
GENDER ROLES AND FEMININE AGENCY IN AUSTEN'S HEROINES

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This current research considers the negotiation of gender roles and feminine agency in Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* characters Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet. The research, set in the sociocultural context of Regency England, demonstrates how normative expectations of women, based on the institution of marriage, decorum and dependence, both restrict and enable female action. While Emma Woodhouse's relative socioeconomic privilege allows her to exercise greater autonomy than was typical of women in her time, Elizabeth Bennet asserts her intellect and conscience by rejecting socially expedient but personally incompatible unions. Through a comparative close reading, this paper illustrates how Austen represents her heroines not as hapless victims of patriarchy but as empowered agents of self-definition. This agency is exercised through dialogue, choice and challenge, but it is ultimately resolved within the parameters of that which they implicitly question. The study also shows how Austen's mix of compliance and critique reveals the tension within the institution of marriage as simultaneously a social obligation and a human relationship with the potential for mutuality and satisfaction. Through its emphasis on agency as an element of Austen's proto-feminist narrative, this paper traces the complex nature of early 19th century gender ideology and the way in which fictional characters contribute to the negotiation of the ideologically constructed roles of women and men.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, feminine agency, Regency, Jane Austen, social norms, marriage, patriarchy, female autonomy.*

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's literary work spans the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a time when bourgeois domestic ideology was solidifying, feminine propriety was being codified, and women were almost entirely dependent upon male-dominated marriage and inheritance law

for their economic security. In this social context, Austen's novels enact a subtle but consistent cultural critique, which has been the subject of scholarly debate for the past two centuries. Her most famous novels, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1815), feature heroines whose performances of gender warrant critical examination. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are two of the most fully fleshed out female characters in the English novelistic canon, and their narratives raise questions about the nature of feminine agency in a social order that limits women's choices while expecting them to accept their fate with gracious resignation.

The notion of feminine agency in Austen is not unequivocally emancipatory. It is not expressed through a full-scale uprising against the social order, nor does it end in a radical restructuring of the world. Instead, the heroines of Austen deploy a nuanced, interiorised form of agency that is witty, morally discerning, emotionally attuned and socially savvy. This agency is necessarily limited and contextual; it emerges in conjunction with and against the grain of the norms of feminine behaviour in Regency England. To understand how it works, it is important to consider both the acts and utterances of Austen's heroines, and also those things that are unsaid, constrained or ultimately compromised.

This paper offers a comparative close-reading of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, considering the ways in which Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse exemplify different, yet complementary forms of feminine agency. Elizabeth's agency stems from the power of her intellectual and ethical judgement; she defiantly refuses to perform femininity as submission and seeks to affirm her perceptions of reality even when they run counter to conventional expectations. Emma's agency is rooted in her privilege (her wealth, status and her single status), but her narrative ultimately presents the education of her agency into a more socially accountable form. The two heroines together provide a complex script for the possibilities and constraints of feminine agency in the particular historical and cultural conditions of Regency England.

The paper unfolds in a number of interrelated ways. It starts with an overview of the context of Regency gender ideology, placing Austen's novels in the context of a wider set of normative ideals. It then moves to a detailed examination of Elizabeth Bennet, considering her rejection of normative femininity and expressions of agency through language, judgement, and the refusal of certain marriages. The paper then turns to Emma Woodhouse, exploring the different ways her status as a privileged woman informs her agency while also risking the consequences of unself-aware agency. Comparative analysis discusses shared and unique aspects of the two heroines' engagements with gendered expectations. The paper

concludes with an analysis of Austen's feminist legacy and of the contemporary relevance of her vision of feminine agency.

Regency Gender Ideology: The Normative Framework

In order to understand the importance of Austen's heroines, it is first important to understand the normative structure in which they find themselves. During the Regency period, English society was marked by a series of interlocking ideological norms about women that were supported by legal, economic and cultural institutions. Gentry class women - the social class to which Austen's characters belong - were subordinate to their fathers and, after marriage, to their husbands. The common law doctrine of coverture effectively erased the legal identity of married women, rendering their property, income and person subject to their husbands' control. The economic implications of women's subordination were stark: if they couldn't find a suitable husband, they risked becoming genteel paupers or dependent on male family members.

