Mrs. Norris, masks her jealousy of Mary Crawford, as she watches Edmund teach her to ride, by expressing concern for the poor horse (67-68).

Jane Austen also goes far beyond the other writers on education when she considers the learned woman, approaching the issue from several different vantage points. She sees Mary Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, as a ridiculous figure just as the writers on women's education would, because she is a young woman who parades her knowledge. However, Jane Austen laughs at her because she is *not* a knowledgeable person; she is merely a foolish girl who has memorized a stock of quotations which she spouts, generally with little regard for their appropriateness. In point of fact, she is really quite stupid.

Although the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* does say, "a woman, especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can," which accords with the conventional wisdom, she goes on to say, "Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid" (110-11). It is important to note in this regard that Jane Austen is not laughing at the well-informed person, but at the vanity of those who want to be considered more well-informed than anyone else!

Generally, the more well-informed a person really is, the more that person admires intelligence. It is Catherine's avidity for knowledge that Henry Tilney admires, not her ignorance. Edmund Ferrars prefers Elinor to Lucy because Elinor is far more intelligent. Darcy, after his initial disparagement of Elizabeth's looks, notes that her eyes are particularly intelligent—and the reader knows he is in love. Anne Elliot is admired by one of her suitors because she can translate from Italian. It does not occur to her to hide her ability. Nor does she fail to recommend a course of serious reading to Captain Benwick. She has the right to do so because of her seniority of mind, which no one disputes.⁹

Jane Austen also refuses to take a simplistic view of the necessity for controlling one's emotions. In *Sense and Sensibility* she agrees with the writers on female education who would have recommended that Marianne

control her emotions, forget Willoughby, and fall in love with someone else. This is exactly what Marianne does, but many readers have found her successful change of heart less than convincing. By the time she wrote *Persuasion*, however, Jane Austen seems to have decided that some emotions cannot be controlled. Anne's emotions are so strong that they manifest themselves physically. She blushes; she becomes uncomfortably warm; tears come; she is unable to speak. As for forming a second attachment, the narrator says plainly—it is impossible. Anne gives her speech affirming woman's constancy (also, incidentally, refuting the conventional notion that women are naturally fickle) saying, "All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (235).

Jane Austen believed that love is so powerful that it could be a force for improvement. The other writers on female education saw it as an impediment to improvement, but her heroes and heroines learn from each other. Unlike the cases in other novels, too, it is not only the heroines who are educated by the heroes. Darcy's love for Elizabeth democratizes him, allowing her to educate him. Anne, too, educates Wentworth to value principled women, quite as much as Mr. Knightley educates Emma, or Henry educates Catherine. In addition, Jane Austen demonstrates that couples can corrupt each other. The Dashwoods in *Sense and Sensibility* manage to convince each other that John Dashwood can satisfy his father's deathbed request that he aid his half-sisters financially, by helping them move out.

In a more positive sense, love is educative in Jane Austen's novels in that it forces those who experience it to examine their own hearts. This, for Jane Austen as it was for Sophocles, is the crux of the educational process and the most important goal of education. Here she differs markedly from the other writers on women's education and effects her quiet rebellion. Her worthiest characters strive not only to understand others but to understand themselves. In fact, the admirable characters can be distinguished from the less admirable characters on this basis. General Tilney believes he really wants the best for his children as he tries to wreck their lives. Isabella Thorpe believes she loves James, until a better catch comes along. The Dashwoods believe they are generous; Mrs. Norris knows she is benevolent. The Crawfords pose a difficulty to some readers because they seem so attractive, but they are dangerous to themselves and to those who might love them, because they do not know who they are (which is why Henry is such a good actor) and what they really want. Worthy characters do not deceive themselves either about what they want or their chances of getting it. Elinor would like to believe that Lucy Steele is lying about her secret engagement to Edward, but she will not allow herself that luxury. Fanny, because she is not blind to her own feelings, cannot help seeing that Edmund is falling in love with Mary.

It is the heroines who do not know their own hearts who are blind to the emotions of others. This explains why Emma really believes Mr. Elton is in love with Harriet and it accounts for her failure to notice the secret love affair

between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Of course she fails to recognize that she herself is in love with Mr. Knightly until it is almost too late.

Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* undergoes a similar awakening. She believes she despises Darcy. At their first meeting, he refused to dance with her because she wasn't pretty enough; he has broken up her sister's romance, and even though he has proposed to her he has couched his proposal in terms insulting to her family. But after he explains his behavior she realizes that she has seriously misjudged him. As she says, "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (208).