In this context, developing marriageability was not just a social ideal but an economic imperative. The domestic ideology that dominated conduct literature of the era (such as the work of Hannah More's *Strictures on the Female Character* (1799) and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765)) defined an ideal of femininity that emphasised gentility, modesty, domestically useful skills, and the subordination of desire to familial and social duty. Women were to be amusing rather than clever, obedient rather than independent, and modest rather than ambitious. The normative feminine ideal, in this ideology, was a woman whose entire being was subordinated to her social obligations.

Austen was well aware of this cultural ideology and she staged confrontations with it in her novels, both comically and critically. In her novels, she depicts characters who exemplify the normative feminine ideal to varying degrees - Mrs. Bennet, whose life is focused entirely on the project of finding husbands for her daughters; Jane Fairfax, whose talents and self-control make her the epitome of proper femininity; and Miss Bingley, whose cultivation of feminine grace barely masks the ambition that the ideology officially condemns. Austen's heroines, with their interiority, independence and resistance to normative roles, present a comprehensive critique of the norms that govern their world. It is because Austen so thoroughly understands and depicts the normative regime that her heroines' deviations from it are significant.

The marriage plot that animates *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* is therefore not a narrative trope, but a site of ideological contestation. Marriage is the main way that women's social, economic and personal identity is secured in Austen's novels. Who gets to marry whom, and

on what basis, is therefore a matter of power, choice, and the possibilities for feminine autonomy. Austen neither affirms nor condemns marriage as an institution; as such, she studies the circumstances under which it can be a site of reciprocal pleasure, rather than just normative compliance. This double-edged nature of marriage as both constraint and opportunity is key for Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse alike.

Elizabeth Bennet: Intellectual Agency and the Politics of Refusal

From her earliest appearance in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet is distinguished by qualities that set her apart from her social milieu. Her 'lively, playful disposition' (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 12) is matched by an incisive intelligence that her father acknowledges and nurtures, but that also presents challenges for her in a marriage market that prizes female subservience above female intelligence. Elizabeth reads, debates and jokes; she draws conclusions quickly and defends them deftly; and she refuses to behave like the demure, compliant young woman that her world would require. These attributes are not just character traits but also performance traits that put her at odds with the norms of her world.

The most intense manifestation of Elizabeth's agency is her rejection of two proposals of marriage that would, according to her world, be socially expedient. Her refusal of Mr. Collins in Chapter 19 is the first and in some ways the most important of these refusals. Collins's offer is entirely premised on the logic of economic need and social convention: he lists his own advantages, invokes the Bennet family's dire financial circumstances, and even hints that Elizabeth cannot be serious in her refusal because her circumstances demand that she accept. Elizabeth's firm, rational, and unsophisticated response to Collins's proposal - not to mention her lack of the false modesty that social convention would require - is an assertion of the power of her own judgement over the claims of economic and social convention. 'I must once again express the sense I feel of your condescension in proposing to me the acceptance of your hand,' she tells Collins, 'but to accept it is out of the question. My feelings in every respect forbid it' (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 108).

The rejection of Darcy's initial proposal in Chapter 34 is even more significant, both on a narrative and thematic level. Darcy's proposal (however badly delivered) is the embodiment of everything that Elizabeth's society would deem to be the ideal match: wealthier, higher status, and genuinely liked. Elizabeth's refusal of it, and her refusal on the grounds of Darcy's haughty attitude, his meddling in Jane's affairs and his misconduct towards Wickham, is a profound statement about the right to consider a prospective partner on moral and interpersonal, as well as economic, grounds. Her answer to Darcy's charge that she has refused him without 'reason' is one of the most famous lines in Austen's novels: 'I might as

well enquire... why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character?' (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 193). In refusing to accept Darcy's terms - in maintaining the relevance of his manner and behaviour to her judgment of his offer - Elizabeth refuses to subordinate her moral integrity to the social and economic demands of favourable marriage. Elizabeth's voice is not just manifest in these scenes of rejection but in her ordinary social engagements. Her speech is marked by a readiness to express opinions that diverge from the social norm, to rely on her judgement rather than the opinions of others, and to use irony as a way of expressing dissent without explicitly contradicting the other. Her conversation with Darcy - initially argumentative, then evolving into the repartee that typifies their growing intimacy - is consistently equal in intellectual terms to what is expected in the novel's social world. Elizabeth does not praise Darcy; she argues with him. She does not play the admirer; she plays the interrogator. This kind of interaction is itself an act of defiance of the expected feminine role of the silent admirer and obedient listener.

But Elizabeth's power is constrained; Austen does not fail to show this. In fact, Elizabeth's great misjudgment - her willingness to accept Wickham's characterisation of Darcy and her subsequent misinterpretation of Darcy's character - is itself an effect of the social circumstances in which she finds herself. Her gullibility to Wickham's charm is a symptom of the social conditions that limit her epistemic authority: in a world in which women do not have direct access to information, and must rely largely on the words of others, Elizabeth's misprision is forgivable even as it demonstrates the limits of her confidence. Darcy's letter, which sets her right, occasions one of the most striking moments of personal reflection in Austen: 'How despicably I have acted!' she cried. 'I, who have boasted of my powers of discernment!... Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly' (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 212). This acknowledgement of her fallibility does not weaken Elizabeth's agency; rather, it enhances it, signalling the shift from a form of self-confidence founded on swift judgement to a more morally complex understanding of herself.

Some critics have interpreted Elizabeth's final marriage to Darcy as an acquiescence in the hierarchical structures of power and privilege that her earlier actions would seem to oppose. Yet this view does not account for the ways that Austen represents the Darcy who proposes to Elizabeth for the second time as having changed, reforming his ideas about merit, title, and social responsibility in response to Elizabeth's criticisms. The marriage that they finally consummate is explicitly framed as a union of mutual respect, intellectual and emotional

compatibility, and love rather than the social deal that Collins's (or even Wickham's) proposal would have been. Elizabeth gets, within her world, a marriage that accords with her definition of a good marriage. This is not a rejection of the institution but a redefinition of terms: a partial but vital extension of the domain of feminine agency.

Emma Woodhouse: Privilege, Autonomy and the Learning of Agency

'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich,' is how the novel begins (Austen, 1815/2003, p. 1) - a description that marks Emma's departure from the archetypal Austen heroine. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet, whose agency must be deployed against the pressures of economic need and social precarity, Emma's privilege affords her a degree of independence from the marriage market that few other characters enjoy. Her father's affluence and her social position mean that she is not pressured to marry; her single status is financially stable, and she exerts enough domestic power to be able to serve, as she describes herself, as 'queen of the neighbourhood' (Austen, 1815/2003, p. 84). This privilege has important implications for the nature of her agency.

Emma's unique brand of independence is perhaps most apparent in her status as matchmaker. Her efforts to control the romantic fortunes of other characters - most especially the young Harriet Smith, her "project" - is, in one sense, a display of the social power that her privilege gives her. Emma is a controller, a counsellor and a manipulator; she has a strong sense of being right about social situations, tends to project her own wishes onto those around her, and is reluctant to be read. Her matchmaking is a form of agency in that it is active, goal-oriented and initiated; it is not the reactive agency of someone responding to outside pressures but the initiating agency of someone who believes that she is master of her social world. But this certainty about herself and this presumption over others' lives is the central fault line in Emma's character, as Austen conceives it.

Austen's novel highlights the assumptions and misjudgements that accompany Emma's agency. Her efforts to divert the attentions of Harriet Smith, first from the amiable farmer Robert Martin and then toward the climbing vicar Mr. Elton, is symptomatic not just of Emma's misperception of the social world but of her lack of sympathy. Emma attributes her own tastes and desires to Harriet and treats her as a project of Emma's own aesthetic and social aspirations rather than an individual with her own personality and desires. When Mr. Elton reveals that he has been pursuing Emma, rather than Harriet, Emma cannot help but reflect on the ways in which her "cleverness" has contributed to her friend's unhappiness. This is the first of several lessons that the novel delivers to Emma's pretensions to independence.