As soon as these heroines do know themselves, they are guided by reason to do their duty. Thus they deserve to marry, and to play an educative role in their communities. Other writers on female education barely mention the value of self-knowledge. For them, a woman's most important attribute and consequently the most important goal of her education, after she has attempted to attain Locke's goals, is good nature, an equanimity of temperament that allows her to be perfectly unselfish, and cheerful in the face of any disappointment or adversity. This stress on the importance of good nature is found in all the works on the education of women from Fénelon on.

Jane Austen was obviously aware of the importance other writers placed on the female temperament. She has Emma use their arguments. Emma, incidentally, is strongly influenced by what she reads. She believes Harriet's illegitimacy is romantic. She believes Harriet must marry Frank Churchill because he rescued her from gypsies and she even believes in the blessings of celibacy. Emma points out that Harriet deserves to marry well because of her prettiness and sweet nature. Men, she insists, believe these are the best claims to a good marriage women possess. Mr. Knightly disagrees, insisting that sensible men want more in a wife (64). Events, of course, prove him correct, but the reader must not blame Emma for her ideas because she has gotten them from the most authoritative books. Clearly, her reading is one factor that has hindered her acquisition of self-knowledge.¹⁰ Of course, she is a much more developed character than the heroine of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, because Jane Austen is a far less doctrinaire writer than Charlotte Lennox.

Jane Austen dramatizes her distaste for the notion that good nature is the most important aspect of a women's temperament. In *Sense and Sensibility*, she introduces us to Charlotte Palmer, whose impermeable good nature weathers not only domestic tribulations, but her husband's disdain. Charlotte laughs at all her troubles. The narrator laughs at her. Jane Austen also shows us how irritating unflinching good humor can be. Charlotte's mother, Mrs. Jennings, with the best of intentions, adds to the pain of the Dashwood sisters when Marianne is jilted, just as Miss Bates, in *Emma*, makes her niece's sad situation, poverty and a seemingly hopeless secret engagement, worse by her cheerful prattling.

The fact that Jane Austen believed that self-knowledge rather than good nature is the most important goal of women's education accounts for some of the differences of opinion between her and her predecessors and contemporaries who wrote on education. As we have seen, she denied that spoiled

children must be ruined for life, although she demonstrates in the case of the Middleton children in *Sense and Sensibility*, how irritating they can be.

Because men and women are equally capable of attaining self-knowledge, neither sex is innately inferior to the other. Now many of the writers on female education, while maintaining that men were naturally superior to women, had a tendency to sneer at men. Dr. Gregory warned his daughters that he was the only man who would ever deal honestly with them.¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft asserted that women could not depend on their fathers, brothers, or husbands (*Vindication*, 206). Jane West used highly derogatory epithets when referring to men. She called them, "lords of creation, bashaw bachelors, domestic bashaws, domestic tyrants, and wayward Petruichios" who needed to be managed by their wives (II, 99).

Jane Austen saw that because men and women are inherently equal, marriage should be an egalitarian relationship—as the few good marriages in the novels are. The greatest barrier she sees to such a marriage is not inequality of fortune or social position as the other writers on education do, but an inequality of intellect. This is what makes the Bennet's marriage so unhappy.

Jane West paints a picture of what she considers to be an ideal marriage. "No portrait can be more truly amiable, than that of a well disposed, well-informed woman ordering her domestic affairs with propriety, and guided in the more important concerns of life by the judgment of a worthy, intelligent husband . . . a well-disposed mind, conscious of its own imperfections . . . shrinks from the burden of unnecessary responsibility" (I, 120-21). Jane Austen describes one marriage that follows this pattern. The reader is told, "Lady Bertram did not think deeply, but guided by Sir Thomas, she thought justly on all important points" (449); however, she is so indolent that she allows the education of her children, as well as the management of her household to fall into the hands of her sister and Sir Thomas, to the great detriment of her children's education. Their failure to educate the children properly leads to one daughter's ruin and nearly does irreparable harm to the other children.

The picture of an ideal marriage that Jane Austen paints is that of the Crofts in *Persuasion*. Mrs. Croft helps the Admiral manage their lives just as she helps him drive their carriage. As the Crofts drive Anne home, the Admiral is about to collide with a post when Mrs. Croft saves them. "By coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage" (92). Other writers might condemn the Crofts' marital style; Jane Austen certainly does not.