Mr. Knightley is the figure through whom this critique is primarily voiced. His friendship with Emma is atypical in Austen's novels: he is one of the few men who deals regularly with a female character as an intellectual and moral equal, and his critique of Emma's behaviour is presented as concerned rather than patriarchally paternalistic. His chilling denunciation of Emma for her unkind joke on Miss Bates at the picnic at Box Hill - 'How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?' is important not just for its rebuking of Emma's conduct, but because Emma accepts this critique as authoritative, and feels shame for it (Austen, 1815/2003, p. 375). This responsiveness to Knightley's call to order is an important aspect of Emma's growing agency: her decision, ultimately, to bring her self-evaluations into line with an external moral code.

The culmination of Emma's self-education comes with her acknowledgment of her love for Knightley and her recognition that her meddling in the romantic lives of others has perhaps just undone the chances for happiness of both Harriet and Knightley. The twofold discovery that she is in love with Knightley and that she may have undermined her and Harriet's happiness produces the most explicit moment of self-reflection in the novel: 'It was a union of the highest promise of felicity in itself, and without any of the evils of precipitation; its advantages to Emma need not be enumerated. She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have thought that he had warned her against exactly such a character as this, who had led her into evil; but it was too much for the heart' (Austen, 1815/2003, p. 484). Emma does not go from active to passive; she goes from unreflective, self-indulgent agency to socially and ethically conscious agency.

Feminist readings of Emma have been split over the nature of Emma's journey. Some have seen the novel's ending, with Emma under the moral and ultimately marital authority of Knightley, as a containment of Emma's agency, a return to patriarchal control over a "deviant" female character. More compellingly, others have argued that Emma's marriage to Knightley is a mutually satisfying one, that Knightley, who has been in love with Emma throughout the novel, is the husband who will not rob her of her agency. What is clear is that Emma's agency, tempered by her own learning, is not lost at the novel's resolution; it is exercised appropriately in a relationship that is based on engagement, companionship, and concern for others.

Comparative Analysis: Two Modes of Feminine Agency

Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse present us with both the possibilities and the constraints of feminine agency in Austen's world. Both heroines are intelligent women in the societies in which they live: more discerning, more wilful, and more sceptical of purely social values than the other women around them. Both eventually find marriages that are supposedly fulfilling rather than only socially advantageous. But the routes they take to reach these ends are very different, and these differences are a function of the distinctive social positions, dispositions and forms of self-knowledge that the women bring to their negotiation of gender conventions.

The most significant difference between the two heroines is the relationship between their agency and their social position. Elizabeth's agency is, in some ways, reactive: she exerts her freedom of choice in a context of economic vulnerability, social coercion, and constraint. Her actions are dangerous in ways that Emma's are not because Elizabeth risks becoming a penniless spinster by refusing Collins. Her agency is, in some ways, a means of resisting an economic system that would objectify her as a commodity. Emma's agency, on the other hand, is enabled by her privilege: her wealth frees her from the same constraints on choice that other women face, and her social power grants her control over others that Elizabeth lacks. It follows, then, that Emma makes more serious errors than Elizabeth, in the sense that she can inflict more harm on others (than Elizabeth, with less power, could), and that the education she needs to develop her agency is more taxing.

A second major difference is in the heroines' trajectories of development. Elizabeth's arc is from error to correction: from a misinterpretation of Darcy and Wickham, based on her over-reliance on her own snap judgements, to a more morally-informed self-understanding that allows her to enter into relationships with them. Emma's, on the other hand, goes from presumptuous to responsible agency: from self-indulgent power over others to a kind of engagement that respects others' autonomous desires. In both cases, there is a profoundening of self-knowledge, but the kind of deepening is different in ways that reflect each heroine's particular circumstances and personality.

Both heroines, however, share a basic attitude toward their social world that sets them apart from more stereotypically feminine characters. Both reject, in different ways, the prevailing structures of the marriage market; both insist, differently, on the importance of personal integrity and affection in the marriage market; and both eventually secure marriages that the novels present as instituted on the basis of mutual respect and compatibility rather than financial or social expediency. In this sense, the experiences of both heroines exemplify

Austen's persistent argument (expressed through characterisation and plot rather than polemic) that the institution of marriage can be used to women's advantage, rather than simply their survival, if women insist on using their reason and conscience in selecting marriage partners.

It's also important to note that the heroines' engagement with gender norms takes place, ultimately, within the social order. Neither Elizabeth nor Emma transcends the marriage plot; neither becomes independent in a way that is "autonomous" from social structures and social relations. Instead, they attain a more dignified, more conscious, and more ethical relationship to them: one that refuses their worst features, without escaping them. This is the distinctive tone of the feminism we find in Austen: neither utopian or revolutionary, but alert to the possibilities for dignified independence that are sometimes available in the most oppressive circumstances.

Marriage as Social Duty and Personal Happiness

A crucial element of both novels' representations of feminine agency is their nuanced representation of marriage. Austen does not depict marriage as an inevitable social obligation, or simply a desirable goal; instead, she shows it as a site of multiple, conflicting pressures, opportunities and meanings. Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* is at once an economic imperative, a social requirement, a potential entrapment, and a potential reward, and the novels' heroines must simultaneously negotiate all these meanings of marriage.

Pride and Prejudice's satirical approach to marriage begins with its opening sentence, which masks an economic truth with romantic rhetoric: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 1). This statement, with its ironic emphasis on the word 'universally' and its implicit turnaround of the actual social reality (that women in want of security are in search of wealthy husbands) sets the tone for the novel's satirical critique of the marriage market from the start. The marriages we see in *Pride and Prejudice* vary between the openly economic (Charlotte Lucas's practical acquiescence in Collins's marriage, which the novel presents but does not condone), the romantically naive (Lydia's elopement with Wickham) and the idealised (Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy). This range allows Austen to make several points at once: that marriage can be a social contract that objectifies women, a romantic ideal that obscures their best interests, or a fulfilling relationship that enhances them, depending on how it is negotiated and what kind of partners are involved.

Charlotte Lucas's union with Collins is the most open acknowledgement in *Pride and Prejudice* of the economic realities that confront women. Charlotte's action is not judged

moralistically: Austen, and her readers, must understand the economic reasoning that prompts a clever woman of slender means and prospects to choose a pompous and tedious husband over an uncertain future.

Charlotte's marriage is not a happy one - not in the way that Elizabeth's is - but it is a sensible one, given the circumstances in which she lives, and Austen's stance toward it is sympathetic, despite the conventions of romantic ideology. The contrast between Charlotte's resignation and Elizabeth's refusal is therefore not simply contrast between accommodation and integrity; it is an expression of the real and sometimes agonies of the choices made by women's social and economic circumstances.

A different representation of marriage is presented in *Emma*, in part because Emma's social position means that she is differently positioned to it. Emma famously begins the novel by declaring that she has 'no inducement to marry' because her independence and social position make marriage unnecessary, and because she is perfectly happy to live her life as a single woman (Austen, 1815/2003, p. 84). This claim is of course ironically subverted at the novel's end; but it is worth taking seriously, provisionally, Emma's argument for the reality of a feminine life outside marriage. In a world in which marriage was the central institution of women's social life, Emma's contemplation of a different kind of feminine life, structured around her domestic authority, her social connections, her domestic projects, is a real if ultimately unrealised alternative to the life of marriage.

The marriage Emma enters into is explicitly presented as an equal relationship-not equal in social terms (Knightley is older, wealthier, and of higher social rank than Emma) but equal in the sense that it is a relationship of equal engagement, intellectual exchange, and moral responsibility. Knightley's attraction to Emma is based on his appreciation of her intellect and her potential for improvement; Emma's attraction to Knightley is on the basis of his moral authority and his willingness to work with her on a level playing field. It is the kind of marriage that Austen offers as the ideal against which other marriages in the novel are judged and it is a kind of marriage that prizes the relationship and not the (social or economic) benefits of the marriage.

The Significance of Austen's Proto-Feminist Novels

There is much critical discussion of Austen's relationship with feminism. Strictly speaking, the label 'feminist' is anachronistic when applied to Austen: the political and theoretical paradigms that comprise modern feminism are at least half a century after her time, and Austen makes no explicit case for women's rights or programmatic critique of patriarchy. But to reject a feminist reading of her novels is to uphold an unreasonably constricted view of

feminism. Austen's novels continually draw attention to the social forces that limit women's options, the ideological forces that limit women's self-understanding, and the possibilities for autonomy that exist within those limitations. This critical focus on the gendered social conditions of life is, if not a political agenda, a proto-feminist literary practice.