The writers on female education also insisted that women must be educated to fulfill their "natural" vocations as mothers. Jane Austen does not recognize motherhood as a particularly praiseworthy occupation. Lady Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*, who devotes all her time and

energy to motherhood (as her husband devotes all his time and energy to hunting—which has the disadvantage of not lasting all year) is a particularly bad mother. It is worthy of note that all the mothers in the novels are highly imperfect; one, Lady Susan, is downright malevolent. Not only does Jane Austen not value motherhood, in her letters she decries excessive childbearing as unhealthy. When she describes a baby, in *Sense and Sensibility*, she emphasizes its least attractive features: constant crying and being covered all over with “pimples” (257). Her comment in this regard on Jane West shows how little she thinks of any of her productions. She writes to her sister, “and how good Mrs. West could have written such books and collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment.”¹²

Just as the Crofts' (childless) marriage is exemplary, Mrs. Croft herself, who might be the butt of humor to another novelist, is held up as an exemplar. She travels with her husband in peace and war, and she is rarely seasick. She is not conventionally pretty, but she is a highly knowledgeable person who considers herself a “rational creature” rather than a “fine lady.” Clearly, she is superior to Mrs. Musgrove, the mother of a large family whose idea of a long journey is the distance to the nearest town and who has never “in the whole course of her life” discussed Bermuda or the West Indies (70-71). The narrator derides Mrs. Musgrove's “large fat sighings” over the death of her son, for whom no one had much use when he was alive. Here, the narrator is not only noting the incongruity of sadness and obesity, or just being nasty, as some critics have charged, but also mocking the traditional figure of be-reaved motherhood.

In her stress on women's education for its own sake, rather than as a preparation for motherhood, Jane Austen may be considered a feminist writer. She was certainly familiar with the views of the writers on education who were her predecessors and contemporaries and she used the ideas they discussed in her novels. An awareness of those issues on the part of modern readers can increase their appreciation of her comic talents and increase their insight into her characters. It is also important to note that Jane Austen goes beyond the writers on education in a very important, even radical, way when she demonstrates that the goal of women's education is not good nature but self-knowledge. Since she is never overtly didactic, however, readers may overlook this aspect of her thought.

NOTES

¹ D. D. Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975; Marilyn Butler, in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) argues that Jane Austen was a committed Christian Tory whose heroines either exhibit a pessimistic view of human nature and a belief in external authority or exemplify such orthodoxy (164-66). Claudia Johnson, on the other hand, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Mary Poovey in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) argue that while she may have had to conceal her feminist opinions due to the conservatism of the times, Jane Austen was no friend of patriarchy.

- ² Letter to Mrs. Clarke, February 1685, quoted in *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James L. Axtell (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), 344.
- ³ Maria Edgeworth wanted to do the translation of the work, but her father, on the advice of Thomas Day, an author who was very much influenced by Rousseau, would not allow her to do it on the grounds that publication was unfeminine. In fact, Maria Edgeworth did not publish until Day's death when she became a very popular and very prolific novelist.
- ⁴ Jane West, *Letters to a Young lady in which the Duties and Character of Women are Considered* (1806; rpt. New York: Garland, 1974, III, 91. *Emma* ed. R. W. Chapman, *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen* 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933-34 rpt. 1971), 85-86. Further references to the novels will be cited parenthetically.
- ⁵ H. C. Barnard, *Fénelon on Education: A Translation of the "Traité De L'Education Des Filles" And Other Documents Illustrating Fénelon's Educational Theories and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), 86.
- ⁶ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune*, 5th ed. (Dublin: Wm. Porter, 1800), 36-37, 236; Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*. (1795; rpt. New York: Garland, 1974), 52.
- ⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. (London: Johnson, 1796), 55.
- ⁸ In *Sense and Sensibility*, Eliza Brandon, an adulteress, suffers and dies. We do not learn the fate of her daughter who is rescued by Colonel Brandon after Willoughby seduces and then abandons her.
- ⁹ I believe it is significant that Jane Austen puts her most feminist views into Anne's mouth (234).
- ¹⁰ The fact that she has been indulged is the other.
- ¹¹ John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*. (1774; rpt. New York: Garland, 1974), 6.
- ¹² *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) 8 Sept., 1816.