Critics like Claudia Johnson, Mary Poovey, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have documented Austen's novels' engagement with the literary and ideological conventions of her era. Johnson's seminal argument that Austen's novels partake of a kind of "feminist revisionism" effected through irony, characterisation and generic manipulation in particular, has had a profound impact on subsequent scholarship. Rather than explicitly challenging the ideological construct of Regency femininity, Austen operates within the parameters of the construct - exploiting the conventions of the novel form, with its domestic orientation and its marriage-plot structure, to expose the contradictions and injustices of the conventions she employs.

Austen's problematisation of feminine agency has much to tell us about the social world in which she lived, but its resonances are not confined to the culture of Regency England. The dilemmas she explores - between social convention and personal conscience, between financial security and emotional authenticity, between the demands of social conformity and the compulsions of social self-assertion - are not unique to early 19th-century English society; they are persistent elements in the social experience of women in many different historical and cultural settings. This is one of the reasons for the enduring success of Austen's works with generation after generation of readers, including those who read her at a significant distance from her time and place.

Furthermore, the particular form of agency that Austen's heroines embody, an agency that is enacted through language, through moral assessment, through the affirmation of the legitimacy of personal feeling and ethical judgment in the face of social expectations, prefigures arguments in subsequent feminist writing. The insistence on the value of women's inner life, the assertion of the relevance of women's evaluative practices to decisions about social and marital relations, and the critique of a social world that treats women as property are all themes that find their echoes in feminist thought from the Victorian era to the present. Austen's place in the tradition of women's writing is not merely historical but also conceptual: she sets the terms and offers the means of analysis that are still used to talk about women's social and moral status.

Finally, it is worth noting the limits of Austen's feminism (as a kind of social critique). Her novels concentrate on a limited social horizon (Southern English gentry) and her heroines'

struggles around gender expectations are made possible by economic and social privileges most women of her era (or our own) did not enjoy. The questions she poses for feminine agency are not the questions of women who lack access to social and economic advantage, to education or leisure. This doesn't mean that Austen's achievement is insignificant but it does mean that we need critical resources that can apply to a wider spectrum of women's experiences than Austen's fiction.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* represent their heroines as negotiating a social world that both limits their autonomy and provides opportunities for it. Elizabeth Bennet demonstrates an agency based on intellectual autonomy, moral integrity, and principled rejection; Emma Woodhouse demonstrates an agency based on structural privilege, social power and self-education. Both heroines end up in marriages that the novels portray as not simply socially advantageous but also genuinely satisfying, and do so by insisting, in different ways, on the bearing of their own values on marriage and social relations.

Austen's rendering of feminine agency is neither naïvely sanguine nor bitterly fatalistic. She recognises the constraints that her heroines live under - financial, social and other - and she also represents the possibilities for dignified autonomy that remain within these limitations. Her heroines do not step outside the constraints of their world; they negotiate within it, with acumen, conscientiously, and insistently on the validity of their own judgements. It is an important agency under the constraints of Regency England.

The significance of Austen's approach to feminine agency is that it demonstrates the possibility that literary characterisation is social analysis, that the depiction of women's thoughts, words, choices and relations can constitute a critique of the ideological landscape of women's lives. Austen's heroines are not merely engaging characters; they are the representatives of a critical faculties that employs the forms of narrative to represent the ideological structure of gender relations and the possibilities for feminine self-determination within it. In this sense, her novels are part of not just the history of the English novel, but also of the intellectual history of feminism.

There are a number of ways in which future studies might build on this analysis: by mapping the intersections of class, race and national identity with Austen's representation of feminine agency; by comparing Austen's approach to these themes with other women writers of the era; and by tracing the reception of her fiction over time and in different cultural settings.

What this study has striven to show is theDepth and diversity of Austen's treatment of gender in these novels, a treatment that two hundred years after their initial publication remains richly evocative.

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